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Design
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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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ISSN 1465 5950

There are times when you just have to say "Shucks" and say goodbye to common sense. Of course, as a reviewer, it's a painless exercise: get it badly wrong in terms of equipment matching and the only thing that suffers is your dignity. Spend your hard earned, on the other hand, and you're going to take a bath: Not that that stops several serial offenders of my acquaintance. As soon as one of them (you know who you are Mike) declares the end of his odyssey, the arrival of his dream product, the one that satisfies his every wish – you just know that the poor product's days are numbered. Sure enough, next month you'll see it in the For sale columns, often before many dealers have received their demonstration unit! Another buys but never sells: Hi-fi shop, he could open a museum.

While such altruistic self sacrifice is undoubtedly good for business and I'm sure it's much appreciated by the dealers who benefit, it's hardly the rule. Most people will carry the burden of any mistakes rather more personally, which makes the lemming like reliance on reviews all the harder to understand. Why do we tend to print positive reviews? Because we review relatively few products and we concentrate on the ones we like and that interest us. Why are our reviews generally so equivocal? Because it's up to you to make purchasing decisions, rather than us telling you what to do. Besides, we don't assume that you read a review purely with a view to purchase. And the bad experiences? Well, they tend not to see the light of day – after all, who wants to publicize their mistakes, and why blame the product for your own stupidity. I'd rather spend the time telling people what does work, rather than labouring the subject of what doesn't.



"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

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

Stereophile, December 2003, Michael Fremer

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

Audio, Germany, September 2003

"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 FPB 700cx

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Hi Fi News, June 2003, Martin Colloms

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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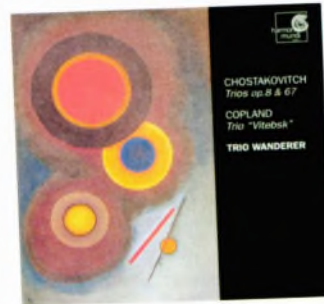
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Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

Given the Boys Toys enthusiast-hobbyist link between hi-fi and photography, it's perhaps surprising that old pieces of hi-fi equipment seem not to be collectible in the way that old cameras are. I know any number of people (well, a few) who collect sub-miniature cameras, but have never heard of anyone collecting mini hi-fi systems. It just doesn't seem to happen...

Actually, I'm happy to be corrected on this. So if you know someone (or are someone) who collects mini hi-fi systems, or grotty 1960s semi-automatic idler-driven turntables, write in and put me straight. Of course there are serious collectors among the hi-fi fraternity. But it's music we collect, not equipment. Yet why not collect hi-fi? Why not have a '60s system, a '70s system, and so on.

I have quite a few cameras, some going back to the 1930s. Results vary; some are easier to use than others. None produce pictures as clean and accurate as a good modern digital camera. Nor are older cameras as quick and easy to operate. But that's missing the point; half the fun with old cameras is wrestling with the thing - learning to overcoming its foibles and idiosyncrasies.

When you get a set of good sharp well-exposed pictures from such a camera, there's a sense of achievement; it's like you battled with the darn thing and won. And the pictures taken with vintage cameras have a certain period charm. When I use my 1930s Rolleiflex, I can imagine I'm Robert Doisneau walking the streets of Paris fishing for pictures...

Now take hi-fi. Suppose you've got a really expensive top-class turntable; would you really choose not to use it some nights in order to listen to LPs on a Garrard SP-25 or a Japanese direct-drive from the 1970s? I can't see why you'd want to do it - except perhaps to remind yourself how bad some of those old turntable were. Having been reminded, you'd go back to your proper turntable pronto.

The other problem with vintage hi-fi is size; most of it's big - big and heavy. It takes up space, and can't easily be held and stroked on a cold winter's night sat around the fire. It looks better at a distance. Not so a small camera; it can be inspected, cleaned, focussed, and fired as you sit in a chair listening to music. It's designed to fit the hand - to be touched and operated.

Although not a collector of hi-fi as such, I have over the years aquired a few choice pieces. In nearly all cases the

equipment was in its time expensive and aspirational. For example, down in my basement lurks a Radford transistor pre-power combination dating from the early '70. It doesn't work, and is apparently beyond any sort of repair. Why keep it, you ask? Well, when I was one-and-twenty I coveted one, having been told by London dealers Studio 99 it was veritabily the dog's whatsits. It cost even more than a Quad, so it had to be cool. Alas, it was way, way out of my price range, costing well in excess of £200. So, when the chance came to acquire one - even one that wasn't working - I could not resist the temptation.

My main vintage hi-fi passion is old reel-to-reel tape recorders. Some are real industrial antiques: solid, heavy, and beautifully engineered. I've got a mint Ferrograph series 7 and a Revox G-36. They're lovely; absolute works of art - pinnacles of mechanical and electronic precision. As a boy of about 13, tape recorders fascinated me; I lusted after a Brenell series 5 or a Ferrograph series 5 or 6. Now I've seen old semi-pro tape recorders like these at boot fairs and street markets, but have never bought. Why? Too big - too heavy - I'd not be able to carry the thing home without my arms falling off! Also, I've nowhere to put the item, except in my basement. There's no way I could keep it on display in the living room - no space - the wife'd kill me.

Staff who work in specialist secondhand camera shops tell me that most of their customers are men in late middle age buying secondhand the cameras they couldn't afford in their youth. I feel sure it's true; I'm doing it myself. So perhaps there's an equivalent group of men in their late '40s or early '50s, seeking out the vintage hi-fi they lusted after in their teens but could not afford. It wouldn't have to be real exotica either. For example, I always secretly wanted to be a Quad man. For me, Quad was very much the Establishment of British hi-fi: solid, reliable, conservative. A sort of Greenwich Meantime of Audio. Although there were better sounding amplifiers than the Quad 33/303, I would still have loved to have owned one.

There was something very reassuring about Quad's The Closest Approach to the Original Sound slogan. I didn't believe it was true, but part of me nonetheless felt that, by investing in Quad electronics, I'd have an amplifier than neither added nor subtracted from the original source. I loved the whacky colour scheme too - a light khaki brown case with cream and

▶ orange buttons! Scary.

On a practical note, the trouble with a lot of equipment from the 60s/70s period is its unreliability in middle age. Many of the early transistor amplifiers simply haven't lasted the course. Nor are they as easy to service as the hard-wired valve amplifiers of a previous generation. Pots become noisy and worn; switches go intermittent; printed circuit tracks start to corrode and crack. Caps dry out. Some years back I swapped a gorgeous vintage Luxman integrated amplifier for a camera. Before it went, I was able to try the amp and verify that it worked. It sounded alright; a bit soft and lacking

in brilliance, but okay - not bad. Yet I doubted it truly sounded as it would've done in it's early '70s prime; the various switches were noisy and making poor contact which must've affected sound quality.

Nonetheless, it was still a handsome beast - one of the last Japanese amplifiers built to battleship standards, and superbly finished. It undoubtedly qualifies for the term 'collectable'. But had I tried to sell it via the classified ad section in (say) *Loot* or *Hi-Fi World* (or on e-bay) I wonder if there'd have been any takers. How many people today would know what a Luxman 507X is/was? ▶+

Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

How much of high-end is about product, and how much is attitude? It's a difficult question with no definitive answers. For many, the question is immaterial too; if you've already got a high-end hi-fi system, you've probably got the whole high-end attitude as a part of the package.

What do I mean by 'high-end attitude'? Put simply, thinking in a high-end manner entails considering every product in its own right and giving each the sort of attention it deserves. It also involves selecting the best possible products in each category, but more importantly, combining them for the best possible sound. Above all, though, it's about listening, always listening.

High-end audio products are always (well, almost always) selected on the basis of listening and are always (well, almost always) handled with care. This is to be expected; unless you are seriously minted, you treat a Brioni jacket with greater respect than one with a Tesco label. But, what happens if you cannot afford Brioni quality? Is there any hope for the high-ender without the bank balance?

No matter how cheap, there is no point where high-end attitudes do not benefit a system. Take the little Denon D-M31 micro system for example; from a high-end audio standing, this thing barely registers. However, take those little speakers and stick them on decent quality stands, put the main unit on a top-class support and change the

giveaway mains and speaker cables (there are no interconnects - it's an integrated system) and the sound improves significantly. It's a moot point as to whether spending £1,000 on accessories to transform a £300 system is a good idea, because only hi-fi reviewers and those trying to sell their accessories would countenance such a concept, but the fact remains there is potential in each component.

Accessories aside, where does high-end really start? Naturally, high-end without high-end prices requires sacrifice, and the sacrifices are either in finish or sound. Thick front panels, wonderful arty finishes and low costs mean something else has to suffer. So, simple boxes and plain finishes attract the low/high-ender.

Of course, there is always the second-hand market, or the discounted or end of line products. All of these knock a substantial amount off the cost of owning high-end electronics, but often require a reasonable high-end budget in their own right. Shaving 20% from the cost of a £5,000 product is a substantial saving, but it still remains expensive.

I firmly believe that simply owning high-end hi-fi components is no guarantee of high-quality sound, but such systems - intelligently constructed - are unlikely to deliver a sound that is anything less than impressive. Especially to the neophyte listener; like a wine buff, ▶

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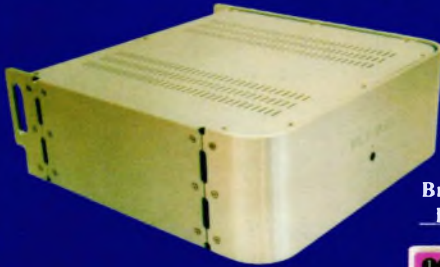
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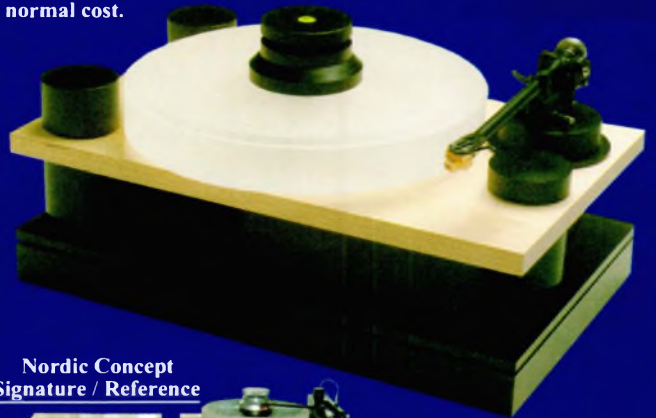
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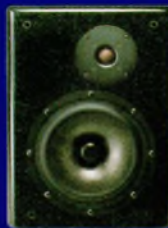
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Get it right!

▶ our palettes are jaded from high-end systems and as a consequence become extremely critical of sonic performance. Someone who has never heard decent hi-fi will be absolutely blown away by a good high-end system, even if those of us more used to such kit will be less impressed. Strangely, trying to achieve at least some of the performance of the high-end system for just a fraction of the starting price sweeps out the jaded cobwebs and also tells us much about what is good and bad about a hi-fi system. Often, the budget system will have a sense of directness and insight that a bigger system, for all its extra detail and holographic soundstaging, will miss.

Sometimes it's worth taking a step back and starting the whole hi-fi process from scratch. I've been putting this off for ages. Revolution is a difficult process, no matter how trivial. It is filled with anguish and angst, and there's all that stamping out intellectuals wearing glasses to worry about. Nevertheless, there is time when revolution is a necessary thing.

Every so often, I believe, a high-ender should rid themselves of the objects of their desire; the high-end system. OK maybe 'rid themselves' is too harsh a statement, but I still maintain that every few years, we should all start over.

Many of us have a second system that costs peanuts compared to the main one, but this rarely sticks to high-end ideals. Speakers are placed on top of wardrobes, freebie cables are used, equipment supports come from MFI and the products are often chosen for price and size first, sound second... exactly the sort of things high-enders complain about. So that second system doesn't count.

Sorry.

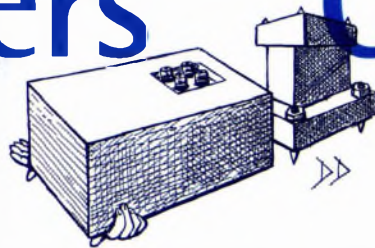
Neither do systems you might have donated to friends and family. These systems are often too heavily biased in one direction or another, with an expensive amplifier of a dozen years ago mixed with a cheap CD player and a pair of often 'unusual' loudspeakers of indeterminate origin (hopefully not a geezer in a white van selling so-called studio speakers).

So, what should you do? Naturally, throwing out your existing high-end system for experimental reasons is an expensive option, and not something I would recommend. Also, shifting all the high-end gear back into the boxes is not a good idea; aside from the risk of damaging something, clearing stuff away will leave you open to all kinds of domestic management issues when you try to bring the kit back in.

Maybe it's time to hit the shops again, but this time not necessarily for you. Someone you know will want to buy a hi-fi system over the next year or so, and it is beholden on you to instil high-end values on this person. But even this is a tough call; it's very difficult not to enforce your own taste upon that of the neophyte. Similarly, advisor is a great position, grey eminence is a questionable position and interfering busy-body is the sort of position no-one should strive for.

But perhaps this is the job of the reviewer. Over the coming columns, I plan to find out just where the high-end starts, by gradually seeing how cheap you can get, without losing high-end cred... at least sonically. Is there another Pioneer A-400 or NAD 3020 secretly hidden in the price lists? We shall see... ▶+

Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

In loudspeakerland, it's easy to assume that bigger means better. Certainly bigger tends to mean more expensive, so both manufacturers and dealers have some vested interest in encouraging an assumption that really doesn't stand up to close scrutiny. Although size can offer some advantages, there are potential disadvantages too, so the equation is never straightforward.

For example, in the last couple of years I've tried two of Focal-JMLab's Utopia Be models: the £45,000/pair Grande Utopia Be; and the £11,000/pair Alto Utopia Be. And guess what? It was the Alto that did the business. Give me a pair of Grandes and I'd either have to move house or flog them on e-bay. On the other hand a pair of Altos would be most acceptable. I call it the Goldilocks ▶

▶ factor, for obvious reasons, and it's all to do with matching the speakers to the room, which is something the hi-fi world would do well to take a little more seriously.

I'd heard the GU Bes at the factory, where they seemed to work very nicely. But the listening room down in St Etienne measures a very capacious 18 x 9 x 29.5 ft, roughly twice the size of my own none-too-tiny 14 x 8.5 x 18ft room. The die had been well and truly cast by the time these quarter-ton monsters had been menhanded (it needed four) into my listening room, so it was all the more disappointing that the speaker simply didn't work

been the development (by brands such as TACT, Meridian and B&O, to name the first three that spring to mind) of digital room equalisation systems. These are intended to pre-EQ the signal before it gets to the power amps, so that the speaker ends up delivering even and smooth bass into any room. As far as I'm concerned, the jury's still out on their value and effectiveness, partly because of the need to convert everything into the digital domain prior to applying the filtering, and partly because I've only tried the B&O, as fitted to the Beolab 5 loudspeaker, thus far.



too well under my conditions – there was far too much low and mid bass, and a big suckout in the upper bass. Paradoxically, the Alto Utopia Be's bottom end turned out unusually even and very well extended.

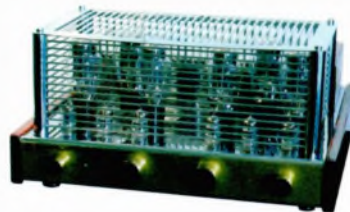
One can't blame the GU Be for this situation. Indeed one might have expected its four widely spread bass sources (15-inch and 11-inch drivers, each port-loaded) to give a smoother result than the solitary port-loaded 11-incher used by the Alto. The fact that it didn't work out that way merely illustrates how perversely complex the interaction of the various bass sources with the listening room is. It would be lovely to be able to predict exactly how any given speaker would work in any given room, but it would seem that the situation is still fundamentally too complex to do this with any reliability.

One of hi-fi's most recent and embryonic trends has

B&O's cleverly automated implementation is at least brilliantly simple to operate, but I have to add that under my measurement regime at least the results were only partly successful. The B5s did give a pretty decent bass balance, to be sure, but various room interaction modes were still clearly visible, and I've encountered a number of regular uncompensated designs (including the Alto Utopia Be) *that delivered a smoother and more even bass balance* [under my conditions].

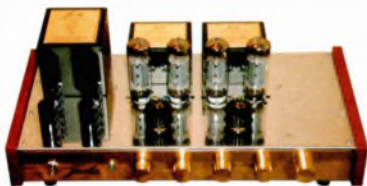
It's still too early to say what sort of role digital EQ techniques might have in the future. But even if they do work, large sections of the audiophile community will reject the idea of digital processing outright, so it surely makes much more sense to try and get a good room match in the first place. I don't have any definitive answers, but have suspected for some time that the

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Amplifon WL25 (left): 28W/channel using 6P3, £795
 Amplifon WT40 (centre): 40W/channel using 6C33, £1995
 Amplifon WT30 II (right): 31W/channel using 6H13, £1395

Amplifon is proving to be a huge success both with reviewers and customers alike - we are delighted! Now made in the EC (a warm welcome to our Polish neighbours is in order), this range of three models, all superbly built, all featuring automatic biasing, and all with large, wide bandwidth toroidal output transformers suitable for 4 or 8 Ohms, offer superb value for money. Sound quality is reminiscent of the best classic designs of the past, but modern circuit techniques and transformers give an authority of presentation and power reserve often lacking in older designs. Truly modern classics!



The Jadis Orchestra Reference (left) from France, at £1699. Output of 40W/ch using KT90s, and even featuring that long missed attribute, tone controls - my, takes me back!

The Consonance M100S (right), £1595, is proving to be a reviewer's favourite, offering a delicacy which is a speciality of the 300B output valve, giving here 25W/channel.



For people who prefer the authentic Star Trek look, the Shanling STP80 (left) fits the bill perfectly! With superb build quality, remote control, digital level indicator, 35W/ch output, all for a mere £1295. Oh, it sounds good too, by the way.

The Audiovalve Assistent 20 (yes, it is spelled like that) is a little gem from Germany, with a very musical performance - sweet as a nut, we say, 30W/ch output, in a neat chassis, for £1600.



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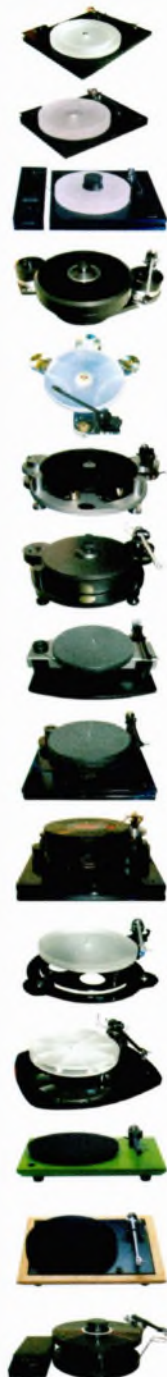


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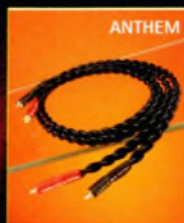
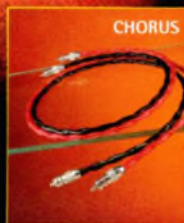


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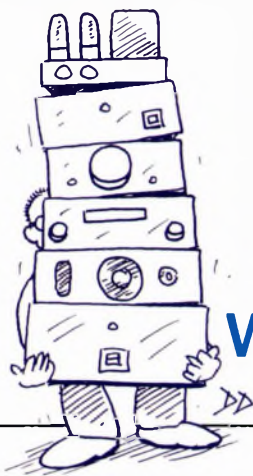


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▶ largest models in many ranges are probably better suited to larger more bass-absorbent American rooms than smaller brick-built British ones. I'm sure that's true for the Grande Utopia Be, and suspect it also applies to B&W's Nautilus 800 and 801 models. Tannoy's Yorkminster and Sonus Faber's Stadivari can also go on the list.

I'm talking generalisations here of course. Many potential UK customers for such large and costly

loudspeakers will have accommodation that's spacious enough to do them justice. But large multi-driver speakers are found at the top of most ranges of speakers, at all price points, yet few if any manufacturers discuss room-matching issues. And ultimately it's the manufacturers who ought to be taking the initiative here, as they should have most experience of how their particular models perform in a variety of different room sizes and types. ▶+



Big Boys Toys... Or, how to succeed at sub-woofing without really trying...

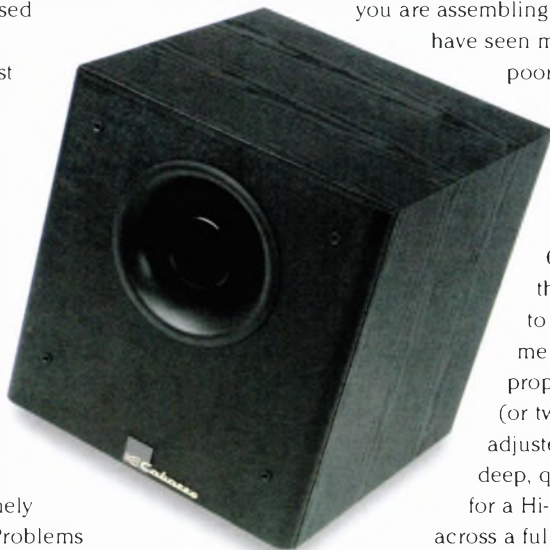
by Scot Markwell

Last month, during the Stereophile Show in New York City, I had a lovely breakfast conversation with our beloved and esteemed Editor wherein, during a discussion of future topics for my column, he disclosed a desire amongst readers for more down-to-earth information on system set-up and optimization. A hi-fi primer, if you will. They have just purchased some new equipment and they are perhaps a little confused and intimidated with it all. Where do the bits go and what are the best ways of hooking them all together so that they operate together with some sense of continuity and synergy? In short, it is apparent that enough of our readership is troubled by stumbling blocks in basic areas of system assembly and set up that Mr. Gregory felt that it might be a good idea for me to put together a short series on set-up issues.

Great stuff, I thought. Now's my chance to address some of the questions and problems that routinely turn up when working with Hi-Fi. Problems

that, if one is unsure how to proceed or even how to consider the situation, can quickly turn an otherwise fine and musical system into a pile of goods that simply does not deliver the music correctly. In some instances, such things may be the result of bad advice from well-meaning people. Friends who like music but listen to computers or boom boxes are, I submit, not the ones to look to when you are assembling your first system. Likewise, I

have seen many a dealer set up a system so poorly in a customer's home that I have had to, on occasion, totally rearrange things and tune the system from scratch so that the customer could hear what they really had. Of course, where to start is the key, so I suppose I will return to a mainstay that has been with me for over 30 years, and that is proper integration of a sub-woofer (or two) into an existing, well-adjusted system. I fully believe that deep, quality bass response is essential for a Hi-Fi to really sound convincing across a full spectrum of music. Some ▶





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▶ do not like the experience of deep bass, but I find them to be in a minority. And usually they do not know what real music sounds like anyhow. For the purposes of this discussion, I am going to assume that your system is at a point where you are pretty happy with things. You can play a wide variety of music and the sonic results are pretty even across the board. There is nothing in your system that is actively pissing you off: no horrible resonances, no tizzy upper midband, no plastic coloration on female vocals. The point I am trying to make is that you do not want to try and integrate a sub-woofer into a system that already has problems. This should be something of a last step on the road to true full-range response, not something used as a band-aid to give effects that are meant to hide deficiencies elsewhere. We will leave that to Home Cinema.

So. You have purchased your sub-woofer and you are wondering what to do with it. To make this as direct and straight-forward as possible, let us assume for this discussion that you have managed this addition on your own; you searched out a likely piece on E-bay or the like, you paid, and now you have taken delivery of what seems to be a rather large and bulky box. Typically these days it will have an amplifier built into it that will be lurking on the chassis somewhere, probably on the underside or in the back. You have no sympathetic dealer looking over your shoulder or perhaps doing the job for you. Might as well start here.

The first thing that you are going to want to do is to determine, in your system, how best to get a signal to the sub. On most modern powered subs, there are typically two ways to do this: you can either use an additional set of RCA interconnects to connect to the line-level inputs of the sub's amplifier, or, in most instances, you can hook up a set of parallel-feed speaker cables to the speaker-level input. Both of these sets of inputs will be grouped together and well labeled. I am assuming here that you are using a sub that has connections for a stereo input; most times in a single-driver system this input is either summed for output or the woofer may have two voice coils, which in the end amounts to pretty much the same thing. You can use two separate subs for more convincing stereo bass, but that opens up a whole 'nother can of worms so we will concentrate today just on the one.

Now, of the two connection methods, I have found that I prefer the line level way most of the time, as in my setup I

take the line outs from my pre-amp and run them to another line-stage, itself remote-controlled for level and muting. This means that any time I want to adjust the level of the sub or simply mute it for any reason I can do so easily from the chair. By no means is this a necessary part of the setup and in many instances it may not even be preferable, as it does involve another box, cables, and interconnects, which many folks will be loathe to splurge

on. For myself, I just happened to have one around that worked so years ago I rigged my system up so that

I could be the ultimate couch potato. If you do not want this complexity than it is

perfectly fine to use a speaker level input; many folks like it

better this way because

the sub is fed from the



same amp that feeds the speakers.

Manufacturers argue that the timbre and dynamic structure of the main amp is carried over to the sub, thus making for easier integration with the main speakers. The trade off is against the greater transparency afforded by the line-level feed. Which option is ultimately the best will depend a lot on the nature and overall transparency of your system.

OK, then. You have a powered sub. It is in your room and installed at least somewhere in the vicinity of the back of the speakers, and it is hooked up to the mains and has a set of inputs attached from either your pre-amp or your amp. This is important: DO NOT make a mistake and hook your subwoofer feeds to a set of tape outputs. This I did once upon a time with results that were, shall we say, quite loud. Impressive bass, as I recall, but because the tape outs on ▶

▶ pre-amps deliver a fixed-level signal, that bass was LOUD and never seemed to vary, even as I turned the volume knob furiously. Quite a shock, I have to tell you, and not a little embarrassing in front of the wife and several observers. A good laugh was had by all including me - just as soon as I pulled the plug and started over.

Once the connection bits are sorted, you need to think on just exactly where to put the darn thing. This step has caused so much furore over the years that a bit of focus and calm is called for here. Many of you may have heard that the only place for a sub is right back smack in the corner, as close to the walls and as out-of-the-way as possible. This does work in some instances, but more often the result achieved with this placement is a thick, slow, overly-resonant character to the low and mid-bass that tends to obscure a lot of detail and makes the lower registers of the system ill-defined and ponderous. In the world of sub-woofing, placement is the money shot. You can have all manner of hardware, giant drivers, heavy-duty Class-G switching amplifiers, the lot. But if you place the driver box injudiciously, you will be faced with a quagmire instead of the deep and clean foundation you were looking for.

The secret, I have found, to getting the placement issue just right is, surprise, experimentation. You may want to try that corner, just to see if it might work, but I predict that you will find the effect not entirely what you were after. I find that in a given setup, if you can manage to keep the sub essentially on the same plane as the main speakers, between and perhaps slightly behind them, you stand a really good chance on not mucking up the mid-band too much. Another great location for your subwoofer is pretty much anywhere to the (either) side and rear of the main speakers, so long as it is not fully crammed in to a corner. You see, because the lowest frequencies thrive on boundary reinforcement, if you put a powerful driver fully in a corner, it is going to tend to play loud and boomy. That's because the output is doubled by each boundary and a corner location delivers three of them (the two walls and the floor) so that's EIGHT times the natural mechanical output of the driver and box. This is not all a bad thing; it just needs to be managed correctly to obtain the smoothest and most extended performance. So



find a piece of music with deep, repetitive bass and put it on repeat. Then simply inch the sub down the wall, listening as you go. Don't worry about integration, just look for an even response. Once you're in the region you can move by smaller increments and listen from the normal position (two people is a real help here). This brings us to the fine tuning stage.

I can see the next question coming: How can I readily ascertain what is smooth and what is lumpy and what is good and what is bad? It all makes a bloody big thump and isn't that the idea? Well, not quite. To be really right, a good sub installation will never overtly show itself. Kind of like the art of not being seen. You should be able to sit down and listen to a cut of familiar music and not be aware that there is an added presence banging away in the background. The

idea is that your sub-woofer remain as invisible (sonically) as possible till its contribution is needed. To that end, once you are reasonably satisfied that you have found a spot that you feel is not too boxed into a corner, you need to start the thing making some noise so that you hear what is what. The way that I generally start is to play test tones off a CD from 20 Hz-250 Hz through the whole system, which is about as high a frequency as you would ever want to hear anything coming from a sub (really lower, but the thing you are checking for above 100 Hz is to make sure that there is

little or no overlap or colouration past about 100 Hz; otherwise you will be constantly aware of its operation, and that is not acceptable). So, the idea here is to see if you can adjust the sub (by moving it around here and there bit by bit) so that you can hear these tones clearly and distinctly, in an even and smoother manner. Ideally, you should be able to hear each change in frequency as a distinct entity. If they all sound alike or are mushy or boomy, you need to keep futzing with the location. At some point I pretty much guarantee you that you will find a spot that sounds clearer and cleaner than the others. That is where you want to be.

Then there is the issue of relative phase with the main speakers. This is the step that gives many folks pause, as they do not think that they will be able to hear the difference. But that is rubbish. If a sub is out-of-phase with the main speakers, you can easily hear it as a suck out at some ▶



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► frequencies and a booming, vague, and sloppy response at others. Here is the key: play just those tones between 40-150 Hz. If things are wrong, you will not get a smooth transition through the frequencies at the listening position and you will notice that you have a big boom at one or two frequencies, generally in the 60-80 Hz region. If things are right, you will get a relatively smoother and more even response that allows you to easily hear the differences between the low frequencies, and not just a dull thud coming from the back of the room. The next step, if you have access to a Real Time Analyser, like the great (and cheap) portable units made by Goldline or others, is to play full range pink noise through the system at a healthy level. As you are in the listening chair, you want to see if the RTA shows you what should be at least a reasonably smooth response from near-subsonics up through a couple hundred Hz. Play with phase here, as well. Generally manufacturers will provide you with a 2-position switch that allows you go back and forth between “in phase” and “180 degrees out-of-phase”. Flip this back and forth and one position will yield both better quality and more powerful, punchy bass. There are also a number of constantly-adjustable phase switches on the market, and they can be a little confusing. Generally speaking, the best thing to do with them is to find the best position at either end of the dial, and then GENTLY rotate it back a bit to where the bass quality is best at the listening position.

Now you are at the point that you should start to play proper music. Assuming you have taken care to do the basic installation as well as you could, you should at this point be pleasantly surprised to hear a deep, weighty, foundation to your favourite discs. I find that using a really really good classical selection that has bass drum, bass fiddles, and/or an organ is generally the best for seeing about overall coherence and integration of the sub with the main speakers. One of my favorites is the EMI LP set from Sir Charles Groves and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra (SLS 998). The combination of organ, drum, and full orchestra makes for quite a ride, and gives you all manner of bumps, footfalls, huge, swelling organ crescendos and bass drum whacks to listen to. This should be a thrilling experience. Play with the phase again. Move the sub around just a bit to see if you can knock out any bumps in response. Another great LP for this portion of the test is the (either the original if you can find one in good shape at a decent price or the Classic Records reissue) *Royal Ballet Gala* (LDS 6065 Soria Series) on RCA. There are stage bumps and subway rumblings galore, not to mention a lot of full-range music. And then there is the *Gladiator* soundtrack on CD, which is a great test disc itself. Again, play around with slight positioning changes and phase. If you have done your job well, you should be able to tell that you have expanded your soundstage, that the “lid” on the top of the soundstage

(that you may have felt more than actually heard before you installed the sub) is gone or lifted ‘way up, and that you now have a bigger cushion of “air” around all of the instruments of the orchestra. I use primarily orchestral music, by the by, for this part of the test, because I have found that if you get it right with such material, then the odds are good that things will sound sorted and right on all other types of music. Of course, if you are not a classical lover than this is easily enough done with music of your favoured type. Just make sure that the bass you’re listening to isn’t itself exaggerated or boomy. Using more than one disc helps guard against this.

Now you can start to work on the crossover frequency and level controls. If there are no graduations then use masking tape and a pen to provide some, as accurate repetition will pay huge dividends. You should have the crossover set to roughly the -3dB point of your main speakers. Start winding the volume down to the point where you start to get decent integration (it’s going to be much quieter than you expect). Once you’re close, you can start to balance the two controls, a little up on one, a little down on the other. But the key here is patience and small, small adjustments. In fact, I normally keep playing with the sub controls for at least a couple of weeks after the initial set-up, normally turning them down rather than up. And a final tip – once you’ve settled on the best settings, make sure you mark them as those fiddly little controls can get knocked real easy by pets, kids and cleaning ladies.

In the end, after you have managed to get a reasonable sound from your new sub-woofer, remember the cardinal rule: do not play the damn thing too loud! This alone has spoiled many an otherwise fine sub set-up. There is a natural human tendency to pump up the bass, and this is fine if you are doing it for playing rap, heavy bebop, reggae, or the like. But if you are playing more conventional fare, you will want to make sure that your sub gives you augmentation on the bottom, but that it does not overwhelm the rest of the music. You shouldn’t notice the sub’s contribution until you turn it off!

There. You are set. Wasn’t that bad, eh? Bollocks. You are probably cursing me and thinking that you will never get it right. Relax. We have all had that feeling. Some of us for many years. But let me assure you that with a little practice you will be a budding expert. Soon enough you will be going ‘round to your mates’ houses and adjusting their sub-woofers, too. This will win you many party favours and free pints. You see, most everyone loves a good sub installation, but at the same time they really dislike a poor one. Get it wrong and you will be made fun of. But get it right and you can be the new superhero for your group of music-listening buddies. ►+



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Editor,

It was a pleasant surprise to see your new issue featuring Chinese hifi on the cover. Returning to China to work ten months ago after a thirteen year absence I was staggered to find an abundance of great sounding gear, particularly valve based equipment, at very reasonable prices. When I first saw the variety of what was on offer I pondered writing an article for HI-FI+ on the Chinese scene but time constraints forbid it, glad to see you have done part of the job yourselves.

Hi-fi shops (along with anything else you can imagine) in China are plentiful and the consumer is spoiled with choices. While westerners marvel at the price to performance ratio for Chinese kit, they would be even more staggered to see what the equipment could be bought for domestically.

China is developing rapidly and while there will certainly be ups and downs, it would be a major mistake to underestimate China's rise. Your magazine continues to be an entertaining read and the visual quality is superb. The music reviews are excellent and I have been happy with most of the classical recommendations I have followed. It seems some readers forget the primary purpose of a hi-fi magazine is to entertain. There are many products you all rave about which leave me cold. Sound reproduction is an art, subjective, and based around a product designers and listeners goals and tastes. We should all relax and appreciate some music, that is the point!

Keep focusing on the interesting products and companies we might not otherwise know about.

Best wishes,

Steven Frost

By e.mail

Dear Sir,

HiFi + is my favorite High End audio magazine, by far. As a Yank, I was quite frustrated for awhile that I had to wait a few months after the pub date to get mine..so I arranged a direct subscription at considerable cost. I think HiFi+ comes the closest of any magazine to telling me about gear that is of most interest to me.

I especially enjoy the pursuit of analog state of the art and related issues. There is no other print source for this

information that is so broad and deep.

A few of the components of my system have been reviewed by Roy Gregory; such as the Nordost Valhalla interconnects, Lamm LP2 phono stage, and Kharma Exquisite 1D speakers. I have mostly heard the same things Roy has heard. I followed Roy's journey thru the elite phono stages with great interest.

I have enjoyed Roy's experience and his writing style. I haven't agreed on everything that Roy has written but I can always make sense of it based on my experiences.

With all that said, I do have a problem with a position that Roy has taken regarding the performance characteristics of one of my components, the Rockport System III Sirius TT. I am admittedly a biased owner of this turntable; and very passionate about it's qualities. Waaay back in issue #29 I read with great interest Roy's review of the Blue Pearl Audio JEM Turntable. In this very entertaining and expansive review, Roy claimed to have "spent considerable time with both the Sirius II and III". As I read Roy's take on how he would characterize the Sirius III, I felt that his nebulous "considerable time" could mean about anything. I had always found Roy to be quite specific with the context of his reviews...now he was being quite vague...and at the same time using this "considerable time" with the Sirius III as a basis of anointing the Blue Pearl as the best tt..... "it's simple, and as of now, it's the best" is how he said it..quite specific and definitive. And who was I to argue?...he had spent ("considerable") time with both and I had not.

Previously in issue #24; in his review of the VPI TNT HRX, he states "and yes, I have lived with the Rockport Sirius III". I had spent time with the HRX, and while I liked the HRX a lot; his point regarding it's performance exceeding the Sirius III in a particular way was completely contrary to my perceptions ...but that didn't really bother me as there was such a drastic difference in performance it was no big deal or worth challenging.

Recently I came across some information that seriously questions the "lived with" and "considerable time" claims. It is my understanding that Roy's exposure to the Rockport Sirius III was a limited time back in 1998 ..6 years ago (at least 5 years prior to these recent reviews). The then Rockport distributor in the U.K., Absolute Analogue, had the Sirius III in his (the ►

▶ distributor's) personal flat prior to delivery to a customer. My information is that this room was quite small; that the whole flat was around 800 square feet, and the room was not a dedicated audio room. This was not Roy's flat, not Roy's system, and Roy's time with the Sirius III was limited and that there was no real opportunity to change out gear or compare the Sirius III directly to any other gear.

Now, at least 5 years later, this is the basis for considerable judgements.

It is possible that Roy has had subsequent exposure to the Sirius III. But as there are only about 30 of these puppies in existence...that is not likely, based on my information.

I would appreciate some very specific info on the context of Roy's experience with the Sirius III.

If my info is correct, then Roy should have been much more conservative in his claims of experience with the Sirius III. A limited exposure 5 years ago with no switching out of gear to determine cause and effect is pretty weak as a legitimate context and required disclosure.

My comments here have nothing to do with the Blue Pearl. It may be better than the Sirius III. My only issue is that Roy's experience with the Sirius III was likely overstated..and not a viable source as to how these tt's compare..or similarly the HRX. If Roy had written in the review that his last experience with the Sirius III was 5 years prior; his whole position in this review would have been different (and his contention regarding the superiority of the Blue Pearl much weaker).

I do have some quibbles with a few of Roy's representations of the Sirius III. The Motor Drive and it's electronic controller are not 'off-the-shelf' items...that technology is specifically adapted and custom built exclusively for the Sirius III. I also have a problem generally with Roy's whole perspective on how the Kuzma's air bearing arm is somehow better than the Rockport's approach. Since (according to my info) Roy never spent much time with the Sirius III arm, his cause/effect points don't have much validity. To really be able to isolate these issues with an arm it would take some time.

Roy states in the Blue Pearl review "the 7000 version fitted to the III"...here Roy assumes (wrongly) that the Sirius III arm is the same as the Rockport 7000 arm. The 7000 arm is an upgraded 6000..and quite different from the Sirius III arm. Roy's lack of understanding of this issue really says a lot about the level of true experience he has with the Sirius III.

Roy's business is selling magazines...and as the vinyl guru that Roy indeed is...the only way for him to anoint the Blue Pearl as the new King...would be to somehow cite experience with the Rockport Sirius III...this I understand.

If Roy did have 'considerable time' and 'lived with' the Sirius III...then just tell us about it and I'll gladly eat crow. I know this letter gets a little personal..but I hope you publish it and an answer that will settle this question for me one way

or another. If you are going to call something 'the best' ...you better have your ducks in a row regarding the facts on the competition, particularly if you are representing it's performance as part of your case.

While it is not important to me whether there is a better it than the Rockport System III Sirius..it is important that published comments about it's performance are based on legitimate, clear, specific experiences... not inferred distant memory and conjecture.

Your reviews are typically excellent; well written and factual... I look forward to some clarification here. Inquiring minds want to know.

I love HiFi+...it is a great magazine...keep up the great work. It is worth the \$\$\$'s of postage I spend.

Best regards,

Mike Lavigne

Dear oh dear, you'd best check your (hopefully disinterested) sources of information! The same sources that managed to overlook the fact that I used to work for Absolute Analogue, during which time I heard the III in the systems of both the company's owners, as well as having the table at home. I was also responsible for taking the deck to customer's homes and a number of hi-fi shows. Same applies to the II and Capella, though I only ever had the base model of the latter at home.

All told that covers a considerable range of partnering equipment, cartridges and in the case of the Capella, different arms too. It has also given me the chance to make detailed comparisons of all these tables with the Clearaudio Master Reference which has remained as a constant benchmark throughout, and still sits across the room from me now. I think that constitutes "considerable experience", don't you? Ed

Dear Sir,

Not being in the market, any longer, for really expensive Hi-Fi, I have resisted buying Hi-Fi+ for years!

Issue 32 was another matter, though.

Again, for some time, I have been hoping some bright soul would publish reviews of once competent kit in comparison with current gear, the aim being to give a true comparison of the latter's worth rather than the "emperor's new clothes" temptation I am certain is all too pervasive for some.

Imagine my delight, then, to see a battleship on p.96, Issue 32!

I bought a Lentek in December '81, a fairly late model. It was auditioned against "the bees knees" of the time, a NAIM 32/150 combo and frankly, there was no contest. Against a QUAD 44/405 the comparison was odious in the extreme. The deal was done and many years of enjoyment followed. Superb soundstage, clear, musical, bass foundation, ▶

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| TRADE-IN or DEPOSIT | £895.00 | TRADE-IN or DEPOSIT | £1190.00 | TRADE-IN or DEPOSIT | £1510.00 |
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| 36 installments of just | £99.39 | 36 installments of just | £132.14 | 36 installments of just | £167.67 |
| SYSTEM 8 ★★★★★ | | SYSTEM 9 ★★★★★ | | SYSTEM 10 ★★★★★ | |
| KRELL SACD Standard | £4249.00 | WADIA 301 CD Plyr | £3649.00 | AUDIO RESEARCH CD3 | £5189.00 |
| AUDIO RESEARCH VS155 | £2899.00 | T+A V10 Amplifier | £3995.00 | McINTOSH C2200/MC2102 | £10,999.00 |
| WILSON BENESCH Curve | £4999.00 | SONUS FABER Cremona | £4999.00 | MARTIN LOGAN Odyssey | £6798.00 |
| Normal System Price | £12,147.00 | Normal System Price | £12,643.00 | Normal System Price | £22,986.00 |
| TRADE-IN or DEPOSIT | £2427.00 | TRADE-IN or DEPOSIT | £2643.00 | TRADE-IN or DEPOSIT | £4586.00 |
| Balance to pay | £9720.00 | Balance to pay | £10,000.00 | Balance to pay | £18,400.00 |
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▶ valve-like lucid mids and top-end were welcomed in exchange for all that cash. Volume was sufficient in a 21 x 21 room for serious partying, tho' when a mate said, "should smoke be coming out of your speakers?" I thought I'd killed the STCs in my Cambridge R50s! Pure power NOT overdriven as I use the overload indicator. The downside? A very slight hardening of the sound at high (excessive?) volume and a hint of a less "airy" upper mid/top than some (Musical Fidelity's A1 springs to mind) that makes easy distinguishing of, say, individual choir members a tad harder. But I'm into blues, rock, jazz and even alt. country (Americana) and for that, the Lentek is wonderful. Certain studio and many live recordings have that indefinable quality of "being there".

Partnering equipment is now a lowly Valhalla'd LP12/Ittok/OC9, Marantz CD63KI and Colloms designed Sony 3-way 90+db efficient speakers. A friend, Dave Greenslade of Coliseum, listened for a few minutes and said, "...flat EQ, dynamic, clear, it MOVES. You're hearing exactly what the musicians and engineers wanted you to hear." It works!

I thought two other things were worth passing on: -

Firstly, about 4 years ago, we became fed up in our new house with the lousy mains dipping to 190v and causing the power supplies in the amp to run outside their SOA giving continuous hum at zero volume. As I leave it on permanently, this was annoying. So, a visit to the local top hi-fi emporium ensued. Long story short - we compared (effectively blindfold) the Lentek with middling cost amps (£1,500 - £2,000) that had been well reviewed, a Marantz PM17 and a TAG/McClaren 100wpc pre/power combo (note: the Lentek was tested by Gordon King as producing near 100wpc at rated distortion. Plus a damping factor of 400...).

The result was good and bad. Good for my wallet, bad for the shop! There was no contest between the Lentek and TAG; the Marantz was better but had a tinkly effect in the mids (piano) and a poor soundstage. Plus neither gave an impression of height. No-one believes me until I demonstrate the effect but height there definitely is on some recordings.

The sales guy called his mate and shop owner in. All were stunned into silence and just kept asking for more music! Eventually, they apologised for wasting our time and suggested that, unless we were prepared to spend upwards of £3,000 not to even think about "upgrading".

Secondly, our amp has been punished - hard. In use for several hours virtually every day for 23 years it has developed a noisy volume pot track and a dodgy mono/stereo switch. Contact cleaner has helped (yes, I have had the case off - the internal build quality is military grade, simply awesome) but it won't forever.

I note that the review model is on eBay and have told a friend (with a dying Sugden A48) who will possibly bid later.

Finally, thanks for the great review and the mag in general -

well laid out, a good read and very interesting even if I'm not in that rarefied market niche.

Kind regards,

Richard Baguley

Dear Sir:

I have been reading your magazine since Issue #3, and I love it. I am writing to request that you look into an interesting new animal in the audio world: the digital amplifier. Most readers, I think, would agree that a competently designed tube or solid state amplifier ultimately should satisfy. The jury is out, however, regarding digital amplifiers. Digital amps offer considerable advantages in being able to supply large amounts of power in a small package and at a cool operating temperature (the latter feature in particular becoming more important with the recent hot summers on record.) Initial offerings, however, seem less than impressive.

While other magazines recently have reviewed multi-channel digital amplifiers, usually in a home theatre context (who cares?), your magazine seems the ideal choice for an in-depth look at a high-end stereo-only digital offering from the likes of Jeff Rowland Design Group, Bel Canto Design, or Audio Research Corp. The Rowland 201s look especially tasty.

I hope we might see such a feature in the near future.

Thanks.

(PS - Nevermind the gear reviews - my subscription will be renewed for so long as MC and RP keep putting me on to great music.)

Craig McDougall

We keep looking but to date we still haven't found one we really like. The latest generation designs, some of which you mention, certainly look promising, so we'll be listening with an open mind. Ed.

Dear Sir,

I read with interest the Home Truths article by Jimmy Hughes in issue 31. I think he misses the point here.

When the recordings are made the microphones are in fairly close proximity to the performers and the reproduced sound should also emulate this proximity. The example of the "walking metronome" will certainly be reproduced with regard to its position between the mikes on equipment that faithfully reproduces the recording.

However sitting back in a concert hall this directionality and pinpoint placement vanishes because of the multiple reflections reaching the listener. If one wishes to emulate that sound then one should place the microphones at that position in the hall during the recording.

It is therefore very relevant for the equipment to be



▶ able to reproduce this positional behavior accurately. It would be poor equipment indeed that makes a well recorded close miked performance into one that sounds like it was way back in the hall with poor directionality.

It is also perhaps why I am disturbed by reviews of equipment that state that the sound is as one would hear way back in the listening room rather than that of a more typical closer miked recording.

Jake Haskell

I'm not sure I really want to be microphone close to a trumpet in full cry! Ed.

Dear Sir

I very much enjoy reading HIFI+ and have much respect for all your reviewers except one, Jimmy Hughes. Here is an extract from his latest ill informed review of the Chord pre/pwr 'the phase switches allow you to experiment with positive/negative absolute phase... Actually I found the difference fairly subtle. But absolute phase is a subjective, system-dependant thing, so try it yourself and see' This comment is clearly just wrong as anyone with a half decent system will tell you that the difference is night and day! Isn't it about time to move Mr Hughes onto the Record Review section or preferably lend/give him a high-resolution audio system to base his reviews on.

Regards

Rex Pointon

Actually, I have to agree with both of you on this one. I personally find absolute phase clearly audible, however I also know that a great many people barely notice it, if at all. That doesn't mean that they can't hear other differences, just that some of us are peculiarly sensitive to phase.

As regards JMH's system, I'll merely repeat what I've written before. Don't judge it on paper or disregard it simply because it isn't conventional. Hear it and you WILL be impressed. Ed.

Dear Sir,

I am writing in regards to Josh S (HiFi+ 31)

I have to say that amidst the virtual (what's all that about?) is a grain of truth, he's spot on about mm/mc cartridges and the part Phono Amps play in the vinyl replay chain I've had many Turntable/Tonearm combinations over the years and any difference in sound has been down to, yep the phono amp.

He has a point about speakers too, I'm amazed at the prices of High End speakers (can I really get a quality speaker from Maplins/Homebase?)

While I obviously don't share the same loathing for Hi-Fi+ as he does, I sometimes gaze at the myriad exotica reviewed

every month and wonder about the real world I, and suspect you live in. Just to illustrate, my lottery winning system would probably revolve around Mark Levinson Electronics, but even then I would balk at 15 Grand for a piece of Hi fi. I could go on about price comparisons all day: is a £1000 interconnect better than a £100 one? Is my Michell Gyrodec/SME 3009 II that much inferior to an SME 10? I think not.

Maybe the hi-fi press in general should take itself less seriously and remember what it should all be about, the music! Yours etc.

A James

Dear Sir,

Alan Sircom's article on the marginalization of multi-channel music (issue 30) raised some interesting issues; principally, is there a place for multi-channel music without video? I think not.

The purpose of hi-fi, in my view, is to attempt to recreate, as close as possible, the experience of live music in the home. With one singular exception, at every concert I have ever attended the music has emanated from a point on stage or from banks of speakers at each side of the stage, which in every case has been in front of me (the exception was, predictably, Pink Floyd). In the case of acoustic music, the origin of the sound is one or more point sources. Not even in my student days, when I bought seats behind the orchestra, was I required to sit in the middle of the musicians!

But then the argument for multi-channel music is that it better represents the ambience of the recording venue, with the reflections off the walls, ceilings etc. being captured and fed to the satellite speakers. But if that argument is true, isn't the music from my two-channel hi-fi reflected off the walls and ceiling of my own listening room? In this case I already enjoy an element of surround sound from these reflections. For there to be an accurate benefit from true multi-channel recording, surely it would need to subtract the effect of reflections in my own room.

Further, this argument could never be applied in the case of studio recorded, amplified music since this is usually recorded through close-coupled microphones or direct from the instrument amplification to the mixing desk. Although, of course, bands like Pink Floyd, who enjoy making use of special effects, would always find a justification for multi-channel studio recording. And this is why multi-channel works with films - for special effects.

For true hi-fi application, the surround qualities of multi-channel music need to be very subtle and I'm not sure how many recording technicians have yet come to terms with this. But then if we do already experience a small effect of reflection off the walls and ceilings of our own listening rooms, why should we invest thousands of pounds in

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► amplification and speakers for further reflected sound? The ultimate question for high fidelity sound is surely this: are we listening to the music or special effects? I say keep the effects for video.

Yours faithfully,

C P Blackman

Dear Sir,

I would like to take up a few lines of your magazine to praise two companies for their excellent service to me recently.

Firstly, when one Bass/mid cone of my Celestion 3000's melted (yes -really!) I contacted Celestion/Kef to ask for their assistance. Despite their initial thought that there may have been no stock left they followed through with a check that revealed the last two relevant units they had available in the UK! For a very reasonable price, including p&p, they arrived at my front door the next day. Congratulations are in order for this excellent response.

Secondly, a rapid response from *Stereophile* to an order for a back number (1990 in fact) that enabled me to set up the speakers far more effectively than I had previously managed. No quibbles, instant reply, greatly improved sound.

Thanks also to yourselves for the most enjoyable magazine on the market, and now the only one that I buy each month - even though I cannot afford any of the new items reviewed in it!

Yours sincerely,

Reverend Dominic Stockford.

Dear Sir,

Recently I purchased a Lyra Titan cartridge.

The rest of my system consisted from: VPI V HR turntable - JMW 12.5 arm, Krell KPE Reference phono stage, B.A.T. 51 SE preamp, Active ATC 70 loudspeakers upgraded with the SEAS Excel Millennium tweeter, Audioquest Diamond X3 interconnects, Essence AC cables.

In order to grace Titan's performance, I sold out the Krell phono for a new Tom Evans Groove Plus phono stage, in which from the factory they normally install a 100-Ohm loading, but they let me choose the loading of my preference.

In my experience up to now, the proper cartridge loading has a dramatic effect in overall system performance. My Titan (as well as my previous Helikon), seemed happy in 825 Ohm loading through the Krell, having too much air (as well as lacing density) in 1000 Ohm, been too closed and damped in 250 or 100 Ohm.

In some reviews of Helikon-Groove (not the Plus) combo in US magazines (Fremmer-Pearson), they found the 100 OHM loading lacking air and having closed in treble, preferring 47 Kohm (though in this loading, as expected, in TAS they found

the Titan bright in high frequencies), but most reviewers in Hi-Fi+ magazine, including you, prefer the Titan loaded through the Groove or Groove Plus in 100 Ohm, though you don't mention if you have experimented with other loadings around this impedance. Additionally, you found the Titan to be happy in 500 Ohm loading in Vitus phono stage, though in that phono stage the Titan was a disappointment in 100 Ohm.

Stig from Lyra suggested me that: "100 Ohm load impedance may dampen the resonance free Titan too much. I recommend a value of around 1kohm (1000 ohms) as a good compromise between openness and control. This is of course system dependent, but as a rule of thumb I have come to believe that this impedance works well for a Lyra when used in a good matching, low noise, high quality phono stage like the Tom Evans Groove Plus. I really believe that you will be happy with this value.

However, load impedance setting is a tuning issue, and it could be that you would prefer a lower value like for example around 500 ohms. It depends on if other factors make your system a bit on the bright side. But if you do not have problems of bright sound, I still would recommend the around 1000 ohms value."

Knowing that the proper loading of each cartridge is depended from its construction, as well as from internal electronic reasons of each specific phono stage, I would be grateful if you could advise according to your experience for the best possible loading of Titan in my system.

Further more, I am sure that all the above are intriguing enough to challenge your restless mind in organizing a special review for Titan's behavior in different loadings through the Groove Plus.

Best Regards

Michael Valakostas

There are a number of issues here. The best loading for any cartridge will be dependent not just on the design of the cartridge itself, but also on the nature of the phono-stage to which it's coupled and the system which that feeds. In the case of the Groove, the operating parameters of the input devices mean that deviating from the 100 Ohm setting increases the inherent noise of the circuit. Unfortunately, being a fixed value design, experimentation is far from easy, but then, if you buy a hot-rod you don't expect a glove compartment and vanity mirror. I have played with a 200 Ohm Groove, but found that in all cases I preferred the 100 Ohm option. And that's the problem - it's down to personal preference and how damped the rest of your system is. Loading is a little like a zoom lens on an SLR (you remember those). Wind it down and you get closer and tighter, wind it out and watch the soundstage expand. But just like a zoom lens, variable loading will always cost you some resolution and accuracy. I wish I could give you a more definite answer but I'm afraid it's a case of to each his own... Ed. ►

Runners-Up

Well, as requested, here are the best of the rest from the Nordost Writer's Competition, won by Steve Dickinson. The emphasis here is on "Writers" and the titles chosen were designed to encourage people to discuss hi-fi in general rather than the specifics of their own sordid past. There's plenty of evidence that those who can write can also review, whereas those who can review all too often haven't got a clue when it comes to writing!

We enjoyed these, and hope you will too – as well as commiserating with those who near missed the big prize...

NÖRDOST

MAKING THE CONNECTION

How come that whilst you can't see the king's new clothes, they are so easy to hear?

by David Dallard

"You did what? No, that can't be right. You changed a bit of diamond and plastic? And that makes Ella Fitzgerald appear in the room? No!"

Thus a friend on the change from a Goldring 1012 to a 1042 needle. Not a major thing to any half-trained audiophile, but beyond comprehension to a normal person, even one with a musical background.

And you should have heard the responses to other changes: interconnect; digital cable; speaker cables; support devices; let alone some more arcane tinkering which will be revealed later.

The last amplifier upgrade initially produced a "How much?" rapidly followed by "O.K., I see". As did the DAC upgrade.

Right, what I'm saying is that we (the audiophile community) accept all sorts of things without thinking too much about them. The rest of the world struggles with what we see as basics, like the difference an amp, DAC, or needle/cartidge can make, because, "well, my radio-cassette sounds nice"... So present them with changes to bits of wire, or, even worse, pointy bits of wood, weird contraptions involving carbon fibre and brass, that class of thing, and you are so far off the map that GPS won't find you.

Or so they think...

However, we know better, and so do some normal people ... if you catch them unawares and let them hear what any given change or tweak does to a piece of music. Don't tell

them what you've done until they've had a good listen. Wait for the "Hey, that sounds different to last time", then tell them why and look for the rapidly descending jaw or the expression which casts severe doubts upon your sanity.

Now ask yourself why this happens.

Because everyone, as our old friend common sense tells us, knows that an electrical signal is an electrical signal and a digit is a digit, so these things can't make that much difference. But, "a rose is a rose is a rose", and therein lies what is at issue. To strain this metaphor somewhat, how many varieties of rose are there? How do they differ in soil or light requirements, colour, scent? And so on...

What do we actually understand of the science of our hobby? If we're lucky we'll remember a thing or two from O-level physics about resistivity and conductivity and ...er, some other stuff. A few of us know more about electrical engineering. Some are even on nodding terms with Thiel and Small. Most of us will have some familiarity with the Subjectivist-Objectivist wars, which still rumble occasionally. And then we've come across esoteric theoreticians, such as Pete Belt (pieces of paper at the ready!), and we've read with varying degrees of incredulity the claims of equipment manufacturers. But what do we know? Possibly not as much as we think.

Let me ask you a couple of questions: what happens if you put a strip of sellotape over the gap between the tweeter mounting plate and the front baffle of your speakers? No idea? Try it and see: you may be surprised what you hear. (Long-standing readers of a rival publication may recognise this one - thank you, Jon Marks.)

Or, how about this one: place a ten pence piece on the front corners of the top of your speakers, with a five pence piece positioned centrally, above the tweeter (sorry, I don't know what happens if the tweeter is offset - suck it and see). There are some discussions to be had about using coins from the same year or which way they face, but one should hear ►

► a wider, deeper soundstage, greater separation of instruments and, maybe, a bit of extra clarity - all for 50p. Apparently this also works with American coinage, 'cos I nicked this from *Stereophile* - take a bow, Sam Tellig.

Right, before you consign me to the barking mad corner, think about an article three years ago in this very journal about cones on top of loudspeakers.

What physical properties of the speakers have we changed with any of these tweaks? Diffraction of high frequencies? Maybe, I don't know. But I have heard the difference.

Jitter... When perfect sound for ever was introduced 20 years ago who'd heard or thought of timing errors in a digital signal (remember: a digit is a digit), but now we re-clock anything that moves, and it is generally accepted that jitter is a Bad Thing, to be shunned by polite audiophile society.

Resonance in equipment: hands up all those who haven't tinkered with cones, spikes, blobby things, inner tubes or whatever? Hands up all those who didn't hear a difference when they did?

Need I go on? And I haven't even mentioned psychoacoustics yet ...

But, and it's a big but, how many of us can explain, in scientifically credible terms, what we hear, or even know someone who can explain? Not many.

Does this make what we hear imaginary?

Not necessarily.

For argument's sake we'll ignore the audio equivalent of the placebo effect (I'm a psychiatric nurse, so do not get me started on that one!) and assume it's all real.

Before I became a nurse, I was sort of a scientist by training, which taught me a number of things.

At any given level of education a large proportion of what one is taught is plain wrong, or at best an oversimplification, as one discovers moving up the educational ladder, and has been known to be wrong for many years.

In any field there are norms for what constitutes accepted knowledge, and any attempts to introduce something new will be resisted, until such time as evidence becomes unarguable, or there is some cultural change, which then leads to a paradigm shift.

Science, like any other human activity, is in some part a social construction, and is thus open to all manner of human frailties. For example, I can recall two eminent botanists, who disagreed on a particular issue, but, because of some personal rivalry, neither would accept any evidence which might support the other's view. Scarcely rational, objective behaviour.

Common sense is vastly overrated, and can be very unreliable. Those electrons over there, moving through your cables, are they particles or waves? Er, both actually, but I can't be certain which at the moment, or exactly where they are, or how they might affect any other electron, or not. (When someone has worked out a simple explanation of quantum

physics, can they let me know?) Remember: the universe is not only stranger than we know, but stranger than we can know.

Anyway, that king and the clothes he may, or may not, be wearing. Can we agree on what clothes are? Do we know what his clothes might look like? Do we know how to look for them? If we see them will we recognise them? Will our observations change the nature of the clothes? Are they in fashion? And does it matter, as it looks like he's having a pretty good time anyway!

Less Is More

by M Preston

I'm a lucky man. I like my stereo system. If, a decade or so ago, a balding weirdo had peered over my shoulder in WHSmith and proclaimed, 'one day you will own a system of this ilk' I probably would have rolled up the magazine and swatted him right across the temples for living in a fantasy world. There and then, that copy of Hi-Fi Whatever should have been discarded alongside the rest of the pointless consumer burps that would have me all a'lather over caravans, tablesaws and remote control panzers. So I took it to the counter and handed over my loose change. Within hours, a passion that had started when I was just tall enough to reach the 'start' switch would be sullied by a peculiar variant of angst

Now, the fact that this is Hi-Fi+ and not 'STUFF' should mean you have a good idea of what I'm getting at, so graphic tales of disheartening supertest winner purchases and close friends openly laughing at the cost of forearm length pieces of wire are, hopefully, redundant.

I'm a lucky man. I like my stereo system. Listen, a disproportionate number of my wide circle are knee deep in music; d j's, promoters, distributors, label hobbyists and professionals, retail know-alls, dizzy collectors, knob twiddlers, strummers, pickers, blowers and bashers of most denominations. Ages? 20 to 40 at a broad stroke. All of these good people own a stereo system, yet not one owns a system close to the absurd complexity and daft expense of my own, let alone the kind of electro-acoustic pornography that the silky pulp of Hi-Fi+ brazenly flaunts!

Now the above is probably not much of a surprise to the hardcore audio fly but considering the mind mangling amount of recorded music cluttering the planet, the enthusiasts, eccentrics, shysters and snake oilers of the 'high end' have gotta be coming up seriously short for a good stereo to have fallen so dramatically down the shopping list of the ardent music lover. But hold your horses! Maybe all ►

► these good folks have got it spot on.

I'm a lucky man. I like my stereo system. Let me tell you how I learned to enjoy it again. Using 20/20 hindsight I've managed to pin down four main factors that have freed me of audio angst. Now to the 'less is more' krux of this slow baked rant. Tracking down one capable hifi dealer was a start. His stock-in-trade is the kind of ruinous {gregoryism} product that Hi-Fi+ plies a living from. We talked, we listened, we drank tea, a bond was formed and I spent some dough. Isn't that sweet, being as though the modern retail environment broadly sucks? I hooked him up with records and got the chance to hear my personal excitors via a slew of the world's finest money pits. Lucky me. Lucky because my reaction to 90% of these products was not "balls. I wish I had a spare We s" but "hey! Isn't my own system whip crackin' good value for money!" This view was further cemented by my first visit to a hifi show which is where point two roughly begins I tagged along with the aforementioned dealer to some artificial smelling hotel in London. Right outside the venue a speeding white van man deftly parted a deep puddle and soaked me good. That was a portent. As I dripped from room to room, the grey chicken of disillusionment started pecking at my ankles. Megabucks yankee-doodle behemoths made noises akin to a room load of sugar high ten year olds re-arranging your kitchen cupboards, while the old world chipped in it's own pipe'n'slippers style of musical good manners. Futuristic alloys, endangered trees, mystic geometry and rare earth magnets all clamoured to prize open my wallet. Nope! I attempted to upgrade my brain in the bar, but save for the nice german dude from Einstein, I was surrounded by lewd speaker spivs and rotund mid-lifers braying on about house priced cars and car priced watches.

That afternoon I endured more rooms of crushingly dull 'reference' recordings as grown men laboured to make the soundtracks of their youth as exciting as they remembered. I longed to hear Shellac or Show+A.G or *The Whicker Man*. A quick trawl through the 'software' stands dredged up the same morass of ludicrously over-priced arid jazz, laughable prog, orchestral yawns and air-brushed country rock tartlets that go a long way to convincing the youthful music head that grown up hifi is a hopeless bore. Tell me this: how come I can stroll into my local record shop and buy a lavishly packaged 180g album of exciting new music from a tiny stateside label for a tenner or so, yet an 'audiophile' pressing of some chestnut that clogs second hand racks all over the land is 25 quid?

I'm a lucky man. I like my stereo system. Points three and four are kind of intertwined. Thinking of upgrading? Vorsicht! Halt! Start downgrading! It's so easy. Scour the junk emporiums, scan the bargain pages, pull those forgotten speakers out the loft and slap together as many gonzo systems as space or spouse will allow. I'm a lucky guy, me and my fun-seeking cohorts have the wherewithal to do this. Less money, more

good-times! Suppose I most kow-tow to some brief lists at this point; in the lounge, Thorens TD280, Eclipse disc spinner, a groovy looking late 70's Sugden a48 and '72 Kef conciertos that effortlessly show that two-way transducers are buggered from the get-go. A totally unprejudiced music maker that left plenty of folding change from £300! The party sized kitchen got some Mission 70s, an awesome Marantz 1150d 'console amplifier', resplendent with over 30 rotaries, buttons and sliders that can rescue the crappiest sonics, add to this the stone-cold biggest bargain in analogue, the Technics SL1210 and you're rockin' laddie! Change from £100? You bet your mpingo discs! Feel the corpulent behind of audio angst lift it's bulk off your ribcage, rustle up some supper with The Monks, slap on Miss Kitten and dance like fools with your drunkest buddies without having to fear the expense of returning your pick-up to an eccentric lowlands womaniser if the record player takes a knock!

I'm a lucky man. Wanna know why I like my stereo system so much? It has little to do with 'macro dynamics' or 'stage depth' or some such audio bluster, I'm just using it less. Less time worrying about the imagined short comings that reading too many hifi mags induces, more time enjoying weird and wonderful records. Less time optimising toe-in for the ultimate image in a foot wide area of sofa, more time listening flat on my back with a broad grin. Less time smearing miracle fluids all over my plugs, more time in my favourite record stores. Less time fretting over mains quality, more time enjoying a higher quality of musical life.

A foot note to any aspiring audiophiles for whom the thought of a 15k cable loom is, perhaps, exciting. 99.9999% pure silver wire in .35 to .50mm gauges is about 50p a metre. Think about that as you are nodding off to your 'corrected' "Kind of blue".

How come that whilst you can't see the king's new clothes, they are so easy to hear?

by Ian Boyd

The world of hi-fi is probably no more prone to spin, marketing hype and other promotional gobbledegook than any other area of life. It just seems that way sometimes! It always amuses me to see mass-market CD players with details emblazoned on the front about the digital-to-analogue conversion technology used within – as if the average purchaser has degree-level training in digital circuit design, and the information means something to them. The point of spin, of course, is not really to inform, but to impress – and if we allow ourselves to be impressed by ►

▶ anything other than the way a piece of equipment plays music, then we probably deserve all we get.

The trouble with hi-fi, though, is that it's not quite that simple. There are far more treacherous liars around than the marketing people and the advertising copy writers. I'm pleased to say, however, that I have uncovered the identity of these deceitful purveyors of untruths, these charlatans who talk us into shelling out hard-earned cash on the wrong piece of equipment. Who are they? (Fanfare of trumpets at this point.) Well, ... it's us. The punters. Ourselves. No-one else to blame. OK, the marketing people told us that the king has new clothes on, but we're the ones who heard them! They sounded so good in the shop!

By far the commonest deception in hi-fi has to be self-deception. When the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that "the most common lie is that which one lies to himself", I don't think he was talking about hi-fi – but his words have an undeniable relevance to the subject!

So how do we manage to dupe ourselves? Well, I've compiled a list of some of the mistakes we commonly make, or should I say the mistakes I've made (well, the one's I'm prepared to own up to right now).

1. Probably the most powerful reason for thinking a piece of equipment sounds good (when in fact it doesn't), is that we want it to sound good. And there's no more powerful reason for wanting a piece of equipment to sound good than having just shelled out a large wad of dosh for it. The new super-duper 8-way active enhanced whizzbang unit (mark 23) got such a good review, and it looks so cool, and it sounded so good in the shop (well what you could hear given the earth-shaking volume the salesman insisted on playing it at, and the cannon-laden demo disk he used, and the fact he was yabbering in your ear most of the time). For the first few weeks you're convinced this is the best your system ever sounded. A few weeks later it occurs to you that you haven't listened to any music for a while. You put on a favourite album and immediately realise why you hadn't listened to any music for a while. We've all been there. Haven't we? Surely it's not just me?

2. Another reason why we want a piece of equipment to sound good is that we don't like going against the flow. If everyone around you sees (hears) things one way, it's hard to stand up and say that you see (hear) things differently. This is true of politics, of religion, of pretty much every branch of human activity, you name it. I once saw a *Far Side* cartoon which made the point nicely. There was a flock of sheep in a field, all running one way. In the middle of the flock, one sheep is standing up on its hind legs, facing against the flow, shouting 'Come on! We don't all have to be sheep!' Quite.

I'm sure most hi-fi dealers will tell you that reviews do have an impact on a product's success in the market. Be

honest with yourself: if you are auditioning equipment and the choice is between two items, one of which has had rave reviews, and the other no press exposure, how easy would you find it to buy the latter one, even if it sounded just as good to you? Isn't one of the great pleasures when you buy a new piece of hi-fi that feeling of basking in the warm glow of your new equipment's good reviews? No? Surely it's not just me again?

3. One of the commonest causes of my past hi-fi mistakes has been overcompensating for the mistake before that. Let me explain. Your system sounds mostly good, but with time you realise all is not well. What used to seem like lively, informative high frequencies now sounds like hardness. You find it fatiguing. Perhaps with the aid of a dealer, you identify your CD player as the chief culprit. An upgrade is in order. But rather than listening in an unbiased way to the various candidates, you're listening for one with non-fatiguing treble. That's the player you buy, of course. The trouble is that a few months later you realise that in your quest for non-fatiguing treble, you ignored other, equally important qualities. Your system's mid-band now sounds closed in, coloured, lacking transparency. With the help of your dealer, you identify the speakers as the chief culprit. ... and on it goes. This approach to system building by no means guarantees long-term satisfaction, because each time you buy a piece of equipment your attention is focussed too narrowly on correcting a particular defect. What you're not giving enough attention to is the balance of the system as a whole. We've all been there? Haven't we? OK, OK, maybe it's just me.

These are just a few of the situations in which our ears can betray us – damn the little blighters! If you recognise any or all of the above scenarios, though, rest assured that you're not alone. In fact it shouldn't surprise us that self-deception is a particular hazard in hi-fi. When you stop and think about it, after all, the entire purpose of hi-fi is self-deception. Good hi-fi allows us to deceive ourselves into believing that the musicians are there in the room with us. Good hi-fi makes it seem as if we are hearing the brush of horsehair on gut, the delicate touch of stick on cymbal. We value hi-fi because, and only because, it gives us access to the music. It gives pleasure because it allows us to hear the most delicate modulation of the violinist's bow on the string, or the most dynamic strike of stick on drum. Except of course, it doesn't really allow us to hear those things at all. All we hear is the sound emitted by loudspeakers, driven by amplifiers, fed a signal by disc or other source. It's an illusion. But it's the achievement of that illusion, that suspension of disbelief, that makes hi-fi worthwhile. It's that glorious self-deception we're after. As for the sound of the king's new clothes, ignore it. Stop worrying and listen to the music instead.



Forest

Totem has spared no expense in making the Forest one of the best speakers available at any price... It's a two-way floor standing model that is surprisingly affordable, considering that it is a true super-speaker. The woofer and its aluminium dome tweeter, allow it to cover the full auditory range. Those aren't mere paper specs, either! The response is down only 6 dB at 28 Hz, a frequency most speakers can't reach. Its lock-mitred monocoque chassis, its slanted rear baffle, and its fine hand-crafted construction place it above lesser speakers of its size and price. Much of this is invisible, though by no means inaudible. As usual with Totem speakers, the fine wood veneer is also placed inside the cabinet, to equalise forces on the two sides of the walls. Why it's called the Forest? Well, where would you expect to find a totem? Well, a forest would be a good place to begin your search. However, a forest also imbues mystery, quietness and unpredictable, unexplainable power. In a real forest you are surrounded with sound, which can suddenly appear, surprise and then disappear. It can happen anywhere around you. Let the Totem Forest surprise you in the same way...

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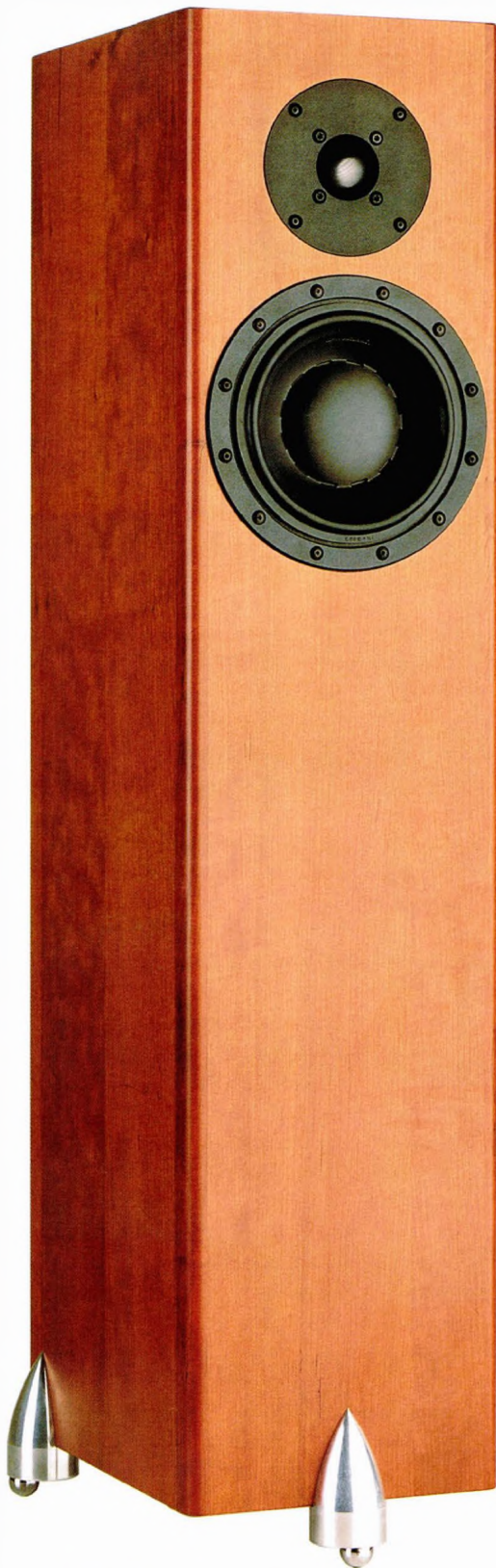
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Vivid Audio B1

by Paul Messenger

Wow! Correction: double Wow! Thirty years in the hi-fi business might well have inoculated my sensibilities against sensational looking loudspeakers, but the first sight of Vivid Audio's B1 made me a little weak at the knees. Even the sight of a photograph some weeks earlier hadn't prepared me for seeing the speaker itself in all its curvaceous three-dimensional glory. The grippy gloves provided are a necessity rather than a luxury

If you saw the Speaker's Corner column in the last issue of *Hi-Fi+* (No 32), you too will have seen a picture of this dramatic looking loudspeaker. Believe me, the photograph is a poor 2-D substitute for the real thing, which is one of the most radical and exciting looking speakers I've ever seen. Read last month's column, you'll already know quite a bit about this speaker, cos the content was basically an interview with Laurence 'Dic' Dickie, the guy substantially responsible for the engineering design of this uniquely innovative confection.



One of its more unusual factors is that it's South African, in both inspiration and manufacture. Vivid Audio is based in Kloof, just outside Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, and was founded by Philip Guttentag, and Bruce and Dee Gessner, who came up with the original concept. Dic came on board about three years ago, bringing his considerable engineering experience and exclusive drive unit designs to the

party. The result is a serious high end speaker that not only looks wonderful, but is also so original and logical I'm really quite surprised that no one else has tried to do something like this before, from both a functional and an aesthetic point of view.

Consider the way speakers have evolved. For many years the bookshelf speaker dominated the scene, so called because it was usually placed on a bookshelf. The idea of using a dedicated speaker stand actually originated with the BBC monitors of the early 1970s, where its initial role was purely acoustic, to reduce the midband coloration caused by close-to-wall reflections. Others noted that the mechanical properties of stands were equally important in achieving optimum speaker performance, and the stand-mount on dedicated stand became the norm for the next two decades. Although such a configuration still makes plenty of sense in

performance terms, by the 1990s fashion and aesthetic considerations had made

slim floorstanders the centre of attention, despite handicaps from both mechanical and acoustic points of view.

In fact many of the simpler floorstanders don't use the whole enclosure to load the main driver, because the total

volume is much too large for a 6.5-inch main driver. In practice only the top part of the enclosure is 'acoustically active', while the lower section effectively acts as an integral stand. However, it's unlikely to give best mechanical performance, and blocking off the space below the driver is certainly not acoustically ideal.

What Vivid has done here, in essence, is create a stand-mount-with-integral-stand design that would seem to combine the best of both aesthetic and performance worlds. The B1 is actually rather larger, more complicated, and at an

anticipated £6,590 per pair considerably more costly than the typical stand-mount, but you do get plenty for your money here. Vivid also has a somewhat larger K1 model, using two more bass drivers, shorter 'legs' and a correspondingly taller enclosure, plus a C1 centre channel, all based on the same drive units and enclosure construction.

To start with, this is a four-driver design, operating in a three-and-a-half-way configuration. There are two 6-inch main drivers, one facing forwards the other back, the latter rolling off at a very gentle 6dB/octave above 100Hz. The front 6-incher continues up to 900Hz before handing over via 4th order (24dB/octave) filters to a 2-inch alloy dome midrange unit. This in turn hands over to a 1-inch tweeter at around 4kHz which carries on up into the ultrasonics. One reason for the separate midrange and tweeter is because Dic believes in operating drive units under exclusively pistonic conditions. To which end, the system is designed so that the mechanical break-up modes of the

▶ driver diaphragms are at least two octaves outside their actual operating bands, thereby keeping any break-up effects at -48dB or better. In this respect at least, the B1 follows the example set by Dic's previous domestic hi-fi design, the original B&W Nautilus from 1994. Another reason for adding the extra midrange dome is to maintain more consistent sound distribution with rising frequency, avoiding the dispersion discontinuity one inevitably gets when crossing over from a 6.5-inch cone to a 1-inch dome.

One real surprise was just how heavy this speaker is. Despite its modest perceived bulk, it turns the scales to a very substantial 38kg. Indeed it's hard to believe the carcass actually encloses a generous 40 litres of air, and the speaker stands comfortably over a metre tall, but that's thanks in no small part to the elegantly curved surfaces, which seem to minimise the impression of bulk, as well as offering major acoustic advantages. The enclosure is actually moulded from a polyester resin, filled with carbon fibres and additional mass-loading minerals to achieve that substantial weight, and it also feels extraordinarily solid, transmitting no trace of detectable vibration even when the speaker was working really hard. Both the legs and the base are solid, to keep the centre of gravity low, while the base not only has an uncommonly large footprint, but uses five peripheral spikes, so excellent stability is assured. Said spikes use thumbwheel lock-nuts, whose tightness (or lack thereof) will need to be checked periodically.



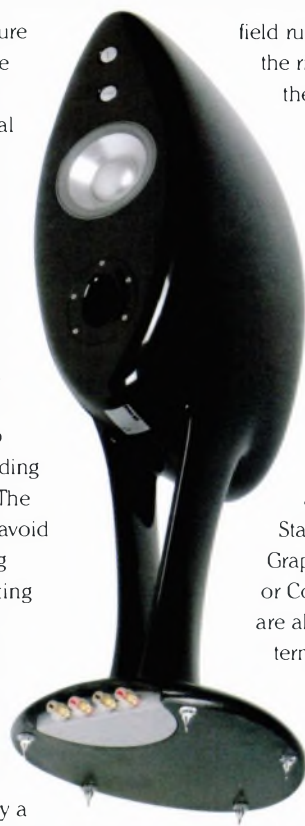
The shape of the enclosure has several implications. Like an egg, the curved shape confers immense mechanical strength and stiffness, but also has acoustic benefits inside and out. The curved edges around the front, vertical as well as horizontal, help to 'spread' any baffle-edge diffraction effects across a broad range. Inside, only the front and back are broadly parallel, so internal reflections and standing waves are also well spread. The legs are carefully shaped to avoid blocking sound from passing under the speaker, and creating reflections here.

The two identical cone drivers are mounted back-to-back, so that the bass-only one fires backwards. Their magnets are mechanically coupled by a force-cancelling tensioned rod, and mechanically decoupled from the enclosure by lossy mounting arrangements. Reflex loading is applied via twin opposing ports front and rear, again to balance and cancel any mechanical reaction forces. The two dome drivers are both loaded behind by individual tapered tube transmission lines hidden inside the enclosure, to absorb rearward radiation, and are also mechanically decoupled from the enclosure via lossy mountings.

The bass drivers have very open and unobstructive frames, and use a short-coil/ long-gap motor section. Special radial magnets (the

field running inside-to-outside the ring rather than between the flat surfaces) help reduce stray flux, so additional shielding isn't needed. The tweeter's magnet is carefully shaped to achieve an extremely high (2.4 Tesla) flux. The whole thing – enclosure, legs and base – is finished in a high gloss metallic automotive paint.

Standard colours include Graphite, Grey, Beige, White or Copper; bespoke options are also available. Twin terminal pairs are neatly and discreetly concealed in the base, with van den Hul signal cable incorporated



in the legs carrying signal up to the enclosure.

The in-room, far-field averaged measurements show a beautifully smooth and even frequency balance, all the way from 80Hz up to the extreme top end of the audio band. Apart from a modest dip around 110Hz and an even smaller peak at 300Hz, the gently down-tilted trend holds within +/-2dB limits that are remarkably tight by normal in-room standards. Below 80Hz there's some excess, especially in the 30-60Hz bass octave, presumably because the ports are tuned to around 40Hz. Partly because of this mid-bass emphasis, ultimate extension is pretty good, registering roughly -8dB at 20Hz under far-field in-room conditions. Sensitivity is bang on the claimed 89dB/W, a respectable enough figure, though the load is fairly demanding through the low frequency region, with a 3 Ohm minimum at 38Hz.

The B1 flew in from South Africa just in time for this review, and with very ▶

▶ little mileage on the clock. They therefore needed a few hours to get the juices flowing through its voice coils, and its muscles properly flexed. After a couple of days regular use, things had settled down noticeably, and an initial mild nasality had substantially abated, revealing a speaker of great delicacy and subtlety, but above all quite exceptional and entirely unexaggerated neutrality.

In my room the bass region did sound a shade heavy, even with the speaker well clear of walls. Out of interest I experimented with port blocking. All rooms are different, of course, especially in the way their bass modes are excited. Under my conditions it sounded a little too dry with both blocked, but with the rear one blocked and front open it seemed just right. Perhaps Vivid Audio might try experimenting with resistive foam bungs, for fine-tuning.

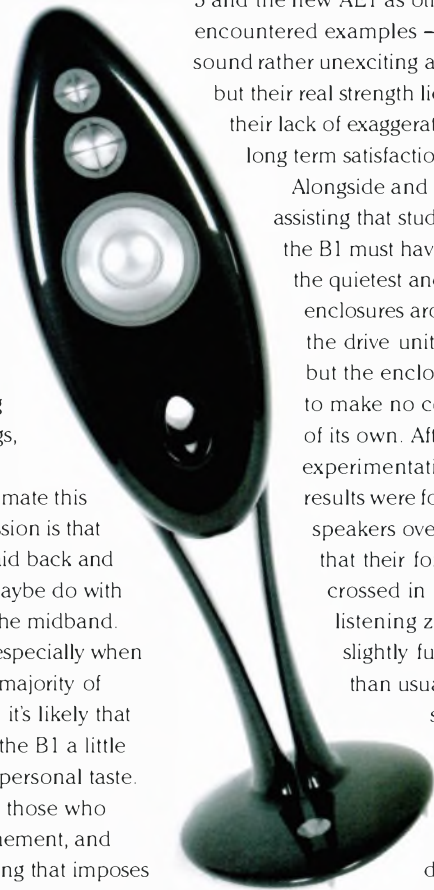
It's easy to underestimate this speaker. The first impression is that it's perhaps a little too laid back and restrained, and could maybe do with a little more pizzazz in the midband. It is laid back, for sure, especially when compared to the great majority of speakers out there, and it's likely that some people may find the B1 a little too restrained for their personal taste. But this is a speaker for those who appreciate genuine refinement, and who don't want something that imposes its own character on the proceedings. What you get here is an essential lack of character: a transducer that simply gets itself out of the way and lets the music flow through – along with the sonic signatures of the system components further upstream.

Looking at speakers I've encountered recently, many tend to emphasise

some or other part of the midband. The two Tannoys (Kensington and Yorkminster) have a little too much output 250-900Hz; the Triangle Magellan is a little strong 1-2kHz; the Wilson Benesch A.C.T. and Curve are both a bit obvious around 700Hz-1.1kHz. All these peaks and plateaus add some degree of 'character' that is strictly speaking anomalous, but which usually assists voice intelligibility and often sounds attractive. Truly neutral speakers like this Vivid Audio B1 – and I could also cite the Rega R9, the JBL K2s, B&O's Beolab 5 and the new AE1 as other recently encountered examples – do tend to sound rather unexciting at first listen, but their real strength lies in the way their lack of exaggeration ensures long term satisfaction.

Alongside and undoubtedly assisting that studied neutrality, the B1 must have just about the quietest and least 'boxy' enclosures around. You hear the drive units, of course, but the enclosure seems to make no contribution of its own. After a little experimentation, best results were found with the speakers over-angled, so that their forward axes crossed in front of the listening zone, and slightly further apart than usual too. Then the speakers themselves then seemed to disappear to an uncanny degree, and

there was absolutely no tendency for the sound to cluster around the speakers themselves. I slipped Joni Mitchell's 'Shadows and Night' onto the turntable, shut my eyes, and was transported back twenty five years, while the end of my listening room was transformed into the Santa Barbara County Bowl, as Michael



Brecker's sax soared above Jaco Pastorius' fey bass lines: room-filling, rich, totally believable and utterly magical.

I noticed one day that a slight midband nasality seemed to have disappeared – quite forgetting that I'd substituted a valve power amp for my usual solid state device the previous day. Going back to solid state, the nasality returned, which only serves to confirm this speaker's unfailing honesty. It doesn't glamorise or hype the sound, but it doesn't hide anything either, and while it looks utterly sensational, it's sonically remarkably discreet and unintrusive, merely allowing the system to get on and make music.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Type: | Three-and-a-half-way, reflex loaded |
| Power Handling: | 50-300 Watts RMS |
| Bandwidth: | 39Hz – 41kHz +/-2dB ±6dB @ 35Hz and 44kHz |
| Sensitivity: | 89dB |
| Nominal Impedance: | 4 Ohms |
| Drive units: | |
| Low-Frequency - | 2x 158mm metal cone bass units (coupled) |
| Midrange - | 50mm metal dome |
| High-Frequency - | 26mm metal dome |
| Crossover frequencies: | 100Hz, 900Hz, 4kHz |
| Enclosure: | 40 litre loaded carbon fibre filled polymer |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 265 x 1095 x 375 mm |
| Weight: | 38kg |
| Finish: | High gloss metallic automotive: Graphite, Grey, Beige, White or Copper as standard; bespoke options available |
| Price: | £6590 |

Manufacturer:

Vivid Audio (PTY) Ltd.
PO Box 343, Kloof 3640, South Africa
Tel. (27) 31 764 2148
E-mail. info@vividspeakers.com
Net. www.vividspeakers.com



spendor

spendor

Spendor S3e Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Not so long ago, the high-quality stand mount seemed like an endangered species. The likes of the SL600 were long gone and the market had swung decisively in favour of floorstanding cabinets with their cleaner aesthetic and lack of iron-mongery. Added impetus arrived with AV and its demands for greater efficiency and bass extension at the expense of quality. But in those last ten words lies the flaw in the fashion. Bigger volume delivers the extra bass and demands less power from the driving amplifier, but it brings bigger panels and a much livelier cabinet – with an independent spirit and a strong desire to sing along. The trouble is that, rather like the blustering Colonel Blimp character singing hymns in a Boulting brothers' comedy, it's tone deaf with absolutely no sense of rhythm.

In contrast, a small box benefits from inherently stiff panels, before you even start to brace it. The small driver and small, enclosed volume may not deliver massive bandwidth, but what does arrive is clean and precise. And while floorstanders have caught on to the benefits of narrow baffles, stiffness in those is even more important. The bottom line is very simple indeed: If you can't make a tall cabinet stiff it probably isn't worth making it at all. The fashion for cheap floorstanders is exactly that – a fashion. And just like flared trousers, they'll disappear in time (from the hi-fi arena at least) because as far as quality goes, there's no reason for them to survive. So perhaps the rejuvenation in the fortunes of stand-mounted miniatures should be seen as inevitable. Be that as it may, it doesn't alter the fact that these new Davids rising to face the established Goliaths have got

an uphill battle on their hands and a considerable point to prove.

Spendor's S3e is a perfect example of the breed. It's got all the fundamental elements that you'd expect, along with a few wrinkles all its own. Like the ProAc Tablette I reviewed in the last issue, the Spendor is also the latest in a long and illustrious line of such compact two-ways. Spendor were, after all, one of the original LS3/5a licensees, although in this case, the S3e is a larger speaker than the granddaddy of them all. Adopting the now standard 'deeper than it is wide' proportions keeps the frontal area small, although it lacks the pleasing balance of the tiny Tablette. Indeed, despite Spendor's exemplary standards of finish and quality veneers, the S3e does look a little drab when presented naked. Put the subtly shaped grille back

on and they look a whole lot nicer. But the really clever bits in these speakers are beneath the skin.

The cabinet itself is constructed from 18mm MDF which isn't unusual. What is unusual is the clever bracing. A substantial circumferential brace runs around the cabinet at two-fifths height, wedged up against the rear of the bass driver's motor, but separated from it by a thin damping pad. This is designed to anchor the driver against the rear and side panels without feeding spurious energy back into it. Theoretically that should make for better, crisper dynamics due to the stable mounting of the driver, while the decoupling should take the edge off of cabinet induced smearing and intermodulation distortion. A similar approach is employed with the tweeter, but this time the clamping is delivered by a lateral cross brace. Finally, a full width slot port is positioned at the bottom of the rear panel, its upper element providing yet another lateral brace. The end result is a cabinet that is both stiff and (from the drivers' point of view) inert, without resorting to massive amounts of weight or overbuilding. It's a carefully struck balance that's reflected in the S3e's sound.

The crossover and terminals are executed with similar care. The network itself is constructed from selected components and materials with no series resistors for gain adjustment and to rob the music of energy. The circuit is mounted on a block of MDF which spaces it from the stainless steel terminal plate, reducing the influence of eddy currents (although not between the terminals themselves) the whole lot being clamped together by the



▶ binding posts. Along with a damping layer this construction creates a solid block that helps eliminate vibrational interference as well as flexing in the terminal plate. The bi-wired terminals themselves are substantial five-way designs, with an external clamp so that 4mm plugs connect directly to the post rather than via the threads of the locking section. The whole shebang is held securely in place by a quartet of allen bolts. So, nothing fancy, but plenty of attention to all the little details that matter.



Which brings us, finally, to the drivers employed by the S3e. The 140mm bass-mid unit delivers the lion's share of the music and gets the lion's share of the engineering. A nicely executed injection moulded basket supports a synthetic rubber roll surround that terminates an ep38 polymer cone. The increasingly common bullet-shaped phase plug puts in an appearance here too, and the complex magnet assembly is of course, shielded. The voice coil assembly and surrounding elements

are carefully arranged to allow decent excursion and good heat dissipation, the latter improving power handling. The tweeter is a 27mm soft-dome design, its Sonolux diaphragm backed by a vented pole piece and a substantial motor assembly. Acoustic damping in the rear chambers minimises rear reflections and lowers the fundamental

resonance to extend the useable bandwidth. Don't confuse that with the first break-up mode of the diaphragm, where the higher you can push it the better.

The whole package delivers 86dB efficiency and -3dB points at 60Hz and 20kHz. The -6dB low-frequency corner is reached at 48Hz while impedance is 8 Ohms average and 6.8 Ohms minimum. It's a nicely chosen balance of reasonably easy drive and decent extension from the compact box. I used the S3es on a pair of IF Designs stands, well spaced out from rear and side-walls. I drove them with the 100 Watt Hovland RADIA which is towards the upper end of their power handling (and definitely the

upper end of the acceptable budget). Cabling was, as always, the Nordost Valhalla, while the Wadia 861SE and Clearaudia Master Reference fed the Tom Evans phono and line stages. I also used the Levinson 383, but more of that later.

With the S3es hung on the end of the big system, their strengths are immediately apparent. They combine a classically neutral mid-band with a surprisingly extended bass to create a remarkably coherent picture. As such they deliver a fascinating contrast to the ProAc Tablette that I reviewed last issue. More transparent and with better separation than the smaller speaker, the Spendor is more of a thoroughbred and less of an all-rounder. It delivers what is arguably a more revealing performance but across a narrower dynamic and musical spectrum.

Let's start with the bass, which is impressively extended and even, suggesting that Spendor have got their port spot on. Whilst it lacks weight and real fundamental substance (it IS only a small speaker) the texture and deftness of the low frequencies makes bass both informative and satisfying, whilst its speed and transparency ensures that things are kept moving along. Not the sort of chopped, forced rhythm and drive of a classic flat-earth system, but honest-to-God pacing, spacing and attack. Bass notes have shape and sustain – tails as well as leading edges. It makes for an involving yet relaxed presentation that pulls you into the wonderfully natural and open mid-band. Voices are particularly inviting, well separated and with real character. Aimee Mann is instantly recognizable when she's 'Lost In Space', while Eliza ▶

► Gilkyson's rye double entendres hit their mark on 'One Man Woman' and 'Wonderland'. The S3e effortlessly unraveled the sense behind these lyrics, yet did so without spotlighting or exaggerating the vocal. The balance between Gilkyson's voice and her complex yet spartan backing is perfect, as is the carefully structured arrangement of each set-piece.

This overall coherence is what binds the Spendor's sound together: transparency, separation and detail are double-edged swords, especially when they appear in concert. The S3e manages to maintain a proper sense of proportion (in every sense). So much so that occasionally they startle you. Playing the Dvorak *Cello Concerto* (Gregor Piatigorsky on Living Stereo) I was astonished by a bow striking a music stand as a page is turned. Clearly wood on metal, it's so alien that it stands out like a sore thumb – just as jarring, in fact, as it would be in real life. Likewise, Piatigorsky's breathing, which intrudes to a far greater extent than I'd ever previously noticed, simply because it is so clear and so clearly out of place.

The important thing here is to get this in context, and to do so means appreciating just where this speaker draws the line. Which is easy: Play the Dvorak, with its stunning climaxes at something approaching serious levels and two things happen when the going gets tough. The little Spendor doesn't exactly protest, but it lets you know about the strain you're placing on its physical integrity (and ultimate health). It also starts to get congested, and the mid-band shuts down really quite quickly as it approaches the edge of the dynamic envelope. Which is of course, exactly where the little Tablette impresses.

The Spendor offers a superbly cultured and capable mid-band, underpinned by a beautifully judged and weighted bass. It's crossover and cabinet are essentially invisible, as are the speakers on well-recorded material.

And this remains true as long as you don't open the window too wide – qualitatively or dynamically. The problem with the likes of the Vibe and the RADIA is that they entice the S3e into overreaching itself. However, used in even slightly less exalted company you'll likely never discover (or never notice) the point where it starts to all unravel: Which is where the 383 comes in. Similarly coherent, it carefully circumscribes its dynamic and



information envelope, ensuring that it keeps everything well under control. Hooking up the little Spendor makes for instant satisfaction and a confidence inspiring security. The combination simply puts the music first while succeeding in avoiding drawing any attention to itself. It's transparent enough to convince, dynamic enough to satisfy and well enough proportioned to keep you from noticing what's missing, especially at the bottom-end that has an unquestioning rightness about it.

Of course, the Levinson is far from cheap (as well as far from available) and

I'd love to hear these on the end of something like the superb little Sugden a21 integrated amp. I suspect that the end result might be both deliciously liquid and wide, wide open, making it far greater than the sum of its parts.

This is a classic small monitor design. Natural and informative enough not to embarrass that oft-abused moniker, you can't afford to take liberties with the S3e, either when it comes to partnering equipment or the volume control. Their exquisite attention to detail is amply reflected in their sound. They demand similar care from the end-user in order to deliver their best. Understand what they're about and they'll respond with a remarkably satisfying performance – just don't ask them to step outside their chosen ground. Small but perfectly formed is a horribly overused phrase when it comes to hi-fi, but the S3e actually deserves the epithet. Once you appreciate what's gone into the insides it's easier to understand the quality of what comes out. It all makes perfect sense – which sums things up nicely: physically and sonically! ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| Type: | Stand-mounted, two-way reflex |
| Drive Units: | |
| High Frequency – | 27mm coated fabric dome |
| Low Frequency – | 140mm ep38 polymer cone |
| Sensitivity: | 86dB |
| Impedance: | 80 Ohms (6.8 minimum) |
| Bandwidth: | 60Hz - 20KHz ±3dB |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 165x340x260mm |
| Finishes: | Cherry, Maple, Rosewood, Black Ash |
| Price: | £795 |

Manufacturer:

Spendor Audio Systems
Tel. (44)1323 843474
Net. www.spendoraudio.com

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Roy Gregory - Hi-Fi+ magazine issue 28.



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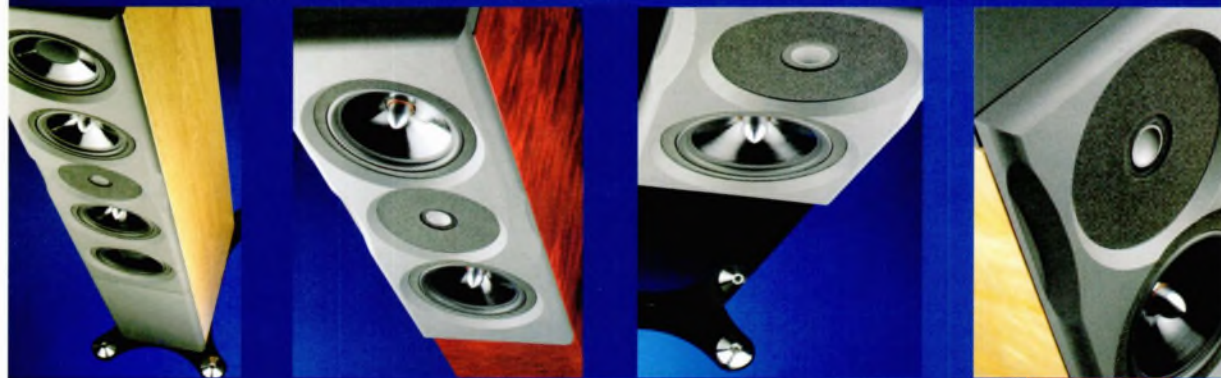
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Stereophile Magazine, October 2002

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Beryllium

Beryllium

JM Labs Electra 907 Be Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

To celebrate their 25-year anniversary Focal:JM Labs have released three limited edition speakers each incorporating a new version of their esteemed Beryllium tweeter. There will be 1000 units of the 907 Be, 500 of the 927 and just 300 of the 937 but, while the two latter models are floor standing, the 907 Be is a stand mounted design which appears to be a little like a scaled down Micro Utopia for approximately half the price. This speaker effectively replaces the Electra 906 though it could never be considered as a modified version of that design as there have been so many changes as to make it a completely new model. It shares the same broad silhouette though it is just a little bit larger in both its width and depth, though not enough to notice. But there is a new bass/mid driver, crossover and connectors and of course that Beryllium unit which has extended the high frequency bandwidth to 37kHz without the use of a super tweeter. There's also a marginal loss of efficiency from 90 to 89dB.

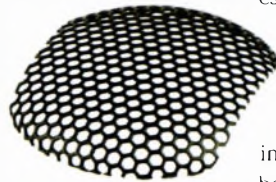
Cabinet construction is very similar to the standard Electra 906 and JM have retained the high mass baffle designed to hold the driver chassis rigidly in place while the cones do the work. It still comprises a 50mm thick piece of medium density fibreboard and the bass/mid unit remains a 165 mm W-coned driver, but now there is a denser sheet of glass laminated with a foam layer twice as thick as normal and this is claimed to give the speaker optimal rigidity and damping. This rather clever W-cone sandwich enables them to vary the thickness and even the order of the lamination to arrive at a different mass/stiffness solution for each and every speaker they build. This one is very different in characteristic from the original, which used two fibreglass layers

and 1.5mm thick structural foam. The newer driver with only one weightier fibreglass layer and its thicker foam has a heavier cone but this is offset by its improved stiffness and better pistonic behaviour, particularly at higher volume levels. At the rear the Electra is now single wired through very nice WBT-type connectors though bi-wired leads can still be easily accommodated.

But it is the tweeter which will justifiably get the most attention. When I first heard the Beryllium device fitted in the Micro Utopia Be it was a revelation and it remains so to this day as I am still using them. This was really one of the only speakers I had ever heard which had what I consider to be a realistic top end balance. To listen to it in a suitable system is an eye and ear opening experience and certainly heaps pressure on the heads of rival manufacturers and the dumbed down tweeters that we have had to put up with for years. Live with the Micro Bes and just about every other high frequency unit you have heard seems thin, pinched, bandwidth limited and artificial. There are many who are extolling the virtues of super-tweeters but these are really only making up for the deficiencies of the standard units that are on offer today. Even JMLabs themselves must have been delighted when they first realised that they could get away without having to incorporate a super-tweeter and all the associated problems of phase and integration that they bring. But I must congratulate them for being bold with its use and not rolling it off into a creamy ball of high

frequency mush. They recognise that music is far more vivid, bright and energetic than most speakers let on and the Beryllium tweeter has the potential to resolve all of these things. I say potential, as the new Focal tweeter places a huge responsibility on the rest of the system and in particular the amplifier and cabling which it is essential to get right if this is to be realised. The version fitted in the limited edition Electra range is designated TCE and is a reduced cost/complexity version of that found in the Utopia. They share the same pure beryllium inverted dome and motor parts but replace the Focus Ring magnetic technology array with a ferrite magnet. But it still covers a 5-octave span from under 1 kHz to almost 40 kHz. It begins its work by reaching well down into the bass/mid driver's range at 850 Hz before extending forever upwards and if you thought that this must be advantageous where driver integration is concerned, you'd be right.

The cabinet finishing, while obviously not to Utopia standards, is excellent though I'd advise leaving the clip-in grilles, which cover the bass/mid driver, off. The only minor quibble is that, given JMLabs standards, I was surprised that the full width aluminium plate that the tweeter is mounted upon hadn't had its edges softened, as those on the review pairs were just too sharp. Apart from that I doubt you would find much to complain about. There are stands available called the SME and these are very much scaled down versions of the Micro Utopia model which has a larger top plate. They are excellent but I should emphasise that I had no suitable



▶ stands with which to compare them but, given the price, you might want to look at alternatives though few will match as well aesthetically.

Being so used to the quality and balance offered by the Micros I began by using the Electra 907 Be sited in the same position, well away from adjacent walls and there, but for

comparison to the Micro, particularly with the Moon amplifier. I went to bed that first night thinking that JM had perhaps been too ambitious tonally with the tweeter and that I would have liked a half a dB less presence. Doesn't sound much does it, a half dB? But think of it across the whole

and ambient detail with a sense of precision and articulation. I settled on the Moon amplifier, a notoriously slow to warm-up device and after a few days the system had settled and gelled and I had grown fully used to its balance. What an interesting and wonderful thing the ear/brain interface is and how quickly it can adapt to changes in tonal balance. What it can't do though is to ignore differences in sheer sound quality and resolution and the message from the Electra was coming through loud and clear. Give it the right partnering equipment and it will deliver the goods but don't blame shortcomings elsewhere in the system on the speaker.

I had recently got hold of Shakti's live *Saturday Night In Bombay* just before the arrival of the 907 Be and had not yet got round to fully exploring it. But, even after a brief run through the disc, the track 'Shringar' particularly intrigued me. A half hour of meditative rolling instrumental conversation, highlighted by the quite incredible playing of Shivkumar Sharma on the Santur. I don't know this instrument at all but it is apparently a plucked string device from the Persian tradition. It has an incredible sound. Alive

with shimmering metallic energy it has so much variability of attack that you could easily believe the strings were being energised with drumsticks rather than fingers. The Electra is in its element here. Its pure speed and refusal to get overburdened by the velocity and complexity of the leading edge means that there is very, very little ▶



operating range of the driver and it becomes a lot more significant. But by the time the system had warmed through the next day I began to realise that they have the

balance just about right. They are not particularly forgiving of poor recordings and if you play a thin sounding piece of music through them they will reflect this and can then certainly seem over bright and a little peaky. But give them something well recorded to resolve and that tweeter just captures your attention with its speed and sheer ability to resolve solid

micro adjustments to toe-in, was where they stayed. Amplification was provided by both the splendid but decidedly different Pathos Classic One and the under-rated integrated Moon i-3 while my Naim CDS 3 provided the source. For the first few hours listening during that first day I was struck with how attractively bright the speaker could sound and how punchy the bass was. The circular port gives a very different sense of bass to the slot-type on the Micros which is smoothness itself but the Electra's speed agility and leading edge control was really excellent and can often give the impression of having a tad more extension. The other early impression was of how precise and pinpoint the soundstage was in



► compression but rather a natural sense of the energy of the instrument and by that I include the tonal range and harmonic variation. If you've ever seen Shakti live you will know that, as soon as the drone instrument starts, a touchable atmosphere of anticipation descends over the concert hall and you know you're in for some seriously stellar playing and a good time.

Well these JMLab speakers do a good job of capturing that sense of place and occasion. This is partially due to their excellent sensitivity to low-level ambient detail but also because the music flows so freely within the picture they paint. From top to bottom there is a real sense

of coherence and integration both tonally and rhythmically which lets you into the music and explains each instrument and their various voices. Exuberant would be a good word to describe both the playing and the way the speaker responds and this band certainly give them a thorough workout as the guitar and eventually the percussion join in. The tabla in particular is quite stunning with its impact and tonal character and there are constant echoes and reminders of the Micro Utopia's sense of uncompressed freedom and sheer stark clarity.

The *True Stereo* CD from Naim (cd080) is another series of live recordings compiling artists who feature on their label, recorded with a pair of microphones and running unprocessed straight onto a Nagra stereo reel to reel analogue tape recorder. Ken Christanson, the man responsible, has

included notes on the various acoustics the different tracks were recorded in and the spatial positioning of each of the instruments or vocals. I think it's a great idea and gives more complete view of each instrument than you'll hear from most live recordings that always

seem to receive some

sort of electronic manipulation. Here the acoustics are live and variously reverberant. Track 1, 'Jump St(u)art' by the colourfully named Jim Gailloro's Split Decision Shadow Puppets gives you a vivid framed picture of a band at work and it is the stability of the soundstage,

the separation and sheer independence of the working musicians that is so enjoyable. I'm glad that JMLabs did not seek to wring the last ounce of bass from the cabinet and sacrifice control for extension because, while you might reasonably expect a bit more weight from this size of cabinet, the control and presence is excellent and it starts and stops very quickly and with a real sense of accuracy. Listen to the left sided acoustic bass on this track and you'll see what I mean. Clean, sharp leading edges, excellent pitch coherence and no sense of blurring, compression or confusion. If the bass wasn't this good I believe that the superb quality of the tweeter would have been for nothing, but the way that it has been musically integrated is what really gives the speaker its continuous appeal.

The 907 Be brings music to a point of focus in front of you. There's nothing vague, sloppy or confused about the way

it does things but it is a very different speaker to the brilliant Micro Utopia. You are far more aware of the tweeter working with the 907 and though, as I mentioned, it has excellent integration between the drivers, the Utopia takes this seamless quality to a completely new level and the tweeter itself is noticeably more refined. So don't audition it as a scaled down Micro, instead pay great attention to the amplification and you will come to appreciate that this is an excellent performer that not only gives you a lot of speaker for the money but also has the ability to survive upgrades to the rest of the system without sounding out of place or outclassed. Well worth a serious listen. ►+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Two way reflex. |
| Drive Units: | |
| Low-frequency - | 165mm W cone mid/bass |
| High-frequency - | 25mm TCE pure beryllium inverted dome. |
| Sensitivity: | 89dB |
| Impedance: | 8 ohms/5ohms @ 170 Hz |
| Connectors: | Single pair (able to accept bi-wires) |
| Dimensions (HxWxD): | 420x231x348mm |
| Weight: | 12Kg |
| Finishes: | |
| Signature - | Burgundy Burr Ash and black lacquer. |
| Classic- | Light Gold Burr Ash and black lacquer. |
| Price: | £1750 a pair. |
| Stands: | £360 a pair. |

UK Distributor:

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Tel. 0845 6602680.

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WANCY
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Tannoy Kensington Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

If I pluck my 1959 Hi-Fi Yearbook from the bookshelf and turn to the chapter on Loudspeakers, there are smudgy black and white pictures of a large number of designs that look a lot like the one reviewed here. Take a look at any hi-fi mag today, and it's quite remarkable how dramatically things have changed. So what place does this, Tannoy's archaic looking Kensington, have in today's world?

One thing's for sure, this speaker has nothing to do with fashion trends. Manufacturing cost and fashion are the two key factors that determine the evolution of loudspeakers, but neither has any relevance here – which of course could very likely be a good thing from a performance point of view.

The Kensington is a throwback, to be sure, and a rather costly one too at £6,500 for a pair. It's one of the latest additions to Tannoy's Prestige series of loudspeakers, which quite deliberately combine classic technology with heritage styling, simply because there's still a demand for just such products, mostly in Far Eastern markets. Are these overseas customers just blinkered by nostalgic yearning for a hi-fi history they probably missed out on fifty years ago? Or do these weirdly retro-style speakers really still have some relevance today?

Let's be frank about it. If there's one lesson to be learned from the history of hi-fi, it's that we've been far too enthusiastic to chuck away the past and embrace the new for its

own sake. We saw it when transistors offered an alternative to valves in the 1960s; when direct drive nearly swept away belt drive in the 1970s; when CD threatened vinyl survival in the 1980s.

Loudspeaker developments have tended to be more evolutionary than revolutionary, but it is possible to identify certain trends and key cusps. The move from mono to stereo was maybe the most obvious and substantial change, but the 1960s also saw the first developments of synthetic cone materials as an alternative to paper pulp, and the replacement of AlNiCo magnets by ferrites. Did these represent an improvement, or were they essentially cost saving and/or marketing opportunities?

As far as the Kensington is concerned, the 1960s might not have happened at all. The driver used in this big two-way design has roots that go way back deep into the mono era: the company's first Dual-Concentric driver actually made its debut (as a FA speaker!) in 1948. And it's interesting to note that the D-C drivers fitted to these more recent additions to the Prestige line seem to be reaching even further back to their origins than some previous Prestige models. This Kensington and its bigger £9,000/pair

Yorkminster brother not only feature the doped fabric surround that reappeared in the Dimension series, but also use costly AlNiCo magnets, which is one reason why they're rather more expensive than the Dimensions. (A third, smaller Sandringham is part of the same three-strong range, but has ferrite magnets to keep the price down to £2,850/pair.) Comparison to the Dimensions is very relevant here, because the three new Prestige models are direct equivalents to the three Dimensions.

Like the latter's TD8, TD10 and TD12 models, the Sandringham, Kensington and Yorkminster come with 8-inch, 10-inch and 12-inch Dual-Concentric drivers respectively, with appropriately matching enclosure volumes. They feature 'heritage' rather than Art Deco enclosure styling, and omit the Supertweeter fitted as standard on the Dimensions. But then the Dimensions don't have those AlNiCo magnets, even as an option.

Which is maybe a pity, since I suspect that we Westerners are unlikely to be as enthusiastic for the aesthetics of these Prestige models as customers in the Far East. I don't dislike the Kensington's appearance myself, because it sits quite nicely in an Edwardian-tinged environment, but don't think its style will have a particularly wide appeal in Britain, especially in its deeply unfashionable Mahogany veneer.

The beating heart of the Kensington is a 10-inch Dual-Concentric, a two-way drive unit with a 7-inch diameter pulp paper cone, plus a relatively large 52mm alloy dome horn-loaded tweeter that fires through the middle. Since this needs to be up near seated head



▶ height, the relatively large driver also has to be well off the ground. The front view is therefore necessarily bulky, over 1m tall and also a full 40cms wide, partly because the large (105 litre) enclosure is loaded by a distributed port system that uses the angled slots between the front and the sides as the actual port. Two full-height slots are incorporated in each of these edge mouldings, the port consisting of the middle third of each. The enclosure here is built from a combination of 18mm birch ply (front and back) and 18mm particle board (wrap), heavily damped and braced, giving a substantial total weight of 37kg.

Strengthening the retro theme, the full-height, thick-frame grille is made from a classic Berber-style flecked brown and cream fabric, and should really be removed for best sound quality. This leaves the gilt-frame driver in full view, which doesn't give me a problem. But it also reveals a very flashy gilt panel inscribed with an unholy mixture of typefaces, using a couple of gilded bolts to select between a choice of five different settings each for both treble energy and treble roll-off.

On the rear panel, the terminal block has no fewer than five socket/binding posts, arranged in a ring. Four are used to feed the two separate voice coils of the Dual-Concentric driver, each via its equalized and 12dB/octave slope filter network. Good phase linearity is promised by inverting the tweeter phase. The fifth terminal is connected to the cast frame of the drive unit, so it may be earthed back to the amplifier to improve RF rejection, provided appropriate

cabling is available. (Tannoy has a 5-conductor Reference cable to suit, though it's quite costly.)

A major reason why I wanted to review the Kensington was because

I'd already tried and been very

impressed by its bigger Yorkminster brother, yet felt there was a good chance that this smaller variation on the same theme might well prove even better, as well as significantly less expensive. Better, that is, in the way its bass end matched my particular room, since the Yorkminster had erred a little on the heavy side under my conditions. It didn't quite work out as I'd expected, but check out my Speaker's Corner column elsewhere in this issue for further discussion on the topic of bass/room matching.

Above 80Hz, the Yorkminster and Kensington delivered very similar measured in-room frequency responses, but the differences in both size and bass tuning created very different relative outputs through those bottom two octaves. Indeed, whereas the Yorkminster has very active and energetic ports tuned to a low 30Hz, the Kensington's

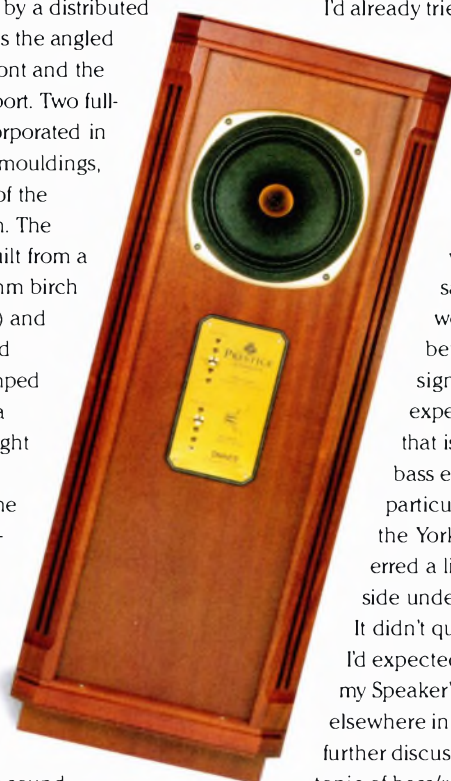
distributed port has much greater damping and is tuned to 50Hz, and as a result this smaller model is relatively lean and rolls off quite rapidly below 40Hz.

The good news is that the overall balance looks rather good, though the mid-band is a shade prominent and the top end a little uneven. Furthermore, sensitivity is quite high, at around 93dB nominal, and the load stays comfortably above 6 Ohms throughout, so this speaker should make a very suitable partner for valve amps.

While it's true that the lack of serious deep bass weight was obvious enough, this by no means spoiled a truly delightful and exceptionally involving loudspeaker. Indeed, it's probably one reason why a loudspeaker with a rather 'heavy' appearance actually sounds very agile and light on its feet. Furthermore, it has the sort of mid-range transparency, delicacy and sheer believability that somehow always seems to go hand in hand with AlNiCo magnets.

One might fairly point out that the sound isn't the last word in smoothness, especially in the upper registers, which have good clarity and openness, along with excellent headroom, but also some lack of sweetness with slightly coarsened textures. One

disadvantage of Tannoy's AlNiCo motor is that it uses the older 'pepperpot' tweeter horn, rather than the rather smoother and more recent 'tulip waveguide' that is used in the ferrite equivalents. A horn tweeter is a much more directional device than a regular direct radiator type. Tannoy's horn radiates across a 90-degree cone, whereas a baffle-mounted dome will spread sound through 180+ degrees over much of its range. This dual-concentric driver also crosses



► over at a relatively low 1.1kHz, both factors adding up to reduced room reflections of presence and treble frequencies. This is neither a good nor a bad thing, but does give a rather different net effect,



keeping the soundstage rather more 'box-bound' in location terms, but also delivering a very precise, accurate and stable stereo image.

The nominally 'flat' settings of the treble pre-sets seemed fine under our conditions, but these adjustments do permit a very predictable range of system matching flexibility here. Although the bass region as a whole is quite dry, best results were nevertheless obtained with the speakers well clear of walls. Moving them back close to the wall did tend to thicken and thump up the bass and make it sound a little too obvious. They also worked best when set over-angled, so that the axes cross in front of the



listening zone, to avoid sitting right on the rather 'hot' tweeter axis. This might not be ideal from an aesthetic point of view, but it would be a shame not to take full advantage of this speaker's very considerable performance potential.

The Kensington's biggest strength lies in the delicacy and transparency of the mid-band, and this has an enormous influence on voices in particular. On 'Indoor Fireworks', the plaintive, breathy quality of Elvis Costello's voice has never sounded more effective or expressive. Likewise, when I slipped Jim White's wonderfully bizarre *Wrong Eyed Jesus* CD into the player, this speaker seemed particularly effective at peeling back veils and revealing both the essence and the lyric of this quite complex and densely layered mix.


Most of the listening was done using my regular Naim NAC552/NAP500 amplifier, yet this speaker makes the mid-band so sweet and natural, it was almost as though I'd swapped it for a valve amp. It's not a perfect analogy, but does convey something of what this Dual-Concentric driver brings to the party. There is a slight 'boxiness' to the mid-range here, though it doesn't sound as though the box itself is responsible; more probably it's due to the slight over-emphasis in the upper mid-band, which certainly aids intelligibility, but at some cost in coloration.



A good test for any speaker is how clearly it reveals the effects of changing components further up the chain. The Kensington clearly revealed the quite obvious differences, for examples between Vertex AQ and Chord

Signature speaker cables; between the NAP500 and an ECS stereo power amp; or between Burmester 001 and Naim CDS3 CD players. Likewise, vinyl replay and valve amplification both clearly revealed their strengths and weaknesses vis a vis CD and solid state. And while it

was unfailingly honest in revealing the signal it was being fed, it has an essentially kindly nature that rarely gets aggressive or unduly untidy.

This is an exceptionally impressive speaker, partly because of a generally fine all round sonic performance, but most particularly for a deliciously realistic mid-band that does much to reinforce my prejudice in favour of AlNiCo magnets. My worry is that dealers and customers won't take its old-fashioned styling seriously. Perhaps Tannoy can be persuaded to package this very superior AlNiCo 10-inch Dual-Concentric in a Dimension enclosure, the better to appeal to Western tastes. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Reflex loaded dual-concentric |
| Power Handling: | 50-225Watts RMS |
| Power Handling: | 135Watts RMS continuous |
| Bandwidth: | 29Hz - 22kHz (±6dB) |
| Sensitivity: | 93dB |
| Nominal impedance: | 8 Ohm |
| Drive Unit: | Alnico magnet Dual Concentric driver: |
| High Frequency - | Horn-loaded 52mm alloy dome |
| Low Frequency - | 250mm treated paper pulp cone with twin roll fabric surround |
| Crossover: | 1.1kHz; 2nd order compensated |
| Adjustments: | ±3dB 1.1 - 22kHz shelf +2dB/-6dB per octave, 5 - 22kHz slope |
| Enclosure Volume: | 105 litres, distributed port |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 406x1100x338 mm |
| Weight: | 37kg ea. |
| Finish: | Mahogany veneer |
| Price: | £6500 |

Manufacturer:

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A landmark loudspeaker for the last eight years, the legendary Virgo has been updated and has spawned two impressive offspring.

Virgo's offspring...?!

Virgos are famed for **HOLOGRAPHIC IMAGING**: "the huge, three-dimensional, walk-in sound stage" and **MUSICALITY**: "I couldn't ignore the music... I was always drawn in, further and further..." (Stereophile on the new Virgo IIIs).

Now Audio Physic have refreshed the slim Virgo II floor-standing formula as the **PADUA**, still at the old price of £3k. This model is even more elegant and performs better than the earlier Virgo, with drive units and other improvements cascaded down from the high-level Avanti.

Padua offers the classic Audio Physic imaging with increased dynamics, better bass control and greater clarity and detail.

The other offshoot – **BRILON** – is more radical: a stand-mount speaker with the same outstanding drive units as the new Virgo III. A very practical feature: the £1800 speaker can be tuned to work well on a shelf by reducing the bass output.

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Townshend Audio TA565 Universal Player

by Roy Gregory

A couple of years ago I received an invitation from the irrepressible Max Townshend to go round and hear his latest toys. Always an entertaining prospect, I needed little persuading. But when the evening was over I was especially glad to have made the trip. Max was as evangelical as ever, flogging his latest hi-bit hobbyhorse whilst cheerfully forecasting the demise of CD, LP and just about anything else that might stand in the path of digital perfection. One gets used to this and learns to apply the necessary – and very large – pinch of salt. But as plausible as Max's arguments might have been, the really convincing case was made by the system he was playing. Even with "BS Filter" switched to maximum it was easy to appreciate that the musical results I was hearing were more than a little bit special. Special enough to give me considerable encouragement regarding the performance potential of hi-bit digital systems.

There were two new elements in the system that night: one was the neat little super-tweeter now known as the Maximum, the other was a prototype universal player based on the original Pioneer model. Of course, the two technologies travel hand in hand, but whilst the Maximum is virtually indistinguishable from the tweeters I saw and heard that night, and has been available for some time now, enthusiastically reviewed in these and other pages, the player has taken a rather longer time to complete. This is reflected in the fact that the unit I have sitting on my equipment rack

has nothing in common with the one I originally heard, including the donor unit itself.

The TA565 is, in that long tradition of audiophile digital development, a modification to an existing player. In this case that machine is Pioneer's DV565S-a, selected after careful consideration. Importantly, it's a universal player, compatible with all the existing disc formats, so as well as CDs it will play SACD, DVD-V and DVD-A. Also, being from Pioneer who are technology leaders in reading optical discs, and who help define the various performance parameters



and format standards to which the entire industry conforms, it also reads a whole host of other digitally encoded formats, both musical and visual, everything including MP3 and J-pegs from your digital camera. It also has a full complement of discrete multi-channel outputs, SPDif digital outputs, component and composite video outputs and a pair of scart sockets. So you should be able to connect the Townshend to just about any kind of system and use it to play any sort of disc short of an LP record. I'll be giving the TA565 to AS to comment on its multi-channel and

AV performance in the next issue. I'll confine my comments to its stereo outputs, although even that means covering CD, SACD and the various DVD options.

The design brief for the TA version was to apply cost-no-object engineering to the sonically critical elements of an otherwise sound design. Despite the appearance of the slim-line casework and cheesy plastic transport the basic elements that constitute the DV565S-a are remarkably capable. Just listen

to the digital output for a serious surprise. Despite its affordable price, the Pioneer offers an extremely high specification digital stage based around a Burr-Brown 1791 24bit/192kHz multi-bit

PCM chipset, teamed with a Philips SAA7893HL chipset to mate it with SACD discs. The Philips element acts as an interface between the DSD data-stream and the Burr-Brown chipset, which takes the DSD data and converts it to PCM before converting it to analogue, thus meaning that the signal from all formats employs the same decoders. But before you cry foul, this situation is far from unusual, especially when you consider that virtually all the effects, mastering and delay units used in both studios and multi-channel amps operate in PCM. Unless you go to extraordinary lengths to preserve the integrity of the DSD data stream, some form of almost casual PCM conversion seems almost inevitable. In the case of some recordings the DSD signals must be feeling schizophrenic the number



► of times they get converted back and forth.

Technologically speaking, the TA565 follows a well-trodden path. This is a two-box machine, the second chassis containing the expensive power supply components precluded from the original Pioneer design by budgetary constraint. There are three separate supplies, delivering $\pm 24V$ for the audio outputs and 12V DC for the digital stages.

to digital processor performance, attributing a pervasive haze to the sound.

Both the main chassis and power-supply benefit from substantial stainless steel casework and extensive damping, both of the internal and external elements. But not satisfied with that, Townshend have taken isolation a whole

just to overcome the natural prejudices inherent in such a price (or should that be ego?) sensitive market. However, as I've already mentioned, it's far from the first player to step this way, and some of the best sounding early CD players involved similar mathematical challenges, while more recently,

Tom Evans performed similar surgery on another Pioneer

player to produce the superb Eikos CD player. The message here is clear: listen to the sound before you try to decipher the numbers – which is as neat an aphorism for the current digital

format war as I've yet come across.

Of course, the TA565's trump card is its universal nature; the fact that it will play any disc you care

to throw at it, now or in the foreseeable

future. That has

always been the promise of universal machines. The problem is that, until now, their performance has always been too variable across the various formats, emasculating their versatility. The first (and most important) bridge that the Townshend player must cross is the tightrope of even-handedness. It's not enough to sound good on CD and DVD-A at the expense of SACD – or any other permutation of two out of the three major formats. The excellent Krell SACD1 succeeded by being equally adept with both CD and SACD, making it something of a first. By adding the various DVD



The supply itself is extensively filtered to eliminate the deleterious influence of RF.

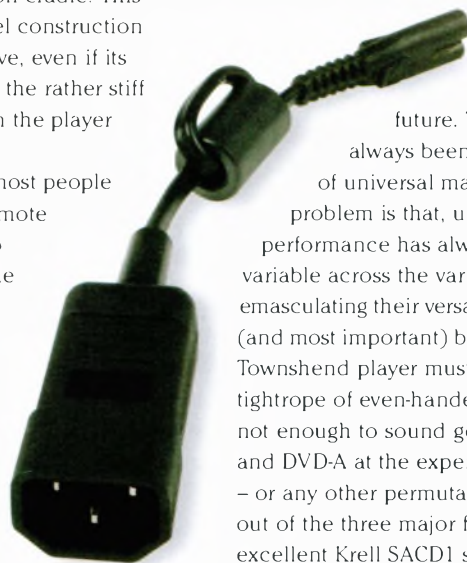
Once inside the player proper the voltages are heavily regulated by task specific devices placed as closely as possible to the circuits they feed. These deliver 5.0V to the DAC chips and the necessary 3.0V to the clock circuit, the close proximity of the regulation helping to reduce jitter. The signal from the DAC is fed to a proprietary circuit, thus bypassing the surface mount and op-amp based Pioneer analogue stage. Instead, the TA565 uses a pair of specially selected, minimalist op-amp chips, each containing only five active devices surrounded with high-quality discrete resistors. Townshend have identified non-linearities in surface-mount resistors as a crucial contributor

stage further by incorporating a hanging suspension cradle. This neat, stainless-steel construction is certainly effective, even if its instability renders the rather stiff control buttons on the player all but useless.

There again, most people will rely on the remote control anyway so I guess it's only me that will see this as a problem.

The end result is functional and impressively solid, rather than a thing of beauty.

It also carries a price-tag that reads £2500 – and that's a tenfold increase over the DV565S-a, which means that the TA is going to have to go some



► increases its appeal but also the potential pitfalls.

Assessing the TA565 multi-standard capabilities is far from straightforward. There are so few recordings available across all the major formats that direct comparison becomes almost impossible, the more so given uncertainty over mastering and source materials which mean that even apparently identical performances can vary significantly in quality. What's more, the available catalogue, limited as it is, is itself uneven, SACD being far better served both in terms of sound quality and repertoire. All of which places the reviewer in something of a cleft stick, shorn of his accustomed comfort zone, comparative listening. In fact, challenging as it is, the change is quite refreshing, comparison being a useful tool but also something of a crutch. Without its support, one's forced to assess each format (as replayed by this machine) on its own merits, examine the musical communication and integrity of the performance. It's a far purer form of the art.

The system used for the listening was the familiar Vibe/Pulse, RADIA, OBX-R2 set up, wired with Nordost Valhalla throughout and including the Maximum super tweeters. The TA565 was thoroughly warmed up using disc from all formats and used both with and without its suspension cradle. Unfortunately, much as I wanted to discard it on practical grounds, the musical fluidity and low-level information it added to the music made it indispensable.

CD Replay

Let's establish some sort of perspective straight away. This is not the best CD player I've ever used: It is, for instance, handily

surpassed by the Wadia 861SE. Having said that, it is the best CD player I've used at its price. Its sound is characterized by a slightly forward, breathy immediacy and a tremendous sense of energy, helped by a generous output level. This brings music a greater feeling of enthusiasm than poise, but given the overly restrained sound of many CDs, that's no bad thing. In comparison to the Wadia, the Townshend lacks focus, stage depth and transparency.

Listen longer and you also miss the micro-dynamic delicacy

characteristic purity. She tracks the syncopated rhythms beautifully, bringing the slightly rocky, hesitant quality to the track's progress that makes it so instantly recognizable.

The brass interlude is all about breathy stabs rather than the complex harmonics of the instrument, leading edges in the nicely tactile bass taking precedence over texture. With its excellent lateral separation there's a live feel to the music, reinforced by the sheer presence of the presentation. What's missing is the brittle poignance that comes from the very best digital and analogue front-ends.

One thing that I did discover was the huge impact that a Statmat has on the sound of the TA565. It brings a far more refined and defined quality to the music, making voices in particular, better focused, intonation far more subtle, phrasing more fluid and explicit. Rather like the suspension (that has a similar effect) I'd consider it an essential accessory for anybody considering the Townshend player.

But moving to the other end of the musical spectrum, we play to the Townshend's strengths rather than its weaknesses. The

Turnabout recording of the
Rachmaninov



and tonal subtlety of the bigger player, but this has to be read in the context of a four to one price ratio. Playing familiar recordings, the Wadia is immediately more accessible and captivating, but the Townshend retains its own appeal. Janis Ian's voice is bold and solid when she sings 'At 17', bigger and more forward than I'm used to, with a slight loss of definition and her

Symphonic Dances (Johanos/Dallas) re-mastered by Analogue Productions is thrown forth with a marvelous inevitability to the ascending steps of its opening crescendo. The drums are impressively explosive with skin and body ►

▶ combining to great effect. The unfettered wide-range dynamics bring a tremendous sense of tension and power, while there's a smooth sweeping grace to the quieter passages. Likewise, Gabriel's 'Biko' revels in the ease with which the TA565S delivers the scale of the open-air choir and massive bass beat. Rock and pop recordings in general thrive on the Townshend's drive and energy, while jazz enjoys its rhythmic organization and leading edge attack. For subtlety and texture you might want to look to a player like the Resolution Audio Opus 21.

Johanos Rachmaninov is impressive and excitingly muscular, another VOX recording, the Slatkin/St Louis *Pictures At An Exhibition* (Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 4004) but this time re-mastered to SACD, is both dynamically authoritative and subtly beguiling. The orchestra enjoys a beautifully developed and coherent acoustic: instrumental tonality and identity are never in question, the whole ensemble possessing a natural power and warmth. But the really impressive part is the

TA565S did a wonderful job on the two Mo-Fi Aimee Mann discs. Don't go getting the idea that I only play Mo-Fi SACDs: It's just that they do offer consistently superior sound. The Gabriel re-masters, Talk Talk and Ray Brown (on Telarc) all came up equally well, and if the Mo-Fi discs represent the cream, then even the homogenized milk tastes pretty damned good, with absolutely none of the skimmed milk thinness of so many CDs. When I say white water, it's not rapids I'm referring to.

The sound of the Townshend replaying SACD is characterized by its winning combination of transparency, warmth, substance and impressive dynamics. It is direct without being in your face (unless the music demands it) and serves the recordings well.

Whether we're talking DSD originals like the Tilson Thomas *Mahlers* or a 1956 mono re-issue like *Steamin'*, it never imposes the format on the music; The performance always comes first, something that is too seldom the case with other, more constipated digital formats.

I'm not saying the Townshend is close to perfect. It lacks the absolute stability and separation of the SACD1 for instance, but its chosen compromise is a skillfully balanced one, with its inviting warmth and substance going a long way to make up for any loss of detail or immediacy. These are short comings that appear when compared to a good record player, albeit one whose phono stage costs more than the TA565 Simply used as a stand-alone source its difficult to imagine even the most hardened skeptic being disappointed with the results the Townshend delivers from SACD.



but in all other respects, the two-box Townshend is at or near the head of its class when it comes to Red Book replay.

SACD Replay

After playing CDs, inserting an SACD into proceedings comes as a bit of a shock. Suddenly, all the space, depth and texture that was lacking in the CD replay is dramatically restored. But it's not just a cosmetic change. It's almost as if the player steps back from the process of reproduction, taking the mechanics, its sonic fingerprint with it. Sure, there's more air and more detail, but it's the sense of musical flow and the expressive qualities generated as a result that step right to the fore. Whereas the

access to the acoustic space. The presentation is far from forward yet there still seems to be less between you and the orchestra, less obstructing their collective energy, less obscuring their collective impact. Dynamics are both quick and beautifully graduated, even at the fff end of the range, where complex crescendos are both appropriately sudden and possessing superb inner definition.

By now you'll have gathered that I'm seriously impressed with the TA565 SACD replay. It really underlines the superiority of the format over and above standard Red Book replay. *Steamin' With The Miles Davis Quintet* is one of those discs that's available in a whole host of formats, yet the Townshend playing Mo-Fi's SACD release bettered everything excepting my Analogue Productions 180g LP. Likewise, the

► DVD Replay

I've left DVD until last as in many ways it's the most confused and confusing of the three main format options. Only is there the issue of DVD-V (and its two-channel 24/96 option) as opposed



to DVD-A, but the whole format is inextricably linked to multi-channel music reproduction whilst I'm concerned primarily with two-channel performance.

The option to actually exploit the "versatile" in the disc title to offer a 24bit/96kHz stereo disc seemed to have died a death after initial interest from the likes of Classic Records and Chesky. However, as DVD-A and SACD both struggle to establish themselves as viable mainstream options, it might be the consolation prize we'll all wind up with. Classic are certainly hedging their bets and have recently released dual sided discs with their confusingly named DAD standard (Digital Audio Disc, 24/96) on one side and DVD-A

(24/192) on the other. These they call HDADs, or Hybrid DVDs, which it seems to me, simply adds to the general confusion, especially when Hybrid SACDs will play on CD players and HDADs won't. What was wrong with the original nomenclature only God and Mike Hobson know, but silly names aside, these are some of

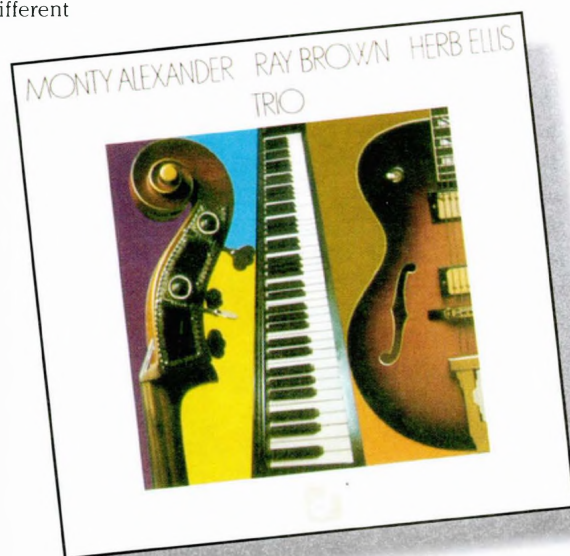
the most interesting DVD based discs to come my way, both in terms of technology and repertoire. And whilst they still don't overcome the issue of backward compatibility with CD replay systems, with just about every home in the UK now owning a DVD-V* player, they do make some sense. Loading DVDs is a tortuously slow process, and in this regard the TA565 is no different to any

other player. It also demands connection to a TV screen if you want to access the disc menus and really exploit the various options on offer. But fear not, you can happily play and navigate discs from the front-panel or remote, just so long as you're prepared to accept the odd misstep and don't want to do anything too fancy. However, this operational

impenetrability does once again underline the close, almost assumed ties between DVD and multi-channel/AV applications.

The Townshend will obviously play both sides of the Classic HDADs, an exercise which clearly demonstrates the superiority of 2-channel DVD-A over the 24/96 option. Whether playing the well worn Netania Davrath recording of Canteloube's *Songs Of The Auvergne* (HDAD 2002) or the Maurice Abravanel/Utah Symphony performance of Mahler's *Eighth*, the red labeled 24/192 side delivers significantly more musical involvement and communication. I think this is founded in the greater dynamic contrasts and truer colours of the DVD-A encoding that leave the 24/96 tracks sounding congealed and homogenized in comparison.

Either way, both the DVD-V and DVD-A options deliver better sound and more musical integrity



than my CD copy of the Davrath. Which is just as well, because the 24/192, two-channel transfer is a rare beast indeed. The whole point of DVD discs is that the storage real estate can be deployed in a variety of different ways. ►

*My niece recently shamed my brother into buying one by returning from a film night with her Guides troop and announcing that of the twenty families represented, hers was the only one without a DVD player. It's a tale that's illustrative of just who and what is driving DVD adoption. I'm afraid those interested in high quality music come pretty far down the list of interested parties.

► The increased capacity of the DVD-A disc has more to do with wanting to offer five uncompressed channels of 24/96 than improving the resolution of stereo recordings. So, whilst the option is there, don't expect too many mainstream companies to make use of it. The problem is that without mainstream support we might simply revert to a 24/96 de facto standard.

Listening to a range of commercially available DVD-As underlines this fact. Everything from Missy Elliott's *So Addictive* to Neil Youngs abrasive *Road Rock* and on as far, even, as yet another version of *Rumours*, none of these discs even begin to approach the reproductive capabilities of the 24/96 layer on the Classic discs. Okay, so that's partly down to the quality of the original recordings, but it also reflects the fact that none of these discs contain a data rate higher than 24/96 either. What's more, these commercially available discs don't come close to the performance of the commercial SACD releases that I have. As much as anything this reflects the deployment of their data storage to surround tasks rather than the two-channel option more often offered by SACD (although these too often offer surround options). However, even the 24/192 stereo layers can't match the directness and natural accessibility of the Mo-Fi SACDs. There's a fine gauze of grain between you and the performers, a less fluid and more reconstructed feel to the performance. Ironically, this is much more like super CD than SACD, which has a completely independent signature sound.

Conclusions

It would be a mistake to burden this player with the shortcomings in the

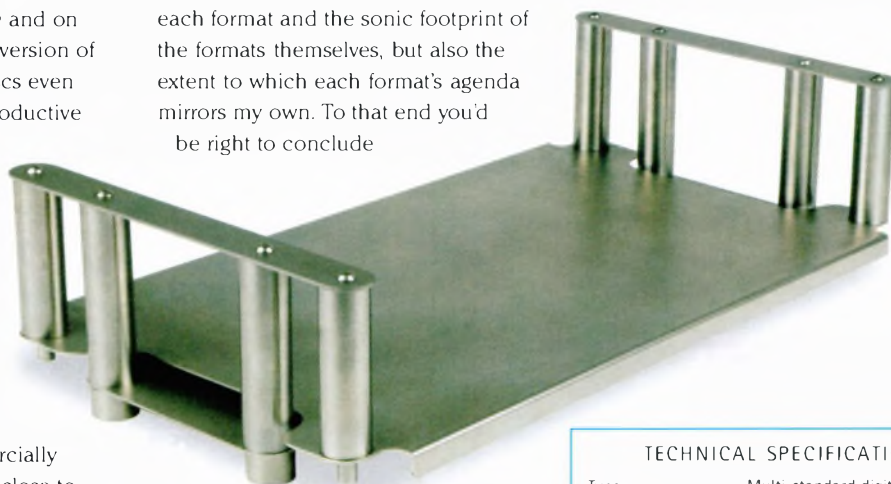
various software formats that it plays. Whilst I have described its sound in each case, what is clear is that the player is merely revealing the choices made by the recording engineers: And I am only examining the two-channel option, which actually works against the more multi-channel orientated DVD-A discs. As I said, AS will get to play with the multi-channel options later.

In reviewing the Townshend, my sonic conclusions reflect not just the performance of the machine with each format and the sonic footprint of the formats themselves, but also the extent to which each format's agenda mirrors my own. To that end you'd be right to conclude

that of the available options I found two-channel SACD to be the most rewarding. However, that misses the point. I also admire the TA565's performance with CD, whilst it has delivered some of the most rewarding DVD-A replay I've ever enjoyed.

What this leaves us with is an extraordinarily capable machine. It makes a good fist of CD replay, a performance that compares favourably to its price peers, yet really comes alive when you feed it with the various hi-bit digital discs. Its performance on SACD is particularly impressive, making the most of the convincing musical integrity available from this format, and making the TA565 one of the best SACD players I've used. As such it finally delivers on the promise of

universal player technology, by making the most of whatever disc you choose to feed it. It also does so at a price that is at least approachable. The TA565 combines blockhouse build quality and tremendous attention to audiophile detail to deliver sonic performance that more than makes up for the less than stylish aesthetics and its disconcertingly bouncy integral suspension. At £2500 it's that rarest of digital beasts, an absolute musical bargain. ➤

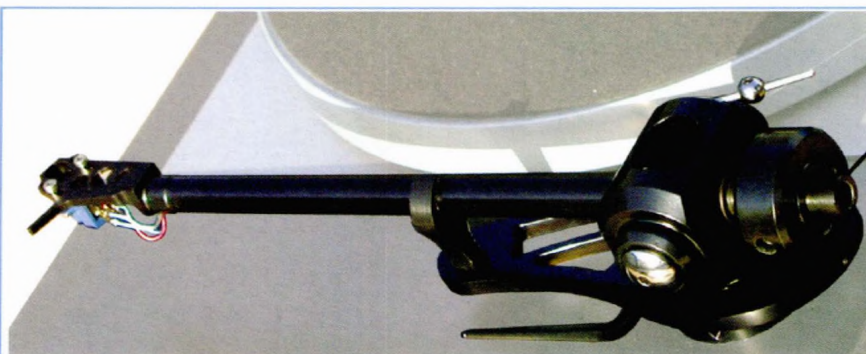


TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Multi-standard digital disc player |
| Formats Supported: | CD, SACD, DVD-V, DVD-A, including multi-channel options. |
| Audio Outputs: | 2x RCA Phono (Stereo) 6x RCA Phono (5.1) |
| Digital Outputs: | 1x RCA Phono (Spdif) 1x Toslink |
| Video Outputs: | 1X S Video 1x RCA Phono (Composite) 3x RCA Phono (Component) |
| Output Level: | 2V |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 488 x 150 x 284mm |
| Finish: | Brushed stainless steel |
| Price: | £2500 |

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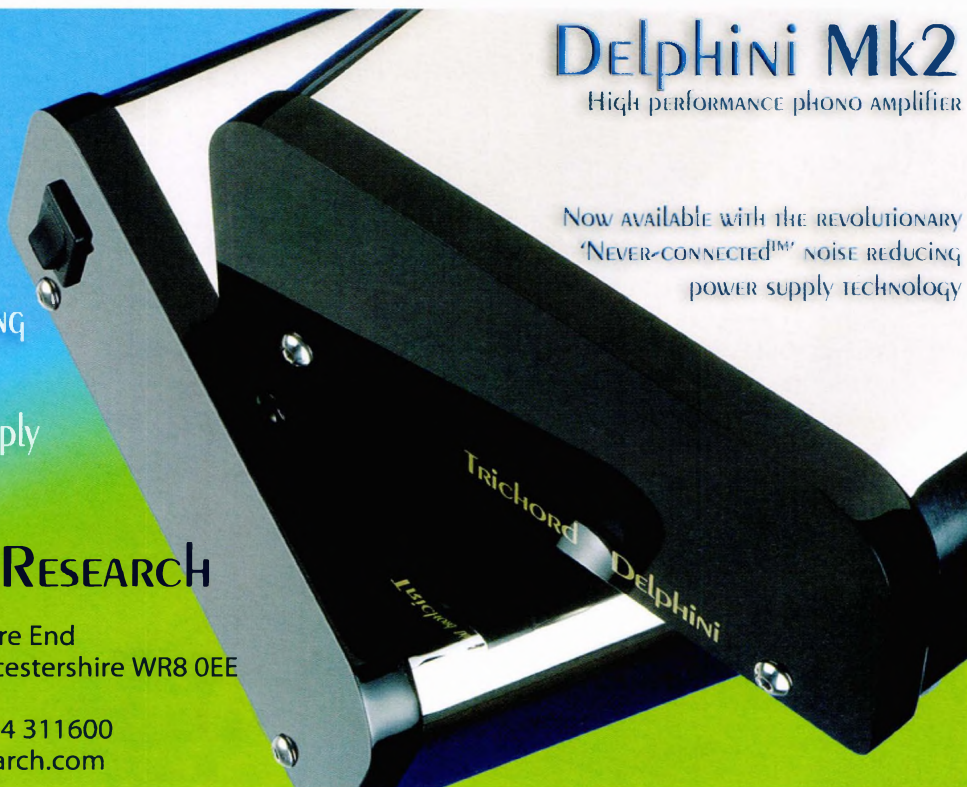
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 **McCORMACK**

McCormack UDP-1 Universal Disc Player

by Alan Sircom

Those with long hi-fi memories will recall the McCormack name. Back in the wild frontier times of the 1980s, Steve McCormack was the man behind The Mod Squad, manufacturers of clever products and the odd wild tweak (Tiptoes cones being the best known of all). But The Mod Squad and the original McCormack Audio came and went. Now, a subsidiary of Conrad-Johnson, the McCormack brand is back.

The £2,800 UDP-1 is currently the only disc spinner from either brand. It is a universal player, that can cope with DVD-Audio/Video, SACD and CD. And, like most one box universal players from smaller manufacturers (those not the size of, say, Sony, for example) is based on the tech from another manufacturer. In this case, the UDP-1 is built on a Pioneer chassis.

This is no badge-engineered Pioneer player though. Boards are ripped out and replaced with new ones in key areas. The basic power supply, transport mech and video circuitry remain unchanged from Pioneer Elite models; but the audio board and power supply for that section are entirely McCormack made. These boards are populated with top-notch components, like polystyrene or PTFE capacitors as seen in c-j products. The point between Pioneer and McCormack technology is visible from the back panel; the McCormack sonic stages come with butch WBT style phono connectors (for all six channels), whereas the video stages have more standard phono sockets for the composite and component video connections, and the phono digital output and the Toslink optical connector is entirely standard.

Of course, the chassis is radically different and made from thick aluminium, especially the massive front panel. It is solidly bolted together; taking off the top panel entails removing 10 screws; most companies will scrimp and save a few grub screws to hold the top plate in place. It also comes with thick neoprene/sorbothane-style feet, which McCormack stresses using in the manual. Don't... use something else. However, I found that the feet seem to make the sound a bit sluggish, compared to better alternatives (the finite element Cerabase or Ceraball products are an obvious choice).

The front panel demonstrates a couple of changes that McCormack have made to the original Pioneer model. It allows the user to switch between progressive and interlaced pictures, for those who have the sort of projector or plasma screen that can cope with such pictures. It also has a switch that can turn the video section on and off. It automatically comes on when setting up the player, but is otherwise out of action entirely. This makes a huge difference, simply because the player will produce a screensaver when playing CD and switching this out will make it sound better.

In video terms, the player is good, but not outstanding. It has a 10bit, 54MHz video DAC, which puts it at the level of most decent players, although up market Denon models and the like have an even better 12bit, 108MHz DAC

for even sharper crisper pictures. This picture can be played through composite, S-Video or component video (this last in either interlaced or progressive scan mode). This does not include Scart or RGB component or the latest DVI/HDMI digital video connections, which may limit its use in top-flight home cinema systems with DLP projectors and in absolute basic systems with conventional TV sets.

There is no such criticism levelled at the audio stage. With the latest Burr-Brown 24bit/192kHz DACs in each channel, this offers processing at the best possible level. It also features all the functionality of the Pioneer designs, whether the on-screen menu complete with idiot-chummy simple three-button set-up or more complicated picture processing and bass management tweaking to get the best from the player. In a good hi-fi system, especially a good multi-channel hi-fi system, going for the more advanced menu options is almost mandatory, as you may need to subtly adjust parameters to suit your system. The addition of iLink/IEEE 1394 would be a good move, for those who want to decode all formats in the processor; but not vitally important as the on-board decoding is better than most processors.

Of all the omissions, there is only one that may prove irritating. The option of RS232 connection would be useful for those wanting to run a Crestron remote in place of the re-badged Pioneer



▶ handset. This is of no great importance for the hi-fi user, but home cinema types often squirrel away their components and run them from a touchscreen AMX or Crestron system. For them, the obvious charms of the McCormack will have to be forsaken.

This is a big shame, because the McCormack is an exceptionally competent player. In order of preference, it pans out like this; the UDP-1 is a remarkable DVD-Audio player, a superb DVD-Video player,

any of that immediacy and overly impressive manner. It simply draws you so close into the music that you just subtly and gently take notice as it sings its siren song.

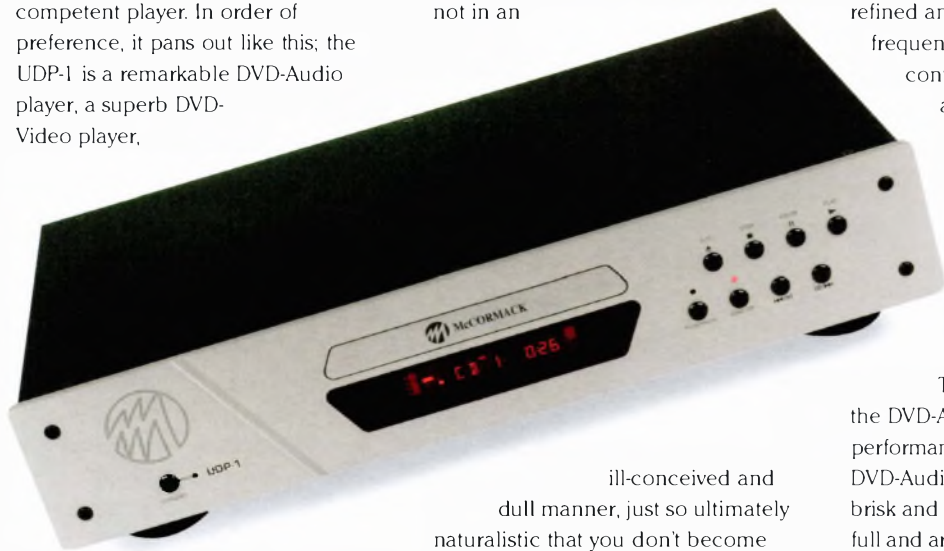
Usually, the level of detail or the steering of the player becomes noticeable, in this case it really faded into the background; not in an

the UDP-1 it becomes impossible to switch off the recording half way through. It would feel like walking out of a concert.

Move on to SACD and the same thing happens, only very slightly less well. That elegant smoothness and unforced detail found in DVD-Audio is in full effect here, too. Sounds are refined and extended into the high-frequencies, while deep and controlled in the bass. Once again, the UDP-1 is so natural sounding finding those properties in the SACD sound becomes difficult. Instead, you are happier leaving the player to get on playing music, while you enjoy the natural and unsullied surround sound.

There is a difference between the DVD-Audio and SACD replay performance, though. Where the DVD-Audio is seamless, the SACD is brisk and clean. Where the DVD-Audio is full and architectural in the bass, the SACD is light and bouncy. Also, the DVD-Audio soundstage tends toward being large and mellifluous, where the SACD is tighter and perhaps more controlled. But the similarities are stronger than the differences. Both maximise on the naturalness; both play with massive amounts of detailing and more information than you ever thought possible if you are coming at this from CD. This naturalness is a big plus point for the UDP-1; usually universal players present DVD-Video and SACD full of sound and fury, signifying nothing; all detail and no musicality. Here, sit back and enjoy the sound; the player presents the music first, the detail second.

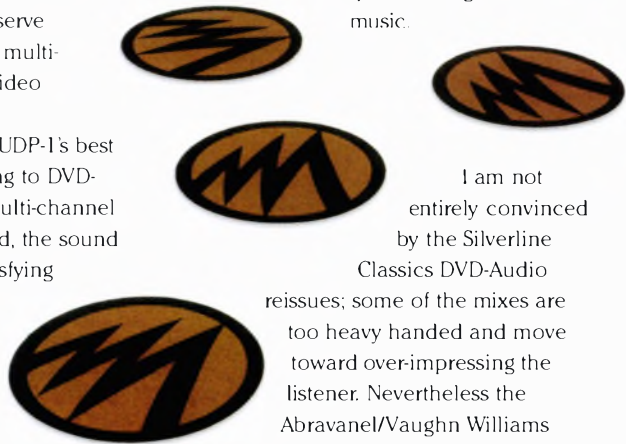
So why the 'slightly less well' comment about SACD? In ultimate terms, the DVD-Audio replay from the UDP-1 is good enough to place it in the very top of the DVD-Audio tree. There is likely better performance possible from the likes of the Meridian 800, ▶



a consummate SACD player and a very good CD player. It is also extremely good as a crossover or even a gateway product; use the McCormack in stereo mode, taking the down-mix options for both DVD-Audio and SACD, and let it serve as an introduction to multi-channel music and video if needed.

Starting with the UDP-1's best face, it makes listening to DVD-Audio a real joy. In multi-channel music or stereo sound, the sound is so smooth and satisfying you suddenly start to realise just how much we could gain if the music format really took hold. 'Godwhacker' from Steely Dan's Everything Must Go played in 192kHz, 24bit mode is just jaw-droppingly detailed, yet without

ill-conceived and dull manner, just so ultimately naturalistic that you don't become aware of these artificialities and just bask in the sound. Sounds are in fact perfectly steered with absolute control and move around the soundstage with solidity and ease, but this takes some time to define; you spend most of the time just relaxing with the music.



I am not entirely convinced by the Silverline Classics DVD-Audio reissues; some of the mixes are too heavy handed and move toward over-impressing the listener. Nevertheless the Abravanel/Vaughn Williams Symphony No 6 demonstrates why the UDP-1 is of the first water. This late 1960s recording is so packed with information and presence through

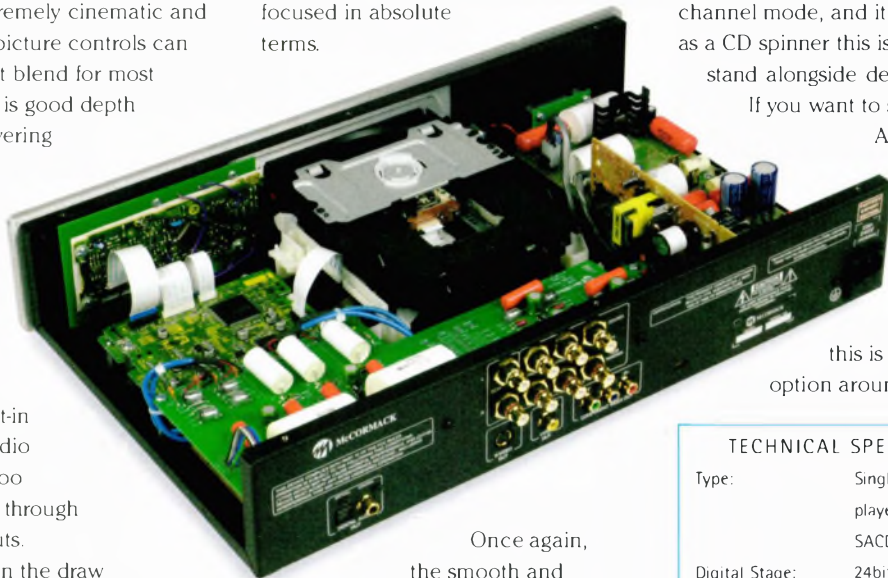
► of course, but you have to go far up the price scale to get demonstrably better performance. The SACD, in contrast, is good... but a property of most universal players means that the SACD performance is not quite as good as a dedicated SACD player.

Before we get to the CD performance in its own right, it's worth looking at the DVD-Video performance. On both picture and sound this is one of the better players around. Yes, the picture is perhaps not as good as a 12bit, 108MHz product, especially one with a digital video connection, but it is also extremely cinematic and bright, and the picture controls can make it a perfect blend for most monitors. There is good depth to the image, layering the features on screen like 35mm filmstock. The Dolby and DTS sound is extremely fine through the built-in decoder and audio stage, but a bit too bright sounding through the digital outputs.

Place a CD in the draw and the player has the same smoothness and subtle filigree detail and dynamics found in the other aspects of the performance. Its strongest suit is that it seems to add or subtract nothing to the performance on the disc, especially the soundstage. This depends entirely on the performance on the disc or the restrictions of the rest of the system, the player merely presents the spatial information without favour. But the UDP-1 does have a sense of solidity that it confers on any disc played. Sounds appear rooted in a solid sense of space, brilliantly. Best of all, it has a mid-band that is ultimately transparent, playing Damien Rice's *O* with the sort of in the

studio presentation it should have.

OK, let's put the CD performance in context. As a DVD player, it is an extremely good CD player. However, as a CD player in its own right, it isn't going to outperform any decent quality dedicated CD player. 'Decent' is a very plastic term, though; I would suggest this is as good as most £1,200-£1,500 CD players. Now, if that seems like faint praise, consider this; very few universal players achieve this level, regardless of cost. Most universal players are merely OK at CD replay, making a sound that is soggy and ill-focused in absolute terms.



Once again, the smooth and satisfying sound heard in multichannel seems to be most prevalent here. The sound is keen and dynamic and detailed, but these aspects of the sound are there in an unforced manner. What you get is a sound that is precise, but not overt. Sit and listen to Damien Rice and the sound is almost uninspiring... then you realise just how long you have been listening and you discover that it is deeply insightful, but not in the forward, shiny way we have come to accept from CD, especially CD played through a universal player.

Yes, this player lacks the temporal authority of a standalone CD player, the sort of sound that most associate

with Naim style rhythmic precision. But for many, this isn't an aim or a priority. Instead, if you like your music seamless and beautifully natural, this is worth checking out.

But what this means is, for once, the McCormack breaks the mould when discussing universal players. Normally, the standard response to universal machines pivots on what you plan on doing with the player. Many people have shied away from universal players for fear of losing good CD sound in the process. Not so here; the product may be best in multi-channel mode, and it is no Wadia, but as a CD spinner this is good enough to stand alongside dedicated models.

If you want to see what DVD-Audio/Video and SACD can offer – and don't plan on losing good CD or keeping your existing player – this is the smoothest option around. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Type: | Single-disc universal player DVD-Audio/Video, SACD, CD formats |
| Digital Stage: | 24bit/192kHz Burr Brown Audio DACs 10bit/54MHz Video DACs |
| Output Level: | 2V |
| Frequency Response: | 4 Hz to 44 kHz(DVD fs: 96 kHz) 4 Hz to 88 kHz (DVD-Audio fs: 192 kHz) |
| Video Outputs: | Component, S, and Interlaced/Progressive Scan Composite |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 483x89x286mm |
| Weight: | 10kg. |
| Price: | £2800 |

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MASTER VOLUME

AV SURROUND RECEIVER ALPS 7809

Denon DVD-A11 Universal Disc Player and AVR-3805 Multi-channel Receiver

by Alan Sircom

It's been said that one out of every two home cinema receivers sold in the UK today has a Denon logo on it. Yet, the pages of Hi-Fi+ seldom see a Denon product. In part, this is because the brand (along with other famous hi-fi names like Pioneer) has shifted focus from two-channel to multi-channel in the past decade. Now that multi-channel music has become an important adjunct to stereo hi-fi and home cinema, it seems only fitting that Denon should be one of the champions of the next generation in music formats.

Denon was one of the first brands to make a universal format player and – unlike many of the high-end designs based on radically uprated OEM versions of other people's players – is entirely Denon-constructed. The £1,700 DVD-A11 is not the top of the Denon range, but it is the company's top universal machine (the older DVD-A1 is a DVD-Audio/Video player with no SACD component). It's packed with delicious sounding features that are entirely useless for the multi-channel music enthusiast, but get video buffs deeply excited; features like PAL/NTSC-compatible Faroudja progressive scan pictures, noise-shaped video filters, dual 12bit 216Mhz video DACs and other luxuries to set the picture performance apart from mainstream DVD players. There is even DVI digital video connection for those who want optimum pixel-by-pixel pictures on suitably-equipped plasma and DLP projectors.

Musically, the player is just as

interesting. It sports Denon's own AL24 processing on each channel, to help smooth over quantization errors on LPCM multi-channel soundtracks and thereby facilitating 192kHz like sound from more prosaic sources. It also can decode HDCD and includes an extensive bass management routine for DVD-Audio and SACD (using the latest Analogue Devices Melody 100 Hammerhead SHARC chips). All the channels can decode 24bit, 192kHz, using Burr-

Brown 1790 chips built to Denon's

specification. And of course, it can process all sorts of Dolby, DTS, DVD-Audio and SACD directly, either down-mixed through the stereo sockets or directly through the 7.1 channel phono outputs.

Denon Link is a pivotal aspect of Denon's move into multi-channel music. Although at the time of writing, SACD was strictly off limits to Denon Link (as with any modern format, before Denon Link can support SACD it needs a last fisting from the legal profession), DVD-Audio could be transferred digitally without any analogue processing.

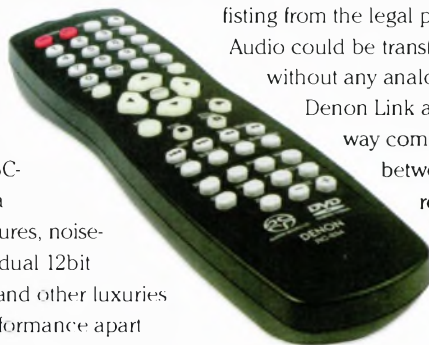
Denon Link also affords two-way communication between player and receiver. More importantly, because the connection is a twisted Ethernet cable, using RJ-45 connectors, it is extremely low voltage and affordable. It also offers fully balanced connection, effectively eliminating radiated noise across the circuit. This means the link is suggested

to be capable of streaming digital data up to two-channel 24bit, 192kHz in LPCM mode. For those not ready to commit entirely to the Denon way of digital thinking, the player also includes iLink/IEEE 1394/FireWire connections too.

The £1,000 AVR-3805 receiver is also Denon Link equipped. But that is only one of the

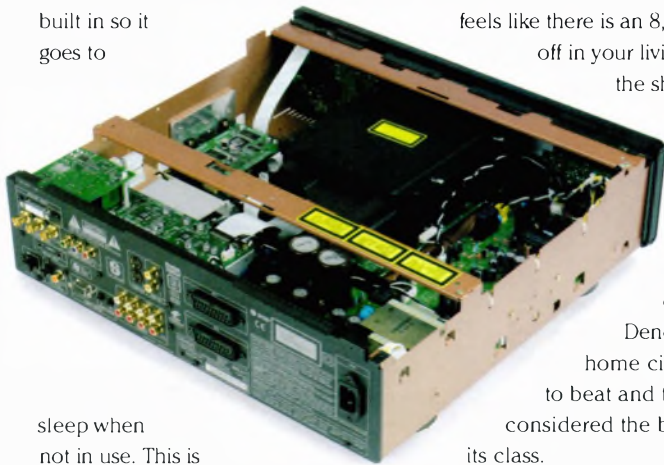
product's innovative new features. It very slightly breaks the mould in the front panel design, compared to stuffy Denon products of old (that said, it is still staid, but at least the product has some rounded edges compared to previous models). The 7x 120Watt receiver also sports all the latest processing modes (including Dolby Pro-Logic IIx and DTS Enhanced Neo:6) and Denon AL24 processing yet again.

Like many of the latest AV receivers, it includes a form of automated installation system. The receiver includes a small measuring microphone on a lengthy cord. Plug this into the mini-jack socket on the front panel and run through the automated installation on the on-screen menu and the Denon will automatically determine speaker size, distance from the listener, volume level and the number of speakers in the system. It's not perfect – like most automated set-up systems, it gets the distance and level of the sub-woofer entirely wrong more often than right – but is very accurate for setting up the main speakers in the system and would require an expert with a test disc ▶



▶ and a sound pressure level meter to do any better.

The supplied RC-970 electro-luminescent touch-screen remote control has a blue low-voltage touch screen, which reconfigures its top and bottom screens for different products. Programmable and learning, the remote has a touch sensor built in so it goes to

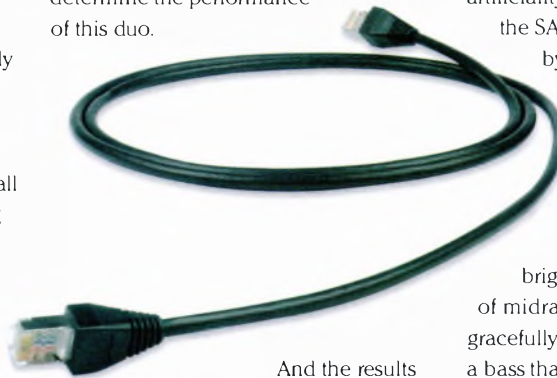


sleep when not in use. This is an extremely attractive addition to the product, a bit like two blue PDAs sandwiched together. It's smart too; it has motion sensors built into the handset, so when not picked up, the remote goes into power-saving mode.

Unless you are desperate for the musically questionable benefits of THX processing, the Denon is technologically advanced. Like the A11, it features Analogue Devices SHARC chips, AL24 and 192kHz, 24bit processing in all channels. The DSP decoding supports all the current decoding formats including Microsoft's HDCD processing. On the video side, the product comes with on-screen displays and a video scaler, which boosts the performance of a any component video or S-Video signal to 100MHz component level – the sort of bandwidth needed to cope with HDTV, if it ever appears. Both Denons have a series of Pure Direct controls that switch out the superfluous sections of the products when used for multi-channel music modes. This does seem to improve the lot of DVD-A and SACD discs somewhat.

Let's begin with what the Denon duo will be most used for – and what the two do best at; the replay of DVD-Video movies. The pair of products are simply marvellous, presenting a keen, dynamic and articulate surround. It also has the picture performance to match. Play the 'Battle of the Crater' scene from *Cold Mountain* on DTS and it really looks and feels like there is an 8,000lb bomb going off in your living room (without the shrapnel) and yet its ability to discern articulate vocals, allied to near-perfect steering, aptly demonstrates why Denon is currently the home cinema company to beat and the AVR-3805 is considered the best receiver in its class.

But home cinema is only the starting place, and comparatively unimportant to hi-fi+ readers. How it works as a multi-channel music system is what counts here. Given the direct digital link from DVD-Audio this is the best place to determine the performance of this duo.



And the results are extremely promising. There is a sense of precision to the soundstaging and integration around the room. Even the most ping-pong surround sound recordings (Missy Elliot, for example) seem better integrated while those less well recorded (Steely Dan's *Gaucho*, sadly) appear less of a crime against music. And then there's

the detail; there's a directness to the presentation and a level of detail that is truly striking. Unless you've heard one of those Meridian demonstrations or one of the other really expensive, well sorted multi-channel systems, this will be the most exciting aspect of DVD-Audio replay through the Denon duo.

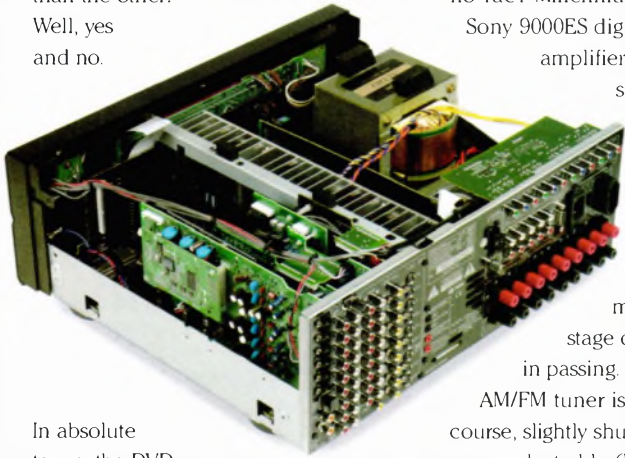
In fairness, there are several iLink/IEEE 1394-based player/amplifier systems (most notably from Pioneer and Sony) that do a similar job to the Denon Link system. It's purely a personal choice, but this is the most musical of these systems; the Pioneer system, although excellent, is very cinema oriented these days and the all-digital Sony 9000ES system both lacks DVD-Audio and sounds very digital in the process.

SACD cannot be evaluated through Denon Link at the moment, so the format must be played through the conventional phono terminals. To see if the switch from Denon Link to phonos comes with an attendant drop in quality, it must be determined by playing a DVD-Audio first, to compare and contrast. And, yes, there is a significant drop in signal quality; hardening and brightening up the sound and adding a layer of artificiality to the performance. As such, the SACD replay must be tempered

by being presented through the analogue stages. That said, by universal player standards, the replay is one of the strongest this side of players costing better than \$4,000. It's clean, extended, bright and focussed, with plenty of midrange detail and extending gracefully into the upper registers and a bass that is powerful and extended. Running through quality SACDs, both stereo and multi-channel shows just what the format is capable of. Dylan's 'Tangled Up in Blue' from *Blood on the Tracks* becomes too intense in multichannel, *Dark Side of the Moon* becomes all the more dark and malevolent and so it goes on. Even plugging in a selection of *Star Trek* ▶

▶ movie soundtracks (an emergency purchase, when SACD was young) sound more dynamic and expressive. There is sense behind SACD, sense you tend not to understand when played through universal players of the first wave. Moving up to Denon Link should make for something really special.

Is one product intrinsically better than the other?
Well, yes
and no.



In absolute terms, the DVD –A11 is the better performer, it being one of the finest DVD players around. The AVR-3805 is not as good as flagship integrated amplifiers, but at £1,000 it is probably the best receiver you can buy. But trying to separate them is folly: they work together so beautifully. Ultimately, the Denon 3805 is an AV product first and foremost; in fact they both are, but the A11 is more likely to be called into hi-fi duties than the receiver. The 805's limitations in musical communication come across when dropping back to stereo. It becomes peaky, accenting the mid-bass and flattening soundstage depth perspective. There is never the freedom from artificiality that you get from a good stereo amplifier – even with the Pure Direct modes switched in – and the almost dull two-channel performance makes you gravitate toward using the Dolby Pro-Logic II or Neo:6 processing to 'sex up' the stereo sound. Although this works effectively in a number of cases, hugely widening the soundstage to immerse the listener in the music when

it is at its best, this runs so contrary to my hi-fi purist sensibilities that it makes it difficult to recommend for CD use.

Well, almost. There is a sense of directness to the presentation that is hard to gain elsewhere at the money, because the digital output of the CD is being worked on in the amplifier itself. But, let's be realistic about this; this is no TacT Millennium, it's not even the Sony 9000ES digital multi-channel

amplifier. It converts the digital signal into analogue quickly and then delivers this analogue signal to the power amplifiers.

Finally, it's worth mentioning the tuner stage of the 3805, if only in passing. This RDS-equipped AM/FM tuner is about par for the course, slightly shut-in and possessed of a squawky treble (like all built-in receiver tuners) but with traces of the TU-260Ls detail and energy. If you are an airwaves buff, leave it alone and by something better, but if you are simply after some background listening between films, it's perfectly fine.

It's easy to be dismissive and sniffy of this Denon duo with the hi-fi hat firmly fixed in place. But look deeper: trying to criticise the AVR-3805 for not being a £1,000 integrated stereo amplifier is a bit like criticising a potato for not being a banana, likewise the £1,700 DVD player is not directly comparable with a £1,700 CD player, because while the latter will likely win out in sonic terms alone, the Denon has a substantial edge when it comes to flexibility. In outright stereo CD and amplifier stakes, the Denon pair can be out-paced by any two channel kit costing a quarter of the cost, but this isn't the point.

What this system offers is excellent flexibility, especially as soon as the SACD legal wrangling is solved. In terms of DVD-Audio, DVD-Video and (presumably) SACD, it provides a fine

and flexible solution that doesn't cost a fortune. Pure CD in stereo lags behind these formats somewhat, but it's still a viable alternative for those who must mix movies and music in the same system. They match together so well, it seems wrong to break the pair up.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

DVD-A11

Type: DVD-Audio/Video, SACD, CD player

Features:

Faroudja PAL/NTSC Progressive Scan circuit
Dual 12bit, 216MHz. Video DACs 192/24 AL24 circuitry in all channels
Denon Link. Separate 2-ch, 5.1-ch outputs
Audio Signal Output: 2Vrms (1kHz, 0dB)
Frequency Response:
2Hz-22kHz (48kHz sampling),
2Hz-44kHz (96kHz sampling),
2Hz-88kHz (192kHz sampling)
Dynamic Range (DVD): 110dB
Dimensions (WxHxD): 434x139x434mm
Weight: 12.6kg
Price: £1700

AVR-3805

Type: 7.1 channel home cinema/multi-room receiver

Features:

Automated microphone set-up system
Dolby Pro-Logic IIx and DTS Enhanced
Neo:6 decoding
DenonLink 3 for direct DVD-A/SACD digital connections. Three zone audio/video multi-room system
Video up-conversion 100MHz HDTV-ready video inputs. 24bit, 192kHz Digital/Analogue Conversion on all channels. Pure Direct mode
Electroluminescent learning/pre-programmed touch screen remote
Output Power: 7x 120Watts RMS amplifier power
Frequency Response: 10Hz-100kHz +/-3dB
Signal/Noise Ratio: 102dB
Dimensions (WxHxD): 434 x 171 x 434mm
Weight: 17kg
Price: £1000

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- Mark Levinson 383 Integrated Amp £495
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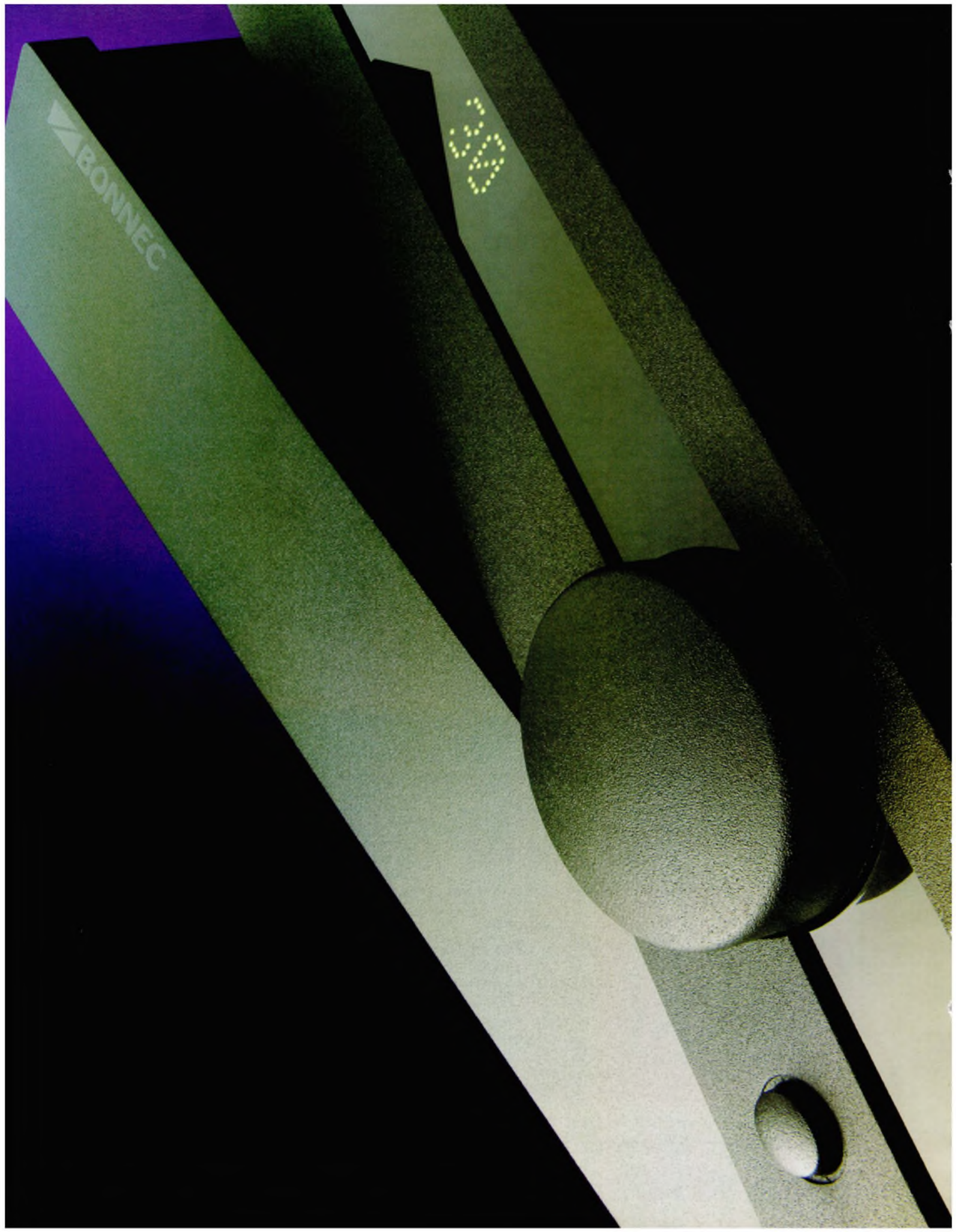
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BONNEC



The Bonnec Timpano Pre-amplifier and Lato Power Amplifier

by Chris Binns

There are certain things that seem to stick in people's memory, and the Bonnec Alto power amplifier that I reviewed almost exactly a year ago is one of them. At the time, I also had the JMLabs Nova Utopia loudspeakers in residence, which managed to create quite a stir with their sheer physical presence alone, while the Bonnec was quite up to the job of powering the system to some pretty impressive levels for the benefit of showing off to expectant visitors. Having gawped at the Utopias, they would then point a finger at the Alto and make some comment about its unusual appearance, and it was only last week that someone asked if I still had the amplifier that looked like an incendiary bomb – which I think was unkind. I like the appearance of the Alto, and at least the company have had the guts to produce something that is interesting and a bit different to look at, rather than just another incredibly boring black box.

But with the introduction of a smaller, cheaper power amplifier, Bonnec have played it safe. To be fair, case work is probably one of the most significant areas in terms of production costs, and to fabricate something along the lines of the Alto is expensive, so maybe a lot of the considerations in making the Lato more conventional were economic. But I have a feeling that there might have been some dealer feedback along the lines that it might be easier to sell a more conventional black box. So be it, the Lato is the same size as

the Timpano pre-amp, featureless apart from a very small power indicator on the front panel, and the two do make an attractive and elegant if minimalist combination; the pre-amp has only one push button and a single rotary knob. In normal operation this controls volume, while a push of the switch alters its function and it goes into the menu consisting of separate input and record selection, balance, mono and display options while the matrix display to the left notifies you of status. Simple but effective. To some extent, Bonnec duck out of the remote control issue by

operation, and only becomes active while a command is being undertaken, a situation that neatly avoids corrupting the power supply and hence sound quality.

Five line inputs (the phono input can be linked through to become line-level when not installed) together with two tape loops and no less than three main outputs are accessed through RCA type connectors, while there is no option for balanced configuration. The Timpano has a very low output impedance of 15 Ohms, apart from being able to drive long cables effectively, it also makes it ideal for driving multiple power amplifiers,



not supplying one, but any handset which is RC5 compatible should do the trick, and although a Cyrus control that I had on hand would only activate mute and volume, what more do you need? More to the point, it operated over a sufficiently wide angle and distance to be genuinely useful, a factor that an awful lot of manufacturers seem to mess up completely. Digital control circuitry is not powered up under normal

a point which a lot of people fail to consider when going for bi- or tri-amplification. With mains switches at the back, it would seem as if the manufacturer's intention is that the equipment should be left powered up, and certainly the combination was no different from most other solid state amplification I have tried in so much as it improved considerably over a few days of running.

Both the pre and power amplifier make extensive use of power supply regulation, with no less than 22 regulators employed in the



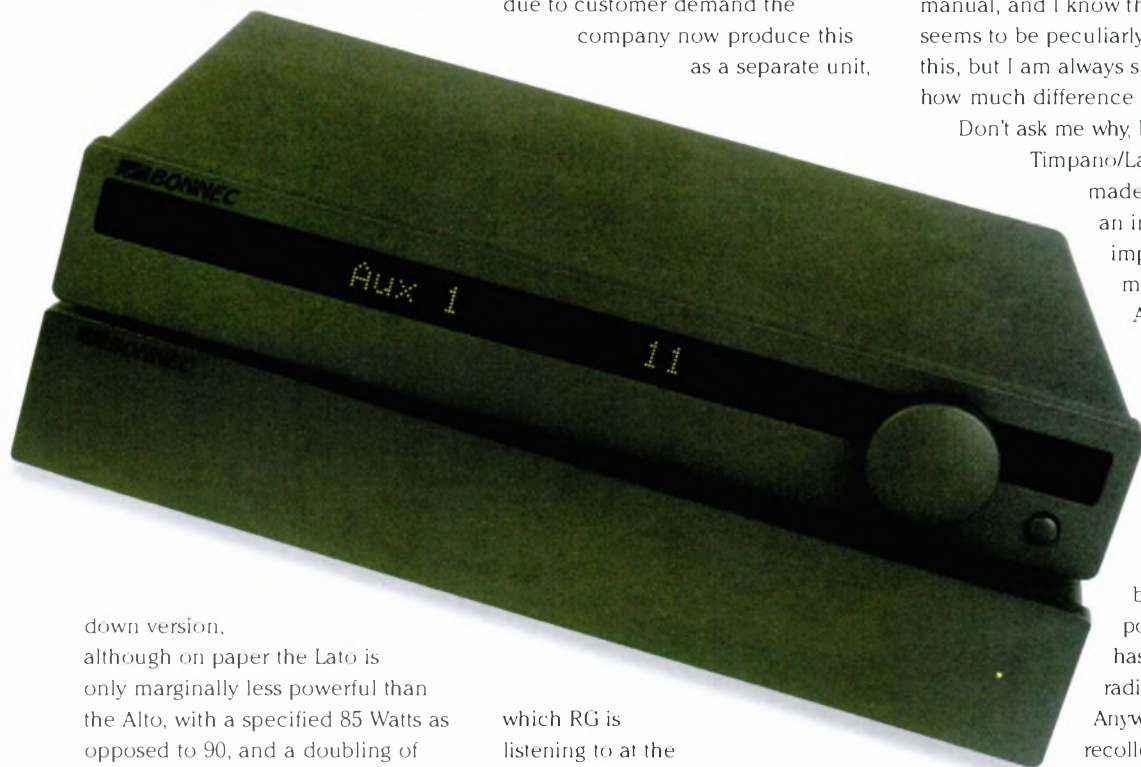
▶ Timpano, (although some of these and two of the four torroidal transformers are specific to the phono stage) and six in the Lato. This would seem to be where a lot of the designer's attention has been focused. In essence, the power amplifier shares a similar circuit topology to its bigger relative, albeit in a scaled

Both units are well constructed internally, although the Timpani looks a little empty without the phono stage, (which judging by my listening last summer was capable of great results, and it would have been nice to try it again) but at fifteen hundred pounds cheaper, the line-stage could have considerably more appeal to a lot of people. Somewhat ironically, due to customer demand the company now produce this as a separate unit,

benefits. I shall be keeping an eye on developments in this field, as there are several other companies (such as Densen) who are also exploring this idea. A word of advice – the Timpano inverts the phase of the audio signal; the Lato does not, so it is worth reversing the absolute phase of the loudspeakers to correct this. To be fair, they do mention this in the manual, and I know that my room seems to be peculiarly sensitive to this, but I am always surprised at just how much difference it can make.

Don't ask me why, but the Timpano/Lato combination made more of an immediate impression on me than the Alto/Timpano did. Such are the vagaries of reviewing, but on reflection, not only am I using different ancillaries, but both cabling and power distribution has changed quite radically as well. Anyway, aural recollections are a dangerous area to go...but I felt that in

particular the Lato was more open in the midrange than I remember the Alto being, thus sounding a little less constricted and mechanical. Which, if I'm honest, was one of the less than brilliant aspects of the latter's performance, but it seems to have had the effect of changing the emphasis of the sound. On the other hand, the Lato does not have as much of the emphatic, unarguable bass performance that the Alto was capable of, a concrete foundation that provided great strength and stability. ▶



down version.

although on paper the Lato is only marginally less powerful than the Alto, with a specified 85 Watts as opposed to 90, and a doubling of output into four Ohms.

A large torroidal mains transformer forms the basis of the power supply, with discrete 'potted' modules performing regulation for some stages of the amplifier; the bi-polar output stage uses two pairs of high power complementary transistors per channel. It is worth noting however, that neither model is fully regulated in the fashion of such designs as the Naim NAP 250 or 300. Electronic protection is provided against misuse or abuse (as well as overheating) and its activation is indicated by two LED's on the back panel, one for each channel.

which RG is listening to at the moment. For those who are into a bit of the old Walt Disney, the Lato power amp has provision for upgrading to VII status; in this form it can provide seven channels for AV use, with presumably reduced power output, as such I have no details as to the specification, but can't imagine there would be a lot of space left in the box. Perhaps of more interest, (certainly to me) is the possibility of active use; Bonnac manufacture crossover cards called the Auro, which slot into the power amplifiers and can be configured for specific loudspeakers to provide full active operation with all the potential

► So, I think it is a little lighter on its feet, but is still able to articulate timing and rhythm quite competently, while making up for the not quite so 'ultimate slam' at the bottom end by being a little more fluid and musical; a trait that as I have already suggested, creeps into the rest of the audio band. To quantify this, I don't think the bass performance is better or worse, just different, and it affects

of made the most of the finely etched detail of the obviously expensive recording. But, thank God, I don't get too excited about this sort of thing very often.) There is enough power on tap to provide decent 'rocking out' levels, even with lower impedance loudspeakers, but the Lato does not have the thermal capacity of its bigger brother and pushing it for

external, stand alone unit) and is certainly on equal ground with the Lato. Together they form an impressive partnership that will not be shamed by the strong competition at this price. For those looking for 'valve like qualities' this is probably not the place to be looking, but in areas where solid state designs traditionally have the edge, the Bonnec combination offers a fine performance. ►+



ones perception of other aspects of performance.

The midrange and top are extremely open, portraying a general air of precision with very little smearing or fuzziness, while the space between sounds was also well defined. So very clean, but possibly a bit dry? Stereo imaging was very good, with well defined spatial depth around the loudspeakers, but a bit reticent to extend forward and behind the loudspeakers compared to some amplifiers that excel in this area.

If the Bonnec amplifier has any character, it does not stray too far from neutral, and as such seems to work well with a wide variety of music. But there are hints of a dynamic performance slightly reminiscent of an older Linn-Naim setup that had me reaching for more rock orientated material rather than orchestral. I will admit to being particularly impressed one evening while listening to some admittedly audiophile-esque late night jazz (I don't have to spell it out, you know the sort) where the precision that the Bonnec is capable

sustained periods into an awkward load will activate the protection circuitry, as I discovered after playing some pretty energetic material at a suitably indecent level.

So is the Lato a more affordable Alto? Setting aside the matter of its aesthetics, which I suspect that many will find more acceptable, I don't think the answer is as straightforward as one would hope. While it has some of the strengths of the larger model, the blend that is on offer is, dare I say it, a shade more musical and involving, with slightly less of the regimented quality that was apparent with the Alto. Perhaps it is not quite as impressive in terms of scale and drama, but I found it to be more capable of emotional involvement with the music; a little less grip and a bit more flow. The Timpani once again came across as being understated but highly competent, (also, do not forget about the extremely fine phono option, either in its internal card form or as an

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Timpano pre-amplifier

Line-stage only

| | |
|---------------------|--------------|
| Input sensitivity: | 200mV |
| Input impedance: | 10kOhms |
| Output voltage: | 10Volts max |
| Output impedance: | 15 Ohms |
| Dimensions (WxDxH): | 450x350x70mm |
| Weight: | 14Kg |
| Price: | £3500 |

Lato power amplifier

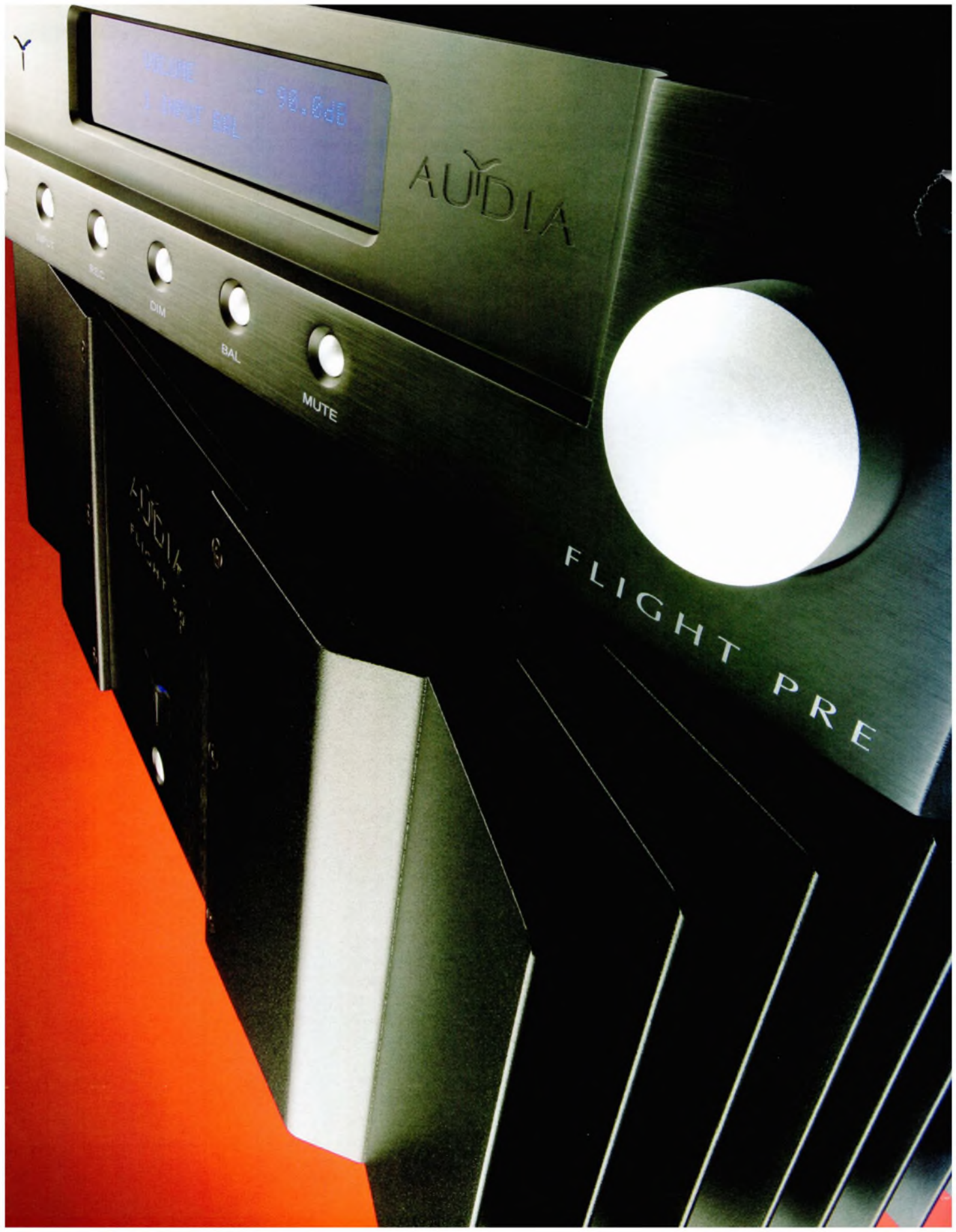
| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Output power: | 85 Watts per channel into 8 Ohms 170 Watts per channel into 4 Ohms |
| Input sensitivity: | 1 Volt |
| Input impedance: | 6.5 K Ohms |
| Dimensions (WxDxH): | 450x350x70mm |
| Price: | £2500 |

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FLIGHT PRE

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Audia Flight Pre and Flight 50 Amplification

by Roy Gregory

When you have as many different products through the house as the average hi-fi reviewer, you have to be careful that your first impressions and prejudices don't effect your objectivity. Products have personalities and whilst some are all sweetness and light, others can be problematic. Some are big and awkward and you hate them on sight: Others are svelte, stylish and become instant objects of desire. Some surprise, some reward and others disappoint. It's a complex pattern of relationships, further complicated by the question of ancillaries and looming deadlines. When do you wheel in yet another pair of speakers or try another, different set of cables? At what point do you call it a day and admit defeat?

Of course, there are some products that you just want to like, which gives them a little more room for maneuver, but even by that measure we've been to pretty extraordinary lengths when it comes to the Audia Flight amplification. No fewer than three reviewers and countless different system combinations in a search for a set-up that suited these amps. It's not that they're fickle – just not necessarily what they seem.

Perhaps I should start at the beginning...

The Audia amplifiers hail from Italy, and like so many products from that country they're long on both style and individuality. What's to like? On the surface, the Flight Pre/Flight 50 combination are classic high-end solid-state designs. The neat, single-box pre-amplifier is a substantial, logic controlled design offering a choice of both balanced and single-ended connection. The remote

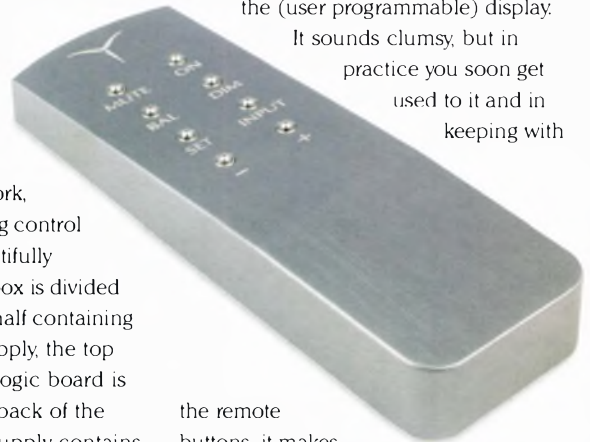
control is big and solid enough to impress your mates, not so stupidly large or heavy as to give you problems picking it up; And glory be, its neat, well separated buttons are positively latched, making operation rather less of a hit and miss affair. The acceptance angle is good too. That attention to detail extends to every aspect of the Flight Pre. The single case is CNC machined from billet aluminium to provide a rigid enclosure that is internally damped with heavy, steel plates.

The quality of the casework, along with the contrasting control buttons makes for a beautifully presented product. The box is divided horizontally, the bottom half containing the substantial power-supply, the top the audio circuitry. The logic board is mounted straight to the back of the front-panel. The power supply contains three discrete transformers, one for each channel and one for the control circuitry, along with extensive filtering and no fewer than 18 separate regulators for different sections of the dual-mono audio circuit.

However, the real piece de resistance is the volume control. Audia have gone to great lengths to create a switched attenuator of constant output impedance. Based around discrete, metal film resistors it offers a 100dB range in half dB steps. It's not the quickest to adjust, simply because you have to count/spin through so many steps, but the precision it offers is superb. And you'd better get used to the volume control, because in a departure

from the norm, the control logic passes everything through it. Turn the volume control (or the volume buttons on the remote) and that's what you adjust. But for the other functions you first have to select them with the appropriate button, and then use the volume control to adjust them appropriately. That includes input, balance and the brightness of the (user programmable) display.

It sounds clumsy, but in practice you soon get used to it and in keeping with



the remote buttons, it makes for very positive control. One other thing I really liked was the Mute function, that rather than simply cutting or reinstating the audio signal, winds it quickly down or back up to the previous level. Nice, and indicative of the thought and attention to detail that's gone into these amplifiers.

The Flight 50 power amp is the archetypal lump, this time enlivened by some subtle styling variations and the understated visual contrast provided by the feet, power switch and illuminated status indicator. However, once again, things get a lot more interesting when you start to look a little closer. Balanced inputs are offered alongside a variable impedance, single-ended option; You get to pick between 24, 28, 42 and 57 kOhms. The amplifier itself is a trans-conductance design (similar to the Alloia reviewed by CT), with an output of 50 Watts into 8 Ohms that's claimed to double into four and double again ▶



► into two. Which is where the problems start. Not that there's anything wrong with trans-conductance amplifiers – indeed, quite the opposite. It's just that the paper spec along with the massive weight and enormous heat sinks lead one to conclude that this is an absolute powerhouse, just waiting to get its fists round the throat of some hapless loudspeaker. Well, the Flight 50 is certainly powerful and it definitely goes loud, even with inefficient speakers, but that's definitely not the way to get the best out of it: Which probably explains why both CB and CT gave up with it. You see, on paper it looks like the perfect amplifier for either of them, but then on paper it looks like some beefy, solid-state behemoth,



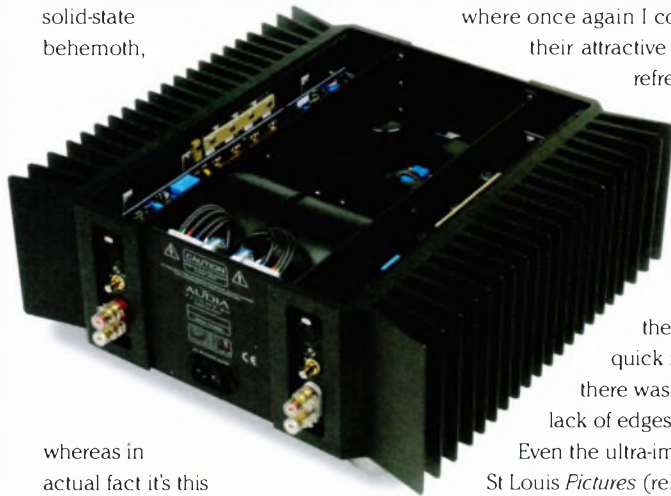
on, but after five minutes you find yourself reading a magazine". Pretty damning for an amp at this price. Hence they wound-up, unwanted and unloved, chez Gregory, where once again I could marvel at their attractive exterior and refreshingly different approach. A quick warm-up with the Perigee loudspeakers proved the point. Even with these blindingly quick ribbon-hybrids, there was a softness and lack of edges to the sound.

Even the ultra-impressive Slatkin/St Louis *Pictures* (released by Mo-Fi on SACD) was more stately than gripping. Play something altogether more subtle and gentle in nature (*The Trout Quintet* on Tacet) and the lack of tension robbed the music of its internal drama, while Los Lobos, far from their rumbustious selves, seemed to be winding down for siesta. However, it was not all bad – not by a long way. Tonally the presentation was

outstandingly natural, free of glare or any electronic texture. The extreme top was slightly dull, robbing the acoustic of a little air and space, but the corresponding ability to play the system at realistic levels for extended periods without fatigue was ample compensation, especially as in this context, the amps were definitely happiest running loud. How loud

I simply wasn't aware, until I failed to hear a visitor pounding on the door! Testament to the amps' lack of distortion and ample power if ever you needed it. But even taking all those things into account it was still painfully clear that the Audias were far from happy.

Switching to the far more efficient and easy load presented by the Living Voice OBX-R2, supplemented by the Townshend Maximum super-tweeters wrought a startling transformation. Everything good was still as good, but suddenly the music lock stepped into a solid groove. Revisiting Los Lobos demonstrated just how dramatic the differences were. The easy paced yet rhythmically complex smooch of 'Corazon' took on its familiar, swaying character, the multiple percussion instruments beautifully separated

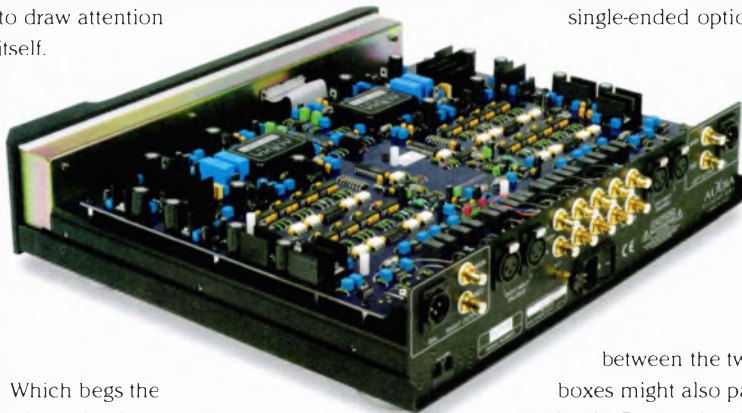


whereas in actual fact it's this cutesy little single-ended triode. And I'm talking 2A3 here, not 300B and definitely not 845. Now, you and I both know that it isn't actually a triode amp, from the photos if nothing else. But that's exactly how you have to treat it if you want to get the best out of it, and that's quite a leap – especially visually. So after CB and CT tried the Audias with the Primary Monitors and various small JMLabs, reporting softness and a terminal lack of grip, it seemed sensible to give them a whirl with something rather more efficient. In fact, I'm being kind here. What CT actually said was, "It sounds nice enough when you first put a disc



yet tied together into a single musical entity. The Mussorgsky likewise took on a new sense of tension and dynamic authority, the sudden contrasts and rhythmic shifts that characterize the piece regaining their drama and impact. Okay, so we're ►

▶ not talking NAP300/RADIA levels of focus or dynamic grip and precision, but combine the new found musical footings with the Audia's undoubted spatial and tonal qualities and you have a very interesting and satisfying mix indeed. And so it proved across each and every disc I threw at it. In fact, I was so perplexed that I spent even longer than usual ringing the musical changes before settling back to simply listen and enjoy. The sound that emerged was not without character (warm, sweet, wide, deep and a little shut in) but possessed that vital quality, musical balance – everything present to an acceptable degree, nothing so exaggerated as to draw attention to itself.



Which begs the question, why the massive difference. So tortuous has the path to acceptable musical performance been that I've run out of time for further experimentation. That will follow, but in the meantime, some preliminary thoughts. My gut feeling is that it's the power amp that's the governing factor here, easily investigated by trying the pre-amp with an alternative power amp.

Used the way you'd assume from its paper performance, you're going to be disappointed. But treat the Flight 50 more like a triode and you'll reveal a subtle and engaging performer. Of course, by moving up to a speaker with an efficiency in the mid-'90s you also alter the amp's power band. As you might surmise from its large heat-sinks, the amplifier runs hot – maybe as much as 10 Watts in Class A.

Use a speaker like the Living Voice and the amp probably rarely gets out of Class A operation. Meanwhile, the ample power reserves account for the grace under pressure and absolute lack of strain.

In terms of overall presentation, the Audias (running in balanced mode) retain a slightly softened character to images, placing them in a large, almost mid-hall acoustic. In many ways it's reminiscent of a Living Stereo, as opposed to something like a Mercury recording. The single-ended inputs to the pre-amp offer a slightly livelier quality, which suggests that playing with the single-ended option

between the two boxes might also pay dividends. But used as is, the Audias deliver an inviting and engaging sound whose warmth and easy sense of progression (despite a lack of obvious inner resolution and focus) reminds me of a bigger, better Musical Fidelity A1. That's a serious compliment, by the way. If you like the unforced tonality and rounded sweetness that typifies the average single-ended amp, but don't want to take it that far: If you want to extend the bandwidth of that quality: If you want a higher-tech and less eclectic solution to engaging musical replay: If these things sound attractive then you should look seriously at the Audia amps. Just make sure that you take considerable care with matching speakers. Pretty much like a single-ended triode in fact.

I'll be investigating this intriguing

combination further, both singly and in concert. I'll be trying them with a few other speakers too, notably the Reference 3As. Then there's the issue of single-ended interconnection and the effect of the variable input impedance. Intriguing is the word... ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Flight Pre
 Type: Solid-state line-stage
 Inputs: 2x balanced, 4x single-ended
 Input Impedance: 51 kOhms (unbalanced) 30 kOhms (balanced)
 Output Impedance: 12 Ohms (unbalanced) 50 Ohms (balanced)
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 420x113x380mm
 Weight: 15 kg
 Price: £4500

Flight 50
 Type: Solid-state, trans-conductance amplifier
 Inputs: 1pr balanced, 1pr unbalanced
 Input Impedance: 24,28, 42 or 57 kOhm (unbalanced) 23 kOhms (balanced)
 Sensitivity: 1V
 Damping Factor: 80
 Outputs: 1pr 5-way binding post/Ch
 Output Power: 50 Watts into 8 Ohms 100 Watts into 4 Ohms 200 Watts into 2 Ohms
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 470x186x440mm
 Weight: 30 kg
 Price: £4500

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Origin Live Encounter Tonearm

by Jimmy Hughes

There I was, singing the praises of Chord's Blu CD transport and DAC-64, saying how great they sounded, how CD had finally come of age. And implying (perhaps) that poor old vinyl had finally met its Waterloo. Actually, I meant nothing of the sort. But, if perchance the odd fleeting doubt did cross my mind about LP in the light of such digital virtuosity, it was quickly banished by the experience of hearing in quick succession three outstanding analogue products.

The first was a Koetsu Gold Urushi, the second Roksan's DX2 phono stage reviewed elsewhere in this issue. And last, but by no means least, Origin Live's Encounter tonearm. Costing £970, the Encounter embodies the fruits of Origin Live's research into tonearm performance, being a blend of precision engineering, careful choice of materials, and a little bit of voodoo. I put my review sample on Avid's Volvere Sequel, fitting it with a Transfiguration Temper W cartridge.

The dimensions of the arm - length of tube, fixing hole diameter - are common to the popular Rega arm. So you could replace (say) a Rega RB-300 with Origin Live's Encounter and not have to change arm boards or start drilling extra holes. I found it quick and easy to replace a Rega RB-1000 with the Encounter. You only need to adjust arm height to suit the cartridge in use - unlike the fixed base Rega, the Origin Live arm allows VTA to be fine-tuned with a threaded collar similar to the Incognito Easy Riser.

First impressions were good - a clear stable sound with plenty of bite and detail. Transients were crisp and clean, while surface noise was very low. Tonally, the balance was sharp and open, with a bright airy treble and crisp attack. Musically, things sounded keen and

precise, yet relaxed and refined. The upper treble seemed very clean; playing an early '80s pop album (Wham!) it was interesting to hear how natural and focussed details like background vocals were - not a trace of edge or splashiness.

Of course the Transfiguration is a superb pickup. Of course the Volvere Sequel provides rock-solid support. But it's the tonearm's job to carry the pickup and enable it to follow the groove. Put simply, the Encounter is a wonderful Enabler. Great tonearms always make it seem as though the cartridge is having an easy time - even when the music is complex and demanding. The Encounter has this quality. It provides the cartridge with a secure stable platform without damping its natural exuberance.

If there's a design philosophy behind the Encounter, it's essentially one of balancing rigidity on the one hand with a certain degree of decoupling on the other. Precision was clearly an important part of the design, but not a goal in itself. Great care has been taken to avoid ending up with an arm that offers fantastic focus and control, but presents the music in a cold, sterile, lifeless fashion. Origin Live wanted something that sounded precise, but also warm, involving and believable.

Thus it is that the arm has a smidgen of 'give' built in at certain key areas. For example, there's a small but just discernable amount of free-play in the arm bearings. Likewise, the headshell/arm tube interface has a slight degree of decoupling. By allowing

a controlled measure of compliance at specific points, one can obtain subjectively better results by managing the flow of mechanical energy in a more efficient manner. At least that's the theory!

Apparently having a small degree of bearing free-play is integral to the design of the arm bearings. There's a precedent for this; I remember Roksan doing something very similar with the Artemiz tonearm. They argued that conventional low-friction 'rigid' bearings did not actually meet the needs of record playing, with its fast accelerations and de-accelerations caused by frequent unpredictable changes in the music.

Now hi-fi's a bit like football; full of conflicting opinions as to what's right and how best to do things. As I put the finishing touches to this article, Greece have just won Euro 2004, confounding all the pundits and every prediction (Have pity on him, he's a France - I mean Arsenal - fan. Ed). So while conventional wisdom has it that tonearms have to be rigid, the truth is it's more complex than that. Good teamwork produces results greater than the sum of the parts; the important thing is to maximize one's strengths.

Speaking personally, while I'm intrigued by the approach taken by Origin Live in designing this tonearm, ultimately it stands or falls by how it sounds. You can only listen and judge the results subjectively. The Encounter arm sounds admirably precise. There's no lack of control or focus. At the same time the music sounds gloriously open and free - the way good LP should sound. Clearly, the approach taken seems to work. 'Nuff said!



► Clarity is excellent. Fine inner detail cuts through in a wholly natural realistic manner. The result is a sound that's smooth open and relaxed, but detailed and precise too. The tapered arm tube is machined from a solid billet of aero quality alloy. Interestingly, the headshell and rear counterweight section are separate items. Presumably it wouldn't have been difficult to machine the entire assembly from a single piece of alloy - Mission did exactly this about twenty years ago with The Mechanic arm.

Origin Live clearly felt otherwise, finding that superior results were obtained by having separate headshell and counterweight sections. It allows a degree of

compliance to be introduced at the joint, as well as affording the opportunity to use different materials. The choice of a large diameter gently tapered arm tube is intended to achieve maximum torsional rigidity while keeping mass within reasonable bounds.

Likewise the vertical arm bearings are very widely spaced - a full 6.5cm apart - also to ensure excellent torsional stability. Of equal importance for sound quality is the specific choice of materials. Origin Live claim they spent many hours experimenting with lots of different metals before settling

on the ones used. Machining the tube from a solid billet of aircraft alloy, rather than moulding it, overcomes the problems of air bubbles within the material. The slots cut in the underside prevent it ringing.

The installation notes are helpfully detailed. One interesting little snippet is the recommendation not to use the large serrated base fixing washer if mounting the Encounter on a turntable with a metal arm board. Equally, the makers warn against over-tightening the base fixing nut - Firm sounds better than Tight.

The aim, they say, is a precise but lively quality of sound, avoiding the 'deadness' that can result if every interface is tightened to an excessive degree.

The arm is smartly finished, and certainly looks like it's worth the asking price. Agreed, the wooden packing box and overall presentation isn't quite in the deluxe class. But that's a virtue in my book. The packaging is honest and functional. You're buying a tonearm, not a piece of designer jewellery! The arm parking device is well thought out, and grips the tube firmly but not too tightly. The lift-lower device has a nice slow descent, though a slightly longer cueing lever would've been welcome...

Internally, the arm is wired with high-quality litz cable, and I liked the leadout wires and cartridge tags fitted - they're robust and easily adjusted. The makers claim to have fitted the best-sounding arm cable out

of a great many tried, and the leads are terminated with Bullet plugs. The arm was completely free from hum and spurious crackles. Once installed it performed impeccably. The headshell is large, with plenty of back space (and long leadout wires) to accommodate big cartridges.

The counterweight is fixed in place by a single allen bolt - a simple enough arrangement, but one that makes fine repeatable adjustment of downforce tricky.

Basically, you need to measure tracking force using external stylus scales (a basic set are supplied), moving the counterweight back and forth till it's right. The makers suggest a burning-in period of about two weeks, and I must say that although the arm sounded good from the off, it did improve as time went on.

There's a lovely airy quality about the upper treble. It's very clean too. This showed particularly when I played Mozart's *Prague Symphony* - specifically an early digital recording on period instruments directed by Christopher Hogwood on Decca's Florilegium label. It sounded impressively open, lucid and detailed; a small group of players in a dry but lively acoustic. Clarity was excellent, with nice forward winds and crisp kettle-drums.

Perhaps the sound was a shade thin tonally - as were many digital recordings made using original instruments at that time. Casting my mind back, I recall there being an unpleasant edginess when I first played this record on my system circa 1983. At the time I was experimenting with my Linn Sondek - removing the Valhalla power supply from inside the turntable really transformed things, removing much of the edgy brightness and cleaning up the top. Of course, much water has passed under the bridge since then. But the LP (and



► CD for that matter) remain difficult and demanding - it doesn't take much to make the high treble sound edgy. Controversially, Hogwood adds harpsichord continuo - an unusual editorial choice for a late Mozart symphony. It's very discreetly balanced - most of the time you can only just hear it. He also uses a very small body of players. Listening again to the LP, having not played it for a few years, it was good to hear the sound reproduced with greater weight and richness than I recall. The presentation was immediate and lively, with an open brilliant violin tone. Some edginess remained, but it was a nice natural edge - not an unpleasant electronic one - massed violins can sound edgy and bright in real life!

I once wrongly thought it was early digital technology making the strings sound papery and starved of richness and resonance. Now it's clear that the 'thinness' is natural - due to the very few players being used. When the scale of the recording is conveyed authentically, you can judge the number of players making up the orchestra.

Dynamic extremes are more plausibly suggested, creating a highly believable impression of players in space. Additionally, I could tell when the harpsichord was adding its little twiddles; despite being played very quietly, it stayed cleanly separated without being obviously spot-lit. Turning the LP over, and sampling the recording of

Mozart's *Symphony No 39*, the sound was notably bigger and louder, with a much fuller string sound. These differences were created by the use of a larger orchestra, rather than changes to microphone placement or the choice of a different venue, and this was conveyed.



The Encounter's low frequency performance proved exceptionally good. Bass lines sounded powerful and deep, but remained nicely separated and individual. The bottom end is tight and clean, rather than full and voluminous. It's the sort of bass that's not there until it's there, if that makes sense - you don't get the impression of low frequencies being boosted artificially to create a false impression of power and weight. But when they're present, boy are they present.

From a design standpoint, the Encounter is an interesting product. Some companies take a wholly subjective approach, aiming for something that sounds attractive. Others design according to a set of technical principles they believe to be correct. If the end result doesn't sound right (or pleasant) - tough! Origin Live's Encounter is a product

with a foot in both camps. It's designed to please the ear by sounding authentic and believable.

At the same time it sounds accurate and correct - proving that a truthful sound can also be a pleasant and engaging one; the two aren't mutually exclusive! Given the excellence of the



Encounter, I find myself wondering what sort of improvements you'd get by moving up to one of Origin Live's even more expensive arms - I see there's one priced at a cool £2.5K! If the top model ever comes my way you'll be the first to know.

In the meantime it's nice to confirm that there's life in the old LP yet - CD watch out. Despite the advances made to CD, LP still offers a smoother more effortlessly natural quality of sound that's both seductive and engaging. The tonal variation is wider. The Origin Live Encounter is very much a product that plays to the strengths of analogue, rather than trying to match CD's clean but antiseptic precision. Musically, it's focussed and clean, but in a very relaxed and friendly sort of way.

A gorgeous tonearm...

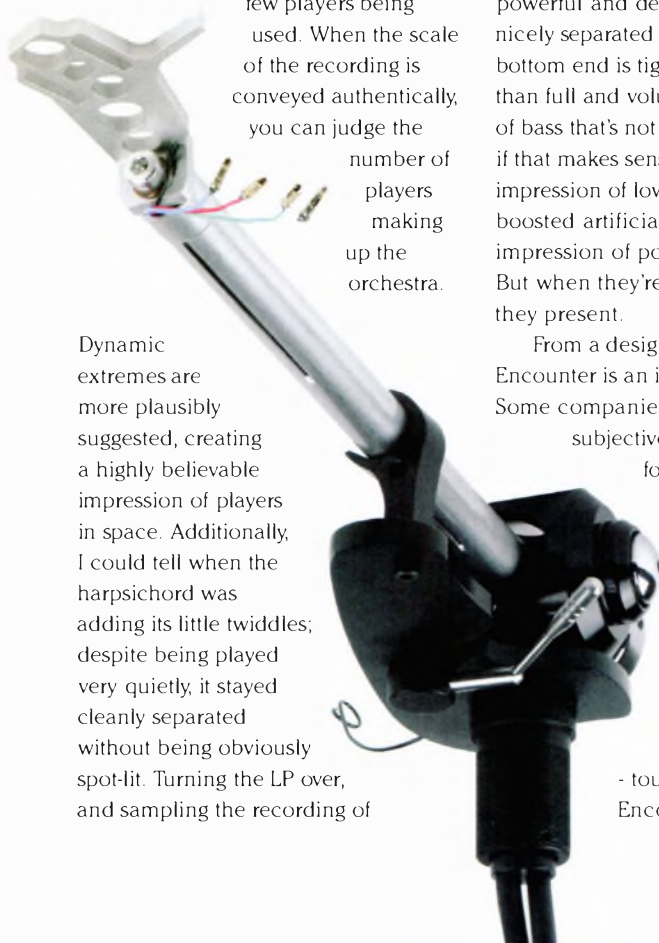


TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|-----------------|------------------------|
| Type: | Gimbal bearing tonearm |
| Geometry: | Rega |
| Mounting: | Rega |
| Effective Mass: | 14gm |
| Weight: | 1760gm |
| Price: | £970 |

Manufacturer:

Origin Live
Tel. 02380 578877
Net. www.originlive.com



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PHONO

Roksan System DX2 Phono-Stage

by Jimmy Hughes

Any electronics engineer will tell you - designing a good phono-stage isn't easy. Indeed, it's probably one of the most difficult things to get right. Amplifying the tiny signal from a low output moving coil cartridge is very demanding; subtle component changes or circuit alterations that might pass unnoticed at line-level, assume make or break significance with signals of just a few microvolts.

Of course the turntable, arm, and cartridge are major players too. But even the best front end will disappoint unless the phono-stage is first-rate. Trouble is, pickup cartridges vary considerably in terms of output and loading requirements. So, even if you've got a great circuit, there's still the important business of correct matching.

Roksan's DX2 is an adaptable, versatile unit that can be user-optimized to meet the requirements of a wide range of moving coil and magnetic cartridges. To this end, there's a set of pre-set switches in the base of the unit for gain adjustment and loading. They're not particularly easy to get to or adjust, being quite tiny. But once set, that's it; you won't need to bother again unless changing cartridges.

In terms of self-noise the Roksan is exceptionally quiet. Even when I set my amplifier volume to maximum, background noise was minimal - many, many times lower than even the quietest LP. This is important, since it helps ensure good low-level clarity and crisp definition in the quietest passages. It ensures the music emerges from an impressively quiet/clean inky-black background.

Moreover, what noise there is has

a velvety-soft 'rounded' quality. So, subjectively, it's very innocuous. It allows the use of very low output MC cartridges without the usual noise/sound quality concerns. I used medium to high output MC cartridges - namely, the Transfiguration Temper W and Koetsu Urushi Gold with excellent results.

Subjectively, the Roksan phono-stage produced a crisp focussed sound. I felt it gave a very 'dark' sort of tonal balance - not dark



in the sense of dull or thick, but full, solid and rich. Expressed in visual terms, the 'blacks' were really black - deep, rich, glowing. Because of this, the contrast between light and dark, high and low, seemed heightened. The presentation was sharp but not bright.

Fine detail was there in abundance. But always very naturally presented. The tonal balance was smooth and refined, but well-extended at bass and treble extremes. Transient attack was impressively crisp and tight, ensuring the music emerged with a delightful sense of solidity and control. The sound was very dynamic: powerful, articulate, firm. Yet at the same time smooth and nicely rounded.

Timing was outstanding - fast, but flowing and rhythmic. Small previously

unnoticed details, like the gentle brushing of cymbals or a lightly strummed guitar, suddenly became apparent: And more than just apparent - contributing something distinct and tangible. It's hard to put this into words. It's not just that you hear this or that bit of detail; it's the way these small details contribute to the whole.

It's as though everyone is suddenly singing and/or playing towards the same common end, rather than doing their own, individual thing. The music and its performance has a distinct purpose and direction. In many ways it's a subtle thing - subtle in the sense of being hard to pin down and analyse. But the effect produced is not subtle; it's actually pretty obvious.

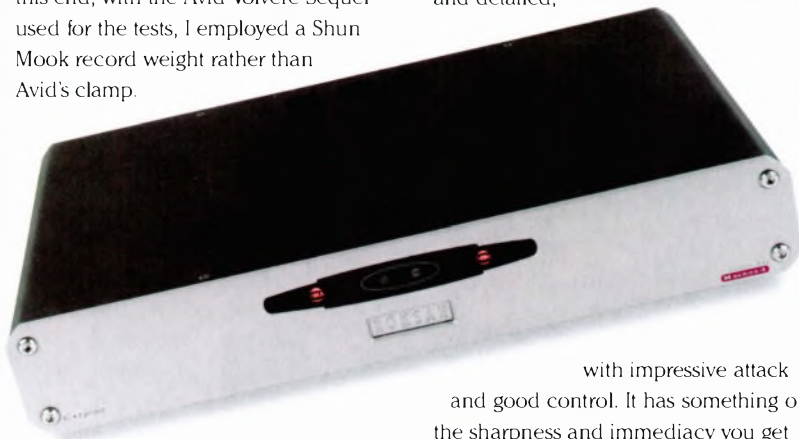
Something else relating to this is the way that sudden unpredictable changes in the music keep surprising the ear. One of the (many) LPs I played was Stevie Wonder's classic *Songs in the Key of Life* double album. In hi-fi terms the recording's hardly a blockbuster - tonally it's somewhat full and rounded, even perhaps a trifle dull. On lesser systems the album can sound a bit thick and lifeless.

Via the Roksan, the tonal balance remained attractively full and warm. Yet listening more closely revealed that instrumental and vocal lines were surprisingly independent and varied. The music would be playing away quite predictably, or so it seemed. Then all of a sudden you'd hear changes of dynamics or tone colour that caught you by surprise.

On the first track, 'Love's in Need of Love Today', the layering of gospel-

▶ like background voices created a warm but vivid three dimensional effect - smooth and integrated, yet full of individuality. It's as though the separate strands that make up the whole retain more of their independence. Rather than everything merging together, more of the various individual flavours are retained.

I find this particular 'independent' quality is more apparent with turntables that do not use a clamping system. To this end, with the Avid Volvere Sequel used for the tests, I employed a Shun Mook record weight rather than Avid's clamp.



There is perhaps a slight loss of tightness without the clamp, but in its place you get a sound of much greater subtlety and tonal variety.

I felt the Roksan was very good at bringing out the specific signature qualities of the different cartridges I used. The subtlety and sophisticated refinement of Transfiguration's Temper W cartridge was very much in evidence with the Roksan, and its winning combination of clarity and openness created some exquisite sounds.

The Koetsu Urushi Gold exhibited superb dynamic control and marvelously rich deep sound-staging, not to mention a fabulously velvety sonority. The sound was hugely big and powerful, yet refined and subtle at the same time. Surface clicks were impressively low; despite the excellent clarity and sharpness of presentation, background noise was rarely noticeable.

Inevitably with so many component parts involved, it's difficult to say

precisely what creates a particular end result. Is it the phono-stage that's responsible, or is it mainly down to the cartridge? Perhaps it's due to the turntable? Or the tonearm? Of course, all play a part. But going back to my regular Audiolab phono-stage, I have to say I was very aware that something important was missing...

The Audiolab produces a very bright, clean, open sound; it's lucid and detailed,

with impressive attack and good control. It has something of the sharpness and immediacy you get from CD - and I like that. But the Roksan offers something extra; essentially it gets to grips with the music in ways that make the experience more involving and rewarding.

Suitably partnered, it extracts a certain magic from those vinyl grooves in ways both mysterious and intriguing. Because of its brighter more forward balance, you'd perhaps expect the Audiolab to be more detailed - and superficially in some ways it is. But the Roksan's strength is subtle inner detail that's otherwise barely hinted at - fine shades within the overall presentation.

I think it has a lot to do with the mid-band. The Stevie Wonder album illustrated this to perfection; despite the lack of crisp sharp treble, having such an extraordinarily detailed mid-band rescued the sound from dullness. All sorts of subtle inflections and dynamics could be heard - important detail that made the most of the music's expressiveness.

By the way, as phono-stages go, the

DX2 is physically a surprisingly large and heavy unit; I've seen smaller/lighter integrated amplifiers! You certainly feel like you're getting your money's worth. An extremely large toroidal mains transformer is employed, and both this and the main circuit board are heavily screened by steel casework partitioning.

During use, the casework stays cool. There's a slight transformer buzz - just audible if you put your ear close to the case - but nothing serious. Build quality is good, with great care having been taken over component placement and screening. The main circuit board is quite small but crammed solid with components - presumably to keep signal paths as short as possible.

So is this end for CD? Could be! If you put Roksan's phono-stage together with a suitable turntable front end, even the best CD players will struggle to produce comparable subtlety and fine detail. Speaking personally, I never cease to marvel at the way analogue just goes on getting better and better. Quality-wise, it's like a bottomless pit.

It's been 21 years since the introduction of CD, and despite everything vinyl has survived. So long as companies like Roksan keep producing products like this phono-stage, vinyl looks set for another 20+ years.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Type: | Solid-state phono-stage |
| Input Sensitivity: | 0.5mV - 5.0mV |
| Input Impedance: | 10 Ohm - 47 K Ohms |
| Output Impedance: | > 50 Ohms |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 432x80x380mm |
| Price: | £1000 |

Manufacturer:

Roksan Audio Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)20 8900 6801
Fax. (44)(0)20 8900 0734
Net. www.roksan.co.uk

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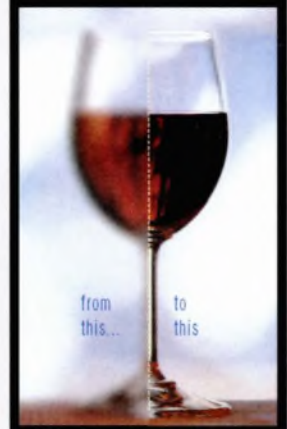
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ROTEL
STEREO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER RA-1062

RECORDING
TUNER OFF
TAPES

LISTENING
CD ALIX
TAPES1
TAPES2

Rotel RA1062 Stereo Integrated Amplifier

by Jason Hector

It's been a little while since I had a Rotel amplifier in my system. Take a look back to issue 15 and you'll find my largely positive musings about this amplifier's predecessor the RA1060. A full featured integrated amplifier the RA1062 like the 1060 before it features separate listen and record selectors, two tape loops, remote control of all major functions, a contour (read tone) control that can be turned off, a balance control and some lovely blue LED's. More importantly the amplifier has a large and heavy in-house designed toroidal transformer followed by a T-network capacitor (like the slit foil capacitors from the 1060 but better). This combination forms a low impedance highly regulated power supply that should help the amplifier's dynamic capabilities and are a bit of a rarity at this price point. Symmetrical circuit layouts featuring metal film resistors and polystyrene or polypropylene capacitors in the signal path, so score one for hifi credibility and one for features.

So what has changed from the 1060? Well Rotel have certainly noticed the vinyl resurgence because the RA1062 has gained a phono-stage suitable for moving magnet cartridges (the resurgence must be real because even Sony are selling turntables to the UK market again, complete with slogans about saving your precious vinyl! Slightly hypocritical?) Together with the phono sockets Rotel have provided an earth post so it really is ready to go. The biggest aesthetic change is the silver fascia of the review sample. The silver bit sits in front of the

solid black box which makes up the rest of the casework. This is heavily vented on the top for cooling. The Rotel still runs pretty warm even idling so you'll need to ensure it has adequate ventilation. Interestingly Rotel have decided to make a statement of the handles at each end of the front fascia, keeping them in the black of the 1060 and the rest of the 1062. While this lends the amplifier a purposeful scientific instrument look,



great for a bachelor pad, my better half wasn't convinced, so maybe half a point for looks.

Also benefiting from an upgrade are the speaker connection posts. While perfectly adequate on the 1060 (you could attach speaker wire to them and everything) the ones on the 1062 wouldn't look out of place on a high-end power amplifier and you get four pairs (!) to allow the connection of two pairs of speakers or easy bi-wiring. All the speakers are switchable A, B, A+B or none at all if you want to use the headphone output jack on the front panel, didn't I mention the headphone output? Yep, it's got one of those as well. So all in all you certainly get perceived value for money with this amplifier, so add one more point.

Switch on is a testament to the detail of the design. Pressing the power button lights the LED above it, followed by the volume control LED accompanied by a relay and a second or so later the input selection is remade which ensures the amplifier is stable before the speakers are exposed to the output. The amplifier benefits from being left on, the sound opening out and stabilising after 24 hours of operation. All of the front panel switches feed relays which clatter away if you change input for example. The fit and finish is excellent and again would put many more expensive products to shame. All of the controls feel solid and weighty and the product is a joy to use. Score yet another point for perceived value. I had some concerns about the treble of the 1060: I have none of those concerns with the 1062.

Whatever changes are contributing they have brought a very useful upgrading to the treble response of the amp while managing not to screw up any other area of its performance. Where the 1060 missed information and sounded shut in, to quote myself, the 1062 is open with little smearing in the upper registers and is transparent to the source material. It's a quality that makes the 1062 critical of partnering equipment and cables. With the 1060 I tried to extract a little more energy by using the ever faithful and boisterous Naim NACA5. With the 1062 this was unnecessary and I stuck with my very neutral Kimber 8TC, the cable that usually resides between my amps and speakers, with no problems at all. ▶

► The amplifier performed flawlessly the whole time I had it and I am reliably informed that the 1060 has been very reliable in the field, so score yet another one for reliability.

For the review period I wanted to make sure I had access to my vinyl and not wanting to fit an MM cartridge to the Well Tempered I fed one of the three line level inputs of the 1062 with the pre-outs of the Dynavector L300 pre-amplifier.

and instrumental timbre for example.

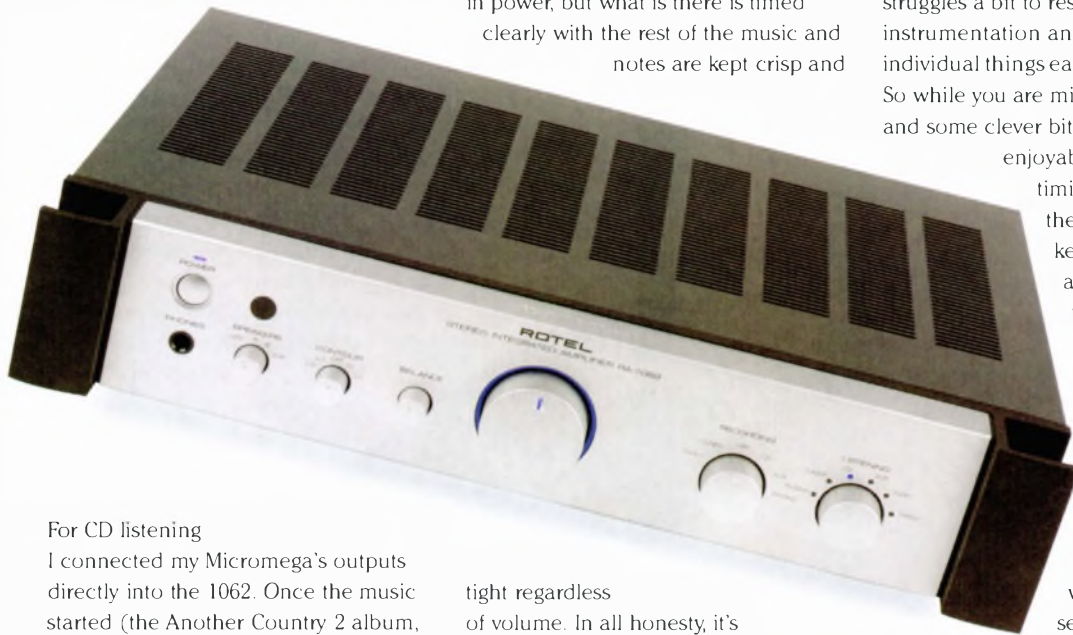
I've already discussed the treble and pronounced it much improved. What about the rest of the frequency range? Well now the treble is sorted I wouldn't try to dissect the performance octave by octave. I am not saying this amplifier is perfect from top to bottom but it doesn't have one area that is glaringly incomplete. If I was moaning about one frequency band then perhaps the very deep bass is restricted in power, but what is there is timed clearly with the rest of the music and notes are kept crisp and

the beat. Similarly the guitars and their chosen distortion have the desired live sound and you constantly have the feeling that you are hearing the sound the band, who are excellent live, intended. The lyrics are clear and the vocals sit free of the instrumentation but are still integrated with the rest of the band and what it is doing.

And now for the other, less impressive points... the production on this album is very dense and the 1062 struggles a bit to resolve the different instrumentation and some of the individual things each part is doing. So while you are missing some strands and some clever bits, the result is still enjoyable as the overall timing of the track and the propulsion, which keeps you listening and dare I say it tapping your feet, holds the whole together. You stay interested and the side is over in no time but you do lose some dynamic contrast. I guess this is where the wheat is separated from the chaff in hi-fi terms.

Can an amplifier keep

resolving detail as more and more information is sent through it? This becomes particularly critical if the music is demanding more and more current from the power supply. The Rotel seems to be rarely let down by its power supply; it simply doesn't harden until silly levels are demanded from my difficult speakers. Speaking of silly levels, next up, a big favourite, *Black Sabbath – Best Of* and the result is a similar story to the Gomez really. Most importantly everything is fun and enjoyable. There is great atmosphere and drama with these sympathetically re-mastered classics. Importantly Black Sabbath sound like they should ►



For CD listening

I connected my Micromega's outputs directly into the 1062. Once the music started (the *Another Country 2* album, the superb collection of alternative, for which read non-Nashville, country music) I was in for a bit of a shock. The Rotel, far from announcing itself with all too visible flaws simply got on with the job of driving the speakers and propelling music into my listening room. Totally rhythmically committed, the sound was emotionally charged in just the way the flat-earther in me likes. In the past Rotel gear has been described as mini-Naim, musically very persuasive but lacking subtlety and more than a little dry - which always suited me fine. But, like Naim, Rotel seems to be moving its ground, trying to give the purchaser more of everything. So this amplifier has a surprisingly effective presentation of spatial cues

tight regardless of volume. In all honesty, it's going to be pretty rare for the 1062 to be used with speakers that will expose this limitation anyway.

This amplifier makes an excellent job of solid rock bands and the latest by Gomez (*Split The Difference*) gave it the perfect opportunity to strut its stuff. Funky guitars, rhythmically massive drums and the usual gravelly tone to the vocal delivery makes this a classic Gomez album.

First the good points, and as an example, in the opening track the kick drum has a wonderful, attention grabbing sound. Its like the skin has been loosened and this looseness is very clear with the 1062 which gives a satisfying wallop in the room and preserves the harmonic structure of

▶ with surprising delicacy and huge soaring Ozzy vocals.

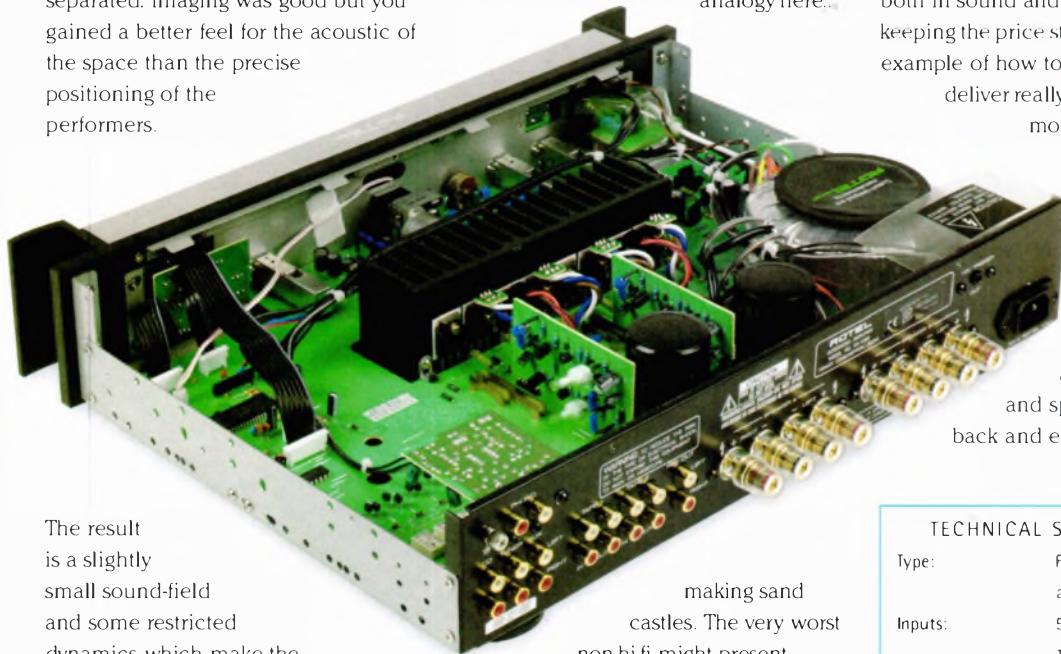
Not being an expert on Classical music I am trying to get myself educated and a recent purchase of some music for worship by Bach and Vivaldi proved a good test of the amplifier. Spinning Bach's *Magnificat (BMV 245)* I found the choral performance very enjoyable, the male and female parts of the choir were well handled if not perfectly separated. Imaging was good but you gained a better feel for the acoustic of the space than the precise positioning of the performers.

choral music and Black Sabbath – and yes, I am well aware of the irony.

On to *River Road* by Eric Bibb and Bert Deivert which is, mostly, a simple recording of vocals and guitars, and we really expose both the strengths and ultimately the limitations of the 1062. What is also very obvious is the difference between the Rotel and more expensive products. I'm going to have to resort to an analogy here...

most reviews of affordable gear in Hi-Fi+ I am almost certainly being too hard on the box in question. This is an astonishingly capable amplifier. Yes it is worth spending more, but the Rotel does get lots of it right and throughout my time with it, it never failed to make entertaining music.

It's great to see that Rotel have managed to take an already good product and improve it considerably, both in sound and features, while keeping the price static. Its yet another example of how to get it right and deliver really excellent value for money. I think you would have to spend well in excess of £1000 to better the Rotel significantly. Just make sure you treat it to a decent source and speakers and sit back and enjoy. ▶+



The result is a slightly small sound-field and some restricted dynamics which make the sound more constrained and less free. The tone of instruments is kept intact through this amplifier with good rendition of the harmonic richness of the massed strings. I followed the Bach with Vivaldi's *Gloria in D Major* and as expected results were similar to the Bach. Here the more powerful choir in the *Gloria Excelsis Deo* section had some compression of the loudest passages which was bound to happen when this piece is played with the required vigour. Through the Rotel the strong rhythmic elements of the Vivaldi composition were brought very much to the fore, emphasising the timing qualities of the 1062. It is further testament to the Rotel designers that the 1062 is equally at home playing

making sand castles. The very worst non-hi-fi might present music like making a sand castle from bone dry fine sand. You turn the bucket over and all you get is a slumped heap of sand. Move into and up through the hi-fi arena and we add more water to our sand and gradually a more refined castle remains after the mould is removed, the crenellations become visible for example. The very best products go beyond this and mix a little quick drying cement in there so you actually end up with great solidity, body and detail to the sound. With the Rotel the voices are clear and separated but they lack ultimate realism and substance. So whilst we are making a sand castle with sand that's slightly drier than we might ideally like, it's surprisingly damp for the price. Like

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|--|---|
| Type: | Full facilities integrated amplifier |
| Inputs: | 5x line inputs 1x MM phono input |
| Outputs: | 1x pre-out 2x tape-out |
| Rated Output: | 2x 60 Watts/Channel with both channels driven, into an 8 Ohm load over 20 Hz to 20 kHz and 0.03% THD. |
| Damping Factor: | 150 (8 ohms) |
| Input Impedance: | 33kOhms |
| Input Sensitivity: | 160mV |
| Input overload level, line level inputs: | 5v |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 430x92x355 mm |
| Weight: | 7.8 kg |
| Price: | £600 |

UK Distributor:

Rotel Europe
Tel. (44)(0)1903 221600
Net. www.rotel.com



The Revolver RW16 Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

And for the main course – the two-way loudspeaker.

Ingredients:

- One bass-mid unit of the Indian/Chinese variety
- One tweeter of similar origin
- One handful of crossover components including Elcap or LCR caps
- One smallish cabinet
- A moulded port

Method:

- Thoroughly mix ingredients – a blender might be useful
- Leave to simmer for a few hours with MLSSA (or something similar)*
- Garnish with gold plated binding posts, and seasoning to taste
- Serve on a stand

Alright, I know I'm being cynical. And I will probably find this is the last time the editor entrusts me with a loudspeaker review. But there seems to be something rather tired and formulaic about loudspeaker design at the moment, and nowhere is this more apparent than the sub five-hundred pound two way box. At the time when 8" bass-mid units went out of fashion (remember the AR 18 and Mordant Short Carnival/Pageant?) cabinet proportions changed from wide and shallow, supposedly for bookshelf use, to slim and relatively deep with stand mounting in mind. The unit of choice was a 6½" or less, while the tweeter was metal or soft dome according to fashion, and most drive units came from Denmark or Norway. This seems

to be the template that is still used today, although the needs of AV have arguably stretched the mould a little. So here is another small two-way box, with very little to distinguish it from the rest of the herd, or so it would seem. Designed and built by Revolver in the UK, this is the same company who made a bit of a name for themselves in the eighties with a well received budget turntable, before moving into loudspeakers, and yes, they are still able to supply spares for those products. Revolver is now headed by Mike Jewitt, who having been involved with Heybrook, Mordant Short and Canon amongst others is not short on experience when it comes to loudspeaker design, particularly in this sector of the market.

The RW16 is the entry level model of a range that consists of a more expensive stand mount (the R25) a floor-stander, and a centre channel loudspeaker. The basic finish is maple; light or dark cherry are available at extra cost. While the drive units are designed in the UK, they are built to specification in the Far East as is the trend these days, although one shouldn't knock it as it invariably means more driver for the money. The 130mm bass-mid unit utilises a woven fibreglass diaphragm within a pressed steel chassis, while the tweeter is a 26mm metal dome type - I would hazard a guess at aluminium. Both units are magnetically shielded for AV use. The crossover aims to keep it simple for the main driver with just a single inductor to provide a first order 6dB/octave roll off, while the HF unit is fed from a third order network with good quality ICW capacitors

crossing over at 3.2 KHz. This is hard wired on a small board anchored to the rear connection panel, where two sets of binding posts allow for bi-wiring. The cabinet is unbraced, but pretty substantial due to the compact dimensions and use of 18mm MDF; certainly it seems solid and relatively inert, and together with the high quality of the veneer the general air is that of a high quality product. The system is reflex loaded by a small port at the rear.

While it was not my intention to go down such a route, a combination of curiosity and laziness meant

that initial listening was done with the RW16's connected to my main system, in the company of the Burmeister CD player and the Naim NAP 300. A situation that was supposed to be a temporary measure for a few hours ended up lasting for several

days, as I could not find too many reasons to take the RW16's off. With a pair of early foundation stands for support, the Revolvers had no problem in filling the large room with sound, and seemed to be capable of volumes quite in excess of what I would expect from a 5" bass unit. Under these luxurious, if totally unrealistic conditions, the RW16's displayed their main virtue to great effect by being engaging and enjoyable, and at the risk of damning them with faint praise did little to get in the way of letting the music do its stuff. But you could argue that a baked bean can would sound great with enough esoteric equipment to drive it, and we supposedly left that philosophy



* By all accounts, Revolver does not use MLSSA, opting for the somewhat more down to earth LMS.

▶ behind in the eighties.

Back down to earth then, and I hastily assembled a more moderate system a little more in keeping with the Revolvers budget, namely a Rotel RCD 951 CD player feeding a variety of



amplifiers, and the little Technics SL10 (with Cartridge Man re-tipped cantilever) for vinyl replay. For a couple of evenings I trawled through a considerable amount of music while outside autumn type storms wreaked havoc with the trees in July. The RW16's give the impression of being just a little bit more efficient than a typical box of this size, and didn't appear to need lots of power to produce reasonable levels. More importantly, the nature of their bass response means that they don't need masses of 'grip' normally associated with more powerful amplifiers, and that is probably why a Leak Stereo 20 sounded particularly nice with them. With a passive volume control between it and the CD

player, there was a good sense of body to music, warm but not mushy, that made them effortless to listen to. The RW16's have a great sense of communication that is largely down to the mid-

band, and while the bass and treble

extremes are not spectacular, they do not draw attention to themselves by trying to be too ambitious. The top end is reasonably clean


and detailed, if not that extended, but more importantly integrates well with the mid-band and is mercifully free of metallic overtones. The bottom end is well judged inasmuch as it offers the right degree of support for rhythm and timing, and has good definition as far as it goes. Moving the cabinets nearer a wall gives the impression of more weight, but at the expense of clouding the midrange and sounding predictably muddy. This also compromises another virtue of the RW16's which are pretty

good at imaging and getting sound away from the box, if given the space in which to do it.

Two other amplifiers that I tried yielded some interesting results. The Cyrus 8 integrated sounded to my ears a little relentless with the RW16's, and although the sheer drive and tightness of the sound was quite exciting, it

seemed to me to be heading in the wrong direction. Actually, that is a bit unfair as rock and pop from vinyl sounded pretty good but string music had a hard edge that made it rather tiring in the long term. Conversely, taking my life into my hands I fired up an old Musical Fidelity A100, the comparatively laid back approach of which seemed to play to the strengths of the loudspeakers very effectively, highlighting once again the engaging quality that the RW16's do rather well.

On the surface of it, there is not a great deal to distinguish the RW16 from any one of a considerable number of similar loudspeakers. It does not boast any great technical innovation, nor is it immediately impressive or spectacular in any one area of performance.

Therein I suspect lies the secret of its success; it has the right balance of (old fashioned?) virtues that allow their use with some of the more modest but musical amplification, while at the same time preserving the integrity of the music that makes it so enjoyable. The R16 tends to hide its light under a bushel, which is a shame, as it has a lot more to offer than most of the supposed competition. Plain but enjoyable... No, let's make that plain enjoyable. 




TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Type: | Two-way reflex |
| Drive units: | 130mm woven-fibre bass-mid 26mm metal dome tweeter |
| Frequency response: | 48Hz - 28KHz |
| Sensitivity: | 90dB |
| Nominal impedance: | 6 Ohms |
| Power handling: | 15 - 100 Watts |
| Dimensions HxWxD: | 335x183x230mm |
| Weight: | 6Kg |
| Price: | £399 |

Manufacturer:

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Fax. (44)(0)87 0047 0048
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Home, Home on LaGrange – living with the Brinkmann LaGrange turntable

by Dave Davies

For years I've owned and treasured a Michell Gyrodek. Modified with the Orbe kit and with a restored and Incognito wired Mission Mechanic and Clearaudio Signature cartridge it has delivered sterling service and proved highly enjoyable with whatever vinyl I challenged it. However, whilst the Michell had remained a constant over the years I have improved other aspects of my system. The old Meridian amps have been replaced with two Michell Stereo Alecto's and an Orca pre-amp (itself recently improved with a Trichord 'Never-Connected' supply). The much-loved Michell ISO has gone and has been replaced with a Trichord Delphini 2 phono stage. My Ruark Paladin speakers have been superseded by Audioplan Kontrast 111i's, with Audioplan's hose-like but superb LS-16 speaker cables and Super AF interconnects used throughout. My Quadraspire racks have also been retired in favour of a Hutter Racktime system. With literally everything else changing, the dear old Gyrodek was beginning to look a little long in the tooth.

Now I don't think there's ever been a more tempting combination of decks, arms and cartridges on the market but of course for the unwary this can mean an equivalent quantity of pitfalls. I only have to pause and shudder at the mistaken purchases I've made in the past. You know the story: it sounded oh so good in the dealers and the reviews in 'Audio Envy' magazine were so compelling that I just had to have it.

The disappointment usually set in within a week or two of purchase usually accompanied by a large dose of incredulity – it can't possibly be that bad can it? This was invariably followed by a month or so of my proving to myself just what a mistaken purchase it was before the offending hardware hit the 'for sale' columns. I'll name no names but I know that several thousand



unnecessary pounds have left my wallet over the years often much to the Editor's amusement. Well I hope I've learned my lesson now and my first action was to consult the Editor on this challenge. The Brinkmann LaGrange was a front runner among the options we discussed, and spurred on by a re-read of Jason's review (issue 24) I quickly lined up a demo at Walrus Systems.

My immediate impression before even a note of music was played was that if anything Jason's rave review had understated the constructional beauty of the deck – it simply oozes class from the black mirror finish of the glass platter surface to the quality of the (distinctly) Breuer-like 10.5 tonearm to

the overall fit n'finish. 'Wife acceptance factor' also came into play immediately since the Brinkmann, even allowing for the essential stone base, occupies a much smaller footprint than the Gyrodek and pretty as that deck is, the Brinkmann has an understated almost sculptural quality to it that's in another class altogether. It was just as

impressive in action and entirely consistent across the wide range of music we played and very soon after this session I had determined that this was the deck for me.

Herr Brinkmann builds to order so there was a delay of several weeks from placing the order. Time to build up a good head of eager anticipation. Finally the wait was over and the deck having been beautifully set-up by Les at Walrus before being carefully disassembled to the minimum

number of pieces for transport and repacked, was ready for collection. Nevertheless it was a fraught time driving home with this precious cargo nestling heavily on the back seat: If I was ever going to get rear-ended, this was bound to be the day. Fortunately I was neither hit by a car nor dropped it on the drive and the various boxes were safely deposited on the listening room floor. Oh and incidentally the quality of build is carried right through to the packaging with, for example, a miniature aluminium flight case for the cartridge and a well-crafted wood case for

▶ the arm and set-up tools. The solid stone support for the deck (which is strongly recommended) is 60 x 40cm's, although I went for a slighter smaller footprint. Brinkmann recommend granite although Les finds slate even better. Given that my local stonemason could only source granite in the available time I took the pragmatic route. A beautifully polished and levelled slab of black granite awaited the deck.

Given that Les had mounted and carefully aligned the cartridge and fully set up the arm, getting started was simplicity itself. The power supply was sited, the sub-chassis and arm placed on the granite base and the heavyweight (16kg of metal

composite - aluminium, lead, and copper), platter carefully lowered into place. The freestanding motor unit was then sited a centimetre or so from the platter, power leads connected to the motor and an additional lead to the turntable's base to power the miniature heater that strictly controls bearing tolerance. The thin round section belt was popped on, fitting snugly into the groove around the platter circumference and the motor positioning finely adjusted to ensure a tight but not too tight tension. A pair of Cawsey STC silver cables with locking plugs (also supplied by Walrus) hooked up the deck to the Delphini. Switch on and that was almost it. The deck sounded great

from the off, but after a week or so of running in it was time for a final adjustment. Brinkmann supply a card strobe and an Allan key and it was a very simple matter via two apertures at the rear of the motor base to fine adjust the speeds for 331/3 and 45rpm. That's it. The deck relies on sheer mass for isolation, a sharp tap with a fingertip on the platter delivers no sound but my squeal of pain, and given that there's no suspension to worry about there's nothing else to do but enjoy the music.

So, what's it like in operation? Well, everything Jason said is

Every aspect of operation has been thoroughly thought through and outstanding engineering applied to realise the design. In short, it's a joy to use. Of course, however slick it is in operation that's all merely a means to an end: so how does it sound?

First up it's refreshingly un 'hi-fi' and almost understated in its performance. What it does do is to calmly wring the best from every disk I threw at it. With the old Gyro I had a number of outstanding disks that would really



shine
with the deck:
Discs like Rockin'

Jimmy and the Brothers
of the Night or the Speakers
Corner Ella Fitzgerald *Gershwin box set*. Everything sounded at the very least okay but these were among a favoured few demo disks delivering a level above its day-to-day performance. The Brinkmann by contrast, is much more consistent across every disc and type of music. It levels the playing field. Take a less than perfect recording of an incendiary performance like my mono original of Georgie Fame and The Blue Flames *Rhythm and Blues at The Flamingo* (Columbia 33SX 1599 if you can find it). Now this is very far from a great recording: thin, muffled it was nevertheless possible to listen through the dire recording quality and enjoy the music on the Gyro. On the Brinkmann however whilst it won't (and can't) ▶

borne out in practice. The clamp spins slickly into place, tightly locking the disk to the platter, the touch-sensitive switches for speed selection and off operate with the merest hint of a fingertip setting the platter in motion. With all that mass to shift it takes a few seconds to get up to speed but in practice this is insignificant. By the time the arm's aligned and lowering commenced the platter is up to speed. Oh, and another testament to the deck's quality is that apart from the light patterns on the disks surface, it's very difficult to tell the platter's spinning so silent, smooth and vibration-free is its operation. For such a costly device, this really is the most user-friendly deck I've owned.

make a poor recording great it digs so much deeper into the recording. The cymbal work opens out, the drive of the band and Fame's vocals are that much clearer and I feel like I'm in the club with the band rather than sitting next door listening through a cup pressed to the wall.

The Brinkmann performed similar magic with a treasured performance of Stravinsky chamber music (DG 2530 551). This bog-standard pressing contains some lovely work from The Boston Chamber Players, but in keeping with much DG output is a little thin and bright. The Brinkmann manages to play down the negatives here whilst setting the musicians in a more convincing acoustic than the Gyro ever managed.

Most importantly each nuance of their performance and the character of their instruments is much better wrung from this pressing. Result: much greater musical pleasure. And in excellent recordings The Brinkmann is hugely enjoyable whether tackling early music like *Villancicos*, jazz such as The Analogue Productions re-issue of Basie's *Farmers Market Barbeque* or a hard-driving band like the wonderful Diverse Vinyl pressing of Frank Black's *Show Me Your Tears*. Almost regardless

of the pressing, the Brinkmann delivers a convincing musical performance every time. Sure the very best recordings will sound great, but the Brinkmann delivers much greater musical enjoyment across my entire record collection, which it has effectively delivered to me afresh. When compared with the Gyro (bearing in mind that this is

'Oxfam rejects' is simply not a serious issue.

Further improvements? At some stage it may be worth my trying Les's recommendation of a slate base for the deck and, being absolutely correct I really ought to consider trying a set of Audioplan Super X wires in replacement for the Cawsey's. The Brinkmann/EMT cartridge could also be replaced with something more exotic and I could also consider the optional Brinkmann tube PSU, but frankly I'm so content with t

he superb, unflappable performance of this machine that I just can't be bothered. It looks gorgeous. It does its job, and it does it supremely well time and time again. Sure

there are a few even better decks out there for even more money, but for me and at anything around this price point (and despite a recent price increase), I know of nothing better. I look forward to a very long and very happy relationship with my Brinkmann.



hardly a fair comparison given that it's a suspended deck with a totally

different arm and cartridge, and at much less than half the price of the Brinkmann), the LaGrange is more solid and capable across the range. Bass is less obviously there until a deep note comes along and you feel it rather than hear it. It digs much deeper down than the Gyro and much more cleanly. Imaging is more precise, the midrange less emphasised and more naturally part of the mix, timing much improved and the background more silent. Surface noise on all but the worst

Prices:

LaGrange turntable: £5,995.00

Brinkmann 10.5 tonearm: £2,400.00

Brinkmann/EMT cartridge: £1,500.00

UK Distributor:

Walrus Systems

11 New Quebec St, London W1H 7RW

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Tom Evans Audio Design Contact Details

Following news of the rupture in relations between Tom Evans Audio Design and their international distributor, Ex-cell Power Solutions, we can now supply contact details for the revised arrangements.



Meanwhile, a new Far-Eastern distributor has also been appointed, covering Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong, and hopefully developing the emergent Chinese market too. Their contact details are:

Customers seeking information or support within the continental USA should contact:

Ed Sheftel
Tel. 818 802 0020
E-mail. edsheftel@aol.com

V&V Audio (Kuala Lumpur)
Tel. 00603 2162 0351

Meanwhile, for UK customers, the service and information contact remains

relief to report their continued availability. Whilst not cheap, they do challenge the performance of the very best available equipment, redefining many listener's expectations of what is possible from a home system. It would be a sad day indeed were they to cease production.

Meanwhile, there's news of new, EL84 based hybrid power amps. Details are scarce at present, but expect a choice of 20 Watt stereo and 40

Watt mono amplifiers, at prices significantly below those of the 15 Watt Stereo "The Soul". Of course, you don't get anything for nothing, so don't go thinking you'll be getting the fancy modular Perspex and aluminium casework of "The Soul". However the basic circuitry is common to the two designs and the new models should deliver similar standards of performance, which has to be good news. Rest assured that we'll keep you up to date on developments.

the factory, which can be contacted at:

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

Having been major champions of the sonic excellence of the Tom Evans designs it's something of a



Non-sticky sticky stuff... The Harmonix system tuning devices

by Roy Gregory

Recent happy experiences with the Reimyo CD player and DAP-777 DAC have left me with a niggling fascination for the products of the Combak Corporation, best known for their various strange, even bizarre, tuning devices. But then, since when has being 'bizarre' ever been cause for exclusion from the hi-fi industry? And if the secret of a great product is the whole exceeding the sum of the parts, then the Reimyo electronics could serve as an object lesson. There's no doubting the care and attention that goes into their circuitry, or the quality of the superb JVC K2 chipset, but it's equally clear that the careful construction contributes disproportionately to the superb sound that results. A key element in those structural decisions is Combak's understanding of resonance and system tuning, gained from extensive experience with their own, add on accessories. I was particularly intrigued by the contribution made by the DAP-777's disc decouplers. These provided a cup for the player's pointed feet, and delivered a pretty dramatic improvement in sound for something so prosaic. It got me thinking...

The extensive range of Harmonix tuning accessories potentially offer the option of adding a little touch of Combak's magic to existing products in your system. They can be divided into two basic categories: those that go on things, and those that go under

them. The various feet and supports are not that controversial, and I experimented with a set of their large, TU-202 ZX turned wooden feet back in Issue 28. Their effect was easily discerned but also particular in character, lending a sense of rounded warmth and space to proceedings that wouldn't



necessarily be welcome in all systems. On the other hand, if that's what you're looking for then they were both sonically and cost effective.

For this exercise I opted to include another set of feet, but also to investigate the rather more contentious aspect of the catalogue, "the bits that go on..." Because by "on" I don't mean sitting on top. The Harmonix tuning devices are intended to be stuck to just about everything, from drive units to circuit boards, input socketry to tonearms. I opted for a pack of eight RF-56 Tuning

Bases, small metallic tiles, and eight of the flexible RF-333 Tuning Belts, intended for curved surfaces.

RF-900 Tuning Spike Base

These are small, slightly conical gold plated discs, 30mm in diameter and with a thin, felt interface on their undersides. Their summit has a small dimple designed to locate the tip of a spike. I have no idea what particular alloy they're made of, although they're surprisingly heavy considering their small size. With only four to play with, speakers were out of the question.

But another, more obvious candidate offered itself. The Wadia 861 arrives complete with four steel cone feet and a matching set of steel discs on which to stand them. Substituting

the Harmonix feet was the work of moments, making for swift and easy comparisons.

Sure enough, substituting the RF-900 feet for the ostensibly fairly similar Wadia items produced a far from subtle change. The thing that catches your ear is the richer, more rounded and more vividly coloured tonal palette. Instruments are drawn with a bigger, bolder brush, as are rhythms and the shape of melodies, giving music an appealing liquidity and flow. If toe-tapping is your be-all and end-all then you'll be buying a set of these as soon as you hear them. However, it's not all positive

► – depending of course on your point of view. The cost of that richness and energy is a loss of focus and definition within the sound-stage, a rounding and smoothing of micro-dynamic transitions.

Now there are those who'll see this presentation as more natural, more involving and more musical. There are also those who will point to the lack of the intricate detail and spatial subtlety that helps reconstitute the sense of reality. You pays your money – you takes your choice. However, the key realization here is that the RF-900s are not a universal tweak, but one that voices your system in a particular way. The issue is not whether they make a difference; it's whether you need the difference they make.

Let's apply the changes to a familiar track or two, in the context of the Wadia, Vibe, Pulse, Radia, OBX-R2 set up, all wired with Nordost Valhalla. This is a classic high-resolution system,



with particularly fine discrimination of energy levels across its bandwidth and an even, overall balance. Listening to the Jackie Leven album *Defending Ancient Springs*, the opening beats of 'You've Lost That Loving Feeling' gain a weight and rounded shape with the RF-900s. This adds undoubted impact and drama to the track, but later, the space around and behind the vocal is less apparent, the distance and arced spacing of the backing singers less noticeable and less of a musical contrast. You gain a sense of solidity and momentum in the music, colour and majesty, but the careful jigsaw construction of the complex

arrangement is obscured, the contrasts within the track diminished. Likewise the cascaded, stretched guitar chords that characterize both 'Paris Blues' and the title track gain substance but lose bite and their tumbling inner complexity.

Combak also suggest using the RF-900s in conjunction with the TU-202s, and as I still had the wooden feet around I gave that a whirl too, although the dimensions of the Wadia combined with the diameter of the wooden feet made for the sort of foot-print that's not easily accommodated. I got away with it – just, on my Clearlight Aspect rack, but it's something to bear in mind when considering these feet. But then, they are something that's well worth considering.

The combination of the RF-900s and TU-202s is far more impressive (and, admittedly, expensive) than the 900s on their own. Together they build on what the metal feet do, but add such a dramatic increase in upper-bass/lower-mid energy and substance that the system actually sounds a notch, or even two, louder. Natural? Maybe not – but it surely is enjoyable. Indeed you could argue that it's simply compensating for the corresponding suck-out that so many solid-state electronics and metal-driven speakers incorporate in the name of speed and transparency. It also restores the air and volume to the soundstage, if not the inner definition. But if you want scale, drama and impact, look no further.

So, that leads me to two conclusions. The first is that the Harmonix feet definitely do what it says on the tin. Given the impact of all sorts of supports this is not exactly revolutionary, but reassuring nonetheless. Secondly, if I was running a system with a tendency to the dry or pinched, I'd be getting hold of some Harmonix feet just as quick as I could. Did anybody say Audiolab?

The RF-56 Tuning Base and RF-333 Tuning Belt

It's nice that the feet work in a way that's sort of accepted, because the confusingly named Tuning Bases and Belts are exactly the sort of tweaks that drive the scientific thought-police wild with epistemological indignation. How do they work? The lord only knows... But work I'm afraid they do, at least in so much as they make a difference that's both audible and repeatable – and not a little bit spooky. Applying four of the tiny RF-56

tiles around the output sockets of the Wadia as directed (look, it's on the top of the rack, okay?) I was astonished to here the sound from the mid on up, gain all the energy and life that the foot combination had injected lower down. But now you were getting air, focus, detail and texture too. Those backing singers were back just where they should be, arrayed in that arc, separated in space and level from the lead vocal. The texture and shaping of the lyric, the way in which Jackie works his voice (and he really does) are suddenly far more intimate and convincing. Dynamics are crisper, snare beats more sudden, the attack in hard strummed guitar chords that

much more assertive.

So I added more of the RF-56 bases to the system – this time on the input socketry of the Vibe. Once again, more focus, more definition, all combined with more body and substance. The end result: greater musical clarity. The effect was less obvious than with the Wadia, although it was also significantly better overall, introducing a sense of refinement and subtlety along with the attack and energy. Whether this effect is



inherent to the addition of extra devices or simply down to the specifics of product and its position in the system I can't say as I didn't fancy removing the tiles from the Wadia.

The RF-333 belts I positioned around the inputs to the RADIA by way of experiment, and again, built on the foundation laid by the first quartet of 56s. This is a purely temporary arrangement as the RF-333s are flexible and intended for curved surfaces. Don't go thinking rubber here. These are stiff but bendable with a bit of effort. It's easy to kink them so be careful. I'm currently contemplating a more appropriate deployment for them, probably involving drive units or some such.

Conclusions

So what exactly are we to conclude? Well, the Harmonix tuning devices aren't new, they aren't big but they are clever. Cleverer than me at least, 'cos I haven't a clue how they do what they so demonstrably do do. That much hasn't changed, and if nothing else,

they prove that just because we can't explain something, forgetting about it doesn't mean it isn't so – or make it go away.

The influence of the Harmonix devices is unfailingly musical and engaging, and some would argue that they lead us back to the true path from which we strayed all those years ago. Indeed, if you asked me to sum them up in a snapshot I'd have to say that they are the easiest way to inject valve virtues into a system short of investing in amplifiers full of glowing bottles. If you live in an arid, solid-state desert then that can only be good news.

My own feelings are slightly more ambivalent. They move the sound of my system back towards where it came from. Further experimentation has left the RF-56s in place while reverting back to my original foot arrangement, the added body and substance

provided by the arrival of Pagode Master Reference racks rendering the Harmonix feet unnecessary. The same conclusions need not apply in any other system. However, what I would encourage is everybody to at least try and experience the effect of the 56s in a system they know, if only to reinforce just how little we really know about what exactly we're doing.

Just be warned that as self-adhesive items, returning them if unimpressed isn't an option! What really surprises me about the Harmonix tuning products is how they all work towards a single, targeted goal. That goal exists already

in the impressive shape and sound of the Reimyo electronics, but what do you make of a set of tweaks that shape the sound of other electronics to that agenda. The really clever part is not finding something weird that effects the sound of a hi-fi system: the clever part is getting it to do what you want, consistently and repeatably. Which makes the Combak people very clever indeed.



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Record Reviews

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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, Richard S. Foster.


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David Sylvian

Blemish

Samadhisound sound-cd 0001 

Denuded guitar strings, minimalist electronica and a closely miked vibrato voice often placed over the top of layered and reverberating feedback tones actually achieves delicate moments of intimacy on this avant-jazz work from the ex-Japan vocalist, David Sylvian. His deliberate yet rich and almost mantra-like enunciations on the title-track are very effective. They deal with love's darker emotions where the truth is compared to a blemish on the skin. It also provides a telling counterpoint to those nagging and disquieting arrangements which worry away at this and other extremely personal topics. There is something quite confessional and introspective about these songs. So much so that I came away feeling like a voyeur and being put in that position is more than just a little unsettling. Elsewhere 'The Good Son' offers an ironic twist in its "return of the prodigal" subject matter and the pared back and exposed nature of its acoustic wrings out the emotional honesty which lies at the root of this and the seven other songs on *Blemish*. Later the wistful melody and stretched harmonics of a track like 'A Fire In The Forest' ratchet up the intensity even further but I still can't help feeling that this is the loneliest and most reclusive music making that I've heard in a long time.

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC





J J Cale

To Tulsa And Back

Capitol 5788262

Once he had decided to make a new album J J Cale went back to Tulsa, Oklahoma (his birthplace) and looked up old friend and ex- Bob Seger drummer David Teegarden – as well as some other old friends he grew up with – and booked himself some studio time. The recording sessions were a relaxed affair, but then what else would you expect from the king of the lazy groove? The musicians featured in those sessions were guys Cale used to play and record with over 40 years ago. "I don't think there's anyone on this record who's under 60 years old" he recalls on the press release. *To Tulsa And Back* is Cale's first studio recording in eight years, and might very well be his finest. That laid back, trademark sound of his is well to the fore; it's a style that's influenced a host of artists from Lynyrd Skynyrd to Dire Straits, and especially Eric Clapton. This time Cale has expanded his lyrical repertoire to include social and environmental issues, something we all need to be aware of in these tangled, dangerous times. On 'The Problem', a brushed drum country shuffle, he has a dig at George Bush, leaving us in no doubt about how he feels when it comes to the man in charge of the USA right now. Musically, *To Tulsa And Back* doesn't break any new ground, but you know what they say; If it ain't broke ...

AH



Lori McKenna

Bittertown

Continental Song City CSCCD1034

Lori McKenna is not your typical rock star. She lives in a small house in an unassuming town with her plumber husband and five children. The Ford minivan she drives doubles as the tour bus! She has had considerable success with her first three albums but it's this one that's set to catapult her into the premier league of singer/songwriters. *Bittertown* is full of wry observations on life in a small town; it's her *Darkness On The Edge Of Town*, a *Scorecrow* for the 21st century. "No strangers in this town, no one moves without making a sound, live and die within the borders and lines, no one dies without paying their fines" she sings on 'Bible Song', as good a tune about the oppressiveness of community life as I've ever heard in a very long time. This is a woman with vision, a poet who paints vivid images through her magnificent ability with words, an artist who sees in minute detail and is able to convey the feelings of ordinary folk and turn them into songs of quite timeless beauty. All 13 songs on this remarkable album are like works on canvas. Rarely have I heard an artist who has talent to convey the mundanities of everyday life the way that this girl can. It wouldn't surprise me to see *Bittertown* appearing on lots of reviewers' album of the year lists – It'll certainly be on mine.

AH



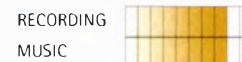
Los Lobos

The Ride

Hollywood Records LC10022

Los Lobos have been recording for a few decades now and have amassed an excellent back catalogue of supremely crafted albums spanning a wide variety of styles, from Tex-Mex and Blues to Country and full-on Rock. It wouldn't be unfair to call them Godfathers of Americana, a band who have influenced many artists and opened doors for many more. *The Ride* is their latest project, a collaboration with many of their friends in the business, and unlike a lot of these all star projects it works exceedingly well. Some of the artists guesting here recorded at Cesar Rosa's home studio and others – like Elvis Costello and Tom Waits – corresponded from various parts of the globe. Elvis Costello laid down his vocal for 'Matter Of Time' in a church in Oslo, Norway and then shipped the tapes to Los Lobos in Los Angeles for fine tuning. The performance he gives here is amongst the very best of his long and distinguished career, he sounds like he's been a member of Los Lobos from day one. The same can be said for ex-Blaster Dave Alvin and his contribution to lovely ballad 'Somewhere In Time', and also for Mavis Staples, who infuses 'Someday' with lashings of liquefied soul. Other guests lending their talents to this fine project are Richard Thompson, Bobby Womack, Ruben Blades and influential Mexican-American rocker Little Willie G

AH





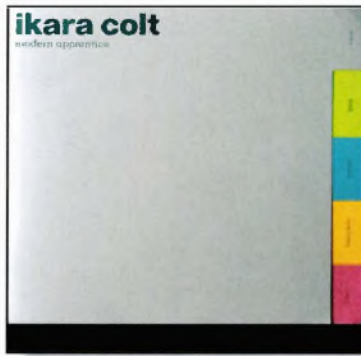
Kathryn Williams

Relations

Caw Records 5050467216655

An album of cover versions can be the mark of a performer's consummate self-confidence or their last redoubt before that lonely retreat into creative bankruptcy. Fortunately Kathryn Williams delivers affectionate enough renditions of songs by the likes of Lou Reed (Candy Says), Neil Young (Birds), Lee Hazelwood (Easy And Me) and Leonard Cohen (Hallelujah) to more than suggest that the latter is the case here. She concentrates on what she does best - the natural warmth and delicacy in her vocals (sometimes double tracked) and the characteristic string arrangements behind acoustic and electric guitars that have given her previous albums that airy sense of intimacy are once again brought to the fore. All very nicely produced by Kathryn. This approach does gloss over the dirty half-light of a dark and gritty world inhabited by Kurt Cobain's 'All Apologies' and the Stephen Malkmus penned 'Spit On A Stranger'. Nor does she entirely recapture the contrasting despair and moments of elation in Lou Reed's transsexual tale. Though the recording of 'Hallelujah' and 'These Days' (Jackson Browne) which were taped live at the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre does inadvertently introduce a degree of coarseness as the top end of the vocals becomes a little ragged at times. Overall, *Relations* is still a collection of carefully chosen and thoughtfully put together music.

RP



Ikara Colt

modern apprentice

Fantastic Plastic FPCD009

Ikara Colt have gone through a few changes since 2002's *Chat and Business*, replacing their bassist and receiving a hefty injection of style. They still draw heavily on bands such as the Who and the Fall, borrowing both their aggression and attitude, as well as their musical signatures. Lead singer Paul could easily pass for Mark E Smith from a casual listen, two years experience having added more than a cursory drop of cynicism and bite to his voice. And the same thing could be said for the whole album. This is the sound of a tighter band, older and wiser. With the new bassist in place the rhythm section is now as tight as the songs demand, allowing the guitar and vocals to punch out their staccato lead. And punch they do, driving the songs forward with military pace, 12 songs in 34 minutes, blink and you miss it. This is an album of contradictions. Having cleaned up their production and tightened their belts Ikara Colt have produced a much more professional record. But they have done so without once compromising their sound: this is still a seriously difficult album to listen to. *modern apprentice* is just as spiky as their debut, more commercial, but just as ambitious. Loud, shouty and offensive to the ears. Superb.

MC



Holly Golightly

Truly She Is None Other

Damaged Goods DAMGOOD 213-LP

Holly Golightly (her real name!) is one of the better singer songwriters to come out of the "wild" Billy Childish academy in the 1990s. (You may remember the review several months back of his raucous and quite abrasive album, *1914*.) Well, Holly has moved away from the girl group and three-chord garage-rock sound that characterised her work ten years ago and instead for *Truly She Is None Other* she now ploughs a Sixties styled groove that shamelessly taps into skiffle and the rock & roll beats of yesteryear. Consequently, her covers of the Ray Davies tracks 'Time Will Tell' and 'Tell Me Now So I Know' now sit comfortably alongside her own songs like 'Walk A Mile or She Said'. While elsewhere 'Black Night' is the track that reveals a folk-blues dimension within Miss Golightly's music. Oddly enough Liam Watson's low-tech production and the scuffed up engineering by Ed Deegan kind of compliments these uncomplicated and lightly driven guitar-based arrangements which are fleshed out with some scoring for percussion and double bass. Holly Golightly may not be the most naturally gifted singer, nor is her writing in the same league as those of say a Thea Gilmore, but she's a hard working, persistent and prolific performer whose relaxed and unassuming delivery is worth investigation.

RP





Emmylou Harris

Stumble into Grace

Nonesuch 7559-79805-2

Stumble into Grace is an album of reflective and haunting folk-based melancholia propelled by a contemporary percussive “Americana” groove. Many of the songs, backed by the likes of Jane Siberry, Linda Rondstadt, Gillian Welch, Kate and Anna McGarrigle, concern themselves with loneliness, missed opportunities and the fickleness of loves won, lost and unrequited. There is a dignified and almost elegiac quality to these musings, untainted by bitterness. The bile is reserved for a condemnation of the selfish consumerism, political corruption and blatant and unrepentant superficiality of cosmetic surgery-this is the America of ‘Time in Babylon’. While the female victims of war, famine and pestilence - the rapes, the brutalisation and bloodshed - are remembered in the sad but beautifully mournful ‘Lost Unto This World’. It’s hymn-like title and structure sets up a telling and effective juxtaposition with this challenging subject matter. Her tone here is heartfelt rather than overwrought and this gives the song even greater integrity. Even at fifty-seven, Emmylou’s creative vitality, intelligence and strong lyrical song writing shows little signs of wear. Any ingrained cynicism or those agonised ruminations of a tortured soul are put aside in this clear-sighted exploration of emotion and ideas.

RP



Eric Clapton

Me and Mr. Johnson,

Classic Records/Reprise Records

As a Clapton fan I’ve been eagerly anticipating this release. To hear the man going back to his roots has got to be an ear opener, and the roots don’t go much deeper than Robert Johnson. So here I am enjoying the outstanding music, but still disappointed with what I am hearing. It’s the typical CD “compress and make it loud” treatment. Looking on the web, I discover that the music is available on LP. The choice was either a regular 120g release or its 200g big brother. I opted for the regular issue, and I must tell you I can’t imagine anything better. Here’s another fine example of an LP blowing the socks off a CD release. Classic has done us a great service by releasing this and I’ve had great difficulty taking it off my ‘table. The music is extremely infectious, once you put this on you’ll be hooked. None of the songs are sung in the traditional fashion Robert Johnson would have delivered 75 years ago, but Clapton is to be commended for an excellent job of updating these classic masterpieces. The CD and LP contain 14 fabulous songs, several with some great accompaniment from Billy Preston and Jim Keltner amongst others. Excellent music, well played and sung with outstanding sound quality – but buy the LP. Top recommendation!

RSF



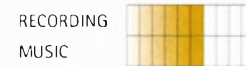
Joanna Newsom

The Milk-Eyed Mender

Drag City DC263

Joanna Newsom is an exasperating musician. Her song writing and playing is that of a mature and intelligent woman but her eccentric and piercing vocal style is like no other I know - her singing could be compared to that of a precocious child with a rustic twist thrown in for good measure. Whether you find this brand of naivety charming or extremely irritating will be down to the individual. Yes, it establishes a pronounced contrast to the poetry, smart allusions and psychological probing which lies behind ‘Peach, Plum, Pear or Inflammatory Writ’. Certainly, the fragile images she creates and an inherent vulnerability within her delivery of these songs has its appeal but I think that this approach works best only with the gentle teasing and simple observations about pets (Sadie) or horticulture (Sprout and the Bean). When this careful embroidery grapples with the much more poetic subject matter of ‘Cassiopeia’, ‘Swansea’ and ‘This Side Of The Blue’ it comes up short. In support of this unique artistic vision though are Newsom’s sparse arrangements for harp, piano and harpsichord. If you can place the vocal delivery to one side then these instruments do beautifully illustrate her beautifully crafted lyrics. Consequently, Joanna Newsom remains a frustrating dichotomy to me.

RP





Laura Cantrell

The Hello Recordings

Spit Et Polish SPIT 023

Re-releases of older material can sometimes seem to be quite a hasty and undignified commercial exercise. Certainly the decision to spend eight quid on this five-track CD that offers less than fifteen minutes of music should not be taken lightly. It was first issued as a part of a series of promotional EPs for the subscription only "Hello CD of the Month Club" in 1996 and the production values have a suitably simple and uncomplicated feel to them. This does not seem out of place for Cantrell's brand of country story telling in songs like 'Cellar Door' and 'The Curse Of Hook Mountain'. The tempo for these and the second track here, 'Roll Truck Roll!', is upbeat and the arrangements for guitars, mandolin (and in the case of 'Hook Mountain' a cello) gives them a more earthy and "backwoods" feel. 'No Place For Me' slows things down a little with its cow-eyed pathos and the concluding 'Lee Harvey Was A Friend Of Mine' which was taped live as a radio remote broadcast from a Havemeyer Street back porch in 1993 ruminates upon Oswald's likely innocence. The recording of this track is about as clear as the events surrounding that November day in Dallas. Definitely a disc for Laura Cantrell's most ardent fans who will be interested to hear just how far she has come.

RP



Lucinda Williams

World Without Tears

Lost Highway 088-170-355-1

There's nothing I love more than seeing a sticker on an LP that states, "Double LP features two songs not available on CD." Lucinda Williams is an awesome talent. She is not only a superb singer and acoustic/electric guitar player, but a brilliant writer. All the songs on this album were written by Williams with the exception of 'Hang down your head', one of the bonus tracks written by the great Tom Waits. Williams has been around since 1979 when her first album was released in the US on Folkways. Since then she has only released seven albums and in addition, three or so EPs. Her style has gone from blues to country to gospel to a mixture of all three, but I'd have to categorize this album as pretty strongly blues in nature. Williams has a different vocal style, a little twang, a little Rickie Lee Jones, a little Janis Joplin, but when it's all said and done . . . she is unique. There's a strong touch of melancholy in some of these songs and you will certainly get the picture when you hear, 'Those 3 days'. Truly a wonderful talent and I hope you get as much enjoyment from these records as I have. Great songs, exceptionally well written and played with first class musicians. This is a winner from side one through side four. Highly recommended.

RSF



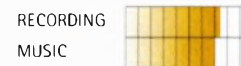
Kings of Convenience

Riot on an Empty Street

Virgin Records 0724357166515

The opening harmonies for 'Homesick' by the duo Eirik Glambek Boe and Erlend Oye are uncannily familiar; they take you back in time to those days when the softly focused and homogenised delivery of Simon Et Garfunkel ruled the roost. This feeling is reinforced through the wistful scoring of the guitars, viola, cello, bow and upright bass on a twelve track LP that certainly spotlights the current strength and charming vitality which exists within the Norwegian folk scene. True, there are no earth shattering revelations in these songs. This Scandinavian pair are content to sing about common place experiences like the demystification of romance in 'Love Is No Big Truth', observations about poverty on 'Stay Out Of Trouble' or the ambiguities that can break a friendship with 'Misread'. Are these dreamy, saccharine filled melodies too sweet? It's a question that I'd answer with an equivocal, "maybe". If SEtG make you purr, then these boys are for you. They possess that same delicacy and an attractive lightness of touch that is then sympathetically captured and mixed with some subtlety by Davide Bertolini at the Grieghallen Studios.

RP





Beth Nielsen Chapman

Look

Sanctuary Records SANCD 269

In 1994 Beth Nielsen Chapman's life was turned upside down with the death of her beloved husband from cancer. She poured all her grief into a remarkable album called *Sand And Water*. Far from being a morbid affair, *Sand And Water* became a touching and uplifting celebration of her late husband's life and death, and it's now often used as a healing accessory for grief. It will always be in my top 10 Desert Island Discs and is compulsory listening for any serious music fan. The same can be said for Beth's latest album *Look*. She's such a master songwriter, she makes the artform look surprisingly easy. Opening track and current single 'Trying To Love You' is a case in point; it tells of the struggle to believe in a higher power: "Trying to love you/I've screamed your name, I've Slammed a 1000 doors/Trying to love you/I've worn a million miles across the floor/Trying to love you/Still I can't ignore, trying to love you". The title song is going to become a standard, a lovely piano ballad with a lush string arrangement that Andy Williams or Tony Bennett are going to plead with her to cover. *Look* is Beth's fifth album and she continues to work to the very highest standards. She's such a special woman and this is a beautiful album, sung by a rare talent and a truly precious soul.

AH



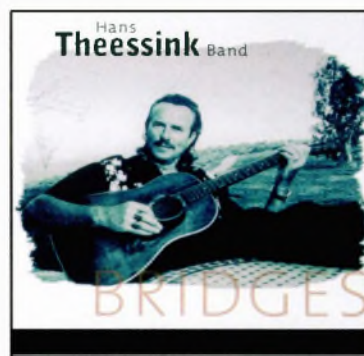
The Killers

Hot Fuss

Lizard King Records LIZARD011

The past few months have seen scores of new releases from new talent. When the stack of new albums next to my hi-fi becomes unstable it is a sign of great things going on in the industry. The Killers are one of the latest of these bands, fresh faced and flushed from early chart success, their album certainly sounds the part. In common with most of these new bands The Killers sit somewhere between mainstream indie and guitar pop. It's a good place from which to create something commercial, but notoriously difficult to create something outstanding... The songs are well produced, catchy and gloriously simple to enjoy. And as each chorus goes past it becomes ever easier to see The Killers filling stadiums in a few years time. The Killers are a band groomed for the chart, and this record certainly seems packed with singles. But you can't help but feel that perhaps this album lacks something. The Killers seem to have made a clutch of singles, and then pasted them together into an album with a handful of filler. Perhaps if their sights were set on the album chart, rather than the singles chart, this album might have been more accomplished. Nevertheless, The Killers pack considerably more punch than most and once the singles kick in you'll be hooked. *Hot Fuss* is instantly engaging, sharper, crisper and more focussed than the competition.

MC



Hans Theessink

Bridges

Blue Groove BG1520

I think it safe to use the word 'Troubadour' to describe Dutch blues master Hans Theesink (pronounced Tay-sink). He's an artist constantly on the move, digesting various musical styles as he goes and incorporating them into a highly distinctive and enjoyable cocktail. The Americans don't take lightly to foreigners treading on their blues toes but they embrace Theesink totally, a fact born out by how many U.S. festivals he gets invited to and the positive response he receives when he plays them. None other than Bo Diddley describes him as "A Helluva Guitar Player" and there's plenty of evidence to back that statement up on this classy album. Theesink is also a fine singer who possesses a rich textured voice, an intoxicating mix of JJ. Cale's gruff growl and Leonard Cohen's deadpan delivery. His style is country blues but he doesn't adhere strictly to the genre's guidelines; for example, *Zambezi* features a gentle reggae beat whilst the talented backing singers add rich African harmonies. Standout track is the 7-minute 'Rain', a Cale-Esque slow burner which allows Theesink the chance to show off his prowess on acoustic slide. *Bridges* is a winner from start to finish and comes as a hybrid SACD disc for those who have the playback technology. For the rest of us the recording is awesome anyway.

AH





Eve Selis

Nothing But The Truth

Proper Music PRPCD017

It's amazing how some partnerships are formed – I'm sure not everything can be down to luck. For instance, take how Eve Selis and her guitarist and co-writer met. Mark 'Twang' Intraivaia was on a flight to Spain and overheard Eve singing to herself on the seat behind him. From that 'lucky' meeting Mark and Eve have been writing and performing their songs ever since, garnering Rave reviews and a swelling fan base along the way. It helps that Eve Selis has a voice of quite tremendous power and control; a mixture of lemonade and whisky, as one reviewer so succinctly put it. So what does she sound like? I'd describe her as a lethal mixture of Maria McKee, Trisha Yearwood and early Linda Ronstadt, all mixed up with a healthy dollop of Bonnie Rait. She's raunchy right? You bet she is, but she's not all force 10 hurricane, she can be tender and a heartbreaker too. Her version of Kim Richey's 'Those Words We Said' will have you reaching for the Kleenex in double quick time, as will the Selis/Intraivaia penned 'Blame It On The Rain'. However, what sets this girl apart from the rest is the way she attacks a damn good rock song, like raucous opener 'Heart shaped tattoo' or the swaggering 'Honky Tonk Town'. Selis' wheel of fortune is a freefall – I'm willing to bet she'll be a big star by the end of the year.

AH



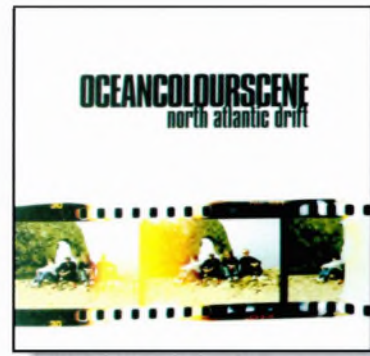
Keane

Hopes and fears

Island Records CIDB145

I still find it hard to think about Keane without also thinking about The Delays. The two bands share so much in common: both come from the South coast, both produce light summer indie, both have taken recent excursions into the charts... and yet Keane seem to do it all so much better. For a start, Keane have all the best the songs, and here I am not just talking about the singles, but the album tracks too, and that's so important when creating a lasting record. For example, the recent hit 'Somewhere only we know' belts out a soaring chorus, carefully pacing the song, playing with dynamics, creating a superb shot of energy and emotion. But then later, in the lows of the album, they produce music which is thoughtful and introspective, slow but never dull. And then there is Tom Chaplin's voice, which is skilfully used above the sweeping orchestration. Somehow Tom's voice manages to avoid the soulless syrup of similar bands, and instead comes across slightly more rough, drawing the listener in. Keane tread a fine line on this record, almost producing yet another bland, also-ran album. But something naturally present in their music keeps it all on track, an innate sensitivity to the mood of a song. Whilst I wonder what albums they have yet to produce, their talent has certainly created a fine debut, worthy of a considered listen.

MC



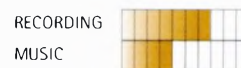
Ocean Colour Scene

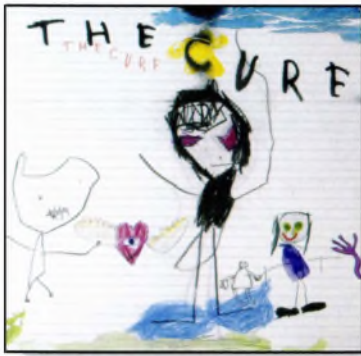
North Atlantic Drift

Sanctuary Records SANLP 160

Ocean Colour Scene began life as a kind of poor man's Stone Roses meandering through the early 1990s with a largely undistinguished indie sound. Only after the endorsements of Noel Gallagher and Paul Weller and a couple of hit singles in 'The Riverboat Song' and 'The Day We Caught The Train' were they propelled along by a bow wave of moderate R&B success. Generally, though, their albums have lacked substance and focus and a "best of" collection, *Songs From The Front Row* (2001), saw them struggle to find material. Here, even the title *North Atlantic Drift* does suggest a rudderless absence of purpose and this search for a direction is not dispelled by an opening pair of derivative sounding rockers in 'I Just Need Myself' and a track about debt, 'Oh Collector'. The mixes are lazy and elsewhere the string arrangements for 'Make The Deal' and 'She's Been Writing' (even with the gloss of some Linda Thompson vocals) are uninspired. The additional scoring of trumpet, saxophone and trombone for 'On My Ways' can not disguise a loose attempt to flesh out this dull tale about escape after the abuse of women, leaving the whole album feeling like a series of afterthoughts.

RP





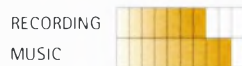
The Cure

The Cure

Geffen Records 0602498628461  


The guitar-laden gothic splendour, a brooding melancholia and that atmosphere of foreboding, which characterised classic albums like *Seventeen Seconds* and *Pornography*, permeates many of the fifteen tracks cut for this new double LP. There's the claustrophobic 'Labyrinth'. The false hopes, repressed anguish and a slightly pitying tone stretched out before us in the longest of Robert Smith's songs, 'The Promise'. Then there are the precise and overflowing insights on the nature of desire that can be heard in 'Truth, Goodness And Beauty'. While a poisonous internalisation of death carved from out of the fear, hate and paranoia in a track like 'Us Or Them' delivers a unique and quite morbid view of the motives and meanings behind our every action. It is another of those familiar Smith dissections that cut deeply into the human psyche. The sculptured lyricism and that distinctive musical architecture will raise the spirits of every hard core Cure fan as the ghosts of yesteryear resurface and resonate once again throughout this album. A couple of tracks even recall the more up beat and accessible music penned in the middle of the 1980s - a change in direction which made *The Head On The Door* such a commercial success.

RP



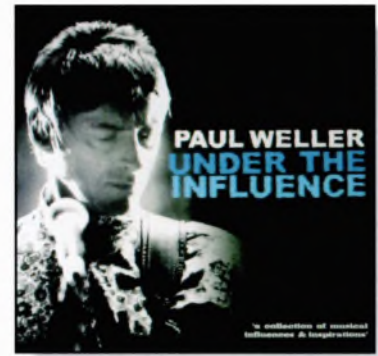
Snow Patrol

Final Straw

A&T Records B0002271-02 


Snow Patrol are certainly fond of the grand gesture. This, their third album has more than a hint of the epic about it, and that seems to have brought them from obscurity, to take advantage of current trends in the charts. *Final Straw* is lyrically baffling, using mundane passages, split across bars and lines, so that the flow of the song is sometimes hard to follow. But characteristic brings a faltering pace to the songs that acts to heighten their emotion and add a sense of doubt. Render this with a superbly strong vocal talent and the result is always going to be exciting. Guitars are (unfortunately) pretty much straight rock standard, but the drumming is, at times, sublime. But what remains most striking about *Final Straw* is the production. Beautiful and sympathetic orchestration makes this album much broader than its peers. Indeed, the harder you listen to this album, the more detail comes forward, with layers of texture being revealed. The album is arranged strangely, forward biasing what is presumed to be the harder material. But it is when they stop trying to record three minute rock songs that Snow Patrol really shine, with a stunning four song set piece across the middle of the album that makes this record worth every penny. Snow Patrol have quietly been producing great music for some time now: perhaps it's time you checked them out?

MC



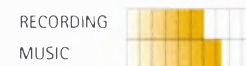
Paul Weller

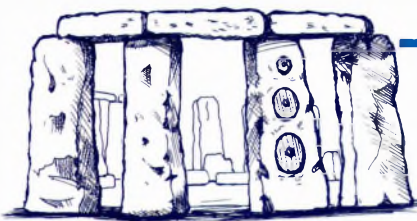
Under The Influence

DMC UTILP003  

Under The Influence is a Paul Weller album in name only because it is simply a fifteen-track collection from a variety of sources that have effected Weller both emotionally and musically. Some of these selections like Little Richard's 'Slippin' And Sidin'' or the Ray Davies penned tale of an innocent country girl being corrupted by city life in 'Big Black Smoke' and the Charles Mingus 'Passions Of A Man' are at least of academic interest. Others and I include Richie Havens 'Handouts In The Rain' from his recent *Wishing Well* album amongst them will have you searching the racks for more material from this new breed of songwriters. There are also some wonderfully funky grooves too in 'Doobie To The Head' (Funkdoobiest) and 'God Made Me Funky' (The Headhunters) or that terrific root and branch reggae of Bob Marley & The Wailers in 'Small Axe'. They show the diversity behind Weller's muse. Individual sounding and truly great vocalists such as Marvin Gaye (Pretty Little Baby) and from out of left field, John Holt with 'Ali Baba' come to the fore and terrific storytelling of course features strongly. But even with the wonderful gospel, blues and jazzy vocal textures of the Blind Boys Of Alabama this remains an inherently fragmented set.

RP





The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

On the Level: Toward removal of vibration, unwanted energy, isolation, resonances and other system nasties... an ongoing journey.

I used to have a friend named John Tverdik. Actually he's still my friend but he's gotten me into some deep trouble. Let me try and explain this so it makes some sense. In a conversation one day John begins discussing this new equipment stand and a different type of 'pointed cone'. While I was listening, the gears began to turn in my little brain and although I'm not from the school of tweakism, some of what John said made rather good sense.

My next move was to point my browser to the website he'd mentioned in his rants,

<http://Stillpoints.us>. While he mentioned the Stillpoints themselves, his main focus was the ESS (Equipment Suspension System) equipment stand. I've used various stands in the past and had never been overly impressed with their ability to perform anything but the utilitarian function of holding various components. Tverdik's statements were overly generous toward the stand, but I do trust what John hears and so I decided to call the owner, Paul Wakeen (+1 715 698 3253 [voice] +1 715 698 3256 [fax]). I've known Paul for a number of years, and although we hadn't spoken recently it was great to renew our relationship. Wakeen's unmistakable enthusiasm regarding his products was extremely infectious. My interest was piqued!

Prior to contacting Wakeen, I spent time studying

everything on the website, albeit with a fair amount of skepticism (read: strong caution) as is my nature with audio products I'm not familiar with. What initially attracted me most to the stand were Tverdik's comments. When I saw the stand for the first time on the website, I was struck with the simplicity of design and intrigued with respect to its perceived ability to improve the sound quality of my system.

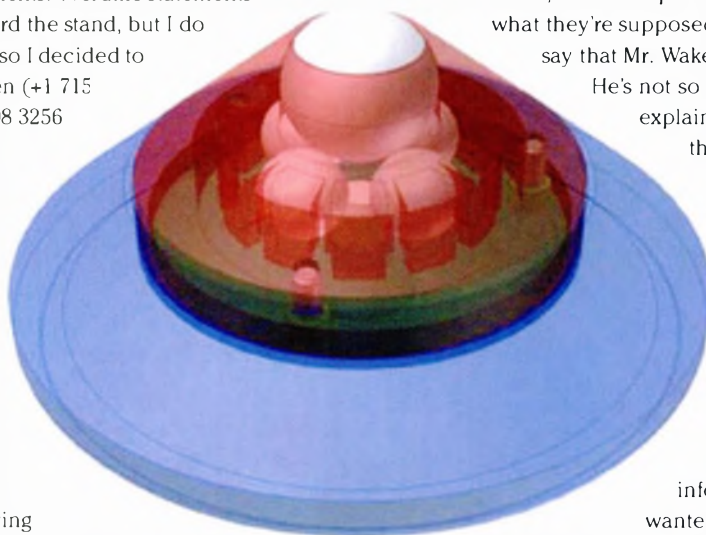


Not just a shelving system to hold components, but one that supposedly offered sonic improvements to your system. Paul and I discussed the stand, the design and engineering philosophy that went into its manufacture as well as what he'd learned from the early prototype stages to the final product. I indicated my interest in "hearing" the stand and Paul had a chuckle and said that he'd see what he could do because

everything they were manufacturing was being sold and they had no stock. I thought that was an ingenious bit of psychological sell to plant in a reviewer's brain; perhaps I am too jaded.

We then moved the discussions toward the Stillpoints themselves, the concept behind how they work or what they're supposed to do and again I can say that Mr. Wakeen knows his products.

He's not so much selling as he is explaining and when you have the time to absorb what he's saying, there seems to be more than a modicum of truth in his statements. Put it like this: I never felt he was over stepping his boundaries nor imparting anything but the most conservative of information. He really wanted me to experiment. ▶



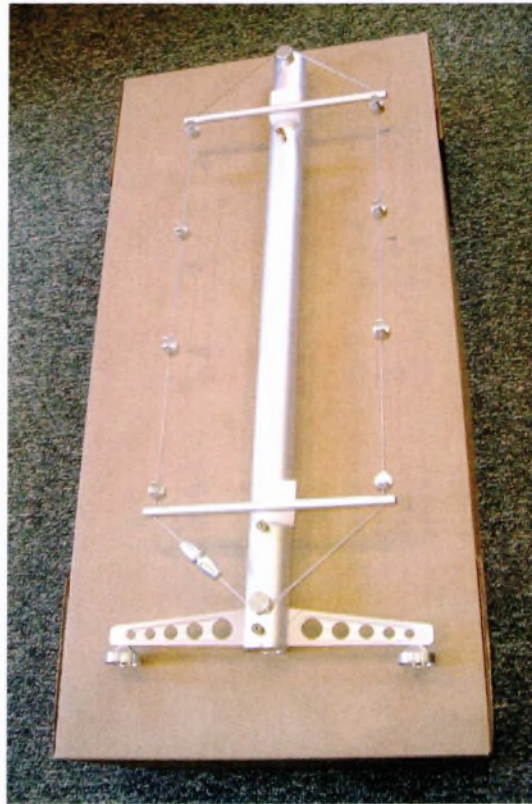
► Finally we moved into a brief chat about ERS. In a phrase, "ERS absorbs, diffuses, and reflects, EMI/RFI energy." We'll talk about this at the very end of the article.

Arrangements were made to send a stand (which comes with four shelves), as well as one additional shelf and about a million Stillpoints, Risers and Inverse Risers. Briefly, the Stillpoints can work alone, but they can also be screwed into a larger base known as a Riser. Because there is a ceramic ball as the "point," and because this can move, they can be seated in what is called an Inverse Riser. I'll try and make this clearer in a few minutes.

Everything arrived at various times based upon stock availability. The first to arrive were the ESS stand, extra shelf and the ERS. The packaging the shelving unit comes in is extremely well thought out. The box and packing material are pretty much bulletproof. The shelves come in a separate box. The large carton contains the two side columns with wire support and legs, stainless steel parts and assorted hardware (including four Stillpoints and special stainless steel Inverse Risers) for attaching the shelves as well. When everything is assembled, you can fit the shelving box inside the larger box for ease of storage should you decide to save the boxes.

The instruction manual is carefully laid out and easy to follow. As expected, a packing list is on page 2 of the manual and everything was provided as anticipated. After laying everything out, what initially impressed me was this little offset pocket driver that contains three different hex bits that slide in and out... three tools in one. You can only appreciate how clever this is when you begin to put the unit together. My biggest concern about this system was that the shelves were made of acrylic, a product I'm not a big fan of because it scratches easily. I'll mention this again later. The box in which the two sides of the ESS are packed acts as a 'table' to use when putting the unit together. The unit can probably be assembled in about thirty minutes, but as I'm a little too cautious it took me about an hour. Then I had to shift everything from the rack under the VPI, which was never designed for the purpose.

The simplicity of design as well as the thoroughness that went into the stand is of course, its great strength. In a large nutshell, while there are three crossbars for rigidity in attaching the ESS sides together, a great deal of the magic is in the cable and the clips. The clips can be moved up and down in order for the user to get the desired height required for each component. You need to allow enough space for heat to dissipate effectively. The top and bottom clips are 'set' at the factory but can be moved if required. Each shelf clip has two set-screws for adjustment: one for height (into



the wire) and the other to 'lock' the shelf in place. Careful thought was given for the height adjustment portion. The set screws which are set at the factory for top and bottom shelves are made of stainless steel. The balance of the clips (for either two or three shelves) arrive with set-screws made of brass. This was done just in case any user decides to over tighten the clip. It will not harm the stainless steel wire support. Of course if you decide to move the top or bottom shelf, remember not to over tighten or you could damage the wire. I doubt this would happen, but it demonstrates the thought that went into this design. As previously mentioned, there are smaller set-screws underneath the clip which allows you to tighten each shelf to the four clips. Obviously everything needs to be leveled

and this also took additional time as my floor is not as level as I thought. A tip: when you attach the shelves to the clips, leave about a sixteenth of an inch between the end of the shelf and the actual clip. In other words, don't let the shelf be locked into place touching the inside of the clip. There are sonic virtues in allowing this tiny bit of space and your shelf will be just as secure whether it's touching the clip or not.

The size of the shelves was going to work out just fine for me. I was never happy with the placement of my Thorens 124 previously. My listening area was getting crowded and where the Thorens sat (on a Target stand) was far, far from ideal. I had no options for movement because of the length of the factory wiring harness



▶ and the proximity required to reach the phono section. Those owners of turntables wider than 20 inches are not going to be able to use this stand for their table. But, in hindsight, I think this is a good thing because if you have your table on another stand as I do the TNT, it creates additional isolation and reduction of unwanted vibration and released energy to the other components in your system. I'm also in an ideal position to now not have either of my tables near the speakers. Both sit against a bearing wall in the apartment, around a corner and the speaker's radiating patterns cannot introduce any direct vibration into the system. This is, of course, a major plus.

In issue 32 I had some of my friends over and we were all happy with what we heard from my system. All I can say is this: You never know you had something that may have been affecting your sound in a negative way until it is removed. So, as good as we all felt the sound Chez Foster was before, I'm here to tell you it has taken a quantum leap forward. It is far better than I could ever have imagined.

When I began this journey, it was simply to 'hear' what the stand alone was doing. Well it's doing a lot. It's allowed the noise floor to be lowered by a wide margin. It's enabled the system to offer more detail. There is a greater level of air in the ambient envelope surrounding acoustic instruments. Simply put there is a dramatic increase in the quality of what is coming from the speakers whether it is analogue or digital across the frequency spectrum from top to bottom. I don't know what I was anticipating, but what I hear from the stand alone - or more aptly put - what I am not hearing from the stand, is tremendous. I've mentioned in the past I like to make CD-Rs of what I'm hearing and when I change something upstream before the speakers, I will re-record the same cut(s) so I will have a reference point with which to compare later. It was quite revealing to hear the 'before and after' of just moving the components from their previous position onto the new ESS. Please keep in mind that my evaluation was

based on using the original four shelves although I did have the fifth shelf set up for the purchase of a Burmester 948 Power Conditioner that had not arrived at the beginning of the review.

The ESS I now consider a component. Although not in an electrical sense, it certainly has provided a much greater reduction of unwelcome elements I hadn't realized were

coming from the system until they were gone. The system 'sounds' cleaner, quieter and my overall enjoyment is greater. A last minute thought, for those concerned about support of 'heavy' components. The ESS can handle four hundred pounds, approximately a hundred and eighty-five kilos. This translates into approximately 100 lbs per Stillpoint and since there are four supporting the stand, you can do the math. Now here's the reason why Tverdik "used to be a friend" (he still is of course): I bought the unit. That's how good I think it is. The other point I want to clear up, and there is no pun intended, is how easy it was for me to remove scratches from the shelves. While I was experimenting and moving components around, especially on the top shelf with the Thorens and the Stillpoints system, I noticed some light scratches on the acrylic shelf. I decided to remove the Thorens and although there were scratch marks from my moving around the Inverse Risers and all the weight they were holding as I was juggling to set them up, I took things much further. I placed a coin on the shelf and rubbed it quite aggressively all over. When

I finished, it looked like a cat had used it for a scratching post. I then used some of the Novus acrylic cleaner (supplied by the manufacturer) and spent about twenty minutes working on the shelf. I'm here to tell you that I removed every scratch... even the ones I could feel with my fingernail before I started. Yes, they were light scratches, not deep gouges but they were scratches' none-the-less. So those who may be concerned about the acrylic



► shelves scratching, I wouldn't waste much time fretting.

The Stillpoints are a resonance damping system. The entire system consists of a Stillpoint, a Riser and an Inverse Riser. Think of this as a system that you may begin with the primary product - the Stillpoint - and as your finances allow, add Risers and if you decide, ultimately, Inverse Risers. Perhaps the best way to describe the inner workings of a Stillpoint is to quote the manufacturer, "The Stillpoint consists of an outer case (called the calyx due to its flower like petals that line the inner shell), two layers of ceramic balls, and a stainless steel pedestal. The Riser is an aluminum base with a stainless steel stud, which accepts the Stillpoint."

You may use the Stillpoint with the 'ball' facing either up or down. This would depend on the solidity of the surface you have to work with and the stability of the component or surface area you have to 'place' the ball on.

I first used the Stillpoints without Risers or Inverse Risers. I tried various combinations of facing the ball up or down, using three then four. Each time there was an audible difference. I then added the Risers. The Riser is very cleverly designed. While there is a hole for a screw to fit through, it is threaded so you must first screw the screw into the Riser, not just 'slide' the screw through a hole and screw it into the base of the Stillpoint. Once you've screwed the Stillpoint into the Riser, do not tighten it. In fact it is recommended, and I heartedly agree, to lightly hand 'tighten' the Stillpoint in the Riser and then reverse by half a turn (180 degrees) so there is a little play. I found in each application, I preferred four Stillpoints over three and also felt superior benefits were had when using the Inverse Risers. In other words, I found the greatest sonic benefits when I used all three products together as a system.

My first experiment with what I will call the Stillpoints system was with the Thorens which had no cones or damped feet. It sat on the top shelf of the ESS (the base of the Thorens had four tiny rubber 'feet'). Please understand that moving from the Target stand to the ESS was a HUGE improvement, but I wasn't ready for what the Stillpoint system was about to reveal from this table. The sound was improved in every way. Edge, again something I previously felt I'd already eliminated, was further gone. The focus and bloom of voices, the harmonics and timbre of instruments were all more natural sounding. This really got me going.



I also noticed one very big change. I could touch the base or the plinth of the table while a record was playing and could not feel the slightest vibration. As far as I was concerned, this system caused vibration (read: resonances) to dissipate!

I had been using the Walker valid points and resonance discs under the Manley amps and felt they were doing an excellent job. Well they weren't! Although there was a tremendous improvement in the sound of the system when the Walker's were placed under the amps, I was still able to feel vibration when I touched the sides of the amps when music was playing through the speakers. When I switched to the Stillpoints system and touched the same spot on the Manleys, there was no vibration. The Stillpoints destroyed the Walker Valid Points, and you could hear the difference in the sound coming through the speakers. There was a further reduction in the noise floor and the sound opened up even more. Everything in the background became quieter. If you eliminate

the vibration, you eliminate the distortions they audibly cause in your system – resonances you don't even believe are there until they are gone.

My speaker stands had four 'pointy things' that raised them off the carpet and helped me level the speakers. I had always felt this was sufficient. Well, the sound quality went to another level again when I used the entire Stillpoints/Riser/ Inverse Riser system. As was the case with the amplifiers, prior to using the Stillpoints I was able to feel vibration in the speaker stand. After putting the Stillpoint system in place, there was no vibration to be felt. The system adds approximately two inches in height to the speakers. Fortunately my listening chair allows for raising and lowering so there was no issue with the speaker height change.

More experimentation ensued and after several hours I once again settled on four rather than three Stillpoints/Riser/ Inverse Riser setups. Now there were four units under each speaker and four under each amplifier. Here's the kicker... not only was the sound quality yet again improved by a giant leap - the records and even the CDs sounded so much more like music and less like reproduced sound.

The last four I tried under the VPI SDS. Here was another case where I was able to record a cut from an album ►

and then place the four Stillpoints, Risers and Inverse Risers under the SDS and re-record the same cut. Once again, what was previously great was now even finer. I don't know where these vibrations went, but they're gone. You can now touch the SDS and feel nothing - no vibration whatsoever.

Don't think my system sounded bad before. It didn't. I was very happy with what it was delivering, but I've now taken the system far beyond what I thought its capabilities were. I'm totally in awe of what these devices have done.

It's very unusual for me not to mention specific records I used and what occurred with each record. I decided not to list the repertoire because it made no difference. EVERYTHING was better. Bass, high frequency extension, acoustic instruments, clarity, it just didn't matter. This is a fantastic product - as a system - which will benefit any audio setup, no matter how good you think yours is.

As mentioned earlier, ERS 'redirects, absorbs and diffuses EMI/RFI frequencies.' My samples were available in 8" x 11" sheets. They are also available from the factory with pressure sensitive adhesive for placing inside components. This was one of the fun parts of my tweaking exercise. It was relatively easy for me to place sheets under or over a component (depending where the heat was dissipated and hear what I did or didn't notice. I would think their application would benefit those users who have EMI/RFI problems, especially from large communication transmission towers. Having said that, I found that placing two sheets over my Yamaha CD-R 1000 seemed to reduce a digital glare that I could never remove. I took a sheet and cut it so I could place it on top of the transformers of my Manleys. I'm still experimenting here so I can't give you a definitive statement that this was or wasn't an improvement. I placed sheets under the components on the ESS and yes, I could hear a degree of quietness that was gone when I removed the sheets.

There are definite applications for digital components and those electronics containing transformers. The sheets are made of 'a blend of carbon fibres of various lengths and sizes'. The sheet can be grounded if necessary for a greater sonic improvement. There is a wide range of manufacturers using this product and I suggest you check the website mentioned earlier for further information. Although the literature says there is great potential in wrapping AC power cords I did not notice any difference in sound when used with the Nordost power cords.

While EMI/RFI products have been around in various forms for some time, I found ERS, for me, to be most effective in removing unwanted noise from my digital source. It has never sounded so good!

For what it's worth... I took a sheet and placed it over my DVD player and yes sir, I could see a difference in the

picture quality. I'm still playing with these but I think there is much more fact than fiction regarding the use of this product. Depending upon the problems you may have, your mileage may vary regarding how well ERS performs for you.

Last but not least, I learned a valuable lesson while I was in San Francisco. I've always used these small bubble levels, round, straight, some going in one direction with another little level going 90 degrees in another direction. I'd been happy with the job I thought they were doing. Well while staying with Dennis Davis prior to playing his TNT6, he pulls out this 6-inch monster Starrett 98-6 level. The bubble portion for leveling is at least one inch across in the marked lines on this level. Dennis was kind enough to let me bring this Made in the USA quality level home and he purchased another on the internet for himself.

First thing I did when I got home was to take the small levels and place them all over the platter of my TNT. Yup, everything looked fine. Then I put the Starrett on the platter, first from a front to back position and then in a left to right position. GOOD LORD!!! What have I been listening to? I then spent the next two hours leveling the table. So folks... it may not be a Starrett 98-6, but get yourselves at least a 6-inch quality level and throw all those little levels in the garbage. They're not the least bit accurate, even though you may think they are. The Starrett retails for a little more than \$100US but can be purchased on the internet for at least a third less. ➤+

US pricing for ERS:
\$19.95 per 8" X 11" sheet
(price drops for quantity orders)

European pricing for ESS and Stillpoints:

| | |
|--------------------------|-------|
| Set of 3 Stillpoints: | \$264 |
| Set of 3 Risers: | \$96 |
| Set of 3 Inverse Risers: | \$96 |

| | |
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| ESS Rack w/ 4 Shelves: | \$3950 |
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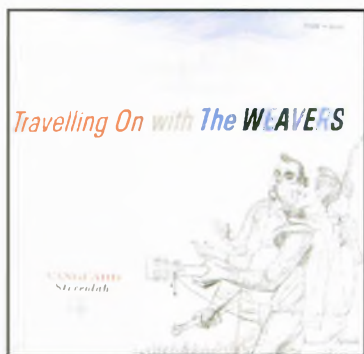
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Travelling On With The Weavers

Cisco Music: Vanguard VSD 2022 **180g**

This was the first Weavers album released in stereo by Vanguard and quite honestly, sonically...it was nowhere. It was also the Weavers fourth album for Vanguard, each one mapping the group's development: how they grew and how diverse, wide-ranging and historically important they were. Their songs range from gospel through blues, folk, protest to early Americana. One of their later albums VSD2150, has been on HP's Absolute Sound list forever. It's a *Live at Carnegie Hall* album and is quite truly a delectable moment in time. *Travelling On...* has been given the life it truly deserves and I am grateful to have it in my library. What is so fascinating about the recording is how vast their repertoire was. Each song builds to the next and the natural-sound Vanguard captured in the studio blossoms in this re-issue. Sixteen songs include 'Twelve Gates to the City', 'Gotta Travel On', 'House of the Rising Sun', 'The Keeper' (who plays that trumpet!?) and even that old camp standby: 'Kumbaya' are presented in the harmony that only this ensemble can deliver - they are unmistakable. The strength of the (bass) baritone voice of Lee Hays and the beauty of Ronnie Gilbert's soprano comes through loud and clear. This is a must own album for anyone with even the slightest interest in exploring the roots of popular music. Highly recommended.

RSF



Albert King with Stevie Ray Vaughan

In Session

Analogue Productions/Stax APB 7501-45 **45**

In comparison with his namesake BB King, Albert King was almost as big an influence on rock guitarists, including his guest on this 1983 set, Stevie Ray Vaughan. The cover has a splendid shot of the imposing King with his upside-down Gibson Flying V serenely puffing on a pipe whilst the relatively diminutive Vaughan is hunched over his guitar in the background. King excelled in live sets and although this is effectively a studio session, recorded for a TV programme, it has a very live feel with its spoken intro's and between tracks interchanges between the pair. It doesn't scale the heights of King's finest like 'Live Wire, Blues Power' but is hugely enjoyable nonetheless. The pair shine particularly in the extended 15-minute workout of 'Blues at Sunrise' and in the lightning-paced 'Don't Lie to Me' that opens side four, trading licks with seemingly endless invention. The accompaniment throughout is adequate - it does the job just fine in laying down a solid foundation for King and Vaughan to fire from - but will win absolutely no prizes for originality. The recording brings the best from each guitarist although the bass and drums tend to merge into a unified warm thump in the background. Not unlike many a live gig I've seen, so that's alright then.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

DD



The Doors:

L.A. Woman

Elektra 7559-60328-1 **180g**

I recently spent a wonderful long weekend in San Francisco thanks to the hospitality of some fellow phonogrammers. I was there for a barbecue of all things, and of course a bunch of us brought our 'killer' LPs to share. Brian Hartsell, owner of The Analog Room (can you believe he only sells two-channel sound? No home theatre!) has LOTS of new and used records in his store. He brings this copy of the Doors album...something we've all heard a bazillion times before. Well...I'm here to tell you that you've NEVER heard what's on this album until you hear this 180 gram re-issue. I've not compared it to the great DCC re-issue, but Brian and others have and said this is the one to own. It's totally insane. Bass like you wouldn't believe. Presence, punch, dynamics, musicality...it's simply unreal. All the album says on the front is 're-issue from original master tapes'...and they even recreated the original first US jacket! Morrison and company bring you back to their greatness in stunning, stunning sound. Brian was kind enough to give me this copy but there are more out there and you will have to turn your Rock/Doors card in if you don't buy this. It's that mind blowing! Do you think I like it? Wait until you hear 'Riders on the Storm': KILLER!

RSF





Joe Williams

Me and the Blues

Speakers Corner/RCA LSP 2879 

The original US release of this album is one of the worst records produced by RCA and their Dynagroove process. They made it sound pinched, thin and just really nasty.

We'll rejoice, 'cause SCRecords has given this the love and attention this fine album deserves.

Williams has a fabulous smooth, deep, silky voice that is just easy listening at its best. Let me tell you right off: If you have trouble getting your wife/girlfriend to buy into your passion for things Hi-Fi, get yourself a nice bottle of wine and put this record on your turntable. I can assure you that you will thank me in the morning.

One of the great qualities this recording offers is how well the musicians are woven into their solos, while Williams keeps reappearing and binding each song together in a sharp, highly polished and sophisticated manner. This album is timeless and a must for anyone even slightly thinking romance. The musicians here are all first-rate: Thad Jones, Urbie Green and Junior Mance to name but a few. Williams is in excellent voice and everything comes together perfectly. I'd always wondered why this LP was so hard to find until I heard an original. Now it's been updated with outstanding sound that allows these performances to speak for themselves. Gentlemen... start your engines. Highest recommendation!

RSF



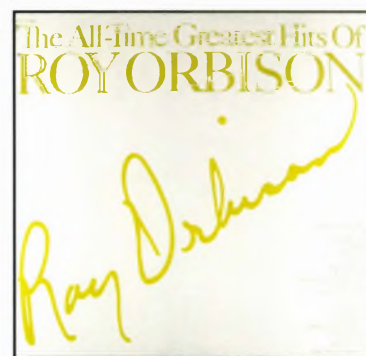
Mussorgsky

Pictures at an Exhibition Night On Bald Mountain Slatkin, St. Louis S.O.


Mobile Fidelity/Vox MFSL UDSACD 4004 

Originally recorded in 1975 by Vox, using a four-channel discrete surround set-up, MoFi describe this as "a jewel in the crown of multi-channel recording". They're not wrong. For once, the care and attention that's gone into the engineering has been matched by a stellar performance of works that are all too often reduced to orchestral pot-boilers and aural firework shows. Slatkin imbues them a coherence, menace and tension that contrasts all the more effectively with the lighter moments. This hybrid disc makes an excellent CD and an even better SACD, the palpable sense of acoustic and the natural tonal colours pulling you into the performance just like a live concert. In fact, the drama and purpose in the playing is reminiscent of exactly that, rather than the more staid, measured qualities of the studio. I was so impressed by the stereo performance of this disc that I took the trouble to play it on a Meridian surround set-up, where the subtle rear ambience further enhanced the sense of being there. Whatever your chosen replay format this is a disc to savour, equally impressive on both sonic and musical grounds. Superb.

RG



The All-Time Greatest Hits of Roy Orbison

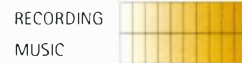
S&P 2-507 

This two record set is all you need of the great Roy Orbison - a spectacularly redone job by Steve Hoffman. Although there is a DCC copy of this album floating around the used marketplace, it doesn't hold a candle to the sonic virtues that have been fleshed out for these new issues. We're given four sides of pure 180gram magic, pressed by RTI in California and I guarantee this is a desert island set if there ever was one.

Orbison is in your room, from the beginning of 'Only the Lonely' to the last track on side 4, 'Oh, Pretty Woman'. I've never heard Orbison sound this great. I've compared several cuts to a couple of original Monument issues I own and they're not even close. I don't know what Steve did, but he's given us a release to cherish. Thank you. For each and every song, Orbison is at the height of his vocal range and it's astonishing to hear what this man could do. No stress, no strain, no loss of high frequency extension in his voice. It's marvelous.

Buy this set: You'll be very glad you did. Oh, and by the way, a little note to Mr. Kevin Gray: I spotted in the deadwax on Side 1 of record 1, 'Roy Lives' and on side 4 of record 2, 'Bill Porter Rules'. Nice touch Kevin.

RSF



Violin Masterclasses Ruggiero Ricci

Decca Recordings 1950-1960, 475105-2, 5CDs

by Reuben Parry

Ruggiero Ricci is undoubtedly one of the great violinists of the Twentieth Century. A child prodigy of Italian-American extraction, he made his concert debut at the age of ten in his home city of San Francisco and within a year there was an appearance at New York's Carnegie Hall to write home about. That was in 1929, the year of the Wall Street Crash and beginning of the Depression. It is reassuring to know that such a natural and expressive talent could still flourish during such turbulent economic times. His teacher was Louis Persinger whose unorthodox methods encouraged freedom of expression and the exploration of an instrument's sound ahead of discipline and technique. Persinger also taught Yehudi Menuhin but Ricci unlike Menuhin did not suffer from that same crisis in technique, which so affected Menuhin's performances in the 1950s. Of course Ricci learnt every facet of the violin, unlocking its innermost secrets through the skill, precision and security of his playing which when he picks up the bow is never less than breathtaking. Yet he has consistently remembered the advice that was given by Fritz Kreisler who told him to "Always play as you feel". This is one of those simple messages that were to inform recitals right from his teenage years into a glowing professional career. It is a quality that's certainly more than evident on these fine Decca CD transfers.

Still, Ricci has always been one of those virtuoso performers who could command strong views. He was definitely under-recorded at Decca with far too few releases on their premium LXT (mono) and SXL (stereo) labels. Artistic temperament has often been cited but it may well have been his reluctance to take up the *Concertos* and *Sonatas* of Beethoven and Brahms with any great enthusiasm that left him in this situation. Although his performances of these works are memorable one would question whether he has ever really been determined enough to make them his own. By 1964 he was making recordings with conductors and orchestras from the second tier like Max Rudolf and the Cincinnati Symphony on Decca's subsidiary Brunswick label for the Saint-Saens *Concerto No. 1* and Paganini *Second*

Concerto (SXA 4529). This was a trend that continued into the Seventies with the Goldmark and Glazounov *Concertos* amongst others appearing on Decca Turnabout.

Ricci has also split audiences down the middle as well. The polarity of opinions divides neatly into two camps. His detractors calling him "screechy Ricci" while the fans, of which I am one, revel in that sinuous agility, lightning speed and easy dexterity on display whenever he places the violin beneath that chiselled chin. Though it is true to say that sometimes on the early LPs both the recording, including Ricci's placement within the soundstage, and the quality of the pressings have not always helped him.

A case in point is the Nicolai Paganini *24 Caprices OPI for Unaccompanied Violin*. The version transferred here is the earlier 1950 mono account that was released on record as LK 4025 and LXT 2588 and not the 1960 SXL 2194 stereo recital. This CD dispels the view that Ricci was guilty of some faulty intonation in the first twelve *Caprices*. There must instead clearly have been something wrong with the LK 4025 vinyl pressing because the new digital re-master reveals a beautifully conceived rendition and I cannot detect any imperfections from the soloist. This disc contains a dazzling series of fluent and virtuoso, bewilderingly brilliant vignettes which make light of the inherent technical difficulties to strike at the heart of what can now be described as Paganini's poetic music. Ricci and Paganini are inseparable in many ways and it was of course Ricci who with this recording first put all 24 *Caprices* in their original versions on LP. He almost single-handedly championed both the *Caprices* and the *Concertos* with exquisite, thoughtful and emotionally engaging interpretations that have reversed their reputation as testing practise pieces of little creative note until they have attained considerable credence in the concert hall and in the recording studio as well. The engineering on this CD takes a little getting used to but please stick with it, the performances are worth it. Yes, it sounds quite lean, yet the violin is life-sized, is securely located and possesses real presence. Now if Ricci had been signed to EMI with that label's characteristically plump, rich ►

► and much warmer sound than he might have won even more friends. His playing though is exceptionally rewarding as it develops a range of emotions where others have found none. Fleet of foot like no other, he shows the kind of panache and jaw dropping bravura that mesmerises the listener.

The second CD delivers more of the same with a 1955 Kingsway Hall recording of both the *First* and *Second* Paganini *Violin Concertos*. This was originally released as the mono LP LXT 5075, it was also reissued in the 1970s on Decca's budget Eclipse label ECS 654. Although the London Symphony Orchestra musicians were not quite at the peak of their powers, here under Anthony Collins' baton, they do a capable job. Steady and workmanlike, rather than inspired by a blinding collective insight on Paganini's musical psyche, they simply leave the fireworks and that invigorating cascade of rising and falling scales to the assured and extrovert playing of this soloist. Understated orchestral accompaniment ensures that Ricci has our full and undivided attention. In the finales his spontaneity, flair and fluidity leave you gasping for breath. While elsewhere especially on the quieter passages he also achieves a beguiling and inordinately charming degree of intimacy that picks out moments of wit and mischievous humour which others often miss. Inadvertently, the recording of the orchestra which is a little flat, works quite well because it draws you closer towards the violin. Its piquant qualities are brought to the fore and there are no distractions. His performance of the famous *Rondo* from *Concerto No.2*, "La Campanella" is a revelation, but that's Ricci for you, constantly delivering surprise after surprise with decisive and brilliantly effortless bowing.

As their filler Decca have chosen to cut and paste those mysteriously dark and emotionally overpowering textures of Maurice Ravel's *Tzigane*. This version is none other than the stereo transfer from the 1959 Decca SXL 2155 LP that was recorded at Victoria Hall, Geneva with Ernest Ansermet and the L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. The original coupling, Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole*, makes it on to the fourth CD in

this set and I will talk about that performance later. Needless to say Ricci's approach to the *Tzigane* is a dramatic one. He treats it largely as a ten-minute display piece. However, to think of it as one big lollipop is to do Ricci a tremendous disservice. The long opening statement for unaccompanied violin, while strictly limiting the instrument's range, does evoke a nomadic and melancholy spirit. It calls for subtle, refined and delicate shifts of emphasis and these are intelligently and atmospherically developed here. Naturally what everyone will be waiting for is the indulgent harmonics and virtuoso playing before a grandiose and sweeping allegro that leads into a closing adrenaline inducing pyrotechnic display. Ricci's artistry

does not disappoint.

Disc three finds Ricci in the company of pianist, Carlo Bussotti for one of those intimate chamber recitals. This pair establishes a healthy rapport and they present performances of the youthful Richard Strauss *Violin Sonata* and the six Carl Maria Von Weber *Sonatas*, which are all fervently and expertly played. The Strauss, put down on tape in 1953, was originally coupled with a melodious but lightweight Prokofiev *Violin Sonata No.2* on LXT 2818, while the Weber recorded in February 1954 appeared on vinyl as LXT

2959. Neither release from an engineering point of view set the world on fire. The LPs sound quite rough around the edges with the dynamic peaks occasionally stinging the ears. Fortunately the digital transfer applies a soothing balm which doesn't mask the finely etched violin and piano work. For his tactile rendition of Strauss's *E Flat Major Violin Sonata* Ricci mines a heavily romantic seam. Spontaneity, passion and a real sense of momentum allow this rendition to blossom and especially in the *Improvisation: Andante Cantabile* he gives us a memorably haunting and convincing account.

The genuine musical partnership of Ricci and Bussotti also really enlivens the uncomplicated but attractively simple Weber *Violin Sonatas*. A half dozen brief and easy to play pieces ranging from four to eight minutes in length showcase this composer's underrated genius. Breezing through the ►



► technical niceties Ricci instead concentrates on the development of that beautifully aristocratic side within Weber's writing. There are few musicians who explore this music with such commitment. Interpretations of this kind resonate. Adventurous repertoire like these *Sonatas* comes along all too infrequently and it certainly takes a rare talent to deliver vital, radiant and uninhibited readings of such relatively anonymous scores. He applies that same warmth, imagination and intellect to each and every one of their movements-much as in the way you would expect a rendition of say the popular and far more famous Mendelssohn or Bruch *Concertos* to proceed. There is a non-judgemental side to Ricci that manages to find the greatest value and elicit the most exquisite moments of charm from completely unlikely sources, which is reason enough to investigate these slight but engaging Nineteenth Century gems.

Earliest wide band grooved copies of the original stereo SXL 2000 series LPs from which the fourth CD in this collection was derived are highly collectable. A mint copy of the Lalo *Symphonie Espagnole* SXL 2155 might just command a \$500 price tag, while the Bizet-Sarasate and Saint-Saens *Carmen Fantaisie*, *Zigeuneweisen*, *Havanaise* and *Introduction & Rondo Capriccioso* SXL 2197 should reach at least half that figure. On the basis that very few of us are fortunate or rich enough to own these records then I think you will find this digital release to be an extremely welcome one. So what is all the fuss about? Well, you can approach the music from more than one angle. The recordings were some of the finest made by Decca. The latter is a September 1959 Kingsway Hall performance that finds superb LSO musicianship under the baton of Pierino Gamba in support of a sparkling Ruggiero Ricci violin. First pressings, later narrow band LPs, releases on 1970s budget labels and this analogue to digital re-master all sound impressively detailed. Ricci is closely miked and this gives a clue to the thinking behind the style and interpretation of these works. Vibrant, exciting and in your face! Such intense playing with a capital "I" coupled to secure and seamless technique means something has to give. When Ricci launches into these brightly



coloured fireworks he does so at the expense of that last ounce of atmosphere. A small price to pay for many but perhaps a little irritating to those searching for an elusive holistic recital. In this way he provides ammunition to his detractors and sustenance for his followers widening the fissure between opinions along the way.

In the Lalo *Symphonie Espagnole* Ricci is noted for those characteristically close and rapid variation of emphasis on the same tone. Here he becomes a victim of his own

surefootedness because it allows him to confidently and securely adopt quite electrifying speeds during the production of vibrato. The contrasting "feminine" second subject in the *Allegro Non Troppo* suffers slightly as a consequence. But you can't help warming to the rhythmic Spanish influences that permeate every facet of the orchestral and violin craft. It leaves you licking your lips in anticipation of the final movement crescendo and diminuendo on an ostinato figure and in that brilliant coda which rounds it all off, Ricci truly rewards the faithful. His generous

mood extends to Pablo Sarasate's loose

selection of the most popular Carmen tunes in the *Fantaisie OP.25*. Both it and the *Zigeuneweisen OP.20, No.1 (Gypsy Aires)* are respectively bedecked with Spanish and Hungarian imagery. We have to remember that these are trifles - decorous baubles intended to show off the fiddler's skills and that this is music that has no greater aspiration than to be played with flawless panache.

The Saint-Saens war-horses have a fainter Latin flavour. *The Havanaise OP.83* based upon the *Habanera* possesses languid rhythms and then the moments of intense virtuosity on which our soloist thrives. While an *Introduction & Rondo Capriccioso OP.28* will always be too much of a carnal temptress to be ignored by any maestro. What they lack in substance they make up for in opportunity, and Ricci dramatically takes every one of these with an exaggerated swagger. Encore! Encore! Encore!

Two more Kingsway Hall recordings, four years apart, are bolted together on the last CD of this set. In scale

▶ these are contrasting works. There is Aram Khachaturian's melodic but technically demanding *Violin Concerto* with Anatole Fistoulari conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra (LXT 5259) and three truly original Twentieth Century *Solo Violin Sonatas* by Paul Hindemith and Sergei Prokofiev (SXL 2240). The Concerto although enthusiastically received on its wartime London premiere has never really sustained an enduring degree of popularity, possibly due to the first movement that is prolonged beyond the sixteen minute mark by an enormous

Cadenza. However, it's a Concerto that is worth sticking with for the languorous, exotic and melancholy dance rhythms of the second movement and the extremely catchy finale in the closing *Allegro Vivace*. The attraction to a violinist of Ricci's immeasurable ability is the exorbitant technical difficulty in Khachaturian's score, which is reminiscent of Paganini or Vieuxtemps in that respect. His interpretative approach is an interesting one too. There is ample opportunity within the outer movements to indulge in

exaggerated gestures of daemonic energy but the violin here takes a more lyrical view. It makes for a beautifully atmospheric slow movement where Ricci's superb playing is extremely well focused. The orchestral support is also very sympathetic and although the recording of the rank and file feels a little dated it barely detracts from the eloquent bow work that captures such vitality from these swirling rhythms. So the Khachaturian while of considerable interest is not quite in the same league as say the contemporaneous Shostakovich or Prokofiev *Concertos*.

It's a great shame that SXL 2240 hasn't been transferred in its entirety. Missing from this disc are two other modern pieces that would have sat very well alongside the Hindemith and Prokofiev *Solo Sonatas*. They were a brief but intensely emotional Stravinsky *Elegie* and what is easily the finest of the works on that LP in the shape of Bartok's *Violin Sonata*. These pieces are played exceptionally well and the failure to include them here is at best a little perplexing. Any way there's no point in bemoaning their absence further, just

make a mental note to acquire both of them should they enter the catalogue. Of the three that we do have Prokofiev's *Solo Violin Sonata Op.115* is by far the most approachable because of its neo-baroque flavour, lyricism and uncomplicated structure. The straightforward dominant first subject of the first movement, variations on a simple theme in the second and an exciting ending to the third, which is preceded by rearrangement of the rondo cum ternary form into its component parts, are stunningly delivered. There's no place to hide in an unaccompanied piece; your technique, tonal accuracy and the very essence of the reading are

horribly exposed. If you slip then the mistakes are laid bare for all to hear. Needless to say Ricci is immense. This is a perfect realisation of Prokofiev's later musical nature.

Hindemith's *Sonatas Op.31 No.1 & No.2* were composed during the mid-1920s when he was playing viola in the Amar-Hindemith Quartet. Surprisingly there is no real contrapuntal writing; instead Hindemith relies mostly on a single line that is imaginatively supported by double-stopped harmony as and when required. The five movements of the first sonata succeed one another in a

fast-slow alternation. It is less lyrical than the second, but this prickly, and untamed work is still broken, branded and ridden with Ruggiero's thoroughly committed and cauterising craftsmanship. *No.2* is a lightly moving piece that thirstily draws upon the violin's vocal textures-though the scherzo like third movement is played pizzicato-these resurface in the final section which consists of five contrasting variations on a Mozart theme. The writing here is hugely evocative in style and the open-chested lyricism is preserved through yet more sublime playing.

Ricci is a singular talent and this generous selection of Decca recordings showcases the versatility, fearsome speeds and blinding skill levels that he naturally and effortlessly displays. He is often noted for his extrovert side but is capable of heart-rending intimacy, the subtlest and most delicate shifts in feeling. Take any one of these master classes and enjoy all of his gifts.





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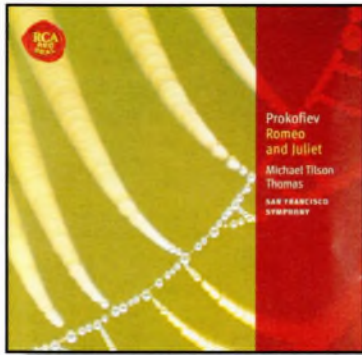
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Prokofiev Romeo and Juliet

Tilson Thomas, San Francisco S.O.

RCA Classic Library 82876 59424 2 

Issued as part of RCA's "Classic Library" Series, this highly acclaimed recording was meant to announce a new contract between conductor, orchestra and record company. Made a couple of weeks after Michael Tilson Thomas' inaugural concert as Musical Director in San Francisco, with the orchestra now releasing SACDs on its own label, the contract has collapsed. The musical arrangement takes the sequence of the ballet, rather than the composer's three suites, with its better narrative, and Tilson Thomas provides some wonderfully perceptive and animated conducting. He employs convincing yet distinctive rubato, heightening the natural flow of the drama. There is particular rapture in the *Balcony Scene*, and nimble yet spirited tempos bring drive to the *Folk Dance* and the *Young Juliet*, while the intense energy exhibited in *Romeo's Revenge* captures the attention better than on just about any other recording. In fact, with warm and dynamic sound, allied to playing of the highest calibre, this has got to be classed alongside those of Järvi, Maazel and Previn. And for some, with an arrangement that accommodates just about every principal theme of the full ballet, while excluding Prokofiev's numerous repetitions, this particularly enjoyable disc will certainly be a first choice.


SG

RECORDING
MUSIC



Ysaÿe, Leclair, Telemann, Locatelli, Bach, Paganini Sonatas

Leonid Kogan

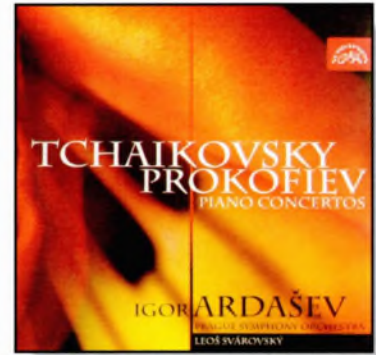
Testament SBT 1227  **1**

It's easy to understand why the original Columbia SAX 2531 and 33CX 1373, 1546 & 1562 recordings from which this collection of Baroque and Romantic chamber works have been drawn are so highly prized by collectors. Leonid Kogan was a legend and his playing here almost defies belief. There is a performance of rare beauty in the *Bach Sarabande from Partita No.1*. The *Ysaÿe Sonata No.1*, *Telemann Canonico Sonata no.1* and *Leclair Sonatas No.1 & No.3* (all for two unaccompanied violins) are priceless examples of the virtuosity and empathic understanding achieved by Kogan and his wife, Elizaveta Gilels. Their naturally intertwining bow work is beguiling, while a peppery *Locatelli Sonata in F minor* and that showy *Paganini Cantabile OP.17* both feature Kogan's regular pianist, Andre Mytnik in exquisitely tuned and quite delectable Paris recitals that were lovingly recorded nearly fifty years ago in glorious mono. A lifelike volume, shape and scale, together with the vibrant and richly textured reproduction of these violin and piano images makes this disc an even more attractive proposition. The only barrier you may need to overcome is the stylistic approach which a half a century later differs markedly from those more familiarly heard today.


Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC



Tchaikovsky - Concert Fantasia for Piano and Orchestra Prokofiev - Piano Concerto No.2 Ardasev, Prague SO, Svárovsky

Supraphon SU 3757-2 031 

Neither of the two works on this disc can be regarded as mainstream repertory pieces. Tchaikovsky's *Concert Fantasia* lacks a big, memorable tune to advertise itself, because its major theme is silenced by the composer as part of his second movement "Contrasts", while the Prokofiev is surprisingly neglected, at least comparatively. Igor Ardasev's performances offer plenty of fireworks in both pieces, but these are handled in a most balanced way, especially in the Prokofiev, where its first movement's harmonic structure is allowed to fully develop without the piece falling into the usual degenerative struggle between the pianist and his instrument. In the second-movement *toccata*, he exhibits an incredible lyrical quality, allied to some magnificent dynamic articulation, which prevents the usual mechanical performance that one often receives from lesser performers. The *Concerto Fantasia* also receives a most fluid performance, with its distinctively thematic orchestral accompaniments receiving superbly disciplined playing from the Prague Symphony Orchestra, especially at its rousing conclusion. In both performances, Ardasev's refusal to simply rely on pyrotechnics alone to batter the listener into submission is fully justified, and makes a welcome case for both works to be more widely heard.

SG

RECORDING
MUSIC





Elogio per un'ombra

Makarski, Larcher

ECM New Series 1712 465 337-2 

For the curious listener, ECM's catalogue is often a voyage of discovery. This disc of works mainly for solo violin (two have a piano accompaniment) is no exception. American violinist Michelle Makarski creates an intelligent and thoughtful program by composers who, on the face of it, are either Italian or have ties with Italy. Many have ties with each other, but it is the sonata by 18th Century composer Giuseppe Tartini that is the key to a connecting thread that runs through the program. Makarski has interspersed the modern pieces among the sonata and some of its variations, revealing that many of the 20th Century works borrow from it, and making the Tartini sound rather contemporary. There are subtle, often gentle changes - variations of light and dark - punctuated with more stark and surprising moments of atonality that provide a fascinating series of colours. While occasionally abrasive, at times almost surrealistic, the music is more often beautifully lyrical. The results are surprisingly accessible, although sometimes uncompromising, but never uninteresting, and like its label, this disc certainly provides the listener with a discovery of the unexpected, confirming the legitimacy of melding new ideas with older forms.

SG



Bach, Beethoven & Schoenberg
Sonatas and Phantasy

Yehudi Menuhin & Glenn Gould

Sony Columbia Masterworks SMK 87856 

This disc appeared two years ago as part of Sony's Glenn Gould Anniversary series and is one of his more interesting chamber recitals not least because it features Yehudi Menuhin. The recordings were made in the mid 1960s at the CBC Television Studios, Toronto and these performances are characterised by a genuine warmth, depth of feeling and generosity of spirit that existed between these virtuoso musicians. Despite Menuhin's familiarity with the Beethoven *Sonata No. 10 in G major, OP.96* he happily gives Gould an unfettered opportunity to express himself with that typically indulgent and idiosyncratic exploration which goes well beyond the printed text to deliver a memorable and quite different interpretation. Bach's *Sonata No.4 in C minor, BWV 1017* is of course confidently handled by both players but the real find is the Arnold Schoenberg *Phantasy for Violin and Piano Accompaniment, OP.47*. Menuhin unlike Gould was not noted for his understanding of Schoenberg's music yet the great man quickly grasped the considerable technical difficulties within this score to give an uninhibited and inspired reading that is quite breathtaking in terms of its physical execution and affectionate tone. A rare and unlikely musical partnership, perhaps, but one that is nevertheless beautifully conceived and full of mutual respect.

RP



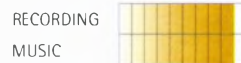
Rossini
Complete Works for Piano Vol. 4

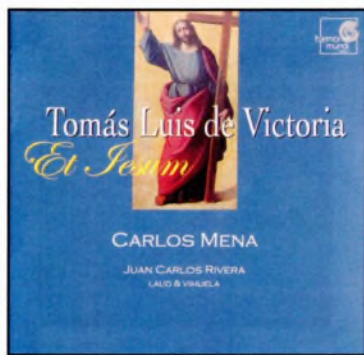
Giacometti

Channel Classics CCS 18098 


This fourth volume of Gioacchino Rossini's complete works for piano features the first eighteen *Queleques riens pour album*. But these innovative, entertaining and often sprightly pieces are anything but the "album of trifles" of the title. They are rather adventurous works that should stand alongside the composer's more famous operas, with particularly notable counterpoint and harmonies. There is a hint of Chopin to some, particularly *No. 4*, which resembles part of the Polish composer's *E minor prelude*, with an added Lisztian ingredient or two. Many reveal a softer, more placid atmosphere, but Rossini does not hold back in the more virtuoso pieces, adding some particularly inspiring fireworks, as in *No. 14*, with its runs that can leave a pianists fingers doing contortions, and *No. 18*, with its ruthlessly recurring chords. The interpretations are all the more captivating with the sound of the 1837 Erard piano, superbly captured by Channel, exhibiting far more in the way of vibrato than modern instruments. Paolo Giacometti sounds as if he really loves performing these pieces, milking the audience at every corner, overemphasising each concluding moment, supplying first-rate performances to add to the first three volumes, and delightfully promoting some seriously undervalued repertoire.

SG







Victoria
Et Jesum (Motets, antiphons and mass movements adapted for voice and lute/vihuela)
Mena, Rivera, Gallego

Harmonia Mundi HMI 987042 

It is a gratifying surprise to find that these magnificent works, known for centuries in their choral settings, now exist as adaptations for solo voice and either lute or vihuela, despite most of these transcriptions not being made by Victoria himself but by the performers. Juan Carlos Rivera and, countertenor, Carlos Mena, in keeping with common practice during Victoria's time, have taken their models (as well as a few actual selections) from 16th and 17th Century manuscripts, adding self-penned transcriptions of their own favourite works by the composer. The results are totally engaging, and any doubts about these standing up to Victoria's originals should be cast aside. They are beautifully sung and played, preserving much of the original's harmonic characteristics and polyphonic structuring, while concentrating on Victoria's beautiful melodic lines and their original texts. Mena sings with technical mastery, but also brings out the music's ardour and sentiment. Several tracks feature Rivera alone, skillfully interpreting his instrumental transcriptions, while a couple also feature Francisco Gallego on cornet. The resulting release is thoroughly enjoyable, played and recorded to remarkably high standards, which provides an enthralling new perspective on some beautiful and extraordinary music.

SG

RECORDING 
 MUSIC 



Mahler
Symphony No.2 "Resurrection"



Barbirolli, BPO, Maria Stader
Et Janet Baker

Testament SBT 1320 

Sir John Barbirolli, the leading British Mahler advocate of his day, had a strong rapport with the musicians of the Berlin Philharmonic. This live performance recorded in June 1965 shows with its convincing representation of human mortality and through the atmospheric development of its themes of Christian regeneration and immortality that conductor, orchestra and soloists fully understand and embrace the composer's conflicted visions of spirituality. The mysteriousness and deep seated symbolism, vivid tonal painting, a literal and quite unmistakable realisation of Judgement Day in the finale and the psychological dimensions of an expressive and overpowering first movement dripping with impotence, anger and despair at man's mortality are all beautifully conceived. The graveside images and much wringing of hands in the middle movements are equally striking, as is the quality of the soprano and mezzo-soprano singing by Maria Stader and Janet Baker respectively. JB's direction is suitably purposeful and clear-sighted. This and the impeccable German playing add to the effectiveness of Testament's transfer. Interestingly, disc one only contains the *first movement* which keeps faith with Mahler's instruction in the score that there should be a pause of at least five minutes before the start of the following *Andante Moderato*.

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RP

RECORDING 
 MUSIC 




Martinu
String Quartets Nos. 4, 5 and 7

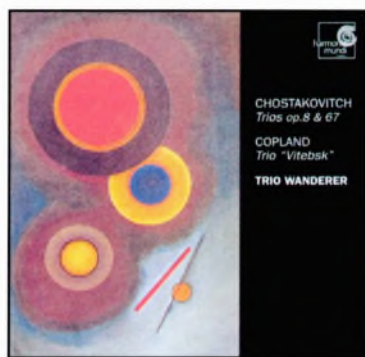
Martinu Quartet

Naxos 8.553784 

The reference recording for these works has been the complete set on Supraphon, by the Panocha Quartet, but this disc now completes a similar collection for the Martinu Quartet. While the charming and affectionate *Fourth*, and the *Concerto de Camera (Seventh)*, with its undoubted lyricism, are the more popular pieces, it is the *Fifth* that is the major statement among Martinu's Quartets. It employs the same anguished vernacular as the *Concerto for Double String Orchestra, Piano and Timpani*, but being nearly half-an-hour in length, is even more extensive than the orchestral work. The Martinu Quartet may lack some of the wonderful effortlessness of the Panochas, but they exhibit a particularly animated sense of rhythm, as well as great understanding for each piece. There is certainly no hint of lethargy, despite a slightly longer finale of the *Fifth* here than with the Supraphon release, with this performance revealing a slightly weightier and darker feel. Either fashion seems to serve the music well, and with excellent sound quality this disc completes a collection that is very much the equal of those by the Panocha Quartet, and possibly the best current chamber release from Naxos.

SG

RECORDING 
 MUSIC 



Shostakovich, Copland
Piano Trios

Trio Wanderer

Harmonia Mundi HMC 901825

This CD includes performances of both Shostakovich's first two piano trios, along with the inspired coupling of Copland's *Trio Vitebsk* - a single movement work, like Shostakovich's *Trio op. 8*, and based on a Jewish theme, like the Russian composer's *Trio op. 67*. In fact the playing here of Copland's piece exhibits much that is reminiscent of Shostakovich, with cellist Rapaël Pidoux offering some outstanding touches. Pidoux also handles the Shostakovich better than just about anyone, matching the tremendous intensity of the other members of Trio Wanderer perfectly. There is no lack of ensemble cohesion, even in the most climatic moments, and there is a certain warmth of tone throughout each performance. Trio Wanderer create just the right atmosphere, revealing some truly solemn moments in Shostakovich's pieces, and tempos are never rushed, with the finale of the *Trio op. 67* simply allowed to build naturally, avoiding the decent into vulgarity in search of dramatic affect that all too often is inflicted upon its magnificent conclusion. In fact this is chamber music at its most splendid and, with a recording of the very highest quality, this wonderful release deserves to be heard by all lovers of great music.

SG



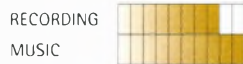
Schumann, Chopin, Debussy,
Mompou
Royal Festival Hall Recital
Michelangeli (piano)

Testament SBT 2088

Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli was an enigmatic and legendary pianist who was reclusive in his personal life but headstrong, controversial and quite brilliant in both the concert hall and the studio. These previously unpublished recordings were taped during a live recital at the Royal Festival Hall on March 4th 1957 and they showcase Michelangeli's formidable crystalline technique and a dazzling interpretative armoury. Schumann's *Foschingsschwank* and *Carnaval* are presented with subtle lyricism, tonal integrity, grace and immaculate control. On the Debussy *Images* he flouts convention with a vital and wonderfully lively rendition whose piquant flavours differ greatly from the usual dreamy and impressionistic readings that we regularly hear. The Chopin *Fantasia in F minor* and *Ballade No.1* are elegantly yet passionately realised. They are also terrific examples of the dexterity, fluidity and rapid tempos employed by this pianist. While the two sensuous encore pieces in Mompou's *Cancion* and Chopin's *Valses* are enjoyable displays of virtuosity. The second disc closes with an indispensable half an hour of sound checks and rehearsals prior to Michelangeli's definitive performances for EMI's recording of the Rachmaninov *Piano Concerto No.4* and Ravel *G major Concerto*. A significant CD in all departments.

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RP



Vaughan Williams
The Lake in the Mountains, Six
Studies in English Folksong, etc.
The Nash Ensemble

Hyperion CDA67313

This wonderfully varied selection of Vaughan Williams' chamber works, written between 1912 and 1952, illustrates the composer's consistency of style perfectly. Whether it is the serene atmosphere of the opening *The Lake in the Mountains*, a tone poem for solo piano, or the dramatic and emotional intensity of the *String Quartet No. 2*, with its wartime connections, there are always those melodic and harmonic structures that are typical of the composer's writing. The *Six Studies in English Folksong* for cello and piano, which continue in the same tranquil vein as the opening work, are from 1926, while the most modern composition is the *A minor Violin Concerto*. With its broad themes and episodic development it is absolute vintage late Vaughan Williams, yet it still reveals much that is found in the earliest - the *Fantasy Quintet* - despite this work's display of youthful freshness and enchanting naivety. Hyperion's engineering is excellent throughout, and the Nash Ensemble, who play with great sensitivity and exhibit a meticulous concern for focus, draw each distinct element into the most entertaining of music, and delightfully project an illustrious style in composition that you will want to hear time and again.

SG





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Rebecca Pidgeon: *The Raven*

Rebecca Pidgeon has long been a favourite with audiophiles is now back on lovely 180g vinyl and sounding better than ever. She is an accomplished folk singer-songwriter with leanings towards pop and soul. Her songs (written often with playwright husband, David Mamet) are literate, melodic, and well crafted but above all, memorable.

The Raven is a powerful musical and emotional album that we warmly recommend. A good pressing from Chesky. Tracks include *Spanish Harlem, Remember Me* and *You Got Me*.

Chesky Records JR 115 LP £19.95

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Rebirth of a Classic



Speakers Corner re-issue the Starker Bach 'Cello Suites

— by Richard S. Foster —

Janos Starker happens to celebrate his 80th birthday, as I write this, tomorrow, July 5, 2004. Starker was born in Budapest, Hungary July 5, 1924. He is a graduate of the Franz Liszt Academy of Music. During his career as an orchestral musician, he was a solo cellist at the Budapest Opera House and Philharmonic, The Dallas Symphony (under Antal Dorati), The Metropolitan Opera and then The Chicago Symphony (both with Fritz Reiner). He's maintained an active career not only as a soloist but a guest artist with Orchestras around the World. He teaches, he lectures, he founded the Eva Janzer Memorial Cello Center Foundation to honour his former teacher. He's published countless articles and many of his students are world-renowned.

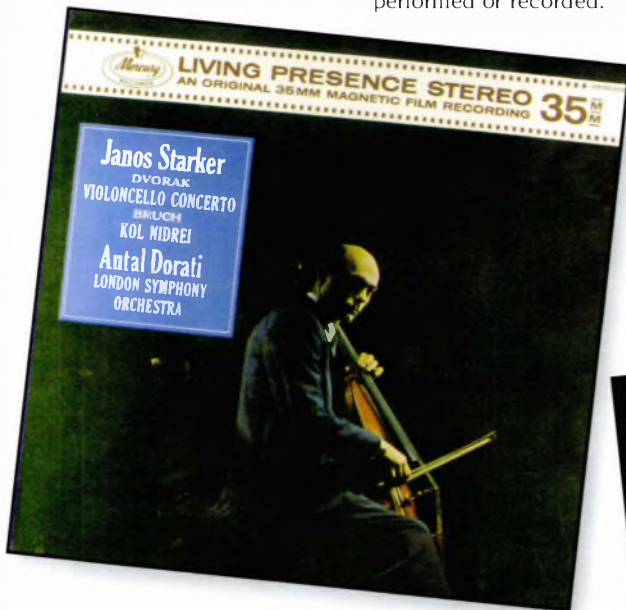
He joined the School of Music faculty at the University of Indiana in Bloomington in 1958. Four years later he was awarded the title of Distinguished Professor of Music. His awards include the prestigious Grande Prix du Disque in 1948 for the Kodaly *Suite for Unaccompanied Cello*, Opus 8, first released on 78's in France on the Pacific label. Shortly thereafter, Pacific re-released this performance on LP. His justly famous recording of this heretofore-thought-to-be-impossible-to-play work was recording again in the US by Period on SPLP 510. It was re-released on Period SPL 510 with Kodaly's *Duo for violin and violoncello* with Arnold Eidus playing violin.

In 1997 he won a Grammy Award for his performance of the Bach *Suites for Unaccompanied Violoncello* on RCA/BMG: compact disc only (61436). This was the fifth time he performed the Bach *'Cello Suites*, however only four of the five sets are complete. He recorded four of



▶ the six for the US company Period (released in the UK on the Nixa label), he then recorded a complete set for EMI on their Columbia label in mono only. The first stereo releases were in the mid 1960's for the Mercury Living Presence Label. In the late 1980's he recorded a complete set in digital on the Sefel label and as indicated earlier, the last time for RCA/BMG. He's premiered many concertos as well as other recital works. He's recorded chamber works for Decca (the Brahms *Trios*) as well as Bloch's *Schelomo* and *Voice in the Wilderness* with Mehta and the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.

There is almost no information I have been able to uncover that suggests there is a work he has not performed or recorded.



There are even a half-dozen wonderful records on the STAR label (STARKer?) released primarily as teaching aids rather than mainstream issues that have become cult classics. The original releases were pressed on beautiful translucent vinyl by JVC.

It was in 1948, shortly after he came to America from France (by Dorati's invitation in Dallas) where he first met Wilma Cozart. He moved to The Met shortly thereafter with Reiner and then in 1952 again with Reiner to Chicago. Based upon World events at the time, his plans changed as he had to get himself established, however he stayed an additional year with Reiner to help bring his parents to America.

Starker was at the Met when he made his first American recordings for Period. Following this brief relationship, he recorded several superb performances on a handful of records for Walter Legge. While his

Kodaly for Period (and the earlier Pacific release) was a stunning performance, he really began to establish himself under Legge. These records are highly sought after by collectors, but it appears his recordings for Mercury are some of the most coveted today - especially his Bach.

Starker has a great love for chamber recordings and made several as the cellist in a group called the Roth String Quartet. Later he began the famous Living Presence Stereo recordings with the Bach being among his last recordings for Mercury. All in all, he recorded four chamber works with his friend, the pianist Gyorgy Sebok, one record with Stephen Swedish at the piano, two with Dorati and the LSO, one with Stanislaw Skrowaczewski and the LSO and his *Bach Suites for Unaccompanied Violoncello*. Nine legendary recordings. (This of course does not include SR90370 which is a re-issue of two of the 'cello suites from the box set, SR3-9016).

When I began collecting these records I knew nothing, and I mean nothing about classical recordings, performances, etc., etc. We all have moments in time where we can recapture what we were doing when a certain event occurred. For me it was the first time I heard the Dvorak 'cello concerto with Starker,

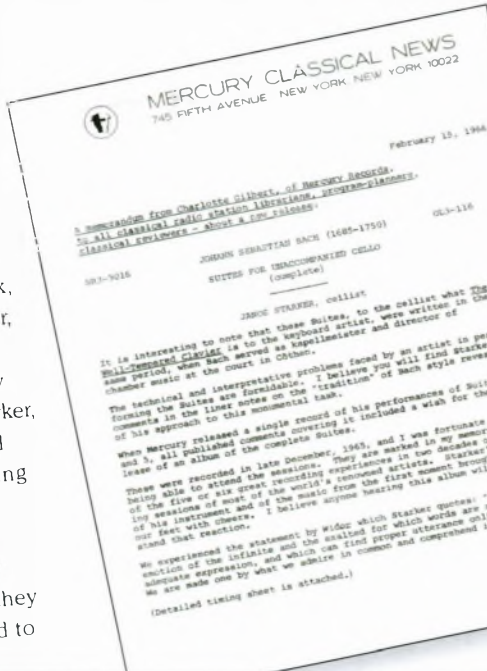


Dorati and the LSO, SR90303.

There was a time when you could purchase the right pressing and in the right condition from reliable sources - yes David it was you. When I cued the record, it was one of those experiences of sonic wonderment and although unbeknownst to me at the time, one of the greatest performances of this composition I would ever hear. Can you imagine? To be given the privilege of hearing ▶

► this work for the first time over a full range system was an event I will never forget. I remember quite literally, shaking as I turned the record over. Today I have heard many other performances of this work, some better, some quite inferior, but nothing will ever take the experience and memory of my first encounter with Janos Starker, Antal Dorati and his LSO - and the unbelievable Mercury Living Presence Sound.

Speakers Corner Records decided last year when their Mercury project began that they wanted to



two microphones were used for this stereo recording. He visualizes the two microphones on either side with the cello at the apex of an equilateral triangle. I cannot speak for this, but it makes for an interesting debate. I've owned these recordings in their earliest stereo issue: Gold Label Promos. I also own the set of originals in mono. (Why you ask? Because I'm crazy, that's why). I've since sold the Gold Label Promo set as I felt the mono was fine enough for me. That's until I heard what magic Mr. Makkee has wrought!

Janos Starker
Modesty and Grandeur

Starker finished with the Philharmonia in 1965. He returned to the United States in 1966. He was appointed first violator of New York's Metropolitan Opera, where he continued to give actively under the baton of Fritz Reiner and others. He is working steadily with Reiner, whom he later followed to Chicago, where a particularly close artistic friendship. At Starker's modest, making music with Reiner meant learning something new in every rehearsal. Perhaps it was precisely this manner that Starker came to develop a remarkably fine sense for the individual "character" of the work's parts, something with which he performed as a cellist not so much for many decades. To him, just having with an orchestra reached identifying the conductor's role and understanding the role of his own playing. It is precisely this, the character of the instrument, the character of the conductor, of each orchestra and their conductor, which has been so fascinating to Starker throughout his musical career.

In his characteristic manner, he is always his intention not to please his audience but rather to make his personal contribution to the work itself. "I do not intend to please myself," he once said. "I'm selling the music." Despite going most of his life with a wife, Starker never had a wife with whom he could share his life. He never had a child, and he never had a child with whom he could share his life. He never had a child with whom he could share his life.

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release the Bach Cello Suites. Starker had actually recorded the works in December of 1965 but they weren't to be released until February of 1966. There is not much to say about these performances that hasn't been said many times before. They are excellent, no. outstanding performances and offer exceptionally fine Mercury Living Presence Sound. These were recorded at Fine Studios in New York. While we've always been told Mercury used three omni-directional microphones for stereo and one for mono recording, upon hearing the re-issue, one famous mastering engineer feels that only

I can tell you with the utmost confidence, you will not believe what your ears will tell you when you hear the fabulous job Kai Seemann and Willem Makkee have done with this restored set. Kai's idea was to release this on Mr. Starker's 80th birthday, but it seems they've come out about two weeks before. But the set is a sonic marvel. Simply put, you will hear a cello as if you were sitting five feet from Mr. Starker. Now there will be those in the audience who will say, "The 'cello is too large." What I can say

▶ to those nay sayers is quite simple. They have never been in a room/studio sitting close to a cellist playing their instrument. Two years ago while on a trip to Switzerland, I had the pleasure of sitting with my friend Juerg Schopper in the home of the great Swiss Violoncellist and teacher, Ms. Eva Pedrazzi. What I hear on the Speakers Corner re-issue is what I heard in Ms. Pedrazzi's home.



You hear everything. His bow strokes, his fingering technique, everything, in glorious, glorious sound.

I'm going to stick my neck out right now and say that if this doesn't win the HI-FI+ recording of the year... I don't know what will. Readers, do not wait to make up

your mind whether you should or shouldn't purchase this set. It's a total no-brainer. Rush to your retailer or favorite mail order company and buy it - now!

The re-issue also delivers more than the original in material terms. Not only do you get the original box. Speakers Corner have lovingly re-created the original insert. There is also a brief biography of Mr. Starker, a copy of the original Mercury press announcement as well as a commentary from Mr. Starker himself on Bach, the recording session and his relationship with Mercury, specifically written for this release in April 2004.

Now . . . just so you all know, there are two releases in North America. One is the same set that will be issued worldwide through Speakers Corner distributors and retailers. There is also a limited edition of 200 sets, individually numbered and

signed by Mr. Starker. I don't know how many are left, but the only distributor for these was Acoustic Sounds. If they are out of stock, perhaps they can assist you in obtaining a set. Why only 200 and why only North America? It reflects both the popularity of the box set on this side of the Atlantic, and an opportunity for Mr Starker to do a good turn. The signed sets cost around \$100 extra, with funds raised going to the Eva Janzer Memorial Cello

Center Foundation in Bloomington which provides two yearly student scholarships. Sorry . . . there are only 200 and when they're gone . . . they're gone. The records in both sets are absolutely the same, so if you do not obtain a signed copy, don't despair. The three records you will own will be reward enough. This set is a treasure to own forever at an extremely affordable price. (Original promos have sold for several thousand dollars. Regular issues with low stamper numbers also hit the thousand-dollar range.) Take it from me - the re-issues are the ones to own. I am delighted to have this set performed by one of the great Icons of the 20th/21st Century. Not to be missed for any reason!



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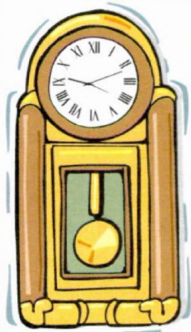
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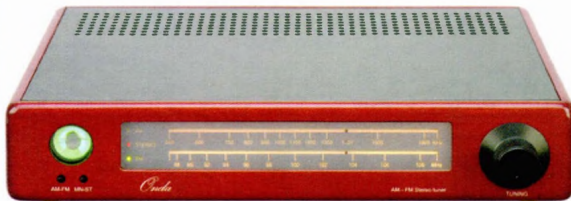
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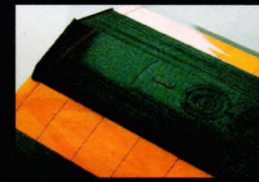
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Acoustic Triangle

Catalyst

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This is the second release from the trio and was recorded like their first album (Interaction) at St. George's in Bristol. Blending melodic jazz with contemporary classical styles Acoustic Triangle have carved a unique niche for themselves. Malcolm Creese (bass) and Tim Garland (sax), are joined on piano by new member Gwilym Simcock. Featuring numbers from Simcock and Garland, the set also includes pieces from Kenny Wheeler, John Taylor, and Cole Porter. The opening number 'In A Wonderful Place' provides a gentle introduction with Garland's fluid soprano sax lines underpinned by Simcock's delicate and responsive playing. Garland's 'Beyond The City The Stars' is a darker toned piece written in a rondo form very much in the classical tradition. Creese has an opportunity to shine in this and delivers a fine solo. It quickly becomes apparent that this set is not only an out-standing example of virtuoso musicianship, but a well-judged collection, offering overall unity yet allowing each track a distinctive atmosphere. Just take the achingly delicate soprano 'Rosa Ballerina' and set it against the jaunty, angular piano driving 'Coffee Time'. My favourite and perhaps the most distinctively classical influenced of the set, is Simcock's three part 'Sea Suite'. This set is beautifully recorded, capturing the spacious acoustic of St. George's and the distinctive tones of each instrument.

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DD



Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers

Moanin'

Classic/ Blue Note 4003 

One of Jazz's finest drummers, Blakey, along with Horace Silver formed the first version of the Jazz Messengers in 1954, trailblazing hard bop. This 1958 release sees Blakey accompanied by Benny Golson, Bobby Timmons, Jymie Merritt and notably by Lee Morgan. Golson wasn't to stay long with the band, but did manage to contribute four numbers to the set: 'Blues March' along with 'Along Came Betty', 'Are You Real' and 'Drum Thunder (miniature) Suite' all of them to become staples of the Blakey repertoire. The latter track came about as a result of Blakey's desire to play a piece based on the (explosive) use of mallets. The title says it all and the recording holds nothing back. 'Blues March' attempts to bring something of the feel of New Orleans marching bands to a more modern idiom. Driven by Blakey's rolls and crisp fast marching beat and featuring some fine duets from the horns this succeeds admirably. This is a uniformly strong album held firmly together by Blakey's exuberant drumming providing a platform for strong soloing from the band. For me Morgan is the hero here, just listen to his superb work in 'Come Rain Or Come Shine'. Classic have done a great job with this heavyweight mono pressing which deserves a prime place in any serious jazz collection.

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DD



Dizzy Reece

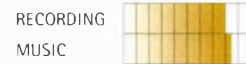
Star Bright

Classic/ Blue Note 4023 

Reece took up the trumpet at 14, later moving to Europe including a six year stint in the UK where he regularly recorded, before returning to New York in 1959. His nickname stems from his schooldays and is nothing to do with Dizzy Gillespie. This album, recorded in November of '59 sees him accompanied by the dream team of Hank Mobley, Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers and Art Taylor, and he doesn't disappoint. The standout track on this strong album is 'Groovesville' a fast paced ad-libbed blues that brings the best solos of the album from Reece, Mobley and Kelly. The take on 'I Wished Upon The Moon' a number made popular by Billie Holiday 25 years before this recording, sees a slower pace and the chance for Reece to stretch out. He does this with aplomb and is followed by a lovely solo from Mobley both players then being eclipsed by Kelly's rolling, melodic improvisations around the theme. The set closes with 'Variations on Monk', which demonstrates a subtle hint of Monk's work with to quote the sleeve notes 'a grace-notes a sixth lower effect at the end of each eight measures'. This number also features, at its very end, the only solo of the album from Art Taylor, a fittingly dynamic close to a fine, relaxed and highly enjoyable set that is done full justice in this essential re-issue from Classic.

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DD





Art Pepper

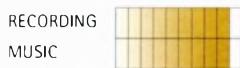
Besame Mucho - Live in Tokyo '79

JVC XRCD24 VICJ 61158 **XR**

From Pepper's latter years, his powers were still undiminished at the time of this 1979 live session. Supported and inspired by a fine rhythm section comprising George Cables (piano), Tony Dumas (bass), and Billy Higgins (drums), Pepper was in great form for these sessions, that also delivered *Landscape* (VICJ 61035). The opener 'Red Car' powerfully sets the scene: Driven by Dumas' bass, Pepper's fluid, bright toned alto flies high and true. This is followed by the ballad 'The Shadow Of Your Smile' with oh so gentle brush work from Higgins, offsetting a fuller toned meditation from Pepper. Cables delivers a lovely solo in this number too. The band also take on an extended (10 minute) version of Pepper's 'The Trip' that is easily the equal of the original studio version, and a powerful 'Mambo De La Pinta'. Pepper plays like he's possessed and the band respond in true form laying down a Latin influenced backing that oozes energy and provides the runway for Pepper to offer some extraordinary high-altitude playing. Higgins drum solo is also a treat in this number. 11 minutes of pure, joyful energy and worth the price of admission for this alone. This is an outstanding and very well recorded set that along with its sister release *Landscape* should be considered an essential purchase.

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DD



Kenny Dorham

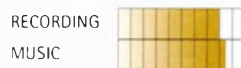
Afro-Cuban

Classic/ Blue Note 1535 **200g**

Side one features Dorham fronting an eight-piece band in the most overtly Afro-Cuban influenced numbers. These had previously been released as a 10" LP. The second side sees him leading a sextet in three numbers. Art Blakey provides his powerhouse drumming for both bands. Dorham was amongst the first bebop trumpeters with an ability to display great lyricism however fast the tempo. He also had a great feeling for blues playing, yet he was somewhat overshadowed in the '50's by the likes of Clifford Brown despite being easily their equal. A listen to his remarkable fluid lines in 'Basheer's Dream' should be enough to convince. It's the percussion that really drives the first side, Blakey's work being complemented by frenetic congas from Cuban Carlos (Potato) Valdes. Horace Silver also features on both sides of the album, but keeps his playing pretty discreet on this first side, but a crisp, characterful and to-the-point solo in the medium paced 'K.D.'s Motion'. With musicians of the calibre of Horace Silver, Art Blakey, Hank Mobley, Cecil Payne and Jay Jay Johnson, Dorham couldn't have asked for finer support. They deliver their best and Dorham rises to the challenge. This is a great album which as an added bonus sports one of Blue Note's finest sleeve designs.

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The Ray Brown Trio

Soular Energy

Pure Audiophile PA-002 (2) **180g**

This preceded the excellent *Like Minds* release from Pure Audiophile that I reviewed in issue 30 and it's another superb set. The sleeve warns 'dynamic recording of bass may cause difficulties at low tracking forces: Well this wasn't a problem in this house but a dynamic recording of bass and every other part of the spectrum it certainly is. Fortunately it's also a wonderfully natural recording that superbly captures Brown, his trio and guests romping through a set of standards. This is straight-ahead jazz played for sheer enjoyment and this is conveyed superbly in this outstanding recording and pressing. Listen to the relaxed tempo of 'Take the A Train' and the imaginative use that Brown and Harris make of this as they trade melodic phrases. The highlight of the set is the extended take on 'Sweet Georgia Brown'. To quote Brown in the sleeve notes: 'There are some tunes that no matter how many times you've played them, they always make you feel good. This is one'. The set is rounded out with three alternate takes and 'CC Rider' taken from another Concord release. This is an exemplary set that contains some of the most naturally recorded double bass I've heard on record. The fact that Brown's bass is accompanied by an equally well-recorded band in such an enjoyable set makes this release a must have.

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