

hi-fi+

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▷ Singing Out

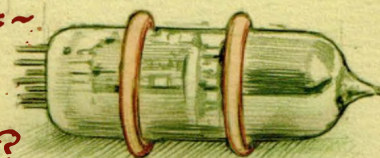
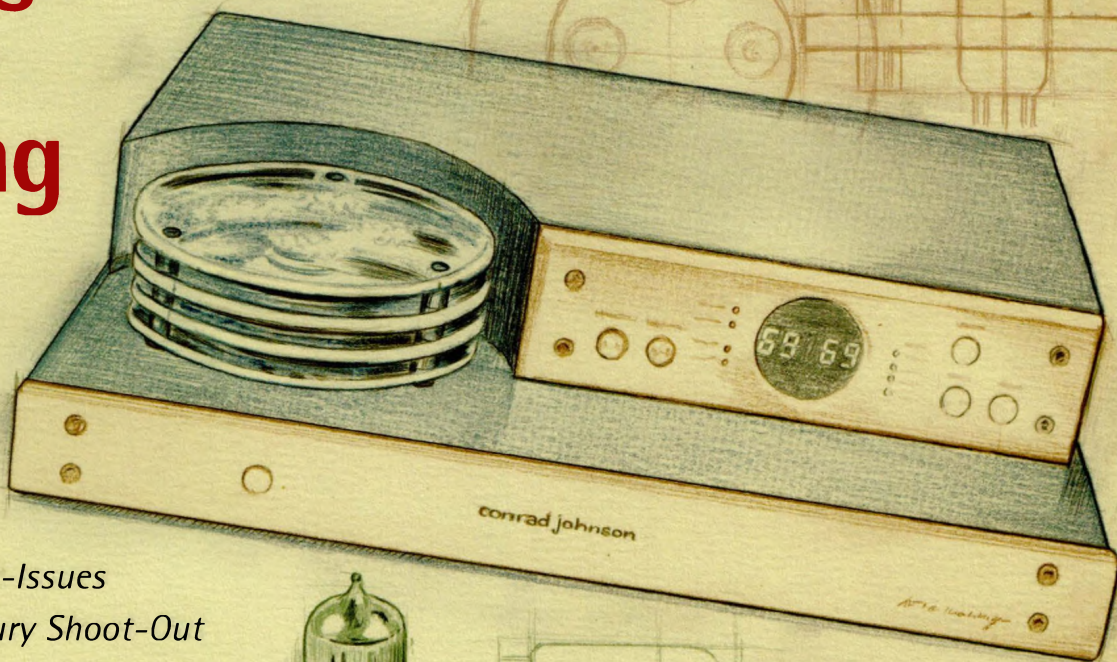
Eliza Gilkyson
Mobile Fidelity
Concord Jazz Re-Issues
The Great Mercury Shoot-Out

▷ Loud and Clear

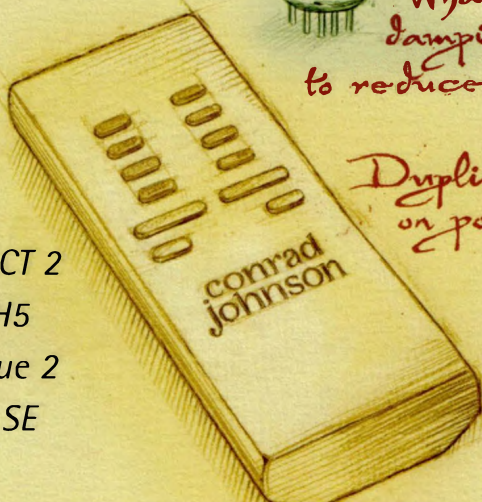
Focal-JMLabs Chorus 707s
Eben X-Baby
Thiel CS1.6

▷ Hot and Glowing

conrad-johnson ACT 2
Audio Research PH5
PrimaLuna Prologue 2
Border Patrol S20 SE



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damping rings
to reduce resonance?*



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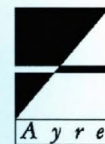
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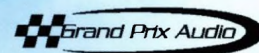
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Editorial

Editor

Roy Gregory

Contributors

David Ayers
Chris Binns
Mark Childs
Martin Colloms
Dave Davies
Dennis Davis
Sian Drinkwater
Richard S Foster
Simon Groome
Jason Hector
Andrew Hobbs
Jimmy Hughes
Jason Kennedy
Scot Markwell
Paul Messenger
Reuben Parry
Alan Sircom
Chris Thomas

Photography

Simon Marsh

Cartoonist

Dave Davies

Cover illustration

Steve Lucas
(after Leonardo Da Vinci)

Design

Creative Byte
Poole, Dorset
Tel. 01202 690990
E-mail. info@creativebyte.co.uk

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The Editorial Office

can be contacted at:

Hi-Fi+ Editorial
Unit 12, Albany Business Park
Cabot Lane
Poole, Dorset
BH17 7BX
United Kingdom
Tel. (44)(0)1202-659380
Fax. (44)(0)1202-659540
Net. www.hifiplus.com
Advertising;
Rebecca Bird
Tel/Fax. 0208 763-1277
Email. sales@hifiplus.com

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Once upon a time people claimed that all amplifiers sounded the same. Then it was cables. Now it's VTA that doesn't make a difference. In each case these claims have all had one thing in common: the people making them are relying on "sound scientific theory". The rest of us, all those who can hear the differences that amplifiers, cables or VTA adjustments make, are simply deluding ourselves: We want to hear a difference so we do. But of course there can be no difference because the science tells us that.

Only it doesn't. What the science tells us is that it can't explain what we're hearing. That doesn't mean that we aren't hearing it. What it does mean is that there's a problem with the science (or rather, the way people are using it) rather than our hearing or our perception. Hey, that's nothing new. There have always been plenty of things that science can't explain, and that's always been a blind-spot amongst too many self-appointed "scientists".

But what really makes me laugh is the idea that we're imagining these things because we want them to exist. How about the scientific reductionists who don't hear things because they can't believe that they exist? Sorry guys, auto suggestion cuts both ways, especially when you've got a room full of amplifiers just sitting there waiting for you to compare. How is it that all those "scientists" couldn't hear differences that no one even questions nowadays? Or cables? Or VTA? Fortunately, this kind of blinkered pomposity is something of a rarity these days, but it doesn't stop the odd zealot leaping on his soap-box and crying foul. Normally followed by the suggestion that the hi-fi industry and magazines are all colluding to rip-off the right-thinking buying public.

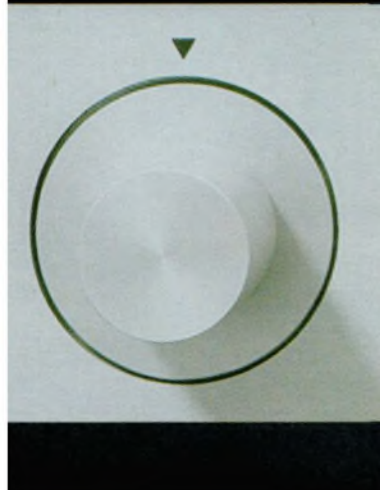
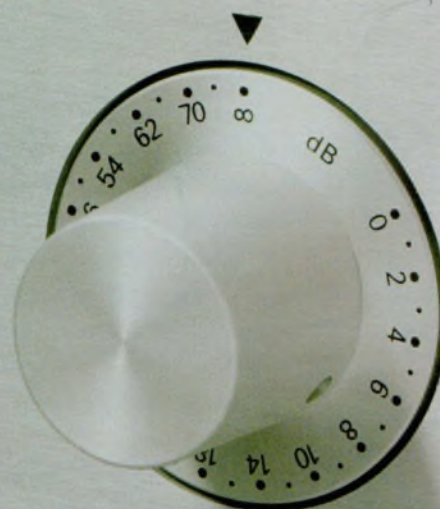
There again, maybe the most obvious conclusion is the correct one. Maybe they're all just deaf...



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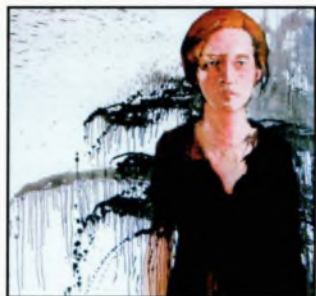
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Incoming!

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

Biased reporting of test results a disgrace

Taking the micky

Blind test in hi-fi +

Expensive cable wins cheapest comes bottom

One expensive cable does not do too well

That's put down to "the nature and sonic character of the Stereovox cables" and a couple of paragraphs in the article are also used to explain and excuse the bad results

Why was the same not said for the QED ?

I suppose you did not want to upset Stereovox ?

You should just print the results as you get them, and leave it to us readers to make up our minds.

Printing certain comments show, that you wanted/ expected the expensive to win, (which it did) when a cable you seem to like did not do well the excuses came thick and fast.

Very hard to take anything you print seriously, when you try putting so much spin on some of the results.

Dave Whitter

Via e-mail

Funny, I thought the raw data was exactly what we did print. We also offered our interpretation of it, which people are free to assess for themselves, and which was based on the actual experience of conducting the listening. The point here is quite simple: this was an article about blind-listening to cables. That means that it's about "blind-listening" and it's about "cables". The aim of the article is to examine the methodology itself as well as its application to the products under consideration. As such, a discussion of the potential shortcomings and pitfalls in the process is central to establishing its value. That's why we discussed the performance of the Stereovox cables. There's no question of making excuses, just applying the fullest information. It's well known that products of any category can be voiced to perform well in quick A/B comparisons of the type that most dealers and customers rely on to sell/select equipment. The long-term appeal of such products is often not so satisfying. The reverse is also true, and quite often, products that don't immediately appeal can offer far greater pleasure over the long-haul. It was interesting to us that the Stereovox cables seemed to exhibit exactly this behaviour, given our previous

experience with them.

One of the other big variables in the blind-listening methodology is the running order. Again, we would be remiss in not discussing this. So, when we talked about the results, it was more to do with the way the test itself effects the outcome (which all tests do, in one way or another) than the performance of the individual product itself.

Why no "defence" of the QED? It didn't need one. Its results reflected its capabilities pretty well, within the caveats discussed. Those caveats apply to the test as a whole, and hence to all the products tested.

What we set out to do was establish whether listeners could hear differences between cables under blind conditions, and if so, how reliably. We also wanted to examine the test protocol itself, such a Holy Cow to the empiricists, along with its shortcomings and the way that those flaws can influence the results produced. There are many ways of conducting blind-testing and the value and validity of this approach (or any other) is entirely dependant on the precise methodology selected. That's why we discussed the issue. The biggest flaw in any experimental programme is to pre-judge the results. We started with no agenda: we had nothing to prove or disprove. We simply wanted to find out what the process could tell us, and how that compared to results derived from other approaches. Hopefully, that's what the finished article described. Ed

Dear Sir,

I was very pleased to see your recent article comparing loudspeaker cables and more needs to be done in that field. I was also pleased to read a few months ago Ken Kessler admitting that he was tired of trying to differentiate between cables. I forget his exact words but something to the effect that he was tired of trying to justify the cost of expensive cables? He seems to have started the current ball rolling and will be respected for his integrity, although the hi-fi accessory industry may not like it.

Cables do make a difference and it seems to boil down to a large degree to system dependency which is not always pointed out in reviews and the punter has

► been conned for too long into spending extortionate sums, believing he is getting more for his money.

What would really set the cat among the pigeons would be to have several cables set up to switching devices at the amp/speaker terminals to allow for quick comparisons. Sceptics would point out that the switch would have a bearing on the sound (which would probably be true) but at least the device would be common to all the cables, resulting in valid comparisons.

Best regards,

Julian Thomas

Via E-mail

Dear Sir,

I remember an article where you wrote a comment on the Nordost Valhalla RCA cable. In this article (if I recall it correctly), you mentioned that Eichmann bullet plugs may be an interesting option for this cable.

Since I was offered such a configuration, I would be interested whether in the meantime there is any information available whether it is a good idea use these plugs in combination with the Nordost Valhalla of whether the original plugs should be preferred.

Best regards

H.-J. Schwarzmaier

Via E-mail.

There are many issues that govern the final sound of an interconnect cable, including the choice of plugs and the quality of the termination. From a manufacturer's point of view you can add mechanical integrity and longevity to that equation. There is no doubt in my mind that the Bullet Plugs offer superior performance to the Neutriks used by Nordost. However, that doesn't mean that you should automatically use them. I think you need to consider the issues of termination as a whole. Who will do the work and with what materials? Does the chosen plug deliver sufficient strain relief for the cable in question? If not, then the integrity of the joint will suffer and performance will decline long before the plug actually falls off. Finally, will the plug cope mechanically with the physical strains imposed by the cable? If not it will simply break.

These are the issues that led Nordost to select the Neutrik plug, and it is pertinent to note that they haven't swapped to the Bullet Plug although they are well aware of its performance.

Should you use Bullet plugs on the Valhalla then you need to be aware of the issues outlined. Make sure that the termination is to the required standard and with the proper materials (I'd be wary of DIY work and home enthusiasts). Handle the cables with considerable care

and pay attention to dressing them so that they don't strain the plugs. Avoid plugging and unplugging the cables unnecessarily. I would also opt for the Silver Bullets over the standard version, given the use of silver plated conductors in the Nordost wires. An alternative to the Eichmann plugs and one which would certainly solve many of the issues outlined above, is the WBT Next Gen plug, also available in a silver version. I have tested these and will be reporting in the January issue, but suffice to say, their performance is most impressive.

The choice of plug (and its connection) can make or break the performance of a cable. Buy an off the shelf item and you receive a predictable performance and a manufacturer's guarantee to that effect. Once you start meddling things might get better, but be aware that they can also get worse. The outcome isn't always predictable as I hope is now clear. Ed.

Dear Sir

I would like to say what a great magazine Hi-Fi+ is. It's the only UK magazine I get, and along with The Absolute Sound the only one that's worth reading. I have just read Issue 34 and have to pass comment on the Koetsu review. I am the owner of a Koetsu Itoigawa D and look forward to a review at some stage in the future. The review of the Jade worked for me and put into words exactly what I thought about this cartridge and the others in the range I know people cannot understand why we spend so much on a cartridge and I cannot put into words why I did. All I have is this story.

Many years ago I owned a Roksan Xerxes with an SME 5 and Koetsu Red Signature cartridge. I thought the sound was great but as ever I was tempted by a better turntable. I ended up with an SME 20 with SME 5 and my dealer said he had another customer that had bought a Lyra Parnassus that was only a week old but that did not work well with his amp and he would swap it for my two year old Koetsu. I did the deal, the new rave cartridge for my old Koetsu and all was well for several months. But then I started thinking to myself that things were not actually better - simply different and I found that I did not listen so much. In the years that followed I change much of my system. I bought several cartridges but something was still missing. Then I heard a Koetsu Jade and the penny dropped. I was offered a very good deal on the Itoigawa D and I just had to have it.

The lesson is that you have to listen for yourself rather than relying solely on rave reviews. I spent at least eight years not knowing what I was missing.

Marc Carver

Via E-mail.

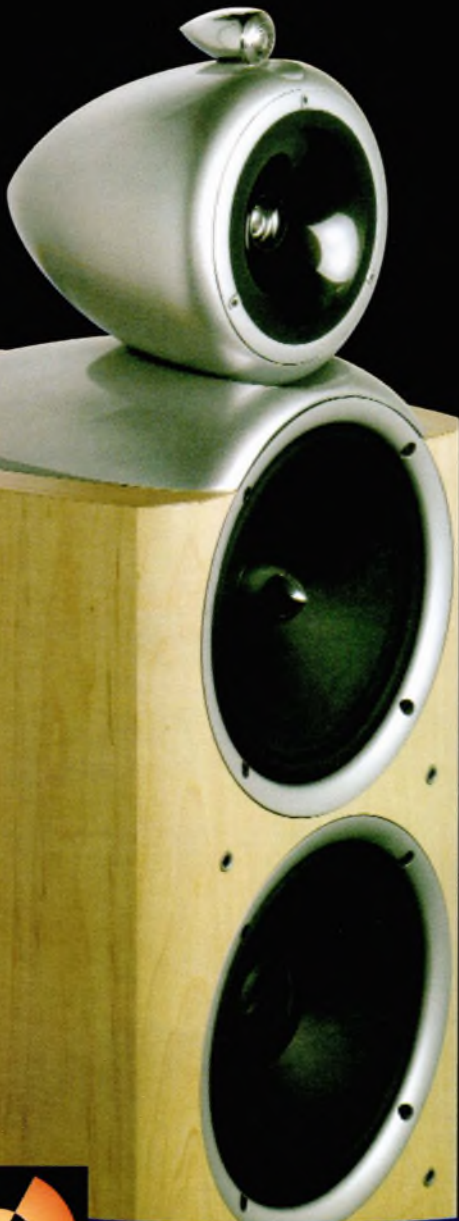


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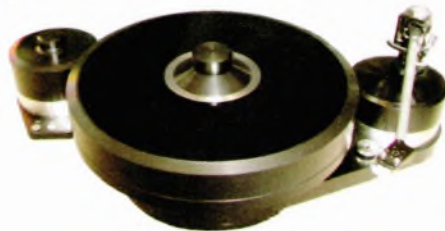


Walrus

11 New Quebec St, London W1



This ad features a few new products we're excited about, as well as a couple of old favourites (which we're still excited by even after all this time!) From top right, going anticlockwise, first off are the Anthony Gallo Reference 3 loudspeakers (£2400/pr). You can't tell from the picture, but these are actually very compact (about 3 feet tall) but have the most amazing bass extension and a very open sound. Next, the brand new Musical Fidelity A5 series amplifier (250W/ch) and CD player, at £1499 each, are superb value. They are designed to be better, and cost less, than the popular 308 series, and don't even feel embarrassed in the company of the famous Nuvista and Trivista series. The CD even features a valve output stage, just like the late lamented Trivista DAC! The Duevel Bella Lunas (£3160 to £4160/pr dependent on finish) need no introduction. This superb Omni design, featured at the recent Heathrow Show, should be on everyone's shortlist. Origin Live's new Sovereign turntable (£3850 plus arm) sets new, even higher standards for this already envied manufacturer whose decks already receive huge acclaim from the press. Next up is something we thought we'd never see - a valve / transistor hybrid power amp from Tom Evans, famous for their Groove phono stage and Vibe preamp. The Linear A (£3999) is a truly innovative design which draws on the strengths of both technologies to give transistor speed and control with valve naturalness and texture, another milestone for Tom! Many people will still remember the success we had with the Magneplanar MG 1.6 speakers at the show. These flat non-electrostatic panels with ribbon tweeters produce the most amazingly believable soundstage, all for the direct import no-middleman price of £1500/pr. The new Duevel Shuttle-Disk rechargeable battery CD player (also £1500) is on permanent demo - bring your own CDs and be pleasantly surprised! Lastly, we had to squeeze it in, what we regard as probably the finest all round (pardon the pun) turntable in the world, the Brinkmann LaGrange with the Brinkmann 10.5 tonearm (£8395 in total), a truly staggering combination.



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Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

Modern marketeers have noted a change in how we differentiate a product of late. Service and performance are both no longer important, in the main; both are implicit (or taken as minimal, in the case of dirt-cheap stuff bought off the internet). Instead, we define products by other identifiers, such as price, design or brand. Strangely, even high-end hi-fi is included in this shift in the buying decision. We choose products on the basis of notional trust in the brand, the elegance of the design or if the price fits your profile. Although you may prefer product P to product Q in the listening test, most of us these days enter that listening test to simply confirm our pre-conceived buying decisions, not to upset them.

Then, there are those with cognitive dissonance coursing through their veins. These nonconformist people are drawn to the quirky end of the spectrum; those who drink Chai Tea Lattes in Starbucks, typing the great 21st Century novel from an iBook pulled out of their Crumpler Budgie Strangler bags. "I'm different", they scream through every action. Of course, those who behave differently to the masses, do so in terribly predictable ways. And the hi-fi industry has relied heavily on this nonconformist streak, especially in recent years.

Here's why. Since the late 1990s, so the mainstream logic goes, stereo became merely a sub-set of the great multi-channel multi-media extravaganza. Sales of CD have tumbled while downloaded music and DVD numbers soar. Despite the ability for people to cling to a hobby long past its sell-by date, the shift to multi-channel in the public domain should have left the hi-fi market about as stalled as sales in bowler hats. What keeps hi-fi alive is the cognitive dissonance. Forget the performance or not wanting to throw out existing collections; it's the need to be cool and non-conformist that drove many people to buy a record player in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Similarly, today's stereo buyers are often making as much of a statement against home cinema's perceived dominance as they are investing in quality hi-fi sounds (in part because the latter is a given). Of course, much of this is marketing hype; we choose our products on the basis of performance, utility and necessity, and are unlikely to abandon thousands of records or CDs just because some executives decide they aren't fashionable anymore. Nevertheless, the theory has a strong vein of truth

running through it.

Trouble is, many companies are not taking full advantage of this cognitive dissonance. Instead, they are embracing the home cinema market almost wholly; not realising that the hi-fi and home cinema markets are diverging rapidly and that few companies can successfully have feet in both camps anymore.

In walking around this year's Heathrow Hi-Fi Show, it was at first surprising how little home cinema was there. Even companies like Marantz (which now has a significant stake in home cinema products) were very definitely two-channel. But then it dawned on me that this was not a home cinema show any more; it was back to being a hi-fi show, and the products that were there – weird, wonderful products – were reflecting that newly reformatted hi-fi market. New manufacturers and old alike were presenting the now-alternative hi-fi market, and in many cases perfectly pandering to the cognitive dissonance market. It almost seemed as if those performing home cinema demonstrations were intruders, like Ford pitching up with its latest hatchback at the Boat Show.

Although initially depressing (especially for journalists who have to write show reports for home cinema magazines), this is in fact enlightening and encouraging. It means the hi-fi business might not go the way of the washing machine, and become a commodity instead of a luxury. Instead, it means the products the next generation of music buyers will invest in will continue to be stereo, and hopefully start to be more quirky and distinctive. This is absolutely vital for products to survive today, but they cannot simply be iMac or iPod clones. This distinctive and new hi-fi market needs to carve out its own particular identity (and difference).

In part, this is already happening. Products like Gallo and 47labs challenge the accepted wisdom of what is right and proper in audio design. That they sound good too, helps. But there must be more of this; more products that have oddness about the design, especially if that oddness is for entirely justifiable reasons.

I dislike predicting the future (in part, because I hoped to be leading an army of giant robot-mercenaries on the battlefields of the planet Zorch in the Galactic Wars by now) but I hope this weirdness in products is a trend that

► continues. In fact, I can see hi-fi and home cinema product lines becoming entirely separate arms of the same parent company soon. Instead of marginalizing hi-fi as 'multi-channel lite', hi-fi brands (seemingly unconnected with mainstream home cinema names) will begin to appear with dedicated specialist products and these will be more and more 'alternative'. Of course, the core excellences of hi-fi should continue and we should continue to praise products that make the grade; but we shouldn't be afraid of things that go a bit wild in the process. Remember, it's supposed to be fun!

It's time for us to come out and hug our inner geeks (it's

nicer than spanking our inner monkeys). We should embrace the odd end of the market more and more. If hi-fi is to survive in a world of bland, cookie-cutter home cinema systems, then the last thing it needs to do is appear equally bland. I want the hi-fi of tomorrow to be wild and alternative and, by extension, ever so slightly cool. Of course, that only works if we stop listening to hi-fi and start becoming proselytisers for the fun in music. This doesn't mean we should turn hi-fi into an exercise in style-led electronics. Rather, it recognises that part of delivering higher performance depends on broadening rather than defining the envelope. ➤

Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

Does it really matter that much when a piece of classical music is performed using an edition of the score that isn't absolutely faithful to the composer's original text? It can happen for many reasons. Perhaps a well-meaning editor makes changes, or the piece was pirated before publication. Or maybe mistakes were made during copying or engraving so that the published score deviates from the composer's manuscript.

Surely, what's important is the way the music is performed; if it's played from the heart in a manner that's sympathetic and idiomatic, who cares if the odd note or dynamic inflection sometimes differs from the composer's actual intentions? What counts is whether or not a performance captures the spirit of the music.


For example, Sir Thomas Beecham's late 1950s recordings of Haydn's 12 'London' symphonies are justly celebrated for their grand magisterial style, and urbane wit. Alas, accurate Urtext scores of these works were not then available. And yet - despite the use of 'corrupt' scores - Sir Thomas captures the living spirit of Haydn's music like few others, before or since. It's this quality that makes his performances so special. That's why people still listen to them almost half a century later. Would it really have made a difference had Sir Thomas used accurate scores? Probably not. Actually, Beecham had a haughty contempt for Musicologists. He said they knew nothing about Music, but everything about Ology!

Good Point.

Yet, while I'd normally not get too worked-up about textual inaccuracies, there is one famous symphony that's frequently played and recorded with an absolutely crass piece of editorial

re-writing that completely misrepresents (and misunderstands) the composer's intentions. Moreover, it's a 'crime' that most of the world's greatest conductors knowingly perpetrate... The work in question? Beethoven's mighty *Eroica symphony*. And the editorial butchery? The mistaken revision of the trumpet part near the end of the first movement. Beethoven's *Eroica* was a landmark work that shattered the classical symphonic mould as laid down by Haydn and Mozart. Music was never quite the same again afterwards. It's a big piece: grand in concept, massive in scale, epic in proportions. Yet something very strange happens towards the end of the first movement. The music builds inexorably towards a powerful climax that, in effect, brings the work to boiling point. As the climax is approached, the *Eroica* theme is sounded out by the trumpet. Then, Beethoven does something quite remarkable; the trumpet plays a few notes, then falls silent. Moreover, the break is sudden - abrupt - coming at a point where you'd expect it to carry on. This leaves the strings and flute to carry the burden, with a little assistance from the horns. At face value, it seems a puzzling not to say bizarre decision - almost as though the composer's pen ran out of ink at that point - or his mobile phone rang! What on earth made Beethoven do it?

Thirty or so years ago, when I first began to collect records, I recall reading about the *Eroica*'s absent trumpet. The explanation was simple; the natural (valveless) trumpet of Beethoven's day had a limited range of notes and could not play the necessary B flat. So the composer was forced to exclude the trumpet at the climax of the first movement. With the invention of the modern valve trumpet, this was ►



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► no longer a problem; so the 'missing' trumpet part was reinstated to comply with what the editors surmised were Beethoven's thwarted intentions. Neat theory. The only snag is – an early version of the chromatic trumpet already existed in 1804, the year Beethoven completed the *Eroica*; Haydn wrote a concerto for it in 1796. It gets worse; actually, the natural trumpet was apparently able to play the B flat required! So, the missing notes were no accident or omission; Beethoven intended it that way. The question is - why?

Conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt believes Beethoven wanted to show that the 'Hero' (Bonaparte?) had failed. So, at the point of climax, when you'd expect the Heroic theme to gloriously blaze away, it suddenly fizzles out. Harnoncourt could well be right [Except that Bonaparte was a long way from any sort of failure in 1804. Ed] but Beethoven wasn't writing literal programme music; I believe his musical instincts as a composer would always have taken precedence over extra-musical associations. In other words Beethoven would not have written or scored in a way that damaged the music for the sake of a programme. The *Eroica* is daring and innovative – a work that took the classical symphony by the scruff of the neck and catapulted it into a new dimension. The closing couple of minutes of the first movement are among the most exciting in all music – and perhaps ironically, this is especially so when the conductor has the courage to play what Beethoven actually wrote.

The passage in question only lasts six to eight seconds in a movement that runs for approximately fifteen to eighteen minutes. So we're not talking about a large amount of music. Yet it is the climax of the movement – the goal, musically speaking. Beethoven's intended scoring is tricky – it's difficult to bring off successfully. It's not easy for either conductor or orchestra to avoid a slightly feeling of anti-climax when the trumpet stops. But listen to Pierre Monteux' 1962 recording on Philips with the Concertgebouw; Monteux was one of the first conductors to record the *Eroica* with Beethoven's intended scoring – and this performance the passage in question is absolutely thrilling. The strings sound full-bodied so that when the trumpet stops they're able to carry the argument without seeming thin or weedy. The Philips sound is a model of balance and clarity; you can hear exactly who's doing what, and how. There's a near contemporary RCA Living Stereo/Decca with Monteux conducting the Vienna Philharmonic; this also follows the letter of the score, though the trumpeter adds a couple of notes to finish his phrase. The Philips version is superior.

Better still is Frans Bruggen and the Orchestra of the 18th

Century – also Philips. What I love about Bruggen is the way he plays up wind and brass dynamics so that it's really clear when the trumpet stops. Some conductors who play Beethoven's original scoring do so in a slightly apologetic manner – making sure the trumpet isn't too loud in its lead up, so that when it stops it's not quite so obvious. Bruggen's performance has a spiky brusque quality that really emphasises the novelty of Beethoven's scoring. It's a confrontational performance - edgy and aggressive – that doesn't pull punches. Also worth hearing is Jordi Savall and Le Concert des Nations on Auvidis; another edgy dangerous performance that gets to the heart of the music.

When you hear the *Eroica* played on period instruments by Bruggen or Savall, you realise how wonderful Beethoven's orchestration is. The idea that a genius of such magnitude – then at the height of his powers - making a 'mistake' by truncating the trumpet part at the climax of the first movement is seen for what it is – ludicrous and impertinent. The re-written version sounds coarse and vulgar – like brass band music...

Although Monteux was famous for his fidelity to the scores he conducted, one feels he wasn't merely playing Beethoven's original text for the sake of correctness. Rather, it sounds as though he really believes in the original scoring – and fully understands why Beethoven did what he did. As a result his performance was and remains a revelation. Sadly, most of the great conductors of the 20th century who've recorded the work – Furtwangler, Toscanini, Walter, Klemperer, Karajan, Kempe, Kubelik, Krips, Haitink, Solti, Szell, Jochum, Masur, Davis, Bohm, Bernstein, Barenboim, Sawallisch, Sanderling, Guilini, Tilson Thomas, – follow the corrupt re-written text. Even some recent recordings supposedly using Urtext editions (Masur, Barenboim) reinstate the trumpet! Clearly, old habits die hard...

Of the conductors that don't, it's mostly those playing the music on period instruments – Roger Norrington, John Eliot Gardiner, Jordi Savall, Franz Bruggen, Christopher Hogwood, and the period style Nikolaus Harnoncourt and David Zinman. Another is Erich Kleiber; his 1955 Decca mono version with the VPO is an honourable exception among almost all his contemporaries.

Claudio Abbado on DG uniquely does it both ways; his 1980s Vienna Philharmonic cycle has the trumpet, the 1990s Berlin cycle hasn't. The most recent cycle from Sir Simon Rattle and the Vienna Philharmonic follows Beethoven; but the recessed trumpet balance means the surprise factor is lost. It's all very well having an accurate score, but you still have to understand it...



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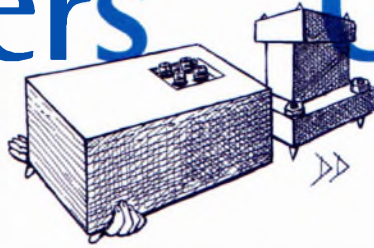
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Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

Perhaps it's time that loudspeaker makers considered consigning wood-based enclosures to the dustbin of history? Fat chance, of course. Wood will remain the popular choice for the foreseeable future, on both cost and aesthetic grounds. But a number of recent experiences have made me more aware of the increasing range of options that now exist, and the possible benefits that alternative materials have to offer.

Experiments with different enclosure materials go back to the earliest days of course. Concrete has made sporadic appearances since the 1950s, and other materials like glass and fibreglass have also turned up occasionally. One of the more radical and influential historic exponents was French brand Elipson, which created numerous curvaceous designs back in the 1960s. Though these never came to the UK to my knowledge, so I know nothing of the construction materials or methods, the most famous was a studio monitor for France's national broadcaster ORTF, which consisted of three egg-shaped enclosures stacked up – dinosaur-plus-sized for the bass, ostrich-sized for the midband, and chicken-sized for the tweeter. Although there are numerous significant differences in execution, B&W's top Nautilus models with their separate midrange and treble sections clearly show the influence of that ancient Elipson.

While the rectilinear MDF-based enclosure remains the rule rather than the exception, the range of materials and shapes seem to have expanded in recent years. Wilson benesch is one notable player, with enclosures that initially combined carbon fibre composites (CFCs) with wood, but which have increasingly moved towards a mixture of Steel and CFCs, both of which offer superior consistency and tolerancing.

Wilson Benesch not only adopts new materials, it also uses them to create curved shapes. Whether one is more important than the other is difficult to say, and in any case the former often leads to the latter. An irregular shape avoiding parallel sides can help reduce direct internal reflections and the sharply focused standing waves that can generate 'boxy'

colorations, while a curved shape which is easy to create with moulding techniques will also add considerable extra stiffness and rigidity, and therefore reduce the coloration contribution of the enclosure walls.

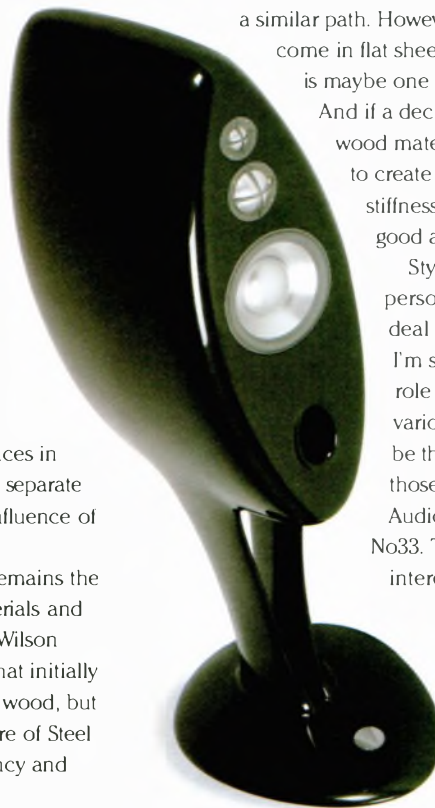
The shaping is probably more important than the actual material used, and it's perfectly possible to create curved shapes out of wood-based materials. Sonus Faber was one of the first to use curved-back enclosures; B&W does so for its Nautilus models; and others, including KEF, have followed a similar path. However, wood composite materials come in flat sheets that aren't easy to bend, which is maybe one reason to explore other materials.

And if a decision has been made to use non-wood materials, it makes good sense process to create the sort of shapes that increase stiffness, avoid parallel sides – and look good at the same time.

Styling might be a matter of personal taste, but it matters a great deal in actually selling loudspeakers. I'm sure it has played an important role in the success of Wilson Benesch's various models, and believe it could be the key factor that helps establish those gorgeously curvaceous Vivid Audio speakers we reviewed in Hi-Fi+ No33. There's clearly no shortage of interesting ideas for exciting looking loud-speakers with radical enclosures. Wandering around the recent Heathrow show

I found lots of examples, including the massive Scandinavian CFC-cased Martens, which sounded notably clean, and Overkill

Audio's Manger-equipped, epoxy-based Prey 'head' unit. Although it doesn't reach down properly into the bass register, the curious and unorthodox Manger drive unit sounds so magnificent through mid and treble, I'm keenly looking forward to exploring it further soon.



► Cast metal alloy enclosures are most commonly used for 5.1 surround system satellites, like Tannoy's Arena with its tiny new dual-concentric driver, and more established examples from Gallo and KEF. However, Eclipse's latest TD712z has a genuinely 'high end' price-tag and pretensions, and looks an altogether more serious proposition. The single small port-loaded driver gets quite close to full bandwidth operation, and while the sound can be rather edge-of-seat unforgiving, its phase accuracy delivers astonishing imaging and analysis.

Although I haven't yet tried a range that does seem more AV than stereo oriented, Crane Audio's speakers look acoustically promising, and the prices are very sharp too, thanks to the made-in-China syndrome. They use architectural cast alloy extrusions – a little like those that Musical Fidelity used for its X-series components, but on a much larger scale – to construct good size floorstanding enclosures which promise high rigidity and stiffness.

It's hard to predict which of these various radicals will make it commercially. History suggests that hi-fi buyers are quite a conservative lot, and one has to acknowledge that many of these dramatic looking designs might be too extreme to fit comfortably alongside typical household furnishings. I think the perspex Ferguson Hill horns and their subwoofer globes look wonderful, but don't have the large minimalist loft apartment best suited to accommodate them.

If the FH's bulk might be problematic, its transparency is

certainly stylish, and is shared by the more conventional but glass-encased Waterfall models. I tried the latter's top Victoria model recently, and was very surprised at how good the combination of glass enclosure and Triangle drivers sounded. In this case the enclosure is strictly rectilinear, and indeed square in plan, with only minimal internal damping for obvious aesthetic reasons. There are therefore some reflection and standing wave mid-band colorations, both audible and measured, but these don't spoil a sound which is dynamically vivid and involving, with notably superior coherence and communication skills.

It's very difficult to establish the relative importance of the shape of an enclosure and of the material it's made from, or how these factors contribute to the final sound of the combination. The whole business of the behaviour of enclosure performance is actually highly complex, and the designer must juggle various parameters in terms of frequency, dynamic range and damping that affect the behaviour of the enclosure walls and the enclosed space therein. Much of this is still a suck-it-and-see black art, given the infinite range of possibilities from which to choose, from the relatively flexible damped thinwall birch ply of the classic BBC-inspired Sendor BC1 through the ultra-stiff metalwork of the Eclipse TD712z. Today's designers have more options to choose from than ever before, and at the same time the performance of enclosures seems to be steadily improving. Perhaps these two factors are not unrelated.



Price Correction For Eidolon Diamond

When we reviewed the Avalon Acoustics Eidolon Diamond in the last issue it must have appeared to be the audio bargain of all time. At a price of just £3300 Audiofreaks were besieged with callers wishing to take advantage of their extraordinary generosity! Unfortunately, the actual price is £33000, but then, what's a zero between friends? Sorry for the error and any inconvenience or disappointment caused. Those who remain undaunted by the true price can contact Audiofreaks at 020 8948 4153.





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It's Show Time!

And now for something a little different. Rather than the normal, endless list of new products on show, I thought it might be interesting to get some contrasting (and conflicting?) overviews of the event and sound as

a whole. So, while AS trawled the corridors in search of new technology and new products, myself, JH and RSF took a look at the rooms that actually impressed us on sonic grounds. Oh, and we got to play some records too... Ed.

The Heathrow Hi-Fi Show and AV Expo 2004

by Alan Sircom

OK, so this year wasn't the one Archimedes jumped from the bath. There are no Eureka moments in hi-fi today; no ground-changing technologies, no innovations to set up the next two decades of music. Unless it's known as the year of nailing down the coffin for multi-channel music, 2004 will not go down in history as a time of hi-fi revolution. Nevertheless, there were changes seen at the Hi-Fi Show & AV Expo, but this year owes more to Charles Darwin than Mao Zedong.

If there was a change to the hi-fi zeitgeist of 2004, it was the realisation of the digital dream, with companies playing and showing the latest in all-digital amplification. TacT began the digital amplifier concept in high-end audio with its Millennium integrated amplifier. More was on show, comprising equalisers, huge floorstanding speaker arrays and the latest in super-clean TDA 2200 digital amplification and SDAi 'semi-digital' electronics. In addition, Chapter Audio had a sample of its forthcoming Precis amplifier on display, using a refined version of the Class D circuit and switch-mode power supply seen in the company's highly-respected Chapter

Two+ power amplifier. Elsewhere, a number of companies such as Emotive Excellence and Overkill Audio were using digital crossovers to integrate low-frequencies.

Another take on the digital technology concept came from O'heocha, showcasing its latest concepts based on the company's D1 series speakers. Using Wi-Fi connectivity from the world of computers, the brace of active speakers were capable of playing multi-channel SACD and DVD-Audio surround sound without long runs of speaker cable. The system is designed to be completely modular, allowing the £1,700 wireless power clients to be fitted into any active O'heocha speaker. These would receive signals up to 100m from the £2,900 dedicated server box connected to the main system. This was probably the most exciting home cinema demonstration of the show, in new technology terms at least.

One of the biggest changes at the show was a purely philosophical one. The "& AV Expo" bit of the Heathrow Show name became purely vestigial. Stereo was back with a vengeance, so there were only a handful of multi-

channel music and practically no home cinema sound systems. Of these, Naim Audio and Absolute Sounds put on the best spreads, with Naim showing its 5.1 channel n-SATS/n-CENT/n-SUB system and Absolute Sounds playing its new DreamVision DLP projector and Krell's HEAT electronics through the new Resolution speakers. There were a few other exceptions to the home cinema ban – notably Harbeth demonstrating its new NRG speaker range – but most sounds were decidedly stereophonic, and the corridors were surprisingly explosion free. In fact, there were more new mains conditioners than DVD players!

Of course, with no home cinema, there was more room for innovative, weird and wonderful hi-fi systems and products on display. One of the consistently most interesting is 47 Laboratory. Best known for its striking Reference Series products like the PiTracer CD player, the company was showing its more down-to-earth products like the £3,020 Flatfish Mk II CD player and its Shigaraki range; uber-minimalist blocks of Shigaraki ceramic (a thousand years of Japanese pottery can't be wrong; shigaraki is ►

▶ stoneware, as if Time Team unearthed the Denby factory) containing power supplies, DACs and phono stages and unpainted alloy, exposed CD transport mechanisms. Allied to the Konus Audio speakers, with their single Ted Jordan driver, this makes DNM seem positively mainstream and gizmo-packed.

One of the more interesting developments was the sight of Marantz playing vinyl alongside SACD and CD in its stereo-only demonstration room. Marantz has specified a £1,000 custom version of the Clearaudio Champion turntable with a MM cartridge, and it sounded fine alongside the company's flagship SACD player.

Another promising trend seen at the show was that stylish design need

not mean terrible sound. Products like Hovland's pre/power, Tube Technology's TT Genetix valve mono-block stack, the full range of Vivid Audio speakers (looking like something intergalactic from *The Day The Earth Stood Still*), the Conrad-Johnson ACT2 preamp and the Ferguson Hill FH001 speaker designs (with the FH002 bass units) all showed that hi-fi can sound and look good (or, in the case of the FH001, sound good and be practically invisible, despite standing almost as tall as the average British bloke). Of course, there were still products that looked like they had been built out of bits of shopping trolley and wrapped in the trim from a 1975 Austin Allegro. But, for once, such untenable designs were in the minority.

On a personal note, it's hard to pin down precisely who made the best sound of the show. Some rooms were packed and were consistently praised by people in the corridors (such as the Usher Audio room) yet seemed to produce a sound like someone throwing a sack of glass spoons down a steel staircase whenever I wandered past. Others cautioned me not to visit the TacT room because of its ear-shredding edginess, yet it sounded simply clean, dynamic and exciting when I heard it. I did seem to spend more time than most in the Raidho room, listening to several of the emilie loudspeaker range (junior cousins to the exacting eben designs) all played through reasonably humble Cyrus electronics and insanely expensive ▶

Sound Scape One

by Richard S. Foster

I want to start a movement with respect to the scheduling of all audio shows. My assignment for this, my first "out of North America" show, was to seek out those rooms that offered great sound. On the first day...after returning from visiting almost all the rooms in both hotels, I thought I wouldn't have much to write about.

Why would I like to change the scheduling? It has to do with when 'industry and press' days are offered. This is always the first day...right after setup day. Do you know what

equipment, some right out of the box, sounds like on the first day? Mostly pretty awful. When do the rooms usually sound their best? Sunday, the last day of the show...usually when they are packed with paying attendees and you have to go outside to change

your mind. In other words...there are too many people in the rooms to give a reviewer a good sense of what the equipment being exhibited sounds



like. And for what it's worth, I think it extremely rude for manufacturers and reviewers to expect special privileges and have a room vacated on a regular show day just so the self-important reviewer can have a listen. So what is the solution? My solution would be to

change the Friday to Sunday format to a Saturday to Monday one. Friday becomes setup day. The first two days on the weekend belong to the public and Monday becomes trade and press day. What could make more sense?

Held September 24-26 at the Renaissance and Park Inn Hotels near Heathrow, it was quite a treat for me to walk around and not know all that many people. I did a quick survey late Thursday afternoon and when I met Roy at the end of the day he asked what I liked. "Nothing", was the response, met with laughter from RG. Well, tomorrow would be another day, the day set aside for trade, retailers and press to talk, observe and listen to their heart's content.

I made another pass through both venues and also some brief notes regarding the rooms I felt had some promise. First stop was the Park Inn which contained a modest number of suites and rooms, approximately 26 in total. The rooms, in general, were ▶

▶ Nordost cables and mains conditioning. They may lack the insight and absolute definition of their big brothers (with their expensive Swedish Audio Technology bass/mid drivers) but that also makes them somewhat easier to live with. They made a sound that managed to cover all the bases; it timed like the Best of British, while that large ribbon tweeter gave it audiophile credentials, too. Any company bold enough to play everything from Mahler to the Beatles and get away with all of them is doing something very right indeed. These are definitely one to look forward to on the review roster. The inclusion of a dedicated centre speaker in combination with their well-extended treble makes them a shoe-in for multi-

channel music systems – and yes Mr Editor, that is a hint.

Another welcome return was to be seen in the shape of the EERA CD player, formerly known as the Helios. One of the very few digital front-ends to ever approach the energy, presence and involvement of analogue, the original designs went through a problematic period associated with ructions within the company. That's dead and gone with the demise of the original set-up. But the design lives on, substantially revised and updated in the externally identical EERA casework. Playing through KR amplification and Apertura loudspeakers, the sound had all the familiar immediacy and bounce that made the Helios so impressive, but

with significantly improved detail and refinement, all at a target price that's well below \$2000. There's still nothing near this price that comes close in musical terms – and hey, it looks real cool too. This looks like a winner assuming UK distribution can be sorted out. In the meantime interested parties can contact EERA at www.eera.fr.

Other returnees were Magneplanar (Walrus are bringing in the well-regarded MG1.6s) and the Cadence hybrid electrostatic speakers, both of which were reminding listeners just how effective two-channel can be. No surprise then that both benefited from top-quality analogue front-ends. Of course, great big turntables do tend to hog all the attention, so it was easy ▶

▶ similar in size to those of the Renaissance, and I felt they were smaller than I had been used to seeing in other North American venues. Setup was, as always, critical and many exhibitors were resorting to extreme experimentation: I would notice significant changes to the set-up of some of the rooms over the next few days.

I enjoyed what I heard in the RT Services room; a complete Nagra set-up, including their new 200 Watt pyramidal mono-block amplifiers, their tape machine as well as their pre-amp. Source material was played on an Orpheus CD player with Pen Audio Charisma and Charabas loudspeakers. Pretty listenable I thought...and only about \$25000 for the setup, including cabling was from Siltech. I thought the sound, especially on small ensemble material sounded quite excellent – good tonal balance, nice texture, and a generally engaging experience. If I only listened to this type of music I could be very happy with this set-up. I'd be a little more concerned if I were a strong orchestral, opera or even rock fan. I'm

not sure whether the goods would really arrive on time. But that's all speculation (I didn't unleash my AC/DC disc) and, based upon the listening I did at the show, I'd rate this room as one of the better ones.

Although I wasn't blown away by the sound in the Opus 3 room, there was a great demo that's well worth mentioning. It was an alternative take on the old live versus recorded demonstration, but with a twist. A tape had been made of a saxophone player. She was at the show and would play part of the first portion of what had been recorded while the master-tape was also running. Then, at a given point, she stopped playing but the tape continued to run: Very interesting and informative. Unfortunately there had not been enough time to have an LP or CD manufactured so that all the various stages in the recording process could be compared. What they did have was another master-tape of an orchestral piece while an LP was being played. The difference however, when switching back and forth from the master-tape to the LP was quite

evident. A demonstration worthy of mention as it was my only "live" musical experience at the show.

Good sound could be heard in the Spitfire Room at the Renaissance where UKD offered a system comprising equipment from Audio Analogue, Pathos (the very interesting integrated Inpol2) and Triangle, in the shape of the Magellan Concertos. A room I came back to on several occasions, and which was never less than busy.

In the Trident Room, I really enjoyed the Waterfall Audio 'glass' speaker systems, the Krysta-line and the Hurricane satellite/sub-woofer system. The Myriad electronics did an outstanding job of running this system and it was a totally musical experience. I've always brought my own CDRs to these shows, almost all made from records in my collection. It's a great point of reference for me and even though there are so many variables (like the room, the interconnects, the power, etc), I got a very nice feeling from this quite modest set-up.

I really enjoyed myself in the ▶

▶ to miss an odd and rather unassuming box lurking on the bottom shelf in the Walrus room. The black, faceted casework concealed Tom Evans latest, EL84 powered, hybrid power amp, based on the Soul circuit but costing an awful lot less and delivering around 20 Watts of Class A power a side. It may lack the fancy, modular casework of its big brother, but few will begrudge it that if, as Tom claims, it out-performs it.

Meanwhile, Symmetry were showing the new Mark Levinson No. 320 pre-amp, a lower priced spin-off based on the superb No. 32 reviewed back in Issue 11. The appearance of this product is significant in that it represents the first new item to appear in the Levinson range since the closure

of the original factory and relocation of production to Harman's Lexicon plant. It's an encouraging sign for all the Levinson devotees out there who've been worrying about the brand's future. What it doesn't do is provide any real signpost as to its future direction, this being the last design completed under the auspices of the former, Madrigal management. Still, it's a positive sign, especially considering the number of nay-sayers out there all too ready to drop the final curtain on the long-running and colourful Levinson saga. All of which is of course irrelevant to the issue of how this product actually sounds. Beautifully styled after the No. 32 control unit, I'm sure that RG can't wait to see if its performance matches

up to the appearance – because I'm sure he won't be letting this one slip through his sticky fingers.

And finally, spare a thought for poor old Tim de Paravicini of EAR. He had spent many sleepless nights getting his prototype turntable ready for the show, only to find it beset with major wowing problems when installed at Heathrow. "It still sounds fantastic on 78s" he confided to me, slightly crestfallen. Of course, the originally name of the turntable – 'Le Platine' – might have caused even more problems than the wow factor; JC Verdier is known for being sanguine about copyists, but there are limits. Fortunately, Tim is considering a new name for what has the potential for being a stunning turntable. ➤

▶ Eben/Pass/dCS room. Using a Pass Labs X150 amp, driving the Eben X-Centric speakers with the fine Verdi La Scala CD SACD transport, the dCS Elgar Plus digital-to-analogue converter and their Verona Master Clock with a full Nordost Valhalla setup (interconnect, digital cabling, speaker cable and power chords), I had a blast when I brought out my AC/DC *Thunderstruck* CDR. Made from a great UK 12" 45RPM LP, I had requests for copies of this baby. The room really rocked and a great time was had by all. Those Ebens are something else. They really are VERY sensitive to the type and quality of information that is being fed to them, and as you can imagine, with that fabulous dCS front end, they were able to pick apart every CD we played. If you want to hear a very special, regular, off the shelf CD, get your hands on a copy of the soundtrack to *Blackhawk Down*, long an RG (and HP) favourite.

This will give your system a major workout. It certainly sounded quite excellent with this setup. A really musical and great sounding room.

What was the standout? For me, the walk away winner was the



room setup by Branko Bozic of Audiofreaks. No doubt about it. Heart of the system was the Conrad-Johnson ACT 2 line-stage, feeding the new c-j Premier 350 solid-state amplifier (yes, solid-state - and the first solid state product from c-j to be given the Premier designation). These were driving the Avalon

Acoustics Eidolon loudspeakers.

The front end was the very tasty Kuzma Stabi Reference turntable with their Airline passive linear-tracking arm and a Benz LP moving coil cartridge feeding the Benz Lukashuk PP1 phono stage. Reimyo and McCormack players provided the digital replay options and Cardas wiring was used throughout. Everything was supported on finite-element's extremely elegant Pagoda equipment stands. A great room, always packed and one fine, musical setup. I had a great time, heard some equipment I'd never come across before, and

enjoyed the hospitality of so many really nice people. And if the people were more interesting than the majority of the sound then that's no great surprise. I'm looking forward to seeing a lot of you again at the CES in January in Las Vegas, and don't be too surprised if you see me at the Manchester show too. ➤

Winging It...

The great Mercury shootout!

by Roy Gregory

One of the enduring controversies that rattle around the hi-fi world concerns the American Mercury recordings. While many US collectors rate the early Mercurys as amongst the greatest ever stereo recordings, encouraged in no small part by their constant presence on HP's Super Disc list and Sid Marks' seminal series in TAS, their British counterparts cannot concur. Brash, forward and unruly they say – while the bright treble and undoubtedly exciting dynamics combine to create a less than polished whole. "You need to hear US pressings" comes the swift response, although the situation is further confused by dissenting American voices that echo the complaints. And don't underestimate the influence of snob-value. Mercury made many popular and populist recordings, while (Dorati and the LSO aside) the orchestras appearing on their classical releases were often far from established names – at least from the European perspective. All of which just adds fuel to the fire, fanning the flames of outrage and injustice at "old-world" *hauteur*

It's a debate that's been rekindled by the emergence of Mercury titles onto the re-issue market, first from Classic Records and more recently from Speakers Corner. With RSF, one of the most vocal protagonists in this debate, flying in for the London Hi-Fi show I took the opportunity to lay this one to rest, hopefully once and for all. Richard duly arrived clutching a selection of the more highly regarded Mercury pressings, while RP, SG and myself supplied the British

and in some cases French alternatives, along with brand-new versions of the re-issues. All records were cleaned before listening.



Audiofreaks kindly volunteered what was by coincidence (although not entirely unpredictably) the finest sounding system at the show on which to carry out the comparisons, while myself, SG and Franz Kuzma were there to listen. RSF was banished to the back row, a silent but hardly disinterested observer. Sifting through the available options we settled on the following titles:

Stravinsky *The Firebird*, Dorati/LSO (British EMI AMS 16038; Classic Records 200g Quiex; US Mercury SR 90226 and US 'Non-vendor' Promo)

British Band Classics Vol. 2, Fennell/Eastman Wind Ensemble (British EMI AMS 16043; Speakers Corner 180g t-p; US Mercury

SR 90197 and US 'Non-vendor' Promo) Respighi *The Birds*, Dorati/LSO (French Magie Du Son 131.012 MSY; British EMI AMS 16036; Speakers Corner 180g; US Mercury SR 90153 and US 'Non-vendor' Promo)

The various pressings were played in the order listed, before returning to the re-issues to assess them with corrected VTA, thus having conducted both a straight comparison and one optimised for the different record weights.



The Originals

If we take the original pressings first, results were surprisingly consistent across the various titles. The EMI manufactured AMS pressings were universally brash and congested with poor definition and separation. There was also a lack of transparency, which combined with a splashy and ill-disciplined top-end made for an

▶ exciting but ultimately frustrating listening experience, further underlined by the quality of the US pressings. And what a difference! Not so much a gulf as a yawning chasm. Where the British pressings sounded messy and muddled the US records threw huge, beautifully defined soundstages, with natural perspectives and nicely-focused images, separated but not etched. The air within

the acoustic and the presence of the instruments was palpable, while the rhythmic coherence and increased dynamic range (rising from the velvety black background) brought tension and purpose to the performances. The long, impressionistic opening to *The Firebird* was filled with a brooding foreboding, a latent, explosive potential lacking completely from the British alternative.

But the biggest shock was the improvement in instrumental timbre and texture, with woodwinds in particular, captured with an uncanny accuracy. No surprise then that the Fennell/Eastman recordings rate so highly amongst collectors. The splashy quality was gone from the top-end, replaced with clean extension and a natural life and energy. And this on speakers that ▶

Sound Scape Two

by Roy Gregory

Another year, another show, and depressingly, a backward slide as far as both interest and sound quality are concerned. For whatever reason, everybody seemed to be struggling this time round, and with a (very) few notable exceptions, the sound ranged from the not very good down to the truly ghastly. Perhaps it's a blessing that attendance was down, because this was no advertisement for the industry!

Analogue participation was definitely on the up, with far more record players in attendance, and more importantly, actually in use. It's no surprise that of the few rooms actually achieving good results, over half were using vinyl as the principle source. In terms of Rosettes, and in no particular order, this year's personal Pony Club champions are as follows...

Walrus Systems showed the legendary SPJ La Luce turntable with matching tonearm, alongside the established Brinkmann La Grange. Pre-amp was the excellent and often overlooked Klimo Merlin, while Tom Evans supplied the phono-stage and power-amp. Speakers alternated between the Duevel omnis and Magneplanar MG1.6s. It's nice to see this range back in the UK, even if Walrus are only bringing in the single model. I always enjoyed the sound as

well as the practicality of the Maggies, which for me offered what was arguably the most successful version of the dipole format. Impressive as full-range ribbons and electrostatics might be, I have always found their appeal tantalizingly ephemeral, flawed by their inherent compromises. Mind you, that hasn't stopped me coming back for more, each time some new design promises to deliver the Holy Grail. In contrast, the understated musical integrity of the Magneplanars, offers long-term musical satisfaction with their open and relaxed presentation. So it was here, the speakers being well-served by the lucid clarity of the driving system. As a sound, it's not hard to criticise, but it's so disarming that you seldom feel the need. Instead, you simply sit back,



relax and enjoy.

Ferguson-Hill were showing their long awaited sub-woofers, the final element to turn their visually striking, transparent, ovoid horns into a

serious, full-range system. A pair of equally transparent globes met my eyes, rather like large, clear exercise balls with a driver mounted in the front. More importantly, my ears were met with an effortless and remarkably well integrated sound, clean, quick and open. Two subs is normally better than one (assuming you get the set-up right) and these passive units certainly seem to match the main speakers beautifully – in every sense. This could well be one to watch...

Audiocraft were making a good fist of demonstrating some of our favourite products, with Lavardin and Rogue audio electronics teamed with the Marten and Amphion ▶

► are essentially flat out to 34kHz. And whilst the Avalons resist any tendency to the forward or bright in favour of musical integrity, they are also perfectly capable of informing the listener of any such tendencies, even if they don't shove them down your throat. The crushing superiority of the US pressings (admittedly FR1 stampers throughout) was universally recognised and very

much appreciated. Richard is returning to the US with wish-lists from all three listeners, a fact which tells its own story.

Which brings us to the Promo copies, and a controversy within the controversy. Opinions are split on the relative merits of these pressings, a situation exacerbated by the existence of two different varieties – the 'non-vendor' and 'vendor' versions.

According to Richard, it is only the 'non-vendor' samples that are superior to the standard pressings (as detailed in the sidebar) and it was these that he brought for us to hear. Well, on the limited evidence of these titles I have to agree with his view of the non-vendor discs, although we had no vendor examples for direct comparison. In every case the Promo copies were more transparent, ►

► speakers respectively, in a rotating presentation. It was nice to see manufacturers from so many companies and countries cooperating so effectively in a shared space; it's not always the way, believe me! Source component for this particular movable feast? The extremely interesting, top-loading Lecteur CD player from France. Excellent, engaging sound from both set-ups too, with both the Amphion Kryptons and Marten Coltranes coping surprisingly

phono-stage paired with amplification and speakers from Cadence in India (for whom he's the European distributor). The little Avita electrostatic hybrids sounded especially sweet and unusually well integrated. However, nice as the sound was, the most impressive machine was a single-sided vacuum record cleaner, in the style of a Moth or VPI HW16.5.

thing of the past. (www.audioclassics.nl)

But the best sound I heard at the show was in the Audiofreaks room, where the system outlined in the Mercury section of this report was offering an oasis of reality amongst the hype and exaggeration that typified the show as a whole. Whilst the components are far from cheap, this system did demonstrate categorically that it is possible to achieve representative results under show

conditions: And this with some of the most demanding and revealing equipment available. Of course it helps if the equipment you choose actually constitutes a system to start with, a major vote of confidence for Audiofreaks' coherent, complementary and evolutionary approach to building their product portfolio.

It's something that seems to have been sadly overlooked by too many of the dealer/distributors who've sprung up in the past few years.

Finally, Opus 3 get a special mention for their brave (some might say foolhardy) attempt to mount a live versus master-tape versus LP comparison. Ultimately flawed, it was at least a glorious failure, and anybody who brings live music to a hi-fi show gets a big thumbs up from me: To put it in the same room as their system probably deserves a medal! ➤



well with a less than spacious room. Doubly surprising (and impressive) given that both speakers possess serious bandwidth.

Johan Bezem of Dutch distributor Audio Classics, was making a rather fine sound in a very small room with a system comprising a modified VPI TNT6, JMW 12.5 arm, Clearaudio Stradivari cartridge and Reference

Noisy (and lid-less) it was nonetheless, solidly built from quality components with a few nice design wrinkles of its own. Even so, that's hardly something to get excited about until you realise that the estimated price of this device is in the region of £200! That's less than Americans pay for the baby VPI. If this machine actually happens, and it performs as well as it seems it should, then the UK notion that record cleaning machines are an expensive luxury could finally become a

▶ more refined and, possibly as a result of the lower noise floor, more dynamic than the standard pressings. It wasn't so much a case of more detail as making better use of the detail they had, weaving a more coherent and better defined picture. There's a clarity and stability, an unforced quality to the Promo copies that is reminiscent of master tape, but before you all start jumping up and down, that's a descrip-

tion of character rather than quality. It's about evenness and a rooted integrity that makes separation and dynamic range come far more readily and with less strain or apparent effort. For me, far from being lighter or brighter, the Promos were cleaner and even more immediate and convincing. Whilst their superiority to the standard US pressing (with its more rounded and arguably more comfortable sound) was less

dramatic than the SR's crushing banishment of the AMSs, it was still clearly and unanimously audible. Indeed, so consistent were the results that the only issue was the individual margin of superiority, the contest between the various *British Band Classics* pressings being far closer than the others, mainly because the AMS was noticeably better than its compatriots. In every case, the US pressing was clearly superior to ▶

Sound Scape Three

by Jason Hector

First the good points ...

... right, now I have that out of the way the bad points.

Actually, in fairness I approached this show with trepidation, but actually enjoyed it a lot more than I have over the last few years. I was only there for a day (Friday in this case) in order to avoid the crush, although several exhibitors have subsequently reported lower attendance than normal. However, the low turn-out did seem to be tempered by a reduction in the number of box-kickers, or so my informants said. At least there was an increased number of two-channel rooms and an ever-increasing number of turntables. In the rooms that had them even the sub-woofers seemed to be in control. Either the manufacturers have changed the designs or maybe, just maybe, they have learnt how to set them up so that they don't overpower everything else. I even heard some midrange in a few of the AV rooms! A less promising trend is the number of big companies that either aren't attending at all (B&W and KEF to name two very obvious absentees) or are sticking to static displays only (Symmetry and Meridian for another year) which to be honest, slightly defeats the object of

attending a Hi-Fi show.

In contrast to this Naim expanded their presence with three rooms and a booth flogging music. The high-end system was fronted by the CDS3 and backed by the SL2 loudspeakers, which sounded very good in the lightly treated room. Next door they were showing a 2.1 sub-sat system with source and amp from the new 5x series. Could the stereo satellites (n-Sats) be the new Kans that many of the faithful have been waiting for? Maybe... They certainly sounded promising and that was in spite of being fresh from the factory. I am assured that they improved further across the show. The new sub-woofer was also featuring in the Naim AV room. Here we had four n-Sat's, the new matching centre and signal derived from the DVD5. Both picture and sound were very promising, finally allowing a full Naim AV system. The sub was noticeable for the lack of attention it was drawing to itself in the stereo AND the AV rooms. It features a completely new Naim amplifier which employs the transistors used in the NAP500, so with a serious pedigree and remote setup, daisy chain option and some presets it is certainly well thought out.

Many people blame the poor sound achieved at shows on the crappy room

acoustics and mains. All-digital systems generally boast about their abilities to overcome these limitations so I was a little surprised to hear the TACT room sounding very bad indeed, with overblown, slow bass and no integration in the rest of the frequency range. I assumed we were listening to the before rather than the post processed sound. Evidently not! I believe there is more to come from this technology and it was a shame to see it fail so spectacularly.

In direct technological and sonic contrast the valves and vinyl guys from Walrus were making beautiful music with either the SPJ La Luce or Brinkman record players and the Duevel speakers, driven by Tom Evans' latest hybrid amplifier. A variety of music was played and this was one system that never failed to engage the emotions. This room was a very good advert for the vinyl revival. Similarly the new top of the range Nottingham Analogue turntable looked very serious, as it should for a purported £17000!

Acoustic Energy managed to earn a black mark for their music choice; they weren't the only ones playing Jamie Cullen but they were the only ones who told me they "had to play it all the way through". What conclusion can I draw from this? Seems they were choosing music that wouldn't upset the system and in so doing failed to convince anyone of their speakers' merits. This was effectively the opposite response to the Overkill Audio room where we were offered free rein of this serious ▶

► the British (in the case of *The Firebird*, shockingly so), the Promo superior to the SR.

The French Magie Du Son was a pale imitation at best, even less satisfying than the AMS, although the earlier Tresor Classiques pressings are considerably better, with personal experience rating them above the British alternatives. However, it's still



a case of scrabbling for crumbs when compared to the US pressings.

The Re-issues

Played with the same set-up as the standard pressings, the re-issues sounded dull and polite, lacking air and immediacy, dynamic range and life. Clearly more refined and tonally accurate than the AMS pressings, ►

high-end system featuring Manger driver based £30K speakers and active digital crossover. On certain music (classical) they sounded very convincing with especially good scale and integration, but the humour of the Eels seemed rather beyond them. Overall, a rather mixed result. Some people will tell you that they don't want to alienate potential punters by playing challenging music. Well that seems nonsense to me. Yes you might empty the room initially but a new group of people will be attracted in. I have seen this time and again in the Neat rooms where the pipe and slippers brigade beat a hasty retreat in the face of say Porcupine Tree or Metallica to be replaced by a new bunch of people who are interested in how the system can handle the sort of music THEY might actually play on it.

Plenty of distributors were using their wide range of products and brands to good effect. RT services were present with a mix of Orpheus transport, Nagra DAC and amps and Pen Audio speakers. The new pyramidal power amplifiers look very good indeed and would aesthetically

match my Obelisks nicely. The system was not at all cheap but did at least make the Eels track swing along and yes, it managed to bring a smile to our, by this late stage in the day, tired faces. Audiofreaks had their usual mix of c-j, Kuzma and Avalon playing in a thoroughly tuned room. Although they were using exclusively classical music while I was there, piano sounded far better than you have any right to expect at a show, very realistic and the right size. This was by far the most subtle and refined sound on offer



The real stand-out systems for me were from another major UK distributor; Absolute sounds. They were demonstrating their wares in three of the larger rooms. The Jadis and Sonus Faber combination I could take or leave but the full Krell AV system was mighty

impressive. I didn't hear it playing real music but playing a, for want of a better phrase, drum off, the power, dynamics and sheer presence was very involving and illustrated what you should expect from this sort of system. But the real star was the 2-channel (no surprise there then) Wilson Audio and ARC system. The mighty Wilson Max2 sounded truly inspiring. Great care was obviously taken with the entire room setup and it paid off. The speakers were totally clean and sounded distortion free compared to virtually all other speakers. Like the Krell system they could shock you with power

but could also sound subtle and intimate. This system really managed to demonstrate just what the high end can deliver. It does come at a high price though, £40000 for the speakers alone! But I could have spent all day in this room - it was probably a good thing we arrived near closing time.

I didn't get to visit all of the rooms I would have liked to, but then neither do the majority of the visiting public. The average performance of the systems

seemed to be slightly higher this year, but the quality of the music was often pretty poor; inoffensive but also unchallenging. Lets hope the Bristol show copies Heathrow with improved sound quality and betters it with some superior and more entertaining music. ►

▶ the Speakers Corner records rated somewhere between the British and standard US pressings. The Classic *Firebird* was another matter, and despite a smoother tonality, its lack of dynamics left it sounding flat and lifeless. More worryingly, a strangely disjointed quality disrupted the rhythmic coherence, totally robbing the long introduction of shape and tension, reducing it to a meandering and purposeless sprawl that undermined the more dynamic elements even before they arrived. It came as something of a shock and disappointment when compared to the other records here.

Correcting VTA for the heavier pressings (up for the Speakers Corners, down for the Classic as dictated by the different cutter heads used) made a huge difference to the tonality and dynamics of the sound. The Speakers Corner pressings leapt to life, with an injection of air and pace that moved them close to the US pressings in quality. So close in fact, that I suspect they'd be superior to all but the premium quality pressings of the type we had available, making them a sonic and financial bargain. Sadly, even with more life and dynamic range, the Classic *Firebird* still exhibited its wandering lack of grip and direction, all the more obvious for the leap in quality taken by the competition. In this instance I'm afraid that the 3-0 thumbs down was just as concerted as the previous enthusiasm for the Promo versions.

Conclusions

Well, it seems that both sides are right. On the evidence of this limited cross section, it seems that the British pressings are as disappointing as the US ones are magnificent. I'd rate the

The Mercury Vendor (and Non-Vendor) Pressings

One of the mysteries in collecting the Mercury Living Presence catalogue in their U.S. pressings, is the provenance of the vendor pressings. No one seems to know or if they do, refuses to state their origin. I've written to Wilma Cozart Fine on several occasions in the past and this was one of the questions I posed. She did not know 'from whence they come'. I know some-one who has had direct contact with Harold Lawrence, the great producer for Mercury, and he too states no knowledge of their origin. Why do we make such a big deal about this? The answer is quite simple: the vendor pressings are much brighter sounding than their non-vendor counterparts. The vinyl also exhibits a sharper edge than other pressings. And before you ask, there are vendors and non-vendors with the same exact stamper numbers. All the alphanumeric



information in the deadwax is exactly the same! There are some records that were only issued in a vendor pressing. No non-vendor is known to exist. This occurred later in the catalogue in the late 90300's and 90400's series. However, there are more non-vendors than vendors in this group. When comparing promo vendors to non-vendor regular issues, I have always come away with the same result: the vendor exhibits 'more information and detail' but is clearly brighter than its non-vendor counterpart. One of my favorite examples is the great SR90316, Vienna. I have a white label promo vendor and a dark maroon non-vendor copy. The WLPV definitely has more detail, presence and information, even though the dark maroon has the same stamper numbers. But it is the maroon labeled version that I listen to as I find it much more enjoyable and musical. In other words, it is not as bright sounding and is not irritating. RSF.



'non-vendor' Promo copies as better still, a conclusion further underlined by additional listening to the Dvorak *Cello Concerto* (where the Speakers Corner test-pressing got even closer to the US version) and the Respighi *Ancient Airs and Dances*.

Likewise, it's nice to endorse RSF's enthusiasm for the Speakers Corner pressings, while in the case of the Classic 200g *Firebird*, rumblings of discontent seem to be well founded. I could not, in all conscience recommend it, even in the absence of an affordable alternative version of this performance.

If you must have 180g vinyl then there's always the Ansermet/OSR, although I have my reservations regarding that too. Perhaps the newly announced SACD transfer might

suffice? We will discover in due course. Meanwhile, what a pleasure it is to finally hear these performances at their considerable best. If RSF can do his stuff then I look forward to investigating their delights at my leisure. And yes – that is a three-line whip... ➤



The System

- Kuzma Stabi Reference turntable
- Kuzma Airline tonearm
- Benz-Micro LP m-c cartridge
- Benz-Micro Lukashuk PP1 phono-stage
- conrad-johnson ACT 2 line-stage
- conrad-johnson Premier 350 power amp
- Avalon Acoustics Eidolon loudspeakers
- finite elemente Pagode racks and equipment supports
- Cardas Golden Cross and Golden Reference cables

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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Audio-T, Camberley, Surrey Tel: 01276 685597
Audio-T, West Hampstead Tel: 0207 7947848

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Audio-T, PORTSMOUTH, Hampshire, Tel 023 9266 3604
Audio-T, SOUTHAMPTON, Hampshire, Tel 023 8025 2827

South East

Rayleigh Hi Fi, RAYLEIGH, Essex, Tel: 01268 779762
Rayleigh Hi Fi, CHELMSFORD, Essex, Tel: 01245 265245
Audio-T, TUNBRIDGE WELLS, Kent, Tel: 01892 525666
Rayleigh Hi Fi, SOUTHEND, Essex, Tel: 01702 435255
Visions, WESTERHAM, Kent, Tel: 01959 569977

South West

Audio Destination, TIVERTON, Devon, Tel 01884 243584
Audio-T, CHELTENHAM, Glos, Tel 01242 583960

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The Soundstage, DERBY, Tel: 01332 364000
Audio Excellence, WORCESTER, Tel: 01905 619059

North

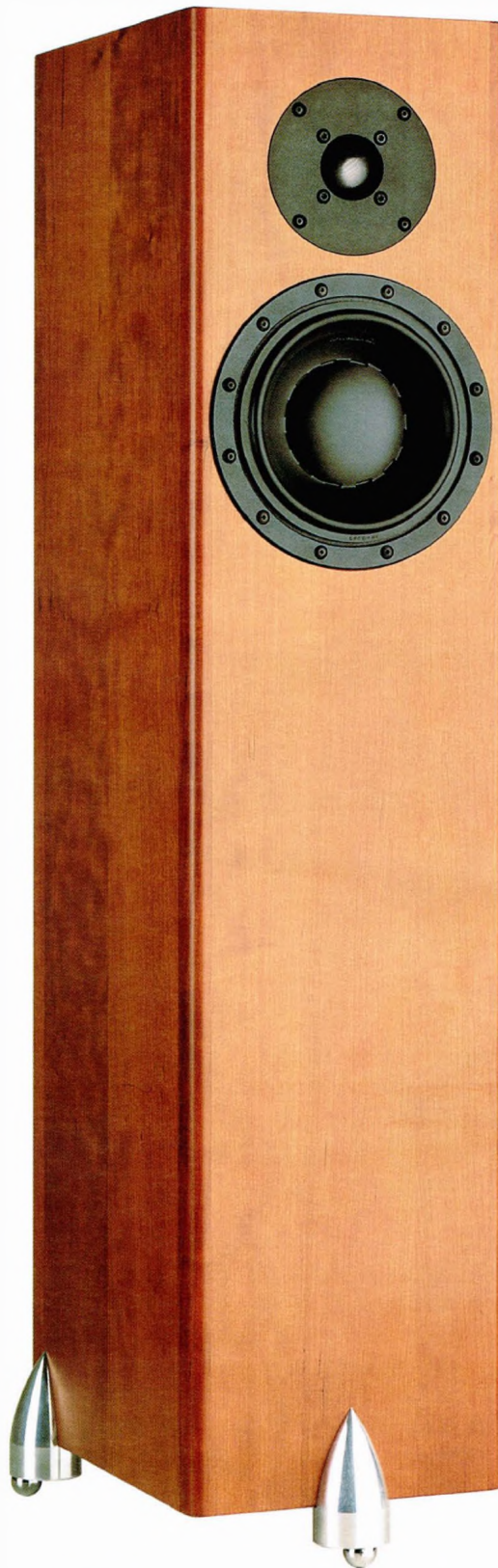
Audio Republic, Headingley, LEEDS, Tel: 0113 217 7294
Romers Hi Fi Great Harwood, Lancs Tel: 01254 887799

Scotland

Loud & Clear, EDINBURGH, Tel: 0131 5553963
Loud & Clear, GLASGOW, Tel: 0141 2210221

Wales

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Our 12" bass driver has ultra high power handling of 700 watts, sensitivity of 96dB/1W/1m. Lightening fast bl to mms ratio and massive 100mm (4") voice coil resulting in ultra low distortion and freedom from dynamic compression.

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Chord Signature



reviewed: issue 28 - 2003

- Heavy gauge high purity multi-strand copper conductors
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- Unique dual layer high frequency shielding structure
- Non-compression aluminium clamping system
- Factory terminated

No matter what your system, the innovative design of Chord Signature Speaker Cable will transform the sound and really bring your music or soundtracks to life. If you are passionate about music, listen to the Chord Signature series of interconnects and speaker cable and find out just how much you have been missing.

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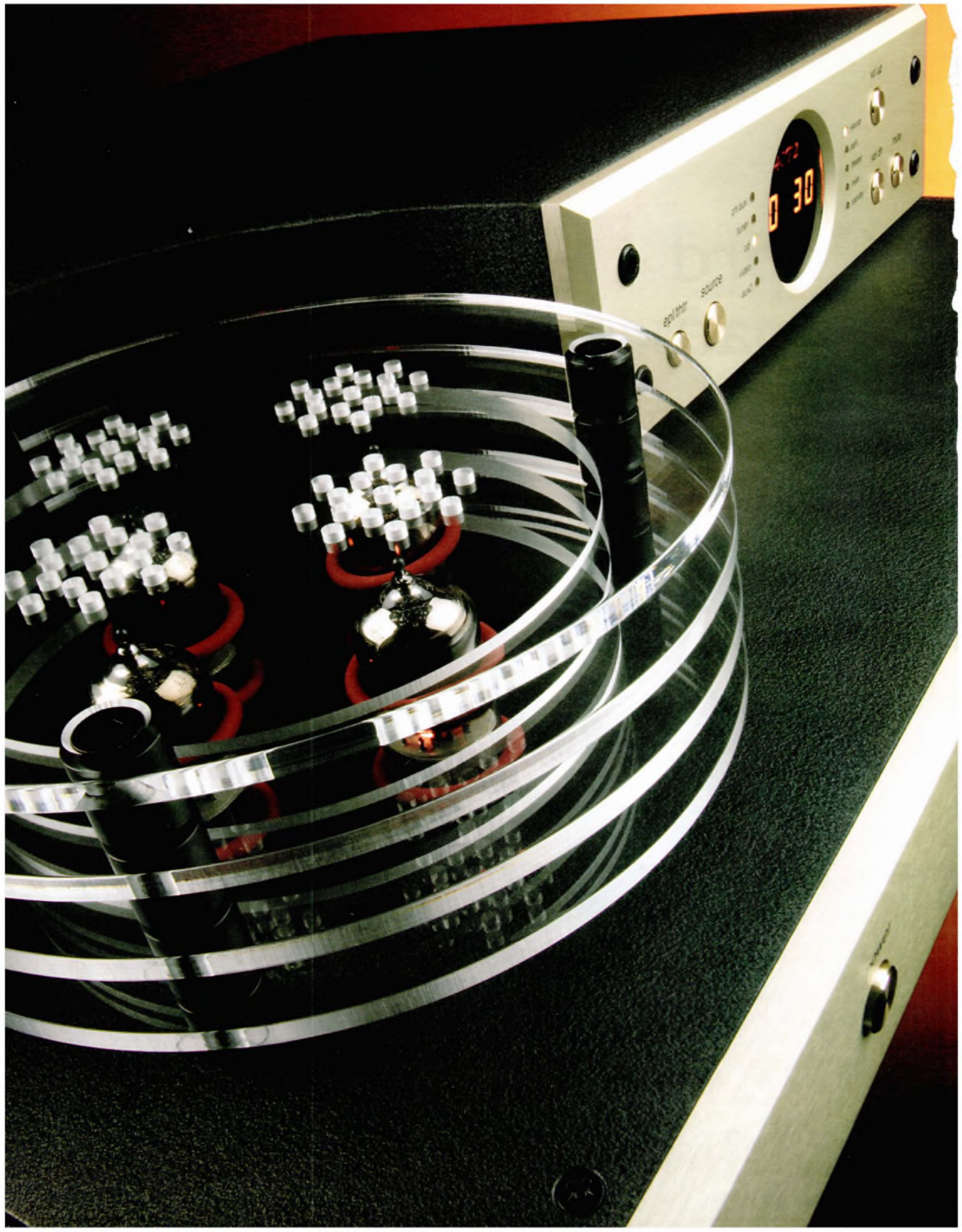
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conrad-johnson ACT 2 Vaccum-Tube Line-Stage

by Roy Gregory

The language of hi-fi is a constantly evolving and shifting semantic landscape, terms emerging, gaining currency and attached values before subsiding once more into the oral history. It's a strange melange of technological terminology, fashion and marketing speak, prone to abuse and shorthand. Yet many of these terms started life with quite precise meanings and implications. In a world of line-stages, line-amps, transformer coupled passives and signal processors, the poor old "pre-amp" has definitely had its day. But reach back further and you'll unearth an even older term – control amp. It refers of course, to the signal routing function of the pre-amplifier and dates from the days when tape was a serious high-end source and no fewer than three tape-loops was considered normal. Yet it's the term of art that most accurately conjures my feelings regarding the ACT 2. Not, I hasten to add, because the c-j possesses myriad switching options, but because it sets it apart from the crowd while also suggesting the root of its singularity.

Descriptive writing is the reviewer's stock in trade. Putting words to sounds is how we describe a product's musical performance. We can qualify its dimensionality, its presence, its dynamic range and tonal impact. We can discuss its grasp of musical nuance and flow. Listen to the ACT 2 and it instantly conjures a whole host of positive hi-fi speak to define its performance characteristics. But to do so risks missing the point, precisely

because it reduces the performance from a single whole to a series of negotiable and comparable elements. Understand this: the ACT 2 is unlike any other pre-amp I've ever used. How it's different and why it's different is what's important – and why I choose to think of it as a control-amp.

The starting point must be the sonic presentation. The singer is seated on a stool, the band arrayed in an arc behind her, the tight confines and low ceiling of the club ramping up the atmosphere. Her spoken introductions to the songs are light with excitement and humour: She's on familiar ground and the audience is appreciative. Her mind outruns her lungs and she stumbles mid-sentence to snatch a necessary breath. Her guitar, caressed gently as she plays the crowd, springs to life, full of body and warm, resonant presence, the band lock step behind her. Her voice is solid and stable

as she shapes her phrases and dictates the pace of the songs, the lift into a chorus or climax. The applause explodes and the shouts and

whistles surround me. It's a performance to cherish, musically AND sonically.

Now think about what's missing from that description. What about the recording, the speakers, focus, transparency and rhythm? What about

the hi-fi? You begin to see my point. The record in question, Nanci Griffith's *One Fair Summer Evening* (MCA Records MCF 3435) is a nice enough live recording, but it is hardly audiophile quality – at least in the standard 120g pressing (although I'd love to hear what

serious mastering and cutting could put onto a 180g biscuit). Nor is it a purist production, yet what I'm hearing puts many an audiophile darling disc to shame. Played through the ACT 2 it has a natural warmth and presence that breathes life into the performance; that exists in total separation from the speakers. The music, the acoustic of the club, the crowd noise and band create a single, holistic event, none of which seems to emanate from the speakers. Well, not quite none. It's an old record and well played. The rustle and tick of surface noise is there, but that is lodged firmly in the speakers, completely separate from the musical event.

The naturalness of the ACT 2's performance rests on its overall coherence. Working back from the whole, it's the evenness of the information across the entire acoustic space that strikes you. Regardless of pitch or spatial location, the c-j seems uncannily capable of defining discrete energy ►



▶ levels across the entire sonic picture, mapping the relative energy spectrum of notes within strands and one strand relative to another, until it weaves it into a single, seamless whole. The effect in musical terms is to resolve each instrument or source of sound, irrespective of level, and preserve it and locate it amongst the others. Going back to Nanci, just listen to the decay on an open guitar string at the end of a track, individual claps in the crowd (all well in front of the band) or the natural separation and identity of the backing harmonies. But the real kicker is the way in which you can hear her sway her head relative to the microphone, reinforcing the impetus, accent and emphasis of her lyrics in the most fundamental and physical way. It's one more layer of insight into the emotional core of the song and the singer, the most intimate of contacts, without having to push the vocals closer than the recording.

This is key to the way in which the ACT 2 goes about its business. By locating and defining energy levels, regardless of their scale, one to another, it provides insight without exaggeration, access without paring away or etching the harmonic structure of notes. The conrad-johnson is neither forward nor bright. It's not overtly transparent, focussed or dynamic. Indeed, I can name pre-amps that surpass the c-j in many of these individual respects, but none that can match its overall sense of proportion. It's the definition of one sound or note relative to another at which the ACT 2 excels. As such, it matters not whether the dynamic range (for instance) is that of real life, but that it's correct within itself. It's an effect I've

noted before with conrad-johnson's products – most notably the Premier 140 and 350 power amps. But the ACT 2 elevates it to a whole new level: a new level of resolution, a new degree of micro information. The end result is to further divorce



the musical performance from the mechanics of its reproduction, to make it more easily understood, more convincing and ultimately more entertaining.



At the same time consider just how effectively it dealt with the surface noise on the record. Those pops and clicks are signals, sure enough, but they're not part of the original recording, and though the two coexist the contamination is alien to it. Which is exactly how the c-j presents it: In a different plane, with a different texture and spectral balance. It's suddenly easy to separate the two,

both aurally and intellectually. It's there, but it doesn't, it almost can't, intrude. Such is the inner integrity of the musical performance that it recreates, the system, the physical surroundings of the listening room, surface noise and other extraneous signals are rendered external to and distinct from it.

Playing music (or speech) through the ACT 2, you should be struck by the stability of the image it throws. The shape, location and size of individual elements doesn't change with level; they don't crowd forward or swell as things get loud or busy. Instead, that perfect sense of proportion remains, virtually irrespective of what's played and the level you play it at. Again, it's not necessarily an obvious, or an obviously important trait – until you realise just how unstable most other pre-amps are in this regard, how destructive that is to the willing suspension of disbelief.

Real orchestras don't rush to a line of scrimmage at the front of the pit, nor do the ones you hear with the ACT 2. It makes listening civilized. It also makes it far more convincing.

So, you begin to understand that the ACT 2 is able to set the music apart from earthly considerations, and that that, in turn, sets it apart. But what's the nature of this view that it creates? In c-j tradition, the basic building blocks that construct the whole are still rooted in the correct reproduction of the harmonic envelope. Notes swell, peak and decay with natural shape and complexity and it's this that defines so much of the control amp's performance. Colours are rich, as they should be, while instruments have weight and presence, as they should. Piano is a ▶

Giant Steps

Development at Conrad-Johnson is and always has been an evolutionary process, which means that a product like the ACT 2 doesn't just happen. Instead there's a clear learning curve and developmental path. Which begs the question, where does the ACT 2 come from and what separates it from its predecessors?

Well, its immediate precursor was the legendary ART, an expensive beast built in two, separate cases. This is the composite triode circuit on which the ACT 2 is based, but designer Bill Conrad identifies three separate areas in which he feels the new design offers technological advances over the older one. First and most obviously, the ACT 2 uses

6N30P valves whose electrical characteristics enable the use of fewer output devices without compromising the output impedance.

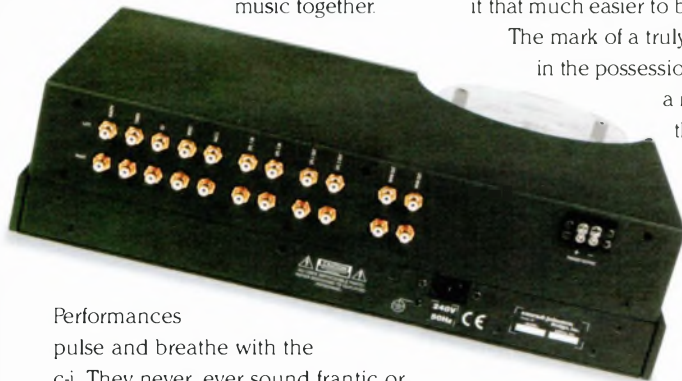
Internally, there's an even bigger change, with the adoption of new, proprietary Teflon capacitors in place of the ART's polystyrenes. That's quite a switch for c-j, who've relied on the 'styrenes for many years. However, having found what they feel to be a superior solution, they also warn that the new Teflon caps have a burn-in time of several hundred hours, and that in common with Teflon cables, burn-in is eroded by shipping.

The final piece in the jig-saw is a general improvement in the quality of peripheral components and

the ever important power supply circuits. Do these changes and developments make the ACT 2 a better pre-amp than the ART? Most of us will never know, simply because the ART was a limited edition anniversary model and you can no longer buy one even if you want to. So, the question, whilst understandable from a human point of view is actually irrelevant. The facts are simple: the ACT2 has learnt its lessons well and is both cheaper and more compact than the ART. Both are undoubtedly superb pre-amps. Only those actually in possession of an ART need concern themselves about this possible replacement. The rest of us can just enjoy its stellar performance.

▶ particular beneficiary, the instrument possessing a realistic scale and authority that's rare where hi-fi is concerned. The power and vibrational complexity of Starker's Cello (the Speakers Corner/ Mercury Bach *Suites*) is awesome – and inspiring, exactly as it should be.

At the same time, giving notes their correct life and decay whilst keeping placement precise locks the tempo of music together.



Performances pulse and breathe with the c-j. They never, ever sound frantic or hurried (unless of course, they should). Music can be urgent and incisive – it should never be hasty! Again, the contribution to relaxed, long-term enjoyment is considerable, meaning that you don't just get to enjoy the ACT 2's performance, you get to enjoy it for longer.

The final element in the completeness of the overall picture again evolves from the resolution of the individual notes. The space between and around players and instruments is beautifully captured and retained. Of course, I've

touched on this in describing the way in which the picture painted remains so stable. But the detail at a closer, more intimate level, the individual rather than the holistic, is also important: The hard, reflective floor beneath a harpsichord, the riser beneath a quartet of double basses. These insights may not be vital, but they contribute to the uncannily natural feel of what the c-j does, making it that much easier to believe.

The mark of a truly great product is in the possession of not one, but

a range of qualities that elevate above the crowd. The Connoisseur line-stage offers a stellar contribution to musical reproduction. In its case, that performance is

founded on micro-dynamic integrity – the precise tracking and preservation of steps in energy levels. It generates a sound of compelling power, life, intimacy and vitality, redolent with a driving energy and purpose that leaves other hi-fi sounding pale in comparison. In its own, very different way, the ACT 2 is just as impressive and just as superior to the run-of-the-mill competition. That it is more relaxed, more equitable in its presentation shouldn't be mistaken for any lack of authority when it comes

to the musical message. Arguably less obviously impressive, as we have seen, things are not always as obvious as they seem. However, there is one performance trait that these two products do share, and it's critical to their greatness. Both make the most of whatever you play, somehow transcending the limitations of poor recordings or poor pressings to liberate the musical life trapped within. We can discuss dynamic range or dimensional integrity all day, but their only worth is in the achievement of this final goal. A truly great product puts the music first and on that score the ACT 2 is clearly front-rank. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| Type: | Vacuum-Tube line stage |
| Valve complement: | 4 x 6N30P |
| Gain: | 21.5dB |
| Phase: | Inverting |
| Output impedance: | 500 Ohms |
| Max output: | 10V |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 483 x 137 x 400mm |
| Weight: | 14kg |
| Price: | £12000 |

UK Distributor:
Audiofreaks
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153
E-mail. info1@audiofreaks.co.uk

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



Marten Design Coltrane Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Some things seem obvious, and being obvious, it tends to follow that conclusions (at least) should be simple. Solutions, on the other hand, are quite a different matter.

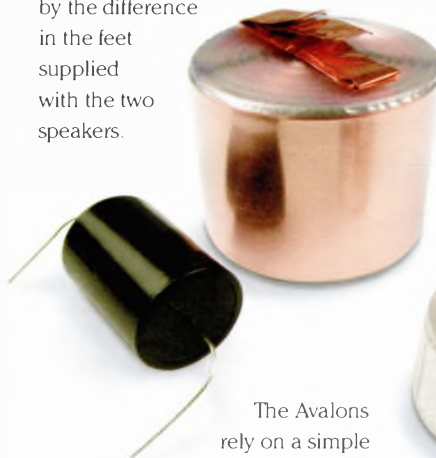
Take the matching of hi-fi for instance. Speakers a little warm? Just add a classically lean and dry solid-state amplifier and harmony will be restored. Or will it? It's the kind of tonal juggling that reached its pinnacle with cable "matching", the application of tone controls by stealth. Only it wasn't very stealthy when it came to the other aspects of musical reproduction. Overall coherence suffered appallingly and out went the baby with the bath water.

Which brings us to the Coltrane – and the perils facing the reviewer, especially when confronted with an extraordinarily expensive product. However, before we get to those, there's the small matter of the perils that face the reader.

Drinking by the label is a habit as old as it is dangerous – yet that does nothing to diminish its attractions. On the face of it, the notion that you can discern the character of a product by the ingredients from which it's built is indeed an attractive one. Think of all the time and trouble that can be saved with those bothersome auditions. Push-pull EL34s? It's obviously going to have a lovely open mid-band and a chronic lack of low-frequency authority. Mosfet output stage? Big, warm and soggy. Such critical/technological shorthand lays the user open to considerable embarrassment – should they ever bother to ascertain the accuracy of their assumptions. Take the Marten Design

Coltrane for example. The seasoned reader of hi-fi magazines could barely fail to notice its considerable similarities to the highly regarded Avalon Eidolon Diamond, reviewed in the last issue: There's the identical choice of mid and high-frequency drivers (especially THAT diamond tweeter). Then there's the near identical price, the dimensions and even, if we stretch a point, the general shape of the cabinet and the positioning of its port.

But the reality is entirely different, the whole quite distinct from the sum of its parts. Perhaps it's best summed up by the difference in the feet supplied with the two speakers.



The Avalons rely on a simple tripod of stainless-steel cones: no fuss, no bother, barely visible in fact. In contrast, the Martens are set solid atop substantial steel outriggers with four adjustable carbon-fibre cones and matching carbon-fibre footers. The whole kit and caboodle adds up to a significant statement of intent as well as a bold styling feature in itself. Where the Avalon seeks self-effacing simplicity, hiding its light under a bushel and its diamond tweeter under a grille, the

Marten wears its heart well and truly on its sleeve. So don't be fooled by the obvious: These speakers sound as different to one another as the details of their approach and presentation. Just like the KEF Reference and B&W Nautilus designs it would be a mistake to assume that their similarities are anything more than superficial.

So, now we know what the Coltrane isn't (an Eidolon Diamond clone) perhaps we should discern what it is. As discussed, the Marten speaker uses the diamond tweeter and inverted ceramic dome midrange familiar from the Eidolon. However, here they are combined with a pair of 228mm ceramic bass-units. A large and extravagantly flared port positioned in the rear underside of the cabinet loads these and together they deliver a -2dB point at 20Hz in room. The drivers are mounted on a carefully sloped and profiled wooden baffle.

This is constructed from two 30mm thick planks, each in turn assembled from 40mm wide hardwood strips. The planks are bonded together with glue that acts as a damping layer, thus creating a constrained layer. The combination of the disruptive, random structure of the grain in the wooden strips and the self-damping characteristics of the structure should make the baffle as near inert as reasonably possible, especially with a wooden construction. The baffle on the review pair was in a beautiful Oak, but is also available in Maple, Cherry or ▶

▶ Walnut, although whether there are sonic differences between the various finishes the Lord alone knows.

The cabinet itself is a boat shaped monocoque molded from inch-thick laminated carbon-fibre, a construction that is lightweight and random, bestowing low energy storage and excellent self-damping, as well as a superb, high-gloss surface. The curved and tapered cabinet walls should help reduce parallel surfaces and resulting standing waves, especially between the top and bottom faces where the longer wavelength threatens the greatest damage, coinciding as it does with the longest panel dimension (at least in a conventional box). The crossover is a hybrid design, second-order on the bass leg, first-order on the tweeter. Component quality is exceptional, with hand wound, foil inductors, copper to roll-off the bass and a pure silver version for the midrange. The single capacitor that introduces the tweeter is a custom made silver-in-oil design. The company has clearly extended its attention to detail well beyond the exterior of the speaker. In Marten's quest for the last word in audio performance, they employ Bybee Quantum purifiers on each of the drive units, small, in-line components that are the tweakers' toast of the moment amongst speaker builders. There are WBT binding posts for the bi-wire inputs, positioned sensibly lowdown on the speaker's curved rear. There is no grille in the conventional sense, although each driver has an integral mesh guard to prevent attention from prying fingers and high velocity objects.

There's one other thing you'll find along with the terminals; a six position rotary control, that allows you to trim bass level in 0.5dB steps. Unfashionable in the UK and Europe, such controls are actually seriously sensible with genuine full range speakers. Given the balancing act that nature imposes on bass and

treble, the ability to adjust one or t'other by way of room compensation is pretty much essential if you want to avoid more incompatibilities than perfect matches. It works for the Revels at the top – and it works for the Martens at the bottom. Don't knock it 'til you try it.



The control afforded was really useful when it came to setting up the speakers in my smallish but well behaved listening space. Initially sounding lean but beautifully focussed and detailed, an extra half-dB of bass output filled things out nicely, fleshing out the images and tonal palette, but

more importantly, locking in the timing. Suddenly the speaker and the music gelled into a coherent whole, with seamless top-to-bottom continuity, all the different elements bound together with a single sense of purpose.

Which brings us round to the question of system matching. Suddenly being confronted by a pair of \$30K speakers is not a little intimidating, imposing its own special strictures on the reviewer. After all, they threaten to throw a pretty intense spotlight on the rest of the system – which in turn sends reviewers scurrying for partnering equipment of similarly stratospheric pedigree. Which is why, on the face of it, the presence of conrad-johnson's flagship ACT 2 pre-amp might be considered a blessing, especially as it forms a common presence with the recently departed Eidolons, along with the Prem 350. However, as experience was to prove, this was far from the case. Which is where we came in...

On paper at least, the c-j would appear to dovetail perfectly with the Marten speakers. Ceramic drivers have a reputation for superb resolution at the expense of some leanness; conrad-johnson have always got the colour, harmonic energy and presence of music just right. Combine the two and you'd expect a perfect synergy. Unfortunately, that's not what you get. Instead, for no reason that I know, these individually excellent products simply do not gel, the speaker seemingly revealing weaknesses in the pre-amp, the pre-amp being equally ruthless with the speaker. But use either in alternative systems and the results are spectacular*.

What this tells us is that the Coltrane is a demanding and potentially difficult partner – not unlike its namesake. Not only is it critically revealing of partnering equipment, telling you exactly what ▶

▶ happens with every adjustment or change you make, but it's picky, picky, picky about what it plays with. Which leaves you wondering where to start.

The first thing to consider is resolution and clarity. Just like a horn speaker which demands speed from its partnering equipment and ruthlessly reveals sloth, the Martens will pounce on any smudging or rounding in the driving chain. But to compound matters they also deliver a genuinely wide bandwidth signal from a mean efficiency of 89dB and a nominal impedance of four Ohms. And whilst those figures might not seem too frightening, and there are no sharp dips in the impedance plot, it can get down to a minimum value of 2.4 Ohms, depending on the setting of the bass contour, and that starts to mean real power. It quickly became apparent that the Hovland RADIA was less than comfortable when asked to deliver serious orchestral crescendos at decent levels. Which simply compounds the problem, leaving you looking for an amp that is both detailed and agile as well as immensely powerful.

I had limited time to



effect a cure but was fortunate enough to obtain the use of a second RADIA, which satisfied all but my basest urges. I can see a return fixture coming on, for which I have a feeling that the likes of a Karan 450 or Spectral mono-blocks

might well be in order.

Once I had the second RADIA things started to fall into place, the standard arrangement of Vibe/Pulse and Valhalla cabling proving ideal, although once again, the use of a coherent Valhalla/Thor mains loom was of considerable benefit, discontinuities anywhere in the system proving seriously detrimental to performance. Source components were the VPI TNT 6, JMW 12.5 and Lyra Titan or Koetsu Jade Platinum cartridges for vinyl, the Wadia 861SE for silver discs; phono-stage was the Groove Plus.

This speaker is all about speed, detail and resolution in the service of leading edge and dynamic definition. In some respects they mirror the speed of response, lack of boxy colouration and top to bottom coherence that electrostatic listeners

love, but deliver a far more balanced overall performance, and far more bass. In the sense that it embodies

certain "electrostatic" qualities, the Marten indeed echoes the performance of the Eidolon Diamond, but in both cases these aspects are simply part of a much greater whole, and neither speaker sounds at all like the other. If the Avalon is the master of harmonic and acoustic coherence, perfectly preserving the energy profile and tail of each note, the Marten leans towards dynamic range and scaling. However, what separates both of these designs

from the crowd, the thing they do have in common, is their ability to carry their attributes and strengths across their entire operating range. There, all similarities end.

From which you should be able to deduce that the Coltranes (again, not unlike their namesake) is rarely a relaxing listen.



More like riveting.

Partly because they're not the last word in harmonic development, their speed and lightness of touch give the sound a pacey, energetic, almost driven quality, while the dynamic tracking and coherence ensures that the different elements in the music stay well and truly bound together. If you want a speaker that "times" (in the hi-fi sense) then the Marten won't disappoint. I suspect that it's their temporal coherence that makes them so critical of partnering equipment, as any slowing or disturbance of the signal stands out a mile. Although, having said that, it still doesn't explain the frankly ▶

* The problem was finally traced to the earthing arrangements in my early RADIA's output stage (since modified to current spec thus resolving the situation). Nevertheless this serves to demonstrate just how critically revealing the Coltrane really is: Music is either just right or very wrong.

► bizarre antipathy that exists between this speaker and the c-j pre-amp, at least in my system.

Working at their considerable best, the Martens present a compelling musical viewpoint that's worth the effort it takes to get right. Their superb levels of detail and resolution mean that every nuance in a recording is laid bare, but don't get the idea that they pull the performance apart. Instead, they give you the benefits of a close-up view without moving you any closer to the players. The easiest way to hear and appreciate the effect is to play a familiar vocal. Suddenly it will stand clearer of the mix than you're used to. The shape of words, the flow of syllables and the way they're inflected is far more apparent, as are singer's accents. I'd never noticed the Americanization of Scarbor-O in the Simon and Garfunkel song, but here it stands out a mile. Playing Nanci Griffith's 'Listen To the Radio' the lyrics are immediately intelligible, the guitar is a "0018 Martin" and you can hear each individual backing voice, separated by pitch, sex and position. Bigger choirs too, with the speakers resolving individual voices with ease. And it's this ease that's important. Make the resolution and detail too obvious and it cries out for attention. The secret is to contain it within the whole, which is where the Coltrane succeeds so admirably.

Along with that resolution comes speed and transparency, the well-known double-edged sword of high-definition hi-fi. Too fast and it becomes obvious; too transparent and it becomes obvious; too direct or purposeful and it becomes hectoring. Which is where balancing the speaker as well as the system driving it becomes critical. The Coltrane is quicksilver quick and agile. Rapid sprays of notes won't trip it, sudden shifts in level or pace are negotiated with panache. Ricci's *Carmen Fantasie*

(Decca SXL2197) is the perfect example, the Martens reveling in the maestro's flashing bow-work and virtuoso precision and control. It's a recording that teeters over into glassy hardness at the slightest provocation but the Coltranes control the leading edge bite with just enough grip to keep it properly lively but also just the right side of uncivilized.



In spatial terms, the Martens throw a large and extremely coherent soundstage, underpinned by their deep and beautifully defined bass. Once again however, that soundstage is particular in style, favouring the sound sources themselves at the expense of the space between them and the overall acoustic. Playing the Reiner/Chicago Symphony recording of Prokofieff's *Lieutenant Kije* the individual instruments that combine to create the opening bars of *Birth Of Kije* are pinpointed and focussed, precisely in space, the side-

drum and life particularly crisp and quick. Listen and you'll hear their echoes spread across the rear wall, fading out stage right. But that's the point, you have to listen, knowing that it's there. Likewise, the low strings that open the second movement, *Romance*, are full of texture and vibrance, a low throbbing grate of bow on strings. The harp and chimes are placed and stable, their notes extending effortlessly up until they fade naturally with the upper reaches of the recording, rather than being shut in by the system. The limitations of the tape are clear yet accommodated. Far from being a problem, they simply become another piece of information that's slotted into the completeness of the whole.

This last point is important. What's interesting is the way that the speaker manages to make you aware of faults and anomalies yet at the same time does so without shoving them down your throat. Over-micing of soloists is a classic example. The Yepes Rodrigo, the Du Pre Elgar, especially the aforementioned Ricci Bizet are all cases in point. The soloist is spot-lit and over-voiced by the recording – essential to maintain any sort of instrumental balance under less than perfect reproductive circumstances.

The Martens would need no help in separating the various strands, but not all speakers (and systems) are created equal. Instead the Coltranes make you aware of the artifice, yet somehow manage to still incorporate and integrate the musical contribution. In part this has to be due to their spatial coherence, front to back rather than side to side. As quick and dynamic as the Martens are, they are NOT forward or overly immediate; in the same way that despite the measured bandwidth, they are not bright.

Things spatial are of course inevitably linked to things fundamental, and bass that is both deep and

informative is a precursor to accurate stereo perspectives and acoustic volume. The impressive width, depth and height achieved by the Coltranes underlines the fact that the -2dB claim of 20Hz in room is no idle boast, while the speed of the drivers and rigidity and shape of the box make that bass tactile and clean, devoid of waffle or clogging warmth. Instead, the extension creeps up on you, leaving you unawares and unprepared until the music demands its presence. Then it steps forward with gusto, rumbling with dramatic air and texture, detonating with impressive force, or simply throbbing shapelessly if that's all the tape contains. But the best bit is the way that bass instruments are located in space just as precisely as the mid-band ones. Drums have volume and shape, tension in their skins and when someone larrups a timpani with a pair of dirty great mallets you can feel the energy it generates. The lower registers of Starker's 'cello as he plays the Bach *Suites* (Speakers Corner/Mercury SR3-9016) pulse with a deep, woody vitality that underpins and drives the flowing phrases. The urgency and purpose in the playing elevates the pieces well beyond the prosaic readings they so often receive, replacing the gentile with a poise and intensity that captivates the listener. Something a little less cerebral? The ramped power and impact of the *Gladiator* soundtrack, whether the explosive battle scenes or the scale of 'The Might Of Rome', are limited only by the capabilities of the driving amplifiers. With both RADIA running flat-out the bass was at once mighty and controlled, helping to anchor the rest of the range securely in place. Yet it was clear that the speakers would have happily accepted, even demanded, more sheer drive and headroom from their partners in crime. Memories of the awesome Levinson 33Hs spring unbidden to mind...

It would be remiss, even foolish, of me to ignore the name of this speaker, especially given just how appropriate it

occasionally seems. Let's leave the last word (musically at least) to John. His 1962 album *Ballads* (Impulse Stereo AS-32) says it all. The drums are quick and tight, insistent and busy behind the more languid rhythms of the bass and McCoy Tyner's piano. The bass itself it actually upright, rather than thudding pitchlessly on the floor, with a shape, position and size to the instrument, shape, pitch and size to its notes. But it's Coltrane's sax that's telling. In amongst the easy intimacy of the quartet, he stretches out long flowing lines that contrast sharply with his more familiar work. Yet the Martens faithfully mark the odd sharp corner, the occasional pulsing repeat that he just can't help throwing into the mix. Just listen to the unfettered agility of his playing on the more up-beat 'All Or Nothing At All', gliding effortlessly across the tracks of those busy, complex drums; it's pure Coltrane – both the musician and the speaker.

Fed properly, the Marten Design Coltranes are mightily impressive beasts. Easy to upset, easier to get wrong, there's a sublime directness to their communication which places them somewhere on a continuum that stretches from the Avalons at one end to the better Wilsons at the other. Where the Eidolons are all about the musical performance and the Wilsons are all about the recording, the Martens embrace the process. What they

tell you about is the system, the recording and the performance. It doesn't make them either equal to or better than the competition:

It does make them distinctly different. Authoritative and commanding they demand attention both to their treatment and their performance,

but then, if you really want to know it all (and you can afford the results) you should audition the Coltranes. It might well be love at first sight – just be prepared for a torrid affair before the settled period of wedded bliss. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Type: | 3-way reflex |
| Drive Units: | 19mm diamond diaphragm, inverted dome tweeter 100mm ceramic inverted dome midrange 2x 229mm ceramic bowl bass drivers |
| Bandwidth: | 20Hz - 100kHz ±2dB |
| Efficiency: | 89dB |
| Impedance: | 4 Ohms (nominal) 2.4 -2.7 Ohms (minimum) |
| Power Handling: | 300 Watts |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 313 x 1130 x 610mm |
| Weight: | 47kg ea. |
| Finishes: | Front baffles in Maple, Cherry, Oak or Walnut |

UK Distributor:

Audiocraft
Tel. (44)(0)1895 253340
E-mail. kevin.walker@audio-craft.co.uk

Manufacturer:

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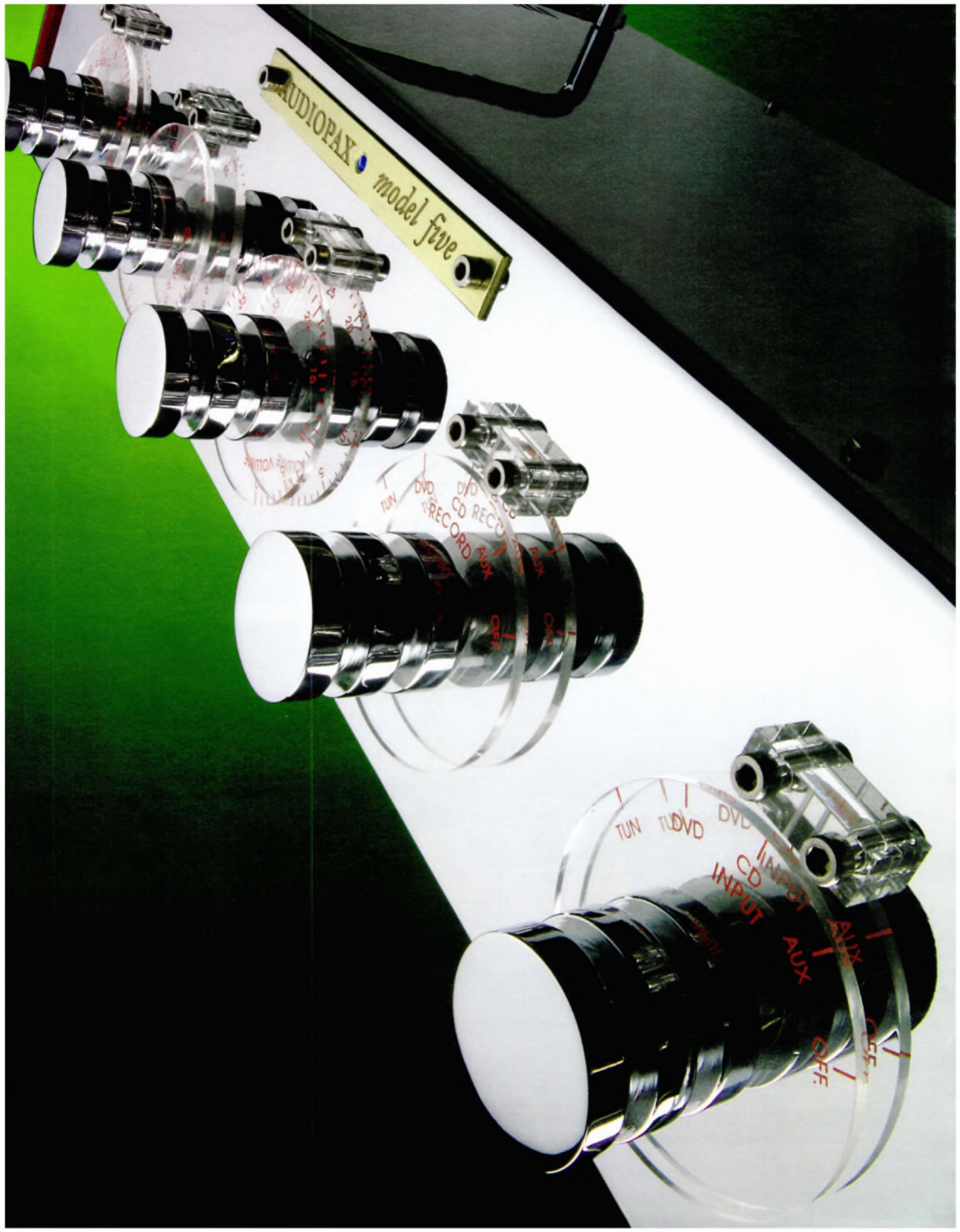
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AUDIOPAX model five



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Audiopax Model 5 Line-Stage

by Roy Gregory

Anybody who develops more than a passing interest in audio reproduction realises pretty soon that there's very little that's genuinely new under the hi-fi sun. Enter then, the Audiopax Model 88 mono-blocks, reviewed back in Issue 28, an amplifier that succeeded in being satisfying, intriguing and intellectually frustrating in pretty much equal measure. Weird is as weird does, and there was little if anything straightforward about the 88. Solid-state regulated, it used KT88s in a parallel single-ended arrangement that is about as close to a technological personality disorder as it's possible to get. But it worked. Oh boy did it work, easily setting aside preconceptions and prejudice with equal disdain. And central to that success? The Timbre-Lock controls, only external evidence of a genuinely novel circuit designed to optimise the amplifier's interface with its load. What's more, not only is this circuit new enough to tax established critical understanding and practice, but it's both readily demonstrable and (even more importantly) reliably repeatable.

And the point is? Well, any further discussion of the detail is beyond the scope of this article (you can always read the original review) but it does serve to establish two things: Audiopax designer Eduardo de Lima is a man who is not afraid to think outside the box, and when he considers something to be more important than it might at first seem, it's as well to take him seriously.

The Audiopax Model 5 line-stage may not be as obviously novel or challenging as the Model 88 mono-blocks, but rest assured that it is, in its own way, cut from the same philosophical cloth. Remember, all a line-stage has to do is take a bunch of signals, select one and pass it to the waiting power-amp at the appropriate

level. But remember too, that signor de Lima has what could be considered an unhealthy obsession with equipment interfaces and what on the surface might appear a simple proposition takes on a rather more labyrinthine quality. Well, you can breathe a sigh of relief. The solution developed for the Model 5 is both far easier to use and understand than the Timbre-Lock controls on the power-amp, even if the back-ground thinking has common elements.

The proposition here is that the overall gain of the line-stage is critical to its correct interfacing with different poweramps and different types of power-amp. It's an effect that I've experienced before, with line-stages and more obviously, phono-stages, however, I've never come across a product that underlines its importance the way the Audiopax does. Change the gain structure and you subtly alter both the unit's electrical characteristics and its distortion artefacts (the latter the object of the Timbre-Lock circuit). To this end, the Model 5 offers unusually comprehensive gain and level control, with a high-gain/low-gain switch on the rear-panel and individual gain controls alongside the volume control on the front-panel, graduated in single dB steps. De Lima sees this as a natural extension of his thinking, and even if gain matching is a familiar concept, his understanding of its effects certainly isn't.

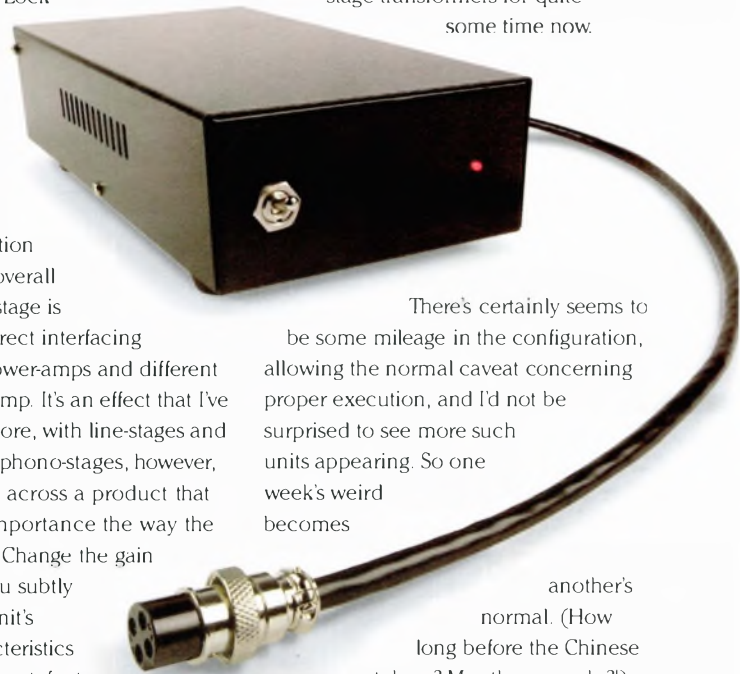
Beyond the off-beat nature of its controls, the Model 5 is another product under-going a technological identity

crisis, combining solid-state circuitry with transformer coupling. This, I might remind you, from a manufacturer of parallel single-ended mono-blocks. Indeed, there's a faint echo here, strangely reminiscent of the Renaissance phono-stage reviewed in the last issue. Both units have impressed, while JMH has been a staunch advocate of inter-stage transformers for quite some time now.

There's certainly seems to be some mileage in the configuration, allowing the normal caveat concerning proper execution, and I'd not be surprised to see more such units appearing. So one week's weird becomes

another's normal. (How long before the Chinese catch on? Months or weeks?!) But in the meantime, the Audiopax is certainly ahead of the curve.

Styling matches the power-amps, the lacquered sides contrasting with the chromed metalwork, in this instance, the top-mounted handles/valve-guards being purely decorative. Aesthetics are one area which is always problematic, and I'm the first to accept that my taste is both personal and far from universal, however, this is where I part company with the Audiopax. Given that the Model 5's great claim to fame is that it offers universal matching to a whole host of alternative power-amps, quite such ▶



▶ a clumsy styling cue seems odd at best, even perverse. I can't help feeling that the construction and colour options would have been sufficient association and that it would have been sensible to make the "handles" an option. I'd also like to see greater care in the positioning and alignment of the control references. With their tdc placement, even the slightest deviation catches the eye, and whilst I've always approved of knob and disc type



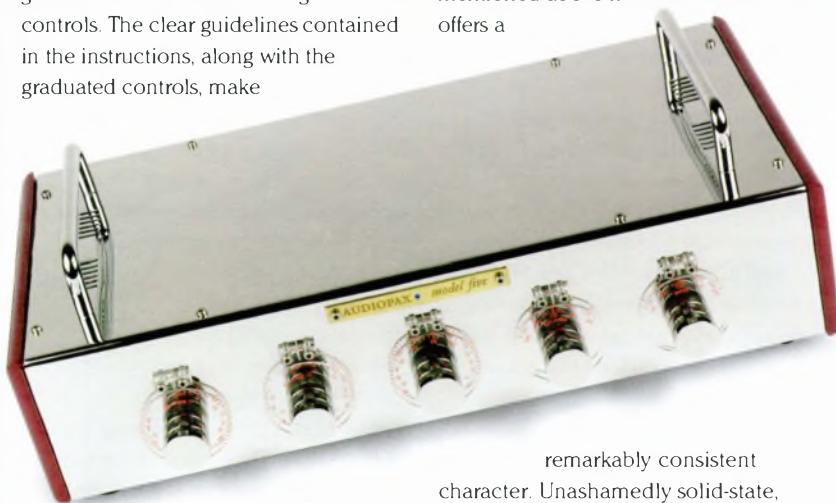
controls, the switches for input select and record-out feel too sloppy for a product at this price. Of course, fit and feel have little or no effect on performance, but the Model 5 faces some pretty stiff competition, and potential customers will see and touch it before they ever get to listen to it. Presenting them with any excuse to pass over your product is a risky policy.

The Audiopax line-stage offers four inputs and a mute, as well as a defeatable tape loop. There is also a Direct input that bypasses the input selector for use in single-source systems. There are two sets of outputs to facilitate bi-amping, all connections being single-ended phonos, with no balanced option. There is a simple remote to control mute and volume, which is all you ever really need, although the handset supplied was an interim design. A plusher model is in the works and will be forwarded to all existing owners as soon as it becomes available.

The Model 5 is a two-box unit, with the external power supply housed in a simple, plastic chassis. This should be

positioned well away from the control unit, a task greatly simplified by the decent length of its umbilicals. In use, the main chassis runs surprisingly hot and should be allowed reasonable ventilation. Also, when you first power it up, it comes on with the mute engaged and this must be

switched out from the remote. It's a nice touch that further highlights the no-nonsense approach of this pre-amp. Once you've got sound it's time to set the gain controls. The clear guidelines contained in the instructions, along with the graduated controls, make



this extremely straightforward. As you increase the gain by a notch simply decrease the level by an identical amount to keep the volume constant; or vice versa, of course. It's a one-time setting for any given power amp, and should take no longer than a couple of minutes. Start from the recommended value and work in steps. Once you hit the right setting you'll hear the sound

lock together, with the pace and timing of the music hitting its stride. In this respect, it's not unlike vta adjustment (although as there are those who profess not to hear that then perhaps I should be careful what I say). The difference between right and wrong is clearly audible, and whilst you might refine it over time, you should hit a ball-park value pretty quickly. I used the Model 5 with the RADIA, Jadis JA30 and Rogue Model 90. In each case the setting was different. In each case it was equally apparent once I'd got it right. Like Timbre-Lock, this works and is far more than a gimmick or merely cosmetic in nature, having a genuinely positive effect on the Model 5's performance. And it's a pretty impressive performance too.

You could argue that the very adjustability of the Audiopax necessarily makes its sound a moving target. However, optimised for the three amps mentioned above it offers a

remarkably consistent character. Unashamedly solid-state, people looking for romance or paint-by-number colouration should look elsewhere. The Model 5 is all about clarity and clean, open transparency. Indeed, the line-stage it most resembles is the Vibe/Pulse combination. Now, there's no question that this is at least partly to do with the presentation of timing and the top to toe coherence displayed by both these products. Tom Evans talks in terms of phase ▶

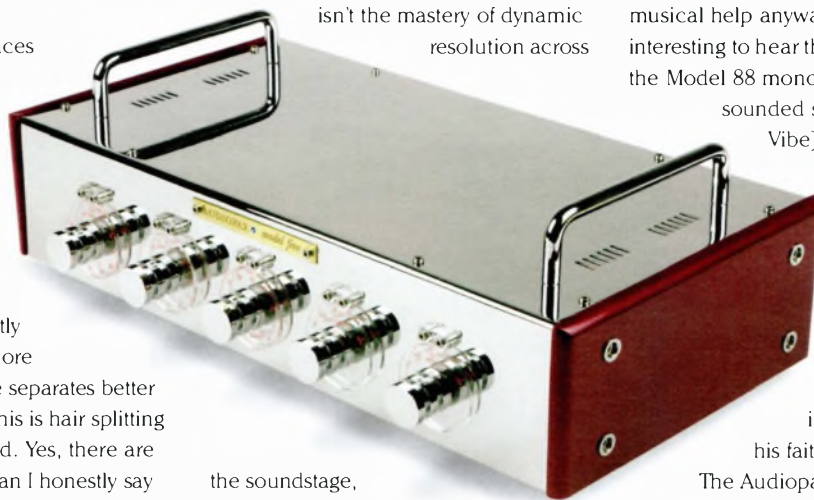
► coherence, Eduardo de Lima in terms of Timbre-Lock and aligning the output of one product with another. I'm in no position to comment on the technology involved, but in both cases the sonic results are impressive indeed as well as being cut from astonishingly similar cloth.

I can pick differences until the cows come home: the Vibe is slightly more even top to bottom, the Model 5 throws a slightly larger stage with a touch more dimensionality; the Audiopax is very slightly richer, with a shade more colour where the Vibe separates better in spatial terms. But this is hair splitting of the most banal kind. Yes, there are differences here but can I honestly say that one solution offers greater musical enjoyment than the other? No, in that regard they're as near identical as makes no difference, which as regular readers will know, constitutes high praise indeed. Use the Audiopax via its Direct input and you gain even greater immediacy, depth and better focus and separation, edging it even closer to the Tom Evans combination. The benefits are worthwhile and if you can take advantage of them I'd urge you to do so.

Not that the Audiopax is beyond criticism. There's a gentle swelling in the mid-bass which doubtless contributes to its slightly richer and more colourful balance, but which can get a little unruly at times. Playing Amy Fradon's 'Long Black Coat' (*Passion Angel*, Leo100) the pared back sparseness of the stage is disturbed at the start of the chorus by momentary confusion between the drum-cello accent and the lead vocal. It's a cruelly revealing track, but you can hear the influence elsewhere if you try. It's more of a problem too with the JA30, which suffers its own mid-bass bloom, underlining the fact that whilst you might optimise the output of the Model 5 for its

partnering power amp, don't confuse that with compensating for its own failings. You will hear the line-stage in the system if you go looking for it.

Mind you, why bother? Why not just enjoy the music that flows so effortlessly forth? In absolute terms there isn't the mastery of dynamic resolution across



the soundstage, across level and across instruments that a product like c-j's ACT 2 delivers. Nor does the Model 5 possess the tonal palette of that product. But then it doesn't possess the price-tag either. Instead, I suggest you play to its strengths, which embrace dynamic range and discrimination alongside superb rendition of vocal and instrumental textures. This is a product that makes recordings sound lively and direct, exciting and engaging. Put on something like Milstein's reading of the Dvorak *Violin Concerto* (Steinberg and the Pittsburgh S.O. Capitol SP 8382, re-released by Cisco) to enjoy the presence and body this line-stage brings to the dramatic opening, the way it holds the soloist against the orchestral backdrop, extracting every last ounce of his passion and technique. For me, that's what hi-fi should be about and on those grounds the Audiopax Model 5 deserves, even demands, your attention. Correctly interfaced it brings a poise and authority to a system that's rare enough. To demonstrably do so in such a wide range of systems is itself no mean trick.

It's one thing buying a component – it's quite another realising its potential: With the Model 5 that should never be a problem. It's lucid, open and involving presentation offers the perfect foil to all but the leanest and most astringent partners (but then, they're beyond musical help anyway). It would be interesting to hear this line-stage driving the Model 88 mono-blocks (which sounded so fine with the Vibe). That the distributor was happy to supply it alone and encouraged me to experiment with a range of partnering amps speaks volumes for his confidence in the product. Well, his faith was well placed.

The Audiopax Model 5 does exactly what it says on the tin – and then some. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

(Typical Values)

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Solid-state line-stage with external PSU |
| Inputs: | 4x line + direct |
| Input Impedance: | 45 kOhms |
| Outputs: | 2x pre-out + tape |
| Output Impedance: | 1500 Ohms |
| Gain - | |
| Low-Gain Setting: | 12dB |
| High-Gain Setting: | 23dB |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 450 x 150 x 250mm |
| Weights: | 5.5kg (control unit) 2.0kg (psu) |
| Finishes: | Chrome and black or various lacquers |

Prices -

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| Chrome and black | £3299 |
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Audio Research PH5 Phono-Stage

by Jimmy Hughes

I recently covered four different phono-stages in these very pages, and each one was very good in their own individual way. When you get to this sort of level, choice becomes difficult. While one might have specific individual preferences, very often standards will be high enough to completely satisfy nearly every requirement. You almost have to create false distinctions to choose a "Winner" when the basic standard is so high.

Here's yet another outstanding phono-stage, this time from Audio Research. It deserves serious consideration – and not just for its undoubted sonic excellence. One immediate plus point is the provision of front panel cartridge loading adjustment, and a stereo/mono switch. It gets better; you can alter these functions via the supplied remote handset.

While quite a number of phono-stages offer variable loading, it's often difficult for the user to access the facility. You either have to grapple with a set of microscopically small, difficult to adjust switches, or unscrew the top to gain access to internal boards. You certainly can't sit back in your listening chair and A/B compare the various different options via remote control. So, the PH5 has a major advantage over its competitors.

Of course, you could argue that loading is something you set and then leave. Therefore, the fact that access is awkward isn't necessarily the end of the world. I fully agree. But, while

you're still deciding which loading option produces the best results, it's handy to have quick and easy access. It means you're able to make comparisons while each sound remains fresh in the ears – and do so from your listening seat.

And anyway – who's to say that one's preferences remain constant? There may be times when you prefer a



change of loading to suit a particular LP.

And of course you might have more than one turntable, and/or a whole bevy of cartridges. Although there are often good technical reasons why cartridge loading switches are placed inaccessibly, the sad fact is that many of us probably won't bother to try different options because of the hassle involved in doing so. So top marks to Audio Research for making loading adjustment easy!

Using a Transfiguration Aria as my main cartridge, I eventually settled on a load value of 500 Ohms. The default setting of 47k Ohms gave the most open sound, but as loading increased

(paradoxically, it 'increases' by lowering the resistance) the sound grew fuller and slightly more dimensional. The bottom-end plumped-up a little at 500 Ohms, giving the bass a marginally rounder more full-bodied quality which I liked.

The PH5 sounds very three-dimensional, producing an impressively holographic soundstage. Partnered with the outstanding PrimaLuna Prologue 2 integrated amplifier, it gave a sound that was very solid and at the same time well-separated. The combination of loading the cartridge at 500 Ohms and the warm rich tonal balance of the PrimaLuna resulted in a solid, weighty sound. Yet at the same time the balance was clear and open.

I'd say the battery powered Sutherland PHD still had the edge over the PH5 so far as sheer openness and naturalness was concerned, being quite unlike any phono-stage I've previously encountered. The ARC, by comparison, has a smoother more velvety sound – an attractive alluring richness and warmth – while at the same time sounding deliciously holographic. It's forgiving, yet highly detailed too; smooth but articulate.

Surface noise has a nice 'soft' quality; noisy surfaces don't hiss and spit at you with quite as much vehemence as some transistor phono-stages. Playing a contemporary copy of the CBS LP *Blood Sweat and Tears* by the band of the same name, I was impressed by the way the PH5 had the necessary precision to reveal the multi-tracked multi-mono nature of the

▶ recording, yet somehow did so without pulling the recording to pieces.

The PH5's gain is slightly lower than usual at 57dB, and noise levels are a fraction higher too. If you were using a very low output MC pickup (say, less than 200uV) it

second far more important reason – to do with playing mono LPs using a stereo cartridge.

Stereo pickups (unlike mono ones, which can only move laterally) are sensitive to vertical movement. This makes them very sensitive to surface irregularities and nasties like turntable bearing rumble. Some mono LPs (and quite a few stereo LPs too!)

of vinyl enthusiast with a collection that includes vintage mono LPs, especially those from the '50s, you'll find they sound a whole lot cleaner and quieter when played with the mono button engaged.

Sometimes, the difference can be staggering. Subjectively, as much as 20dB reduction in noise. And, as this noise is cancelled and not filtered, the music itself does not suffer in terms of bandwidth or dynamic range. Why this valuable (and easy to include) facility is omitted from the great majority of phono-stages is beyond me. No ifs or buts – a stereo/mono switch should be absolute compulsory!

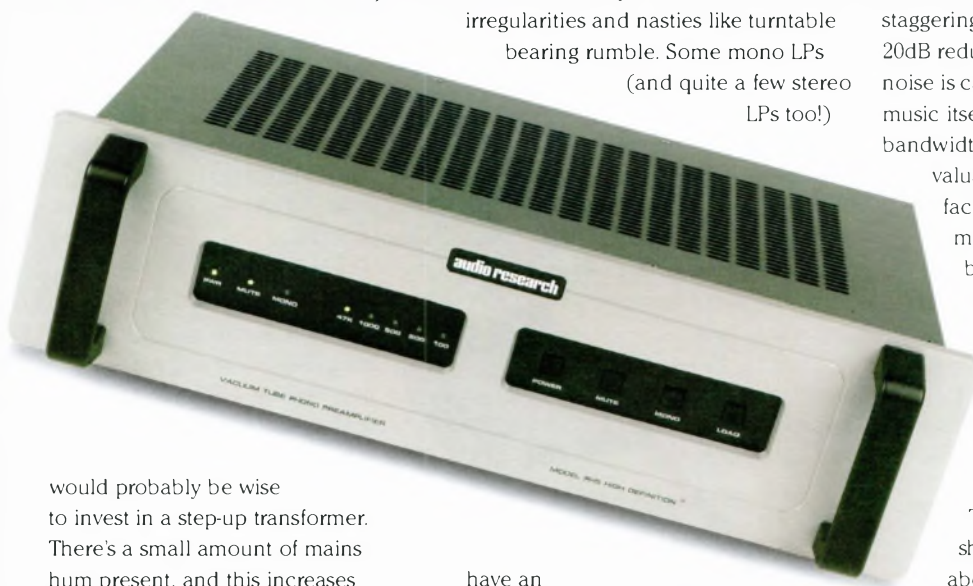
Tube compliment (for this is, in Audio Research tradition, a valve circuit) consists of four ECC88 dual triodes with a J-FET input.

The makers claim the tubes should have a working life of about 2000 hours. Bandwidth is extremely wide, and Audio

Research quote an impressive 10Hz to 60kHz within +/- 0.25dB. The -3dB points occur at 0.7Hz to beyond 400kHz – very wide by any standards – and fully comparable to the best direct-coupled solid state designs.

Whilst accepted wisdom now seems to suggest that solid-state is the way to go for phono-stages, at least as far as amplifying the output of MC cartridges goes, ARC have a long history of using valves to fulfil this function (along with c-j and Convergent Audio

Technology) and by being canny and keeping overall gain moderate, they have largely kept the noise issues at bay. Having said that, valve quality will be critical (just think back to the likes of the SP8 and SP10) and it might well pay to experiment a little here. The quietest valves don't always sound the best, but I reckon you



would probably be wise to invest in a step-up transformer. There's a small amount of mains hum present, and this increases slightly when you load the cartridge. I experienced no actual problem with noise using the Aria (about 500uV), but it's there if you go looking for it.

Because there's a range of loading options, from 47k Ohms down to 100 Ohms, the PH5 is compatible (or – perhaps more correctly – usable) with either MM or MC cartridges without needing to be switched one way or t'other. Maximum input voltage is given as 70mV @ 1kHz – a high figure. Of course, the loading options only apply to MC cartridges – virtually all MM pickups will need to be terminated with 47k Ohms

The other great practical benefit with this phono-stage is the provision of a stereo/mono switch. Now, younger readers might question the point of this. Actually, there are two reasons. The first would have been to allow you to A/B compare mono and stereo; in the days when stereo was new and something of a novelty, it was useful to compare the difference. But there's a

have an 'orange peel' sort of surface that causes background noise. Playing mono LPs with the channels summed (ie mono'd) eliminates such disturbances.

It's interesting to look at mono LPs pressed in the '50s; often, the surfaces look very rough and uneven.

Because stereo placed far greater demands on surface quality and flatness, there was a general raising of standards in LP pressing and vinyl quality from the early 1960s. So, if you're the sort



► might find a happy medium which could pay musical dividends, elevating the already fine performance of this phono-stage even further. And unlike output tubes, ECC88s aren't going to break the bank!

The four phono-stages featured in my comparative review were all very heavy; this one's a comparative featherweight at a mere 5.1 kg – 11.3lbs. In use, the PH5 gets barely warm. The makers recommend a warm-up time of about 1 hour, but actually it sounds pretty close to its best within ten or fifteen minutes.

Incidentally, the phono-stage mutes for about 30 seconds when switched on to prevent bangs and thumps while the power supply stabilises.

As previously indicated, the PH5's sound quality is first-rate: smooth and tonally warm, but surprisingly detailed and very holographic. It's a wholly natural and unexaggerated sound that's both engaging and easy on the ear. Because it's impressively dimensional, the PH5 creates a vivid 'out of the boxes' 3D soundstage – meaning you don't need to play the music loudly to create a big vivid effect.

It's smooth and natural, yet colourful too, while remaining beautifully integrated. The high treble is subjectively less exposed

than it can sometimes be with other phono-stages, yet there's no lack of brilliance or detail. And the easy-to-change loading option makes it simple and quick to tailor the sound to individual requirements. Because it's so easy to implement, you're more likely to experiment with this important parameter.

By solid state standards the PH5 is not absolutely quiet – hum and hiss levels



are slightly higher – but this will only be problematic if you use a very low output MC cartridge – 200uV or less. All things being equal, you'd expect a tube phono-stage to be slightly noisier than a solid-state one, and the PH5 is no exception. But in most situations the noise will not be audible – and that's what's important.

On a purely practical level, the provision of a stereo/mono switch and remote-control loading are big plus factors. Speaking as someone who regularly plays mono LPs, having a stereo/mono switch is invaluable. Given that it's a feature absent from nearly all other comparable phono-stages, not to mention amplifiers and pre-amplifiers, it's especially welcome. If I were buying a phono-stage myself,

this would be a major consideration.

Take these factors together and they make the Audio Research PH5 another outstanding phono-stage; one that offers both outstanding sound quality and exceptional ease of use. Not so long ago we were scrabbling around for decent stand-alone phono-stages to take on the task of amplifying the ever tinier signals emanating from MC cartridges. Since then, cartridge output levels have been on the increase and so has the number of top-notch phono-stages jostling for attention, until now they represent what must be one of the most over-populated sectors of the market (after cables of course – but that goes without saying). The good news is that so many of them are so good.

Decisions! Decisions!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Standalone valve phono-stage |
| Valve Complement: | 4x ECC88 |
| Inputs: | 1pr RCA-phono |
| Overall Gain: | 57dB |
| Input Impedance: | 100 Ohms – 47kOhms remotely controllable |
| Outputs: | 1pr RCA-phono |
| Output Impedance: | 200 Ohms |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 470 x 132 x 254mm |
| Weight: | 5.1 Kg |
| Finishes: | Front panel in silver or black |
| Price: | £1799 |

UK Distributor:

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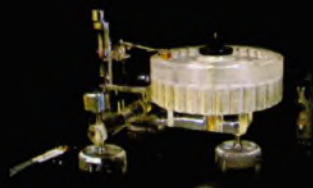
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Border Patrol S20 SE Power Amp

by Jason Kennedy

Back in those heady days before home cinema and the plethora of formats that came with it, an audio anarchist called Peter Qvortrup ran a company called Audio Innovations. His aim of world domination through valve amplification seemed crazy but harmless and many people were able to buy lovely amplifiers like the Series 500 integrated (a push pull EL34 design) for around £500, hook it up with some Snell Ks and a Systemdek turntable and produce a miraculously musical and entertaining sound.

At that time, Gary Dews was selling just such systems in the unit across the way from Audio Innovations' Brighton HQ and not grumbling all that much for a fellow from Featherstone. When Innovations moved to Portsmouth Gary carried on retailing from what had become Definitive Audio Brighton and the market being relatively lively, things ticked along quite smoothly. Around this time Audio Innovations employee Guy Sargeant's part-time potterings produced a rather unusual, green valve power amp (with PX4 output tubes if memory serves) nick-named the Border Patrol. I'm not sure where this name originated but chances are it was meant to be a light-hearted reference to the slightly militaristic green

enamel finish of the metalwork. It was also dubbed the Big Ten, another humorous reference to the fact that it produced nine watts, but one which backfired when Guy's employers heard about it – whence the name reverted to BT for big trouble!

What became of that green amp could probably be answered by Guy, who still likes to keep his hand in with valve amplification even though he has a relatively proper job with what remains of the JPW/Heybrook axis. Nonetheless the name struck a chord with

Gary who having a decent grasp of tube amp design himself made his first Border Patrol power amplifier in 1993. In his opinion the brand didn't really become established until he produced the first fully finished, silk screened models in '97. Since that time BP has produced a number of variations on the power amp theme alongside some of the meatiest external power supplies in the valve kingdom. The latter being made for valve amps from other brands, with Audio Innovations models such as the First and Second Audio 2A3 designs being among a wide variety

of successful projects. By the time you read this the first Border Patrol pre-amp or Control Unit as it's dubbed, a design which not surprisingly uses a similar power supply arrangement to the big amps, should be slowly shuffling off the production line.

As the BP website reveals, they offer various ways to skin the valve cat, all using 300B triode output tubes. There are SETs (single ended triodes) with one output tube per channel and push-pull versions with four output tubes. The latter are technically, but not necessarily sonically, superior to the parallel single ended arrangement found on the S20 SE that I



▶ have before me.

A fully hard wired, all triode design, the S20 SE is class A all the way through its 18 watts. It uses a Russian 6545Pi input driver valve that has high gain, low impedance and high transconductance. The latter in simple terms indicates sensitivity but as an

be turned past the ten o'clock position because input sensitivity on the power amp is so high. Gary has designed the

runs very warm indeed you won't feel inclined to leave it on all the time unless the central heating has packed up.

One thing that strikes you about this power amp and its supplies is the attention to detail. At first glance it looks to be of a similar build quality to many other small brand amplifiers; in other words fine but nothing to write home about. But look a little closer and use the product for a while and you realise that this is a fully finished well thought out component that will stand the test of time as well if not better than machine made audio electronics. Look under the lid at the way components are connected up and held in place and it inspires a confidence that can sometimes be lacking in the valve world. Connections are straightforward, RCA phonos for the incoming signal and alternative four or eight ohm taps for the speaker connection. Standard of finish is high throughout, but stops just short of slick while the paintwork is perfect and the screen printing professional.



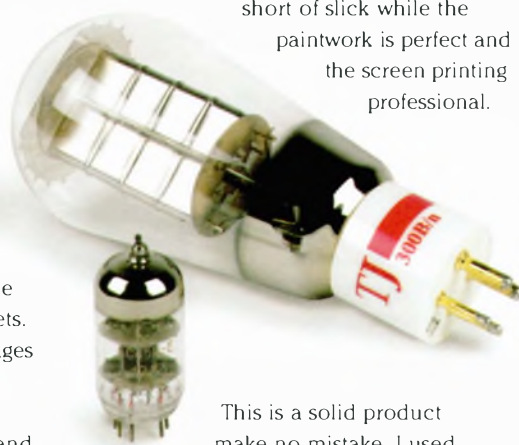
S20 SE so as to avoid this practical inconvenience and as a result it is well suited to the majority of pre-amps on the market.

indication of its importance used to be referred to as the 'goodness factor'. Higher sensitivity being 'A Good Thing' in almost all high fidelity components, unless we are talking power amp inputs. The 6545Pi drives an inter-stage transformer which in turn drives a 300B output tubes and thence the output transformer. The 300Bs on this S20 SE are TJ Fullmusic Meshplates from China, Gary prefers the Western Electric variety but these are currently not available, not to mention considerably more expensive.

It is still not unheard of to come across pre/power amp combos where the volume pot on the pre-amp cannot

The other good thing you need in any amp is a decent power supply, the S20 has just that in its valve rectified, choke input filter, high voltage supply of which there is one for each channel. The amp is dual mono all the way back to the mains sockets. These feed the requisite voltages to the amplifier via meaty multipin connectors. Rather conveniently both supplies and the amp itself are powered up with a single chunky switch. Somewhat inconveniently this switch is located behind one of the supplies and as this amplifier

This is a solid product make no mistake. I used the Border Patrol with Living Voice Avatar OBX-R speakers, a combination that works well because of the decent sensitivity of the speakers and a shared approach ▶



▶ to sound reproduction. By which I mean that both brands value the high fidelity virtues of dynamics and timbral resolve a little higher than average. It does seem that if you can get these two things right everything else falls into place. Timing for instance is very good – this is a nimble amplifier that keeps up with everything you throw at it. It reminds you of why Quicksilver was such a good name for a valve amp brand: not such a great name that the company still exists, but you can't rely on a name alone.

What you get alongside the S20 SE's speed is rather substantial bass that, truth be told, is distinctly atypical for a valve amp. Those two power supplies are damn 'stiff' as they say in the trade, and allow the essentially low power output valves to deliver some serious grunt. Because this is SET grunt it reveals all the colour and shape of bass notes in a tuneful and dynamic fashion. The majority of SETs sound distinctly lame in the bass compared to the Border Patrol, this is a triode amp for those reared on transistor bass. Stick on some heavy modern beats and you'll know all about the instrumentation, recording and processing of the sounds used to produce the bass – low synth bass being particularly well delivered, the amp revealing the character that the musician and producer have clearly gone to some effort to create.

Another unusual aspect of this amp is its response or bandwidth; valves are famous for having a glorious mid-band and a tendency to emphasise this above all else.

The S20 while phenomenally transparent in the mid-band has a remarkably even and clean response. You don't miss out on the frequency extremes and this is a wide band amplifier by anyone's standards. Gary credits this to the transformers which he has made especially for each of his amplifiers. They are designed to avoid

watts is still 18 watts and you don't get the power that a similarly priced transistor design can offer, but the way funky rock tracks pump with energy and colour is extremely beguiling. Even if you push the level hard, the way it clips is actually rather nice with certain types of material, and I don't mean violin quartets!

When a tranny amp clips the distortion produced is pretty offensive,



saturation at all costs and to keep phase reversal as far out of band as possible.

The S20's mid-band is proper SET stuff, voices are superb and you can hear all the words all of the time. This is a fluid and revealing amp that combines a delicacy which lets you hear micro dynamics clearly with an ability to swing real energy when it's required. At the end of the day 18

a valve design on the other hand can actually sound quite good, that's why many electric guitar players still prefer using valves in their amps.

The Border Patrol is also very strong when it comes to producing three-dimensional notes in a soundstage that is as deep as they come. With sampled and treated music where studio effects are heavily used sounds are solid yet never static, the way that the artist uses reverb and level to manipulate the placement of the sound source is extremely well recreated with the BPs. This quality also applies ▶

▶ to the reproduction of acoustic space, this is not one of those blowsy valve amps that makes everything enormous, it's a precisely focussed device, but when something comes along with genuine height information you really know about it. It's as if the speakers are now taller or the room more capacious. What's more the resolution of small sounds is so good that you can precisely identify what the sources for all those sounds are.

Captain Beefheart's *Clear Spot* is a classic abstract blues album with gorgeous 'phat' bass lines, colour, life and energy and no apparent shortage of grunt in the BP's capable hands. It's a lovely meaty sound which majors on grin factor, Don van Vliet's distinctive take on music works a treat with this level of attention to timing and energy. Technically speaking valve amps produce quite a lot of odd order harmonic distortion, but if this is distortion it certainly doesn't get in the way of the music.

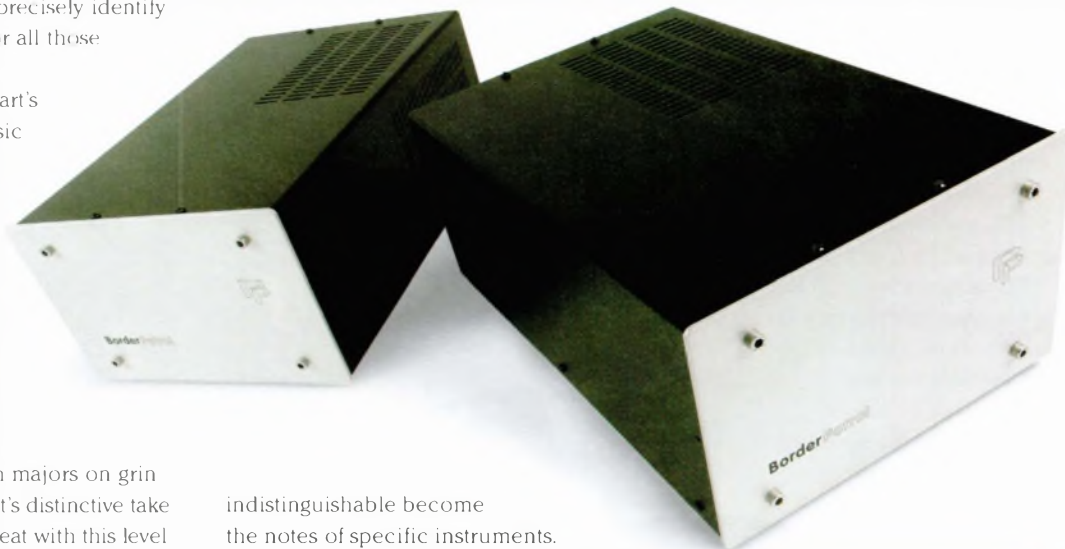
As the opportunity arose I gave the S20 SE a spin with some Vivid B1 loudspeakers (reviewed by PM in issue 33), this rather more demanding and neutral design proved nearly as well suited to the amp as the Living Voice. The Vivid helped it to reproduce the character of recordings rather well and did rather a lot to show that tubes can do cymbals rather realistically thank you. In general you could hear how each recording had been treated, the compression and lack thereof being very obvious. Presence is of course a valve strength and Adem's atmospherically charged *Homesongs* provides plenty of the stuff from the

close miced, double tracked vocals to the creak of the organ's foot pedal. This is a slightly super real recording when reproduced by kit of this calibre but thankfully that only adds to its musical appeal.

With denser mixes such as EST's *Seven Days of Falling* a lot of the finer sounds that had previously been

indistinguishable become the notes of specific instruments. Low-level sound is transformed into clear cut musical detail, something which applies to the beats of Timbaland and Missy Elliott just as much as with Scandinavian jazz. The former's masterpiece, *Da Real World*, is a slick, dark album that comes through tight and dirty, delivering plenty of revelations in the micro dynamic arena. This may not be sophisticated music in the traditional sense but it is not short on fine detail, it's a bit like the way the better projectors and plasma screens reveal more going on in shadowy areas, the BPs highlight both the character in the singer's voice and the nature of all the backing sounds and effects. This is a bass heavy experience and this amp combines with a speaker like the Vivid to recreate the power and variety of tonal shading in the bottom end to persuasive effect.

The Border Patrol S20 SE is an impressively well-built amplifier that gives the impression that valves aside it would give more than a lifetime's service. Combine this with its glorious energy, drive and resolve and you have a remarkable amplifier that anyone with reasonably sensitive speakers would be a fool to miss. ➤+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Type: | Parallel single-ended valve power amp |
| Valve Complement: | 2x 6545pi 4x 300B |
| Power output: | 18 watts, fixed bias |
| Input sensitivity: | 200mV RMS to full output |
| Frequency response: | 8Hz-45kHz +/-3dB |
| Dimensions (WxHxD) - | |
| Audio chassis: | 430 x x 220 330mm |
| Power supplies: | 220 x 145 x 345mm |
| Weights - | |
| Audio Chassis: | 22kg |
| Power Supplies: | 16kg each |
| Price: | £6,600 |

Manufacturer:

Border Patrol
Tel/Fax. (44)(0)1242 717171
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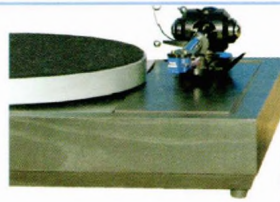
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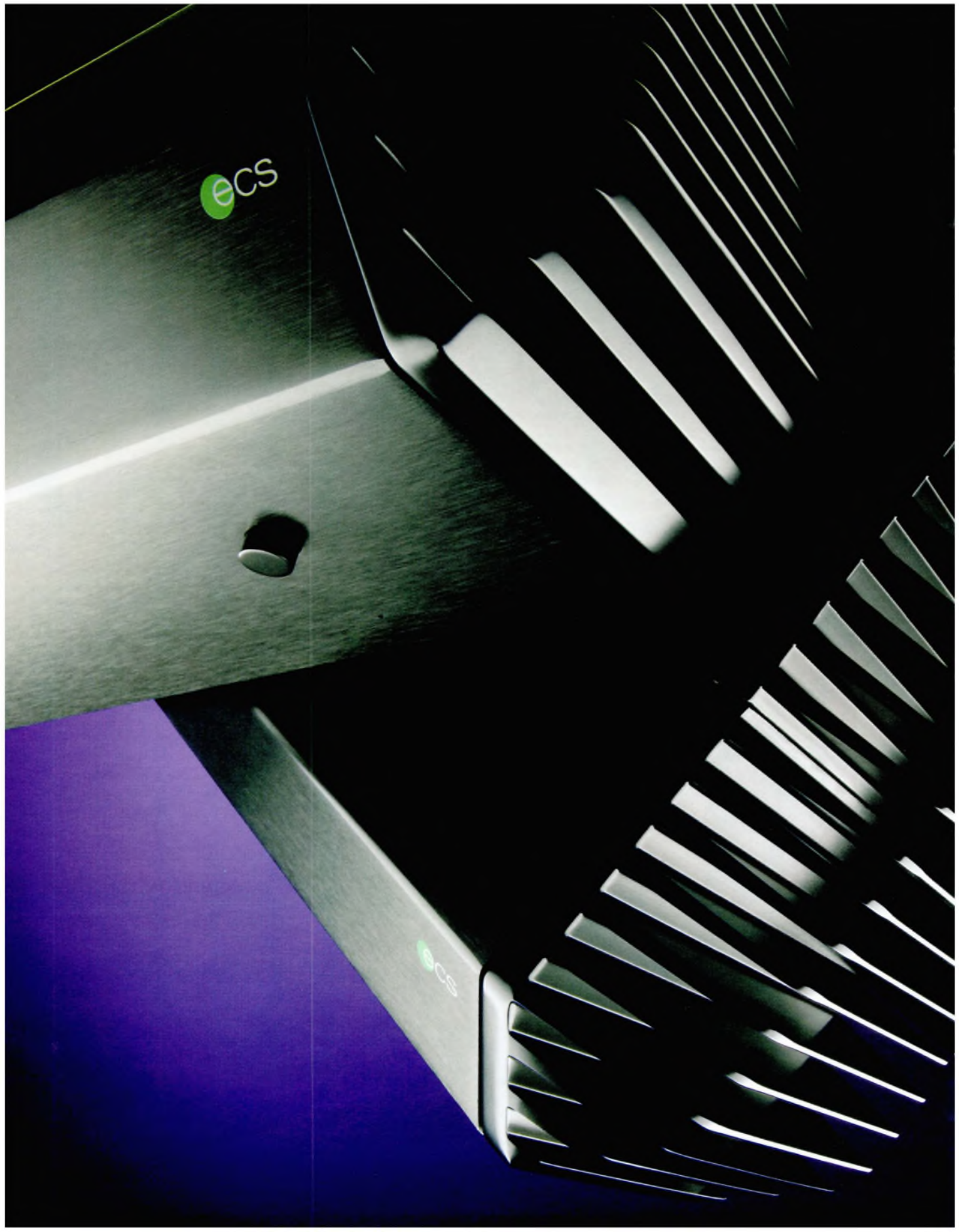
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ECS EA-1 Mono-block Power Amps

by Jason Kennedy

Those of you whose RAM isn't so clogged with ephemera that A no longer stands for memory, might remember that equipment support maker Mana Acoustics once bought out an amplifier called the Stealth. That amplifier was manufactured by ECS. As fortune would have it the two companies decided to go their separate ways before the amplifier went into full production and only a few prototype Stealths were built. Having invested a fair amount of time and money in the project ECS decided to push on with their own version which first came to light two years after the Stealth. This revised design turned into the stereo EA-2 that went into production in late 2002. ECS sourced metalwork from PRP which resulted in improved fit and finish, implementing internal modifications and improvements along the way

ECS's stock in trade is PCB manufacture; the company makes custom circuit boards for a wide variety of applications from its West London base, and this is where the internals of the EA-2 stereo and EA-1 mono-block power amp are produced. Both models inhabit the same chassis, only the rear panel giving away the single channel nature of the EA-1. This monster features high quality single-ended phono and balanced XLR sockets with a switch to select between the two. Each block sports two sets of WBT speaker terminals for easy bi-wiring.

Look inside the casework and you'll see a very similar picture with these two amplifiers, the mono is essentially a stereo unit with only one output board. You get the same power supply driving one rather than two channels, and as power supplies are the engine of an amplifier you are getting twice the capacity. The actual power rating doesn't increase much but the amperage must

virtually double. The EA-2 gives 180 watts a side whereas the EA-1 delivers 200 watts from four its bi-polar output transistors. That aside there are no other specs to suggest that the mono-block is any different to the stereo. I'm surprised that distortion measurements aren't included, as they would reveal the advantages produced by all that extra capacity. But then again such things do not translate to increased sound quality as we all know.



Each EA-1 has an ultra low noise FET input stage with a dedicated power supply and high purity copper PCB track. Being PCB makers ECS are fully aware of the effect that the track has on high frequencies and the way that the signal flows. The board naturally has a dedicated ground arrangement. The mains transformer is a 1500VA toroidal monster that makes up a fair proportion of the 22 kilo mass, its oversize nature ensuring that all voltages are maintained precisely whatever the demands placed on the supply as a whole.

ECS appreciates the advantages of minimising inductance in amplifier design and uses zero inductance components in the critical paths and ultra low tolerance/inductance parts elsewhere. Each mono-block has

40,000uf of bypassed reservoir capacity and enough heat sinking for an air cooled motor-bike, well almost. The output transistors are hand selected with eight individual parameter tests being applied to each, the ability to dissipate heat being considered one of the more important in the view of ECS' design team.

I had a bit of trouble with the first pair of amps that were delivered. Driving the higher than average sensitivity of my Living Voice Avatar OBX-R loudspeakers they proved a little too noisy. A second sample reduced the noise significantly, and you now had to put your ear right up the tweeter before the hiss became apparent. Fortunately it's not volume dependent, and more importantly, you can't hear it from more than a foot away.

I wouldn't say that the EA-1s are unsubtle, quite the opposite in fact, but give them something with energy, space and power to reproduce and they quite literally rock. Led Zepelin's live *How the West was Won* CD kicks serious arse, the rendition of dynamics and speed allowing the explosive moments to genuinely ignite. It's not hard to hear why this specific bunch of minstrels was considered to be the greatest rock'n'roll band in the world ever when their live recordings can sound this good. I used a different track of this album to contrast the mono-blocks against a Mk1 Gamut D200 stereo amp, which although half the price is capable of holding its own in exalted company. Both amps have a similarly open, dynamic character but the extra speed and low-level resolution that the monos are capable of is stunning. What sounds like background noise on the Gamut amp turns into an ecstatic crowd on the ECS, and when a chord is struck the impact is twice as powerful thanks to the rapidity with ▶

▶ which the amp recovers from transients.

With acoustic music such as the sublime *Seven Days of Falling* (EST), there is a confidence and nimbleness about the delivery that is extremely engaging, it almost seems to infuse the music with enthusiasm, but what it's really doing is letting you hear the intent of the musicians. Just to prove the point the mood on another track is more sombre and pensive with gorgeous double bass tone; the instrument revealing its fully bodied sound and lovely thrumminess.

Bass as with the rest of the band is nimble and controlled which can give the impression of dryness with some material, some big transistor amps certainly deliver a more obvious bottom end. But if there is low frequency energy on the disc and your speakers and room can cope with it then the EA-1s have no difficulty in delivering it in a controlled, substantial fashion. Take King Crimson's latest disc *The Power to Believe*. It is as heavy as anything that Robert Fripp and his cohorts have ever attempted and Tony Levin



exercises little restraint with his Stick bass. This is abundantly clear via the EA-1s yet the sound never gets oppressive as excess bass can.

Removing the Border Patrol Control Unit pre-amp from the chain and using the onboard volume controls of both Wadia and Resolution Audio CD players direct peeled another layer from the acoustic window and let even more fine

detail through. The sort of thing you wouldn't expect to benefit a track as full on and essentially basic as *The Real Slim Shady* (*The Marshall Mathers LP*), but that would be to underestimate the importance of speed to the resolution of music. How Eminem manages



to rap with such finesse taking so few apparent breaths is remarkable.

Shortly after using these amps at home ECS organised a day out at John Jeffries' place in Sussex where they had hooked up the amps with his Lumley Concert Grand speakers. These are genuine behemoths; six foot tall and bristling with drive units each one weighs a laughable 120kg, as in if

someone suggested I try to get them into the house I'd laugh! Rarely has anyone had the audacity to put such a variety of drive units into a loudspeaker cabinet. You want tweeters? Have four, plus four super

tweeters, and while you're at it add four dome midranges to the mix and shake with a single 12inch bass driver. But that's not all, there are two mid/bass drivers on the back to create a bit of ambience. A 90dB/4 Ohm design they presumably take a bit of controlling,

something that the ECS mono-blocks had little trouble in doing. However there were two per channel with Boulder 2010 pre-amplification at the front and an Audiomeca CD transport with Boulder 2020 DAC doing the digital thing. And that's not forgetting the Lumley Stratosphere turntable and Graham arm for the vinyl. The result was a huge and unusually transparent sound, the amps clearly not out of their depth in such expensive company. We played a good variety of music from both formats and whilst it was difficult to get a feel for what the EA-1s were contributing in such an alien system, they certainly weren't cast in the role of limiting factor.

These power amps are very impressive devices. They seem to be extremely neutral, responding to every nuance of the music in a clear, coherent and swift fashion that lets the sound breathe. Some may crave more crunchy bass, others more holographic imaging, but they would be better off seeking speakers that have these qualities rather than assuming these amps don't. They may not be the flashiest or most demonstrative designs around, but it would be a mistake to underestimate their highly capable performance.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Type: | Transistor mono-block power amps |
| Inputs: | Switchable balanced XLR or unbalanced RCA |
| Rated output: | 200W into 8 ohm |
| Dimensions(WxHxD): | 43.8 x 11.2 x 42.8cm |
| Accessories: | Hand made power cables |
| Weight: | 22kg each |
| Price: | £6,000 per pair |

Manufacturer:

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MEDEA

3

2

1

reference digital to analogue converter

A

Weiss Medea DAC

by Jimmy Hughes

There was a time – say four or five years back - when the mention of someone sending me an expensive high-end DAC for review would have resulted in severe misgivings. Put simply, the concept of having a separate DAC seemed to have run its course. Although outboard DACs were fairly popular in the late '80s and early '90s as a way of upgrading the performance of an existing CD player, the idea began to lose its sparkle as the '90s progressed and single box CD players kept improving.

More significantly, many manufacturers stated their belief that having everything in one package was actually a technically better solution. It had become clear that having a separate CD transport and outboard DAC created its own problems; specifically, increased levels of jitter. Any sonic advantage achieved by splitting transport and DAC into two packages was far outweighed by the drawbacks. The days of two-box CD players seemed to be drawing to a close...

True, Arcam had tackled the two-box jitter problem as long ago as the mid '80s by providing their Black Box 5 DAC and Delta 170.3 transport with an extra data cable to help 'lock' the two together. But it wasn't until Chord introduced their DAC-64 converter, which put the digital signal into a buffer and then re-clocked it, that the problem was finally dealt with. The DAC-64 was a product that significantly improved CD sound using any transport – precisely what's required from an outboard DAC.

A quick flick through the Weiss brochure on the Medea DAC certainly raises one's expectations. If it actually does what the makers say, it's going to

be a significant piece of kit. Founder and President Daniel Weiss cut his teeth at Studer/Revox in the early '80s, leaving the company in 1985 to start Weiss Engineering. The company have largely concentrated on making products for the pro market, especially professional mastering studios, and their client list reads like a Who's Who with many big-name users.

They've now decided to make something for high-end home users wanting the very best from CD.



So – enter the Medea Digital to Analogue converter.

As a company, Weiss seem to have a definite feel for what's required to make digital audio deliver subjectively satisfying results. They seem to know most of the problems and - more importantly – appear to have some of the answers! But, would the Medea really perform as well in practise as it appears to do on paper. I couldn't wait to find out...

Speaking purely for myself - having gotten well and truly used to the outstanding results produced by the Chord Blu CD transport and revised DAC-64 - the Medea had an exceedingly

tough act to follow. It's easy to take the excellence of the Chord combination for granted, forgetting that such outstanding results from CD aren't easily achieved. As I got ready to listen and put on the first CD, I wondered if any DAC could better the revised DAC-64 – especially when partnered with the Blu transport.

The Medea certainly sounded good. First impressions were of a clean open sound of great clarity and immediacy. The tonal balance seemed extremely natural and realistic, with no sense of false highlighting or exaggeration. The music sounded vivid and lucid, yet at the same time very natural and

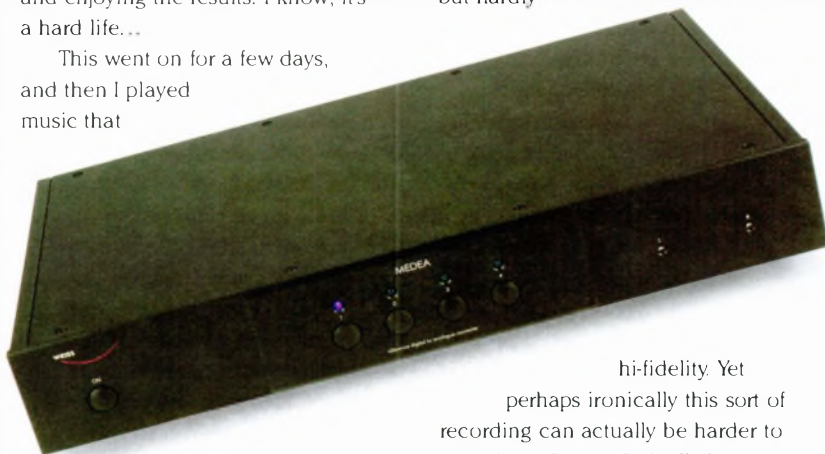
believable. It was a winning combination: impressive fine detail and sharpness, allied to an attractive smoothness and naturalness. Put in simpler more basic terms, it sounded right.

Tonally, the music sounded beautifully balanced – sharp and tactile, while at the same time smooth and integrated. Difficult things – like massed violins, solo voice, massed choral forces – had a difficult-to-describe rightness that struck me as being wholly natural and authentic. By comparison, while the DAC-64 certainly seemed able to match the Medea for detail and analysis, it wasn't quite as sweet and natural sounding; the Chord's presentation was slightly 'harder' tonally, and a tad more forward too. The Chord gave a sound that had slightly more bite and greater immediacy.

Although such distinctions in sound quality seemed strongly contrasted when I first made my comparisons, after a few days spent listening to the Medea in ►

▷ isolation the difference seemed to fade. The sound was still extremely good, but wasn't the result pretty much as it had been with the DAC-64? Well, yes and no. The Medea proved very easy to listen to – so much so, I quickly 'forgot' about evaluating its performance. It was very much a case of sitting back and enjoying the results. I know; it's a hard life...

This went on for a few days, and then I played music that

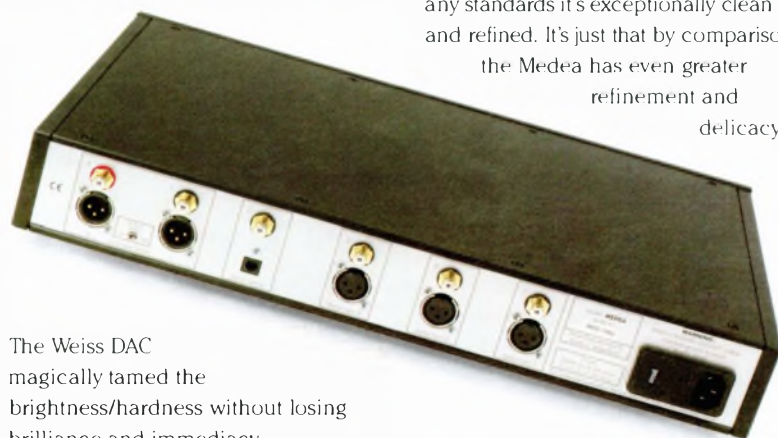


unexpectedly re-focused attention on exactly what the Medea was doing. Ironically, it was something from the gaslight era – something predating high-fidelity as we know it. The recording that really highlighted the difference (even without comparisons) turned out to be a four CD boxed set I'd recently bought of French Chansons sung by Charles Trenet. Most of the tracks were recorded in the late 1940s - among them, his most popular song *La Mer*.

Although in strict hi-fi terms the recordings have certain limitations – they're off '78s and in mono – the actual sound is surprisingly good in musical terms. Clarity is excellent; you can hear every inflection in the voice, and lots of orchestral detail. But, previous listening via the DAC-64 had sometimes produced a hint of hardness – especially, in some of the more vigorous, trumpet-dominated tracks. I thought the hardness was due to limitations in the original recordings – hardly surprising given the age of the material.

Like many tracks taken from '78s, the Trenet recordings have a slightly 'peaky' quality; a forward upper mid-range that gives clarity and presence, while at the same time helping to disguise the lack of high treble frequencies. It's a distinct 'vintage' sort of sound – not unpleasant in its way - but hardly

hi-fidelity. Yet perhaps ironically this sort of recording can actually be harder to reproduce than technically better more recent recordings.



The Weiss DAC magically tamed the brightness/hardness without losing brilliance and immediacy

Via the Medea, Trenet's voice had a noticeably smoother more liquid and beguiling quality. It sounded more effortless and easy. Although clarity and detail remained excellent, the recordings now sounded more relaxed – with less of the peaky brightness that had been apparent before. Not that the DAC-64 had sounded bad. But the Medea - sweeter, mellower, with a more analogue sort of reproduction - sounded even more natural, and

believable. It sounded realistic, and very easy to listen to.

The Medea produces a truly 'big' sound; quite awesomely huge. For convenience I mostly used my review sample via its unbalanced RCA phono outputs. But, those having amplifiers with the appropriate inputs, will find the Medea sounds even bigger and more dimensional when used via its balanced XLR outputs. Incidentally, perhaps due to its professional origins, this DAC is capable of massive output levels when set to 'high' – up to +27dB – fully adjustable via multi-turn trim potentiometers.

For classical music, voices and acoustic instruments, the Medea edged it for sheer relaxed naturalness. For non-classical material, the extra bite of the Chord DAC sometimes created a more exciting up-front 'in your face' sort of presentation. Not that I'm saying the Chord lacks the finesse and refinement necessary for acoustic instruments – by any standards it's exceptionally clean and refined. It's just that by comparison the Medea has even greater refinement and delicacy.

Everything in hi-fi is relative. Always remember that. By the highest LP standards, the Medea still isn't quite as smooth and open as the very best analogue. You don't quite get the subtle individual tone colours and effortlessly articulate detail that's somehow sharp and smooth at the same time. But it's a pretty close-run thing.

A wide range of sampling frequencies can be utilised –

► 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, or 96kHz; plus either 176.4kHz or 192kHz using the dual wire system. Maximum input word length is 24bits. There are four inputs; four via unbalanced phono sockets with three parallel balanced XLRs, and one optical Toslink. Analogue output is via unbalanced phono sockets or balanced XLR.

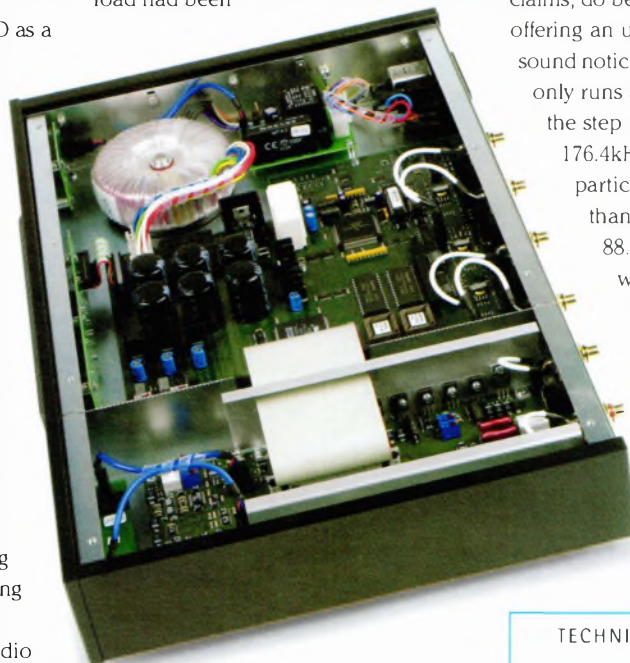
For domestic listeners using CD as a source, best results (in terms of smoothness, openness, and a mellow relaxed immediacy) are achieved when you use the Medea via its 176.4kHz dual input option. Next best is the 88.2kHz alternative. However, these high sampling rates can only be used with CD transports that have the necessary up-sampled outputs. If your transport does not offer such luxuries, then the standard 44.1kHz has to be used. I'd have liked some indication as to which sampling rate was being used.

Operating at a higher sampling rate enables some of the anti-aliasing filtering to be done in the digital domain, meaning the analogue audio signal no longer has to be 'brick wall' filtered at 20kHz. This allows the bandwidth of the system (in filtering terms) to be doubled, and seems to create a smoother more open tonality that's closer to good analogue. Although the Medea sounds very good with a 44.1kHz transport, it audibly improves with either the 88.2kHz or 176.4kHz options. But of course that's assuming a natural sound is what's wanted! Some actually like the brightness of basic CD...

Although I still believe the finest analogue retains a certain extra 'something' that even the best CD doesn't quite equal, it has to be said that CD from a DAC like the Weiss Medea is mightily impressive. Quite frankly, if you couldn't accept and enjoy CD from a DAC like this, you wouldn't be able to live with CD period. The road to Pure Perfect CD

Sound has been a long and arduous one. It's taken over twenty years for CD to finally deliver the musical results its specifications promised.

For me personally, hearing Chord's DAC-64 represented a turning point: the moment when CD finally came of age. Not that this meant the end of the road had been



reached with no further progress possible. However good a piece of hi-fi is, it's always possible to improve it! It's been something like three years since I reviewed the original DAC-64, and for me it was and remains a landmark product. Since its release, Chord have updated it for use with their remarkable Blu CD transport – which offers 44.1kHz, 88.2kHz and dual 176.4kHz outputs – creating a combination capable of producing truly fabulous results that would've seemed unbelievable when CD was originally launched.

Now the Medea mounts a challenge, and in a number of ways actually improves on the Chord DAC so far as openness and naturalness are concerned. Like the DAC-64, the Medea re-clocks the signal to reduce jitter to microscopically low levels. However,

it does so in real-time, rather than relying on a four-second buffer. This should mean the Medea is relatively insensitive to things like inter-connect cables and the quality of the CD transport used. Indeed, Weiss make exactly this point in their literature.

While I'd broadly endorse these claims, do bear in mind that a transport offering an up-sampled output will sound noticeably better than one that only runs at 44.1kHz. In particular, the step from 88.2kHz to the dual 176.4kHz option seems to be particularly significant - bigger than going from 44.1kHz to 88.2kHz. What I think you will find is that different CD transports lose much of their individual signature when used with the Medea – even quite modest budget CD players will sound fabulous with this DAC! ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Type: | Stand alone digital to analogue converter |
| Sampling frequencies: | 44.1K, 48K, 88.2K, 96K |
| Inputs: | 3 x AES/EBU XLR 4 x S/PDIF RCA-phono 1 x Toslink optical |
| Outputs: | 1pr RCA-phono 1pr balanced XLR |
| Output Level: | 0–+27dB |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 445 x 75 x 295mm |
| Weight: | 10Kg |
| Finishes: | Black or silver |
| Price: | £9000 |

UK Distributor:
Nola UK
Tel. (44)(0)20 7684 1490
E-mail. pammusic@3mail.com

Manufacturer:
Net. www.weiss.ch



OPEN/CLOSE

PLAY

STOP

STILL / PAUSE

HDMI / DVI
SELECT

VIDEO MODE

SUPER
AUDIO CD
SETUP

PURE
DIRECT
SELECT

DVD AUDIO

ENTER

DVD AUDIO CD PLAYER DV

Denon DVD-3910 Universal Disc Player

by Alan Sircom

There are two ways of making a DVD player – the easy way, and the hard way. The easy way involves taking someone else's DVD player and modifying it to the new company's requirements (even if this means simply an exercise in badge engineering). The harder – and considerably more expensive – option is to start from scratch and design your own player. Surprisingly, most high-end universal and DVD players take the 'easy' option, uprating an OEM device; Denon is one of the few that takes the tougher route.

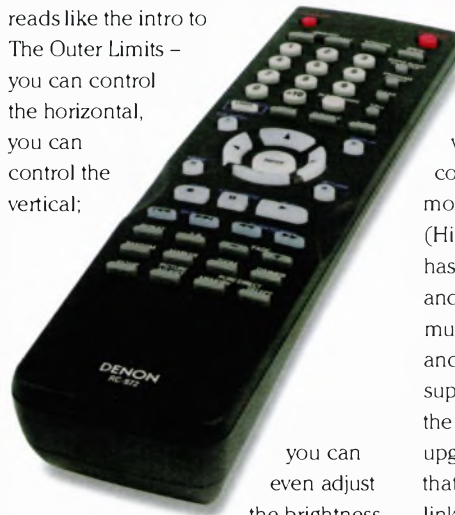
The DVD-3910 only costs a grand. Not bad for a universal player, given you can spend five times this on what is essentially a modified Pioneer. Despite its relatively low cost, the 3910 bristles with techie innovations that only occur when the company both designs and builds the player. The centre-mounted transport mechanism is a case in point; more akin to a DVD-ROM transport, this enclosed unit is built with that reassuring solidity that makes you think it won't break down in a month of Sundays.

The rigidity of build extends from the transport mechanism to the chassis itself, a thick modular design, which helps to up-rate the stiffness and anti-vibration properties of the player and effectively mechanically separate the key stages (analogue audio, analogue video, digital audio, digital video, power supply, logic and transport mech, etc) from one another.

Of course, a fancy transport and rigid case do not provide much in the way of quality, without the technology to back it up, and the DVD-3910 features Denon's AL24 192kHz, 24bit digital processing through all channels. It also supports HDCD encoded discs.

This may be a music review, but the

DVD-3910's video performance represents a great leap forward in video performance. It is infinitely adjustable, right down to the pixel level. It already has the right credentials with its DCDi progressive scan circuit and its 216MHz, 12bit video conversion. However, the addition of a raft of picture adjustment facilities make the player deliver the best possible picture whatever the screen. The list of corrections reads like the intro to *The Outer Limits* – you can control the horizontal, you can control the vertical;



you can even adjust the brightness and luminescence and diagonal performance and more. The only downside to this is it becomes bewilderingly complex, even to the experts. Imagine trying to explain VTA adjustment to someone who had never seen a record deck (or explaining downloading a MP3 file from the internet to your great-great grandfather) and you can see how complex this might be. Suffice it to say, in the hands of an expert, this can tailor-make an already excellent picture to your own TV screen and in the process, become better than any other player today.

One of the more interesting additions is that it places both HDMI

and DVI-D video connections (alongside the more commonplace composite, S-Video, SCART and interlaced/progressive component video connections) on the back panel.

This may be of little direct interest for the musical content of the player, but demonstrates Denon's commitment to keeping the player ahead of the curve. HDMI is currently digital video link

du jour for the plasma fraternity,

DVI-D is more popular among projector and LCD makers.

Although the two are effectively interchangeable, DVI-HDMI (or vice versa) leads are relatively hard to come by and this makes the player more directly display-friendly. HDMI (High-Definition Multimedia Interface) has had an interface-lift very recently and now supports digital multi-channel music alongside digital stereo music and digital video; this HDMI v2 is not supported by the DVD-3910 as yet, but the chances are this will be a firmware upgrade for those that need it (amplifiers that support HDMI as a digital audio link are practically non-existent today, but in a couple of years time, this could be the digital SCART lead, with just a single cable connecting all kinds of device together).

Until HDMI takes over the duties, the DVD-3910 uses the proprietary DenonLink3 connection and the more commonplace IEEE1394 to digitally connect multi-channel music. These should support DVD-Audio and SACD out of the box, but – as usual – there's a hold up with SACD approval and a few media lawyers need to earn another Porsche or two before the player squirts a digital SACD signal to an amplifier. Until then, the six-channel analogue connection fit the bill, while vanilla ▶

▶ optical and coaxial digital links are also supplied for stereo audio and Dolby /DTS surround in digital.

Denon is clearly onto something here, because this sets a new standard in universal players; this is the first player to deliver decent performance in all formats at anything approaching affordability. Of course, with SACD being limited to analogue (DVD-Audio/Video and CD capable of being played in the digital and analogue domains), comparing formats becomes a bit hampered, but this does put in a good performance pretty much however you use it. This is what you would expect from a universal player but is in fact surprisingly rare, especially among players that cost £1,000 or less. Processing the individual needs of the three main sound formats (SACD, DVD-Audio and CD) is uniquely complex without ruining one or more formats.

Starting with SACD in analogue only, the sound the Denon produces is every bit as extended as a dedicated SACD player, but with an accent more on the richness of the sound instead of

the stark upper frequency detail.

This seems to give SACD more body and weight, but not at the expense of information or soundstaging. It's a very good balance, although those seeking to demonstrate the brilliance of SACD over DVD-Audio may find this places the accent on the wrong part of the sound. Personally, I find this a better sound than the brighter, typical SACD sound; too often, there's a disparity between the CD and SACD layers, or between the SACD and a CD

mix on the same player, with the brightness of the SACD being perceived as much of an improvement as the detail. Until there comes a time when SACD versions of almost every disc are freely available, I prefer no such shift from stereo to multi-channel.

DVD-Audio is just as competent as SACD. That's a rare statement, in and of itself. Like SACD, DVD-Audio has the emphasis on musical midrange, with detailed extended treble and deep, potent bass. Comparing analogue SACD to analogue DVD-Audio,



the sound really isn't that different from one format to the other; the differences between two styles of recording are greater than between the two formats when played through the analogue outputs of the DVD-3910.

So, the overall sound of both DVD-Audio and SACD is generally impressive, with good steering round the room, plenty of detail and extension in the upper regions, clean and deep bass and a fluid, open midrange. Ultimately, DVD-Audio is slightly better in the bass while SACD is cleaner in the upper regions, but these differences are comparatively mild through the DVD-3910.

This would suggest the DVD-3910 is doing something wrong, but in fact it isn't at all. We have come to expect the sound of the two to be fundamentally and significantly different, but why should this be so? Multi-channel music

should sound similar regardless of source, and this is one of the few players that does just that.

That said, it's hard not to find DVD-Audio more attractive on the DVD-3910 at the moment, simply because it can be processed through DenonLink and SACD (for the moment) cannot. This makes the sound considerably more precise, especially in steering. Suddenly, bass management becomes more accurate, speakers

appear more solid and precisely located and the whole sound appears more direct than through the analogue output. The advantage is significant, but temporary; SACD will also be processed digitally, soon.

The acid test for any universal player is its CD replay. There's usually so much jitter floating round the insides of a DVD player that it makes the possibility of a decent CD sound next to impossible. Even the DVD-3910 suffers here; but it suffers less than most. The player isn't the most directly beat-sniffing model around and will leave those who begin and end all listening criteria with timing slightly disappointed with the DVD-3910. That said, the same people will not be particularly chuffed with any DVD player – universal or not – this side of about £2,500, and the Denon does a better job of keeping the music in time than any of its rivals. Its strengths in a stereo context include fine detail delivery and good stereo soundstaging, all without ▶

▶ making you think DVD stands for Duvet over the Drivers. There's no soggy, stodgy sound here, and CD is more reminiscent of a good mid-price Arcam CD player of a few years ago, mixed with a little bit of Marantz DNA for good measure.

There is a slight weakness across all music formats, a flavour of the Denon rather than the disc. This is not the most dynamic player around, and music may be detailed, precise and possessed of good soundstaging, but the sort of powerful swings of

worth experimenting (there are presets, so you won't ruin your basic picture); but even left entirely as standard, the picture is rich and natural, with a good sense of film-like layering to the images on screen. Colours are not overblown, but neither are they muted. The player is just honest and accurate. Of course, you can tweak to deliver shiny brilliant colours and sharp contrasts, or washed out colours with bland, soft contrast if required; but in the main the picture is

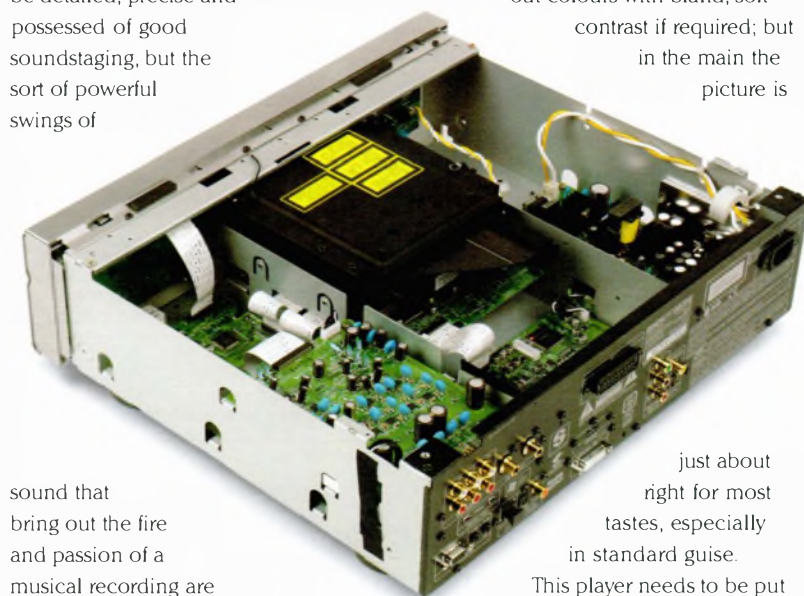
sound that bring out the fire and passion of a musical recording are slightly flattened. If you value the sort of lithe dynamic freedom of a good single-ended valve amp, this ain't the source for you. However, this dynamic flattening is commonplace among home cinema electronics and seems to match the dynamic shortcomings of most multi-channel amplifiers, especially models that will be used with a player at this sort of price tag. In stereo, though, there are more dynamic models around, particularly for CD replay.

Last, and least important for hi-fi readers, comes the video performance. And, as you'd expect with such a high performing, infinitely adjustable player, this is first rate. But that doesn't cover it... this isn't just first rate, it can potentially out-perform every DVD player out there if correctly installed. If you aren't entirely sure what you are doing with the picture connections, it's still

just about right for most tastes, especially in standard guise. This player needs to be put into some kind of perspective. Is this a high-end player? Well, yes... and no. For high-end home cinema fans, this is wonderful stuff; the video scaling and proliferation of digital and analogue video connectors, coupled with the technology to back those connections up, make this one of the best bargains around. Musically, too, there is much to commend this model. Most important is the degree of balance it has, delivering good DVD-Audio, SACD and CD sounds alike. There may be players that excel in a single field and turn in a better performance in one particular format, but few work so well across the board, unless you spend considerably more.

But perhaps the single most important aspect of the Denon DVD-3910 is the message it sends to the home cinema and hi-fi industries. It boldly proclaims that you need to do

something more than stick a thick front panel on a cheap universal player if you want to make a high-end player these days. Those who have to make machines based on OEM parts must now do more to justify their players; the McCormack UDP-1 and especially the Townshend Audio TA 565 being perfect examples of how to customise an existing model and make the differences credible. However, those with £1,500 badge-engineered range-filler players had better think again; the DVD-3910 will get you!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Type: | Universal disc player |
| Signal system: | NTSC/PAL |
| Applicable discs: | DVD-Audio/DVD-Video, SACD, CD, Video CD, HDCD compatible CD, DVD-R/RW, CD-R/RW, JPEG picture CD, MP3/WMA on CD-R |
| S-Video output: | Y output level: 1Vp-p (75ohms), C output level: 0.286 Vp-p |
| Video output level: | 1Vp-p (75ohms) |
| Component video: | Y output level: 1Vp-p (75ohms), Pb/Cb, Pr/Cr output level: 0.7Vp-p (75ohms) |
| RGB output level: | 0.7Vp-p (75ohms) |
| Audio output: | 2V(rms) |
| Frequency response - | |
| DVD/Linear PCM: | 2Hz-22kHz (48kHz sampling), 2Hz-44kHz (96kHz sampling), 2Hz-88kHz (192kHz sampling) |
| SACD: | 2Hz-100kHz |
| CD: | 2Hz-20kHz |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 434 x 137 x 403mm |
| Weight: | 9.3kg |
| Price: | £899 |

UK Distributor:

Denon (UK) Ltd

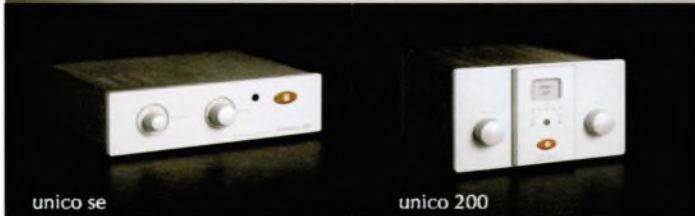
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
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Roy Gregory - Hi-Fi+ magazine issue 28.



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Eben X-Baby Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

This has been a vintage year for high quality stand-mounted speakers. Focal-JMLabs, Sonus Faber, Reference 3A and Eben, to name but three manufacturers, have all come up with quite special offerings over the past twelve months. And now Danish manufacturer Eben have introduced the X-Baby, which is essentially an X-Centric with only one bass driver. Back in issue 30 I had an encounter with the X-Centric and ended up liking it a lot, but the review was not without some teething problems and these were largely down to the horn loaded Raidho planar tweeter that all the Eben X series feature so prominently. As I have said before, the tweeter in so many ways really defines the speaker and never was this truer than with the Ebens. Sitting and listening to the X-Baby for the first time bought a forceful sense of *deja vu* to the proceedings. Here was that cupped and slightly enclosed sound to the high frequencies that had thrown me the first time round. It is true that what you think about anything in life, including Hi-Fi, depends to a large extent on where you have been before and I had been living with the Micro-Utopia Be and the Reference 3A Dulcets so I had grown used to high frequency extension and separation and lots and lots of air and space. In comparison the X-Baby initially seems bandwidth-limited and even somewhat muted. It was obvious that a suitable period of acclimatisation was, once again, going to be needed. After all it didn't take that long to get used to the X-Centrics.

If you picture the X-Centric then remove the top bass driver you will get a pretty good idea of the X-Baby's appearance. The tweeter and the

mid/bass unit are essentially the same except the latter has been fitted with a heavier cone to facilitate better power handling. Swedish Audio Technologies, run by Per Skaaning, make this driver and if you think it bears a striking similarity to the Dynaudio range then you'd be right as Per was the designer of those units too. The Planar tweeter is the same model found in the X-Centric and is an ultra low mass diaphragm etched with a voice coil and sitting in an array of neodymium magnets and



is not to be confused with similar looking ribbon designs. But it is the loading of the tweeter that gives it its own individual personality and is responsible for the unusual colouration that is so prevalent while you are acclimatising yourself to it. This element is made from a highly damped injection moulded polymer, which fits tight against the tweeter's periphery and flares outward loading

the unit in a specific and sonically instantly identifiable way. I think it's true to say that I have never heard high frequencies reproduced in such a way before I heard the X-Centric and the X-Baby and indeed, all of the X series feature this device.

The cabinet is small, a rather dull grey in colour and extremely solid though perhaps not as heavy as you would imagine when you know that the front baffle, which slopes to allow for time alignment, is up to 50mm thick at one point. Internally the tweeter is located in its own, individual sealed box while the crossover is a deliberately simple first-order type, which acts at 3.5 kHz. Internal wiring is Nordost monofilament, which just has to be a good thing, while externally there's a single pair of gold-plated connectors, which can accommodate bi-wired cables. There is also a rather large 70mm rear firing port. The whole speaker has a claimed 50-50 frequency response though the sensitivity has dropped from the X-Centrics useful 90 dB to 87dB, which in practice has greater relevance than the 3dB dip at first suggests.

The stands are very similar to the X-Centrics too although the base has been simplified. The rectangular section fluted aluminium column is left hollow, open at the top and unfilled with sand or any other material, while the speakers sit atop 4 small lightly compliant dimples. The base can accept spikes, Nordost pulsar points or the ColdRay feet, which I used and even with the speakers in situ the whole thing is light enough to make positional adjustments easy. And siting the X-Baby correctly is an extremely important part of wringing the best from them, though perhaps not quite as important as the choice of ►

► amplifier, which is absolutely critical. The large rear port means that they must be sited well away from rear walls and the horn loaded tweeter necessitates a certain amount of toe-in as the high end response rolls away quite quickly off-axis.

But even with the tweeters at the optimum angle it is hard to credit the claimed 50kHz top-end. This is partly due to the horn loading but also to the fact that there is very little "air" to the sound. Music seems to happen in a way that seems unreconstructed by the speaker, with very low distortion (at least of the classic "dome tweeter" type). Some would say that they are more natural in this respect. It took me a long time to get used to the nature of the Eben's portrayal of music, longer than with the X-Centrics in fact. Where the latter speakers with their 90dB efficiency put in a creditable performance with relatively modestly priced amplifiers, the X-Baby is noticeably more demanding. That 3dB loss of efficiency doesn't help, but I never felt entirely happy with them hooked up to any of my usual integrated amplifiers like those from Pathos or Moon and didn't think that I was really hearing what they were all about until I tried them with the Hovland RADIA power amplifier partnered by both their own HP 200 pre-amp and the Tom Evans Vibe/Pulse. They eat power and really need a very special amplifier to show their mettle, but with these requirements satisfied they move into such a different league that it is hard to credit that you are listening to the same loudspeaker. They are fast, so much so in fact that they will accurately reflect the rest of the system's ability to gain and loose energy and this stretches from the overtly dynamic right down to the micro-dynamic where they are

simply tremendous. The more you listen to them the more you begin to appreciate that there is a certain truth and honesty in their musical performance. So, as with the X-Centrics and I suspect all of the X range, heavily multi-tracked music is often disappointing in that it can seem flat and uninvolved though high quality multi-tracked productions will show their superiority. I constantly found myself being drawn

equipment is much better at showing volume swings, big or small and should be equally good at illustrating small variations in pitch. But listen closely to the X-Baby and it could well make you question just how good your own system is in this respect. On a three part vocal harmony we often hear the blend of the voices but are drawn by the dominance of the lead vocal. We can hear the harmonies but find it difficult to follow



to live music or simply miced acoustic and vocal performances where the Eben can be absolutely stunning. But don't expect enormously broad and deep sound-stages of the walk-in variety, or music produced on a vast scale. This is not the way that Eben speakers work at all.

One of the limitations of budget systems is their inability to show small shifts in either level or, more importantly, pitch. Really high quality

them individually and continuously but the little Eben has such an unadorned sense of fine pitch coherence that the harmony is laid bare and listening to the notes changing against each other you really begin to understand just what a harmony really is. And this splendid ability applies right through the mysterious world of instrumentation too. Take a listen to your favourite soloists and those solos that you have heard a million times before and know so well. There will likely be some surprises in store as the Eben's extraordinary midband sensitivity, which has an unhurried air of calm about it, is able to illustrate the smallest shifts in emphasis and of course pitch and this enhances the expressive range of the musicianship enormously. ►

► This has to be one of the most delicate of all the small speakers I have heard and it is one of the reasons why living with them becomes so interesting as they drag the ear toward the small things while doing the big things extremely well too. And these abilities are helped enormously by the stunning sense of rhythm they possess and their ability to unravel even the most complex of timing issues with such ease. That they can gain and lose energy quickly is not in doubt.



In fact they will work at the speed of the rest of the system without ever seeming flustered or breathless and if they do, then look elsewhere for the cause. But this is a speed that is not linked in any way to tonality and the X-Baby does not rely on a bright leading edge to fool you into believing it has real pace as so many others do and it never ever feels as if it is snatching at notes. Tonally they can often seem a little mono-chromatic, especially at lower levels where unsurprisingly they cannot match their bigger brothers which have a broader tonal palette altogether. The X-Baby just seems to be begging for

more power all of the time and as you wick up the level the music knits together and grows stronger and the speaker seems to get tighter and tighter and this is one of the reasons why you need such a quality amplifier to drive them. A 60-watt minimum is recommended and the drop in sensitivity plus the very nature of the speaker tells me that they need to be 60 serious watts too. Eben themselves say that the X-Baby responds to current rather more than voltage.

For the size of the cabinet there is as much bass in terms of extension as you could reasonably hope for and when the speaker is really driving hard it has that relentless rhythmic urge and push that is right on the button tempo and timing-wise. I've heard similar sized speakers with more bass but seldom with this speed of response. It lacks the subtlety of the midband and as the frequency drops becomes just a little softer around the edges. But its sheer rhythmic cohesion, lack of drag and that pistonic sense of momentum through the musical progression can become quite addictive and you tend to listen to music at appreciably

higher levels than normal. Not all tempos are percussive but where they are the X-Baby is about as good as it gets from such a modest sized speaker. In fact it handles all leading edges quite brilliantly be they percussive, instrumental or vocal and this is due to the fact that, when they come, there is no trace of what was there before to confuse matters.

The X-Baby is an excellent speaker hoping to make a mark in a market already containing some quality performers. I doubt they would leave an immediate impression in a dealers listening room where they would very likely sound dull next to either a Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor or the great

little Reference 3A Dulcet. They haven't the scale and bandwidth of the Reference 3A Da Capo and certainly lack the top to bottom refinement of the JMLabs Micro Utopia Be. But they bring other attributes to the table and this would absolutely mandate a lengthy period of domestic listening. One of their major downsides is that they really need a quality of amplification that is likely to cost at least twice their own price. I tried them with everything I had at home. Amplifiers that are entirely useable with any of the other speakers I have mentioned were simply not good enough to get the X-Baby's juices flowing. They are different; there is no getting away from that and I doubt that they will have quite the same broad appeal as some of their similarly sized or priced competitors but I have a huge respect for them as they are so musically intriguing and can actually make listening a learning experience and for that you've just gotta love 'em. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Stand mounted rear ported 2-way. |
| Drive Units: | 1x Raidho planar tweeter. 1x Swedish Audio Technologies 155mm bass/mid. |
| Bandwidth: | 50Hz-50KHz ±3dB |
| Sensitivity: | 87dB |
| Impedance: | 6 ohms nominal |
| Crossover: | 3.5KHz |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 180x 345x280mm |
| Finishes: | Grey as standard (other colours to order) |
| Prices: | |
| Speakers: | £2500.00 |
| Stands: | £350.00 |

Manufacturer:

Eben by Raidho
Tel (45) (0) 9816 6027
E-Mail eben@eben.dk
Net. www.eben.dk



Thiel CS1.6 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Second views are normally fun; after all, someone else has done all the technical and descriptive donkeywork. There are those who might argue that that's the easy bit, but I say that it's defining and describing the sound of a product that presents the challenge – and hence the satisfaction. Of course, some products are more challenging than others. . . . That's why the second view in the first place. Except that Mr Binns appendix hadn't read the script and a second view suddenly turned into a full review.

Thiel's little floorstanders have had CB pulling his hair out - that's all the time he hasn't been covering his ears to ward off the slings and arrows of their outrageous treble. But what a difference a week or three (and a different room) makes. I've heard the CS 1.6s chez Binns so I know what he's been wrestling with and he wasn't exaggerating the problems. Perturbed, given this little speaker's excellent reputation, I duly carted them over to my listening room, only to be greeted by, if not exactly a pussy-cat, then a far more domesticated beast than CB had been struggling with. Sure, I don't think they'd ever be described as anything other than on the bright side of neutral, and you'd never mistake them for using anything other than a metal-dome tweeter, but this was a far more balanced and credible performance than we'd ever extracted before – and believe me when I say that we tried!

Somewhat taken aback as well as relieved, I set out to provoke them. Sure enough, you can create detached cymbals that tick, tick, tick away and sibilants that hiss menacingly, but to a large extent it's just the speaker actually doing its job – which is another way of saying that they're not exactly kind to

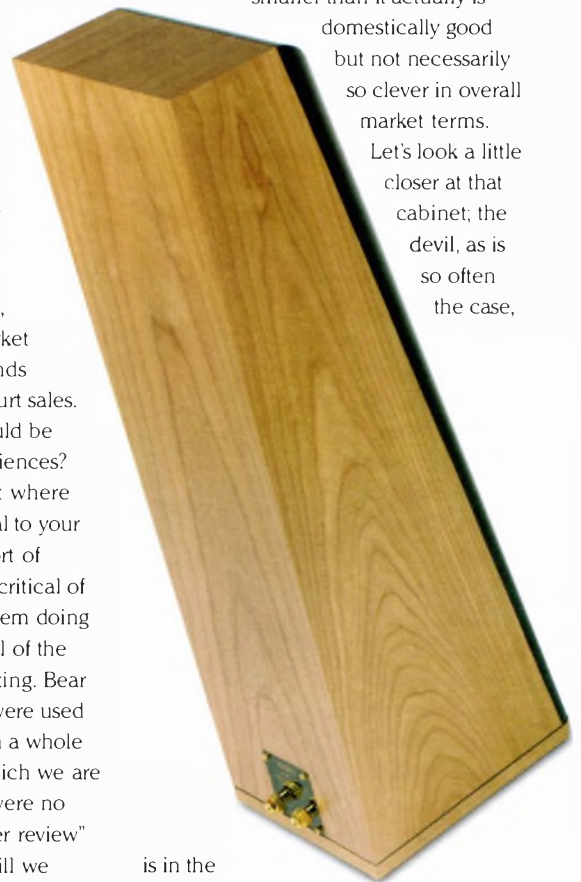
recordings. They've been voiced on the detailed, explicit side, a fact reflected in their chosen driver technology as well as in their sound. Massed violins have a brilliance that is brighter and shinier than real life, but this is effectively balanced by the excellence and transparency of the low frequencies, so that whilst they occasionally threaten, they never actually get glassy or out of control. Instead the result is a heightened sense of reality, an etched and spot-lit quality that I suspect many listeners will actually find attractive. It's far from exclusive to Thiel, and looking at the world market and the more successful brands involved, it certainly hasn't hurt sales.

So, what conclusion should be drawn from our mixed experiences? This is certainly one product where assumptions could prove fatal to your chances of achieving any sort of acceptable performance. It's critical of recordings, critical of the system doing the driving, and highly critical of the room doing the accommodating. Bear in mind that these speakers were used in familiar environments with a whole range of equipment with which we are also deeply familiar. There were no interlopers or "products under review" to muddy the waters. And still we struggled with them.

Not that a speaker could look more straightforward, at least on the surface. But the "butter wouldn't melt" appearance is more than a little misleading, and things are far from what they seem. On the surface there's little to separate the CS1.6 from the host of other compact floor-standers that

seem to dominate the loudspeaker market these days, apart perhaps from the unusually neat and seamless fit and finish. But that's the first giveaway. The Thiel is much more expensive than most of the similarly priced competition. It also does a good job of looking

smaller than it actually is – domestically good but not necessarily so clever in overall market terms. Let's look a little closer at that cabinet; the devil, as is so often the case,



is in the details and these are impressive. The CS1.6 stands three feet tall, nine inches wide and just off a foot deep and the cabinet tapers significantly towards the top, an effect accentuated by the heavily curved and tapered finish on the front baffle. The baffle itself is a full 51mm thick, while the rest of the carcass is

▶ constructed from 25mm material. Although its precise nature isn't specified, the heavy machining of the front baffle certainly suggests that it's MDF, but that's just a guess. The thickness of the panels and those narrow, heavily tapered sidewalls should create a seriously rigid structure, in stark contrast to the majority of the cheaper competition. The sloping baffle also time aligns the two drivers, revealed when you remove the flush mounted grille. Constructed from fabric stretched over a metal plate (with cut-outs in the appropriate places of course) this is held in place magnetically and designed to be left in place for listening.

The driver line-up is all metal, a 25mm aluminium dome tweeter and a 165mm bass/mid with an aluminium cone. Both are long-excursion designs with short-coil/long-gap magnet assemblies, while the woofer uses an innovative motor configuration in which a huge, 75mm diameter voice-coil is arranged outside a neodymium magnet structure, creating an inherently shielded structure. The large diameter voice-coil creates a stiff cone structure, pushing the first break-up mode to a high 9kHz, with claimed benefits in terms of the midrange quality, and allowing the use of a gently sloped first-order crossover. The final element on the front-baffle is the long and carefully profiled slot-port, an arrangement that prevents unwanted resonance of the port itself as well as reducing the chance of unwanted chuffing.

The CS1.6 offers a single pair of binding posts placed near the bottom of the rear baffle. They represent the

first crack in the near perfection of the exterior. I'd actually like them a little higher, as low as they are, getting speaker cables in at right angles is a real struggle, and it's not like the Valhallas are big or inflexible. Having said that, at least they



offer a decent clamping option which can deal with the second set of 4mm plugs on a bi-wired cable set. Owners should definitely opt for single-wired termination, preferably

with 4mm plugs (or spades if the cable's flexibility allows). Another disappointing aspect of these speakers is the floor spikes. Ditch the gold-plating guys and give us something that actually has a fighting chance when confronted with a carpet. I reviewed the speakers in standard trim but again, as an owner I'd be casting a beady eye over CT's findings regarding support feet back in

Issue 33. A couple of sets of titanium pulsar points ain't going to be cheap, but I reckon they might be just what the Thiels need.

Put all this together and you should end up with a compact loudspeaker capable of decent bandwidth and exhibiting excellent time and phase coherence. In practice Thiel have sensibly chosen to trade a little bass extension for efficiency, and the CS1.6 delivers a -3dB point at 48Hz with a realistic 90dB efficiency. What you need to look out for is the 4 Ohm impedance, with a 3 Ohm minimum. The manufacturer suggests a minimum power requirement of 50 Watts – in which case they'd better be pretty healthy ones!

CB ran the little Thiels with the NAP300, which on paper you'd think would be a near perfect match. We also tried the excellent Rogue Audio Model 90 power amp, but even with the EAT valves, its slightly unruly top-end was cruelly high-lighted by the

► CS1.6s. I used the Hovland RADIA, sitting on the end of the Groove Plus, Vibe, Pulse combination and fed by the Wadia 861SE and VPI TNT 6/JMW 12.5/Koetsu Jade Platinum or Lyra Titan cartridges. This list of ancillaries might seem a little over the top given the Thiels' price point, but frankly, I'd hesitate to use anything of lower class. Maybe the Lavardin IT Ayre or Sim Audio Moon I-5 integratseds, but then they punch way above their weight anyway.

How does the potential purchaser get the best out of these speakers? Well, first and foremost, you audition them in your own room. That's an absolute must. Then, you give them space to breathe, fire them straight ahead and make damn sure they're level. I'd pick my cables with considerable care too; Stereovox or Transparent would be good starting points. Make sure that you avoid anything that tends to the bright or carries a lot of high-frequency energy. The inherent balance of Valhalla meant that I could get away with it, but Chord Signature proved to be a no-no while CB's Valkyrja was equally unsuccessful. Likewise, I think I'd tend towards warmish, but more importantly, well behaved electronics. Any tendency to thinness or brashness will be ruthlessly revealed. And finally, don't sit too close, and if you must then at least try to sit slightly lower than you might other-wise; It helps to both mute and integrate the treble.

So, are they actually worth all the bother? That depends on what you want out of a speaker. The little Thiels redefine the quality of low-frequencies available from compact, floorstanding enclosures. Mind you, they pretty much redefine their price too, but that money has been well spent. The 1.6s combine their clever port and high-tech metal drivers with a carefully constructed cabinet that adds little or nothing of itself to proceedings; so, no fat mid-

bass to clog up proceedings. Instead the bass runs deep and surprisingly clean, with excellent transparency, focus and a much better stab at texture than I've heard from any other speaker of this size or price. It delivers the foundation for a surprisingly large and well-developed soundstage as long as

the recording delivers the information.



The Heifetz/Beethoven *Violin Concerto* (JVC XR24003) demonstrates this to perfection, the beautifully weighted but never ponderous orchestration fills the stage, balancing and underpinning the soloist's legendary, smooth technique. Those lower register contributions breathe

beautifully while the speaker easily portrays their subtlety and poise. Likewise, Janos Starker's solo cello is full of vibrant, deep-throated energy and life, a commanding presence with a palpable, three-dimensional body that commands the room. It's an impressive performance both musically and sonically, underlining the excellence of the Speakers Corner transfer of the Mercury master tapes (Starker, *Bach Suites For Unaccompanied Cello*, SR3-9016)

It's moving up the range that some leanness becomes apparent, curtailing the harmonic development of notes, lending them a clipped and slightly stilted quality when compared to more expensive alternatives like the Living Voice OBX-R2s. It is this tendency, which increases with frequency, that makes the speaker so system critical and which can leave it sounding exposed and shrill. It helps explain why the Heifetz works so well, with its rich, Living Stereo tonality and well behaved top-end. Even here, massed strings can take on a homogenous quality, although thankfully one that avoids the glassy brightness of some speakers. Which also brings us to a conundrum.

Jackie Levin's is a voice with which I'm extremely familiar. Play *Defending Ancient Springs* on the Thiels and it's robbed of some of the rich, full body (have you seen Jackie?) that makes it so wonderful and distinctive.

Instead it's a clipped and cropped facsimile of the real thing, quick, neat and tidy, but without the years and experience that have shaped the reality. Yet, and here's the conundrum, when JL sings 'You've Lost That Loving Feeling', deconstructing and reassembling the familiar

► song before your very ears, it's more obvious than usual that the different "voices" and pitches employed all come from the one person, over-laid in the studio. So whilst the speaker isn't without a specific character of its own, within that compass it achieves a remarkably consistent tonality.

On first listen I was aware of a lack of rhythmic agility and integrity that undermined many rock and pop recordings, robbing music of swing and momentum. It's a tendency that becomes far more (or less) obvious with

Ellington's stabbed piano interjections lose their incisive sense of purpose and direction. The subtle prods he uses to guide and shape arrangements become aimless and irrelevant decoration.

Ironically, this tendency is nowhere near as apparent with classical works, even something as structured and formal as a string quartet. Maybe it's the greater space around and between the instrumental strands, the greater variety of available structures that allows the speaker to rely on its superb low-frequency performance to underpin

performance that places equal stress on the recordings and the driving system. The trick is to ensure that the strengths of the speaker outweigh its weaknesses, but if you want to realise the benefits you'd best be prepared to make the necessary effort, both positionally and in terms of system matching. This Thiel is far from an easy speaker, although it possesses some considerable – even unique – strengths within its category. As such it's impossible to offer more than a guarded recommendation. If the CS 1.6 does it for you then it's unlikely that any other speaker will come close, but careful auditioning should be considered essential. ➤



positioning and precise spacing to the rear wall, as quick experimentation rapidly revealed. Once again, it underlines just how critical these speakers are of their environment, but even working at their best, they're not going to win friends amongst the die-hard rhythm and timing brigade. Back to JL's magnum opus and the carefully intertwined strands of that opening track. Somehow, whilst the disparate elements are clearly, even starkly, separated they never seem to recombine to create a single whole. The rhythmic complexity that binds it all together evades the speakers' grasp and with it the music's compelling, engaging quality. Even a more straightforward offering like the title track is robbed of its easy lope, so critical to the sense and power of the song. Disjointed jazz structures suffer in a similar way and

and stabilise proceedings: more weight, scale and texture rather than outright agility. Whatever the reason, all the time I used these speakers I found myself listening to far more classical music than any other genre, and time and again I revelled in the uncanny sense of scale and acoustic space that they produce. And if I reached for Heifetz in preference to Ricci, sweeping romantic works rather than the baroque repertoire, then that simply tends to reflect the speaker's balance of virtues; scale, power and space, that's what the CS1.6s are about.

For a listener who can't accommodate large speakers yet demands a realistic sense of scale and power from the likes of the romantic classical repertoire, the Thiels offer a unique combination of virtues. Compact and discrete they are capable of a remarkably revealing

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Type: | Two-way reflex-loaded floorstander |
| Drive Units: | 25mm aluminium dome tweeter 165mm aluminium cone mid/bass cone |
| Bandwidth: | 48Hz - 20kHz \pm 3dB |
| Sensitivity: | 90dB |
| Impedance: | 4 Ohms nominal, 3 Ohms minimum |
| Power handling: | 50 - 300 Watts |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 230 x 915 x 290mm |
| Weight: | 17.25 kg ea. |
| Price: | £1895 |

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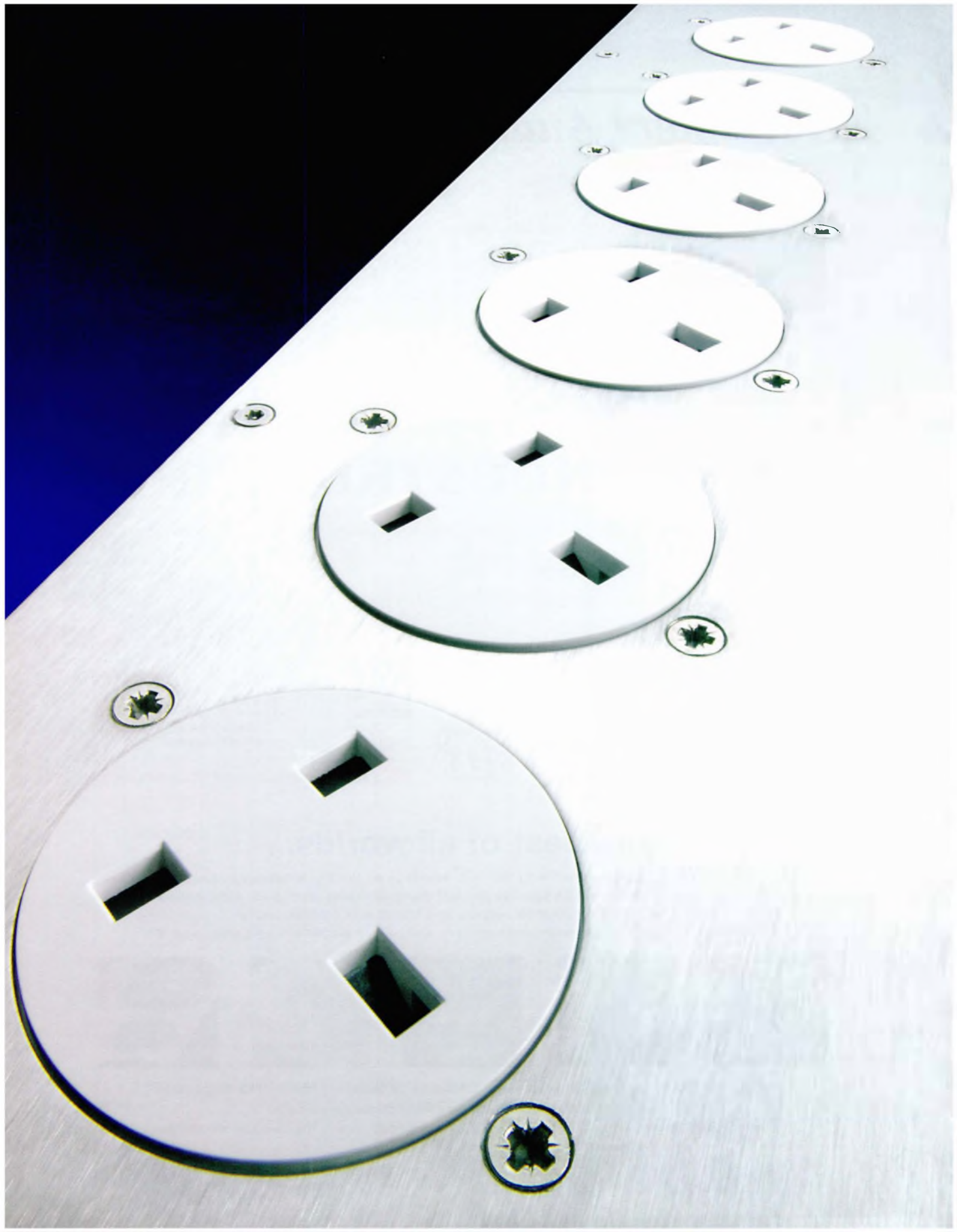
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Hammer and Tongs...

The long awaited Nordost Thor distribution block finally completes their mains loom.

by Roy Gregory

Until now, running the Nordost mains-leads has been something of a compromise. Some compromise I can hear you mutter, but the fact is that a star-earthed mains set-up, running from a single wall socket will always outperform a multiple outlet set-up. That means using some sort of distribution block and up 'til now that's meant using someone else's – in my case, the excellent Russ Andrews Power Block.

Now, past experience has demonstrated that mixing and matching mains leads is, if anything, even more problematic than mixing and matching signal wiring, with an even greater impact on overall musical coherence. Screw around here and it's your system's foundations that you're undermining. And just to really put the hundreds and thousands on the icing that adorns the top of this particular cake, Nordost's power-cords are, just like their interconnects and speaker-cables, snootier than most when it comes to keeping strange company.

So, why the Russ Andrews block? Well, it's non-metallic construction and straightforward, star-earthed construction is perfectly in keeping with the straight-wire with turbo charger ethos of the ultra-fast, micro mono-filament mains leads. It's the best option as regards putting as little between the power-cords and the wall socket. It's a combination that works - and works pretty well too, delivering enough of the stellar attributes that characterize the Nordost mains leads to show a clean pair of heels to even the most determined competition.

But no one is more aware of this situation than Nordost. After all, they're losing the sales on all the distribution

blocks that people are using with their mains leads. So here we have their response, and it's something of a surprise. Far from the stripped down, bare-bones hot-rod we were all expecting, the Thor ('cos that's the rather portentous name they've chosen) is a full width chassis, over a foot deep and containing considerable circuitry. This is no empty box or off the shelf six-way block.

So what do you get for your money? (Oh, and they do want your money – around 1600 hard earned pounds worth!) Well, there's an IEC input and an earth post on the rear panel. Then of course, there's the six 13Amp outlets on the top rear face. This rather unusual position allows for the stiffness and wide curves preferred by the Valhalla leads. The cheaper Shiva and Vishnus are nowhere near as problematic (although they are kind of springy) but make no mistake, although Thor is intended as a universal unit, logic dictates that it's built and performs to Valhalla standards. Open the box and that fact is underlined by the use of Valhalla wiring throughout. Inside there's a large circuit board with silver-plated copper tracks, a construction that mirrors the conductors used in the mains leads. All the solder is silver too. The circuit is novel, perhaps best described as a star distribution system. In other words, it's not just star-earthed. Each live and neutral leg also finds its way back to a single point. There's also a sophisticated shunt filter and a proprietary circuit, the workings and effects of which Nordost keep close to their chest. The chassis is a combination of a thick aluminium

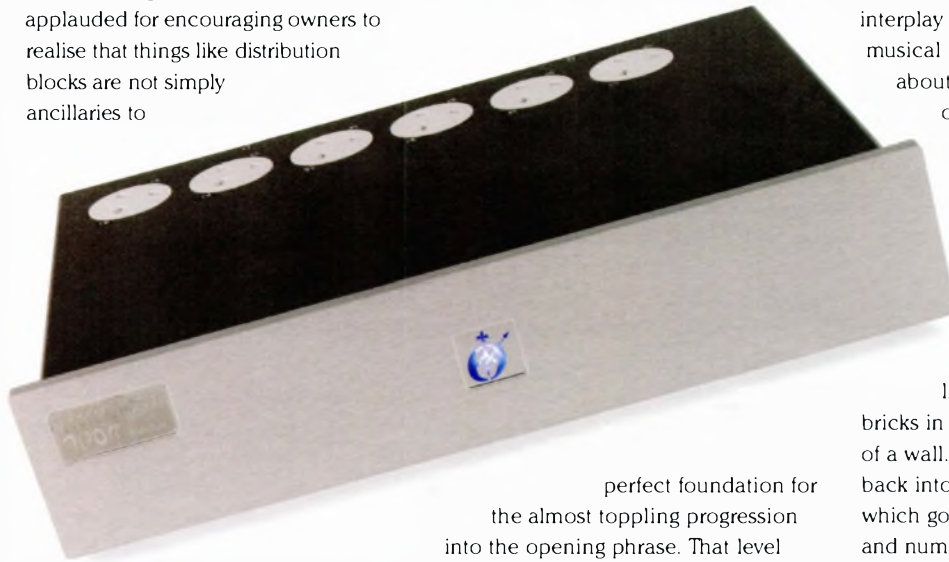
faceplate and heavy stainless-steel casework, making for a non-magnetic structure. But once again, there's more. Each element is strapped back to the earth-star, a situation that makes construction and servicing a nightmare. But it also eliminates eddy currents in the chassis, the best possible sonic situation without compromising the structural integrity of a box that carries raw mains. Such is the attention to detail that not only is the LED that lights the front panel suppressed to prevent interference, but the base plate is M6 threaded to accept Pulsar Points (or, dare I say it, RDC cones or such like).

This is a seriously complete product – surprising considering it's the company's first foray into the field. Well – not quite. Look a little closer at the front panel and you'll see the Isotek logo there too. Nordost were wise enough to combine their cables, thinking and proprietary circuitry with the experience and expertise of an established practitioner of the art. The end result is significantly greater than the sum of the parts.

When it came to assessing the Thor's performance, the first step was to simply install it into the system in place of the Russ Andrews Power Block. Of course, the two units are not exact equivalents: the Russ Andrews block is fed via a 20Amp input and has eight active outputs to the Thor's 13Amp input and six outputs. What's more, the absence of a daisy-chain connection on the Thor means using one of its outputs to power a second unit if you need more than six outlets: Either that or a second wall socket, which is in my experience, t

► o be avoided. In this respect at least, the Russ Andrews design has an edge. Accommodating a pair of Thors is also far from easy, unless you happen to have two spare shelves in your rack – which I don't.

Having said that, there's no doubt that placing the Thor on a proper support has all the same benefits that accrue from similar care with an amp, and the designers, Isotek, are to be applauded for encouraging owners to realise that things like distribution blocks are not simply ancillaries to



be shoved on the floor behind their rack. But it's one thing getting people to think about it, another to persuade them to part with the money for extra racking. One simple solution to this problem would be a set of spacers, with or without a shared front panel, allowing sufficient space to stack two Thors together and still access the sockets. Otherwise, the laudable intention of making the mains distribution an essential part of the system becomes a potentially expensive ball and chain. US and European versions (with their straight-in plugs) place their sockets on the rear panel in the conventional arrangement. On balance, I'd have opted for rear-mounted socketry on the UK version too, simply for the versatility it delivers.

But, once successfully installed, the Thor's benefits were far from subtle.

Let's use the superb new Speakers Corner 180g pressing of Lou Reed's *Transformer* (RCA LSP-4807) by way of an example. With the Russ Andrews block the album can sound ponderous and heavy. The deep chord that opens 'Perfect Day' sounds homogenous and lifeless with no real shape. With Thor in circuit that chord becomes poised and complex, its hanging harmonics the

perfect foundation for the almost toppling progression into the opening phrase. That level of insight into the inner mechanics of the song is a given once you have the entire Nordost loom in place. Intonation and accenting of vocals, phrasing of words and notes all become far clearer, with improved shape, pacing and placement. Dynamic range is wider, dynamic peaks are scaled with far less strain, so that when Lou climbs into the first chorus there's a real sense of drive and a palpable change in the energy level from the system: it doesn't just sound louder, it IS louder. Likewise the string backing which is better focused and spaced from the voice and piano, with more natural tone and harmonics. The cello entry after the second chorus is unmistakable, a separate instrument with its own, complex identity and vibrational signature.

So what's going on? In technical terms – lord knows. What I can tell you

is the sonic effects that make the musical ones so apparent. What Thor does is lower the noise floor and strip grain and haze out of the soundstage. That's about par for the course. However, what it also does is bring a sense of grounded stability to the sound. Images and notes don't waver, in space, but more importantly, relative to each other; instrumental relationships are far more stable and as a result, so is the interplay between them and their musical parts. What I'm talking

about is a fundamental sense of clarity, not in terms of etched detail but in terms of process. You are simply more aware of what is happening within the performance, thus you understand it and its intent that much more clearly. It's a bit like trying to count the bricks in an out of focus photograph of a wall. The Thor snaps everything back into crystal clear vision, a view which goes beyond just the pattern and number of bricks to the texture of their surfaces, their shade and the contrast with the mortar. It's not hyped or exaggerated, it's simply detailed and coherent enough to be realistic.

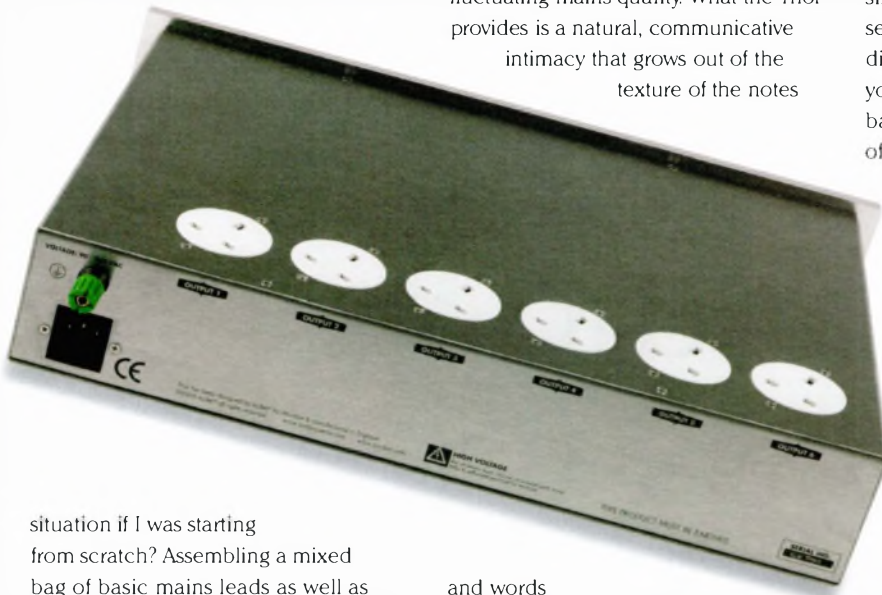
It's the security of that foundation coupled to the ultra low noise floor that makes the Thor's dynamic impact so impressive. Dynamic steps are precisely scaled, for level and density, an effect that is startlingly apparent on large-scale orchestral pieces. If you really can't bring yourself to slap opera or a romantic symphony on the turntable then the *Gladiator* soundtrack will do. Suddenly, the way in which Hans Zimmer uses his score to ramp up the tension, one turn at a time, becomes clearly apparent. Far from detracting from the effect, it actually enhances it, making the music even more emotive than normal.

Of course, I'm using the Thor in addition to a full suite of Valhalla mains leads. As the last piece in ►

► the jigsaw you'd expect it to make some considerable difference, unless of course you subscribe to the law of diminishing returns. Well, that's one law that doesn't apply here, either in practice or in theory. Just because I happen to already have the Valhalla mains leads, the Thor constitutes an apparent after thought. But, I asked myself, what would be the

The lesson here is clear. Whilst the power cords make an impressive and musically valuable contribution on their own, by using the Thor to feed them, you are delivering the optimum foundation for their efforts. The end result is far more valuable in musical terms and robust in environmental ones. Since having the Thors at home I've noticed far less influence from fluctuating mains quality. What the Thor provides is a natural, communicative intimacy that grows out of the texture of the notes

music in the right shape, right place and at the right time, than anything else I've used at home. As such, it's lifted the performance of my system significantly, and even with two in use that makes it an extremely cost effective upgrade in the context of the other equipment. What's so impressive is that it delivers similar (or even greater) benefits with cheaper and simpler systems, where £1600 might seem extravagant for a mains distribution block. That is until you hear what it does. Forget more bass or better dynamics – the sort of things people normally talk about with mains leads. What the Thor does is fundamentally more musical, and musically important, than that. Once you've got used to it in the system, taking it out means no music – it's as simple as that.



situation if I was starting from scratch? Assembling a mixed bag of basic mains leads as well as Nordost's cheaper Shiva and Vishnu power cords, I rang the changes with a simpler, two-box system consisting of a Rega Jupiter CD player and Mira amp driving Epos speakers.

What quickly became apparent was that far from a luxury, the Thor is actually the most critical element in the mains loom and the part you should really be buying first, along with a lead to feed it. I actually tried comparing the Thor used with a pair of standard mains leads to drive the Jupiter with a single Valhalla. Yes, the Valhalla power cord had dynamic benefits, but overall the Thor delivered greater improvements in terms of natural instrumental tone and that uncanny sense of clarity and musical organisation. Add a Vishnu into the mix, running between the wall-socket and the Thor and things start to get really interesting.

and words themselves. But it also seems to protect and preserve that quality in the face of assault from mains pollution. Once you have that stability and sure footed clarity in place, the power cords add greater dynamic range and precision, tonal colour and musical energy, until the Thor/Valhalla set-up offers an expressive subtlety, rhythmic and dynamic authority that elevates the potential of even quite modest electronics when it comes to sheer musical communication.

The Thor might represent the final piece in the Nordost jigsaw, yet in system terms, it should be considered amongst the first elements. I've said it before but I'll say it again: When you listen to a hi-fi system you're actually listening to the mains. The Thor does a better job of delivering the fundamental building blocks of the

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Mains distribution unit |
| Input: | 1x 13Amp IEC |
| Outputs: | 6x 13Amp UK mains 1x star-earthed binding post |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 453 x 100 x 310mm |
| Finish: | Silver |
| Price: | £1600 |

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Focal JMlab

Focal-JMLabs Chorus 707S

by Paul Messenger

Loudspeaker makers have a problem. They need to keep chivvying the market along by introducing new and improved models, yet the laws of acoustics remain stubbornly unchanged. Genuine improvements do occur, of course, but many – indeed probably most – of the changes that occur from one range of models to its successors have rather more to do with fashion than technological innovation.

Over the last few years, for example, we've seen an increase in the numbers and popularity of floorstanders, and slimmer front panels with smaller, sometimes multiple main drivers. Neither change could be said to contribute to superior performance – probably the reverse is closer to the truth. By implication, old designs and/or out-of-fashion models should not be overlooked by anyone seeking best performance for their money.

Indeed, the larger stand-mount will usually outperform an equivalent floorstander for several reasons. First and most obviously there's actually much less cabinetwork to add unwanted colorations to the sound. Then there's the shape, with a basic set of dimensions that usually (though not always) provides a more even spread of internal standing waves, and avoids the column resonance some (but not all) floorstanders suffer. And the simple opening up of the space underneath allows the midrange to disperse in all directions, rather than being guided down the front and reflected off the floor.

All of which provides excellent justification for carrying out a review on this generously proportioned and very reasonably priced two-way stand-mount, from France's number one speaker specialist Focal-JMLabs. It's a classic, timeless format, which explains why both Focal-JMLabs and B&W (in the DM602 S3, which was covered in Hi-Fi+

No 23 and won a Product of the Year award) have models that correspond quite closely to this simple but entirely sensible configuration. In fact, the external dimensions of these two rival models are almost identical, each enclosing a volume of around 20 litres, both use main (bass/midrange) drivers about 10mm larger than the usual 165mm diameter stereotype, and their respective prices only differ by £50 too.

I have it on good authority that dealers find it difficult to interest customers in speakers this size and shape. But the facts that the two leading hi-fi speaker specialists both make examples of the type, and that B&W has been doing so to my knowledge for thirty odd years, suggests that the reason has more to do with fashion than function.

This Chorus 707S sells for a very reasonable £349 per pair, and is the third stereo pair up the company's wide 'budget' Chorus range, one £90 step above the 706S that Chris Thomas reviewed in Hi-Fi+ No 29. The two designs have plenty of basic ingredients in common, most notably sharing the same inverted metal dome type TNC tweeter, though the model under scrutiny here has a slightly bigger main driver, and a box volume around 80 per cent larger.

For a budget speaker, it has some surprisingly classy touches. The three different cosmetic options, christened Classic, Style and Technic, each have wood-veneered side panels in 'calvados', cherry and black ash respectively, with neatly rounded front and back edges.

The front, back top and base come in appropriately matching laminates, and the drivers are nicely flush-mounted, though just two screws are used to secure the tweeter in place.

The new TNC tweeter uses a push-pull double neodymium magnet and a 25mm aluminium/magnesium alloy inverted diaphragm, with a bandwidth claimed to reach 28kHz. The bass/mid driver has an unobstructive yet rigid cast alloy frame and a 130mm diameter 'polyglass' cone – a plastic cone damped by tiny glass 'microballs'.

A large flared front port (tuned to 42Hz) reflex-loads the enclosure, and twin terminal pairs feed a 12dB/octave 'phase optimised' network, crossing over at 2.4kHz. Before looking at the fine detail, or indeed the measured performance of this speaker, let me unequivocally state that this is a thoroughly capable and musically highly enjoyable speaker by any standards, and a quite remarkable one

in view of its modest price. It has a smooth evenhandedness and a fine freedom of expression that many more costly models will struggle to match, and hides its modest pretensions very well indeed, especially when fed from a high quality system. However, it does have its own quite distinctive character, and in this respect differs quite strongly from B&W's same size/shape competitor.

The basic measurements are interesting, a little unusual, and also very revealing. With the speakers placed well clear of walls, the bass is a little restrained and the alignment quite dry, rolling off very gently below 100Hz. It might be worth experimenting



▶ with precise positioning in relation to the wall behind, in order to provide a little mid-bass augmentation, though under our conditions free space siting gave the most even balance.

The lower mid-band is a shade strong, especially around 300Hz, but above that point the speaker delivers an extraordinarily smooth, flat and even in-room response, holding within remarkably tight ± 2 dB limits way up to and beyond 10kHz. It's not entirely neutral: a 'glitch' at 950Hz is also seen in the impedance trace and evidence of a resonance (probably in the main driver surround); and a broad treble peak centred on 7.5kHz registers at least 1dB more than the broad midband datum.

This mid-to-treble balance is very unusual. Having measured (literally) hundreds of speakers under similar farfield conditions, the overwhelming majority show a significant down-tilt somewhere around 1kHz, some lack of 2-3kHz presence energy, and then a partial recovery through the treble proper. Compared to this norm – and B&W's 602 S3 is a typical example – the 707S will have a very different tonal balance, with a much more 'open' voice band and brighter top end.

Although the manufacturer claims a high 92dB sensitivity, our regime indicates that a more realistic 90dB is closer to the mark. That's still a good figure especially in view of a load that's not too demanding, staying comfortably above 4 Ohms throughout, alongside decent in-room bass extension that registers -6dB at 28Hz under our far-field, in-room

averaged conditions.

There is a degree of 'boxy' coloration here, and a touch of nasal coloration too, but the 'open' presence sounds very natural, and avoids the 'shut in', 'hooded' character that is more commonly



encountered. It also helps maintain fine vocal intelligibility, even when playing the system at very low levels, which will be a major bonus for late night listeners. There's always some element of compromise in loudspeakers, however, and one limitation here comes when the volume is turned up high, when the sound can take on a less welcome touch of aggression.

That actually has less to do with the 'flat' presence than the treble peak, which is clean and detailed but also a little too obvious for its own good. This certainly succeeds in sharpening up transient detail, emphasising sibilants and consonants on voices, and the leading edges of percussion instruments, for example.



And while that feature is quite seductive, it also demands that the driving equipment achieves a commensurately high standard of cleanliness, and even

so tends to put an indelible stamp of character on all proceedings.

One thing that tends to emphasise that treble peak is the fact that the bass is a little dry. Speaker balancing is a subtle art, and while getting the broad mid-range as right as possible has got to be the prime objective, it's also

important that the top and the bottom of the audio band 'balance out', so that neither stands out obtrusively. The failure to do this successfully here is perhaps the 707S's most obvious weak spot, and the mild lack of warmth and authority does slightly reduce its appeal.

That said, this speaker still does a remarkable job for the money, fully vindicating its adherence to a 'classic' format that has stood the test of time. It has limitations, for sure, which is why Focal-JMLabs has other more elaborately engineered models at higher prices. But with decent stands – Kudos S100s in my case – it makes a pretty convincing argument for the view that an inexpensive speaker is quite capable of delivering most of the goods, provided it is fed from high quality sources, amplification and ancillaries. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | 2-way bass reflex stand-mount loudspeaker |
| Drivers: | 175mm Polyglass mid-bass 25mm TNC inverted dome tweeter |
| Bandwidth: | 50Hz-28kHz(+/- 3dB) |
| Sensitivity: | 92dB (measured at 90dB) |
| Nominal Impedance: | 8 Ohms (measured at 6 Ohms) |
| Crossover: | 2.4kHz |
| Power Handling: | 110W |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 235x 490x300mm |
| Weight: | 9.6kg |
| Price: | £349 per pair |

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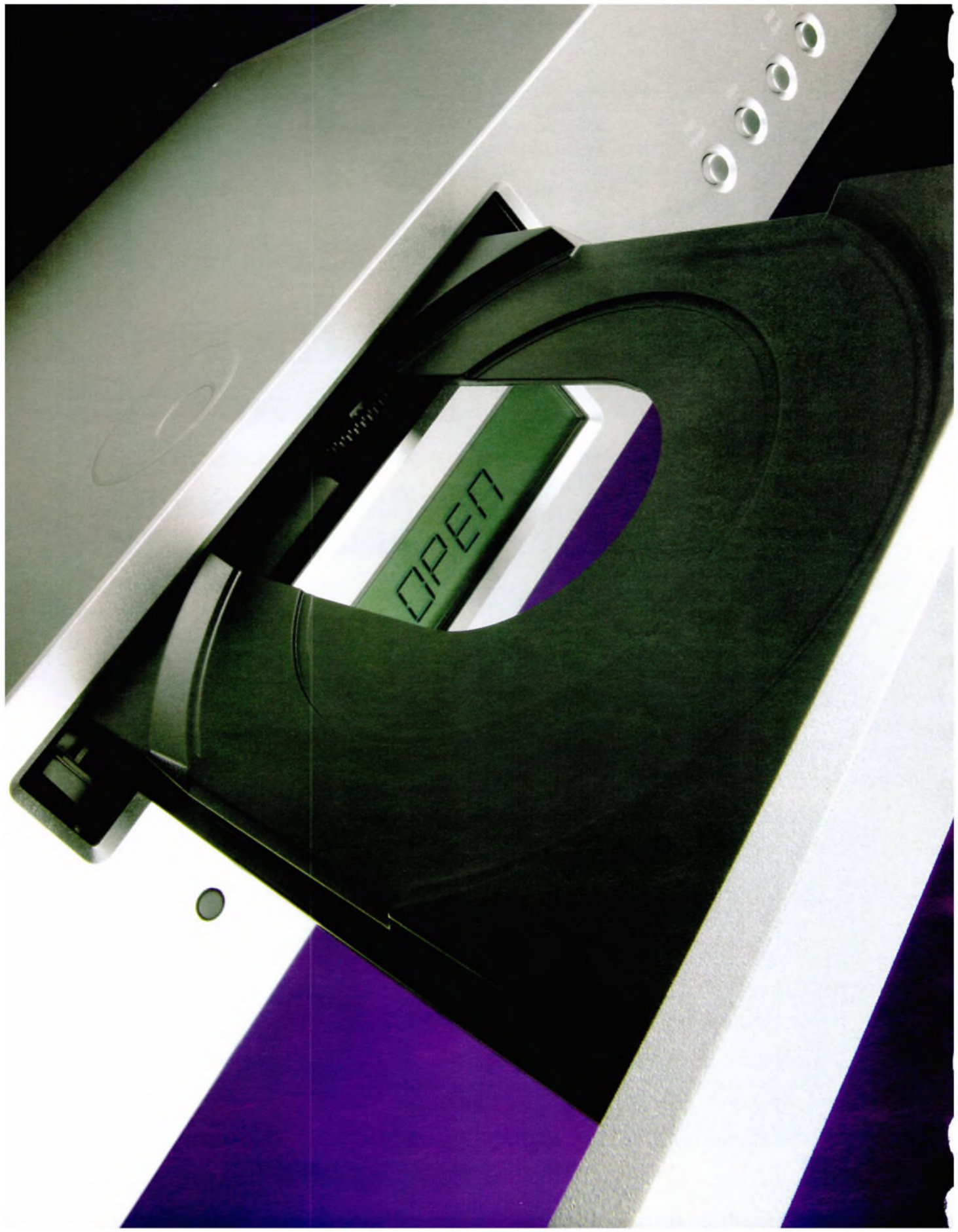
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Cambridge Audio Azur 640C CD Player

by Paul Messenger

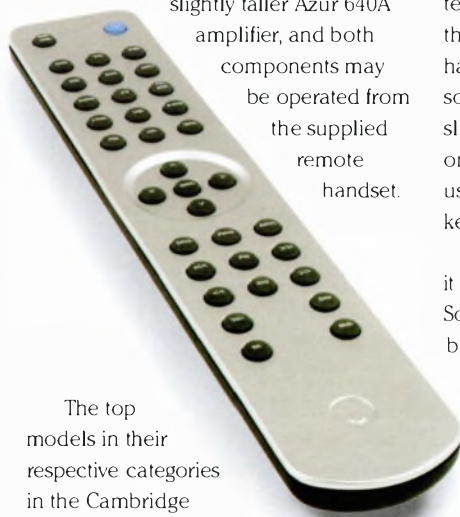
"It's high time we started looking at stuff that everybody can afford", quoth Editor RG when we started talking about the content for this edition of HiFi+. It's certainly true that we reviewers can be a pretty self-indulgent lot, yielding all too easily to the temptation to try the latest megabuck fantasy product.

There's the excellent reason that we're "establishing the boundaries" and "exploring the ultimate". And speaking personally, I have an even better excuse: since I tend to specialise mostly in loudspeakers, it's essential that the sources and amplification are as impeccable as possible, to forestall criticism that the speakers aren't given a fair chance of performing at their best.

Over the last decade in particular, and partly because the 'middle ground' has proved very hard going, many specialist hi-fi manufacturers have been moving upmarket. All too often their "quests for the ultimate" seem increasingly out of touch with the financial reality of most hi-fi and music enthusiasts. Meanwhile at the budget end of things, a number of Japanese multi-nationals, distracted by DVD and AV, have given up on the stereo hi-fi sector altogether. Although several of these traditional overseas budget brands continue to supply the market, a British contender also emerged about ten years ago, and is currently growing faster than any of its rivals.

Indeed, employing some 70 people here in the UK, Audio Partnership is already one of Britain's biggest hi-fi operations, and its prime budget electronics brand is Cambridge Audio. The current CA has no real connection to the original Cambridge Audio of the 1960s, but as a trading name it has plenty of resonance, and the strategy that this revived CA is adopting makes lots of sense in the 21st century.

The key is to combine the design expertise and experience of UK engineers with the low cost electronics production facilities currently available in the large Chinese factories. The result is a very sharp looking CD player, christened the Azur 640C, that sells for a very reasonable £250. For the same price there's a cosmetically matching if slightly taller Azur 640A amplifier, and both components may be operated from the supplied remote handset.



The top models in their respective categories in the Cambridge Audio roster, the Azurs are the company's most recent introductions, and its first completely new range for nearly five years. However, British residents should note that CA's UK distribution is handled by Audio Partnership's sister company, the budget-oriented Richer Sounds retail chain, so they're most unlikely to be found in other retail outlets.

The 640C is a stereotypically neat, slim player. Our review samples came finished in brushed silver, though black is also available as an alternative. The slightly oversize front panel has nicely radiused corners, and our silverfinished sample features an attractive central back-lit LCD display, situated just beneath a loading drawer that feels a little flimsy. A total of six buttons gives access to the basic functions like on/off,

open/close, play/pause and skip/scan, while the rear panel has a stereo phono output pair, plus digital outputs in electrical and optical formats.

The handset is a particularly neat affair – nice to see a budget manufacturer taking this vital human interface component seriously for a change. It's not quite B&O in style terms, and one might criticise the fact that all the buttons look the same and have tiny labels. But it does have the solidity of a metal front plate, the slimline convenience that facilitates one-handed operation, and there's useful discrimination in the way the keys are laid out for easy access.

Under the well damped casework it uses CA's own disc drive design, using Sony laser optics and with the servo based on a Toshiba chipset. Separate power supply sections feed the analogue and digital sections, and the separate DAC board uses a Wolfson WM8740 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC, with proprietary data clocking to minimise jitter, and a double virtual earth 3-pole analogue anti-aliasing filter. Copper screening cans over the servo, DAC clock and transformer keep electromagnetic fields away from sensitive parts.

The analogue output is DC coupled, for improved response down to very low frequencies, and to avoid the need for a coupling capacitor that could degrade sound quality. To minimise mechanical resonance, the chassis is stiffened by several extra pressings, while a rubber damping pad is sandwiched between the lid and chassis of the disc drive.

One of the problems in reviewing a beer-budget component such as this lies in putting it into a proper price context. Just how much should one expect from a CD player which costs just £250? Comparing it to the sort of high-end ▶

▶ players I normally use when reviewing loudspeakers is both irrelevant and unfair. Even the less costly players to hand cost three or four times as much as the Azur 640C.

Plugged straight into a genuine high-end system, consisting of Naim NAC 552/NAP 500 amplification, a pair of Tannoy Kensington loudspeakers and Vertex AQ connecting cables, this little CD player didn't fare at all badly, and does at least deliver a very well balanced result with no unpleasant and unwanted 'nasties'. Perhaps the most obvious characteristic is some lack of tautness in

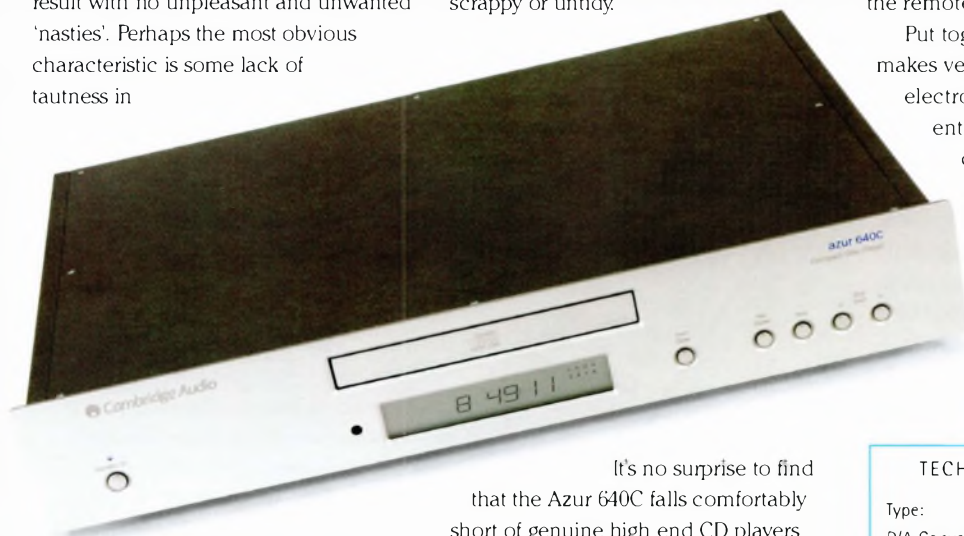
taut timing and texture variations to create the dark and menacing mood that hangs oppressively over tracks like 'Inertia Creeps', and it has to be acknowledged that the 640C didn't quite capture the same degree of tension that a more costly player can generate.

The extreme top end here also loses a little definition, air and transparency, so the finest detail lacks some precision, and transient leading edges are slightly softened, though it never sounds scrappy or untidy.

treble makes one less aware of similar limitations in the CD player.

While the 640A might fall a little short of serious hi-fi in definition and precision, and adds a mild patina of coarseness to the proceedings, it too does a very decent job in terms of overall balance, neutrality and coherence considering its very modest price, though I did experience some difficulties when trying to make small incremental volume adjustments via the remote handset.

Put together, this Azur 640 duo makes very good sense as the electronics element of a basic entry level system. Both components do rather better than one has any right to expect in view of their modest prices, and the 640C CD player will provide serious competition for machines costing at least twice its price.



definition and a mild softening in image focus, so the degree of musical insight is somewhat diluted, but the sound remains basically evenhanded and enjoyable.

The most obvious limitations are towards the frequency extremes, while its strength lies in a very decent broad midrange, which is attractively expressive and coherent, and very happy delivering a decent dynamic range. Its most obvious weak spot is the bottom end, which sounds a little loose, heavy and resonant.

With much material this is a relatively minor problem, but bands such as Massive Attack rely heavily on complex bass figures and textures, and here a degree of thickening and lack of poise was evident, with some loss of agility and blurring of textures. An album like *Mezzanine* is heavily dependent on

It's no surprise to find that the Azur 640C falls comfortably short of genuine high end CD players when auditioned in a top quality system, though it did get surprisingly close to a couple of sub-£1,000 machines that were on hand. Again there was slight extra softening and vagueness, and somewhat less well defined tonality when playing this budget unit, but the differences were small enough to indicate that the Cambridge Audio player can easily mix it with players costing at least twice its price.

Furthermore, the differences become that much less obvious when the 640C is partnered with a comparably 'budget' quality and price amplifier. While it may well be normally true that two wrongs don't make a right, the slightly 'fat' bottom end of the 640C CD player does seem to work pretty well alongside CA's Azur 640A integrated amplifier, and the amp's limited ultimate resolution through the mid-band and

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Compact disc player |
| D/A Conversion: | 24-bit/192kHz Wolfson DAC |
| Analogue outputs: | 2x phono stereo pair |
| Output level: | 22V |
| Digital outputs: | Optical Toslink SPDIF; electrical coaxial phono SPDIF |
| Features: | Full function aluminium faced remote handset Custom back-lit blue-on- white LCD display |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 430 x 310 x 70mm |
| Weight: | 4.6 kg |
| Finishes: | Black or silver |
| Price: | £250 |

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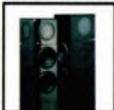
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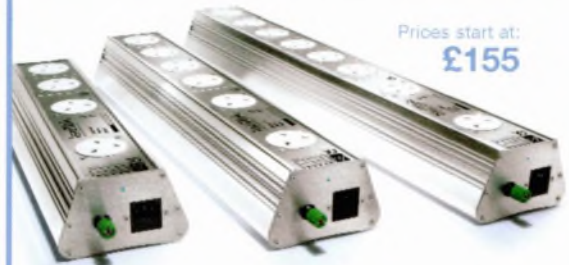
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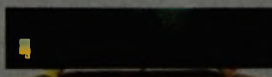
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PrimaLuna Prologue Two Integrated Valve Amplifier

by Jimmy Hughes

Appearances can be deceptive. Outwardly it's little more than a fairly unassuming black box; compact, and rather stubby, but (at 1kg) unexpectedly weighty. Because large mains and output transformers are used, the weight is concentrated towards the back – something that makes the amplifier feel even heavier. Small and perfectly formed it might be, but genteel and reserved it ain't.

The PrimaLuna Prologue Two sounds remarkably gutsy and powerful. It produces a big, big sound that has real presence and weight gain is very high; Subjectively, I found volume levels were ample with the control about a quarter advanced. Turn the volume knob halfway, and the sound increases to a point where the music gets pretty loud – certainly a lot louder than I'd ever want it. Yet the sound retains its clarity and control – the amp doesn't sound strained.

More to the point, because the sound is tonally rich and powerful, you don't actually feel the need to play music at excessive volume levels in order to achieve a proper sense of presence. The amplifier offers around 40W output, but sounds much bigger in ways that perhaps only a tube amp can. If it was a transistor design you might mistakenly think it had 200W+ under the bonnet. It really does sound that gutsy and dynamic. But no – the actual Wattage is surprisingly modest.

Tonally, the Prologue Two gives a very warm/rich sort of balance. Bass is very deep and powerful – almost as if the lower frequencies were slightly

boosted. This is most definitely not a lean-sounding amplifier! While treble and mid-band remain crisp and detailed, overall the impression is one of weight and sonority.

The bottom end is clean and full, but distinctly rounder and more ample than you'd typically find with a direct-coupled transistor amplifier.

A veritable J-Lo among amplifiers!

I found bass quality very satisfying with my Impulse H-1 horns. The bottom end was full and rich, with a lovely resonant bloom. If hi-fi were a building, Bass would be its foundation. But although the bottom end sounded fine with my H-1s, it's possible that the lower frequencies may prove a little too ample with some smaller, infinite baffle or poorly positioned speakers that benefit from tighter control. If that is the case, try using the 4 Ohm speaker tap – more on this later.

Here I must confess to laziness. Having quickly hooked up the amplifier to get a taste of its how it sounded, I didn't complete the installation by connecting my REL sub-woofers. I know – I should have done it... However, it hardly seemed to matter; if I didn't know, I'd have thought they were working - the bass was so full and weighty. Going from

the superbly clean lucid-sounding Chord pre/power to the PrimaLuna proved something of a culture shock. I'm still recovering...

Of course, valves are supposed to sound rich and warm. But, how often do you find a tube amplifier that really does have the tonal fullness



and golden glow of legend? In my experience, all too rarely. I reckon it's part of a world-wide conspiracy. It's long been my belief that audio designers actually strive to avoid making their products sound true to their origins. A lush warm-sounding valve amplifier? Whatever next!

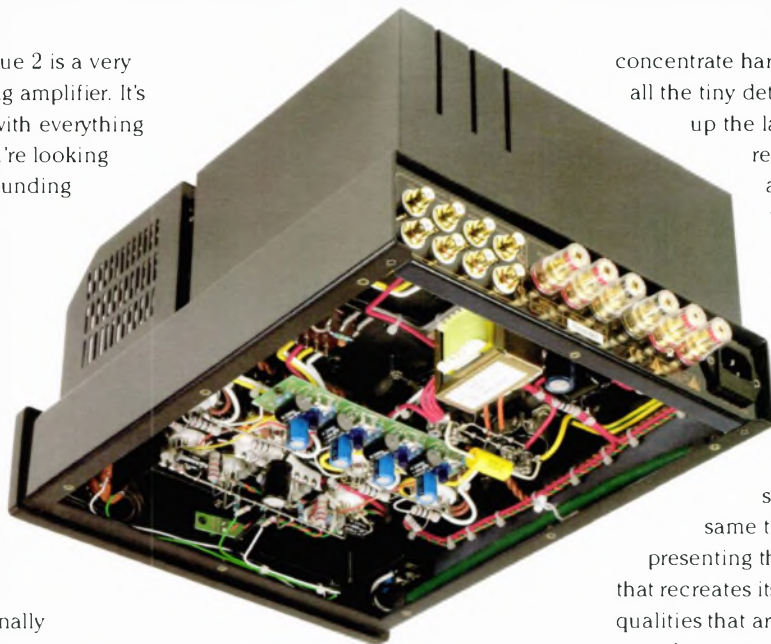
Thus you get valve amps that sound bright and tightly focussed, and trannie amps that are smooth and laid-back. CD players try to sound like analogue LP, while vinyl strives for CD's neutrality and crisp precision. Whether any of that's true or not, ►

▶ the PrimaLuna Prologue 2 is a very rich and lush sounding amplifier. It's unmistakably tube, with everything that implies. So, if you're looking for a warm friendly-sounding amplifier that glows sonically as well as physically, believe me you've found it.

Yet despite its warmth, the Prologue Two actually sounds quite crisp and lucid. Once you get used to the rich tonal balance, you realise the sound is exceptionally clear. The high treble is very clean and not too exposed; and this, coupled with the full bottom end, creates an impression of integrated smoothness and weight. It's a difficult amplifier to 'upset'; even quite brash nasty recordings fail to antagonise it.

Sonically, it's something of a paradox: at once, sweet and cultured, yet powerful and gutsy. There's nothing genteel about the Prologue Two for all its effortless refinement. It's very much a case of iron fists in velvet gloves. As time went on, I warmed (literally) to its sound more and more. Pitch rendition is exceptionally good. Put on some music with lots going on and you'll notice how easy it is to follow the layering of individual voices and instruments.

But, not only are voices kept separate, you're also made more aware of specific pitch values. When (say) two singers harmonise, you can really hear the individuality of the two voices. Yet the musical result



remains blended and harmonious – it's not a case of the music being desiccated or stripped to its bare bones. Detail tells, but in a manner that's very integrated and beguiling. It's a curious mix of opposites...



On a superficial level, the basic sound produced by the Prologue Two is tonally attractive and very easy on the ear. The presentation is exceptionally coherent. So you don't need to

concentrate hard to make sense of all the tiny details that go to make up the larger picture. In this respect it's a relaxing amplifier to listen to. Yet at the same time it's also a very involving and stimulating one. I found the Prologue Two pleasing (in the sense of making a nice attractive sound), and at the same time rewarding (by presenting the music in a way that recreates its spirit and drama); qualities that are opposed yet also complementary. After all, why can't an amplifier sound involving and soothing? Does a detailed informative presentation invariably mean a sound that's brash, forward, and unpleasant?

Spatially, the amplifier produces a nice sense of ambience and depth. Its warm tonal balance creates a believable impression of space, as though the music were coming from a place somewhere between, behind, and beyond the speakers. It was very satisfying on classical music, giving accurate timbres and a proper sense of tonal richness. At the same time it impressed on rock and pop, sounding rhythmically cohesive and together.

Build quality is extremely good and hard-wired throughout. I feel certain this contributes a great deal to the fine end result. There's an engaging lucidity that remains apparent even during the most complex pieces of music. It's something you tend to get with hard-wired transformer-coupled

► amplifiers – an impressive coherence and control regardless of how ‘busy’ the music becomes. Your ears are never assaulted by a welter of fast but unrelated leading edges. That’s what I mean by coherence and control.

Residual noise is low, but – ear close to the speaker – a trace of mains buzz is just apparent. But it really is completely inaudible through my



fairly efficient Impulse H-I horns, unless you put your ear to the drive units. But those using ridiculously efficient speakers (like Lowthers) might notice it if sat close by. All I can say is – serves you bloody right... Mechanically, there’s a small amount of mains transformer buzz that becomes audible when sat close to the amplifier – nothing serious though.

Four line level inputs are offered, plus 4 and 8 Ohm loudspeaker outputs. Although the ‘correct’ speaker output impedance is strictly-speaking the one that delivers the

higher volume (with most speakers, probably the 8 Ohm option), you should find the lower impedance 4 Ohm output actually sounds slightly tighter and better focussed. Myself, I always go for the 4 Ohm setting, and most of my listening was done thus.

However, with the Prologue Two, the difference between the two did not seem massively significant.

All the same, I felt the lower impedance outputs did sound a shade ‘darker’ and slightly better controlled. So that’s what I used. Since we’re talking about impedance matching, results will be greatly influenced by the speakers used. However, bear in mind that the 4 Ohm option always means your speakers are being driven from a slightly lower source impedance. So this should improve tightness and control.

Valve compliment consists of four KT-88 output tubes, plus two 12AU7s and two 12AX7s. During use the amplifier gets reasonably warm, but not excessively so. For safety reasons there’s a removable cover over the eight valves. This

concentrates the heat a little, despite the ventilation slots, but keeps the tubes safe from prying fingers. If you like, this cover can be dispensed with, but I preferred to keep it on. The amp sounds very good from ‘cold’, and reaches it’s optimum after about 15 minutes.

If you’ve read this far you’ll hopefully have gathered that the Prologue Two left me deeply impressed. It’s a great little amplifier, made all the more attractive and desirable by having a very reasonable price tag. I think it’s a terrific bargain, and on sound quality alone could command a far higher price. I loved it, and strongly recommend you try one at the earliest opportunity. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| Type: | Integrated line amplifier |
| Valve Complement: | 2x 12AU7 2x 12AX7 4x KT88 |
| Inputs: | 4x line (RCA Phono) |
| Input Sensitivity: | 300mV |
| Input Impedance: | 65 K Ohm |
| Outputs: | 4 and 8 Ohm taps |
| Rated Output Power: | 40 Watts/Ch. |
| Valve Cover: | Yes, removable |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 280 x 190 x 395mm |
| Weight: | 16kg |
| Price: | £999 |

UK Distributor:

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Eliza Gilkyson

by Roy Gregory

*My father made a pretty good living
playing music on the beauty way
he's gonna die with some money in his pocket
wish I could do the same today little darling
wish I could do the same today*

*doe eyed kid and a little transistor
tuned into Wolfman Jack
I picked up a guitar heard the siren's whisper
and I never looked back little darling
and I never looked back*

*I worked the clubs along the Sangre De Cristos
polished the diamond in the rough
by the time I hit L.A. I was hotter than a pistol
but you're never hot enough little darling
you're never really hot enough*

*I felt the lights on the big, big stages
The fire burning in my soul
I've had those nights where my guitar rages
but it's not something you control little darling
it's not something you control*

*redtail diving for a rat at sunset
coyote picking through the trash
I wish I was lying like a cat in the sun
'stead of working like a dog for the cash little darling
I'm only working for the cash*

*sometimes I wish I could unplug this cord
and my soul or my money I could save
but every time I say I'm gonna quit the beauty way
I hear my bones just turning in their grave little darling
bones just turning in their grave*

'Beauty Way'
Eliza Gilkyson
Hard Times In Babylon

She arrives late for the interview (jet-lag, strange car, strange country and the very strange roads of West Sussex). Tall and slender, with fine bones and long limbs, there's a patrician, detached, almost languid elegance about Eliza Gilkyson's tired yet economical movements,

echoed in her distracted, myopic interrogation of the anonymous dust in the herbal teabags she's offered. It's not a promising start.

You might well wonder why I've traveled all this way (and let's be honest, I find the back-roads of West Sussex just as impenetrable as the average foreigner). Gilkyson's is hardly a household name, and on the surface there's little to pick her out from the host of other US female singer-songwriters that seem



the stock offering of today's "alt-country" scene. Except for... well, a few things really. She's been at it longer than most, although the four albums, full of knowing and painfully honest, mainly autobiographical songs that have preceded her current release have come fairly

late in a long, live career. Her father wrote songs for Disney, amongst others, possibly his crowning achievement being 'The Bare Necessities', a song she still delivers as part of her live set. Which makes her pretty close to musical Royalty, at least as far as the short history of American popular song goes. And she's attracted the attention of that faultless weather-vane of musical taste, Bob Harris, who included 'Beauty Way' on his second *Bob Harris Presents* CD. But whilst all these things are interesting, none are actually compelling. At least not as compelling as *Land Of Milk And Honey*, her latest album.

*Well the white god said to the little man
we're gonna fulfill scripture in the holy land
between the Tigris and Euphrates it's a lot like hell
go on and liberate my people and their oi-l*

▶ *get your big trucks rollin' down hiway 9
put on the armour it's party time
gonna dance with the devil of our own design
get your big trucks rollin' down hiway 9*

*so the little man gathered all his chickenhawks in
and the neo-cons and his daddy's kin
they had their own clear channel and a hell of a spin
and a white man hidden in a black man's skin*

*big trucks rollin' down hiway 9
pulverize the puppet it's payback time
whose tax dollar is it yours and mine
keeps the big trucks rollin' down hiway 9*

*well we got caught sleeping at the sentry post
now we're standing toe to toe with what we feared
the most
that old father and his son and the
unheavenly host
we gotta do what we can don't give up the ghost*

*get the big trucks rollin' down hiway 9
with food and water and an internet line
run to the polls when it comes the time
'cause the big truck's rollin' down hiway 9*

'Hiway 9'
Eliza Gilkyson
Land Of Milk And Honey

Quite a departure – and quite a shock. It's the first track on the album, complete with jaunty "yee-ha" delivery and all the Nashville trimmings. Yet this is only the start.

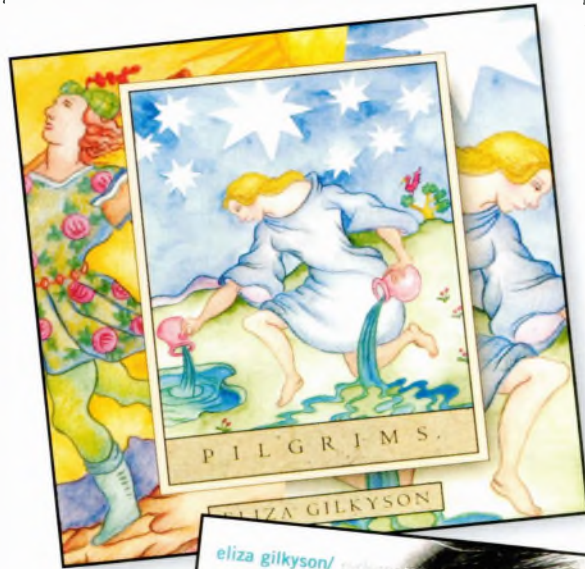
The US has a long and illustrious history of protest song, yet in the wake of 9/11 there's been a conspicuous, an almost deafening silence from the liberal music community. Well voices around the rest of the world have been raised in howls of anger and protest at America's actions, the internal, non-elected opposition have been deathly silent.

Of course, this is due in no small part to the ready accusation of a lack of patriotism by the political right against anybody with the temerity to stand up and criticize. Those who disregard that threat are attacked on other grounds. So Michael Moore is portrayed as a shameless self-publicist who's simply exploiting a terrible tragedy. Along the way, the message gets lost along with the answers it demands.

Yet, just when I was despairing of any intelligent internal response, along comes *Land Of Milk And Honey*, an album so articulate and incisive, that so eloquently defines the ragged edges of America's relationship with and dislocation from the

rest of the world that you're forced to wonder where it came from. For this is far more than simply anti-war or anti-Bush; it asks more questions than it provides answers; it is at once deeply personal and also universal. And above all, it's a women's perspective on a journey travelled and lessons learnt (and unlearnt). It's not a polemic, and it's not a rant, but because it's about being a woman in America and a women

looking at the world it somehow shortens the distance between the strip-malls and downtown Baghdad.



We'll come back to *Land Of Milk And Honey*, but first let's try and reconcile the distracted and diffident persona with the clarity of vision that the album presents. The mere mention of 9/11 or the US response to it, either on a national or an individual level, is like throwing a switch. Suddenly you see a new, purposeful Eliza Gilkyson. Her eyes flash, her body language becomes taut and animated, her every action is

► informed with a passion and direction that, moments before seemed entirely absent. But this isn't about anger or outrage, it's about sadness, an appalled sense of waste and a deeply rooted rejection of selfishness and ignorance. It's about responding to the disappointment and despair she sees around her and feels for her fellow man. It's as if she's served a lifelong, five album apprenticeship in human observation, all leading to the transforming moment when the twin towers collapsed, a catalyst that threw the world and its reactions into a heightened sense of focus. The results are powerful and moving, and although it might seem odd, more about the individual than the general; more about the world and her place in it. So 'Hiway 9' turns on collective responsibility; it's not enough to blame the government – it's you that did (or didn't bother to) elect them. It forges a link between personal actions and international events that has escaped the vast majority of not just middle-Americans, for whom the rest of the world seems an awfully long way away – geographically as well as culturally. What 9/11 did was shorten that distance in the most dramatic way possible. But devoid of context, reactions have often been difficult to frame or scale. It's perspective, rather than answers, that Gilkyson is trying to provide.



*Across the world she tapes explosives to her chest
steps into a shopping mall
a life devoid of all of mercy's tenderness
really isn't any life at all*

*tender mercies, tender mercies, come before despair
shine down all your tender mercies
it's every mother's prayer*

*down below the factory along the riverside
children swimming in a poison pool
playful afternoon of unintended suicide
gone before they even knew*

tender mercies...

*across the world she holds her loved ones to her chest
lays them down and listens at the door
everybody safe and warm among the truly blessed
how can we even dare to ask for more*

tender mercies...

'Tender Mercies'
Eliza Gilkyson
Land Of Milk And Honey

The stark simplicity of the sentiment is powerful enough, but echo it with the fragile, tenuous beauty of a pared away and etched out melody and the effect is breath-taking, encompassing so much within so little. For this is Eliza Gilkyson's other, almost preternatural skill; the dovetailing of musical style and lyrical content to compound effect.

Consider then, the track that follows 'Tender Mercies', the rumbustuous and playful, coyly wanton 'Wonderland':

*Take off your old coat
take off your dark cloud
shake off your reservations
come play with me*

*I don't need promises or happily ever after maybe
I just want your sweet kisses
hey don't you know what this is baby?
this is wonderland*

*we never even fell in love
no sinking spell to pull us under
no sign from below or above
I know it makes you wonder baby
is this wonderland?*

*romance lickers on the screen
come buy your dream with money
but things are never quite what they seem
in the land of milk and honey*

*so take off your old coat
shake off your reservations*



► *break down the old fort
why's it all so complicated?
this is wonderland*

'Wonderland'
Eliza Gilkyson
Land Of Milk And Honey

Not exactly what you might expect, based on the previous examples, but that's exactly my point. The same depth of understanding that informs a song like 'Tender Mercies' is applied just as concisely to the emotional realities of being a woman, being a certain age and being single. It's an honesty of expression that shines through every song on the album, elevating what could have been a simple cry of anguish or outrage into something far more insightful and profound. Here we have a view into another person's world, a world where wider reality has crashed suddenly and uncomfortably in.

It's hard to overstate the impact of the music in the effectiveness of these songs. The unerring way in which Gilkyson rifles the pantheon of traditional American musical styles, the way each cleaves to its lyrical pairing betrays a deep understanding of and fascination with her cultural identity. It's all here, from Woody Guthrie (a world premier for his previously undiscovered, or at least unrecorded, 'Peace Song') through traditional hymn form, blue grass through to folk and roots. No genre survives untouched, but each foray is full of respect and humour, displaying an abiding affection for the past and the way in which it should inform the future. Who else would use the wonderfully distorted, pre-recorded riffs from a 12" toy guitar to embellish a song, but when Gilkyson sings "won't you carry me be my voodoo child" ('Engineer Bill' from *Hard Times In Babylon*) to her, the association is obvious. So obvious that the "instrument" appears as part of the live set. I hope to God it never breaks!

This is an album that gleefully ransacks the country/folk idiom, leaving both it and us enriched for the experience. Perhaps the perfect example is the murder ballad (and you don't get much more traditional than that) 'Ballad Of Yvonne Johnson'. It's a harrowing, true tale of a native American woman, abused as a child, whose life spirals down into despair and destruction. Yet even here there's a ray of hope, redemption to offset the horror and despair. It's not a song about murder and abuse so much as one about finding oneself. It's a recurring theme that binds the



disparate subjects covered by the album's vast compass. Eliza Gilkyson has found her place, viewing the world with a clarity and understanding that's rare in these complex, inward-looking, self-centred and self-serving times. That vision is hitched to a musical talent and vocabulary that opens itself for our understanding. The tradition of US protest song is alive and kicking in this album. But it's so much more as well. It offers us a mature perspective on love and longing, living and loss,

linking the general to the particular so that we find songs like 'Not Lonely', 'Wonderland' and 'Separated' sitting naturally alongside 'Tender Mercies', 'Milk and Honey' and 'Hiway 9'. They are all, after all, part of the same, new reality. It is without a doubt the most impressive disc I've heard in a very long time.



Discography

| | |
|------|---|
| 1995 | Pilgrims Silverware Records MTI 395-2 |
| 1997 | Redemption Road Silverware Records MTI 397 |
| 2000 | Hard Times In Babylon* Red House Records RHR CD 146 |
| 2002 | Lost And Found Red House Records RHR CD 162 |
| 2004 | Land Of Milk And Honey* Red House Records RHR CD 174 |

* Albums I'd recommend as a starting point.

For further information visit:

www.elizagilkyson.com

www.redhouserecords.com

www.rootsaroundtheworld.co.uk (UK tour info)

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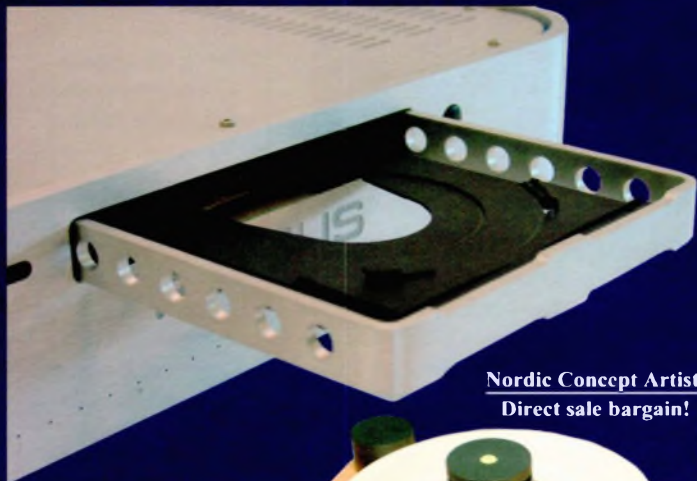
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The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put 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.

Key to Icons

-  CD
-  Gold CD
-  HDCD
-  XRCD
-  Double Disc
-  DVD
-  SACD
-  Hybrid SACD
-  MultiChannel SACD
-  120g 120g LP
-  150g 150g LP
-  180g 180g LP
-  Availability As S/H LP
-  Vinyl Double Album
-  45rpm



Kate Rusby

Underneath The Stars

Pure Records PRCD012 

Kate Rusby is an English folk icon. She occupies an important musical niche, and whilst it is an acquired taste albums like these are keeping alive the traditional words and tunes of a genre that spans centuries. At the same time with her own elegantly crafted songs such as 'Young James', 'Falling', 'Underneath The Stars' and 'Polly' she has expanded the canon. Accompanied by a core of like-minded musicians in Ian Carr, John McCusker, Ewen Vernal and Andy Cutting, Rusby's scores for these tunes make frequent use of guitar, cittern, diatonic accordion, fiddle, viola, euphonium and double bass giving this twelve track disc a hugely atmospheric feel. It would be easy to overlook this contribution to folk music and let a unique form of expression and storytelling slowly wither and die but that would be an act of criminality. From an opening 'The Good Man' Kate's airy and idiomatic singing reveals a wealth of truths and hard lessons originally learned so many years ago. It shows humanity in some interesting shades of dark and light. Often these insights are conveyed through finely tuned comic images-in the case of 'The Good Man' we are treated to a pastoral tale of mistaken identities - elsewhere it might be the young girl's lament for her dead soldier lover in 'The White Cockade'. Clearly little has changed along the way.

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC





Bjork

Medulla
One Little Indian

TPLP358  

In a world overflowing with weird shit this enigmatic Icelandic siren manages to out do the weirdest of them all on a bizarre album that includes a throat singer, finds hidden depths in a human beat box and features two choirs – one from London and the other from her homeland. Oh, and it's almost entirely *a cappella*. This is extreme choral pop interspersed with what can only be described as orgasmic yelps, agonised birthing pains, violent outbursts and hymnal majesty. This cacophony assaults the ears right from an opening 'Pleasure Is All Mine' to 'Mouth's Cradle' and a closing 'Triumph Of A Heart'. The emotional tension is palpable as individual primitivism and the massed synchronised vocal ranks collide in an unimaginable expression of dissonance and delight that I think is supposed to reflect life's duality. *Medulla* takes every convention and musically either smashes it or stands it on its head. The moods, and they are many and varied, oscillate between the sombre and the ecstatic, but it is those darker instinctive drives that dominate. This is an album of extremes and they will diametrically divide opinions. There has been nothing quite like it and some will hope that there never will be again. Depending upon your persuasion this is either both brilliant and esoteric or a complete pile of crap!

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP



Willie Nelson

Across The Borderline

Columbia COL 472942 2 

This man is an absolute country legend. An old weather beaten visage, gnarled fingers gripping a battered acoustic guitar and a stylish splash of colour with those distinctive headbands cut quite an image. Beneath this surface lurks a bristling talent. A songwriter who encapsulates both sides of the American Dream; a guitarist of outstanding quality, a singer who immediately captures the right mood and a genuine outlaw who at one time reputedly owed the IRS \$16 million in back taxes. *Across The Borderline* was perhaps his strongest album of the Nineties and amongst his very best of all time. There is a striking mixture of songs. Nelson originals like 'Valentine', 'She's Not For You' and 'Still Is Still Moving To Me' gel with a diverse selection of covers and modern standards. Amongst them are Lyle Lovett's 'Farther Down The Line'; John Hiatt's '(The) Most Unoriginal Sin'; a brace of Paul Simon penned numbers in 'Graceland' and 'American Tune' as well as Dylan's 'What Was It You Wanted'. The performances are all brilliantly handled. On his own old Willie is charismatic. Surrounded by his touring band of musician friends including guitarist John Leventhal, drummer Jim Keltner and Benmont Tench playing B3 & C3 he is irrepensible. Throw in guest spots for Bonnie Rait, Paul Simon, Sinead O'Connor, Bob Dylan and Mose Allison and you have another must own Willie Nelson album.

RP



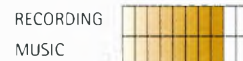
Cowboy Junkies

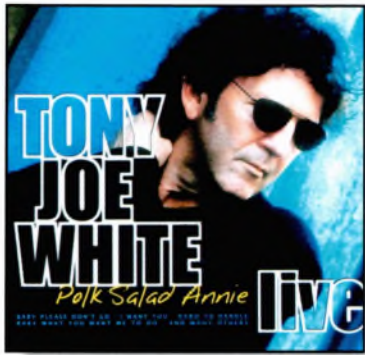
One Soul Now

Cooking Vinyl COOKCD296 

A cult following and no little critical acclaim has allowed this Toronto based band to plough its own furrow. *One Soul Now* confidently sits astride an accessible pop/rock groove that still has familiar ripples beneath its surface. The Cowboy Junkies were of course propelled into the audiophile hall of fame with that minimalist recording at the Church of the Holy Trinity back in 1988. While *The Innity Sessions* cost a mere \$250 to produce, more was definitely spent on this album and the track 'Simon Keeper' in particular. This is a prophetic tale about a middle-aged man; white-collar crime and the price paid for having your hand in the cookie jar. One by one his children cut their ties and he is left alone to contemplate life's ironies. Here there is a stronger rhythmic underbelly behind those eerie Margo Timmins vocals. Elsewhere the provocative 'From Hunting Ground To City', 'No Long Journey Home' and 'My Wild Child' have that distinctively tight and quite sparse three-piece guitar, bass and drum sound we've heard before. Although these songs do have a profusion of religious allusions, these are songs that still have enough secular content to sustain the interests of an old heretic. An ambitious bonus five-track disc of covers including mouth-watering cuts of 'Thunder Road', Neil Young's 'Helpless' and a haunting version of The Cure's 'Seventeen Seconds' will also raise more than a few eyebrows.

RP





Tony Joe White

Polk Salad Annie

IMC Music WMO 90382

Sneaky, Tony Joe White's last album, did not find the old swamp monster at his best. The singing was not always in tune but at least the song writing in that trademark soulful white-rural blues style was as powerful and rugged as ever. This live eight-track CD is in many ways much more of a disappointment. The sound is dreadfully thin and has little depth or range and the audience noise is intrusive rather than atmospheric. Many pirated discs are better recorded! That said dyed in the wool TJW fans would be interested to hear the reprise of his unlikely US Top Ten hit from 1969, 'Polk Salad Annie' or a healthy rendition of 'Roosevelt And Ira Lee'. There are also some thoughtful covers in the shape of an opening 'J. Williams Baby', 'Please Don't Go' and the Otis Redding penned 'Hard To Handle'. White's tuning is more together and his voice, which here is surprisingly Elvis-like, has a lighter softer touch than we've become accustomed to down the years. Although this disc should set you back less than five quid, I would look elsewhere to either 'Lake Placid Blues' or his acoustic album from 2001, 'In The Beginning' for a more representative account of this unique music from the Louisiana wetlands.

Supplier: www.trackrecordsuk.com

RP



Eric Bibb, Rory Block & Maria Muldaur

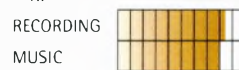
Sisters & Brothers

Telarc CD-83588

There is an easy and unforced familiarity about this collaboration that reveals itself through the vibrancy, passion and delicacy in the vocal execution. Bibb, Block and Muldaur – three distinctive voices that lie at the very heart of these fine folk and often quite spiritual country blues performances – were recorded in an old timber-frame barn outside of the small Maine town of Unity. This unusual location provides an atmospheric, earthy and quite natural acoustic – one that is punctuated by sensual and eloquent singing as well as the lean and hungry Bibb and Block guitars. Per Hanson's drums, the Michael "Mudcat" Ward upright bass and sinuous keyboard skills of Chris Burns are employed to rhythmically sustain this tight thirteen-song set. They certainly bring together several old favourites, including a playful 'Good Stuff', 'Lean On Me', 'Travelin' Woman Blues' and 'Bessie's Advice' and go on to provide some unanticipated clear-sightedness in gems like the Eric Bibb cover of Bob Dylan's, 'Gotta Serve Somebody'. Here his rich, almost lazy vocal style is well suited to this intelligent and emotionally profound material, probably because it establishes a striking contrast to these undernourished images. Elsewhere, when taking a back seat with the supportive harmonising on an unaccompanied 'Rock Daniel' Bibb's understated contribution is equally impressive.

Supplier: www.trackrecordsuk.com

RP



Heather Nova

Glow Stars

V2 VVR1001982

Heather Nova debuted over a decade ago with this evocative and mostly acoustic album. Her sensual voice has a sweetness about it that rhythmically ebbs and flows in keeping with her favourite seascape imagery. A languid tempo, those fat bass lines, minimal percussion, some ethereal choruses and fragile harmonies also delicately sketch out an otherworldly feeling. While this youthful effort lacks some of the finesse and production punch found on her more recent outings it does successfully immerse us in an exposed lyrical place. One where the words for tracks like 'Bare', 'Ear To The Ground', 'Talking To Strangers' or 'My Fidelity' contrast with instrumental waves of contentment. When you interrogate your feelings in this way it throws up some interesting insights on the emotions that lie behind romantic entanglements and the frustrations and confusion that they cause. I really like the way she creates a tension with precise lyrics and dreamy, imprecise music. The limp Christ like figure of Heather on the reverse of the liner seems to reinforce a genuine sense of over exposure and vulnerability rather than hinting at irreverence. If there is mockery beneath this image it is a kind of confessional self-mockery. It is as much an album of discovery for Heather Nova as it is for us and we should be sensitive to that when approaching these idiosyncratic textures.

RP





Paul Weller

Studio 150

V2 Records VWR 1026901

Whereas the bankrupt *Under The Influence* LP masqueraded as a Paul Weller album, the big man at least deigns to rattle the keys, strum a chord or two and sing on this *Studio 150* collection of covers. It's a luscious and intricately arranged selection with the generous use of horn and string sections, male and female backing vocals, Eliza Carthy's violin playing on 'Black is the Colour' and 'Early Morning Rain' and scoring for harp, tablas, Moog and Korg synthesisers elsewhere. These instruments certainly spice up familiar standards and classics alike. 'All Along The Watchtower' and 'Birds' retain enough of their original identities not to offend the purists; 'Black is the Colour' has a strong folk vein running through it and old romantic numbers such as 'Close To You' are delivered with sufficient dignity to just avoid pastiche. Paul's vocal lines also stand the test of the traditional material. It is a rugged and textured performance that doesn't allow these songs to regress under an immense weight of a pop idiom. The flexible production and engineering skills employed here are more than adequate for this presentation of these varied styles and musical hues.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP



Tamrah Aeryn

Typical Gurl

Massacre Records : MAS PC0433

The delightfully named Tamrah Aeryn hails from Wisconsin, USA and this is her debut album. Tamrah trained as a classical pianist but quickly realised her calling was a career in the more popular field of music, so she started writing her own material and performed live whenever the opportunity presented itself. Events led her to Lionel Hicks, producer and drummer with rock band Balance Of Power, and the results of chance meeting can be heard here. Tamrah's music can be likened to Kate Bush, Tori Amos and, to a lesser extent, Bjork. Fortunately, she doesn't go in for the latter's ridiculous vocal warblings or nonsensical lyrics. Instead she relies on cleverly constructed songs which she layers with lush harmonies and thoughtful, poetic wordplay, underpinning each track with a strong, distinctive voice and lovely piano work. She displays a confidence and maturity way beyond her 23 years, and there are moments of genuine brilliance to be found on these 12 tracks, like the title song, where she seductively stretches and entwines her vocals to a backing of acoustic guitars, piano and congas. Not everything works; The ill-advised 80's hairspray metal guitar solo ruins 'Over Now' and must never be repeated on future releases, but that's a minor quibble. Overall *Typical Gurl* is a very assured debut; I highly recommend it to anyone looking for something with a fresh and innovative twist.

AH



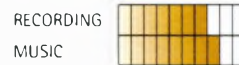
Julie Doiron

Goodnight Nobody

Jagjaguwar Jag66

Montreal based Julie Doiron is an indie folk singer-songwriter with a winsome and quite gentle vocal style who tells of beautifully chilling winter landscapes: 'Snowfalls In November'; lightly touches upon romantic flights of fancy in 'Dance All Night' or reveals her tightly guarded secrets in an autobiographical 'The Songwriter'. The instrumental arrangements are exceptionally sparse. Sometimes on songs like 'Dirty Feet' and 'Banjo' there is little more than Julie's voice, or a guitar and banjo underscoring and perhaps a slight infusion of colour with a splash of vibes. Even with tracks such as 'Last Night', 'No Money Makers' and 'When I Awok'e there is an understated simplicity about the accompaniment that rarely strays far from guitars, voice and the drum kit's rhythmic support. This exposes both the themes and the vulnerability of the chanteuse. The LP sounds pretty good for a mainstream recording. The closely miked vocals are cleanly and delicately reproduced; the guitars have a natural shape and the drums have a stronger presence when required. Of course this all happens across the midrange where little strain if any is placed upon the sonic extremities of the engineering process. However the surfaces are a bit noisy and if you find this intrusive then the CD would be a better choice of format.

RP





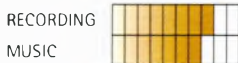
Kings of Convenience

Quiet is the New Loud

Source SOURCD019 

Duo Eirik Glambek Boe and Erlend Oye love to tease us with their incongruous album and song titles and those worldly wise lyrics which are set against the softest of close harmonising. It's like entering the hall of mirrors at a fun fair where the music and the lyrics are inverted or bent out of shape into surprising new images. The two protagonists are so close to one another that the roles of guitarist, pianist, drummer or lead vocalist are totally interchangeable for any of a dozen tightly arranged songs that combine airy tunes, sugary backing vocals and provocative themes. However, an understated delivery and the absence of instrumental teeth occasionally diminish the seriousness of this subject matter. Themes like the promiscuity in 'Toxic Girl' or when you are haunted by a woman but life's pressures have left you mute and unable to articulate the enormity of those most intense feelings on 'The Weight Of My Words', should hit you much harder than they do here. Which proves along the way that "quiet" is not always a "new loud" and that sometimes big sounding voices which chew you out with their biting and edgy qualities can be more appropriate and effective than these extremely pleasant tones.

RP



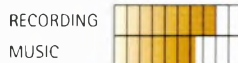
Ron Block

Faraway Land

Rounder RRCD 0477 

Better known as a guitarist with Alison Krauss and Union Station, Ron Block is a musician and lyricist whose words and scoring on a dozen songs hark back to some old fashioned God fearing country roots. Fiddle, mandolin and banjo feature strongly alongside bedrock guitars and the light tenor Block lead vocals. There is tenderness about this beautifully constructed set of songs that generally make great play out of spiritual sustenance. Here the philosophy that shines through is one that places self worth, trust and affection at its core. Though if you concentrate too closely on the lyrical content then it does sometimes feel as though you're being force fed religion with a spatula and this is less beguiling. I came away from this album with a respect for the strength that lies behind the dogma but no more than that. A supportive Alison Krauss makes an appearance on three tracks: 'Your Heart Has Found A Home', 'Another Life I'm Living On' and 'In The Morning Light' lending her sweet traditional vocals and accomplished fiddle playing to proceedings. *Faraway Land* is the kind of music to fuel an existing belief system rather than ask more searching questions beyond its Sunday morning fervour.

RP



Lambchop

Aw C'mon / No You C'mon

City Slang 7243 595890 1 5 / CS 20232-1 

This is a sprawling double album that presents us with two distinct canvases. *Aw C'mon* was written to underscore Murnau's 1927 silent movie and its vision is a broad one more concerned with the creation of a smooth panoramic. The relaxed mood is developed through a kaleidoscope of colours and new wave country textures that wrap themselves around Kurt Wagner's soulful and Curtis Mayfield-like falsetto delivery. *No You C'mon's* songs present a tougher attitude. The Wagner vocal threads become gruff and more clipped in their dark staccato mutterings on tracks such as 'Low Ambition' or 'Nothing Adventurous Please' while his characteristic musings upon low key and mundane topics in 'Listen' and 'About My Lighter' are never that far away. A curious and contrasting mixture of lush string accompaniment and stripped mined guitar alternately lightens and then darkens the mood on these tracks. The incongruous string and vocal combination is over played. This is a marriage of convenience; too contrived it dilutes some interesting observations on the commonplace. Here Wagner's preoccupation with life's minutiae is lost within a vast aural landscape.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP





James Grant

Holy Love

Sanctuary Records 

James Grant was lead singer with Love And Money, a very fine Scottish band who produced a clutch of great sounding albums in the late 80's and 90's. They should have been as big as Simple Minds and Deacon Blue, but for whatever reason, failed to capture the imagination of the record buying public. *Dogs In The Traffic*, their last for Fontana, was a masterful slab of white soul and singled out James Grant as a singer of considerable substance – the Scott Walker of his day. With *Holy Love* he's stripped the sound to the bone and created an album of soft, intimate songs. Instrumentation is sparse and uncluttered; the merging of acoustic guitars, mandolins, banjos and harmonium compliment Grant's deep honey-coated vocal, adding plenty of atmosphere to his poetic wordplay. He's drafted in the great Dobro player Jerry Douglas and two of Scotland's finest female talents – ex-Thrum vocalist Monica Queen and Capercaillie's Karen Matheson – to help him create this understated little masterpiece. The blending of Grant's voice with the two girls' harmonies is a continual delight, especially on stand out track 'The Streets You Walk Every Day'. James cites catholic guilt as the inspiration behind *Holy Love*. Personally, I think guilt's a wasted emotion, but if it's going to help him create songs as brilliant as this he can carry on feeling guilty for as long as he likes.

AH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Tony Joe White

Heroines

Sanctuary Records SANCD 301 

Heroines is Tony Joe White's first album in six years and the idea for this collaboration with some of his favourite female singers came about after a conversation with his son Jody (also his tour manager). Some of the girls couldn't make it to White's Tennessee studio to record because of other commitments (or in Lucinda's case, a fear of flying), so Jody hand-delivered or shipped the tracks to wherever they were; they recorded their vocal performances and shipped them back. White is a spontaneous, one-take man. A few of the girls chose to do their vocal parts four or five times over, but it always ended up being the first take that he chose for the album. 'Closing In On The Fire' is a hot and sweaty duet with Lucinda, lusty and clear about 'Being out of control' and 'In it way over her head'. Emmylou's contribution on 'Wild Wolf Calling Me' is a little more sedate, but still up to her exacting standards. Shelby Lynne, Jessi Colter and White's daughter Michelle are the other "Heroines" contributing to this project; the rest of the tracks are just White doing what he does best – bluesy, swampy, groovin' pop rock. Apparently there is a complimentary "Heroes" set scheduled for release sometime next year; perhaps sanctuary should consider releasing them as a double package.

AH

RECORDING
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Upwardly Mobile

The changing faces, formats and fortunes of Mobile Fidelity Part 2

by Reuben Parry

In the first part of the Mobile Fidelity story I was able to look back at the label's humble beginnings with Brad Miller's sound effect recordings. I also got to mention that early and continuing commitment towards advancing the cause of music and sound reproduction and reflect upon those famous half-speed mastered LPs and Ultradisc CDs that established their reputation for quality. The label's re-launch a couple of years ago seems to have finally and successfully balanced both the commercial and musical realities of an audiophile record company operating in today's marketplace. A label of this type is of course by its very nature something of a navel gazing entity. Scouring the back catalogues may be a way of life but the real test is not how to repackage that 257th re-issue of *Kind Of Blue*, this time pressed on limited edition turquoise 600g vinyl to celebrate the albums forty-fifth birthday. Most of us have a second sense when it comes to rip-taking like this. No. Mobile Fidelity passes the real test when it unearths gems like the R.L. Burnside blues disc or imaginatively moves the bar upwards to encompass a newer generation of talented musicians whose significance may only be truly appreciated over the coming decade.

They have certainly chosen intelligently. The cross-section of material selected for release on the SACD and 180g vinyl formats covers most of the bases with rock, pop, jazz, blues and classical genres all strongly represented. It is a catalogue

that continues to artfully combine those bread and butter releases from the old and established sources like Miles Davis and John Lennon while clearly looking to the future and a fresh generation of musicians in Patricia Barber, Aimee Mann or Ryan Adams. I've already talked about the importance of

the Pat Barber releases. She is most definitely a modern jazz diva and an audiophile darling whose popularity and banker status, in my opinion, helps to underwrite some of the more musically satisfying but perhaps less commercially rewarding projects.

I also think that the Ryan Adams and Aimee Mann releases are particularly significant too. These are a pair of incredibly strong, wilful and independent singer-songwriters who appeal to distinct and very different audiences. Adams is the new Dylan. He has with

a series of albums, which includes *Heartbreaker* UDSACD 7002, placed his feet firmly within the 'Americana' folk and rock music camps. His social observations, astute arrangements, appetite for work and bad boy attitudes have won over the old rockers and, more importantly, brought new blood into the realms of serious music as well as the audiophile arena. The former, akin to a pack of hounds, can track down strong introspective and visceral lyrics from the barest scent, while I think that the latter warm to the honesty and directness present in these mainly acoustic guitar based songs. Their haunting and world-



► weary vocals fill an emotional and compositional void left by most of the music in the current charts. If audiophile record labels like Mobile Fidelity, and for that matter, specialist hi-fi as a whole is to flourish, then we need to encourage a generation of twenty and thirty something's to turn their backs on low-fi midi systems and mainstream recordings. If they do not take up our pastime we run the risk of having it die with us. Issuing albums like *Heartbreaker* and Aimee Mann's *Lost In Space* or *Bachelor No.2* (especially on the SACD format) is a step in the right direction and definitely invests in the industry's future survival.

Mann, like Adams, attracts a diverse set of groupies. Go to any of her concerts and you will see those



middle-aged fans, me included, who remember her from those New Wave, big hair-do days, fronting for 'Til Tuesday in the mid 1980s. Alongside them you are just as likely to find their sons or daughters – probably students in their late teens or early twenties. They too are captivated by her catchy pop melodies and a strikingly vivid view of romantic entanglements, feminism and the often-difficult relationship between a musician of principle and record company executives with other agendas. This music proves that there is and has always been much more to her than classically good looks, long blonde hair and a shapely figure.

An album like 1999's *Bachelor No.2* (UDSACD 2025) which came after a four-year hiatus, deserves our attention for a number of reasons. It is a tuneful, intelligent and accessible thirteen-track disc by a seriously good musician who has most certainly been through the industry meat grinder and come

away as a stronger performer. The opening song, a rhetorical and plaintive 'How Am I Different', encapsulates the ways in which Mann has not only taken control of her career after the battles with the Geffen label but also got a grip on her emotional well being. She is different because the major-label record deals and their inherent constraints have now been jettisoned in favour of an enviable degree of artistic integrity offered by a small indie outfit like SuperEgo Records. The days of locking horns with the executives may be over but it has left some scar tissue and Mann enjoys twisting the knife into her former employers. However, rather than dwelling upon some overriding and damaging sense of bitterness, she instead draws a lesson from this experience and offers a warning on the likely price to be paid should you go down that route. It leaves behind a broader message on the choices that we have in life and the cost that each and every decision made might have. One of her other most consistent and telling themes is the turbulent nature of relationships. Mann has in the past gained a reputation for those volatile, high-octane affairs of the heart which musicians more than anyone else seem to be victims of. She sings on this subject with such freedom and conviction that again you are easily won over by her views. Yet these are not songs written just to elicit sympathy. Aimee shares with us some hard-earned wisdom about self-worth, self-respect and self-determination. Ultimately letting other people (even your lovers) lead you by the nose through life could be emotionally crippling and in these heavily autobiographical songs like 'Nothing Is Good Enough' she acknowledges that fact. This is a track that manages to succinctly combine topics of artistic and emotional frailty. When Aimee

addresses the man of the moment with that line "Critics at their worst could never criticise the way that you do" you sense her inner strength and self-belief predominate. The stability and hard won security in both her business and personal affairs have allowed Mann the freedom to unreservedly express these feelings. In the process she has crafted a superior album.

Underpinning these lyrics and her attractive rolling vocal cadences is that delicate, shimmering and quite distinctive Aimee Mann sound, based around her own acoustic and bass guitar playing and those electric, slide and twelve string guitars of Michael Penn, John Brion and Michael Lockwood. Piano, drumming, programmes and loops are rhythmically solid and together with those daring infusions of boldly drawn colour from that additional scoring for chamberlin, wurlitzer accordion or celeste she musically reinforces the sentiment of each moment. The original recording was classy but this Mobile Fidelity ►

► SACD transfer builds upon the stunning levels of clarity and transparency to reveal just how subtly *Bachelor No.2*, with its closely linked instrumental and lyrical patterns, has been constructed. This release further opens out those honest and sensitive feelings of relief that come after such hard won triumphs over adversity. You know that there is something euphoric behind these beautiful entertaining yet instructive tales but Aimee never overplays her hand and so we warm to the woman all the more.

Her second independent album release from 2002, *Lost In Space* UDSACD 2021 has made it on to this the most eloquent of digital formats and also been re-issued on a 180g vinyl LP, MFSL 1-278, as well. This is a disc with a much quieter and self-deprecatory style. Ruminative and introspective, *Lost In Space* communicates to us through a softly spoken lyrical honesty. There is a trapped small town feel. The themes concerning broken relationships or relationships stretched to and then far beyond breaking point again stresses the vulnerability of her characters. But these are personalities who can draw enough inner strength to overcome the hopelessness of each and every crisis. They also possess enough realism about them to be recognisable and believable. Consequently, you can understand how her music manages to gain an unquestioning acceptance no matter what the age, gender or creed of its audience. An intimate mood is firmly established and that extends right into the very heart of the recording sessions, which were largely made in the apartment of co-producer Ryan Freeland. It's an interesting location because this then goes on to create a virtue out of an amazing composite of filtered guitars, manipulated electronica and soundscapes developed from a fusion of diverse textures that were added later. The incorporation of eccentric instruments into the grand scheme such as an egg shaker in 'Pavlov's Bell', a mini moog on 'The Moth' and soprano zither for 'High On Sunday 51' establishes a remarkable tension. The integrity of Aimee's words butting heads with the artifice of that instrumental tableau underneath them gives this language a renewed focus.

Another popular medium but one that has been poorly served by the audiophile community is country music. A recent surge of interest in the blue grass scene has made re-cuts and transfers a lot more commercially acceptable. Diverse Records astutely re-issued a brace of Alison Krauss and Dolly Varden LPs; Cisco tapped into the perennial attractions of Jennifer Warnes, while Sundazed invested in the inimitable Laura Cantrell. Large dollops of praise have rightly been heaped upon them for those records. These performances and the standard of the song writing happen to be first rate and the engineering

solutions do them justice. Mobile Fidelity have also come to this party, a little late perhaps, but with them they have brought an album that our own RSF adores. It is the 1997 Rounder release from Alison Krauss, *So Long So Wrong* MFSL 2-276. This is a beautiful set of tightly framed songs that eloquently range across the classic country music patch with a series of atmospheric and touching vignettes like 'Deeper Than Crying', 'Blue Trail Of Sorrow' and 'The Road Is A Lover'. Keeping the side lengths short by spreading these and the remaining eleven songs over two entire half-speed mastered LPs has real acoustic benefits. Alison's lovely

voice, the delicacy, careful enunciation and tonal range are exceptionally well recreated, as is the



natural sounding and empathic instrumental support courtesy of Union Station. Dan Tyminski, Ron Block, Barry Bales and Adam Steffey not only understand how to really play blue grass music, they live, breathe and feel every nuance.

I can probably slip country guitarist Dave Alvin into this category, although he is a modern day genre shifting American song-smith steeped in folk, blues and country traditions. *Blackjack David* UDSACD 2007 showcases Alvin's powerful narrative style on songs including 'California Snow', 'Abilene' and 'The Way You Say Goodbye'. His mixture of guitar based rockabilly, blues and country rock 'n' roll dovetails nicely into a road movie themescape of moonlight deserts, cornfields, low rent housing, truck stops and that glow of distant city lights on the horizon. Mobility though does not necessarily bring with it personal freedom and Alvin bemoans the loss of roots and a sense of belonging. It's one heavy price to ►

► pay and he certainly puts little faith in the politicians solving the increasing social problems of dislocation. Ultimately his songs leave behind lingering doubts about the long-term wellbeing of the American people. This is a thoughtful response to an insidious social trend, while the musical continuity, with its bedrock of honest, traditional sounds, offers a toehold of hope. *Blackjack David* is a gutsy and clever album, full of integrity that raises the profile of these genuine concerns.

Not everyone though wants an intense or thought-provoking experience each time they drop a diamond tip into a groove or pass a laser across a gold disc. Some just want to be entertained and the highly evolved Tex-Mex brand of rock 'n' roll played by Los Lobos achieves this and more. In thirty years

their line up has changed little. Founding father and fine vocalist in the substantial shape of guitar playing Cesar Rosas, drummer Luis Perez and guitarists David Hidalgo, Conrad Lozano and Steve Berlin have remained as ever presents. They were propelled to fame through the 1987 *La Bamba* soundtrack and have since then refined their Chicano sound with varied and delightful releases that draw healthy amounts of levity from their inclusion of Cuban, Cajun, straight rock and even soul music influences. The Mo-

Fi SACD transfer of their 1999 album *This Time* (UDSACD 2024) beautifully reproduces this airy lightness of touch and an old fashioned rhythmic sense of fun. This is not to diminish the serious side to their music. Tracks such as 'Some Say, Some Do' are not afraid to tackle the subject of empty bellies and urban poverty or the purposelessness felt within 'Oh Yeah'. My Spanish is non-existent so I can't comment upon the seriousness of the lyrics for an idiomatic 'Cumbia Raza', 'Corazon' and 'La Playa' but I am happy to sway to that beat.

I don't want to sound like a Mobile Fidelity apologist. Not everything in their catalogue is to my taste. For example, I cannot put hand on heart and say much in praise of a five-track LP like 'Animals Should Not Try To Act Like People' MFSL 1-45001. Primus is not in my opinion a band that merits the 45rpm half speed mastered treatment they have received.

Perhaps one of the guys at Mo-Fi really digs Les Claypool's enigmatic and quite freaky fusion of punk, metal and indie music and is stroking an ego or two with this release. I believe Primus has a large cult following in the States but like The Flaming Lips; these Primus performances have a huge visual dimension. So why the audiophile vinyl instead of say a DVD-A format that would do these unique, dynamic and often bizarre displays of musicianship justice? Try as I might I was unable to find enough gristle in the Claypool bass lines and vocals or through the Larry Lalonde guitar and Tim Alexander drums to sustain my interest. Lyrically a song like 'Mary The Ice Cube' while amusing is still only held together by a single flimsy idea and although others such as 'My Friend Fats' expand the picture with interesting

images of debauchery and some clever rhymes its just not enough. Undoubtedly those of you who disagree with these views will put forward the case for Primus in the next post bag.

The hardest taskmasters are probably the jazz aficionados, but from the evidence of those heavy hitting titles mentioned last time they should be satisfied with the direction taken by Mobile Fidelity. Just behind them are the not so easily pleased classical music devotees. At least as knowledgeable as the be-bop boys, some



of these crusty old characters will have looked at the Mo-Fi resurgence and wondered exactly what the catalogue would hold in store for them. I think the question of classical releases posed a real problem for Mobile Fidelity. Much of the best repertoire from that golden age of stereo classical music recording has already been snapped up by the competition. Testament has made inroads with their EMI ASD and Columbia SAX label reissues. In Germany Speaker's Corner cut their teeth on DECCA SXL and Deutsche Grammophon LPs and now has unprecedented access to the Mercury archives, while Classic Records are clearly unfamiliar with the term "restraint" if their (overly?) comprehensive trawling through the RCA Living Stereo vaults is any indicator. It doesn't appear to leave a whole lot for anyone else. True some of the DECCA and RCA offerings have not got the best out of those fine



▶ sounding original master tapes but I remain an extremely reluctant advocate for the re-issuing of re-issues. The release of a performance firstly on 180g vinyl at 33rpm and then a couple of years later finding the very same recording as a four-sided 200g LP cut at 45rpm is one of my pet hates. These records are expensive enough without being asked to buy them twice! But I digress. Classical music represents an important slice of the audiophile market that can't really be ignored and Mobile Fidelity's initial response to this dilemma has been to search out performances and recordings that would best suit their Ultradisc Gain 2 SACD format.

The back catalogue of choice is indeed an interesting one. Vox Turnabout reappeared on the audiophile radar over a decade ago with an



exceptional but short-lived series of Reference Recordings Mastercut LPs which featured Gershwin, Rachmaninov and Ravel works conducted by Leonard Slatkin and Stanislaw Skrowaczewski. Before that Athena re-issued a couple of titles, including the Johannes/Dallas Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances*, longtime resident on HP's TAS list, and the recording that got the whole VT ball rolling as far as audiophiles were concerned. I still feel a lot of affection for those RR transfers. The quality of the performances from those famous if somewhat provincial Minnesota and St. Louis orchestras were memorable and the erudite direction gave us solid and eminently likeable readings. Sonically, they were superb. But did Reference squeeze every last ounce of juice from those master tapes? I think perhaps not. The reason for that statement is simple. When these performance (and the ones that Mobile Fidelity has now brought into their catalogue)

were made, they were recorded on to four-track half-inch analogue tape and encoded for quadraphonic LP release. Reference Recordings was really only concerned with the retrieval of a two-channel stereo playback for their LPs. Mobile Fidelity has taken the multi-channel recordings and used the versatile SACD format to brilliantly breakdown, redistribute and artfully recreate all that information including those discrete four-channel details which were originally captured by the Vox Turnabout engineers.

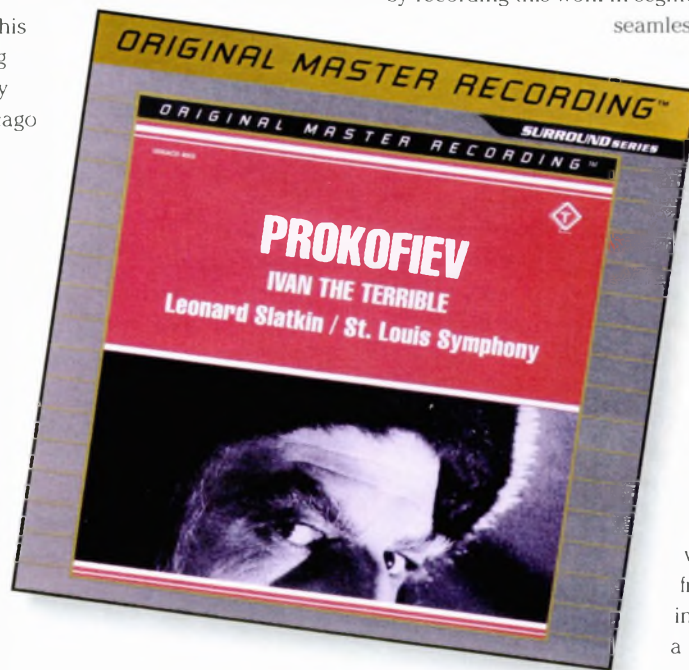
It is possible to detect a common thread amongst those titles that Mo-Fi have recently re-issued. The compositions are big, real big in terms of orchestral scoring and the glorious overstatement. They are infused with the boldest of instrumental colours imaginable. For example you barely have to enter the swirling and relentless rhythmic worlds of the *Bolero* or touch the effervescent surface of a mysterious and unmistakably ethnic *Rapsodie Espagnole* to appreciate and be carried away by the eloquent undercurrents of the SACD transfers crafted for their Ravel disc UDSACD 4002. Stanislaw Skrowaczewski handles these works – and the contrasting delicacy and melancholy heard throughout that most piquant and impressionistic of vignettes, the *Favane pour une Infante defunte* – with an intriguing amount of authority and flare. He manages to make these most familiar and popular of pieces fresh and interesting, which is no small success in itself. The Minnesota Orchestra's playing conveys all the sensuous textures that so colourfully permeate these scores and that of a drama-filled *La Valse*. Playing of this quality is reminiscent of the old Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra recordings under Antal Dorati or a younger Skrowaczewski. Only in the *Daphnis et Chloe Suite No.2* are they not quite at the very peak of their powers, but that barely dents the huge amount of enjoyment still to be had from

this collection. A resonant and cathedral like Minnesota Hall acoustic allows these vibrant performances to mature, ripen and open out right before our ears. Make no mistake this is one of those venues that goes to prove that as well as delivering a vast canvas it can also accommodate the tiniest and seemingly most inconsequential of tonal details as well. Ultimately this disc is so musically satisfying because it is played and directed with total assurance and the recording backs it all up with an uncanny depth and range of images.

Another exceptional venue can be found at Powell Symphony Hall in Saint Louis. Here too we are treated to marvellously presented, dual-layered hybrid SACD resolution and surround sound, both for the episodic *Pictures At An Exhibition* and a panoramic *Night On A Bald Mountain* UDSACD 4004. It's larger than life cinematic properties are also gainfully employed for the Prokofiev score that graced ▶

▶ Eisenstein's perceptive portrait of patriotism in *Ivan The Terrible* UDSACD 4003 but I will speak of that later. In the former, from *Gnomus* through the *Catacombae* to *The Great Gate Of Kiev* we are treated to a sumptuous recording. Spacious and beautifully detailed, the St. Louis Symphony musicians are equally adept at teasing us with the wistful mood of *The Old Castle* or fleshing out the bombastic caricatures in *Samuel Goldenberg* and *Schmuyle* as they are in reconstructing the majesty before Kiev's massive gates. When we get to that dark and forbidding mountain the strongly projected brass comes sharply into focus. Its climaxes are overwhelming sonically and emotionally. Leonard Slatkin has fire in his belly and while this reading may not have the legendary power of Fritz Reiner's Chicago recording it is still a damn fine performance. Nor do those varied and unending Russian vistas finish here. Modest Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina* bursts at the seams with tuneful episodes culminating in a sexually charged *Dance Of The Persian Slaves*, while that vast sweeping expanse and sense of oriental mysticism is decoratively displayed in an evocative account of Alexander Borodin's *The Steppes Of Central Asia*.

You may just have guessed from my enthusiasm that I like these discs a lot and that is something I would reiterate for the 1979 recording of *Ivan The Terrible* which comes as close as anything to matching the virtues found in Riccardo Muti's 1978 benchmark performance for EMI. This work, originally commissioned by Stalin, is a troubled one. He wanted a hugely patriotic spectacle but both the Eisenstein film and Sergei Prokofiev scores (especially in Part II) were not to the old dictator's liking. The "warts and all" portrayal of Ivan's epic life and Russian history in general, did not conform to Stalin's revisionist Soviet aesthetic for a war torn Motherland. It destroyed Eisenstein as a filmmaker and Prokofiev was condemned until well after Uncle Joe's passing. In this rendition Slatkin revises the famous Stasevich oratorio in two ways. The first change is the inclusion of a *Polonaise*, which was not strictly part of *Ivan*, while the second was to separately record the



orchestra, bells and the narrator. The narration is completely absent from this transfer. A wide-ranging orchestral recording employed ten microphones: three behind the orchestra for the chorus and vocal soloists; one for the brass; two mikes for ambience and another four facing the strings. Overkill? Well, perhaps. But this feeds a truly ravenous SACD beast. The technology eats up engineering of this kind and produces an awesome sound in the process. Again and again the impact of these bold and transparent instrumental images as they pour throughout the auditorium is palpable. Moreover, despite the fragmented nature of this particular performance (Slatkin chose to minimise the editing required by recording this work in segments) the finished article

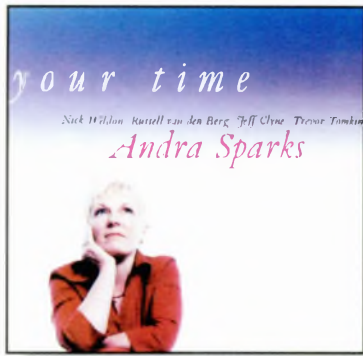
seamlessly delivers contrasting

aural textures that gel into a satisfying whole. It causes the hairs on the back of your neck to rise when they play sections like *On The Bones of Your Enemies* or in the unravelling plots which lead to the poisoning of Anastasia. Hearing those soaring trumpets, horns and trombones; wave upon wave of massed and solo vocal parts and a midrange where the cut and thrust from biting strings saws into your soul might just be a life changing experience, or possibly at least an equipment changing one.

This is certainly the sort of software that will entice people to trade in their existing kit for a SACD player.

I could conclude with a whole heap of superlatives but the records and SACDs really speak for themselves. Mobile Fidelity has sought to bring together a balanced, genre-spanning catalogue of noteworthy performances and recordings. They have delivered. There are one or two judgement calls that I personally do not agree with. Put them down to taste or brand awareness if you like. And let's face it – what do I know? But when I do buy one of their releases the pulse generally races because I know that they will have moved the sonic properties forward. I do not begrudge the price tag. They take my money and in return provide me with tangible improvements to the music I love. Audiophile re-issue labels have not always been this considerate or accommodating.





Andra Sparks

Your Time

Verge 006 

Andra Sparks moved to jazz from a background in classical music and whilst there's a trace of precise classical intonation in her singing she is clearly more than comfortable in the jazz environment. This album comprises a mix of carefully chosen standards along with a few less familiar tunes such as Dorrough Et Landesman's 'Small Day Tomorrow' a number that is given an outstanding interpretation here. Sparks is accompanied by a very strong band, comprising Nick Weldon (piano), Russell van den Berg (sax), Jeff Clyne (bass), and Trevor Tompkins (drums).

Standout tracks include a tender and quite beautiful reading of Wolff Landesman's 'Ballad of the Sad Young Men', a nice reading of 'After You've Gone' enlivened and given edge by some fine piano playing from Weldon, a dramatic version of Rodgers and Hart's 'I Didn't Know What Time It Was', and for me the strongest song here, Sparks version of the title song, Ferre's 'Your Time' (translated from the original 'Avec Le Temps') a song about both the fading of love within a relationship, and at another level about the diminishing spirit of life itself. Here she almost recites the lyrics imbuing the number with powerful emotion.

This is a beautifully sung, very well played and well-recorded set that I hope will gain Andra Sparks the wider audience she clearly deserves.

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DD



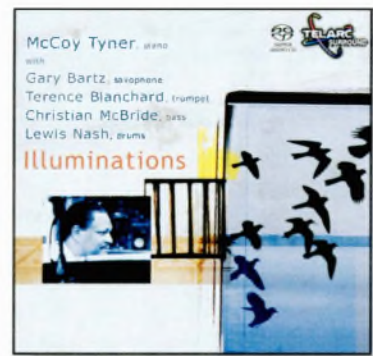
Duke Ellington

Money Jungle

Blue Note 7243 5 38227 2 9  

Way back before I knew anything about girls, working for a living or jazz, I bought a re-issue LP of *Money Jungle*. Compositionally and musically it just happened to be one of the Duke's finest. Here the original seven tracks including classics like 'Very Special', 'Caravan' and 'Solitude' have been expanded to fifteen with alternate takes and four new titles that were all recorded at this New York session back on September 17th 1962 but not previously released. This is definitely not one of those cases where more is less. More of the mighty Mingus on bass, more of Max Roach's technical mastery and inventiveness on drums and more of that wonderfully adroit and quite unique Ellington sound are individual blessings. Together what a stellar trio they were and on the new cuts of 'A Little Max (Parfait)' and the traditional blues numbers 'Switchblade', 'REM Blues' and 'Backward Country Boy Blues' their playing is as sumptuous as ever. The 24-bit mastering and the re-mix of those original session tapes reproduce the synergy and beautifully intricate moments they conjured up over forty years ago. Even though this is not what I would describe as "audiophile" sound it is good enough to reveal that musically it's an essential purchase.

RP



McCoy Tyner

Illuminations

Telarc SACD 63599 

At a time when many musicians would be resting on their laurels, McCoy Tyner is one of the most influential pianists, composers and arrangers in jazz. A key member of the classic John Coltrane Quartet, his playing has graced two of the best albums in the genre, *My Favourite Things* and the groundbreaking *A Love Supreme*. Nevertheless, here he is at 66 with his energy undiminished, leading a powerful band comprising Gary Bartz (sax), Terence Blanchard (trumpet), Christian McBride (bass), and Lewis Nash (drums). A listen to just a few bars of 'New Orleans Stomp' with its spitting trumpet, lithe sax and driving percussion held together by Tyner's masterful playing is enough to convince that he's lost none of his powers over the years. The frenetic pace of Gary Bartz's 'Soulstice' gives the composer and Blanchard an opportunity to really shine while Tyner kicks in with a magisterial solo. Outstanding stuff and one of the best tracks of this very strong set. McBride's 'West Philly Tone Poem' demonstrates a more lyrical approach with bowed bass offsetting tender chords from Tyner in this delicate number. The bands romp through Arthur Schwartz's 'Alone Together' is a fitting closer. Full-bodied and appropriately dynamic this is a good recording lacking (at least in 2 channel SACD mode) only in a little stage depth, and a highly enjoyable musical experience.

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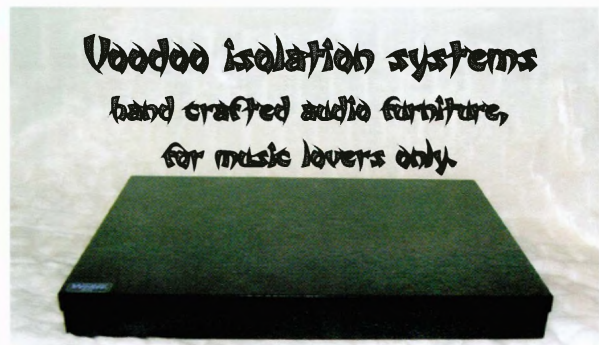
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Beethoven
"Archduke" Trio & Op. 1 Trio No. 3
in C minor

The Kempf Trio

BIS-SACD-1172 

This is a particularly charming disc, and while the ensemble is presented in a most naturally spacious soundstage, by a recording that's detailed enough to reveal every nuance of each performer's aptitude, it is their insightful performance that leads the way. It opens with Beethoven's *C minor Trio*, and while the second movement may be a touch on the slow side, this is a minor point in an otherwise splendid rendition, in which the Trio respond to the composer's sometimes chaotic writing marvellously. The playing is full of warmth and reveals some particularly nice touches, especially in the *Menuetto* where Freddy Kempf performs a descending scale softly before repeating it fortissimo to gain the most marvellous effect. The "*Archduke*" is also played in a most satisfying manner, although once more the tempos are on the slower side; emphasising the charming rather than the impressive. Accordingly, there are times when the structure of the work seems about to collapse, but the Trio sustain momentum in the most serene manner, exhibiting a wonderful lightness of touch and agility. In fact, while there are more vigorous performances, I know of few more affectionately played renditions of Beethoven's chamber music.


SG

RECORDING
MUSIC



John Mayall and Friends

Along For The Ride

Audio Fidelity AF2 016 

Originally released on Eagle records in 2001, this set sees Mayall, headmaster of that venerable finishing school for blues players that was the Bluesbreakers, joined by a lengthy list of ex alumni such as Mick Taylor, John McVie, Mick Fleetwood and Peter Green, alongside young pretenders like Jeff Healey and Jonny Lang and long-time friends and admirers such as Chris Rea and Andy Fairweather-Low. Fortunately the set doesn't feature the entire cast in dreadful 'Live-Aid' encore style, but offers a judicious selection for each track. Standouts include the rolling 'Yo You Man' with a good chunk of the classic Fleetwood Mac backing Mayall, including deft acoustic slide from Peter Green, 'If I Don't Get Home' with Gary Moore in fine form, Shannon Curfman duetting with Mayall on 'Testify', and 'So Many Roads' with Otis Rush adding a gigantic dollop of soul to proceedings. 'California' is lifted with fluid tenor from Red Holloway and Hammond from Tom Ganning. Mick Taylor gets his chance to prove that the years haven't withered him in 'She Don't Play By The Rules' and doesn't disappoint. As ever with collaborations like this it's a bit of a curate's egg but fortunately a reasonably tasty one with nothing bad and the good greatly outweighing the mediocre. A good but not outstanding recording makes this a curious choice for SACD, but still a highly enjoyable set.


Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

DD

RECORDING
MUSIC



Chen Gang/He Zhanhao
The Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto
Breiner
Songs and Dances from the Silk Road
Nishizaki/NZSO /Judd

Naxos 6 110082 

The story of Takako Nishizaki and her recordings of *The Butterfly Lovers* has come full circle. It begins in 1978, in Hong Kong, when a certain Klaus Heymann made the first recording of her performing the best known of contemporary Chinese compositions, having brought her from Japan following their marriage. This, her seventh recording of the work, has been released by Naxos, the label that Heymann was to found a number of years later. Many have been critical of the composition, regarding it as unadventurous, and while its themes originate in traditional Chinese opera, popularised in a film of the 1950s, its simple harmonies are just as appealing as many Romantic concertos, and could almost be described as a Chinese *Lark Ascending*. Nishizaki's experience with the piece enables her to bring a consummate sensitivity to the performance, with playing that is focused and displaying wonderful finesse. James Judd and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra add some notable support. The coupling of Peter Breiner's eight rearranged folk tunes, *Songs and Dances from the Silk Road* may not be the most inspiring or challenging music, but it is very pleasant. With excellent sound and superb performances this is a most agreeable release.

SG

RECORDING
MUSIC





Jimmy Reed

At Carnegie Hall

Audio Fidelity AFZ020 

A prototypical primitive bluesmen, Jimmy Reed with his simple guitar lines, straight ahead vocals delivered in a voice that has been described as 'oblique and toneless' or as a 'high-pitched, lazy seeming drawl' and biting harmonica came into his own in the '50's and early '60's when he notched up over two dozen hits. A functional illiterate, Reed often had to be prompted by his wife with the lyrics of his own songs at his recording sessions. This clearly worked well since 'Mama Reed' soon became a regular feature in his recordings.

This set from 1961 is not quite what it says on the cover. One batch of numbers comprises Reed's re-creation of his Carnegie Hall play list, the other half comprises a 'Best of' selection in living mono. This matters not a jot, since this is a great collection of no-nonsense blues, refreshingly unfussy and downright satisfying. Both sections are equally enjoyable, although if forced I'd plump for the original mono's maybe because this music just seems made for mono - the simpler the better. Re-mastered by Steve Hoffman, every nuance of this earthy, gritty stuff is caught, making this hugely entertaining set the jewel in the Audio Fidelity crown and an essential purchase for any serious blues or R&B fan.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk
DD



Barb Jungtr

Sings Bob Dylan

Linn AKD230 

Despite greatly enjoyed one of Barb Jungtr's previous outings for Linn - 'Chanson - The Space In Between' [Linn AKD 129], I approached this with some trepidation. After all for every Hendrix 'All Along The Watchtower' there lurks many a far less successful interpretation. Fortunately Jungtr with her highly theatrical readings successfully lends a new dimension to many of these numbers. This is helped by her eclectic selection which whilst it takes in many a crowd pleaser such as 'Don't Think Twice It's Alright' and 'Tangled Up In Blue' is rich in slightly less familiar selections. Amongst the strongest is a cracking version of 'Things Have Changed' that gets a full, rolling 'Waitsian' treatment, superbly arranged, that alone is worth the price of admission. Add a gutsy take of 'Ring Them Bells' with gospel choruses, a tender reading of 'Not Dark Yet', a slow paced, impassioned version of 'I Want You' and many more nuggets from Dylan's inexhaustible catalogue and you really can't go far wrong. The weakest tracks here are for me the best known Dylan numbers, but the bulk of this album is hugely enjoyable in its own right.

The recording is up there with Linn's best being weighty, spacious and doing full justice to the husky timbre of Jungtr's vocals. The arrangements and playing of the band are exemplary too.

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DD

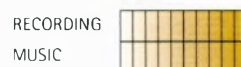


Mozart Requiem Mass
Schäfer/Fink/Streit/Finley/
Schoenberg Choir/Concentus
Musicus Wien/Harnoncourt

Deutsche Harmonia Mundi B2B76 58705 2 

With such an excellent array of soloists, how could this release fail to impress? Soprano Christine Schäfer leads with such wonderful tone and great commitment; communicating each nuance of the text with superb clarity and expressiveness, while her second soprano Bernarda Fink and tenor Kurt Streit are also magnificent. The bass of Gerald Finley is most dignified, and the Arnold Schoenberg Choir assist them with singing of tremendous authority and great conviction. But the highlight of this wonderful performance comes from Nikolaus Harnoncourt, who leads his charges with a determination to wring the last piece of drama from each and every bar of the score. This approach induces feelings that had not previously been realised from this work, and it is as if he has looked at the composition anew, suddenly becoming aware of its true direction and significance. While there may be just 50 minutes of music on this disc, there are some pretty insipid recordings of this music out there, and with excellent sound and the most astonishing performance of Mozart choral music available, this release deserves the highest of accolades.

SG





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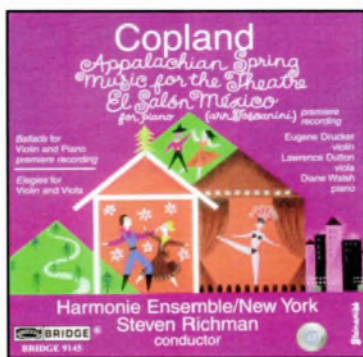



Berlioz
Symphonie Fantastique/Lélio & Le Retour à la vie (excerpts)

SFSO and Chorus/Tilson Thomas
RCA Red Seal Classic Library 82876 60859 2 (CD)

Despite Michael Tilson Thomas being very much an American conductor, this mid-price re-issue of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* has a rather Gaelic flavour: particularly in its elegance; with Thomas' intelligently utilising a full palette of colourful textures. To this he adds a wonderful sense of spontaneous dynamism that brings forth a certain splendour and vigour to the *March to the Scaffold* and *Dream of a Witches' Sabbath*. *A Ball* reveals a beautiful flow to its rhythm and tempo, and the *Scene in the Fields* is most eloquently handled: instilling a real sense of peace and solitude. With playing of the highest order this is simply the finest performance of this great work to have appeared in recent years. This 1997 recording also benefits from some excellent engineering, with sound that, while not matching either Munch's fabulous issue on RCA Living Stereo or Kojian's demonstration quality Reference Recordings release, both on vinyl, betters all of the CDs I have ever heard. Add to this two less well-known extracts of the composer's work, performed to the same high standard, and you have over 75 minutes of glorious music that not only make this a firm recommendation, but something of a bargain.

SG

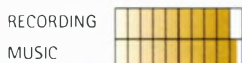


Copland
Music for the Theatre/Appalachian Spring Suite/El Salón México, etc. Walsh/Drucker/Dutton/Harmonie Ensemble/Richman

BRIDGE 9145 (CD)

Bridge is a label that constantly releases superb sounding recordings of bold and innovative repertoire: usually performed to the highest artistic standards. Even with the more standard repertoire, they can generally be relied upon to find some novel and attractive viewpoint to tempt the public. A wonderful example is Arturo Toscanini's solo piano arrangement of Aaron Copland's *El Salón México*, or the American's *Two Ballads for Violin and Piano*: both of which see their premiere recordings on this disc. Neither are major compositions, but along with the *Elegies for Violin and Viola*, they certainly make this more than just another issue of Copland's music. Pianist Diane Walsh and the two members of the Emerson String Quartet, along with the Harmonie Ensemble, conducted by Steven Richman; play with undoubted assurance and exhibit a certain élan. There are also marvelous performances of the more significant works, which include a reference version of the *Appalachian Spring Suite* in its original chamber version, which flows impeccably with the aid of some brisk with lively tempos in the speedier sections. No matter how well you know it, here the piece sounds original and fresh, helping to make this a most enjoyable and inspirational release.

SG



Dufay
Missa Puisque je vis Compère. Omnium bonorum plena Binchois Consort/Kirkman

Hyperion CDA67368 (CD)

While some may spend time arguing whether the *Missa Puisque je vis* was actually composed by Dufay, the rest of us can simply sit back and listen to its masterfully written and seamlessly integrated lines. It is also glorious the way that the eight male voices of the Binchois Consort have imbued it with a wonderful warmth; producing a vibrancy that allows its rhythms and phrases to flow majestically. The motet *Ave regino celorum* on the other hand is unquestionably by Dufay. This is one of the most sublime works of 15th Century vocal music and is able to move the listener with its melodic charm and breathtaking harmonic writing. This release also contains three other motets, two of which are anonymous. The third is another work of eloquent beauty, with its composer, Loyset Compère, employing varied textures, luxuriant harmonies and habitually spirited rhythms. As with the opening *Mass*, the singing is of the highest quality, with a purity of tone and clarity of line that produces rich and complexed hues. Hyperion's engineering, captured at All Saints, Tooting, is also very good, leaving no doubt to this CD gaining a firm recommendation.

SG





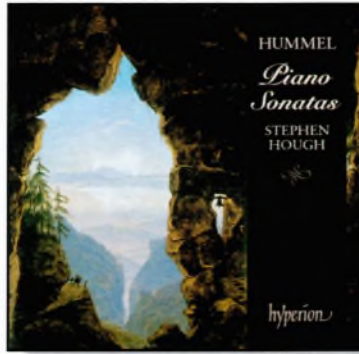
Hartmann – String Quartet No. 1
Bartók – String Quartet No. 4

Zehetmair Quartet

ECM New Series 1727 465 776-2

It is logical that these two quartets should have been coupled on this CD. Bartók wrote his *fourth* in 1928, while Hartmann composed his *first* of two only five years later. While it certainly draws from the earlier work, it also has a distinct character of its own, treading a separate path, and ranking as a first-rate piece in its own right. It is an exquisitely crafted work that covers an expansive breadth of expressive themes, brought to the fore by the composer's imaginative sense of drama and use of textures. The Zehetmair Quartet's communicative playing emphasises this, simply drawing each mood out into full view, animating the musical sentiment. Add to this their ability to shade each note perfectly, while their attack and dynamic qualities are beyond reproach, and you have an emotional rollercoaster. Their aptitude and elegance are also as breathtakingly evident in the Bartók. No matter how congested the music gets, the clarity and precision of the playing allow you to hear each line clearly. With such musicianship it is difficult to find fault, although the finale may be a touch too brutal, but this can never spoil such a terrific disc of astonishing chamber music.

SG



Hummel
Piano Sonatas

Stephen Hough

Hyperion CDA67390

The work of Johann Neopomuk Hummel stands somewhere between that of Beethoven and Chopin – just lacking a little of Chopin's most illustrious melodies, while not fully exhibiting the monumental structures of Beethoven. This is beautifully revealed by Stephen Hough in this selection of *piano sonatas*, but also exposes Hummel's remarkable originality. Other composers are hinted at, with the *D major Sonata's Scherzo* evoking the work of Schumann: with its punctuated rhythms and dense chords. But there are always Hummel's own idiosyncratic and stimulating characteristics. His work often proves quite formidable to performers, with the *F sharp minor Sonata's* dramatic finale allowing little reprieve from its inexorably discordant octaves and exacting runs; but Hough seems to make everything sound effortless through his control and superb technique. There is also a certain musicality to his performances. By utilising tremendous authority and drive, in the *F minor Sonata's finale* he manages to maintain a full and varied sound, expressing the integral dynamic qualities of the piece. In fact, his playing during this most enjoyable recital should remain the reference for many years to come, as well as a valuable inspiration for many a pianist.

SG

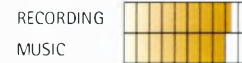


Karłowicz
Violin Concerto. Moszkowski
Ballade in G minor/Violin
Concerto
Little/BBC Scottish SO/Brabbins

Hyperion CDA67389

This release is the fourth in Hyperion's already fine *Romantic Violin Concerto* series, and contains the music of two relatively little-known composers. Both had associations with Poland, although neither's birthplace was actually within the borders of the country at the time of their birth. Mieczyslaw Karłowicz's warm and vibrant concerto owes much to the music of Tchaikovsky, with skilful composition that requires a fair degree of virtuosity from the soloist. This can also be said of Moritz Moszkowski's *concerto*, which is a finely crafted work that exhibits some melodious and particularly attractive music. Between the two is Moszkowski's less-interesting *Bolode in G minor*, but as with all three works, Tasmin Little delivers a rather classy account, with playing that exhibits real enthusiasm. Her instrument has a wonderfully sweet tone, never sounding over-shrill, and with particularly lyrical performances, the results are always pleasant. She is accompanied with true professionalism by Martyn Brabbins and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, who play with their usual gusto, and Hyperion have captured the whole thing with a balanced recording. The resulting disc should hopefully enhance the reputation of Polish music, as well as the two featured composers.

SG





**Poul Ruders
Guitar Concertos and Solos**

Starobin/Speculum Musicae/
Odense SO/Palma/Wagner

Bridge 9136 

All four of the featured performances have appeared on CD before, but Bridge has now combined Poul Ruders' complete works for guitar on one disc. The opening *Psalmodies* (*Guitar Concerto No. 1*) is a suite of eleven brief pieces, each with its own title and character, for soloist and nine instruments: with the composer joining Speculum Musicae on metal wind chimes. The pieces alternate between genuine solos, mixed groups, and full ensemble performances, resulting in a work of originality and wide-ranging eloquence. There are two solo pieces, with the *Etude* and *Ricercare* being a major score lasting over thirteen minutes, but David Starobin, for whom all these works were composed, plays magnificently, sustaining the music's polyphonic patterns on an instrument not totally suited to contrapuntal phrasing. The closing *Paganini Variations* (*Guitar Concerto No. 2*) is an exceptionally innovative work, taking the violin virtuoso's *Caprice No. 24*, with its simple melodies and rhythmic patterns, as a starting point. The performances throughout are marvellous, and the engineering is consistently fine, despite being recorded over a ten-year period, in three distinct locations, resulting in a disc worthy of the attention of any devotee of contemporary music.

SG



**Paganini
Violin Concertos 1 & 2**

Erede/RPO/Menuhin

HiQ Records/EMI ASD 440  

Both these Concertos are lively and tuneful with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra introducing the themes with some short and vigorous flourishes before the violin picks up on these statements. The emphasis here is on virtuosity. Yehudi Menuhin is a bold soloist who plays these Concertos in an agreeably attacking manner that has plenty of personality and tonal ripeness. The performance of *La Campanella* is a virile and quite handsome one and the orchestra throughout dotes on Menuhin's every expressive whim and capricious switch-even if these extravagancies occasionally lack that last ounce of fluency. However, Alberto Erede is sometimes inattentive and the RPO as a consequence does not always accurately accompany the soloist-failing in the process to develop the tension to its fullest. The recording is lean, the violin sinuous and nicely detailed but the pressing and reproduction of the original art work was not quite up to the standards that I have come to expect when say Testament have repackaged and re-issued LPs from EMI's back catalogue. Annoyingly there was also a noticeable rim warp on my copy - a problem that was resolved with the use of my VPI rim clamp but not everyone has the luxury of owning that useful but expensive piece of kit.

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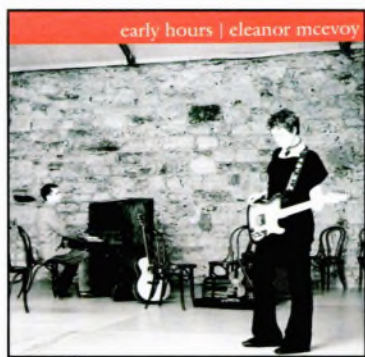
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Eleanor McEvoy

Early Hours

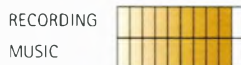
Mosco Vinyl MOSV101 

The acclaimed *Early Hours* SACD was reviewed back in issue 30. This analogue multi-track recording engineered by Ciaran Byrne had been mixed to a stereo half-inch analogue tape before the black SACD arts were introduced. The bedrock analogue source material and Eleanor McEvoy's commitment to a vinyl release made this 180g half-speed mastered LP transfer almost inevitable. It will be welcomed by a legion of fans that adore her natural idiomatic singing and evocative insights on life. Anyone unfamiliar with Eleanor's music will quickly realise that she revels in a collision between heartache and pain. Here on this LP, as yet another relationship breaks down and the cracks appear and the fissures open wide into bloody wounds, her voice and intelligently scored musical fabric sensitively mirror the full range of emotions experienced. These clean vinyl surfaces cut at a decent level presents us with a recording that bleeds a similar kind of honesty. It doesn't even paper over the occasional vocal or instrumental slip, but proudly bares all, in the process picking out that empathic almost imperceptible connection between Eleanor's voice and guitar and the Brain Connor keyboards. Guitar breaks and vocal nuances, the smallest changes in weight or emphasis, the subtle inflexions that sensitively nail another poignant moment in 'Slipping Away' or on 'At The End Of The Day' are beautifully exposed. Meanwhile the ripe, incisive and rock solid piano, keyboard or Hammond notes that rhythmically underpin them are extremely

well defined. Consequently, elsewhere when the light, airy, gently ironic humour and self deprecating tone of an opening 'You'll Hear Better Songs (Than This)' is presented, these qualities are effortlessly and beautifully revealed. Whereas the LP pressing of *Yola* was a little disappointing when compared to the SACD, *Early Hours* shares none of those difficulties found in reproducing dynamic shifts at the frequency extremes or towards the side-ends. For example, Lindley Hamilton's sharply etched trumpet stands firm as it soars upward to then open out at the peak of its range. On *Yola* this would have been masked or muted by limitations in the transfer. *Yola* also suffered badly from being cut at quite a low level. To get decent resolution you had to really crank up the volume, which in turn raised the noise floor. The *Early Hours* vinyl cut is much closer to the SACD in this respect and in comparison the LP surfaces are whisper quiet. Although I personally prefer the songs found on *Yola* (Eleanor's onomatopoeic arrangement for 'The Rain Falls' is truly memorable) there's no doubt as to which is technically the better LP.

Of course, coming a close second to *Yola* in the song-writing stakes is no mean feat in itself. Eleanor's songs and the sonic qualities of *Early Hours* make for their particular mix of heady brew.

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Procol Harum

Procol Harum

Classic Records/ Regal LRZ 1001 

This eponymous 1967 debut album, which was only recorded in mono, was not the strongest or the most musically satisfying of Procol Harum discs. That accolade probably goes to *A Salty Dog* or *Grand Hotel* but it is nonetheless significant not least for the way in which it and their ethereal anthem from earlier in the year 'A Whiter Shade Of Pale' captured the spirit of personal freedom and love. The 33 and 45 rpm cuts of that hit single which appear here on mint coloured 12 inch vinyl are indispensable and should be in every collection, while a bonus white-vinyl 7 inch single of the same with 'Lime Street Blues' on its reverse is a nice finishing touch. Yet between the single and album releases there were dramatic personnel changes with guitarist Robin Trower and nimble drummer B.J. Wilson joining Brooker, Fisher and Knights in what was always a fluid line up. This ten track LP does have some impressive and imaginative songs like 'Homburg', 'Cerde', 'Kaleidoscope' and 'Something Following Me'. It is though characterised by an unlikely but successful stylistic marriage. Seemingly disparate parts such as Trower's distorted and Cream like guitar with the classical majesty of Mathew Fisher on organ are wed to the fine Gary Brooker R&B vocals which deliver the often-surreal Keith Reid lyricism.

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Sara K.

Play On Words

Chesky SACD278 

Led by Sara K's soulful vocals and four-string acoustic guitar this is a nicely varied set that ranges from folk through jazz and blues, the latter carried through the album by Larry Campbell's very tasty slide guitar licks. 'If I Could Sing Your Blues' leans, despite the title, more to jazz, opening with Bill Mobley's muted trumpet spiralling gently around Sara K's heartfelt voice before the full band kicks in: A nice subtle arrangement here from musical director and pianist Joel Diamond.

All the numbers in this set are penned by Sara with the exception of one really oddball choice in Lerner and Lowe's 'Wouldn't It Be Luvly'. A perfectly okay song in its original context but plain bizarre here. Sara's impassioned vocals overstretch the simplicity of the show tune and the cockney phonetics sound daft in this setting. Fortunately this is the sole aberration in an otherwise very strong set, and it's good to give that 'skip' button a little exercise occasionally. My favourite tracks include 'Burnin' Both Ends', the tender 'Second Wind' and the closing 'History Repeats Itself' punctuated with muted trumpet from Lou Soloff and driven by solid bass and percussion. Recorded live with very few overdubs and set in a warm, spacious acoustic this is a thoroughly enjoyable album.

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DD

Ravel
Daphnis et Chloé
New England Conservatory
Chorus/Alumni Chorus/
BSO/MunchRCA 82876 61388 2 



Original released in 1958, RCA's "Living Stereo" recordings have been revered among the greatest sounding records ever to appear. Now the first group of ten has been released on the SACD format. Among these is this masterful reading of Ravel's complete ballet *Daphnis et Chloé*. Charles Munch conjures both stunning power and delicate beauty from the Boston Symphony's virtuosic members, projecting the entire splendour of the composer's score. Recorded onto a two-track tape by John Pfeiffer and Leslie Chase in January of 1955, the stereo release would have to wait for over three years, until the Western Electric Company had produced the Westrex stereo cutting machine. While many of the "Living Stereo" SACDs will be issued in a multichannel format, these were mastered from three-track tapes, so here we have to do with plain old stereo. Yet the sound is anything but old, and this mesmerising performance is revealed in all its glory by a wonderfully clear and grand presentation that still retains much of the warmth and presence of its vinyl counterpart. While owners of original "shaded dogs" can carry on listening in smug silence, those wanting excellence on a new format should seriously consider this disc.

SG



Rickie Lee Jones

The Evening Of My Best Day

Diverse Records DIV 008DLP  

Illinois' Rickie Lee Jones is a versatile and politically outspoken musician; dividing her time between the piano and guitar, singing with great heart (and a social conscience) in that clipped slightly pinched way and writing candid songs that are peppered with streetwise images. Here sharply observed contradictions like those heard in 'Mink Coat At The Bus Stop' or for an incisive 'Face In The Crowd' and a snappy 'Lap Dog' are given plenty of breathing room because the twelve tracks are spread across four sides. The emotional depth and expressive quality of these songs and for that matter the funky sounding retro feel of 'Little Mysteries', 'Second Chance' and 'Ugly Man' reflects her compositional flexibility. It comes as no surprise that later in 'Sailor Song', 'A Tree On Allenford' and on the title track she shifts down to plough a productive folk sounding groove. This LP transfer absolutely hammers the CD into the dust. It has beautiful instrumental separation; acoustic and electric guitars have a sinuous tactile quality, the piano casts bold voluminous images and all manner of colours from a bowed dulcimer and harmonica to the flute, organ, tenor sax and vibes are recaptured in all their glorious resonant hues. Spectacular!

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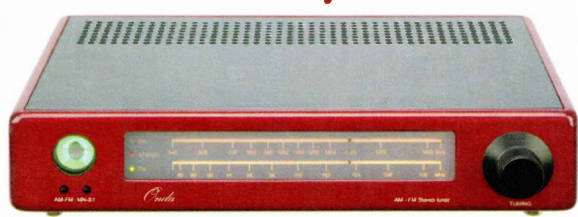
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Straight Down The Middle...

Re-issuing the Concord jazz label

by Dennis Davis

I moved to San Francisco in 1973, a few years too late for the summer of love. A few years too late to see Janis Joplin perform live. I did briefly date a woman who opened for Janis, and of course the Dead kept playing for decades. But by 1973, I was living on the exhaust fumes of the 1960s. As

with all things, of course, time brings perspective and I can now look back on 30 years of music history in the Bay Area that I did not miss out on. One of those opportunities was to be around for the birth of the Concord Records label the year of my arrival in California.

Carl Jefferson founded the Concord Jazz Festival in Concord, California (just outside of San Francisco and even closer to Altamont) in 1969. Jefferson was not the first to establish a jazz festival. The Newport Jazz Festival (on the east coast beginning in 1954) and the Monterey Jazz Festival (on the West coast since 1958) significantly predate Concord. Neither of those festivals, however, ever resulted in the creation of a record label. Carl Jefferson listened to a couple of his artists' advise and started recording and releasing his festival music. Since 1973 Concord has continued to steadily release mostly jazz and Latin titles, and has a catalogue of about 1,000 albums. While the occasional album consists of live recordings from the festival, the vast majority of the catalogue consists of original recording sessions.

The thrust of Concord's catalogue is mainstream jazz. During the LP era, the catalogue seemed to be dominated by the likes of Monty Alexander, Ray Brown, Charlie Byrd, Rosemary Clooney, Herb Ellis, Scott Hamilton, Gene Harris, The L.A. 4, Pancho Sanchez and George Shearing,

With the arrival of the CD era, several jazz legends were recording for Concord, including Dave Brubeck, Kenny Burrell, Gary Burton, Chick Corea, Jim Hall, Hank Jones and Marian McPartland. In addition to featuring a good cross-section of mainstream talent, Concord built an

envious reputation by producing a steady stream of great sounding records. The high quality of its recordings was blemished only by the occasional click and pop from Oil Embargo vintage vinyl.

Over the last couple years, two audiophile labels, Groove Note Records and Pure Audiophile Records, have begun slowly re-issuing Concord titles on LP. The number of releases is still small. Some of the titles selected for release are sure winners, while some (do we really

need any more re-issues of the LA4?) seem poor choices. Several new titles have been announced for release in 2005, and they look very promising.

Groove Note Records is the creation of Ying Tan, one of the two original founders of Classic Records. After Ying split from Classic, he teamed up with Joe Harley (of the now defunct Audioquest Records) to begin releasing double album sets of jazz and blues titles. At first, he released mostly original material. Each release included the main album cut at 33 1/3 RPM plus a bonus album with a couple of extra songs cut at 45 RPM. Later, he contracted with Concord to re-issue LPs and SACDs from the Concord vault. Each LP package includes two LPs, with everything now cut at 45 RPM. The mastering engineer, as with Classic Records, is Bernie Grundman.



► Pure Audiophile Records is the creation of Dennis Cassidy. Dennis used to sell records retail through his business Sound Advise in Kansas City, Missouri. A few years ago he went to a Karrin Allyson concert and was smitten. One thing led to another and before long he had signed a contract with Concord Records

to release Allyson's record *Remembering John Coltrane* on vinyl, and had lined up Stan Ricker to half speed master the disc. To date, Dennis has exclusively released Concord Jazz titles and has stuck with Stan for all his releases. By the time you read this, Pure Audiophile will have released Allyson's *In Blue*.

When I think of Concord Records, the first two names that spring to mind are Herb Ellis and Ray Brown. While I've never done an audit, I suspect that no other artists appear on more Concord issues than these two, and both appeared on Concord's first release (*Jazz/Concord CJ-1*) with Joe Pass and Jake Hanna in 1974.

If I had to cherry pick my top ten all time Concord favourites, Ray Brown's releases make a strong showing. Brown's duets with Jimmy Rowles on piano have long been known as musical and sonic gems. Their first release was *As Good As It Gets* (Concord CJ-66), followed up by *Tasty!* on CJ-122 in 1980. Both records represent the pinnacle of Concord's superior sound, with perhaps *Tasty!* having a slight advantage. The production credits reflect only one difference. *Tasty!* was mastered by George Horn,

who has done so much good work as mastering engineer at Fantasy Records, while the other LP credits The Mastering Room. These differences matter little, as both LPs are easy to find, cost next to nothing and

are as good as it gets in both sonic and musical terms. The only shortcoming is that, like most Concord vinyl releases, the surfaces are not as perfect as they could be. These two titles are available as silver discs with very good CD sound. I cannot think of two Concord LPs more deserving of reissue on heavy vinyl. These are two of my top candidates in the Concord catalogue for audiophile re-issue. But for now, I am doomed to prolonged disappointment. The other Ray Brown title that has always had iconic status as an audiophile collector's item is *Soular Energy* (CJ 268). This trio

recording, with Gene Harris (piano) Gerryck King (drums) and special guests Red Holloway (tenor saxophone) and Emily Remler (guitar), is a phenomenal album. Like most Concord releases, this one has always been easily available. There are tons of original vinyl copies floating around, and it is available on CD. Many years ago, there was even an

audiophile pressing from the German label Bellephon. But in 2002, Pure Audiophile released a two record limited edition set, spreading the record over four sides. This is a monster release, offering easily the best combination of great sound and great music yet



► re-issued from the Concord Records vaults. The Pure Audiophile re-issue is way superior to every prior vinyl and digital release, which given the quality of the performance makes it a must own record.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Concord captured a number of live performances of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers at jazz clubs in the San Francisco area. These smoking performances are one of my favourite sub-groups within the Concord catalogue. First up was *In This Korner* (CJ-68), followed by *Straight Ahead* (CJ-168) and *Keystone 3* (CJ 196), all recorded live at the now defunct Keystone Korner in San Francisco. Wynton Marsalis is in the *Straight Ahead* lineup, joined by his brother Branford on *Keystone 3*. Terence Blanchard and Mulgrew Miller feature on the fourth album, *Live at Kimball's* (CJ 307). These records are all available in various digital formats, although some have been repackaged. *Keystone 3* is available as both a CD and an SACD. *In This Korner* and *Straight Ahead* have been packaged as *Blakey's Beat*, a 2 CD set (2234) while *Live At Kimball's* has been packaged together with *New York Scene* as *Coast To Coast*, another double disc set (4926). In the US, original vinyl copies are plentiful and cost next to nothing.

Pure Audiophile has scheduled *Keystone 3* for release next year as a double vinyl album set. While all the Blakey Concord albums are terrific records, *Keystone 3* is the standout performance. These guys were into the music the evening of this show, with whirlwind fast numbers interspersed with rich ballads. The sonics are absolutely explosive with real presence, life and energy. I'm dying to hear what this will sound like when Stan Ricker does his re-mastering magic. I expect this re-issue to go to the head of my rating list for Concord re-issues in both the music and sound categories.

Another incredible sub-set of releases by a single artist on Concord is the group of six Tal Farlow albums. Tal Farlow is one of my jazz guitar heroes, although he never received full recognition of his talents because of his retiring ways. After recording a handful of albums for

Norgran and Verve in the 1950s and early 1960s, Farlow dropped out of the recording business and then "returned" with a double album for Prestige in 1969. In 1977 he returned once again, this time recording for, among others, Concord. Farlow had left jazz to pursue his trade as a sign painter (continuing to play guitar locally), and one of his first albums on Concord, *A Sign Of The Times* (CJ 26) plays on that association. He also played on *Tal Farlow '78* (CJ 57), *On Stage* (CJ 143), *Chromatic Palette* (CJ 154) and *Cookin' On All Burners* (CJ 204). He recorded a sixth Concord release, *The Legendary*, which I have never owned. *Cookin'* has long been known as an audiophile delight, and it is the best of the lot, aptly

named. The Penguin Guide gives the Farlow Concord albums a somewhat lukewarm review, accusing Farlow of lacking the "sizzle" of his 1950's Verve recordings. I do not agree. These albums sizzle just fine, and *Cookin' On All Burners* definitely sizzles on all burners too.

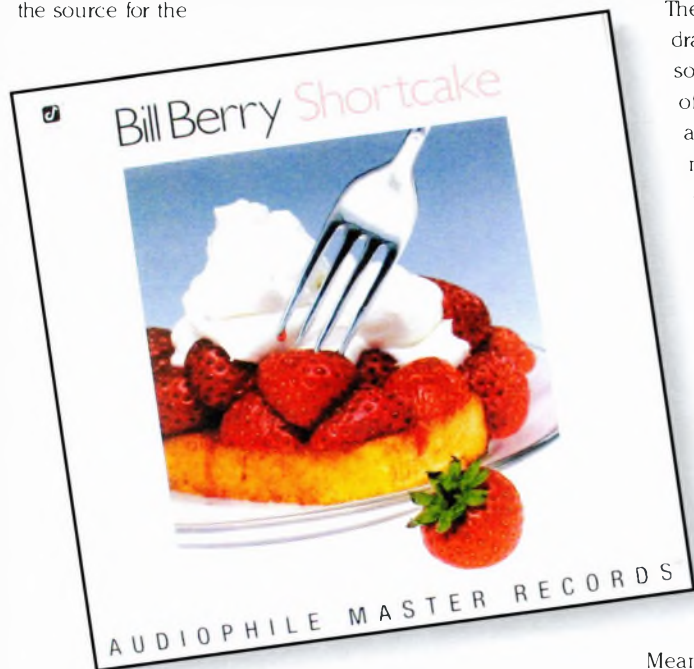
Five of Farlow's Concord albums are available on CD while *On Stage* is scheduled for release as a Pure Audiophile double LP in 2005. *On Stage* is not technically a Farlow album, but a live quintet



date with Hank Jones, Red Norvo, Ray Brown and Jake Hanna from the 1976 Concord Jazz Festival. The original album only ran to 38 minutes and 3 seconds. Farlow began his career in the late 1940s, and spent much of the 1950s with Red Norvo's trio, along with Charles Mingus. The live Concord date brings back memories of that classic trio, whose recordings are best remembered on a couple of ten-inch discs from Discovery Records. This is a must have set, and I look forward to the upcoming re-issue of this album. Now if I was really greedy I would keep pressing for a re-issue of *Cookin'*. Find all of these albums in any format you can play. You will not be disappointed.

A Concord album that never saw the light of day on vinyl has also recently received the Pure Audiophile treatment, issued on two thick slabs of blue vinyl as PA-003[2]. *Like Minds* was a collaboration between

► Gary Burton, Chick Corea, Pat Metheny, Roy Haynes and Dave Holland. That line-up sounds like something you might expect to find on the ECM label. It was, however, originally a Concord CD, and remains available in both CD and SACD formats. The vinyl incarnation, however, adds a bonus track not on the CD. Burton has released eight Concord CDs, but this is the only one with this stellar line-up. Nor is this your standard audiophile fare, and will not be to everyone's taste. While it is definitely not smooth jazz, it can sound that way to a casual listener. Dig a little deeper however, and you'll discover complex and rewarding music. The sound is fantastic, better than CD can hope to deliver. Although the record was originally released as a CD, the source for the



LP is the original two-track master tapes, recorded and mixed by James Farber, who has consistently produced fine sounding recordings during the CD era. The packaging is a high quality gate-fold sleeve and that, coupled with the terrific photographic reproduction, makes for some of the best LP cover work I have seen in a long time.

Stan Getz's *Spring Is Here* (available as Groove Note GRV 1020-1) comes from a live 1981 session at San Francisco's *Keystone Korner*, the same session that was the source of the better-known album *The Dolphin*. The two albums are available from Concord as a two CD set called *My Old Flame* (4955). *Spring Is Here* was recorded live before an enthusiastic audience for whom Getz plays mostly ballads. The re-issue is more dynamic than most Concord releases. I compared it to a German Bellephon audiophile re-issue of *The Dolphin*, and the newer album bests it in

almost every way, most obviously in terms of its wider and more spacious soundstage. While the top end is more extended than the Concord CD issue, it does not achieve quite the perfection to be found on some of the new Fantasy 45 RPM/AcouSTech releases or on the best of the Pure Audiophile issues, but that could be down to tape quality or a host of other variables, so don't read it as a general judgment. This is still one hell of a record.

One album that never made a great impression on me before its release on audiophile vinyl was Bill Berry's *Shortcake* (originally issued as CJ 75 and now available as Pure Audiophile 004[2]). I compared this new issue to an original (promo) LP, and the differences were remarkable. The dynamic range of the Pure Audiophile pressing is dramatically greater than on the original. As good as the sound is on the original, the re-issue gives the character of the reproduced instruments a much more palpable and genuine quality. The cover of this issue is also noteworthy, as the re-issue is better looking than the original. The cover photo is of a slice of strawberry shortcake covered with a dollop of whipped cream, with a fork poised over the dessert. It appears that someone cleaned up the original photo in Photoshop and improved what was a pretty boring studio shot. Which is a handy metaphor for the whole album, with this set of standards by a crack group of mainstream players now well worthy of repeat listening. The sound quality is a treat.

Other Concord re-issues on the horizon and not mentioned above are *From the Beginning* by Scott Hamilton and *Steaming Hot* by Monty Alexander, both from Pure Audiophile. Both are compilations drawn from albums that still feature in the current Concord catalogue as two CD sets. Meanwhile, Groove Note will be releasing all of its planned re-issues on both vinyl and SACD. The upcoming titles are Ray Brown's *The Red Hot*, Ernestine Anderson's *Never Make Your Move Too Soon*, Laurindo Almeida and Charlie Byrds' *Latin Odyssey* and Charlie Byrd and Bud Shanks' *Brazilville*. This last title was a favourite of mine when it came to generating a romantic mood in the early 1980s, so I look forward to replacing my worn out copy!

Concord Records is owned by Act III Communications, a holding company itself owned in part by Norman Lear of *All In The Family* television fame. Act III recently purchased the Fantasy Records catalogue. I do not know what this implies for the future of either catalogue or for the future licensing of titles for re-issue by small enterprises devoted to premium quality vinyl. To the extent that the titles released appeal to you, rest assured that these re-issues are worth having. Vote with your wallets and keep these fledgling companies alive to pan more gold from the hills of San Francisco. ✚

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