

hi-fi+

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS

Issue 48
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Awards Issue

- ▷ **Best Speaker?**
Avalon's mighty Isis
- ▷ **Best Systems?**
Reviewers' picks
- ▷ **Top Tweaks**
33 outstanding accessories

Interview:
Pierre
Boulez





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Editorial

With the Awards appearing in this issue the question of Records of the year arises once more. This time around, rather than simply picking a couple of titles or a label or two, I decided to allow each of the music writers to submit a list of three titles they feel deserve special attention, thus giving you, the readers, a far wider range of genres and formats. You'll see the results in the next issue, but for the moment, looking at the lists as they arrived (and the copy for this issue) I was struck by two features: the breadth of material coming out of vinyl re-issue houses, and the number of SACDs that are included. On the vinyl front it's fantastic to finally see recordings making the re-issue list on musical rather than just sonic merit. Maybe the old audiophile chestnuts have been done to death, but the range of early blues and jazz that's now available is fantastic, the rise of mono recordings an astounding, almost Luddite surge, while for Speakers corner to raid the Harmonia Mundi recordings of Gregorio Panagua and the Atrium Musicae de Madrid without disinterring *La Folia* along the way is refreshing indeed. And that's without even mentioning the superb historical recordings coming out of Testament on CD.

Meanwhile, an increasing number of labels are releasing impressive new recordings on Hybrid SACDs, with both established and exciting new talent. Add to that the growing quality and sophistication of surround sound mixes, as well as an increasing appreciation of the care and equipment that's needed if systems are going to realise the benefits, and suddenly the future for high-quality audio formats doesn't look quite so bleak. Sony's hi-res format might not ever reach the mainstream, but if existing sales continue to grow, perhaps it won't be the lost opportunity it has so often seemed. Maybe it's a little premature to talk in terms of resurrectionist tendencies, but if the Back To Mono brigade get any more vocal the ironic parallels might become hard to ignore.



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Hi-Fi Choice, UK 2006

All the reviewers seem to agree - Q series, the intelligent choice.



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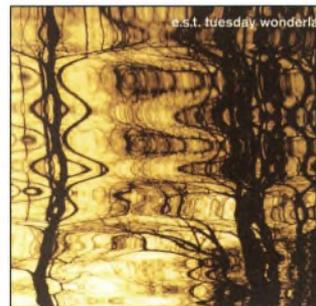
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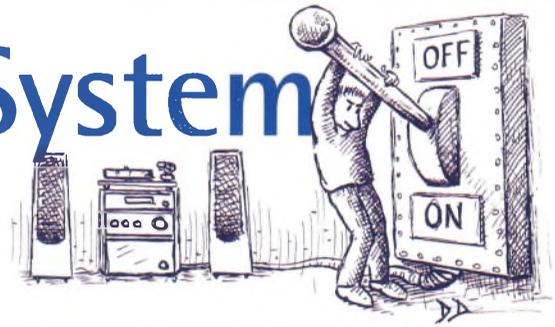
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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



Chester is a nice enough town, but it's a long way from the South Coast. Far enough in fact to make you wonder why I'd undertake the trip to visit a weekend dealer event a mere three-weeks after the London shows. But actually, that was very much the point.

Given the confusion that surrounded this year's Heathrow event(s) it's hardly surprising that its status as the UK's premier hi-fi show was still further undermined, especially when you consider that attendance at the Bristol show now outstrips it by a fair margin. But I think there's another side to this. The trials and tribulations of the London show have tended to distract from what is a fundamental shift in attitude on the part of exhibitors, partly itself a result of changes in the UK industry. With this in mind I was keen to visit Acoustica in Chester and sample the delights of their weekend event, organized in conjunction with Naim Audio. That's right, the same Naim Audio whose equipment could be found in three or four rooms at the London Sound and Vision show and who would also be exhibiting at Practical Hi-Fi's Manchester show, a week after Acoustica's open-house.

To make any kind of sense of this sequence of events, you really need to start by looking at the difference between a show and a dedicated dealer event – as well as what shows have become.

Once, way back when, shows were events at which manufacturers exhibited their goods in the hope of generating interest in them, which would in turn result in sales through their dealers. They offered a chance for the public to meet the people behind products, to hear a whole range of equipment in a single place and to discover the latest developments and experience their benefits. In addition, the London show, with its September date, marked the traditional start to the winter season.

Companies worked to launch their new products and ranges on that schedule and it was very much the case that if you didn't attend the show then you really didn't know what was going on.

Well, that's all changed and for a number of reasons. Firstly, the advent of the internet and the globalization of markets has diminished the importance of the London show as a launch platform; a company can bring a new product to market at any time, and the sooner it does so the sooner it starts to reap the financial rewards. Secondly, the distinction between manufacturers/distributors and dealers has blurred significantly in recent years, such that many dealers are now also minor importers, giving them a reason

and motive to exhibit at shows; the reason being to represent their brands – the motive being to sell them. As a result, the separation of exhibiting and the actual selling of product has likewise collapsed.

Now, against that backdrop let's look at the Acoustica event, a typical (albeit extremely well planned and organized) manufacturer/dealer collaboration. Based, as I mentioned, in Chester, Acoustica was founded some 11 years ago by owner Geoff Coleman. With a long history in the hi-fi business, this marked his step away from working for others and into the world of self-employment and he had very clear ideas about how he wanted it to work. His model can best be described as "old school": no flashy high-street premises, a limited range of key brands and an emphasis on adding value to the purchase. Not surprisingly, a brief look at the product line up includes most of the usual suspects, with Naim, Arcam and Rega featuring prominently – although the presence of B&W Nautilus, Classe and Thiel represent significant lumps and bumps in what might otherwise





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▶ be considered a rather flat-earth perspective.

At Acoustica you'll find a refreshingly relaxed, even slightly cluttered ambience. No acres of pristine glass display racks and intimidating lighting. The stock that fills the reception area is there to equip the two dem rooms, so artfully arranged, inviolate displays are rather out of the question. I arrived on the Friday to find Geoff and staff helping Mark Ragget and Adam Meredith from Naim to assemble a daunting and seemingly limitless array of near identical black boxes on four Fraim racks – a veritable wall of sound. The object of the exercise? To allow customers to hear the benefits of upgrading almost any conceivable CD player with the various power supply options, as well as offering a similar "ladder" of power amps. That of course requires a range of pre-amps and hence the sheer volume of electronics (and the considerable effort that went into assembling them). There was also a smaller 5 series system running in the rear studio, allowing the full range of Naim options to be appreciated.

Now, even with the shop's own dem stock on hand, this impressive array still required considerable effort and support from the manufacturer, not to mention the presence of two employees for three days, but come the Saturday morning the shop quickly started to fill, until, by early afternoon it was standing room only in the dem studios, many customers staying for several hours. In fact, some 65 people attended in all, from which Acoustica garnered around 20 orders, most for multiple boxes and including in excess of eight 555PS power supplies at £4295 a piece. I think that I can safely say that both shop and manufacturer were well pleased with the return on their efforts.

But, why was the event so successful? You can point to the decision to offer interest free credit, as well as savings to be had on ex-dem equipment, but the key is simple. Here was an environment in which almost any customer's system could be rapidly mirrored, massively increasing the effectiveness of the demonstrations. Of course, Naim's highly structured product line lends itself ideally to the approach, but even so the Acoustica event serves as a perfect example of the difference between a

dedicated, dealer-based selling scenario and a national hi-fi show. If you want to make a demonstration sufficiently convincing to sell product then it needs to be tailored to each individual; the more specific it is to their system, the more successful it will be. What's more, the customers knew exactly what to expect and appreciated the opportunity on offer. With a general audience of the type that goes to a national hi-fi show, unless you have a generally applicable product or accessory, that's almost impossible to achieve. What's more, the more specific your demo, the more you risk alienating or boring an increasing number of the audience.

If a national hi-fi show is going to succeed it needs to understand its role and appeal. It should be a general forum, a showcase for what is good and exciting in the industry. The public don't go to shows to have things sold to them – they go to have their interest levels topped up, their faith reaffirmed, to reassure themselves that this is a worthwhile pursuit. They want to hear loads of great stuff, they want to hear impressive demonstrations – whether they're going to buy the equipment in question or not. When they do decide to buy, they'll go to a dealer who can give them much more specific advice and a far more relevant demonstration. Interestingly, at the Acoustica event, all but three of the visitors were existing customers, despite considerable advertising in the local press. This kind of event doesn't attract new customers – you need to offer a far wider range of experience for that.

What the hi-fi industry needs to understand (or remember) about shows is that a demonstration doesn't have to be personally relevant to still be interesting. A national show should be about building brands and offering a superior experience. Their return is longer term. If manufacturers want to grow their customer base they need to look beyond short-term gain and offer general events of a superior standard – and part of that means focusing on that goal and selling an experience rather than products. As we can see, there are better ways to do that! If the industry wants a successful national hi-fi show then it will need to give the public what they want (and expect) from such an event. Pale imitations diluted by the direct-selling sub-text simply won't do. 



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Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

'The Decisive Moment' is a classic essay by the legendary photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. The concept is simple: there are points in time where everything comes together perfectly and the outcome is the best photograph you that can possibly be made at the time. The same thing can be applied to music.

There are times when everything comes together perfectly, the music is perfect, the musicians are all on top form, well-rehearsed and hang together brilliantly. These are the recordings that make the big difference, whether it's Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, Hendrix at Monterey, or Glenn Gould at the Joanna. These recordings transcend our tastes – if you have the remotest interest in music of any stripe, these are the recordings that you will appreciate, even if you loathe the genre. Sometimes, the recording comes together just as well as the musicianship.

Then, there's those decisive moments when the system comes together, too: The point where the components in the chain are all run-in enough to sound good, but not so run-in that their performance begins to pall. Every component is well matched: not in some intellectual, price-matched sense, but in the visceral feeling where every piece matches perfectly with every other. All the components compliment one another, even down to the cables and tables. And the mains is somehow working well – perhaps it's after midnight, or you are just lucky and have good mains, perhaps correctly filtered.

But that's just the start. The decisive moment occurs in the head of the listener, too. There are times when music is a vital component in one's life, there are others where it leaves you cold. But it's worth it for one of those vital times, you

know the music you choose is right for you and you feel good – or bad, I guess, but you get what I mean.

Unfortunately, these decisive moments are all too fleeting; even more so when the little audiophile part of your brain kicks in. Suddenly, you discover why Henri Cartier-Bresson thought the decisive moment lasted for less than 1/30th of a second. The audiophile suddenly kicks in and starts to tinker. The disc is stopped, out comes the 'test discs', cables are changed or speakers are moved microscopically. The moment is lost. What you should do is stop, maybe take a wine break, and restart in search of that fleeting, decisive moment.

Of course, that never happens. Instead, you keep tinkering with the system for hours on end. And that's the problem. When you discover that you spend more time tinkering with your system than you do reaching for the decisive moments, something's amiss. But, what's amiss is possibly not the hi-fi system itself; instead maybe it's you to blame. The system was bought on the grounds of its performance and if you originally liked it, stick with it.

How do you get past the tinkering? How do you get back to those decisive moments, the ones that first made you get into hi-fi in the first place? It's exactly the same thing that made a street photographer like Henri Cartier-Bresson develop (ho ho) a good eye. It's called training. Training your ear... Well, your mind really. Training to get past that first minute of listening. You will still perceive things that you want to tweak, but resist the temptation to jump up and change things.

Keep a listening diary. No, really. Buy a little notebook and jot down the times you listen to pieces of music. ▶

"I'm impressed by the way Vertex AQ adopts a holistic system oriented approach, underpinned by a consistency of philosophy and methodology. Good results may be obtained without going the whole hog, as I have done here, but the bottom line is that this stuff really works..."

Paul Messenger, Hi-Fi+

Vertex ran a competition at the London Sound & Vision Show. Here is what the lucky winner had to say: "Since winning your Vertex AQ interconnect, I have to tell you that your products really do transform the way you listen and feel about your music. I have never heard such a 3-dimensional and tangible soundstage, delivered with such emotion and dynamics. The sound is so grain free, one could be tricked into thinking you were listening to an actual performance. I take this opportunity to thank you for making such an experience possible. Keep doing what you're doing... you guys rock."

Martin Ebdon, competition winner

Put one Vertex Component in your system to start with - listen - then ask yourself if you can now listen without it.

► First, write down the conditions prior to your listening session, how you were feeling, what you were doing and anything else you think important. Now listen to a piece of music, entering the date and time, the music listened to, the amount of time you sat and listened and whether the experience was good or bad. If you want, scale the listening experience from -3 to +3. Don't put this off, write your findings at the end of each track or album. This has two bonuses; it stops you from forgetting your experiences and revising them later on, but it also slows you down, forcing you to pause between records.

This is a very different entity from 'tasting notes' for hi-fi. These are the sort of things that reviewers and manufacturers use to attempt to determine differences in performance of hi-fi components. And they are deeply useful, but not if you are constantly fiddling with your own system.

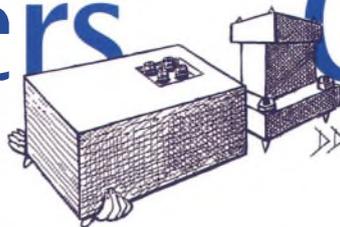
In some respects, though, the listening diary is exactly the same as a reviewer's notebook. What you are doing is building a pattern of behaviour that allows you to learn what you do to get the best out of your system every time. Those prior conditions you jotted down are vitally

important; if you find your musical appreciation is heightened by a relaxing bath prior to sitting in the hot seat, now you know one of the keys to appreciate music for you. Of course, if your prior conditions include heroin or human sacrifice, perhaps you should reconsider your options totally.

Once you get into the habit of keeping a listening diary, it's a perfect thing to broaden your musical horizons. Try to include something new and different in your listening once a week and jot down your feelings about it. Then, try listening to the same recording a few weeks later and record your feelings once again. Now refer to your original notes and compare and contrast. If the numbers go up, it's probably worth investigating that genre further; if they go down, you know it's not for you.

Nothing's foolproof, but if you engineer the decisive moments by using a listening diary, the decisive moments will come more and more. The downside is this might make you less critical of changes in your hi-fi, but is this really a downside? Only the guy down the pub with his endless hi-fi tales will think less of you. ▶+

Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

In the last edition of Hi-Fi+, I wrote a tentative and qualified, yet also very positive review of Rega's first and brand new low-output moving-coil cartridge, codenamed Apheta. The review was tentative because I only received a sample a few weeks before the copy deadline, so had little time to give it a proper workout. It was qualified by the observation that this cartridge does have a distinctly bright top end, which certainly represents an unwelcome

departure from strict neutrality, and which was inclined to emphasise the surface noise of worn or damaged discs. And the compliance was also a little too high for optimum matching with most medium-mass tonearms.

But it was also positive because the Apheta was so downright enjoyable to listen to. My final sentence read: "Forget the foxy measurements – just dig the sound and the music that the most interesting new cartridge ▶

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IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC

▶ for years can deliver."

Seven weeks further down the road, it's time for a more considered appraisal, and the good news is that the Apheta is even more fun than I'd originally thought. It does have flaws, for sure, but they pale into insignificance compared to the wonderfully fast and communicative mid-band that just keeps you spinning vinyl, and allowing the CDs to gather dust.

Most of us have a lazy streak, and I'm sure that the convenience of full remote control operation, combined with extended playing times, were two major reasons why CD became so successful. When I'm sitting at the lap-top, typing away, it's just so handy to be able to skip up and down through a new CD, getting into the favourite tracks without having to put up with tracks one doesn't like, or get out of the chair to change the record every twenty minutes or so. (Much the same, but to an even greater extent, is true of the current trend towards storing one's music collection on a computer or server.)

Digital media might be the kings of convenience, but fitting an Apheta into the end of my tonearm has found me leaping up and changing records at twenty minute intervals, rather than taking the easy way out, even with software I've purchased on both formats. Having initially bought Bob Dylan's new *Modern Times* album on CD, I had to wait a couple more weeks for a vinyl copy, so I already knew the album pretty well by the time I had the option. I still play the CD version, but mostly when work requires me to write about a particular CD player. For pleasure or relaxation, or even when I'm just trying to get on with some writing, it's the vinyl I'll be spinning, simply because it sounds that much more natural, human and believable. Best of all is the extraordinary extra clarity and articulation brought to vocals: I've been playing Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* for forty odd years, yet the vocal line on 'Stuck Inside of Mobile etc' (my second favourite track after 'Visions of Johanna') has never sounded as clear or made such obvious sense. Even on a seriously good player, there's an artificiality and processed quality about CD sound that makes it somehow less palatable. Even if you buy your cook/chill lasagne from M&S, it'll never taste as good as one you take the trouble to make for yourself.

I can witter on trying to describe what something sounds like 'til the Curfew tolls the knell of parting day, etc etc, but its effect on one's behaviour is the bottom line for any judgement involving listening to music and/or hi-fi. When I find that I've dramatically cut down my consumption of CD and replaced it with a big helping

of vinyl, then I know something important has happened.

In my earlier review I mentioned Rega's plans to produce at least one (possibly two) phono-stages to match the Apheta. The cheaper of these uses regular electronic amplification and equalisation throughout; the more costly couples the cartridge to its active electronics via transformers. Both of these, which I briefly heard in breadboard prototype form, were also fitted with defeatable and adjustable tuned filters designed to counter the cartridge's treble peak.

The results were interesting, and not entirely expected. First, the transformer-coupled phono-stage was clearly and obviously better than the all-electronic approach, the most obvious advantage lying in greater dynamic freedom and expression. Secondly, it was debatable whether the tuned filter was worth including: although it did trim the top end peak quite successfully, it was hard to say whether the exercise was really worthwhile, as its insertion also seemed to sacrifice a little of the purity and sweetness of the untreated signal. Exactly what form Rega's phono-stage (or stages) will take has yet to be decided, but I do hope the transformer-coupled variant goes into production. Neither I nor Rega have yet figured out just why transformer coupling should offer this advantage. If I was to speculate, it might have something to do with the reduced electronic gain making less demands on the power supply than the all-electronic phono stage.

It might not be intuitive, given the tiny voltages and currents generated by a moving-coil cartridge, but power supplies do seem to be an incredibly (I use the term literally!) important part of the sound of a phono-stage. Just look at the revered Aesthetix Io with its hefty outboard supplies, which some regard as the non plus ultra of the phono stage firmament. By the same token, the main reason I upgraded my Naim NAC 52 to a NAC 552 was that the latter's superior power supply wrought significant improvements in the performance of the Prefix phono-stage.

Interestingly, my worries about surface noise on worn discs have turned out to be largely laid to rest. Yes there is some exaggeration of groove damage, but over and beyond a couple of 10-inch Tom Lehrer LPs I picked up at a jumble sale forty years ago, I've encountered very few problems. Could be the cartridge has run itself in a little; or could be the cartridge somehow keeps the surface noise separate from the music. Or could be I've just got used to it... Whatever, the Apheta and I are still having fun.



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Incoming!

Please address letters to the Editor at Hi-Fi+, Hi-Fi+, 25-27 Whittle Road, Ferndown Industrial Estate, Wimborne, Dorset, BH21 7RP or via the web-site at www.hifiplus.com

Dear Sir,

I have spotted a small error in your excellent single driver article (issue 47). On page 17 you mention a manufacturer called PHL, with which you most surely mean the French company Phy, or rather Phy-HP, owned and run by monsieur Bernard Salabert.

I have their KM30 driver units (mentioned in your article) in Musical Affairs Auris enclosures and I can honestly say they have a way of communicating music far better than any other speaker I have owned or heard.

Kind regards,

Arjan van Assen

The Netherlands

Dear Sir,

Having read your review of the Avalon Evolution NP 2.0 I am most probably going to buy a pair.

However, I have one concern on which I would like your opinion – will the fairly low impedance (mean 4W with, for me, an unknown lowest value) be a problem for my amplifiers? The amplifiers are Nelson Pass Aleph-60 monoblocks, and their strict class A mode is the reason I am worried about the low impedance.

Very short loudspeaker cables will be needed, since I have balanced connections between the pre- and power amplifiers and the amplifiers are placed right behind my speakers, but do you think the Supra Sword 3.0 would be a good choice, even in such a setting?

This may be a bit of a narrow topic to be put into printing, but I would really appreciate an answer via e-mail. Speaking of which – did you at all get my last letter with a suggestion to write about the Mørch DP6 tone-amp?

Being a bit spoiled having my first two letters published (and answered via e-mail) I am curious of the fate of the latest.

With the Best of Regards,

Jan Kährström

Sweden

Generally speaking we don't reply to requests for specific system advice, simply because we rarely have sufficient information (or indeed time) to provide a meaningful answer. However, there's an interesting general point buried in here, so...

I don't think the power demands of the NF2 should give the Aleph-60 amps any problem at all. What would concern me more is the tonal and presentational match of the two

products. The Aleph may be a little warm and smooth overall, so this is something that you should definitely check out before purchasing. In this respect I think that the Supra Sword would be an ideal match, its bold, vivid and dynamic presentation dovetailing perfectly. The fact that the cables are going to be comparatively short doesn't mean you should underestimate their impact on the sound. The cable itself sets the width of the gateway seen by the signal; as the cable gets longer that gateway will tend to narrow. Unfortunately the converse isn't true. Making a cable shorter can't increase its absolute quality. It's always a good idea to get the best cable you can afford – best of course also taking the system circumstances account.

The Mørch arms have long been a Plus favourite and I have a DP6 at home, along with a couple of different armtubes. It's a fascinating and versatile performer and yes, perhaps we should revisit it. Ed.

Dear Sir,

I found Paul Messenger's article on the Living Voice battery powered mains supply (issue 47) interesting since I have noticed similar improvements with a different, less expensive solution.

I have now been supplying the mains to my Naim NAC72/Hicap/NAP250 (olive versions one and all) for more than a month via a Moth 1kVA 1:1 transformer. My system has been manifesting the same sort of improvements as PM noticed without the intrusion of "politenes" he noted with his NAC552/NAP500; Nightwish and symphony orchestras have not suffered. Personally, I suspect this drawback he noted could well be due to the lowish 600W available from the battery setup - given the size of transformer within Naim amps maybe they were not getting enough current.

For those interested, the Moth 1kVA cost me about \$500 delivered to France. I am pleased enough with the size of the improvement to have started saving for another for the source components to be followed by yet another to isolate digital from analogue. Even if I get carried away and buy only 1kVA models this totals a maximum of £1,500 - much more in keeping with my components (LP12, Lingo, Linto etc, Arcam CD36, Roksan AV+DVD). Another advantage; although the Naim transformers used to emit audible (read loud) hum when the mains was poor the isolation transformer has yet to make a whimper (and nor have they).

Yours,

Nigel Briggs

Via e-mail



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REL

Dear Sir,

I purchased issue 47 about a week ago and as usual, a bunch of thoughts about audio pop up again.

The "when a ribbon is not a ribbon" box in the Piega review caught my attention because my understanding of the differences between a planar driver and a ribbon driver are different than those presented. The box seemed to define the difference primarily as material with a planar being a thin 'plastic' sheet with a conductor applied to it and a ribbon as simply the metal conductor itself. While I agree that all the examples of planars and ribbons that I know are constructed as stated I think that is coincidental and not the fundamental difference.

I believe that a ribbon is a planar membrane in a magnetic field loosely held at the top and bottom so that the membrane literally floats in the field. The magnets are usually (but not necessarily) on the sides of the ribbon (since almost all true ribbons are narrow tweeters) and the motion of the membrane is completely a result of the signal in the membrane interacting with the magnetic flux; geometry and clamping at the top and bottom have nothing to do with it. Due to the wide gap between magnets the Gauss in the gap is relatively low and so is the driver efficiency. So often, as in the renowned Kelly ribbon, the drivers were horn loaded to compensate. Today with exotic, high power magnets this is not always needed, as in the Raven drivers. Another way around this difficulty is to lengthen the driver so the area is large without widening it and destroying horizontal dispersion as in the true ribbon tweeter used in the larger Magneplanar speakers.

On the other hand a planar driver's membrane is held on all sides and is stretched so it is taught, as the non-ribbon Magneplaner drivers (and the duly renowned Quad 57 which is an electrostatic planar speaker). Thus there is resistance to the movement. And the magnet structure is either behind the membrane in some cases (with spaces to allow sound propagation) giving a single ended and less linear magnetic field or both behind and in front producing a more linear, more symmetrical back and forth movement. This structure is, I believe, the significant difference between a ribbon and planar device, not the membrane construction.

My suspicion is that the ribbon format is the more linear because of its freedom of motion. The planar format quickly resists linear displacement because of the tight membrane clamped on all sides. The planar device with magnets parallel to the membrane is more amenable to larger area drivers, which will help to soften this poorer linearity, but I find a lack of dynamics and attack in the planar speakers I've heard, which I believe is caused by this inherent design structure. The one possible exception to this planar design limitation is the Greek Analysis planars, where the planar membrane is surrounded by a suspension like a conventional dynamic driver's surround. This should permit easier and more linear motion over a greater range.

I look forward to further discussion of these observations from the magazine, designers, and readers leading to better designs in the future.

Allen Edelstein
New Jersey, USA



Hi-Fi+ At The Manchester Show – January 27th–28th 2007

The Northern Sound&Vision Show at the end of January sees our continued sponsorship of this already impressive (and still improving) event. This year we will of course be running our now traditional demonstration, and in keeping with our policy of demonstrating for you what we write about in the magazine we'll be playing the Arcam/KEF Reference 7.1 system as reviewed in Issue 47. What we'll be out to show you is the benefits that come when you apply two-channel standards of set-up and system logic to multi-channel replay. That and the possibilities it opens up for recording both classic acoustic performances and the more inventive studio artists. This is about new recordings, not just remixes of old ones. This is about recordings that have been conceived as surround projects from the word go. The results



are quite astonishing as we hope you'll discover.

Though we'd argue that the 7.1 system should be of interest to any die-hard two-channel listener, even we're not prepared to swim up that river. So, God and the organizer's generosity willing, we'll also be showing the Wilson Duette system reviewed on page 42 in this issue – with and without the Vertex upgrade naturally. As always our demonstrations will take place behind closed doors, so make sure you stop by the Hi-Fi+ stand to pick up your tickets. You are of course welcome in both rooms and yes, we will be playing some of the same tracks.

Northern Sound&Vision is held at the Radisson SAS Hotel, Manchester Airport. We'll see you there.



A y r e

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The Ayre MX-R represents a radical new approach to power amplifier design, exceeding all previously known performance limits. Housed in an ultra-rigid chassis machined from a solid block of aircraft-grade aluminum, the MX-R's unique form factor provides for easy placement as well as a stunning appearance.

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Korea :
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France & Belgium :
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info@inlegato.com

Italy :
Audio Lyric
Phone: 059 39 04 74
audio.lyric@itali.it

Norway :
Audiofreaks, Bergen
Phone : 90 65 42 35
peterd@online.no

Greece :
Sirius-group
Phone : 210 6252205
info@sirius-group.eu



"What I dream is an art of balance, of purity and serenity" (H. Matisse)

WWW.ARGENTOAUDIO.COM

Hi-Fi+ 2006 Awards

Hi-Fi+ Awards are a very different to those handed out by other bodies or magazines. No democracy or pseudo-scientific meritocracy here; no attempt to give proceedings mock gravitas. This is a simple straw poll, an arbitrary listing of those products that have got us and kept us excited.

They're easy to choose because they keep cropping up in conversation between reviewers, pushing their way to the front of our collective awareness. This is after all, a collective rather than a competitive exercise (although you'd struggle to realise that given the way a few of our compatriots carry on) and you advance understanding by pooling knowledge. Along the way, certain ideas and products don't just bubble to the surface, they float there waving at you. Well, these are they and each in its own way has something special to offer.

Having said that, products appeal for different reasons, besides and beyond simple audio performance. There are companies with a long and established record of producing not just one great product but consistent musical excellence across the years, supported by long-term servicing and back-up. It's a very real difference buying a product from a company like this (with guaranteed consistency, serviceability and second-hand value)

rather than from the latest star, hurtling across the audio firmament. As magazines we are as guilty (perhaps more so) as anybody else of seeking out excitement in novelty. Of course, every company starts somewhere and today's establishment were yesterday's revolutionaries, but identifying the companies that will survive and prosper from those that will flare and die is notoriously uncertain and has little or nothing to do with the sonic attributes of their products. This year in particular, has seen several of the more established companies elbowing their way back to the front of proceedings, welcome returns to form.

So, with this in mind I have sub-divided the awards structure, with three different categories. These are explained below and it's important that you appreciate the nature of each award. None (save the Legacy award) is inherently superior to the others, but they are distinct from one another and that distinction is important: Read carefully and digest. Then stop taking things so seriously and enjoy. Each of these products or companies should be able to show you something new or exciting. Seek them out and appreciate their efforts because, irrespective of price, they've all taught us a thing or two, and they can probably do the same for you.



Product Of The Year

As outlined above, these are the solid products that have that little bit extra, that certain something that elevates their performance above (in some cases way above) the norm. Each will be special in its own way but each must also be treated with respect if you are to understand and appreciate just why it excited us in the first place. Reading the original review will give you an idea of what you should be looking for, but also the context in which you are likely to find it. Just remember that it is a lot easier to make any product sound bad than to extract the last ounce of its potential.



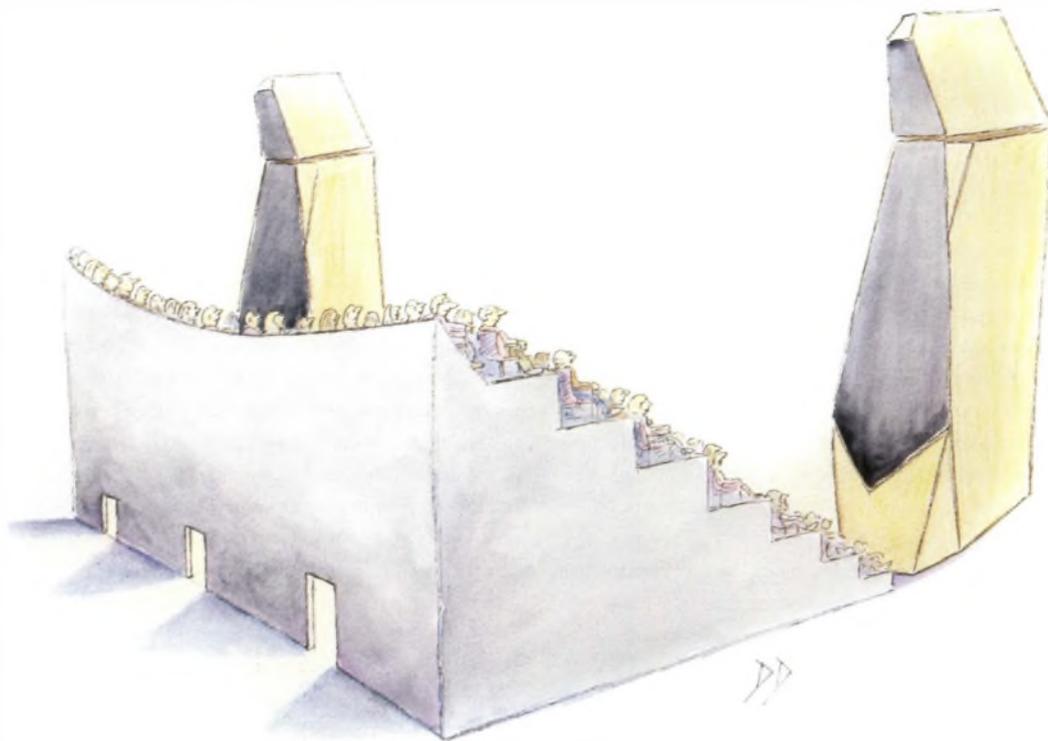
Discovery

This designation rewards exceptional performance in products from emergent companies. Whilst the sonic rewards should never be in doubt, you need to be aware of the vulnerability of start-up enterprises. A little research into the background behind the designer/manufacture as well as an appreciation of second party serviceability will reap dividends, especially where these products are exotic or expensive. So, approach with the appropriate caution, but do approach: advice that applies to just about any piece of hi-fi now that I think about it!



Legacy

The Legacy award recognises not just the excellence of an individual product, but also the consistent performance and longevity of the company behind it. In many ways this two-tier commendation is the nearest thing we can give to a blanket endorsement. Normal caveats regarding equipment and system matching apply, but these products come with the imprimatur of an excellent company reputation and proven record of support behind them. It's no trivial consideration, contributing directly to the likelihood of you realising the best, long-term performance from the unit as well as the best return should you decide to sell it. These are products you can consider with confidence.



Avalon Isis Loudspeaker

Reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 48

Those wondering at the yawning chasm in price between Avalon's Eidolon Diamond and the flagship, four-box Sentinel need wonder no more. The Isis not only fills the gap, it also provides a more practical range-topper for smaller European rooms. Although there's seemingly little new to differentiate the Isis from its more affordable siblings, at least as far as styling and driver complement goes, the new speaker extends the Eidolon's performance envelope not just in those areas where Avalon



have always excelled, but into the new realms of dynamic range and impact. Here we have a speaker with the seamless integration, dynamic discrimination, transparency and staging for which the company is justifiably renowned, but combined with a sense of power, scale and sheer presence that has so often been the preserve of more obvious sounding alternatives. It's a little like discovering that the well-spoken young man being bullied by the scruffs is actually the Eton boxing champ. These speakers are well capable of administering a sound drubbing

without getting so much as a hair out of place: Impeccably mannered, supremely organised but brutal if necessary, it's a combination that's very, very special indeed. ➤+



Price: £58000

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

Manufacturer:
Avalon Acoustics Inc.
Net. www.avalonacoustics.com



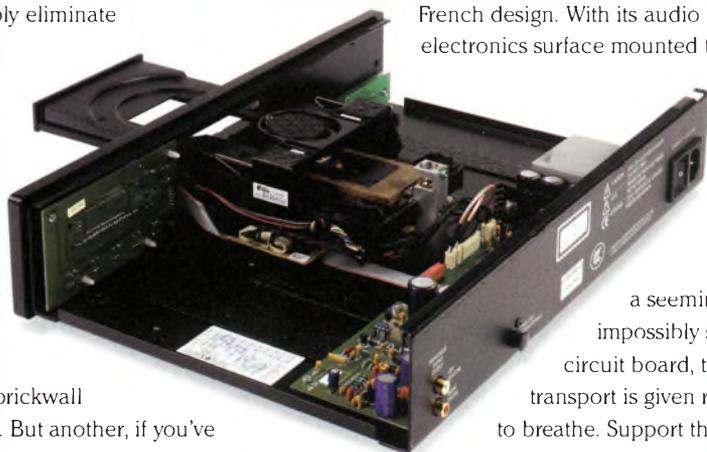
EERA DL1 CD Player

Reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 45

In this day and age you've got to do something special to steal a march in terms of digital replay. One option, deployed to maximum effect by Cambridge and Consonance, is to simply eliminate

heavyweight chassis and you've got the ingredients for something a bit special – in this case the EERA DL1. For sheer presence, energy, impact and musical flow few players can match this French design. With its audio electronics surface mounted to

enthusiasm and momentum that makes your system fun – and makes you use it a whole lot more. With the DL2 waiting in the wings, suddenly digital doesn't seem so bad!



the brickwall filter. But another, if you've got the technology and the know-how, is to replace it with your own over-sampling algorithm. Couple that to a beautifully engineered energy sink transport, directly connected to a

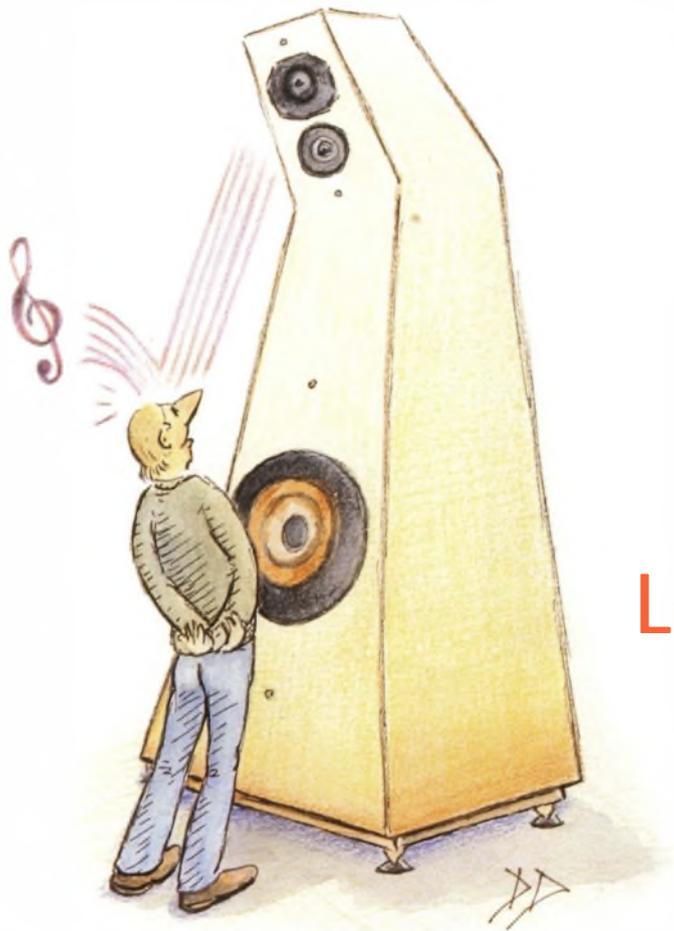
a seemingly impossibly small circuit board, the transport is given room to breathe. Support the whole kit and caboodle on a Vertex platform or Stillpoints and you'll get an amazing lift in what is an already impressive performance. EERA's DL1 has the kind of musical



Price: \$1795

UK Distributor:
GT Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1895 833099
Net. www.gtaudio.com

Manufacturer:
EERA
Tel. (33)(0)491 790753
Net. eera13@numericable.fr



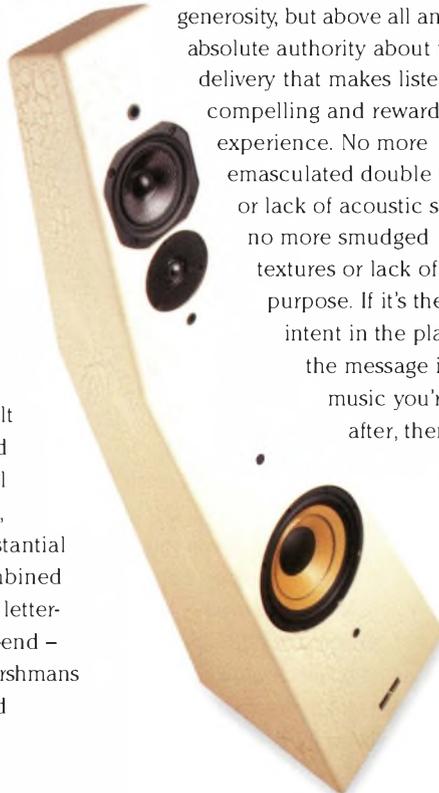
Gershman Acoustics GAP-828 Loudspeaker

Reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 44

Gershman may not be a familiar name in the UK, but they're a long established, key player in their home market in Canada. In fact, the statuesque GAP-828 is the latest incarnation of their original product, one that I've waited a while to review. Well, I'm glad I persisted because the speaker didn't disappoint. The massively built cabinet is further mass loaded to establish a firm mechanical foundation for the bass driver, itself mass loaded with a substantial brass ring. Those factors, combined with a reflex slot the size of a letter-box suggest a prodigious low-end – and they're not kidding. The Gershmans are all about scale, power and presence. There's a warmth, a

generosity, but above all an absolute authority about their delivery that makes listening a compelling and rewarding experience. No more emasculated double bass or lack of acoustic space, no more smudged textures or lack of purpose. If it's the intent in the playing, the message in the music you're after, then look

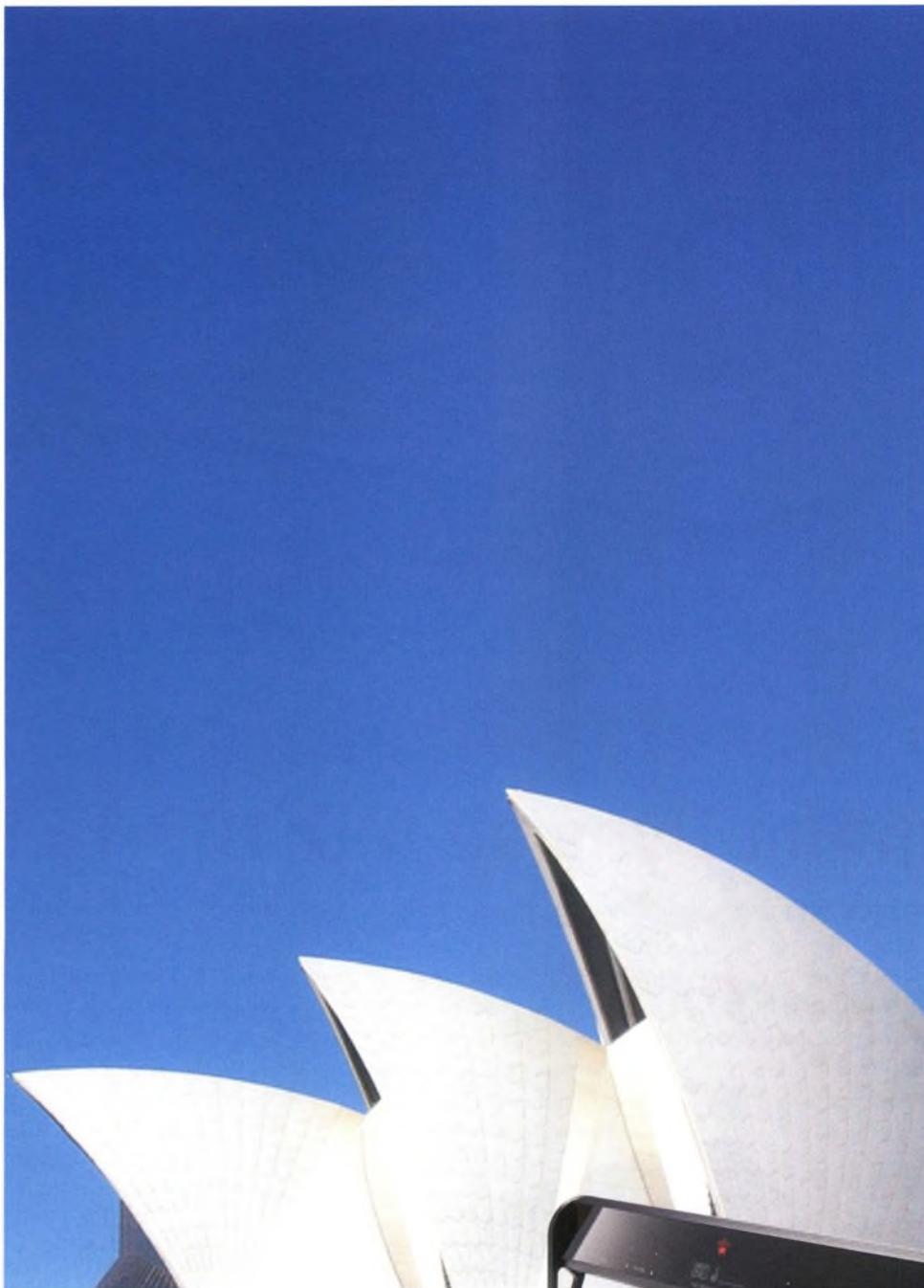
no further than the Gershmans. If you want bounce, life and passion over the finest of clinical detail, then look no further than the Gershmans. And if you want speakers whose sculptural, visual impact matches their considerable musical one, 



Price: £10950

UK Distributor:
Select Audio
Tel. (44)(0)7962 176477

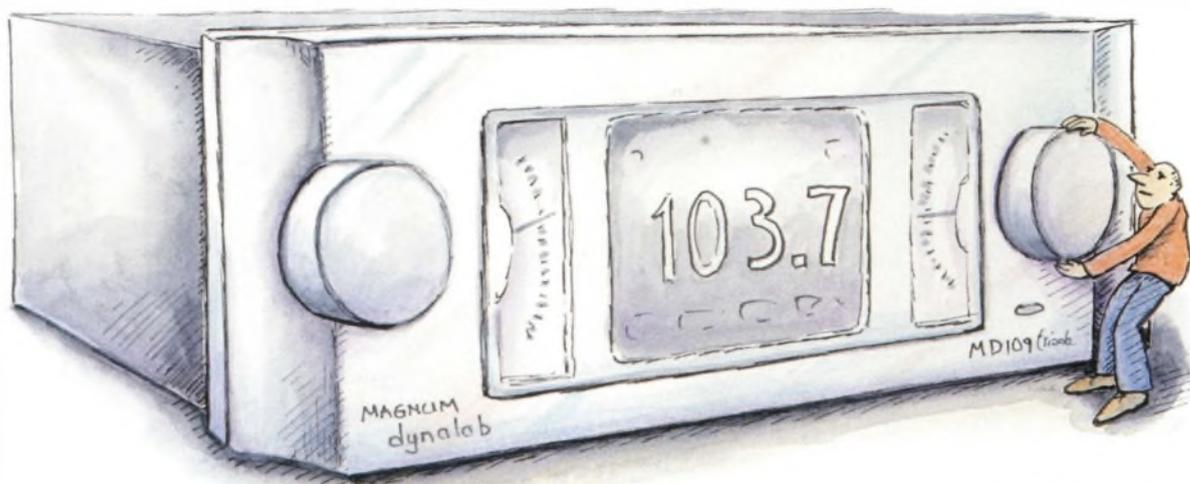
Manufacturer:
Gershman Acoustics
Net. www.gershmanacoustics.com



The shape of music

Whether it is the Sydney Opera House or High End components from Gryphon Audio Designs, the Danes have a definite predisposition for innovative departures in design that effortlessly strike a perfect balance between form and function.





Magnum Dynalab MD 109 Tuner

Reviewed by Alan Sircom in Issue 44

It's not exactly news that Magnum Dynalab make the best FM tuners in the world. Not exactly a surprise that they're getting an award for doing it, either. But the product that's winning the award – now that is a surprise. You see, whilst no one seriously questions the excellence of their their performance, not even their most ardent fans would suggest that the magnum tuners represent things of beauty. Well, all that's about to change. The arrival of the MD 109 flagship marks a dramatic change in the appearance of the company's products. Gone is the angular black utility look of previous models, more communications centre than Design Centre, replaced by a sleekly curvaceous fascia available in silver or black with large and beautifully weighted control knobs. The large signal

strength and tuning meters are still there, but now they flank a large touch screen control panel. Oh yes, the changes run far deeper than the external looks. There's a massive new power supply (helping explain the tuner's prodigious weight),



an all new RF front-end, controlled by that LCD touch-screen, as well as the requisite four tubes scattered around the circuitry. All very impressive I hear you say, but who in their right mind would drop \$8K on an FM tuner while transmitters are switching off all over the

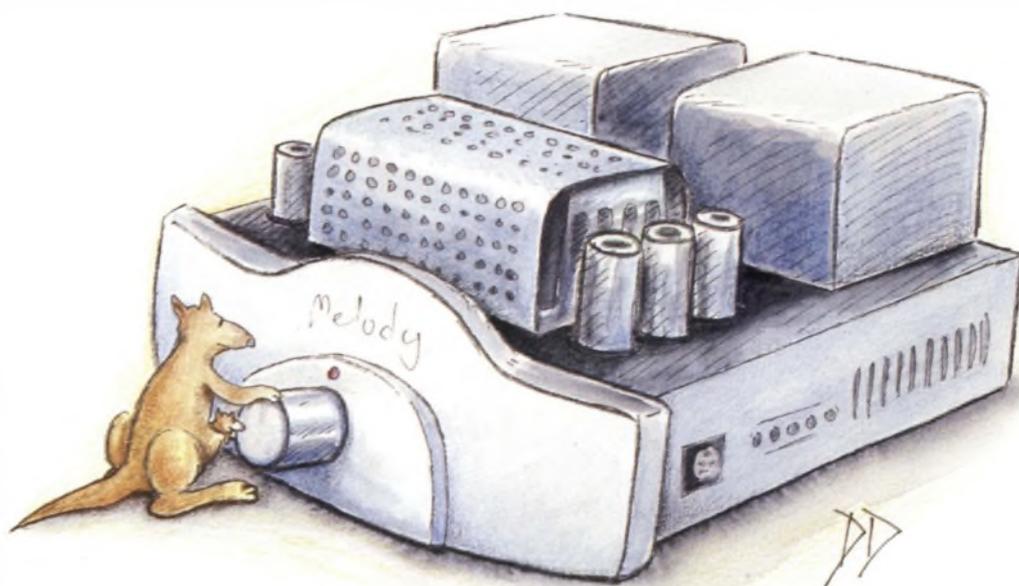
world? Well, the MD 109 is already configured to accept a DAB module, currently in development. Far from waiting for the end of their world, Magnum Dynalab are embracing the future; long may they thrive. ➤



Price: \$7990

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

Manufacturer:
Magnum Dynalab Inc.
Net. www.magnumdynalab.com



Melody SP3 Integrated Valve Amplifier

Reviewed by Jimmy Hughes in Issue 45

The hi-fi world is changing and no product symbolizes that shift more dramatically than Melody's SP3 valve integrated. Built in China to an Australian design, it is sold in Britain by Real HiFi. The end result is a remarkably accomplished and superbly finished product with the almost unbelievable price-tag of £850! With its Buck Rogers styling, two inputs and simple stepped attenuator volume control, the SP3 is as minimalist as it gets, but it has all the facilities most of us need, while the paired 5881 output tubes running in Class AB offer exactly the sense of presence,

immediacy and the vivid colours that make small valve amps so appealing. Melody offer a whole range of more up-market and sophisticated designs, available through the more conventional dealer-based route, but

I can't help feeling that the SP3 could become a classic – the right product with the right looks and the right sound too. Is it the right time? Yes – maybe it is. After all, it's not like it costs a lot to investigate. ➤+



Price: £850

UK Distributor:
Real HiFi
Tel. (33)(0)870 909 6777
Net. www.realhifi.com

Manufacturer
Net. www.melody-europe.com



Wilson Audio Duette

Reviewed in Issue 47 by Roy Gregory

Award winning £10K speakers, they're just like buses; you wait for ages and then four turn up at once. Having said that, the Wilson Duette is the only one of those four that's a stand-mounter. In material terms that puts it at a disadvantage, but don't underestimate this astonishingly capable and versatile performer. Equally at home on its matching stands or a shelf, against the wall or mounted in free space, the Duette seems to break every hair-shirt hi-fi rule in the book. After all, how can anything so "compromised" sound any good? But that's exactly what makes the Wilson so wonderful; the one thing that they haven't compromised on is the sonic performance. Clever design and

creative solutions and materials do the rest – at a price. But when you consider Wilson's legendary build and finish quality into the bargain it's a price worth paying. The Duettes' presentation is so beautifully integrated and natural that it sounds almost understated – until you realise just how much of the music you're hearing and how little of the system playing it. Nor is it super critical of partnering equipment. Whilst it will make the most of every upgrade, it's astonishing how comfortably it matches modestly priced but capable partners. That makes it something of a departure for Wilson and should open a huge new

potential market. Something to sit on the end of a Naim 500 system? Suits you, sir. In many ways this is David Wilson's most impressive achievement to date – as well as his most approachable. ➤



**Price: Speakers £8900
Stands £1800**

UK Distributor:
Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.co.uk

Manufacturer:
Wilson Audio
Net. www.wilsonaudio.com

Meridian's G06. Higher Fidelity.

"...assured, detailed and refined...
this is a really music-loving piece of
hi-fi equipment.

"Meridian has achieved a high and
consistent standard with this player...
a highly recommendable item.

"Overall score: 90%."

—Richard Black, *Hi-Fi Choice*, July 2006

Meridian has been
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since the beginning. In 1984, we released the
world's first audiophile CD player, and since then, we've
never looked back.

Compact Disc remains the world's most popular music
medium, and the format is capable of exceptional quality
— but only with the right player.

The Meridian G06 is a fine example. Based on the G08, the
premium CD player in the popular G Series range, the G06 is
an exciting, affordable and above all *musical* CD player.

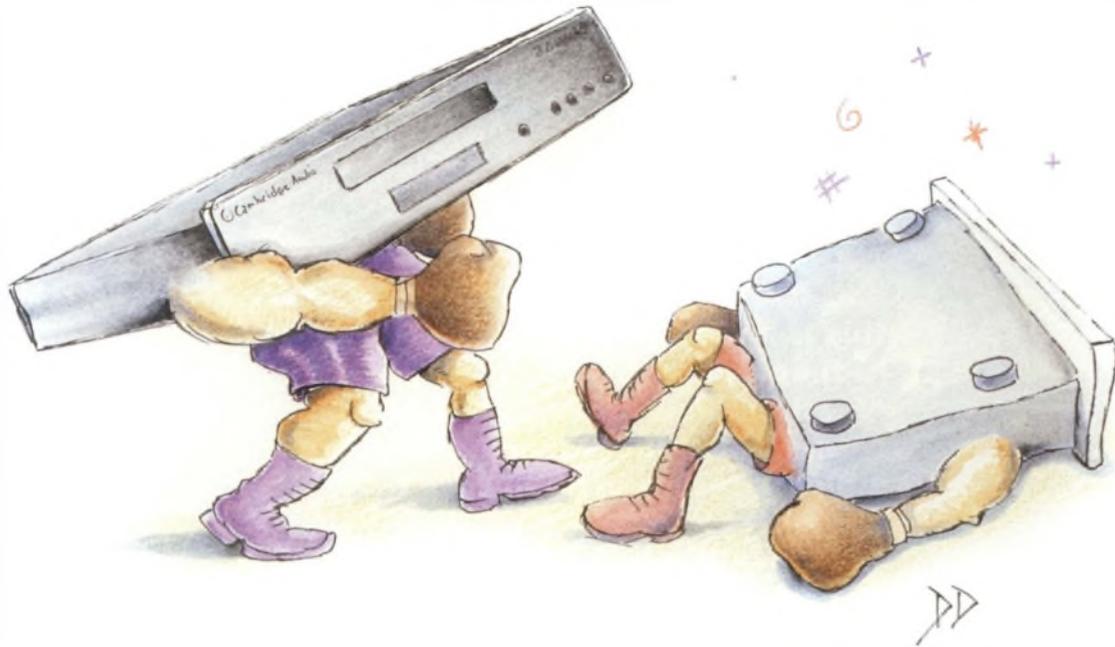
Inside the G06 is a ROM drive that can read the disc up to
ten times faster than normal speed, for absolutely accurate
data recovery. Triple reclocking circuitry minimises jitter,
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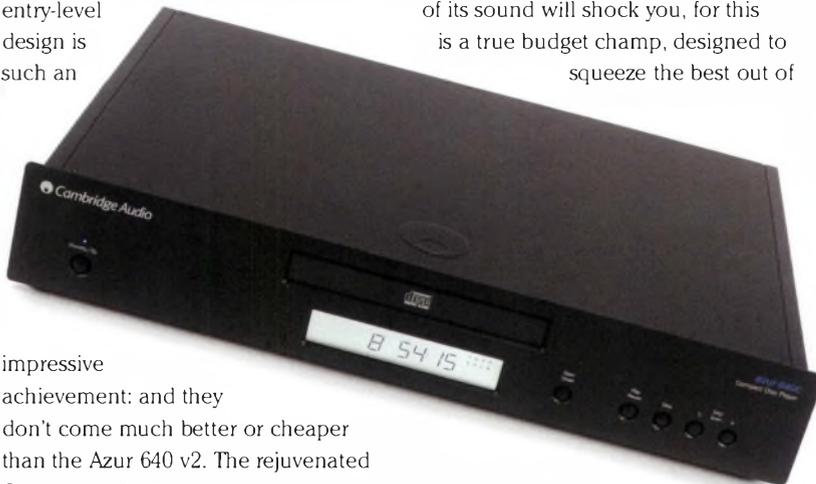
Cambridge Audio Azur 640C v2 CD Player

Reviewed by Alan Sircom in Issue 45

Making high-priced, high end products might present a challenge, but it pales into insignificance against the mountain that budget designers have to climb. Which is why a really entry-level design is such an

Neatly styled and superbly built, it's the epitome of purposeful minimalism. Pick it up and it's heavier and more solid than you expect. Plug it in and the directness and sheer enthusiasm of its sound will shock you, for this is a true budget champ, designed to squeeze the best out of

to show its rougher edges, but back where it belongs it covers its tracks superbly, sounding muscular and purposeful, sure-footed and solid. This is where proper hi-fi replay begins and you know what they say; the beginning is a very good place to start.



impressive achievement; and they don't come much better or cheaper than the Azur 640 v2. The rejuvenated Cambridge Audio have developed quite a reputation for producing standout budget electronics, but this CD player is impressive even for them.

similarly priced ancillaries, a goal it achieves to perfection. Plug it into a high-zoot, high-resolution system and it starts



Price: £250

Manufacturer:
Cambridge Audio
Tel. (44)(0)870 900 1000
Net. www.cambridgeaudio.com



Bewitch A30 Integrated Amplifier

Reviewed by Alan Sircom in this issue

There has always been a logic that suggests that the world needs a sensibly priced, sensibly powered valve amp and that such a product should sell in droves. Yet despite the obvious nature of the proposition, the market has been left wanting for way too long. But now, the advent of Chinese manufacturing combined with established audiophile know-how has started to deliver.

Prima Luna's Prologue Two was the first, generally available example, but it has now been overtaken by events in the shape of the Bewitch A30. With a pair of 6550s per side delivering 32 Class A Watts the A30 certainly meets the sensible power requirement. But what makes it really

sing is the combination of a choke regulated, valve rectified power supply and superior transformers. This may not be the prettiest amp on the market (and it might lack a cage for its tubes) but

above its weight. With a matching CD player that bears a striking resemblance to the Consonance CD-120 Linear, but with a valve output stage, Bewitch are serious contenders in the budget esoteric field.

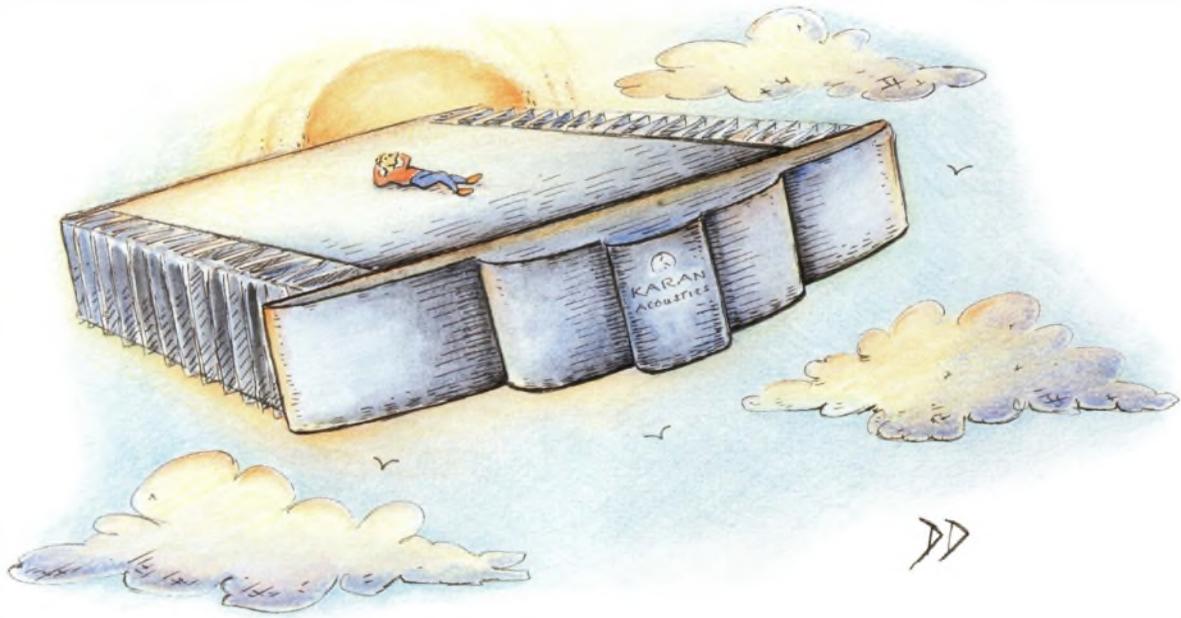


sonically there's nothing to touch its combination of musical integrity and authority at anything like the price. Sweet and fluid it is also impressively dynamic, punching well



Price: £995

UK Distributor:
Bewitch
Tel. (44)(0)1822 612449
E-mail. pure.sound@hotmail.com

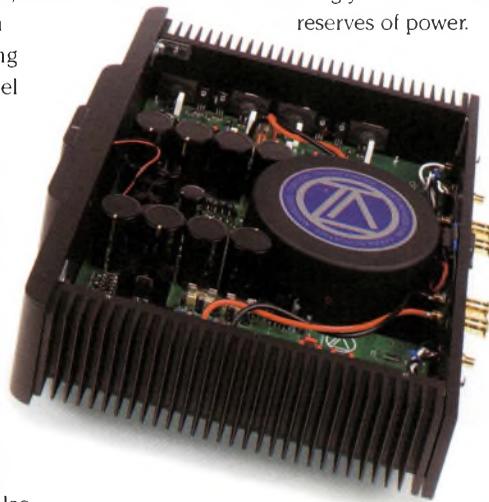


Karan Acoustics KA S180 Power Amplifier

Reviewed by Alan Sircom in Issue 46

While the established heavyweights of solid-state amplification have been going through various paroxysms, struggling to come to terms with maintaining growth in a changing market, flirting with multi-channel and other distractions, Karan acoustics have been quietly building some of the best sounding, best presented amps on the market. Sadly, for most of us, even Karan's relatively affordable pricing (compared to the competition) remains tantalizingly out of reach – until now. The KA S180's slim proportions are deceptive – as you'll discover when you try to shift its 27kg bulk. They also deliver 180 seriously high-quality Watts into 8ohms and 300 into four, from an amp that costs just £3500. Which makes the KA S180 something of a paradox; like any good, small

amp it's fast, agile and musical. Like any good big amp it's solid, muscular and has seemingly endless reserves of power.



Of course, in reality everything has limits, but you'll have to go some to find the Karan's – probably to amps at around three times the price. And that's the biggest

paradox of all; how does Milan Karan get so much out of such a small box and for such a low price? As AS put it, "This is the cheapest £6000 amp on the market!"



Price: £3500

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

Manufacturer:
Karan Acoustics
Net. www.karan-acoustics.com

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Chord Epic

Chord Epic is the result of combining two of the Chord Company's award winning cables.

Taking the shielding system from Chord Signature and applying it to Chord Odyssey has brought huge improvements to the overall performance.

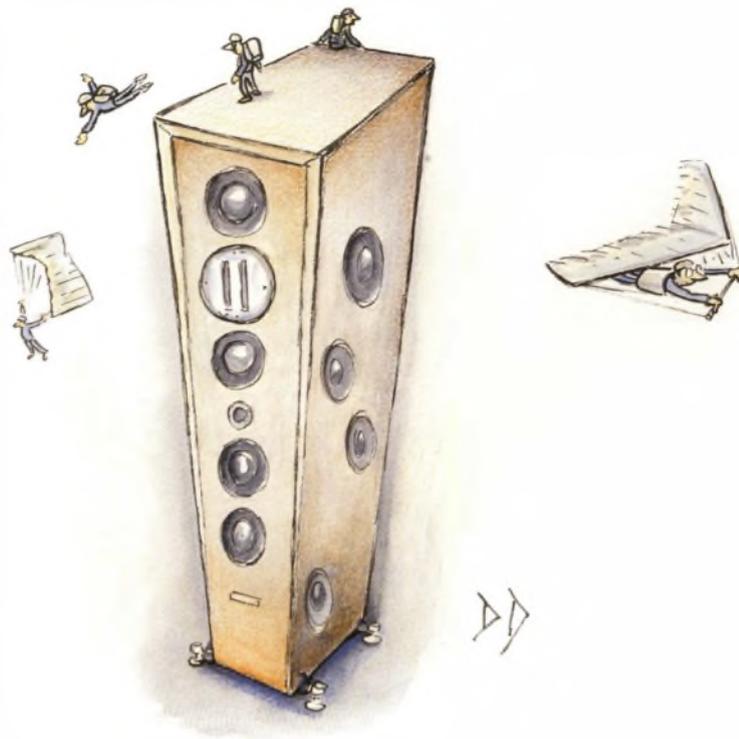
Higher levels of detail, crisp and neutral treble performance and outstanding dynamic resolution result in music sounding completely natural and utterly believable.

If your system swings, rocks or boogies, make sure you hear it at its best and most involving. If you love your music, this is the cable for you.

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Coincident Total Victory II Loudspeaker

Reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 44

Coincident's Total Victory II is that most unusual of beasts, a large, wide bandwidth loudspeaker that's actually easy to drive. Normally it's a case of perm any two from those three, but by employing a massive but massively braced cabinet whose slim frontal area and deep sides support no fewer than nine drivers and by keeping the impedance high, designer Israel Blume has achieved a speaker with a 97dB efficiency and a -3dB point at 26Hz. If you want full-range sound from low-powered amps without resorting to active bass, this isn't just the best game in town - it's the only one. But whilst that's the obvious application don't assume that the TVII is simply loud and proud. It's agile, dynamically coherent and supports an incredibly stable



soundstage, thriving on the transparency and precision of amps like Hovland's RADIA. Whilst its bottom-end might lack the substance and sheer presence of the Gershman, few speakers match its

ability to project the sheer energy of a performance into the room. One thing's for certain, with a pair of TVIIs in your system you should never want for musical excitement. ▶+



Price: £10400

UK Distributor:
Musicology
Tel. (44)(0)1273 700759
E-mail. sales@musicology.co.uk

Manufacturer:
Coincident Speaker Technology
Net. www.coincidentspeaker.com



Opera Audio Consonance CD-120 Linear CD Player

Reviewed by Jimmy Hughes in Issue 44

In hi-fi as in life, to quote Jim White, "Things ain't always what they seem." The CD-120 Linear is as plain to look at as its name is convoluted, but buried inside that prosaic exterior is a performance of astonishing verve and musical integrity.

Here again we have evidence of Opera Audio's ability to deliver the sonic goods without making you hock the family silver. But even given their exceptional track record the CD-120 sets a new standard for value. JMH was bowled over by its easy grace and coherence, a sound that is detailed without being obvious, rich

without being syrupy. But the thing that's really special, the thing that makes the CD-120 sound so reminiscent of

at once – exactly as they should. Not so long ago you couldn't achieve this level of performance from CD at any price, let alone well under four figures. ▶+

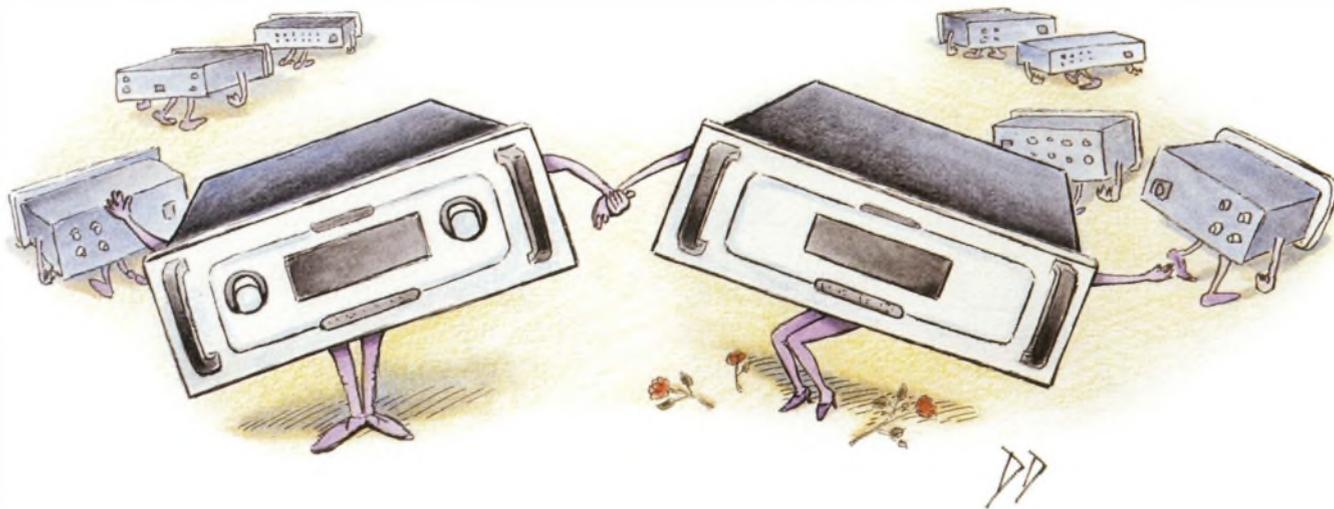


good analogue is its effortless sense of musical flow, the way it integrates its colour and detail into a single, coherent musical whole. Performances are so expressive, they simply make so much sense, that they become seductive, involving and compelling all



Price: \$695

UK Distributor:
Alium Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1273 325901
Net. www.aliumaudio.com



Audio Research Reference 3 Line-Stage and PH7 Phono-Stage

Reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 45

Audio Research might have suffered a few fallow years, but recent releases have shown signs of resurgence, a return to form underlined with a bang by the arrival of the Ref 3 and PH7. Classically styled and wonderfully versatile, these products deliver true high-end performance without the operational limitations or quirkiness that so often attend such sonic excellence. Easy to use with the facilities and options you actually want (all accessible via remote control and the clean, clear displays) these units are so sensible you start to suspect their audio credentials – but one listen will convince.



Carefully engineered, using appropriate technology (the PH7 employs a J-fet input



stage and limited gain to deliver a truly stellar performance) the ARC combination offers superb stability, separation and a relaxed confidence that allows you to hear right into the musical performance. Initial concerns over gain levels and a persistent haze from the line-stage were traced to a faulty valve. Back in rude health, the Ref 3 proved itself a superbly consistent and unflappable performer, with a phenomenal sense of power and dynamic range

built on that stable foundation. Quiet authority might seem a strange epithet to describe a pre-amp and phono-stage, but it sums up the unobtrusive excellence of this ARC pairing perfectly. 



**Prices: Ref 3 £8998
PH7 £5200**

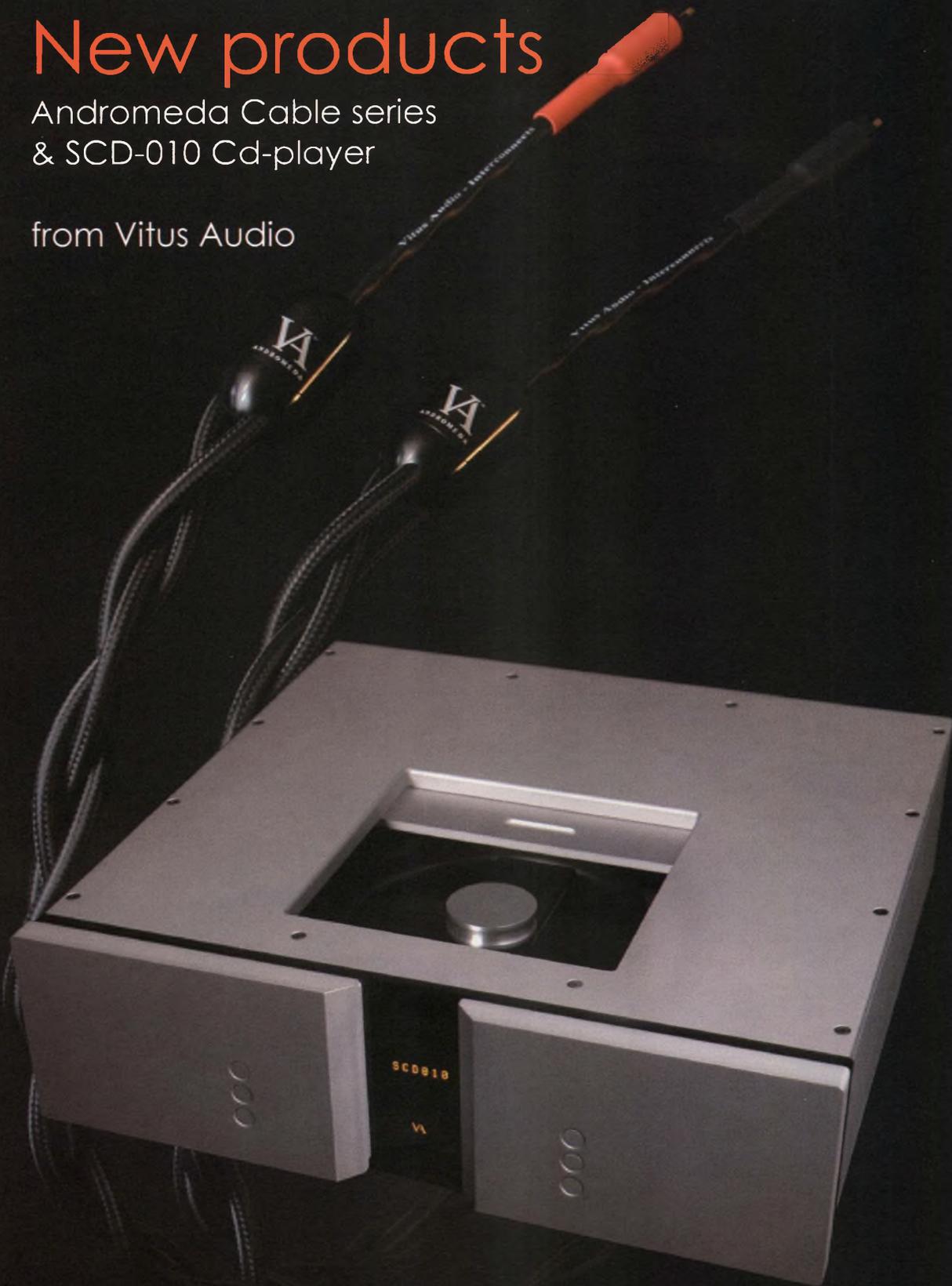
UK Distributor:
Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:
Audio Research Corporation
Net. www.audioresearch.com

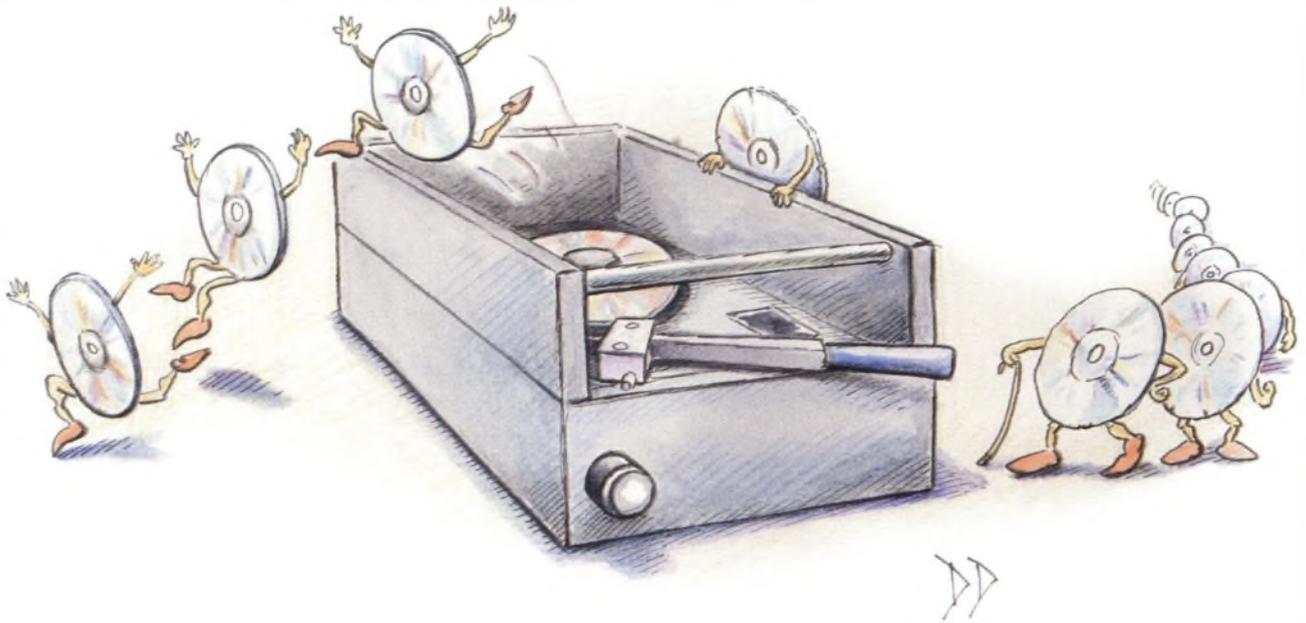
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& SCD-010 Cd-player

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Vitus Audio A/S, Virkelyst, 80, Gjellerup, DK-7400 Herning, Denmark
Phone +45 9626 8046 / Email: info@vitusaudio.com / Web: www.vitusaudio.com



Audio Desk Systeme CD Improver

Reviewed by Richard S. Foster in Issue 44

Sometimes it seems as though there's nothing new under the hi-fi sun – and then you happen across the Audio Desk Systeme CD Sound Improver, or their equally astonishing CD Washer. There's lateral thinking, thinking outside the box – and then there's thinking that's so sideways it's completely off the map! Enter Reiner Glass and his one-man crusade to extract the last gram of performance from the much-maligned silver disc. His answer is a simple manual lathe that trims the edge of your disc, delivering the preferred 36 degree angle and perfect concentricity in a single operation.



The effects are far from subtle, as readily and repeatedly demonstrated by RSF to anyone who'll listen. Music becomes cleaner, clearer and better focussed, with greater separation of instruments and a greater sense of the space around them. Indeed, few if any such tweaks have received the almost universally positive response that this has. Bringing new meaning to the term "hands-on hi-fi", Glass's lathe is only the first step. As I've suggested, his CD Washer is almost as impressive, but the

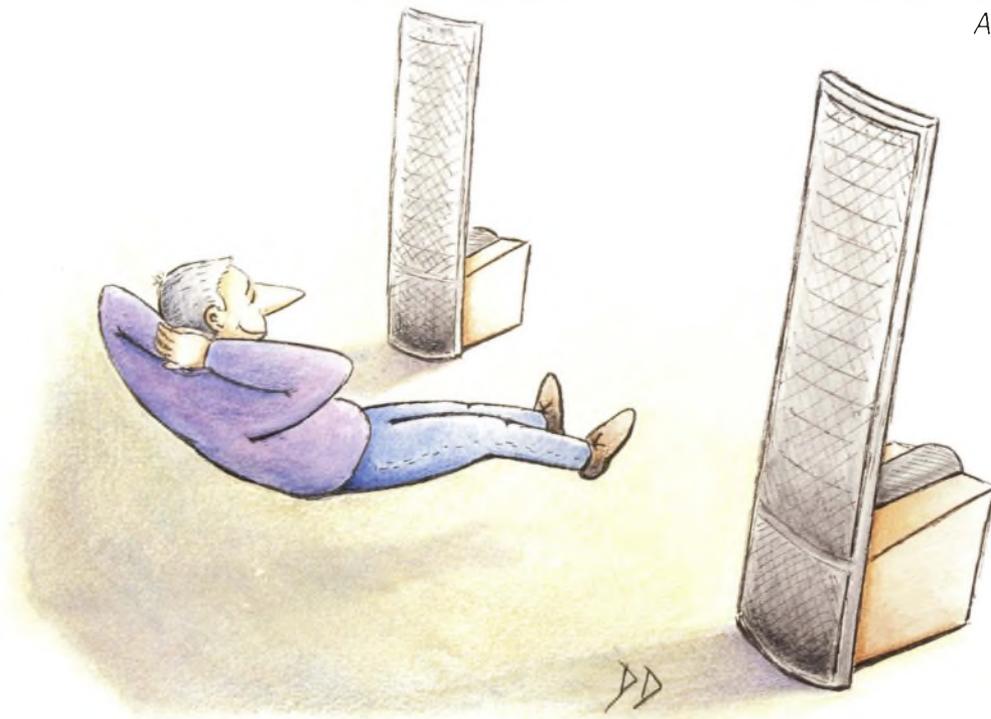
really good news is that he has applied his fertile imagination to that old chestnut, cleaning the LP record. I just can't wait... 



Price: £320

UK Distributor:
Lyngdorf Audio UK
Tel. (44)(0)8709 100100

Manufacturer:
Audio Desk Systeme
Net. www.audiodesksysteme.de



MartinLogan Summit Hybrid Electrostatic Loudspeaker

Reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 44

MartinLogan have always pushed the boundaries, challenging accepted notions of performance and aesthetics. Yet, such was the impact of the original CLS that each subsequent product has lived in the shadow of that illustrious predecessor. Well, no more. ML started with hybrid designs, and this latest generation of mixed driver products eclipses the full-range electrostatic in every regard. It sounds better, is easier to use, easier to drive and even looks better



– and that's saying something! The Summit's active, double woofer bass module has enabled the company to create a speaker system that is smaller and easier to optimize in room, whilst also going louder and deeper. It retains the traditional ML strengths of detail and transparency, but builds them on a firm low-frequency foundation that adds presence, scale and impact to the equation. The end result is by far their best speaker yet, with an unmatched combination of elegance and deliverable performance from a surprisingly affordable

package. Beautifully engineered and implemented, the Summit finally delivers on the flawed brilliance of the CLS.



Price: £8498

UK Distributor:
Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:
MartinLogan Ltd.
Net. www.martinlogan.com



Neat Motive 2 Loudspeaker

Reviewed by Jason Hector in Issue 45

Increasingly, small stand-mounted speakers seem to be becoming the exclusive preserve of high-end offerings. Given the cost and appearance of stands, it's hardly surprising that compact floorstanders have come to rule the budget roost. But while they might represent an aesthetic improvement, too few designers adequately handle the extra bass that comes from the larger enclosed volume, or the colouration that comes from the larger



panels doing the enclosing. All of which makes the successful budget floorstander something of a rare beast. Neat's Motive 2 is smaller than most of the equivalently priced competition and cleverly loaded by a large, downward facing port. It's also beautifully finished and noticeably more solid. The result is a quick, coherent sound with surprising resolution through the rhythmically all-important mid-bass. The controlled bass termination makes them largely insensitive to positioning while the

excellent inverted metal dome tweeter keeps things crisp and clean. Demanding reasonable control from the partnering electronics, careful optimization of system and set-up will deliver surprisingly satisfying results from even the most modest front-end: a textbook example of budget loudspeaker design. ▶+



Price: £850

Manufacturer:
Neat Acoustics Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)1833-631021
Net. www.neat.co.uk

TRACK

15

TOTAL

MIN

SEC

55:20

5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12
13	14	15	

MODE

CD

TUNER

VIDEO

LINE 1

LINE 2

TAPE

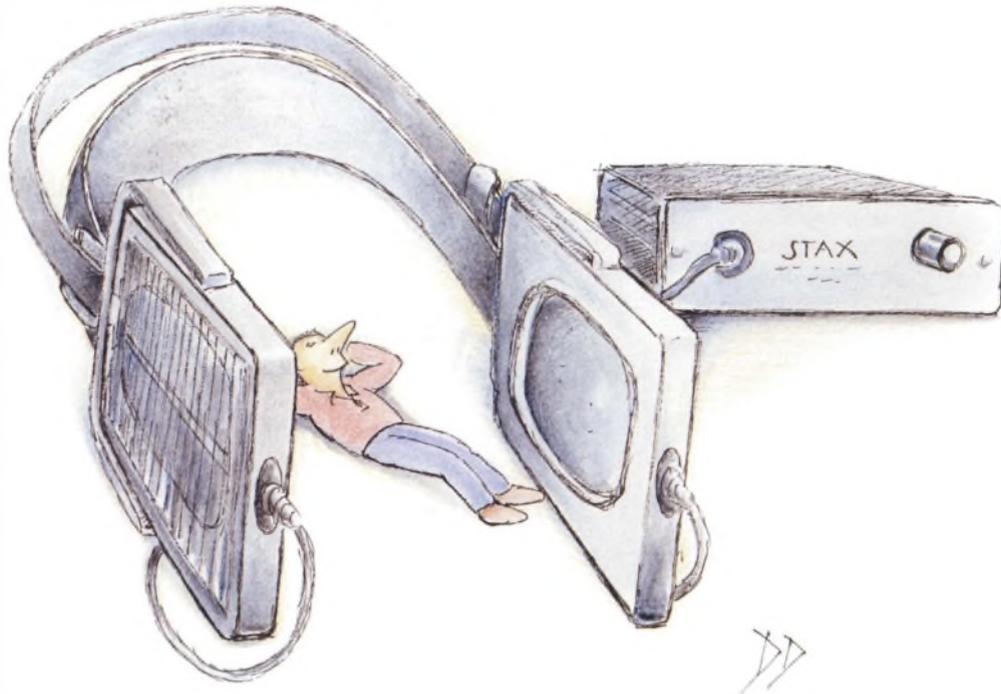
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Henley Designs +44 (0)1235 511 166 www.henleydesigns.co.uk



Stax SRS2050 Mk II Earspeaker System

Reviewed by Jason Hector in Issue 48

My recent adventures into can land have thrown up a few surprises as well as opening my ears. Remove the room from the speaker equation and it's incredible what you can achieve for relatively small amounts of money. The single best example of this is the entry level Stax Earspeaker system that is receiving this award. Stax have been making headphone systems for a long time, and it shows. It is great to see new products living up to and even increasing the company's already fearsome reputation. You can definitely buy a prettier product with more bass and a more forceful delivery but you can't seem to get the integration, balance,

transparency or realism on offer from the Stax systems.

My first Stax shock was with the valve driven SRS-4040 which was in a different league to the coil competition. So why isn't the SRS-4040 system getting the award? It is excellent but crossing the £1000 barrier makes it less of an

impulse buy. The SRS-2050

Mk II extends the Stax experience to a much lower price band.

More than that, these systems are so good that many people who through circumstances beyond their control (like neighbours, kids, partner, too much travel...) might consider high-end sound an impossible goal can

actually achieve it with ease. That is genuine high-end performance from a system that represents pre-amp, power amp, speakers and cabling – all for \$450! The Stax SRS-2050 Mk II is a great way to access your music; every system should have one!



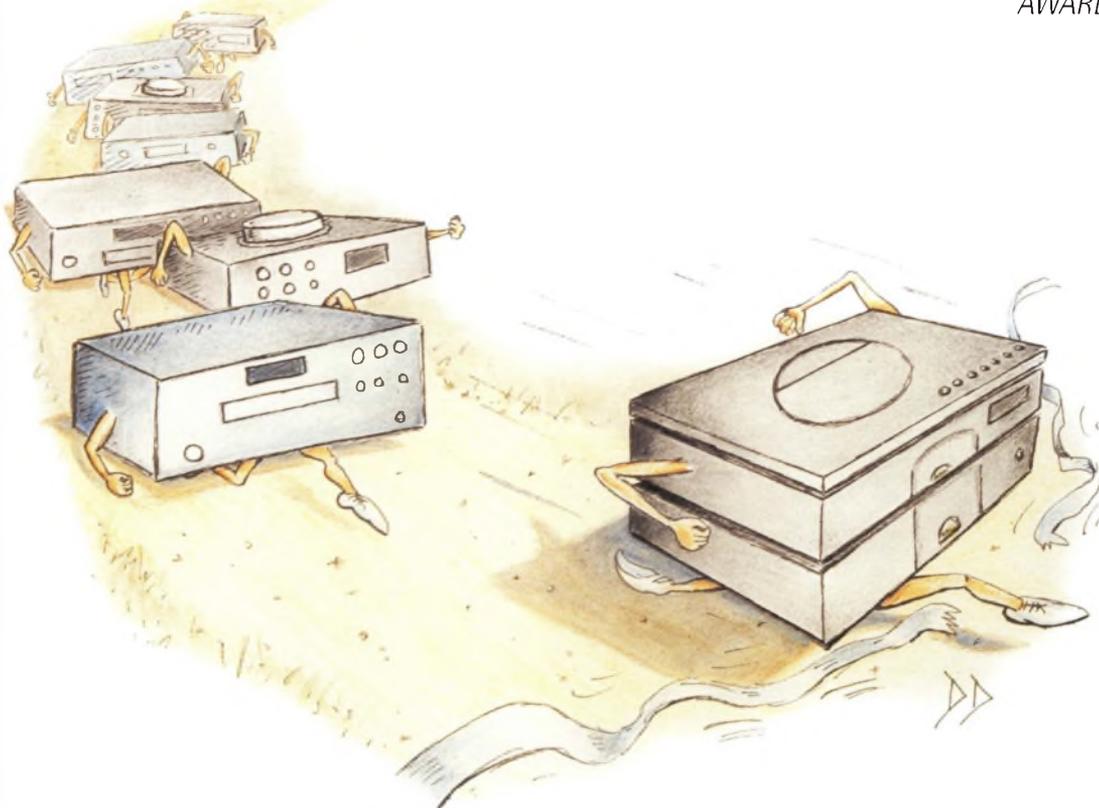
Price: \$450

UK Distributor:

Symmetry

Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488

Net. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk



Naim CD 555 CD Player

Reviewed by Chris Thomas in Issue 47

Finally rounding out the 500 series range by adding the source to match the NAP 500 power amp and NAC 552 pre-amp, Naim Audio have taken another major step towards truly high-end performance. Of all their products, it's always been their CD players that have translated most easily to a non-Naim system context; the 555 is no exception. Whilst the PS 555 power supply can be applied to other players in the range, extending their virtues in the traditional Naim sense, it's the CD 555 head unit with its massive flip-top lid that extends the performance outside the Naim straitjacket. Space, dimensionality and far more fluid and sophisticated rhythmic presentation are all musical traits that will escape users of the 500 series system *in toto*, but they're there and more than apparent on equipment that both opens those

windows and chooses to look in those directions. In many respects this is Naim's most balanced product yet, a factor reflected in the emergence of the company's own high-end



interconnect, the Hi-line, but also the clear value in experimenting with other Din to Din leads. Naim's latest amps have moved well beyond the performance limits of

the NACA5 speaker cable; the CD 555 goes much further still. It represents both the best CD replay system CT has had at home and the best product Naim Audio has ever offered. The stepping-stone to a far wider performance envelope, one can only wonder as to where it might lead. ➤



**Prices: CD 555 £10300
PS 555 £3995**

Manufacturer:
Naim Audio Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1722 426600
Net. www.naim-audio.com

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JUL/AUG 04 / YOUR GUIDE TO HI FI AND HOME CINEMA / SP16 / STAN CURTIS

"A SUPERB ALL-ROUNDER AND AN OBVIOUS BEST BUY"

THE COLLECTION 04 / HI FI CHOICE / VM220 / ALAN SIRCOM

"OUTSTANDING SOUND QUALITY AND EXCEPTIONAL EASE OF USE"

ISSUE 35 / HI FI PLUS / PH5 / JIMMY HUGHES



AUDIO RESEARCH REF 3



AUDIO RESEARCH VM220

Audio Research has studiously applied the technology gained from their Reference series amplifiers to every model in their range, right down to the entry-level designs.

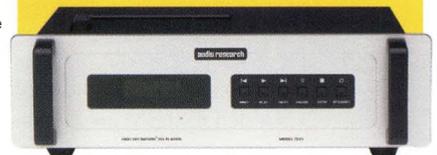
The SP16 preamplifier, VS55, VS110 and VM220 power amplifiers, the state-of-the-art CD3 Mk II CD player, the multi-channel amplifier and the VSI55 integrated amplifier are not only packed with knowledge gained from the company's legendary flagship models, but they herald a change in the way reasonably-priced high-end equipment is perceived. The astonishing PH5 brings Reference Phono performance to a remarkably affordable price point. The LS25 Mk II Pre-amp clearly shares parentage with the Reference pre-amplifiers. And the VT100 Mk III boasts DNA derived from the Reference 300 and 600 power amps.

Now, there is new inspiration. Joining these classics is the most radical product yet to wear the AudioResearch logo: the Reference 3 preamplifier. An absence of conventional controls, refined circuitry, better sound.

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Round The Houses...

Swapping systems – and what it tells us about equipment reviews

by Roy Gregory

The great thing about awards issues is that anything goes. Okay, so that can become a recipe for laziness and simple regurgitation; or it can be grasped as an opportunity to do something different and hopefully interesting. Hey, it might even be a bit of fun...

For this issue I had four of our writers (myself included) each specify a system that would appeal to them, and then supplied those systems to another of the reviewers in the group. The object of the exercise? Firstly, to try and demonstrate the spread of taste that exists, even amongst a fairly select group of professional listeners. Secondly, to show just dependent quality judgements thus become on the individual making them and where they do it. Or to put it another way, to demonstrate that one man's meat can all too easily be another's poison, and that what works in one room won't necessarily work in another. Along the way, hopefully you the reader will gain a degree of insight into the limitations and constraints that apply to the review process in general and indeed, the reviewers themselves.

Interestingly there were no constraints placed on the systems specified, my only desire being to avoid too much duplication. I also wanted to make sure that the systems were complete, including supports stands and cables, thus reducing the variables to individual taste and the listening room. Approaches varied a little: PM and I each went for a specific approach, tailoring that in turn to our own particular requirements. AS aimed to shape his selection a little in the hope of appealing to his target audience, while the object of that scrutiny, CT simply put together a system that worked for him. What we ended up with, in price terms at least, were four surprisingly comparable set ups. But the actual nature of the systems varied enormously – as did the reactions.

Over the years, too many audio writers have set themselves up as all-seeing oracles, with undisputable opinions on everything hi-fi you might care to mention. Yet just observe the results when you ask one writer to review a system that appeals to another, or put a system that works in one situation into quite a different listening room. What price the definitive judgment of individual products if whole systems prove so problematic?

Of course, such things should be well understood by experienced magazine readers. Audio reviews are, after all, only one or, at best, two peoples' opinions. Those opinions are (hopefully) informed by experience and an appropriate methodology, the requisite care in equipment matching and set-up. Even then the value of the conclusions needs to be weighed against the tastes and inevitable prejudices of the writer. They are not written on tablets of stone; they do not constitute the wisdom of ages.

Which might seem like a strange observation, coming as it does from someone who makes their living by writing and publishing such reviews. Of course, you could read any disagreements as undermining the value of reviews: but only if you expect them to provide the one true answer – to deal in truth. I don't and nor should you, because the whole object of this exercise is to demonstrate just how illusory any form of absolute truth is when it comes to audio equipment. Instead, let's look at this in another way. Four people chose four systems for another four people; they did it effectively blind, none to the best of my knowledge having spent any time listening in the company or listening room of the person who'd be reviewing the system they were putting together. Yet in every case a simple change of one component promptly rectified things (or would have done so). In one instance it was the amplifier, in others the speakers, but in each case the quality of the core ingredients shone through. That's a substantial vote of confidence. Had they been dealers specifying a system for a customer, these set-ups might not have provided the final answer, but they'd all have been pretty darn good starting points. Which is exactly what reviews can do for you. They can create a short list. They can get you close, just don't expect them to tick every box on your system agenda.

As a magazine, the quality of our reviews and how you use them is critical to their value. Just be aware that they don't and can't provide all of the answers. What they are is a source of information, a tool, and as such you need to use them in the right way. You can tighten a screw with a chisel, but it's not the recommended approach! You can let a reviewer choose your system, but as you'll see that's hardly to be recommended either...





One For The Money...

by Roy Gregory

When it comes to judging quality, drinking by the label is one of the first security blankets most of us reach for. After all, if it's got a good name and a high price then it's got to taste all right – hasn't it? Anybody who has traveled the outer reaches of the wine lists in the more vaunted eateries that dot this planet will know just how flawed and expensive this approach can be. Yet how many of us apply it to hi-fi equipment? How many of us make assumptions about products based on the company that made them and the price being charged? Big ticket – that must mean costly ancillaries; and all of a sudden we've ruled a product out of our notional system on budget grounds alone. Yet, in reality it needn't be that way...

Almost as soon as I first got my grubby mitts on the Wilson Duettes with their enticing yet forgiving musical qualities, I started to wonder just how tolerant they'd be of partnering equipment. After all, you can't listen to just a speaker – you need the kit to drive it. Which can make the cost of speakers somewhat misleading; it's the cost of the system you need to worry about, as owners of the cheaper Apogee ribbons discovered – often to their considerable cost. Apply that thinking to the Duette and it could change things pretty dramatically. On the surface you have a £10K stand-mounted two-way, which makes it one of the pricier examples in its category. Go with traditional FEF* thinking and you are looking at a £40K system as a sensible starting point – without cables and all the other gubbins you'll be needing. That puts the Duette well and truly out of reach for most mere mortals.

* Front-End First / a term dating from the era when all sane people thought the World was flat – and just about as relevant as that concept today.

However, what if the entry level Wilson can be persuaded to “walk out” with genuinely entry-level electronics? How expensive does the associated kit need to be to get a worthwhile and representative performance out of the Duette? How pricey does the system get before the speaker stops being embarrassed? Right about now you're probably thinking that I got off the trolley bus at Marble Arch and left my marbles on board – and if I didn't then the Duettes'

distributor or manufacturer probably did, on the basis that they're prepared to be involved in such a hair brained scheme. But hold on. Wilson themselves have always espoused spending the lion's share of your budget on the speakers (well, they would, wouldn't they).

Their logic is that the speaker has the hardest job in the system and at least if it's up to that task, then you'll hear the benefit of any subsequent upgrades. Of course, I'm not sure they were thinking along quite such extreme lines as me...

So, the cheapest system that will get the Duettes running properly? Well, the speaker is a given, along with the stands. I'm kind of tempted to try the Quadrasire stands at some point, but for the purposes of this exercise let's keep the considerable mechanical and aesthetic coherence of the speakers intact. That means we're looking for source, amp, cables and supports.

Much as I'd love to run with a record player, these days it's an expensive option, which means that CD it is. Once I'd bitten that bullet the choice was easy; at \$695 the Consonance CD-120 Linear is a shoe-in. Reviewed back in Issue 44 by JMH (and given a Product of the Year Award in this one) the simple exterior of this Chinese built machine conceals a confident and lucid performance that punches way above its price. Like many other recent players it dispenses with the brick-wall filter in its DAC and keeps ▶



▶ everything else simple too. The result is sound quality and musical integrity from silver disc that would have cost a fortune even five years ago.

The amplifier was more problematic, especially given the speakers' moderate sensitivity and 4 Ohm load (3 Ohm minimum). First thought was solid-state, with the likes of the Krell 400Xi and Lavardin IS Reference tried with some success. But at well over £2K a throw, these are hardly bargain basement products. How about setting the bar at a grand? Now there's a challenge.

At this price the cost-quality curve gets pretty steep with solid-state, which got me wondering about a valve amp. After all, the Duettes' impedance curve is actually pretty benign and output transformers will ease the path still further. With all those nice little ultra-linear integrated designs flooding out of China, surely I could find one to do the job? Sure enough, and the one I settled on will probably be new to you. Dubbed the Bewitch A30, it's a Class A design offering 32 Watts a side from a pair of 6550s. Choke smoothed and heavily valve rectified, it's not just the butch power supply that sets it apart. Although built in China, the Bewitch brand is specced by Guy Sargeant, once of Audio Innovations and a man who knows a thing or two about valve amplifiers. What's even better, it comes in at five pence under the thousand pounds; job done.

That still leaves cables and supports for which I chose my budget benchmarks, Chord's Chorus interconnect (£163) and new Epic speaker cable (£39/m). The fact that the speakers are single-wired saved a bit more money too. Stand was a couple of layers of the excellent Cambre CORE rack at around £200 per level. Add all that lot up and you arrive at a grand total of

£2492.95, including 2.5m speaker cables and termination.

That makes for an all up system price of £13.2K, near as spittin'. Not bad given that the speakers constitute £10.7K of that! Does it work? I'll leave AS to decide...

PS. Having expended so much time and ink on the subject of proper mains cables and supports – and with a suitable Guinea Pig to hand – it seemed silly not to trial that hypothesis too. So saying, here's the upgrade package:

2x Vertex AQ Super Kinibalu platforms - £1155
 2x Vertex AQ Roraima mains leads - £634
 1x Vertex AQ Jaya mains filter - £453.40

That's an extra £2242.40 that doesn't even touch the signal path. Of course Vertex AQ offer interconnect and speaker cables too (much loved by PM) but they would have muddied the waters and raised the price. Let's see what AS makes of purely environmental factors! 

The System

Opera Audio Consonance CD-120 Linear	£695
Bewitch A30 Integrated Amplifier	£995
Wilson Audio Duette Loudspeakers	£8900
Duette Speaker Stands	£1800
Chord Co. Chorus Interconnect	£163/1m pr.
Chord Co. Epic Twin Speaker Cable	£274/3m pr.
Cambre CORE rack	£600

Two For The Show...

by Alan Sircom

This is the system that shouldn't work. It has no right to work. By all that hi-fi people of good standing hold dear and true, this system should be taken out and shot, put to the sword, burned at the stake for heresy and then sent to work down a salt mine until really sorry. I mean, c'mon... the CD player and amplifier cost a fraction of the price of the speakers – armed Flat-Earthers will be storming the barricades by nightfall.

Only problem is, this system works: Really, really well. Like, well

enough to recast all your hi-fi prejudices, make you wonder if we've got it wrong all these years and start looking round the room to see what you might free up to let you buy into the experience. That well.

Of course, the basics help. The Opera Audio Consonance CD120 Linear CD player may not cost a fortune, but the removal of the brick wall filter makes for a very good foundation stone to build a sound upon. Then there's the Bewitch A30 line integrated amplifier. This valve

amp sports some disturbingly high-spec components to augment the good solid Class A operation, ultra linear push-pull output, and twin rectifier and choke power supplies. Short of joining the SET set, the A30 represents the best good valve engineering can get at a reasonable price. Even the Chord Company wires and Cambre stand represent the unprepossessing entry point to high-end cables and supports.

Of course, a system totaling less than three grand should not be 

DEFINITIVE AUDIO



Main image: KSL Kondo Neuro Line Integrated Valve Amplifier £23,500



L to R: 1. Kuzma Stabi XL £10,000 2. Art Audio Concerto Stereo Amplifier (GE) £4400 3. Living Voice IBX R2 (Burr Oak) £4400 4. SME 10 / SME V £4115
5. Living Voice OBX RW (Santos) £7200 6. KSL Kondo Ongaku Integrated Amplifier £49,000 7. Magnum Dynalab 106T Valve Tuner £3600
8. KSL Kondo Gakuoh 300B Mono Amplifiers £48,500 9. Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD Player £2950 10. KSL Kondo V-z (1m) Interconnect £750

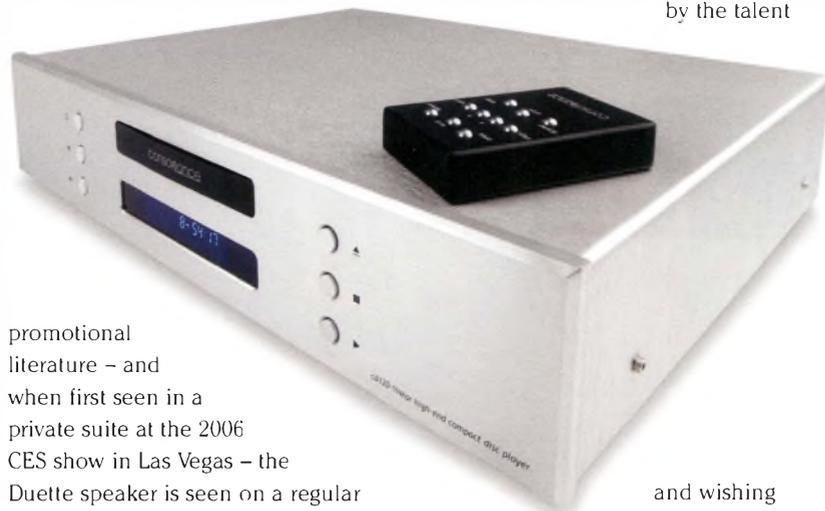
► considered as partner to more than ten big one's worth of speakers. But that's the plan set out by Wilson Audio for the Duette. In fact, by putting the speaker on the recommended stand, we are already over-egging the Duette pudding; in most

disc for almost a decade; there's nothing but test disc left for me here, its musical content has been worn flat through too many listening sessions. Only here, that cynicism simply washed away. I was back listening to the recording anew, stunned by the talent

jazz, big band jazz, classical piano, small scale orchestral works, small scale choral works and finally to vast orchestral mania. Usually, a dozen discs can pin down the nature of any system, finding the places where it works well and those where it falls flat on its speaker drivers. Only not here; yes, the system couldn't quite keep up with a concert hall full of singers, musicians and organ pipes wiggin' out, but it tried and did a surprisingly good job. Let's put it this way; unless your music consists almost entirely of organ works, or you look at something like Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* as a dynamic light-weight, this system will pass muster with almost every recording you play. More than pass muster, in fact. It will sound remarkable.

It's a curious thing; this system managed to combine the sort of analysis that makes you listen out for loose phono plugs with the sort of musical enjoyment that makes you into a karaoke mime. I found myself air drumming to John Bonham, rapping into my pen with Eminem, playing an air double-bass to the Jazz Messengers (that's 'Art Blakey and the...', not PM in a beret), even air conducting with Sir Georg Solti. That's some entertaining magic in this kit.

Part of that magic comes from its completely transparent nature. This isn't totally unvarnished CD truth at play, but what's on offer is detailed, coherent and expansive. Imagery never draws attention here, but it's just there; wide of the boxes, deeper than the room, and taller than most. This is backed up by good solidity, although the extra bass notes that adding \$50k to the system

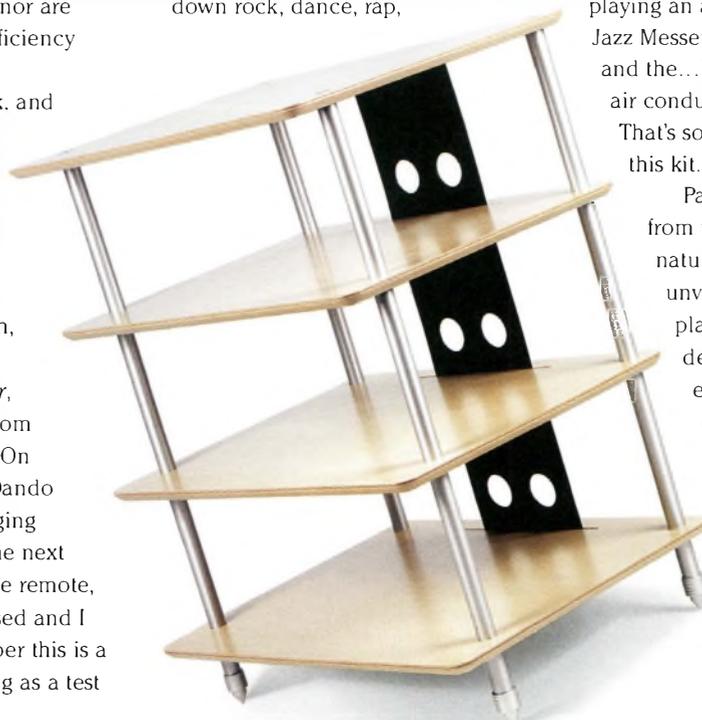


promotional literature – and when first seen in a private suite at the 2006 CES show in Las Vegas – the Duette speaker is seen on a regular bookcase, up high and in totally the wrong place for a pair of good speakers to shine. We aren't cheating – the stands are designed by Wilson and improve the performance – but this is one design where an almost fanatical devotion to the instruction book is not mandatory (nor are fear, surprise, ruthless efficiency and nice red uniforms).

Anyway, it can't work, and I am going to have to nod and smile nicely to Our Beloved Leader, for it is his chosen system. I start gently, expecting something possibly harsh, possibly bland, possibly nasty. In goes *Rare on Air*, the CD of live sessions from KCRW in Santa Monica. On went track four – Evan Dando and Juliana Hatfield singing 'My Drug Buddy'. And the next time I could reach for the remote, six other tracks had passed and I was captivated. Remember this is a CD that I have been using as a test

and wishing I'd bought more *Feel Sessions* with me. Damn it! The Beloved Leader got it right again, and the smile isn't painted on.

Acoustic rock moved to electronica, then back to more head's down rock, dance, rap,



► would bring do begin to show up here. There is a touch of the Wilson forwardness and big sound, but this sounds more like excitement than aggression and those who have previously dismissed Wilson speakers for being FA-like will find the Duette, especially in this system, to be a genteel partner for our smaller British rooms and our slightly softer-hued sensibilities. I'd like to say vocal intelligibility is a strong point, but that's understating the case. It's not a strong point... it's a magnificent point. One of the regular torture discs I use is *The Eminem Show*, purely because that machinegun vocal is like submitting a system to a shorthand test. A good system will return about 70 words out of 100 clearly, leaving the rest swamped by the sheer speed of his delivery. A very good system will occasionally get past 85 out of 100. I'm not sure this is entirely possible, but I didn't lose a single word here. It retained all the intensity, the venom and the pace of his vocalization, but made every single nuance immediately understandable. So there must be a limitation? Of course... the limitation is that it isn't a well thought out £50,000 system,

of a Thousand. It lacks the dynamic freedom of the very best (and biggest) systems. And it lacks the frequency extension of the tiny handful of loudspeaker systems that can take this speaker on, and win. Yes, the chances



are if you replaced every other component in the chain to bring it up to the same price level as the Wilsons, the sound quality would in most cases improve. But whether it would improve to a commensurate extent is hard to say. Fact is, this is by far, one of the best systems I've ever heard this side of £20,000.

So, the idea of adding the Vertex AQ equipment to this system falls into my 'tweaky nonsense' box and my hackles start to rise.

So, the supports went under CD player and valve amp, the mains leads went between electronics and wall

and the parallel mains filter was plugged in. Up went my hackles... and up went the hairs on the back of my neck with them. Suddenly there's an odd sense

of correctness that kicks in.

It wasn't missing beforehand but sure as hell is missing when you go back; all the system's ducks are in a row, everything is neatly ordered like the Trooping of the Colour. Suddenly, the already well-ordered music makes just that bit more sense and becomes more coherent. Just as Scotty couldn't describe anything about the Enterprise's engines ►



or a well-matched £100,000 system.

That means it lacks the power behind the throne to deliver the sort of scale needed to parse Mahler's *Symphony*

Now, here comes my personal problem (no, the other personal problem... the one that needs more than a dab of talcum powder and some breath mints). I have an antipathy toward cables in general and exotic mains fiddling in particular. Something deep inside

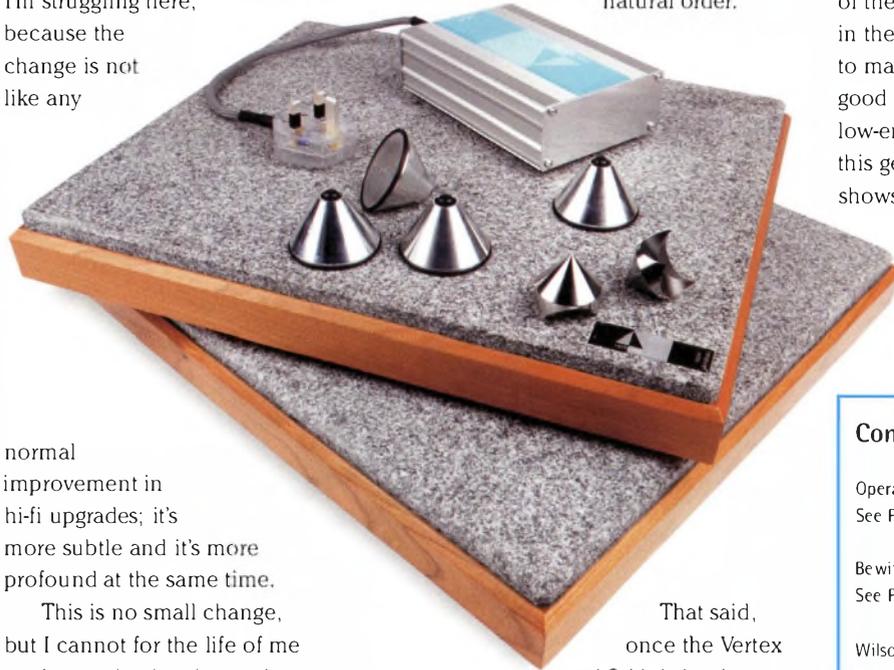
▶ without recourse to analogy, so I have to fall back on the same blunt tool. But at least the analogy has the benefit of not being used before (I hope); the system is like a hand-made, custom Turnbull & Asser shirt – a perfect fit, elegant and able to be both brightly coloured and understated at the same time. It's an instant arbiter of the wearer's taste and bank balance. The difference between the system with and without Vertex AQ is like the difference between that T&A shirt ironed five minutes before rushing out to work, and it starched and pressed by a professional. In other words, it's the small space between classy and classic. Or something. In truth, I'm struggling here, because the change is not like any

normal improvement in hi-fi upgrades; it's more subtle and it's more profound at the same time.

This is no small change, but I cannot for the life of me work out why the change is so musically significant. As with the system entire, it shouldn't be this good, but it is. The little part of me that still clings to my physics A-level cries out in pain at the thought of something so patently bonkers making a difference, and it won't come out until I double-blind ABX test this under proper lab conditions. But that's okay, because the other part that clings to my theatre studies

A-level wants to make a song and dance about Vertex AQ. Preferably in iambic pentameter.

Generalissimo Roy thinks the Vertex AQ additions are as fundamental to the sound of the system as the system itself. I don't agree... sort of. I think the groundwork was done by the good system itself – the Vertex AQ equipment takes that very good sound and places it in even more natural order.



That said, once the Vertex AQ kit is in place, there's no going back,

which means in some respects it is as fundamental to the sound of the system as the system itself. Oh my!

But let's draw back from this and look at the bigger picture. This is a system that literally inverts the source-first thinking firmly (albeit sometimes unconsciously) ingrained in every English hi-fi reviewer's head. There are still many of us who simply could

not accept this system, simply because of the way the components are priced. Not to undermine any of the other parts of the system, but in the Duetto, Dave Wilson set out to make a speaker that will deliver good results with comparatively low-end equipment; whatever else this genuinely important system shows, it certainly shows that he totally succeeded. With honours.



Contacts

Opera Audio
See Page 31

Bewitch
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Wilson Audio
See Page 34

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Tel. (44)(0)1635 821357
Net. Isotek Systems

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Flying Blind...

by Alan Sircom

It's easy to put together a system based on your own feelings, tastes and findings – that's what we all do, anyway. It's much, much harder to do this for someone else, without actually demonstrating or even talking to that person directly. But, that's what we did for this round-robin test.

My system was going to Chris Thomas, but from what I remember, the last time I spoke to CT face-to-face for any length of time, John Major was the new face 'round Downing Street.

"So, what's he like?" I asked the editor.

"Well, he's about yay high, nice bloke... you must have met him."

"No, I meant 'what does he like'? Musically..."

The resulting answer perhaps demonstrates how we put systems together. It also immediately put me into 'dealer' mode, remembering my long-lost days selling hi-fi at Grahams Hi-Fi, in London. Perhaps, this gives insight into how dealers build up systems for customers, too.

"I tends to prefer small speakers," was the first response from RG. Being the immediate thought about Chris' tastes, this is likely to be the cornerstone of the system. You don't respond to this by setting up a pair of refrigerator-sized five-ways. So, my internal speaker system calculator started down a particular line of thinking to match this sound.

"He used to like Linn/Naim systems", the immediate reaction here was fast, tight slightly bass light speakers along the lines of the Linn Kan. Acoustic Energy AE-1 Classics for example; or maybe ATC, AVI or Audio Physic. I started thinking systems to suit.

"But, he likes a fuller sound these days." Say goodbye to AE-1s and that whole line of reasoning. Welcome to Sonus Faber, ProAc or Harbeth world!

"He plays a lot of guitar music." Bingo! My speaker selector pointed to ProAc's Tablette Reference Eight Signature. Although all three have the midrange to suit, the Sonus Faber would be a little too warm sounding and the Harbeth sound a bit laid back, but the ProAc is the perfect partner, with just the right hint of upper midrange euphonic charm to bring out the best in any guitar, but not so much as to over sweeten the sound. My mind started racing, building several systems that perfectly suit the ProAc. Two names sprung to mind, though; Ayre (for the CD player and possibly amp) and Sugden (mostly

for the amp). From the above information, either would suit.

"He likes a lot of detail" seals the deal. Sugden's A21SE is a detail retriever, but has nothing on the Ayre sound. So, that's it sorted – Ayre's new 'evolution' series revised CX-7e CD player, with the matching (and similarly revised) AX-7e integrated amplifier and a pair of ProAc Tablette Reference Eight Signature loudspeakers. This all looks the part, and sounds the business.



Eagle-eyed readers may notice this is one of Audio Salon's most popular systems, too. I'm sure the people at the store did the same deductive process to establish this as their base system. For good reason, too – it sounds excellent. But, that's only half the story, although I confess the second half is not my forte any more. I tend to go very cold at the mention of cables, tables, stands and space-cadet accessories.

Something to do with blind-testing 70 speaker cables over a two-day period ten years ago – I still twitch at the thought. And, the ProAc's were tested on long-defunct Target R1 speaker stands – ideal for the speaker, but hardly decorative or available these days.

My first choice for speaker stands would be a high-mass design, rather like the Custom Design SQ404, but the editor convinced me that Quadraspire's new acrylic stands would be an interesting (and rather more practical alternative). On the subject of platforms, that was easy: the choice came down to finite element and BCD Engineering, but as most spinal columns in the HF+ team are already under duress, the high-mass BCD kit groaned into second place behind the lighter, sonically superb finite element Pagode Signature.

Cables were a chance for playtime, at least for someone else, someone who doesn't come out in hives at the mention of the subject. I was having this discussion with Roy in his office (for once not via phone or email). We both looked down into his Nordost dungeon. Given there is enough monofilament cable in his office to rewire the Telecom Tower (I think he's collecting the stuff and secretly plans to trade it in for a small island... he already has enough to buy the Isle of Wight) it would be churlish not to experiment. So, out came a set of the new Tyr interconnects and matching speaker cables. ►

▶ Not quite Valhalla but still pricy enough to shock your non-audio relatives.

For me, this is bad crazyness, but entertaining crazyness nonetheless, which make the results from this system all the more interesting for me. Normally, I would be far more conservative in cable choice and even Heimdall (at the bottom of the monofilament pile) would make me come out in a cold sweat when recommending its use in what is basically a five grand system. I am way beyond my comfort zone here, but that's not a bad thing. That's how new paradigms happen.

This system certainly makes the 'ten per cent' rule on accessories look pretty silly – depending on the length of cables involved, this is nearer the 'sixty per cent' rule, maybe even the 'one hundred per cent' rule. But, when you think about it, why should a system potentially as good as this one

be hampered by a £500 budget on accessories? This would probably mean spending £150 on speaker stands, £200 on a table and £150 on cables... And components at that level are nowhere near the quality of the main separates. So, if it works, bring on the five grand system with the five grand accessories... it's rule breakin' time!



Ayre CX7 CD player	£2195
Ayre AX7 integrated amplifier	£1995
Proac Tablette Reference Eight Signature loudspeaker	£899
Nordost Tyr speaker (3m) and balanced interconnect cabling	£4935
Nordost Brahma mains leads	£900 ea.
Quadraspire QX 600A acrylic speaker stands	£200
finite elemente Pagode Signature rack	From £915

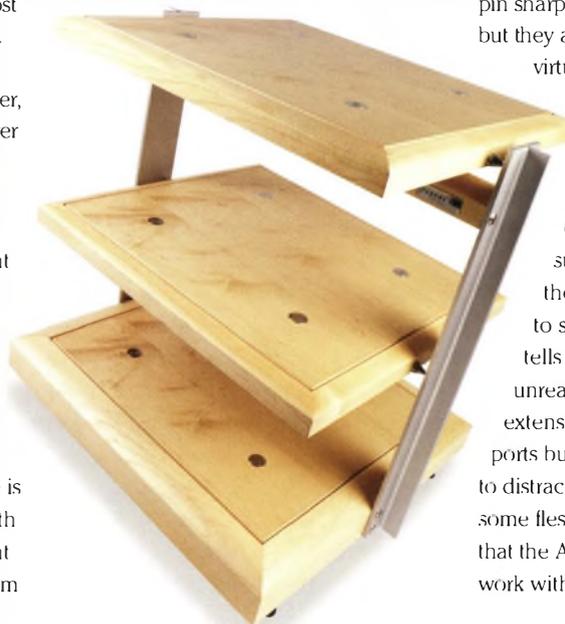
Ayre Traffic Control

by Chris Thomas

On the face of it this is just the sort of real-world system I like and often recommend. Clean, straightforward and simple in concept and execution, incorporating no magic ingredients and truly international in flavour, drawing together components from Germany, the US and the UK. It benefits enormously from having very serious attention paid to speaker, interconnect and mains cabling, equipment supports and in this case has the added intrigue of most of it being completely new to my ears.

I have reviewed both of the Ayre components before but these are newer, improved versions with modified power supplies. They are also cheaper than they used to be due to a change of importer. I have been looking forward to using the finite elemente equipment stand for some time. This is the Signature version and not the Master Reference model, which has gradually become the support of the Gods, but I figured that it should still give me a pretty good idea of what this renowned audio furniture is all about. However, my experience with Nordost cable and the Ayre equipment told me that after installation the system

would need at least a week before it settled down and became at all representative of what musical rewards I could expect. After being rolled up for transport I have found the Nordost cabling notoriously brittle sounding and it really needs to be installed, dressed and then physically left alone. I should add here that RG had already very kindly run the cables in for me on the Nordost machine. History also reminded me that



the Ayre electronics prefer to be used in balanced mode so, after confirming this with Symmetry the importer, I settled on this configuration throughout the next month of listening.

I do like small speakers and not always purely for near-field listening, but after a short time it became apparent that, for me, the Tablettes may, in this situation, be a small speaker too far. They are delicate, quite detailed and pin sharp with regard to their imagery but they are lean, lightweight and have virtually nothing in the way of

bass weight or substance when used in this system. I moved them from the acrylic stands and onto a pair of heavy single pillar Kudos supports and spent ages juggling them back and forth and side to side. The diminutive cabinet tells you that it is completely unreasonable to expect any real bass extension through those twin rear ports but I was driving these little things to distraction (destruction?) looking for some flesh on the bone until I realised that the Ayre amplifier just doesn't really work with them. Well, not to my ears ▶



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▶ anyway. They are actually crazy demanding when it comes to amplification. I know because I hooked them onto the end of about £20k's worth and they became a different proposition altogether. So, after exhausting all avenues of experimentation within this system I decided that I really needed to bite the bullet and retire the Proacs with their honour still intact and opt for a change of speaker.

It is with many thanks to Simon Bennet of Absolute Analogue that I managed to swiftly acquire a pair of the Reference 3A Dulcets which very quickly reminded me that they are probably my favourite small, small-speaker. Actually they are not an awful lot bigger than the Tablette, although close to twice the price, but they wasted no time in letting me know that it was a much better match with this amplification. You won't hear me recommending the Dulcet on the basis of its accuracy but I will say that, despite its size, it has enough bandwidth to constantly surprise and lends a real novelty value to a system like this as it is just so much fun. And they work well on the Quadraspire stands too although the fit is so tight that the smaller version of the stand would very likely be a better bet.

Now the system was cooking and I felt a lot more comfortable with it. Personal preference plays an awfully big part in ones reaction to any system and here was the proof. Now the music was completely out of the box and the soundstage quite unique and unpredictable at times. With no crossover to speak of, the Reference 3A speakers, just let the music pour through. That puts a heavy responsibility on the drivers, but these are excellent with great resolution and sweetness, so they never

grow really stressed or ragged. In the Ayre amplifier they have found a perfectly balanced partner, as the AX-7 is not about solid-state grip and pure driving output. It is spacious, detailed and full of depth and space and this suits the Dulcets just fine. Forget about making any kind of technical analysis of the sound and just sit back and let the music wash around the room. Instrumental separation is tremendous but the music remains solid and

almost touchable. With no crossover to formalise and shape the sound there seems to be a degree of freedom and spontaneity that can become very addictive and makes you wonder why more serious systems don't have the same sense of freedom and musical flow and out-pouring that this one does.

This system won't disappoint with its tonality either. It can be indecently good through the mid-band with its surprisingly full-bodied richness and tonal warmth. Pianos in particular a problem of scale for many small speakers, are vivid and have a solid sense of integrity and pitch about them that is most impressive. Where, with the Tablette, I found myself selecting the music with care I felt no such restriction with the Dulcet in place. When the Tablette was good, it was very good but I found too many times that, in this system I thought it was operating at the edge of its and my comfort zone. But the Ayre is no muscle amp but is very

refined and quite polite in comparison to something like the Moon i-3. It has a real taste of the classic American high-end with a feeling of smooth depth and ambient detail about it.

This is brought into sharp focus by both the finite element rack and the superb, but revealing Nordost cabling which give the system that added touch of real class and enables the AX-7 to use the high levels of information supplied to it by the CX-7 in an efficient and musical way. There is plenty of power although I wouldn't say that the system is at its happiest when driving over-hard; it's a bit too subtle for that. The Ayre delivers its wattage with something of a velvet glove and never disassembles the music as you ask more and more of it. In fact, after a bit of experimental chopping and changing I began to realise that in some ways the equipment stand and cabling should really be thought of as being as much the heart of the system as the amplifier. Together they provide the system with a solid and unwavering

operating environment which elevates the quality of the musical experience enormously by allowing each component to more fully realise its musical potential. They are a clever and very welcome addition and certainly make more of a contribution than a better CD player and amplifier with inferior cabling and support. Without such care being taken in these areas it would have been very easy indeed to make this system sound extremely average.

The size of the speakers tells you that this is a small room system and a few hours in its company let you know that it is designed to take full advantage of all those things that small speaker systems should excel at. It is fast and lets go of energy as fast as it takes it on, so any music that is rhythmically



► biased literally pours into the room through the wide-open window of the sound-stage. As you ask more and more of it you are just waiting for the moment when it begins to let go and for the speakers to cry “enough”. But it doesn’t happen. The quite amazing separation holds firm right up until the amplifier is driving so hard that it’s operating at the edge of its comfort zone – and that is quite loud.

So it can produce pure volume if that’s what you want, but I think that is missing the point and getting away from what this system is really good at. If that’s really what you are looking for then this particular assembly is not for you. When you look at the size of the cabinet you can’t help but wonder quite how it can generate the kind of bass that it does, even at very moderate levels. That little bass/mid driver is really quite special not only in extension but also in the fact that it feels so pitch coherent and stable. In absolute terms this speaker has little real power or air-moving ability in the bass. Physics will tell you that and much of what it does down here is a clever illusion bought about by intelligent and careful design. It is punchy but is never going to excite any low frequency room nodes. But, musically it certainly works and brings with it great agility and a real feeling musical energy and dynamism that keeps you coming back for more with a smile on your face. This is helped enormously by the Quadraspire stands which perform their usual disappearing trick of removing the sound from the box and as the speakers are pretty good at this themselves anyway, the result is that the music seems to emanate from



just about everywhere except the cabinet. Equally, I have to say that the tweeter, the nail in the coffin of so many small speakers, no – make that speakers in general, is extraordinarily refined. Using a version of JM Lab’s terrific Beryllium unit for the past few years has made me more than a little dissatisfied with most of the older dome tweeters that are still around. But this one has that open-throated response that so many conventional units don’t and never sounds compressive at the leading edges or remotely brittle or saturated. It has great articulation and depth, with surprising resolution and subtlety of texture.

This set-up shows what

I mean when I say that it’s all about systems.

So many times I read reviews or opinions about single components that are supposed to transform the system onto a new level in a single bound.

But a balanced system approach will always have the upper hand. What, for instance, is the point of sinking thousands of pounds into a new amplifier if the cabling is not up to revealing the musical improvements of the real upgrade? As the equipment itself develops and improves then so does our knowledge and experience of

how to assemble a system, within a budget, to achieve some sort of musical satisfaction. Many years ago when us Flat Earth Linn/Naim devotees advocated system-building by spending a huge chunk of the budget on an LP 12 and a Nait and the rest on a simple two-way speaker like the AR 18, we were scoffed at. But, considering the times, were we really wrong? It seems blindingly obvious to me that the quality of the equipment support and cabling should really be given as much thought, attention and even budget proportion

as the electronics

and speakers. Speaker cables should not be things that the salesman throws into the deal at the end. People who think that the importance of cabling has been overstated by snake-oil salesmen posing as audio reviewers should listen to what it can achieve in a system like this. Those who think that dedicated equipment supports are merely things that get the gear off the floor or the sideboard should have a listen to the difference a stand like the finite element Pagode Signature can bring to speakers and electronics with real quality – like these.

Unlocking the musical potential of the equipment and giving it the chance to perform at its best is what it should be all about and this little system achieves that admirably. Each component is excellent but here it’s a case of the sum of the parts that is so successful. What I have been listening to for the past month has made me stop and think at how serious and furrow-browed hi-fi can often become and how easily we overlook the pure entertainment value that a hi-fi system can bring. It’s a great little system.



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Quadraspire
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Culture Clash...

Flat-earth meets the single-ended revival in Paul Messenger's Beauhorn, Unison Research and Rega Mix

by Paul Messenger

I'm not a hi-fi dealer. I review components, the vast majority of them loudspeakers, for magazines that want to publish reviews of individual components. I do so to the best of my abilities, within tight constraints of budgets and deadlines, and although I do try to bring a measure of consistency to the proceedings, I'm happy to concede that it's a far from perfect scenario.

When the Editor suggested I should put together a system for another reviewer, my first reaction was to chuckle at the idea; my second was to agree to get involved; my third was to realise that I was ill-qualified to put a system together, and would have to resort to some guesswork.

Still, I reckon the system I've selected is interesting, newsworthy, and has some real potential for delivering good results. Trouble is, there was no way of ascertaining that prior to ordering up the gear.

I knew I was on solid ground with Rega's excellent Saturn CD player, cos I'd already reviewed it for another hi-fi magazine, and I was pretty certain the same company's similar-price vinyl spinner would hold its end up with no problem, as it always has in the past. Rega continues to refine its models, in engineering as well as cosmetics, and the P5 is a pretty affair with (optional) outboard supply and the very classy RB700 tonearm and equally capable Exact cartridge.

I sort of knew what to expect with the Beauhorn B2 Rhapsody too, because it's really just a slightly slimmed down variation on the familiar B2.2 theme, a strange looking but sonically very involving high sensitivity, single-driver, horn-loaded design. Extension is inevitably limited

at both ends of the audio band, but what's in between is the most important bit, and it comes over with great dynamic integrity; communication and coherence.

One advantage with using high sensitivity speakers is that you don't need much amplifier power, which immediately suggests a single-ended valve amp, and the speakers' limited bandwidth would also seem a good match. I'd briefly heard Unison's compact and pretty

Preludio when visiting the company earlier this year, and subsequently got to try the much

larger Performance model

at home. The Performance was such an impressive, er, performer, I had good reason to

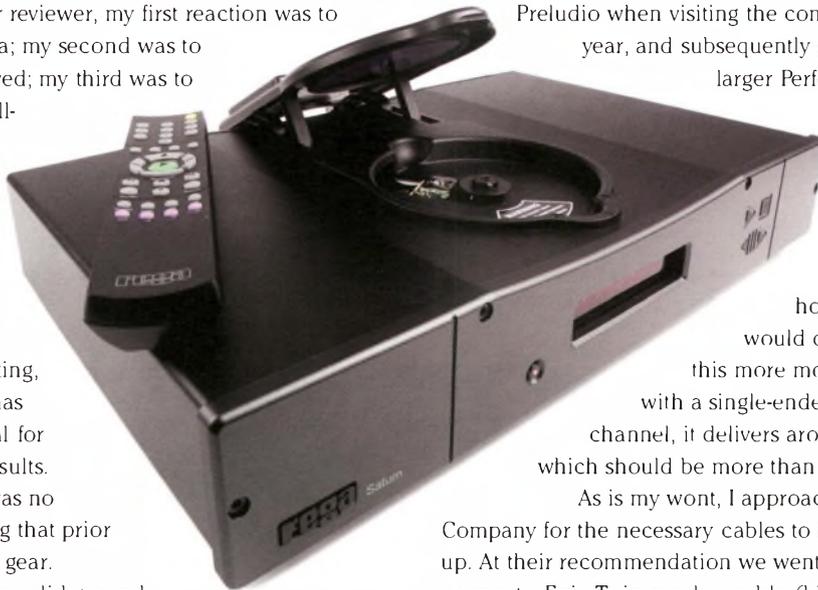
hope the Preludio

would do a similar trick in this more modest system. Armed with a single-ended KT88 for each channel, it delivers around 15 Watts a side, which should be more than up to the job.

As is my wont, I approached The Chord Company for the necessary cables to link everything up. At their recommendation we went for Anthem interconnects, Epic Twin speaker cable (bi-wiring and current capacity are hardly necessary with single-driver horns), plus a couple of Powerchords.

Which just left the need for support furniture. I've always rated Quadraspire racks for their impressive combination of attractive appearance, decent performance and reasonable prices, and also enjoyed recent dems of the decoupled transparent acrylic Reference supports. To take the considerable weight and heat output of the valve amp, I went for a combination of the Q4 shelves for the amp and ancillaries, plus Reference shelves for the sources, which looked pretty good.

I only had a short time with the system up and running, as the Beauhorns were arriving and departing on the same day. Feeding my regular B&W 800Ds with



▶ Vertex AQ cabling, and substituting in and out of my other components, it was clear that both sources were working fine, but the Preludio amplifier clearly favours the mid-band, somewhat at the expense of both frequency extremes.

The same is true of the Beauhorn speaker of course, so the end result did lack some scale, weight and transparency. While it might sound a little 'small' for some tastes, it retains an impressive ability to communicate essential musical information nonetheless, with the essential sweetness typical of valves, and the fine dynamic expression and coherence of a horn loudspeaker. Still, I do agree with Roy that it would be worth exploring alternatives, especially after I heard a special prototype 'transconductance' (current source) amp that Beauhorn's Eric Thomas had brought along to wind me up! (Note this radical amplifier is not available commercially, and is only suitable for use with single-driver horn speakers!)



The System

This system offers solid source components for both Vinyl and CD replay – at roughly equivalent prices. It also pays attention to cables and supports, important components that are often overlooked.

Rega Saturn CD Player	£1298
Rega P5 Record Player	£698
Outboard PSU	£148
Fono Stage	£165
Exact Moving-Magnet Cartridge	£199
Unison Research Preludio amplifier	£1795
Beauhorn Rhapsody B2 speakers	£2750
Quadraspire Hybrid Q4/Ref rack	£540
2x Chord Powerchord	£130 ea.
2x Anthem Interconnect	£315/1m pr.
Epic Twin Speaker Cable	£274/3m pr. terminated

Not Just Another "Me Too" System

by Roy Gregory

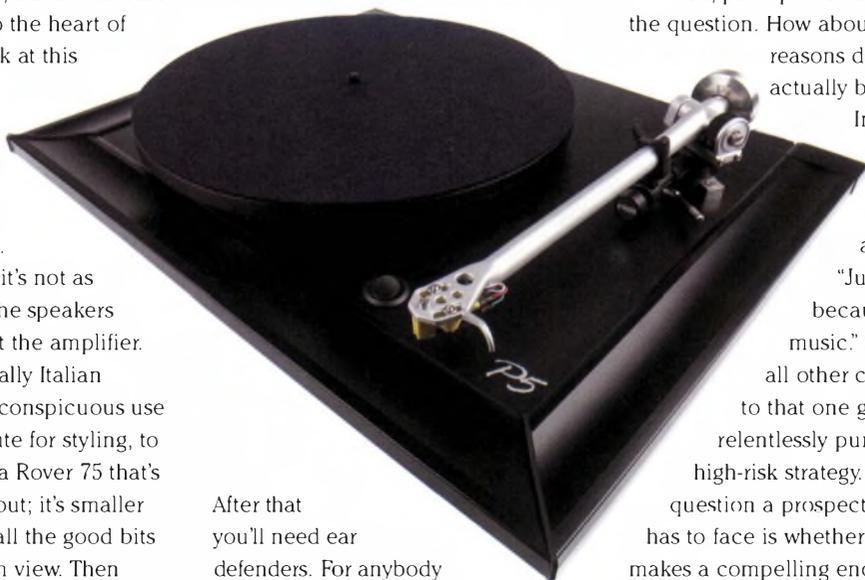
Just how many reasons do you need not to buy a system? It might seem like an odd question, but in this case I'd say it cuts right to the heart of the issue. Take a look at this system, on paper or in the flesh and the list starts to form, involuntarily in your head: first off there's aesthetics. Personally speaking it's not as you might assume, the speakers that are an issue, but the amplifier. One of those classically Italian products where the conspicuous use of wood is a substitute for styling, to me it just looks like a Rover 75 that's been turned inside out; it's smaller than you think and all the good bits are now hidden from view. Then there's the residual noise level, always a potential problem with such efficient speakers. And talking of efficiency, the useable range on the

volume control covers about the first 45 degrees of movement.

After that you'll need ear defenders. For anybody brought up with Quads or something from the BBC stable, colouration levels are horrifying, while bandwidth goes beyond limited

to the positively curtailed. Why then would anyone bother?

Well, perhaps we need to rephrase the question. How about, "How many reasons do you need to actually buy a system?" In this instance, this set-up assumes that the answer is, "Just one; because it makes music." Subordinating all other considerations to that one goal is both relentlessly purist and a high-risk strategy. In turn, the question a prospective purchaser has to face is whether the message makes a compelling enough case to overcome concerns about the means of delivery. Sitting in front of the Rega, Unison, Beauhorn system the answer is a resounding, "Maybe..."



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► Now, when it comes to hi-fi (or anything else for that matter) I'm not exactly known for hedging my bets, so I'd better explain my reticence. First up, and leaving aside all previously mentioned concerns, there are two purely practical aspects to getting the best out of this system. The first is related to the gain; this system shuts down at low levels. As you turn it up, you suddenly cross a threshold at

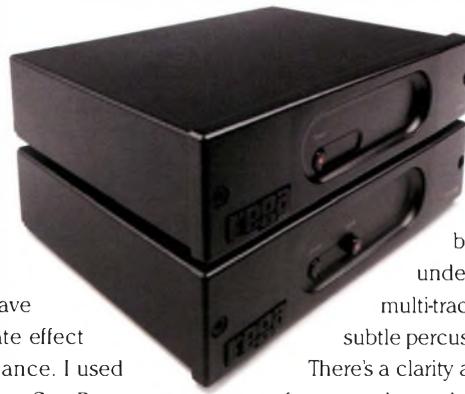


which it springs to life – and below which it sounds thick, turgid, grey and sluggish. The problem is that the threshold is actually quite loud. This may have to do with the fact that it's operating so near the bottom of the volume control, or it may have to do with actually getting the air in the horn cabinet to move, but either way, it's an amp/speaker matching issue.* Secondly, the bass output from the B2, whilst surprisingly healthy given their svelte dimensions (this is a horn speaker, remember) is lumpy, rather wooden and prone to unevenness. Properly integrating it with the rest of the range requires extremely careful placement and toe-in of each cabinet;

positional flexibility is definitely not a B2 strongpoint. Likewise, coupling the speakers to the floor seems to have a disproportionate effect on their performance. I used finite elemente CeraPucs,

which proved far better than the spikes and various other options with which I dallied. Experimenting with a soft termination (as provided by carpet as opposed to my floorboards) muddled things still further, suggesting that those with carpeted floors might well try Symposium speaker platforms.

With these details attended to, you can finally start to enjoy some music – and enjoy it you will. Pick something acoustic and simple off the shelf and you'll quickly learn everything you need to know about the considerable strengths (as well as the trade offs) in this system. A recently acquired acoustic CD EP from Stewboss (*L.E.E.P*) serves admirably. Gregg Safarty's clever vocals and



the perfect phrasing so critical to the layered meanings in his songs are beautifully present, underpinned by the multi-tracked guitars and subtle percussive touches.

There's a clarity and directness of purpose that makes each track wonderfully effective and intelligible. Likewise, the dense complexity of Patti Smith's 'Gloria' (from the Speakers Corner repressing of *Horses*) has pace and layers unravelled by the B2's speed, unhindered by the clogging effects of dense, deep bass. The chanted vocals with their screams



and yelps have an almost hypnotic power, the shifting rhythmic patterns and accelerations mapped with effortless ease. In fact, as long as you are prepared to use the volume there's an attractive, structured and rhythmically coherent presentation to almost anything you choose to play. Go looking for the limits

with something like 'Nimrod' from the Monteux *Enigma Variations* and the carefully constructed levels, the

* I've never been convinced by the argument that suggests that single-ended triodes make the best partners for high efficiency speakers. To my mind too many such pairings have too many weaknesses in common, especially at the frequency extremes. Likewise the midrange softness that characterises so many single-ended designs can be ruthlessly revealed by the speed and transparency of a single-driver loudspeaker – leaving the system sounding like the speakers are constantly waiting for the signal and the amp to catch up.

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▶ growth of the piece are laid out with a clarity and precision that's adds a clear sense of logic to the musical progression. Indeed, sense rather than facsimile is really what this system is about. It brings a directness, a communicative quality to



performances that escapes all too many hi-fi systems. If you want to be moved by music, drawn into it and carried along, this system will do that – and some. But the benefits are not without associated costs and those need to be weighed very carefully indeed.

Any of the examples I've already chosen will also show the weaknesses of this system's approach – if you go looking for them. The Achilles' Heel in this particular combination is that you don't need to dig that deep. Listen to the spoken introduction on the fourth track of the Stewboss EP and you'll notice a subtle lack of immediacy. This is a voice talking and it should be right there in front of you – but it isn't. Instead there's a haze, a distance between you and it. Intrigued I reached for the Analogue Productions direct to disc recording of Lazy Lester. Straightahead blues

with nothing more than a wire between microphone and cutting head, nothing should be more direct than this, but even here there was a softening. It robs the sound of the vital immediacy and emotional impact, the tactile connection

that makes the single driver argument so hard to ignore. What is more, even with the speakers optimally positioned there's still a question mark over the bottom end. The orchestral underpinnings of the *Enigma* aren't just curtailed, they're congealed too, while the easy lope that characterizes the rhythm of Art Pepper's 'Las Cuevas De Mario' becomes two dimensional, metro-nomic as opposed to the sexy smooch it should be. In short, it drives but it doesn't groove.

Now, I've reviewed an earlier incarnation of these speakers and shy and retiring they ain't. Likewise, listening to the Saturn and P5, it's clear just how competent these affordable front-end components from Rega are. No surprise there then; after all, the various Planars were under-rated for years, while the Saturn's predecessor, the Jupiter, was a personal favourite of mine. All of which rather points the finger at Unison Research's Preludio. I'm always doubly suspicious when prejudices prove correct – especially when they're mine. But the longer I listened the more intrusive these failings became. It was almost as if the system was ultra clear, but only up to a point; only letting you see so far into the music. It seemed to be extremely good at revealing a limited expressive range. Likewise, it was

tight and rhythmically it got your feet tapping, but it was almost as if it was fitting the music to a simplified rhythmic template, again limiting the range of musical expression. In fact (and as bizarre as it may sound) the more I listened the more the system as a whole reminded me of an early Linn/Naim one. It has exactly the same appealing (yet ultimately frustrating) simplicity of view.

I just had to try an alternative amp, so I plugged in the Lavardin IS Reference. More expensive than the Preludio, it is also slimmer, black and a better aesthetic match to the source components. It's also a better match to the speakers – much better (I'm equally confident that the Preludio will prove much happier



in different company). The presence of the little French solid-state amp immediately banished the lack of immediacy, adding greater clarity, separation, air and an increased sense of image precision and acoustic space into the bargain. It was almost as if the speakers breathed this huge sigh of relief. Suddenly, the wooden lumpiness that has slowed and

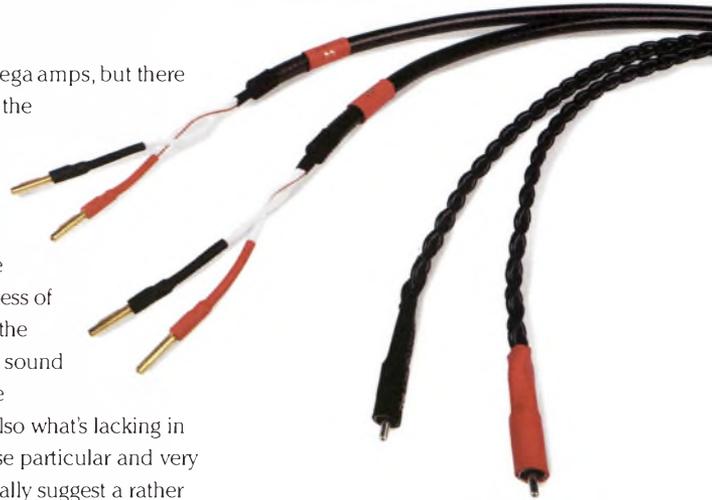
▷ coagulated bass lines was gone, replaced with deft, lucid, fleet notes, clear in pitch and time. Art Pepper rediscovered his mojo; Greg Safarty took on that familiar sardonic twist. Indeed, by sorting out the energy spectrum in the system, the Lavardin also reduced the colouration levels, making individual voices and instruments much more recognisable. It worked better at lower volumes too. Was there a downside? Well, performers lost some of the solid presence they enjoyed with the Unison, along with its rounded warmth, but hey, that's what you get when you open the window – sometimes the rain comes in.

In a way, substituting the Lavardin is a cheat, but what it does is validate the system architecture – and the argument behind it. Once you've experienced the tactile directness



of a sorted single driver system, it's hard to do without it. With the solid-state amp calling the shots, the system really started to gel, and even deliberate attempts to catch it out had an alarming habit of leaving me with a silly grin on my face. The Enigma? Now it grew, swelling exactly as it should. Lazy Lester's languid style was perfectly captured, with a real reach out and touch quality, while even opera failed to trip this system, glorying in its dramatic contrasts and agile precision. Of course, I might have reached for one of the equally appealing and rather

more affordable Rega amps, but there is a special feel to the precision and transparency you get from the Lavardin, one that really suits the speed and directness of the B2s as well as the unfussy, organised sound of the Rega source components. It's also what's lacking in the Preludio, whose particular and very real strengths actually suggest a rather different application. Some searching revealed a dealer with specific experience of the little Unison amp driving the B2s – altogether too much of a good thing seems to be the conclusion. Instead the amp should be paired with the smaller, Italian built two-way boxes that are so popular, a combination that makes the most of its sweetness and open mid-band.



one size fits all, and as soon as you start fitting yourself into a pre-determined performance pattern, your system will start editorializing your listening. Having the confidence to recognize what you like but also to appreciate and live with its flaws is the key to a successful relationship (and not just with your hi-fi). The Rega, Unison (or Lavardin), Beauhorn system is a refreshingly different and challengingly extreme solution. There will be those who just don't get it; but for those who do, nothing else will come close.



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There's much to admire in the music made by the Regas and the Beauhorn B2s, especially when you take their prices into account. Renewing my acquaintance with the speakers in particular, has been a real pleasure. All the amp switch means is that the Lavardin suits me better than the Unison. Someone with less Catholic tastes, someone who wants the colour and body that the Unison brings, its cuddly character and easy musicality, will wonder just what I'm on – and they'd be right. No system should be a



Solid Citizens...

by Chris Thomas

Reviewers see a huge number of products, but there are always a special few that you turn to when the going gets tough. In some respects that's exactly what I've done here. I've been a huge fan of the Moon integrated amplifiers for some time now, both the i-3 and the i-5 representing reference products in their class, but it is the i-5 I have included in this system for its extra sophistication and calmer temperament. There are few times when a bit more power would not be welcome and the i-5 is no different, not just for the loudness potential but more for its strength and pure driving grip. But the Moon is still adequate if not generous, very good tonally and is still pretty strong throughout its decent bandwidth, particularly through the mid and top which will, as we'll see, be critical if this system is to deliver.

I picked the CD 5.3 CD player as a source not necessarily because I think it is absolutely the best available at the price as an individual component, but more for its overall musical compatibility with the amplifier with which it dovetails superbly. As a combination these two are hard to fault at the price but they need a speaker to do them justice, which makes them a perfect match for the one I have in mind.

The Focal-JMLab 1007 Bes are potentially superb. I say potentially because they are very demanding when it comes to the quality of the rest of the system. That amazing beryllium tweeter now extends further down into the bandwidth than ever before so inferior amplification need not apply (not that this will stop them being coupled with totally unsuitable amplifiers of course and judged harshly as a result). When I reviewed them I pushed them to their absolute limit and found them to be full of surprises in the sort of systems where they would, on paper, appear to be out of their depth. But, although the Moon remains at the lower end of the required amplifier quality, I wanted to show that by affording the speaker respect with careful consideration of partnering equipment and ancillaries, superb results are still possible without spending a fortune. But, equally you could spend a lot more on electronics and not achieve these results.

I would like to have stood them on the Quadraspire QX 600 acrylic stands because I think they bring something special to the mix but as the system I'm reviewing incorporates these I opted for the Custom Design M1s as recommended for this speaker by Moon distributors Redline (whose retail arm, Loud And Clear, are extremely fond of the little 1007 Bes). You may have other suggestions, but remember one thing; avoid the stands Focal supply to be used with this speaker at all costs! Likewise, it would have been easy to include a decent

loom of Nordost cabling but again I took Redline's recommendation and included a set of the very interesting

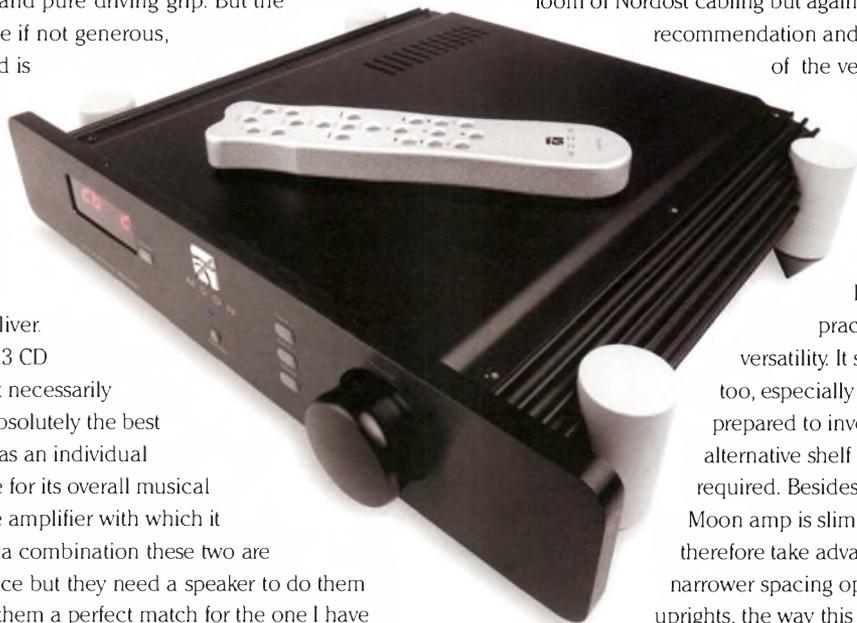
Abbey Road cables. Naim's Fraim comes in for its fair share of criticism but I love its

practicality and versatility. It sounds great

too, especially if you are prepared to investigate alternative shelf materials when required. Besides which, the Moon amp is slim line and can therefore take advantage of the narrower spacing option on the uprights, the way this support sounds best. Of course, there's always at least one great unknown and that's the

listening room. I've never visited PM's room but based on a few of the speakers he reviews it must be pretty large.

My only concern is whether the little Focals will cope... 



The System

Moon CD 5.3 CD Player	£2950
Moon i-5.3 Integrated Amp	£2950
Focal-JMLab Electra 1007 Be	£2299
Abbey Road Reference Interconnects	£520
Abbey Road Reference Speaker Cable	£980/3m pr.
Naim Fraim Rack	£1380
(2 tiers, one at 105mm, one at 190mm)	
Custom Design M1 Speaker Stands	£130/pr.

Trying To make Ends Meet...

by Paul Messenger

At the heart of this system, CT has selected Moon's CD 5.3 CD player and i-5.3 integrated amplifier for source and amplification. Each is priced at \$2950, and is part of Moon's Classic range: the CD 5.3 is the more costly and advanced of two Classic CD players, while the i-5.3 amplifier is the more upmarket of two integrated amplifiers, but sits below a number of separate pre- and power amplifiers.

Both have attractively unusual styling and very rigid structures, based around exceptionally thick alloy front panels and semi-cylindrical finned heatsink sides inset with large full height pillar legs. All is black apart from the cylinder legs, in contrasting silver, which have adjustable black flattened-cone feet, with optional 'points'. (The fascias too may be ordered in silver/pewter.) While the amplifier is a conventional rectilinear shape, the CD player has an attractively distinctive bulge in its top, rather wider than the disc loading tray and extending the depth of the player. The front-loading disc drive is partly inset into this bulge. Both units were placed on wooden boards (as recommended) into a Naim Fraim stand, the extra height of the CD 5.3 requiring a taller section (or placing on top).

The two front panels have a handful of buttons each, alongside large and very visible red displays – a shame the one on the CD player can't be switched off, like that on the amplifier. The amp has a large electronically-encoded volume control, and this proved

exceptionally nice to use, with good weighting, a very well chosen law, and fine feedback from the display. Channel balance adjustment is also included, along with muting, but there's no mono option, which is a shame, as I regard this as an essential for replaying mono LPs.

The five line inputs – one labelled CD, the others A1-A4, one of which is configurable for use with an AV processor – are selected, on either amp or

handset will do most of the work. This is a very attractive looking device, if a tad on the heavy side because it's mostly cast alloy. But it's slim, shapely and with an intelligent disposition of the various buttons. These are all the same, which is a pity, and the legends aren't easy to read either, but the layout is good, and considering it's intended to operate a number of different components, it's not over-burdened by buttons. The control codes follow the Philips protocols, and the crucial up/down volume control works particularly well, with just the right speed of action.

On the technical side, the CD player has two toroidal power transformers to supply digital and analogue sections separately, via eight DC voltage regulators.

The disc drive mechanism is sourced from Philips, but used with in-house control software. The player has internal 24-bit/352.8kHz processor upsampling, feeding a Burr Brown 24-bit/192-kHz DAC with a 8x oversampling digital filter.

The amplifier has a generous rated maximum continuous power output of 85W/ch into 8 ohms and 130 watts into 4 ohms, delivered through a single pair of high quality 4mm socket/binders per channel. The 500VA toroidal transformer and extremely short (40cm) capacitor-free signal path are both oriented towards maximizing the speed of current delivery. Fed from class A pre-amplifier and driver stages, each channel has just two bi-polar output transistors, and the design uses no overall feedback.

Redline has recently added a new line of cables to its portfolio. Branded Abbey Road Cable (with the full approval of the famous recording studio), the interconnects and speaker cables were developed by two

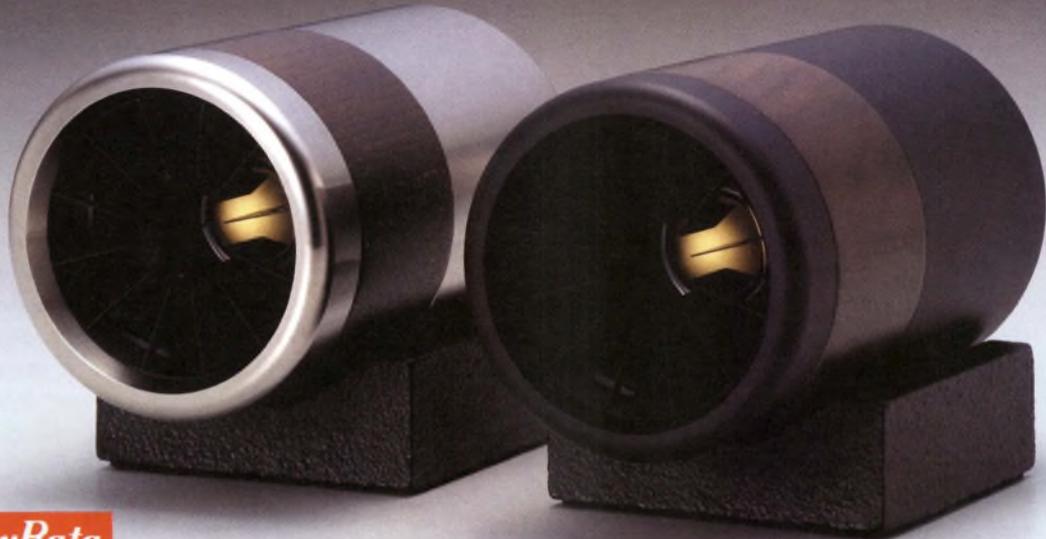


remote handset, via pushbuttons that cycle through the sequence. Tape and pre-amp output

sockets are also provided, plus an input for an external IR sensor. The CD player has all the usual control features, but nothing fancy. Rear socketry of both components uses single-ended phonos for interconnection.

Though it's perfectly possible to drive the system with the buttons on the components, in practice the remote

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Acoustica always prefer whenever possible, to deliver and install any systems bought to ensure that the customer realises the full potential of their purchase. The same critical approach is applied to the choice of Home Cinema equipment, whether it is by projector - up to a massive 10' screen being achievable - or by Plasma flat panel monitor, but the most important part is to make sure that the sound is in scale with the image. A surround sound system with DVD and 5 channels of audio all around you can cost from £3,000 to £30,000 and above, it all depends on how good you want it to be!

► pro-audio engineers, Michael Whiteside and Dan Gable, initially for studio use. Their company, Moving Air Products, now sells a refreshingly simple range, with just two grades of speaker cables and interconnects; Redline supplied the more costly Reference grade, which cost £520 for the Eichmann-terminated 1m interconnect, and typically £980 for 3m of the terminated two-conductor speaker cable. Key features include the use of a copper/silver blend for the speaker lead conductors, and the use of two layers of dielectric (insulation) on both cables, the inner one foamed so that much of the insulation is provided by nitrogen gas.

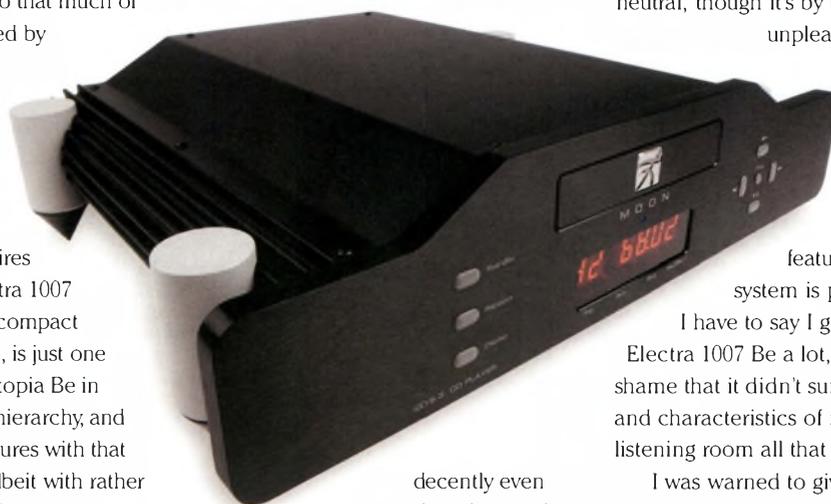
Mr Thomas's adoration of the Focal Beryllium tweeters is well documented, so I wasn't surprised to find one at the end of the wires in this system. The Electra 1007 Be is a very classy and compact £2299/pair stand-mount, is just one step below the Micro Utopia Be in the Focal stand-mount hierarchy, and shares a number of features with that top-of-the-line model, albeit with rather less costly implementations.

Mostly finished in high gloss black, like all the Electra Bes it has a hefty convex baffle and a rather narrower back, so the wood veneered side panels are not parallel. The 165mm bass/mid driver has a W-sandwich cone, and is loaded by a slot-shaped rear port. The tweeter, mounted on a substantial full-width alloy casting, has Focal's characteristic inverted dome diaphragm, fabricated from beryllium as the name suggests, and rather smaller than that used in the Utopia models. Just a single pair of terminals is used, and a pair of lightweight open-frame 24-inch Custom Design M1 stands (£130/pair) was also supplied.

Although getting the system up and running couldn't have been simpler, getting good results from the speakers actually proved rather tricky. Plonking

them down in the positions where I normally place speakers didn't prove very satisfactory on this occasion, as the resultant sound had decidedly uneven bass delivery – thumping away at around 50Hz, where the port tuning unfortunately coincided with a major room mode, but then lacking punch and drive further up the bass register.

A number of different speaker positions and approaches were tried. Foam strips are supplied to damp the port output to a degree, and these proved quite effective in achieving a



decently even bass when the speakers were quite close to the wall (leaving a gap of about six inches). However, the best bass alignment of all was finally achieved when the speakers were brought much closer together than usual, ports open and speakers clear of walls, as this reduced the 50Hz peak and filled in the lack of output higher up the bass region. Trouble is, it also meant listening to a much narrower stereo image than I was used to, which was a bit of a handicap.

Even ignoring these bass alignment difficulties, which are as much the responsibility of the room as the speakers, their measured performance is not very inspiring considering their substantial price, though it's also true to say that they sounded very much better than the measurements suggested. Sensitivity is a respectable 88dB, and

the impedance, staying mostly above 5 ohms, should be easy enough to drive.

Given the modest dimensions and port tuning, deep bass was neither expected nor found. Above the bass region, the 1007 Be is not particularly smooth, and the upper mid-band and presence is decidedly laid back. As a result, the treble proper looks a shade detached and exposed.

These in-room measured characteristics directly translate into the listening experience, and give the speaker a quite obvious character which is not strictly neutral, though it's by no means

unpleasant. In fact the net effect is a little like a 'loudness' contour, which is actually a quite attractive

feature when the system is playing quietly.

I have to say I got to like the Electra 1007 Be a lot, so it was a shame that it didn't suit the layout and characteristics of my particular listening room all that well.

I was warned to give the system a warm-up of at least 72 hours, which I did, but things continued to improve for quite a time thereafter – and could well carry on doing so. I actually started off building the system backwards, first connecting the speakers to my regular Naim-based system, then adding the speaker cables, then the amplifier and finally the CD player. And even though it actually took some days to get the speakers finally working at their best, this progression still proved a useful exercise in getting to grips with the system as a whole.

The Abbey Road speaker cables may be costly items, but they certainly work very well. I don't have a lot of experience with different speaker cables, but the ARC Reference is at least as good as any I've tried, with a natural sweetness and neutrality that's immediately impressive and



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► ingrating. I started off using it from my Naim NAP 500, continued using it with the Moon i-5.3, and never felt the least inclination to try anything else. It has an inherent 'rightness' that is both obvious and very satisfying.

I fully expected to find myself disappointed by the introduction of the i-5.3 amplifier; after all, the Naim combo that I normally use costs more than eight times its price. While the Moon didn't quite match the Naim for sheer speed, it did get surprisingly close to that much larger separates combo in overall musical terms, clearly showing that this compact integrated amplifier is a true class act.

While it might not be the last word in sweetness and transparency, it is an excellent musical communicator, thanks to great timing and excellent speed. No one could mistake the i-5.3 for a valve amp – this is solid-state amplification par excellence, with the matter-of-fact crispness and clarity of the breed in full evidence. For some listeners, Moon's little amp might lack a little romance and delicacy, but it does possess fine agility and excellent neutrality, and adds vanishingly little of its own sonic signature to the proceedings.

Working up to the front of the chain, the Abbey Road Reference interconnect is an undoubtedly effective, albeit costly component, and while I do have reservations over its hefty price, I can't deny that the cable works very well, with a sweet and delicate character that's very inviting and thoroughly enjoyable, alongside a very authoritative and precise bottom end.

The CD 5.3 was a bit of a slow starter. Even after 72 hours on repeat, it still hadn't finished clearing its throat to my satisfaction. Things continued to get better (as someone once nearly said) over the next week or so, and eventually the player's sound quality seemed to stabilise. This is a very decent sounding machine, with a wide dynamic range, good balance,

and a fine measure of grunt and authority that does indeed match the i-5.3 beautifully.

Compared to my near-£10K Naim machine there's a slightly 'processed' quality, and a subtle lack of texture, so that fine instrumental details are slightly less obvious and coherent and vocal inflexions seem a trifle bland.

A little more sparkle and air might have been welcome too, though in context these are minor criticisms of what is certainly a high quality player.

Although this system only included a CD source, I also fed the amp and speakers from vinyl, radio and TV sources, with very satisfactory results.

I was perfectly happy living with this system, mostly I suspect because the amplifier is such an impressive device, both in sound quality terms and in its excellent user interface. It's just particularly nice to use, once you've got the hang of the button layout. I particularly liked the digital volume readout, which made it very easy to set and adjust the volume and/or balance. It also has copious amounts of power on tap and delivers very decent levels with the little Focal speakers. Going back to my regular Naim combo did reveal the Moon's ultimate limitations, but its sins of omission were minor and proved very easy to live with.

The Focal Electra 1007Bes were a source of both frustration and pleasure. I reviewed their bigger 1027Be brothers a year previously and found them an excellent speaker as well as a fine match for my room.

The 1007Bes were still very enjoyable because they shared the same excellent drive units, but their ultimate potential was frustrated by the virtual impossibility of getting a good in-room balance. This turned out to be an object lesson in the important role the listening room has to play when

choosing loudspeakers, which is something our industry would do well to take more seriously (although just

how that can be accomplished is rather harder to say.)

This system promised much and showed flashes of brilliance. In a smaller, or even just a different, room the speakers' considerable charms might well flatter the excellent Moon electronics to astonishing cumulative effect.



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The Avalon Isis Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Expectation is a funny thing – and it can also be quite disconcerting when it's wide of the mark. After all, I thought I had a pretty good idea of what Avalon speakers were about, when along came the Isis. Not only was it larger than any Avalon I've spent time with, it was clearly, obviously and comprehensively better than them too – and not just in a "more of the same" kind of way. Here was a speaker that delivered everything I've come to expect from an Avalon, but wed so holistically to a whole new capability that it rewrote the rulebook, not just for Avalons but for my understanding of how speakers work in general. Here is the product that has finally crystallized, for me, a whole host of thoughts and ideas about the way that hi-fi and loudspeakers communicate and handle information into a single moment of clarity. Suddenly, all those things that I knew were important – now I know why.

First impressions are important – but they can also be misleading. Walk into a room where there's a pair of Isis and the first thing that's going to go through your brain is the word, "BIG": The second is probably "Avalon". Yep, this is indeed a large speaker, which, with its multiple facets and angular grilles is very definitely an Avalon, but in both cases you'd only be part right. In reality, the Isis does a remarkable job of minimizing the visual impact of such a large box; it might look BIG, but it's actually BIGGER than that. Yet, despite its true dimensions it doesn't dominate my room in the same way that the MAXX2s did, or indeed the Nola Pegasus do.

More importantly, that lurking sense of familiarity goes beyond the basic styling cues; there's something of the company's massive Sentinel system here. Seldom seen and familiar in the photographic sense only, the huge (and hugely expensive) system is well named,

with its human dimensions, tapered shoulders and forward tilted head combining to give it a brooding (omni)presence. Look closer and you begin to realise that the Isis is both an outgrowth of its smaller siblings like the Eidolon and a downscaled version of the Sentinel – although it's also neither of these simple constructs. You might assume then, that it represents the next evolutionary stage in designer Neil Patel's thinking and development and here you'd be on safer ground; except that evolution is a gradual process whereas in developmental and performance terms "the great leap forward" represented by the Isis is actually a significant step-change, more revolutionary than evolutionary in nature.

Instead, let's just say that, despite appearances and the more obvious physical evidence to the contrary, this speaker is like no Avalon you'll have heard before. Let's start with form; the Isis might draw its overall aesthetic and humanoid dimensions from the Sentinel, but it is, technologically speaking, a much closer relative to the Eidolon Diamond. Its cabinet is constructed in familiar Avalon fashion, from massively thick slabs of laminated selected density fibre material (or MDF just not the off-the-shelf variety) the sloping shapes helping to eliminate parallel surfaces and thus internal standing waves. In this instance, the baffles are over 115mm thick, which combined with a five-foot high frame, near 15" width and 17" depth (although it's actually greater

because of the slope) translate into a seriously massive body, helping to explain the 100kg weight for each cabinet. The carefully arranged facets are self-evident and help reduce diffraction effects from the front baffles, while the complex shapes that result ensure that the beautiful veneers are selected and superbly applied by hand. The thick, black base that visually couples the speaker to the floor also acts as a channel for the twin, downward

firing ports, allowing an easier egress towards the rear for their considerable output. Once inside the cabinet, if you could get there, you'd find the familiar multiple braces and the exhaustively selected crossover components that grace Avalon's other products.

So far so good and exactly what you'd expect – just larger, a difference whose importance (and challenges) it's easy to underestimate. Other changes are likewise, more important than they seem. The three viciously sharp cones supplied for each cabinet now thread on beautifully engineered studs, while large spanner flats make levelling the speakers an astonishingly accurate and simple (and vital!) process. The separate "head" is indeed physically isolated (although it's permanently fixed to the main cabinet) making this a four-box, stacked system, rather like the Pegasus in concept. The two cabinet elements are spaced by a slab of "carefully selected polymer material" (that's Corian to you and me) that mimics the U-shape and rear aperture of the speaker's base. ▶



► Squint through the gap and sure enough, buried in the recess is a small, downward firing reflex port that loads the mid-range driver. The polymer slab serves to damp the mechanical interface between the two cabinets, reducing intermodulation distortion of the mid and treble by spurious energy generated by the huge bass forces produced in such a speaker. Physically, it also allows the shift in baffle angle that allows corrected axes for the tweeter and mid driver – as well as creating that chest to face transition that helps to make the speaker seem oddly human in form.

Remove the grilles and once again it's a story of the familiar writ large. Avalon's own, in-house modified version of the 7" ceramic mid-range is flanked



by a diamond tweeter and a pair of Nomex-Kevlar coned bass units. But, when compared to the Eidolon Diamond, the 25mm high-frequency driver is some 25% larger, while the bass drivers are the bigger, 13" units employed in the Sentinel. Add all this lot together with the changes to the cabinet and you get a significant increase in both internal volume and swept area when compared to a system like the Eidolon. Somewhat surprisingly, the figures that go alongside these dimensions are far from extravagant. Bandwidth is stated as 20Hz to 45kHz \pm 3dB, while efficiency is 90dB with a 4 Ohm load, but once again, there's more to these numbers than meets the eye.

There are other, less obvious factors that contribute significantly to the speakers' performance. Avalon have developed proprietary, purpose designed motor assemblies employing Neodymium magnets for all the drivers. Likewise, all diaphragms are concave and are contained in vented enclosures. This consistency across the audio range, especially as regards the magnetic material, is a critical component in the speakers' seamless sense of integration. Once again, in the Isis Avalon have produced a speaker that doesn't wear its value on its sleeve. If you are shopping with your eyes then you'll need to look below the surface to discern their significant investment in materials and technology. But, shop with your ears, and the benefits will be immediately apparent. I hesitate to use the words "Avalon" and "obvious" in the same sentence, but as the opening preamble makes clear, there's something so

Set up and ancillaries...

Any speaker system approaching the quality of the Isis will place demands on the driving electronics and source components. However, where in some cases their super-critical nature rips the partnering amps to pieces, ruthlessly exposing their musical weaknesses and reservoir capacitance with equal disdain, the Avalons do not fit that mould. Maybe it's a reflection on the generally optimistic claims made for the sensitivity of speakers, but their 90dB sensitivity seems pretty conservative, which combined with their flattish 4 Ohm load makes the manufacturer's lower power limit of 75 Watts unusually realistic. In this instance it's the quality and nature of the amps that matters, a very good thing given the difficulty of combining quality and serious quantity in a single chassis. So, whilst the mighty Karan KAM 1200s (2kW into the Avalons' 4 Ohm load!) delivered an undeniably majestic sense of scale and awesome dynamic potential, the agile and tactile 100 Watts delivered by the Hovland RADIA were also astonishingly effective. Oddly enough, the valve amplifiers I tried were less impressive: I'm not saying you won't get valves to work with the Isis, but I'd certainly approach the combination with care (and definitely different cables).

Pre-amplifiers employed were the Lyra Connoisseur 4-2L SE with the RADIA and the Tom Evans Vibe, with the latest (and dramatically superior) Pulse 2 power supply. Front-ends were the Kuzma Stabi XL/Airline and VPI TNT6/JMW 12.5 Signature turntables, with Koetsu Blue Onyx, Lyra Titan i, vdH Condor and Mysonic cartridges, all played through the Groove Plus phono-stage. Silver discs spun in the Wadia 861SE with racks and supports from finite elemente and Stillpoints, signal and power cabling from Nordost, the Valhalla speaker cables shot-gunned to the Avalons' single terminals.

One word of warning; although the Isis aren't unmanageable heavy, their shape certainly makes them awkward to handle, especially as you are advised against holding them by the top cabinet. A little thought devoted to their installation before they arrive will definitely pay dividends. Once in the listening room, basic positioning of the speakers was surprisingly straight-

forward. The very nature of their bass, naturally weighted, with excellent speed, air and a convincing harmonic complexity and texture, means that it's very obviously either right or wrong. With the speakers placed at the standard width in my room (a surprisingly constant factor) I simply moved them forward until the bass locked in; too far back and it was heavy and sluggish, too far forward and it lacked weight. In the absence of carpets I found that a little damping beneath the bass ports paid dividends. Having tried various serviettes I finally settled on thin cork mats, which removed the hint of chestiness from voices experienced with the fabric option, while still ameliorating the thinness and slight bass hump delivered au naturelle. That's the beauty of the Isis; at each and every stage of set up, they let you hear exactly what's going on, any deviation from "right" being perfectly apparent.

Thereafter, with tape providing reference axes, a significant period of subtle refinement, a square dance involving lateral or front to back shifts of a few mms at a time and even smaller adjustments to toe-in, realized incremental improvements until I suddenly hit the sweet spot and the soundstage and dynamics locked together. If that sounds weird, just believe me when I say that you'll know it when you hear it. Instead of music and images, the energy within the notes feels like it's coming from within the images – rather than from their general vicinity. It makes you realise how vague and insubstantial the soundstage generated by most speakers really is.

In my room, nirvana was situated with the left hand speaker 2cms to the left and 5mm forward, the right hand one 5mm to the right. That's the order of change we're talking about here. However, it's certainly a process that any experienced listener should be comfortable with, especially once the goal is appreciated. Fortunately, I was aided by the use of finite elemente's deeply dimpled discs between the speakers' spikes and my wooden floor, an arrangement that allowed tiny, repeatable adjustments with ease. The final piece of the jigsaw arrived with precise levelling of the speakers, which introduced additional focus, dimensionality and presence to the soundstage, generating an even more emphatic and convincing musical delivery.



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▶ obviously unusual and right about the way these speakers sound that you'd have to be wantonly obtuse to miss it.

Ironically, in some respects Avalon speakers have suffered from their greatest strength also being their greatest weakness. Their resolute refusal to add anything to the signal they receive has produced speaker systems of astonishingly low distortion and genuinely low colouration. So much so that they generally leave less of a thumbprint on the music than the driving electronics – an amazing achievement for a transducer but one that's not always appreciated in the marketplace. This almost Protestant adherence to sonic virtue and silent cabinets has led to the speakers being smaller than the competition, with less character – and its character (and perceived value) that customers cling on to.

Let's digress for a moment and examine the way in which those competing products operate. Generally speaking, they might be described as having more scale and weight, "better" bass and more impact – but how is this effect achieved? Hi-fi exists in a physical world and you can't get nothin' for nothin' with physics. Any speaker system can be defined by the balance it strikes between the conflicting and interlocking requirements of bandwidth, internal volume (more generally perceived as external dimensions) and efficiency. Therefore, if a speaker is of a certain size and sensitivity, these should define its bandwidth – at least assuming that the manufacturer isn't exaggerating or "enhancing" the figures. Thus, for many speaker designers their art consists of tricking the ear into believing that there's more coming out of the box than there really is, creating a sense of bass power and impact where it doesn't actually exist. This "voicing" of speakers essentially consists of adding (hopefully) judicious quantities of spurious energy from the cabinet to flesh out the lower registers, adding that sense of increased

Lowering the cost of living...

One of the most interesting things about the Isis is the way in which it rewrites the cost/quality curve when it comes to building a system. Linn's "front end first" philosophy was born out of a mixture of self-interest and technological necessity. Record players are a mechanical engineering problem and by their nature are expensive to get right. Speakers with crippling severe impedance curves and low efficiency demand amps with big power supplies – and the components in those don't come cheap. But it would be wrong to apply this logic to every system, or to equate quality with price – especially when it comes to different types of product. Just look at the cost breakdown in a horn based

system to see what I mean. But the Isis undermines this in an even more fundamental way. It not only offers a more than reasonable load to the driving amplifier, it does its own job better than almost all other speakers too. Instead of having to control the speaker, bending its output back into some kind of shape, all the amp has to do now is pass the signal, allowing its owner to concentrate on its quality rather than its power delivery. The same applies (to a lesser extent) further up the system. Suddenly, the speaker has become a facilitator, making the system's job easier rather than acting as a choke on performance. The Isis might be expensive, but at least it lightens the load on the rest of your equipment, and its load on your wallet.

body and weight. The problem is that the extra energy won't track the phase and harmonic relationships within the music, which means that it distorts the reality of the performance. Of course, no speaker is devoid of extraneous energy and this is as much about controlling and directing it as anything else. If you think adding controlled energy to the sound is bad, just listen to a few of those speakers where it isn't controlled (pretty much any sub £300 floorstander will do).

Of course, if you want to talk about the subtle manipulation of reality, then you need some kind of recognisable reference for comparison. That generally means a familiar voice or acoustic instrument, which in turn means that such manipulation is more obvious or troublesome with some kinds of music than others. Now consider what that means in the light of Avalon's zero tolerance approach and lighter, more accurate bass output. Not surprisingly their speakers have garnered an excellent reputation for their integration, imaging and acoustic precision – which translates as "good on classical" in the less than Darwinian world of hi-fi retail. You can see how a strength can also

become a weakness... I'm afraid that if you want real, high quality bass extension (which precludes sonic sleight of hand) then you're looking at large drivers and even larger cabinets.

Which brings us neatly and far from coincidentally, back to the Isis. Just imagine a speaker system that combines Avalon's traditional strengths with the electro-mechanical horsepower to generate realistic bass weight and power. Now dream about the possibility of it having sufficient sensitivity and a benign enough load to be driven by real world rather than second mortgage amplification and you're beginning to get the picture. Add in a bandwidth and physical dimensions that coincide almost perfectly with the most a European listening room can realistically support, together with flawless finish and a shape that makes them seem smaller than they are and you can begin to understand why these speakers are so exciting. It's not just their sonic performance (which is, believe me, exciting enough) but the fact that you might actually be able to realise that potential. ▶



► Enough of such theoretical meanderings; it's time to talk (musical) turkey.

When discussing the Isis, it's meaningless to talk in terms of individual aspects or bands of performance. The whole point about these speakers is the holistic nature of their presentation. So, let's be clear: they go deep, they go high, they go loud – enough in each direction to satisfy. Their focus, transparency, resolution and lack of distortion are all without serious peer, their integration is utterly seamless. What that means is that in real terms they impose no limits on choice of material – and few in use. One colleague, hearing that I had a pair of Avalons at home (and assuming they'd impose a stringent classical diet) asked with a mischievous glint in his eye, what the last record I'd listened to was... Oh the pleasure in telling him, the consternation caused when it turned out to be the B52's first album – and yes, I was playing it very loud!

It's long been an article of faith that transducers have the greatest tonal impact on the sound of a system – because they have the hardest job, taking a signal in one form and converting it to another. Indeed, listen to a range of CD players and you can almost hear them struggling to take all the information and put it back together again. Yet, it never occurred to me until now, that a loudspeaker has to do exactly the same thing. In any musical performance, there's a place for everything and everything has to be in its place. The problem with speakers is that the distortions tend to be so gross, the transducer so inefficient (in energy terms) that the cracks in the mirror get smeared over with the sonic equivalent of a thick layer of Vaseline. In other words, we're struggling to see through the soft focus and whilst we're aware of the discontinuities we can't define their edges. Besides which the ear and brain are clever enough to take this fractured whole and make some sort of sense from it.

But as well as having a place, every event in a musical performance also has a time, which means that in reconstructing an acoustic soundstage, a speaker must be accurate, quite literally in both time and space. Now, I always knew that imaging was important and often argued that this was so precisely because if the image is right then other equally important things must also be right. But it wasn't until I heard the Isis that I finally joined all the dots in the argument, because until I'd heard the Isis I'd never heard a speaker that really did image right. Let me explain...

Most speakers throw out some kind of soundstage but in most cases it's a very pale imitation of reality. Let's look at a few of the more common distortions. Those speakers that are touted as delivering excellent depth; listen to the far reaches of their sound stage and you realise that more often than not you realise that the images placed there are physically smaller and quieter than they should be. Their sense of distance is a visual thing rather than an acoustic one. Which helps explain why so many of these speakers exhibit a gentle mid-bass dip. They're playing with the energy levels within the sound field. Likewise, very detailed speakers that have an etched or spotlit soundstage are manipulating the arrival time of upper frequency information. That detail that reaches the ear before it should certainly stands out, but it also appears ahead of the harmonics that should support it and flesh it out.

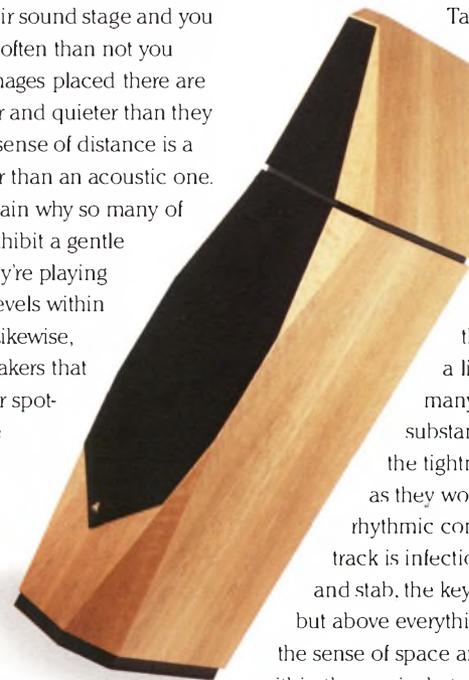
By now, it should come as no surprise to learn that the Isis is pre-eminent in my experience, when it comes to arranging musical information in space and time. What's more it does so with equal aplomb from

the bass (although not the very deepest registers) all the way to the upper reaches of audibility. Listen to these speakers and they sound both different to what you expect from a hi-fi system and far more natural. Listen longer and you'll realise that it's because the scale of the instruments and performers is totally consistent, wherever they're placed in the soundstage. And I'm not just talking about acoustic, audiophile pressings either. Let's revisit the *B52s*.

Playing 'Dance This Mess Around' (which has to be about as un-Avalon as a track can get) there's real drive to the solid insistence of the drumming, the easy separation of the kick drum and bass as they push the music along. Kate Pierson's vocals are at exactly the right height, Fred Schneider unmistakably behind her on the left.

Taped at Compass Point with Chris Blackwell at the controls this is no audiophile recording. The drum booth crowds the lead singer, the kit spread just a little wide by its many mics, but the substance and energy, the tightness of the band as they work through the rhythmic convolutions of the track is infectious. Guitars jar and stab, the keyboard grumbles, but above everything there's the sense of space and tension within the music, between the musicians. Dance? Play this track through the Isis and it almost physically lifts from your seat.

A step further? How about *Fillows And Prayers*, 99 pence worth of LP sampler from Cherry Red, and as righteous a record as ever was. But with 17 tracks crammed onto its two sides, what price fidelity. Well, just try



► Everything But The Girl's 'On My Mind'. There's Tracy, all winsome and right in front of you, with Ben Watt well back on her left. It's a device demanded by the song, her lyric, his distant echo and it works beautifully. So much so in fact, that you can hear quite clearly, both in terms of scale and the way that he's projecting his voice, that this is no studio artifice; he's back there and this is a single take. It's the ability to preserve these cues, to conjure both the sense and the fact of the original performance that makes the Isis so special. Play something stellar like Janis Ian's 'Some People's Lives' and the effect is quite breathtaking, both for its musical realism and the directness of its communication.

The other thing you'll quickly realise is that on smaller ensembles, rock bands and the like, images are astonishingly natural in size and scale. This is due in no small part to the physical size of the speakers, which are after all, near man-sized themselves. But it's a fact that holds good to the back of the stage, such is this speaker's ability to delineate, direct and deliver musical energy. Suddenly, you realise just how emasculated upright bass sounds on most systems just because it's almost always positioned to the rear of the group. The Isis rehabilitates both it and its contribution, the playing clearer, the tone far more complex, the groove coming alive.

Translate that to orchestra and although the images shrink in size, they maintain their consistency and perspective. Concerto recordings no

longer leave the soloist sounding so exposed and over-miced, the orchestra, the life and energy in its contributions, restoring the proper balance. Even something as familiar as the Starker Dvorak Cello on Mercury holds new surprises. Not only is the soloist positioned properly on the same stage as the orchestra, and much more to scale, the orchestra is physically larger, laid out flatter and in distinctly serried ranks. The double-basses have real power and weight, a rasp to their bowing to balance the slashing brilliance of the violins. Likewise the Du Pre Elgar, the Heifetz Tchaikovsky and a host of other records about which I thought there was little more to learn. And that's really the point. It's not about how deep these speakers go, or the wonderful bass textures they float so effortlessly. It's not about the lack of glare or edge in the treble, the supremely natural midrange tonality or the effortless dynamic range. Indeed, you can get speakers (although not many) that do go deeper and throw an even more palpable acoustic space as a result. You can destroy the fragile wonder of their performance if you ask too much of the partnering amp (a point I reached once or twice with the RADIA but never with the Karans). You'll find that this is a speaker that reveals (but doesn't rub your nose in) the acoustic irregularities of your listening environment. These are all factors you need to consider. But what you won't find is a speaker that makes more sense of the music on your discs. This is a speaker that makes you dance

to Basement Jaxx and cry at the end of *La Traviata*, strut with Jagger and conduct the LSO. It delivers you into the heart and soul, meaning and emotion of a performance. It gives you the music...

It's been a long journey, via the Eidolon Diamond, the Nola Pegasus and the Wilson Duette, all speakers that have taught me about aspects of musical coherence and low distortion. But those threads have been bound positively, emphatically together in the Isis. Avalon speakers have long added little of themselves to the musical event, but now finally, Neil Patel has produced a speaker that encompasses the scale, the pattern and the energy of that event – as well as the complexity and nature of that energy. It is the most musically complete speaker I've heard.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way reflex loaded loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm inverted diamond dome tweeter 1x 178mm ceramic bowl midrange 2x 330mm Nomex/Kevlar bass units
Sensitivity:	90dB
Bandwidth:	20Hz – 45kHz
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Power Requirements:	75 – 750 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	38 x 153 x 56cm (actual)
Weight:	100kg ea.
Standard Finishes:	Quilted cherry, curly maple, figured walnut
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SWEDEN DISTRIBUTOR: AUDIONORD AB www.audionord.se

Please check the LYRA web-sites for distributors in other countries

LYRA
Connoisseur

Santa's Goody Bag...

With dark nights drawing in and Christmas looming, what better time is there to give your listening experience a lift. Gathered here is a host of accessories that the magazine's reviewers have found particularly useful, impressive or in some cases absolutely indispensable. They range from set-up aids to a pair of Stax electrostatic 'phones (only for those who've been very, very good), from a few pounds to several hundred. But all of them, without exception

will help you, one way or another, to extract better sound from your system and more enjoyment from your discs. There are things for turntables and things for speakers and things for everything in between. So whether you are the perennial problem to buy presents for or you just feel like rewarding yourself, you should find something here to suit your system and your wallet. Besides, it'll keep you out of trouble on Boxing Day ...

EAT Cool Dampers

Euro Audio Team's Cool Dampers look just like heat sinks – because that's what they are. Finned, cylindrical extrusions anodized a variety of different colours they are intended to be slipped over any of the various nine-pin dual triodes typically used in low-level signal applications like line-stages and the driver and phase-splitter stages of power amps. But that's only half the story. A clever arrangement inside allows a series of Teflon lips to press against the glass envelope of the tube. Different slots for the silicon strips accommodate different diameter valves. Believe me, it's a lot easier in practice than it is to describe. More importantly, the end result is mechanical damping of the glass combined with the creation of an incredibly efficient cooling chimney.



Expect cleaner, crisper sound, more focus and detail and better dynamic range and definition. Expect longer valve life too, making this a win-win scenario. So much so that EAT have gone to the lengths of creating a special, high-quality ECC83 equivalent permanently built into one of their coolers. That will set you back around £60 a throw, but the basic Cool Dampers cost 15 very well spent pounds each. RG

Price: £15 ea.

Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Big Bubble Turntable Covers

With an increasing number of turntables arriving without any kind of cover (and an ever increasing number involving large slabs of acrylic) your average record player's dual capability to act as a dust trap and thus a major source of domestic discord is definitely on the up. Given the cost of the average MC cartridge these days the wish to keep those viciously flicking dusters at bay is understandable, and here at last is a solution. Big Bubble offer simple, attractive, lift-off acrylic covers that won't affect the sound of your beloved, whilst still allowing you to ogle her when she's not in use. They also keep dust off, which hopefully will affect the sound of your (other) beloved... Available in pretty much any size you want and with cutouts to allow cables to exit, they are also surprisingly affordable. Treat yourself and reduce residual noise levels when you are listening – as well as when you're not!

Prices: From £185 to £225

Moth Marketing
Tel. (44)(0)1234 741152
Net. www.britishaudio.co.uk

ERS, the magic cloth...er, paper for EMI, RFI and other airborne invisible audio nasties

I think it's a paper but it has a feel like cloth. At nearly \$20 per slice, it's not cheap but if you think carefully about how you might use it, this could turn out to be the audio miracle and sonic breakthrough you've been looking for... and that makes it a bargain!



EMI/RFI interference can be extremely troubling. I should know because I live in a high rise apartment in a major city with cell phone towers, radio transmission towers as well as television towers. This combination can spell big trouble for the audiophile. I've been using the ERS papers for about two-years and you'd have to pry them out of my system with a crowbar! I've spent quite a bit of time placing ERS above and

below components until I've come to a place I'm really happy with. ERS is a blend of carbon fibers of various lengths woven with a metallic type coating. You can wrap it around power cords, place it on power supplies, transformers, components, etc. (The sheets can easily be cut). You should see what happens to the picture on your television when you're watching a DVD and place ERS on

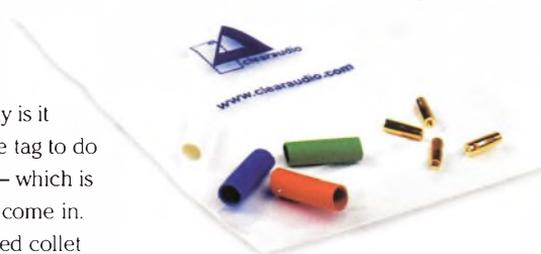
top of the disc player! Like many such things the key to using ERS is not over-using it, a fact which helps keep the cost down. But get it right after a little simple experimentation and the results can be fantastic. RSF

Prices: \$15/sheet (normal)
\$20/sheet (self-adhesive)

hififorsale.com
Tel. (44)(0)870 2412469
Net. www.hififorsale.com
<http://www.stillpoints.us>

Clearaudio Cartridge Tags

Nothing brings a record player to a more resounding and frustrating halt than a broken cartridge tag. Not only is it fiddly to fix, you need a spare tag to do it, as nothing else is suitable – which is where these Clearaudio tags come in. Using the company's four-sided collet design they clamp all sizes of cartridge pins without fuss or bother. They're also about half the length of the originals, making them easier to handle and lighter, as well as reducing



the amount of metal involved. The solder bucket is also a sensible size and correctly colour coded heatshrink is supplied. When replacing tags, whether

they've failed due to wear and tear or (if it's a Rega tonearm) cracked along their folds, it's worth swapping them all in order to keep things symmetrical. In fact, if you've got a Rega I'd swap them now, to avoid problems in the future. Cartridge tags are an essential spare for any vinyl user's toolbox, and these are the best I've found. RG

Price: \$15
Audio Reference
Tel. (44)(0)1252 702705
Net. www.clearaudio.de

Clearaudio Diamond Cleaner and Brush

You need a stylus cleaner and these do the job: simple as that really. Extremely low alcohol content means no problems with stylus adhesives or transfer to record surfaces, while Clearaudio's solution is both cost effective and readily available. More must haves for vinyl lovers. RG

Prices:
Cleaner \$12
Brush \$7



Audio Reference
Tel. (44)(0)1252 702705
Net. www.clearaudio.de

Bondhus Ball-Ended Allen Keys

Allen keys may not be sexy – after all the world is awash with cheap and nasty examples – but having paid a lot of money for your pride and joy, the last thing you want to do is round off its fastenings by using an allen key that's the wrong size or poorly tolerated. This is especially true if you've indulged in an expensive US import, whose allen bolts are a near fit for your metric allen keys but not quite. That way lies ruin. Do yourself a gigantic favour and get the right tools for the job, which means a set of really high quality, metric allen keys, (Imperial sizes too, if you are going to need them) preferably ball-ended so that you can access those hard to reach fixings. The Bondhus keys are the best I've ever used; my metric set dates back more than 20-years and includes periods of extremely heavy,



non hi-fi usage. Yet its edges are still crisp, all keys present and correct, partly because of the (now much imitated) plastic block holder which makes a missing key immediately apparent. So, next time you want to adjust your tonearm, tighten your driver bolts or change your tubes or internal fuses, make sure you have the right tools to hand.

It doesn't just make sense, there's even the bonus of the vicarious self-satisfaction that goes with being properly equipped. RG

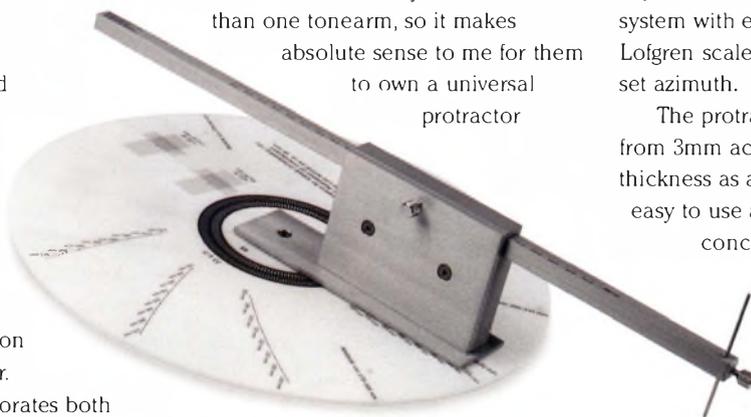
Price: c£25
From all good hardware stores.

Dr. Feickert Analogue Tonearm Protractor

Okay, let's get this said early; I consider this a must-own tool for anyone who cares about proper tonearm setup and cartridge geometry. This beautifully manufactured precision device, the work of Dr. Chris Feickert, incorporates both Baerwald and Lofgren geometries, the two principle approaches to cartridge alignment – one on each side. It's also a universal device, handling arms of 200 to 440mm effective length! It even includes a strobe pattern, 50Hz for Europe, 60Hz on the US version.

Many vinyl audiophiles will, over

the life of their hobby, have more than one tonearm, so it makes absolute sense to me for them to own a universal protractor



(as well as one which is exceptionally accurate) as opposed to purchasing a protractor/setup jig for one particular tonearm. The Feickert comes with a well-illustrated and very detailed instruction manual that guides you through the use of the template, alignment protractor and even

explains the logic to setting up your system with either the Baerwald or Lofgren scales. It's also a breeze to set azimuth.

The protractor template is made from 3mm acrylic, about the same thickness as a 180 gram record. It's easy to use and as far as I'm concerned, simply the best.

It is an essential tool for your vinyl toolbox and with proper care, will last a lifetime. Highly recommended. RSF

Prices:

Europe – 180 Euros (including shipping)
Order from: www.feickert.de

USA - \$250
Order from: www.acousticsounds.com



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ATLANTIS ACOUSTIQUE Esterel Loudspeakers (£3,500)	Mint, boxed	£2495
AUDIO NOTE M2 RIAA Phono Stage	Mint	£1495
AUDIO RESEARCH D130 Power Amplifier	Superb, boxed	£895
AUDIOSTATIC DCI Wing Loudspeakers in black	Mint, boxed	£2795
BENZ MICRO Ruby Wood Cartridge - Very, very few hours	Mint, boxed	£1295
BOW Wozoo XL Integrated Amplifier (£3,000)	Mint, boxed	£1795
B&W DM603 Mk2 (Black)	Superb, collection only	£ 325
CARDAS Quad-Link Loudspeaker Cables, bi-wire, spades 12ft +	Superb	£795
CLEARAUDIO Insider Cartridge - Very few hours	Mint, boxed	£2595
CLEARAUDIO Insider Reference Cartridge - Very few hours	Mint, boxed	£3495
CONSONANCE Ref 1.0 Tuner (£895)	Ex-dem, boxed	£595
CONSONANCE Ref 1.1 Valve Pre-amp (£2,495)	Ex-dem, boxed	£1595
CONSONANCE Ref 2.2 Valve output CD Player	Ex-dem, boxed	£995
EAR "The Head" MC Transformer	Excellent	£349
LINN SONDEK LP12 (Trampolin) - new Origin Live Ultra DC motor,	Mint + New	£1095
HORNING Zeus High Sensitivity Speakers (£2,000)	Ex-dem, mint, boxed	£1295
MICHELL Orbe with SME V	Superb	£2695
MUSIC FIRST MF1 Passive Pre-amp (Ex-dem)	Mint, boxed	£1195
ORTOFON MCA-76 Moving Coil Phono Transformer (2 gain levels)	Superb	£ 95
REFERENCE 3a Dulcet (£1,595)	Ex-dem, mint, boxed	£1095
SME Series IV Tonearm	Ex-dem, mint, boxed	£895
SUMO Gold Valve Pre & 300B monoblocks	Superb	£2695
TALON Raven Loudspeakers. Black glass finish (£7000)	Mint, boxed	£2995
TOWNSHEND Isolda Speaker Cable (5mtrs)	Mint, boxed	£ 495
ZUI Druid Mk IV Loudspeakers. Black (£2,395)	Ex-dem, mint, boxed	£1795



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all situations and are especially useful between speakers and bare wood floors. The larger CeraBases might seem costly until you experience their effects,

especially under equipment racks (only those with very deep pockets will consider

their application under individual components). Beautifully presented, both the Pucs and Bases also improve the appearance of equipment, making them a win-win solution. RG

Prices: From £70 for 4 CeraBalls

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

Chord Co. Signature Bi-wiring Links

Anybody still using the supplied metal plates to bridge their bi-wirable crossover terminals is killing the sound of their system. Simply replacing the stamped metal monstrosities with decent links will effect an immediate and pretty dramatic improvement, and links don't come much better



or neater than these ones from the Chord Co. Constructed from the same conductors as their Signature speaker cable, the 10cm links have a spade at one end and a 4mm plug at the other to

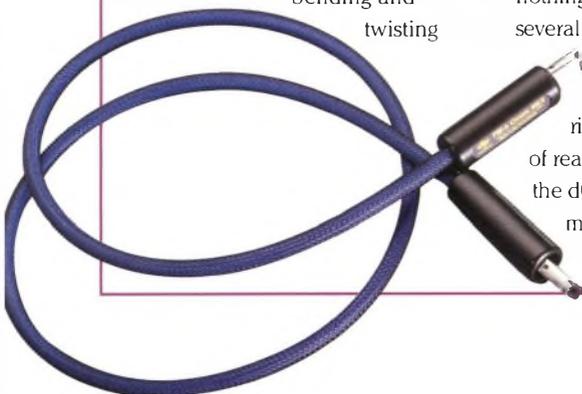
facilitate installation (although any combination of terminations is available to order). Installing them in an existing system is great, but an even better option is to use them in conjunction with a speaker cable upgrade, meaning that you can single-wire with a much better cable – definitely the preferred option. RG

Price: £49

The Chord Co.
Tel. (44)(0)1980 625700
Net. www.chord.co.uk

Siltech Classic Mk2 FireWire cable

According to the Siltech website, "The Classic Mk2 FireWire cable uses Dual Balanced Micro Technology in a precision matched construction and therefore does not suffer from impedance irregularities due to bending and twisting



of the cable. Furthermore it features ultra high purity PTFE insulation with a special noise blocking carbon layer to make it immune to outside interference."

While this might "sound" impressive, my experience with this one-meter cable, used between the dCS Encore transport and Elgar + DAC, has been nothing short of astonishing. After several ~lesser~ quality products I hit upon the Siltech and suddenly everything simply seemed right. This wire embodies a sense of realism and tonal accuracy enabling the dCS boxes to perform at their best, making the most of their ultra resolution without ever tipping

over to the analytical. This IEEE 1394 (Fire Wire is a trademark of Apple Computers) really lets them shine. I have found this one cable to be a critical component and indispensable when it comes to the enjoyment I derive from SACD playback. The cost of the wire is moderate in comparison to the return in terms of harmonic integrity it delivers. RSF

Price: £333 for 1m.

R.T. Services
Tel. (44)(0)123 5810455
Net. www.rtsaudio.co.uk
www.siltech.net

Our Motives are clear



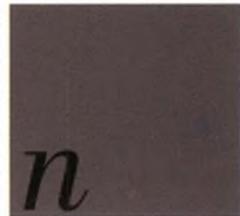
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STEREO TIMES



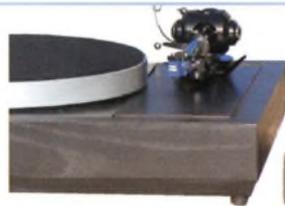
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E-mail: info@originlive.com

www.originlive.com

The Vertex AQ Kinibalu Platforms

The Vertex platforms concentrate on removing spurious energy from within your equipment and are shockingly effective in this regard. Just read AS's response to their effect on the system he reviewed in this issue. Available in Standard, Super and High Resolution guises, with standard or tall couplers, performance improves commensurate with price, but perhaps the best value is offered by the Super Kinibalu platform used with the new High Resolution coupler set.

Upgrades like this are amongst the



most cost effective you can make, simply because they maximize the performance of the system you already own, as well as embracing any future upgrades. Also available with black surrounds, the Vertex platforms should

be top of any serious audiophile's set-up wish list. RG

Prices from:
Platforms £149.50
Couplers £195.50

Vertex AQ
Tel. (44)(0)1597 825993
Net. www.vertexaq.com

Clearaudio Spirit Level

Hi-fi sounds better when it's level – and not just turntables and CD players. Of course, a precision, long-line level (not some bright yellow plastic monstrosity from your local DIY store) is the perfect tool but you'll still need a smaller, lighter and less intrusive device for those hard to reach corners or suspended



products. Whilst not the lightest, Clearaudio's circular level is precisely machined (many cheap ones aren't) and its large bubble is easy to read, both of which features ensure that an accurate result is achieved. RG

Price: £23

Audio Reference
Tel. (44)(0)1252 702705
Net. www.clearaudio.de



The Stillpoints Isolation System

Starting with apparently simple cones, Stillpoints offer

a sophisticated equipment damping and isolation system that can be built through support stands and racks into a total system solution. Simple on the outside, each component contains considerable engineering and materials investment, including the extensive use of

expensive ceramic bearings. However, once heard their effect is hard to credit. It's also cumulative, with each additional layer of Stillpoints isolation building on and extending the considerable musical merits. I now consider these products an essential part of system set-up, a key element in relising the performance in the equipment you've already paid for! RG

Prices: From £225/3 Stillpoints cones

Lyngdorf Audio (UK)
Tel. (44)(0)8790 9100100
Net. www.lyngdorfaudio.co.uk

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dsteven@dcsLtd.co.uk

USA: VTL Amplifiers

Tel: 909-627-5944
www.VTL.com

Hi-Fi Tuning Fuses

Gold plated fuses? You've got to be kidding, right?

Well, no actually. These Audio Tuning fuses employ silver fuse wire and gold plated caps. They're available in various sizes and values and are supposedly directional, although I can't reliably detect a difference. What I can detect, all too easily in the system at home, is their effect on the sound as a whole: less grain, blacker background and more natural colours. At £20 a throw you'll need a few to treat an entire system but so far, every piece



of equipment I've tried them on has benefited. Around a £100 to equip a whole system is not unreasonable given the sonic improvement you'll experience. Just don't go here unless your system is already well tuned and not in the habit of blowing fuses. Otherwise it could be a frustrating and expensive disappointment. But as the final touch to a sorted set-up, the Audio tuning fuses are an excellent choice. RG

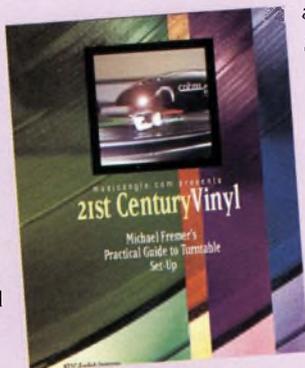
Price: £20 ea.

hififorsale.com
Tel. (44)(0)870 2412469
Net. www.hififorsale.com

21st Century Vinyl: Michael Fremer's Practical Guide to Turntable Set-up

Michael Fremer, for those who may not (?) know, is a Senior Contributing Editor for Stereophile Magazine where, amongst other writing, he authors a monthly column entitled the 'Analog Corner'. Michael is an industry cheerleader with a positive and devoted outlook on all things vinyl. He also operates a website <http://www.musicangle.com> where you will find interesting information about records, interviews with noted personalities, record reviews and much more. With his interest in analog and a background that includes work in the film industry, he was a natural to produce a DVD devoted to bringing the 'art and science of turntable set-up' to the masses.

Many audiophiles count on their dealers (and so they should) to help them set-up a turntable, tonearm and cartridge. On this three-hour plus disc,



Fremer shows you in great detail, how to set up the Pro-Ject RM-5 (RPM-5), a Rega P5 and a VPI Scoutmaster. There are many excellent tips for the beginner and I believe this DVD should be given free by all dealers to turntables newbies! Fremer carefully shows you how to set-up almost any cartridge on a variety of arms and walks you through the geometry of the cartridge-tonearm-turntable interface. There is a wealth of material here, including some 'easter eggs' and other surprises. I highly recommend this DVD to anyone looking to banish the analog heebie-jeebies and dissolve the mystique of turntable set-up. Currently available only in NTSC format, there will be a PAL version available soon. RSF

Price: £30.00

Moth Marketing
Tel. (44)(0)1234 741152
Net. www.britishaudio.co.uk

The Sophia Electric S.E.T. Princess 300B Mesh Plate Tube

I've embarked on a lengthy project investigating a variety of 300B tubes for my Manleys and other amps. This Sophia Electric 300B Mesh Plate has emerged as a very special tube indeed. It offers not only a one year warranty, but a surprisingly affordable price for an audiophile 300B, at \$450 for a matched pair! That's rather less than half the price of most of the serious competition! I know the standard that everyone measures 300Bs by and I'm here to tell you (hear to tell you?) that these Sophia's can stand with the best of them, Western Electrics and all.

These tubes have been designed by Sophia and are hand matched, tested and selected especially for them. The very first thing I noticed was their stability in holding a bias setting – they don't drift. With

less than five-hours on the tubes when I first set them I checked every other day and for the better part of six-weeks I never had to adjust the bias settings on the amps. That's almost unheard of in the Manleys. How do they sound? They have an openness, a clarity and sweetness (with no euphonic coloration) that is quite amazing. I have switched to the higher priced spread on several occasions and I've come back to the Sophia's time and time again. RSF

Price: \$450/pair

Net. www.sophiaelectric.com

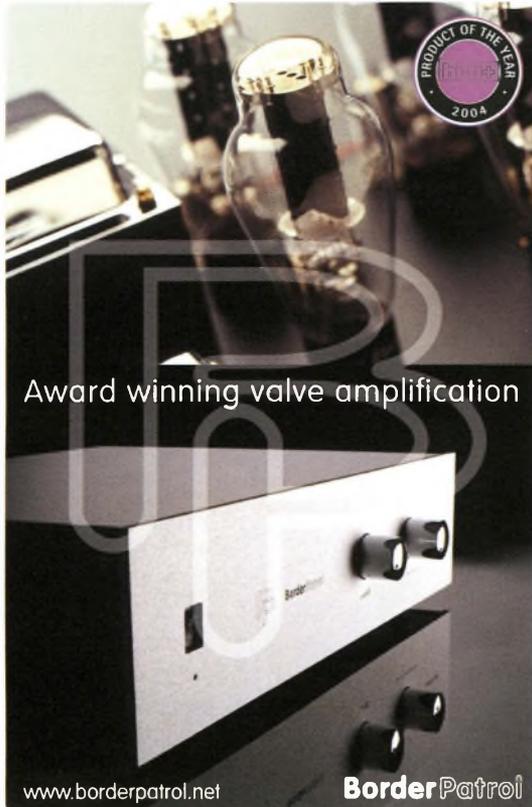


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Can Do!

Stax's standard-setting SRS2050 mkII electrostatic earspeakers

Having been knocked sideways by the performance of the Stax SRS4040 system I was keen to try the company's more affordable electrostatic offerings. At £450, this combination of the SR202 earspeaker and SRM252 II solid-state energiser are less than half the price of the valve energised SRS4040. By way of comparison I used both the more expensive Stax combination and an extremely successful moving-coil combination, the AKG K601 driven by the Creek OBH 21SE (£180 and £250 respectively). In addition the Stax headsets were mixed and matched with each other's energisers.

The SR202 headphones are very similar in construction to the SR404s, albeit in a much more attractive black plastic which transforms their looks. The 404 would benefit from a similar colour scheme. Connection is via a multiway cable that is significantly thinner than the one attached to the SR404 but both terminate in the same high voltage multi-pin connector. Other than that there is very little external difference between the two 'phones, while Stax are not saying a lot about any internal differences other than capacitance (higher in the SRS202) either.

The SRM252 II energiser runs cool (unlike the tube SRM 006t) and is housed in two boxes comprising a small off-board plastic cased power supply, and a diminutive black painted, silver fronted box which houses the energiser circuitry itself. Controls are simplicity itself with just a volume/on/off combination knob on the front panel with a single set of inputs (plus parallel outputs) on the rear.

The Sound of the SRS2050 mkII presented no any real surprises; in global terms it sounds very like the SRS4040 system in terms of timing and speed, tonal balance and transparency and its very low congestion and distortion. Indeed it manages to make even the best moving coil options sound slow, and closed in. Moving from one technology to the other rams this home, any departure from the electrostatic system leaving one with a feeling of mild claustrophobia. The freedom from distortion, the effortless sense of clarity and realism with the Stax always



impresses, opening the sort of window on the performance that only the very best hi-fi can normally approach.

However, the cheaper electrostatic system also leaves the technology's weaknesses more exposed. While transients can be incredibly fast they are also less powerful; the force and punch of a good pair of well-driven moving-coil

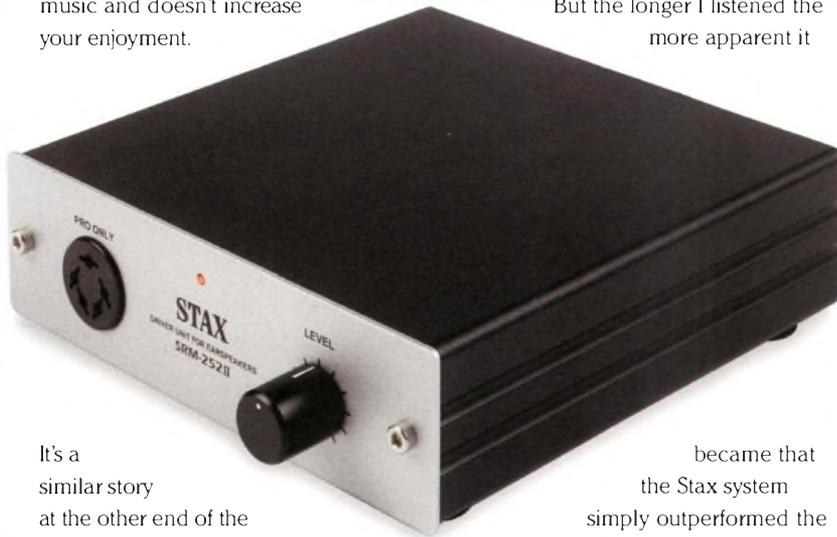
phones is beyond the Stax systems. Similarly, and I am sure partly the cause, the bass response is certainly weaker, with the 2050 incapable of the deep bass response of the K601. In general the moving-coil headphones that sound closest to the 'stats are the Grado SR325s, and they share both a tonal balance that is tilted towards the higher frequencies and the ability to present multiple strands of rhythm and timing information without imposing any forced speed or over emphasis. This even-handed clarity is what helps the Stax deliver a song with the necessary enthusiasm and propulsion, and is at least partly explained by the lack of constraint placed on micro-dynamic information.

To put these qualities in context, this Stax system did not stand quite so obviously head and shoulders above the competition. In direct comparison with the AKG K601 with the Creek amp the Stax system is all about space and revealing the tiny dynamic shifts in musical phrasing and expression while the AKG/Creek system revels in transient attack and big dynamics. Both systems reveal plenty of detail but where the Stax opens out the midrange, providing a big spacious sound the AKG reaches further into the bass with more solidity and density when the music demands it. But the longer I listened the more I valued the electrostatics' ability to portray the musical whole, the fact and the feeling, across a wider expressive range. Once you get used to a Stax system, for many of us nothing else will do.

But which Stax system? Time to mix things up.

Plugging the better SR404 headphones into the SRM252 II entry-level energiser brings immediate gains in bandwidth, producing more energy in the bass and treble while the midrange does open out and gain some clarity.

But all is not peachy however; the problem is that the SRM252 does not generate great control or information at the lower frequencies. With the better headset you just hear more but less well defined and controlled bass that provides no more insight into the music and doesn't increase your enjoyment.



It's a similar story at the other end of the spectrum with the SR404 revealing some hardness in the upper registers. Combine these bass and treble results and the musical whole suffers slightly in spite of the improved mid-band, eroding the excellent balance of the recommended Stax system. The obvious next step is to connect the SR202 to the SRM006t and again the result is less than convincing with the 'phones sounding overwhelmed by power and information at times, the music losing some of its focus and naturalness. The conclusion is simple, stick to the recommended systems because Stax really know what they are doing with their headphones and energisers at this end of the range. Mixing and matching can improve things in some areas and alter others but overall I do not believe you gain a benefit in musical communication proportionate to the increased cost. Mix the components and one or other seems to be exposed.

After my experience and ongoing satisfaction with the Stax 4040 system, listening to the entry level 2050

system was a reassuringly familiar experience; everything that the 4040 delivers but at a slightly lower performance level. Because the AKG K601 is such a good combination with the Creek amplifier I thought they would compete well against the Stax 2050 system.

But the longer I listened the more apparent it

became that the Stax system simply outperformed the dynamic alternative, sounding freer, more transparent and far more open. Although the K601 and OBH21SE go deeper with more power, they don't let you see nearly as far into or allow you to understand the performance as a whole. It's this easy access and the resultant lack of fatigue that makes the Stax so impressive. For me the SRS2050 proves that once you reach the price level of the electrostatic option it becomes the one to beat. These headphones are not perfect by any means; the SRS4040 outperformed them and easily justified the price difference. But in isolation they are totally satisfying, marking the entry to truly high-end headphone performance. At less than half the price of the SRS4040 that makes them both more accessible and a total bargain. JH

Price: £450

UK Distributor:
Symmetry
Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488
Net. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Walker Audio Extreme SST Contact Enhancer

Once you've cleaned the contacts in your system, why not take things a stage further with Walker Audio's Extreme SST Contact Enhancer. Best described as a silver gloop that's applied sparingly to the contact surfaces, it helps prevent oxidation and improves conductivity at the same time. Can you hear it? You'd better believe it. Just don't over-do the application. This is definitely a case of less is more. At £120 for a tiny pot it makes Chanel cosmetics seem bargain basement in comparison, but used properly this small amount should last for years, so value isn't as bad as it appears. Certainly, the sonic benefits are more than worthwhile. For those wishing to dip their toes into slightly more affordable water, the standard SST version is half the price.



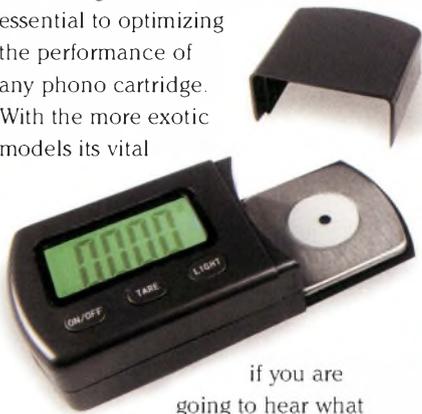
The difference? Only God and Lloyd Walker know, but yes, you can hear it. RG

Walker Audio SST Contact Enhancer: £60
Walker Audio Extreme SST Contact Enhancer: £120

hififorsale.com
Tel. (44)(0)870 2412469
Net. www.hififorsale.com

Clearaudio Weightwatcher and Origin Live Electronic Stylus Gauges

Accurate, repeatable measurement of tracking force is an essential to optimizing the performance of any phono cartridge. With the more exotic models its vital



if you are going to hear what they're capable of. That

means investing in an electronic stylus gauge.

Once the exclusive preserve of dealers and the well-healed audio enthusiast with everything,

electronic gauges were exotic and seriously expensive. Now, all that has changed. First the Clearaudio approached the £100 barrier, and then the Origin Live shattered it – and they are both just as accurate as their more expensive ancestors.



Performance-wise there's nothing to choose between them however, the Origin Live is smaller and cheaper but runs on watch batteries (there's a spare included).

The Clearaudio uses good old AAAs meaning that spares are never far away, which for me gives it the edge. Those unlikely to be setting up turntables at midnight in far off hotel rooms might choose to save the difference and spend it on a record or two. Either one of these balances will perform faultlessly – you pays your money and takes your choice. RG

Clearaudio Weightwatcher
Price: £115

Audio Reference
Tel. (44)(0)1252 702705
Net. www.clearaudio.de

Origin Live Stylus Balance
Price: £55

Origin Live
Tel. (44)(0)2380 578877
Net. www.originlive.com

Symposium Platforms and Roller Blocks

The Symposium platforms and Roller block couplers work in much the same way as the Vertex and Stillpoints supports, but with one interesting wrinkle; they are particularly effective and simple to use under speakers. The Roller Block Jrs are threaded to accept studs enabling them to be used in place of speaker spikes. They're a straight swap for the spikes on the Nola Pegasus, but adaptors are also available to the common metric sizes. The Svelte platforms are available in a range of sizes as well as to special order if necessary,



providing broad-band coupling to the floor as well as protecting carpets and bare boards. Once you get used to the fact that even the largest, heaviest speakers can



move alarmingly freely in the horizontal plane, you realize that they're actually extremely stable. They also go deeper, are cleaner and far more agile in the bass – so much so that you'll likely need to pull them an inch or

so forward from their customary position. The bass improvements simply open out the mid-band, bringing the music vividly to life, making the Symposiums a sonic as well as a practical success. RG

Prices: Platforms from £265/pr.
Rollerblock Jrs from £240/four

Musicology
Tel. (44)(0)1273 700759
Net. www.musicology.co.uk

KAB Speed Strobe

Setting correct speed for any pitch adjustable record player is clearly critical to accurate reproduction. The KAB Speed Strobe employs the all-important, handheld,

discrete values between 70 and 90 RPM, vital if you want to play 78s (often recorded at speeds anywhere between those two limits) with correct pitch. In the same way that the Feikert protractor is genuinely universal,



so too is the KAB strobe disc, making it a solid investment for the future. RG

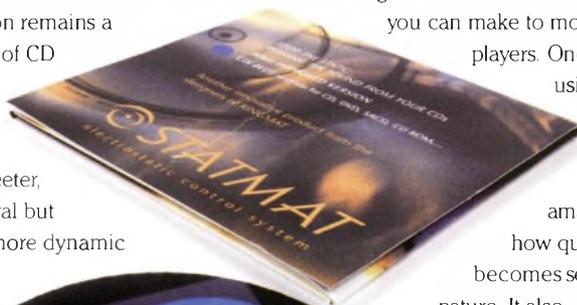
battery powered strobe light that ensures your readings are independent of the mains, the gold standard for speed accuracy. What's even cleverer though, is the ability to set not just 33 and 45, but a range of

Price: £56

Moth Marketing
Tel. (44)(0)1234 741152
Net. www.britishaudio.co.uk

Ringmat StatMat CDi Blue

Ringmat's venerable StatMat has been steadily evolved and the latest CDi Blue version remains a staple part of CD replay chez Gregory. Richer, sweeter, more natural but above all more dynamic sound is



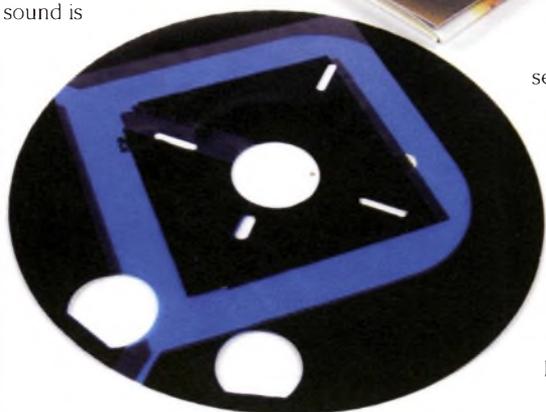
the result, increasing musical enjoyment and involvement while at the same time reducing listener fatigue. This is arguably the single most cost effective upgrade you can make to most CD

players. Once you start using it you'll not want to stop, and it's

amazing how quickly it becomes second nature. It also serves as an intriguing introduction to Ringmat's world of accessories and system tuning devices. RG

Price: £32.50

Ringmat Developments
Tel. (44)(0)1277 200210
Net. www.ringmat.com



L'Art du Son CD/DVD Cleaner

Following hard on the heels of L'AdS's superb, alcohol free, LP cleaning fluid (also highly recommended) comes their optical disc cleaner. A simple wipe on, wipe off fluid, it does exactly what it says on the tin, err... bottle. Equally effective on CDs and DVDs, expect greater detail, delicacy and intimacy, richer and more natural colours and blacker backgrounds. The differences are far from subtle, whether discs are new or not, with manufacturing derived deposits just as damaging to the sound as greasy



fingerprints and smears. No, it won't repair surface damage, but it will make the most of what's actually available, the increase in believability on well recorded material being really quite breathtaking. RG

Price: £39.95

hififorsale.com
Tel. (44)(0)870 2412469
Net. www.hififorsale.com

**Sky-line...
Chord's Din leads offer Naim owners a whole new horizon!**

For years, Naim Audio have hidden behind the fiction that cables don't effect the sound of systems – or to put it another way, they've never found anything better for their systems than the cables they supply. Until now that is...

The venerable Snaic 5-pin Din has finally got some in-house competition in the shape of the new (and far more expensive) Hi-line interconnect cable, complete with fancy, mechanically decoupled plugs. All well and good, as far as Naim are concerned, with thousands of existing customers beating a path to their dealers' doors for this simple plug and play upgrade. One demo later they'll be trundling happily home having reassured themselves as to the Hi-line's sonic superiority to the Snaic (and safe in the knowledge that one bit of cable looks much like another to their wife/girlfriend/significant other and thus there's no danger of embarrassing questions). At least that's the theory; practice could prove a little different, as there's a very real danger that in launching the Hi-line Naim have opened a Pandora's box. Not only does it raise the vexed question of cable sound within Naim's jealously controlled system hierarchy, but at \$500 a throw there are plenty of alternatives queuing up for consideration. Both Russ Andrews and The Chord Co. offer Din terminated versions of their leads, with others clamouring to jump on the bandwagon.

Naim are naturally dismissive of such offerings so with this in mind I set out to gauge the performance benefits of both the Hi-line and a few alternatives in an all-Naim system. With a two-box CD player, pre-power combination and speakers to hand, I set out to compare the advantages of a Hi-line to two different Chord cables, the new Anthem 2 (\$325 1m Din-Din) and the established

Indigo (\$825 1m Din-Din). Well, if I was expecting differences I certainly wasn't expecting their magnitude. Swapping between the Hi-line and the Anthem 2 left the Naim upgrade sounding flat, turgid, lumpy and ill-defined. With the Hi-line in situ music lacked pace and dynamic range, texture, space and rhythmic subtlety. Inserting the Anthem brought all those qualities and more, with an engaging sense of life and energy about the music. Reverting to the Hi-line flattened the picture in every dimension, not just spatially but expressively too. Where the Anthem sounded interesting and intricate, the Hi-line was actually disjointed and boring in comparison. What's more, remove the unremittingly awful NACA5 speaker cable from the equation and the chasm

in quality between the two leads gets wider still. With Chord Signature running between the amp and speakers the differences between the Hi-line and the significantly cheaper Anthem 2 were verging on the embarrassing.

Installing the Indigo was the icing on the cake, with even greater transparency, detail, depth, texture and weight on offer. And whilst these all sound like hi-fi benefits, the really shocking thing was the gulf in musical performance, the manifest superiority of the Chord interconnect cables over the Naim alternative. Using the Chord leads simply unlocked the performance sealed on the disc, making the musicians sound not just alive but like much better players; or to put it another way, with the Chord leads they grooved – with the Hi-line they didn't. Even better, with the Indigo you can extend the benefits to your 4-pin leads as well (not an option with the Hi-line) further increasing

depth, focus, dimensionality and the sense of ensemble timing within the group, while reducing grain and top-end stridency.

The conclusion is simple; if you are thinking of upgrading your Naim interconnects then consider the alternatives, as well as some new speaker cable. These Chord leads are only the tip of the iceberg, with a Kimber K-CAG on its way to me and other offerings besides. But don't take my word for it, as Naim have always counselled, listen for yourself. And if your dealer is reluctant or unable to do the dem, don't worry. First wonder why – and then contact Chord (or one of the other

suppliers) to arrange a loan cable. If they don't have a local dealer then I'm sure they'll be happy to send you one SOR. I know exactly where I'd be spending my money.

With Naim's Hi-line about to hit the streets in phono-phono guise the company is about to wade into the unfamiliar world of direct cable comparisons. If my experiences with the Din version of the Hi-line are anything to go by, they might find the water a little deeper than they anticipated. RG

Chord Co. Anthem 2, 1m din-din
\$325
Chord Co. Indigo, 1m din-din
\$825

The Chord Co.
Tel. (44)(0)1980 625700
Net. www.chord.co.uk



Clearaudio Contact Cleaner

Clearaudio's contact cleaner is ideal for keeping signal interfaces suitably spotless. But to get the best from it you need a little ingenuity. Eichmann's hard plastic plugs make the perfect tools for cleaning hard to reach surfaces. Simply dab a little cleaning fluid on the inner face and pin of a Bullet Plug, or the plastic post of the 4mm banana, insert into



the socket to be cleaned and gently twist – job done. Audio

Technica actually used to make a kit containing plastic tools for this very purpose. Sadly it is no more – but the Eichmann plugs do an excellent job of standing in. RG

Price: £15

Audio Reference
Tel. (44)(0)1252 702705
Net. www.clearaudio.de

The Quadraspire QX! Silencer support system

The fact that these beautifully simple objects seem to show the same benefits on very different types of music, and on many different systems from entry level to serious high-end, suggests that there's something fundamentally right about them. There's a general and consistent cleaning up of the frequency extremes, the top end shines, the bass is tighter, faster and more tuneful. Textures, backgrounds and micro-dynamics are brought out just-so, without over-emphasis. That the benefits are not subtle further suggests that the rightness, whatever it may be, is doing something important at a fairly elementary level, and even if you already have decent support. That these benefits can be had for the cost of a couple of CDs is barely credible.

A set of the standard 25mm size costs £25, and the 50mm size just £5 extra. It's tempting to go mad and put



them everywhere, under cables, mains blocks, wherever really and at that price it hardly matters if you do. Fact is, it seems to help, pretty much wherever you put them. An only slightly more substantial £400 gets you the most deliciously unobtrusive speaker stands whose sound can quickly become compelling, not least because they don't seem to have one.

OK, it's not exotic, it's not expensive, but it might just be the best hi-fi bargain this year (and next). You owe it to yourself to risk

£25 and try them. If I'm wrong, what have you lost? But if I'm right, I warn you, these little blighters are addictive... SD

Price: From £25/four

Quadraspire
Tel. (44)(0)1225 333360
Net. www.quadraspire.co.uk

Isotek System Enhancer CD

Burn-in and conditioning CDs for hi-fi systems are not exactly news. But Isotek have taken note of all the various offerings and evolved perhaps the most sensible and complete version available. Their System Enhancer disc contains three tracks: the first is the standard burn-in type signal, but in this instance combined with a demagnetization function. The second track is the same as the first but with



extended and augmented low-frequency content, designed to perform with sub-woofer

based systems or those with the largest, full-range speakers. Finally, the third track is a five-minute system refresher track, designed for use on a weekly basis, just to keep things in tip-top shape.

Simple, sensible and supremely cost effective, what more could you require? RG

Price: £14.95

hififorsale.com
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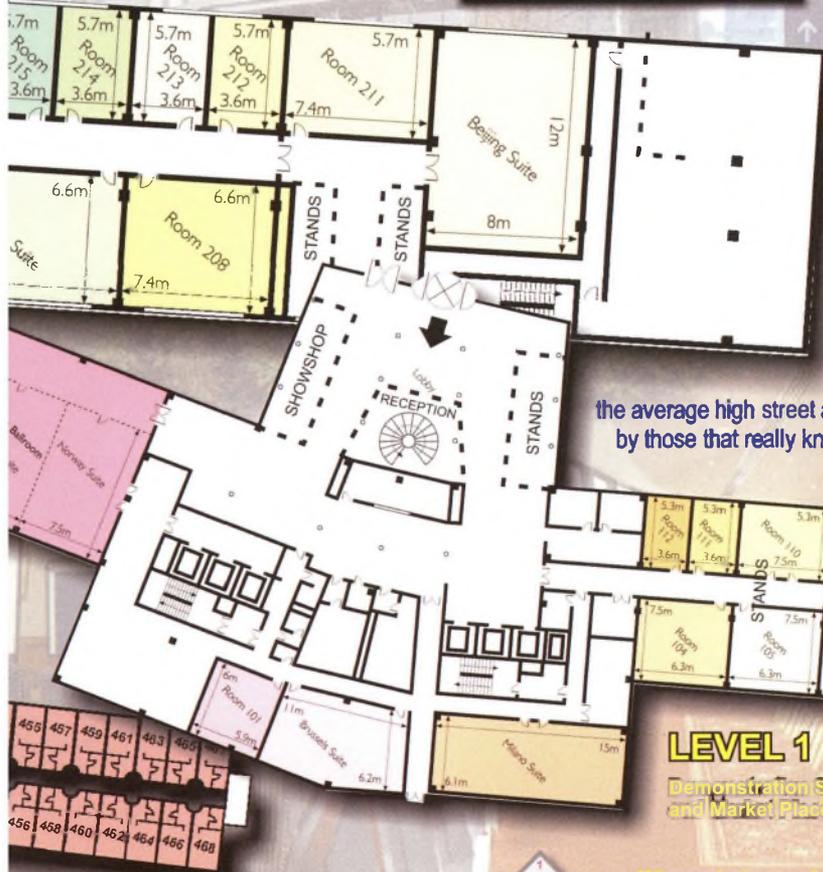
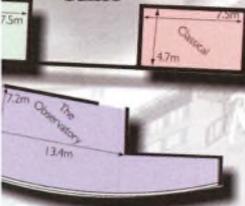
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Northern Sound & Vision. Key to its success has undoubtedly been its choice of venue not just for its location and access but also the superb staff and support services that the show enjoys each year. Enjoying a show means many things: easy access to the venue, good safe parking, friendly staff, and last but not least the very reason we attend shows: to see and hear things that are simply not available on the average high street and more importantly supported and demonstrated by those that really know their game. Going to a show should be fun and great value and that's a fact that the organisers 'Chesterfield Communications' have held dear to their objectives. " That's why, says the organiser, that Northern Sound & Vision has such a great atmosphere, all of us now look forward to these two special days at the end of January when all of us appreciate a lift.

STAY OUT

Like the previous visitor, they're that good for you!!



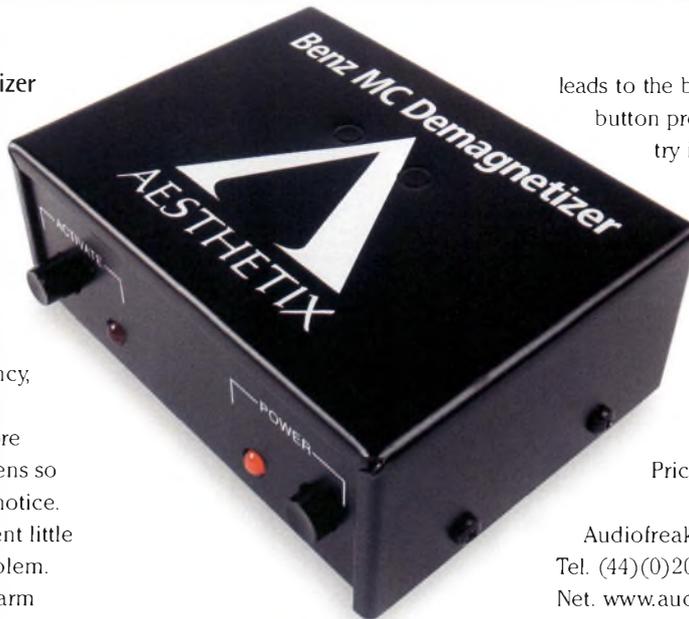
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- QUARRY BANK MILL www.quarrybankmill.org
- TATTON PARK www.tattonpark.org.uk

Aesthetix MC Demagnetizer

The incredibly strong magnets employed in today's moving-coil cartridges lead to residual magnetism in the coils themselves. Not good! The sonic effect is to limit transparency, soften transients and limit dynamic range; all the more insidious because it happens so gradually that you barely notice. Aesthetix offer this excellent little degausser to cure the problem. Simply connect your tonearm



leads to the box and press the button provided (just don't try it if you use a moving magnet!). Once you get used to the benefits of periodic application you'll wonder how you ever got along without it. RG

Price: \$199

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

The Vertex AQ Jaya and Jaya Silver Plus Mains Filters

Parallel mains filters, boxes that act as RFI sponges when connected to your system's electrical supply, first appeared around six or so years ago.



The first one I came across was offered by Russ Andrews, was cheap, effective and looked for all the world like a wall-wart power supply – just lacking the cable. Inevitably, things move on, with quality (hopefully) and price adopting a seemingly ever-ascending spiral. These Jaya filters from Vertex AQ are dramatically more effective than

those Russ Andrews originals, while the nicely presented boxes are certainly more in keeping with their elevated prices.

Insert a Jaya into the mains spur or ring running your system, preferably as close to the system socket(s) as possible, and you'll hear less grain, truer colours and a more fluid musical presentation.

Notes will be cleaner and crisper, their pitch more definite. But the real benefit is in the sense of time and space around notes, the poise and pacing the Jaya brings to the performance, making it not just more natural but more effective too. The Jaya Silver Plus simply extends the trick,

adding a sense of body and presence to instruments and voices, growing out of a lower noise floor, increased dynamic range with quicker dynamic response, and greater harmonic definition and subtlety. These are not small differences, nor are they musically trivial. But be warned, once you've tried a Jaya in your system it's awfully hard to go back; witness AS's consternation on his first exposure, as recounted in the Wilson Duette system review in this issue. On the face of it, an aluminium box that simply plugs into a spare socket shouldn't be able to do this. In practice it's actually all too easy to demonstrate, all too easy to hear. Suspend your disbelief and give it a try – after all, no one's going to take your money unless you want them to. The trouble is, you will want them to. You really, really will! RG

Prices:
Jaya £295
Jaya Silver Plus £545

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- Mark Levinson ML380S pre-amp £3495

- Naim Nac 92 with Nap 90/3 amp
- Proceed PAV pre-amp

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Pierre Boulez

The composer, conductor and musical iconoclast

Interviewed by Anke Kathrin Bronner

Equally famous as a composer and as a conductor, Pierre Boulez certainly ranks amongst the outstanding classical artists of the 20th and early 21st centuries. He is a giant as a performer and influence, a champion of and eloquent advocate for the musical avant-garde. Yet this notorious Frenchman has seldom avoided controversy, provoked as much by his polemical statements as his music and performances. At one point he was even considered persona non grata in his native country. But today, things have calmed down, and the "prodigal son" is as acclaimed in France as he is by the rest of the world. I met the composer/conductor during the Salzburg Festival. At first glance Pierre Boulez appears to be a rather inconspicuous person, especially considering his reputation, but in front of an orchestra he rises to veritable grandeur. Here he's a towering presence, arms swinging with independent tempi, an easy three-four time with the left whilst the right gives a strict seven-eight; here he gestures and coaxes, commands and teases; here he seems entirely in his element – a kind of human "double pendulum", the culmination of all that's Boulez. Yet that's not how he sees himself...

Anke Kathrin Bronner: Maestro...

Pierre Boulez: No, no, please don't call me Maestro!

AKB: Monsieur Boulez?

PB: Voilà!

AKB: Monsieur Boulez, do you consider yourself as a composer or a conductor?

PB: Well, if I don't overestimate myself, first of all, I'm a composer. I just learned conducting to conduct my works and the work of my generation. But after a while, I understood that I would have to conduct other repertory, too, to work in that field. You don't always have the time only to play new works. But conducting is only of minor concern to me, yet has become too important. So, my main problem is to divide my time between composing and conducting.

AKB: When did you write your first composition? As a child?

PB: No, I wasn't a wunderkind. The first – extremely amateurish – compositions I produced at the age of sixteen or seventeen. The first professional pieces I did at the age of 19. So, it didn't take long to learn my profession: Within two years, from 1943 to 45, it went from amateurish to professional. I mean, it was still very simple then, but it was totally controlled.

AKB: Already dodecaphonic or serial music?

PB: No, it was a kind of free language first, influenced by Messiaen in particular; but more modal than atonal. In 1945, I discovered the dodecaphonic composers – Schoenberg, Webern and Berg – who influenced me a lot! But also Stravinsky, who was extremely popular and much performed. That of course was a huge influence, particularly the rhythmic language. And at that time I also discovered Bartók. It is funny. Look, during the war, when I was a student, all these composers were scarcely ever played – Bartók not at all; Schoenberg, being Jewish, not at all. But it was not just a question of being Jewish or not; this field of musical culture had been totally ignored in France. Berg and Webern, too. So, when I started composing it was at the simple level of musical language. But step by step, after studying these scores, my language – I hope, at least – become richer.

AKB: Soon after this, you started to compose serial music, then turning to aleatory composition. How would you describe your current compositional technique?

PB: Free, of course – but with organisation afterwards. But much more free than in the past. I realised very early that there are two dimensions in both composition and in perception: very strict or rather free. This is the case in baroque music: When Bach writes a prelude, it is very free. If he writes a stretta or a fugue, there is in an obligatory dimension. And that's what is interesting to me: the dimension between obligatory and free! Responsibility can be general at one extreme or it has to have a law at the other. This is a very important dimension in music: freedom versus law!



► **AKB:** But many people have problems with atonal music. Do you think it is really part of human nature, or are we geared to major-minor tonality from birth?

PB: In my opinion, it is not a simple matter of tonality or non-tonality! There has been incredible development: You can't compare the tonality of Mozart to that of Wagner. Of course, there are also similarities between Monteverdi or Gesualdo and Wagner that are astounding. In the madrigals of Monteverdi, every time grief is expressed it is chromatic; every time when there is peace or joy, it is diatonic. This is a permanent kind of sensibility or perception that amounts to a common law. There are many such really simple laws. It is interesting to find these two constants of perception in all styles. Therefore, the problem is to respect that perception and to play with it

AKB: You studied with Olivier Messiaen. Please tell me about the lessons!

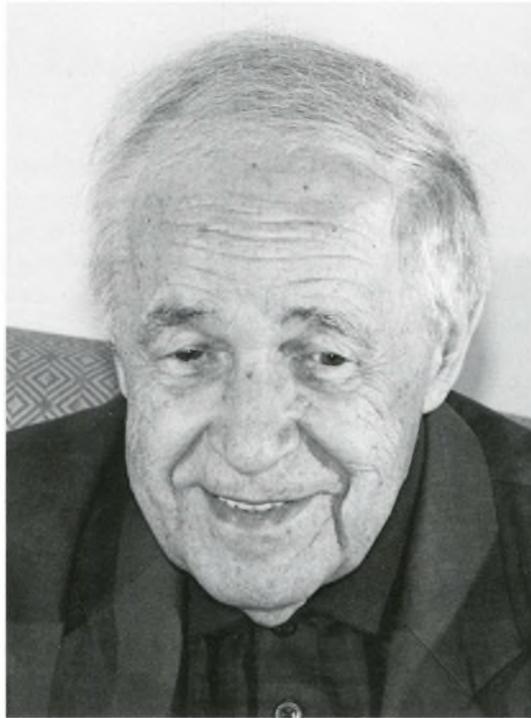
PB: Oh, they were very interesting. Not just interesting, but he influenced me very strongly in the beginning. I studied harmonic analysis with him, and he also held private lessons outside the Conservatoire. He analysed scores, and I can tell you, he went through those scores! After three, four hours you really did understand every aspect! I remember my first private lesson: He had chosen *Ma Mère l'Oye* by Ravel. First of all, he analysed the poetic source, then the first piano version for four hands. It was composed for children, so he limited the technique compared with his other virtuoso works for piano. Then Messiaen analysed the orchestration, without any of those technical limitations. And for me, it was like: If I ever analyse a score, it has to be like this! He analysed *Le Sacre du Printemps* by Stravinsky in the same manner, and he also showed us Bartók, Schoenberg and Berg. Please remember, it was in 1945, at the end of war. This was truly special teaching for the Conservatoire. He was the only one to dare! The other professors stuck to so called tradition – which in reality means boredom! (laughs)

AKB: What is the meaning of “progress” and what is the meaning of “tradition” to you?

PB: Well, in most cases tradition means to serve the period before, but to take the mannerisms rather than the content.

AKB: So, imitation?

PB: Imitation, yes! But, if there is progress, you see what has been written before and you extract the ongoing ideas.



It contributes to your own direction, to what you see. Another composer might see something different, there are different points of view. So, a great masterpiece always gives new impetus in different directions. When I had my composing class at Basle – which I didn't do for long – I always said, “It is of no interest for me if you just analyse and describe what is already there, because everybody can do that! But what are the consequences behind it? Because it is the consequences that matter, and not just literal analysis.

AKB: So, you think there can't be something completely new, but that anything new is based on something preceding it in some way?

PB: Malraux said: You don't become a painter because you see a landscape; you become a painter because you see pictures. A picture is the true influence, a landscape has no influence. I believe this to be true! Nothing is created spontaneously. A culture is not spontaneous. It seems to be spontaneously, but it is not!

AKB: So, everything that appears to be new has actually evolved?

PB: Yes! But sometimes it might surprise you if you don't see the connection. Let's take Schoenberg: One can't understand why he suddenly found this atonal style. But you can find a link to Mahler. It was the language of Mahler that led him as a consequence to his atonal language. The same with Wagner: From the operas of Gluck, Mozart and Weber he found his own original language, step by step. Berlioz had the same sources, the same input, but his development was not the same at all. Hence: The sources are important, but they don't mean everything; they don't dictate the outcome! ►

Biography Pierre Boulez

1925:	Pierre Boulez was born on 26 March in Montbrison, Loire, France	1967-1972:	Guest Conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra
1932:	First piano lessons	1970:	First <i>Parsifal</i> in Bayreuth
1942:	Decides on a career in music	1971-1975:	Principle conductor of BBC Symphony Orchestra
1944:	Harmony classes with Olivier Messiaen at the Conservatoire de Paris	1971-1977:	Principle conductor of New York Philharmonic Orchestra
1945:	Lessons in counterpoint with Andrée Vaurabourg-Honegger, in composition with Messiaen, and in dodecaphonic technique with René Leibowitz. His first composition, <i>Trois Psalmodies</i> for piano, is broadcast in France	1976:	Foundation of Ensemble InterContemporain in Paris to perform contemporary music; Conductor of the legendary <i>Ring</i> tetralogy at Bayreuth with Patrice Chéreau as director
1946-1955:	Musical leader of the Renaud/Barrault Theatre Company	1977:	Opening of IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique); director until 1992
1950:	First compositions performed in Paris and Donaueschingen (Germany)	1979:	Ernst von Siemens Music Prize
1954:	Concerts du Petit-Marigny/Domaine musicale founded	1991:	Honorary doctorate from the University of Frankfurt
1955:	Premier of <i>Le Marteau sans Maître</i> (Hans Rosbaud, Baden-Baden)	1992:	Winner of the Theodor W. Adorno Prize from the City of Frankfurt
1958:	Premier of <i>Improvisations sur Mallarmé</i> (in 1962 reprised in <i>Pli selon Pli</i>); Start of his career as conductor with the Symphony Orchestra of Baden-Baden	1995:	Principle Guest Conductor, Chicago Symphony Orchestra
1960-1962:	Analysis and composition courses at Music Academy of Basle	1997:	World premiere of <i>Anthèmes 2</i> (Donaueschingen)
1963:	Guest professor at Harvard	1998:	World premiere of <i>Sur Incises</i> (Edinburgh)
		1999:	World premiere of <i>Notations VII</i> (Chicago)
		2000:	Grammy Award, category: Classical Contemporary Composition, for <i>Répons</i>
		2004:	Return to Bayreuth with <i>Parsifal</i> (direction: Christoph Schlingensiefel)

Pierre Boulez has won more than twenty-five Grammy Awards, both as a composer and conductor, and has been awarded innumerable other prizes.

► **AKB:** Concerning your own opera: I find it exciting that you seldom finish a composition, but that it is an ever-changing work-in-progress. Would completion also represent stagnation?

PB: Well, there are pieces that are finished and that I won't touch any more. Perhaps they may serve as source material later on. But, yes, there are also pieces where I realise that by using this material, I can improve or prolong something or... Sometimes, it even happens with a time-lag: My work *Notations* is based on quite simple pieces from 1945, and yet I am only now about to complete it! I'm really interested by this gap and the way it affects the material. When I created it in 1945, I didn't know how to use it. Funnily enough, there are some processes that are completed, and there are others that go on and on. But I can't assert that a piece would have been completed or not completed on purpose. I just feel it when I can do absolutely nothing new at all with the material.

AKB: Two thoughts come to my mind: Your ideas must have been incredibly good if they hold so much potential for thematic work. But I think it is also evidence of greatness to say there is always room for improvement.

PB: Well, in the beginning, ideas are very simple. So, you have ideas when you are young. You have a lot of them, but you don't know how prolific they might be. Look, a piece of wood is a piece of wood. You have found it, but you can also make a lot with it. So, ideas for me are elementary material. Sometimes you think you will go in a determined direction,

but whilst working you find a totally different way. And that's interesting: at the same time determined and surprising, quasi accident.

AKB: Has it to do with Adorno's "belated maturity"?

PB: Yes, of course! The best example for me is Wagner: When he was writing *Das Rheingold*, he wrote themes, leitmotifs. And then, after 25 years, in *Götterdämmerung*, you sometimes find these same leitmotifs from *Rheingold*. He definitely didn't think about this consequence whilst composing *Rheingold*, but he might well sense the possibilities while concentrating on that work! This is a very important example: You have had an idea, and you left it for a while. And then, suddenly afterwards... On the other hand, there are ideas that are very attractive, like the end of *Die Walküre*, yet he never goes on to develop it. It would have been possible to adapt this theme, but perhaps the opportunity never arose. And it's the same with me – not stylistically, of course: I've had many ideas that weren't interesting for me at the time, but later on they are!

AKB: Why do you so seldom conduct classicism or baroque? Don't they hold any interest for you?

PB: Of course I am interested and I listen to this music. But I think it has enough performers; so, for me, there are plenty of new and surprising or seldom interpreted works. I'm more interested in closing the gap than in conducting Beethoven's *Seventh* just the once. There really is no lack of performers for this, but for Schoenberg, there, there is a lack, even more for Webern. If I have to play a role, that's mine! ►

► **AKB:** Is it for this reason that you founded IRCAM in Paris?

PB: Well, my experience with music in general is that young composers are not allowed to really concentrate on new things, especially new technology. Consequently, the people working with this new technology are seldom classically trained. They don't write a score, it's just bricolage (DIY)! For me, technology is a part of musical culture and not just something separate or aside! The important thing about it is the richness of sound material and the possibilities of the machine in opposition to human beings. The machine is able to do very small differentiations that push the boundaries of human ability: There are things that we can't create but we can perceive, e.g. small intervals. With our musical instruments, we can't realise them, but with synthetic instruments, you can! You can change the spectrum; turn a sine wave into saw tooth and so on. And you can also enrich the rhythmic language. In my opinion, as these capabilities exist, we absolutely have to use them!

AKB: But our ear hasn't been trained for this. So, what would be the perfect audience for your music?

PB: There will never be a perfect audience! But I have never had any problems with, for example, my work *Répons*. It is not arranged for a usual concert hall layout: The musicians are seated in the middle, and the audience is sitting around them. Behind the audience, there are six musicians with modern, technology-based instruments. The audience is right in the middle of the sound. And it is not the same old story: "Here are we musicians, there is the audience". Technology allows mingling! And suddenly, the sound is everywhere. For me, this is important, and more and more musicians are also asking for a spatial concept in compositions.

AKB: This time-space component is a distinct philosophical concept. You are also known as a philosopher of music. Do you think that in the last few decades, philosophy has been factored out too much from society?

PB: Well, I think that currently the influence of philosophy isn't the same as it has been. Look, how many people read Adorno? Of course, philosophy is very important. I was fortunate to meet Adorno myself in Darmstadt, and we had a discussion about symmetry in Berg's music (*Th. W. Adorno studied composition with Alban Berg from 1925-26. Ed.*). In his opinion, Berg never erred in his use of symmetry; and I said, "It's not a question of erring or not erring. I just say Berg was somewhat obsessed with symmetry, especially in *Lulu*, the *Lyric Suite* and his *Chamber Concerto*. And in most cases, it works. But there are also some moments

where it is less effective. For example in the *Chamber Concerto*, in the slow movement, the themes lose their identity. On the other hand, in the *Lyric Suite* it has a huge effect and in the film score for *Lulu* too. You can really feel the dimensions!" This was my last discussion with Adorno... The audience can't think of every detail, every minor matter during a concert. You want to experience something, and in this case these details are minor matters. So, for me as a composer, this is where the influence of the conductor starts: When I was very young, I had a kind of mazy thinking. I always loved the idea of a maze. But maze or not, you have to be realistic. And this is my problem, between reality and this complex thinking. Thinking always veers towards complexity, and I adjust by reality. Coming back to your very first question: The conductor corrects the work of the composer, and the composer inspires the conductor.

AKB: But you don't compose with regard to the feasibility of the final work?

PB: No, not primarily.

AKB: Thank God!

PB: First of all, there is an idea. Please notice that I don't say: "Reality imposes limits." Reality affects the way I can realise it. With *Répons*, I had some problems with distances and technology. But I just thought about the practicalities of the realisation; to better realise my goals I have to know the situation. This is the impact of reality. When I compose a piece for piano, I know how to arrange because I have studied piano myself, even if it is difficult. With violin, I first have to ask a violinist if it is possible in this tempo, in this position. I don't have the practical experience of playing that allows me to write in such detail.

AKB: As a conductor, you know the sound of an orchestra very well and you play with it in your compositions.

PB: Yes, and I can even make use of two dimensions at the same time because of my ability to conduct independently with both hands.

AKB: You are famous for it...

PB: Oh, yes! Of course, I first considered the composition, but then it becomes apparent how its realisation is possible. And without this technique I would never have dared to write like this because I would have asked myself, "Well, how can it be played?" But I know how to! And so, it is not a brake, it is an impulse! ►

► **AKB:** How has your relationship with John Cage been?

PB: Right at the beginning, I liked him very much. We met in 1949, the first time he came to Europe after the war. I was interested because I had heard about his specially prepared piano from a magazine. He had some records with him and played them for me. I even organised his first concert in 1949 (laughs). It was a private concert, and of course, people were very curious, as I was. Then, I heard his *Sonatas for Prepared Piano* for the first time. We got along very well.

He stayed in Paris for two or three months, and we met very often. We kept in touch afterwards and did correspond. We have quite a lot of letters together! Then, I met him in New York and stayed with him. But it was a completely other Cage. At that time, he was studying Zen, and his ideas were different. Some time later, there was the period of *Happenings*. Some of his ideas were interesting, but the actual realisation was too harmless in my opinion.

AKB: How would you characterise 4'33"?"
For me, it is almost stagnation! Of course, when I'm sitting in the audience, something is happening to me, but if it is necessarily due to 4'33"?!?

PB: Well, it is kind of Malevich, like *The Black Square*.

AKB: You are an art connoisseur, you even wrote a book about Paul Klee. Do you get inspiration from paintings?

PB: Not necessarily! I don't go to an exhibition just to be inspired, but I like paintings! If I hadn't become a musician and if I had had any talent... But I don't, not at all!

AKB: Sometimes it even is more enjoyable not to be talented, so that you can receive in another way.

PB: Correct! That's the reason why I won't attempt painting, but I like exhibitions – mainly the modern ones. But I also visited Cézanne, and it is fantastic what you can learn! I also learned a lot from Klee. I mean, really learned! You can see how others, in another field, solve the same problems. Look at perspectives in Klee and think about heterophony, it is just the same problem! You just have to transpose.



AKB: Do you think the space of a painting or a drawing...

PB: ...the perspectives! The perspectives!

AKB: ...the perspectives are equivalent to sound dimensions?

PB: I remember a certain painting by Klee with a room with different perspectives. You can see the room in this perspective, in that perspective and in another. It is the same as polyphony: You can change the same polyphony a little bit with a different rhythm, thus creating two or three perspectives, each with a different rhythm and different layers, different levels, at the same pitch, but not coinciding exactly. So, there you have different perspectives simultaneously, but all in a single musical direction. And that's one of the things that I learned from Klee!

AKB: According to Schopenhauer, music is at the pinnacle of art, and

painting and architecture are far beneath! But he also holds the view that it is a manifestation of a higher power, operating via the composer. So in truth a composition is not the act of the composer but of that higher power! ►

► **PB:** Well, all these theories might be nice, but I don't think they represent the truth. What is it, the truth?!? I mean, every composer has his own concept. Schoenberg, for example, was very theocratic: I think, I organise, but that everything is already there. As God said, "Let there be light: and there was light." This is not my concept at all. Sometimes, I do have a very general concept, but sometimes I must find it myself, by degrees. Thank God there are accidents! Really accidents, yes! You think you are going in one direction, but the material forces you to go on in another. And that's what it makes it interesting! But if I had a special sequence of boxes, and first I took box A, then box B and so on, that's of no interest to me! This is Klee, too: Let's imagine for example a walker. He walks from here to there. But what happens if instead of going alone he is walking with his dog?!?

AKB: Oh, that promises to be much more fun!

PB: Of course! (laughing) Klee is an odd mixture of realistic matters, of what he observes, and the consequences he draws. That is what I learned with him! You see something that's absolutely not in the field of music, it might be architecture, it might be mere chance, and it makes you go, "Ah! This could be the source for a musical construction!" I mean, particularly if you are in the midst of a creative period, anything can give you an idea! So, from this point of view I'm not theocratic at all! I wait, I wait. I take the reality and think about it, and that's why you can't find, for example, a special influence in my work. It is the same with music: I listen to music and it captures me, or I conduct a new work from another composer and think, "Ah! That's interesting; I can evolve and develop that!"

AKB: This means that it influences both your work and your own development?

PB: Yes, yes, correct!

AKB: What about the opera project?

PB: No, the opera project... I have already killed two librettists. I don't dare to start with a third one! It is a pity! The work I did with Jean Genet was very interesting. We discussed a great deal and he made first drafts, but they are too sketchy to complete. And then he died. And it was the same with Heiner Müller. I have very precise ideas concerning the relationship between the staging, meaning the libretto, and the music – and between libretto and stage direction, and so on.

AKB: I can imagine the perfect combination: Nietzsche

and Boulez. Nietzsche criticised the way Wagner was going with words and music. He already expressed what you are saying: that they have to arise at the same time.

PB: (laughs) But for that I'd have to have been dead for a very long time...

AKB: Fortunately not!



Selected Discography:

As Composer:

Piano Sonatas Nos. 1-3
Piano: Paavali Jumppanen
Deutsche Grammophon DG 002894775328

Boulez conducts Boulez: Le Marteau sans maître; Dérive 1 ; Dérive 2
Ensemble InterContemporain a.o., Conductor: Pierre Boulez
Deutsche Grammophon DG 002894775327

Explosante-Fixe
Ensemble InterContemporain a.o.
Deutsche Grammophon DG 002894775385

Pli selon Pli
Soprano: Christine Schäfer; Ensemble InterContemporain a.o.;
Conductor: Pierre Boulez
Deutsche Grammophon DG 002894713442

Sur Incises; Messagesquise; Anthèmes 2
Conductor: Pierre Boulez
Deutsche Grammophon DG 002894634752

Répons; Dialogue de L'ombre Double
Ensemble InterContemporain; Conductor: Pierre Boulez
Deutsche Grammophon DG 002894576052

As conductor:

Richard Wagner: *Der Ring des Nibelungen (Complete Ring Cycle) – The Centenary Production!*
Deutsche Grammophon (DVD Video (9)) DG 004400734057

Alban Berg: *Lulu*
Orchestre de l'Opéra de Paris
Deutsche Grammophon DG 002894636172

Béla Bartók: *The Wooden Prince*
Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Deutsche Grammophon DG 4358632

Anton von Webern – *Complete Webern*
Emerson String Quartet; Ensemble InterContemporain;
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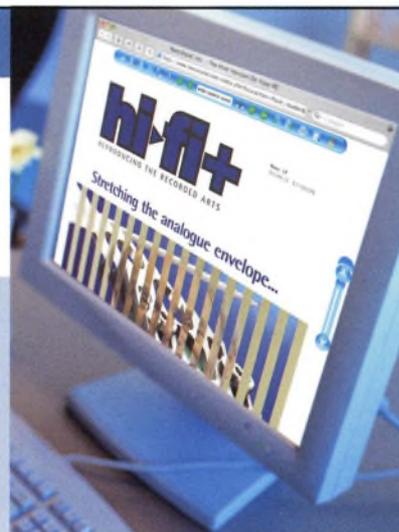
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Record Reviews

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The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

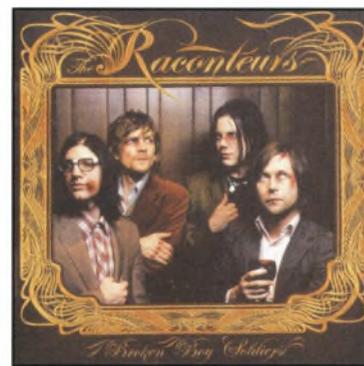
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The reviewers are identified by their initials.

They are:- Dave Ayers, Tim Britt, Anke K. Bronner, Mark Childs, Richard Clews, Dave Davies, Dennis D. Davis, Peter Downard, Richard S. Foster, Roy Gregory, Simon Groome, Jason Hector, Andrew Hobbs, James Michael Hughes, Reuben Parry.

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The Raconteurs

Broken Boy Soldiers

XL Recordings XLCD196 

So, you front a high profile band with at least one all time classic album, and you've got a bit of time on your hands; what do you do? If you're Jack White, you get together a few friends, all of whom play in their own, perfectly decent bands, and form a super-group. So do the Raconteurs exceed the sum of their parts? Or do they sound like the plaything of a restless megalomaniac? This album blends the talents of the band perfectly, reigning in Jack's freeform style, matching it to Brendan Benson's alt-country vocals and binding it together with a bit of garage rock. Considering Jack White's other project is totally devoid of a rhythm section, The Raconteurs use theirs with unerring skill, heavily deadened drums and warm bass lines providing a good spine for the music. Whilst the White Stripes' roots are firmly planted in the dark ages of guitar music, the Raconteurs sound is laced with heady psychedelic overtones. Gentle keyboards and dual vocals give the record a deeply retro sound, and the rough and ready recording and production keep the album feeling gritty. You already know what this record should sound like, a heady mix of White Stripes back-to-basics with the hard edge of a garage band, punchy songs, fuzzed up guitars and songs that twist like a bag of eels. *Broken Boy Soldiers* delivers on all its promises.

MC





Tab Benoit

Brother To The Blues

Telarc Records CD83639

Oh my God, this one's really going to upset the purists! Benoit's going to be accused of deserting his roots and selling his soul to country, which of course is absolute nonsense. Yes there are a couple here that are country songs, almost in its purest form, but there's still plenty of great blues too.

Since the release of his superb debut *Nice And Warm* (if you don't own it track it down immediately) Tab's been carving a name for himself as a player with great touch, feel and technique... a true master of the Telecaster. His work with fellow axe god Jimmy Thackery helped cement his reputation as a rising star, albeit one who is always looking to push the boundaries, and on this recording he's just taking it a little further than he normally does. The title track is classic country in the Hank Williams tradition containing a fine fiddle break courtesy of Waylon Thibodeaux, and 'I Heard That Whistle Blow' is another, this time beautifully augmented by a sensitive guitar solo.

There's thumping R'n'B, soul (a great version of 'Bring It On Home To Me') and stinging blues guitar aplenty on 'Pack It Up' and the driving 'Why Are People Like That?' Great music is great music, however it comes to us, and this is one of Tab's very best.

AH



Gram Parsons

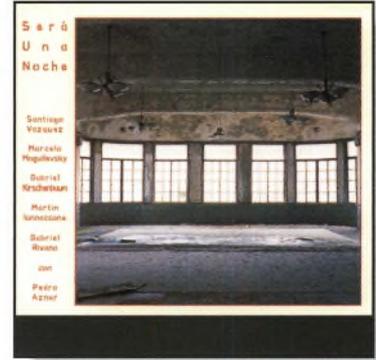
The Complete Reprise Sessions

Reprise/Rhino R2 74669

This is foundational stuff if there ever was any; the two Parsons solo albums re-issued here are records that launched a thousand ships. These recordings commenced a reconciliation of rock and roll with country and western that did not sacrifice the authenticity of either form, that it is sustained to this day in the work of artists like Lucinda Williams, Steve Earle and many more.

Revisiting *GP* and *Grievous Angel* from 1972 and 1973 respectively, one is struck by just how soaked in country Parsons was. This music is served absolutely straight up, from the first-tier Nashville session players to the traditional use of male choruses. Parsons also added significantly to his songwriting credentials here. Songs like 'Return of the Grievous Angel' and 'How Much I Lied' deserve a place among the great country records. A third disc of alternative takes makes a pleasant addition to the set. Overall sound is just fine and the packaging here is marvelous, right down to miniature cardboard reproductions of the original album jackets. There are also magical extras, like lo-fi radio recordings of Parsons and the young Emmylou Harris on 'Love Hurts' and 'Sin City'. For those wanting just a taste of Parsons, you can get the first two albums as individual releases, but with music of this quality I would advise against being penny wise and pound foolish.

PD



Será Una Noche

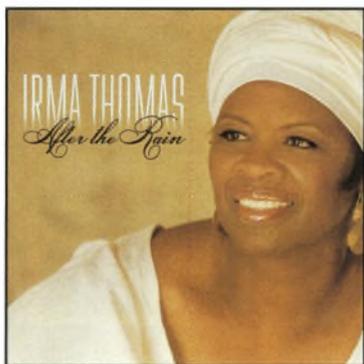
Será Una Noche

M - A Recordings M052A

Tango means more than a mere dance; Tango, means the art of passion. Two dancers, male and female, subtly circling, approaching and departing, a kind of game, similar to love. Tango even means real life! When, during the Sixties the famous Tango orchestras vanished into thin air, that was the time for "conjuntos", small ensembles like *Será Una Noche*. These six young musicians have wiped the dust from the melancholic melodies and created an irresistible recording. Never before have I heard this bittersweet atmosphere, musically so well interpreted! It is such a captivating album, a mixture between traditional instruments and Asian inspired sounds. Of course, you will find the bandoneon, "la voz del tango" ("the voice of tango"), but also a tabla and other percussion instruments. But despite the variety of instruments, there remains enough breathing space between for single words – and for the vocals of Pedro Aznar. Tango – it also means ambivalence, an aerial airiness despite earthly content! My favourite song is the classic from Carlos Gardel, "Soledad", here introduced by a sonorous bass clarinet, evidence of the transience of love: "But there isn't anybody, because she won't come. Solely the illusion of my desires that, once it will decompose, will leave only ashes in my heart." Can heartache sound more beautiful?

AKB





Irma Thomas

After The Rain

Rounder Records 2186-2

Known as the 'Soul Queen Of New Orleans', Irma Thomas has been releasing albums since the early sixties. She has gone on record as saying there is no such thing as soul music, a curious admission considering she is blessed with one of the finest soul voices to have ever come out of America. For this latest album she enlisted the help of some of New Orleans' finest musicians, including slide master Sonny Landreth. She also brought in Scott Billington to produce, and he has done a magnificent job. The album has a very warm 'vinyl' feel, and it sounds to these ears like they all had a great time making it and bonded as a band, because it certainly doesn't sound like a bunch of sterile sessioneers who only turned up for the pay cheque.

The material is perfect for Irma's rich and powerful voice; especially powerful when she turns up the wick on songs like the gospel fuelled 'If You Know How Much'.

It was feared that Irma had lost her life in Hurricane Katrina but she was in Texas at the time (I reckon it would take more than a storm to dent her style!). 'After The Rain' was recorded before the hurricane but could be seen as a tribute, such is its deepness.

AH



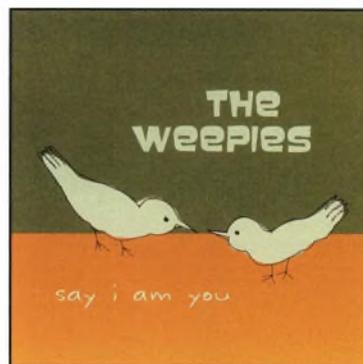
Nouvelle Vague

Bande A'Part

Universal/Peacefrog PFG079

Okay, so I'll admit to a strange fascination with covers, especially covers that add to or even better, knock the originals into a cocked hat. 'Satisfaction'; it has to be Devo. 'These Boots...' belong(s) to Paula Yates. 'Suspicious Minds'? No one gets close to Gary Glitter and the Glitter Band. I can see the shudders of horror from here, but no mercy; bring on Nouvelle Vague. Their first album could be dismissed as a curio or flash in the pan – if only it wasn't for the sublime brilliance lurking in 'Too Drunk to Fuck'; all Astrid meets the stylishly disengaged. Now Bande A'Part rams home the lesson with a vengeance. Acoustic salon jazz versions of 'Ever Fallen In Love With' and 'The Killing Moon' rub shoulders with a reggaed up 'Heart Of Glass' an improbable 'Bela Lugosi's Dead' and an impossible 'Blue Monday'. Running amok amongst the high points and gutter dregs of new wave electronica, Nouvelle Vague mine new seams of gold from the inner workings of these familiar fields. Here a change of tempo, there a shift in phrasing, all done with a fragile, effortless, sexy chic that brings new sense and new meaning. I can see rock dinosaurs rolling in their (artistic) graves at the very thought. I say, bring on the sacred cows. So many people will hate this for so many reasons – I love it.

RG



The Weepies

Say I Am You

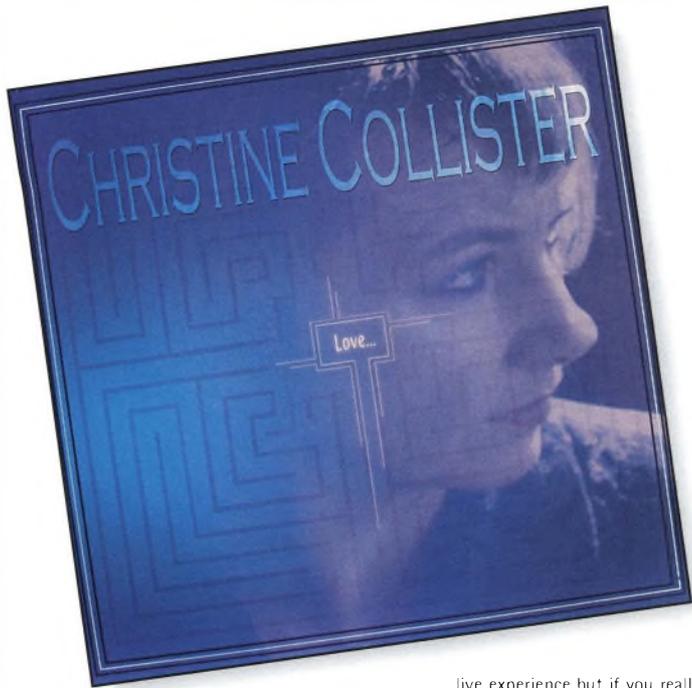
Nettwerk 5037703046627

Deb Talan and Steve Tannen were respected artists in their own right who met at a club in Boston when Deb had gone to see Steve play a show in support of his debut release *Big Senorita*. He was already a big fan of her solo work and obviously she of his; the wheels of destiny were turning and that evening The Weepies were born.

Soy I Am You, The Weepies second album, is rammed to the rafters with glistening pop songs, the sort to stop you in your tracks and make you wait with breathy anticipation to find out who's singing them when they come wafting out of the radio. They're like a soft summer breeze on the skin, so welcoming when everything else you hear leaves you feeling cold and lifeless. These two voices really were created to be used in unison, in the same way they were for Simon And Garfunkel and the brothers Finn. The harmonies on display here swoop and soar and elevate the songs to a different hemisphere. On occasions I found myself waiting for a particularly jaw-dropping moment in a song, one of those moments where you listen with astonishment as a man's and a woman's voice weave together so beautifully that it takes your breath away. It's a stunner. Seek it out.

AH





Christine Collister

Love....

Rega ENS 002 

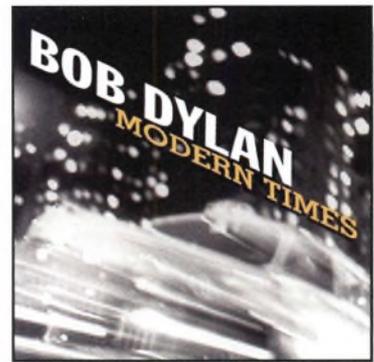
A true labour of love this album's genesis stems all the way back to Gregson and Collister performing at a private concert back in the 1980's in Roy Gandy's (Rega's owner) Essex house, the venue for this recording. Using a Pearl CC22 mike to capture Collister's voice, a customised Studer A80 eight track, and a custom made mixing console nicknamed Thunderbird 3, this project really was a labour of love, with Roy giving over a large proportion of the ground floor of his (admittedly extensive) home to provide the 'studio'.

The main point about Collister is of course that she has an absolutely gorgeous voice. Always a treat live, she has not always been well served by her releases since splitting with Clive Gregson back in 1992. Of course there have been exceptions, I particularly like 1996's *Blue Aconite* with the great Richard Thompson repaying the compliment for the many times Collister has provided sterling backing for him. 2003's *Home* gives a fair representation of the

live experience but if you really want that lovely voice more nearly in the room with you, this is the one to go for. It's a fact that is evident from the get go.

The album opens with her interpretation of Jim Croce's 'Time in a Bottle' and it's immediately clear that this is something special. Collister and her guitar are placed tangibly between, forward and centre of the speakers in a believable acoustic space within which are set the accompanying banjo, and cello. The real point is that it is the music that grabs you and keeps you engaged. This is an exceptionally natural, 'real' recording in the sense that you just aren't aware of, or looking for, the hi-fi aspects – and that's surely what it's all about. Favourite tracks (so far – I'm sure I'll be playing this album many times), include a heartfelt reading of Cohen's 'Hallelujah', and a bold and very lovely acappella reading of Joni Mitchell's 'Amelia'. There is also a creditable version of Sandy Denny's 'Who Knows Where the Time Goes?' that whilst it can never replace the original is a very worthy contender. Cut by Ray Staff at Alchemy the pressing is exemplary and does full justice to this hugely enjoyable and very well recorded set.

DD



Bob Dylan

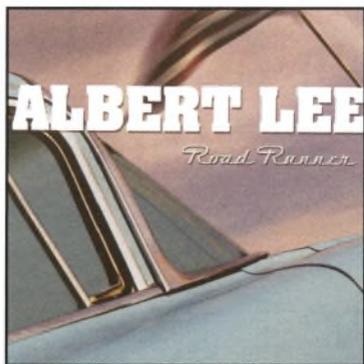
Modern Times

Columbia 82876 87686 1  

Who would have thought that Bob Dylan would age so gracefully? And this is indeed an older man's record. *Modern Times* is steeped in various forms of blues and light jazz, most of which first spun on a turntable at 78 rpm. Dylan adds subtle melodic strengths that are the sign of a master craftsman. Tracks like 'Spirit on the Water' and 'When the Deal Goes Down' are as sweetly sentimental as anything Willie Nelson or Louis Armstrong ever cut. Dylan is also an exemplary curmudgeon here, albeit one with a sparkle in his eye – his woman in 'Rollin' and Tumblin'', causes him so much trouble that he "ain't goin' to touch another one for years", and in 'Thunder on the Mountain' he has "sucked the milk out of a thousand cows". There is also wise commentary that can only be born of years, be it political (Workingman's Blues #2) or interpersonal (Nettie Moore). The sound on the *Modern Times* CD is quite good – warm, full and free of grit, with Dylan's voice and important lead instruments artfully and naturally highlighted. The 180-gram vinyl pressing is all this and more (surprise) with a wider and deeper soundstage and greater realism, especially in the treatment of Dylan's voice. No contest. This is one of those records that gets better every time you hear it. A great album.

PD





Albert Lee

Road Runner

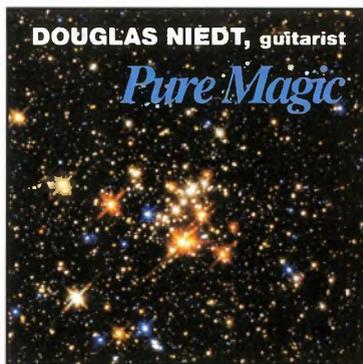
Sugarhill Records SUGCD4011 **CD**

As a guitarist Albert Lee has got absolutely nothing to prove to anyone. He is one of a select few English guitarists whose reputation amongst American musicians is so high that he could literally walk into any country rock band he wanted. His work on Emmylou's *Luxury Liner* album reached dazzling proportions; the first time I heard the title track I remember thinking how sensational the picking was - clean and fast but so sweetly melodic. That's Albert; wherever he turns up he leaves his mark.

He's not just a sideman though, Albert's a mighty fine solo artist in his own right. This latest album is a great set of tight country rockers with plenty of those dizzy-inducing licks ('I'm A Roadrunner' and 'Didn't Start Livin') mixed in with sensitive ballads like 'Julie's House' and Jimmy Webb's 'The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress'. Lee's voice is reminiscent of Rodney Crowell's; easy-on-the-ear when he tones it down but capable of a certain raunchiness when the song calls for it.

Because of who he is he has no trouble attracting great musicians to work with him, and here he enlists the likes of Bekka Bramlett, Buddy Miller, Bob Glaub and Don Heffington to make sure proceedings go with the necessary swing. 'Road Runner' doesn't break any new ground but it's a solid piece of work from the consummate guitarist.

AH



Douglas Niedt

Pure Magic

Niedt Records CD-100852 **CD**

The classically trained Kansas based guitarist, Douglas Niedt is a technically accomplished performer who for over forty minutes displays real emotional depth and no little sympathy throughout all fourteen of these engaging solo vignettes, which is quite an achievement when tackling such diverse material. The collection includes Duke Ellington's 'Dancers In Love', an Argentine folk dance, 'Misionera' and a hard-edged African groove, 'Mombasa'. When you add to that list a Welsh melody in 'Hyfrydo', the French caricature 'Tango En Skaï' and the radiantly classical arrangement of 'El Noi De La Mere' then it's easy to appreciate the versatility of his playing. Sonically, this recording has exceptional clarity and range. It beautifully reproduces the Ramirez guitar's resonant tonal colours and that percussive beat against the instrument's body heard in an enjoyable opening Spanish romp by Jorge Morel. 'Jugueteando'. It accurately illuminates those rapid shifts and slides across the strings. His perfect pitch and exquisite phrasing help Niedt's fluency, the delicate realisation of bittersweet moments and the broad exploration of a variety of moods. This is a surprisingly satisfying outing when considering the fragmented nature of the programme.

Supplier: www.douglasniedt.com

RP



Bernard Fanning

Tea And Sympathy

Lost Highway DEW90172 **CD**

Tea And Sympathy has already gone five-times platinum in Fanning's native Australia, a fitting tribute to the man's wealth of talent. He's rightly revered as lead singer of Australia's premier rock band Powderfinger, but on this album, recorded in England at Peter Gabriel's Real World studios, Fanning's turned his attentions to a country rock sound more in keeping with Lost Highway stablemate Ryan Adams. Relocating to England to record and write has afforded Fanning's skills a certain 70's charm, but he's whisked it all up and given it a truly modern feel. The results are magnificent. Opener 'Thrill Is Gone' fires itself into the imagination immediately on a wash of acoustic instruments, Fanning's superb voice lifting the song to the greatest heights. It's swiftly followed by 'Wish You Well', a feel good anthem with a rousing chorus and chiming guitars. In fact, it doesn't matter what track you choose, all 14 have a way of crashing into the subconscious and mesmerizing the senses. I love this album's vibe; it doesn't matter where, when or what time you listen to it, the rewards are always so great. Powderfinger are a class rock band but in my opinion what Fanning has done on *Tea And Sympathy* is the direction he needs to keep heading in. He's every bit as good as Adams and if he gets the breaks he'll be a lot bigger.

AH



Angie Palmer

Interviewed by Drew Hobbs

Angie Palmer is a softly spoken, slightly built girl with a liking for the occasional cigarette, but there is a steely determination in her eyes. Not surprising to learn then, that she spent seven years in France busking on the streets and in the bars and clubs, scratching a living along the way. "I learned that the harder I played, the better I ate - literally!" she confesses on her website biography.

It was whilst she was there that she had a chance meeting with one Paul Mason, a university lecturer who was attending a seminar on Philosophy, and who was in the same bar as Angie trying to understand what was being said by his French colleagues. He approached her and asked if she spoke the native tongue, which she did, and she duly translated for him. That meeting developed into something much deeper, and from there Paul discovered a hidden talent for writing lyrics. It was the start of a quite spectacular partnership, one that flourishes and grows with each passing album. BBC2's Bob Harris - someone Angie affectionately refers to as 'Saint Bob' - became an intense fan and started championing her on his radio programme, calling her one of Britain's finest singer/songwriters and regularly featuring her live in the studio.

I met up with Angie and Paul at the Grand Hotel in Brighton armed with 20 odd questions and a brand new recording machine. I started with a few questions about the stunning new album, *Tales Of Light And Darkness*, which finds Angie pushing her vocals a little harder than she did on its predecessor, *Road*. Was that a conscious decision or just the way it turned out?

"Just the way it turned out. You don't really plan a vocal; the song, the lyric and the music determine the way the vocal performance emerges. 'Ravens' for example demanded a dynamic, slightly over-the-top delivery because of its gothic themes of murder and guilt. So I find the mood of a song and sing to its demands." The album's second track 'Down On Zero Street' has a really swinging rock feel to it so



I asked her if there might possibly be a full-blooded, amp-to-eleven album in the locker? "When I started I sang with a lot of rock and blues bands and kept my own acoustic material separate. I'd cover Janis Joplin one night and Joni Mitchell the next. I always loved the energy and release of singing full-on with a band and still do it sometimes, but my own albums are unlikely to ever produce an album of 'Spinal Tap' proportions!" One of my favourite songs on *Tales...* is 'Premonition Blues', which basically paints a very bleak future for our world. I was intrigued to know if the track's overall feeling of hopelessness and resignation really was the way Paul saw it or if he was just

having a bad day when he wrote it? He explains:

"Actually I can't remember what kind of day it was. However, I do remember trying to write a contemporary blues song - if that's not a contradiction in terms - by using contemporary themes and then pushing them to the extremes by using them as signs, or premonitions, of the apocalypse. This seemed to me the ultimate blues. Looking back, I guess it must have been a bad day!"

Because the lyrics form such a strong bond with Angie's musical arrangements I decided to stay awhile on the content of Paul's writing. I asked him about their spiritual and universal leanings and wanted to know where the searching side of him came from? He confides: "For me the God question is an open one and is why it is present in some form in some of my writing. Hopefully the lyrics work at two levels: the personal and the universal. I don't want to write about 'me and my issues' so to speak, but to gesture towards something more shared in our experience. That is what I aim for anyway. As for the searching; I really don't know, though my mother was a very philosophical person, and I did make the mistake of reading *Nausea* when I was a teenager."

Returning the spotlight to Angie, I asked her how old she was when she wrote her first song, and wondered what ▶

► it was about and if it was a positive or negative composition? I remember her looking a bit coy at the interview but she shared the experience nonetheless.

"When I was very young I used to make up little tunes and terrible lyrics walking home from school" she recalls, "but luckily none are around to haunt me. I suppose the first real song I remember

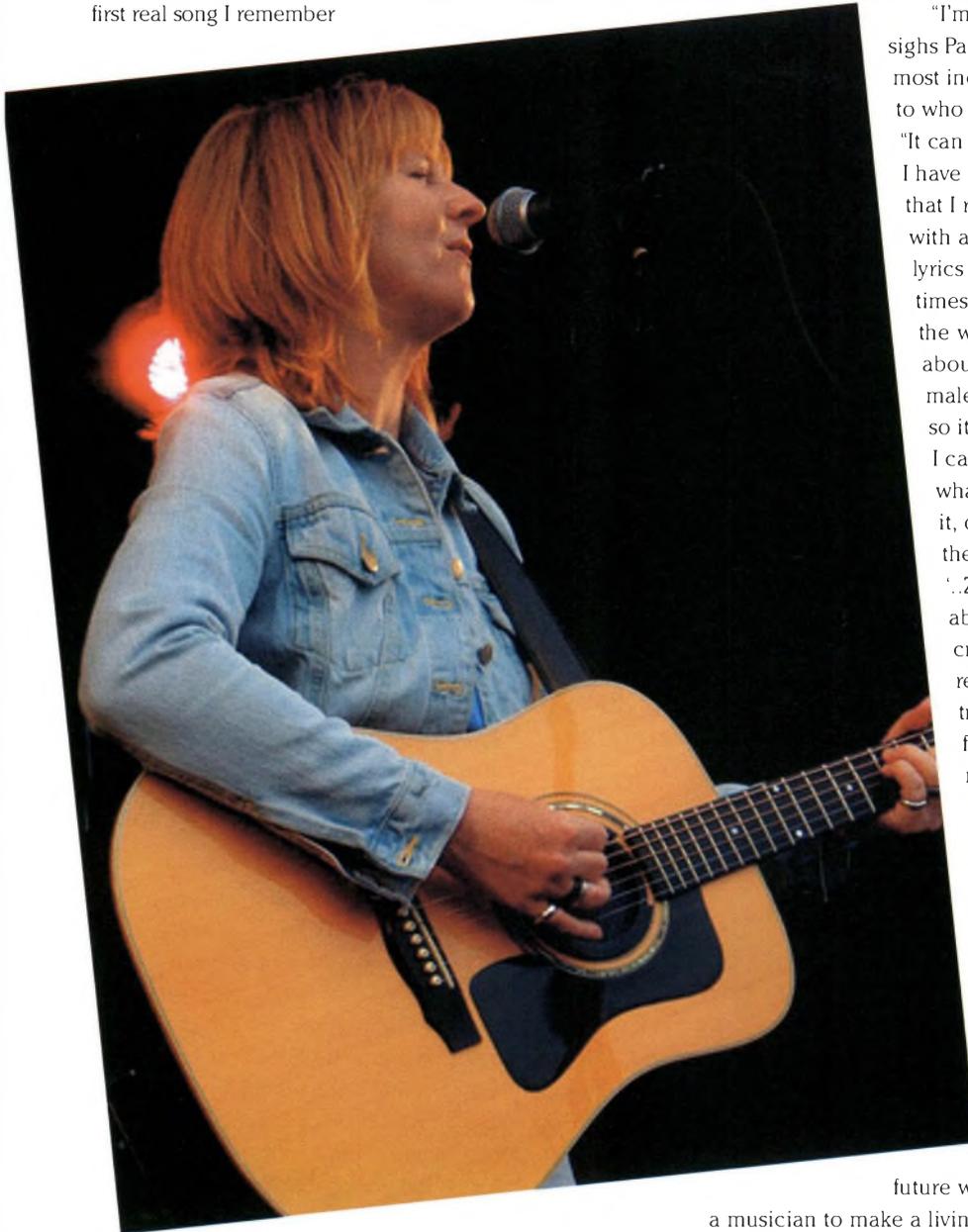
always fascinated to know when and where songs come together for different artists, so I put the question to both of them. "I like to make some time just for fun" Angie muses, "because that is when you are not really thinking of anything in particular. Watching TV with the sound down is good."

"I'm a middle of the night writer" sighs Paul. "Ideas for songs come at the most inconvenient times!" So who goes to who first with the ideas? Angie: "It can work both ways; sometimes I have a tune or chord progression that I really want to do something with and I will leaf through Paul's lyrics and see if anything fits. Other times it will be make the tune to fit the words." Paul: "What is interesting about our partnership is that it's a male writer and a female singer, so it places some limits on what I can write. Angie can't always sing what I write because she can't feel it, or the words don't work when they're sung. This happened with 'Zero Street' which was originally about a 'Jesus' figure who escapes crucifixion and then starts a revolution. It was re-written as a tragic cowboy love story, which for some reason she felt much more comfortable with."

The music business is having to change the way it operates in the marketplace, what with the onset of downloading and the penchant a growing number of the public have for trying to get something for nothing. As Angie Palmer is a true 'independent' artist I felt the need to get her take on this phenomenon. Did she see a time in the not too distant

future when the only option left for a musician to make a living would be via a soul-less download?

"I hope not. We put a lot of effort into the whole package and I would hate to see the end of the album. I have no idea what will happen though. Keep buying the albums folks!" No plans to hand your future over to the majors then? "Oh, we've had offers, but the devil hasn't put enough money on the table to tempt us yet!"



writing was about traveling...here's where I embarrass myself; it was about my 2CV... "bought myself a cheap old car, painted it sunny yellow" is thankfully all I can remember! The first one I was proud of and still sing is '50 Thousand Wrongs'. I wrote it whilst watching the First Gulf War on TV and it's the most overtly political song that I have written.' Staying on the subject of song writing I am



Fiddler Tam The Music of Thomas Erskine

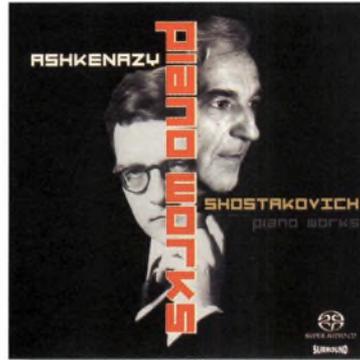
David McGuinness, Concerto Caledonia

Linn Records CKD 240 (SA)HD

A son of Scotland and contemporary of Haydn, Thomas Erskine (the 6th Earl of Kellie) was an eminent violinist and prolific composer. His cavalier approach to the Baroque resulted in an often euphoric, exceptionally lovely, highly enjoyable and varied body of work that combines lyricism and wit with some marvellous harmonies. *Death Is Now My Only Treasure* and *The Lover's Message* featuring the soprano Mhairi Lawson drip with Masonic symbolism and metaphysical rakishness. His "message" is a coy yet charmingly insincere one - playing the "dying for love" card for all it's worth in the time honoured pursuit of sexual congress. David McGuinness' keyboard skills on the harpsichord and his sympathetic direction of the Concerto Caledonia players both here and for other pieces like the lively *The Maid Of The Mill Overture*, the vivid and emotionally sophisticated *Quartet in A* and through the courtly elegance found in the *Trio Sonata No.5 in E* effortlessly guides us amongst the trysts, expressive exchanges and poetic conceits. Performed on period instruments, this atmospheric recording taped in the Crichton Collegiate church, Midlothian and at St. Judes on the Hill in London has persuasive warmth, delicacy and refinement about it that adds to an amiable and occasionally impassioned gesture or two buried within this agreeable music.

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC



Shostakovich Piano Works

Vladimir Ashkenazy, Piano

Decca 470 649-2 (SA)D

A great piano recording and fine performance full of robust firmly located images, which also shows us just how much delicacy this format possesses. It recreates each and every subtle dynamic shift or explosive exclamation delivered by the impeccable and dexterous hands of Vladimir Ashkenazy in this wonderfully coherent and consistent approach. He gives a virtuoso display throughout, right from an opening *Piano Sonata No.2* whose sparse thematic material is woven around this most traditional of forms to those miniatures like the *Nocturne* from *The Limpid Stream* or *Lyric Waltz* originally found in *Dances of the Dolls*. Then there's those *Aphorisms Op.13*: ten youthful, short, revolutionary pieces, ever so pithy in nature, which are loosely associated with dance forms. "Succinct" is the watchword both here and in the quite charming rendition of his *Five Preludes* and that capricious and very popular work, the *Three Fantastic Dances*. Shostakovich piano compositions are not always comfortable or easily accessible but they have undeniable character and Ashkenazy (who is an elegant master of shape, tonality and drama) perhaps more than any of his esteemed peers, cuts to the heart of each structure to expose the underlying intent.

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC



Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No.2 & Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini Lang Lang, piano, Valery Gergiev, Marinsky Theatre Orchestra

DGG 00289 477 5499 (SA)

The *Second Piano Concerto* is one of my favourites because of those broadly romantic moods so tinged with suffering and its grand sweeping melodies of tremendous beauty. Chinese born pianist Lang Lang taps into the expressive heart of this music through a precise, fluent and eminently likeable reading that balances differing demands within a score that calls both for considered reflection and vitality. He adopts safe speeds (unlike Richter's controversial and famously slow, yet highly successful reading of the first movement coupled to a breakneck tempo for the allegro found in his early 1960s recording for this label) but does not overstate a languid and relaxed side heard in the slower sections of this concerto. For the *Rhapsody* his elasticity and flair conveys the true sense of impetus, excitement and virtuosity underpinning this music. Conductor, orchestra and soloist really gel in these performances and the instrumental balance has been astutely engineered to reveal that rich, sonorous and firmly focused piano timbre as well as the wider enveloping warmth conveyed by the Marinsky Theatre players. Overall, this is an excellent recording of a powerful and persuasive rendition possessing considerable emotional depth.

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC





**Handel – Six Violin Sonatas
Bach – Partita No.2**

**Alfredo Campoli, violin
George Malcolm, harpsichord**

Testament SBT 1358

The *Partita No.2* with its renowned *Chaconne* dates from 1948 and is the only unaccompanied Bach recording made by Campoli, so in one respect it is a valuable musical document. However this is a performance that I am not completely comfortable with, mainly due to a rather seesawing nature to the chords and an understated almost modest approach to such a virtuoso piece. However, the *Six Violin Sonatas* ascribed to Handel have more purposeful, strongly melodic and rhythmic qualities. Campoli's playing here, and that of his eminent accompanist, George Malcolm, conveys the stately magnificence of this score with great assurance. Testament's transfer improves upon an early 1950s Decca LP. The instrumental balance is superior, with the violin better focused, revealing the tonal richness and warmth of the Campoli technique. True, there are a few lapses of phrasing in the slower movements but these can be overlooked because of the obvious rapport that these musicians had for chamber works of this kind. It certainly illuminates how their approach fifty years ago differed from that of today's luminaries of bow and board.

RP



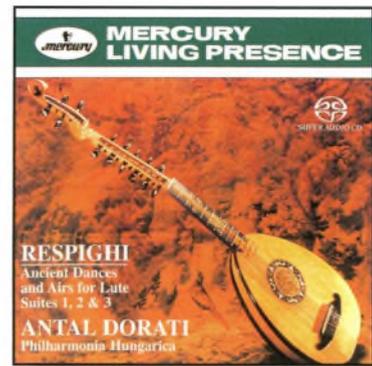
**Hugo Alfvén
Symphony No. 4, 'From
The Outermost Skerries'**
Iceland Symphony Orchestra;
Niklas Willén, cond.

Naxos 8.557284

A soft murmur, like water silently flowing its way, vents in an eruptive demonstration of the sheer force of the ocean. Suddenly silence, a solo violin creates the atmosphere of moonlight shining on dark water. "The action takes place in the Skerries, where sea rages among the rocks..." Seldom have pictures of nature been painted in music with such a vividness and attention to detail to make a program unnecessary! One wonders whether he was also a talented water colourist – he uses the orchestra almost as if he's using paint! God moves in mysterious ways, but one also wonders why Hugo Alfvén hasn't been paid as much attention as he deserves.

Alfvén, like George Enesco, transformed the love of his country into music. Inspired by the rich and colourful traditional and folk music, his compositions are deeply seated on the sound of the symphonic poems of Smetana and others from the 19th century. Perhaps this retrospective focus and lack of obvious innovation explains his failure to reach a public outside Sweden. His use of human voices as musical instruments is really touching, and fits perfectly. The male and female voices bear witness to a love story – but the star role is reserved for nature, and that provides more than enough fuel for great emotion and drama, for sure!

AKB



**Respighi
Ancient Dances And Airs
For Lute Suites 1,2 & 3**
Antal Dorati conducting the
Philharmonia Hungarica

Mercury 470 637-2 MSA

Some forty-five years after they were originally recorded these brilliant and exceptionally sensitive performances by Dorati's countrymen remain the finest available. Respighi's taxing Twentieth Century string orchestration of Renaissance and Baroque dance music with its three or four part chords and exposed high notes are eloquently delivered through an enviable degree of delicacy, elegance and liveliness. Exquisite, atmospheric and beautifully sculpted scenes effortlessly unfold before us. Played out with such sublime virtuosity, especially in the harpsichord part, that this version demands a place in every collection. The choice of format though will provoke a much more intense debate. I have American, British and French LPs and the standard CD release to choose from as points of reference. The CD layer is the same as before, but the SACD's layer's position within this hierarchy is an interesting one. It does not replace my U.S. FR1/FR3 pressing SR 90199 at the top of the pile (RSF probably owns an even better cut) but does possess sufficient clarity, detail and warmth to take second spot. What it lacks is that musical snap and sheer presence, naturalness and instrumental lustre heard from the LP. However, at £11.99 the SACD is realistically priced; a pristine vintage vinyl copy will set you back much more.

RP





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Thelonious Monk

The Classic Quartet

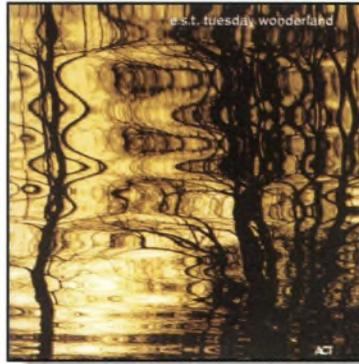
Candid CCD 79551

Monk's original quartet first came into being at the time of his renowned 1959 town hall concert in New York. That quartet included Charlie Rouse (tenor) along with Sam Jones and Art Taylor. The combination worked so well that it was expanded to a quintet with the addition of Thad Jones in time for the recording of the *Five by Five* album. This version of his quartet dates from 1963 and still features Rouse, here joined by Butch Warren (bass), and Frankie Dunlop (drums).

The set comprises a familiar selection opening with a storming take on Monk and Clarke's 'Epistrophy' – one of his earlier compositions (it was originally titled 'Fly Right'), and pretty much his theme tune, frequently being used to either open or close a show. This is followed by the less familiar 'Ba-Lue Bolivar Ba-Lues-Are' (or just plain 'Bolivar Blues'), named after the New York hotel where Monk once stayed. Things really come alive with 'Evidence'. The standard 'Just a Gigolo' is given a poignant and tender reading by an unaccompanied Monk. The album closes with an extended version of 'Blue Monk' with another great workout from Rouse followed by a superb solo from Monk – sly and ingenious and the best in this set.

Whilst this is no hifi demonstration disk – the sound lacks weight – the music is what counts and this is a very worthwhile release.

DD



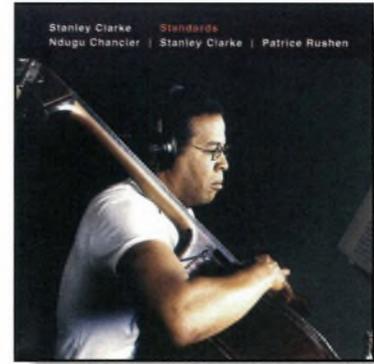
EST

Tuesday Wonderland

ACT Records

Swedish trio EST has been gathering momentum and garnering favourable press all around the jazz world of late, I suspect this has as much to do with the band's consistency and persistence as anything because the quality of the band's output has not changed to any dramatic extent. What EST does extremely well is lay down a groove that while it has a strong jazz feel thanks to the combination of piano, double bass and drums, is probably closer to blues in its composition. Bandleader Esbjörn Svensson keeps things interesting by treating his piano both mechanically and with effects, so that at times it clatters and buzzes like some demented hurdy gurdy. Dan Berglund's bass is likewise remarkably versatile, delivering a good impersonation of an electric guitar under duress. *Tuesday Wonderland* is if anything an improvement on last year's *Viaticum*, the grooves chugging with an ease and drive that is infectious while the interplay between musicians is superb. Drum and piano in particular lock into one another to mesmeric effect on the title track. At times it can get a bit bombastic; the opener tries a little too hard to woo the rock audience but for the most part EST sticks to what it does best – fantastic rhythms and beautiful piano work.

JK



Stanley Clarke

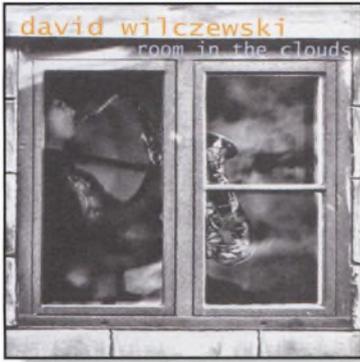
Standards

Kind of Blue KOB10010

Stanley Clarke, despite a grounding in acoustic bass working alongside the likes of Dexter Gordon, Pharoah Sanders and Stan Getz, really came to prominence on electric bass. His playing was influenced by rock, Hendrix and McLaughlin in particular, although he always maintained a real feel for melody, moving to a more funk-oriented style as his career progressed. His collaborations with keyboardist George Duke were hugely successful. Clarke has constantly evolved and changed direction during his career, working as a producer and even scoring film soundtracks, but more recently has gravitated back to contemporary jazz and this album of standards. Originally recorded in 2001 for the short-lived Vertical label the album has now been remastered by Kind of Blue and two bonus tracks added, along with a bonus DVD of the recording sessions. Clarke is joined by Leon 'Ngudu' Chancler (drums), and Patrice Rushen (piano). It's clear from the get go as the band launch into a sprightly reading of 'Lover Man' that these three are having a ball. Other treats in this high octane set include a lovely relaxed reading of 'Take Five' but really everything here is of such a consistently high standard that it'd be churlish to single more out. Just make sure you get your bonus tracks – my early promo didn't have them!

DD





David Wilczewski

Room In The Clouds

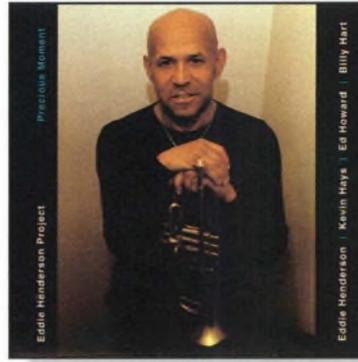
Opus 3 CD22051 

This set really comes alive on track two 'Wayne's World' (thankfully dedicated to Shorter and not Mike Myers), a slow building circular theme showcasing the virtuoso guitar of Max Schultz alongside Wilczewski's tenor as it works through a host of variations slowly gaining in intensity to really powerful effect. The title track, an interpretation of 'Munen-Musou' meaning free of worldly thoughts in the original Japanese, sees Wilczewski move to alto and Magnus Persson adding vibes to the mix to enhance the spacey atmosphere and help bring the best from this ethereal theme. 'Elvin Jones' naturally has a solid, driving beat with the tune initially taken by Wilczewski on flute before moving to tenor. The tune is based on an old Elvis Jones/Grant Green number 'I Want To Hold Your Hand'. Another really strong number is 'Fun For Kofi', dedicated bass player Kofi Bentsi-Enchill. It's full of texture opening with the bass doubling Wilczewski's electronically treated tenor to great effect.

The standard of playing, the variety of texture and the just slightly cool tone throughout the album make for an intriguing listen that I'm sure will reveal more on each playing. Complemented by an appropriately full bodied and spacious production from Opus 3 this is well worth seeking out.

DD

RECORDING
MUSIC



Eddie Henderson Project

Precious Moment

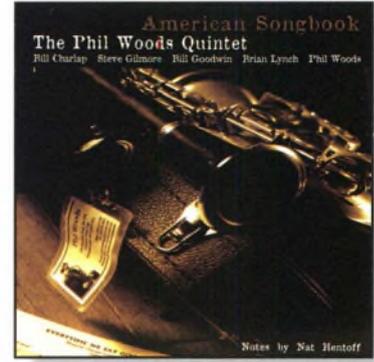
Kind of Blue KOB 10008 

Initially encouraged to get involved in jazz by Miles Davis, Henderson (trumpet and flugelhorn), first came to prominence in the 1970's as a member of Herbie Hancock's sextet (along with Billy Hart). He has since worked with Art Blakey, Joe Henderson, Pharoah Sanders and many other jazz greats alongside carving a strong reputation as a headliner with fine albums such as *Inspiration*, *Dark Shadows* and *Think On Me*. This album sees him in good form leading a quartet comprising Kevin Hays (piano and synthesiser), Ed Howard (bass) and drummer Billy Hart.

Originally the album was going to be called 'Around the World in A' since the majority of the tunes were in A, but ultimately Henderson plumped for the title of another tune composed by his wife Natsuko, 'Precious Moment'. A good choice since it neatly sums the experience of listening to Henderson's rich, liquid tone throughout this gentle set. Favourites include a relaxed work through the standard 'Unforgettable' with Hays shining throughout, and an excellent version of Bill Evan's 'Blue in Green'. Whilst it'll never win any awards for innovation, this is an honest and superbly played set that truly is packed with precious moments. The warm, full-bodied recording does it full justice too.

DD

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Phil Woods Quintet

American Songbook

Kind of Blue 10005 

This set features alto saxophonist Phil Woods alongside his long-time collaborators Bill Goodwin (drums), and Steve Gilmore (bass). The three have been playing together for over 30 years. They are joined here by trumpeter Brian Lynch and pianist Bill Charlap. To quote Woods: "coming back to the great American songbook. I've been training for it all my life. Many of my other albums have focused on obscure pieces by Duke Ellington and Oliver Nelson... But I've never before done a recording just of songs in settings like these." Well it's certainly paid a musical dividend because this is a refreshing, straight ahead take from a band that demonstrates its musical chops with every note. There's plenty of superb interplay but also the necessary space to let each soloist shine. Just listen to the nine plus minute take on Kern's 'All The Things You Are' for an excellent example. It doesn't seem a second too long yet there's room for some superb soloing from (in sequence) Woods, Lynch, Charlap (particularly good here), and Gilmore. Other standouts include a lively reading of Porter's 'I've Got You Under My Skin', a slinky, bluesy take on Arlen's 'When The Sun Comes Out'. This is a remarkably cohesive set. Subtle stuff, superbly arranged, expertly played and well recorded. What's not to like?

DD

RECORDING
MUSIC





The Django Reinhardt Festival

Live At Birdland – Gypsy Swing!

Kind of Blue 10001

Recorded live at New York's legendary Birdland – during the 2002 Reinhardt Festival a hugely popular event since its inception in 2000: That popularity is evident from the first frantically paced notes of 'Swing Gitan'. If you can keep your feet still throughout this you'd better check your footwear since you must be wearing diver's boots. The 15 musicians comprise a mix of European and American exponents of this wonderful music. The American contingent includes the likes of Grady Tate (drums) and Jay Leonhardt (bass). The Europeans fielded a team including Dorado Schmidt (lead guitar), Serge Camps (rhythm guitar), and Ludovic Beier (accordion). Mostly the music steams ahead with the band powering through the likes of 'Minor Swing', 'I Can't Give You Anything But Love' and 'Stompin' at Decca' although there's the occasional breather such as the delicate take on 'New York in November' and a lovely reading of 'Melodie au Crepuscule' with some fine sax from James Carter. The album closes with a bonus track from the first concert in 2000 that features Django's son Babik along with a quartet performing 'Pretext'. This is a CD brimming with the pleasure of music making and successfully delivers an hour or so of sheer foot tapping delight.

DD



Keith Jarrett

The Carnegie Hall Concert

ECM

The hottest jazz ticket of 2005 was Keith Jarrett's return to solo performing after a ten year sojourn; he played at New York's Carnegie Hall in September and blew the lucky buggers away. This two-disc set captures the event's ten parts and five encores in a recording that sets the benchmark for CD sound. ECM has so far stayed away from the high resolution formats despite its long term reputation for sound quality, but if it can achieve this with 16/44.1 why bother. Disc one contains the first five parts and opens in a surprisingly challenging style with a pretty discordant piece designed, perhaps, to test the audience. This style recurs throughout the album but with varying levels of success. Part IV, for instance, develops as it progresses and flirts with melody and pattern before reverting to player piano-esque flourishes of technical skill, yet somehow works. For those who prefer a more obvious musical path Parts II and III fit the bill as do the majority on disc two. There is even a glimpse into the player's soul on III, something that appears fleetingly on Jarrett's best works. The difference here is that there are none of the meanderings of yore, once an idea is played out he stops, but sometimes you wish he didn't. This should be scored between 7 and 10 for music but that's not an option so 8 is an average.

JK



Count Basie And The Kansas City 7

Speakers Corner Records

Shortly after Bob Thiele took over from Creed Taylor as Impulse! Records' producer in 1961 he issued several classic albums from artists spanning several generations. While Impulse! is often called *The House That Trane Built* (also the name of a recent book about the label's history by Ashley Kahn) and is best known for new jazz, the label also released some great sessions from the Ellington and Basie bands. This is a reissue of AS-15, and is a remarkable album of small band music. I take issue with the Penguin Guide's overly cute and dismissive assessment of this record - it's a superior Basie album and I never tire of hearing it. While its hard to find a Basie album that does not swing, this one is even better than most, perhaps because Basie is propelling a small group rather than his usual big band. Thad Jones is outstanding on trumpet; Frank Wess equally so on flute and the rhythm section of the Count, Freddie Green, Eddie Jones and Sonny Payne are spot on. The session was recorded by Rudy Van Gelder in his Englewood Cliffs studio in 1962, and it's among the finest sounding Impulse! albums. There are no weak spots in the ultra transparent recording, with each instrument's timbre accurately represented, a good bass foundation and a pleasing stereo layout.

DDD



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Mel Tormé with The Marty Paich Orchestra

Swing Schubert Alley

Speakers Corner Records 180g

Tormé's recording career as a jazz vocalist spanned half of the twentieth century. He recorded extensively for Bethlehem in the 1950s, Verve in the 1960s and Concord Jazz during the last two decades of the century. This 1960 Norman Granz production, (originally released as Verve MG VS-6146) teams Tormé with the Marty Paich Orchestra capturing a swinging session with these musicians at the top of their game. The orchestra of west coast all-stars includes Art Pepper, Frank Rosolino, Red Callender and Bill Perkins. Like Paich's better known, and extremely collectible LPs on Warner Bros. Records from the late 1950s, this is west coast jazz at its finest. Tormé performs a selection of show tune chestnuts (from the likes of Cole Porter, Leonard Bernstein and Oscar Hammerstein) chosen for their jazz potential. Tormé's voice during this period is a fascinating blend of Tony Bennett and Wayne Newton. I had not listened to this record in many years, and within seconds of dropping stylus on vinyl, my attention was transfixed and I was scribbling notes about how this record knocked my socks off. I cannot think of another Tormé album I prefer; it catches him at the peak of his vocal powers, in stunning sound. Speakers Corner has done another great job in mastering this well recorded session. Don't miss this under-appreciated treasure.

DDD

RECORDING
MUSIC



Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D Piano Concerto No. 1 Tetzlaff; Lugansky. Nagano, Russian N.O.

Pentatone Classics PTC 5186 022. SACD

This is one excellent disc! While I'm sure you've already got your favourite recordings of these two Tchaikovsky concertos, I think you owe it to yourself to add this one to your collection. Prior to hearing the violin concerto, I was not familiar with Tetzlaff's recordings. This German violinist certainly delivers the goods. There is nothing precise about his playing and he delivers a precise reading that follows the music's cohesive construction. But as good as Tetzlaff is with his violin, so too is Lugansky with the piano. I think he is currently one of the top pianists on the classical circuit. He's very well represented in the recorded catalogues and has been recording since he was thirteen! While he is well known for his Rachmaninov (and he has performed a fabulous Chopin *Etudes* disc for Erato), I find his Tchaikovsky mesmerizing. His pace is rapid but not overbearing, insightful but still youthful, and his technique is exciting and gripping. As is the case with all Pentatone Classics, the CD layer is an exceptionally down-conversion of the DSD layers. While this is not a new release it was new to me and I hope it will find a home with you. Not to be missed!

Supplier: www.pentatonemusic.com

RSF

RECORDING
MUSIC



Rosemary Clooney and Duke Ellington

Blue Rose

Pure Pleasure Records 180g

Like Mel Tormé, Rosemary Clooney spent her golden years recording for Concord Jazz. This recording, originally released as Columbia CL 872, may be the jewel of her discography. George Clooney's aunt Rosemary puts her stamp on eleven Ellington/Strayhorn tunes backed by the Ellington band. During her early recording years, most of Clooney's output was more pop oriented but she established her jazz credentials with this album, becoming one of Concord Records' jazz stalwarts by the '80's. She turns in excellent renditions of several songs, especially 'It Don't Mean A Thing' and 'Mood Indigo', but some of her work may seem a little tame in comparison to the top echelon of jazz vocalists from the golden era. Or maybe it's just that I can't get the picture of Clooney's role in *White Christmas* out of my mind when listening to her sing. Still, she puts almost any female jazz vocalist on the scene today to shame. The mono recording, like other Ellington Columbia recordings of the day, is as well done as anything that was being recorded at the time. Even though Clooney's vocals were overdubbed, it does not detract from an extremely fine recording. Sit back with this splendid sounding record and wonder why nobody does it this way anymore. Kudos to Pure Pleasure for another winner.

DDD

RECORDING
MUSIC





Ludwig Van Beethoven
Quatuors à cordes no.7, 8 & 9;
"Razumovsky" op.59 no.1, 2 & 3.

The Tokyo String Quartet.

Harmonia Mundi HM807423/4. SACD

The Tokyo String Quartet has captivated audiences and critics alike since it was founded more than 30 years ago. It is comprised of violist Kazuhide Isomura, a founding member of the group; second violinist Kikuei Ikeda, who joined the ensemble in 1974; cellist Clive Greensmith, the former Principal Cellist of London's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, who joined in 1999; and first violinist Martin Beaver, who joined the ensemble in 2002.

A new recording for Harmonia Mundi and a celebration of the quartet's new configuration, we are treated to an exceptionally skilful performance of Beethoven's quartets. With the revolutionary quartets of *Opus 59*, Beethoven left behind the classical confines of the genre and gave it a truly symphonic dimension. Count Andreas Kirillovich Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador in Vienna commissioned these works in 1806 and they were completed by Beethoven in six short months. The masterful playing here provides the perfect balance between technical control and emotional freedom. Harmonia Mundi has given us spectacular sound and the Tokyo gives us approximately 108 minutes of sheer excitement and beauty. These readings are exceptionally polished and are the first offering in a new set of Beethoven quartets by this fabulous group of players.

Supplier: www.harmoniamundi.com

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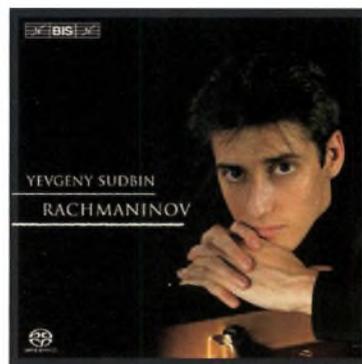


Gerry Mulligan meets Ben Webster

Speakers Corner Records 180g

This LP combines the sound of Ben Webster, the tenor saxophone's most luscious sounding proponent, with Mulligan's equally mellow baritone sax to give us the equivalent of double-double chocolate cake. It's a true orgy of sound. The session was recorded in 1959, and in addition to Webster and Mulligan it features the classic west coast rhythm section of Jimmy Rowles on piano, Mel Lewis on drums and Leroy Vinnegar on bass. The LP mixes a number of slow ballads and up-tempo swinging numbers. Most are Gerry Mulligan compositions, and they are all perfectly suited to bring out the vibrato-laden sound of both soloists. The record was originally released as Verve MG VS-6104 with a photo cover of the two horn players, different from the art cover used on the mono release (MG V-8343). This music is available on a CD in its original form and as a "complete" two CD package, including alternate takes. This stereo re-issue gives up nothing to the mono version, with the soloists occupying their own space, rather than being each stuck left and right in their respective speakers. Any way you get this music, it is a desert island disc. Speakers Corner has done an exemplary job of remastering this well recorded session, in rich sound unrivaled by any CD. It deserves my highest recommendation.

DDD



Sergei Rachmaninov

Piano Works

Yevgeny Sudbin

Bis 1518 SACD

Released in November of 2005, Sudbin's second disc for Bis is a tour de force. The engineers have done a remarkable job in capturing the incredible sound and power of his Steinway Grand 'D'. From the first moments of the Chopin *Op. 22*, you will be captured by the exquisite playing of this young master. I've only listened to this disc in stereo and whilst the CD layer is quite remarkable, I can only imagine what this will sound like on a full blown multi-channel configuration. After last year's outing at the Northern Sound & Vision show in Manchester it's not hard to imagine how much better a piano sounds in Multi-Channel surround than in stereo.

This is playing of the highest order. For someone who is only 26, it's really quite amazing the vivid skills Sudbin brings to his piano. This is as exciting a piano disc of Rachmaninov works as I've ever heard. The performances are colourful, passionate and offer a deep sense of understanding you rarely hear from someone who's as young as Sudbin. I am looking forward to more from this grand pianist. He'll have you sitting on the edge of your chair, holding on for dear life. Outstanding in every sense of the word!

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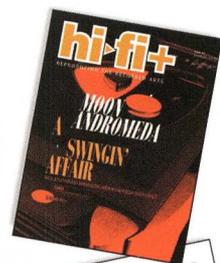
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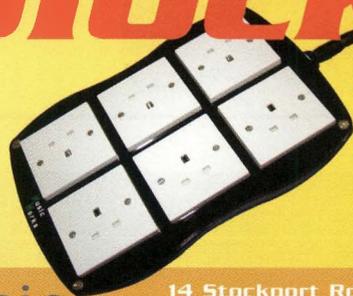
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Old School...

An all-analogue, residential studio in the 21st Century: who'd have thunk it?

by Roy Gregory

In last Issue's review of Eleanor McEvoy's latest album, *Out There*, I mentioned the fact that it was an all-analogue recording, made at the new Grange Studios. Of course, analogue recordings are far from unfamiliar in audiophile circles, but McEvoy is a serious mainstream artist with major sales potential. But what's interesting is not just that there's

Converting the barn into a purpose-built facility and the two cottages to provide accommodation has been a far longer process than originally envisaged, finally reaching fruition in April this year. *Out There* was the inaugural project and bodes well for the future, especially when you consider that the studio is booked solid through

March, with its second album just completed (a solo effort from Mike Harrison of *Spooky Tooth*). The day I spoke to Dave Williams I just missed Eric Bibb, who'd dropped in for a look around, so who knows what might be on the cards... What is it that draws these artists back to a technology and style of recording that the music industry thinks it's left behind forever?

The thinking behind *The Grange* is interesting. Faced with a market in



a studio out there prepared to meet her sonic concerns and provide an analogue recording environment, but that it's a new venture. *The Grange* is the brainchild of Dave and Sue Williams, owners of Frontier Promotions, one of the biggest independent influences on the UK blues and roots rock scene. But Dave's first love is the studio, a field in which his credits stretch back as far as Ike and Tina Turner, including the likes of John Mayall and Peter Green along the way.

When Frontier took up residence in a sprawling Norfolk farm and its outbuildings, the barn was just too tempting an opportunity to miss. In fact, as long ago as 1999, there were recordings coming out of *The Grange*, with Eric Bibb's *Home To Me* being the first. But these were ad hoc affairs, using the house as studio space and stringing cables to the desk situated in a cottage.



which digital recording, sampling and Pro-Tools have created the capacity for a genuine "home" studio, big name recording venues have been folding at an alarming rate. So, the reasoning goes, do something different, something that attacks the



► weaknesses in the now fashionable approach, the primacy of the computer, the notion of music as a construction process, digital Lego. The decision to go analogue was crucial, not just in technology terms, but just as importantly, in terms of attitude.



Whilst DW is quick to point out the sonic benefits of analogue recordings running on two-inch tape, it's the notion that sonic quality matters in the first place that really counts. What he wanted to create was a large space, a single acoustic in which multiple musicians can perform together. The Grange offers one large space with two smaller, but inter-connecting areas, so that even if you put the drums in a separate space there's still a visual link between the players. Each area has a range of removable acoustic treatments, meaning that they can be tailored to meet the requirements of a particular project without changing the site, the personnel or the venue. It's this desire to preserve the chemistry in a band's performance that dictates the approach, whilst also demanding the weight, warmth and subtle substance that analogue



recording brings to the process. The intention is to capture the sound of multiple instruments, along with all the low-level bleed and harmonic ghosting that binds them together. To that end the studio boasts an array of vintage mics from the likes of Neumann and B&K, including valve models. There are vintage compressors and if you want to use them, Neve 9098 mic-amps to replace the ones in the desk.

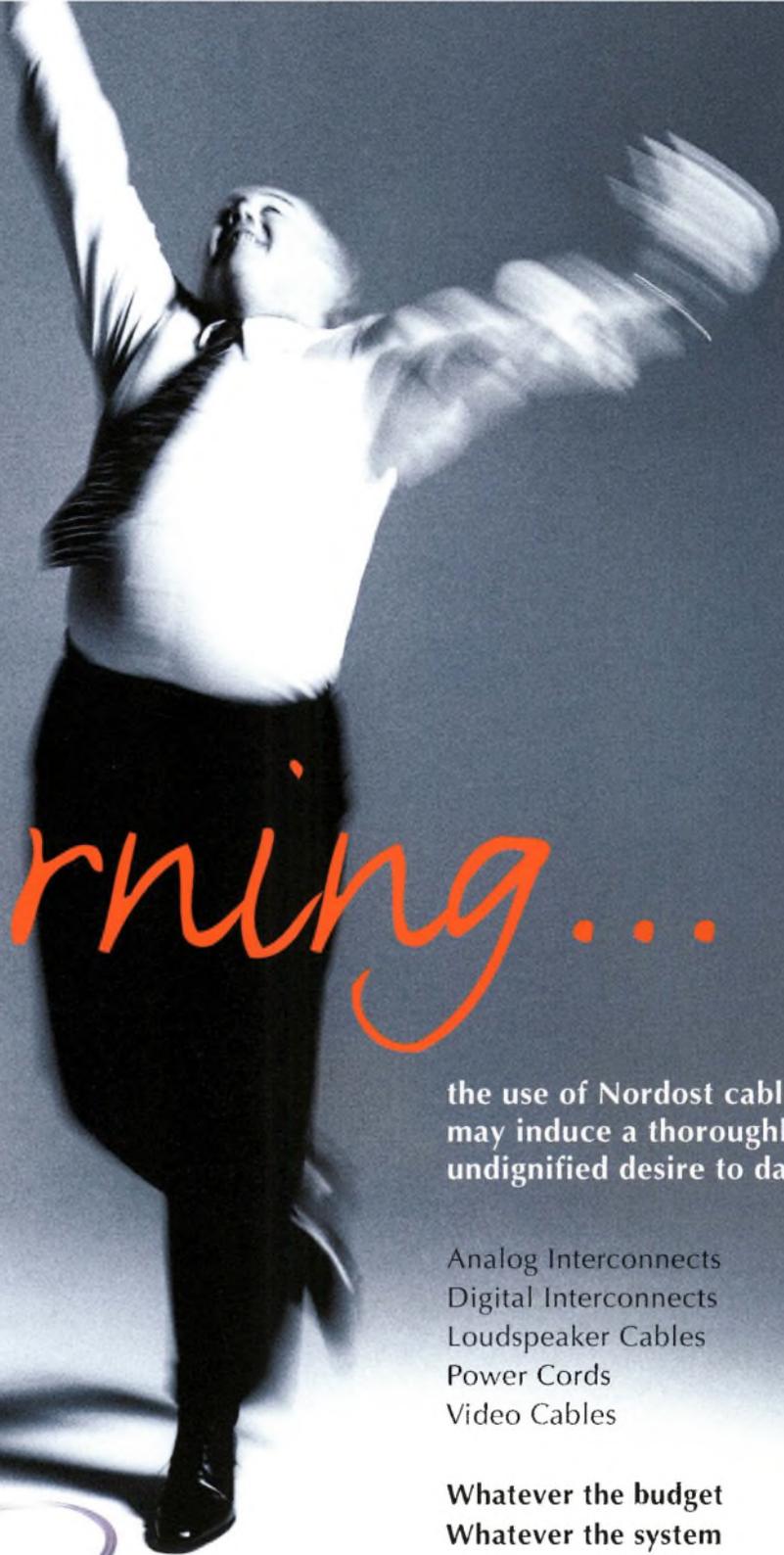
The analogue tapes are run on a Studer 827 Gold Series 24-track machine, although there's also a Radar hard-disc running as a slave. (Thankfully the panic over two-inch tape stocks is over, with new tape back in production.) Likewise, the AMEK Rembrandt desk is an analogue design that incorporates digital control. Finally, for analogue mastering, there's a half-inch Studer A80. It's a pragmatic array, with DW happy to use which-

ever approach will give the best results. As he points out, "Analogue isn't just about technology, it's more about attitude. Why fix something digitally by faking it when you can just do another take?" It's an approach that has proved equally appealing to older performers who experienced it first time round, and younger ones who've been put through the

Pro-Tools mill and found it wanting. Either way, it signals a refreshing return to concerns over the sound quality of mainstream recordings by serious artists, which has to be good news. DW again; "If a guy has spent years learning to play a guitar, that's what he wants to do, what he wants to concentrate on when making a recording. What he doesn't want to do is spend hours waiting while an engineer recalls stuff from hard-disc and goes to work on it – or waiting for the drum track to arrive from LA by e-mail." I couldn't put it better myself...



You can read more about The Grange at www.grangestudios.co.uk



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