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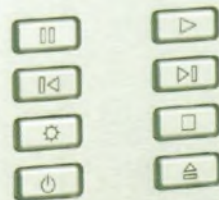
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# Editorial

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## Printed By

JPS Litho Ltd., Poole

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

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The term "gentleman's agreement" might not seem to have too much relevance in today's business environment, which I'm sure you'll agree, is something of a shame. So I was a little surprised to hear rumour of just such an accord between the principal producers of audiophile vinyl. Apparently, and I stress that this is pure and unsubstantiated gossip, the major re-issue merchants have a treaty that they won't compete directly by releasing the same titles. Of course, the downside of this is that we don't get to engage in cross-label navel-gazing of the sort so beloved of the audiophile community and vinyl addicts in particular. However, the considerable upside is a far wider range of premium vinyl titles as a result. Otherwise, it would be more of the same-old, same-old. I mean, how many different audiophile pressings of *Kind Of Blue* do we really need? Interesting example that, being as it represents one of the few breaches in the protocol, but then I think it's general rather than universal.

What's the point? Well, for once, it seems that commercial interest and the public good coincide. What a shame that the principle can't be extended to cover a few more areas in what is, on occasion, a destructively competitive marketplace. Having said that, there are a few cooperative glimmers lighting the horizon to give me cause for hope. Not being one to count my chickens I'll not be making any promises on this one, but there are definite ripples on the surface of some of our deeper waters, definite indicators of convergence. What do you know? Several times in the last few weeks, manufacturers of review products have been fulsome in their praise for ancillaries from quite another company: ancillaries I've seen them using (and even promoting) at shows. There might be hope after all ...



Ry Gregory

**"This amplifier can blow your house over but loses nothing from the music"**

Your Guide to Hi-Fi and Home Cinema, January 2004, Stan Curtis



**"Combining clarity with control is virtually a three word encapsulation of the KAV400xi"**

Hi Fi Choice, November 2003, Alvin Gold



KAV400xi

**"The new player not just delights with the still quite rare SACDs, it also knows how to please with CDs"**

Audio, Germany, September 2003

**"If I had to choose one SACD player, (regardless of price), I'd go for the Krell."**

Stereophile, December 2003, Michael Fremer

**"A unit capable of delivering performance at the very top in the reproduction of CD and SACD"**

Audio Review, Italy, November 2003, Franco Guida

**"The 'Standard' is a player with...guts"**

Diario de Noticias, Portugal, September 2003, JVH



SACD

# KRELL'S ANGELS THE NEXT CHAPTER

From its arrival with a single power amplifier in 1980, Krell's exclusive product range has evolved into a total system concept. Because it is now recognised as the premier high-end audio and home theatre brand, Krell has been compelled to create the ultimate in audio-only and audio-video systems from front to back. Its range of amplification devices have been augmented over the years by CD transports, digital converters and audio/video processors. In 2004, the concept reaches fruition with the ascendancy of both definitive source components – the SACD Standard and the DVD Standard – and a range of loudspeakers suitable for pure music or multi-channel cinematic pleasure.

Krell has also expanded its catalogue vertically, with the KAV and Showcase ranges for entry-level and mid-level systems, and the rare and exotic Reference Series for systems without limit. Regardless of the model, however, a component must attain the highest standards of sonic performance, ergonomic excellence, superior build quality and long-term dependability before its front panel is graced with the Krell badge.

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Hi Fi News, June 2003, Martin Colloms



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# Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

I knew I shouldn't have played it. But when someone lent me a CD containing various test tracks, allowing you to evaluate the performance of your hi-fi system, I couldn't resist. Trouble is, I know all too well that my rig does not perform well on many of the standard tests - especially for imaging. Thirty years ago it was a different story; the system I had then (used in a small room) imaged with laser-like precision. The slightest shift of position could be heard.

On this particular test disc, an individual carrying a ticking metronome walked from one side of the soundstage to the other. On a system working properly it should've been possible to discern a smooth shift as the metronome moved from one speaker over to the other. I could certainly tell when the metronome was hard left or hard right, and more or less when it was in the centre. But the bits in between these extremes were, I have to admit, a tad vague.

Is this important? Is it worth losing any sleep over? Depends on how you view things. The aural impression of image-placement-in-space that good two-speaker stereo creates, is an illusion. When you listen, and a singer appears to occupy a narrow space mid-way between two spaced loudspeakers, you're being tricked. It's a function of our hearing that, presented with identical sound from two spaced points left and right, we hear not two sounds but one.

If you want to hear really precise vivid stereo, whereby you're able to place images with pin-point accuracy, then your equipment needs to be able to recreate the aural impression of that metronome moving from left to right. Being able to do so largely depends on faithfully reproducing the subtle phase shifts that occur as positioning changes. It's difficult to record and difficult to reproduce, depending heavily on correct positioning of microphones and loudspeakers.

The more certain you are as to precise placement when the metronome passes between the speakers, the more accurately your system is reproducing the information being fed to it. Whether it results in a more

authentic and enjoyable sound is another matter! And there's the rub. For me, the problem with tests like this is that they don't mirror the reality of how we hear live sound in real rooms or concert halls. Let me give you a ferinstance...

Suppose you go and hear an orchestra live in a good hall, and sit in the centre maybe 20 or 30 rows back. You'll certainly hear 'stereo'. The layout of the orchestra - who sits where - will be aurally apparent. But usually 'imaging' is not that pin-point precise. Just shut your eyes. What makes things seem more precise than they are in reality is vision - the fact that you can see where the instruments are placed helps focus the ear.

Staying in our imaginary concert hall, suppose someone walked back and forth across the stage, from left to right, with a ticking metronome. Do you suppose that, eyes closed, you'd be able to place precisely where the person was? I strongly doubt it. A stereo system, carefully set-up, would almost certainly produce greater precision than the real thing. Which is why I have grave doubts about such tests being a useful way of evaluating hi-fi.

In any case, is anyone today really that bothered? Thirty-odd years ago I bought a budget EMI LP called *The Enjoyment of Stereo*, which had imaging tests based on wine glasses being tapped. I kid you not! One glass was placed on the far left, another at far right, while a third was placed in the centre. Then, two more glasses were added at half-left and half-right. I agonized over whether or not the central glass was truly central, and if there was sufficient difference between full left and half-left.

Does anyone today worry about such things? I'd like to think so, but strongly doubt it. Stereo sound, once the wonder of the age, has lost much of its allure. In the early days, everyone - from recording engineers to listeners at home - were in thrall to the idea of stereo. Consider, for example, the care that went into the stereo soundstaging of many Decca Sonic Stage opera recordings in the 1960s. Sets like Solti's *Elektra* were absolutely mind blowing in ►

▶ their day - and still impress even now.

But to modern ears, such recordings probably sound contrived and over-wrought. Stereo announces itself in capital letters, and the 'special effects' are somewhat exaggerated, though undeniably exciting. During the late 1950s and 1960s Decca in particular seemed hell-bent on exploiting the possibilities of stereo. With every new recording it seemed they were trying to expand the boundaries. Solti's Decca recording of Wagner's *Das Rheingold* was made in 1958, yet sonically it has never been bettered.

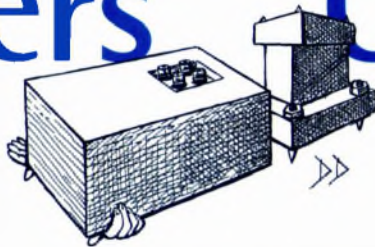
That most climactic of climaxes; the huge anvil strike and thunderclap at the forging of the Rainbow Bridge is absolutely sensational in Solti's old recording. So much so, every recording since has seemed a bit of an anti-climax; you expect the latest digital wonder to blast you out of your seat, and bugger all happens. What a disappointment!

We had the best first, and after that things fizzled out.

But maybe this is just as well. Perhaps now we're all a bit too grown-up to sit there listening to our hi-fi systems. We've grown out of being amazed by stereo; it no longer lights our candle. In some ways that's sad. The enthusiasts who collect early Decca or Mercury LPs for the sonic thrill of hearing their amazing holographic sound are remnants of a dying breed; the true hi-fi enthusiast! For myself, though, I've sort of lost interest in this aspect of hi-fi.

I think the sound I get today, even if it doesn't pass the metronome test, is musically far more authentic and enjoyable than what I had fifteen, twenty, even thirty years ago. I don't want to listen to hi-fi any more; I want to listen to music, and not have hi-fi get in the way. Hopefully, the sound I get today is extremely good; I certainly think so. But it's not obviously 'hi-fi'; the music impresses more than the sonics. ▶+

# Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

A number of topics have presented themselves for discussion recently, so there's something of a pick'n'mix flavour to this month's column. I'll start off by referring back to the Issue 30, which devoted a number of pages to the topic of active loudspeakers, including reviews of some examples.

It reminded me of a six-way group test of small active speakers that I carried out for Hi-Fi Choice magazine three years ago. My group included the impressive PMC AML1, which RG also reviewed in Issue 30, and his findings closely paralleled my own, but the article that particularly caught my attention was Chris Binns' "One Careful Owner...", a review and appreciation of the long obsolete but highly regarded Meridian M20 active speaker (and its M2 predecessor) from the 1980s.

Chris really liked his 'used' M20s, and reckoned the overall design would still be perfectly valid today. And while it's true that new M20s have not been available for a great many years, Meridian does make a couple of

models that can be seen as its natural successors. The M33 (and its more sophisticated DSP33 brother, intended for direct digital drive) share both the active drive and the same basic driver line-up as the M2/M20. Where they differ is that the M33/DSP33 has a much smaller enclosure, is sealed rather than reflex-ported, and has a bass alignment specifically oriented towards wall-mounting (presumably with multi-channel operation in mind).

I never tried an M20, so can't make any sort of comparison, but can state quite categorically that the M33 is an absolute honey, and was my personal favourite amongst the half dozen actives I tried. It isn't necessarily better than the PMC, but it is a lot less expensive, and also rather better balanced for relaxed long term listening.

I think this little speaker tends to get overlooked because it doesn't look that special, but in fact it's a rather clever way of creating an exceptionally discreet and compact speaker capable of very high performance. The enclosure is damped metal, maximising internal ▶



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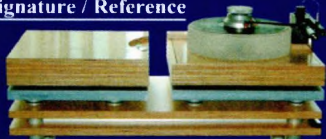
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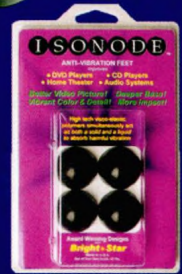
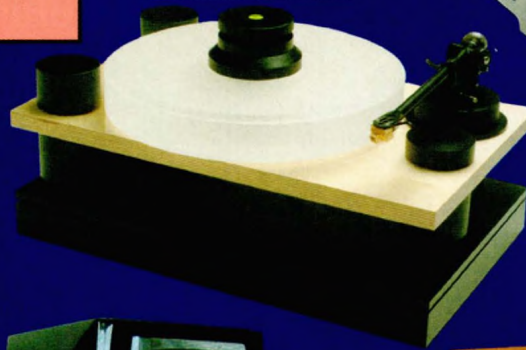


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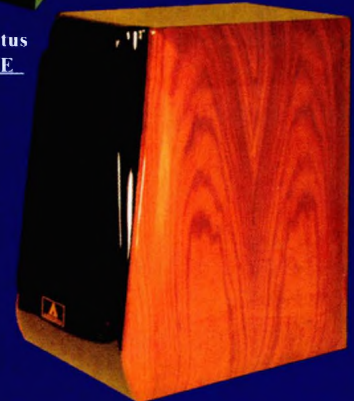
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▶ volume with minimal coloration, and also tapered every which way, helping spread internal standing waves. A wall bracket socket is fitted, and the bass end balances out beautifully when the speaker is close to a wall, with smooth in-room extension down to 50Hz. The wall does inevitably add some midband unevenness, but in every other respect this speaker is a fine performer, the active drive helping it to go louder and sound bigger than it has any right to. The M20 might be long deceased, but the M33 is its inheritance.

Changing tack, I normally use solid-state amps, partly because of their consistency and predictability across a wide range of speakers. But I recently got to play with a selection of valve amps, which made a very pleasant change – so pleasant in fact that going back to solid state wasn't at all easy. As expected, the valve amps show distinct advantages in mid-band transparency and delicacy, though it was quite a surprise to discover just how good an old Leak Stereo 20 that one of the listening panel had brought along could sound.

In order to be fair to even the lowest power single-ended valve amps, it's necessary to use speakers which have lots of sensitivity and a relatively easy-to-drive impedance. The simultaneous arrival of a pair of huge Tannoy Yorkminsters, which are strong on both criteria (93.5dB sensitivity; 6 ohms minimum impedance), was therefore a very happy coincidence. This is the largest of three new Prestige series models, which exactly parallel Tannoy's successful Dimension-series models in featuring large reflex-loaded enclosures with 8-inch, 10-inch and 12-inch Dual-Concentric drive units. There are, however, two major differences between the two ranges. Where the Dimensions have Art Deco styling overtones, the Prestiges are strictly British Traditional, best suited to an antique oriented environment. No less significant, the 12-inch Yorkminster and 10-inch Kensington both feature AlNiCo magnets in place of the usual ferrites.

AlNiCo – the name usually given to an alloy of aluminium, nickel and cobalt – is very rare indeed these days, mostly because it's many times more expensive than the ferrite equivalent. But there's long been a belief, especially amongst Japanese audiophiles, that AlNiCo-equipped speakers simply sound better, a point of view with which I agree. Nobody has really come up with a satisfactory explanation for AlNiCo's alleged superiority – one theory is that its conductive metallic nature reacts better to the eddy currents created by coil motion.

Whatever the reason, AlNiCo-equipped speakers do sound remarkable good, especially in the same sort of area that valve amps sound so impressive – in the delightfully delicate and beguilingly transparent way that low level midband detail is delivered. There's an

easy naturalness about the sound they create that somehow makes ferrite equipped speakers sound relatively forced and congested. I heard it as soon as I connected up the Yorkminsters, in the same way that it's audible with the flush-mounted 15-inch alnico Dual Concentric drivers that I sometimes use. I'm sure it's one of the reasons why I was so enthusiastic about the AlNiCo-equipped JBL K2 S9800 (Hi-Fi Plus \*21), and why it sounds significantly better than its junior K2 S5800 brother. And it probably explains why the old Sendor BC1 can still hold a midrange transparency candle to the company's new S8e reviewed in this issue.

Indeed, having dug the ancient BC1s out of the speaker store to finalise the S8e review, I was again entranced by how delicious these speakers sound, especially with modern state-of-art sources, amplifiers and accessories. You have to take care not to drive them too hard, as the thermal power handling of 30-year-old voice coil glues doesn't match what's available today. But provided due restraint is exercised that shouldn't be a problem, and used on modern stands with modern cables, the quality available is quite shockingly good. I'm looking forward to trying them soon with a battered Leak Stereo 20 I found in the attic and am getting restored. The combination won't go loud, but it should give wonderful sound for comparatively little outlay.

Given the highly competitive nature of the speaker market, and the sometimes almost desperate attempts by individual brands to distinguish their product from its rivals, I'm really surprised how few brands have investigated, let alone adopted, the alnico option. It would seem an ideal opportunity to add a USP (unique selling point) that would give a speaker some real individuality, and also probably have a particular appeal to valve amp users. And given the number of operations making and marketing valve amps, I'd have thought there's a real opportunity here for speaker brands to get involved.


AlNiCo was first developed during WWII, and was the first permanent magnet material powerful enough for practical loudspeakers. It was the material of choice for speaker makers from the 1040s until the 1960s – Tannoy's famous Dual Concentric driver first appeared in 1948, for example. But the price of cobalt skyrocketed in the 1960s, around the same time that the much less costly ferrite alternative became available. AlNiCo is at least available to those prepared to make the effort, but it's much, much harder to find examples of the technology that preceded it.

In the absence of suitable permanent magnets, 1930s loudspeakers used electromagnets, or 'field-



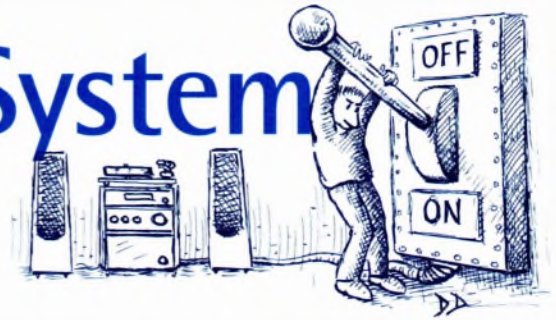


► coils', which needed to be energised by heavy-duty power supplies. I understand there are some examples in Japan, and French drive unit maker Supravox offers a field-coil option for some drivers, but suspect you may have to build your own power supply. I've never heard a field-coil driver, but rumour has it that they

sound even better than alnico, with lower magnetic hysteresis and superior field 'stiffness' (because of the way an external supply keeps the field 'topped up' and stable). Hopefully I'll get a chance sometime soon, as there's some industry interest currently investigating this antiquated approach. 

# Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



Some time ago, I received a call from a manufacturer who expressed concern about having left his baby – I mean product – with JMH. I guess he was concerned for its moral safety. There it was, far from home, and all alone. It was in a weird system, with weird set-up and worst of all, the speakers were facing the wall. How on earth could he expect a realistic review? "But how did it sound?" I asked. "Oh, it sounded really good!" he said.


The review, of course, was spot on.

What's the point of this anecdote? Well, it demonstrates how easy it is to be convinced by what you see, or what you expect rather than working out what actually is. Back in Issue 3 we pointed out the possible dangers and risk of manipulation inherent in unregulated, public review websites. Those sites that invite the general public to offer reviews of the products they've bought. It's a great idea in theory, but as soon as you actually examine what happens in practice it soon becomes apparent that it's open to serious and malicious abuse.

Our virtual brethren responded with solicitor's letters and threats. After all, we were attacking their freedom of speech. Two years later, the exact scenario we warned against almost put an established speaker manufacturer out of business. That's just the one, documented example where the victim has successfully followed the campaign back to source. How many less severe or more subtle instances are we completely unaware of?

More recently, someone described internet forums as the CB radios of the 21st Century. All those anonymous people, hiding behind their screen-names, hiding their agendas and basking in the importance of their opinions. It's certainly a point of view. Visit some of the more extreme sites and you'll find everything from conspiracy

theories to outright accusations of corruption on the part of manufacturers, print journalists and magazines. The problem is that like all the best prejudices and moral panics, they're based mainly on ignorance. Simply repeating them enough times doesn't make them true. However, like the vitriolic spoutings of the tabloid press, it's easy to discern a number of common themes. Let's leave aside motive and psychology for a moment and see whether the background and logic actually supports these views.

The most common accusation is that of reviewer bias, normally appended to some sort of grand conspiracy theory. Well guys (How do I just know that all these contributors to web forums are male?) I've got news for you. Reviewer bias is alive and kicking and anyone who pretends otherwise is a fool. The issue is not whether reviewers embody bias, but what we do about it. The first and most important step is to print the reviewer's name at the top of the review. Combine that with information regarding the equipment the reviewer uses, the music he listens to and any stated leanings he's prepared to declare, and over time you can build a pretty good picture of what he likes and what he doesn't. So, whilst I'm afraid that we all have our favourites, at least you should know what they are. Most manufacturers are only too happy to see reputable reviewers using their products on a regular basis. It's perhaps the best exposure available. But that generosity means that we can get pretty much get what we want. Which means in turn that we tend to use the stuff we like. Simply making equipment available in no way guarantees its use. Indeed, my house is full of stuff that I don't use yet never seems to get collected. What I do use is listed in the reviews I write. 



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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



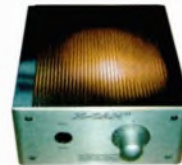
Stax, legendary headphone manufacturers, present their valve driven Omega electrostatic 'phones



The Klumo Beltaine monoblocks, from Germany, with onboard 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!

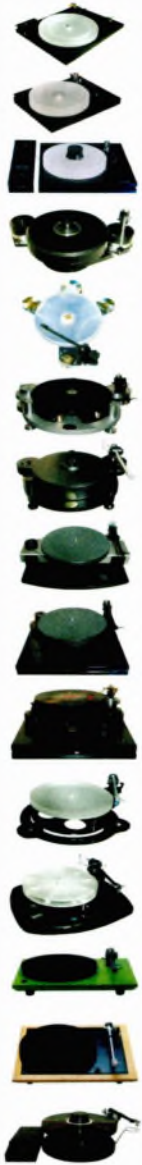


The famous Musical Fidelity X-CAN valve headphone amp, now in v3 form

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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▶ So bias exists and we need to be transparent about it. But, the thing to realise here is that it isn't bias towards a company or product. It's actually listening bias: a preference in presentation or relative attributes. Do we rank dynamics above stereo soundstaging? Do we value bass extension over tonal accuracy? The equipment we choose reflects these choices rather than any specific allegiance. You see, no matter how much we like a product we'd be pretty stupid to put into the public domain an opinion we couldn't demonstrate or support. After all, we also have to retain the respect of other manufacturers. So, whilst we might like our sound a certain way, the environment in which we work, the degree of outside scrutiny actually keeps us honest. Very often, the first thing a manufacturer says when he walks into the listening room is something like, "Oh, you've got the QuakeMaker Thud Buster II sub-woofer. Is it as good as the reviews say?" I'm afraid that "Yes, but I can't play it for you" doesn't really cut the mustard.

Which leads us directly to the question of bribery and corruption. I've even seen suggestions that manufacturers actually bankroll magazines. If you knew how much it costs to set-up and run a magazine, and how long it takes to recover that investment, you'd realise not only just how ludicrous that idea is, but that most hi-fi manufacturers couldn't afford to buy the staff, let alone the publication as a whole. Either that, or they've got better things to spend their money on (like stock, product development, marketing and not forgetting overheads). Besides which, a magazine's ownership and accounts are open to public scrutiny, just like the opinions it publishes.


If you consider that most of the writers employed by hi-fi magazines are free-lance, the simple mechanics of organised bribery become extremely difficult. For a start, it requires a major slush fund of unaccountable money. Secondly, most of the writers actually earn their living doing something else. The money paid by hi-fi magazines makes it hard to live by reviewing alone. The writing is a sideline, which is generally overshadowed by their real income. They do it out of interest, not for the money, which makes them poor candidates for bribery, especially given the profit levels in the hi-fi industry!

Of course, there's always the possibility of editorial bias and a potential for corruption there, but the mechanics make that difficult. After all, magazines don't employ freelance writers for fun. Editors simply don't have the time to rewrite other people's work so that it accords some party line. It's actually easier to write a piece from scratch rather than rewrite someone else's work. In fact, the reviews that appear in Plus are only edited for grammar and punctuation (and some would say they're not edited for that). That's magazine policy, simply

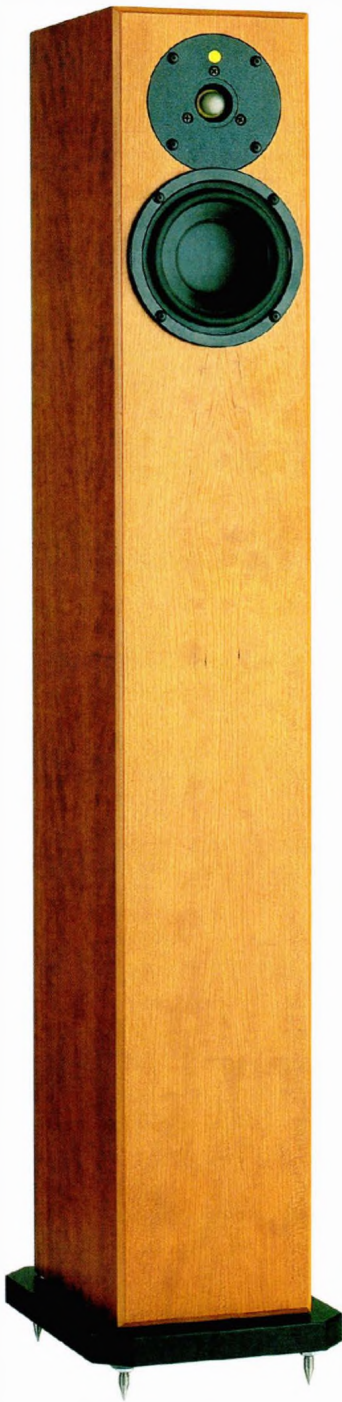
because we want to hold a broad church of opinions, which means a range of different voices. Does it worry me that reviewers disagree with each other? Why should it, when so many listeners also disagree? Do we attempt to govern reviewers' opinions. It would be counter productive.

The point here is simple. Whilst some degree of corruption might be possible on the part of an individual, and there are more forms of bribery than money changing hands, the influence of a single writer or editor, even in our world of inflated egos and exaggerated notions of self importance, is strictly limited by the structure of the industry and the magazines themselves. The fact that hi-fi is such a tiny, claustrophobic world imposes its own regulation on proceedings. Writers or magazines suspected of bias rapidly lose the support and confidence of the manufacturers they rely on for advertising revenue and review product. No matter how big a manufacturer or distributor is, they'll find it hard to make up the short fall. Just do the sums. Look at profit margins, subtract overheads and other costs and then work out how many extra units they'd need to sell just to pay for the bribes or extra advertising. It simply doesn't add up. And if you don't believe me, look at the number of hi-fi companies that go bust. Hardly cash rich then!

But the real thing about a printed magazine is that it is financially transparent and answerable for its content. If we print something about a product then the reader (and supplier) knows who wrote it, who published it and can hold us legally responsible for any inaccuracy. Such action is rare, mainly because the editor and publisher of a magazine don't want to get sued, so work to operate in good faith. Mistakes and disagreements still occur from time to time, but they are generally sorted out without recourse to law.

Which brings us back to web forums and the opinions they pedal. Just like review sites, their content is open to manipulation by those with their own agendas. Multiple posts from multiple addresses can easily dominate a thread, and who is to know? The problem is that the lack of restraint leads to intemperate claims and accusations, as anonymity like alcohol affects peoples' inhibitions. When was the last time you witnessed a cogent and well informed debate around closing time? But what people fail to appreciate is that the content of web-sites is governed by the same legal strictures as the printed word. Perhaps it's about time that the people running web forums considered the accuracy of some of the more extreme views expressed by their members? Otherwise, before too long, I can see the same companies that can't afford their own magazine being only too happy to demonstrate the quality of their lawyers. 

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# The Manchester Show

by David Ayers

All change for the Hi-Fi+ sponsored Manchester Show this year, with a different date and venue from the previous show in 2002. With the new February date being just two weeks before the established Bristol show, it was always going to be interesting to see what effect it would have on the number of exhibitors and attendees. In the end, the show had more exhibitors than the previous year and attendance was also up, despite the inevitable teething problems that come with any change of location. In this case, that related mainly to confusion regarding parking, but otherwise things ran very smoothly indeed.

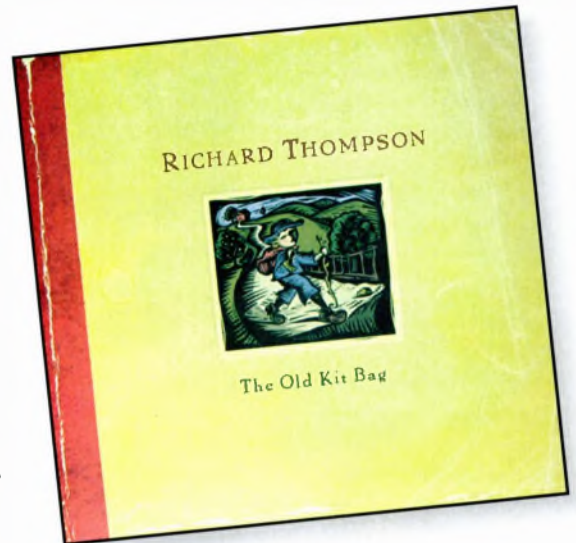
Just as importantly, the established Bristol show seemed unaffected, with exhibitors' space being 100% sold and attendance at its normal enthusiastic level. So, it seems that two regional shows can be run successfully on adjacent dates, as long as they are at either end of the country. From the Hi-Fi+ point of view, we had an excellent room for our demonstration of super-tweeters and sub-woofers, which RG described in detail in the previous issue, and a much nicer spot for our stand.

Dali Megaline



This article concentrates on those items and exhibitors that particularly attracted my attention during the weekend, and as such is not an exhaustive (and ultimately boring for you, dear reader) list of all the exhibitors and

equipment to be found in the show. As usual, no particular importance should be attached to those included and those left out of this report. Armed with the CD of Richard Thompson's *Old Kit Bag* and *Lark's Tongues In Aspic* by King Crimson, I headed off into the throng in search of musical nirvana. Could I find a system that would raise the performance from the rather flat sounding Richard Thompson CD to anywhere approaching the marvellous Diverse Vinyl LP pressing, or a system that could make sense of the cross-rhythm section of 'Larks Tongues In Aspic Part II'? It was a tough assignment, but someone had to do it...



'A' Audio Solutions were demonstrating the enormous Dali Megaline ribbon line source speakers on the end of a system consisting of the Opus 3 Continuo turntable and amplification from Korato. When I arrived, Fleetwood Mac's *Tango In The Night* was on the platter, sounding realistically unrealistic (if you know what I mean) and avoiding the usual ear splitting problems with this particular LP. The initial impression of this system has nothing to do with the sound quality, but the mesmerising effect of these 7' 6" high speakers sitting staring at you. Hmm, and I thought my new Revel Salon's were an imposing sight in my listening room. At least you know where your 30 grand is going with the Dalis.

Ferguson Hill were demonstrating the FH001 speakers reviewed by JK in issue 29, along with the



▶ prototypes of their new sub-woofer. Now, with one or two exceptions, Lowther driven horns are not usually my cup of tea, but I have just extended this small list of exceptions to include the FH001s. Not only do they look very space age and funky, but they sound great as well. Clear and detailed, and, with the addition of the subs, almost enough bass to satisfy an ageing rocker like me.

One of the most unusual loudspeaker designs was to be found in the AEON room, hanging off the end of the new Exposure CD player and Korato amps. The AEON MC5 Series is a small and strangely shaped £3,500 speaker that produces a surprisingly big sound, although in the demonstration the sound-stage was disturbingly floor bound. The MC5s are definitely speakers that are worth further investigation.

Up in the conservatory, where one could enjoy the panoramic view of the planes sitting at the adjacent airport, Wilson Benesch were demonstrating their new speaker, the Curve. Hung off the end of a system that comprised the WB Full Circle turntable and Audionet pre/power combination, the sound was a lot more ballsy than I am used to from WB. Despite the room boom that somewhat hampered the demonstration, these speakers showed great promise for those people, like me, who admire the WB speakers but wish they had a little more guts.

It's interesting to note that JMLab have been forging a similar path to WB with their latest speakers,

Wilson Benesch Curve



adding a certain degree of slam that has been missing from their previous models. Examples of their speakers were to be found throughout the show, notably in the Music Works room, where the new Diva model was sounding excellent.

Over in the RT Services room, the Pen Audio Charisma speakers were singing well with the new Chara bass extenders, driven by Orpheus electronics. The Chara maintains the tiny footprint of the Charismas, whilst adding an impressive

amount of bass extension. I really enjoyed this system for its clarity and image stability.

dCS had their latest SACD/CD transport, the Verdi La Scala, on demo. This transport can up-sample CD to hi-bit sampling rates to be fed into the Elgar Plus DAC. I have to say that this system produced the greatest resolution of any at the show, allowing a remarkable insight into the textures created by percussionist Jamie Muir on the King Crimson CD. The rhythm was locked in even during the difficult middle section of 'Larks' Tongues In Aspice Part II'.

Possibly the rockiest sound was to be heard in the Henley Designs room, where a Projekt Radius TT was feeding Roksan Caspian electronics and the Vienna Acoustics' Strauss speakers. Not

the most delicate or refined system, but big beefy, and full of fun. Toes were tapping left, right and centre while I was



Ferguson Hill Sub



▶ there, mine included.

And so to my personal favourite room of the show: Audiocraft. With a Lindemann SACD/CD player feeding the Lavardin PE pre-amp and Lavardin MAP mono-blocks, driving a pair of Amphion Argon 2 speakers, the sound was sharp and immediate with great resolving power. That resolution might be defined by the Lindemann, as well as being the forte of the Lavardin amplification, but the small and modestly priced (in this context) Amphions do a fantastic job of letting it through. With this system you could really hear that Danny Thompson plays

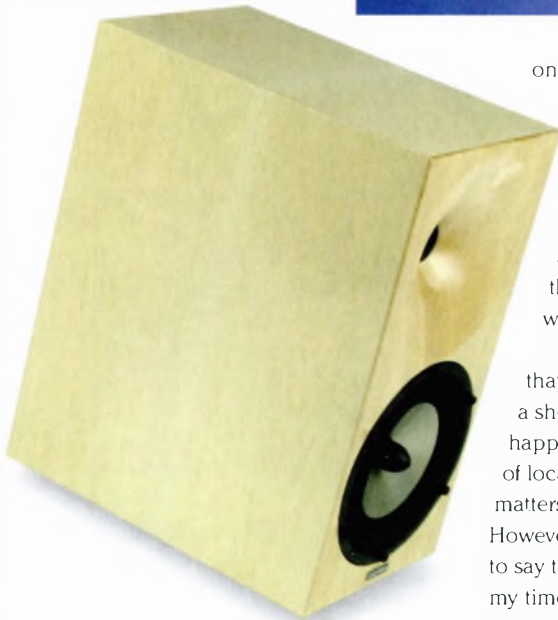


Airport Hotel delivered a variety of great sounding rooms and a really pleasant environment. The sheer fact that we took a massive sub-woofer into our room, and used it successfully exclusively at frequencies below 30Hz, speaks volumes for the quality of that room. We were very pleasantly surprised indeed, and given that the venue always seems to be the biggest issue with any show the collective organisers in Manchester seem to have got this one absolutely right. I'm looking forward to next year, and whether you're a manufacturer or an enthusiast I would strongly suggest that you check out Manchester next February. Put it in

on to the difficult middle section of *Larks' Tongues...* But then the diary next year. ➤+

again, only the incredibly expensive dCS system managed that. All in all I could easily forgive this slight aberration, given that the set-up as a whole was so enjoyable.

We've always said that we'd only sponsor a show that we were happy with, so the change of location and date were matters of some concern. However, I'm pleased to say that I really enjoyed my time at the show this year, and I feel that the changes made from the previous show have been entirely positive, especially the change of venue. The Radisson



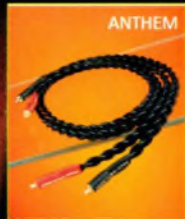
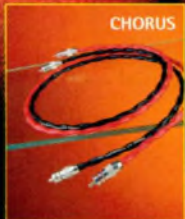
Double Bass and not electric on the Richard Thompson track 'Pearly Jim'. Where the system failed slightly was in its ability to hold



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# The Montreal Hi-Fi Expo

by Richard S. Foster

It's hard to imagine this show has been thriving for the last seventeen years! I don't know what the attendance figures were, but I will say this was a busy three days with plenty of great exhibits from around the world. The main venue was the Delta Hotel on Kennedy Boulevard offering ten floors of exhibits while a secondary hotel as the Sheraton Four Points just across the street was offering an additional five floors.

There were in excess of 325 manufacturers, distributors and retailers exhibiting their wares. The place was packed! If you'd like to take a look on-line at some of what was going on, then visit: <http://www.hifiexpo.com/>. My main task was to cover the Canadian manufacturing sector. Having not been at the show for about five years - and even then, not paying as much attention to what was going on in my own country - I was totally unprepared for the sheer number and quality of these products. There are some very innovative designs offering quality sound... and in many cases, at very affordable prices. The only major disappointment I encountered was that many rooms that were supposed to be open at 9AM on Friday for the audio press and retailers (the show opened at 1PM for the public) were still closed. This was a real bummer because it would have been the ideal time to spend some additional quality time with the exhibitors. Having said that,

many exhibitors were still setting up in the wee small hours of the morning, trying to get their rooms to sound right. One of the distributors/dealers I know told me they were up until 4AM working on their room, so perhaps it is understandable that some manufacturers opted not to open before the public arrived. That's got to be a hard call, because they certainly missed a great opportunity to impress the press.

Two of the Canadian distributors dealing on the software side of the business, May Audio, <http://www.mayaudio.com/mayaudio/home.asp> and Diamond Groove, <http://diamondgroove.com/> were both enjoying healthy sales. I know that May was selling CDs, but Diamond Groove, bless their vinyl loving hearts, were just selling black gold, which was moving out of their room at lightning speed. They even got me for a long out-of-print Mosaic box set of the complete Aladdin sessions by Amos Milburn, new and unused. Thanks guys!!

Speaker manufacturers as always, were present in abundance and I must say that in several cases

I was delighted to hear such excellent sound quality... especially under show conditions. But I'll come back to those. The product I was most smitten with was by a new Canadian company - and from Newfoundland no less - Aurum Acoustics, <http://www.aurumacoustics.com>. President and chief designer, Derrick Moss, has created and is manufacturing a fine sounding, stand-alone CD player/pre-amplifier (Integris CDP). His real wonder is the Integris Active 300B. Basically what we're talking about is an active loudspeaker system utilizing their special 300B amplifier for the midrange and tweeters while employing woofer amplification



Aurum Acoustics

by Bryston. Believe me when I say I was drooling over the sound I heard in this room. I spent some great time with Moss early one morning as he put the products through their paces. I really didn't find the clogging colorations so



Arum Acoustics



Blue Circle Audio, <http://www.bluecircle.com> have been around the Canadian scene since 1991. Owner/designer Gilbert Yeung has done an excellent job of filling out his electronics catalogue since the days of his original product, the BC-3 line-stage. His product range consists of everything from hybrid amplifiers (tubes and transistors), line-stages whether they are dual mono, tubed or transistor, with a pricing structure that starts at

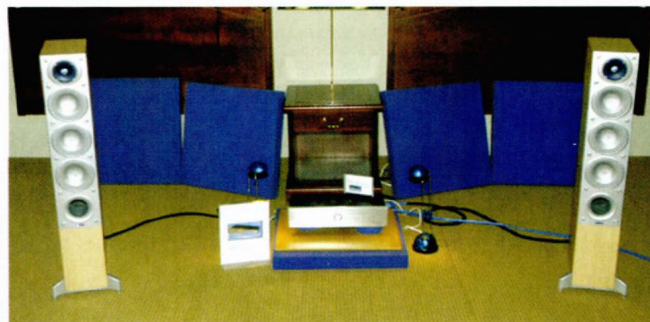
Ascent-i loudspeaker system, the electronics consisted of Gilbert's BC28 (120 watts, stereo class AB hybrid power amp with 2-6922's at \$5195CDN), the BC3 Galatea Mk II tubed, dual-mono line-stage, (\$6495CDN) and a Wadia 302 CD player. The sound was open, airy and very accurate to these ears. I know this CD intimately and we were both able to clearly discern the differences between the two cartridges. I really liked what I heard and will spend some time in the near future discussing these electronics once I've had a chance to take a longer listen at home.

Sim Audio, <http://www.simaudio.com>, is not a name unfamiliar to readers of this magazine. Based in Quebec, they've built an international reputation by offering some fine electronic components, not only for two channel aficionados but also for those inclined to move towards multi-channel music or home theatre installations.

often associated with SET playback and because of the uniqueness of this design the woofers (in a sealed enclosure within the speaker system) passed my AC/DC Thunderstruck test with flying colors. Whilst they're still pre-production models, these products will be available later this year. The cost for the Integris Active 300B (amplification and speakers) is going to be approximately \$30,000CDN and the CDP will be \$10,000CDN. That allows you to include your favourite phono section with no digital spillage, and the flexibility of the CDP allows you to employ either single-ended or balanced connection. Cables for the speaker system are included, sourced from Cardas. This is a very innovative product and I am still trying to figure out if I can get these babies in my room for a test run when production starts. My biggest concern is going to be space... but out of my living room!

approximately \$1100CDN all the way to \$15,000CDN! Their amplifiers start at \$1995CDN and move right to the \$21,000CDN price point. A phono stage, integrated amplifiers, various power cords, interconnects, speaker cables, power line conditioners and

The Small Blue Circle



several other accessories complete a product list that encompasses in excess of 65 items! I spent some great time with Gilbert one morning and we listened to my test CD-R which compared the same tracks using the Helikon mono and Titan mono. Listening to the Martin Logan

I spent a few minutes talking with Lionel Goodfield, Sim's V.P. of Marketing who basically explained to me that the new toys on the block were their Moon Limited Edition Series. This currently consists of five products in two different categories. In the MOON

Limited Edition Balanced Differential Music System we have the Eclipse LE CD Player, P-5 LE Dual-Mono



Fab Audio



► Pre-amplifier and W-5 LE Dual-Mono Power Amplifier. In their Limited Edition Reference Music System the two products are the Nova LE CD Player and the i-5 LE Integrated Amplifier. These are products that have many upgraded parts, tighter tolerances when matching parts and a Cardas power cord. This series will be strictly limited to 250 units each. Check their website for more information... but hurry as there's only a handful of each for the World!

There must be something in the water in this country given the number of fine speaker manufacturers. Too many to cover in real detail, so here are the web contacts for the ones I found most interesting such that you can do a little home research. These included Fab Audio

exposure to his fine line of very affordable loudspeakers. StudioLab Reference speakers were on display and the room was always packed ...too much so for me to spend any time with a one-on-one, but I will follow this up in the near future. You can have a look at their line at

<http://www.studiolabspeakers.com> . Israel Blume of Coincident Speaker Technology was getting some good sounds with a small speaker system in a room located across the street at the Sheraton Four Points.



Tondino

and have a look at a really fine line of loudspeakers.

I had a great time at the Montreal show, and really look forward to going back next year! I just hope I can remember that wonderful Friday night restaurant location which served some insanely fresh



Studio Lab

(and their new "Brat" loudspeaker): <http://www.fabaudio.com>. I was also very impressed with what I heard from Tondino Acoustic, <http://www.tondinoacoustic.com> and I'd like to thank Guy Pelletier for his kind explanations of his line. Believe me. His English is far better than my French! Also offering excellent sound, and some products I was very impressed with were what I heard from Focus Audio, <http://www.focusaudio.ca> and will be contacting Roger Kwong for some up close and personal

Coincident has seen many favourable reviews in North American magazines. They can be located at <http://www.coincidentspeaker.com> . I will be contacting Israel in the future to see what we can line up since we both live in Toronto. Totem Acoustics is a well-known manufacturer with an extensive line of products for both two and multi-channel installations. They had selected a pretty surreal home theatre demonstration located on one of the pavilion levels at the Delta. Totem can be viewed at:



The Coincident

<http://www.totemacoustic.com> . If you'd like to see what I mean by eclectic, then jump to: <http://www.totemacoustic.com/english/photoGallery/photoGallery.htm> and enjoy this for yourself. My biggest frustration was trying to get into the Gershman Acoustics rooms. I must have gone back at least a half dozen times and the rooms were packed. I'll be getting in touch with Gershman here in Toronto and see if we can remedy that situation. In the meantime, point your browser to: <http://www.gershmanacoustics.com/>





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# Incoming!

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

Dear Sir,

In earlier versions of Hi-Fi+, RG refers to (and uses!) more than once, an 'LEDR' - a useful tool when checking out speaker placement in a room. I believe that 'LEDR' refers to either a test CD or LP but I might be wrong!

Now as you know, I have read all bar one of the Hi-Fi+ issues but I am not clear what this LEDR stands for and where to obtain it from - it might be something esoteric or something out of production or both. However if it is something I could obtain from somewhere I would appreciate more details: you see I have to reset my speakers in another room - and anything to cut down the time and the back aches involved from endlessly moving around huge pieces of furniture (a phenomenon called 'age catching up with me') would be greatly appreciated! Many thanks once more.

**Kostas Agath**

Via e-mail.

*The LEDR test track first appeared on the original Chesky Test And Set-Up Disc, later on the HFN/RR Test CD 3, both now out of print I believe. It may also appear on one of the various Stereophile Test CDs, although I'm not sure about this. The track itself consists of a computer generated tone burst that is moved around the soundstage, first horizontally, then vertically and finally, and most interestingly, in a rainbow arc right across the speakers and soundstage. When setting-up speakers it is invaluable in quickly achieving correct lateral spacing and toe-in. The best starting point for obtaining one? Probably Moth Marketing (44)(C)1234 741152. Good luck! Ed.*

Hello,

I was wondering if you have any plans for reviewing either Totem or Sim Audio products in the not too distant future? I have tried to find on the net reviews of their top of the range products (like The Rock from Sim Audio and Shaman/Wind from Totem Acoustic) to no avail. It seems as if those products have received very little attention from the English language press. I myself own a pair of Wind and have compared them to speakers costing five times as much and I still consider them as good or sometimes even better. In other words they seem to me to be a very good price/performance buy. However I am biased. Thus it would be nice to hear someone

with TONS of experience (read you guys and girls) opinions' of their products.

Best Regards,

**Jorgen Boberg**

Via e-mail.

*As you'll have noticed, Sim's i3 integrated is reviewed in this issue, with more to follow. We've also reviewed several of the Totem speakers, being very impressed with the range, particularly the scale and integrity of the sound they produce from relatively small enclosures. We're looking forward to a deeper acquaintance very soon. Ed.*

Dear Ed:

Hi Fi+ is a fine publication. I enjoy reading it.

What bothers me is the incessant reviews of Naim equipment. Why not get it over and announce that Hi-Fi+ owners and staff are all share-holders or are in fact paid shills of Naim?

It's disturbing that Naim gets so much space from an otherwise great magazine.

**Jim Clark**

Via e-mail.

*I think Naim might be amused by your point of view. In fact, look at the development of the magazine since its inception and you'll see an interesting thing. Naim are one of the UK's most important and influential manufacturers, and when we started out both FM and JH were committed users, while CT was a lapsed devotee, having been seduced by the additional charms of the likes of Spectral. Well, in the last few years, things have changed pretty significantly at Naim. They have totally revamped the range, launching the new 5 Series, a complete new Classic range, as well as tilling out the top-end with the likes of the CDS3. But what is even more significant is the changes in their sound, which have alienated many of their most ardent fans whilst attracting admiration from the most unlikely sources.*

*So, the current situation is as follows. JH no longer uses any Naim products at all. FM remains a fan, but was far less impressed with the new NAP300 than either RG or CB, traditionally the valve die-hards on the magazine. Meanwhile CT feels that the "new" Naim is dramatically better than the* ►



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► *old, its performance aligning far more closely with other high-end offerings.*

*So, with such a major shift in sound going on, and with Naim being such a major player in the UK market, we'd be remiss in not investigating it. But, whilst we've reviewed more than a few Naim pieces we have in fact barely scratched the surface. We haven't looked at the 5 Series pre-power (or the surround processor!), nor most of the Classic pre, power or CD players. Nor have we looked at the new speakers. As with everything else it's a case of striking a balance. I do believe that what's happening in Salisbury is important to both Naim fans and those who've traditionally eschewed the brand. The performance of the NAF300 alone reveals that. We try to pick and choose the key products from what is a vast range. But, as I said, whilst we know our near neighbours well, I'm not sure they entirely trust us, what with all our strange cables and all... Share-holders? I'm not sure they'd let us buy in. We'd dilute the party line! Ed.*

Give up the Ghost if I were you, the web has you knackered, and you have some old hats scribing for you who are just too out of touch. Only one, at one point counted for anything, and that was Paul Miller who forced the hardware OEM's to sit up and pay attention to the problem of digital distortion - jitter, but we have all rumbled the ruse, and no matter the amount of copper plating, milled front panels, noise-free power supplies etc, we all know that our humble PC World or TIME budget PC's can be upgraded with a forty quid Crystal 24bit chip soundcard and a £15 "low noise" 12 volt power supply, and it will sound exactly the same as a MF Two grand SACD player, well that is sound the same when playing 16 bit/band limited PCM cd recordings.

As for some of the bollox spewed in your dreadful mag, again look back to Paul Millers testing on HFC for the nonsense of Trichord reclocking, and as for that lunatic old fraud- Dangerous Jim, when it comes to vnyl replay, the all important factor is the Phono stage, and we all want defined bass, and the only way to get that is with a one hundred quid MM cart into a wide bandwidth MM phonostage. Cartridges are a scam, it don't matter one jot if it is £100 mm or a Thirty Grand MC, both take a technician no more than a couple of hours to assemble, and the quality of components dosen't add up to No more than a tenner, and you tossers just add to the scam. And you lemons have written of Speakers costing thousands, but are fitted with transducers that we native surfers can purchase - including tax and shipping - NO more than 40 quid, add in a quality crossover from maplins (YEP, thats right, Maplins are selling crossovers for less than £18 that are found in cabinets costing twelve grand!) And all thats needed are the Theile small parameters for the cabinets - Birch coated medium MDF, cut precisely to exact measurements in

Homebase - \$9.

You haven't a clue what you are talking about, and you won't be missed one iota when you eventually vanish, and the sooner the better - Good Riddance.

**Josh S**

Via. e.mail

*Sic! Ed.*

Dear Sir,

In the latest issue of Hifi+ you CB the Naim NAP 300 with the McIntosh C2200 pre-amp with great results. I currently have the C2200 along with the MC2102 tube amp. I have two goals that I am trying to reach.

The first is to find a summer amp. We don't have air conditioning here in the San Francisco Bay area and in the summer the MC2192 can be unbearable to use. I've been looking for a good solid-state amp to mate with the C2200. From your commentary it sounds like the Naim and C2200 could be my solution (for another reason too which I'll note later). My local dealer won't loan out a Naim to demo for this purpose. What technical advice (or any other advice) do you have on mating the C2200 and a Naim amp, say the NAP 200? I know Naim can be finicky about connections and speaker cable and I don't want to blow anything up.

My second goal, and another reason to add a Naim amp is that I may work towards a Naim system. There are several reasons for this both practical and audio-wise. After a demo of the Naim gear last year, I left with a lingering taste for it. Right now I have the Nait 5i and CD 5i in a smaller system and thoroughly enjoying it. I'm looking forward to the Hi-Fi+ review of this pair when the issue gets to the US! But I would shoot higher than the 5 Series in my main system. Take the initial step with the Naim amp then go from there? I would probably need to replace my Tannoy speakers in that case too.

Anyway, I would appreciate your feedback and warnings.

Thanks,

**Andrew**

Via e-mail.

*CB responds.*

*Firstly, I should say that neither I nor the magazine can take responsibility for these suggestions, and I only report on what I find. However...*

*As you've probably gathered, until recently the idea of using a Naim power amp with anything but a Naim pre was definitely not allowed, due to the technical reasons I outlined. Your local dealer is right to uphold this, unless he gets the blessing from the manufacturers. What I can report is that Naim, while having not jumped for joy at my suggestion, have not indicated disapproval at the idea of using different pre-amps. A quick ►*



► *chat with designer Rcy George informed me that the new range are inherently more stable than the old, and I suggest that with caution you should encounter no problems.*

*I was very keen on the Mac C2200. It behaved perfectly, and sounded fantastic - against my every expectation. The combination with the NAP 300 was sublime, and one that I hope to repeat one day: Probably one of the best all round amplifier combinations I have ever had. I think the NAP 300 is special, and while the 250 is good, there is a large difference between them. I have no experience of the 200, but as far as I am aware it does not have a regulated FSU, which seems to give the more expensive models something special. Speaker cable...your dealer might insist on NAC A5, but as you know, I was using Nordost Valkyra, which over a 5 metre length is not significantly different in terms of inductance. Again, I have the impression that Naim, whilst not endorsing this, are more relaxed than they were. Avoid cables of fancy or dubious construction liable to exhibit strange electrical characteristics - particularly high capacitance. Short lengths of less than 3m should also be avoided, as Naim amps ideally need to see a certain amount of inductance. Decent power cords and interconnects also had a significant effect.*

*My opinion is that if you can afford it, go for the 300! I know I would. You will have to get some specific Cannon leads made up, and somehow convince your dealer. Why not take your pre amp into him for a listen? CB.*

Dear Sir

I am writing to tell you of a miraculous transformation in the sound of my hi-fi system, which took seconds and cost nothing. My brother is a valve and vinyl freak and has a tri-amped all-valve system. While talking to him recently, he emphasised the importance of phase coherence throughout the system. He then explained the concept of 'absolute phase'. Sometimes, to achieve this, it is necessary to alter the position of the plugs in the amplifier/speaker chain. Thus in a single-wired system there are four combinations: Normal at both ends, reversed at both ends, reversed at the speaker end and reversed at the amplifier end.

I reversed the cables at the speaker end and sat back in amazement. Almost every hi-fi parameter you can think of was improved. The stereo image was beautifully focused, there was increased width, height and depth. Counterpoint was much easier to discern, detail retrieval being improved. It became more obvious how a piece of music was constructed and produced. Bass definition improved and treble was more extended and airy. Even the noise floor seemed lowered.

What I would like to know, is why is this so? I have not tried the other combinations yet, but cannot imagine it getting any better than this. I would love to hear your comments.

Secondly, on the subject of your recent review of Nordost

mains leads, I have an observation. The expense of these leads seems unjustified, for the following reason. I do not doubt the accuracy of your staff's observations, but for a good deal less than this one can obtain a mains regeneration unit. I would expect the sound of a system to far surpass the use of these leads by installing a mains regeneration unit, thus freeing the system from the evils of the mains and using standard mains leads for the equipment. Since the Nordost Valhalla mains lead costs £1750, and a regeneration unit can be had for less than £1000, I would be very interested if you were to run a comparative test to check this out!

Yours

**Lynn Gray**

Via e-mail.

*Absolute phase is critical to system performance. However, things are not quite as simple as they might seem. The problem is that there is little or no consistency between studios and their recordings, or even on occasion, within their recordings. However, as you report, the sonic effects can be staggering. That's why so many CD players (and some pre-amps) offer a phase reversal switch.*

*As to mains regenerators, they are not all created equal. We have had some success with them, especially with CD players, but few have the capacity to accommodate a reasonably powerful amplifier. Of the ones I've used, the Accuphase is the best, but the larger model (still marginal with amplifiers) is well up there with a complete set of Nordost leads in the cost stakes. This is something that we'll be looking at in the near future, and we've been assembling the latest regeneration offerings to that end. Watch this space. Ed.*

Dear Sir,

Surely Tony Thomas has missed the point of a magazine like Hi-Fi+ which is to stimulate ideas and enthusiasm about reproducing music, and the more esoteric the equipment the better. His letter prompted me to review my system and discover that not one item has been reviewed in your magazine, but that has not in any way reduced my pleasure in reading it. There are plenty of mundane magazines which review equipment at the lower end of the market, though I can't say too much about them as I find them boring. If the only purpose of a hi-fi magazine was to enable the reader to purchase equipment then having once done so there would be little point in continuing to read the magazine, or you would need very deep pockets to support constantly changing equipment. It is the very fact that you explore the upper reaches of the hi-fi marketplace that makes your magazine so fascinating. Keep up the good work.

**Ron Kirkpatrick**

Via e-mail.



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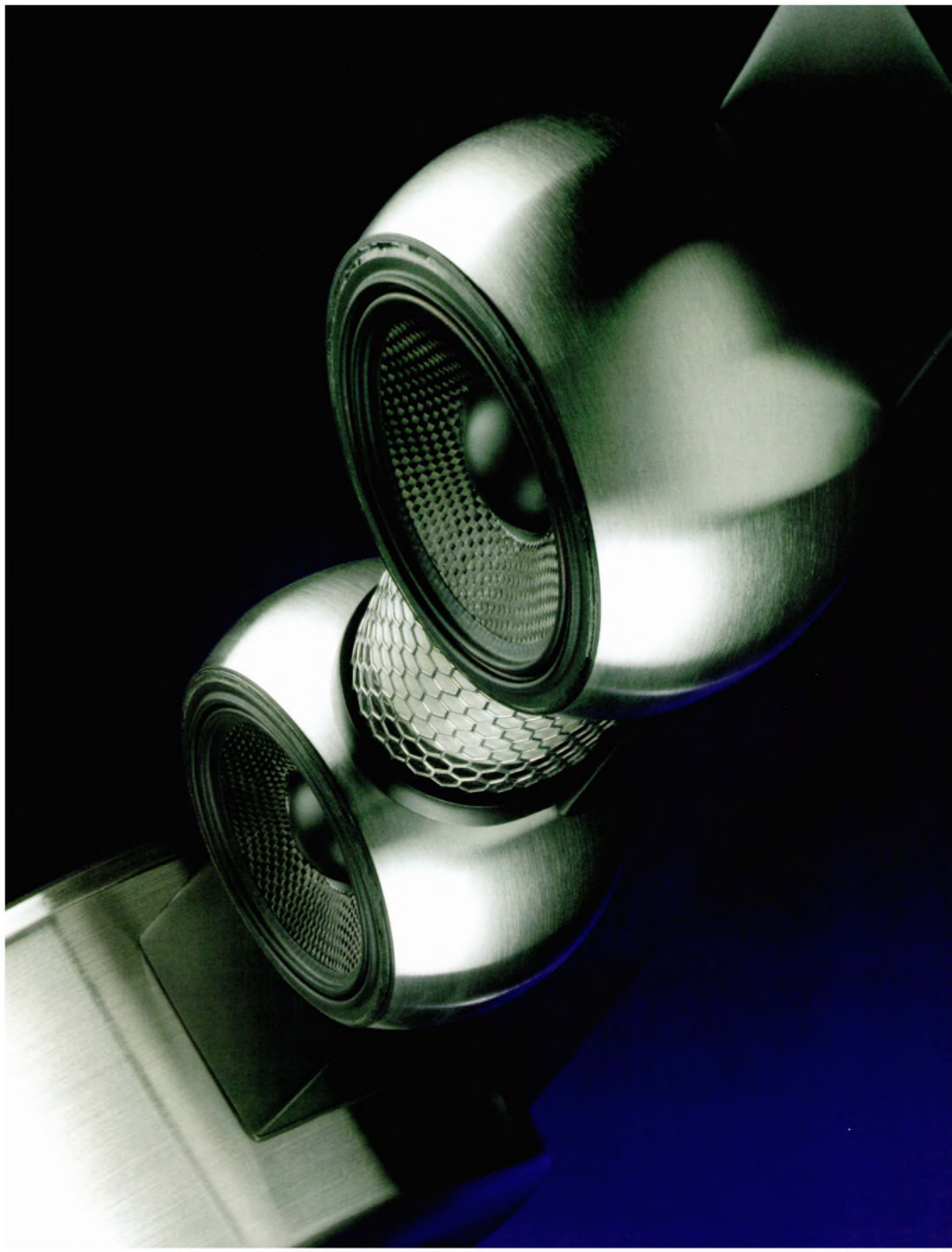
A remarkable *tour de force* - *Hifi News* magazine, UK.

The finest loudspeaker on the planet? Possibly - *Stereophile* magazine, USA.









# Gallo Nucleus Reference 3 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

When it comes to unusual (even bizarre) products then tonearms rule the hi-fi roost. Weird, wonderful and invariably expensive structures abound, exotic materials and manufacturing techniques rubbing shoulders with the frankly homespun. But loudspeakers run them a close second. The fact that even quite sophisticated drivers are readily available off the shelf combined with the hobbyist's natural spirit of enquiry and adventure creates a volatile mix. Factor in the sheer variety of driver technologies and options when it comes to bass loading and the possibilities appear something close to infinite. However, as so often, appearances are deceptive. The nature of speaker design means that, under the vastly different exteriors, many of these designs represent no more than variations on established themes. Unfortunately, the plethora of alternative "visions" serves only to obscure the few that are truly original.

Whilst many companies have played with spherical enclosures over the years, as far as I'm aware, Gallo were the first to actually use this approach in a commercially available design. Those original models featured largish mid-bass spheres coupled with the Lineaum DCT tweeter to produce stand-mounted designs of stunning appearance (and dispersion). And lest you think that these speakers were a mere novelty, their sonic performance was good enough to warrant UK distribution by no lesser a party than Absolute Sounds.

Of course, more recently, Gallo have carved themselves an enviable

reputation for their tiny, spherical satellite speakers and cylindrical sub-woofers. But there, lurking between the twin balls of their top satellite model the Due, you'll find lurking the familiar form of the CDT high-frequency driver. So, whilst the dimensions and overall concept might have changed, the execution and ingredients have remained very much the same. Until now...

Gallo have just launched their first floorstander in the shape of the Nucleus Reference 3. And shape is the word.

Rarely have I seen a speaker with such striking looks, no matter what angle you approach it from. But once you get over the visual impact and actually study the speaker it quickly becomes apparent that in reality it represents a modular unit, tied together by the mechanical spine. Just don't assume that any of the individual elements are the same as the satellite and sub units they appear to resemble.

The central core of the Reference 3 is a massive aluminium casting, constructed in two, mirror-imaged sides and securely welded together. Spacing bars ensure correct positioning of the rear slot as well as bracing the sides. Remove the rear panel, held in

place by no fewer than 20 substantial allen bolts, and you reveal the hollow interior, stuffed full of acoustic damping material. The crossover is mounted on the rear panel, the latter covered across its entire length by a rubber damping sheet. This is an extremely solid and rigid structure, to which the various drive unit enclosures are secured, decoupled by rubber interface mats designed to prevent rattles or mechanical non-linearities.



The carbon-fibre coned, 100mm chassis-diameter midrange drivers are mounted in the front of 120mm stainless steel globes. Gallo employ a patented approach dubbed "Roundsound S2" to decouple the rear-wave of the drivers from the enclosed air-mass, although they offer no details as to how this is done and the drivers themselves are not easily removed for examination. In an arrangement reminiscent of the Due, the two stainless steel balls flank the central tweeter, however, in this case the balls are bigger than those in the satellite design which

► necessitates shifting the high-frequency unit back a little to maintain correct time alignment.

CDT stands for Curved Diaphragm Tweeter, which is literal enough without really telling you anything. A silver plated plastic sheet is curved in tension between magnets so that it pulses, or breathes, when the signal is passed through its conductive surface. Closest in concept to a tethered ribbon of the type seen in the Eben speakers reviewed recently, Gallo also claim a  $-3\text{dB}$  point for the DCT at  $50\text{kHz}$ , delivering more than enough extension to render super-tweeters superfluous. In common with many other American speakers, the Reference 3s offers the user a rear mounted, tweeter-level control. The three position switch is simply annotated  $+$ ,  $0$  and  $-$  and you set it by ear.

But it's the bass where things start to get really interesting. Positionally of course, it's weird enough – perched up there, sideways on the speaker's leading edge and almost devoid of baffle area. The ten-inch, pulp coned drive-unit is contained in its own compact, stainless steel cylindrical drum, not much deeper than the driver's basket and motor. It's an elegant arrangement and certainly visually striking, but not an ideal way, you might conclude, to maximise low-frequency output. But, there are a few tricks up the Gallo's sleeve.

Firstly, despite its apparently exposed position, the Reference 3 places its bass driver much closer to the floor than the vast majority of modern floorstanders, and that brings bass-reinforcement benefits. I believe that there's also a port that vents from the driver's drum into the speaker's spine, thus increasing the available volume of air, loading the driver in a complex infinite baffle arrangement. "I believe" because, short of stripping all the damping material out of the upright it's impossible to be certain. Interestingly, the tapered and

mechanically separate nature of the spine's internal volume should help prevent standing waves and acoustic energy hitting the back of the driver's cone and causing intermodulation distortion of the type that smudges bass timing and detail.

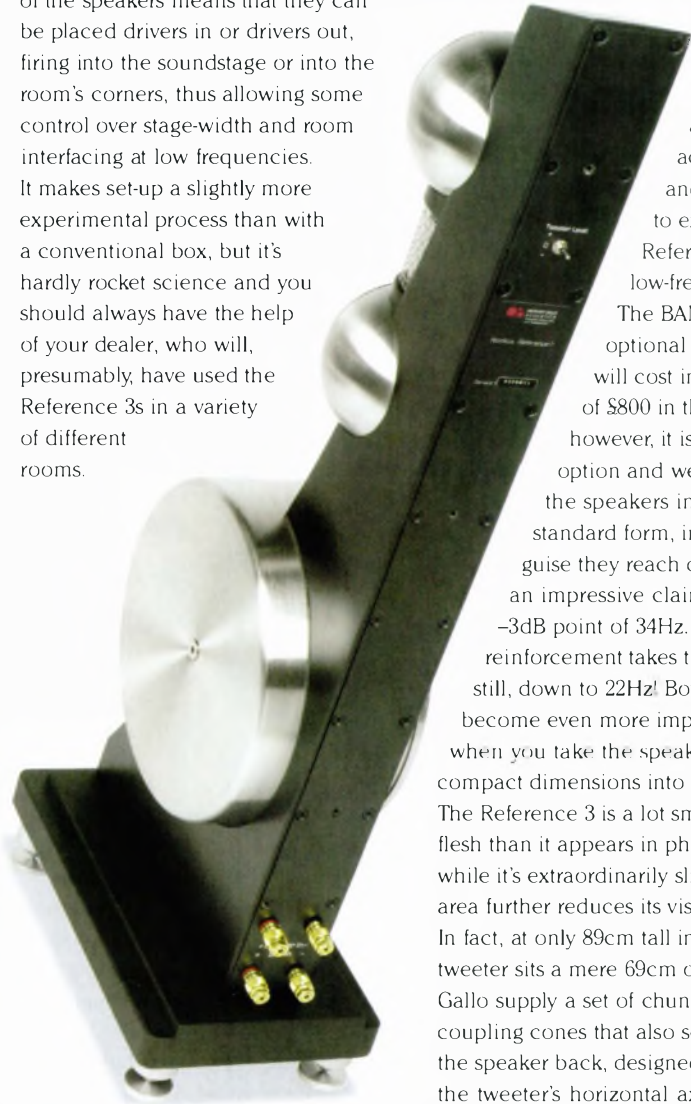
Secondly, the mirror image nature of the speakers means that they can be placed drivers in or drivers out, firing into the soundstage or into the room's corners, thus allowing some control over stage-width and room interfacing at low frequencies. It makes set-up a slightly more experimental process than with a conventional box, but it's hardly rocket science and you should always have the help of your dealer, who will, presumably, have used the Reference 3s in a variety of different rooms.

Thirdly, and least obvious of all, is the second set of speaker terminals, located at the bottom rear of the spine. Easy to assume that they're for the standard bi-wiring/bi-amping arrangement which is virtually standard on current speaker designs.

Not so. Look at the label next to the sockets and you'll see that it says "Sub In". That's because it connects directly to a second voice coil wound on the motor's former. This is designed for direct connection to the Gallo BAM (Bass Augmentation Box)

a rack width chassis containing an adjustable active filter and amplifier to extend the Reference 3's low-frequencies. The BAM is an optional extra that will cost in the region of  $\$800$  in the UK, however, it is only an option and we reviewed the speakers in their standard form, in which guise they reach down to an impressive claimed  $-3\text{dB}$  point of  $34\text{Hz}$ . Active reinforcement takes that further still, down to  $22\text{Hz}$ ! Both figures become even more impressive when you take the speaker's compact dimensions into account. The Reference 3 is a lot smaller in the flesh than it appears in photographs, while its extraordinarily slim frontal area further reduces its visual bulk. In fact, at only  $89\text{cm}$  tall in total, the tweeter sits a mere  $69\text{cm}$  off the floor. Gallo supply a set of chunky floor-coupling cones that also serve to tilt the speaker back, designed to bring the tweeter's horizontal axis up to seated ear height.

Which brings us, I guess, to the rest of the numbers. We've looked at the speaker's diminutive dimensions and surprising bandwidth of  $34\text{Hz}$  to  $50\text{kHz}$  ( $\pm 3\text{dB}$ ). Now add in an impedance of  $8\text{ Ohms}$ , an efficiency of  $88\text{dB}$  and a continuous power





▶ handling of 350 Watts and on paper you're looking at a potent and extremely well balanced package. Okay, so the sensitivity is a little on the low side, but the ease of drive and prodigious power handling certainly help to compensate. Now, and most important of all, the price. The Gallo Nucleus Reference 3 retails for £2400. Not exactly chicken feed, but it's an awful lot of speaker for that sort of money in every respect except its physical presence – and that, of course, can be a positive advantage.

One issue confronting any speaker that makes such a strong visual statement is the acceptability (or otherwise) of its appearance. Normally, I'd leave that one to the eye of the individual beholder, however in this case, a few additional observations are necessary. The Reference 3 is one of those products that looks a lot more attractive in the flesh than it does in most photographs. That's partly down to the solidity of its construction and the quality of its finish. But it also reflects the essential visual harmony of its various shapes and the way in which they combine. It's a package that has attracted universally positive comment from all those who've seen it – male and female. And that's with the high contrast silver on black finish option. Gallo know a thing or two about domestic harmony, and they've applied everything they know to the Reference 3. Such as? Well, the driver enclosures come in the brushed stainless finish shown, or a more discrete satin black. The speaker's foot is also available in cherry or a blond maple veneer for a slightly more organic, less monolithic feel. But the real trump card is the skeletal grille that completely encloses the spine and drive units if you so choose. Subtly curved in profile, the space-frame construction keeps the fabric well clear of the drivers and offers minimal acoustic interference. It simply drops over the speaker and is then

clamped securely in place by three, knurled allen bolts that screw, top to bottom, into threaded bosses welded to the spine's back plate. Positively located by the step around the foot, it creates a structure that's stiff and strong enough to pick the whole speaker up by – although I wouldn't actually recommend that.

The end result is compact and discrete enough for any environment, whilst retaining enough shape to remain innately stylish. Doesn't it rather defeat the object?

Well, no. You see, Gallo have been really clever in choosing a lightweight,

open weave fabric. Sonically superior, it also gives owners the option of back-lighting the speakers with something like a small halogen placed on the floor behind them. It's a stunning effect, illuminating the grilles from within, revealing the speaker's silhouette and offering subtle highlights off of the curved surfaces. Stylish? In spades and in any language you choose.

Setting up the Gallos, as I hinted earlier, is slightly more involved than with some speakers, however, it's mainly a case of different rather than

any more difficult. Start by spiking the speakers and placing them pointing straight out from the rear wall and maybe 18" clear of the boundary with the tweeter switches in the zero position. In most cases I'd start with the bass-drivers pointing outwards. Choose a record or disc with nice, clear bass that covers a decent range – upright bass works pretty well in most cases. Move the speakers forward or back (using a tape measure to ensure symmetry of all adjustments) for the best combination of bass weight and pitch definition. Next, take a recording with a good central vocal and work on toe-in. If the soundstage sounds congested look to spread the speakers laterally. If the voice sounds insubstantial and lacking body, now is the time to consider swapping the speakers so that the bass drivers point into the soundstage. Just remember to mark their positions before you shift them. If you do swap them you'll have to readjust for bass weight, but the previous placing will serve as a good starting point.

Once you've got the lateral spacing right (and it'll probably be slightly wider than you expect) it's time to fine-tune the vertical angle of the speakers. Start by getting them absolutely vertical using a spirit level across the front edge of the foot. Then, sitting in the listening position slowly rock your head forward and back through 18 inches or so.

Listen for best focus, dimensionality and coherence. That will indicate when you're on the tweeter axis, and be aware that what you are listening to is really the mid-band rather than the high-frequencies. If that point is ahead of your normal seated position, use the spikes to tilt the speaker slightly towards you, or vice versa. Once you are happy measure the angle of the speakers along the side of the foot ▶



▶ and ensure that they are identical. Make sure the feet are totally stable on the floor and use a spanner to tighten the lock nuts on the cones. Now go back to your bass track and ensure that everything is as it should be. Now is also the time to check the tweeter level. Pay attention to its effect on bass speed, integration and definition. I ended up with it flat, but play with this, because it makes a real difference. I found that I needed to push the speakers back about an inch to compensate for the toe-in, necessitating readjusting the tweeter axis, but it really is worth taking this much care.

It might sound complicated but basically, what you are trying to do is balance the bass reinforcement from the side and rear walls against the super-tweeter level, to get the best soundstage dimensionality and musical coherence. Once you hear what the tweeter control does to the midrange and bass, you'll soon get the hang of it. Once again, in most cases it'll probably end up flat, but this and the in/out option on the bass drivers actually makes it possible to achieve this speaker's considerable potential in a wide range of different rooms – and that's before you consider the BAM.

I used the Reference 3s on the end of the Wadia 861 (with and without the Reimyo DAP-777) feeding the Hovland HP200/RADIA via the Nordost Valhalla signal and mains cables. Vinyl front-end was the Clearaudio Master Reference record player, while the excellent Burmester CD Player 001 also made an appearance. The bi-wired Valhalla speaker cables were doubled up by clamping one plug behind the speaker's binding-post and putting the other into its 4mm socket – better than a single run, but hardly ideal: Far better to get a set of high quality single-wires made up by your dealer.

On the face of it, that system might seem like overkill for a speaker at the Gallo's relatively modest price. In practice however, the Reference 3s

are perfectly comfortable in this kind of company. As soon as you play them you notice their speed and open presentation, their focus and quick dynamics. So much so that they easily eclipse their conventional price peers. Most of the speakers I run at home slot into the £4000 to £8000 bracket, and the Gallos beg comparison with those products in the sense that they challenge their strengths and its really only in that context that their weaknesses become apparent. So, with that in mind I'm going to do something a little dangerous: I'm going to measure the Gallos against the standards set by the best of the competition at between twice and three times their price. It means they'll come in for criticism, but what you have to remember is the context of that criticism.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the real strength of the Reference 3 lies in the absence of the normal, boxy colourations. The equal and opposite energy generated by the frenetic movement of driver diaphragms has to go somewhere. Secure them to a rectangular, wooden structure and the panels that make it up will start to shake at their various resonant frequencies, taking the broadband energy they receive and re-transmitting it as spikes of energy within discrete bands. Some of that energy goes straight out into the room, some of it goes back through the speaker's structure and the driver's basket into the diaphragm itself. The net effect of this intrusive energy is to blur and confuse the information generated by the drive unit. Because it happens at specific frequencies, dictated by the dimensions and structure of the cabinet, these distortions take on an equally specific and recognisable character.

Of course, manufacturers who produce speakers in conventional wooden cabinets go to great lengths to minimise these effects. Witness the rash of boat-backed cabinets or the

enormous care that a company like Avalon puts into its enclosures. Material choice and mix, bracing and shape all have a significant part to play. But they also cost a lot of money to execute. Combine that fact with the unfortunate reality that the bigger the cabinet the bigger the problem, and that the cabinet is the most expensive part of a loudspeaker, even before you start doing anything fancy with it, and you begin to appreciate why the bass response of most sub-£1000 floorstanders is about as clear as mud.

By adopting such an unconventional approach to the cabinet for the Reference 3, Gallo have killed two birds with one stone. The cast and welded aluminium spine, with its complex shape and multiple braces is far more rigid as well as being cheaper to execute and finish than a wooden box. It's at the heart of both the Reference 3's sound and its price. Combine it with the technology already developed for their satellite speakers (and subs) and they're onto a winner.

So far so good: The problem is that, in banishing box colouration, that most obvious of speaker artifacts, you risk exposing flaws that are otherwise obscured. It's rather like electrostatic speakers. What people think they are hearing is their lack of box colourations. But other panel speakers lack boxes, yet they don't have the characteristic "electrostatic sound" that characterises that sort of drive units. There again, ribbon and planar magnetic drivers use different structures and materials to most electrostatics. What you hear when you listen to an electrostatic is not the absence of box colouration: Rather it's the absence of box colouration allowing you to hear drive-unit colouration. The loudspeaker as Hydra – banish one problem and another rears its ugly head.

In the case of the Reference 3, you are actually faced with a slightly different scenario. The average ▶

▶ electrostatic uses a single driver to cover the majority of the range. This delivers both a coherent presentation and consistent colouration! But we all know about trying to integrate moving-coil woofers with electrostatic panels, and just how hard it is. The Gallo faces the issue of trying to integrate three different driver materials and two different driver types. What this means in real terms is that the crossover engineering becomes critical, with the slightest discontinuity ruthlessly revealed. In truth, the designers have done an excellent job, but it isn't flawless. Whether it's the shift in dispersion angles between the midrange drivers and the tweeter, or the change in materials (probably a combination of both) there is a change in tonal character as you ascend the frequency range. The treble has a hint of the plastic-y hollowness that I hear from a lot of electrostatics, which contrasts with the rich warmth and substance of the broad mid-band.

What does this mean in terms of music? As I've noted, pace, dynamics and musical structure are all first rate making the Gallos engaging and enjoyable to listen to. There's a rewarding sense of weight and impact from the bass that provides a firm foundation for the focussed substance of the midrange. Vocals are beautifully solid and separate, with a nice sense of space behind them and shape to the words. That open presentation, uncluttered or muddled makes music and its meaning immediately accessible. Combine that with the impressive timing and rhythmic fluidity and integrity and you are ensured of a communicative experience. So, musically the

Reference 3s are definitely all there. Just listen to the way they sail through the rhythmic minefield that represents Jackie Leven's stunning and complex cover of 'You've Lost That Loving Feeling', or the emotional sleights of hand that represent the pain and loss of 'Single Father'. No shortage of agility or expressive musical insight then: That's what raises the Gallos well above the expected performance level.



Where the Gallos have failings is, as I've suggested, tonally at the top-end. Even then, they're neither intrusive nor destructive. There's not a hint of spit or edge to irritate or subliminally annoy. Indeed, if anything it's a shade too smooth. Jackie's voice

loses some of its complexity, taking on a homogeneity and sweetness that anybody who's heard him live would certainly question. The XRCD re-issue of Britten conducting his *Young Person's Guide...* reveals both the Reference 3's strengths and weaknesses. There's an impressive weight, power and texture to the orchestral depths, with excellent

spread and placement of the individual instruments within the sound-field.

Imagery is specific, fastening on instruments at the expense of the acoustic boundaries, which is much more in the style of a mini-monitor than a di-pole. The tims are wonderfully resonant, while the carefully layered structure of the piece is beautifully rendered.

On the downside, the piccolo has an exaggerated, piping quality, the triangle and other high percussion has a hollowness and lack of body. Cymbals are all frizz and no fundamental.

Most troublesome are massed violins that take on a smoothness and gloss that robs them of edge, texture and bite.

Likewise Martzy who comes across as rather too polite, and Camilla Wicks who suffers a similar

infusion of grace and manners, robbing both these powerful performers of some of their poise ▶



▶ and impact. The violin, more than any other instrument, suffers from the mid to treble discontinuity. That first swooping theme that opens the Wicks' Sibelius concerto loses some of its haunting quality, the solo instrument some of its command, integrity and tension.

So, here we have a conundrum: A speaker that performs superbly in terms of its musical and structural (in every sense of the word) integrity, but one that exhibits a single real flaw. The advantage of course, is that with such a specific issue it is relatively easy to take ameliorative measures. The combination of the stark neutrality of the RADIA and the high frequency energy levels of the Valhallas represent a worst case scenario. Why then concentrate so heavily on this set-up? Precisely because the Reference 3 is so good in other respects that it becomes important to understand the limits

of its performance – and place those limits in a proper context. Which is what I'll attempt now.

Were I going to live with the Reference 3s (a proposition that I find really quite appealing) then I'd run them on the end of a different system. My first choice would be the Rogue Audio M150s (or the stereo 90 if it had enough guts) with the Chord Signature cabling, a combination that would make the most of the speaker's musical

the high-frequency body and balance. But I fully intend to follow this strand further. It's just that I'm way over word count already.

As it stands, the Gallo Nucleus Reference 3 is a fascinating speaker that will bear comparison with competitors at far higher prices. Only then, and only when driven by the most critical electronics, does its musical integrity begin to suffer, its flaws begin to reveal themselves. But, those flaws are relatively minor in scale, and more importantly, are rarely musically destructive.

It may lack the overall coherence of the KEF Reference 207 or Avalon Ascendant, but that you can compare it at all is impressive given the price differential. Compared to designs that sell closer to the retail price of the Reference 3s? No contest I'm afraid.



enthusiasm and dynamic capabilities without accentuating the issue of tweeter integration. Having had these units in the house recently you might well wonder why I didn't do exactly that? Unfortunately the Rogues had to go before I had the chance. Then there's the whole issue of extending the bass and the effect it'll have on

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way infinite baffle loudspeaker
Drive Units:	1x CDT tweeter 2x 100mm carbon fibre midrange 1x 250mm pulp cone bass
Bandwidth:	34Hz – 50kHz (±3dB) 22Hz with active bass module
Sensitivity:	88dB
Power Handling:	350 Watts continuous
Nominal Impedance:	8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	203 x 889 x 406mm
Weight:	21.3kg
Finishes:	See text
Price:	£2400

#### UK Distributor:

Anthony Gallo Acoustics  
Tel. (44)(0)870 350 1348  
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# The Rega R9 Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

It is an arguable and possibly controversial point that loudspeaker design is now less of a black art and more of a science than it used to be. It is, however, a fact that the computer age has brought the cost and difficulty of measurement and technical evaluation of audio equipment down to a level where it is easily available to almost anyone who wants to produce loudspeakers. What was previously strictly the domain of bigger companies with a suitably large research budget is now commonplace. The prevalence of software such as Melisa has simplified the design process quite considerably, while there are a number of crossover design programmes and enclosure simulations that enable modelling of different drive units and components without ever having to go near a soldering iron or hacksaw. There is little or no excuse these days for a commercial loudspeaker not to have some of the more basic parameters technically correct, such as a 'flat' frequency response or an 'acceptable' impedance curve.

So is the 'art' of loudspeaker design dying? I would tentatively suggest that the parameters we measure are still a very small part of what contributes to a great loudspeaker. When all the available measurement technology is used as a time saving tool (and not a substitute for listening) there is still plenty of room for imagination and creativity. And fortunately, there is no such thing as the universal loudspeaker – yet. It might also explain why the Rega R9 uses four drive units when on paper at least, two would do. But then Rega have always had a history of doing things differently.

Amongst the many fashions and trends that have afflicted hi-fi, there was

a time in the mid-eighties when there was no such thing as a floor standing loudspeaker. The stand mount enclosure ruled the day, a fact verified while recently looking through a 1984 Hi-Fi Choice book I found while clearing out. Out of nearly eighty designs, only two could be considered floor standing, one of which was the Quad ESL 63 and doesn't count, the other being the then new KEF 104. 2. Then in the late eighties it all changed, with one or two models from certain manufacturers leading the way, and the rest following like lemmings until the market was swamped with them.

I think Rega can claim to be one of the innovators here, as their ELA model was certainly one of the first. I remember some vague justification for the compact floor stander running along the lines of it taking up no more space

than a stand mounted model, besides which it made sense to substitute the space vacated by the stand with more cabinet and thus extend the bass response. Which was fine in theory; in practice that meant more opportunity for panel resonances, while greater low frequency extension could mean that room integration was more of a problem.

The latest loudspeaker to appear from Rega breaks little new ground in so much as it too, is a floor stander, albeit one that's somewhat larger than anything they have produced before. Like the P9 turntable it aims to extend the company's products policy into a higher cost/performance area of the market. To that end, the R9 is more than just a tall slim box, and incorporates a number of innovative features, implemented in the slightly idiosyncratic way that is typical of Rega, while continuing to offer value for money. Bearing in mind what I said earlier about larger loudspeakers and interfacing with rooms, one of the priorities was to create a design that would be as flexible as possible in this respect, and there are a number of aspects to the R9 that reflect this. The use of a quarter wave transmission line to load the bass unit (used in a number of Rega designs before) potentially offers advantages in terms of achieving an even bass response in different acoustic environments; it also provides superior control and damping of the cone over a wide range. Considerable attention has been paid to its implementation in the R9; the internal damping is



► supported evenly with the use of nylon rods, while the wiring is anchored into the corner of the enclosure to minimise turbulence.

While the R9 is a fairly large loudspeaker, the proportions make it domestically quite manageable by being tall and slim, with a visual identity that distinguishes it from the more normal, bland veneered boxes. The three drive units on the front are surrounded by an elegant piece of machined Perspex, over which the grille is magnetically attached to the cabinet. At the bottom, four brackets into which the spikes are threaded provide a wider footprint. Personally I think that they slightly diminish the aesthetic, looking like a bit of an afterthought. The relative complexity of the transmission line means that the cabinet is well braced internally. This exits to the real world via a large opening on the rear panel, above which is a large port that acts for the mid range enclosure. The in house manufactured eight inch bass unit is mounted on the side of the cabinet, and has been engineered to start rolling off at about 250 Hz. With careful design and the use of an eight-layer voice coil this is accomplished without any additional electrical filtering. This is one of the benefits of making your own drive units; the lightweight paper coned mid range unit is likewise designed to work with the minimal amount of crossover components, and apart from an inductor to tailor the top end roll off, runs pretty much full range. Hence the large port, where the low frequencies produced interact with the main bass driver output to even the response.

Crossing over at 3.5 KHz, the first tweeter handles response up to about 15K, where a smaller

unit takes over. Both of these are coupled with third order networks, and while sourced from Morel and Scaspeak respectively, they are extensively modified in house for their particular application.



This unusual arrangement might at first suggest a concession to current fashion in the form of a super tweeter, but Rega are at pains to point out that this is not the case; it is merely to provide a better response within the audible band. To prevent adverse effects on air flow and minimise micro-phony, the crossover components are housed in a separate,

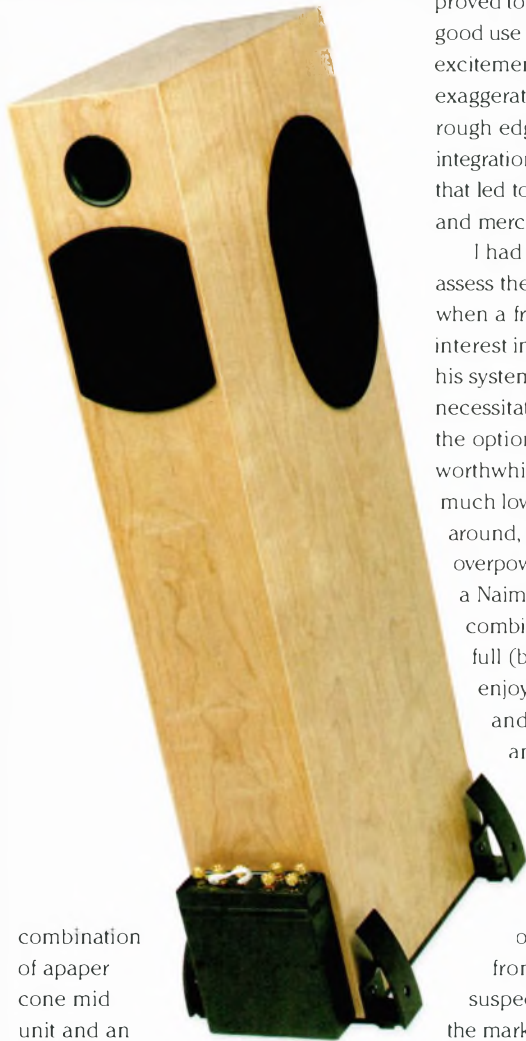
non-magnetic enclosure that is bolted (a little inelegantly) on to the back of the cabinet. High quality binding posts allow for bi wiring (something I always felt Rega would not favour) and unusually, the option of electrically reducing bass output via a selectable link. This is to allow more flexibility in smaller rooms and/or situations that demand near wall placement, although a minimum of eight inches or so is required due to the rear firing port and transmission line exit. It's an approach that's familiar from the KEF Reference series and certainly aids room matching.

Maybe it was the presence of both Roy Gandy and designer Michael Stops who delivered the speakers, but the R9's sounded pretty damn good right from the start. So much so that I did not feel compelled to start messing around with positioning and spikes; the Rega's appeared to be pretty fuss free. I was, I admit a little concerned when I discovered that the little 5 inch mid-range unit was also covering the bass - surely this must compromise the power handling? Cue various 'heavy' bass type recordings, and a bit of excessive electronic music, only to discover that it is not a problem, even after Roy and Mike had headed back to Essex and I let rip with the volume control. The R9's will go satisfyingly loud, and remained clean and focused with all the material that I played through them, while the nature of the sound changes very little with listening level; thankfully they are capable of working well at low volumes too. Positioned in my room with plenty of space around them, the bass response seemed to be pretty even, with good extension, although it very occasionally sounded 'detached' from the rest of the loudspeaker, like a poorly positioned sub woofer. The solution was to swap the speakers around so that the bass units were firing inwards rather than at the walls, whereupon things improved considerably. Most of my listening was carried out with the ultra-refined Naim NAP300, but using



▶ Rega's own Exon 3 power amps proved worth-while, as not unexpectedly they 'keyed in' with the R9's to offer a bit more kick to the bottom-end that was worthwhile, particularly with rock music.

The R9's are very comfortable to listen to. While the bass end was quite generous, the mid and top seemed to be well balanced, and managed to be informative without being analytical, with a presentation that was unforced, allowing music to develop at its own pace. I think the



combination of a paper cone mid unit and an absence of crossover components was responsible for the coherent and detailed presentation, while the top end was beautifully smooth and

natural. The use of two tweeters has worked rather well, and bear in mind that I have been listening to some very exotic and costly units such as the JM Labs Beryllium and Eben acoustics recently. The Rega's are not perhaps the fastest loudspeakers in the known universe, but there is plenty of leading edge definition, which together with the ability to resolve musical dynamics means that they are not short of excitement when required. Hooking them up with the Rogue mono blocks proved to be interesting; the R9's made good use of the boundless energy and excitement that was on offer, while not exaggerating the M150s' occasional rough edges. There was a sense of integration and presence to the sound that led to some very enjoyable listening, and mercifully few thoughts of hi-fi.

I had more of an opportunity to assess the Rega's room adaptability when a friend of mine declared an interest in listening to the R9's with his system. With a smaller room that necessitated placement near to a wall, the optional attenuation proved to be worthwhile; without it there was too much low frequency energy bouncing around, giving rise to a swampy, overpowering performance. Driven by a Naim CDS3/XPS2/NAC 552/NAP300 combination, the bass was still pretty full (but that's something that I quite enjoy), while remaining tuneful and reasonably taut. With an overall sound that was sumptuous and highly engaging, the R9's sounding like a large and refined high-end loudspeaker.

While the R9 has a number of features that set it apart from the mainstream, (and I suspect this particular sector of the market is fiercely competitive) its real strengths lie with the combination of these to produce a very musical and thus enjoyable loud-speaker. While they do not appear to be critical of amplification, I think the R9's benefit

from being used with products that have some drive and authority, and I cannot see them being a great success with low powered valves for instance. The bass alignment and available attenuation does offer a degree of flexibility with different environments, but the extended, generous bass does require a certain amount of space in which to work properly and realise its potential; I think it could prove too much in very small rooms. However, I think Rega can sleep soundly at night, as the R9 successfully continues the company policy of offering high performance and value for money: Admirably so. ➤+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Four-way floorstanding loudspeaker with quarter-wave bass loading
Drive units:	
Bass:	8 inch paper cone with 8 layer voice coil
Mid:	5 inch paper cone
Treble:	1 inch soft dome 0.75 inch soft dome
Impedance:	6 Ohms nominal
Power Handling:	150 Watts continuous
Efficiency:	88 dB
Bandwidth:	35 - 20 KHz
Dimensions (HxWxD):	1030x170x388mm
Footprint:	435 x 260
Weight:	19Kg
Finishes:	Cherry or Maple
Price:	£2498

#### Manufacturer:

Rega Research Ltd.  
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# The Spendor S8e Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

It was during the Bristol Show in February that Philip Swift (owner) and Graham Landick (designer) drew my attention to a whole new range of Spendor speakers. It's just as well they did, as I might not have noticed them, because the new models look just like they did before, and have very similar type numbers too – just distinguished by an 'e' suffix. This implies that evolution has taken place, in the form of all sorts of fundamental changes to the main drive units. Which seems reason enough to take a fresh look and listen to something from the new generation of S/e models.

But which model? There are five regular stereo pairs to choose from – one stand-mount and four floorstanders – besides a clutch of multi-channel extras. The stand-mount is the S3e, while the floorstanders include the two-and-a-half-way S5e, and S6e and S8e two-ways, plus the three-way S9.

It's not an easy decision. By and large I'm wary of three-ways, finding that any theoretical advantages are often outweighed by their extra complexity, and that two-ways (and two-and-a-half-ways) tend to work rather better at normal listening levels. I therefore left the S9e out of the picture. I was tempted by the S5e, which looks particularly cute and neat, but I've always had a high regard for Spendor's 8-inch two-ways, going right back to the classic BC1 (which still serves me as an occasional reference), so the S8e looked the likeliest contender. Besides, it was the S8-without-an-e which I reviewed for Hi-Fi+ a couple of years ago, so it seemed logical to give its evolved successor a whirl.

When reviewing a loudspeaker, it's nice to be able to set up some sort of context. I did actually suggest it might be interesting to compare the S8e with

its S8 predecessor, but Philip didn't think this was such a good idea. He did, however, bring along a pair of S6es as well as the S8es, and that in itself proved illuminating. And of course I still had the measured data I took for the original S8, which was also rather interesting.

Spendor's heritage goes back some thirty-five years, and it's intriguing to note how loudspeakers as a breed have changed down the years, even though the laws of acoustics remain resolutely the same.



When the BC1 first appeared at the end of the 1960s, it was unusual in a number of respects, though with hindsight, had a powerful influence on the way things subsequently developed.

Back in the 1960s, 'serious' loudspeakers still reflected the earlier era when systems were monophonic and amplification was low-powered and thermionic. They were big and bulky affairs, usually based around 12-inch drive units. Taking advantage of increased solid state amplifier power and the doubling up of stereophony, the BC1 opted for a much lower sensitivity, using a relative small 8-inch main driver – a size normally only found at the time in the 'budget bookshelf' boxes like Wharfedale Lintons and Dentons. Thirty five years on, the 8-inch driver has itself

become a rarity, supplanted by the 6.5-inch size, used singly or in multiples, that dominate today's scene.

Other influential innovations introduced by Spendor's BC1 included stand-mounting and free space siting, neither of which were common prior to the 1970s. Those original BC1 stands lifted the 2 cu ft speakers just 1 ft off the deck, and had castors (not spikes!) so they could be moved easily back towards the wall when not in use.

Stand-mount two-ways grew in popularity through the 1970s and 1980s, and are still the choice of enthusiasts today, though the mid-1980s saw floorstanders reappearing, some as two-ways, others using the extra enclosure and the falling real price of drive units to experiment with alternative driver configurations, like two-and-a-half-ways. Some – like the Naim SBL and Rega ELA – used the whole of the enclosure acoustically; others effectively took a stand-mount design and extended the box down to the ground, fitting spikes and blanking off the lower section of the enclosure to allow greater bandwidth or sensitivity.

Although the two-way stand-mount still arguably makes the most sense from an all round performance perspective, there's no denying that, outside the performance-led enthusiast sector, most customers prefer to avoid having bits of ironmongery in the lounge, and prefer floorstanders for largely aesthetic reasons. Spendor still makes classic large stand-mounts like the SP2/3e, known logically as the Classic series, but the S-series is where the real commercial action lies these days.

A major reason for the popularity of 6.5-inch and 5-inch (165mm and 130mm) drivers lies in their potential for use in fashionably slim and hence ▶



▶ discreet enclosures. An 8-inch (200mm) unit inevitably requires a chunkier cabinet, but the S8e still manages to look attractively compact, if a little chunkier than its S6e stablemate.

It's actually an exceptionally good looking loudspeaker, thanks to high class ingredients and some neat detailing. The sharp-edged enclosure is all over veneered in real wood, with a choice of cherry, maple, 'rosenut' or black ash.



It seems a shame to cover up the veneered front with its flush-mount drivers, but the shield-shaped grille, protruding from a shaped hardwood trim strip, adds a distinguished and distinctive touch.

A hefty black MDF plinth provides a finishing touch, lateral extensions at the back ensuring superior physical stability. An unusual method of securing the chunky 8mm spikes is adopted here, and proved highly effective too. Each spike has two lock nuts: the upper serrated circular one being finger-tightened while adjusting the spikes to level the speaker; then the lower hex-nut is tightened against it to ensure the spike stays tight over the long haul, without risking damage to the socket

arrangement.

The S8e costs £1,895 per pair, a significant increase over the £1,700/pair S8 predecessor, but numerous changes have been introduced to improve the performance, so maybe the increase is justified. The cast-frame main driver



uses a new ep38 polymer cone material, plus a new and carefully optimised surround material too. The 150mm diameter cone used here has roughly one and a half times the area of the 120mm cones normally used by 6.5-inch drivers. Finite element analysis has been used to improve the linearity of the magnetic motor, and a shaped phase plug improves its top end smoothness around the crossover. A new type of 27mm soft fabric dome tweeter is also fitted, with a rear chamber to absorb back radiation.

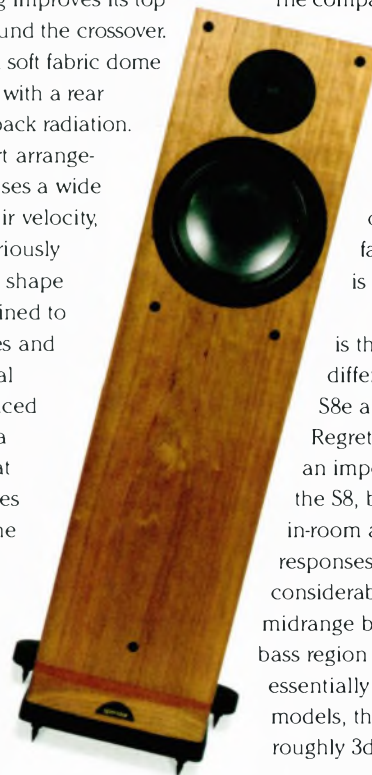
The unusual port arrangement at floor level uses a wide rear slot to reduce air velocity, as before, but its curiously asymmetric internal shape has been further refined to avoid standing waves and promote symmetrical airflow. The well braced enclosure includes a polymer damper that mechanically couples the main driver to the box and damps any vibration energy.

The crossover network is now mounted on a damped stainless steel plate to

inhibit mechanical vibration, along with two terminal pairs for optional bi-wiring or bi-amping. The inductor cores have been updated and series resistors to attenuate the tweeter output are deliberately avoided, using auto-transformers instead. Each loudspeaker pair is matched to within 1dB across the audio spectrum.

As mentioned, Philip had brought over both the S6e and S8e models, so first of all we connected up the smaller model. This sounded well enough in a rather restrained sort of way, but swapping over to the larger S8e was particularly interesting because the two speakers have so many similarities in terms of ingredients and tonal balance, yet the S8e sounded clearly and convincingly superior in terms of its dynamic capabilities and expression. I've long suspected that a larger drive unit with (slightly) greater sensitivity has an inherent advantage over its smaller equivalent, though it's virtually impossible to isolate sufficient variables to confirm such a theory.

The comparison of these two Spondors, however, certainly seems to provide some support for the hypothesis, though whether cone area or sensitivity is the factor responsible is impossible to say. No less interesting is the quite substantial differences between the S8e and its S8 predecessor. Regrettably I don't have an impedance trace for the S8, but comparing the in-room averaged frequency responses reveals a quite considerable change in the midrange balance. Although the bass region (below 150Hz) is essentially the same for both models, the new model has roughly 3dB less output (on





► average) through the broad mid-band up to 2kHz, and around 2dB less through the treble above 3kHz. The result is that the low-to-mid bass is a little more prominent than before, relatively speaking, but the overall balance is rather smoother and more even than it was. Indeed, the whole frequency range above 60Hz is very well balanced indeed, and the cross-over transition at around 2.3kHz is considerably smoother than before. Furthermore, apart from being a little leaner through the upper bass and lower mid-band (70-300Hz), the new S8e delivers a balance that shows surprisingly close correspondence to my thirty year old BC1s. Which is no bad thing, of course, since few if any designs have been better voiced than that classic monitor.

The consequence is a speaker which has sacrificed a little sensitivity compared to its predecessor – I'd give it 86.5dB/W rather than the 89dB claimed and achieved by the S8. But that's not a big price to pay for the lovely mid-band voicing that this new 8e delivers. There wasn't a whole lot wrong with the S8, although voices did sound a little shut in. Now they simply sound beautifully natural, with no trace of forcing or aggression, and just a little restraint. The latter probably has less to do with the voicing than a slight lack of dynamic expression. The S8e might have the edge over the S6e in this regard, and tightening its driver fixing bolts and making sure the spikes were firmly fixed helped sharpen things up a little, but it doesn't quite convey the same level of tension

or instrumental texture that one can find elsewhere.

Just prior to auditioning the S8e I was enjoying a pair of enormous Tannoy Yorkminsters – with a 12-inch alnico magnet dual concentric driver and 93dB sensitivity. Changing over to the Spondors provided a clear illustration of the compromises involved in all loudspeaker designs. Whereas the Tannoy supplied the micro-dynamics that provide subtle extra clues about, say, the makeup of a string section, the Spondor showed its superior side through remarkably low boxy colorations.

Restraint and self-effacement are high on the S8e's agenda, and it's surprisingly easy to forget that there's a pair of speakers operating between you and the music. Imaging is excellent, and naturally miked acoustic material, like much of the output of Radio 3 worked particularly well. Some might wish for a little more resin and catgut, a little greater vividness and more pronounced chiaroscuro perhaps, and a little more openness at the extreme top end too, but this speaker has great natural charm that makes for a very relaxing as well as an essentially informative experience.

I expected to find the bass alignment a little troublesome, but apart from a slight lack of warmth and nourishment through the cello register, the bottom end simply sounded clean and reassuringly weighty, with good timing and no real tendency to 'thump'. However, I can't quite go along with Spondor's

suggestion that the S8e will still work as well when placed quite close to a wall – for me this is very much a free space design, from both a bass and a mid-band perspective.

I couldn't resist the temptation to compare the S8es to my thirty year old BC1s, and have to admit the original model still had a slight edge in overall transparency – the alnico effect maybe? But the S8e is unquestionably a Spondor, fully maintaining the company's fine tradition in a package that is altogether more practical and lounge-friendly than its Classic predecessors.



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	2 way floorstanding, reflex-loaded loudspeaker
Drive Units -	
HF:	27mm coated fabric dome
Bass/mid:	210mm frame; ep38 polymer cone
Bandwidth:	44Hz-20kHz ± 3dB -6dB at 32Hz
Sensitivity:	89dB (measured at 86.5dB)
Impedance:	8 Ohms (nominal) 5 Ohms (minimum)
Crossover frequency:	4.0kHz
Power handling:	15 - 300 watts
Magnetically Shielded:	Yes
Dimensions (HxWxD):	925x226x320mm
Weight:	25 Kg
Finishes:	Cherry, Maple, Rosenut, Black Ash veneers
Price:	£1,895 per pair

#### Manufacturer:

Spondor Audio Systems Ltd.  
Tel. (44)(0)1323 843474  
Net. [www.spondoraudio.com](http://www.spondoraudio.com)







# The PMC OB1 Loudspeakers

by Jason Kennedy

Transmission line loudspeakers are not a new thing, they go back a long way, and were first detailed in 1965. The most ancient example that comes to my mind is the IMF, which as the result of a joint venture with ELAC metamorphosed into TDL. The transmission line (TL) principle is that by using a long tapered tube which is lined with very specific damping materials such as long haired wool, the line absorbs all the frequencies produced by the bass unit apart from the very low frequencies which are ejected from the vent in phase, adding to it's output. A properly constructed TL will produce an octave more bass than an identical driver in a conventional sealed or reflex enclosure. As the loading/pressure within the cabinet is constant the TL produces the same response at all volumes.

PMC or the Professional Monitor Company is the creation of Ozzy Osbourne lookalike Pete Thomas, a one time BBC engineer with a penchant for level. As readers of the last issue will have noticed even small PMCs go loud in a convincing fashion and those lucky enough to have heard the company's bigger speakers will be fully au fait with the reality of sound pressure. But PMC is not only about level. After all you could get a FA rig that went louder for less dosh. The company's professional activities are usually found in the better studios of the recording world. PMC recently fitted out the Emil Berliner studio that belongs to Deutsche Grammophon with a pair of its MB2-XBD-A active

monitors, a loudspeaker whose muscularity is emphasised by the use of an external chassis on the bass drivers. It also recently installed an AML1 based active surround system in the Austrian Broadcast Corporation's control room facility in the Musikverein concert hall in Vienna. Things obviously aren't going too badly in Europe.

But there are always going to be more music lovers than studios, even if there might be more home studios than living rooms with serious systems in! And the domestic market is obviously a healthy one for PMC. It enjoyed critical and commercial success with its first serious floorstander, the two-way FB1,



and was encouraged to produce a more serious alternative dubbed the OB1. Not it would seem in honour of the Jedi knight of Star Wars fame, though I'm sure that Pete liked the similarity, but like all the PMC speakers the initials stand for something, in this case Other Box (yes, really).

Designed to exceed the FB1 in all respects PMC took the transmission line from that design and developed it by adding an extra third of a meter to its length and lining it with a new

generation of damping foam. This foam is claimed to "vastly increases air density in the line" and requires a stiffer driver than that in the FB1. The result is a small increase in bass extension and loudness potential.

The cabinet is externally a very similar size to the FB1 but as a result of the extra drive unit and thickness of panelling weighs rather more. PMC is very keen to point out that it uses genuine Medite rather than any old MDF to build its cabinets, claiming that the consistency is superior and the sound less porridgey as a result. Balanced veneer is used on 25mm thick external panels in order to improve stability and longevity, internal partitions are 18mm and form a separate tapered enclosure for the midrange dome which is lined with bitumastic pads and stuffed with foam to absorb rear radiation from the driver.

The biggest outward difference to the FB1 is the inclusion of that 75mm soft dome mid-range unit, a driver you tend to find on all the big PMC speakers and one reason for their impressive mid-range transparency. Dome mid-range drivers are something of a scarcity because of their relatively low sensitivity compared to the cone alternatives, but the improvements in power handling and dispersion that they offer are arguably worth the extra effort required on your amplifier's behalf.

The Vifa tweeter is different too. It's another soft dome that graces





▶ both pro and domestic models in the range and features a short horn flare to assist sensitivity. The bass driver is a 125mm doped paper cone in a 170mm chassis with a large dust cap which helps with stiffening.

The OBI has a substantial crossover with high frequency and midrange sections that are almost identical to those in the bigger IB1 speaker, posh Solen caps being employed in "key areas". The PCB has extra thick copper tracks and sits proud of the rear panel (internally) on stand-offs in order to reduce microphony. PMC claims to spend "far too long" in R&D adjusting the position and orientation of components to minimise interaction between them. Components are hand soldered to each board and both hot glued and strapped down, a belt and braces approach that should make them bomb - if not idiot - proof.

The actual crossover points are made as steep as possible with 24dB/octave roll-offs all round, the advantages claimed being greater power handling and optimised operating ranges for each driver.

The OBI has an unspectacular sensitivity of 87dB but offers a reasonably unchallenging load thanks to an impedance minimum of five Ohms. It certainly didn't prove too much for my Gamut D200, the combination producing deep, finely resolved, well extended bass and a highly detailed mid and top. This speaker has the sort of balance that encourages you to play at higher than usual levels, which is probably because the

mid-range is a hint restrained, but is also a reflection of the speakers' ability to remain composed when played loud. This does tend to play down dynamics a little when you are not winding up the wick but there is always a great sense of transparency.

Playing some of EST's piano, drum and double bass based contemporary but not too commercial jazz, the quality of shape and colour to the big bass drum is the first thing that strikes you. Normally it's the double bass that stands out on this album (*Strange Place for Snow*) but the OBIs either exaggerate or emphasise the scale of the kick drum rather nicely. The snappy brushwork on the snare and the creak of bowed double bass are as rich and strong as you might hope but not so full on as to overpower the piano which produces the tune in the piece.

Fourtet's electronic creation Rounds works equally well, the speaker revelling in low level, inner detail and getting to grips with the complex rhythmic patterns that make up this, at times, difficult music. I was very impressed at the way previously unexceptional tracks took on a vibrancy and urgency, the samples seemed to fit together more tunefully which made the album seem more consistently interesting. It's the sort of disc that

reveals the bass potential of these speakers rather nicely. There are moments where girth is the only appropriate word to describe the weight and tactility of certain notes. The sound gets extremely muscular in places yet never loses composure

thanks to the fine timing and coherence of the speaker. It's not just about muscle though; space and air are presented as well, be it electronic or acoustic reverb or echo, which means that the small sounds within the mix have an opportunity or space to be heard.

It's quite an analytical sound, a reflection no doubt of its makers pro inclinations. On a multi-track recording such as the Fourtet it's clearer where the various elements begin and end; you can hear right into the mix. I have heard more expensive speakers produce a finer sound. In fact the Focal-JMLab Diva Utopias that preceded the OBIs in the listening room did as much, but they didn't reveal significantly more detail nor did they feel so comfortable at higher levels.

Moving onto another Scandinavian jazz crossover act, Bugge Wesseltoft, revealed a certain reluctance to push sound right into the room. The track 'Heim' (from *Moving*) has various percussion sounds that some speakers can send round the room as if they had been produced with a phase distorting effect like Q-sound. The OBIs kept those sounds circling the speakers alone. Yet at the same time the depth resolution was superb. More importantly the piano retains



▶ a solidity and presence that is highly convincing, and the groove that the band build's up behind it drives the piece along in unstoppable fashion.

Turning to Turin Brakes for some more mellow vibes revealed the lovely sound of the guitars at their best. Again it sounds better if you wind up the level a little. Not to realistic levels but a bit higher than a speaker like the Living Voice or Diva Utopia for that matter.

Playing less impressive recordings is just as interesting, especially if you're a student of compression. Jeff Beck's *Wired* often sounds like a decent enough record but speakers that are sensitive to compression tend not to do it any favours and the OB1 is no different. You can still enjoy the white hot guitar playing and powerhouse drums from Narada Michael Walden but it can be a more expansive experience with less fussy/more dynamically forthcoming speakers.

I'm gradually getting into Miles Davis' much vaunted *In a Silent Way*, but until you play it on a speaker with this degree of insight it can seem like a bit of a ramble – a chilled out jam where some of the world's finest jazz/rock musicians have got together. The OB1 brought new insights, revealing the themes thanks to its ruthless unearthing of the details. The only drawback is the hiss on this so called re-mastered for digital CD. It'll have to be vinyl - quick someone re-issue it beautifully on 180g.

Back in Cologne, or Koln as they have it over yonder, Keith Jarrett's piano sounds more metallic than usual but has a presence that is uncanny. It sounds less like he's in a concert hall and more like he's in the room, until he hits lower notes or taps his foot and then you can hear the size of the

acoustic more clearly. A very engaging rendition it is too, pulling you into the strange counterpoint between right and left hands, the latter playing at a completely different tempo. The OB1s give you a lot of detail for the money and manage to equal if not increase that when it comes to revitalising familiar material. Which given the number of times I've played this side of this LP would suggest a degree of emphasis or colouration. But if there is any, it's pretty subtle.



Tori Amos' voice stands clear and strong, not perhaps as stereophonically etched as it can be but pretty clear nonetheless and the 'noisy' section on

*Pretty Good Year* surprises with its low frequency content. The discordance of the band is reduced by the coherence of the speaker and the compression used to achieve the effect is fully revealed.

I had to play a few tracks from my album of the moment, *The Love Below*, by Outkast, and I wasn't disappointed. The OB1s pulled out

more lyrical precision and some of the chewiest, most tuneful bass lines in pop (I didn't realise it was pop when I bought it you understand!). The kick drum on 'Cupid Valentino' is simply massive while the sublime 'Love Hater' is as tuneful, tight and deep as I've heard it.

This is a curious loudspeaker.

It's highly revealing but has some mild and entertaining characteristics that don't ring entirely true, the bass sometimes seems slightly odd but there's no arguing with its ability to stop and start whilst plumbing impressive depths. It's the sort of speaker I could live and work with quite easily, if I hadn't heard bigger speakers like the PMC IB2.



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way transmission line
Drive Units -	
Bass unit:	6.5inch doped paper
Mid-range unit:	75mm fabric dome
Tweeter:	25mm fabric dome
Sensitivity:	87dB
Impedance:	8ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	200x1060x325mm (inc plinth)
Weight:	23.5kg
Finishes:	Cherry, maple, oak or others to order
Price:	£2,450

#### Manufacturer:

The Professional Monitor Company Ltd.  
Tel. (44)(0)870 444 1044  
Net. [www.pmc-speakers.com](http://www.pmc-speakers.com)



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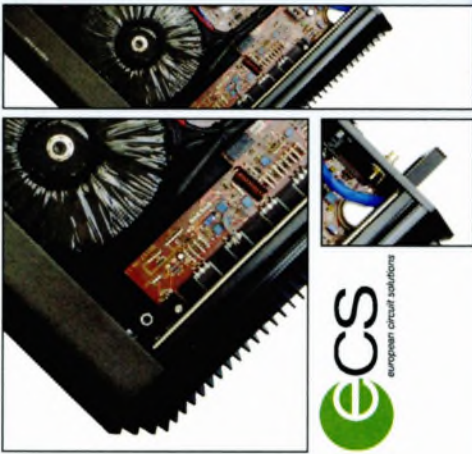


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# The Hovland HP200 Vacuum Tube Pre-amplifier

by Roy Gregory

Good things come in fours? Four products, in four years and four front covers: Hovland clearly rewrite the rules of more than just hi-fi aesthetics. For me, their products have been a breath of fresh air at a time when other designers have been becoming more and more cautious, their products less and less individual. But don't make the mistake of thinking that the Hovlands' beauty is only skin deep. The longer you listen the clearer it becomes that whoever is responsible for these designs has a deep and abiding respect for and appreciation of music and where its fascination lies. From the HP100 onwards, each successive model has stood further and further from the path of the musical performance, imposing less and less of itself on the signal being passed. At the same time, this steady evolution in quality has elevated the performance of the power amplifiers above and beyond that of the original pre-amp: Hardly an ideal state of affairs. Clearly it was time to apply some of the lessons learnt in developing the Sapphire and RADIA to a revised pre-amplifier.

Having said that, the HP200 is far more than a simple revision of the earlier model. As well as the lessons learnt in designing the power amps, there's the valuable experience garnered from the 100's four years in the marketplace. One thing that that revealed, loud and very clear, was that the customer wanted remote control. But if you go back and read the review of the HP100, you'll realise that this notion strikes right at the heart of the original design. Hovland rightly consider that the quality of the volume control is

central to the performance of any pre-amp. So much so that they went to the lengths of building their own, precision stepped attenuator for the HP100, a veritable work of audio art. But beautiful though it is, and wonderful though it sounds, it clearly ain't compatible with remote control operation. This above all else has shaped the development of the HP200.

Given their obsessive concern regarding the sonic impact of even the most seemingly innocuous components, it's hardly surprising that Hovland quickly concluded that there were no off the shelf options that met their performance requirements. The only answer was to build another design of their own, but this time relay operated. Thus started a long and tortuous search for suitable switching technology, a veritable odyssey that eventually turned up a sealed, glass tube, rhodium plated design that delivered the sonic goods. Arranged in a switching ladder and controlled by a small (but carefully isolated) logic board, these could be combined with the same metal film resistors used in the stepped attenuator to create a remotely operable volume control. The circuit layout proved critical, and it was here that lessons learnt from the RADIA paid off.

However, having got the relays to work, the approach could be extended

to source selection and all the other switching functions. Not only does this extend remote control to mute and source as well as volume, it eliminates these switches from the signal path. What's more, the relays responsible for these functions can be positioned right next to the back panel, shortening the signal path and eliminating considerable internal wiring.

So far so good, and all sonically positive. The downside is that the volume control circuitry takes up a lot of space – space that used to be occupied by the on-board phono section.

Which is definitely a problem given that over half the HP100 owners out there invested in one of the phono options.

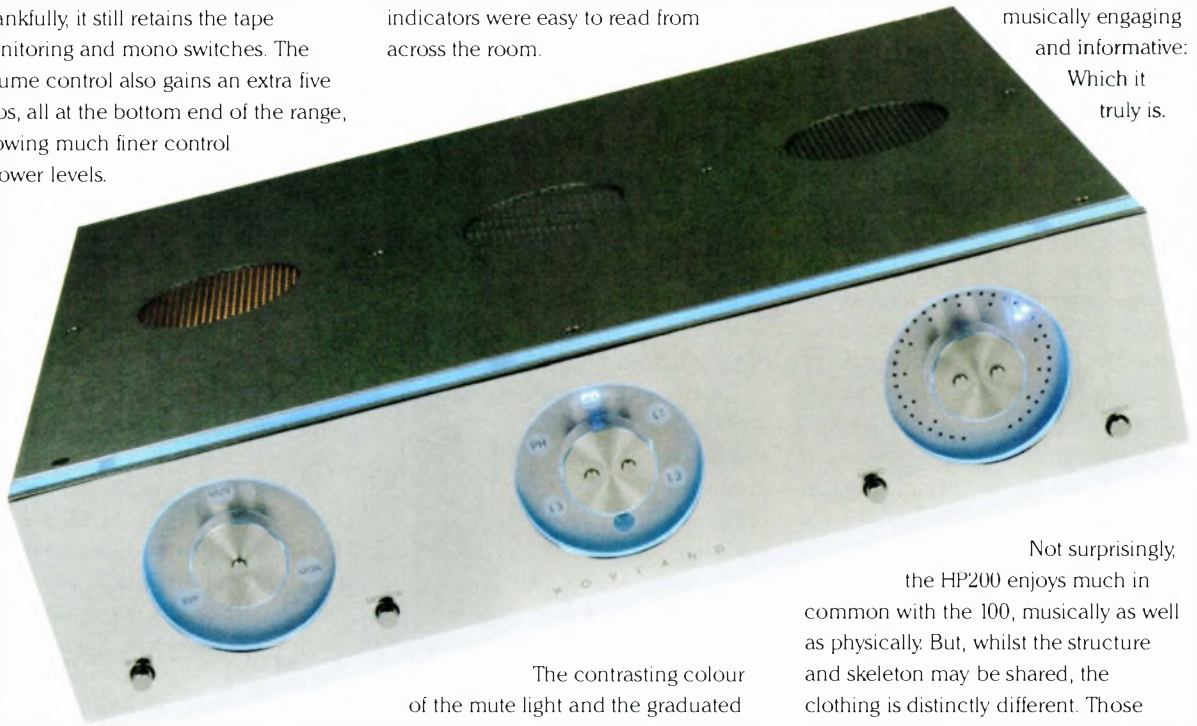
Hovland were already working on a new, solid-state phono-stage that was destined for a standalone design. Adjustable for

both gain and loading, the problem was that by the time you put the new circuit in its own chassis, along with a power supply, it would end up costing close to the price of the HP200 itself. The answer seemed obvious: put the phono-stage, along with a dedicated dual-mono power supply, inside the HP200. It's an option that will become available shortly. It is retrofittable, but the work required on the chassis in order to mount the board and its power supply mean returning the unit to the factory. We'll be reporting on its performance shortly, but its



► availability at last promises to make the Hovland a genuine full-facilities, one box option.

There are a couple of other changes incorporated within the new circuitry. There's a Bypass switch and input for use with external processors, and an RS232 port for programming purposes. Thankfully, it still retains the tape monitoring and mono switches. The volume control also gains an extra five steps, all at the bottom end of the range, allowing much finer control at lower levels.



The one change that is applicable to the HP100 is that the valve fitted in the V3 position on the HP200 is now a 12AT7, in place of the 12AU7 used in the earlier design. It's a more transparent choice and rather less forgiving. Hovland's decision to use it reflects their confidence in the improving quality of front-end components, especially in the digital field. It's also the one change that can be retrofitted to the HP100. I'll report on the difference it makes in a separate piece.

Unlike CT, I really like the look of the HP200, and think it provides the perfect complement to the resident RADIA. Unlike him, I rarely use remote controls, so I was really impressed by the wonderfully intuitive nature of the front-panel controls. The Hovland was never

less than a joy to use. When I did use the remote (I felt obliged, given the development history and all) I found that it worked positively enough and had a middling angle of acceptance (not as good as the Levinson 383, miles better than the Wadia 861SE). More importantly, the illuminating status indicators were easy to read from across the room.

The contrasting colour of the mute light and the graduated circle of the volume read-out proved especially effective. Oh, and you can turn the front-panel back-lights off if you want to. It's a well-rounded and carefully considered package. Which just goes to prove, you might be able to make good things arrive in fours, but you still can't please all the people all of the time!

However, the one thing on which CT and I absolutely agree is the sound of the HP200. Having lived with the HP100 as a long-term benchmark, I can claim considerable experience with the Hovland sound. The other unit I've relied on is the Vibe, with its matching Pulse power supply. Now the obvious conclusion is that I keep the Vibe as a solid-state reference, the Hovland as the equivalent when it comes to valves. However, that's not really the case. Both products have earned their berth on

musical grounds, and if they do things differently, it's more a case of the way they handle the music itself rather than the technology they use. To be honest, I've never really considered the HP100 as a typical valve pre-amp anyway. I couldn't care less if it runs on horse

feathers, as long as it's musically engaging and informative: Which it truly is.

Not surprisingly, the HP200 enjoys much in common with the 100, musically as well as physically. But, whilst the structure and skeleton may be shared, the clothing is distinctly different. Those differences might be of degree, but together they are also different in effect, and fascinating it is too.

If I had to sum up the sonic character of the Hovland pre-amps I'd rely on the terms unforced and unobtrusive. They are devoid of an obvious overall character through which you hear the musical performance. Instead, they manage to stand aside, allowing the music to speak for itself. They provide a direct connection to the structure, the sense and soul of the music. The question of course, is how they do it.

Part of the answer is that they both do it the same way, so we can discuss the similarities in the singular before worrying about the differences. The rest is down to specifics, and they start with the question of instrumental colour ►



▶ and musical energy. What a Hovland pre-amp does is manage its energy budget and protect the core values. So, the centre of each note is precisely placed and scaled, meaning that the overall structure and grid of the music is reproduced intact. The precision with which notes are weighted and spaced means that each has sufficient energy and time to properly develop

So much for the common ground: Where the 200 diverges from its predecessor is in the detail. The internal changes have resulted in a significant increase in focus and transparency, right across the audible bandwidth. The sound is now quicker and more immediate, more detailed and more intricate.

grip, allow the music to breathe quite so convincingly.

The result is a sound that is at once engaging but commanding. Just listen to Aimee Mann's vocal on the title track of *Lost In Space* (the Mo-Fi pressing, playing on the Kuzma/Triplanar/Titan 'table, amplified via the Groove Plus). The 100 is smoothly seductive, easily insinuating the catchy melody into your sub-conscious. The 200 is leaner, not so much tonally, but physically. The curbing of bass weight opens out the mid, robs it of a hint of rounding and produces a starker, much more focussed and dimensionally accurate soundstage. The added dynamic delicacy allows through the wicked twist that Aimee applies to the lyric, introducing a new sense of pointed intent behind the surface meaning.

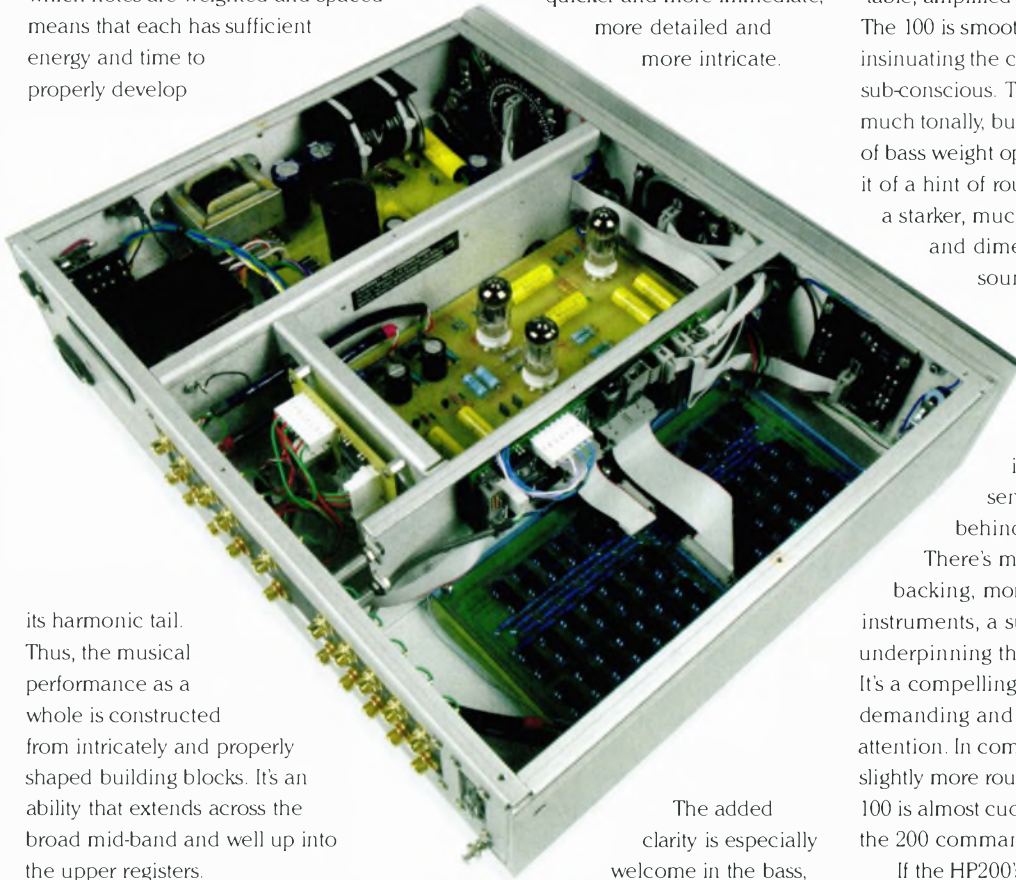
There's more texture in the backing, more space around the instruments, a surer footed bass-line underpinning the track's progress. It's a compelling performance, demanding and holding your attention. In comparison, the warmer, slightly more rounded sound of the 100 is almost cuddly, seductive where the 200 commands.

If the HP200's additional attributes were merely hi-fi cosmetic in nature, they'd be worth the hike in price over the 100. That they translate and contribute so directly, so powerfully, to the pre-amp's musical capabilities raises its performance to compelling new highs. Just as importantly, they do so without in any way diminishing the factors that made the original so appealing in the first place. Which is great, because the HP100 continues, and continues to offer superb musical performance for the money. The HP200 is an entirely different kettle of fish. It stands firmly astride the solid-state/valve divide, defying

its harmonic tail. Thus, the musical performance as a whole is constructed from intricately and properly shaped building blocks. It's an ability that extends across the broad mid-band and well up into the upper registers.

How does this translate in terms of the musical performance? The ability to place and shape notes with such natural ease allows the input of the musician to escape his (or her) instrument without constraint from the system. The way in which the players express themselves through the weight and length of their notes, and just as importantly, the spaces they leave between them is crucial to understanding the performance, transforming it from ink on a page to a living, breathing thing. The result is an incredibly natural ebb and flow to musical proceedings, a progression that draws you into the musical lines.

The added clarity is especially welcome in the bass, which whilst it still doesn't match the reach out and touch solidity of the mid-range, now has greater insight, air and texture. There's a refreshing sense of urgency and purpose where appropriate, the added air and harmonic control allowing a more expressive and atmospheric contribution from the likes of bowed double bass. You don't get the slabs of straight-edged solidity that comes with several hundred Watts of solid-state power driven from a wide bandwidth, solid-state pre. But the timing of notes, the placing of their weight, is impeccable, and few if any of the solid-state alternatives, for all their



▶ preconceptions. More demanding and less forgiving, it won't cover the tracks of partnering equipment, or disguise shortcomings in a performance. But carefully homed and fed it delivers a real advance in musical insight over the already impressive 100. In combination with the RADIA, it moves Hovland very firmly into the high-end, where they need fear no competition. With a physical and operational beauty to match the sonic splendor, Hovland's latest creation has become my latest object of audio desire. Hear it soon. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS			
Type:	Vacuum tube line-stage with phono input option	Prices –	
Tube Complement:	2x 12AX7, 1x 12AT7	HP100 Line-stage:	£4750
Inputs:	5x line-level 1x tape monitor	HP200 Line-stage:	£6450
Input Impedance:	100 kOhms	HP200 inc. Phono-stage:	£7295
Gain:	14dB	HP200 Phono upgrade:	£1200
Outputs:	2x main outputs 1x tape output	<b>UK Distributor:</b>	
Output Impedance:	2.5 kOhms	Metropolis Music Ltd.	
Dimensions (WxHxD):	18.25 x 4.88 x 15.52	Tel. (44)(0)1892 539245	
Weight:	12.2kg	Net. <a href="http://www.metropolis-music.co.uk">www.metropolis-music.co.uk</a>	
		<b>Manufacturer:</b>	
		Hovland Company	
		Net. <a href="http://www.hovlandcompany.com">www.hovlandcompany.com</a>	

# Hovland HP 200

by Chris Thomas

As a confirmed fan of their RADIA power amplifier I was delighted to be able to squeeze in a few weeks with Hovland's new HP 200 line-stage before RG took it for the full review. At the time I was still running the Eben X-Centrics with the Radia being partnered with Tom Evans Vibe/Groove line stage. This was being sourced by the Naim CDS 3 and the whole system was wired from mains to speaker cables with Nordost Valhalla. This is a pretty fine, well-balanced audio system I must say, so when the HP 200 arrived I was intrigued as to whether it would soar to new musical heights or fall, rather embarrassingly, off its perch.

I don't like the look of the HP200 very much at all and am at a loss to understand why Hovland chose to fit a chromed front plate to the unit as the frosted acrylic of the RADIA already looks so good, especially at night when the amplifier glows with that icy blue light. They surely should have continued the theme and only chromed the control centres. And while I'm mentioning the negatives I should also

say that the remote control, good as the handset itself is, does not operate with anything like the smoothness that it should on a unit of this price and quality. I found it difficult to achieve precise adjustments, as the window of acceptance is just far too narrow. In fact I generally don't like the operation of this pre-amplifier but when it is working within the system these things do tend to fade into insignificance as sheer musical fascination takes over. Make no mistake, this is a very, very good piece of hi-fi equipment and in the RADIA it has the perfect partner, though it needs to be used in the right system and is not universally successful as was shown when I replaced the Ebens with the JM Labs Micro Utopia, but more of that later.

When you mix solid-state and valves as Hovland have done with this pre/power combination you are hoping that the best aspects of both design approaches compliment each other in harmony and balance – and that is exactly what they have achieved. The sheer grip, tautness and compact nature of the RADIA is expanded by the

inclusion of the HP 200 which brings new shades of colour to the tonality and a completely different sense of rhythmic expression and movement. Where the Vibe/Pulse majors on presence, precision, ultra fine resolution and dynamic contrasts the HP 200 is somewhat looser and cannot quite match the Vibe's sense of dynamic freedom and tight control. But it is the master of fine tonal shadings and it is absolutely impossible to resist the sheer emotional content of the music as it imposes itself on your ear in such a profound way. This is one of those designs that should dispense with a volume control altogether in favour of a tap, as the music flows like a river from the speakers and its movement through any piece of music is what really captured my attention throughout my all too brief time with it. It just seems so much more naturally musical than so many other very good pre-amplifiers.

Let me try to explain this rather sweeping statement. When I was being taught guitar many years ago my ▶



▶ tutor would have me repeatedly run through scales and modes and lean over and whisper "Legato, legato". This description of the smooth changeover from note to note so the flow would be even and not jerky or forced is exactly what the HP 200 reminds me of and be it vocally or instrumentally, you cannot ignore it. So when a quality singer is doing their stuff, the natural flow, breathing and intonation of the words is about as close to real life as any hi-fi I have heard. Likewise, the beauty of a musician's physical technique, choice of notes and the sense of their decay, release and most importantly the transition between them as they

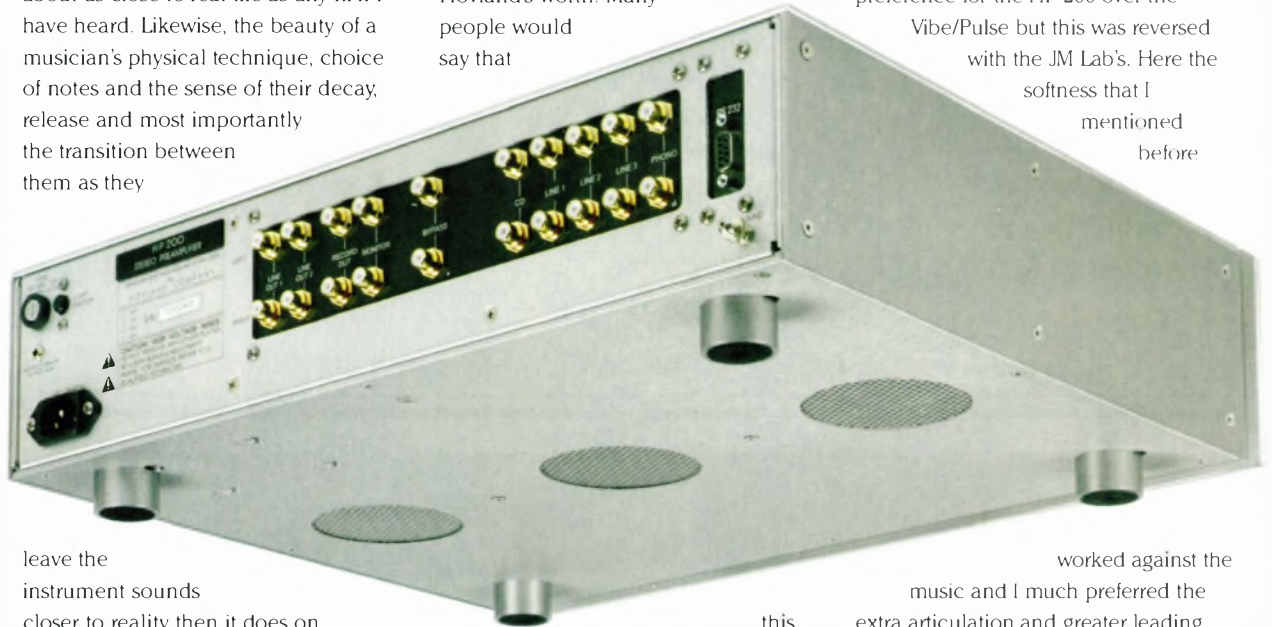
never have the raw pace and sheer impact of the Tom Evans design.

Space, depth and instrumental separation are really superb. The Hovland HP 200 does not produce walk-in soundstages as a matter of course but it has that rare ability to maintain the characteristics of each instrument including its tonal colour and the way it is being used. On Miles Davis stunning album *Nefertiti*, the track 'Fall' shows the Hovland's worth. Many people would say that

subliminal time signature that has been previously stated and somehow continues in the silence through the piece. As an example of musical minimalism it is magical and is dripping in atmosphere.

There was one surprise in store though and that was the disappointment I felt when I hooked the JM Labs Micro Utopias into the system. When I was using the Eben X-Centric I had a clear preference for the HP 200 over the

Vibe/Pulse but this was reversed with the JM Lab's. Here the softness that I mentioned before



leave the instrument sounds closer to reality than it does on most high quality audio systems. This is such a fundamental observation but it is at the root of much of what the HP 200 does so well and though the music never feels as rhythmically taut or emphatic as the best solid-state designs, the actual smooth flow of the tempo is quite remarkable. The bass lacks a really incisive edge and the Hovland never manages quite the same shape and focus here. There is also an overall softness to the sound right across the whole of the bandwidth, so you never quite get that finely etched sense of micro detail that the Vibe/Pulse excels at, or the explosive sense of leading edge dynamics. But the musical pictures that the Hovland paints are still beautifully coherent, open and rhythmically fascinating though it will

this sparsely produced track, played at well below walking pace, should be food and drink to any half respectable audio system but I would disagree. Listen to Miles' trumpet and then to Wayne Shorter's tenor sax. It's the blend that kills most systems and it can end up being more than a little sour. But not here as both players let the notes spill from the instrument in unison and the Hovland allows both full rein and space expressively and tonally. And when Herbie Hancock drops small pearls of piano into the tune you realise that the silences between the notes are just as important. The beautifully slow tempo almost meanders to a stop at times but on a system as good as this even Ron Carter's bass solo is played on top of the

worked against the music and I much preferred the extra articulation and greater leading edge definition. Perhaps it is partly that very special tweeter and its endless potential. But right through the mid and down into the bass Tom's design explores and controls the speakers capabilities in a much more sharp, convincing and focussed way. I think we are talking about system synergy here mixed with a fair degree of personal taste so I could easily understand it if you disagreed.

I am slowly being seduced by the inclusion of valves in audio systems. The Hovland HP 200 has increased my fascination because it has given me a different view of the music that I listen to. Given my interest in the minutiae of musicianship and the raw sound of instruments, it was almost bound to appeal. Well, it certainly does. ➤

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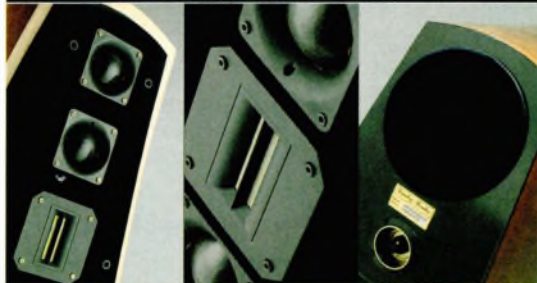
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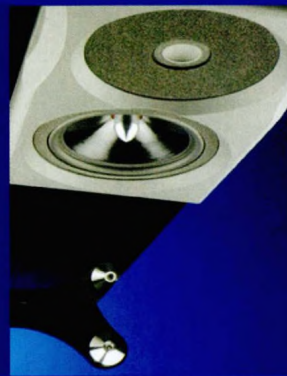
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# The Rogue Audio M150 Amplifiers

by Chris Binns

With the ink barely dry on the review of the massive Zeus power amplifier from Rogue Audio (issue no. 28), it might seem a little like over exposure to be reporting on yet more product from the same company so soon. But when news of a new 150 Watt design filtered through from Kevin Walker of Audiocraft, Rogue's distributor in the UK, we figured that maybe we should have a look at it on two counts; they are the natural successor to the now discontinued M120's that I favourably reviewed in issue no. 10, and they are mono-blocks, which means that there is some small chance that I might be able to lift them. Having said that, they are still pretty substantial, weighing in at a not inconsiderable 50 pounds. As you might expect, aesthetically the 150's are very similar to the 120's in terms of general construction. The valve layout on the rear deck is now slightly different, but the most obvious difference is on the front panel. The 150s have inherited the classy looking rounded edges of the Zeus, along with a heavily engraved logo. Personally I think that would have looked better with straight rather than sloping letters, but then I am being picky.

Internally, the changes are far more significant. The original 120's were also available as a Magnum edition, the major difference being the incorporation of higher spec output transformers, a component

that some designers consider the most important element in valve amplifier performance. It is a similar design that appears in the 150's. But perhaps the biggest change is given away by the appearance of a meter and a removable panel with four pre-sets underneath it. Rather than the cathode bias found on all previous Rogue amps (with the exception of the Zeus) designer Mark O'Brien has opted for fixed bias, possibly as a result of research carried out in relation to the monster amplifier. The basic circuit configuration remains much as it was, comprising a 12AX7 for voltage amplification and phase splitting feeding a pair of 12AU7's that are configured as cathode followers to drive a quartet of KT88's, which should comfortably provide 150 Watts of output. The HT is delayed from reaching the output stage for a minute or so after switch on, which should increase the life expectancy of the valves, and unusually, they are also fed with a DC supply for the filaments. Internal construction is pretty good, making use of one large circuit board for all the components – save the transformers – all of which seem to be of high quality. Both single ended and balanced inputs are offered, the latter fed through a small Jensen transformer. Finally, two sets of binding posts cater for both four and eight Ohm loudspeaker taps. As these will only accept one

set of 4mm plugs, bi-wiring will require common connection at the amplifier end.

My first real listen to the 150's occurred at the Manchester show, where they were part of the system that the magazine was using to demonstrate the effects of sub-woofers and super-tweeters; for a full report on events RG has documented proceedings in the last issue (with only minor reference to the damage inflicted on the staff who had to listen repeatedly to the same eight tracks, several dozen times a day). It is to the system's credit that despite the opportunity for unmitigated boredom it actually proved relatively painless, and I was still impressed with the general sound coming from it at the end of the last day. While a certain amount of credit must go to an unusually good sounding hotel room, and of course the expertise of the staff when it came to setting up (!) I think the 150's were doing a particularly good job of holding my attention, a feat that they easily duplicated when they arrived in my living room. Unlike the Zeus which required a lot of effort and pandering to get the best performance, the mono-blocks were sounding great within five minutes of turning them on. What was most apparent was a tremendous sense of enthusiasm, a sort of 'get up and go' that reminded me why I liked valve amplifiers in the first place, and a presentation ►

▶ that makes listening more involving.

When I originally reviewed the M120's some three years ago, I expressed some surprise at the designer's choice of cathode bias for the output stage. While it is quite common to do so in amplifiers up to 50 Watts or so, it becomes a little bit unwieldy in anything much larger. To understand this, I should explain that there has to be some method of controlling the standing or quiescent current

provided by a negative voltage from the power supply, which is usually adjustable, to provide an effect not dissimilar to setting the idle speed of an engine via a pre-set on the carburettor of a car. The great advantage of this system is the elimination of that big resistor (the cathode is effectively connected to earth), the downside is the need to monitor and adjust the working conditions of each output valve.

different. Different? I was going to say better, but I guess that is a matter of opinion; personally, I feel that cathode bias adds a 'soft' character to the sound, particularly when an amp is driven hard. I have always felt that a cathode resistor of 150 Ohms (not an untypical value) in the primary side of the transformer circuit is like putting a 1.5 Ohm resistor in line with your speaker leads, which comes into play when the amplifier leaves class A operation, say with demanding musical peaks.

This was one of the main aspects that I noticed while using the M150's at home. There was a solidity at the bottom end that I do not recall the 120's doing quite so well, and even with fairly punishing loudspeakers I was able to generate reasonable levels without the amplifier losing control. While there was not the iron like, corner turning grip that one can sometimes achieve with a really powerful solid-state amp, the bass had plenty of slam and speed, while remaining tuneful and integrated with the rest of the spectrum. Ironically, in some ways the 150's actually sounded louder than the Zeus, mainly due to their ability to let the music go. The bigger amplifier had a more reticent approach in this respect. Music had a tangible, three-dimensional quality to it that allowed it to have a life of its own, and I think this was one of the major factors that made these amplifiers so enjoyable.

The mid-range has a presence to it that generated solid images independent from the loudspeakers, while the top end was well in keeping with this, open and with plenty of body. They are not perhaps the most refined amplifiers that I have used, and do not possess the ultra clean, ▶



through the output valves, and in the case of cathode bias this is achieved by inserting an appropriate resistor in line with the cathode. This has the effect of making the electrical potential of the control grid more negative and thus stemming the flow of electrons and hence current. The problem is that the resistor has to be capable of dissipating an awful lot of power in the case of a large amplifier.

The M150's on the other hand, utilise what is confusingly known as 'fixed bias', whereby the limiting potential on the control grid is

With the 150's this is pretty straightforward: flick the appropriate switch and adjust the pre-set for a reading of 50 milli-amps on the meter.

So why the change? There are several reasons; I gather that after some research Rogue Audio feel that fixed bias offers improved reliability of the valves, it also allows slightly more power output, hence the up rating to 150 Watts, and it sounds



► precise quality that some particularly good solid-state amps are capable of – I am thinking in particular of the Naim NAP 300 that I have recently been using – but they make up for this with their unbridled enthusiasm. OK, so maybe the M150's are not quite the last word in precision and finely etched detail, but most of the time you are too busy enjoying the music to even notice. The M150's also have an uncanny ability to capture the tonal character of instruments. All the colour and shades on offer go toward making the sound of, say piano or a solo violin, convincing.

on acoustic or electric instruments, the 150s effortlessly managed to deliver the substance and sense of the performance – with atmosphere or attitude intact.

Using the Rogues with loudspeakers other than the current hungry Primary Monitors proved interesting. In particular, the Eben X3's that had previously shown themselves to be demanding, not

amplifier for the money, while on the surface of it, at £1000 more, the 150's might not seem like such a bargain; I would disagree. There are other amplifiers that probably offer a little more detail and precision, but I would be loath to trade it for the sheer musical ability that the 150s possess. If you really want to know what colour socks the drummer was wearing on the last disc you played (and talk about it for the rest of the evening) there are plenty of anaemic, clinical and ultimately boring amplifiers that will suit you. But if you want the music to provoke and entertain you, the Rogues should be investigated. Thoroughly enjoyable. ➤



Thus the mood and tension of a piece such as the quiet movement of Ravel's *String Quartet in F* come across as suitably dark and eerie, the textures evoking a mood of contemplation. (In fact this was a piece we used extensively at the show for this very reason, where it came as something of a respite.) Regardless of the scale or scope of the music played, whether

from an electrical drive perspective but more with their desire for speed and dynamics, were an unlikely hit, and served to highlight the agility and dynamics that the 150's were capable of. Also the Rega R9's worked rather well, and I have described that particular partnership in more detail in the attendant review.

So, have the Rogue M150's lived up to expectations? Yes. At £2995 the M120's offered an awful lot of

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Ultralinear valve mono-blocks
Valve Complement:	2x 12AX7 2x 12AU7 4x KT88
Output power:	150 Watts
Input sensitivity:	1.0 Volt
Input impedance:	200K Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	141/2 x 7 x 19 in inches
Weight:	55Lbs
Price:	£3995/pr

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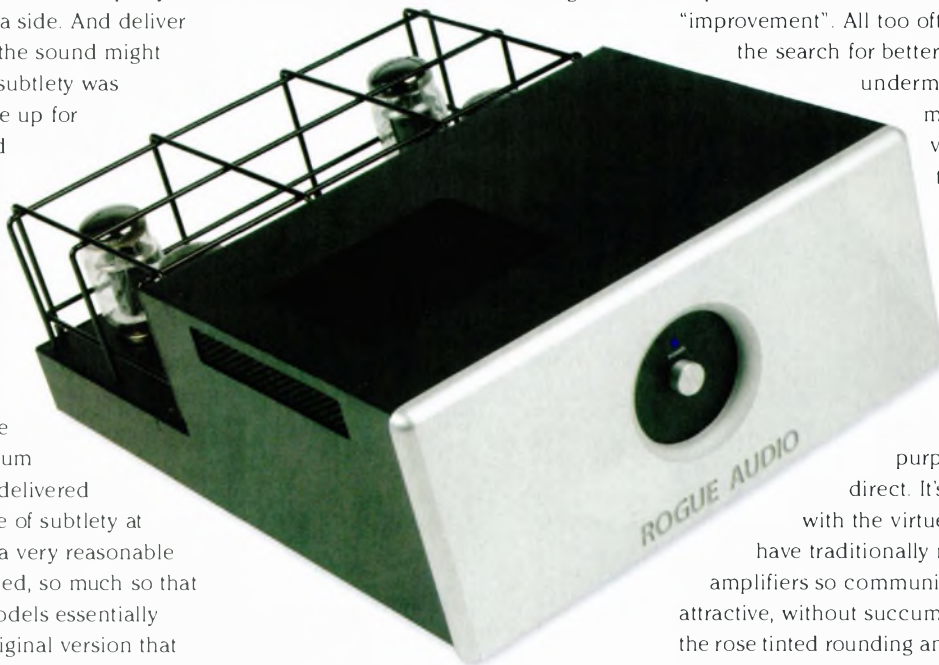
# Rogue Audio Part 2

by Roy Gregory

Rogue's original 120 mono-blocks delivered an impressive, even astonishing, bang for your bucks. Two large, nicely styled amplifiers, solidly within the American tradition yet with enough of a visual twist to give them their own distinctive personality, delivered an equally solid 120 Watts a side. And deliver they did. What the sound might have lacked in subtlety was more than made up for with energy and enthusiasm. These amps were all about power – affordable power – an emphasis underlined by the arrival of the upgraded Magnum version, which delivered a welcome dose of subtlety at the expense of a very reasonable price hike. Indeed, so much so that the Magnum models essentially replaced the original version that they were intended to run alongside. As soon as you heard the difference, then thought about what it cost, the decision became a no-brainer. Pretty soon the basic 120 was all but superceded.

Meanwhile, the trickle-down influence of the enormous Zeus stereo chassis offered a new driver circuit and a prettier, more rounded front-panel, bringing the looks into line with the more refined sound. Thus was born the new model, while slightly increased power output provided the new designation. There's also the choice of both balanced and single-ended inputs, essential

credentials in the US high-end, and a very sensible ground-lift switch. One aspect, inherited from the 120s is however, less than welcome. The speaker output connections are in the form of binding posts that are both small and functionally challenged.



They won't take a 4mm plug at right angles, and using a bare wire (or adapter) shortens the length of the horizontal socket to such an extent as to compromise the integrity of the connection. The moral of the story is simple – get your cables terminated to a single connector, and a spade might be the best choice. Unfortunately, while these miserable little sockets were acceptable on the bargain priced 120s, they're way out of place on an amp costing as much as a 150. Hopefully Rogue can address this sooner rather than later. On a far more positive note, the revised fixed-

bias arrangement is simplicity itself to use, and another example of the excellent, common-sense engineering I've come to associate with Rogue products.

Hi-fi history is littered with products whose performance has been impaired in the name of subsequent "improvement". All too often it's the search for better hi-fi that undermines their musical value. Well, thankfully that isn't the case here! The 150s deliver a sound that's big and bold, purposeful and direct. It's redolent with the virtues that have traditionally made valve amplifiers so communicative and attractive, without succumbing to the rose tinted rounding and cloying warmth that can so chronically emasculate them. Running the Rogues in close comparison with the Bonnac, an archetypal modern solid-state design of equivalent cost, was highly instructive. The valve amps scored big for colour, presence and their sheer sense of musical momentum, and whilst they suffered in terms of absolute focus and transparency, the gulf was not nearly as wide as you might imagine. Whilst they painted with a broader (and far more emphatic) brush, they also made greater sense of proceedings, leaving the solid-state competition in danger of sounding rather pale ▶

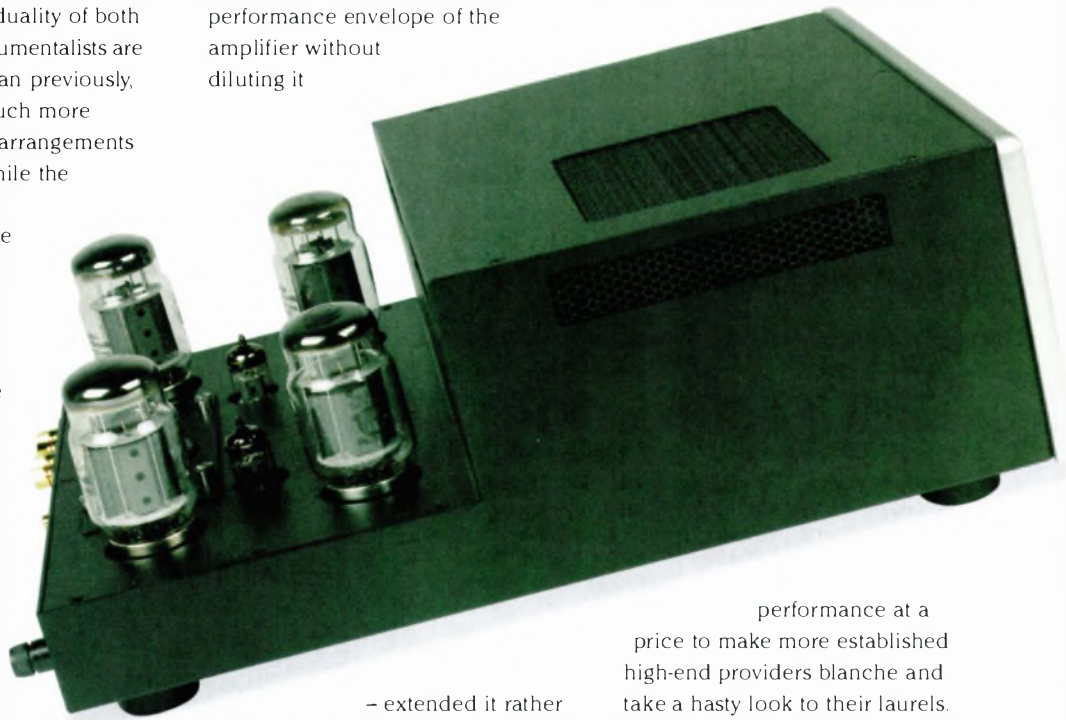


▶ and less than interesting.

It's this musical boldness and swagger that first attracted me to the 120s. The questions facing the 150s are whether the refinement of the original has diluted that message and whether the increased subtlety, detail and finesse can justify the now, considerably higher price? Well, without beating around the bush, the answer to both of them is yes. The 150s possess a tonal range and a rhythmic subtlety that completely eluded the 120s. The character and individuality of both instruments and instrumentalists are far more apparent than previously, their contribution much more impressive. Now the arrangements make more sense, while the way the instruments combine to create the whole is much more natural. The poise, pace and timing of rhythm sections, the purpose and essence of their vital role becomes clear, adding a tension and organic chemistry to the performance you'll recognise from the live experience. It's about recognising what's important about the musical delivery of the broader, dynamic strokes and successfully translating that energy and structural integrity to progressively lower and lower levels of operation and information.

So much for the cake, how about the icing? Well, even the improved tonal rendition of the 150s could still learn a little from the likes of the c-j MV60SE: Although it's interesting to note the importance of c-j's own evolutionary advances in underpinning their traditional

strength. However, the 150 now represents a far more balanced performer than the 120 in either guise. Indeed, it was the imbalance between the dynamic and tonal qualities of the original that allowed the Magnum such immediate success. Well, the 150 builds still further on that start, broadening its musical vocabulary in the process. It's now far harder to pick their shortcomings and they appear less frequently to disturb your pleasure. The new driver circuit has successfully extended the performance envelope of the amplifier without diluting it



– extended it rather than simply spread it thinner. The end result is a far more capable all-round performer than Rogue's previous designs, which brings us to the bottom line.

Anyway you cut the 120 it was an awful lot of amp (and music) for the money. I'd rate it the biggest valve bargain I've seen for years. The 150s are 30% more expensive – but they deliver twice the music, if not more. By which I mean they'll do twice as much with the music you play, as well as playing twice as many types of music. It's a fair

deal. But it also moves the Rogue monos into a whole different ball-park when it comes to price. They simply can't represent the bargain that the 120s did, even though they deliver more musical bang per buck, because they've raised the bar so much higher when it comes to the cost of entry. I guess that's the price of progress, or should that be growing up? Rogue might have started out as young Turks and industry upstarts, but with the 150s they've achieved solid high-end

performance at a price to make more established high-end providers blanch and take a hasty look to their laurels. The 150s up the ante in their price and power-band in much the same way as c-j's impressive Premier 140. Together they promise something of an epiphany in high-power valve amplifier design, always the most troublesome of thermionic product categories. Which makes the merely worthy performance we experienced from the Zeus all the more baffling. The 150s are both impressively balanced performers and musically impressive. Rogue Audio getting all respectable on us? Perish the thought!



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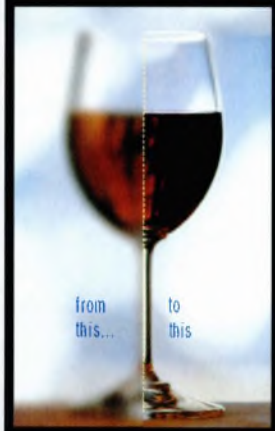
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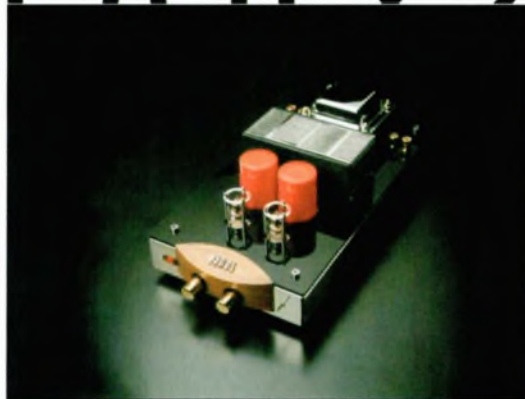
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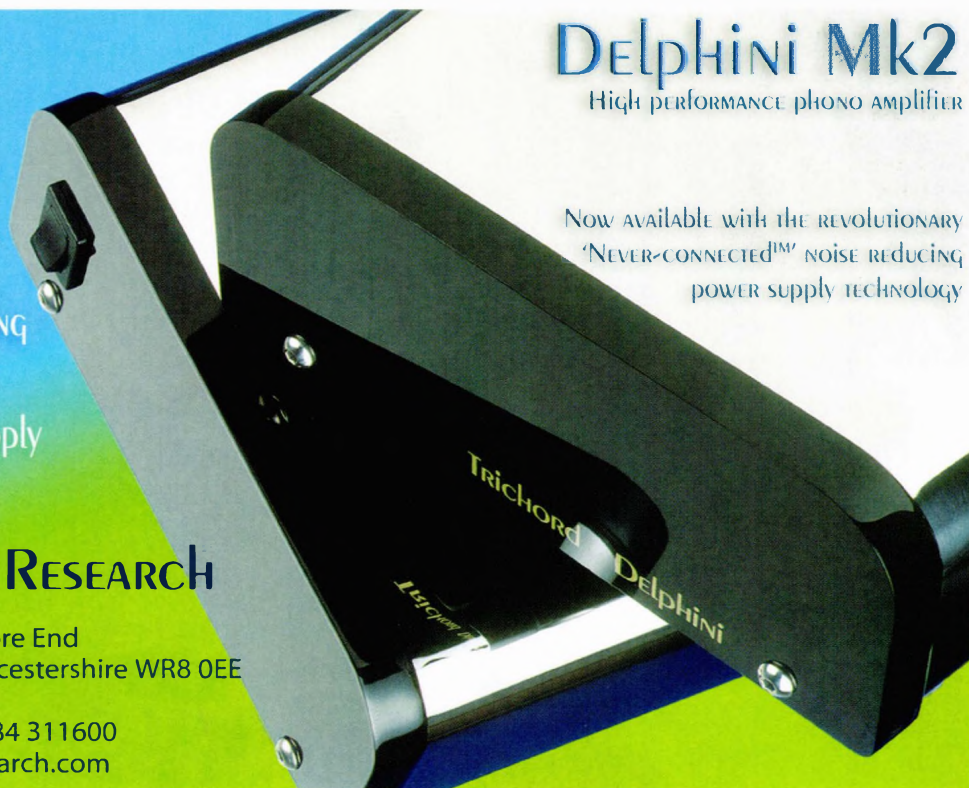
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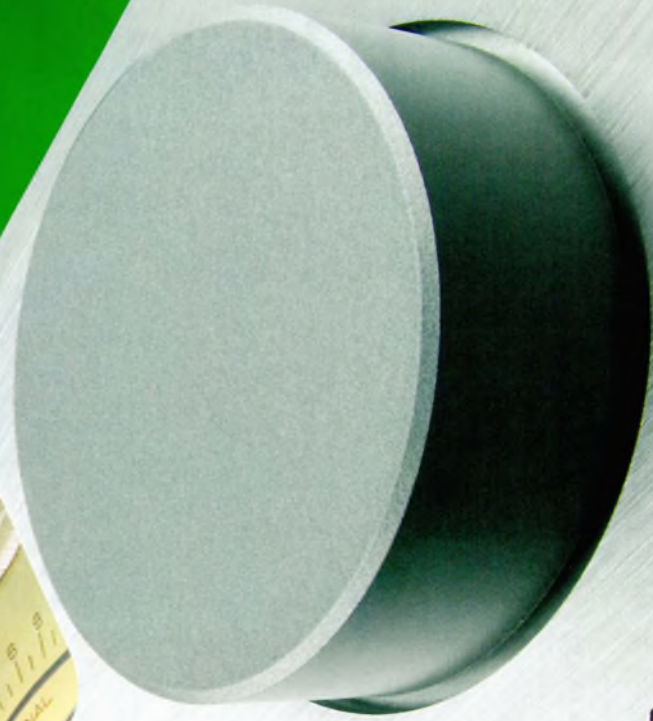
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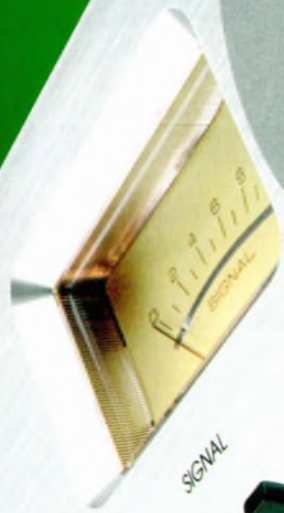


STEREO



*MD 106 triode*

*analogue FM TUNER*



SIGNAL

BW1



BW2

STEREO



MONO



FM/DE



ALWAYS MET



MUTE

STANDBY

MD 106



# Magnum Dynalab MD-106t tuner

by Alan Sircom

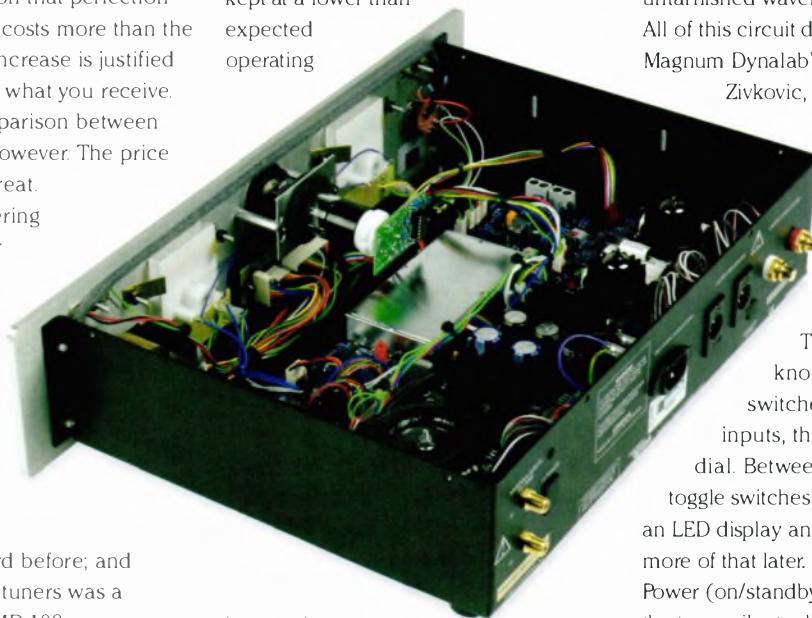
That 'perfect sound forever' marketing Philips used to launch CD entailed a philosophical problem for CD's replacement: how do you make a perfect thing more perfect? I have the same problem. The Magnum Dynalab MD-102t tuner reviewed back in Issue 26 was perfection in tuner technology. But the £3,600 MD-106t FM tuner improves on that perfection considerably. Yes, it costs more than the 102t, but the price increase is justified in what you get and what you receive.

This isn't a comparison between the 102t and 106t, however. The price differential is too great. Few people considering one would consider the other and even less will upgrade between the two. It's just that the 106t so effectively shifts the goal-posts you can't help but compare it to every other tuner you have heard before; and unless one of those tuners was a Marantz 10B or an MD-108, every other tuner you've heard before will come out slightly wanting.

Magnum Dynalab separates the analogue RF and audio sections of the tuner completely, something that's only expedient in tuners designed from the ground up. Its custom-made five stage front-end RF circuit features hand-matched components in all key areas and means the tuner is off to a flying start when it comes to tuner sensitivity and lowering distortion. Magnum

Dynalab is one of the last companies hand producing its own tuner head like this. Off the shelf circuits, no matter how good lack this chance for tweaking or improving the sound.

Part of the sonic improvement comes from designing their own hybrid amplification stage, featuring a pair of Bugle Boy 6922 double triodes, kept at a lower than expected operating



temperature – and thus dramatically extending their life without compromising performance – by the fitting of Pearl Coolers on the tubes as standard. The 106t was the first of the Magnum Dynalab tuners to feature this triode stage. This sets it apart from practically all other tuners currently in production; even the MD-102t has the triode amplification as an optional extra to the standard circuit design.

Magnum Dynalab claim that

this custom approach bestows three benefits on the design. It means the tuner has better earthing than most designs, removing stray ground path signals that could undermine subtlety. This is aided by top-class power supply circuit design, with high grade components. Next comes the zero feedback circuit, to keep that untarnished waveform, er, untarnished. All of this circuit design is credited to Magnum Dynalab's designer Zdenko Zivkovic, the Zinedine Zidane of tuner design.

Functionally, the MD-106t behaves like any of the other tuners in the Magnum Dynalab range.

There are two big knobs; the leftmost switches between aerial inputs, the right is a tuning dial. Between them are four toggle switches, a pair of VU meters, an LED display and a magic eye, but more of that later. The toggles control Power (on/standby), Mute (which keeps the tuner silent when whizzing from station to station), Stereo (weaker, hissier signals sound better in mono and an IF bandwidth toggle switch that moves between wide and narrow bandwidth for better or faster tuning. In the middle of this quartet of toggle switches is the inset green four number LED frequency read-out. Above these toggle switches are two classic needle VU meters; for multipath distortion and signal strength (the latter is buffered, so it can never go right up to 10). ▶

► Most importantly, there's the magic eye, in this case a 6E5-style tube that has a little cup at the top of the tube to denote tuning status. This bathes the room with a turquoise glow whenever you approach the tuner (it has a sensor to detect nearby movement, saving the magic eye from being permanently switched on – useful given the cost and relatively finite numbers of magic eye tubes still in circulation). If you've never used a magic eye before (or oscilloscope tuning on some equally high-end tuners), it's surprising how intuitive it makes tuning become. You get the tuner roughly tuned using the VU meters and your ear, then fine tune using the magic eye

head can be more precise, but you need more accurate metering to determine just how close you are to the station. The magic eye is the ideal graphical interpretation of just how close you are to perfection.

Now the 'bad side'. One of the joys of synthesiser tuners is a phase-locked loop, to keep the tuner on station. Without a PLL, the tuner can drift around the airwaves slightly, which is why channels played on basic transistor radios seem to have a life of their own and

every moment of every day. In fact, you have no say in the matter; once mains power is connected, the tuner begins heating the triodes. Only turning the mains off at the wall or ripping the IEC socket out of the back of the tuner discontinues the power feed.

The tuner has two antenna inputs, both using 300ohm 'F'-type inputs (found in satellite decoders) rather than the more UK radio-chummy 75ohm connectors. Although it is easy to find connectors to make the tuner fit most UK FM aerials, this makes it less easy than most to connect up. Here are also both balanced and single-ended outputs to a preamplifier – with a substantial 2V output on the single ended phonos, and the tuner can be supplied in one of three finishes; black, gold or silver. There will even be an optional remote control, in the coming months, too.

What makes the MD-106t so good? It seems to come with a radio appreciation course. You don't just listen passively to the radio on the MD-106t; you become actively involved with the radio broadcasts. Jon Gaunt's BBC London morning phone in is a fine example of this. Normally background controversy, this becomes inflammatory listening and feet stamp and hair (what hair?) gets pulled out. Normally I can take the ranting of some neo-fascist who wants to deport anyone without family ties dating back to 1066 or the raving of a bleeding-heart who wants free heroin for the nation's paedophiles as just London's crazies getting their 15 minutes of fame. But through the MD-106t, I seem to go all John McEnroe every few minutes.

Perhaps the nearest we get to shock jockism is too in need of anger management for the MD-106t. So, instead we scoot over to Classic FM or Radio Three. But that doesn't work either; that gentle piece of Mozart sounds all fresh and new. The Copland passages

periodically start to make the out of tune whistle and spitchiness. Instead, this tuner has to rely on good old analogue technologies – like a good, stiff power supply – to keep the tuner on song. This is no problem, but does mean that for the first few days, the tuner will drift a little. This is expected; just think of it as the tuner awakening from its beauty sleep.

This also means the tuner needs to be kept on permanently, but the valves run in stand-by mode, so they only receive the smallest amount of heater-juice and don't run hot. This has dual benefits; it prevents early death of the tubes (if anything it will keep them healthier longer, as powering up and down the heaters is a great way to shorten the life expectancy of a triode) and keeps the circuit on constant standby without the mains-sapping strength of valves running at full tilt

to get the signal exactly on song. It makes those five LED signal strength meters supplied on most synthesised tuners seem a little unsubtle and pointless. Of course, magic eye tuning only works when you get rid of synthesiser tuning altogether.

Doing without synthesis has a good and a bad side. But the bad side goes away after a couple of days, so perhaps 'bad side' is too strong a term. The good side is that it affords the listener far closer tuning than any synthesiser can provide. If your favourite station is perfectly tuned at 93.523 kHz, for example and the synthesiser tuner tunes in steps and jumps between 93.52 and 93.53 kHz, you will never precisely tune that station in. Only an analogue tuner





► make me want to saddle up and rustle some cattle and the Gorecki movement makes me want to slit my wrists and castrate an SS man.

From here, it gets personal. If I'm quick, I'll pick up *Book of the Week* on Radio Four: that's anodyne and soothing enough to stop all these hidden radio emotions. Oh no, it's a biography. I listen, enraptured to the tales of Nicholas Culpeper; I want to be a herbalist and I want to live 350 years ago.

This is all too intense, so I slide over to Capitol Radio for some bland pop.

Oooh, isn't *Toxic* by Britney Spears

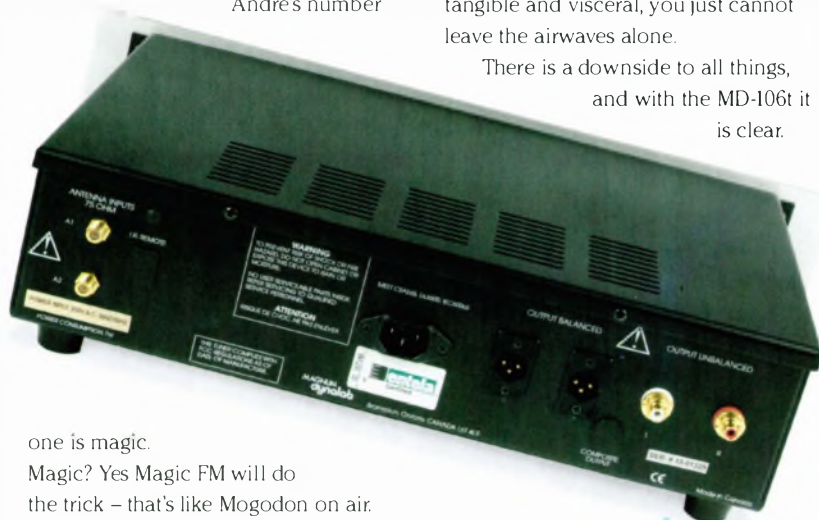
a great record? I think Peter  
Andre's number

considerably better than the products in the FM studio, and you become acutely aware of the jump in technology when you listen to a CD being played through the studio components. But when you hear a live broadcast, or even a play that is recorded, such complaints fall away and the fullness and naturalness of the sound is so understatedly impressive, the miles between you and the broadcaster just melt away. You are in the same room as the orchestra, you are sitting in a 17th Century drawing room or you are sitting in the lap of the newsreader. You see, it's impossible to stay dispassionate about the MD-106t, it makes the aether so tangible and visceral, you just cannot leave the airwaves alone.

There is a downside to all things,  
and with the MD-106t it  
is clear.

realisation; not only does it seem like the BBC effects staff are pulling the wool over our ears (sorry), but you also discover how deeply sad you can be for listening out for individual sheep. So, not only do you become a tuner geek, you also become a sheep geek.

Order the MD-106t so that you can install it on a Wednesday if it is at all possible. This means, come Friday evening, your tuner will be waiting for you, rock stable and ready to roll. Now sit down and listen. Write off the whole weekend. Warn people that if they are accidentally exposed to the 106t's sound, they will listen for days on end, too. And, if you buy it in gold, expect people to fight over it, calling the tuner "my precioussssss". I want one! ▶+



one is magic.

Magic? Yes Magic FM will do the trick – that's like Mogodon on air. Strange, I always remember hating Dire Straits, but this really hits the spot. And so it goes on.

Eventually, you begin to settle down, good taste presides once radio listening becomes less of a stream-of-consciousness race through the airwaves. But the feeling of constantly listening to something live and new never once escapes you. Radio takes on a larger part of your life when played through the MD-106t.

Let's look at this less existentially. This is the most detailed, biggest and deepest insight into the radio studio I have heard to date. Any closer and I'd be staring into a microphone. And this is good and bad, because chances are that your CD and vinyl replay is

It changes the way you listen to radio. If you want something to softly numb you with elevator music, look elsewhere; whatever you play through the MD-106t draws you in. Even the most arch Radio Four play seems like the first-ever performance of *King Lear* and the thing is so mind-crunchingly detailed you start to listen for individual sheep baaaa's in the background effects to *The Archers*. In fact, those bloody sheep are the most telling factor in the tuner's quality. Through this tuner, and this alone, you get to recognise the timbre of each baaaa and start to hear that there are only a handful of recognizable sheep sounds, and they are constantly repeated. This comes with a secondary

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	All-analogue FM tuner
Inputs:	2x 300ohm F-type connectors
Outputs:	1x pair single-ended 1x pair balanced
Output Levels:	2V single-ended 3V balanced
Signal/Noise ratio:	80dB
THD mono/stereo:	0.10%
Stereo separation:	50dB
AM suppression:	70dB
SCA Et IF rejection:	80dB
19kHz pilot tone rejection:	75dB
Audio Frequency response (+/- 1dB):	15Hz-17kHz
Dimensions (HxWxD):	114x 483x 381mm
Weight:	7.1kg
Price:	£3,600

#### UK Distributor:

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Email: [info@audiofreaks.co.uk](mailto:info@audiofreaks.co.uk)

#### Manufacturer:

Magnum Dynalab Ltd  
[www.magnumdynalab.com](http://www.magnumdynalab.com)



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# The Burmester 001 CD Player

by Paul Messenger

Berlin's finest, Burmester is a high-end brand in the true meaning of the phrase, making a number of components that cost a scary twenty grand or more. That's not quite the case here, but this 001 CD player still costs a decidedly hefty \$9,000, and doesn't fall far short of Burmester's finest.

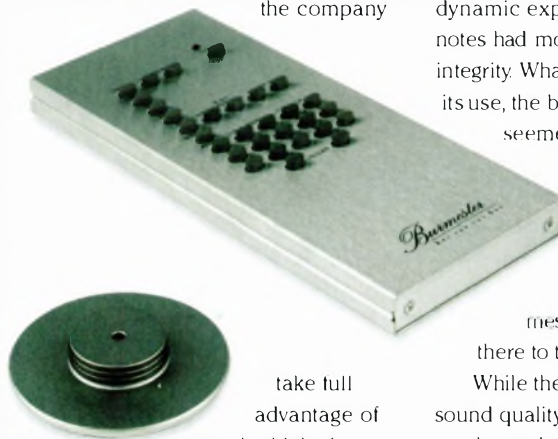
Established for more than twenty-five years, and highly regarded in its homeland, the brand has made sporadic appearances in the UK down the years, via importers like Jacob Zellinger and more recently John Jeffries. Now the company has started running its own UK distribution operation, working through Gosport-based Standesign.

The Burmester hierarchy is as logical as one might expect from a German company. It consists of four ranges, each one distinguished from the next by an approximate doubling in the prices of the individual components. The least expensive series, called Rondo, costs around £2,500 per item, while Basic Line components are around \$5,000 each. Next comes the Top Line, which includes the 001, with prices close to \$10,000, followed by a further price doubling for the Reference Line, at the top of the tree. There's an interesting logic in Burmester's nomenclature too. The first two numbers refer to the year, the third to the month in which the design was actually finalised: the 001 used to designate this CD player therefore refers to January 2000.

Although I had some recollection of – and respect for – the early Burmester products dating back to the original UK debut in 1980, I had little idea of how the brand had evolved since then. To rectify this ignorance I paid a visit to the factory and met the people at the end of last year. It was a very short trip, but a thoroughly interesting one for all that, showing how Burmester had grown

substantially while still sticking firmly to its principles of engineering excellence.

The company is still run by founder Dieter Burmester, aided by the indefatigable Udo Besser, and sleeping partners with major interests in German consumer electronics retail, which has helped out with some classy manufacturing facilities close to the heart of Berlin. All the assembly and QC is carried out here under the most clinical conditions, but this also helps the company



take full advantage of the high-class small-scale specialist metalwork and engineering operations that still throng this metropolis.

It was during this visit that I first encountered the 001. I'd done the factory bit, and repaired to the listening room to chat with Dieter about what I'd seen, as well as getting a chance to listen to some of the kit. The question foremost in my mind was: why did he go to all the trouble and cost of building high precision belt drive mechanisms for his top CD players?

Instead of answering, he went over to a rack of mostly Basic Line equipment, which included both the Basic 006 and Top 001 CD players. These share much the same electronics ingredients and casework, the main difference apparently being that the 001

has the fancy belt drive mechanism, whereas the 006 uses a high quality, bought in, direct drive affair. He played me a few tracks on 006, then substituted 001 and repeated the same music. While I can't of course guarantee that the comparison was entirely valid, it came as a bit of a shock that the superiority of the latter was so immediately obvious. The separation between instruments was clearer and more distinct, each instrument seemed to possess greater dynamic expression, and individual notes had more convincing power and integrity. Whatever the reasoning behind its use, the belt drive mech certainly seemed to be justifying its

existence in the most persuasive way possible – in the superior way it was conveying the musical messages. I resolved then and there to try this CD player at home.

While there was no denying the sound quality advantages the belt drive mech was bringing to the party, that still didn't explain why it should offer such a bonus. Ironically, Burmester's explanation turns out to be rather similar to one of the reasons why belt drive turntables rolled back the direct drive tide way back in the late 1970s. When Technics, rapidly followed by all the other Japanese multi-national hi-fi brands, led the direct drive turntable revolution in the early 1970s, there was immediate recognition that eliminating either belt or idler-wheel coupling and combining the motor with the spindle and bearing would offer a major advantage in terms of long term reliability and consistency. But the riposte by UK belt-drive protagonists like Linn, Rega and Systemdek was simply that their approach sounded better, and that a major reason for this was

► precisely because the motor and main platter spindle bearing were kept separate, allowing superior tolerancing for the vital bearing surfaces. In other words, a dedicated bearing will always be more accurate and precise than one that combines bearing and motor in the same unit.

According to Udo, if you run a regular CD mechanism with a reflective silver disc and no lid, and shine a light onto the spinning disc,

many as are needed to get the best possible fits. The bearing tolerance is actually at or better than 1/3,000th of a millimeter. Even the manually positioned disc clamp puck is selected to match the individual mechanism. I was reminded a little of a similar process I'd seen down at Rega, where one

skilled worker was painstakingly selecting the bearing assemblies for its premium RB1000 tonearm.

An integrated one-box CD player, the 001 essentially combines the ingredients found in the 969/970 and 979/980

should remain that way for decades, immune from changes in fashion.

It's a top-loader, the disc drive mounted on a hefty alloy billet and hidden under a thick alloy cover that slides beautifully and closes firmly with a light magnetic tug. Although I used it exclusively as a CD player, having little interest in other digital media, it actually has a pretty heavy complement of features and facilities, giving useful potential flexibility. The on-board DACs are doubled up in balanced pairs, incorporate up-sampling to 96kHz/24-bit resolution, and may be accessed by any of the four external digital signal inputs (2 phonos, 1 optical and 1 balanced XLR) in addition the built in CD drive. Since the output stage is equipped with a good quality 60-step electronic volume control, the unit can serve as a full digital-to-analogue pre-amp, and be connected directly to power amps. There are phono and optical digital outputs for use with an external DAC, plus three sets of fixed or variable analogue outputs, two on phonos the other on balanced XLR.

Burmester is big on balanced architecture and connections. The whole player is constructed that way internally, and the company recommends its use wherever possible.

Undoubtedly popular in some markets, especially for long signal runs, it's a connection system that has still to make its mark on the UK domestic hi-fi scene.

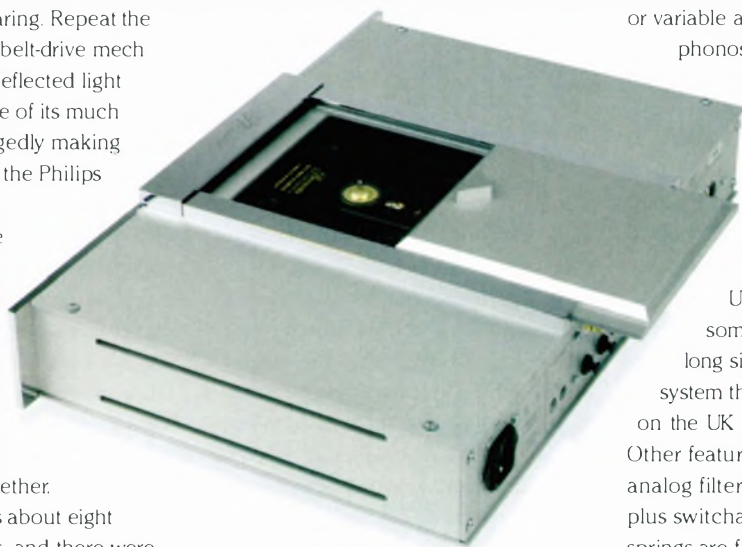
Other features include a switchable analog filter (linear or soft settings), plus switchable polarity. Carbon fibre springs are fitted into the feet, while the generous power supply arrangements include a 50 VA transformer, backed up by 64,000 µF of filter capacitance.

In fact the only thing I don't like about this player is its bulky, button-rich all-metal handset, which is, frankly, pretentious. Although it works well enough, it's heavy and too

transport/converter two-box combos. It follows the company tradition, using a beautifully chrome-plated front panel with all the operating captions deeply engraved into the surface. It doesn't make for particularly easy reading and thence operation, but it does look very smart indeed, and

the reflection on the ceiling will show some blurring due to the limitations of the direct drive motor/bearing. Repeat the trick with Burmester's belt-drive mech and the image of the reflected light remains sharp because of its much greater precision, allegedly making it that much easier for the Philips CD PRO components, controlled by in-house software, to read the disc data accurately.

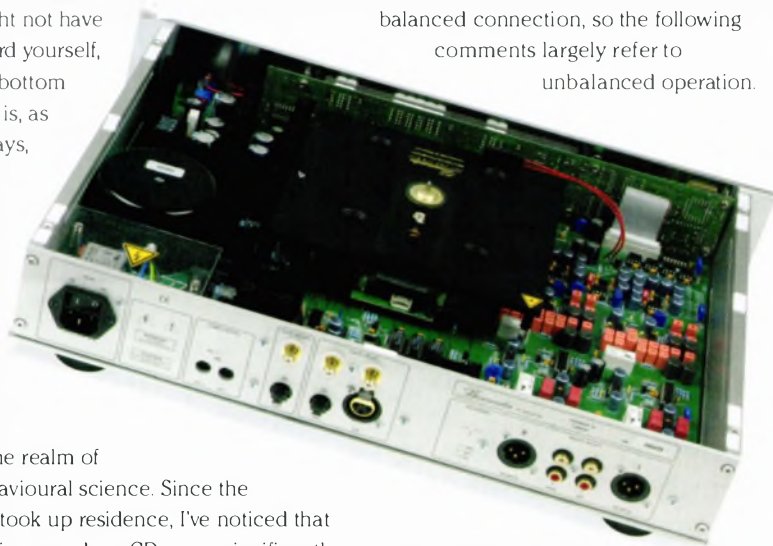
I can't vouch for this observation, but did see the bench in the factory where the belt-drive assemblies are put together. Each mechanism uses about eight precision components, and there were enough bits for about twenty mechs set out on the table. Apparently just one guy puts them together, because he has a particular feel for them and enjoys doing the job. He must do, because he gives up a Saturday to come in when the place is quiet and deserted, and sort through hundreds of combinations, dry-fitting as





► cumbersome for easy one-handed operation, with little button discrimination and small, difficult to read labels.

I liked the 001's sound quality well enough when I heard it in the factory, and wasn't in the least disappointed when I got it home. In fact, over a period of several months I've now tried three different examples, and can therefore add that the consistency between them has been superb. While I could waffle on at length about the sound and experience of individual bits of music that you might or might not have heard yourself, the bottom line is, as always,



in the realm of behavioural science. Since the 001 took up residence, I've noticed that I've increased my CD usage significantly, and am less inclined to search out or spin a vinyl equivalent.

As ever, it's hard to put a finger on exactly why this should be the case, but it's also impossible to argue with the basic observation. The Burmester might not be a paragon of ergonomic virtues, but it's still a thoroughly satisfying machine to use, partly because of the magnificent precision of the disc drive mechanism. It might be entirely irrelevant to the musical experience, but there's still a certain tactile pleasure to be gained from the simple task of changing a disc here.

My first experiences with the 001 came as part of a Burmester package which also included the 948 power conditioner and 032 integrated amplifier, the latter being reviewed in another

magazine. This did provide the opportunity to bring the balanced connections between the two into play, using the company's high quality but exceedingly stiff Silver interconnects, to very good effect. Since both these components have essentially the same electronic volume control, I disabled the 001's variable output, pretty much for the duration thereafter, though in the right system it seems to work very well indeed. Apart from that early exposure with the 032, I had no real opportunity to use the balanced connection, so the following comments largely refer to unbalanced operation.

If it was possible to sum up the 001's sound in just one adjective, I'd go for 'lush'. There's a warmth and richness to instruments that is both romantically engrossing yet also harmonically convincing. The occasional disc can sound a little too weighty, but that has more to do with the disc – Lambchop's 'Is a Woman' springs to mind – and the speakers on the end of the chain. The 001 itself is essentially neutral, but notably powerful and punchy at the same time, with excellent timing and drive, and very clean, quiet backgrounds.

I stayed with the 'linear' analogue filter almost throughout; the alternative 'soft' setting is just that, with a rather more obvious, though still very subtle, treble rolloff – I guess it could be useful

with some speakers. Whichever filter is used, the top end here is sweet and kind, with no hint of harshness, though the 'linear' setting does supply the most fine detail. I experimented for a time with inserting a Whest Audio CD processor between player and pre-amp, and this also seemed to have a positive effect, with a slight improvement in naturalness. Although the 001 is equipped with serious decoupling feet, I also tried it on a Vertex AQ Kinabalu platform, adding an extra sense of air and spaciousness to very good effect.

I normally use a Naim CDS3 for CD replay, and wouldn't say the Burmester offers significant extra musical detail – the two seem very similar in this regard. But the 001 has a welcoming friendliness, even a cuddly quality, that is very engaging and involving, and found me using this player in preference, and spending significantly more time playing CDs than my usually varied musical diet.



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single-box, belt driven, top loading CD player.
Digital inputs:	2x co-axial (phono) 1x optical (Toslink) 1x balanced XLR
Digital outputs:	1x co-axial (phono) 1x optical (Toslink)
Analogue outputs:	1pr balanced XLR 2prs single-ended phono
Configuration Options:	Analogue filters Variable output level
Dimensions (WxHxD):	482x115x340mm
Weight:	11 kg
Price	£9,000

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# Kuzma Stabi SD Turntable and Stogi S Tonearm

by Roy Gregory

If you want to attract attention, all you need to do is stick two tonearms on a single record deck. Works every time. Even hardened audiophiles, indeed, especially hardened audio-philos, are stopped in their tracks. Anacrophiles love it; analogue addicts go weak at the knees. But the people who seem most impressed are the uninitiated. After all, why on earth would you need an extra tonearm on a record player? Except for blatant exhibitionism, that is.

Well, actually, there are several good reasons, but perhaps the best of them is the phoenix-like rise of the mono-record from the supposedly cold ashes of analogue reproduction. For anybody who's missed the History Man's contribution to the single-channel cause, you should be aware that this particular movement has now reached the point where a \$3000 mono, moving-coil cartridge has become a viable product. The audiophile record labels are on the case too, with a burgeoning stream of highly recommended heavy-weight reissues to augment the bewildering array of affordable secondhand options on offer. Problem is of course, that you're going to suffer noise issues playing them with a standard stereo cartridge. Which, given the importance of precise set-up to the replay of any vinyl record, pretty much demands a dedicated arm and cartridge, and therefore either a second record player or one that will take two arms. Either option has been pretty pricey, given the cost of decks with the necessary dual arm capability. Which is where the Stabi S comes in.

The record player was originally reviewed by JMH back in Issue 10, along with its matching Stogi S uni-pivot tonearm, and he was suitably impressed.

Simplicity itself, the chassis is constructed from two, turned brass rods arranged in a T. These are separated from the shelf or support on which it sits by thick rubber O rings around their ends. But be warned - despite the compact dimensions of the resulting structure, its (literally) solid construction makes it a seriously heavy element. The first time you pick it up you will be surprised by the sheer weight of the chassis, and that's without the platter attached! A simple standing bearing is used, supporting an aluminium sub-platter, atop which sits the heavy, cast platter itself. Perhaps, under the circumstances, it's just as well that it's almost impossible to move the deck around with the platter in situ. Belt-drive is furnished by a separate, cylindrical, stand-alone motor housing that sits beneath the platter, only its on-off switch protruding. The Delrin pulley provides 33, a secondary sleeve (reminiscent of the LP12) being provided for 45. Of course, there's no reason why you shouldn't use an external power-supply to run the deck at 45 (or even 78).

The Stogi S tonearm is a classic uni-pivot design, but rather more rigid and heavily engineered than much of the competition. The large diameter, aluminium arm-wand is perched high above the record surface, a situation necessitated by the design of the small

and extremely rigid headshell. Its cylindrical and heavily braced form places the cartridge beneath the arm-tube, level with its underside rather than the more normal, upper edge. But, stability is ensured by the low-slung counterweight and the

cylindrical brass mass suspended about the bearing. The broad, flat under-face of this is sat in a bath of silicon fluid to provide damping of the arm's movement.

The arm-lead, a single piece Cardas item similar to the Incognito, exits the top of the bearing housing and is

then neatly secured against a small stub attached to the side of the silicon trough. It's a neat arrangement that allows a single run of cable from cartridge-tags to phono plugs. Bias is applied by a neat falling weight arrangement whose fishing-line simply hooks to the edge of the brass stabilising mass. Disconnect it, and the arm-wiring from its fixing stub, and the whole moving portion can be lifted clear. Slightly fiddly to accomplish, this nonetheless makes mounting a cartridge far easier and safer. Azimuth depends on the standard arrangement of rotating the eccentric counterweight, although thankfully, in this case you can lock the two-part assembly firmly in place, once you've adjusted it precisely.

The whole package is a model of practical simplicity, perhaps matched only amongst uni-pivots by VPI's JMW series arms. And just like the JMWs, Kuzma are at pains to supply all the



► necessary tools, instructions and protractors to ensure proper set-up, along with some good quality cartridge fixing hardware. You'd be surprised just what a pleasant change that makes these days.

So much for the basic beast. Here, however, the Stogi S appears in its two-arm guise (or SD – D

moving-coil installed, a £395 model that delivers a superbly balanced performance, especially given its price, which also makes it appear an obvious match for the turntable. However, that's an assumption that underplays the performance of the Stabi SD and Stogi S. Don't misunderstand me, performance with the Ace was excellent and thoroughly enjoyable, but this record player is quite capable of supporting (even deserves) an even better pick-up. It proved perfectly comfortable in the company of the Lyra Helikons (both stereo and mono), cartridges that cost almost as much as the tonearm and turntable combined.

I was taking the opportunity presented by the two-arm Stabi to run back through some of my older recordings, comparing stereo and mono performances of the same piece. The damped uni-pivot Stogi S, perfectly at home on the ultra-stable platform provided by the Stabi SD, delivered a big, bold and colourful performance, capturing the full orchestral sweep and the sheer gusto in the playing. Its drama and presence were musically direct, instilling a real sense of life into the proceedings. This arm's presentation is about energy and the substance in

music, the drive and purpose behind the music. It's picture is compact and stable with the kind of solidity I normally associate with a parallel tracker, and certainly not with a uni-pivot. Logic suggests that the large damped area probably has a lot to do with this, although I also suspect that the sheer rigidity of the oversized and overbuilt arm structure has rather a lot to do with it. They probably also account for the arm's comfort in the company of the ultra-rigid and mechanically demanding Helikons. You might occasionally want for greater delicacy or transparency,

possibly a more expansive stage than the Stogi S delivers, but you'll never want for fire or impact. I can't help feeling that, good as the Helikon was, the natural tonality and extra soundstage

depth of a Transfiguration would be the ideal match,

an enticing proposition indeed.

One of the works I was revisiting was *Tosca*, an opera where I've tended to default to the Colin Davis recording on Philips: The combination of Caballe and Carreras, combined with a superb recording delivers the best balance of overall virtues. Not that other recordings lack their own individual appeal. On the one hand you've the emotive drama of Callas playing opposite Di Stefano (in glorious mono) the very soul of the

characterisation: on the other, there's the precision and flawless technique of Zinka Milanov and Jussi Bjoerling, a more considered and sophisticated view of the score.

Do you want seat of the pants drama or musical insight? Do you want a reading or a performance? Well, naturally you want both – but then the pleasure's ►



standing for double), the second arm-base provided by extending the brass crossbar that tops the T shaped

chassis. Of course, you could take advantage of the extremely neat, integrated column arm mount designed for the Stogi S and simply mount another of those. But that would fly in the face of audiophile, and just as importantly, human nature. No. Why have two the same when there's the option to have something different. Variety is, as they say, the spice of life. So, ever the realist, Franc Kuzma has devised a simple arm-board, adaptable to virtually any arm (including those longer than nine-inches) that bolts to the top of the arm-mounting column. The end result is remarkably versatile, its skeletal structure allowing a flexibility denied more conventional designs with their fixed arm-boards and the need to wedge everything under a lid. Ah yes, lids. Audiofreaks can supply a simple perspex cover that sits on the platter and shields the arm, although I'm not sure whether this extends to a twin-arm arrangement. Audiofreaks delivered the deck with a Benz-Micro Ace M





► in the hunt. Did either the RCA or the EMI make me forego the Philips? No – but they contributed mightily to both the understanding and enjoyment of the work once I returned to it.

And the point is? Well, for everybody out there who loves the Callas, there will be an equal number who appreciate the Milanov (or indeed, the Caballe). The power and impact of the Stogi S might have been made for Callas. The option to listen to these recordings with a second tonearm and cartridge also allowed me to appreciate the artistry, precision and control



of Milanov. It was the opportunity to enjoy the best of each, maximising my appreciation of the whole. As great as the strengths of the Stogi S are, and they are, there's always the opportunity for another arm or more importantly a cartridge to offer a second perspective on a piece. Once you've been exposed to the facility you'll find it surprisingly addictive. All of a sudden, and contrary to all common sense, the provision of a second arm starts to become a necessity rather than an extravagance. All you need is a deck that will accept it. ▶

Which brings us back to the Stabi S, quietly going about its work almost unnoticed, what with all the attention being lavished on the more obvious questions posed by the whole issue of a second arm. Prior to the arrival of the little Kuzma (and it really is about as compact as turntables get – especially

those with two arms) its place atop the right-hand equipment rack was occupied by the Clearaudio Master Reference. Visually it's a swap that leaves the Stabi S looking a little lost; after all, the Clearaudio is nothing if not ostentatious. Musically however, the gap is narrower than you might think. No, I'm not suggesting that the Kuzma presents a serious challenge, and I'll not bore you with

a list of the specific superiorities



enjoyed by the Clearaudio.

What is impressive about the Stabi S is the way it maintains the structure of the music and the absolute stability with which it presents it. If transparency, detail and separation can't compare with 12 grands worth of German engineering, then that's hardly a surprise. What is impressive is how little that seems to matter when simply enjoying music. I can only echo JMH's incredulity at the quality of the musical experience delivered by the little Kuzma – and its price. With an impressively solid yet mobile bass and capable of impressive dynamic contrasts, it really does represent the most cost effective way I know of getting even pretty exotic tonearms up and running. It makes you wonder just how far you could take this basic chassis, given the availability of various supports and external power supplies - all things that can be executed surprisingly

cheaply if funds are really tight.

The Kuzma combination is everything that JMH suggested, the turntable providing a stable and well-rooted foundation, the arm the drama and dynamism. The whole is very definitely greater than the sum of its parts, the product of the engineering integrity and elegance that I've come to associate with the marque. Add in the dual arm facility and you extend the musical horizons even further.

One thing that will stay with me long after the Kuzma's departure is the musical opportunities presented by the constant presence of that second tonearm. Having that mono cartridge is one thing, so is having it in a second arm-wand, but its constant availability, ready and waiting to play, is something else again. Once the Stabi SD wings its way back to its rightful owner, the Clearaudio will reappear, and this time it'll be carrying a second arm! ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Kuzma Stabi SD Turntable

Type:	Rigid turntable with stand alone motor
Speeds:	33 and 45 RPM
Lid:	Optional platter shield
Price:	£1150 inc VAT

##### Kuzma Stogi S Tonearm

Type:	Damped uni-pivot
Armtube Material:	Aluminium
Effective Length:	229mm
Effective Mass:	11g
Counterweight:	Two-part composite design, rigidly coupled
Price:	£495

##### UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks  
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153  
Net. [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

# The SME Series M2-9 Tonearm

by Roy Gregory

It's not exactly every day that a new product arrives from SME. Alistair Robertson-Aikman has always produced products with a long shelf life, and a standard of finish that has made them look as good after ten years as they did on the day they were bought. He has also resolutely followed his own path rather than the whims of fashion, relying on the quality of his arms' engineering to win and keep customers rather than the plaudits of a fickle press. Indeed, the Steyning company has survived for nearly 40 years on three basic designs.

First came the 3009 (and its longer siblings, the 3010 and 3012) which evolved eventually into the R series before finally ceasing production. The second generation of SME tonearms was the ultra-lightweight III and the simplified IIIs, products that survived well into the 1980s before being superseded by the revolutionary Series 5, with its one-piece, cast magnesium arm-tube.

Of course, since then we've seen the longer versions of the 5, along

with the cheaper 4 and the 309 with its detachable headshell, but all have been variations on the 5's ground-breaking design. Now, a new century sees a new arm from SME, one that looks to its past in order to see a way forward. The Series M2 tonearms represent a new range that fits below the Series 5 and its derivatives. But at the same time it also attempts to redefine the versatility and functionality of basic

right about now. Indeed, many parts of the M2-9 bear such a close resemblance to the old SME 3009 that you might be forgiven for assuming that AR-A had simply raided his old parts box to cobble together something new.

In fact, it's much more a case of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it", an attitude that has informed the governing aesthetic to the point where the common themes visually outweigh the new, creating a false impression of similarity that evaporates on closer inspection.

Okay, so what remains the same? The most obvious elements are the shiny, internally damped, stainless steel arm-tube and the familiar sliding base for overhang adjustment, albeit the earlier version without the precision ratchet drive of the Series 5. The large contact area between the arm-base and the mounting-plate makes for a rigid coupling that also eliminates the slots in the headshell that potentially compromise the sound (Naim should, perhaps, take note). Once adjusted, the overhang is fixed using the two heavily knurled screws, once again inherited from the older models. But here I'm afraid I must take issue with SME. The brass heads on these screws mark extremely easily, a situation that quickly detracts from

tonearms, the increasing simplicity of which has been underlined by the dominance of the

5's contemporary, the Rega RB300. The M2 tonarms allow precise adjustment of every parameter of cartridge alignment and set-up, together with that most unfashionable facility of all – a detachable headshell.

Those with long memories should be suffering a severe case of *deja-vu*





▶ the otherwise superb appearance of the arm. Taking the time to select the correct screwdriver for the task will of course solve the problem. But if you are ham-fisted or slap-dash in your approach then the visible damage will remain



to reproach you for the arm's entire (very long) working life. (Spares are, naturally available!) A switch to something more robust might be both sensible and desirable. I'd also dispense with the small retaining latch on the armrest that seems unnecessarily fiddly to use. But let's be honest, these quibbles reflect personal impatience more than faults in the arm's design.

Beneath the deck, you'll also find the familiar wing-shaped extension that allows the connection of phono-terminated arm-leads at right angles to the arm. Its reverse side carries a gold-plated earth terminal. SME supply an appropriately finished vdH D501 tonearm cable, which is a good starting point, but as experience was to demonstrate, the M2 certainly justifies something better. Fortunately, the sensible engineering of the arm-base makes that a simple prospect. One word of warning, though. The sockets themselves are extremely close together, which prevents the use of all but the slimmest phono plugs, so check before you invest.



Arm-height (VTA) is now adjusted by a knurled thumb wheel set between the sliding base and the threaded arm post. Similar in operation to Incognito's Easy Riser, it makes small, repeatable adjustments

simplicity itself – either up or down. Once you are happy with the results you simply tighten in the usual way, using the allen bolt closed collar. It's by far the best VTA arrangement I've enjoyed on an SME arm, and clearly demonstrates that the company is still prepared to learn and innovate.

Cueing is carried out by the same components employed by SME since time immemorial, giving this, their budget arm, the same

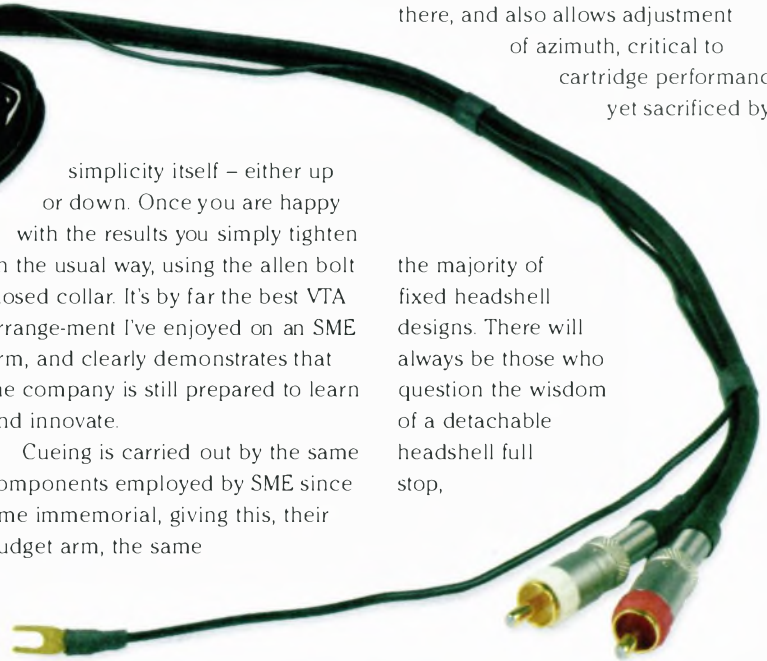
operational feel and precision as the Series 5. There is also an optional fluid-damping trough, although this wasn't supplied for review. Finally, bias adjustment is still of the thread and falling weight variety, again, beautifully executed with a low friction roller arrangement.

So much for the similarities to the 3009, the differences are, as we shall see, quite profound. Firstly, and most obviously, the M2 dispenses with the older arm's J-shaped arm-tube. It retains the detachable headshell facility, but again, dispenses with

the old two-pin IEJ arrangement in favour of the massive, collet fixed, cast magnesium design first seen on the 309. Whilst detachable headshells will always involve some compromise to structural integrity, this is probably the best option out there, and also allows adjustment of azimuth, critical to cartridge performance yet sacrificed by

the majority of fixed headshell designs. There will always be those who question the wisdom of a detachable headshell full stop,

seeing it as an anachronism. However, I firmly believe that (properly executed) it's a valuable facility. Proper, noise-free replay of mono recordings requires a cartridge specially designed for the task, while pre-micro-groove 78s need a larger stylus profile. If you want both good stereo and good mono (and the option for further alternative pick-ups) then a detachable headshell is clearly the most cost (and space) effective solution. Besides, SME have the evidence of their own sales figures to rely on. It's safe to assume that the 309 is ticking along at a healthy rate, thus underlining the continuing public demand for detachable headshell tonearms. However, in order to work the carrying arm needs to offer easy and repeatable adjustment of bias, VTA and



▶ tracking force. Well, we've covered the first two, but what about VTF? The M2 uses a single-piece tungsten counterweight, running on a tightly threaded stub. It is arranged so that each turn represents 1g of VTF, the graduations around its periphery further dividing that into 0.025g steps. Simple and effective, the precision interface between the counterweight and thread eliminates backlash in the action, thus ensuring accuracy.

However, the biggest difference between the M2 and its visual forebears lies in the bearing assembly. Gone are the horizontal knife-edge bearings of old, replaced by a precision gimbal arrangement that's wonderfully smooth in action. There's an indefinable silkiness to really good arm bearings. The Tri-planar has it,

and so does the Rega RB1000. Well, the SME M2 does too, and that's definitely a good thing. In fact, the feel of the arm in use is entirely in keeping with the one other thing that hasn't changed – the quality of the finish. SME have always set the benchmark for fit, finish and presentation when it comes to tonearms. The M2 is no exception and, having seen photographs I was surprised by how much more impressive the arm looks and feels in the flesh. It might represent SME's effort to offer a more affordable product, but rest assured that neither the engineering nor the finish has been compromised.

The M2 is available in three

versions: the nine-inch reviewed here, a ten-inch (actually nearer nine and a half, but intended for decks with oversized platters) and a 12". Ultimately, I wouldn't be surprised to see fixed headshell versions, although the company has no plans in that direction at present. Effective mass is sensible, at around 9.5g for the shorter arms and 12g for the 12". Combined with the damping trough this should accommodate all but the highest compliance cartridges, which let's face it, are a real rarity these days.

a critical consideration in getting the best out of a demanding pick-up like the Helikon. And whilst the headshell might be detachable, the substantial structure provides a superb mechanical mating surface for the cartridge body. No surprise then that the sound of the M2 majors on focus, delicacy and transparency. It positions its images on a capacious soundstage with clearly defined space between and behind them. Nor do they move or wander. The M2 might not possess the iron grip of the Series 5, but its lighter touch has musical benefits of its own. Rhythmically and spatially rooted, it still manages to combine those qualities with delicacy and an inner life. The superb control of Milanov's *Tosca* is laid bare without becoming mechanical or contrived, while the colours and character of individual voices is beautifully separated.



Spare headshells are readily available from SME, but be aware that they are specific to the length of the arm you use, the off-set being different in each case: The company will of course, advise.

I mounted the M2-9 on the second arm-board of the excellent Kuzma Stabi SD, which proved an excellent match. However, I suspect that the M series arms would be equally at home on more exotic mounts. I used it with both Benz-Micro Ace M and Lyra Helikon cartridges, the latter in particular, proving a superb combination.

The tools and excellent overhang protractor supplied with the M2 make really precise set-up easy to achieve,

The emphasis here is on micro-dynamic discrimination rather than ultimate dynamic range and sheer impact, but it's a quality that sorts out the densest of mixes. The separation comes easily, but above all, naturally. It never imposes itself or intrudes on the music. It simply sorts out the competing elements, allowing each its own space and identity. Ingvor Wixell's *Scarpia* (to Caballé's *Tosca*) has a cold, hard edge of real cruelty, all the more apparent on the French pressing, which the SME easily differentiates from the English or Japanese



editions. It's a stunning performance and one that elevates the Colin Davis *Tosca* above the competition. The M2-9 let's you hear just how good it is, and the contribution it makes to the whole. But don't get the idea that this arm only plays acoustic music. If it can handle Puccini, then there's little in pop music to cause it any qualms! Aimee Mann, Steve Earle and Gabriel all came and went without concern.

I couldn't help wondering just how good the SME M2 might get, shorn of the constraints of price. First and easiest item on the agenda has to be the arm-cable, and to that end I imported Audiofreaks for a Cardas Golden Cross Phono (\$520) tonearm lead, fitted with the necessary slim-line phono plugs.\* The vdH wire supplied is an excellent starting point, but experience suggests that a little experimentation (and money) can reap worthwhile rewards. Sure enough, the Cardas proved an immediate hit, even if its bulk confines it strictly to non-suspended decks. It delivered all the weight and tonal sophistication that you'd expect, but the effect on timing and expression were what really counted. Playing Ryan Adams' cover of 'Wonderwall' (*Love Is Hell, pts. 1&2*) it cuts the core of the voice free from the wash of reverb used, giving the song an important centre. At the same time the spacing, placing and timing of the guitar notes becomes far more natural and explicit, delicately picking out the shape of the melody, providing critical structure beneath the shambling, disjointed, almost spoken introduction. Put those things together with the increased sense of acoustic space and the tension in the hung backing notes and you've elevated the

emotional impact of the song to a whole new level. Undeniably beautiful if slightly unfocused with the vdH cable, the Cardas makes this music truly effective. At the same time it reveals the underlying potential inherent in the M2. There's a sense of flow and evenly distributed energy that makes this arm engaging yet undemonstrative, musical without drawing attention to itself.\*

Of course, the Cardas Golden Cross costs almost as much as the arm itself, but there are cheaper options available that might offer a more sensible match. Incognito and Audioplan would be my first ports of call, although we've just received a fascinating alternative in the shape of the latest Discovery arm-lead. Turntable permitting, I'd certainly try one of these. You might decide that you're happy with the vdH. If not, then these alternatives should be cost effective.

The SME Series M2-9, to give it its full, if rather unwieldy title, is something of a departure from what has become the established SME sound. Reducing the ticket price for this, the doyen of tonearms, it also and not surprisingly given the structural and material differences, subtly alters the voicing. Compared to the Series 5 and its derivatives, the M2-9 offers a less defined, less detailed and undoubtedly less accurate sound. However, it counters with a sense of life, energy and colour, mostly emanating from its attractively spot-lit upper-mid, that combined with the traditional virtues of focus, separation and essential neutrality make it a musically rewarding and versatile performer. Compared to its price peers, it's more stable and easier to

use than the uni-pivots, more adjustable and versatile than the gimbal bearing designs. Some might consider it "old-fashioned". I think of it more as re-establishing the virtues of a traditional approach, underlining aspects of tonearm performance we've been overlooking for rather too long. Sonically it treads a finely judged line between the vivid drama of arms like the Stogi S and VPI JMW 9.0 and the controlled accuracy of the SME 5. Don't be fooled by first impressions – there's nothing hand-me-down about its performance. Just like the Kuzmas it combines careful engineering and materials to deliver musical value well above its price: A carefully consider and beautifully executed classic in the making. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### SME Series M2 Tonearms

Type:	Gimbal bearing with optional damping
Armtube Material:	Damped stainless-steel
Effective Lengths –	
M2-9:	233.2mm
M2-10:	239.3mm
M2-12:	308.8mm
Effective Mass –	
M2-9:	9.5g
M2-10:	9.6g
M2-12:	12g
Counterweight:	Tungsten, decoupled
Prices –	
M2-9:	£583-40
M2-10:	£596-24
M2-12:	£638-40
Spare Headshell:	£65-31
Fluid Damper:	TBA

##### Manufacturer:

SME Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0)1903 814321

\* I am aware of AR-A's reluctance to accept "improvements" such as expensive alternative cables. I was further warned about this by Audiofreaks when supplying the Cardas Golden Cross Phono cable, but could not resist, nevertheless.

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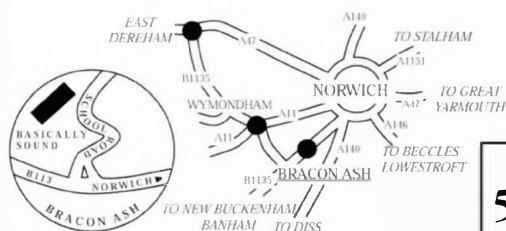
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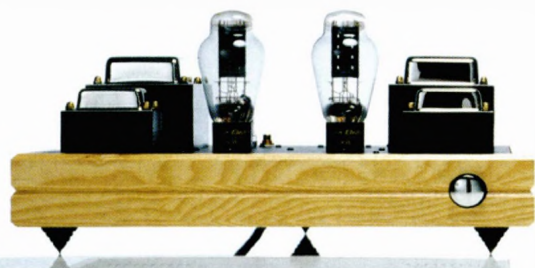
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# The Chord Blu CD Transport

by Jimmy Hughes

I know it sounds like hype, but Chord's DAC-64 digital-to-analogue converter literally changed my life. Encountering it back in 2001, I finally felt CD had come of age. And about time too! It had only taken 18 years for CD to deliver the Pure Perfect Sound the makers originally promised. The DAC-64 recreated subtlety, dynamics, and timing I'd never experienced from CD before. At a stroke it transformed my entire CD collection, making every disc sound more accurate and believable.

The DAC-64's secret weapon was something called the Watts Time Aligned (WTA) filter. A clever use of technology that greatly reduced the transient timing errors that had previously afflicted CD. Yet this was only part of the story. The massive benefits of the WTA would've been lost without Chord's other secret weapon - the four-second RAM buffer and sophisticated re-clocking system. In effect, re-clocking made the DAC-64 virtually independent of the CD transport being used.

As a result, inherent jitter levels in the CD transport became relatively unimportant. By re-clocking via a RAM buffer, the DAC-64 effectively cleansed its digital source of impurities. There were two levels of re-clocking, plus 'off', making it possible to compare different options. For listeners this was all very positive; for Chord it represented a double-edged sword. Having made the absolute quality of the CD transport seemingly unimportant, how could they offer a sonically viable transport of their own?

Perhaps it didn't matter. Maybe existing Chord owners only required a good transport that matched the unusual styling and rugged build quality of their other Chord Choral components.

Thankfully, Chord were having none of that. They weren't happy at the thought of users paying a premium for something that in reality sounded no better than transports costing considerably less. So began a long and exhaustive process as Chord tried to extend the state of the art.

The problem was a very real one. Speaking personally, having tried the DAC-64 with various CD transports, I wasn't convinced there was any point in aiming high. When making transport comparisons via the DAC-64, it proved very hard to decide if one was distinctly better than another. Sure, some differences could be heard, but they were always slight. So Chord faced a stiff challenge; bringing out an expensive matching CD transport for the CD-64 that truly sounded better. Could they do it? The eventual answer was - yes. But it involved more than simply making a 'perfect' transport.

They were up against a truly formidable, seemingly invincible opponent; the very limitations of CD's 16bit 44.1kHz specification. Rethinking the relationship between DAC and transport was just the start. Instead of relying on the DAC-64's RAM buffer to re-clock the signal, Chord modified the DAC-64 so it could accept further up-sampling via a second digital input.

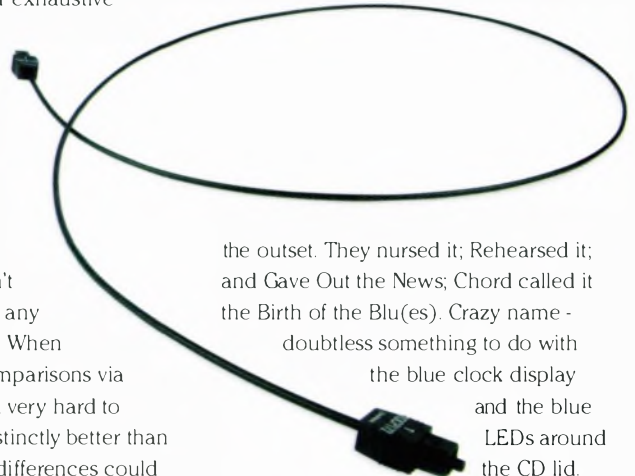
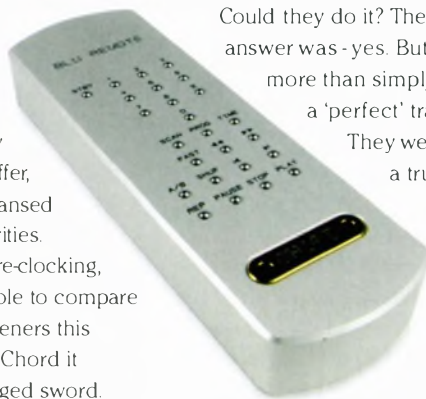
All Chord needed now was an inherently clean jitter-free transport -

easier said than done! Having decided not to rely on the DAC-64's re-clocking buffer to take care of jitter errors, Chord started work on a new transport designed to be virtually jitter-free from

the outset. They nursed it; Rehearsed it; and Gave Out the News; Chord called it the Birth of the Blu(es). Crazy name - doubtless something to do with the blue clock display and the blue LEDs around the CD lid. Or perhaps it's a reference to listeners getting the Blues when they hear it and realise it's financially out of reach. Could be. Because the Blu makes one helluva difference. Dare I say it? - life-changing. You can of course still use the DAC-64's RAM buffer to re-clock Blu, but doing so makes the sound worse! Or, more accurately, it reduces Blu to the sort of performance levels achieved with more ordinary transports.

Before Blu arrived, I naturally wondered how a better transport might affect sound quality - what sort of areas the improvements might show themselves in. The DAC-64's re-clocking system does such a good job (or seems to), was there really any possibility of improving on it? If so, would the difference be worth the added cost? Isn't CD's 16bit 44.1kHz spec the real limiting factor? Blu is a very expensive item and clearly needs to be outstandingly good to justify its price on sonic grounds.

Although not believing the



▶ DAC-64 to be absolutely perfect and beyond improvement, I nevertheless wondered if adding a dedicated transport - even one as advanced as Blu - might not turn out to be a disappointment. Would it simply make the sound a little bit sharper and more detailed? Or could the differences be bigger and more fundamental? I began by listening to Blu with my regular DAC-64 using a single optical cable,



replacing a Musical Fidelity transport previously in use.

There was a difference, but it was very slight. Blu sounded a fraction sharper and more precisely focussed - perhaps a wee bit cleaner at the top - but that's about it. Just what I feared - a slight difference; nothing earth shattering. But remember - I was still using a single cable via the Blu's standard 44.1kHz output, relying on the DAC-64's RAM buffer to re-clock the signal. That isn't the best way to hook up a Blu and original first-generation DAC-64.

The proper way is to switch Blu's output to 88.2kHz, thereby taking advantage of its up-sampling technology. This isn't quite as good as using 176.4kHz up-sampling - possible when you connect Blu to a second-generation DAC-64. But it's not too far off, and better than 44.1kHz. The sound grows sharper, more open and slightly more dynamic. That slightly 'closed-in' tonally hard effect one usually gets with CD is considerably reduced, there being increased air and space at the extreme top end.

The next step was to hook up a new second generation DAC-64 to audition

Blu with 176.4 up-sampling, requiring a pair of BNC terminated digital cables (I was lucky enough to lay my hands on a matched pair of Nordost Valhallas). Immediately there was a more fundamental change - and a very interesting one. Playing a CD of female soprano with orchestral accompaniment, the voice became noticeably more 'separate' and detached. For some reason I wrongly thought the volume level was fractionally lower - and increased it slightly to compensate. But this was a mistake.

When the voice really sang out it was distinctly louder than before, so I hastily returned to my previous volume setting. Clearly, dynamic swings between loud and soft were now much greater.

But it wasn't simply a case of the voice being louder and more forward. Rather, there seemed to be a greater sense of swell as dynamic levels increased - as though the voice had more power and greater projection. It wasn't just louder - it was bigger and firmer.

There was much greater separation between voice and orchestra, and at the same time a more tangible sense of the acoustic in which the recording had taken place. The whole sound was cleaner and truer, as though various impurities had been stripped away. Allied to this was what I can only describe as a 'commanding' quality. With the Blu/DAC-64, the singer had a distinctly tangible presence - making you listen with the attention and respect you'd show to someone performing live in front of you.

There was a palpable sense of electricity in the pauses between sections - as though anything could happen - making you concentrate and pay attention. Playing other recordings, it became apparent that the lower

frequencies were better focussed and more solidly portrayed. Subjectively, bass sounded deeper and more powerful; there was a greater sense of firmness and precision when (say) a bass drum was struck - more of a definite thwack, rather than a soggy thump.

Bass lines seemed more strongly defined and deeper, with improved differentiation between pitched sounds (like bass guitar or double bass) and bass drums. Now a big improvement in bass quality and low-frequency depth/weight was one of the main things I noticed with the original DAC-64 - increased firmness, improved timing, greater precision - so it was interesting to find Blu taking things even further. Subjectively, it was almost as though I'd added a couple of big sub-woofers.

Imaging improved too; generally speaking Blu creates a more holographic three-dimensional soundstage, with greater sense of depth and width. But much depended on the specific recording being played. Used together as intended, the Blu/DAC-64 combination produced an unusually sharp open sort of sound;



very airy and crisply-defined. Using a colour analogy, if CD typically offers a dull greyish top-end, the Blu/DAC-64 is by comparison silvery-brilliant.

There's a very sharp extended treble; an openness that challenges good analogue. Listening to a wide range of material, there seemed to be noticeably more variation between different recordings - wider tonal/timbral changes, plus an increased aural impression of the acoustic signature of the place in which the recording had been made. In essence, it was more like being there ▶



► - being present at a live event - being closer to the people making music.

Put on something you think you know; prepare to be surprised. There's definitely more - instruments and voices that seemingly hadn't been there before suddenly become audible. Blu definitely gets you closer to what was on the original master-tape, revealing fine detail normally buried or obscured. Some may find this openness too truthful, too revealing. The Blu/DAC-64 really shows what's on your recordings - usually for better, sometimes for worse. It definitely doesn't offer rose-tinted views.

Listening to Chord's Blu/DAC-64 combination, I really felt it was telling the truth - telling me everything about the music and recording. The sound was extremely clear and clean; very focussed and defined; very open and uncolored. Yet not in a cold antiseptic sense. Timing was outstanding, and the music had excellent rhythmic drive: impressive flow and swing. Again and again I was reminded of a good moving coil cartridge on a top-quality turntable. It really was that good...

I particularly noticed these special qualities on simple things like solo violin; massed violins; solo soprano voice; solo piano. You can't cheat with such material - the slightest departure from true fidelity and you know immediately. Violins sound 'hard' tonally; soprano voices likewise; pianos lose their warm woody tone colour and rhythmic subtlety. The Blu/DAC-64 sounds very neutral; it's vivid, sharp, open and detailed. Tonally it sounds right. If it doesn't, suspect your recordings or speakers!

Even though the DAC-64 sounds excellent when it's partnered by a conventional transport and used with its RAM buffer, adding Chord's dedicated Blu transport elevates it to a whole new level, producing substantial gains in

performance. Agreed, the financial cost is high. But it's arguably worth it for that final 'nth degree. And it's still cheaper than a top-top-top top-end turntable. Basically, CD doesn't get any better!

Try it on messy compressed pop CDs that (via lesser players) sound flat, congested, and lacking in space/depth. The Blu/DAC-64 will almost certainly reveal a dynamic and spatial depth you never dreamt was there. Suddenly the recording will become dimensional in ways hardly hinted at before. In much the same way that mediocre LPs suddenly become exciting and magical on a good



turntable/arm/cartridge, 'poor' CDs are resurrected by the Blu/DAC-64.

But what is the Blu like operationally? Judged as a transport, in terms of speed and friendly user interface, I'd describe Blu as okay but nothing more. Indeed, using it took me back to the bad old days of 1980s Philips transports! Before being able to choose a track or select Play, you first have to let the Blu digest the disc's table of contents. Fast Search is frustratingly slow. It's very much a transport you use at its own measured pace, rather than yours.



It won't be rushed or hurried.

Impatient souls, wanting a fast responsive transport, won't be dancing with delight. The seemingly vast array of press buttons on the top is slightly confusing too. I also feel Chord could assist installation by labeling the various sockets and switches on the back panel. Colour-coding the BNC sockets would be very useful, helping ensure you get the various cables correctly plugged in. It is possible to end up with the Blu/DAC-64 working, but connected incorrectly and not giving proper performance.

This is one product where you most definitely need the instruction manual. Chord need to make things easier for users, retailers, and - dare I say it? - reviewers. Alas, we're not all geniuses like you! However, none of

this matters once the units are properly installed and up and running. And if you're the sort of listener who simply puts on a disc and plays it from the top, you won't worry about the slowness of the transport, or those seemingly endless rows of press-buttons.

Actually, you eventually get used to the plethora of buttons (25 in total). The main one - Play - is usefully positioned on the bottom left. So it's straightforward to find and access. As is the case with many CD transports, Blu is much easier to operate via its cordless remote handset. And what a handset! Like the ►

## Technical Configuration

For the Blu, Chord elected to use a professional standard CD mechanism with a rigid die cast metal chassis, mounting it on a fairly stiff, de-coupled suspension. The aim was to eliminate low frequency timing data reading errors at source - preventing the need to do it later via error correction. A solid heavy lid covers the CD compartment and has a rubber O ring that Chord claim seals the compartment, preventing light entering. However, light can enter via a finger slot milled in the case.

Those familiar with the DAC-64 may recall that its WTA digital filter had 1024 taps. The more taps, the greater the accuracy with which the signal is reconstituted - and the better the sound. Blu improves on this, with its 4096 tap WTA filter used to up-sample the digital data from 88.2kHz to 176.4kHz with 80 bit precision. This provides a four-fold improvement, allowing the DAC-64 to perform as never before possible. Demands on the DAC-64's own over-sampling are greatly reduced in the process. At the same time there's now no need to use the DAC-64's digital buffering. Because both up-sampler and transport are run from the same master clock, absolute jitter-free precision is achieved. Two levels of dithering are provided; Normal dither (re-dithered from a word length of 80 bits to 24 bit) and High dither (dithered to 16 bit). Chord recommend High if Blu is partnered with older 16/18bit DACs. Otherwise Normal should be used.

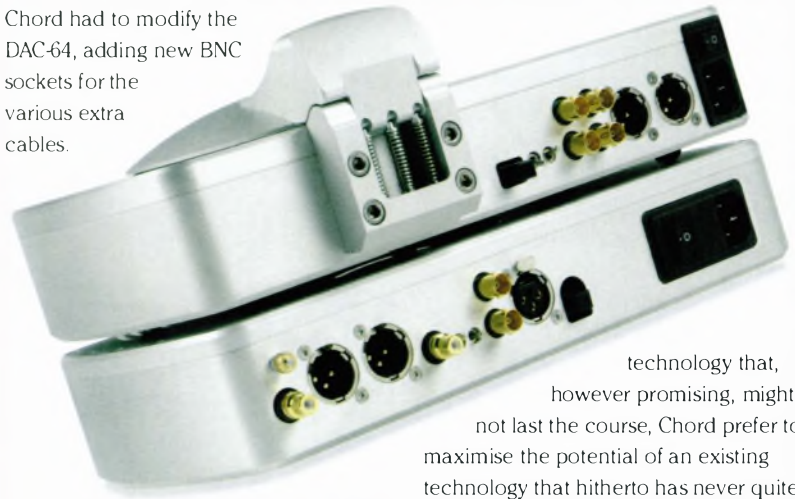
► unit itself, it's a de-luxe piece of kit that oozes class. Milled from a solid billet of aluminum, it's so OTT it's almost decadent...

Blu's build quality is likewise lavish and extravagant; the hinged disc top cover is massively weighty, and those 16 blue leds surrounding the mechanism (8 of which remain lit when the cover opens) are super-cool! The whole transport is satisfyingly heavy and looks the proverbial million dollars. The spring-loaded cover the clamps down on the disc closes with a delicious 'thunk', like the door of a massive safe snapping shut.

Mind you, it's tricky to remove a CD without fingermarking it. It takes a certain sleight of hand (finger?) to do so.

If you're a bit fussy about marking your CDs (as I am) this requires some getting used to. During operation the transport is virtually silent - there's no disc whirr, or any other strange noises to spoil one's listening pleasure.

Of course one question remains; where does all this leave existing owners of the original DAC-64 who want to buy a Blu transport? As mentioned earlier, to interface fully with the Blu, Chord had to modify the DAC-64, adding new BNC sockets for the various extra cables.



This entailed a new motherboard and new casework, making it uneconomic to convert existing DAC-64s. As I write this, the official word is that older DAC-64s cannot be upgraded.

However, apparently Chord are exploring an e-prom modification that would effectively allow original DAC-64s to interface at 176.4kHz with Blu. Hopefully it can be done... For while the DAC-64 is certainly capable of superb results with the 88.2kHz up-sampled output, it really demonstrates its full potential only when used on the 176.4kHz setting. Which is how it should be, I guess.

I said at the start that, for me personally, CD finally came of age with the Chord DAC-64, 18 years after its birth in 1983. Now, some 3 years later, we have a second coming-of-age at 21 with the Blu transport. Of course some may question the wisdom of Chord's commitment to CD in the light of 'better'

systems like DVD-A or SACD in the offing. Many would say that it's folly to invest so heavily in what is 'obsolete' '80s technology

But Chord's view is that the sheer quantity of CD titles in circulation, their comparatively low price, and massive availability, makes getting the absolute best from CD a very worthwhile priority. So rather than throw in their lot with new

technology that, however promising, might not last the course, Chord prefer to maximise the potential of an existing technology that hitherto has never quite fulfilled its potential.

Which begs further questions - is there still more to come before CD finally draws its old age pension aged 65? Is this as good as it's ever going to get? Or will life begin at 40 for CD... ►+

### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD transport
Outputs:	1 x coaxial SPDif 1 x twin BNC dual data 1 x optical Toslink
Input:	1 x 44.1k word clock
Data Rates:	44.1k, 88.2k and 196.4k dual data
Dimensions (WxHxD):	335x105x170mm
Weight:	7Kg
Price:	£4195

Manufacturer:  
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Tel. (44)(0)1622 721 444  
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# The Simaudio Moon i-3 Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

The first thing I learned about Simaudio's i-3 integrated amplifier after switch-on was to ignore it for several days and I would suggest you do the same should you ever come face to face with a cold one. There's a familiar pattern developing with a lot of reviews these days and it goes something like this. After carefully unpacking whatever it is that came in that box, plug it in and have a quick listen just to make sure that it is working and sounds very disappointing and then totally forget about it for anything from two-days to two-weeks. Then come back to it and you'll be either pleasantly surprised or utterly dejected by what you hear. When the i-3 first arrived it plumbed new depths of awfulness straight from the box. The treble was like a buzz saw and what little extended bass it did have, seemed locked in a cardboard box. After a couple of days the patient was showing some small signs of rallying but it took a whole two-weeks before a full recovery was evident and the real Moon i-3 integrated amplifier was able to stand up and be counted. This was on a previously run-in example too. A fresh, new example will take up to six-weeks to burn-in – and that's according to the manufacturer. You have been warned.

This compact Canadian built solid-state amplifier strikes me as having just about everything a \$1795 integrated should and in fact packs a considerable punch in the shape of 100 watts output into 8 ohms and 160 into 4 ohms though in practice and to use an automotive analogy, it has more power than torque. It has a full complement of 6 RCA phono inputs

for its line-stage section and this includes a home theatre option which bypasses the i-3's gain stage, allowing you to control its level through a source component's own volume control. There is also a pair of pre-out RCA sockets and a decent set of outputs for one set of speakers – and that's about it; nicely minimal and no gimmicks. Evidence and previous experience would suggest that the front panel layout is always easier to get wrong than right,



but Simaudio have resisted the temptation to give their product a Unique But Rather Useless Selling Point and kept it very simple. The volume readout is clarity itself and indicates a range from 0–50 where the incremental increases are smaller between 1–35 than higher up the range. It's designed to make lower level adjustment more accurate and it works. Just three discrete buttons and a standby switch ensure that the front panel is clutter free and entirely the better for it. Normally, all adjustments and input switching would be done from the superb little remote control, which is certainly one of the most tactile available. This metal unit feels just right in the hand and has

an intuitive layout which mirrors the panel controls and adds the ability to alter the channel balance though I think that Simaudio could happily remove this option with no detriment to the i-3's super smooth operation.

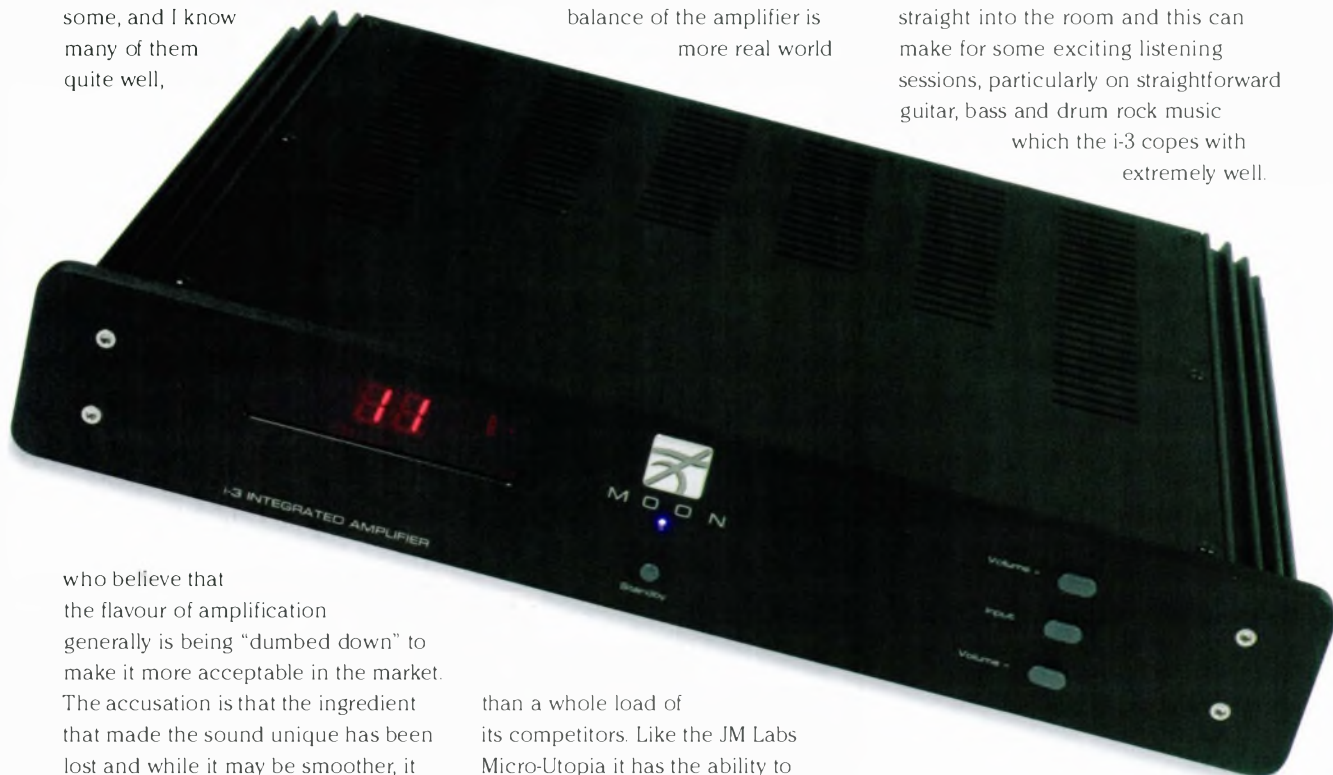
Inside and out this little amplifier is impressively constructed and the provided literature boasts a list of significant design features of near Biblical proportions, including the massive power transformer and capacitors, a short, capacitor-free signal path of a mere 18.5 inches from input to output sockets, the amplifier's pure class A operation for the first 5 watts of its output and so on. What I can say is that the i-3 is as quiet as any piece of audio electronics I have heard with the exception of Tom Evans equipment, and is totally without foible or irritancy like noisy switching or susceptibility to fridge and central heating cycles (a quirk which seems to be rearing its ugly head more and more over the last year). You can get to where you want on the volume control quickly and see precisely where that is from anywhere in the room. It runs cool too, which is quite reassuring when you think about the lengthy warm-up period that will surely follow after a power down. I have never felt entirely comfortable with amplifiers that run too hot to touch and have certainly never been keen in leaving them unattended for long periods. This irrational fear is known as Fire.

There is, I believe, a growing tendency among today's amplifier

► manufacturers towards making their products smoother and easier to listen to over a wider range of music. Look at Naim Audio and the way in which their recent offerings have found a wider market and broader appeal since they changed the balance of their amplifiers. And while most people would accept that this is a positive thing, there are still some, and I know many of them quite well,

whether you are asking it to unravel a particularly complex set of polyrhythms or just produce pure controlled velocity and impact. But use it with the wrong equipment and the brightness can become a bit of a glare as I found out when I hooked in the Nordost Valhalla cabling which left the high-end sounding a bit over exposed. But, correctly managed, I think that the balance of the amplifier is more real world

warmth or harmonic richness and colour, unless that is the nature of the recording. There is clarity and a notable sense of instrumental and vocal separation here that can border on the stark and chilly at times. Even though the Moon could be described as being forward in presentation, its drive and sense of forward motion often pushes elements of the mix straight into the room and this can make for some exciting listening sessions, particularly on straightforward guitar, bass and drum rock music which the i-3 copes with extremely well.



who believe that the flavour of amplification generally is being “dumbed down” to make it more acceptable in the market. The accusation is that the ingredient that made the sound unique has been lost and while it may be smoother, it has lost that edge and voicing which made it so special in the first place. This is not a point of view I share and here is not the place to enter into that particularly thorny debate but I can tell you that the Moon i-3 reminded me of the olive-cased Naim sound with its drive and rhythmic push. The tonal balance reinforces the comparison too. This is no shy, retiring, soft-edged middle of the road integrated at all. It is a shade on the bright side but with decent if not notable resolution and quite excellent speed of delivery and recovery. Give it some heavy-duty rhythmic work to do and it will respond with great enthusiasm and energy

than a whole load of its competitors. Like the JM Labs Micro-Utopia it has the ability to illuminate the high frequency content of any instrument or recording and if either is bright or thin, then that is how it will sound. There is little margin of safety built into the amplifier that would soften or round off either the leading-edge sharpness or the tonality and I applaud this. It is far easier to balance a system with cabling or select a pair of speakers for an amplifier with this type of tonal balance than one that has no real high frequency energy or drive to start with. But don't get the impression that this is a one trick pony. The overall sound is almost as well integrated tonally as it is rhythmically, though it will never be known for its

It's that old-fashioned solid-state grip and sense of driving power that does it and the ability to project the music at you at high speed. This is one amplifier that isn't trying to mimic the colourful softness and front to back depth of valves.

Its sheer control and sense of tautness extend right across the bandwidth, the only real disappointment being in the bass which, with smaller stand-mounted speakers like the Micro Utopias, never feels either as extended or weighty and full bodied as you might like. But this could well be a real boon with any number of



▶ sub £1500 floor standers which are perhaps a little too extended for their own good. You could though never really criticise the sheer momentum of the bass, its sense of pitch or its ability to start and stop. What the Moon i-3 lacks is body and never more so than when you are operating it at low levels in its pure class A mode. Here it can certainly sound thin, lightweight and insubstantial, though once the volume is advanced towards the upper 20's and beyond on the readout it adds substance to its impressive dynamic freedom.



But, with a pair of average sensitivity speakers, we are talking about a fair old volume here, too loud in fact for many late night listeners. Sustained high levels with control is not a problem for this amplifier but what it needs is a greater sense of substance, power and dimension at the sort of levels where it will spend much of its time.

Those looking for pure space and depth from their amplifier might well have to look elsewhere too as the Moon tends to bring the music quickly to a point of focus in front of you, giving you a seat quite close to the front of the auditorium. There's width and height to the sound and rock-solid stability, but not great front to back depth or transparency. Instead, there is a foot-tapping immediacy and sense of

involvement in the music and while the resolution is as good as you might reasonably expect, you just yearn for that little more in the way of nuance, subtlety and delicacy.

Although reviewers are always looking to nominate equipment as the best in its price range, the fact is that most audio these days offers a decent and balanced performance for the money and that is what we have here. The Moon i-3 is a really good all round integrated amplifier that stands out for

me because of its sense of drive and rhythmic solidity. I could name you several comparative models from other manufacturers that are both better and worse in other areas. Where the Moon wins out is that it is one of the few remaining products that lives life on the edge and one of the very few that can make a really decent stab at balls-out rock music. I cannot help thinking though that the magic figure of 100 watts output has more to do with marketing the amplifier than being of any real usefulness and if Simaudio had limited it to 50 watts

and made it a more rewarding experience to listen to at lower and more normal listening levels it, for me, would be a more attractive proposition. It is in many ways the complete opposite of the excellent little valve/solid-state hybrid Pathos Classic One, another integrated amplifier that is far more colourful and relaxing to listen to but cannot do rock or anything really up tempo with anything like the swagger and confidence that the Moon i-3 manages. As ever there is likely to be more than a little synergistic balance to be taken into consideration when choosing an amplifier and the i-3 is certainly interesting and vivid enough to catch the ear. It is also a thoroughly sorted and very well made amplifier that is completely fuss-free in everyday use. Just remember to keep it switched on. ➤+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state integrated amplifier
Inputs:	6 Line-level
Input Sensitivity:	200mV -3.0V RMS
Rated Output:	100 watts per channel-8 ohms 160 watts per channel-4ohms
Freq. Response:	10Hz - 80kHz +/- -3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430x75x390mm
Finishes	Black or Silver
Price	£1795
Weight	10 Kgs

#### UK Distributor

Redline (Scotland) Ltd  
Tel.  
Net. [www.red-line.co.uk](http://www.red-line.co.uk)

#### Manufacturer.

Simaudio  
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# The Vecteur Club Sixty L-4 CD Player

by Alan Sircom

Sometimes it's not easy being French. Early this year, at the Las Vegas CES, I spoke with the British designer of a well-known French speaker company. He was complaining that 2003 was terrible for sales. For the first half of the year, SARS killed off the Far East market and the Iraq war flattened out the rest of the world. The same things afflicted all companies, but where the second half of the year picked up for most, for some, things remained just as flat. "We're French!" he explained, and then I realised that – amid a sea of American dealers at an American show – the French stand was almost entirely free from American accents.

Even in less Francophobic times, it's a hard task to get an even-handed review of a French CD player. It's known as the "Micromega Effect". Micromega was France's best-known manufacturer of high-end CD players from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. It made some of the very best sounding players money could buy and received some of the best reviews of the time, but had the sort of quality control that British Leyland would have blushed at. Some models had nine out of ten players returned for repairs... or worse. Dealers and reviewers alike smarted at recommending and selling so unreliable a range and are wary of making the same mistake again. As such, there is at least one reviewer who categorically refuses to review French products "just in case".

But, lay aside the Francophobia for a while, and the £1400 Vecteur L-4 CD player (strangely called Club Sixty on the continent) is worth closer

inspection. It's a 24bit, 192kHz player with a set of gold-plated stereo phono outputs, a single S/PDIF gold-plated phono and virtually nothing else. There is also a balanced version, which adds a set of XLR outputs and an extra £143 to the price-tag. There are just five tiny buttons on the front panel and not that much more on the remote. You can't even turn off the display. Functionality on the remote is pretty much replicated on Vecteur's main system remote (supplied with the matching I-4.2 integrated amplifier – see next issue).

Instead of the high-tech approach employed by the likes of Wadia, extending the frequency response of the player beyond the limits of the CD itself, the L-4 is more conventional; but conventional doesn't need to be basic or limited. The player features a triple-regulated power supply with a transformer-based mains filtering device and a transformer-coupled power supply (all of which feature British-sourced components). The anti-jitter master-clock features a tightly specified quartz oscillator, while the resistors on the Teflon circuit board are all 1% tolerance metal film affairs. In short, good solid engineering.

This is a damn big, heavy box for a CD player, weighing 10kg and taking up 430mm x 370mm x 110mm. The casing is thick and black with a light alloy inset for the transport, display and controls. The chassis and lid are both damped, with a healthy amount of anti-magnetic treatment. This whole case sits on four black wooden feet,

outwardly similar to the Mpingo wood discs used by Shun Mook.

The review sample came shipped with a transport mechanism that wasn't precisely adjusted. The transport itself – and the control and digital conversion circuitry – are mechanically de-coupled and all sit on an anti-resonance chassis that itself attaches to the main case with three Allen bolts.



If not properly adjusted, the transport will foul the hole cut in the front panel. It isn't easy to adjust without a Linn Sondeck style-jig (although a Quadraspire Reference table with the holes cut in the middle suffices). In fairness, this may be due to dodgy handling by people prior to the review, as often happens with review samples that get shunted around far more and more haphazardly than products intended for selling. Nevertheless, that the player could so easily be knocked out of kilter is somewhat worrying. Perhaps some of that Francophobia is justified, after all.

Once the product is installed (and the transport mechanism no longer fouls the front panel) a long run-in ▶

► is recommended. But how long a run-in depends on who you listen to. The literature suggests at least 50 hours of break-in before the player comes on song, and at least half an hour from initial power up to critical listening thereafter.



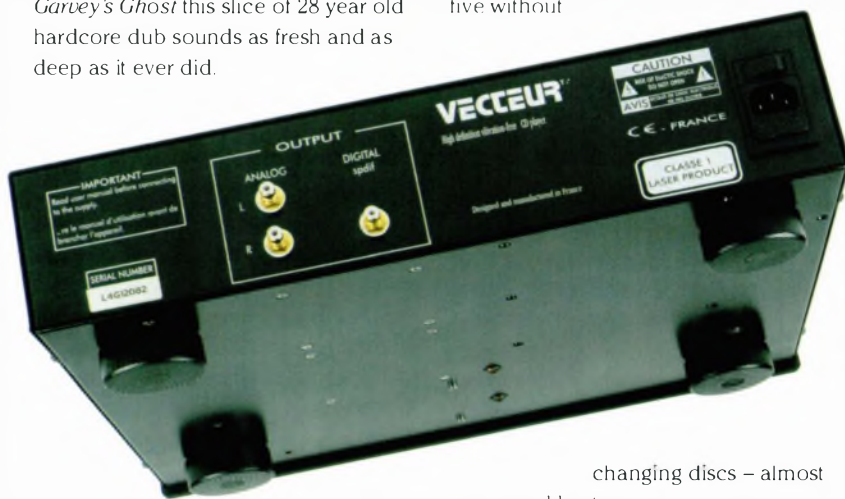
However, apparently the American distributor recommends a 400 hour run-in. By that reckoning, the player has only just settled down. In fairness, I did detect a continued improvement throughout the listening period, although the law of diminishing returns did kick in after the 50 hour point. Moreover, this is a player that really demands a 50 hour warm-up. Anything less and it sounds like a bad cartoon of itself, throwing a very inconsistent sound in the lap of the listener. Turning off the player at the front panel is also not so good; it doesn't damage the player, but the L-4 sounds best when permanently on, even if the display cannot be turned off.

This is not some characterless clone of a CD player; the L-4 has a distinct flavour, and one that perfectly suits the amplifier, too. It's almost as if the CD player was tailored to suit someone who still clings to an analogue sound, with a rich, deep and palpable bass allied to a clean, extended (but not too extended) treble and a forward presence. Yet it does all this without a trace of the warm or woolly sound often associated with

these character traits. As such, it's the sort of CD player that will appeal strongly to those who loved the sound of the classic suspended turntables.

It's the bass that really brings home the lardon with the L-4. It is deep and rhythmic, far more controlled and more richly natural than we have come to expect from CD players this side of about four grand.

So when you play Burning Spear's 'I and I Survive (Slavery Days)' from Marcus Garvey/ Garvey's Ghost this slice of 28 year old hardcore dub sounds as fresh and as deep as it ever did.



This is a tough slice of polycarbonate for a CD player to parse; the bass can easily overawe proceedings leaving the recording sounding confused and flabby. Here, the L-4 keeps the sound firmly under control, coping with the

frankly dreadful quality of the recording and the sort of bass that can knock people off their feet at 10 paces. This, of course, comes from a wicked sense of rhythm. The player is a real foot-tapper, almost able to excavate a beat out of anything from Schoenberg to Eric Dolphy. Playing Dolphy's *Out to Lunch* – not so much a jazz recording, more someone throwing a sack filled with musical instruments down a steel staircase for the best part of an hour – is not quite as random as it can appear on other machines. Here, the seemingly atonal, arrhythmic percussion takes on some semblance of timing and you can begin to determine the inner structure of the recording. This has always been touted by jazzers as a seminal recording, but everyone else finds it a bitter pill to swallow. The L-4 gets you closer to the jazz position; you begin to hear other jazz recordings as arch and pretentious, instead of just reaching for the off switch. Personally, this meant I could get to about track five without

changing discs – almost a personal best.

The Eric Dolphy disc – with all its odd sax squeaking – also highlights one of the (comparatively minor) shortcomings of the player. It seems to push the mids and top-end, making the recording appear brighter than usual. Not uncomfortably so, and



▶ not extended into glassy brash brightness, but brighter nonetheless. There isn't much air on the disc – and what's there is all fakery – but recordings made in a more acoustic environment show that the player is extremely natural, especially at the top end of the scale.

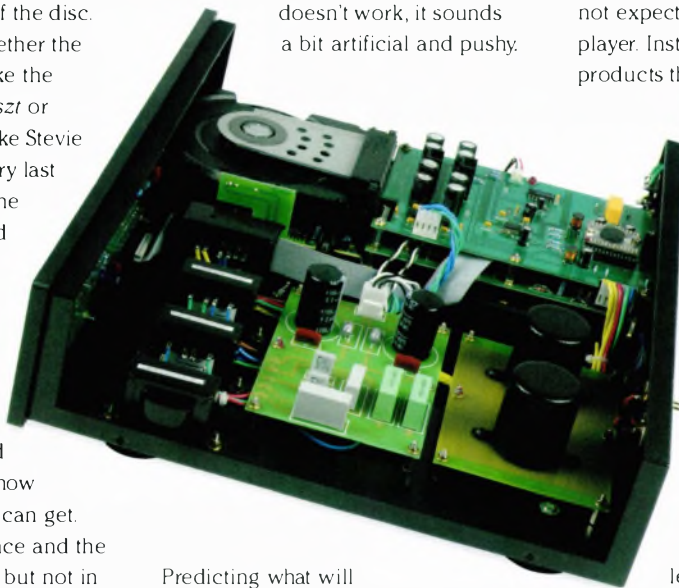
One of the most endlessly fascinating features of the player is the level of detail it gets off the disc. It doesn't really matter whether the recording is something like the beautiful *Nojima Plays Liszt* or something more prosaic like Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions*, every last ounce of information on the disc seems to be presented here. *Innervisions* demonstrates where this information-retrieval service can get too intense; tracks like 'He's Misstra Know-It-All' get far to spitchy – the repeated title soon rams home just how forward those 'sss' sounds can get.

But get past the sibilance and the detail never fails to excite, but not in that bright manner common to most CD players, especially CD players of a few years back. You get to really listen into the recording, which pays dividends in large-scale classical recordings like the classic 1960s von Karajan version of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* on DG. You might not get the layering effect that a more expensive player provides, but you do get the distinct ability to differentiate instruments in the mix and properly determine the 'shape' of each one. You get the same on any disc you play through the L-4. It might not portray all the information with 100% accuracy, but you do feel you are getting all the info off the disc.

It's a player with a deep rather than wide soundstage. It seems to place the image forward of the speakers with some behind-the-speaker depth and even some height. This is good for large

orchestral works, although it does make you think you are closer to the orchestra than usual. This isn't a big shift, simply moves you from the third row of the stalls to the very front, yet without enlarging the size of the orchestra.

When this player works, it works wonderfully well. Music comes alive, it's exciting vibrant and fresh. When it doesn't work, it sounds a bit artificial and pushy.



Predicting what will work and what won't is difficult, though. It doesn't seem to be limited to a genre or particular CD sound. It is almost arbitrary. Perhaps this is over-egging the pudding, only the occasional disc falls foul of the L-4 and it's possible to go through an entire CD collection without finding a single duff disc. Moreover, those that don't sound that good are not bad, just not as beguilingly natural.

Used in isolation, the player is good, but in a system context it moves up a notch. Partnered with the I-4 integrated amplifier the two seem to balance one another out well, extending the analogue-y sound of the CD player. This doesn't change the idiosyncratic nature of disc replay on the L-4 and it's still forward, but the overall balance shifts without undermining the detail. This is no magic synergy system, where changing

either product spells disaster, but the two combine together well and help to bring out the best of both products and, by extension, the sound of every recording. And, as a bonus, the standby button of the I-4 doesn't spoil the sound like that of the L-4.

There's no such thing as a perfect product. In a world where it's possible to spend ten times as much, we should not expect perfection from a £1400 CD player. Instead, we either end up with products that are blandly satisfying, or

ones that work wonderfully in a more idiosyncratic manner. Many of us seem to prefer those players that do some things well and others less well, than those that do a more mediocre job. As long as you make sure that it's correctly set-up, this is a player that punches well above its weight. It might not be le grand fromage of CD players, but the Vecteur L-4 is close to being les boules du chien, especially for the money. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD player
Chipset:	24bit/192kHz D/A Conversion
Frequency Response:	20-30 000 Hz ±3dB
Outputs:	1pr analogue RCA 1x S/PDIF Digital RCA
Output Level:	2.5V
Dimensions (HxWxD):	430x110x370mm
Weight:	10 kg

UK Distributor:  
Sound by Design  
Tel. 020 8404 4343  
Net. www.soundbyd.com

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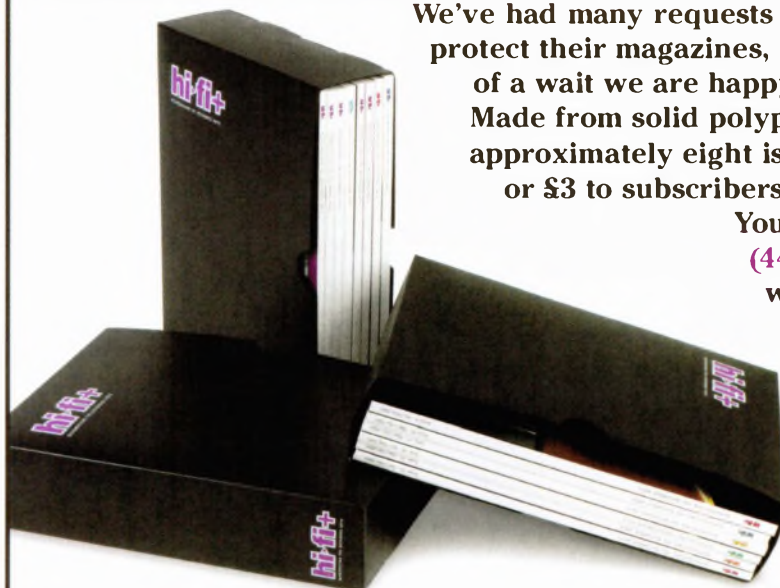
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# The Trichord Delphini Mk2 Phono Pre-amplifier and Never Connected Power Supply

by Dave Davies

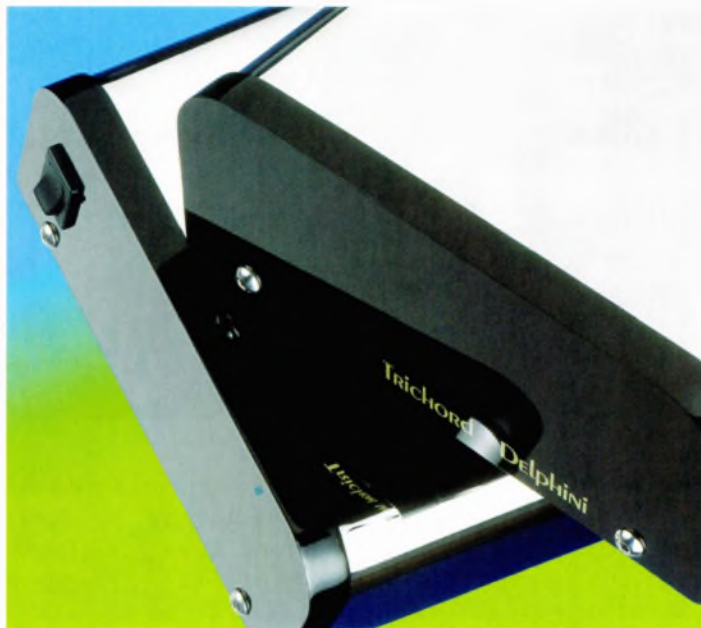
As a long time user of a much loved Michell ISO/Hera it was only the arrival of the highly affordable Trichord Dino that had jolted me out of my vinyl complacency. This unlike similarly priced contenders I'd tried offered when coupled with the larger power supply, many of the qualities of the ISO (in the full-bodied midrange in particular) along with much improved speed, detail and bass precision. The Dino has stayed in my system, with a short-lived detour to a Clearaudio, since I purchased it following my review in 2001. At that time I'd also sampled its bigger brother the Trichord Delphini and had been mightily unimpressed since its younger sibling beat it hands down in just about every area of performance.

Now in it's Mk 2 guise, the Delphini is outwardly identical to the Mk 1 but for a blue LED shining through the front panel rather than the green of the original model.

However, whilst it sports the same polished steel casing and dark acrylic front panels, the interior of the latest Delphini reflects a total re-design. The most obvious change is that like its little brother the Dino, it now features fully user configurable switching (via tiny dip switches beneath the cover), allowing simple changing of load and gain settings, allowing it to work to its optimum with either moving coil or moving magnet cartridges. High performance ultra low impedance,

low noise wide band voltage regulators are also a feature of the Mk 2. The new unit complete with the chunky matching PSU retails at just under £1,000.

So how did it sound? Directly replacing the Dino via my 'Orbe-d' Gyro/Mission Mechanic & Clearaudio



Signature (via a Michell Orca and a pair of Stereo Alecto's to AudioPlan Kontrast 111i's), the Mk2 immediately stomped on any lingering negative memories of it's original incarnation. 'Some People's Lives' from Janis Ian's *Breaking Silence*, which had sounded fine through the Dino, snapped into much sharper focus with a more expansive soundstage. Her voice gained in tangibility and expression, the piano became more three-dimensional. On the title track the increased resolution and speed of the

Delphini were brought to the fore.

The layering of the multi-tracked vocals, the attack and drive of the percussion were superbly caught, blowing the cobwebs off what could so easily have become yet another outing of a demo track cliché. The 12" single of Martin

Stephenson's 'Wholly Humble Heart' features a lovely version of 'Get Get Gone'. Here the Delphini demonstrated its ability to convey the joy of this performance from the spoken Geordie interjections, the neat slide guitar fills to the foot stomping beat. This was so much closer to the feel of live music when compared to the Dino, the musicians taking

up a tangible presence between the speakers.

'Way Out Basie' from the Analogue Production pressing of *Farmers Market Barbeque* brought the clout of a superb big band to the living room. With no sense of constraint to the many crescendos, the sly blocked chords of Basie's piano and Freddie Green's guitar held true beneath the storm raging around them. This superb album can, in the wrong hands sound a little strident (via my old ISO for one), but not ▶

▶ here. The muted horns in 'St Louis Blues' were just more real, and with the stage spread deeper and wider than the Dino could manage, the Delphini demonstrates that vinyl still holds the edge in its ability to create a believable,

### The Never-Connected Power Supply

Shortly after completing this piece, Graham of Trichord contacted me to tell me about a 'must-try' upgrade option – the new 'Never-Connected'

from load-generated noise.

Given that my system enjoys a fair degree of attention to mains quality c/o the excellent Russ Andrews Purifier block and Super Purifier, I was a little sceptical of



three-dimensional performance.

I'm still digging out old favourites and staying up far too late for the good of my day job. From Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, various Richard Thompson albums, Little Feat, Charlie Mingus, David Lindley's *El Rayo Live*, hell, even some much treasured old Bonzo Dog albums, I've found new things to enjoy in each and every one. The Delphini successfully combines pace, detail, subtlety and power in a highly affordable package. In its new incarnation it's finally a very worthy big brother to the Dino and given its combination of performance, superb build quality and good looks, it is a must for any vinyl lovers shortlist, and has already made it to the top of mine.

power supply. This supply distributed by Trichord, was developed over two years by Fenson Ltd and is aimed to do just what it says on the tin. Equipment is never connected directly to the mains, providing total isolation from mains borne noise and interference and delivering substantial improvements in sound quality. The supply sits in place of the existing bridge rectifier and power supply, isolating the equipment from the existing supply (and from the relatively noisy rectifier diodes most supplies rely on) resulting in clean, low-noise D.C. power. The Never-Connected is also claimed to provide 'total reverse isolation' of the incoming A.C. feed

the claimed results from the Never-Connected upgrade. I was wrong. The effect of this seemingly simple improvement to the Delphini turned an already outstanding phono stage into something substantially better. The effect was not subtle. Even from cold – the Never-Connected was supplied installed in a brand new Delphini supply - the effect was of an increase in musicality: pacing was markedly improved, staging gained a layer of depth, but most importantly the music was simply more real and more enjoyable. The upgrade also added a degree more resolution, subtle aspects of performance were more readily noticeable: the sound of fingers ▶



► on guitar strings, the delicate inflections of each musician's technique, the characteristics of each instrument in the mix. In comparison with the standard Delphini, the effect at first was of a marginally more lightweight performance but it takes no more than a few notes to establish that that's simply because there's so much more detail being conveyed. Downsides? None really, there is slightly more background hiss at high volumes when compared to the standard Delphini, but this is no problem in practice since it in no way interferes with the music. The increased resolution will also mercilessly expose shortcomings in turntables set-up, but that's no bad thing either. I also briefly tried the upgraded power supply with my Michell Orca pre-amp (it uses exactly the same supply as the Delphini), and whilst the effect was not quite so dramatic as with the phono stage, this too showed worthwhile improvements in the same areas.

I have a much-loved Copland 289, a bulky, big, but rather beautiful beast. Its primary strength has been in its delivery of a warm, big-hearted sound much in keeping with its looks. (a 'Ben Webster' when compared to the 'Jan Garbarek' of many CD players). Given the size of the casing, there had to be plenty of space in there to try out a Never-Connected supply, so I duly gave Graham a call and arranged to ship the player to him. Within a few days the job was done and the player returned.

I hooked it up with a little trepidation – had I unwittingly robbed the Copland of its essential character? At least I had the comfort of knowing that the job could be reversed if I didn't like the results. I needn't have worried, in fact the use of the Never Connected has wrought an even bigger improvement in the Copland

than with my pre and 'phono stages.

It still has lost none of its presence and warmth but has now gained hugely in musicality. Timing is more accurate, and it's gained in speed too, with dynamics like rim-shots much more, well, dynamic. Imagery is also more precise, on the excellent Paul Motion CD *On Broadway Vol. 1* (JMT edition 919 029-2), it's much easier to position the individual elements of his drum kit, and the sense of Joe Lovano's fingers on the keys of his tenor, and of Bill Frisell's fingers on strings and fret as he powers out his characteristic sustained notes making it all more tangible and human. This is not to imply that the result is a much more squeaky-clean 'hi-fi' performance. Far from it; Sonny Rollin's tenor has never sounded more in my room and three-dimensional from a CD source, nor has acoustic bass sounded so tangible and full-bodied. Moloko's *Time is Now* has gained a new urgency, and Richard Thompson's *Old Kit Bag* (Cooking

Vinyl), sounds markedly more like his excellent band's live performances of these songs.

The effect of all this is simple: The player is much more musical and therefore more involving, in short, the Never Connected has made a good CD player even better. And that's with just one supply powering the 5V digital stage. In theory, Graham could fit a multiplicity of supplies powering each of the voltage rails in the CD player including the analogue stages... Now there's a thought!

The Never-Connected upgrade adds £275 to the cost of a new Delphini bringing it to £1270 in total and for existing users it's available as a £295 upgrade. Fitting to the Copland cost £175 (including VAT but excluding carriage). In my opinion, in both cases this is a bargain and a quick 'pre and post' demonstration should be enough to convince anyone of the merits. The Davies cheque book has already felt the impact. ►+

#### Specifications Delphini Phono Amplifier

Output impedance:	33ohms
MC input capacitance:	2nF
MC input impedances: (all link selectable)	33ohms resistive 100ohms resistive 330 ohms resistive 1K resistive 47K all links open
Selectable gains (all link selectable)	54dB@1KHz - 1K setting 62.5dB@1KHz - 2K49 setting 68.5dB@1KHz - 5K1 setting 70dB@1KHz = 5K9 setting
Dimensions (WxHxD):	160 x 65 x 240mm per box

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# finite-elemente Cerabase Equipment Supports

by Roy Gregory

A while ago I was introduced to finite elemente's rather clever little Ceraball equipment supports, a model of elegant and practical simplicity. And cost effective too. If I wanted crisper, cleaner, more focussed and more detailed sound from a component, then the Ceraballs went straight to the top of my accessories list, a position they've occupied ever since. Essentially damped aluminium cup and cone assemblies, coupled through a ceramic ball interface, the Ceraball feet are neat, discrete and petite.

But finite elemente have a well kept secret. The Ceraball has a bigger – no, make that a much bigger – brother, the Cerabase. Whereas the Ceraball has a 35mm diameter footprint and a height of just 25mm, the Cerabase is 70mm in diameter and 50mm tall. That makes it visually eight times the size! But the real story is in the weight. The Ceraball weighs a measly 25g: the Cerabase tips the scales at a significant 750g – or a little over a pound and a half in old money. That makes it an impressively compact mass, if nothing else.

Conceptually speaking, the Cerabase and Ceraball are virtually identical. The difference is that the Cerabase allows far greater loads and is a much more sophisticated beast altogether. The wide base of the larger model retains the central shaft and damping O ring of the Ceraball, but



the entire structure is turned from stainless steel rather than aluminium. Three small dimples are equally disposed around the post and these serve to locate the large diameter ceramic balls that support the top cap. So far so good, but the really clever bit is saved for the upper section.

A full 45mm in diameter, it is based on a two part turning.



The lower section is shaped like a top hat with a 22mm crown that locates over the central shaft of the base. Its underside carries three identical dimples that engage with the ceramic balls. The hat's crown carries a close pitch thread onto which screws the cylindrical top section. This has a profiled top

that carries a circular rubber mat that compresses under load, acting as a non-slip locator. But, remove the little mat and you reveal an eight-millimeter hole. Counter sunk on its underside, this enables the user to choose from the supplied M6, M8 or 50mm self-tapping allen screws in order to firmly attach the top cap to an equipment rack or other piece of furniture. Once fixed, the rest of the Cerabase

simply screws into place, while the close pitch and diameter of the thread bestows incredibly stable height adjustment through a full 10mm. There's no locking system, but the precision engineering and the mass expected to be carried render it unnecessary. Mass? Oh yes, a set of four Cerabase feet are specified to support a total of 500kg – or to put it another way, half a metric tonne. With their bomb-proof stainless steel construction I can believe it. Of course, as soon as you pick one up you just know that these things are going to be expensive and the gulp-inducing price won't disappoint you. Say it very quietly indeed - about a hundred pounds each!

The Cerabase is designed to support either racks as discussed (including finite elemente's own models) or individual power amps and speakers. With but a single set to play with (well, would you have fancied lugging two or three sets around?) I tried them under power-amps, starting with the tube c-j



► Premier 140 and moving onto the solid-state Hovland RADIA. They proved to operate equally effectively, without fear or favour, regardless of the technology they were asked to support. Slipping a trio of Cerabase feet under either of these power amps, two under the transformer side, one under the other, produced an immediate and impressive boost to their sonic performance and musical impact. It's one of those changes that you need to ABAB simply because you don't credit what's happened, given the fragility of aural memory. But with the feet in place there's a significant improvement in instrumental focus and separation. Kind of what you might expect, so no great surprises there. The surprise comes in the form of added weight, stature and tonal richness. Now normally, supports will give you one aspect or the other: clarity or weight, body or separation. So far, of all the many I've tried, only the Nordost Pulsar Points in Titanium deliver both. Sure enough, a quick comparison demonstrates that the Cerabase outperforms, and certainly out engineers the reigning champ. Impressive as the titanium foot is, the finite element model offers a more organic and richer tonal palette without any harmonic or spatial clogging. The result is that the dynamic benefits swell more naturally, with better scaling and control.

Let's take a musical example, in this case the Barbirolli/RPO Sibelius 2 on Chesky. It's a fabulously atmospheric performance, but the pressing is rather soft and murky. Sure enough, played with the Premier 140 sat on the concrete floor the sound is exactly as expected. Separation of instrumental choirs is vague and the tonal range is lightened and washed out. A conventional amp stand does little to improve matters. But

substitute the three Cerabase feet and you can now clearly differentiate the orchestral elements, spatially and tonally. The subtle bass that underpins the *Allegretto* has more weight and texture, yet pulses and breathes in a much more natural and convincing way. Indeed, the separation of the pizzicato bass phrases in the second movement are superbly tactile, their spacing and pitch adding real tension to the music. And this is what makes the Cerabase benefit so impressive. They don't just separate and define the instruments, but also the space between them. Likewise they define both the



leading edge and tail of notes, the shape of the energy that makes them, and once again, the space between them. So, much as I can admire the solidity and presence, the colour, energy and dynamics that the Cerabase feet inject into the Sibelius, it's actually the drama and palpable tension they reveal in the performance that knocks you sideways. The hi-fi differences are impressive enough, but listen past them and hear what these feet do for the music. The new lucidity and the better definition of the relationship between elements within the orchestra make the structure of the piece, its melodic lines and themes gel into a single, coherent

whole. Far from pulling things apart, the Cerabases separation actually binds things together, keeping instruments in their proper place and relationship to each other, spatially, but more importantly, musically. In the process, they reveal the sheer majesty of Barbirolli's vision. For what is the benefit of a great conductor if his control and direction are diluted by the inadequacies of the system. Now, you might well expect the Cerabases to perform

better than the floor or a basic platform, especially given their price. But the really impressive thing is that with the Premier 140 returned to its rightful (and very fortunate) owner, they migrated to a position underneath the RADIA, between the amp and the RDC Aspect rack in which it lives (the c-j was too tall). Whereupon they promptly made just as big a difference – and that with a solid-state device which is already rather well supported. And the benefits are not confined to classical music either. Rock, pop and especially jazz all got a lift. Result: far more records stayed on the system for far longer, and whilst it's a cliché to say that I only meant to listen to one track and ended up

▶ enjoying the whole album this was near to the truth. The fact is that the new level of musical integrity compelled you to follow strands to their conclusion. And if the Cerabases didn't actually stop you halting proceedings mid-track, they certainly underlined the artistic affront of doing so.

Oddly enough, results under the HP100 were nowhere near as impressive, but even a quick experiment with an Aspect perched rather precariously atop the Cerabase feet demonstrated even greater benefits than they achieved under the RADIA alone. This is perhaps the only rack with which the various fixings provided can't engineer a solid interface. What is underlined by the experience is that it's just as well that the feet are available in sets of four or three, meaning

that you don't end up with a very expensive spare on your hands.

This level of design and engineering doesn't come cheap, but the benefits are impressive to say the least. Hear them in the context of a serious system, especially one with genuinely wide bandwidth, and you'll find their charms extremely persuasive. Inevitably, proliferation under individual components will take a heavy toll on your wallet, especially in the context of mono-block amplifiers. However, for me, the real home of the Cerabase will be under your equipment rack where its financial burden (and sonic benefits) will be spread across several components. Suddenly it doesn't seem so bad. With my new finite element racks due any day I can't wait to try it. More on

that latter, but for the moment the Cerabases will be staying put beneath the RADIA. If you must have the best, these are it – and what else in hi-fi can claim that at £100 a throw? ▶+

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# The Wave Mechanic Turntable Power Supply

by Jason Kennedy

I do not, as a rule, go in for accessories, tweaks and the like. Not because they don't work but because a reviewer's system needs to be a robust and constant workhorse, preferably featuring components in standard form so that other enthusiasts have a chance of relating to any findings. Nevertheless my system does contain a number of ancillary components that are not essential to its operation but which bring such great improvements that it is worth putting up with the occasional inconvenience of using

them. For instance I have been using Max Townshend's remarkable Siesmic Stand and Sink equipment supports for some years, one of which is the original free floating type that needs re-balancing every time you change or even move a component. My SME Model 20A that forms the biggest balance weight must be the most active in the country as it gets shuffled from one side to the other in order to balance electronics below.

Some extras are worthwhile and one such that has recently

joined the system is the Wave Mechanic made by Martin Bastin. This name rang a bell for me when it was first mentioned but it wasn't until he sent me one of his Polaris Plus alignment gauges that I realised why. I have been using an earlier and cruder version of this gauge for some time and his name is printed on it. If you don't have an SME (which has its own alignment protractor) the Polaris Plus is by far the easiest to use protractor on the market and, as it's made of card, doesn't cost a lot either. Martin has also been ▶



► involved with Garrard turntables for some time and has made supplies specifically for these current hungry decks. It would be intriguing to hear the effects of one of his generators on a turntable but at present he doesn't make a big enough one, not least because he fears the consequences of such a thing getting too popular!

But I digress. Martin designed the Wave Mechanic power supply for use with Nottingham Analogue turntables which use AC synchronous motors running straight off the mains. As a result of the pollution found on our electricity supply today this is not always at the voltage and frequency it should be and the effect upon unregulated AC motors is to vary torque. Variations in absolute voltage level affect dynamics and detail resolution, while clipping in the 50Hz mains waveform has the effect of adding high order harmonics that feed through to the platter.

Martin's Wave Mechanic serves to correct these fluctuations by synthesising the mains with a degree of precision and constancy that has probably never come out of a 13A plug socket. Aesthetics are prosaic to say the least, but what else can you do with an essentially featureless black box? It was designed for turntables that don't have a power supply of their own and offers plus or minus one per cent of frequency/speed variation via a knob on the front. You establish the correct speed by using Martin's Zapper battery powered strobe light and a strobe disc such as that made by Morgan Jones.

The Wave Mechanic was created for turntables without regulated power supplies but it was recommended to me as offering benefits to my SME Model 20A which has an outboard power supply and permanent magnet DC motor. In theory the regulated

supply should smooth the mains sufficiently for variations in its quality to be isolated from the performance of the motor and thus turntable. Yet by putting the Wave Mechanic between wall socket and power supply the performance of the turntable is enhanced. In the past I have used an Acoustic Precision Cube mains 'filter' on the turntable to good effect but the WM proved a worthwhile upgrade on that. Having used the Zapper to establish the correct speed, using the SME's own adjustment facility, I replaced the Cube with the WM and found that transparency to low level detail had increased. Keith Jarrett's piano now had richer harmonics accompanying the fundamentals. The rather glassy tone of the instrument was still as clear as ever as were his murmurings and foot thumping, it would presumably take a much more sophisticated device to remove these foibles.

Going straight from regular mains supply to the WM improved dynamics of both the micro and energy related persuasions. In other words it became possible to appreciate level variations from note to note and to get a more vivid sense of the instruments. Instrumental tone became richer and there seemed to be a lot more going on in the recording. Him's album *In Transition* motored along with a fluid energy that had previously been suppressed, yet overall the system seemed more relaxed, as if the process of reproduction was easier.

Obviously the result will depend on the sensitivity of the system as a whole, the cartridge, arm, phono stage etc. Other manufacturers such as Clearaudio have already taken this route, but to find a modestly priced device like this that makes a significant contribution to an already good system is gratifying. So much so that I had to put on

a bit of Beefheart in celebration, his *Low Yo Yo Stuff* being invested with extra grunt and greater integrity thanks to the Mechanic.

One might expect such a device to enhance timing; while the groove is quite distinct in its care it is just one facet of an all round improvement. If you want a speedy sounding turntable it's best to work from the ground up rather than trying to change a fundamentally neutral design like the SME. With this deck backed up by the WM the realism of instruments is highly convincing, the better recordings really shine. Buge Wesseltot's *Moving* for instance offering up more power, space and dare I say it light. You can play it louder with ease and the double bass solo on the track 'Lone' is genuinely illuminated rather than blending in with the soundscape.

I would expect the wave mechanic to be even more beneficial with turntables without supply regulation. No surprise then that that category includes the Nottingham Analogue range, and I can't help feeling that it is a positive contribution to road safety, let alone another reason not to watch the bilge that passes for TV programming these days, but that's another topic!



Output frequency:	50Hz/60Hz
Speed control:	±1%
Size WxHxD:	105x65x285mm
Weight:	2.55kg
Prices -	
Wave Mechanic:	£500
Zapper Strobe:	£40

Martin Bastin  
Tel. (44)(0)1584 823446

# Revisiting the Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD player

by Chris Binns

The Resolution Audio CD player has already done more than its fair share of growing up in public; the original CD55 made quite a name for itself before being withdrawn from the market, while its successor, the Opus 21 suffered a number of unfortunate production problems that prevented it from being the performer that we all hoped it would be. These had more or less been sorted out by the time that I got to review it in issue 24, but its performance was as different as it looks when compared to the CD55. In essence, it required considerable nurturing to maximise its potential, which when all was said and done was impressive, in a sophisticated and refined fashion – but I could never get the basic grunt and immediacy out of it that its forerunner was capable of. To put it more eloquently, it traded some of the more basic rhythmic qualities for finesse and delicacy, and was never less than polite, which was fine with a lot of music. But its impeccable good manners could suck the life out of say, Led Zeppelin, and I think compromised my overall selection and enjoyment of CD's while I was using it.

This is a follow up and not a review... and maybe I should have been paying more attention when I first put the Opus back into my



system, but over several sessions concentrating on the loudspeakers and amplifiers I began to realise that CD's were sounding particularly good, and very engaging. The Latest Opus still does not have the slightly emphatic 'in your face' quality of the 55, and nor does it shove kick drum down your throat, but it presents all the fundamental timing qualities in their rightful place, in much the same way that good vinyl replay does. All without diluting the impressive refinement and poise. The net result is that, while not immediately impressive in the way that

the 55 was, it is ultimately a lot more satisfying to listen to. And compared to the unit I listened to last year, this latest version is far, far more interesting. Still refined, but there is some real depth, with body and substance, and thus much more capable of letting the life and character of the music through.

The strangest part of this though, is that one of the outcomes of all my experimentation to liven up the Opus I reviewed last year strongly suggested that the two boxes did not like being stacked on top of one another – a bit of a problem with a forthcoming amplifier designed to make a neat integrated system. So it came as some surprise to discover that putting the power supply box on top of the transport

actually made a small but positive difference; I'm pretty sure that images took on a greater solidity and there was more depth behind the speakers. What hasn't changed is that I still find it annoying when the draw obscures the buttons while it is extended, but the importers tell me that the mechanism is designed to cope with a small nudge to get it closed.

So, it's been a slow and arduous process, but the Opus 21 has finally got there. Judging from what I've been hearing, hopefully it'll be around for a while.





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# Jazz Fantasy...

## AcousTech master the art of 45 RPM releases

by Dennis Davis

Over a year ago, Acoustic Sounds introduced a new series of jazz releases as the Fantasy 45 Series, billed as the “best jazz ever”. Twenty-five titles were released within the first year, and a second batch of twenty-five titles began release in March of 2004. The plan is to release two titles per month until a total of one hundred titles has been reached.

The Fantasy reference, whether intended or not, is a double entendre. Fantasy Records is perhaps best known to the general public as the record company that released the string of Creedence Clearwater Revival hits. However, Fantasy Records also owns, in addition to its own releases, the Riverside, Prestige, Contemporary and Milestone catalogues, and this series draws from that rich vein. Fantasy has also been releasing its own material since the 1950's, when it released many 10 and 12-inch records, most notably from Dave Brubeck.

However, among other definitions, the Oxford English Dictionary defines “fantasy” as the “process, faculty, or result of forming mental representations of things not actually present”. The vast majority of the

titles released in this series are indeed a fantasy given the choice of material and the outrageously high level of care taken in mastering. It is now possible to believe that John Coltrane, Bill Evans and Sonny Rollins are in your music room without ingesting psychosomatic



substances to enhance your powers of perception. These wonderful new renderings are as close to aural nirvana for jazz fans as they are likely to find.

Few record companies lavish such care on their treasure trove of master tapes as Fantasy. They keep the tapes (and copies of all its vinyl LP releases) in a temperature and humidity controlled vault. ▶

► The tapes are looked after, cataloged and organized by archivist Stuart Kremsky, an avid jazz fan, journalist and record producer. I've visited the vault a couple of times and can testify that wandering the rows of shelves of master tapes at Fantasy certainly lives up to that name.

How good are these records?

I have originals copies of most of the titles released in this series, and can say without hesitation that these re-issues sound better in most ways than those original pressings from 40 to 50 years ago. I have never found that with any other jazz re-issue series. Technically they are excellent, and the 45 RPM mastering team have turned out a superb product, which isn't always the case. There tends to be an assumption that 45 RPM pressings will always be a good thing, but that's not necessarily so. Many others have tried to accomplish the same thing, but have not achieved the same results. The most recent example is Classic Records, which released numerous jazz titles in 45 RPM editions, mostly drawn from the Verve and RCA catalogs.

I recall reading rave reviews of these releases, about how much better the Classic re-issues were than the originals, but I never found that. Having now heard the AcousTechs I thought that maybe I'd missed something, so returned to several of the Classics by way of a reality check. But no, the AcousTechs are strong in the very areas that the Classics fail. For example, on Sonny Rollins' *Our Man In Jazz*, the Classic sucks the three-dimensional character out of the horn sound and gains little or nothing in terms

of dynamic impact and detail in the percussion. Classic's *Louis Armstrong Plays King Oliver* fails to make an improvement in any way on the original, while doing some damage to the tonal accuracy. Of course, this could be down to the quality of the

tapes, or the cutting equipment, or many other factors that I know nothing about. Besides, I'm not comparing like with like. The point I'm making is that even if, like me, you've been unimpressed by the cost and quality of the many previous 45 RPM re-issue attempts, don't group these in the same category. AcousTech have definitely got it right!

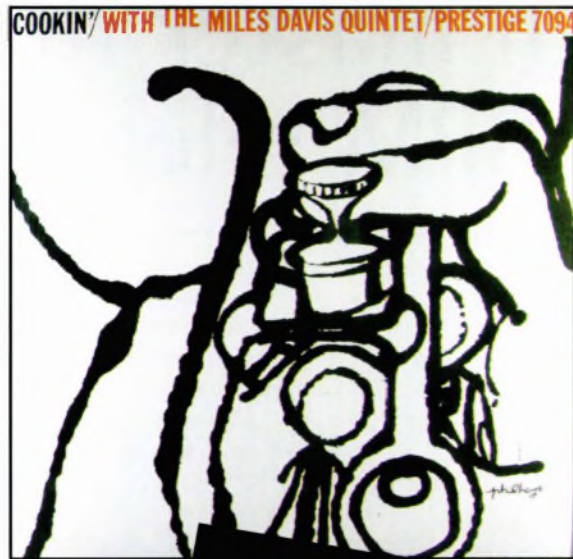
Musically speaking, Fantasy wins the title for the best collection of historic jazz tapes on the planet hands down. More importantly, in most cases AcousTech have made selections that live up to the "best jazz ever" billing. There are a few titles that I would have skipped,

and a few stereo releases

that I would have preferred in mono. However, I can't always have things my way. This is probably as close to a record collecting fantasy as I will ever see. And at one hundred records, it looks to be at least a four-year fantasy at that.

You've been looking for a perfect original copy of Bill Evans' *Waltz For Debby* and *Sunday at the Village Vanguard* on Riverside? So have a lot of other people for a long time, and each one

will probably cost you a £100 or more if you find them. Chad Kassem, the owner of Acoustic Sounds is no dummy, so he released these two titles early on in the series. I won't tell you how good they are, because they have sold out. Only 1,000 copies of each title in this limited edition series are pressed. I know that jazz is





▶ a niche taste, and jazz LP collectors are an even more endangered species. However, considering the quality of these records, I find it amazing that the entire series has not sold out already.

The first twenty-five titles also include Miles Davis' *Relaxin'* (sold out), *Cookin'* and *Bag's Groove*; John Coltrane's *Soultrane*; Monk's *Thelonious Monk with John Coltrane* (close to sold out) and *Brilliant Corners*; Sonny Rollins' *Saxophone Colossus*, *Way Out West* and *Tenor Madness*. Is your head spinning yet? A couple of blues titles are also mixed in. The only questionable calls to my mind are a few Pablo releases and Vince Guaraldi's *Jazz Impressions of Black Orpheus*. Good, but not "the best jazz ever."

Being some of the most popular jazz titles ever issued, most of these records have been released many times, some of them quite recently. Acoustic Sounds issued the Miles Davis titles as a vinyl box set, which is still available. Many of the titles are available as high quality XRCD issues on CD. Several were issued by DCC on CD (although those are out of print). Several are currently available on SACD. Most are also available as regular OJC CDs, 20 bit re-mastered CDs and gold CDs. So, you're not short of options when it comes to most of these titles.

If I had to pick one of my favorites from the AcousTech 45 series then Sonny Rollins' *Saxophone Colossus* would be a good choice. Recorded by Rudy Van Gelder for Prestige Records in 1956, the record catches Rollins at the peak of his powers. This is his third album as a bandleader, and it established him as one of the greats. The quartet is filled out with Tommy Flanagan on piano, Max Roach on drums and Doug Watkins on bass. The group recorded three Rollins compositions (including his signature tune 'St. Thomas') and two standards. This is a great album, is great sounding, and belongs in the collection of anyone remotely interested in jazz. It has been re-issued many times, with the best re-issue to date being the DCC LP of a few years ago (LPZ-2008). Steve Hoffman mastered that version, as well as this AcousTech release, and his renewed efforts are worth

the wait and effort. As you might expect from a 45 RPM version, the improvement in percussion is obvious and immediate. There is simply more information there; more shimmer in the cymbals, more information in the brush strokes and more percussive effect with drum sticks. You hear grunts and comments from the musicians heard on no other version. But what knocked me off my seat was the improvement in horn sound. I always thought the original, and the DCC re-issue, had pretty good horn sound. The AcousTech version adds a whole new layer of information. You can hear the air rushing over the reed. You sense the hollow cavity of the horn, and the air rushing through it in a way not apparent with any other version. The other thing

that struck me was that the AcousTech version sounded faster paced than either the original or the DCC vinyl, or the regular CD versions, but more importantly, that the pace sounded more "right".

Contemporary Records originally issued another classic Rollins' session, *Way Out West*, on its subsidiary label Stereo. This label experiment was an unsuccessful effort by Contemporary to establish an ownership claim to the name Stereo. At the time (1957) Rollins had not yet launched his career

as a leader, and was still playing with Max Roach. On a trip to Los Angeles with Roach, Rollins was approached by Les Koenig, owner of Contemporary Records, and engaged to record an album with the best of the west-coast players. While this is a perfectly acceptable stereo recording by the great Roy DuNann, in my opinion the mono version is superior. The stereo recording pretty much isolates the three instruments left (horn) and right (drums and bass). Original stereo copies have always been in high demand and nice copies are liable to cost some way north of \$100. Save your money. The AcousTech re-issue is better in every way. Compared to the original, the 45 RPM version presents a saxophone sound that conjures a far more immediate and physical sense of Sonny blowing into his horn. The percussion is clearly superior with more detail and impact. The whole presentation is



▶ more effortless. Although still not presenting much center fill, the 45 RPM version fills a bigger space around the speakers and separates the drum and bass better. For those looking to digital sound, the best of the CDs is the XRCD version (VICJ-60088). The horn sound is not bad, close enough to the original to serve in the absence of something better. However, the drums and bass are more bunched together in the right speaker, and lack detail compared to the original vinyl version.

For a more successful exposition of stereo sound, pick up Cannonball Adderley's *Know What I Mean?* with Bill Evans, Percy Heath and Connie Kay. The AcousTech re-issue is a killer record, a super disc in every way. There is no center fill problem with this recording. The middle of the stage is convincingly occupied and the instruments are arrayed around the piano in a very successful presentation. I have a mono original, and do not pine for mono sound on this re-issue, as the stereo sound stage is so good. To appreciate just how good, compare it to the XRCD version. In the otherwise excellent CD, the piano does not come off convincingly as a single instrument. With many jazz CDs and LPs, the stereo presentation of a piano is life-size, but in some ways sounds like two different pianos—one played by the left hand and the other by the right hand. With the AcousTech pressed Adderley vinyl, you hear the instrument as a whole. Whatever audible cues are missing in the CD are added back into the very convincing LP.

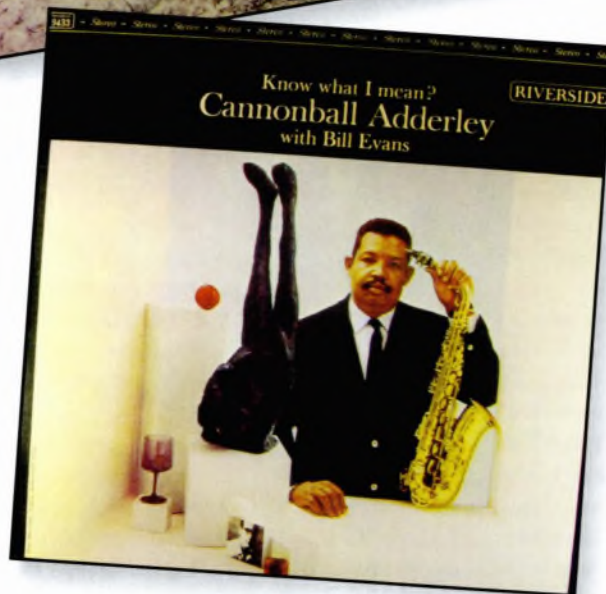
Bill Evans' *Moon Beams* was the product of a Riverside session following Evan's recuperation

from the loss of bassist Scott LaFaro. He went into the studio and recorded a balanced program of ballads and up-tempo pieces, and it was the ballads that were packaged together and released as *Moon Beams*. By way of a warm-up, I first listened to the impressive XRCD version (VICJ-60214). The album has an excellent

stereo spread and the instruments are well spaced. Switching to the 45 RPM vinyl right after that was a kick in the pants. Suddenly, Chuck Israels' bass is there in the room with you. In fact, there is more all around bass energy. The piano becomes almost life size, compared to the miniaturized version on CD. You hear the instrument's action and sense that you are hearing a piano, rather than a digital reproduction of one. Truth be told, I hear details here (and on the other Evans' 45 RPM LPs) that are not often heard on even the best 33 RPM vinyl. My original has just the

slightest bit of background noise that is of course missing from the new issue. The bass is less prominent, the cymbals less delicate and airy, and the piano not as three-dimensional. Guess which version I'll be returning to? The recordings Miles Davis made for Prestige with John Coltrane are one of the great treasures in the jazz catalogue. The first group of AcousTech 45s includes both *Cookin'* and

*Relaxin'*. By the time these sessions were recorded in 1956, Miles Davis had been on the scene for over a decade and was an established star. He had just signed a recording contract with Columbia Records, which would propel him to super-stardom. In order to get





▶ a release from Prestige Records, and before Columbia could begin releasing new material by Davis' group, Davis had to fulfill his Prestige contract. Prestige was a budget operation, and rarely wasted any recording tape on rehearsals or extra takes. Rudy Van Gelder taped these sessions on the run, with no rehearsal. Perhaps that's why these recordings



sound so fresh and vibrant. Davis and his group, in a couple of marathon sessions (five and a half months apart) recorded a body of work never to be equaled. Arguably the greatest jazz ensemble ever, Coltrane was on the verge of establishing his own career as a soloist while the other band members all became celebrated in their own right. Prestige packaged these sessions in a series of releases aimed to compete with and profit from Davis' Columbia releases. Some of the more hard bop tunes were grouped together for the first release under the name *Cookin'* in 1957. Columbia then brought out its first Davis release *Round about Midnight*, which contained a balanced program of lyrical and hard swinging numbers.

Prestige followed suit with *Relaxin'*, which contains

some of the best ballads from its tapes. Coming from the same recording sessions as *Cookin'*, you would expect the sound of the albums from to be similar, and the differences between LP and CD versions to be consistent. These performances have been issued numerous times and are currently available in a host of different incarnations. Well, soon the entire series will be available in 45 RPM AcousTech versions too.

The 45 RPM pressings of *Cookin'* and *Relaxin'* have a big sound, with the drum kit taking up a big chunk of real estate, including a nice sense of front to back separation. The cymbals especially, have great detail. You can see the bass fill out in front of you like a real instrument, not just a memory of a collection of strings over a sounding board. In fact, every instrument on the 45s occupies a much more specific space than in any other version I have heard. These records always sounded pretty good in their original pressings, but they lack the dynamic punch of the AcousTech, and the image specificity of the instruments is less certain, their overall size smaller. The recordings are not perfect (especially the piano sound) but they have a big, hot mono sound that

after all these decades we identify with the music.

On CD, I compared them to the now deleted DCC issues, which I find to be the best digital versions. These are excellent digital renditions and not far off the original vinyl, but if you can play 45 RPM vinyl, then the AcousTech discs are clearly the way to go.

The next 25 titles are now being released, and they include lots of Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bill Evans, Thelonious Monk and Sonny Rollins. My

preliminary impression of the earliest releases is that they maintain the high quality of the first set. Do whatever you have to, but make sure that you don't miss these releases. As I was preparing the final edits to this article, I read that the Fantasy catalog and masters are for sale. If a major label purchases the catalog, will this vinyl reissue series be continued? No one can say for sure. Don't let this fantasy become a missed opportunity. ❖

# 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.

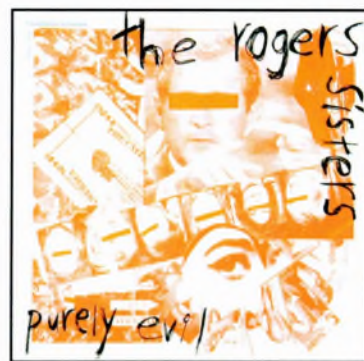
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard, 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
-  45rpm



The Rogers Sisters

### Purely Evil

Troubleman Unlimited TMU-101 

Bursting with spiky guitars, *Purely Evil* is an impressive garage-pop debut from Brooklyn-based trio, the Rogers Sisters. Their sound has a raw edginess to it, giving this album an almost homemade feel (hardly surprising when you consider it was recorded in two days). But what *Purely Evil* lacks in high production values, it more than compensates for in attitude and energy. Opening with 'Zero Point', the Rogers Sisters start as they mean to go on; heavy bass, fast-paced drums and three vocalists with a style closer to shouting than singing. In other words, post-new wave at its best.

The combination of the different vocal parts is very effective, particularly when in response to one another such as on 'I Can Tell You How I Feel About You'. Miyuki Furtado's stuttering vocals are reminiscent of Mark Mothersbaugh of Devo fame (especially on 'The Money Life'), whilst Jennifer and Laura Rogers seem to prefer the style of the B-52s. *Purely Evil* is a straightforward, energetic effort. Various influences are plain for anyone to hear (Gang of Four, Devo), and in this sense this album doesn't offer anything particularly new or different. But since this is twenty-eight minutes worth of post-new wave goodness, who really cares about originality anyway?

SD









## Tori Amos

### Scarlet's Walk

EPIC EPC 508782 2 (CD)

Tori Amos is a musician for whom I will always have time. Her talent cannot be weighed and measured in number ones but the doggedness and passion with which she has pursued a song writing career speaks for itself. It was sparked into life following a move to London in the early 1990s where the liberating, sometimes erotic, often earnest and most deeply held personal messages in these songs were better received. To my mind the performance of one song in particular encapsulates the acute pain and inner strength which permeates all her music: A barely whispered and unaccompanied rendition of 'Me And A Gun' that cuts you to the bone as it tackles the highly emotive and devastating topic of her rape by an armed "fan". This is a cathartic moment of the kind that has informed every groove cut and album mixed since. There is such candour and startling honesty here. And it is that level of intensity and an overpowering feeling of integrity which can be found throughout the eighteen-track CD from 2002, *Scarlet's Walk*. Her stroll around America charts spiritual and emotional growth through a series of intelligent and literate journeys. There is of course a thinly veiled reference to *Gone With The Wind* in its title but I think it's safe to say that Amos (despite her North Carolina roots) is not the sheltered, haughty and spoilt Southern belle in need of instructions in life. She is instead a guide rather than the tutor and while it is a minor distinction the paths she treads and the opinions voiced are made all the more convincing because of it. For seventy-four minutes we are

treated to these beautifully lyrical visions of that twisted and manipulated nation state - a juxtaposition that is not lost on the listener. In songs like 'Don't Make Me Come To Vegas' and 'Amber Waves' she shows us the all-consuming appetite that exists for sexual exploitation and mistreatment both at the personal level during relationships with boyfriends, husbands and lovers and through pornography coldly viewed by strangers. There are the casual religious asides often coupled to drug references or prostitution in 'Wampum Prayer', 'Virginia' and 'Pancake'. Comparisons between their contrasting yet inescapably addictive natures are exhaustively explored and condemned. The track sequence is important too. An exquisite pastoral gem about separation such as 'Your Cloud' butts up hard against the misogyny and homophobia of 'Pancake'. Beauty and hatred are accentuated as a consequence.

RECORDING   
MUSIC 

### Tori Amos

#### Tales of a Librarian

ATLANTIC 7567-93223-2 (CD)

This is a seductive and intelligently constructed collection of twenty tracks spanning her best work from the 1990s - a set that also includes two new songs and two re-recorded b-sides in the form of 'Angels', 'Snow Cherries From France', 'Mary' and 'Sweet Dreams'. Yet arguably the most telling aspect has to be the imaginative way in which this album has been put together. The title

alone has special importance. It gives us a clear and unambiguous statement about the role Tori Amos sees for herself and any like-minded artists as they work through the constraints and tensions of a modern-day environment. *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (T.S. Eliot) this is not. Nor is it an unnecessarily bookish and pretentious compilation. However, her writing and performances go beyond the boundaries of simple "cherry picked" entertainment. She is not one of those insipid artists who take the easy road and the easy buck. Her songs are reservoirs of knowledge and lived experiences that should be drawn upon when needed. Moreover, she conveys these messages in a manner that avoids arrogance and didacticism. All the songs (through the liner notes) are prefixed, summarised, catalogued and cross-indexed against library style classifications. An act, which sheds even more light on a woman who has bravely put the substance of career uncertainty, grief and those barely describable tragedies of her personal life into every word penned and enunciated. Consequently, 'Playboy Mommy' taken from *Choirgirl Hotel* is categorised under 610 Medicine and Health and 618 Miscarriage. 'Cornflake Girl' (*Under The Pink*) falls into 170 Ethics and 177 Ethics of Social Relations (Betrayal). While 'Way Down' (*Boys For Pele*) should be considered in relation to 150 Psychology and 154 Subconscious and Altered States. And 'Precious Things' (*Little Earthquakes*) rests within 920 Collective Biography. Overall these are essential insights that expand our understanding of these familiar songs.

RP

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



Silver Sun

Silver Sun

Polydor 5.37 208-2 

If the Beach Boys were alive in 1997, and significantly closer to puberty, they might just have made *Silver Sun*. This eponymous debut album from Silver Sun was a blast of pop that has yet to be rivalled.

Silver Sun mix heavy, fuzzed up guitars with Californian surf harmonies, creating an instantly impressive wall of sound, and it was their natural talent for penning simple, perfect pop melodies that stands them so far above everything since. But this pop gloss was underpinned by sharp witty lyrics which dredge through the murkier topics of adolescence and modern life. This dark and cynical take on growing up comes as all the more of a surprise for the saccharine production, a trick that the Beautiful South have long played. But whereas the Beautiful South make coffee table music Silver Sun make candy punk with a bite. This record is tight, fast and filled with adrenaline, and Silver Sun play on this with the album structure: its tracks flash seamlessly past with a fast/slow variation that really works

Silver Sun never managed to hit this high again, and the album remains unequalled. *Silver Sun* is a masterpiece, every song simply perfect. As with all the best pop, the attraction of this record is immediate, but you'll never tire of it.

MC



Scissor Sisters

Scissor Sisters

Polydor 986 605-8 

The Scissor Sisters are much less a band, and much more the sum of their influences: Pink Floyd, The Bee Gees, Duran Duran, Frankie goes to Hollywood... the list goes on and on.

Essentially this record is a pastiche of music from three decades. Scissor Sisters must have been sure they were on to a winner, cherry picking their styles (a little funk here, a dash of electroclash there and a pinch of country western) but the slightly surprising outcome is that they end up somewhere between Bowie and Elton John, and closer to Elton than David at that. Setting about ripping off just about every modern classic is rarely a wise endeavour and this album should be terrible but it isn't. Scissor Sisters just about manage to pull it off. This is due in no small part to their stunning cover of 'Comfortably Numb', sitting smugly amongst a superb six track opening blast. It also helps that they keep a thoroughly modern perspective on proceedings throughout, pulling the whole thing together into a cohesive recording.

Sometimes though you have to be honest to yourself, this album can at times seem just too cool. I don't know if I will still be listening to this album in six months time, but for now at least, it's damn good fun. If there really, truly, has to be an eighties revival, then at least let it sound like this.

MC



Mary Coughlan

Long Honeymoon

Evangetine Recorded Works Ltd GEL 4014 

Whilst we have in the past come to expect dark almost morose albums from this sorrowful Irish diva, *Long Honeymoon* proves to be something of a departure. The familiar heart rendering themes give way to a mischievous, amusing and languidly paced set that is beautifully played and sung in an open and attractive jazz and blues style. The songs are an intriguing selection that includes material like Gershwin's 'I Don't Want To Play In Your Yard' and the Richard Rogers penned 'It Never Entered My Mind'. There are also cleverly arranged and worked versions of a Tom Waits 'Lucky Day' and the Elvis Costello title track. But the improvised approach to Lee Hazelwood's 'These Boots Are Made For Walking' seems a little mannered. Sometimes, though, there is also a feeling that Coughlan is straining too hard to win us over. An example would be her rather lack lustre performance of Bruce Cockburn's 'Blues Got The World'. She's straining at the leash, gets a bit ragged and is clearly uncomfortable with this raucous and lively paced music. It certainly needs a more powerful and focused voice to back it up.

RP








## The Cribs

### The Cribs

Wichita Recordings Webb 058CD 

The Cribs sound frighteningly similar to a sixth form band, and their debut album sounds frighteningly like a homemade demo, and yet, somehow, I remain strangely drawn to it. But then, recorded at Toerag Studios, you expect the album to be a bit shabby. This though is something else again: this album sounds genuinely rubbish. So, why then, would you spend your hard earned cash on *The Cribs*? Well, because you might just like it.

Scattered throughout the album are a handful of bite-size singles. These tracks are satisfyingly reminiscent of the Strokes at their most chaotic, with the slightly off beat, deadened guitar lines. But The Cribs bring a certain home-grown naivety and freshness to this that the Strokes have since lost, and is now seldom found outside the school disco. Avoiding basic filler tracks, the remainder of the album displays a greater degree of experimentation and freedom that most records, with all the roughness that entails. The Cribs are no White Stripes, but they share the confidence that allows them to keep their music loose and fluid, with plenty of opportunity to grow.

This record is sparse, rough and simple. It is, perhaps, not the best album ever made, but it remains worth a try. Whilst it lacks a final coat of polish, if you are looking for a good raw recording then look no further.

MC



## Kelly Willis

### What I Deserve

Rykodisc rcd 1045B 

Kelly Willis (pre-makeover) is still soft on the gaze and gentle to the ear on an album where that distinctive whoop and twang heard in these thirteen slow burning country numbers is more prominent than it was for her more recent outings. Tracks such as 'Talk Like That' are a welcome contrast to all those images where she makes a heart beat faster and faster with tales of loves bad, happy or sad of which she sings so well. Its charming country waltz tempo mimics the meandering Oklahoma drawl of a companion who has pricked half-forgotten thoughts of home and a distant past, memories that have lain dormant through restless years on the road. This also serves as a resonant metaphor for those musical journeys in a career that has lead her to the recording studios of Austin, Texas for this CD released back in 1999. The instrumental fabric throughout this disc with its guitars, piano and Hammond B-3 (as well as some lively Amy Noelle Farris bow work and finger plucking of fiddle and mandolin) gives these thread bare themes a suitably modern dress code in a smartly engineered and well-balanced Dave McNair production.

RP



## Kevin Montgomery

### 2.30am

Syren Records 65902102302

With his father Bob a member of Buddy Holly's pre-Crickets band and his mother Carol a talented backing singer (she sang the high parts on Elvis Presley's 'Suspicious Minds'), it was inevitable that Kevin Montgomery would find his way into the music business. Although he records independently these days, Montgomery began his career on major label A&M, where he released the critically acclaimed *Fear Nothing*. Many years on the road have honed his storytelling style of songwriting which can be likened to Bruce Springsteen and Rodney Crowell. *2.30am* contains 12 beautifully constructed Montgomery originals and one cover, a storming version of Springsteen's 'No Surrender', delivered slow and sexy and all the better for it. Montgomery doesn't rock as hard as Springsteen, he prefers a more mid-paced approach, a style more suited to his controlled, slightly grainy voice. That voice hits the heart hard though, especially when he wraps it around evocative ballads such as 'I Can't Drive You From My Mind' and album tour-de-force 'Fear Nothing'. If this song, with its simple "Yeah, you are something/Fear Nothing" chorus doesn't tug your heartstrings I suggest you get down the doctors and ask him to check your pulse. *2.30am* has got it all and if Montgomery keeps up this level of quality Springsteen will be in real danger of losing his crown.

Supplier: [www.hotrecords.uk.com](http://www.hotrecords.uk.com)

AH





Jewel

0304

Atlantic 7567 93209-2

The Alaskan-born actress, poet and singer-songwriter, Jewel Kilcher, has boldly stated that this album is a modern take on swinging lyrically driven big band music much in the tradition of Cole Porter! Well, I doubt whether any of the fifteen songs here will ever achieve the enduring resonance, wit or sophistication of 'Night And Day' perhaps because Jewel's lyrics are written for a far more knowing audience in far less genteel times. They are, however, rhythmically and instrumentally set down in a catchy dance style fashion. It is just too ambitious to expect explicit lines like "The Mayor has no cash. He said he spent it on hookers and hash" ('Stand') or "I will mesmerise with milky thighs and languid eyes" ('Leave The Lights On') to woo you with their innocence and charm. Jewel does though have an intelligent and evocative way with words. Usually these are reserved for the love songs but in 'Haunted', an unsettling song that is taken from the stalker's perspective, she strikes at the heart of it with "I will come to you in the still of the night and I will crush you with the burden of sight". An enigmatic album that hints at but never quite attains its goals.

RP



Richie Havens

Live At The Cellar Door

Five Star FS1001CD

Richie Havens burst to prominence back in the 1960's, firstly in Greenwich Village as part of the protest folk explosion and then in 1969 at Woodstock, where his gentle songs of peace, love and understanding found their natural home and spoke to a generation. He's still recording today, as well as running an organisation he helped found called The Natural Guard, a group who teach young people about ecological and environmental issues. *Live At The Cellar Door* is an amalgam of two shows Havens recorded back in the early Seventies. The first eight tracks are from The Cellar Door in Washington D.C. and the last four are taken from a Santa Monica show two-years later. The band is stripped back and simple; Havens and Paul Williams on guitar, Eric Oxendine on Bass and Joe Price on percussion. This arrangement gives the performances an intimate feel and creates the perfect backdrop for Havens' highly distinctive voice. His rendition of George Harrison's 'Here Comes The Sun' is mighty fine, as is the cover of Fred Neil's immortal classic 'Dolphins'. Although the definitive version remains Tim Buckley's The D.C. shows are the better recordings; the Santa Monica ones are a little flat and uninspiring. As a historical document though, it's well worth owning.

Supplier: [www.hotrecords.uk.com](http://www.hotrecords.uk.com)

AH



The Delays

Faded Seaside Glamour

Rough Trade rtraddvcd114

The Delays follow a long line of guitar bands trying desperately to sell albums based on light pop ballads. Whilst a few of these bands succeed and re-sculpt the charts, most disappear without trace after the second album. For the handful of great bands you can name, there are scores that you might dimly remember hearing about. The question is, to which category do The Delays belong? *Faded Seaside Glamour* opens with an impossibly good three-track set piece, with two singles standing proudly after an ethereal opening track. If this record could maintain the beauty and power of these tracks, it would undoubtedly stand amongst my top ten albums ever. Unfortunately this album is clogged with filler. It's not a bad album, not by a long way, but they just don't hold the pace. It's hard to see where they go wrong, as there are a few good tracks embedded in the second half of the album, but somehow it just fails to thrill. That's not to say you should pass this record by, quite the opposite. It'll sound great in the sun, and I'm sure it will grow with familiarity, but it's not quite there just yet. Buy this album for four or five songs, and make generous use of the skip button, and you'll still consider it worth the money.

MC







Charlie Musselwhite

## Sanctuary

Real World CDRW117 

Charlie Musselwhite is the greatest living exponent of the blues harmonica. He has won countless W.C. Handy Awards in a career spanning 30 years and has recorded with some of the all-time greats, as well as racking up an impressive collection of solo recordings, *Sanctuary* being his latest, and possibly greatest, release.

Everything on this album, from the choice of musicians and the songs to the singing and the playing, reeks of class. It was a stroke of genius on Charlie's part to bring in legendary Texan guitarist Charlie Sexton for these sessions. Sexton is one of the world's greatest players and a fine artist in his own right. If you can find it check out his marvellous solo album *Under The Wishing Tree*, a bona-fide classic he cut in 1995.

*Sanctuary's* approach reminds me so much of that album; it's moody and dark in places but it also possesses a strange ethereal quality, thanks in no small part to Sexton's mastery of his instrument and Musselwhite's eerie vocals. Musselwhite's harmonica is not to the fore, it just blends in and adds to the atmosphere in a beautiful, otherworldly way. Don't listen to any one track, play 'Sanctuary' from start to finish and marvel at its wonder. Buy it if you love the blues, buy it if you don't – its appeal is universal.

AH



Carrie Newcomer

## The Gathering of Spirits

Philo PHCD 1243 

Newcomer is a consummate professional and veteran performer who has with *The Gathering Of Spirits* (her ninth album to date) given us a CD that transcends the routine topicality and unfounded optimism of the folk idiom. Bold and determined, she takes worthy concerns about social justice and those indelible experiences gleaned in a Quaker upbringing and then nourishes your mind through a brand of contemplative lyricism which immediately engages you on a philosophical common ground. Half the battle is won by Carrie's expressive voice. None of that trapped nerve, tie-dyed trilling here. These richly textured vocals are brimming over with power, volume and projection. It impregnates her songs about personal suffering like 'I'm Still Standing' and those wider upheavals of the World heard on 'Little Earthquakes' with an intensity and defiance that reverberates from one verse to the next. Don't be fooled by those vulnerable looks either. There is a steeliness and well-practised art behind those eyes, one that seamlessly traverses material as varied as a reflective bluegrass 'Silver' or plaintive 'I Heard An Owl'. Her versatility extends beyond these sub-genres to permeate the superbly crafted arrangements for acoustic and electric guitars, bass, dobro, cello, accordion, piano and banjo that lie beneath those strongly sung yet remarkably supple lines.

RP



Dave Kelly

## Resting My Bones

Hypertension 1209HYP 

Dave Kelly is a veteran of the UK blues scene and when he's not fronting his own band he can be found rockin' it up with Paul Jones and Co. in The Blues Band. *Resting My Bones* is a collection of originals and well chosen covers recorded over a four-year period and the musicians used here form the nucleus of Kelly's touring band, which includes original Dire Straits drummer Pick Withers. The five original tracks cover country blues ('Life After Love'), down home country shuffles ('Velocity Of Love') and swinging slide boogie ('Longing For You Baby') and feature Kelly's superb mastery of the electric guitar and dobro. He's a fine singer too, with a warm and easy going style that compliments the choice of songs. The best of the covers is Steve Earle's 'My Old Friend The Blues', a beautiful song respectfully handled by Kelly with some divine slide playing enhancing the song's message of loneliness and despair. There are also excellent versions of Jackson Browne's 'World In Motion', Tim Hardin's 'If I Were A Carpenter' and a lovely country tune called 'City Of New Orleans' which features mournful violin work from Steve Simpson and more of Kelly's delicate slide work. *Resting My Bones* consistently delights and will appeal to anyone who's ever bought a Bonnie Raitt album

AH



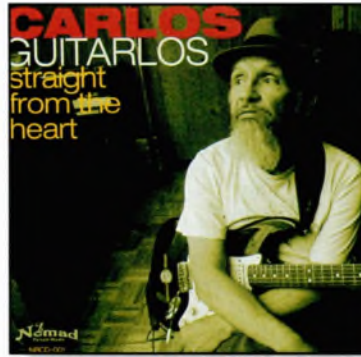
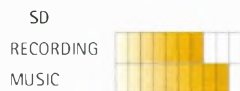


Black Nielson

The Seahorse Boe

Truck Records TRUCK 013 (CD)

You have to give credit to Truck Records, a hardworking, independent label with the ability to produce great albums on a small budget. After all, how many other record companies would donate the profits from their annual festival to Amnesty International! Trouble is it does rather eat into the promotional budget, limiting exposure of gems like this. Building upon the evident potential of their debut album (*Still Life Hear Me*), Southampton-based Black Nielson have crafted a sophisticated and sometimes haunting follow-up. 'Some Nights Villains' and 'Your Faint Heart and Guardian' (complete with a generous sprinkling of flutes and trumpets), are particularly lovely tracks. However, this is not to imply that Black Nielson are in short supply of upbeat, lo-fi moments. You only have to listen to 'Teezzer' with its chaotic guitars to realise that. Singer Mike Gale has a unique voice that sounds even better this time round, with more adventurous backing. The female vocal part on 'Life Is Different For You' is especially effective when coupled with the pedal steel. Listening to such songs, it isn't hard to see why the band has invited comparisons with the likes of Grandaddy and Sparklehorse. *The Seahorse Boe* appropriately closes with the beautiful 'Conflict K', building to a crescendo of violins and guitars. Black Nielson have created something special here; let's just hope people get a chance to listen to it.



Carlos Guitarlos

Straight From The Heart

Nomad Records NRC0-001 (CD)

Carlos Guitarlos, aka Carlos Ayala, is an L.A. legend. Two decades ago he played in the famous bar band Top Jimmy and the Rhythm Pigs who were a frightening collision of big personalities and a blues-punk genre. They lived hard and fast, womanising, drug taking and drinking beer by the bucket load. Before overcoming all that substance abuse Carlos had descended into the streets of San Francisco's Mission District busking simply to survive. Now he's clean again and laying down a varied and wonderfully versatile mixture of chords that are informed by his deeply confessional style. And oh boy! does he have plenty to say on the subject of living a life to excess on tracks like 'When The Pain stops Killing Me', 'Women Et Whiskey' and 'The Sea Of All My Troubles'. Those self-destructive years have left him diabetic and suffering a serious heart condition, yet there's nothing frail about the spirited duelling as guitar licks are traded with his fellow musicians. That infectious zydeco rhythm on an opening 'Damn Atchafalaya' confirms it. The body may be pretty beat up, but that voice although ravaged by all these experiences has a reassuring, no make that a commanding presence as lyrics are delivered with authority and soul. It's an amazingly expressive seventeen-track set that was recorded and mixed in just one unbelievable day.

Supplier: [www.hotrecords.uk.com](http://www.hotrecords.uk.com)



Amy Fradon

Small Time News

Leo Rising Records (CD)

These days female singer/songwriters pour out of the woodwork with alarming regularity. A fair few are pretty average, some are pretty good and some are plain bloody marvellous (check out Jann Arden, Beth Hart and Trish Murphy for examples of the latter.) Amy Fradon's not a new kid on the block. She released six albums when she was working as a duo with Leslie Ritter, and *Small Town News* follows hard on the heels of her debut solo album *Passion Angel*, released to much critical acclaim in 1999. On the strength of *Small Town News* it's quite easy to see why the press have been championing her cause. What we have here is an album of mainly self-penned tunes covering a wide variety of musical bases; country, blues, folk, (contemporary not traditional) and breezy jazz are all present in the mix, and she nails every style down with a voice of crystalline purity. The backing is mainly acoustic and all the musicians play their part beautifully. It's hard to pick a favourite track because each song oozes its own peculiar charm, but special mention has to go to 'Silver Wings', a touching tribute to the band's Rick Danko. *Small Town News* is a fine album and should go a long way towards introducing this talented artist to a much wider audience.

AH





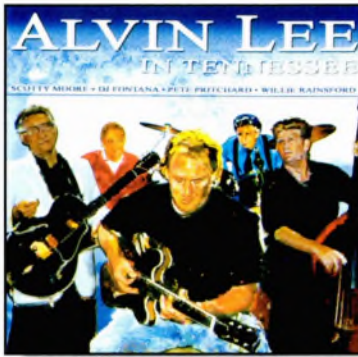
## Animals That Swim

## Happiness From A Distant Star

Snowstorm Storm 010 LP  

If Hank Starr's band released albums more frequently then they could rightly be described as perennial under achievers. However there's been a five-year hiatus between *Happiness From A Distant Star* and the unfashionable *I Was The King*. Throughout the 1990s they simply ploughed their own furrow ignoring the advance of the New Wave and Britpop to play mellow acoustic and electric guitar-based rock music that is punctuated by keyboards, Derek Crabtree's trumpet and the rich baritone voice from Starr. Evocative lyrics and wry observations pinpoint the many tiny often quite insignificant moments that fill a lifetime. Yes, birth, falling in love and death feature but it's the dancing naked on the lawn ('Seven days') or the half-remembered smell of perfume ('Homunculus') which fills in those gaps between the bigger events. This is of course a semi-autobiographical song about an unfulfilled and frustrated individual but Starr and co-writer, Barker both understand that a joyless existence is a waste of a life. The opening track, 'All Your Stars Are Out', is in some ways reminiscent of Lloyd Cole and the Commotions but *Animals That Swim* are far less literate or melancholic beasts. A diverting and attractively framed album nonetheless.

RP



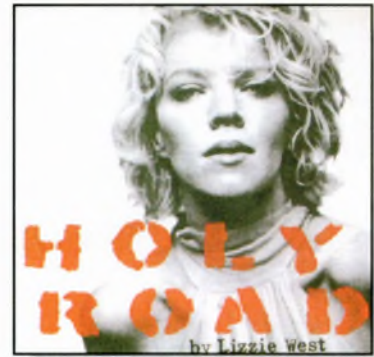
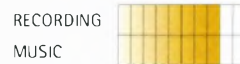
## Alvin Lee

## In Tennessee

Repertoire: Repuk 1029 

This Album represents something of a dream come true for Alvin Lee, the charismatic front man and lead guitarist of legendary British blues rockers Ten Years After. As a 14 year old Lee was inspired to learn guitar when he heard Scotty Moore's playing on those early Elvis Presley recordings, so when he got the chance to record with his hero he wasted no time in catching a plane to Nashville. The album was cut at Scotty's private studios with original Presley drummer D.J. Fontana, double bassist Pete Pritchard, pianist Willie Rainsford and Organist Tim Hinckley providing Stellar back up. Not surprisingly the album has the feel of those early rock n' roll records and it's clear that Alvin and the lads are having a major ball. Lee's guitar playing certainly seems to have been given a new lease of life. It swings with a passion and a fire that's been missing in some of his more recent outings. The eleven tracks were recorded in only two-days in the studio and the lack of sonic tinkering really pays off. "Those guys put everything into the feel of the music" Lee explains in the liner notes, "Being flashy or virtuoso does not come into it. Just get the feel and keep it in the pocket". Just for good measure the band finish with a rollicking version of Ten Years After anthem 'I'm Goin' Home'... Presley style. Fun with a capital 'F'!

AH



## Lizzie West

## Holy Road

Warner Bros 9362484172 

I bought this album when it came out in 2003 and remember the immediate impact its catchy songs had on me. It was in the summertime and all I could think of as I listened was how wonderful any of the thirteen slices of perfect pop would sound pumping out of the radio. You see, *Holy Road* is one of those very rare beasts indeed; an album with the ability to appeal to the more chart-minded amongst us but at the same time containing more than enough mystery and intelligence (lyrically and musically) to appeal to the more discerning listener. Lizzie wrote all of the 13 songs on *Holy Road*, songs that show a remarkable maturity for someone who didn't even pick a guitar up until she was in her 20's. With her wonderful band The Gangs Of Kosmos providing sterling support and her Natalie Merchant inflected vocals wrapping themselves hypnotically around the insanely catchy rhythms and melodies, West has created the winning formula – a modern masterpiece for the masses. If I was a marketing man for Warners I'd be straight down to the broadcasting stations with promos of the album, insisting they play it on rotation. Summer's almost here and the timing's perfect. Time to get focussed Warners; you've got a bona-fide classic in your hands – get your arses in gear and make Lizzie West a superstar.

AH





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SME Ser III/VMS20E	£500	£275
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TANNOY Buckingham	£2500	£1295
TANNOY M3	£200	£ 75
TANNOY DC2000	£200	£ 95
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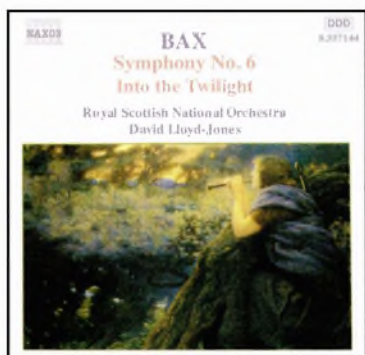
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**Sir Arnold Bax**  
**Symphony No 6**  
**Into the Twilight; Summer Music**  
 Royal Scottish National orchestra  
 David Lloyd-Jones

Naxos 8.557144 


The Naxos Bax symphonies cycle is now complete. As a body of work, Bax's symphonic output is uneven, but the *sixth* is a genuine masterpiece, and one of the best symphonies of the 20th century. Written in 1934, mostly in Morar Inverness-Shire, it's a turbulent three-movement score, nervy and moody, with few moments of respite. For some, it reflects the wild beauty of North-West Scotland. For others it captures the restless Zeitgeist of the 1930s - the passing of worlds - also reflected in Walton's near contemporary *first symphony*. With Bax, the experience has a slightly mystical feel; his music is not as focused and immediate as Walton's. But listening one senses a restless passion just as raw and edgy. Even the slow movement (almost nine minutes long in this performance) feels like an intermezzo between two brooding giants - a troubled dream. David Lloyd-Jones directs an atmospheric performance that captures the music's dreamlike other-worldly qualities and sense of foreboding. But there's no lack of tension or forward momentum. The two fillers are evocative tone poems, played with sensitivity and panache. The recordings are vivid but smooth and nicely spacious, less resonant than the old Chandos/Thomson set. Those collecting the Naxos/Bax cycle will probably have bought already; those new to Bax should start here.

JMH

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Vaughan Williams**  
**Symphony No. 2**  
**"London"/The Lark Ascending**  
 Griffiths/RPO/Previn

Telarc CD-80138 

If it had not been for Sir Adrian Boult's exemplary series of Ralph Vaughan Williams' symphonies, recorded in the late 1960s and early 1970s, André Previn's recordings of the complete cycle for RCA, made at around the same time, would certainly be more-highly regarded. Unfortunately, most collectors will bypass his releases, making a beeline for the EMI discs, for both the performance and the truly excellent sound, despite Previn providing a number of high-class and sympathetic readings. His "*London*" *Symphony* was in many ways the equal, and in a few the superior, of Boult's more highly-prized issue, but since the early 1980s Previn has generally failed to impress, with recordings that are certainly slower, often more lethargic. But here those more deliberate tempos serve the music well, especially in the *Second Movement*, which is particularly gorgeous. In fact, the whole reading is especially sublime, although Previn is a little over self-indulgent. The results simply demonstrate that this most characteristic of symphonies can tolerate such colourations. A bewitching *The Lark Ascending* is an attractive bonus, while the engineering is in the demonstration class, permitting the conventional wisdom about Previn's more recent recordings to be ignored, and allowing a firm recommendation.

SG

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Sergei Rachmaninov**  
**Piano Concertos 1 and 2**

Krystian Zimerman (piano)  
 Seji Ozawa, BSO

DG 459 643-2 

DG have been sitting on this release for some time. The first concerto was recorded in 1997 and has marginally better sound than the second concerto, recorded in 2000. At first glance Zimerman is not perhaps a natural idiomatic Rachmaninov player. But apparently he's played both works since the 1970s, and feels a close affinity with the *second concerto* in particular. He certainly has a big technique and can really encompass the notes without sounding strained. In the sleeve notes he says you don't just play Rachmaninov's concertos, you live them. Yet in many ways his approach is cool rather than hot. He brings a certain lucidity and objectivity to these saturated works, as if trying to play down the Hollywood aspects of the music. The neglected *first concerto* is a very fine work; tuneful and rhythmically varied - a winning combination of virtuoso brilliance and youthful exuberance. When heard in a performance as accomplished as this, its originality and high quality are fully manifest. The *second concerto* comes with too much baggage - be it memories of Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson in *Brief Encounter* or the pop song 'All By Myself'. So it's good to hear the music played cleanly and objectively for once. Apparently there are no plans to record the remaining concertos and *Rhapsody* - a great pity.

JMH

RECORDING  
MUSIC





Vallet  
Le Secret des Muses

Paul O'Dette

Harmonia Mundi HMU 907300

Nicholas Vallet's compositions are seldom-heard today. This may have something to do with the fact that early in his career he turned his back on the fame and glamour of the early 17th Century French court, preferring a life as a freelance composer and musician, as well as music and dance teacher, in Holland. His work displays a particular brilliance, and spans a number of styles from French dances and elaborately written variations to skilfully arranged contrapuntal psalm-settings and arrangements of Elizabethan songs - no doubt inspired by the three expatriate Englishmen with whom Vallet formed a quartet. Most importantly for today's lutenists, Vallet's compositions and arrangements include carefully detailed notes on technique and fingering. Paul O'Dette's technique is always clean and clear, and here he carefully allows any articulation to come to the fore. He is always tasteful with his ornamentation, never relying on overly flamboyant or tasteless virtuosity to win over his audience. These are simply performances by a modern master that entice the listener into the music, entertaining with pure musicianship, allowing us to follow the composer's ideas more easily, and therefore drawing our attention to the work of an almost entirely forgotten past master.

SG



Ludwig Van Beethoven  
Piano Concertos 1 and 2  
Rondo in B flat major  
Berezovsky (piano).  
Swedish Ch. orch. Dausgaard

Simax PSC 1181

It's such a pity the young Beethoven 'died' so early! Although many of his greatest works were written in the so-called middle period, the early pieces - like his first two *piano concertos* - have a freshness and exuberance that's so refreshing and exciting. For years these two *concertos* suffered by comparison with the greater more monumental *third, fourth* and *fifth concertos*. Agreed, the two earlier works lack profundity and real Beethovenian weight. But there's a genuine sense of fun and engaging high spirits. Speaking personally, I particularly like the *second concerto*; it's a work I can listen to again and again with real enjoyment. The present performances offer the transparent lean textures we expect from period instruments. Strings play without vibrato, and dynamic contrasts are crisp and strongly contrasted, with keen fast tempi. What's missing is that unpleasant thinness of tone - especially from the soloist. The weak clattery forte-piano is unable to match Beethoven's vivid orchestral dynamics; hence the disappointing nature of many otherwise good performances on original forces. Here you've got the best of both worlds; an orchestral sound that's crisp and lucid, and piano tone that's light and sharp but not thin. Best of all, everyone sounds as if they're enjoying the music.

JMH



Rossini  
Sonate a quattro

Ensemble Explorations

Harmonia Mundi HMC 901776

Gioacchino Rossini was only twelve years of age when he composed his six *Sonate a quattro* (legend has it, during a three day period) in 1804. While they were composed for two violins, cello and double bass, these works are ideally suited for performances with additional instrumentation, but it is still rather refreshing to hear them as originally conceived, as is the case here. This more concise approach also manages to reveal more of the humour, often masked by lush orchestration. In fact the Ensemble Explorations are without peer, exhibiting a youthful swagger throughout but nowhere more than in the opening *Moderato* of *Sonate No. 1*, where they imbue a certain carefree expressiveness through spirited playing and light-hearted interplay. Their attention to detail is exemplary, utilizing contrast to emphasise vigour, rather than breakneck tempos that can destroy Rossini's more subtle moments. This is all beautifully captured by the Harmonia Mundi engineers, who manage to reveal every individual sonority while never losing the wonderful illusion of a group performance. With only four of the set included on this CD, I now wait with baited breathe for the promised follow-up disc.

SG





Liszt  
*Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*  
 Steven Osbourne

Hyperion CDA67445 

Like so many of his piano cycles, Liszt's spiritually inspired *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* underwent a number of changes during its composition, before being published in its definitive form in 1853. Pieces were revised, others discarded, over a sixteen-year period, and two others disappeared until 1981. While Liszt thought highly of the published works, often performing them for friends, long after his concert performances had been abandoned, only two, *Funérailles* and the luminous meditation of *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude*, remain among the popular repertoire. This complete performance lasts just too long for a single CD, so Hyperion have spread the cycle over two, but charged no extra for the second disc. Steven Osbourne's playing is full of sensitivity and displays tremendous affection for this music. His approach is straightforward, exhibiting a certain serenity and a particular variety of texture and colour. The pieces derived from vocal works reveal sustained eloquence, while those requiring particular virtuosity benefit from Osbourne's controlled drama. With such a masterful release, it now remains to be seen as to whether it is enough to create a new audience for the complete cycle in the concert hall.

SG



Johannes Brahms  
 Symphony No 2  
 Double Concerto  
 Gordan Nikolitch (violin) Tim  
 Hugh (cello), Bernard Haitink, LSO

LSO Live LS000043 

Although it's common to record Brahms' *double concerto* with big-name soloists, it's just as viable to use the orchestra's first-chair players; indeed, Toscanini did just that. For this new LSO Live recording, Bernard Haitink chooses the LSO's leader Gordan Nikolitch and principal cello Tim Hugh. Their playing is warmer and more intimate than we're used to from established soloists, but none the worse for that. The performance is a very lyrical one; sensitively shaped and beautifully 'sung' from first note to last. Intonation is near perfect, and the two soloists need fear no comparisons - regardless of how illustrious the performances. Which is not meant to imply the playing is in any way small-scale or lacking in breadth. The big moments have real presence and attack. Likewise the *symphony* is lyrical and intimate. Tempi are spacious, giving the music a nice broad unhurried feel. Brahms is not among the easiest composers to record; neither is the Barbican hall an ideal recording venue. Here, the results are pretty good. The sound is not especially rich or spacious, but clarity is good. This is the first in a projected live Brahms cycle from Haitink and the LSO. On the basis of this first release it's going to be a worthwhile venture!

JMH

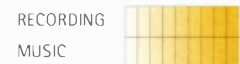


Hahn  
 Piano Quartet No. 3/Violin Sonata  
 and other chamber music  
 Room-Music

Hyperion CDA67391 

While Venezuelan composer Reynaldo Hahn had, by the age of six, entertained at the salon of Napoleon III's cousin, and at eleven entered the Paris Conservatoire, where he was taught by Massenet, he was also a lover of literature, and became a friend of Marcel Proust. Like the writer, his work harks back to a bygone era, with the *Sonata in C major*, composed in the 1920's, hinting at the styles of Franck and Fauré, whom Hahn thought of as the last great composer. The *Nocturne* and the *Romance*, both earlier pieces for the violin and piano, are similarly pensive and tender, as is the *Soliloque et Forlane*. There is also a sensitive performance of the *Third Piano Quartet*, where Hahn's lyrical qualities combine with his natural ability for utilizing timbre. The epitome of this recording is the composer's arrangement for cello and piano of his song *Si Mes Vers avaient des ailes*, written when he was thirteen. While small-scaled and rather restrained, this music is perfectly formed, and is beautifully played throughout by the members of Room-Music, who have come together to recapture some delightful music that is simply a Remembrance of Things Past.

SG







Gustav Mahler  
Symphony No 9

Sir John Barbirolli  
Berlin Philharmonic orchestra

EMI CDM 5 67925-2 (CD)

The Berlin Philharmonic had played virtually no Mahler when Sir John Barbirolli conducted the *ninth symphony* in concert with them in January 1963. The response was so overwhelming that the orchestra asked to record the work with Sir John - and this occurred a year later. Given his high standing with the Berliners, it's curious that no more recordings followed. Indeed, when Barbirolli recorded the Brahms *symphonies* in 1968, the Vienna Philharmonic was chosen - an orchestra Barbirolli had not previously conducted, and with whom he did not get on. One can understand why. The fastidious Berliners would have admired Barbirolli's fanatical attention to detail. Apparently, during the first movement, the cello section asked Sir John to solve a difficult fingering problem. He stepped down from the podium, and taking the first 'cellist's instrument, played the passage in question with the 'cello section, leaving the players immensely impressed and deepening their respect and admiration for JB. By the same token, can you imagine the Vienna Philharmonic welcoming someone coming from Britian to show THEM how to play Brahms! Newly re-mastered for this release, Barbirolli's *Mahler 9* remains one of the finest performances on record. It's surprisngly fast, demonstrating the way in which performances of this work have broadened in the past thirty or so years.

JMH

RECORDING  
MUSIC



Franck/Schumann/Brahms  
Sonatas for Cello and Piano

Wispelwey/Giacometti

Channel Classics CCS 18698 (CD)

With a number of great cellists in the past four decades, from Jacqueline Du Prè and Pierre Fournier to Yo-Yo Ma and Mischa Maisky, Pieter Wispelwey may not be top of many lists, but has certainly made people sit up and take note. Here he has produced three performances of the utmost efficiency, ensuring one re-listens before making any firm judgement. The Brahms *Sonata's* opening *Vivace ma non troppo* sounds too fast, but Wispelwey produces such luminous textures Paolo Giacometti still has time to shape the musical colours. In Schumann's *Adagio and Allegro* (originally for horn and piano), the introduction remains elegant and lyrical, but no horn player could ever produce the intoxicating tempos of this performance. But the best example is the opening *Sonata in A major* by Cèsar Franck, with its wonderfully serene opening of consummate simplicity, but closer examination shows that there are also rich harmonies and eloquent moments, before building to an profound climax. Perhaps Wispelwey and Giacometti lack a touch of the great sensuality of Maisky and Argerich, but they produce tremendous variety of feeling and texture, especially in the closing *Allegretto poco moderato*, resulting in a most balanced and no less entertaining release.

SG

RECORDING  
MUSIC



George Frederic Handel  
Messiah  
Sutherland; Torangeau; Krenn,  
Krause, Ambrosian singers,  
Bonyng, ECO

Decca 467 475-2 (CD)

In its LP format, this was the first recording of *Messiah* I ever owned. I bought it when it originally came out in 1970, and retain a certain affection for the performance to this day. Back then, almost a quarter of a century ago, Bonyng's approach - reduced forces, lively tempi, lots of ornaments - was considered 'authentic'. No one would dream of making such claims today. Indeed, some of the conductor's embellishments sound positively funny and very dated - a long way from what we now think of as historically accurate. The other minus point is that three of the four soloists are not native English speakers - The men aren't too bad, the women are less good. But the chorus is good, and sing with full-blooded commitment. Being the first recording of *Messiah* I owned, by and large I 'learnt' the work from listening to it; I still mentally hear Bonyng's abundance of trills and fussy encrustations when I hear other versions! It warped my appreciation of the music. So it's a set recommended to experienced *Messiah* collectors (and anyone wanting a laugh) rather than those coming to the work for the first time. The recording has transferred well to CD, sounding slightly brighter and more forward than the LPs.

JMH

RECORDING  
MUSIC



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Although now well into her eighties the Forties dance band legend Myra Taylor is still at home when effortlessly recreating that bouncy and good-natured swing of 'Take It Easy Greasy' as she is with the beautifully delivered and slow burning number, 'Still Blue Water'. Resonant vocals, expressive, rich and big on projection, can in a moment switch between the improvisational skating on 'Lady Be Good' and in the next instance gently caress your ears with a song like 'This Is A Night To Dream' that has a delicious tenderness and intimacy about it. Beautifully sung and sympathetically played blues and jazz standards like these don't come around too often. And with this tight six-piece band (including guitarist Sonny Kenner, bassist Gerald Spaits and Eddie Saunders on tenor sax) you just know that they will flesh out either an endearing ballad or hip banging melody with an appropriate dash of instrumental colour and rhythmic integrity. Taylor simply couldn't wish for better support both here and with the technical expertise on offer at Chad Kassem's Kansas City Blue Heaven Studios. This vibrant and lively church acoustic, together with her closely miked voice, has immediacy and plenty of fine detail that radiates throughout all twelve tracks.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

RP



Harry Big Daddy Hypolite  
Louisiana Country Boy

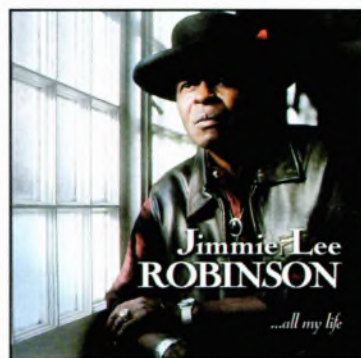
Analogue Productions

APO 2016 SA 

Harry Hypolite is an old fashioned and big-hearted blues man steeped in the legacy of Muddy Waters and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown. Half a dozen of his self penned and autobiographical songs jockey for position alongside the Creole sung and delightfully observed Clifton Chenier tracks like 'Colinda', 'Hog for You Baby' and a plaintive 'You Used To Call Me'. They encapsulate that sweat drenched and callus-ridden existence of the field hand toiling away amongst the rows of cotton, sugar cane and okra around Lafayette, St. Martinville and New Iberia in the 1930s. His open and syncopated acoustic and electric guitar licks are as steamy and brooding as the Louisiana swamps that serve as an ever present back drop to those rich and fulsome vocals which so memorably capture an essence of poverty, hard luck and heartache. However this is a recording that does not quite match up to the depth and intensity of these emotions. Unusually for this format it wraps each of the performers who include Jimmy D. Lane (electric Et dobro guitars), Bruce Cahoon (drums), Big John Amaro (Hammond B3) and Louri Villeri (bass) in a light gauze. I'd expect much more instrumental detail and precision from an SACD.

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RP



Jimmie Lee Robinson  
All My Life

Analogue Productions

APO 2011 SA 

Jimmie Lee Robinson at only seventy-three years of age is one of the younger crusty old personalities who in the twilight of their careers have graced the live direct-to-two-track Analogue Productions recording sessions. *All My Life* is a worthy tribute to the Chicago Maxwell Street tradition of rhythm and blues. It's a stand up front porch acoustic style that has Robinson's spurs jangling in time with the beat, his humming of the tune between lyrics and generally beguiling the listener with every bold and richly coloured improvisation. Meanwhile Madison Slim's weeping harmonica again breaks your heart with almost every other note and then there's an acoustic and dobro guitar playing Jimmy D. Lane who dove tails in perfectly with his peers. Alongside Jimmie Lee's title track and a pensive 'The Girl I Love' are those forthright and foot tapping Willie Dixon songs, 'I'm Ready' and 'Too Late', as well as that mournful beauty of the Muddy Waters penned, 'Forty Days And Forty Nights'. Throw down classic performances of Jimmy Reed and Chester Burnett numbers like 'The Sun Is Shining' and 'I'll Be Around' and this superbly recorded Chicago blues just eats you up inside.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

RP







Aimee Mann  
Bachelor No.2

### Mobile Fidelity

UDSACD 2025 

Sonically, *Bachelor No.2* has always been the strongest of the Aimee Mann solo releases and Mo-Fi have improved that sense of surrounding space and depth in a beguiling and pleasantly detailed transfer. Musically, it grabs you with those tuneful, melodic and catchy hooks in songs like 'Red Vines', 'Satellite' and 'You Do' that are shaped by her beautifully languid and lilting vocal style. Here, she hypnotically lulls and then leads you willingly towards an insight on love, inequity or disaffection before delivering a delicate but tell tale lift of the voice for that special moment of emphasis. This comes as she closes out the lyric before wooing us once again with harmonies or a subtly exposed refrain. Her intelligent song craft remains a far cry from the banal bludgeoning approach favoured by many pop contemporaries. Aimee is a rare and enigmatic iron fist within the seductively tender velvet glove and that is made patently clear from the plaintive opening track, 'How Am I Different'. Rhetorical, determined, feisty and self-assured lyrics like "And just one question before I pack - when you f\*\*k it up later, do I get my money back?" flow freely between the questioning title refrain.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

RP



Jay McShann  
What A Wonderful World

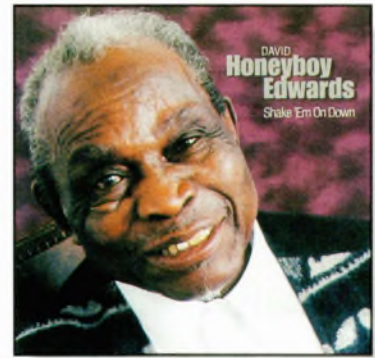
### Groove Note

GRV 1005-3 

Kansas City band leader and pianist Jay McShann has down the years worked with some legendary musicians including Charlie Parker, Walter Brown and Jimmy Witherspoon. Here, he is joined by a quartet of players in Sonny Kenner (guitar), Ahmad Alaadeen (tenor sax), Gerald Spait (bass) and Todd Strait (drums) who tastefully pay homage to the city's Sunset Club and Pete Johnson's ivories on 'Piney Brown Blues', 'Cherry Red' and 'Just For You'. McShann's voice is not the usual deliberately robust and broken biscuit sounding kind you tend to expect from ancient blues men. Instead he sings with a nasal lightness and delicacy that suits intimate material like Witherspoon's 'Rain Is Such A Lonesome Sound', 'Blue Monday' and 'Gee Baby Ain't I Good To You'. The tempo and mood has the feel of a club gig. Witty and good-natured interplay amongst the band strikes an up beat and infectious chord within us-one which is a distinct departure from that moaning, mournful country blues laments heard on stoops across the South. The recording has excellent instrument separation. It allows their individual characteristics, the shape, detail, presence and weight to be naturally recreated in a vibrant and sympathetically warm acoustic.

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RP



David Honeyboy Edwards  
Shake 'Em On Down

### Analogue Productions

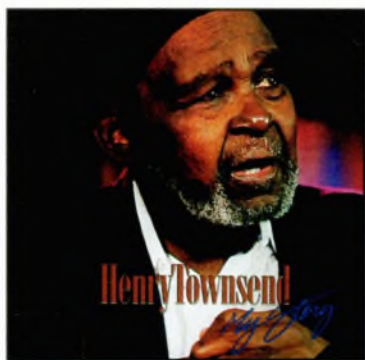
AP0 2010 SA 

A succession of grizzled old blues men have passed through the Blue Heaven Studio doors and all without exception have proved worthy of audiophile treatment be it on SACD or 180g LP. Edwards, a magical and quite vigorous guitarist, is another of those who has the Mississippi Delta running through their octogenarian veins. Rhythmic playing of classic material, including Charlie Patton's 'High Water Everywhere' and the Roosevelt Sykes penned track, 'West Memphis Blues', sends out an unmistakably authentic message to all those younger pretenders like the Eric Bibbs and Keb Mos who can't really hope to match these earthy and tightly grained life experiences which inform his every chord. Allied to this are those weathered and emotional charged vocals and a pair of willing sidemen in Memphis Slim (harmonica) and Jimmy D. Lane (guitar). They spar and then lock horns for 'Bullfrog Blues', 'Pony Blues' and 'Drop Down Mama' as the icy slide and country walking bass lines from the man dog it out with them in these traditionally testing and quite superb displays of musicianship, camaraderie and good humour.

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RP





Henry Townsend  
My Story

Analogue Productions

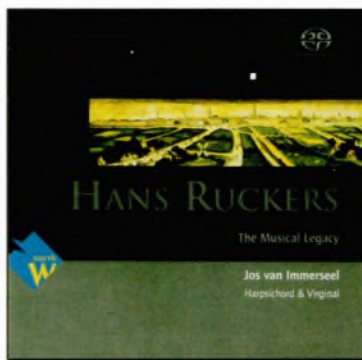
APO 2014 SA



*My Story*, recorded in the fall of 1999 shortly before Townsend's 90th birthday, is a venerable and ruminative retrospective by that legendary Kansas City piano and guitar playing lyricist whom in his time partnered the likes of Roosevelt Sykes and Walter Davis. Robust piano notes, occasional guitar licks and a thoughtful and carefully executed vocal line works through these timeless laments and universal tales of loneliness, lost love and rural poverty which have been a staple diet for blues men since Henry began recording back in the twenties. Themes that were so innovative all those years ago still prickle with gritty and irreplaceable observations until during tracks like 'Screaming And Crying', 'Goodbye' and 'No Fuss And Fight' you find that they've thoroughly worked their way under your skin. It proves that Townsend is no dinosaur. Slick long-term sideman Ron Edwards with that finger-picking style of his goes on to deliver a series of gentle almost melancholic counters, ones which provide a sympathetic instrumental adhesive in these songs. The closing 'Repentance Blues' where Jimmy D. Lane's dobro can again be heard is both a reflection upon the way you lead your life and a growing sense of mortality. It is a nicely framed and tender meeting of old world blues and that new generation of musicians keeping their flame alight.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

RP



Hans Ruckers  
The Musical legacy

Jos van Immerseel (Harpichord and Virginals)

North West Records



As well as the major re-issue programmes slowly starting to gain momentum on the new, hi-bit formats, the other real foothold secured by SACD and DVD-A is in the area of new audiophile recordings. Small labels, thanks in part to the technical generosity of the major combatants, have access to the very latest recording technology, expensive toys that would generally be well beyond their budget. This disc from North West is an example of this emergent trend, although it uses a dCS/Nagra recording chain. Its audiophile credentials are ensured by the combination of purist mixing and an eclectic (though in this case remarkably accessible) repertoire. Celebrating the contribution and legacy of the Antwerp school of keyboard construction, Immerseel plays contemporary pieces on three different instruments spanning the 16th to 18th centuries. The playing is clean and crystal clear in style, perhaps lacking a little emotional investment, but suits the astonishing focus and transparency of the DSD master. The instruments are presented with impressive solidity and sonority, devoid of the jangly glassiness which they so often provoke on CD. With sensibly chosen and nicely varied repertoire, expert execution and a recording that really demonstrates and exploits the benefits of the technology employed, this disc is a tour de force. Beautiful, beguiling and impressive in equal measure.

Supplier: [www.northwestrecords.com](http://www.northwestrecords.com)

RG



Talk Talk

The Colour Of Spring

EMI 7243 591452 2



Tick... Ticky... Tick... Whump, Whump, Thud... Tick... Ticky... As soon as that opening percussion motif reaches the speakers, hi-fi retailers from the mid-eighties will be scattering for cover! Beautifully recorded it was catchy to the point of extreme irritation, but Talk Talk's finest hour was captured for posterity on analogue tape, making it a primo candidate for transfer to SACD.

Of course, its popularity as a dem record speaks volumes about the recording quality, which is well above and beyond the mainstream pop norm. Crisp dynamics and an open, immediate sound transfer beautifully to the SACD format, giving it plenty to work with. EMI haven't managed to match the warmth and weight of MoFi's transfers, the current standard setters for re-issues on the format, but the musical results are impressive nonetheless. The CD layer easily betters my original copy, sonically and musically, but is still readily eclipsed by the focus, detail and easy flow of the hi-bit option. Running it in the Krell SACD Standard leaves you in no doubt as to where the technological advantage lies. Once you get over the familiarity of the done to death singles, there's some stand-up music on this album, individual enough to survive the intervening 15 years without dating to the point of nostalgia (or comedy). It's nice to see some musically valid material fighting its way to the front of the re-issue queue. More please!

RG





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keeping the music alive

## folk music for the early hours

### Eleanor McEvoy: *Early Hours*

Eleanor McEvoy is a highly talented songwriter, able to communicate the complexity and subtleties of human emotion and life in all its hues. She has a beautiful, lived-in sort of voice and a great ear for a tune. Pick up any of her recordings (her recent *Special Edition CD* is a favourite) and you'll hear an artist who lives to express all the elements of her musical character. This diversity of expression finds fulfilment in *Early Hours*.



There are wide a range of moods, textures and styles to be heard. Eleanor does a little violin feature (with Brian O'Connor on piano) called *Driving Home From Butlers* that will have the tears flowing. It's only one minute forty five, but its cracking stuff. There is the melodic pop of *I'll Be Willing*, the driving *Days Roll By* and the beautiful ballad, *Make Mine A Small One*. To close the album, there is Celtic traditional song, *Anach Cuain (Eanach Dhuin)* which is a simple piano/vocal duet that is heart melting.

Eleanor and band do a very swinging, almost jazzy take on the Chuck Berry chestnut, *Memphis Tennessee* that makes you wonder why no one else has thought to do it before. All in all *Early Hours* is a very considered piece of work with plenty of excellent songs and sophisticated musicianship. The SACD format lends itself to this sort of intimate yet multi-textured music making, so expect a decent sounding disc and you won't be disappointed! Vivante SACD of the month. **Market Square SACD 128 Dual Layer £15.95**

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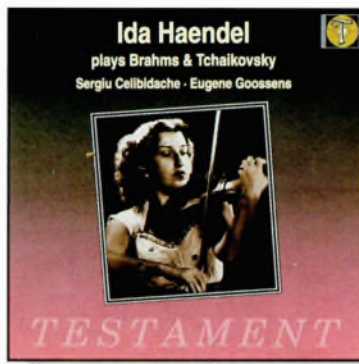
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**Bruch & Beethoven  
Violin Concertos**  
Rafael Kubelik, Philharmonia  
Orchestra  
Ida Haendel, Violin

Testament SBT 1083 

Both the Bruch *Concerto* recorded in October 1948 and the Beethoven fiddle that was also taped at the No.1 Studio Abbey Road in September 1949 are historical recordings which first appeared as HMV 78rpm releases. These sessions engineered by Douglas Larter and Robert Beckett respectively were supervised and produced by the great Walter Legge. Despite their age the transfers have delivered an acceptable sound quality although there is some minor distortion on the Beethoven tapes which couldn't be remedied by Paul Baily who digitally re-mastered these works for Testament. The musicianship is sumptuous - the Philharmonia was Britain's finest orchestra at that time - and in Rafael Kubelik they had a conductor whose warmth and quietly observed directions have subtly shaped and informed these performances. Throughout each *Concerto* the orchestral playing has authority and possesses an attractively rich ambience. Haendel's youthful freedom delivers two enchanting readings. Spacious and sweet for the Beethoven, where she tastefully and intelligently develops the poetic and serene nature of his vision, and in the Bruch her opulent tone and lively technique conveys the heartfelt melodies with its expressive phrasing and emotional intensity. Certainly this is a strong and very likeable interpretation of a work that stylistically lies midway between the *Violin Concertos* of Mendelssohn and Brahms.



**Brahms & Tchaikovsky  
Violin Concertos**  
Sergiu Celibidache, LSO  
Ida Haendel, Violin

Testament SBT 1038 

Ida Haendel's original mono recordings including 78s from the late 1940s and LPs in the 1950s are highly collectable and usually come with an appropriately lofty price tag. So I see Testament's transfer of these and the many other desirable performances in their catalogue as no less than a public service. Of course this CD release of those 1953 Abbey Road tapes is not of audiophile quality. But it does wonderfully capture the expansive playing of a mature soloist. One whose secure technique and emotional intensity explored these evergreen Brahms and Tchaikovsky *Concertos* without all that unnecessarily theatrical show boating which is much favoured by the current crop of young violinists in their more modern and to my mind empty and quite ephemeral accounts. Haendel, who for a violinist has unusually small hands, plays the 1696 Stradivarius that she still uses today. The tone when demanded of it is beguiling, muscular, opulent or astringent and this disc definitely reveals these qualities within a well-focused and beautifully defined presentation. The Brahms can also be considered a rarity because of its Rumanian born conductor, Sergiu Celibidache, who for over forty years refused to make any recordings - preferring instead the uniqueness of live performances

played out before an audience. His reading and the direction given here to the LSO communicate both the physicality and deeply spiritual nature of this conductor. It also imparts a very important lesson or two that is now often forgotten. If you instead ask less rather than more from your orchestral players then there is inevitably much greater space for the soloist. Haendel's violin metaphorical breathes deeply and is projected with remarkable clarity because of that particular insight. We hear very little of the conductor of the other *Violin Concerto*, Sir Eugene Goossens, who was perhaps better known for his interpretation of ballet and opera works. Yet he gives us a polished and secure reading that nicely balances the broad orchestral tapestry with that virtuoso thread work demanded of Haendel. Clearly his affinity and understanding of Tchaikovsky's ballet music has a bearing on the proceedings here as well and Goossens' willingness to allow a seasoned and exceptional campaigner like Ida Haendel to intuitively tease, coax, prise out and manage the complexities of this score is commendable. Along the way she infuses a brilliantly conceived *Concerto* with her own personality and it's always possible to detect that penchant for expansive phrasing, broad tempi and rhythmic integrity. This is of course the cement which glues a performance together.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)  
RP







Memphis Slim &amp; Willie Dixon

## The Blues Every Which Way

Speakers Corner/Verve V6-3007 

This was a surprise for me because I'm a big Blues fan and had absolutely no idea it even existed. I've got Dixon & Slim on several Folkways albums together and was delighted to hear and have this addition to the magic these two great entertainers offer up in a recording session.

Dixon, perhaps more famous for his activities with the double bass, is nonetheless a great Blues man and one of the most prolific blues writers in history. Some of his better-known songs are 'Hoochie Coochie Man', written for Muddy Waters, 'Evil' for Howlin' Wolf, and Little Walter's 'My Babe'. One of Dixon's great performances, sadly not on this record, is his 'Crazy For My Baby'. However, this album does contain, 'Shaky' which is an earlier version of his insanely wonderful 'Nervous'. Memphis Slim (Peter Chatman) is also a Blues man of the highest caliber. Not only can Slim play the piano like the devil - and boogie-woogie with anybody - he's also a great singer. These guys are outstanding and not to be missed!

This album was a superb early stereo release by Verve, and Speakers Corner has done us a great service by bringing it out. Wonderful music from start to finish and I guarantee your toes will be tapping all the way. Highly recommended!

RSF



Grey De Lisle

## Home Wrecker

Hummin' Bird Records  

Grey De Lisle has all the country singer credentials one could hope for. The girl possesses an observational charm reminiscent of a Nanci Griffith, tonal beauty similar to that of Alison Krause, the lung capacity of a young Dolly Parton and that little something else which is all her own. It's deeper and darker than you might expect. In her formative years there was a penchant for the music of gothic bands such as the Cure, and it's clear in songs with titles like 'Dead Cat', 'Home Wrecker' and 'Ferris Wheels And Freakshows' that Miss De Lisle is daring enough to step well beyond the white picket fence boundaries with their themes. At the same time her home life was governed by the volatility of a drug addicted and then born-again mother. Personally, I find it hard to imagine a worse combination, but although these experiences have inevitably left their marks Grey does not obsessively pick away at the scar tissue beneath them. Instead her songs are full of tense and contrasting images. 'Beautiful Mistake' and 'Twas Her Hunger' distils these bittersweet moments into a tasty lyrical essence where you can believe her when she says, "I would even give my life to overcome this fear of kissing you."

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RP



Ray Brown and Duke Ellington

## This One's For Blanton

Pablo Records/Acoustic Sounds 

The great Duke Ellington would pass away in five months, but he's still on top form here, with his good friend and great double bassist, Ray Brown. However, you'll have to do some homework to get the lowdown on Jimmy Blanton's contribution to liberating the double bass from its shackles as just an accompanying instrument. Brown's accomplished playing clearly underlines the instrument's versatility on this justly famous Pablo recording now re-released with glorious 45rpm sound and dynamics. Kevin Gray and Steve Hoffman's superb mastering continues in this second series of releases from Acoustech. Sides one and two contain hit after hit. 'Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me', 'Pitter Panther Patter' and 'Sophisticated Lady' are just three of the winners I really enjoyed. The sound of Duke's piano playing is still strong and vibrant and there's not much one can offer that hasn't already been said by others about the great Ray Brown. Sides three and four contains a 'Fragmented Suite for Piano and Bass' in four movements and is a naural treat not only in musical flavor but in sonic terms too. These records are treasures and offer some of the greatest sound you'll ever hear coming from your system... no matter how large or small. Highest Recommendation.

RSF



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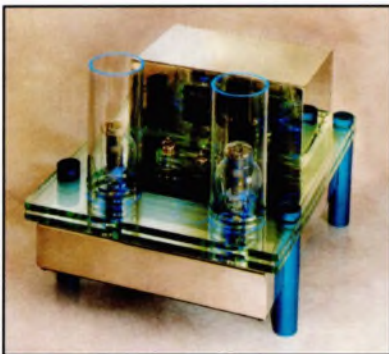
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# Mercury Living Presence, A Perspective: Part Two

by Richard S. Foster

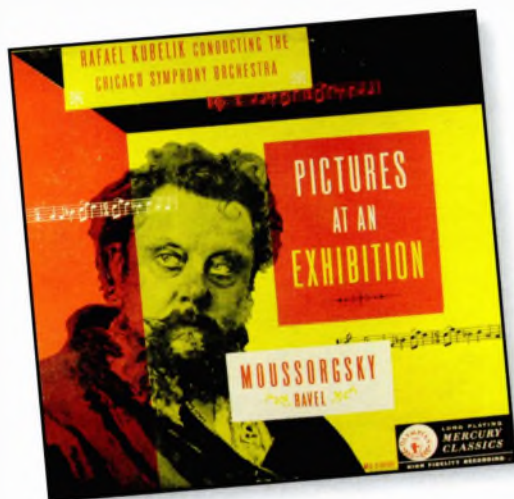
I really ought to offer a little background on the beginnings of the Mercury 'Living Presence' series. For this we have to go back in time to April 23, 1951 and the now legendary recording of Rafael Kubelik leading the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the Ravel orchestration of Moussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, released in the U. S. as MG 50000. After 53 years, this is still an amazing sounding record. I think the stamper numbers on my copy of this are approximately 23 . . .

I can only imagine what a record pressed from the first or second stampers must sound like!

The liner notes offer the following paragraph: "It is the disc contained herein which marks the official birth of Mercury's Living Presence recording technique. Indeed, it was the observation of The New York Times record critic, Howard Taubman, upon hearing this disc that "one feels oneself in the living presence of the orchestra" which led to Mercury's adoption of the phrase Living Presence as a capsule description for the single microphone recording technique used by its staff with major American symphony orchestras. . ."

At this point, chief engineer Robert Fine was using one Telefunken microphone placed approximately 25 feet directly above the conductor's podium. This of course continued until approximately 1954 when Fine began adding three additional microphones for his stereo recordings. Thus, like many other contemporary engineers, he was running two parallel yet dedicated recording chains.

I was about to put the record away when I noticed this small paragraph on the back of the jacket. "A cardinal principal of Mercury's "Living Presence" recording



technique is the use of an unusually wide dynamic range, which matches exactly the range from ppp to fff of the original musical performance; for at no time during the recording sessions do the Mercury engineer's tamper with the dynamic range of the music as recorded." Dynamic range is a major thorn in my side when it comes to modern recordings. Engineers and producers know what pianissimo means as well as fortissimo, but I think

they've all forgotten the former and replaced it with compression and triple fortissimos because I reckon that 99.9 percent of today's compact discs have almost no real dynamic range. They are virtually ALL LOUD - the only soft passages appear to be in between tracks. What's wrong with these people? They all know better. Hasn't anybody learned anything about recording techniques? Okay, thank you for that . . . I feel better now.

I've always been fascinated with the fact that while RCA and Columbia were going at each other, Mercury kind of just came through with a repertoire not duplicated (for the most part) by these giants. Fortunately, early on Mercury received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation that allowed them to record for posterity, a plethora of great American music. There are approximately fourteen or so releases that came out first in the MG 40000 series and were later re-issued and re-mastered for the MG 50000 series. These records contains some great music, most of which has never been recorded since. Mercury continued recording American composers in their stereo catalogue and there is some wonderful music available. Yes, America produced more than Aaron Copland, Charles Ives and George Gershwin and I'm glad Mercury has left us this legacy. ▶



My favourite releases include:

SR90136: John Alden Carpenter: *Adventures in a Perambulator* and Burrill Phillips: *Selections from McGuffey's Readers*. Howard Hanson conducting the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra. These recordings were made on October 28, 1956 at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York.

For whatever reason, there is always a higher level of tape hiss on the Rochester recordings than say the London Symphony

issues and even the records Mercury produced on the historic trip to Russia during the height of the 'cold war'. Also I do find the front-to-back perception a little narrow, but that's definitely the hall at the Eastman-Rochester School. I've seen it . . .

and it is not deep at all. It's hard to describe this music to someone who's unfamiliar with it, but Harold Lawrence, the great Mercury producer, did a fabulous job of giving us some insight into what to expect. About Carpenter's work he says, "Carpenter employed the same charming literary style in *Adventures in a Perambulator*, an American counterpart of such impressionistic excursions into the mind of a child as Debussy's *Children's Corner*. This six-movement work had explanations written by the composer as to the 'meaning or scenario' one should feel when listening and they are wonderfully charming: *En Voiture!(In Car)*, *The Policeman*, *The Hurdy-Gurdy*, *The Lake*, *Dogs and Dreams*."

Regarding Burrill's work, Lawrence tells us, "During the second half of the last century (the 1800s), children not too long out of their perambulators learned more about the 'large world' from one of the most famous series of books in American education, McGuffey's six *Eclectic Readers*, published between 1836 and 1857. For nearly two generations these volumes were, in most cases, the principal textbooks in the elementary schools of some thirty-seven states. Estimated sales were 122 million copies. . . ." The three 'selections' we're given

on side two of this record are, *The One Horse Shay*, *John Alden and Priscilla* and *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*. This is a truly grand record containing great sound, wonderful playing and definitely evokes the moods intended by the composer. I do hope this album gets re-issued but if not, try and find one in either the original form, Mercury Golden Import series, or for that matter on the original CD issues.

Strongest Recommendation.

SR90206: Walter Piston: *The Incredible Flutist* (Suite from the Ballet); Douglas Moore: *Pageant of P.T. Barnum* (Suite for Orchestra). Howard Hanson conducting the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra.

Another pre-1960 recording session offers us some wonderful music from these two fascinating American composers. While Piston is acknowledged as one of the modern masters of counterpoint, his style for the music for this ballet is clearly romantic in nature with a hint

of modernism. The ballet, in a nutshell, deals with a flutist (flautist), the most charming of flutists who, through his playing charms snakes, the snake dancer the merchant's daughter and on and on. The musicians even get into the act with some vocal cat calling which adds to the delight of this charming piece. It's a wonderful score and

definitely another of my favorite

Mercury recordings.

Douglas Moore's score for *The Pageant of P.T. Barnum* is clearly a derivation of American folklore and is another aural delight. Certainly you don't have to be an American to know who P.T. Barnum was and this five-movement work tells the tale of various episodes in Barnum's career. Here is another sonic and musical masterpiece from Mercury. Highest recommendation!

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention one of the greatest of the Fennell recordings:

SR90197: *British Band Classics, vol. 2*: Gordon Jacob: *Suite: William Byrd*; Gustav Holst: *Hammersmith*:

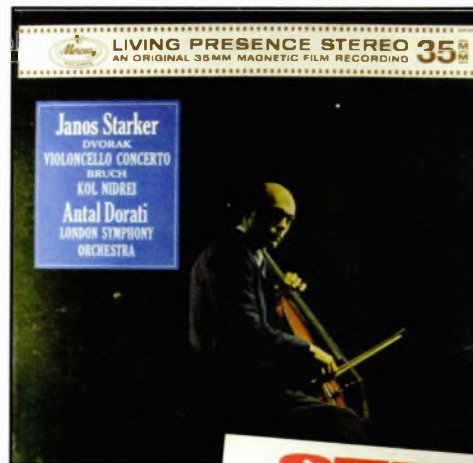


► *Prelude and Scherzo*; William Walton: *Crown Imperial March*. Frederick Fennell conducting the Eastman Wind Ensemble.

This justly famous recording really needs no introduction by me. It's been on Harry Pearson's TAS 'Super Disc List' forever. It certainly belongs there. Not only do I find this record outstanding sonically, and I mean outstanding with a capital "O", the performances are pretty much reference quality. I'm a big fan of English music and love the conducting of Sirs Barbirolli, Boult and Groves. Respectfully, in my opinion, this record proves that Fennell, at the time of this recording, owned this material. You'll just never get better performances or find better sound quality than a first pressing of this record. (A first pressing would be manufactured by RCA in Indianapolis. In the deadwax you'd find the following information: "I" (for Indianapolis) with A1/B1 mothers FR1/FR1 stampers and have George Piros's favourite cutter marking: P-17). There is a story that has circulated in North America and although I have no proof it's true, it makes for a wonderful anecdote. Apparently producer Wilma Cozart-Fine would be going over the scores with George Piros (the great Mercury stereo cutting engineer) while he was listening to the tape and would 'advise him' when there was going to be a dynamic peak coming up and he supposedly cut the records accordingly. True or not, this record is NOT to be missed... even if you have to fly to America to buy it! Highest recommendation!

SR90303: Dvorák: *Violoncello Concerto*; Bruch: *Kol Nidrei*. Janos Starker, violoncellist. Antal Dorati conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. Recorded July 1, 1961 at Watford Town Hall on 35MM Magnetic Film.

This is a typical Mercury masterpiece using a 3-track Ampex and three Telefunken 201 microphones. The engineer was the great C. Robert Fine and Wilma Cozart was the Recording Director. Another George Piros (P-17)



cutting job, this time the first pressings have RFR-2/RFR-1 in the deadwax. (The first R refers to Mercury's own cutting facilities in Richmond, Virginia). Cover photo by Mary Morris Lawrence. You name it...I've heard it. From Feuermann and the Philadelphia through Piatigorsky, Rostropovich, Fournier, Jacqueline Du Pre and probably many others I'm forgetting, but this to me is THE performance. I have to admit it was one of the first performances I'd ever heard and I know that plays a role in my thinking. Don't get me wrong. I like very much the Rostropovich/Karajan affair on Deutsche Grammophon

(139 044) and Fournier's collaboration with Szell also on DGG as SLPM 138 755. I'm even partial to Starker's earlier effort on EMI Columbia SAX 2263 with Walter Susskind and the Philharmonia... But this Mercury performance is RIVETING. Yes, I'm fully aware the 'cello maybe a tad too large, but the playing, not only Starker's playing, but that of the LSO is just wonderful. This recording is another Mercury that contains every quality one could ask for: stunning performance, mesmerizing, stunning sound. I guess I've said enough. Get a copy, whatever you do!

SR90300:

Prokofiev: *Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major, Opus 26*;  
Rachmaninoff: *Piano Concerto No. 1 in F sharp minor, Opus 1*.  
Byron Janis, Piano.  
Kyрил Kondrashin conducting the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra.

As indicated on the cover, this was one of a handful of "First recording ever made in Russia by

American Technical and Musical Staff and Equipment." Recorded on location in Moscow, June 1962. These records were recorded at the Bolshoi Hall of the Tchaikovsky Conservatory. This is one of four recordings made by Mercury on their famous trip to Moscow at the height of the cold war. Four years of negotiations and we get four wonderful records: The Prokofiev/Rachmaninoff above; *Encore Byron Janis*,



▶ SR90305; Shostakovich *Quartets* with the Borodin String Quartet, SR 90309; *Balalaika Favorites*, SR90310.

The Janis/Kondrashin collaboration is another stunning example of the art of Mercury. Working with all the recording equipment (nearly four tons) in a truck situated outside the Conservatory, we're given a very special snapshot in time. Although I readily admit to not being the number one fan of Rachmaninoff's *First Piano Concerto*, for me the jewel in the crown here is definitely the Prokofiev *3rd*. It's a difficult work and Janis offers a very exciting and inspirational performance, definitely a recording worth seeking out and hopefully on the list for Speakers Corner to release. It seems the Russians had rights to approve everything Mercury did regarding artwork, liner notes and any photographs used in these productions. Original releases of SR90300 contain three photographs on the back of the jacket. From left to right: 'Janis chats with Mme. Lina Prokofiev after Moscow concert; Kondrashin and Janis at the end of a recording session; Emil Gilels, Vladimir Ashkenazy congratulate Janis.' Apparently the Russians were displeased with the use of Mme. Prokofiev's picture on the rear of the jacket and this was removed for later issues. Getting back to this record... another not-to-be missed performance offering outstanding sound quality. Highest recommendation!

SR90518: *A Flamenco Wedding Party*, The Romeros: Celedonio, Pepe, Celin, Angel -guitars; Maria Victoria, singer.

There are about eight or nine Romeros recordings on Mercury, and each one is better than the previous release. This particular record was unknown to most Mercury collectors until the very early 1990's. For whatever reason it didn't get wide circulation and was never included in any of the "audiophile" lists. I remember fingering through a bin on one knee in a store in Toronto (terrible city for records... but that's another story) and I saw the word Flamenco,

but kept on going because what else I saw on this record took a few seconds to sink in. These were the days for me that the world was made up of RCA, Mercury, EMI and Decca. No one else made records (if this was an e-mail, there would be a big smiley here). So after about twenty seconds I go back and pull this record out. "This can't be right," I remember saying to myself.

The jacket says Mercury with an SR90518 number, and it's a U. S. pressing (the 'last' number known is 90528, but there are some numbers that weren't released). I pulled the record from the jacket, slid it gently out from its inner sleeve, and sure enough, although a late label (as it should be) the words Living Presence High Fidelity Stereo and Margin Control, are all there to greet me. I almost fell on the floor. I've since come across three copies of this record. They all have a cut out hole punched through the jacket and all have the same Philip's stamper numbers M1/M2 engraved in the deadwax - of course the SR90518 was also in the deadwax area. No lathe number as we had come to expect from other Living Presence productions, a couple of initials

on each side 'MR' and that's it.

Let's get to the record. It's a barn burner. The title is absolutely what you are going to get. It's as if you've been given the opportunity to go to a Flamenco wedding, get seated right in the middle of the party, and then you get so caught up with the playing, the singing and the dancing! You're there! This is a delightful recording and unfortunately too elusive for many collectors. The Romeros made numerous recordings for Philips and are a justly famous group. I'm glad to own their works on Mercury and I wish you great luck in finding this wonderful record. Highest recommendation! Olé!!





# VALHALLA

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Roy Gregory Hi Fi + Issue 9

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