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HI FI NEWS / JULY 06 / KEN KESSLER / DUETTE

**"THEIR PERFORMANCE IS REMARKABLE, OPTIMIZED AND IDEALLY SITED
IT REALLY IS SPECTACULAR"**

HI FI PLUS / ISSUE 47 / ROY GREGORY / DUETTE

PROVO-NANCE

Provo, Utah's hi-fi artisans, the speaker builders of **Wilson Audio**, have now been at the top of the high-end tree for three decades. Recent recognition of their achievements tells us that complacency has yet to affect David A. Wilson's enthusiasm, as is evident in the rave reviews afforded the stunning new small speaker, the **Duette** - a Wilson 'first' designed to perform as well against walls or on shelves as it does in free space. The award-winning **Alexandria** has been acknowledged globally as the greatest cost-no-object speaker available today. As the **Alexandria** paves the way for new and exciting advances in music reproduction, so, too, does the deliriously exciting **Wilson WATT Puppy System 8**, which remains the benchmark for consumers who desire compact speakers that demonstrate zero compromise. For this season, we're pleased to note that its single-chassis sister, the sublime **Sophia** has been revised to earn the **Sophia 2** name. And for the comprehensive embrace of authentic surround-sound, only the wall-mountable effects speakers and centre channel model in the **WATCH** range achieve the ultimate in home theatre sound playback. Now that's what we call "Provonance"



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EDITORIAL

Editor

Roy Gregory

Contributors

Anke K. Bronner
Chris Binns
Mark Childs
Richard Clews
Anthony H. Cordesman
Dave Davies
Dennis D. Davis
Steve Dickinson
Peter Downard
Richard S. Foster
Ian Harris
Jason Hector
Andrew Hobbs
Jimmy Hughes
Jason Kennedy
Paul Messenger
Reuben Parry
Alan Sircom
David Stirling
Chris Thomas

Photography

Simon Marsh

Cartoonist

Dave Davies

The Editorial Office can be contacted at:

Hi-Fi+ Editorial
Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd
Cornerways House
School Lane
Ringwood, Hampshire
BH24 1LG
United Kingdom
Tel. +44 (0)1425 461155
Net. www.hifiplus.com

Advertising

Pete Irewin
Tel. +44 (0)1425 461113
Fax. +44 (0)1425 461139
Email. sales@hifiplus.com

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Design

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

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Well, if the London show proved anything, it was to vindicate our decision to run our demonstrations across the road at the Renaissance. One of the prime considerations, every time we select the venue for one of the magazine's presentations, is sound quality – and the Park Inn isn't blessed with a large number of good sounding rooms that will accommodate a reasonable number of listeners. By going with the tried and trusted rooms in what used to be the Penta, the result was a worthwhile experience for all those who made the short trip across the Bath Road. I'll cover the demonstration's specifics in greater detail in the next issue, but first and foremost, a heartfelt thanks to all those who made the effort to visit and were so warm in their appreciation for our efforts. In fact, the differences demonstrated were so obvious that apparently, certain forum members are accusing us of rigging the results! To which the response is simple – how and why? What we did was completely transparent and open to inspection. It's also completely repeatable – in your own home and in your own system. If you choose to ignore that fact, then that's up to you...

But of far greater concern was the overall response to the show. According to the girls on our stand, the overwhelming reaction from visitors who'd been to our demonstration and the other rooms at the Renaissance was a variation on the theme of, "Why do the systems over there (in the Renaissance) sound so good, while the one's over here (in the Park Inn) sound so bad?" The answer, of course, is that the rooms are better – but more importantly still, the smaller number of exhibitors meant that rooms could be spaced out, creating lower levels of noise pollution and a much more relaxed environment. The lesson here is simple; even if the industry seems to have forgotten that sound matters and quality counts, the public hasn't – which probably helps explain the drop in show attendance. If we want better shows we need better venues and we need more companies to make a greater effort when it comes to giving people what they expect. The days of simply setting up a system and playing a bit of music are long gone. As the Wilson room at the Park Inn proved (the one honourable exception to the barrage of disgruntled complaints) we can – and should – do better.



"...At the relatively modest cost involved in a complete Piccolo loom, this sort of musically complete and engaging performance is frankly unheard of..." Roy Gregory, Hifi+ magazine



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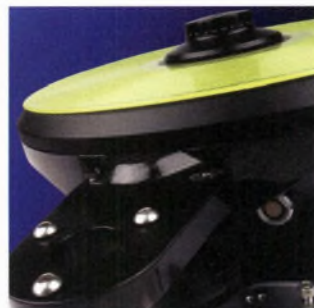
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BACK TO THE FUTURE...

by Anthony H. Cordesman

In the last issue I posited the need for the high-end to take room correction seriously and waxed lyrical about the analogue room correction approach adopted by Richard Vandersteen in his 5A and Quatro loudspeakers. However, before I get into the details of those room correction features, I should stress that the Vandersteen 5A is an exceptional high-end speaker in other ways too.

Vandersteen Audio has long been one of the most respected names in US speaker design, and Richard Vandersteen was one of the pioneers in combining advanced technical measurements with listening to advance speaker design. Like Dunlavy and Thiel, Vandersteen Audio was one of the first firms to get serious about time alignment in drivers and the use of first order crossovers, and Vandersteen has a long tradition of keeping its models in production for years – offering upgrades to keep up with advances in technology.

The Vandersteen 5A is now Vandersteen's top of the line speaker, and it is a well-proven design. It builds on the Vandersteen 5, which went into production in 1997, but it offers a much more powerful amplifier for the sub-woofer and a much better power supply. It also uses improved drivers to produce something approaching a coherent point source at real world listening distances.

This speaker has a musically natural timbre. Some audiophiles may find it slightly soft or rolled if they compare it to other speakers that seek to deliver “flat” frequency response like Thiel, TAD, and B&W. There is, however, no one way to define or measure flat response in loudspeakers, and I feel that if you want musically realistic timbre - and musically realistic upper midrange and treble energy - the Vandersteen 5A has the more realistic sound. No matter how well speakers with a different timbre may measure, the end result is more upper midrange and treble energy in reproducing classical music and acoustic instruments than I hear in live performances. It also results in music that is at least slightly bright or hard with today's close miked and overproduced recordings.

Worse, in an era where most pre-amps have no tone controls,

and far too many interconnects and speaker cables seem to be tuned to emphasize upper midrange detail rather than neutral sound, strings, woodwinds, and piano become overaggressive and lose their natural sonority. Brass bites too hard, and female vocals can acquire a slight edge – particularly given the growing tendency of far too many female pop singers to “chew the mike” in mid song.

The 5As control dispersion in ways that affect the impact of room reflection at the listening position, while the speaker also has a tweeter mounted on the rear that allows you to add the exact amount of additional, dispersed treble energy you want.

The vertical dispersion of the Vandersteen 5A is a mixed

blessing. It is limited in ways that can reduce the problems with floor reflections. One also notices in standing up that the high frequencies go away minimizing high frequency smear from the ceiling. At the same time, it is important to use the feet of the 5As to adjust their tilt to the listener's ear height, according to a chart in the owner's manual. Because the Vandersteen 5A uses multiple stacked and displaced drivers there is a focal point ± 3 inches to accommodate posture and listeners of different height. Not enough tilt and the speakers will sound forward because the tweeter frequencies arrive first.

Too much tilt and they will sound dark and slow.

Horizontal dispersion is a different matter as the alignment is correct anywhere as long as the listener is seated. This, however, means that – like virtually all speakers other than dipoles, the Vandersteen 5As should be kept away from the side walls or some form of absorbing material will be needed to keep the resulting reflecting from slightly muddling and hardening the sound. (Dipoles introduce a separate set of problems because of the need to adjust the distance from the rear wall to get the smoothest bass and avoid excess real wall reflections.)

Like all speakers that have careful phase and time alignment, the Vandersteen 5 needs to be carefully set up to provide the best “point source” effect at a given listening distance and



► height. (This is a case where “RTFM,” and actually following set up instructions, are critical.) The result, however, is an extremely detailed sound stage with excellent imaging, width, and depth, and the kind of resolution more often associated with electrostatics and full range ribbons.

There is little practical need for room treatment to deal with such effects, and speaker placement is much easier. The choice of a focused listening area also does not mean the kind of ‘beaming,’ or narrow listening area that occurs with some ribbons and electrostatics. This is not a speaker where every head motion shifts the sound stage and there is definitely seating room for a significant other.

Richard Vandersteen explains the use of the rear firing tweeter as follows: “Extensive R&D and live vs. recorded experiments have led me to leave the main tweeter flat minus of course the natural attenuation that occurs when sound travels through air to the listener. What then to do about a room that is a little dark or over damped or when compared with most high-end speakers today having exaggerated high frequencies? I have found it to be more natural to add a precise amount of energy in the reverberant field or one can adjust to taste. This method leaves the first arrival of the tweeter reproducing the overtones of many instruments in sync with their fundamentals.”

There are a number of other speakers that have a rear firing tweeter, but the Vandersteen 5A allows this tweeter to be defeated and has a unique mix of rear panel controls to adjust a its frequency range and loudness. This makes a major difference in adjusting the Vandersteen 5A to a given listening room.

The manual recommends that the rear tweeter should not be used in most listening environments. My own experience is different. I recommend setting it to provide at least some high frequency information at very low levels. Just a touch can add a bit of air that is missing in a pure point source sound, and a sense of added space. “First, do no harm,” should be your guiding principle, and the other speakers I’ve tried with rear firing tweeters don’t provide enough options.

Now, to the core of the Vandersteen 5A’s ability to provide analog room correction. The Vandersteen 5A is the first full range speaker I’ve listen to that actually succeeds in integrating a true active sub-woofer into a full range speaker. Far too often, you can hear discontinuities in timbre, speed and resolution between an active sub-woofer and the other drivers. It takes time and listening to get the level and the “Q” of the sub-woofer exactly right (again, read the manual!), but the end result is more than worth it.

Deep bass is one of the joys of music, and the Vandersteen 5A has a sub-woofer capable of producing house vibrating deep bass without losing tightness and definition. The 5A has a 12-inch woofer assembly mounted horizontally in the bottom. This is not a conventional driver, but a massive push-pull design with a powerful magnet or “motor” on either side of the curvilinear aluminum cone, similar in layout to the unit used in the Wilson Benesch Torus. Each motor can provide more than

an inch of linear excursion. The lower section of the enclosure that contains the dual-motor subwoofer driver and its 400-watt amplifier is constructed of an advanced 1-inch to 2-inch thick constrained layer-dampened material. It has elaborate, heavy bracing and reinforcement to provide superior control of resonance. If you are into home theater, the Vandersteen 5A can deal with even the most excessive sound effects as well as any separate sub-woofer I’ve tried – at least at levels that will not do active damage to your hearing. I’m not a fan of the “make your ears bleed” school of audio.

What is far more important than cannon fire and car crashes, however, is that this sub-woofer is intensely musical at anything approaching a realistic volume. It can handle even the most complex deep organ passages, reproduce bass guitar with total realism, allow you to hear everything a synthesizer can deliver, and deal with percussion like the Kodo drums (or Telarc’s bass drum spectaculars) with the kind of detail, control, and apparent “speed” that equals the best woofer columns and room filling massive designs. This is not a speaker with “small” or limited bass, or that substitutes bass energy for musical realism. You can push jazz, rock, or Saint Saen’s *Symphony No. 3* to any reasonable limit.

Moreover, the sub-woofer level control on the rear of the 5A increases or decreases the overall level of the deep bass without changing its character. There is also a low frequency contour control that adjusts the “Q” of the sub-woofer to accommodate different rooms, listening tastes, or system modes. Technically speaking, “Q” is the product of a complex mathematical equation derived from driver, electrical, and enclosure parameters. In practical terms, it defines the sound character of the bass response. A low “Q” sub-woofer sounds tight and controlled. A high Q produces a full, warm bass with more energy in the most audible bass range.

But what is really important is that you can do more than set the sub-woofer level and “Q” to your taste. The Vandersteen 5A can be placed in the best location for imaging and soundstage and – barring major standing wave problems – be adjusted to eliminate the audible impact of the “peaks and valleys” in low bass response that are inevitable when a speaker is placed in a real world listening room.

The sub-woofer amplifier has 11, dealer-adjustable compensation controls that modify its response to precisely counter room and placement induced nonlinearities at frequencies centered around 20, 24, 30, 36, 42, 50, 60, 72, 84, 100 and 120Hz. When the speakers are initially set up in the owner’s home, the dealer uses a low frequency analyzer to set the compensation controls for the most linear bass response at the listening position. Once the dealer has set these controls, they do not need to be readjusted unless the speaker placement or listening position changes significantly. You can do it yourself using warble tones or a Vandersteen test disc, and an inexpensive Radioshack S.P.L. meter. Here, however, I must offer the same ►

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1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.



1. CEC TLOX Belt Drive CD Transport
2. Living Voice OBX-RW Loudspeaker in Ebony
3. KSL Kondo DAC
4. KSL Kondo Negro Integrated Amplifier

5. SME 2012A Turntable with KSL Kondo iOJ Cartridge
6. New Audio Frontiers KT66 Legend Integrated Amplifier
7. Kore-Eda LLA-1 Control Amplifier & PLA-1 Power Amplifier



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► caution that I would make about the use of digital room correction devices. Proper set up takes time and experience, and is as much a matter of judgment as it is of measurement.

As any one who has ever worked with parametric equalizers already knows, it is far too easy to overadjust in trying to get “flat” response, or simply to misadjust through inexperience and get the same result. I have also found that very small changes in meter location and height, and relatively small changes in average loudness, affect the measured bass response in most rooms in ways that the ear will not hear in the same way. An experienced dealer, and one who cares about what he sells, will bring judgment and experience to bear and not just technical expertise.

Moreover, this is the one area of the Vandersteen 5A’s instruction book that I find less than helpful. The manual does place the right emphasis on finding at least a good location that is relatively free of standing waves to begin with, and does provide help in finding such a location. However, all of the eleven equalization settings are interactive, the suggested Vu meter is difficult to read and use. It can take forever to get the settings right. It would be far better to have some kind of computer program and a calibrated mike and pre-amp, or sound level meter with an output connection. The right program could prevent both over and under adjustment and suggest ways of dealing with the interaction between the 11 compensation controls.

Yet, once you get it right, you may never go back to a speaker without such adjustment – particularly if you can hear bass problems now or you are getting poor bass measurements below 100 Hz. Getting rid of the worst dips and peaks in bass response, makes instruments sound far more natural. Even correcting for the worst peak makes a tremendous difference in either extending the deep bass frequency response you actually hear or bring up the mid bass and reproducing the full character of the bass viol, grand piano, organ, and drum. Complex synthesizer passages become far clearer, and the bass guitar has more impact.

Equally important, you can hear far more of the low level mid and deep bass in your music, and if you have ever actually measured this with an RTA, you are aware that there is a lot more low bass than you might suspect. This musical information is often lost without a subwoofer, or masked by room resonances with one. Its presence is often barely audible even with a speaker like the Vandersteen 5A,




but it makes a surprising difference in expanding the sound stage and in musical realism.

I realize that there is a “back to the future” aspect in recommending an analogue solution. In theory, any analogue attempt to deal with room problems is inherently more limited than digital technology. In practice, however, the Vandersteen 5A does at least as well as any digital correction I have yet heard in creating a truly high-end listening experience. It does not follow the crowd and allows you to tailor many critical aspects of what you hear to provide a musically realistic listening experience. It may rely on analog technology, but it is very definitely “back to the future” in terms of delivered performance.

The Vandersteen 5A solves real world listening problems in a speaker that is small enough to actually fit in most (US) listening rooms.* It deals with the reality that room-speaker interaction problems do far more to shape the actual listening experience in most cases than the technical design of a full range speaker that cannot be adjusted to compensate for room effects.

It is also a symbol of the limitations in far too many high-end speaker designs. At \$17172 (including the necessary filter network) the Vandersteen is anything but cheap, yet it provides truly unique value for money compared to the steadily more astronomical cost of other high-end speakers. The \$7233, cloth covered Quatro, which shares the

same bass compensation system, is an absolute bargain. If the only place a speaker can really perform to its best is in a problem-free listening room – something close to a physical impossibility – you are investing in the high-end equivalent of the sound of one hand clapping. 

Alternative Audio
 Tel. (44)(0)1984 624242
 Net. www.alternativeaudio.co.uk

Vandersteen Audio
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* I think AHC might need secondment to the UK in order to get an accurate sense of proportion – room proportion that is. The smaller Quattro is nearer to European size. Ed.

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Ken Kessler Review - Hi-Fi News, Volume 51 No. 5.

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MUSIC MATTERS...

by Alan Sircom

I can't help thinking we have missed the boat with hard disk players and – to a lesser extent – servers. The Naim Audio HDX is a perfect case in point. "Hurrah!" says Naim, "we have made a hard disk player..." and is met with almost total silence from the audiophile community.

The HDX is a bold – but logical – move. And it's not surprising that it comes from a hi-fi manufacturer that also has a music label. Naim is in a perfect position

the company. Ultimately, if the HDX makes the audiophile consider the CD as merely a one-time data carrier, it's not much of a jump to doing without that data carrier altogether. If Naim makes that intellectual jump, why shouldn't the music lovers that buy the products?

Here's why they might not; many audiophiles are inherently conservative (with a small 'c'). Although there are other sonic benefits for doing so, it's part of the reason

why the twenty-first century audiophile may well be playing on a music system using technology from 50 years ago. On the other hand, those who are prepared to approach new technologies have already done so – and generally have either a Squeezebox or a Sonos system installed. Or maybe they've gone the whole hog and swapped out the front-end of their system for something like a Mac Mini.

This represents a series of hurdles for a company like Naim. The conservative audiophile will have nothing to do with hard



to track just what's happening to the music business, spotting trends in music buying in a more direct way than someone merely selling a CD player can. Chances are high, then, that the company has noticed what every other record company has been shouting about; selling music on disc is not a rosy proposition these days. The music market is down year-on-year by a few points (possibly due to a lack of inspiring musical content), but sales of CDs are down by anything between 10-16 per cent (depending on which statistics you follow). So, even if we had a musical golden age as buoyant as that of the 1960s emerge tomorrow, it seems unlikely it would emerge on CD. Selling a CD player today is not folly; judging by the continued success of vinyl, CD has decades of life left in it. Although the HDX is designed to work with CD media, it represents a change in thinking, both for Naim and for the audiophiles that follow

disk players for the next 10 years (perhaps this might explain why the Naim Forum is practically devoid of chatter about the HDX). Those with a Squeezebox or a Sonos may have hundreds of discs or thousands of files saved, and no way to easily migrate to a different system. And, perhaps most importantly, it forces Naim to compete in one of the fastest moving streams in consumer electronics – the PC component.

A major problem with PC-side specifications is the price goes down as the performance goes up and this does not sit comfortably with a hi-fi side product. Let's look at a photographic parallel here – the Leica camera. This delightful jewel of a camera is beautifully engineered. In the past, that meant Leica could justify annual price increases, because people recognised engineering costs rise with time. Unfortunately, that doesn't work in the world of digital photography, where people expect a camera to stay on the shelves for three years and knock a third off its list price in the process. This doesn't sit comfortably with Leica's

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► business practices, and it won't sit comfortably with Naim. So the locked-in specification of the HDX with its 400GB hard drive will look increasingly antiquated over time and that will make it very difficult to justify price rises. Either the HDD gets upgraded each year (in which case those with last year's HDD watch their product's resale value drop through the floor) or the product begins to look like a dinosaur in a couple of years. Even if the built-in hard drive is a token gesture to start people on the road to hard disk storage, it is still perceived as the sort of storage that will be the norm on £299 Dell PCs next year. Interestingly, by removing the HDD to an external network attached storage box, Linn has effectively skirted round this perception problem.

The other problem endemic to all music server and hard disk player systems is how do they compete with someone armed with a PC and some decent freeware? A locked-in system may be the absolute state-of-the-art today, but will that still be the case two years into its five-year product life cycle? This is perhaps less of a problem for custom install systems, where the person who ends up using the system has less of a 'hands on' connection with the components. If everything sits away in a plant room and is controlled by some exotic Crestron touch screen, the end user will not want to tangle with the server's architecture.

For those who have to use a PC to control the higher functions of a music server anyway, the temptation to check out whether the PC can outdo the server could prove irresistible. And what happens if your Exact Audio Copy/Foobar 2000-equipped PC, hooked via USB to a halfway decent DAC turns in a performance comparable with your hard disk system? The Foobar player program is especially popular with PC buffs, possibly because the interface is unfriendly enough to be truly audiophile.

Yes, the HDX will appeal to a sub-set of Naim's faithful; those who are computer literate enough to understand how to run NAS boxes (for additional storage) and use a PC for advanced track handling, but have not already made the jump to one of the existing solutions. In other words, those who wouldn't buy into the concept until Naim made something.

As it is a product sui generis, the Naim HDX stands alone, but does so as a twentieth century solution to a twenty-first century problem. It uses Naim's engineering smarts to deliver a product that constitutes a pinnacle of hardware and software design. The trouble is, hi-fi products move at a far slower pace than PC equipment and the HDX, no matter how deeply entrenched in the hi-fi camp it appears, is a PC-based product. 



Reviewing Reviewers Or – pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!

by Harry Pearson


It is both a pleasure and something of an honour to finally welcome the insightful and often acerbic audio persona of HP to these pages. The founder of US high-end magazine the absolute sound, his pioneering approach to audio writing and development and definition of the reviewer's vocabulary stands behind almost everything we do today. With rocks to the left of us and "digital convergence" to the right, who better then to cast an eye over where we are – and where we are going. Ed.

The equipment review has been, almost forever, the cornerstone, the building block and the roof slate of audio writing. Yet magazines in general and writers in particular, rarely if ever discuss the process that creates those reviews. The further we travel down the audio road, the more we add to the paper mountain of description, dissection and judgment – and the less is said or written about how those

judgments are arrived at, or what they are actually worth.

One of the things you never hear reviewers talking about, outside of the four walls imposed by the equipment review itself, is the reviewer himself: his assumptions, his biases, his – shall we call it – "philosophy" or outlook. And yet that outlook can, and often does, shape his conclusions and the commercial destiny of the products he (or she) reviews.

But, before exploring that in depth, let's first try to define some of the various contexts out of which reviewers operate, to see if we might thus set the groundwork.

Reviewing, these days, is much trickier than it used to be when colorations, discontinuity, and their ilk were so obvious the reviewer could describe equipment's sonic tics without having to get very deeply into the thicket of "realism" versus "taste". Yet, in so many ways it is this conflict that defines 

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► or pulls our writing into focus.

The school of realism suggests that there exists a sonic reality to be reproduced. (I call that reality the absolute sound.) And believers in this doctrine say that this standard should be the end-all and be-all - the reviewer's final conclusion. Sad to say, the number of writers committed to that absolute sound today is not in the ascendancy.

So let's say, instead, that there are two general types of reviewers at play in the fields of audio.

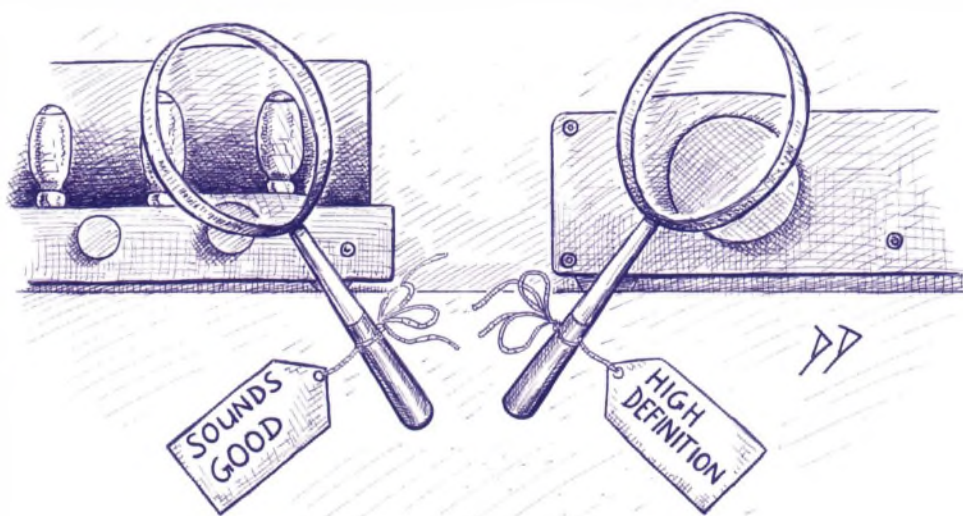
One is the generalist (a category that might include the reality-oriented critic), the person attempting to describe the "gestalt" of a component's sound, what I call its "character". A simple example of this comes with the use of colors to describe the sonic flavoring of a component, colors ranging from black to white, with gray and gold and ecru in between. (I note, for the

This is the realm of the specialist reviewers, who walk you through each and every characteristic of the component, from each octave of the frequency range and each shading of the dynamic spectrum, to arrive at their concept of the higher truth, which is on the order of a Robert B. Parker analysis of the fruits, bouquet, and tastes of wines. The problem with this kind of review is that you can get lost in the trees and not see the forest. And, conversely, with the generalist, sometimes you can see just the forest, which leads to an amorphous overview, skimpy on those anomalies, the specific trees, the ear unconsciously hangs onto while listening - that is to say, any of the distinguishing characteristics that are part and parcel of the character of a piece of equipment or a system

I failed to mention the specialists' other sleight of hand: the description of the circuitry, design, cost, practicality and the like - in order to fill up space.

This is a device also used, perhaps as frequently, by the generalist who may, in this era of low-coloration components, soon run out of things to say. So absent a comparison against the real thing, and thus a ranking of worth (anathema to many an advertiser in today's highly ad conscious magazines), both types of reviewers might fill the reader up on design details.

Of course, with so few rules and even less oversight, there's nothing



record, that concert halls also have their own general coloration - Kingsway, dark; Boston, burnished gold.) Sometimes, the uppity (like me) will use terms, derived from the Chinese and the concept of Tao, "yin" for the darkish, and "yang" for the whitish. Not long ago, Levinson electronics could, with justice, be called yin, or a very dark black (which could have been the result of excessive use of feedback), while the German Burmester or the American Spectral could fairly be placed on the "yang" side of things. Sometimes a manufacturer, VTL for instance, can switch from the darkish sound of its earlier tubed units to the whiter sound of today's.

This dichotomy is more useful these days than one might at first suppose, since a great many tubed units lean toward the yin, and solid-state in the opposite direction. What the generalist is after is telling you how the unit sounds, and maybe how that sound might strike you. Both the "sounds good" school - based entirely on the reviewer's taste, not his familiarity or lack of it with the real thing (un-amplified music in a real space) - and the realist school could be wedged into this category. But not the next one.

to stop writers flirting with one approach or the other as mood, equipment or manufacturers take them. But having at least defined the extent of our landscape, perhaps now we can begin to consider "philosophy": In doing so, we have to consider what any specific reviewer is looking for, his unspoken (usually) and underlying (usually unconscious) set of assumptions. In other words, what is important to the reviewer, and this you may call his subjective slant - which shortcomings he can live with and which ones he cannot.

Some writers want to hear every last whistle and squeak on a recording. They usually say that it's "high definition" they're after, even if that definition is never heard by anything other than a too-closely-placed (and imperfect) microphone. Components with that degree of "definition" are almost always bright, either in the sense of being forward in their perspective, or exhibiting a rising top end.

There is another subset of reviewers who, arguing that all components, by definition, must fall short of reproducing anything approaching the "real" thing, dispense with the real ►

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▶ thing and declare that sound ought to be as sweet, romantic, and “good” to the ear as possible. A stance that makes comparisons (so odious to the advertiser) unlikely, if not impossible. Frequently the “high definition” crowd gravitates toward the solid-state in electronics; the “sounds good” crowd tends toward tubes (or valves, as you guys would have it) and especially SETs.

The long playing record, that is, vinyl, and its kindred playback gear, is the Grail to the “sounds good” crowd, while the delectations of digital and most of its latter-day players is the bedrock of the high definition brigade (and of many audiophiles as well). The irony here? The deliberate design of romantic, tubey (or tube-like) colorations into compact disc players, to warm up the sound for those who can’t give up the colorations we associate with analog.

Remember that reviewers are all too human, so take that into account when they begin pontificating, especially if they buy into a manufacturer’s theoretical approach (be it single-ended amps or omnidirectional speakers) or show signs of wanting to become equipment designers themselves. Those who do this can become rigid (an old example: digital is “perfect sound forever” – three lies in three words) refusing to examine their precepts. This has happened with the design of phonograph cartridges, with an entire (though vanishing) school insisting that moving magnets or moving-iron designs with their superior flatness of frequency response are the ne plus ultra of LP playback. It is more evident still in the turntable wars now in progress, with much ado about materials, suspensions and motors that provide minute gains at exorbitant cost – another irony considering that the analog disc is an Endangered Species clinging to life by quite sheer threads. Do not get into an argument with any of these folk – they are right, and you are wrong. Period. And, never ever completely trust a reviewer who “consults” with

a manufacturer on the design of a product he will review or one who writes literature for the company.

Let us not forget that all reviewers have certain kinds of equipment for which they feel an affinity and which they do a superior job in evaluating. I have been told that I shine in the description of transducers, those components that translate one form of energy into another, cartridges and speakers (if I didn’t disagree I wouldn’t be me). I don’t think there is any question that Michael Fremer, of Stereophile, writes most passionately about vinyl and turntables. Indeed, I have dubbed him the “analog messiah” for the ardency of his advocacy. If you think about it, and if you have individualized the identities of the prominent writers in this field, then there will be those to whom you cleave – and others with whom you clash. But your favored writers and components may well be destined never to meet so, naturally, you will find yourself drawn to the writers who best express the delectations of those components that, at any given moment, most interest you: keeping in mind, to be sure, that a really good reviewer can do justice to any piece of audio gear that sufficiently intrigues him*. That “sufficiently intrigues” is the key here. Those who are best in the business can rise to the occasion when an out-of-the-ordinary component comes their way. I don’t say that all, or even the majority, do frequently - but they can when ablaze with passionate enthusiasm.

But moments of passionate enthusiasm are rare, and speak eloquently for themselves. It is when reviewers are faced with evaluating just another integrated whatnot or “bargain”-price anything that you, the reader, need to remain most keenly aware of what biases and philosophies they bring to the task. They are the filter through which you view the reviewer’s world and it’s well to remember its shade.



* I keep using the word “him” simply because there are fewer “her” reviewers than you can count on the fingers of one hand.

UK Distribution Details For Gershman

When we reviewed the Gershman Sonogram speaker so enthusiastically back in Issue 59, the only fly in the ointment was uncertainty over the UK distribution details. Well, now they’re settled, meaning that the innovative and musically impressive Sonogram is available through distributor Select Audio and their dealers. Offering clean and

surprisingly extended bass from its simple and compact floorstanding cabinet, especially at its attractive £2795 price tag, it’s a welcome addition to the UK speaker market

For further details, contact:
Select Audio
Tel. 01900 813064
E-mail. select.audio@tiscali.co.uk





Incoming!

Please address letters to the Editor at Hi-Fi+, Cornerways House, School Lane, Ringwood, Hampshire, BH24 1LG
or via the website at www.hifiplus.com

Dear Sir,

I am writing to thank you for an excellent, informative demonstration at the Hi-Fi show at Heathrow last weekend. It made my visit to the show worthwhile. How good it would be if dealers, too, developed their teaching skills and presented their products by engaging with the audience in such a meaningful way. Your demo raised as many questions as it answered, of course, but it was very helpful to further exploration that you uncovered the principles of your experiments so clearly. It was easy to follow the changes and improvements in sound as you went from configuration to configuration and it was all very practical stuff for improving a home system.

It rather seems that the economic climate has hit the hi-fi industry hard: So few people around on the Saturday, when I went, and less variety in the products on show than I remember from two or three years ago.

What I find so dispiriting about the show is the relative absence of music that I can relate to my own classical interests being played on the systems being showcased. I find it really is very difficult to make a judgement of any sort about sound if it is so removed from the instruments and music I normally listen to. Is it really the case that the overwhelming majority of visitors listen at home to the types of sound dominating the corridors and rooms at the show, I wonder.

A thought struck me for the first time that the criterion I use - memory of the sound in a concert hall - is no longer the criterion used by manufacturers of hi-fi equipment for output from recorded music, or even for recording music. I've begun to wonder whether some companies are working to a different plot altogether, so unlike the concert hall experience as I know it was the sound in most rooms.

With kind regards,

Robin Hull

Dear Sir,

Hi-Fi+ Issue 59 – Equipment Supports & Mains Conditioning

This edition - dangerous reading for any hifichondriac – interrupted my gentle convalescence following a severe attack of upgradeitis. I write to give my reaction to your “Where Next?” paragraph announcing Issue 60 will be “closing the loop on system foundations”. I fear it mightn't do so for me – and will explain.

Hi-Fi+, over the years, has done far more than its share to convince me the wiring loom is as important a part of my

system as the boxes it connects. I have applied this to the limit of my pocket if not my ears. Next now seems to be a reassessment of the ‘firm foundations’ you describe. Experience tells us firm foundations require at least three legs. Two won't do. Vibration control and mains quality are two. Debugging the listening room is certainly a third.

I don't feel inclined to contemplate the first two without first assessing the relative state of the third and prioritising my efforts. To do this I desperately need the same high standard of advice from you and then decide my own Where Next. Apart from some obvious jobs, like properly nailing down the family silver, I have only heard mention of room modes and the like. I haven't a clue what they look like, where they lurk or how to catch and despatch the little blighters.

I feel in need of a methodology and a toolkit – and probably a little theory too. Issue 61?

Kind regards,

David Harris

Maybe not Issue 61, but not too far away either. As I write this the plaster is going up on the walls of a new, purpose built listening room at home, a project I'll be covering as a case study in the near future. Before embarking on building, we sought advice from a number of sources, with surprising results that actually, once you stopped to consider the issues, made considerable sense. The room itself is essentially a bare shell, allowing us to experiment with different treatments and approaches to the acoustic environment. Naturally, it will incorporate our current thinking regarding mains wiring and equipment supports too, adding the all important room context into the system set-up equation. Ed.

Dear Sir,

I always look forward eagerly to receiving *Hi-Fi+* through the post. The interview in Issue 59 of Nigel Kennedy coincided nicely with his thrilling concert at the Proms – Albert Hall.

Nigel Kennedy shows great respect to his violins and their creators, to other musicians, composers etc. BUT despite your explanations for deciding to print in full his frequent oaths and expletives I still am of the opinion that to show some “respect” to your readers (even when Nigel Kennedy doesn't) you should have used some appropriately printed ** asterisks! I hope that your next interviewee shows more “respect” with their language.

Yours sincerely

P Metson



COMPETITION

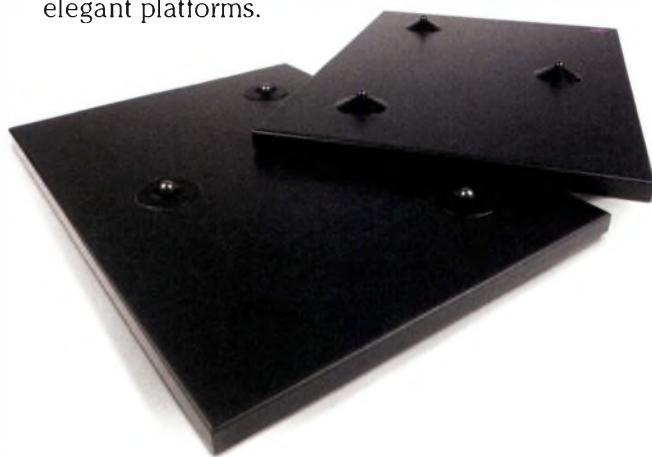
WIN A £3500 SYSTEM SET-UP PACKAGE

From Sonority Design And The Chord Co.

We've been banging on about the importance of system set-up and providing a firm foundation for all your equipment for quite a while now. We even took time out at the London show to demonstrate just how musically important these things can be. Not that giving your system the full treatment could be described as cheap, not with isolation for all the key components as well as a coherent cable loom of mains and signal wiring to take into account.

Well, now, with the help of those kind people at Sonority Design and The Chord Co. you can lay your hands on enough goodies to get yourself well and truly sorted. And just to make sure that everybody gets a fair crack of the whip we've organized a flexible package that should add on to and upgrade almost any system.

Starting with isolation, Sonority have promised three of their standard shelves, compatible with most existing racks and enough to support a source, pre and power set-up. Got a Naim Frain? Just opt for the Frain specific versions. Only got a CD player and integrated amp? You've enough in the budget to upgrade to a pair of Ultra shelves. There are even speaker supports if the rest of your system is sitting pretty. Read the review in Issue 59 and you'll see just how much we liked these slim-line and elegant platforms.



www.sonoritydesign.co.uk



On the cable front, we've opted for Chord products, a performance benchmark around these parts since the first issue of the magazine. Again, taking our notional system, we budgeted enough to allow for two pairs of Anthem interconnects, 5m Epic speaker cables and three Power Chords, but once again the mix and measurements can be adjusted to suit, meaning that put together, the platform and cable options should accommodate most systems and set-ups.

If you want to know more then just take a look at www.chord.co.uk and www.sonoritydesign.co.uk for the full details and specs on these products – and a fuller appreciation of just what they can do for your system.

What you need to do

Of course, before you get to experience the benefits, you'll have to win the prize. In keeping with all our other competitions, we don't just get you to tick a box and send in your answer, safe in the knowledge that whatever you win can be dumped on Audiogon or eBay the week after it arrives. Oh no, we want the prize to go to somebody who will actually appreciate and want it. Which is why our questions require more than a little thought...

To lay your hands on all these lovely goodies, you are going to have to do two things:

Firstly, we want a definition of the term "transparency" as it is so often used in audio reviews. No word limit, but the more sly, cynical or downright irreverent the result, the more likely you are to win.

Secondly, we want you to coin your own term to add to the stale and hackneyed lexicon of reviewer-speak. And naturally enough you'll need to define it too – just so we know what it means!

Where you need to send it

Entries should be sent by e-mail (clearly headed Issue 61 Competition Entry) to accounts@hifiplus.com, or you can write to:

Hi-Fi+ Magazine
Cornerways House, School Lane, Ringwood
Hants BH24 1LG United Kingdom

Make sure that you include your name, address and a daytime telephone number.

Closing date for all entries is the 31st of January 2009 and the judges decision is final. This competition is barred to all employees of AMI (UK) Ltd, Sonority Design and The Chord Co. Overseas entrants may be asked to pay shipping costs should they win.

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PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARDS '08

Once again, we make no claims as to the scientific basis or impartiality of these awards. They represent quite simply, those products that we've got most excited this year. They might have found themselves as permanent, indispensable parts of our systems. They might have challenged our preconceptions of what is possible, or more likely, what is possible for a price. But all, without exception, have entertained, charmed or astonished us – and may well do the same for you.

In audio, just like every other field of human endeavor, progress is never a smooth process, occurring in nice even increments. Instead, it happens in fits and starts – and more often than not, in more than one place at the same time. Indeed, sometimes it takes the drawing together of small advances from a number of places to synthesize into that single great leap forward. This year it's been the year of the speaker, with lessons learnt at the inaccessible upper reaches of the market starting to filter down to more affordable products. There have been genuine advances in cone material and driver technologies – with more to come, while the promise of Chinese production efficiencies have finally started to deliver quality as well as quantity.

It's also been a bumper year for analogue die-hards and our older technologies, with two notable returns in the shape of direct drive and the iconic Thorens TD160, whilst tonearm design has also taken a rare and significant (in performance terms at least) stride forward.

But the best news is that all these advances will, like pebbles dropped into a pool, create a ripple effect across other products and other companies. With a refocusing of attention on high-quality two-channel sound after the distractions and attractions of AV and multi-channel (the promise of easy money and the reality of shallow pockets and unbelievable complexity) we are finally back doing what we should – and what we do best. It shows in the products and it shows in their performance, with potential realized at lower costs than we've all come to expect. Graft on rapidly emerging and genuinely different technological opportunities and suddenly the future starts to look a little brighter. . .



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.



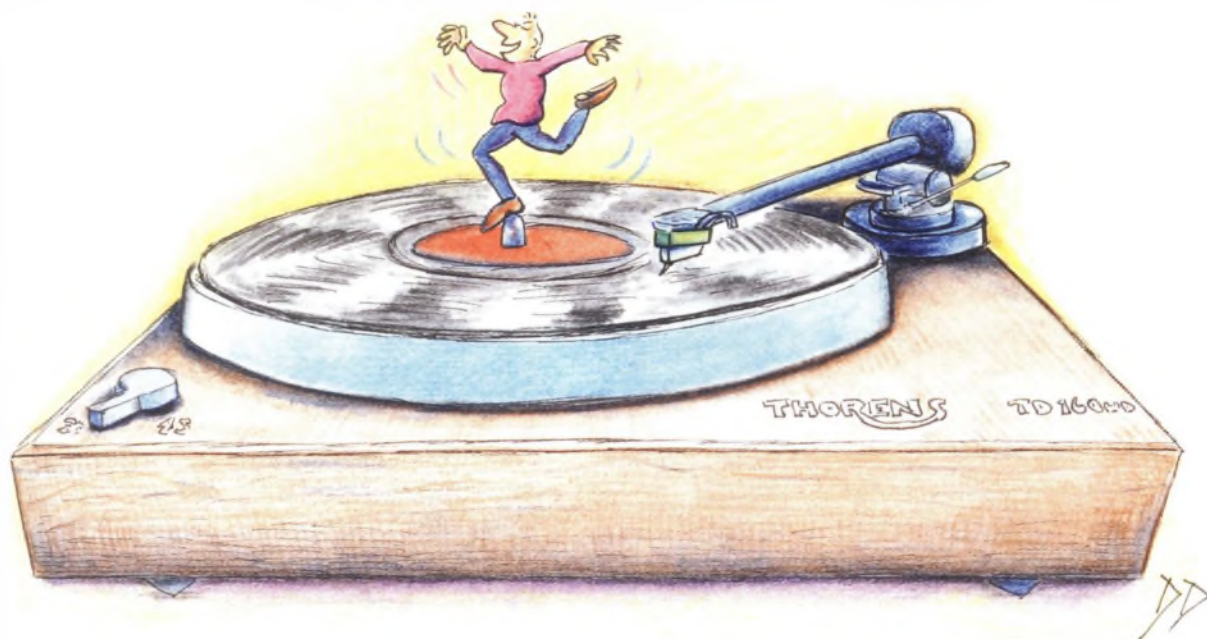
DISCOVERY

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.



THORENS TD160HD TURNTABLE

Reviewed by Roy Gregory



There at the beginning, it was Thorens which imported the three-point suspended sub-chassis formula first seen in the AR XA into Europe, originally in the shape of the TD150 and later the various TD160 models. With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight it's easy to see it as an obvious move, but let's not forget that this was a market dominated by the new direct drive technology, and not even the most optimistic projection would have predicted the way in which the three-point suspended revolution would sweep all before it in the audiophile arena.

It's a format that has all but faded from view, at least at the serious end of the turntable market, but it still has a lot to offer at more affordable price points – and never more than now with the emergence of the revitalized TD160HD. Totally reworked to incorporate sophisticated RDC material in critical applications and high-tech industrial isolation grommets in place of coil springs, the new 'table retains the appearance and compact dimensions of the original – but the performance is in another league altogether. Immensely engaging and musically energetic, the basic motor unit is an absolute bargain. But add in the ability to support and do justice to top-flight tonearms, as well as the dramatic improvements that come with attention paid to delivering a clean power supply and you've got a sleeping giant. How far can you push the envelope? We've been pushing pretty hard and haven't got to the edge yet... A classic in every sense of the word.



Price: £1250

UK Distributor: UKD

(44)(0)1753 652669 www.ukd.co.uk

Manufacturer: Thorens Export Co. Ltd. www.thorens.com



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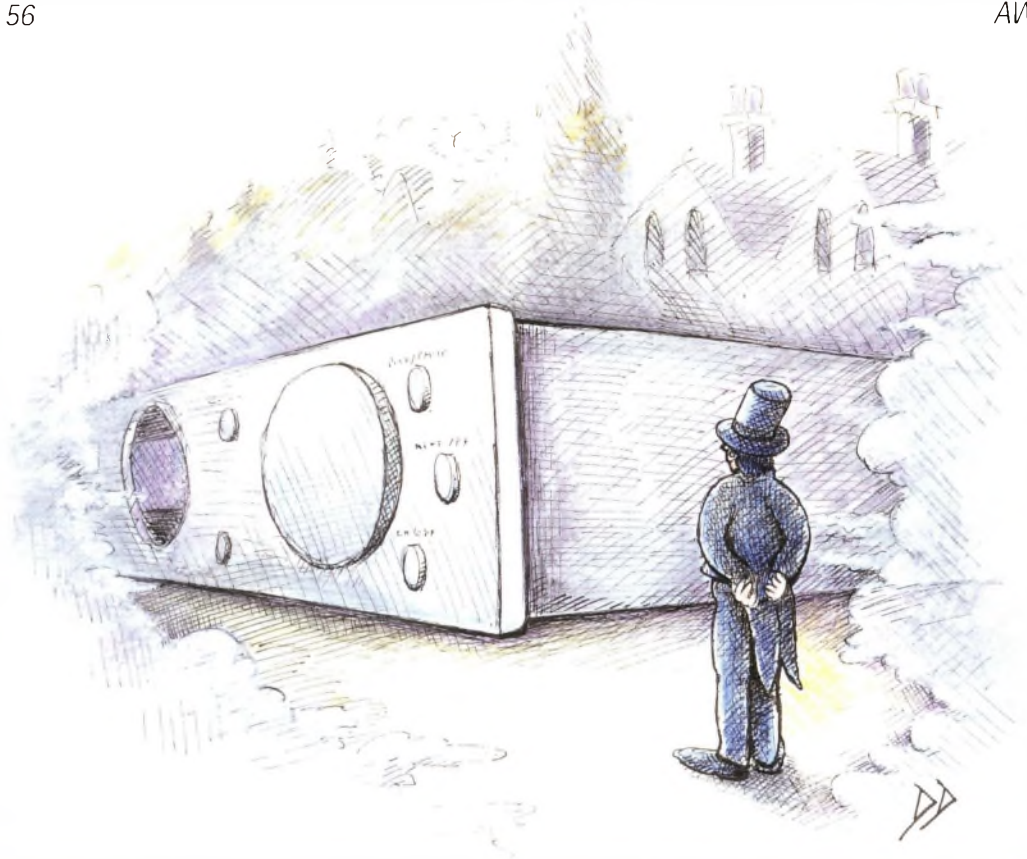


VERTEXaq Taga 6 Way £795



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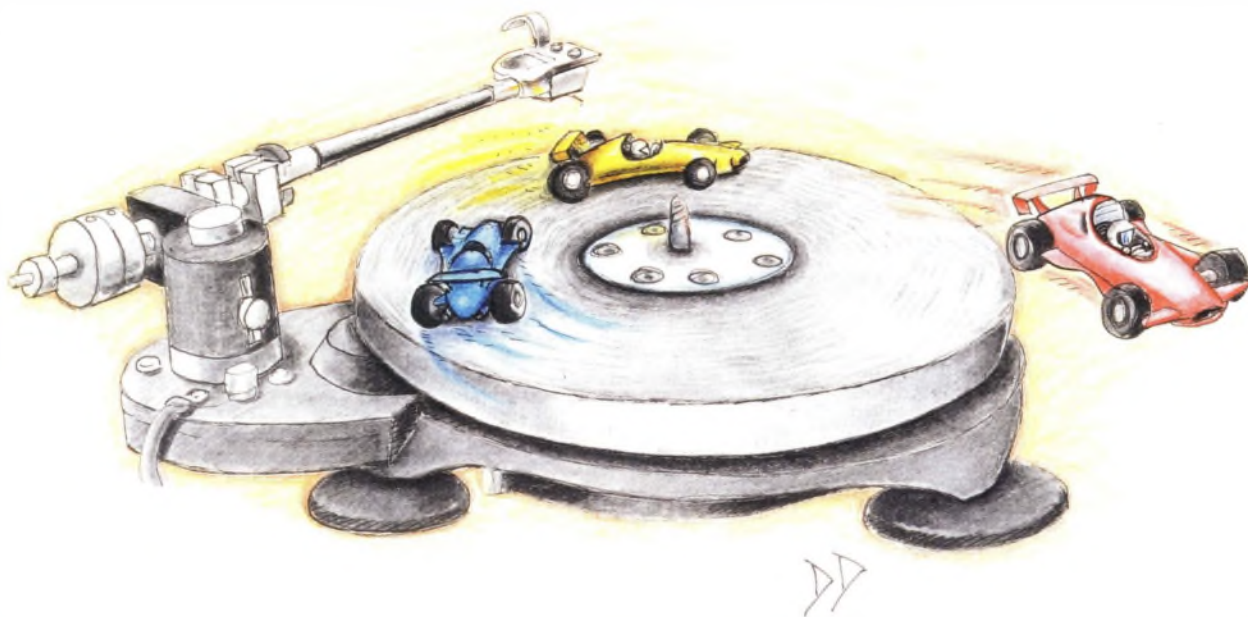
CAIRN FOG3 CD PLAYER

Reviewed by Steve Dickinson



Cairn may not be the best-known brand on the UK high-street, but their visually clean and unassuming units have quietly been building quite a reputation for this company from across the channel. Well to the fore in this particular crusade rides the Fog 3 CD player, an affordable and conventional looking machine (at least by French standards) whose performance/price balance is almost as unlikely as its name. Fast, clean and dynamic enough to make a flat-earthier swoon, the Fog 3 manages to be spacious and naturally colourful too – rare in CD players at any price, let alone one as relatively affordable as this. Throw in high-resolution DACs replete with digital filtering options, comprehensive digital inputs and outputs as well as both balanced and single-ended analogue output options and you've got an awful lot of machine for your money. The price is paid in the realm of control functionality, which is perhaps most kindly described as imaginative – but it's a price that SD was happy to pay, parting with his own hard-earned cash to make the Cairn a permanent resident in his system. Besides, what's life without a challenge, and if the control logic is a little less than obvious, think of the benefits of keeping the kids, nephews and nieces at bay; and you won't even get reported to Childline!

Price: £1995 UK Distributor: Hi-Fi Brokers
 (44)(0)1422 372110 www.hifibrokers.co.uk
 Manufacturer: EZO SARL www.icairn.fr



GRAND PRIX AUDIO MONACO TURNTABLE

Reviewed by Roy Gregory

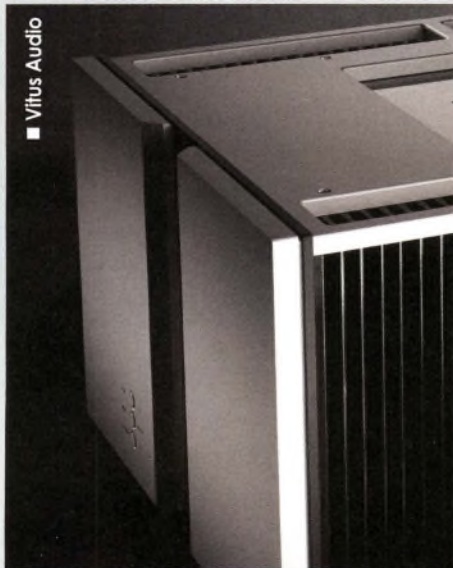


In a world of turntables where bigger is better and biggest is best, the Grand Prix Audio Monaco turntable (or more properly, as you'll come to appreciate, motor unit) doesn't just break the rules, it seems to take each one in turn and wantonly ignore, discard or reverse it. It is shamelessly compact, embarrassingly easy and precise to set up, it will accommodate just about any tonearm you might choose and in high-end terms at least, it is ludicrously under-priced. What sort of prop to an audiophile's ego is this? And I haven't even got to its greatest transgression, for yes, yes indeed, the Grand Prix Audio Monaco has communed with the devil of direct drive and sold its soul for pitch security like you've never heard.

Versatile, practical, stable and supremely easy to use, this diminutive turntable generates a sound of **awesome** authority, clarity and musical coherence. Its high-tech materials and critically damped plinth and platter system deliver an intelligent solution to the mechanical problems of record replay that dovetails perfectly with the supreme accuracy of the direct drive motor. The result is a 'table that sounds unlike any other I've used, **virtually** devoid of what we've come to recognise as vinyl sound. In the review I questioned whether this might be a harbinger of things to come. In performance terms that's certainly true and now, if rumours circulating are to be believed, it's true in technological terms too. Sometimes, breaking the mold can be a truly liberating experience.

Price: £12000 UK Distributor: Symmetry Systems Ltd
(44)(0)1727 865488 www.symmetry-systems.co.uk
Manufacturer: Grand Prix Audio www.grandprixaudio.com

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Good practice makes perfect...



Because the how and the why are just as important as the what when it comes to cables

While the design of audio and video cables is considered by many as something of a 'black art', there is one company that employs proprietary design and manufacturing technologies developed for critical applications such as the space program and the field of medical science. That company is Nordost, makers of the original Flatline® Cable. Today, Nordost's renowned Valhalla and state-of-the-art Odin cables are acclaimed by audio manufacturers - and audio critics - the world over as simply the most accurate and musically transparent cables that money can buy.

In striving to preserve the tiniest nuances of musical information and picture detail during power and signal transmission between various AV components, Nordost rigorously selects its materials. Then it employs unique production processes, executed to exact tolerances in its Massachusetts-based factory in order to produce

what can rightly be claimed 'the best cables in the world'. Needless to say Nordost's extensive R&D has resulted in countless awards and accolades during the company's ten year history of precision cable design and manufacturing.

Nevertheless it's Nordost's Balanced Design Concept that truly sets the company's products apart. By employing consistent materials throughout the range, and thanks to a deep understanding of the issues and problems surrounding signal transfer, Nordost designs functionally specific cables that enable audiophiles and home theatre enthusiasts to create a 'coherent cable loom' throughout their systems. The results are astonishing, delivering a level of overall musical balance and coherence that places you closer to the original performers than ever before - even when using modestly-priced separate components and loudspeakers.

MAKING TRICKLE-DOWN A TORRENT

Applying lessons learnt during the development of its flagship designs, Nordost has created a complete new range of cables called Wyrewizard. And the great news for enthusiasts not fortunate enough to be able to afford the very best cables in the world is that many of Nordost's carefully selected materials and unique manufacturing processes have trickled down to the company's most affordable range yet. Better still, the Wyrewizard range employs the same Balanced Design Concept that is core to Nordost's design philosophy in order that your system will perform to the very best of its ability and deliver a directness of communication and musical expression that simply has to be experienced to be believed.

REAL FAMILY VALUES

So today even Nordost's most affordable cables – the Wyrewizard range – share common design DNA with its flagship cables such as the legendary Odin and Valhalla products. A few of the key features found in the Wyrewizard range include:

- The use of aerospace grade dielectric materials – and even patented Micro Mono-filament construction in key applications
- Consistency of design together with common choice of materials and construction - such as silver-plated solid core conductors and proprietary FEP insulation
- Low mass – utilising very high quality, lightweight cable terminations and minimalist construction for superior sound
- Coherent cable loom – functionally specific designs ensuring a lead for every need in all types of stereo audio and multi-channel AV systems
- All analogue and digital audio cables precision-manufactured and custom-terminated in Nordost's factory in the US



NORDOST

MAKING THE CONNECTION

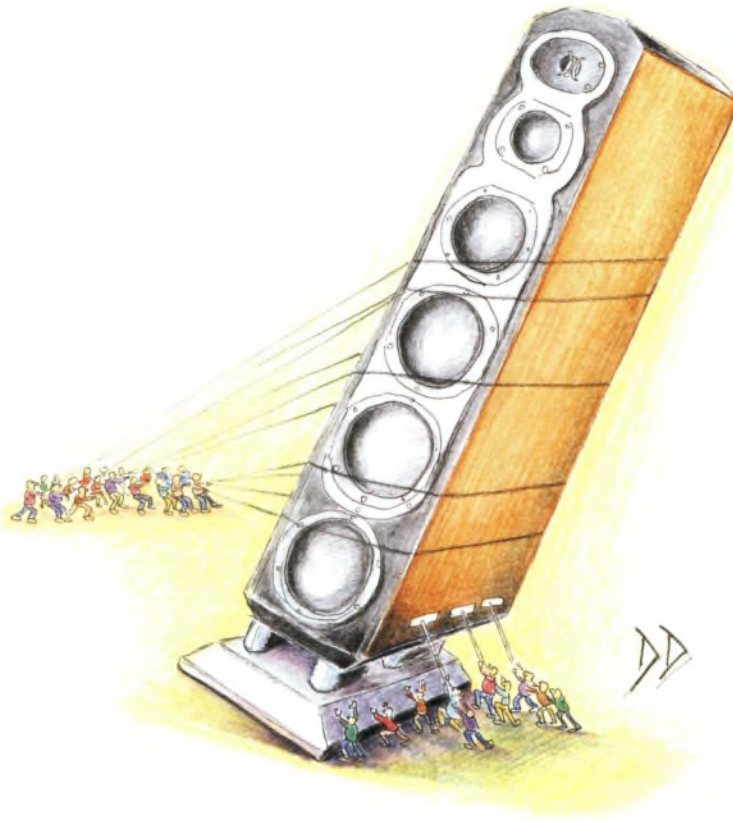
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REVEL SALON ULTIMA 2 LOUDSPEAKER

Reviewed by Chris Binns



We loved the original Revel Salon, reckoning it to be both beautifully and thoughtfully engineered and by far the most affordable yet impressive full-range speaker system we'd used. Mind you, not everyone liked the looks and it was an absolute pig to drive...

Enter then the second incarnation of the Salon, one that has been substantially revised in just about every regard. A new version of an established and much loved model is always a source of some anxiety, especially in an industry where babies rarely seem to remain once the bath water has departed. First impressions raised the anxiety level still further: not sure about the formulaic looks; are they serious about those tiny bolts securing the drivers? Well, we shouldn't have worried. The Salon's heart still beats true beneath the shiny new exterior. Along the way it has gained in bass linearity, air and spatial coherence, dynamic range and discrimination; oh, and its now significantly easier to drive... That doesn't mean you can hang it on the end of any old amp. The latest Salon is even more revealing of system quality than the original, demanding an increase in ancillary performance by way of compensation for its reduce appetite when it comes to Watts. But properly fed this is still the most affordable way to get genuinely high-end, full bandwidth performance out of a manageable two-box speaker system. It does big, it now does small and it does pretty much everything in between – and you can't say fairer than that.

Price: £15000

UK Distributor: CSE Solutions Ltd

(44)(0)1423 359054 www.csesolutions.co.uk

Manufacturer: Revel www.revelspeakers.com

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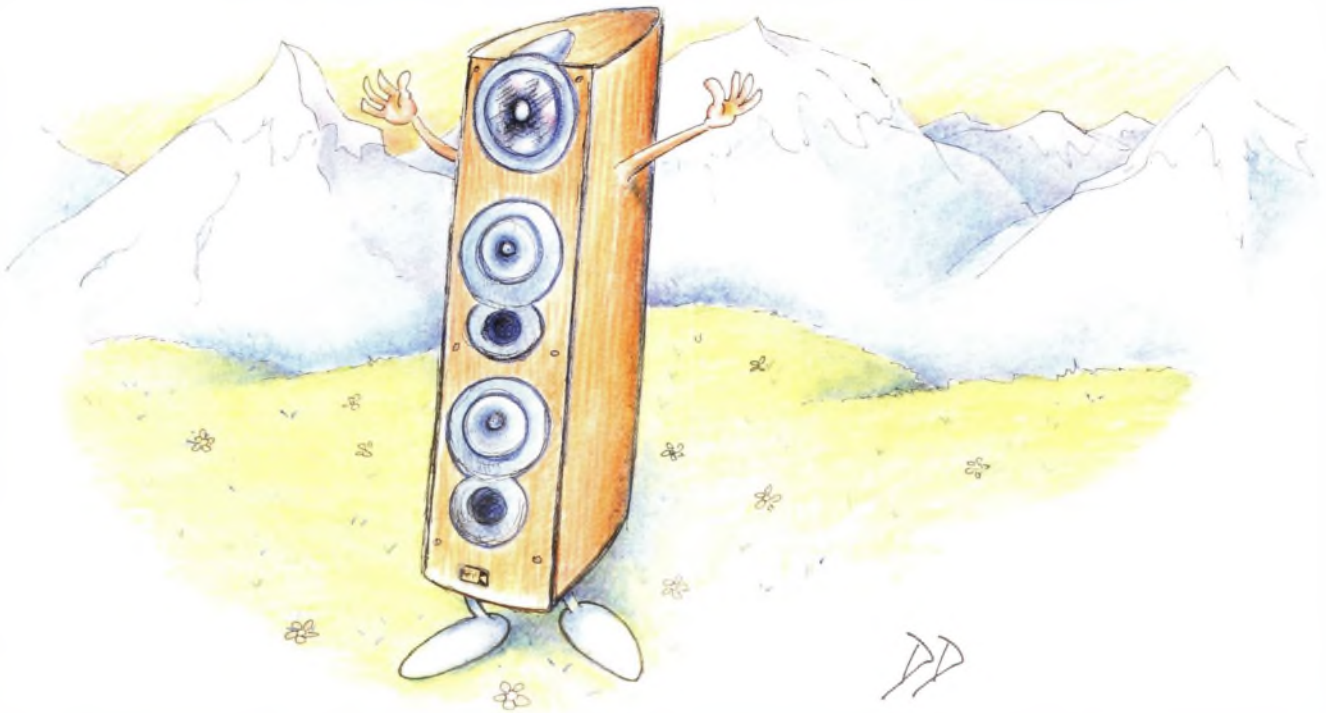


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KEF IQ9 LOUDSPEAKER

Reviewed by Paul Messenger



When it comes to consumer electronics, affordable floorstanding speakers are the most popular purchase in the home entertainment category (as long as we ignore flatscreen TVs that is). Shame then that so many of them deliver such a lamentable performance. Their thick, boomy bass and shrieky, exposed treble might sound impressive enough on a Batman movie, but hi-fi it most surely is not.

But there are **exceptions** and chief amongst them is KEF's iQ9. A large box loaded with drivers, it seems to fit the "more bang for your bucks" mold perfectly – except that the mix also includes an elaborate, boat-backed cabinet, the latest Uni-Q driver, incorporating many of the evolutionary modifications found in the excellent Reference series speakers, and careful detailing that goes well beyond the purely cosmetic. The result is a combination of decent bass extension, good **sensitivity** and well integrated and remarkably smooth high-frequencies – but the thing that really sets the KEF apart is its overall musical coherence. Always a strength of the Uni-Q driver, the iQ9 has managed to banish the big-box boom that afflicts so many of its competitors, twin drivers and generous twin reflex ports pushing the well-controlled low-frequencies down to 30Hz or so. The result is a speaker that does everything pretty well and with considerable scale and enthusiasm to boot – which at \$800 a pair is a pretty remarkable achievement!

Price: £800

Manufacturer: KEF (UK) Ltd
(44)(0)1622 672261
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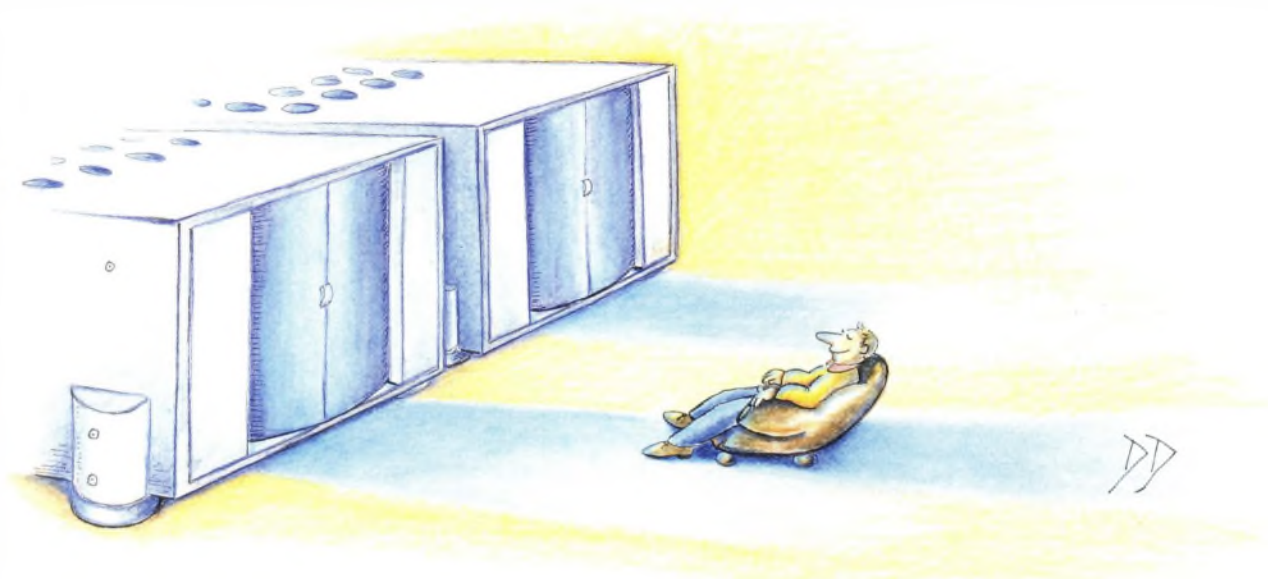
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HOVLAND STRATOS MONO-BLOCS

Reviewed by Roy Gregory



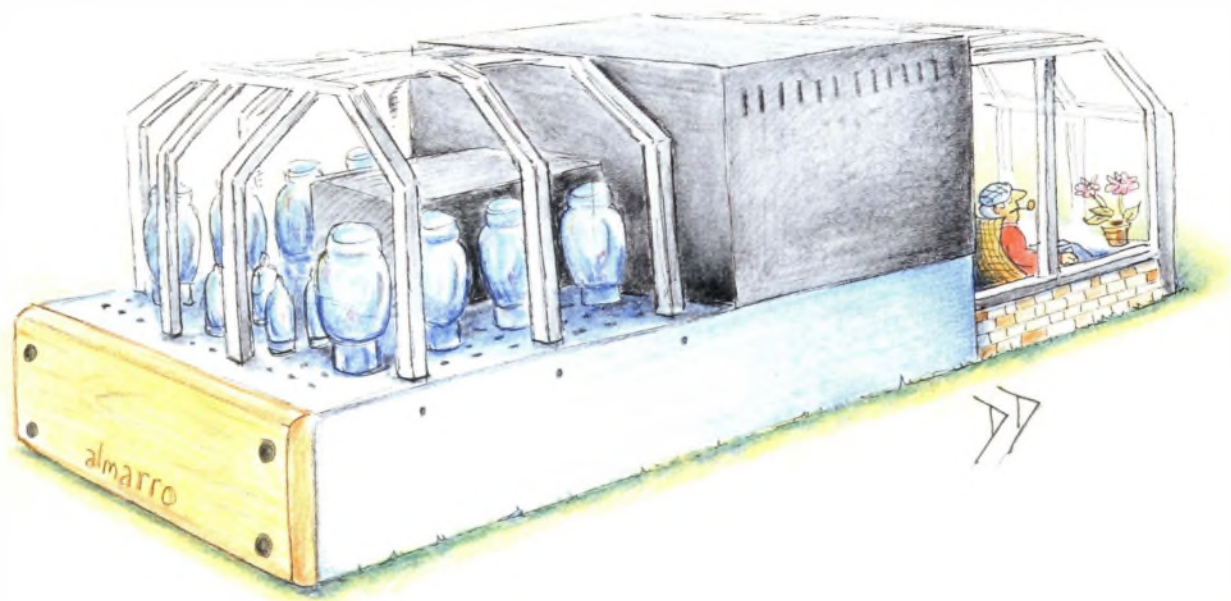
Hovland's RADIA has been a mainstay in my system for six or so years, striking a near perfect balance between lucid clarity, musical agility and useable power. But the latest generation of wide bandwidth speaker systems have tested its mettle and found it wanting. You might assume then that I'd rejoice in the arrival of the more than twice the power STRATOS mono-blocs, product of the same design team and ethos. But the question I found myself asking was just what sonic price I'd pay for all those extra Watts? As it turned out, those come free – along with a performance that betters the RADIA in every single respect, technically, sonically and musically. The improved resolution, musical authority, rendition of colour, note shape, length and texture all contribute to a more convincing, more immediate and much more accessible musical performance. When it comes to sheer musical insight and enjoyment the STRATOS mono-blocs both shorten and ease the way, whilst the increased power delivery means pairing them with the likes of Avalon's similarly subtle yet commanding Isis is more than a possibility, it's the nearest thing to a musical treasure map. There are products you admire and products you covet; the STRATOS tick both boxes with a performance that once heard is positively addictive.

Price: £23000

UK Distributor: **Metropolis Music**

(44)(0)1435 867438 www.metropolis-music.co.uk

Manufacturer: **Hovland Company** www.hovlandcompany.com



ALMARRO A50125A AMPLIFIER

Reviewed by Chris Binns

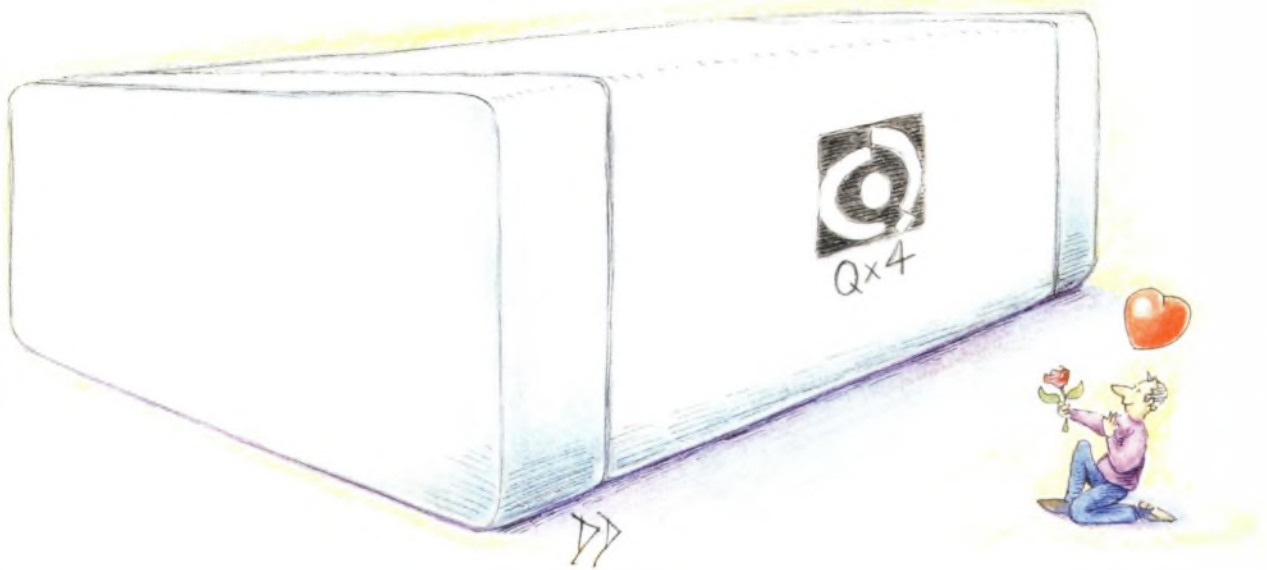


There are certain formulae that just seem to work, be it three-point suspended turntables if you want performance on a budget or 25 Watts Class A when it comes to power amps. Another is the 100 Watt stereo chassis, constructed around a quartet of KT88s or 6550s a side. There are sound engineering reasons why this is so, embracing both ends of the amplifier's topology. On the one hand the output stage represents a manageable load that can be properly driven from a suitable straight-line input stage: on the other, the output transformers don't need to be so big that they start to suffer limited bandwidth and overly heavy bass, whilst still isolating the output devices from the worst vagaries of the outside world. Then there's the small point that such amps deliver enough power to handle many of the speakers out there and do it from a package that's actually man portable. Which makes the absence of such designs from the myriad Chinese valve manufacturers all the harder to fathom...

But fear not, The Almarro might hail from Japan but it fills the gap nicely and at a very nice price. Lift the lid and you'll see that it's got more than its share of nice little touches too. Which probably helps explain why it sounds so darned energetic and engaging. A classic incarnation of a classic recipe, the Almarro should form the heart of many a system for years to come.

Price: £2750

UK Distributor: Angel Sound Audio
(44)(0)1923 352479 www.angelsoundaudio.co.uk
Manufacturer: Almarro www.almarro.com



QUANTUM OX2 AND OX4 MAINS PURIFIERS

Reviewed by Chris Thomas and Steve Dickinson



We live in an industry, which isn't short on outrageous claims, spurious technology and straight, unashamed snake-oil. It makes healthy skepticism a necessary instrument of survival – as well as helping to explain the rampant cynicism that greets anything beyond the strictly pedestrian. But sometimes, things happen along that you have to take seriously: things that crop up simultaneously in widely separated locations; things that have actually been out there and survived for over ten years; things that are backed up by readily replicated measurements; above all, things whose effects are so darned obvious that only those in abject denial won't hear them. Such a thing is Quantum Resonant Technology – a field-generator based approach to mains purification that manages to confuse (on an intellectual basis) and impress (in terms of its unmistakable sonic impact) with equal ease.

Given the history of such devices, I spread the reviewing task across two writers new to the technology (I've been using an early QRT design for a couple of years) and with totally different backgrounds and expectations. Yet both were bowled over by what they heard – as were all the friends they played it for. But the best news is that the benefits are in areas it's both difficult and expensive to realize in any other way. More natural, more fluid, more human, more lucid, more organized – all terms used to describe what Quantum does. Me – I'd simply say that it makes your system make more (much, much more) sense of the music. Listen and be enthralled...

Price: From £950 **UK Distributors:** Russ Andrews www.russandrews.com
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WILSON BENESCH TORUS

Reviewed by Roy Gregory



The Torus is not really a sub-woofer at all – at least if you listen to its designer, Craig Milnes. He prefers the term “infra-bass generator”, and given the performance of his creation I can understand why he’d want to distance it from the “big unit(s) in a bigger box” brigade. Built around a novel push-pull driver design with a motor on each side of the cone, this is a sophisticated, dedicated device, built from the ground up with a single purpose in mind. No hotch-potch of existing parts and off-the-shelf electronics here, the Torus uses a separate, external electronic crossover and high-quality amplifier, all driven from a substantial linear power supply, in place of the virtually universal Class D packages used elsewhere. This directs the output from the elegant and surprisingly compact, cylindrical bass cabinet to such effect that the low-frequencies generated possess the transparency, texture, pitch security and timing that eludes all but the very, very best full-range loudspeakers. It’s all down to speed and control, qualities the Torus seems to possess in abundance – so much so that the long search for audio’s holy Grail is finally over; here is the sub to integrate seamlessly with even the quickest and most transparent electrostatic loudspeakers. The Torus isn’t cheap – but then quality rarely is and high-quality low-frequencies will always cost, whether they come from a separate box or not. But Wilson Benesch deliver better bass for your money than anybody else, making the Torus a genuine bargain.

Price: £5240 complete Manufacturer: Wilson Benesch
 (44)(0)1142 852656
www.wilson-benesch.com

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MARTIN LOGAN CLX LOUDSPEAKER

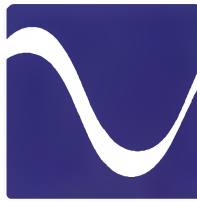
Reviewed by Roy Gregory



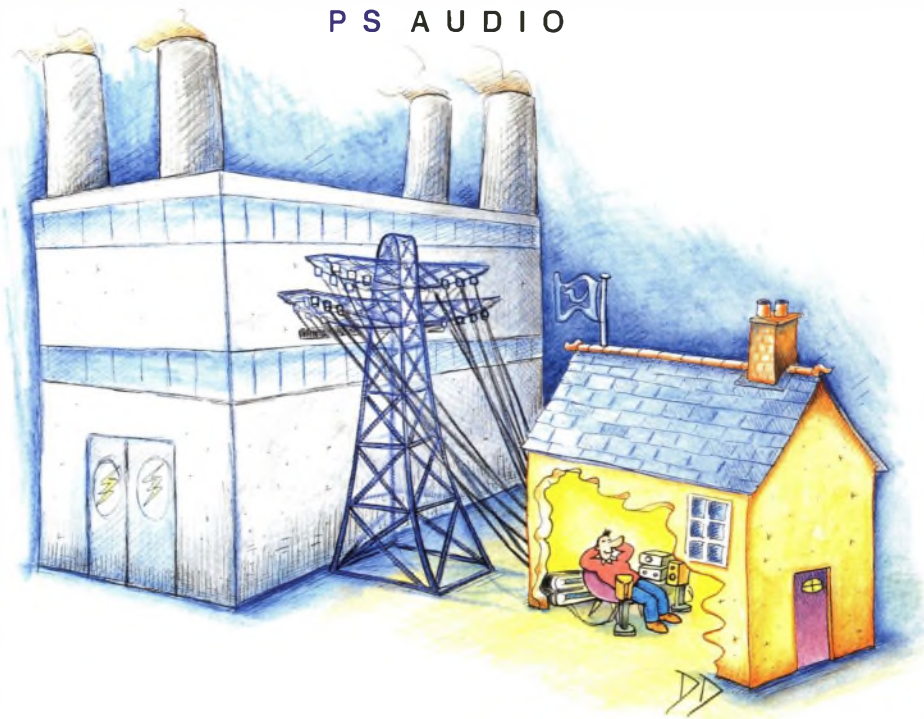
25-years after the launch of their first product, a company that has built its business and much of its reputation on producing hybrid speaker designs, has finally cracked the pure electrostatic. The CLX is an unusual and innovative two-way design, the sophistication of its drivers, including the unique dual-diaphragm, triple stator bass panel, matched by the care and attention that's gone into the crossover and electronics package. The result is the real deal – an electrostatic speaker that finally delivers on the promise of the technology and has a fair stab at matching those areas in which other approaches might expect to be superior.

You might think that you've heard what Martin Logan's electrostatic panels can do, but until you've heard one in conjunction with this bass driver, you haven't heard the half of it. So much of what happens in the mid-band and treble depends on the quality of the bass and the continuity of its connection with the rest of the range. In this regard the CLX exceeds all other electrostatic and hybrid designs, while those that come close can't match its dynamic coherence and sense of musical purpose and substance. No shrinking violet, the CLX can rock and roll just as readily as it gets up close and personal. It has enough bass for all but the most extreme demands and such confidence in its delivery that you'll rarely feel the lack. In fact, musically speaking, you'll need a lot of system before you feel any lack at all...

Price: £22500 UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds Ltd.
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BELLES MB-200 MONO-BLOCS

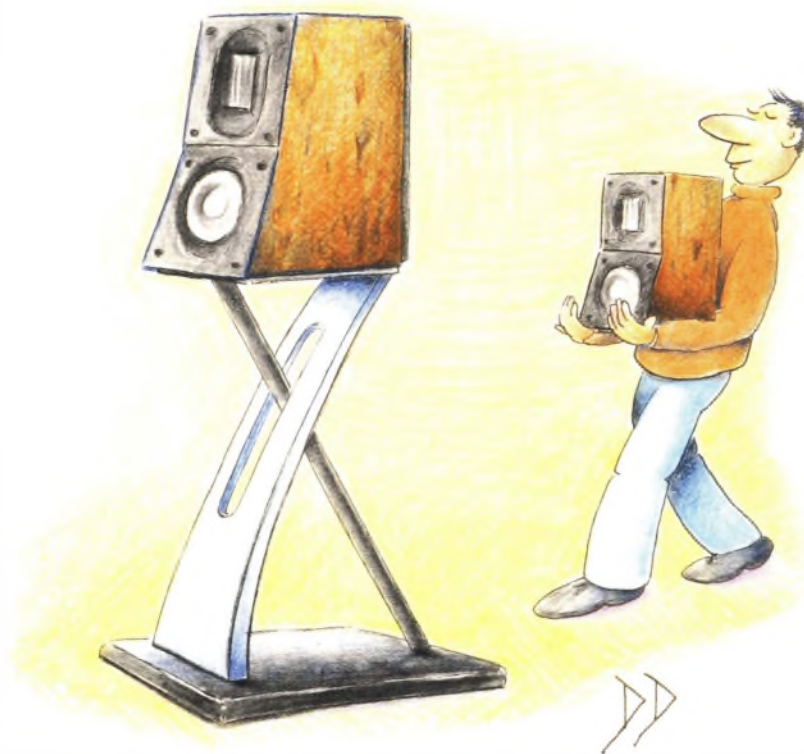
Reviewed by Roy Gregory



Compact, capable and discretely elegant in appearance, these Belles mono-blocs stand to become something of a reference around these parts. Superbly detailed, their transparency, dynamic and spatial resolution are underpinned by a conservatively rated 200 Watt output that means they can laugh in the face of most speaker loads. They have also succeeded in all but banishing the leading-edge softness that afflicts the majority of Mosfet output stages, the last remaining vestiges adding a welcome degree of comfort to the musical process. And for once, they don't hide those strengths under a bushel. Immediately impressive, even from cold, they are so well organized and well behaved that they simply get better over time, with none of the ultimately frustrating, etched leanness that so many high-end wannabes resort to. The MB-200s are unmistakably real world and the real deal – right from the off.

With all those things going for them you are probably waiting for the “but” – and in this case it's a pretty big but, too. After all, here you have amps with all the classic, solid-state virtues, that are neither too big, nor too puny to be useful – but they only cost £5500 a pair. Now that's a “but” I really like – a “but” I could easily live with. One listen to these amps and you might well decide you could live with them too.

Price: £5500 pr. UK Distributor: Coherent systems
(44)(0)1684 310849 www.coherent-systems.co.uk
Manufacturer: Power Modules Inc. www.powermodules.com



EBEN AYRA C1 LOUDSPEAKERS

Reviewed by Chris Thomas

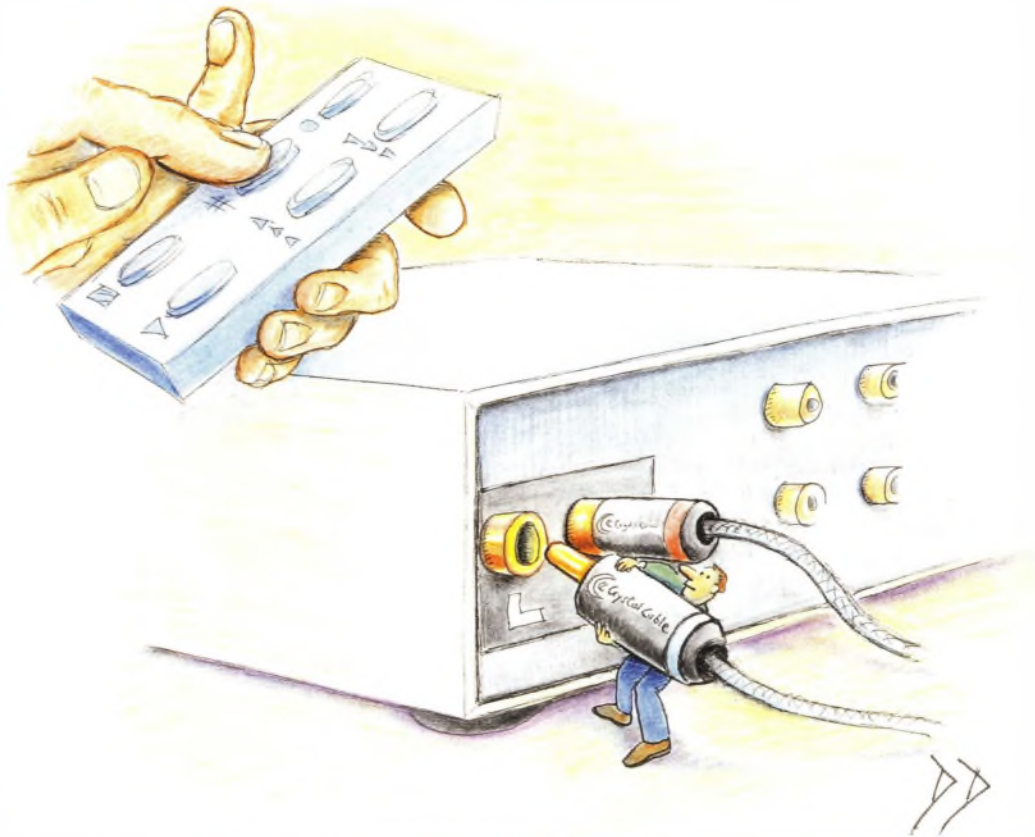


£8000 is an alarming amount of money for a small, two-way, stand-mounted loudspeaker – even if it is perfectly formed and you get the stands thrown in. But perhaps the most alarming realization is that so much of the competition costs even more! CT took one listen to the C1s and was utterly besotted, a regard that only deepened once he started to appreciate what was actually inside the little monsters. For Eben don't just build their own drivers, they do so with a sense of technological focus and a mechanical inventiveness that borders on the maniacal. Eliminating the driver basket and building the units straight onto the baffles is only the start; most of the crossover components are hand-built too. The dedicated stand incorporates an integral mechanical decoupling system top and bottom, while the appearance, fit and finish are both elegant and flawless.

These standards carry over into the performance, which delivers astonishing bandwidth and dynamic range, transparency and sheer energy; yet also resolves the tiniest shifts in level or the position of a player. Breath-takingly immediate and intimate, CT swears that nothing gets you closer to the musicians or tells you more about your system. Indeed, if the C1s have a weakness it is in the demands they place on system and set-up. But put in the necessary effort and you'll be rewarded by sound you've only ever dreamed about as the Eben promise is finally (and spectacularly) delivered.

Price: £8000
inc stands

UK Distributor: Metropolis Music
(44)(0)1435 867438 www.metropolis-music.co.uk
Manufacturer: Raidho Company www.eben.dk



CRYSTAL CABLE PICCOLO CABLES

Reviewed by Roy Gregory



“Less is more”, is an aphorism that crops up with alarming regularity when it comes to hi-fi, more often in optimism than in reflection of the facts. But when it comes to the vexed question of cables, then physically at least, it’s definitely hard to get less than you do with Crystal’s Piccolos – or to get more music than they deliver at the price. Nor are these simply stock conductors pared back to the bare minimum or “me too” designs, following a trend. Instead, they apply unique metallurgy (shared only with their Siltech stable-mates), kapton insulation (which I’ve yet to find in any other cable) and consistent conductor geometry across a range that embraces every conceivable (non-optical) configuration, from power cords to iPod cables. Add in the excellent Crystal distribution block and a readily available upgrade path via the other cables in the range, which also use the same materials and basic configuration, and you’ve got a product that takes the pain out of cabling your system. Engaging, fluid and unfailingly musical, there’s nothing hyped, false or exaggerated about the Piccolos. They make beautiful music based on the music’s beauty – and sound, for all the world, like they love doing it. We love what they do too. Install them in place of those heavy-weight, mix and match cables you’ve been using for years and you’ll be falling in love as well.

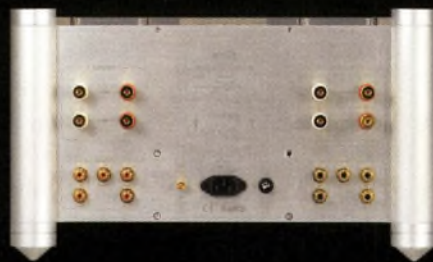
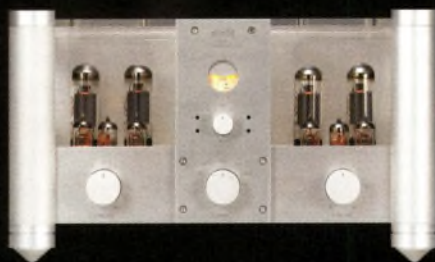
Price: Various **UK Distributor:** Absolute Sounds Ltd.
 (44)(0)20 8971 3909 www.absolutesounds.com
Manufacturer: Crystal Cable www.crystalcable.com

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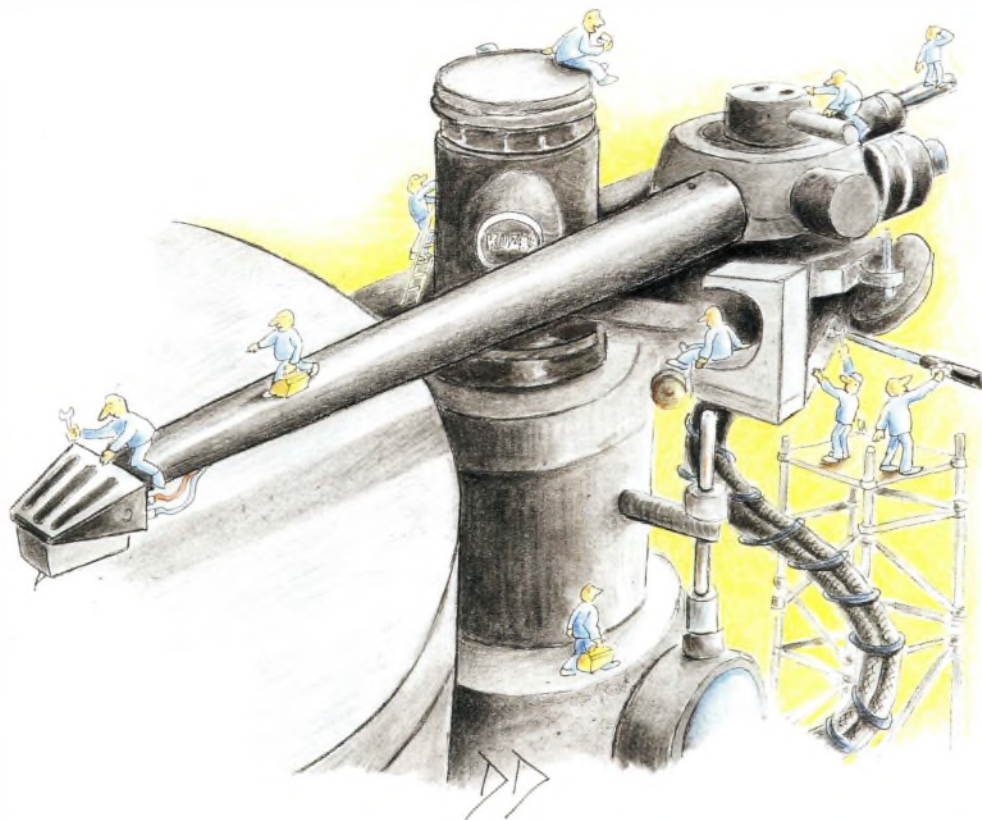
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KUZMA 4POINT TONEARM

Reviewed by Roy Gregory



It's not often a genuinely innovative tonearm appears; it's not often that a tonearm redefines our expectations of record replay. For the two things to happen simultaneously is almost unheard of, yet that's exactly what the Kuzma 4POINT has achieved. A carefully considered amalgamation of all that's great and good in existing, pivoted designs, combined with Kuzma's own innovative, hybrid bearing design. The Kuzma arms have never been short on practicality or the ability to optimize cartridge geometry, but the 4POINT takes that to new levels, adding cartridge interchangeability and independent horizontal and vertical damping to the company's superb VTA adjuster and the best azimuth adjustment out there.

But it's listening with the 4POINT that makes you realize just how special it is. With improvements in the low-frequency performance of the best modern loudspeaker systems threatening to expose a lack of tone and shape to analogue's nether regions, the latest Kuzma arm steps forward with the best control of pace, definition, texture and bass transparency that we've experienced, a quality that underpins the performance as a whole, injecting presence, life and energy into the beautifully stable and richly shaded soundstage. Big and bold, with tremendous impact when called for, the 4POINT does small and intimate too. A consummate musical all-rounder, the Kuzma significantly raises the analogue bar; the resulting *scrabble* to overhaul it is a delicious prospect indeed!

Price: £3950

UK Distributor: **Audiofreaks Ltd.**

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

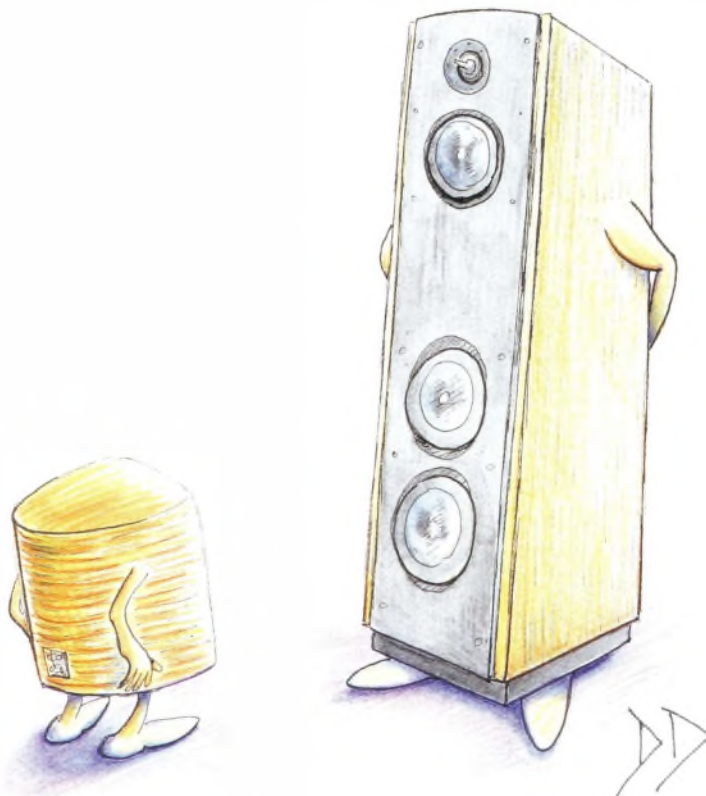
Manufacturer: **Kuzma Ltd.** www.kuzma.si

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MAGICO V3 LOUDSPEAKER

Reviewed by Alan Sircom



Real audio epiphanies are few and far between. When they happen they are generally as a result of a product that rewrites our expectations, our accepted notions of the performance limitations in the systems we listen to. Well, I think AS is still recovering from his first experience of Magico's V3, a medium sized floor-standing speaker of unassuming appearance that stands firmly on one of the high-end's most firmly established and keenly contested price points. Nothing prepared him for the kind of impact more normally associated with speeding juggernauts and zebra crossings and if these were a truck, you'd still be able read the maker's name, firmly imprinted in the middle of his chest.

On the face of it, taking on the Wilson Watt/Puppy combination (surely one of the high-end's most enduring and iconic products) on its home territory might seem like an act of bravado bordering on lunacy, but Magico are nothing if not confident in the performance of their products – and with good reason. The V3 talks with such musical poise and authority that they'll have you rooted to your listening seat. In common with other contenders at the price, you might want more extension – for which Magico offer bigger models. What you won't be wanting for is the kind of transparency, presence and coherence that puts musicians in front of you and allows them to demand your attention. Sit up straight and pay attention or, before you know it, you too could be run down...

Price: £24900

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds Ltd.
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ZANDEN 2500S CD PLAYER

Reviewed by Roy Gregory



Ever since spending time with Zanden's amazing (and amazingly expensive) four-box CD player, I've been champing at the bit to get a hold of the half-the-price, one-box design. Fleeting glimpses of the stunningly beautiful prototype merely sharpened that desire, whilst a string of delays heaped on the frustration. All in all, a far from ideal backdrop against which to make one's entrance: after all, if you fail to meet expectations then that longer than expected wait is going to add significantly to the backlash. Yet the Model 2500S arrived, it was seen, it was heard and it duly conquered, a performance that's all the more impressive because it treads a very different musical path to the four-box we know and love.

Sweeter, rounder and more forgiving than its bigger brother, the 2500S trades the absolute musical authority of the four-box for an altogether more seductive presentation. Indeed, this has to be the most musically seductive player I've ever used. But this is no warm and wooly cuddle-fest. That enticing quality is down to the player's sense of fluidity and communication, its way with a musical line, the life it breathes into a performance. It's a machine that sounds as beautiful as it looks, making listening almost addictive in the process. It deals with the senses: the sense and beauty in the performance. Beauty is as beauty does – and this one-box Zanden is nothing if not beautiful!

Price: £17490

UK Distributor: **Audiofreaks Ltd.**

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“ But what is blindingly, staggeringly obvious once you've trodden this path is that we've grievously underestimated the importance of a coherent approach to system support and the cable loom, the fundamental foundations of system performance. The Vertex components (used in the review) are far from cheap, but in purely performance terms they represent a bargain, both as upgrades and in releasing the performance potential in the electronics you've already paid for. ”



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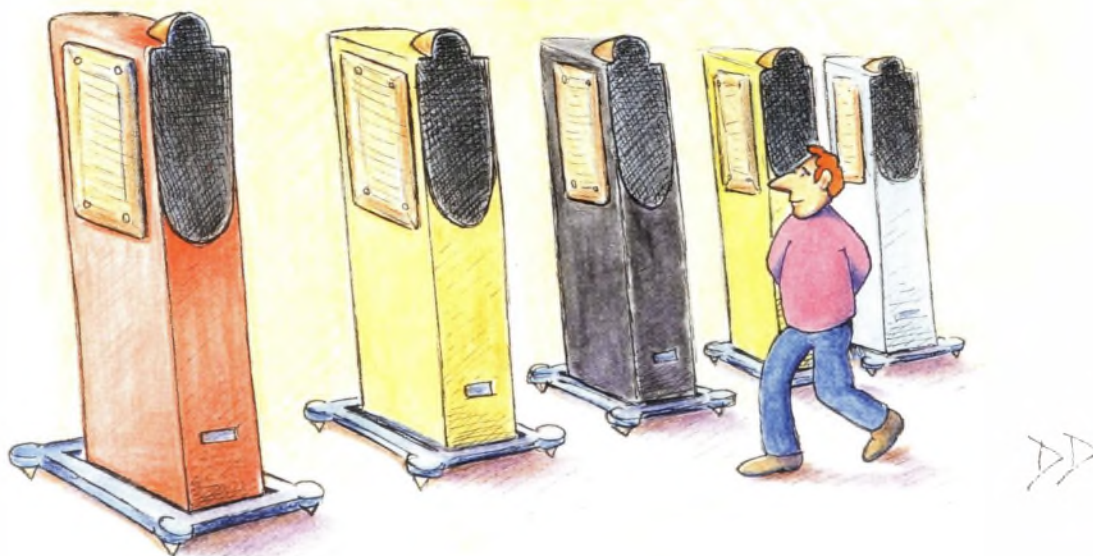
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USHER 6371 LOUDSPEAKER

Reviewed by Roy Gregory



Sometimes you see a product and when you discover the price you can't resist an involuntary exclamation of, "How Much?" Sometimes it's because the price is shockingly high; much more rarely, it's because it seems too low. Usher's unimaginatively named 6371 sits firmly in the latter category, only in this case, people tend to say, "What – each?"

This is a large and visually imposing speaker, beautifully finished in a rainbow range of immaculate lacquer finishes, set off by solid wooden cheeks on either side of the driver array. A massive, cast-iron sledge provides a firm footing, and if that isn't enough, a chamber in the bottom of the cabinet offers the opportunity to add even more ballast. A pair of carbon reinforced, pulp coned bass drivers make the most of that large cabinet, rear loaded by a massive but beautifully contoured reflex port, while a conventional silk-domed tweeter delivers a sweet top-end. A warm balance, generous dynamics and serious extension add up to music delivered with the sort of scale, presence and drama that way too many supposedly high-end systems can only hint at. There's no mystery here; these speakers are about sheer musical enjoyment. They've got life and energy to burn and an attractive sense of musical generosity that means you'll be spending a lot more time enjoying your system – and a lot less time apologizing for it!



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The Speaker They Said They'd Never Build...

The MartinLogan CLX Full-Range Electrostatic Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

It is 20-years on from the original CLS and MartinLogan are back in the electrostatic loudspeaker business. "What?" you might well say, "I thought they never left." But every model they've launched since the CLS (in its various versions) has been a hybrid, relying on moving-coil bass drivers to fill-out the bottom-end; No big surprise given that Monolith, the company's original product was also a hybrid. So it is an ironic if inescapable fact that for many audiophiles, the product they most associate with MartinLogan is also the exception to the company rule, a situation that's seen the question, "When will MartinLogan produce a new CLS?" take its place in audio mythology, alongside the likes of, "What's the best amp to drive the Quads?"

In short, the answer to that question has always been, and remains, "Never" – for all the reasons listed in the accompanying sidebar. But the interest in a full-range electrostatic design is undeniable and has loomed like a shadow across everything the company has done since they ceased production of the CLS. So much so that eventually their stance shifted from "Not on your life" to "I wonder what if..." The resulting product is emphatically not a CLS – or even a CLS development or replacement. It is a CLX – and if anything it's the result of the hard lessons learnt from the earlier design. It's not just distinct, it's different in just about every way from what many will persist in seeing as its spiritual

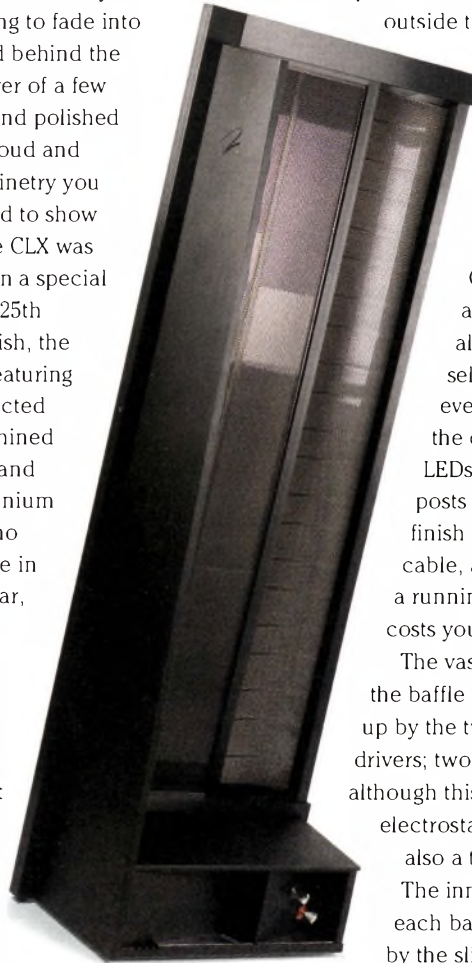
ancestor. But get past the perforated stators and clear diaphragms that result in a superficial similarity and you'll quickly realize that the CLX is very much its own speaker.

The first thing you are going to notice about the CLX is its size; this is a very large, imposing panel. Fortunately it has the confidence to make a strong aesthetic statement; there's no hiding a speaker this size and you'd be foolish to try. So, rather than trying to fade into the background behind the inadequate cover of a few bits of curved and polished Walnut, stand loud and proud with cabinetry you are not ashamed to show off. Initially, the CLX was only available in a special limited edition 25th Anniversary finish, the first 100 pairs featuring a baffle constructed from solid machined billet, brushed and anodized aluminium designed with no visible hardware in a distinctly linear, post-modern style; it's both striking and architecturally impressive. For those who want to soften the visual impact, by the time you read this the baffle parts

will also be available in a range of carefully contoured and lacquered or dyed wooden Art frame sections, in finishes that vary from jet black through a whole range of natural wood tones to a striking bright green or orange, individually selectable through MartinLogan's Custom Shop Configurator programme. In theory, these wood finishes will also be cheaper, but be aware that, rather like the options on an Audi, step

outside the basic spec and the price starts to climb alarmingly... Fortunately the Custom Shop Configurator, as well as allowing you to select (and view) everything from the colour of the LEDs and binding posts through to the finish on the power cable, also gives you a running total of the costs you are racking up.

The vast majority of the baffle area is taken up by the two electrostatic drivers; two because, although this is a pure electrostatic speaker, it's also a two-way design. The inner edge of each baffle is occupied by the slim mid/treble ►



A Hard Act To Follow...

When a hi-fi product achieves legendary status it's normally for one of two reasons: either, like the Goldmund Reference turntable or Wilson WAMM loudspeaker, it's so ruinously expensive that few if any members of the audiophile community actually get to hear it – or, it delivers a genuine slice of high-end sound at a price that's almost affordable. The Martin Logan CLS was definitely in the latter category, but never forget that the operative word is slice.

When it first appeared the CLS set new standards for elegance. Here, in the days of bent metal casework, was a product of such aesthetic distinction, such style and class that it became an overnight icon, a large loudspeaker that was both invisible and in full view. Add to that a performance that delivered the sort of transparency and resolution we'd only ever read about, expansive soundstaging and an ego boosting quota of high-end Brownie points and you had the recipe for a runaway success. And it was. CLSs sold faster than the company could hand-build the panels.

But all that enthusiasm conspired to conceal problems with the speaker. Sonically, the most telling were a one-note bottom-end that managed to aggregate the vast majority of bass information into a 50Hz thump, and an impedance curve that made them a rather more than awkward load – two problems that often served to compound each other. Like I said, the operative here is "slice" and that astonishingly transparent and quick mid-band simply distracted from the lack of overall musical coherence, an irritation that became more and more obvious over time. The other thing

that happened over time was that the conductive coating on the diaphragms started to shed, resulting in progressively diminishing sensitivity.

The panels could be and were replaced, but this was a problem that further burdened the already stretched production capacity.

Subsequent versions of the speaker sought a more balanced performance, especially at lower frequencies, but they inevitably resulted in even more demanding load characteristics, loss of sensitivity and ultimately, loss of the immediacy and clarity that had made the speaker such a success in the first place. But with so much momentum behind the model and with interest in each subsequent version stoked to fever pitch, the rush of pre-orders – followed by the absence of significant sell-through – created a boom and bust cycle that almost sank the company.

Eventually, they recognized the reality of the situation and simply retired what was an inherently limited model. But they couldn't extinguish the magic – the tantalizing prospect of state-of-the-art performance brought within reach – and even killing the product couldn't kill the legend. Indeed, if anything it just made it more powerful. Other companies even produced dedicated accessories and sub-woofer systems to match the speaker, some indication of both its popularity and the urge to try and finally unlock its potential. Sadly, that potential was defined by the limits of a single diaphragm of modest dimensions – the reason why the CLX doesn't follow that path. In reality, one's forced to conclude that the potential glimpsed in the CLS was largely theoretical and realizing it on a grander scale demanded a totally new approach, the results of which are finally before us...

– and that despite the company's long experience of hand-building electrostatic transducers – you'll begin to appreciate just how precise a process it requires. The resulting panel operates from a –3dB point of 56Hz up to the crossover point at 360Hz, with an efficiency of 90dB, making the CLX equivalent to a compact floorstander of similar sensitivity, at least in terms of bandwidth.

Behind the aluminium baffle work, you'll find the power supply housing at the base of the speaker, and running up from it at right angles to the outer (wider) edge of the front baffle there's a tapered buttress or 'wing'. This acts as a wave-guide, helping to reduce the low-frequency comb-filtering effects suffered by di-pole designs as a result of rear wall cancellation. The buttress and electronics cabinet are constructed from a material dubbed EcoSound, developed for audio applications by MartenLogan in conjunction with Klip BioTechnologies. A 50/50 blend of wood pulp and rapidly renewable bamboo fibre, it is bound by a water based resin to create a material that is eco-friendly, dense, rigid and readily machined, whilst also offering a naturally clean and attractive surface finish.

▶ panel, a 1450mm by 210mm curved array that's essentially identical in technological terms to the units found in the likes of the Summit. It's taller, narrower aspect allows for better dispersion, but essentially it relies on the same micro-perf stators and ClearSpar construction that represents the current state of MartinLogan's art. But it's the flat panel next to it that's the really interesting part. The same height as the midrange driver, this 300mm wide driver is a triple stator, double diaphragm design, a topology that emerged around 30 years ago but which has never found its way into a commercial design. By running

the two diaphragms in opposite polarities, you produce a di-polar output that generates twice the force for a given bias voltage on the stators. Given the obvious potential benefits, you might well wonder why nobody ever applied the technique, but if I tell you that Martin Logan started experimenting with the approach back in the mid-90's and it's taken this long to get it to the point where performance is consistent and the unit can actually be manufactured



It also makes a significant contribution to the CLX's substantial weight.

The whole structure is supported on four large spikes, complete with spanner flats and large diameter knurled locking washers. Normally I wouldn't make such a thing about the spikes supplied with a speaker but in this instance their quality and placement is crucial, because getting these speakers onto an identical vertical axis is essential to achieving their best performance. In terms ▶

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▶ of quality these are well up to the job, but the rear pair are recessed well below the electronics box, a peculiar decision as it makes access something of a chore.

The front spikes screw straight into the base of the baffle, but with a speaker this tall, to eliminate risk of toppling, the speakers arrive with an additional plate of EcoSound bolted to the bottom and extending forward of the speaker's front face. Undoubtedly effective, this solution is also plug ugly – although removing the plate does give you the opportunity to appreciate the rigidity and mechanical integrity of the resin-based material...

The electronics box is internally illuminated to highlight the cutouts of the cooling logo, while a second logo is placed at the base of the midrange panel. Both switch off when the speaker isn't in use (in keeping with the CLX's eco credentials) and can be permanently defeated by small, rear-mounted toggle switches. Aside from the IEC power input and the single pair of wing-nut, spade-only binding posts on the rear panel, that's your lot. No bi-wiring option is offered as the lack of a back EMF from the bass driver eliminates the benefits, while the passive, second-order crossover reflects the speaker's purist stance, the benefits of musical coherence across the entire bandwidth outweighing the ability to extend

or equalize the bass output through active drive.

It's easy to assume that the CLX is all about that bass driver – and in many respects you'd be right. As soon as you hear bass notes through this speaker (and, inevitably, some bass-heavy material is the first thing you reach for) you realize that they do something special. Play some up-right bass, something off of a mid-sixties jazz recording with typically wooly nether regions and you'll be astonished at the degree of pitch definition and texture the CLXs unearth. Of course, having the likes of Grand Prix Audio's Monaco turntable, the Kuzma Stabi XL with the magical new 4POINT tonearm and CD players from the likes of Wadia and Zanden on hand doesn't hurt. Nor does feeding those sources through the Connoisseur pre-amp and David Berning power amps, but few other speakers manage this trick, very few at the

Logan's price and none that don't go down a lot deeper.

But what's really impressive is the uninterrupted continuity that travels from the lowest notes to the highest. There must be a join between the output of the bass panel and the bottom of the mid-band, but I've yet to detect it. Add that to a distinctly un-electrostatic sense of weight, solidity and presence and you've got the foundations for something very special indeed. Play 'Trans-Am' from Neil Young's *Sleeps*

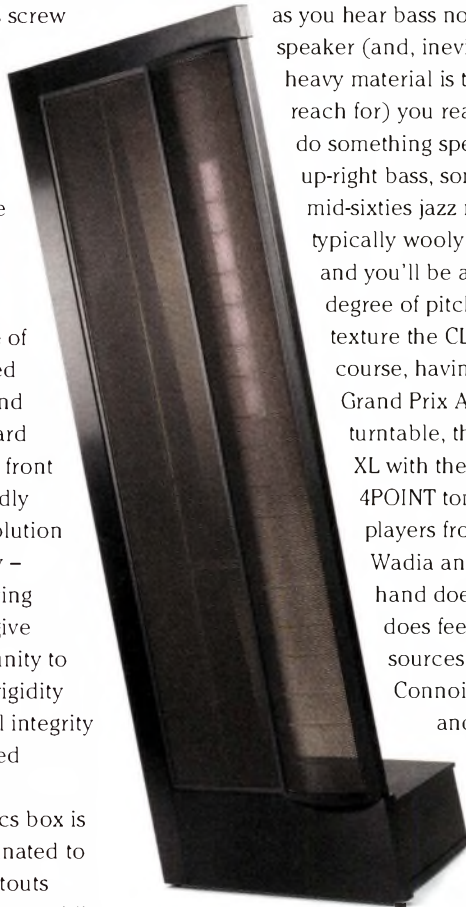
With Angels and the instrumental detail lifted off the disc by this set-up, and duly delivered by the speakers is remarkable. The bass line is deep and measured, overlaid with the bottom registers of guitar, yet the CLX keeps notes separate and the steady pace measured rather than leaden. Even when Young hits an open string, there's just enough undamped resonance and fuzz to garner full effect. As the song slowly (and I do mean slowly) builds to its guitar solo climax, the bass moves to the top of its range, chopped notes chorusing the guitar's tortured line. It's an

impressive display of control, separation and continuity that makes an impressive musical performance more effective still.

The degree of continuity is remarkable, because it embraces not just pitch and speed but texture and tonality as well.

That's helped by the sense of substance and presence instilled by the bass, a quality that in turn embraces and fills out the midrange and treble. So much so that in many ways (staging aside) the CLX really doesn't sound like an electrostatic at all – and that's a serious compliment. There's none of that floaty, insubstantial, ethereal

character to the sound, none of the plasticity colouration that makes so many 'statics sound quick and clean. These Logans sound quick ▶



▶ because they are, and clean because so much thought has gone into the structure and materials employed. The result is sound with a real feeling of physical presence and impact when required, a natural solidity and stability even through quieter moments. If the best modern moving-coil designs are starting to approach electrostatic levels of continuity, transparency and freedom from cabinet colouration, the CLX matches those boxes for dynamic impact, musical substance and coherent bandwidth.

In common with other panels, you need to be seated to get the correct balance from the CLXs, the reason they are so critical of rake-angle. At least the horizontal window isn't as restricted as some, the sweetspot being at least two full seats wide before the soundstage loses its independence and you start to hear the nearer speaker. But in the zone and with things set up just so, you can expect a sound that has an inviting warmth and sweetness without ever cloaking or obscuring detail. Images have depth and physical volume, transients can snap and crackle if required. Just listen to the propulsive drumming and cymbal work on Young's 'Piece Of Crap', a full-on grunge-rant that the CLXs hurl into the room with gusto, following that up with the acoustic contrast between the subtle, distinctive, mechanical complexity of the tack piano and the deep detonations of marimba on 'A Dream That Can Last'.

If we take all these facets of the CLXs' performance and bind them together we can see them reflected in their musical presentation and range of expression. So, if we listen to the Ricci *Carmen Fantasie*, it reveals both their considerable strengths and inevitable compromises. Ricci's virtuoso playing and the enthusiastic support of the LSO, beautifully measured and restrained under

Feeding and positioning...

Any di-pole speaker will be extremely critical of placement, toe-in and particularly, distance to the rear wall. The CLX is no exception, and when it comes to fore and aft positioning, it's far more critical than most. How critical? Change your amp, expect to adjust the speaker position to rebalance the bottom-end. It will probably only need about 5-10mm, but you will clearly hear the benefit, a sensitivity that makes choosing matching electronics something of a challenge. Of course, in part this reflects the transparency, weight and pitch security on offer at low-frequencies – as well as the effectiveness of the rear-facing wave-guide in evening out the bass response. But don't underestimate the demands this speaker will place on your reserves of both precision and patience. You must also start with the electronics box exactly horizontal, both laterally and front to back, which will tilt the baffle back 2 degrees from vertical, the recommended starting position. It's a task that requires considerable time spent scabbling on the floor. Thereafter, soundstage focus and midrange presence will depend on toe-in and subtle rear tilting of the baffles, but to get the best from the CLX all adjustments must be exactly symmetrical.

There's also a secondary consideration; the length of time it takes the bass panel in particular, to deliver its full performance. The

Gamba's baton, is a telling challenge for any system, but the big Logans revel in its detail and dramatic contrasts. But let's pass over the bombastically impressive opening salvos with their flashy percussion and even flashier bow work. Instead, let's look at *Act Two* and the interior of Lillas Pastia's tavern. The exposed soloist is beautifully stable and solid in space, although not focused with the same pinpoint precision you'd associate with the more holographic mini-monitors. Instead of hyper-reality, this is a more distant and actually more natural perspective, the instrument driving the cushion of air around it as a whole, rather than being dismantled into strings, body and neck. The combination of contrapuntal phrases and sudden, pizzicato punctuation makes for a

longer the speaker is plugged in and used, the deeper and weightier the bass becomes. I was gently edging it forward for at least ten days before it finally settled down – a combination of break-in and the charging effects common to all electrostatics. The differences are not subtle, so be prepared to both revisit your initial set-up and ensure that the speakers stay permanently connected to the mains.

As regards choice of amplifier, I drove the CLX with a host of different electronics, their large radiating area making a nonsense of their modest electrical sensitivity, while their capacious soundstage and sense of presence generally managed to bring the best out of partnering electronics, rather than crucifying them. Valve amps as varied as the Emille KI-40L and ARC Ref110 delivered excellent results, while both the Belles MB-200 and Hovland RADIA also excelled. But the best results of all were achieved with the astonishingly transparent and quick delivery of the David Berning Quadrature Z mono-blocs, an all tube, OTL design – but one with a spectral balance and power delivery far more reminiscent of a solid-state amp. The lesson here is simple; whilst you can get away with surprisingly modest amplification, the CLX is perfectly capable of revealing the benefits of the best amps you might choose to throw at it – which is both reassuring and something of a challenge...

steady ramping up of the musical tension as Ricci gathers momentum, the mid-hall balance bringing shape and a sense of presence to his performance.

In keeping with that perspective the soundstage spreads broad and deep, behind the plane of the speakers. The sidewalls and floor are not as apparent as they can be, a reflection of the speakers' low-frequency limitations, but the rear wall is both way back and well defined. Indeed, depth definition and the correct scaling and layering of instrumental groups is a key component in the CLXs' performance. There's also a very real sense of the acoustic space, the continuous body of air and space in which the musical performance is occurring. The air and delicacy with which the speakers deliver ▶

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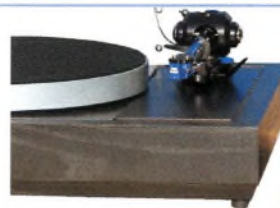
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► Ricci's opening bars, the plaintive, almost lilting quality he brings to the haunting melody with its songlike lines and phrasing emphasize the speakers' sweetness and lack of fizz or distortion at high frequencies. As the piece builds, the patchwork of orchestral support is subtle but insistent, each instrumental choir locked beautifully scaled in terms of energy and level, clearly establishing both their distance from the soloist and their location in the coherent acoustic space, adding significantly to the sense of event, but also to their musical impact and drama. At first they hover, almost delicately prompting in the background, before building and growing into the commanding presence of the dramatic finale.



It's this sense of completeness, the way that everything you get is presented as part of a single, coherent and contiguous whole that makes the CLXs so special; that and the fact that they do so without reducing the music, the musicians or their range of colours, techniques and emotional shading, to some dulled, lowest common denominator. Sure, they lack the deepest bass frequencies, but the

bass they do deliver is remarkable both for its quality and its utterly seamless integration with the rest of the range. With so little stored energy to slow progress, the pace of music, and changes in its pace, are effortlessly natural, again irrespective of frequency. Whilst the length of bass notes means that they take time to happen, shifts in the direction of the playing or the attack on a note shouldn't be slowed in sympathy. The CLX reveals the agility in playing, whatever its pitch, underlining just how poorly most speakers perform in this regard. It is this evenhandedness across their entire bandwidth, the consistency with which they deliver dynamic and tonal information, the coherence of the spatial cues they provide, the natural sense

of energy and colour they bring to performances that makes this such an enjoyable and rewarding loudspeaker. As to enquiries regarding the extent of their bass extension, clearly those can safely be answered with that old standby, "adequate". You can easily get more, but within its working range, you'll struggle to get better.

This level of performance never comes cheap and never, ever comes

easy. The MartinLogan CLXs might make you work when it comes to set up, and make your system work when it comes to meeting their demands for quality (rather than quantity) but they'll repay the effort handsomely. They cost more than twice the price of the Summit and deliver less bandwidth for your money – but good as the Summit is, the CLX is capable of way more than twice the performance of the hybrid design. The best MartinLogan speaker I've ever heard (by some considerable margin) it finally delivers on the all-electrostatic promise – and does so to spectacular effect. ►+

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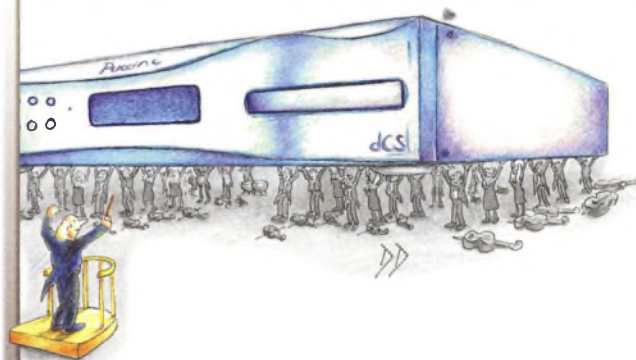
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assembling a system of fine (not outrageous) components with a focus on 'TLC & set-up' paid off



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Ring A Ring A Roses...

Or – what happens when reviewers escape the editorial leash

by Roy Gregory

As a reader, one of the more subtle but entertaining sideshows that illuminate the Lilliputian world of hi-fi publishing, is the constant battle over prominent products. Standing, Gulliver-like astride the various titles, you can see the after effects of editors puffing out their egos and PR people scrabbling to take advantage. Who cares if a product ends up on the front of a magazine with no readers who are interested in it or likely to buy it? How many times have you seen a designer's carefully nurtured baby, thrown to the wolves in return for some corner of a cluttered cover, half obscured by a lurid "Exclusive!" banner? But this is a world with many layers, and even more entertaining are the undignified little squabbles that break out between reviewers, hyped on their own inflated sense of self-importance. Just watch who does – and even more importantly, who doesn't – review a given product: especially once it's been despoiled by the grubby (and doubtless incompetent and corrupt) hands of the competition. My, how the self-appointed mighty make public asses of themselves... All of which is good for a laugh – unless of course you are a manufacturer caught in the crossfire. Still, those who play these games ultimately tend to get their

fingers burnt, one way or another.

But there is a more serious side to this. Often, as an editor, the hardest decisions you have to make are those concerning which reviewer should receive a given product – especially something particularly innovative,



interesting or that's been long awaited. And nothing is more frustrating as a reviewer than seeing a product you'd really like to hear go to a different writer for review. Sometimes it's a question of system matching or room size, other times it's down to taste or specific experience. Sometimes we'll have two reviewers look at a product,

although logistically this tends to be a bit of a nightmare.

So, with another Awards Issue looming and a tradition of doing things a little differently for these, a thought occurred; why not allow the reviewers to select those products from the last year (or so) that they really wish they'd got their hands on – and then arrange exactly that? Okay, so I had to impose a few budgetary stipulations – total spend, split any way you want – but within those limits it's a case of anything goes. Of course, they wouldn't be reviewers if they stuck to the rules, so CT blew his budget on just the one product (ironically, one I'd wanted him to review in the first place!) while others looked outside of past issues and even into the future! But hey, it makes for an interesting mix – as well as a second view on some of the most challenging and exciting products we've been lucky enough to get our hands on. It puts them into different systems and views them through different eyes and ears – as well as burdening them with the heavy weight of expectation. Some are obvious choices – and others are not. Some are award winners whilst others have not even been reviewed yet. The lunatics are taking over the asylum – and you know what? It's really kind of fun...





Bigger Than It Looks... And Cleverer Too! Wilson's Wonderful Duette

by Chris Thomas

Being a long-standing fan of stand mount speakers meant that I was always going to jump at the chance of a serious listen to the "baby" Wilson. But after several months conditioning by the remarkable Eben C1 it soon became clear I was going to need to make a bit of a head jump to understand and enjoy them. They are bigger than I had imagined from the photographs and quite room dominant, piano black and tall on their stands. And what about that big bass/mid driver and Scanspeak ring radiator tweeter? This is the very antithesis of the Eben's ceramic and ribbon units, to say nothing of their resonance-controlled stand. In comparison, this Wilson is a bit of throw back in terms of driver technology but has obviously had tremendous attention paid to the cabinet and crossover.

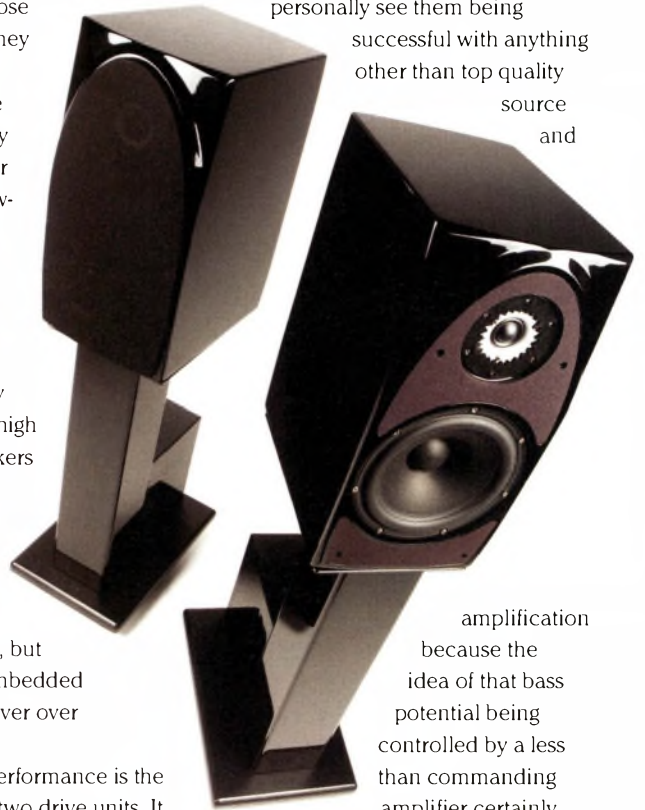
Precision and procedure are needed when it comes to installation. Tiny changes in position bring about big changes in sound and toe-in especially needs to be thought about with no regard for previous experience to influence you. RG and I painstakingly installed them in their free-air guise (as you'll probably already know, they can also be configured for near wall use) but even so, it may take a further day or so of tiny refinements to optimize them as they settle in – but believe me, it is time well spent because, when it is cooking, the Duette is a very interesting design indeed and one that offers an almost unique solution to some of the limitations intrinsic in stand-mount speaker performance. It should go without saying that the system itself and its installation in particular will need to be exemplary but, thus equipped, you will find that the

Duettes are so vice-free that you will be able to listen to music for hours on end. Where most high quality stand-mount speakers project the music vividly into the room, the Wilson produces deep and expansive views of the recording that just seem to appear in and around the speakers. I suppose you could say that they are somewhat laid back but I really like the perspectives they offer, especially their portrayal of ultra low-level detail and the way they preserve ambience within recordings. They are certainly not as explicit and finely etched through the high frequencies as speakers like the baby Eben or the Beryllium-equipped Focal speakers and don't have their obvious articulation, but they have notable imbedded resolution, that is never over analytical.

The key to their performance is the integration of those two drive units. It is remarkable and music is portrayed as a whole, living, breathing thing. The scale and full-blown size of the sound means that you never run up against that small-speaker brick wall where the music simply cannot fill the room. The more you appreciate just how comfortably the speaker copes with any musical situation, the easier it is to understand Wilson's decision to go with that big bass/mid driver that just squeezes into the cabinet. Then there

is the bonus of good efficiency and bandwidth as the Duette, while not exactly subterranean in bass response, reaches down and moves air with power and authority at frequencies that other stand-mounts merely suggest. This is one of the reasons why I cannot personally see them being

successful with anything other than top quality source and



amplification because the idea of that bass potential being controlled by a less than commanding amplifier certainly doesn't appeal to me

at all*. But, get it right and they are concise and to the point. Overall I find their tonal balance a touch on the dark side but, where individual instruments are concerned, they are superbly charismatic with a subtle delicacy and space that brings their character ►

*Although both RG's and AS's experiences suggest the contrary, I guess that assumptions are hard to overcome, because I just can't see how it would work...

▶ to life and this helps enormously if you are interested in examining technique and playing style.

At first I thought they were a little slow but time and experience have changed my mind. They certainly don't have the snap and obvious pace of the micro-focussed Eben C1 but they deal with music in a very different way to that speaker. Their speed is not linked to tonal sharpness like many other two-way designs, but drive the Duettes hard with a pair of power amplifiers like the accomplished Ayre MXR mono-blocs and they seem to rhythmically tauten as you pour the power on, without losing their shape or that expansive quality and atmosphere that are their most compelling attributes. Listen to the opening track of *Heartworn Highways* and the high and lonesome sound of Guy Clark's 'LA Freeway' and you'll be struck by the stark, dry nakedness of the vocal and the colourful contrast and acoustic space of that naturally recorded steel-string guitar. It's just a man and his guitar, but through the Duettes this song is positively tactile and it becomes impossible to do anything else other than to listen to the story unfolding as every small melancholic vocal inflection and chord change is ripe with expression and dripping in presence.

In another musical land completely you'll find *Drive East* by a classical Indian collective known as Yashila that consists of a very hot percussion duo playing an array of Indian

instruments and Kala Ramnath's simply gorgeous violin. She is a truly incredible musician who plays wildly exotic Indian classical passages in a series of slurred notes that are perhaps harmonically alien but so attractive to the Western ear. Classical

Indian musicians playing music inspired by the landscape of Andalusia? It works for me, but now the system challenges are very different as the tempos are anything but straightforward and the tonal palette is wildly variable. The Duettes were

simply stunning on this album, as they picked up on the whole rhythmic sway of the music and focussed it within a deep soundstage. While a drone instrument floats its ambient mood-making influence in the background, the picture is filled with a pulsing percussive vibrancy and this almost plaintive call from the violin as it darts in and out with scattering runs full, of the intense and vivid flavours of the East. It's that word atmosphere again and the speaker's willingness to bend to the demands of such wildly variable material without imposing its own characteristics. I loved the intensity that the Wilson's bring and the fact that they never seem breathless or stretched and this album can certainly tax a system's reserves and in particular its ability to deliver that violin's full vocabulary from the shape of the note to the

sometimes edgy rasping colour that she puts on it.

The Duette's are certainly different to any stand-mount speaker I have used for a long time. In many ways they have more in common with a pair of Acoustic Research speakers I owned many years ago. The big, paper-coned driver also gave that speaker an expansive and full-bodied weight that I remember with fondness. These are very different from the advanced material drivers that we find in the high-tech designs of today.

I like both approaches and have come to believe that these Wilson Duettes are really quite special. By offering a totally different set of compromises they also provide an alternative view of the music, but one that is no less interesting, involving or enjoyable. The more I used them, the more I liked them – and you can take that as a firm recommendation. ➤



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Coming Around Again...

The Wadia 581se CD/SACD Player

by Jason Kennedy

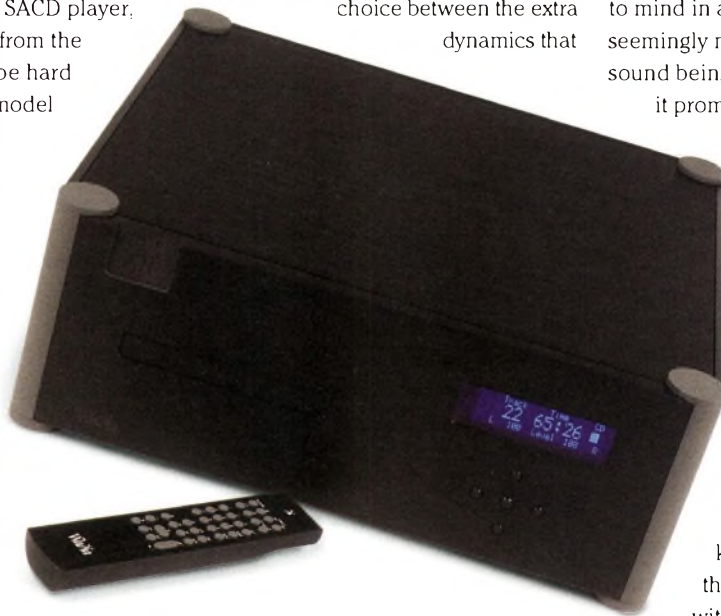
Four years ago I reviewed an earlier incarnation of this almost brutalist CD player. It was called the 861se and topped Wadia's one box range and, confusingly, looked almost identical to the 581se I see before me. But now, given the demise of the company's more affordable models, this is now pretty much their entry-level machine.

The 581se is also an SACD player, but you'd not guess it from the outside. In fact you'd be hard pressed to tell which model it is without turning it on and interrogating the display. This both helps in production terms and means that if you upgrade the player its appearance does not give the wrong impression. Finally, there is a 581i se version of the same player, which has digital in and outputs, but both are built around the same modified TEAC

VRDS transport and feature Wadia's processing and clocking techniques in an attempt to keep the signal jitter free. As ever with the brand, there is also an onboard volume control in the digital domain, an option you cannot bypass but which you turn to max when using the player with a pre-amplifier. The volume control system is of the bit reducing variety which can sometimes mean that resolution is impaired at lower outputs but Wadia claims to have countered this by up-

sampling the signal to 24-bits which leaves it eight bits of headroom with which to adjust level.

Counter intuitively a lot of volume controllable players sound better when fed through a decent pre-amplifier than they do when connected directly to a power amplifier. However, when they are of this calibre, you get a genuine choice between the extra dynamics that



a pre-amp brings (combined with its inevitable character) and the still remarkably dynamic and transparent sound of the player alone. I found that it was more engaging when passed through a pre-amp, whether it was a Classé CP-700 or the Audio Zone Pre T1 TVC. Which in the latter instance was a pain because I no longer had remote volume control and a mystery because the Wadia is designed to drive long cables and has a reasonably low 51ohm output impedance.

The Pre T1 and ATC SCM150 SL active speakers worked extremely well, delivering the full power and body of everything played with a degree of transparency that is very rare. This is an addictive player, one that has this usually relaxed reviewer scurrying around tweaking cables, supports and anything else that came to mind in an attempt to bridge the seemingly narrow divide between the sound being produced and the reality it promises. With a great recording

in the Wadia's drawer that gap is tantalisingly small, the music so close and solid that you can almost taste it. The recording I chose for the best of year, *Sensuous* by Cornelius has some superb wind chimes on it that are so crisp yet present that you wonder who left the window open. Then the kick drum comes in and thumps you in the sternum with a bodaciousness that is seriously substantial.

Wadia players are renowned for their muscular bass and this one is no different. The piano that Keith Jarrett plays on his Carnegie Hall disc reveals so much more of its timbre and body than usual, you can feel the weight of the instrument and the subtlety with which it's played. This is even clearer with SACD. Barb Jungr's rendition of 'Who Do You Love' features tabla, which normally sounds quite dry, but here you sense their shape and ▶

▶ texture to full effect. There is clearly another layer of detail being revealed by the player; you can hear far more decay in notes, which helps to flesh out individual instruments and voices to an uncanny degree.

This Wadia has three filter options which, with a bit of stabbing at the rather attractive handset can be accessed and compared. The machine comes set on algorithm A which is v2.5 of the Digimaster filter that's said to deliver "a robust sound with extraordinary image Focus and re-creation of recorded space". Option B on the other hand "provides more extended top end with superior time-domain performance", which piqued my interest because anything that improves timing has got to be a good thing. But it doesn't take long to realise that Wadia's algorithm of choice is the most appealing, option B sounding distinctly hard and flat by comparison, the polish and image depth of the Digimaster setting being far more satisfying.

Back to that luxurious groove, and I had a particularly enthralling time listening to the opening track from Serge Gainsbourg's *Histoire de Melody Nelson*. This features a superbly recorded electric bass guitar which sounds absolutely gorgeous with the sort of insight that the Wadia brings. Its depth and tone is enough to make you wonder where recording technology has gone wrong in the last thirty years, either that or why most bass guitars sound so flat by comparison. Gainsbourg's voice is also extremely well rendered, there's no mistaking that Gitanes and brandy quality that has so clearly influenced Tom Waits

and Yellow amongst others.

If there is one thing that I would change about this player, apart from the fact that at 25kg it's a pain to shift, it's that it could be mechanically quieter. Even four metres away its high-pitched whine is audible with quiet music. I suspect that if it were placed in an alcove



or a damped environment it might not be an issue but atop a regular hi-fi stand it does occasionally intrude.

But why would you play quiet music when you have such a powerful and dynamic disc spinner to hand, and one that plays SACDs at that. I have a few of these whose CD layers at least, get regular use, so hearing the SA layer in such comprehensively revealing style is a real treat. The Barb Jungr album alluded to earlier, *Walking In The Sun* is one, and it has rarely sounded so complete. It's a Linn Records recording of considerable crispness and very low noise but I've not heard so much depth in its sound before. The dynamic range on another Linn disc of solo piano (Artur Pizzaro – Beethoven *Piano Sonatas*) was positively scary, which when combined with massive depth of image makes for a very convincing result. David Wilczewski's *Room in the Clouds* on Opus3 likewise offered

up a lot of fine detail, like the air on cymbals and all manner of low level subtlety that helps to build a more complete sonic picture.

With a very good regular CD things can often still get pretty close, the 581se injecting a tremendous sense of palpability and presence into the room with Fink's latest disc, the voice again sounding extremely real.

After my usual reference, the Resolution Audio Opus 21 which admittedly costs less than a third of the asking price here, the Wadia is ahead in pretty well all respects. It's not dissimilar in its character but it brings you more power in the bass, greater openness, better dynamics and more vitality and solidity. It is

also clearly better at image depth and finds a shine and brilliance in brass instruments that the more affordable machine is unable to match. Oh, and it times like a beauty too.

I have heard disc players that sound more precise and crisp than this Wadia and I've heard others that are more refined, albeit not a lot. But I've not encountered one that delivers energy, timing and tangibility to this degree. I have always held Wadias in high esteem and this reinforces that respect – with bells on. ▶+

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Power To Impress...

The PS Audio Power Plant Premier Regenerating Power Supply

by Jimmy Hughes

I'm lucky with my mains supply. It appears to be of good quality and seems pretty consistent; regardless of when I listen, I don't notice much variation in sound quality. Some years ago, I did some simple tests for noise using the Russ Andrews gear. This confirmed that impression. That said, specialist mains cables made a big difference. I'd already experimented with solid core mains back in the 1980s, but trying Russ Andrews' Kimber cables a decade ago resulted in a huge improvement. Even with clean mains, there's still scope for improvement. So, what about something that completely cleanses the mains?

RG gave the PS Power Plant Premier Regenerator an enthusiastic review in issue 59, making it sound like a Must Have. Others reviewers have been equally positive. Everything about the PS Premier makes it sound like the sort of device that can't fail. Buy one, and you're sure to get a better sound. Or is that being over simplistic?

Suppose your mains supply is consistent, and low in noise/distortion; perhaps a power supply like the PS Premier (which completely reconstitutes the mains voltage, giving a clean low distortion signal) might not make that much difference. It's obviously going to work best with a

dirty/noise supply. However, even if your mains supply is free from noise and distortion, noise can be created by other components – computers, TV sets, microwave ovens, phone chargers – plugged in alongside your hi-fi. That's why some enthusiasts have a separate spur put in for their hi-fi to run off – it helps reduce contamination from outside devices. The PS Premier has five



isolated 13A mains sockets. It's got sufficient power capability even for big power amps. However, unlike earlier PS Supplies, it does not run hot; even after several hours' use the case is barely warm to the touch. There's a cooling fan should you really push the unit, but it was never needed. Many years ago, I encountered PS Audio's P300 supply, and that ran alarmingly hot. Much as I liked what the P300 did, I would never have considered buying one because of the heat – I felt there would be long-term reliability issues given such high

operating temperatures. But with the Premier there are no such worries.

Now, there are basically two ways to test a device like this; you either plug everything in at once, or you start with a single component, and go from there. I decided on the latter approach, and began with the Arcam DV135 CD/SACD player. There was a noticeable improvement, but it seemed fairly slight. Playing a disc with a plucked lute, the sound seemed slightly sharper, and there appeared

to be a bit more space around the instrument. It was slightly clearer and more dynamic, and the acoustic of the venue was more apparent. But that was about it – the difference wasn't huge or mind-blowing.

I did a bit more listening, and then plugged in my Musical Fidelity kW pre-amp.

Again, there was a difference, albeit a fairly small one. Next, I connected my Musical Fidelity kW-750 power amp. More of the same – a slight improvement in clarity and transparency - but nothing earth shattering. Was I missing something?

Although my perception was that the each improvement had been fairly small, I had to admit the whole system was now sounding very sweet and transparent. It sounded extremely clean and relaxed, with good detail and clarity. The music had greater finesse ▶

▶ and seemed more refined. At this point I unplugged everything from the PS PPP and went back to mains from the distribution board. It was then that the penny dropped. All at once, the sound seemed to lose its easy transparency and inner detail. Everything seemed rather bland and less focused.

The smooth effortless clarity I'd pretty much taken for granted seemed to have disappeared. On the face of it, nothing had changed. The sound had the same tonal balance and the overall presentation seemed similar. Yet the music no longer sounded as effortlessly clear and immediate. It simply wasn't as good. Using the PS PPP, the music had excellent, unforced clarity and separation. With it removed, the sound seemed a bit 'shut in', as though volume levels needed to be raised. I really noticed this with solo voice or an individual instrument against an orchestral backdrop – the soloist 'projected' far better with the PPP.

The Power Plant Premier hadn't really altered the basic qualities and characteristics of my hi-fi system. It just made it easier to appreciate its positive aspects. Essentially, components like the PPP reveal the true nature of your equipment, allowing you to discern its strengths. It's certainly an 'upgrade', but more in the sense of allowing your equipment greater freedom to be itself. With the PPP you hear more of what you already paid for. For me, the benefit was a stripping away of something (noise? distortion?) I hadn't realised was there. Initially, it did not strike me as a seismic transformation. It wasn't a dramatic night and day sort of thing. Given that my mains quality is quite good, I would have

been surprised if the difference had been huge. Yet this was deceptive; in a sense the difference was huge. Whenever I went back, I was faced with a sound that lacked the same effortless transparency and ease. It's a bit like going to a good live concert, and not being overly impressed by what you hear – only when you get back home and switch your system on, it sounds awful. The live sound was much better than you realised at the time.

However, one individual component that was noticeably affected by the PS Premium was the Thorens TD-160 HD turntable. Using



this straight from the wall socket, and then via the PS, made a big difference to the clarity and separation of the sound – if anything, more so than with components like the CD player. The more components you have powered by the PS, the more individual differences seem able to come through. In other words, the effect produced is cumulative. You can hear the effect on a single component, but the more things you have running off the Premier, the bigger the difference gets. Does using something like the PPP nullify the benefit of using audiophile mains cables? The answer is a definite – No. Changing mains cables to better types like Kimber still makes a difference. Even the quality of the power cable feeding the PS Premium is important.

Although I liked the results produced by the old PS P300, I found the heat it produced completely off-putting. The PPP is the complete opposite; it barely gets warm. Perhaps if you were using a big class-A power amp that drew heavy amounts of power, it might run a bit warmer. But - even using a big amp like the Musical Fidelity kW750 with its 750W output – I couldn't get the PPP to break sweat. The unit itself produces a very faint mechanical hum, but it's barely audible, and to all intents and purposes the unit is silent. If any of the components you use suffer from transformer buzz, the PPP should reduce this.

One last point; I really like the way the PPP allows you to switch the whole system on and off from a single button. Before, I had something like four or five buttons to press. Sometimes, I'd forget and leave certain things on overnight, but that can't happen now.

I'm deeply impressed with the Power Plant Premier. The more I get used to what it does, the more I like and admire the end result. It really makes your hi-fi sound more listenable. It makes the music sound more natural and relaxed, while at the same time improving dynamics and separation. An outstanding product! ▶+

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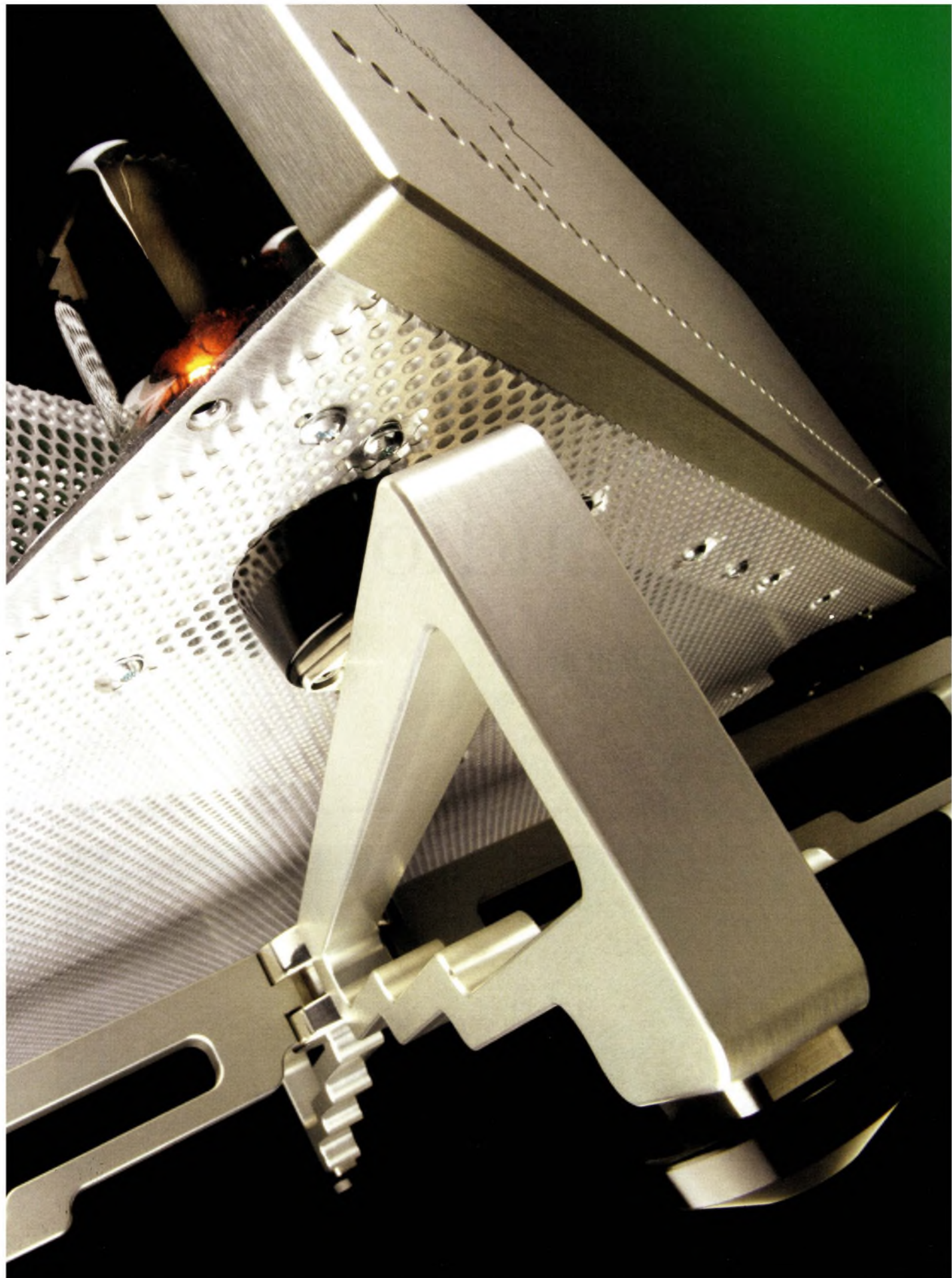
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Grace And Favour...

The David Berning Quadrature Z Mono-Blocs

by Roy Gregory

The Berning amps, as they not surprisingly tend to be known, given their clumsy and convoluted nomenclature, arrived with quite a fanfare – and an equally impressive reputation to live up to. Most recently, CT has declared them the most impressive amps he's ever used, and whilst they are also the most expensive by some margin, there's no escaping the depth of the impression they made on him. Then of course, there's that price tag – a burden that can weigh just as heavily as a record transfer fee on the shoulders of a footballer. (Well, before the days of the Premiership, when players gave a fig about more than their next pay-cheque!) But there's more besides; the cult reputation and almost underground status of previous Berning products, tales of whose performance have been whispered in the darkened back corridors of the audiophile community for many a year. And finally, there's the man himself – undeniably and genuinely brilliant as well as creatively eccentric (who else would wear a valve wrist-watch?). Audio is just a hobby for him, relaxation after a heavy day certifying power device performance and safety for the US government. It is, quite literally, a high-powered responsibility. How does he accomplish the task? By designing and building ultra fast and accurate valve circuits to do the job. Yes, that's right; he uses tube circuits to test and measure the fastest solid-state devices...

My first exposure to Berning electronics was in a system at the Montreal Show a good few years ago. It was the same system that

introduced us to Stillpoints – and was producing not just one of the best sounds at the show, but impressive sound by any measure. It was an encounter that had a profound effect on our thinking, but whilst the Stillpoints devices have become a prominent part of our ongoing history, engaging with the Berning amps has taken quite a bit longer.

In part that's because David Berning isn't really interested in his hobby becoming a business, being happy to tinker and build a few



amps for friends. But those friends, having trodden a long and often winding road to audio Nirvana, are less relaxed about the products and their potential. More people, they reason, should have the opportunity to hear what a truly ground breaking amp can do (and make no mistake – the circuitry in these amps is totally unlike anything you'll have seen or heard before). Eventually they brokered a deal in which the man would provide the design and engineering expertise, but they would handle all other aspects of the business. The Quadrature Zs are the first product of this arrangement and, if these are

anything to go by, the future looks rosy indeed.

The Berning mono-blocs pitch up right alongside the likes of the Hovland Stratos, the big c-j and Karan mono-blocs, established favourites offering a powerful and balanced performance that makes them the pick of the amplification options we've heard

The Quadrature Zs are perfectly comfortable in such exalted company, but like each of those models, they also bring their own particular slant to proceedings, that one realm in which they excel – except that in this instance it's not so much a presence as an absence that really impresses.

Even the briefest of listens to the Berning amps will make you realize that there's something remarkable going on. Both the speed of the amps and the pace of the music, its ability to progress seamlessly from measured phrases to lightening quick runs of notes, is remarkable in the realm of hi-fi reproduction. It invests the playing with an expressive range, a mastery of time and space that's captivating. Playing the Heifetz *Kreutzer Sonata* on Cisco's superb re-pressing allows the amps to really show their flair, ▶

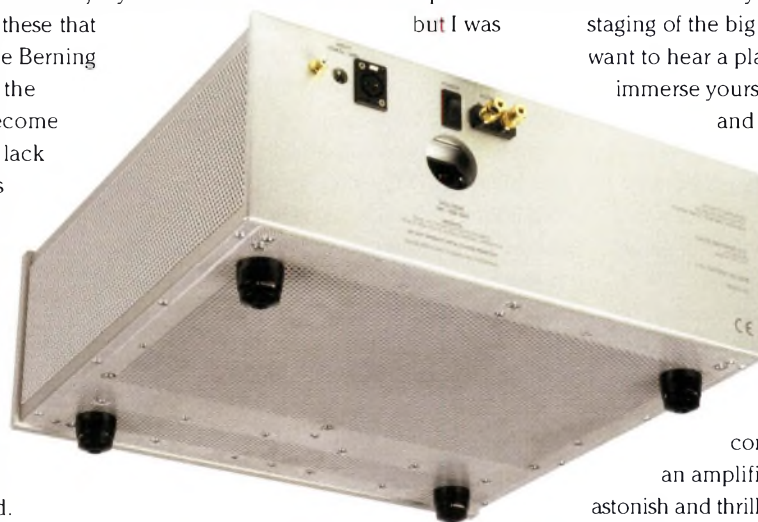
▶ matching the maestro for poise and his flair for the dramatic contrast. The sudden switches of line and musical accelerations, the blindingly quick sprays of notes that scatter from his bow, are beautifully controlled and juxtaposed with the slower passages and the sonorous support of the piano part. The balance between the instruments is perfectly maintained – and if Heifetz is a little larger than life, well, that's life!

It's listening to the unfettered majesty of performances such as these that reveals just how much the Berning amps are contributing to the experience. What you become aware of is the complete lack of restraint in the process – not the music, where the players exhibit exemplary control – but the process of reproducing it. No matter how fast the signal or how wide and sudden the dynamic jumps it makes, it is never slowed or impeded. Simply because things can happen as quickly as they need to, suddenly the sense of the system tracking the demands of the signal disappears altogether, allowing the music to ebb and flow, race or dawdle as the players desire.

Add to that the OTL's traditional transparency and the Bernings' lack of grain, a facet of their sophisticated power supply, and you have an instrument for unimpeded access to the inner workings of any recording. Key to that capability is the lack of baggage, the absence of extra weight or colour, either right across or at discrete bands within the bandwidth. Rhythmic patterns are never slurred or slowed, and only stumble when they're meant to – or they were played that way. These amps aren't lean in the traditional sense that we use that word – but they are spare, without an ounce

of extra fat on their musical bones, neither adding to the music's colours nor taking away. Indeed, one of the few artifacts I can attribute to the Quadrature Zs is a subtle shallowing of instrumental textures, but you'll need a good system and fantastically good speakers to hear it! You might also detect a hint of coldness, but that's more to do with another absence – the lack of expected, added warmth.

The Bernings were run with a number of speakers but I was



fortunate to have them in-house alongside the MartinLogan CLX electrostatics. Cue that old joke about OTLs and electrostatic loudspeakers – the one that points out that the transformer has been moved from the output of the amp to the input of the speaker. Be that as it may, the combination was spectacularly successful, possessing phenomenal presence, intimacy and immediacy. But in a way, what was more impressive was the way in which these amps handled the sort of moving-coil systems that would normally make an OTL go weak at the knees. This underlines the effectiveness of Berning's patented Zero Hysteresis current-impedance conversion technique, a topology that allows the Quadrature Z to drive low impedance loads without its

output collapsing the way it does in conventional OTLs.

If this all sounds too good to have your cake and eat it, good to true, then in one sense it is. The Bernings ability to drive awkward loads is unproven, and they'll probably need more careful speaker matching than the other amps in their class. They lack the sumptuous warmth and colours of the c-j LP-M 275s, the textural intimacy and phrasing of the STRATOS, the rock-like stability, separation and staging of the big Karans. But if you want to hear a player's technique and immerse yourself in the structure and inner relationships

of a performance then I can think of no finer tool for the job than the Quadrature Z. Quick, capable and almost intuitively direct in its

communication, this is an amplifier than can beguile, astonish and thrill. I gave these amps to CT for review because they would fit both his system and my purpose – I wanted to stretch his appreciation of the possible. Well, now I'm duly humbled, for they've stretched my appreciation too. I've yet to discern their full mettle, but a number of projects on the horizon promise the opportunity to do just that – and believe me when I say that it will be a pleasure. ▶+

Price: £22,500 pr.

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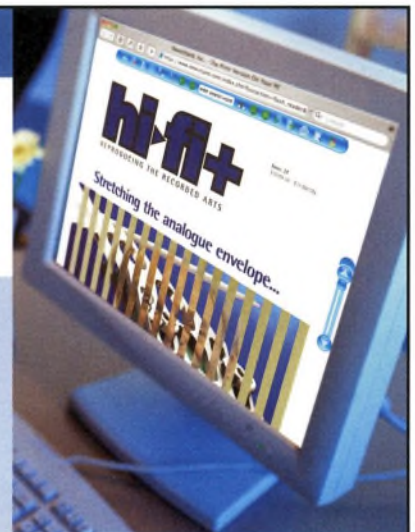
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08

A Good Thing Just Got Better... The Cairn Tornado 192 CD Player

by Jason Kennedy

I reviewed some of the new Revel Studio2 speakers recently – extremely refined and incredibly well finished speakers that cost a lot and weigh even more – yet my initial findings were less than enthusiastic. They produce incredibly low levels of distortion and with sufficient power behind them can produce very high SPLs for a domestic loudspeaker, but they seemed almost too refined, even restrained. Fortunately I was able to remedy this sorry state of affairs by replacing my stalwart Resolution Audio CD player with something costing less than half the price, the Cairn Tornado 192.

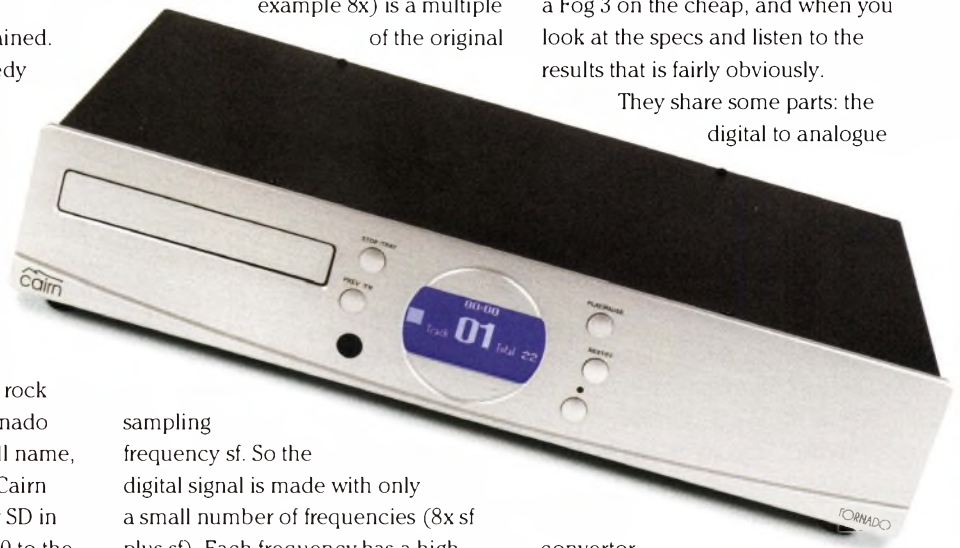
This had the effect of injecting life into the sound and bringing vitality to the loudspeaker; now it could rock with the best of them. The Tornado SOFT 24-bit.192 to give it its full name, is an upgraded version of the Cairn Tornado that was reviewed by SD in issue 58. The change adds £250 to the price of that machine and involves the replacement of the DAC and filter stage with a new board dubbed SOFT 24-bit 192, changing the sample rate of 352.8kHz (8x 44.1) to 192kHz. Which, if higher is better as is usually suggested, would seem to be a retrograde step. Gilles Belôt at Cairn explains: “You might think that the sound should be better because the frequency is higher, but in fact its not because there is a correlation between the fundamental frequency and the over-sampling frequency so the digital filtering is

less efficient. 192kHz is not a multiple of 44.1kHz and a simple filter, which doesn’t modify amplitude or phase is efficient enough. The sound is more natural because we don’t modify the transient response.”

Which left me in the dark so I pressed Gilles for further elucidation: “The over-sampling frequency (for example 8x) is a multiple of the original

exuberance without undermining the power to engage that is this player’s raison d’être. The new board also brings in switchable filters much like those on Cairn’s top player the Fog 3, an estimable machine which sits very high on the pile of circa two grand players. However, Cairn are keen to point out that the Tornado 192 is not a Fog 3 on the cheap, and when you look at the specs and listen to the results that is fairly obviously.

They share some parts: the digital to analogue

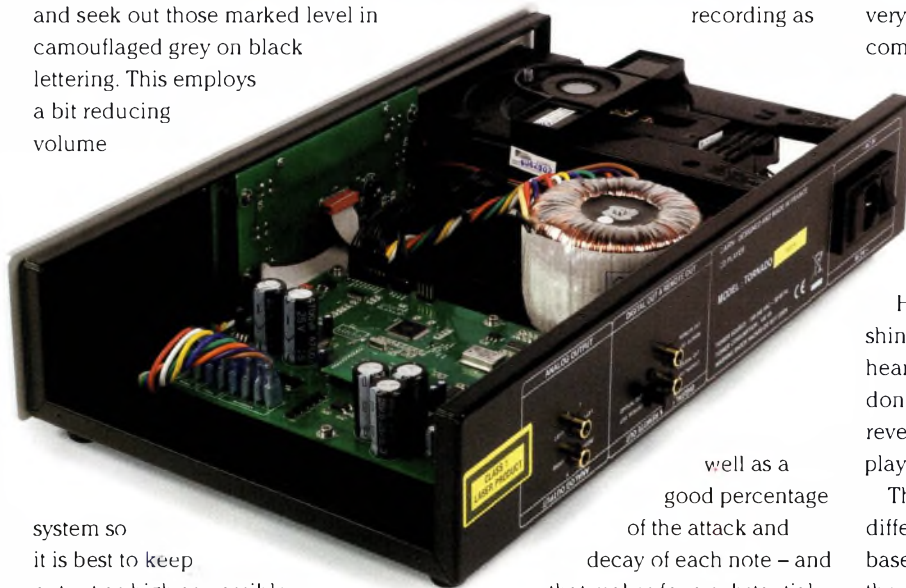


sampling frequency sf. So the digital signal is made with only a small number of frequencies (8x sf plus sf). Each frequency has a high amplitude and it is difficult to delete it. When the over-sampling is not a multiple of the sampling frequency, the digital noise is more random (more frequencies) and each frequency amplitude is lower which makes filtering easier.”

Well, one thing’s for sure – the sound is distinctly smoother and more revealing with the SOFT board. While the standard Tornado lives up to its name with a pretty forward sound that makes it very exciting but not so relaxed. The SOFT board tames the

converter that lies at the player’s heart is the same Crystal CS4398 but here there is just the one. Likewise both have a Philips laser mechanism, but Fog 3 has the top ranking CDM 12 version. The Tornado 192 has simple single ended phono outputs for the analogue signal alongside digital outs in S/PDIF and Toslink optical form, the fourth RCA socket is that rare thing, a remote out, presumably for a market other than ours. The Fog 3 is an operationally idiosyncratic machine and some of that character ▶

▶ has rubbed off here; turning the thing on for instance requires a PC like double click while inspiring the drawer to open needs a little patience. As with Fog 3, operation is a little easier with the remote handset so long as you can ignore the selection of keys designed for other Cairn products, including its wireless system and radio. You can also adjust output level if you ignore the buttons marked volume and seek out those marked level in camouflaged grey on black lettering. This employs a bit reducing volume



system so it is best to keep output as high as possible and rely on your pre-amp.

The SOFT board brings the same four filter options to the player that you find on the Fog 3. They offer different combinations of long or short group delay alongside optimisation of frequency or time domain information. When I reviewed the Fog 3, F3 – which combined short group delay with time domain optimisation – stood out as having the most engaging and dynamic sound.

With the Tornado 192 the differences were far less clear-cut and while, after a long period of listening to one setting switching to another was audibly different, the musical benefits were far more elusive.

The Tornado 192 provides top-notch entertainment. Its skill lies in the ability to latch onto and deliver the musical content from a digital signal

to a greater degree than one usually encounters at such a reasonable price. It does this by being sensitive to timing and dynamics and by presenting the music in a solid and substantial form. The Cambridge Audio 840C, a competitive £750 player with all the bells and whistles sounds thin and spatially challenged next to the Cairn, which extracts an awful lot of the acoustic from each recording as

well as a good percentage of the attack and decay of each note – and that makes for a substantial and realistic sound.

Bass is attractively strong, bold even, with good articulation, depth and power and it's this that backs up the rest of the range, bringing body to higher notes that other players fail to deliver. The highs are not as extended as dearer alternatives or, to put it another way, are a bit smoother, but this will make it easier to accommodate in appropriately priced systems. Nonetheless one of its strengths is that it can be played at proper levels through a high-end system without becoming tiring or worse, boring – the usual alternative. In fact it is downright thrilling with the right piece of music; in my case that was Fink's *This Is The Thing*, Avanim's *Third World Love* and the opening track of Serge Gainsbourg's *Melody Nelson*, with its gorgeous Rickenbacker bass line.

By the highest standards the bass is a little on the fat side, but again this will help in systems where amp and speakers are of a similar price, as it is definitely part of the allure with most material. Only the excesses of someone like Me'Shell Ndegéocello's 'Mary Magdelene' track make this apparent – and then only if played through a very wide band system. On the whole the Tornado 192 has a very well judged tonal balance that combined with its ability to trace dynamic swings makes it amongst the very best under \$1,500. I particularly like the way it digs out so much of the ambiance on each recording and presents such a coherent and engaging musical picture.

Higher piano notes have a genuine shine to them that you don't usually hear and just as importantly they don't have any of the edginess that revealing systems often expose in players at this price.

The SOFT board makes a significant difference to the Tornado. If the base player is a bit like a Lotus 7 then the 192 version is a Lotus Elise; both exciting and highly entertaining but one is rather more comfortable and built for the longer term. But such analogies only go so far and if your budget can stretch to the fully-fledged Tornado 192 then I'd strongly recommend you let it do so. ➤

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Déjà vu...

Reinventing the Thorens TD 160 HD Record Player

by Jimmy Hughes

It's been a good few years since I last listened to a Thorens TD-160. I'm thinking of the original model with two-part metal platter and three-point, sprung suspension. The 160 HD might look externally similar, but is actually quite different. The platter is made from a single piece of acrylic, and the suspension no longer uses metal springs.

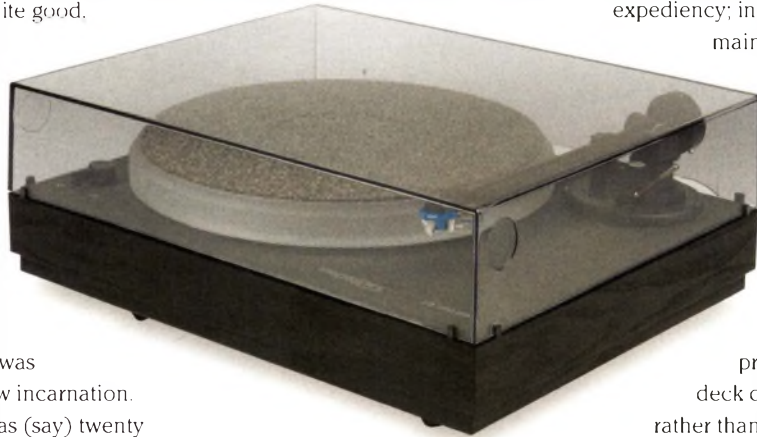
RG gave the turntable an enthusiastic welcome in issue 56, and I can see why. The old TD-160 was quite good,

but it was distinctly second-best when compared to more expensive turntables like the Linn Sondek. No matter what you did, no matter how you set it up, the gap in performance was always there. So I was intrigued to try this new incarnation. Compared to how it was (say) twenty or thirty years ago, my hi-fi system today is much less source-dependent. By that I mean it doesn't stand or fall by whether or not you're using the finest turntable on the planet. I now get very good results with 'lesser' turntables.

But, certain aspects of performance are still difficult for turntables – even very expensive ones. Pitch stability is a major issue; quite a few good decks sound less than 100% rock-solid in this respect. One solution is having a huge powerful motor and a very heavy platter, but (inevitably) this increases

costs. Assuming you don't go down the brute force route, it's tricky to get good pitch stability with a normal sized motor and medium weight platter. Listeners vary in their ability to notice slight pitch variation. Some are very critical – others seem hardly to notice. So, it's not an issue for everyone.

Unfortunately, it is an issue for me! And regular exposure to sources like CD and SACD (which



intrinsically offer absolute pitch stability) make one even less tolerant. However, if I had any worries about the TD-160 HD on that score, they were entirely misplaced; pitchwise the deck sounds very solid and steady.

Playing solo piano, the notes sounded crystalline and free from any slight waver. LPs of other types of music created the same impression; the music sounded very solid and stable. If an LP were pressed slightly off-centre, you'd hear some wow. But not much. With

Vladimir Horowitz playing Mozart's *Piano Concerto No 23* on DG, and was impressed by the way the turntable reproduced Horowitz' bright piano tone and quirky dynamics. The sound had plenty of attack and tone colour, and there was a wealth of subtle inner detail too.

I began listening to the TD 160 HD with it plugged into the PS PPP regenerator. This was partly down to expediency; initially I couldn't get the mains adaptor supplied with the turntable to plug into my mains block. So I took the easy option, and plugged it into the PS Premier. Eventually, I managed to sort out the mains adaptor

problem, and tried the deck direct from the mains rather than the PS Premium. I can't say there was much (if any) difference in pitch stability, but suddenly those quirky Horowitzian dynamics were not quite so apparent. The performance sounded less individual – more homogenous. There seemed to be less separation between instruments, with the piano blending in more with the orchestra. You might say the sound was more integrated – and it was. But all the little individual touches – a slight dynamic emphasis, or change of tone colour – were suddenly much less evident. The TD-160 HD isn't

► bad straight into the wall socket, but it certainly jumps a couple of levels when powered from the PS Premier. The music has more finesse; more light and shade, with a noticeably wider palette of tonal colours and inner dynamics. It goes from being Very Good to Outstanding.

I've found that other turntables which use plug-top transformer power supplies are greatly improved with a beefier supply, so the TD-160 HD is not doing anything unexpected here. Turntables as a breed are very sensitive to variations in power supply quality, and this one's no exception. However, where some decks demand almost hospital levels of cleanliness when it comes to the belt and drive surfaces, the Thorens was refreshingly free of such foibles and things don't have to be totally spotless in order to work.

The deck came fitted with a Rega RB-250 type tonearm. The knotty question of arm cables has been circumvented by having a couple of phono sockets on the back of the deck – enabling you to use your own cable, as desired. This introduces an extra 'break' in the signal path, but does allow you to use better quality wiring. There are probably any number of reasons why the new TD-160 HD sounds better than the original TD-160, but having a non-metallic acrylic platter is high amongst them. These always seem to deliver a smoother more open sound, which works wonderfully well at this price level. The turntable comes with a cork mat, and this also worked very well.

Surface noise was low, and the deck produced a sound that was clean and open, yet focused and detailed. It was smooth and natural, but also dynamic and immediate. Bass was solid and

firm; maybe not as powerful as some very expensive turntables, but clear and open, with good pitch definition.

The deck uses high-tech rubber isolators for decoupling between plinth and sub-chassis, but isolation isn't absolute. If you tap the plinth lightly with the stylus sat on stationary LP, you can hear a little noise breakthrough – mostly mid-band, rather than heavy bass. The noise breakthrough sounded 'light' and there's no ringing or stored resonance. Of course, not being sprung-decoupled helps avoid pitch waver due to spurious movement between motor and platter. It means the belt can

as being one of those decks you just set-up and play – there's nothing to go out of alignment. It was improved quite noticeably by the PS Premier power supply. And while this is expensive given the cost of the basic deck, it will upgrade the performance of the other components in your system – amplifier and CD player – too, giving you a better overall sound. So, it's arguably money well spent.

I really like the TD 160 HD. It's rare for a reasonably-priced turntable to offer such good pitch stability. The fact that it does so without having a huge motor or a massively-heavy platter is very impressive. For this reason alone

I could live very happily with this turntable.

While I'm not saying it's able to see off its more expensive brethren in every aspect, chances are, once you start listening to it, you'll not feel the least bit anxious about how it compares. What's really important is that it makes the music sound real and involving.

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'drive' the platter more effectively.

The great thing about the TD-160 HD is the way it fulfils expectations. Whether or not it's the greatest turntable ever made is not the point; it does most things very well, and doesn't betray its (relatively) humble origins. As a result, you can listen to it and enjoy the music, forgetting about 'hi-fi' in the process. It offers subtlety and fine detail, with excellent dynamics and clarity, yet at the same time sounds solid and robust. Even those critical of pitch stability will find it rewarding. It's an engaging and highly listenable turntable.

Set up is not critical. Providing you get all the basics right – arm and cartridge alignment/tracking weight – there should be very little 'tweaking' necessary. The TD-160 HD strikes me

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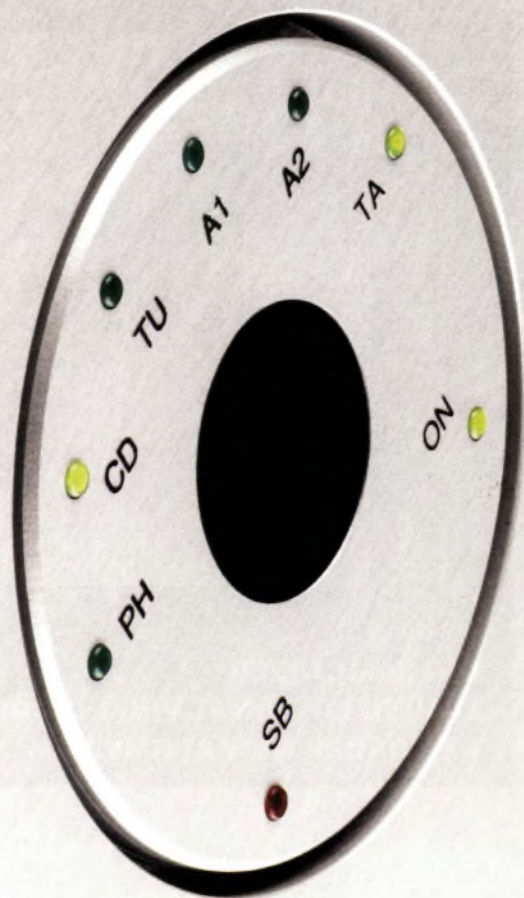
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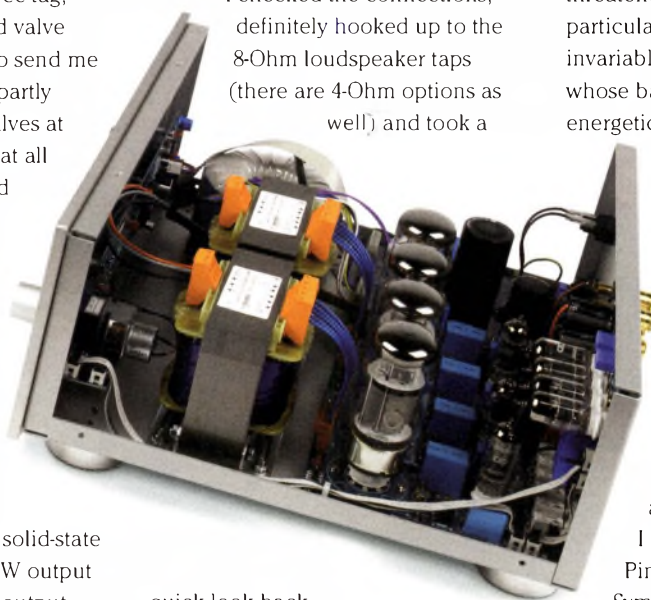
by Steve Dickinson

Actually getting to choose the equipment that comes for review is an unaccustomed luxury, an opportunity to broaden the audio landscape a bit and one I wasn't going to let slip. So, to complement the AMR CD-77 player, with its elevated price-tag, filter-less output option and valve output stages, I asked RG to send me some valve amplification, partly because I've never used valves at home, partly just to see what all the fuss is about. We settled on the Copland CTA405, a substantial, 25Kg, 50-Watt integrated design whose generous specification even includes a moving-magnet phono-stage. It's positioned well towards the 'fuss-free' end of the valve-amp market, requiring no more consideration than a solid-state integrated amp, and the 50W output from the two pairs of KT88 output tubes is sufficient for most modern loudspeakers it might be paired with – it drove my Focal Electra 1027Bes to generous levels without any hint of strain. At £2498 it occupies the same price stratum as my 90 Watt per channel, distinctly solid-state, Accuphase e213 amp (although in this case the phono-stage is extra) so direct comparisons would be illuminating.

Having connected up the amp, a little casual listening was in order. Oddly, the sound was not as coherent and focussed as I had expected.

Imaging, while acceptable, was certainly below the level I'd been led to expect (mainly by urban myth I have to admit), timing was a little vague and the whole, while pleasant, was somewhat less than compelling.

I checked the connections, definitely hooked up to the 8-Ohm loudspeaker taps (there are 4-Ohm options as well) and took a



quick look back through the manual. "Blah, blah, yadda yadda, phase inverting output, aha!" So, if you're a Copland CTA405 owner, apparently, red is the new black. Having thus reversed the connections at the speaker terminals, the amplifier was quickly revealed to be significantly more capable in all the above.

Unfortunately for me the arrival of the Copland also coincided with the departure of two sofas from the listening room (for re-upholstering) with all the resultant side-effects on the acoustics that one might expect.

It did make the room considerably livelier and I'll admit to some concern in my mind that all these valves might constitute too much of a good thing; indeed, there were occasions when the Copland's somewhat looser style, threatened to unbalance matters, particularly in the bass, though this invariably tended to happen on tracks whose bass is already a little on the energetic side. In those, it has to be

said the Accuphase has a tighter grip. Conversely, the Copland's freer, airier approach complemented the wonderful tonal colours of the AMR player, sometimes to startlingly impressive effect. One such, which brought about something of a turning point in this assessment, came when

I put on an old favourite, Pink Martini's first album, *Symphatique*. One track in particular, a reworking of the old Doris Day number 'Que sera sera' uses some strange and unsettling arrangements, distinctly sour harmonies and curious percussion, to most disturbing effect. If you remember the first time you saw The Joker in *Batman* or discovered how sinister a clown face could be in the hands of Stanley Kubrick, you'll appreciate just how deeply unsettling the juxtaposition of opposing themes can be. I have to say, the AMR/Copland combination wrought more sheer, chilling,

► sinister portent out of that song than any other combination I've played it through. The particular strength of both these pieces of equipment lies in their ability to dig deep into the tonal subtleties of the music and rarely have I heard such atmosphere conjured from my system.

To an extent, this was bearing out my preconceptions, with the valve output stages of both the AMR and the Copland delivering significantly more than I'm used to in terms of tonal colour, subtlety, finesse and atmosphere. What I found more interesting, however, were the areas where my expectations were being challenged. The Copland neither looks like, nor sounds like the regular or more traditional interpretation of a valve amplifier. The freshly-scrubbed Scandinavian looks are tastefully understated and the valves, hidden discreetly away inside the box, betray their presence merely by a hint of gentle glow from inside the casework (and a torrent of heat necessitating a good few inches of breathing space above, it should be said). The sound is neither sentimentally mellow, nor flabby. Instead it is incisive, insightful and quite invigoratingly dynamic – an advertisement for fresh air and clean living, Danish-style, perhaps.

Happily the sofas reappeared before my, all too brief, spell with the Copland came to an end and, room acoustics restored to normal, some form of qualitative comparisons were possible. In all honesty, any bass bloom which might be apparent is pretty benign: unless you have particularly wayward loudspeakers, or a rather lively room, it is unlikely

to present any problems. Indeed had our sofas not disappeared for a couple of weeks, the bass would hardly have merited singling out for comment in this way. Having thus drawn attention to it, I feel honour-bound to redress the balance: the Copland might lack the ultimate levels of low-frequency resolution and impact that a powerful solid-state



amplifier achieves, but it acquits itself with honour nevertheless, contributing a freshness and a liquid fluency that similarly-priced transistor amps are hard-pressed to equal.

It is a trade-off that may, to some extent, be programme-dependent. If your tastes run to the more bombastic end of the canon, you might find the Copland wanting, not necessarily in sheer volume, but perhaps in its ultimate degree of control. But if you favour a more nuanced approach, then the Copland certainly delivers; simple, really.

Having thus whetted my appetite, the Copland departed all too soon. If this be the world of valves, then it is a world I'd like to explore some more. I'm not completely sold on the notion that valves are the one true musical solution and in truth I don't expect to be. There is

enough in the world of transistors that I haven't found in this system, elements of propulsiveness, drive, timing and drama that have, so far, eluded me via the valve solution, to make me crave a 'best of both' set up. Conversely transistors, certainly at this price level, concede plenty in terms of atmosphere, subtlety and sheer loveliness to their bottled counterparts. What I wasn't expecting was the fluidity and presence that seems to go hand in hand with glowing bottles – although perhaps I should have expected that, given the familiar impact of alcohol. Indeed, there is much in the AMR/Copland system that would keep a metalhead happy, something I didn't think I'd be saying when I set out.

Neither of these solutions, valve or solid-state, delivers everything I want. Nor, at this price, can I expect them to, so I'll keep looking. But I'm also aware that the Copland was selected in part because, sonically and operationally, it bridges the divide between these two technologies, thus somewhat lessening the shock of the new. Well, I think I might be ready for my close-up now, Mr G. 

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Perfect Performer...

The Spendor SA1 Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

I first encountered the Spendor SA1 at the time when the company's largest product, the SP100R Monitors arrived for review. MD Philip Swift just happened to have a pre-production pair in the car and a sneak preview combined with a sore back all led me to question the sanity of agreeing to live with a pair of loudspeakers the size of an average garden shed, particularly after hearing what these little boxes, which are about twenty times smaller in volume, could do. Not that I regret for one minute having the 100's (or the 'gentle giants' as they have become known) on hand as there are often times when I have a genuine requirement for a full bandwidth loudspeaker capable of high volume levels. But perhaps not surprisingly (considering the family connections) I find that the diminutive SA1 shares a lot of the attributes of its much larger brother, with a certain charm of its own that goes to make it extremely easy and enjoyable to listen to.

With Roy's review in issue 60 covering the mechanical background regarding these loudspeakers I do not need to go into detail about their construction. Suffice to say that the dimensions are immediately appealing and small enough to be regarded as a miniature, while the deeply lacquered wood finish has a luxurious quality that even I found quite attractive, a little reminiscent of a musical instrument. But as someone who prefers the austerity of black where possible the matching stands proved just a bit

too much for me, and while I have no question over their effectiveness, I opted to use the SA1's on a pair of light but rigid Foundation 'crows foot' supports instead.

While not wishing to reiterate Roy's comments regarding the original SA1 which was around over twenty years ago, I cannot help but agree on its capabilities, and personally feel



that it was often overlooked on the basis of being related to the BC1 which many regarded as a 'classical music only' (read; fuddy duddy) loudspeaker in the mould of the original Quad electrostatic, which it certainly wasn't in terms of its performance. While essentially neutral, it avoided the over

equalised sound of the LS3/5A and it's polar opposite the Linn Kan, which was brash, coloured and quite often ill-mannered, but more to the point the Spendor had most of the refinement of the BBC design with a lot of the life and dynamics of the little Linn. The new version is a shade smaller than its predecessor, but continues the Spendor tradition of using a plastic coned bass-mid driver of their own manufacture, coupled with a soft dome HF unit of Norwegian origin in a thin walled critically damped cabinet. Unlike so many small loudspeakers that utilise ports to extend the bass response (with often dubious results) the SA1 is an infinite baffle design that might not screw the last bit of bass weight out of a small cabinet, but offers a more predictable bottom end response. In practice, it meant the Spendor was unfussy about room positioning, working well in a small space and against the wall where the bass was reinforced without cluttering the mid range, a factor which I would imagine has to be a priority for any speaker of this size. Which is important, as the

mid range is particularly clean and informative, conveying a great sense of detail and space with the ability to project away from the cabinets in the way that good small speakers (should) find very easy compared to bigger designs. It also blends pretty seamlessly with the top end, which is again informative without drawing attention to itself, fast and open but never aggressive. With a quoted sensitivity ▶

▶ of 85dB they need a reasonable amount of power to get them going, but like most of the current Spendor range, have a kind impedance curve that doesn't place great demands on the amplifier. While I don't think that the sub fifteen Watts of something like a leak stereo 20 would wake them up, I had great success with the Radford

pretty loud, and given the grip of a suitably powerful amplifier such as the Bryston 14B SST (500-ish Watts per channel) or Naim NAP 300 (not quite as absurdly well endowed) responded by revealing a more wild and unreserved side to their character, managing a very respectable degree of authority and impressive dynamics with both rock and orchestral music. And no, I didn't burn any drive units out.

(Which is always a danger of using monster power amps with small loudspeakers... *) It is a rare

octave, even having listened to the album previously on the much wider bandwidth S100's. I think it is the sense of coherence that the Spendor's manage to achieve that makes this possible, and although it should be less of a challenge with a small box it is surprising just how many designs miss the mark in this respect. It is also telling that I have been in no hurry to move the bigger loudspeakers back in to the listening room.

I have also recently been using the SA1's as near fields on a couple of mixing projects with great success, where I have found them to be both revealing and informative of subtle changes within a mix while allowing long sessions of monitoring without stress or headache. It was in this situation that a number of people commented on just how life like voices sounded, which considering that only five minutes previously they had been listening to the real thing, is praise indeed.

I have always had a bit of a thing for small, perfectly formed objects, and loudspeakers are no exception. The SA1 fits that bill very nicely, but is also one of the few compact designs that doesn't seem to compromise musical enjoyment. If for some reason I found that I had to move into a smaller listening room, the diminutive SA1 would be right at the top of my list of desirable speakers. ▶+



STA25 at forty Watts per channel, and was able to generate surprisingly high levels where the bass remained punchy, tuneful and in keeping with the rest of the performance. There is enough of the LS35/A character to make tube heads go weak at the knees, with a beautiful liquid – or should that be creamy – midrange that really does it for voices and similar instruments, and a soundstage where you can wade in and be indulgent. It helps that there is little or no energy below about 50Hz, but the SA1's do a great job of convincing you that they go much lower than they really do. The fact that they are quite happy against a wall is a bonus, and the fall off is extremely gentle and even which means you are never that aware of the lower limits.

But despite their small size and gentlemanly heritage, they will go

thing for me to be listening to a small loudspeaker and not crave the missing extension and weight at the bottom: end, but the SA1's somehow manage to give you the impression of a complete performance by letting the music grab your attention rather than the system and any shortcomings. Clichéd I know, but I was listening to a disc by Icelandic singer Emiliana Torrini and it struck me that at no time was I aware of the lack of a bottom

* Was that a dig? Ed.

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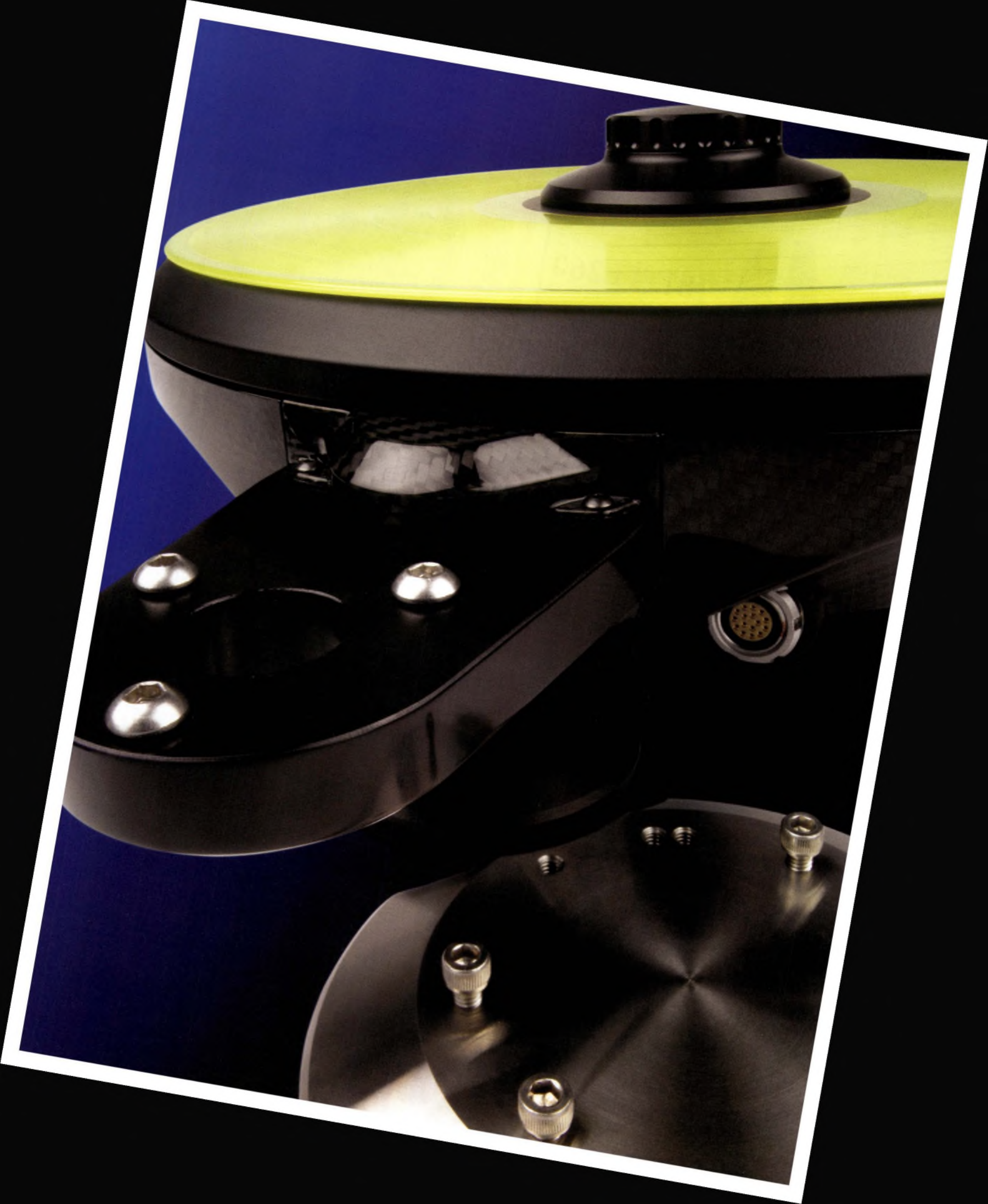
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Slave To The Rhythm... The Grand Prix Audio Monaco Turntable

by Chris Binns

As elegant engineering solutions go, the concept of direct drive has always been a far more attractive proposition than the use of belts or pulleys to couple rotational energy from the motor to the platter. Go back thirty years and a good proportion of the turntable market was made up of such devices which claimed superior speed stability over other forms of coupling – on paper at any rate – while the technology continued to get cheaper and become available to the mass market where they were incorporated into music centres. For a short time it seemed as though the direct drive turntable would render other designs obsolete, this of course being a time when the widely held perception was that beyond rotating at the correct speed, turntables had little or no influence on sound quality. But the truth was that despite an impressive specification in the manual, many (if not all) direct drive turntables of the era didn't actually sound very good, a key factor in a radical change of attitude that occurred and the rise to ascendancy of the Linn LP12. The all-pervading arrogance of the new wave saw those that did not agree with the musical superiority of belt drive condemned as deaf idiots, and partly because of this, direct drive technology crawled back under a stone and became virtually extinct, although its attributes of quick start up and general ruggedness made it a natural choice for the broadcast

industry and DJ's; ironically, the Technics SL1200 and 1210 must qualify as the best selling turntable of all time.

But since that time, there have been a few rare examples of high-end turntables that have continued to refine the genre and overcome the servo related problems that gave them such a bad name (the Goldmund



Studio springs to mind) and the truth is that we now know just how much the mechanics of a turntable influence the sound quality. So there has been a bit of a renaissance with the direct drive approach, not to mention some reassessment of vintage designs such as the Technics SP10 and Micro Seiki models.

And now there is the Grand Prix Monaco, a tour de force of innovative mechanical, material and electronic engineering, and yes it's direct drive. For the full picture I urge you to look at RG's review in issue 57, this explains in considerable detail about the product and its design, and thus is an important part of understanding exactly what this turntable is about.

Compared to many high-end designs that seem to sprawl in terms of their bulk, the Monaco is appealingly compact and aesthetically rather beautiful, with form definitely following function. Don't be fooled by its diminutive size – it is extremely solid, in fact reassuringly so after years of using suspended sub-chassis designs – and you soon get used to the slightly fiddly business of incorporating the Sorbothane damping washers that sit under the record and screw down clamp. The accompanying arm and cartridge was the TriPlanar Vlli with the Lyra Skala, a combination that I am quite familiar with having used it with the mighty Kuzma Stabi reference recently.

Let's get to the point, the Grand prix is quite unlike any turntable that I have heard before.

I have always been reasonably confident in discerning the strengths and weaknesses of CD and vinyl respectively, but the Monaco seems to blur the boundaries between the two mediums and form a category of its own. My first impression was of neutrality the like of which I have rarely encountered from a turntable, and at times I had to remind myself that I was actually listening to a record. The sheer cleanliness of the signal does little to hide any faults, and in fact tends

► to highlight the ability of partnering equipment, how it is set up and the quality of the pressing to an almost frightening degree. Adjusting the VTA – a process that the TriPlanar allows while playing – becomes not so much a matter of preference but more of a right/wrong setting that is all too clearly obvious, and once right, the soundstage had a dimensionality and presence that was awe inspiring in its realism, particularly when using the little Meridian M20 active



loudspeakers which excel at throwing three dimensional images. Disregarding the quality of recording for the moment, the Monaco lays bare the mechanical quality of the vinyl that you are playing and how well it was cut; ironically the discs that came off worst were either certain 'audiophile' pressings that sounded thin and undynamic, or discs that had played to the strengths of turntables such as the Linn over the last thirty years or so but sounded quite artificial on the Monaco. But there were others that revealed astonishing detail and presence that I had not heard before, despite years of familiarity with the albums.

Levels of surface and background noise were eerily low, but it is when the music starts to play that you realise there is a stability and grounding to what you hear that transcends anything CD can offer, and betters most other turntables that I have heard. It is against

this that the music finds its own pace in the most natural and unforced way, and had me seriously questioning how often the excitement I experience with other vinyl replay is sometimes a bit of an illusion; after all is said and done, it should be the music that is stimulating rather than the system.

If the Monaco is picky about pressings, there is no such favouritism when it comes to music. The foundation and consistency provided

by such precise speed control allow solo piano a measure of depth and expression that has to be heard to be believed, while rock orientated material is has more of an insight into both the playing and how the recording was put together. Pitch stability is supposed to be one of the great strengths of CD, but increasingly I disagree; I think one of the biggest problems with the format is its ineptness when it comes to dealing with that information that feeds the listener's perception of musical pitch, so its ability to sustain it is immaterial. This is an area where a good turntable excels, and the Monaco has served to not only highlight this particular aspect but also carry it to a new level, where music sounds significantly more convincing as a result.

Having no suspension of its own to speak of, the Monaco is highly dependant of the support that it is used

with. The combination of the grand Prix F1 shelf with the Monaco modular isolation rack offered (as you would expect) a good interface with the turntable, but attention to detail with levelling and the like is essential to performance. Likewise, positioning in an area where the loudspeakers have minimal impact will have a dramatic affect on the sound, but the Monaco is so uncluttered in the information that it gets out of the groove that fine-tuning has an obvious effect that is both rewarding and fun.

Living with the Monaco for the last couple of months

has proven to be both an interesting and enlightening experience, but also mildly disturbing, giving me cause to re-evaluate and move forward with my record collection. It is almost as if all the traditional negatives of vinyl replay have been removed, and whilst the Grand Prix turntable isn't perfect – or even close to perfect – putting your finger on its flaws is easier said than done. And if you think that's an unsatisfactory conclusion, look at it from my point of view; When it leaves I'll be reinstalling my LP12. It won't be easy going back... ►+

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Say Hello...

The Wadia 170i Transport Tilts The Audio Landscape

by Alan Sircom

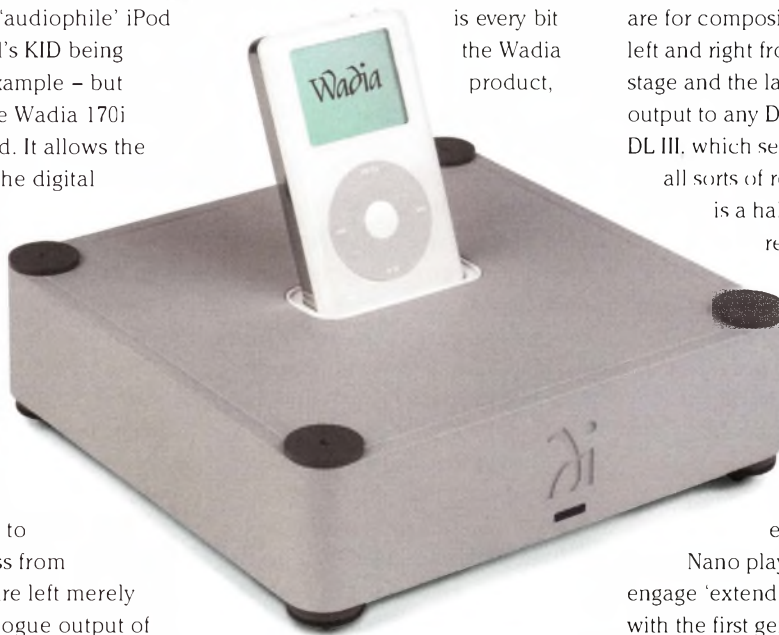
The Apple iPod is the single most important thing to happen to recorded music since the launch of the CD. Unfortunately, it also has precious little to do with audiophile-grade hi-fi systems. Or so we thought...

There have been 'audiophile' iPod docks before – Krell's KID being the most obvious example – but in many respects the Wadia 170i holds the trump card. It allows the user to crack open the digital audio signal from an iPod and pass it through to an external DAC. This is pretty much playing with Apple's Holy of Holies; the digital datastream from an iPod is supposed to be immune to access from without so that we are left merely modulating the analogue output of the player.

In fact, there's some precedent for playing with Apple's digital data, as anyone who hooks the USB connector of a Mac to a suitably-equipped DAC will attest. It's just that the digital data within the iPod has never been formally tampered with and no-one thought it could be done*. Maybe Wadia was the first to get the OK from Apple on this conversion process or – as some have suggested – Wadia made its case so

convoluted and filled with datababble that Apple caved in. Whatever... Wadia managed to split the iPod clean open and let any converter improve on the performance of its built-in DACs.

The 170i is every bit the Wadia product,



writ small. It has the same basic squared off look with four rounded, spiked feet and the Wadia logo in the embossed into the centre of the front panel. It's powered by a separate power supply, but one that

wouldn't look out of place driving a laptop and could well be ripe for the upgrade artists out there. There are eight little connectors on the rear: two mini-DIN (one for S-Video, one for the PSU) and six phonos. Three of these are for composite video, two are stereo left and right from the iPod's analogue stage and the last is a coaxial digital output to any DAC (I used a PS Audio DL III, which seemed appropriate for all sorts of reasons). In the box

is a half-credit-card sized remote and a series of inserts to help the 170i and different flavours of iPod fit comfortably together. There are some slight functionality limitations with early generation iPod

Nano players (like you have to engage 'extended interface' mode with the first generation model if you are going to delve into the digital domain) and these can disable some of the menu systems – but this is more to do with Apple's architecture than any fault of the Wadia, and will be less of an issue as time goes by. ▶

There have been examples of docks that do output digital, but only from modified specially modified iPods – voiding the guarantee in the process. What's more, such an approach means that only your iPod will work in the dock (unless your friends run similarly modified units at home and in their pockets) – which rather defeats the object.

▶ When you dock your iPod, there can be anything up to a 10 second handshake before the chips in both devices align themselves to one another. If you are impatient and start yanking the iPod out of the dock, you may need to



reset one or more devices in the process. You might also find the little remote takes an age for its commands to make their way into the iPod's psyche, and Cover Flow simply doesn't work when the iPod's digital domain is being breached by an 170i. Also, Apple's interface cannot be passed to a big screen through the video sockets (again a function of Apple, not Wadia), making a remote control at best academic. Normally, all this could be off-putting, suggesting a hobbled product when used with the dock, but this is easily forgivable when you hear the thing. So can the glacial speed the information from the remote takes to reach the iPod – it's just something you get used to. And you will want to get used to it.

This is because the 170i adds audiophile legitimacy to the iPod, pure and simple. Yes, you are pretty much limited to Apple Lossless, AIFF or WAV formats, but suddenly instead of being a convenient but unpromising format that's really only good for portable listening, the iPod turns into a

tiny, high-quality music server.

In some respects, the sound of a CD is inferior to the sound of a CD ripped into AIFF and played back on the iPod through this device.

There's a degree of temporal robustness and solidity that CD can lack in direct comparison (and it really is direct – same piece of music through the same DAC and merely switched from source to source). This becomes more directly noticeable than when you hear the standard sound of iPod, because you tend to focus on other aspects of the sound being ruined by the iPod's analogue stages. Freed from that particular tyranny, you get to hear what the iPod can do when it's at its best... and from a timing prospect at least, it does very, very good.

Stereo separation is also surprisingly good, even if the soundstage itself is curtailed in both width and depth. Individual instruments in a small group are solidly positioned (although that sense of rootedness you can only get from a really good player remains MIA). Vocal articulation is also good, although once again if you compare it to the real deal, there's a bit of

slurring and blurring. It's also very good at planishing out sibilants, leaving behind a sound that has a flavour of the high-end, albeit perhaps without the structure.

Perhaps the most marked change from the sound of an untapped iPod is the dynamic range. One of the big worries prior to this test was wondering how the dynamically-flat sound of the iPod would cope in the big dynamic shading of a real system. In fact, once again that was a function of the built-in DAC or analogue stage of the iPod, squeezing music down to commuter-friendly chunks. Behind those digital and analogue stages, there's a naturally

dynamic sound bursting to come out. Yes, this is tempered by the type of codec deployed, but the sound of an iPod is far more dynamically energetic than you might imagine, when played through a good DAC. Even something as dynamically silly as AC/DC's *Back In Black* stops sounding like a tribute band.

The big arbiter of codec quality is the music's coherence. This is why the iPod should be limited to Apple Lossless, AIFF or WAV in an audiophile context. In the latter two especially, the musical themes flow together as naturally as they do on the CD they were printed on. On Lossless, there's an almost imperceptible blurring of instruments or instrument groups, but unless listening hyper-critically and comparing to the CD directly, this is no big deal. Once you start to look at AAC or MP3 files, especially below 256kbps, everything goes a bit too legato. But, AAC/256 is fine for background listening and has the advantage of giving you half a decent CD collection to access – and this is one of the joys of a music server. However, if you ▶

► want your server to replace your CD collection for critical listening, be uncompromising... even if it means your 80GB iPod only holds just over 100 albums.

If you don't have a DAC, the Wadia 170i quickly ceases to be anything like the star product it is shaping up to be. The audio quality is hampered by the iPod's built in analogue stage, making a thin, bass-light sound with a squawky treble and not much excitement. Worse still, the nature of the chipset that allows you to tangle with the iPod's digital domain makes the interface unnecessarily ponderous. The 170i would be the fastest stepping-stone to a DAC on the market in this

care (the right codec and by-passing the built-in digital and analogue sections), it offers a viable way of getting music from your computer to your hi-fi system without tears. Here's what we mean – if you already have a computer in one room with an iTunes account, and a system in another room, the ways of making one talk to the other without sacrificing quality in the process are strictly limited, or add a significant layer of expense and complexity. Assuming you have an iPod and a DAC, the Wadia makes a simple, non-disruptive method of crossing the great musical divide. No, it probably won't make you cast off that CD player tomorrow, but it will mean

iPod/Wadia/PS Audio combination. Yes, ultimately the CD player was the better musical performer, but the differences were not as clear-cut as they have ever been before. Factor in the advent of useable volume flash memory in the latest portable devices, technology that banishes the moving parts that compromise hard-disc performance, and things are going to get better still. The iPod just hit hi-fi – are you ready? ►+



case. So consider those analogue outputs legacy devices.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the 170i is that it demonstrates how we've all been duped for the last few years. The iPod is not a so-so source component, but it has a so-so output stage; handled with

you will never have to feed the hi-fi system at a party ever again.

Perhaps the most interesting thing is to compare this system against a similarly priced CD player. We had a chance to do just that at the close of the test, as the Cyrus CD 8se is roughly the same cost as the

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	iTransport with digital output
Digital Output:	1x S/PDIF Coax (RCA)
Analog Outputs:	1x Unbalanced (RCA)
Video:	1x set Component Outputs, 1x S-Video Output
Dimensions (WxHxD):	203 x 68 x 203mm
Finish:	Silver Aluminum
Weight:	1.1 kg
Price:	£349

UK Distributor:

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Tel. (44)(0)1992 573030
E-mail. enquiries@mdc-hifi.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Wadia
Net. www.wadia.com



It's Big, And It's Really Quite Clever... The AMR CD-77 CD Player

by Steve Dickinson

I can't say I wasn't warned. "It's heavy. No, I mean properly heavy, amplifier heavy. It's also rather bigger than you think." RG's words rang in my ears as I hefted the AMR CD-77's thirty kilogram mass onto the top tier of my rack – or it might just have been the urgent sounds of the blood of unaccustomed exertion rushing to my head. Looking at the alarming bow developing in the top shelf, discretion triumphed over fatigue and I heaved it down, replaced the shelf with a stiffer one and settled the player back into place. RG was right. It is heavy. Hewn-from-solid heavy. Not a CD player that merely trips off the end of a production bench. I harbour a suspicion that all AMR CD players have a bottle of champagne cracked on their case, before easing gracefully down a slipway into the Clyde. Looking at the pictures of the CD-77 from RG's review in Issue 56 it was easy to gain a false impression of the unit's size.

Deeper than it is wide, it calls to mind the three-quarter sized chassis of, say, the Meridian 500-series kit whereas in real life, the AMR is a full-width affair, making the whole look a little like a normal CD player which has been enlarged on a photocopier. And you'd need a substantial and sturdy photocopier, at that.

So the player has undeniable presence, not in the least diminished by the blue backlighting which filters through the glass windows in the top panel, and through which the valve stages can be viewed; definitely something, then, to impress the

neighbours with. Chances are, if they have even one musical bone in their bodies, they'll also be impressed by the CD-77's muscular but delicate musicality. The overall effect is perhaps, rather like seeing Lawrence Dallaglio in an Italian silk suit – not entirely what you might have expected.

I don't know if this is an inevitable side-effect of using valves, or perhaps the v-word (t-word in America, obviously) just brings out the sort of audiophile who craves delicacy and silken delivery so



manufacturers voice their kit accordingly, but the CD-77 has that seamless, liquid naturalness, a clear-eyed, wholesome freshness that brings out the best in so much music. Nor is it merely airbrushing over flaws or roughness. Give it some Tom Waits and it positively relishes the sordid sleaziness of his musical world, creating a little piece of some rain-sodden, litter-strewn, after-midnight, back-street gutter in the space between your loudspeakers.

It has an easy flow, the sort of lack of artifice I mostly associate with analogue reproduction and it is very quick to get under your skin.

I asked for this unit partly because RG's review intrigued me, partly because I wanted to get to grips with a filter-less CD player. The Cairn Fog 3 which has taken up permanent residence in my home system has four switchable filtering options, of which I use only one (the others offer little that works for me – though clearly others are welcome to disagree). The AMR has six, including a 192kHz up-sampling option broadly similar to the Cairn, so some sort

of comparison might be possible. However, it was the first two, the filter-less options, which most attracted me. From the manual provided, it is clear where the designers' preferences lie. 'Digital Master II' a filter-less output with a slight treble lift is clearly the anointed one in AMR-land. The

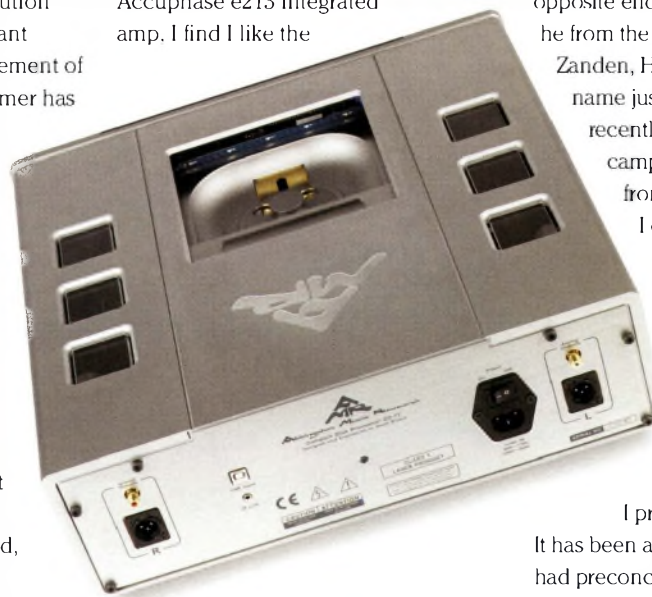
other options are damned with somewhat faint praise in AMR's own literature, their relative strengths always accompanied by an implied 'but'. Naturally, knowing what it feels like to be the last kid picked for the team, I spent a lot of time with the underdogs – to the extent that I concur with AMR's own findings, 'Digital Master II' is undeniably a wonderful-sounding device. Big, bold, lush and intimately detailed, this is the sort of delivery that gives hi-fi a good name. It is profoundly capable when ▶

► comes to recreating the acoustic space, a sense of volume and moving air. It is also capable of recreating the full tonal palette of a band, soloist or orchestra. The Robert Plant/Alison Krauss album, *Raising Sand* makes the case rather elegantly. The second track, 'Killing the Blues' shows how Plant softens his tones, the better to allow Krauss' clear, lilting voice to lift above them. His restraint, impeccably judged, allows both voices to subtly blend, each to the benefit of the other. Using the 192kHz up-sampling filter, the interplay is shifted so that Plant's voice is the more focussed, Krauss' contribution becoming more a kind of descant above the melody, losing an element of the mutual respect each performer has for the other.

Interestingly, I observed a similar effect via the Fog3, but the Cairn player also highlighted a propulsive flow to the music which the AMR lacks in either mode, a flow which contributes at least as much to the musical intelligibility as the nuanced, fluid poise of the filter-less AMR, suggesting that it may not be the up-sampling per se, but rather the way it is implemented, which counts. For classical, particularly large-scale, music, the differences are illuminating: the filter-less options tending to bring out the tonal colour and instrumental character – the free-range, organic, wholegrain version if you will – whereas the up-sampling and over-sampling options introduce a degree of artifice, perhaps the slightest emphasis on leading edges or a hint of paperiness in the treble. But in so doing they also expose a level of subtle discrimination which reveals more of the inner workings of the music. If I were listening to, for example, Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 and I had the score before me, the better to study the piece, then I would choose one of the up-sampling or over-

sampling options. But if I just wanted to kick back and let the glorious colours and shades of Beethoven's music wash over me, then the filter-less option would probably be my choice.


In truth, it is nice to have such a choice. Then again, compared to other players of similar stature, the difference between these filters is less obvious than the difference between two players, the AMR's character showing through regardless. I very briefly dropped the Accuphase DP 500 player into the system. Having also recently permanently committed to the Accuphase e213 integrated amp, I find I like the



Accuphase 'house-sound' very much. I like its propulsive, communicative and engaging quality, but I was not quite prepared for the difference between these two players. The Accuphase is far tighter, faster and leaner than the AMR on anything with a hint of rhythmic drive; the AMR quite clearly outpoints the Accuphase for instrumental colour, atmosphere and nuance, the Accuphase sounding a tad buttoned-up, the AMR a mite loose and under-damped. The AMR is a bit like a Bentley to the Accuphase's Aston Martin; both will go very fast, very well, but one you want to drive, the other you may prefer to be driven in. In truth, I'd like the

best of both, for which I suspect I'd be asked to pay significantly more than the \$4000-ish of either of these players. On the question of price and value, the \$4400 asking price for the AMR CD-77 includes a rather decent mains lead (at least equal to the £200 Nordost Shiva from a brief comparison), a recognition of something many other manufacturers spectacularly fail to acknowledge. It also includes a pair of (apparently non-directional) interconnects, which sadly failed to impress as much as the mains lead.

RG and I approached this player from opposite ends of the hi-fi continuum, he from the rarified stratosphere of Zanden, Hovland and Avalon, to name just a few, whereas I have only recently achieved high-end base-camp after a long struggle up from the foothills. While I can't say that the AMR CD-77 would be an essential waypoint on my onward ascent, there is a lot here that I like and admire (and will greatly miss) and, frankly, nothing else at the price I prefer without reservation.

It has been an interesting time; I've had preconceptions challenged, and sometimes confirmed, by this extraordinary player. It did what I expected, having read RG's review – yet it still surprised me and made me think about what I am looking for in a system. I have most definitely gained from the experience. 

Price: £4,400

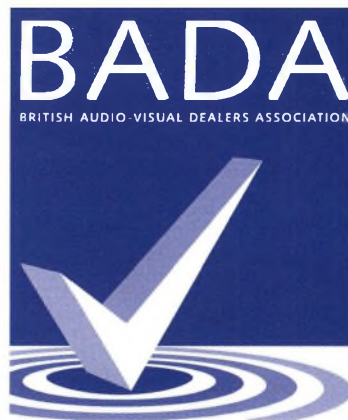
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Things Should Ever Be The Same Again...

The Acoustic Energy

AE22 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

When I bought my first real hi-fi system, the rules was the rules and you followed those rules. You bought the best turntable you could – a Rega Planar 3 in my case – fed it through a half decent amp and hooked it all up to a pair of budget speakers. So the outputs of my Crimson 510/520 (which I'd slept overnight on a pavement to acquire in a sale) were connected up to a pair of AR18s. And a great little system it was – even if it didn't match the Leak .5, Stereo 20 and GRFs it was replacing, but that's another story...

Yet, ironically, the fact that it bore any sort of comparison was largely down to those speakers. GRFs don't go that low and the tried and trusted combination of a sealed box containing a directly connected 8", paper coned bass driver, jammed up against the wall did a surprisingly entertaining job. Well, it kept me entertained: not so sure about the neighbours on the other side of the party wall.

In fact, at that time, just about every budget speaker followed the formula. Mission's 700, various Mordaunt Shorts and the soon to crowned king, KEF's Coda 2, all employed 8" drivers and a minimal crossover – to considerable musical effect. Which makes it all the more remarkable that the approach has fallen so far from favour. The flood of ever-smaller boxes and drivers that followed saw sensitivity drop and the fun factor with it. The 4.5" cones that

grace most budget designs these days are no substitute for the real thing – and adding a cheap sub merely makes things worse.

Of course, I can point to designs like the Reference 3A Da Capo and Wilson Duette to show that the large driver, two-way concept hasn't died out completely, but at the budget end of the market, both Focal and B&W, the last hold-outs against the dual onslaught of price pressure and makeover TV, have finally jettisoned the type from their entry-level line-ups. I'm sorry guys, but 7" is as far as they go these days, and even that measurement is on the optimistic side...

Which makes the arrival of the Acoustic Energy AE22 all the more interesting and remarkable. Designed as a near-field or deck-top monitor to finally oust the last remaining Yamaha NS10s from pro studios, it uses a large, aluminium-coned bass/mid driver built into an 8.5" basket and directly connected to the amplifier. A simple first-order crossover rolls in the popular ring-radiator tweeter, a definite cut above the predominantly Audax soft-domes used in days of yore. Being a pro-orientated design, the 22 is laid out for horizontal placement (that is, wider than it is tall) although the staggered drivers mean that you can stand it on end too. The speaker is bi-wired via either a single pair of binding posts or a Neutrik Speakon connector and there's no grille. Some will find the

rather squat proportions and lack of fabric a problem. Personally I think the looks suit the solid cabinet, while the curved baffle decoration and slightly raised tweeter are both different and attractive.

The pro influence dictated one other thing – a degree of dynamic and time coherence that is unusual in hi-fi speakers at this price level: hence the minimal crossover. Whilst studio obsessions with power handling and near indestructibility (or at least easy repair) are less relevant to domestic listeners, dynamic and phase coherence should be near the top of your list, giving the AE22 a surprising but definite musical edge in a world of cheap floorstanders. The transient response that results gives music a sense directness and purpose that grabs your attention and refuses to let go. Okay, so the soundstage is as flat as an LCD TV, but it's a small price to pay for performance as informative and infectious as this. The monitor heritage might make for a less than forgiving balance, but the incisive clarity and immediacy are ample compensation. The bottom-line; choose an amp that will deliver the generosity that the speaker lacks and you'll be in clover.

Listening to the AE22s, it's hard to be anything other than impressed by the sheer quality of that big bass/mid unit. Look inside the box and you'll find a substantial, cast basket supporting an unfeasibly large

▶ magnet wrapped round the underhung voice coil. There's nothing cheap about this driver – and nothing you'd normally expect to find in a speaker at this price level. Which helps explain why the tweeter is the cheapest variety of ring-radiator, quicker than it is clean. With next to no crossover to blur the truth you can see why CB stressed the importance of matching an appropriate amp with this speaker, I caution which I thoroughly endorse. But take the necessary care and you'll be rewarded by a large, sloppy grin that spreads right across your chops. I used Avantgarde's squeaky clean and super clear Model Three integrated amp, reveling in the tactile attack and impact of the pairing – but substituting either the VAS Citation Sound Model 1 and a pair of 2s brought a beguiling combination of immediacy, drive and physical presence, all without any hint of edge or glare.

Back when the AR18 was de-rigueur, timing was all. These were the days before PRAT had become part of the language, a badge of honour as well as a term of derision. But the 18s had it – even though we hadn't quite worked out what "it" was. The AE22s have got it too. Play blues or jazz and you'll hear just what I mean, rhythms locking step with the rest of the music, anchoring proceedings without tying them down. This is timing – real timing, rather than the predetermined, metronomic catch and release rigidity that PRATs pursue. There's no question where a note sits, or where it fits the pattern that makes music out of noise. This explicit statement of intent

makes listening a vivid, captivating experience, but at the same time, this sure-footedness also allows the music the confidence to breathe.

No, the 22s aren't perfect – far from it. But their ability to cut through the mess that constitutes modern recordings, to invest even the most sluggish Protools mix with a spark of life and expression, is a priceless attribute if your starter system is



going to satisfy your musical cravings, let alone lead you onto bigger and better things. And for me, that's what really separates this speaker from the vast majority of the competition; by getting the musical basics so right it lays a firm foundation of expectation, a touchstone for future upgrades – because any speaker that doesn't do what these can is going to cost too much, both musically and monetarily.

The AR18 was a classic. So too was the NS10. By bridging the gap between these two designs so successfully, the AE22 stands to inherit the mantle of both. Over 25 years ago, the AR18 cost around £110 a pair, with a standard of fit, finish and material content that was way, way inferior to this Acoustic Energy. My universal sliding-scale price

comparator (well, okay then, the Mars bar) tells me that in 2008 pounds the 22 will cost you about the same. I love that congruence almost as much as I love the quirky looks and infectious musical performance of this speaker. When your friends point a finger or raise an eyebrow, you can simply sit

back and let 'em rip, confident that these speakers are more than capable of explaining themselves. Any questions can be disposed of equally simply, just by advancing the volume control. They'll either get it or they won't and if they don't – they're probably incapable of understanding anyway. Music, magic and flawless indication of personal character: what more can you ask? The AE22s arrived, burdened with high expectations and surpassed them all: what more can I say? ▶+

Price: \$500 pr.

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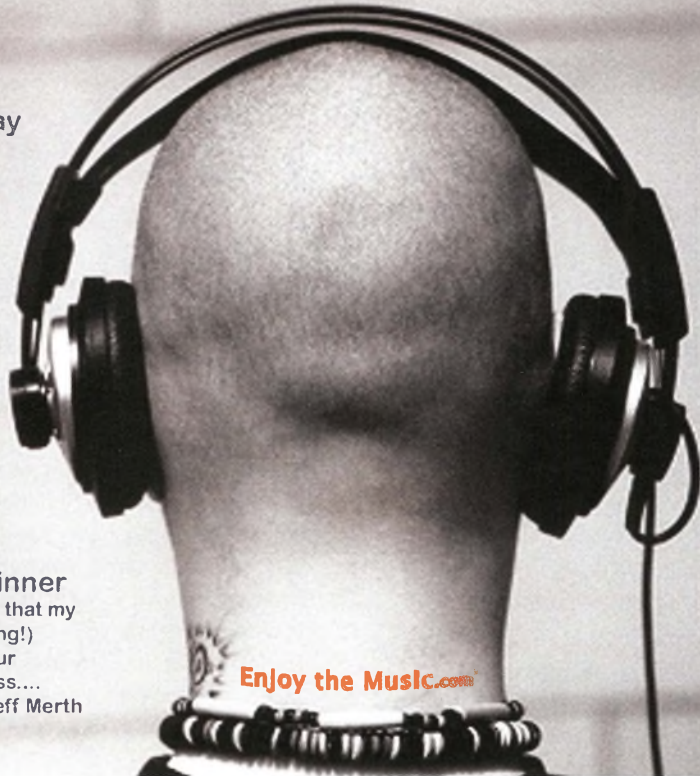
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What a great review! — Paul Kittingerk

Enjoy the Music.com Contest Winner

In fact, the Axiom Audio EP500 works so well that my wife and I both stood mouths open (not kidding!) as it shook the rafters and window glass in our house. Amazing! Love that palpable, tight bass....

Thank you again for the awesome prize! — Jeff Merth



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"I Want Candy..."

Discs you might well want to own, from a bumper year of great music

by Roy Gregory

The Record Of The Year Awards in *Hi-Fi+* follow the same essential format as the equipment awards. There's nothing scientific about them, nothing necessarily fair or just in the selections. Indeed, if anything they are even more arbitrary and prejudiced than our equipment picks. The recordings we've chosen are simply the ones we like,

recognise the genre or artist, at least you can be confident that someone out there loves it and thinks it worthy of your attention.

Give a writer a brief and the first thing they'll do is bend it out of shape. So, rather than asking for just one disc, I asked for three; a favourite and two runners-up, if you will. But even that doesn't deliver sufficient scope for some, with the ingenuity and invention expended on cramming in a few extra albums far outweighing the effort that normally goes into copy. From RP's fan dance of possibles and maybes through to RSF's blatant trampling of all restraint, listing no fewer than three complete ballets, seven symphonies and associated works – not to mention a collection of string quartets! Still, it's all grist to the mill, adding ever more names to that sub-conscious shopping list, so I shouldn't complain too loudly.

One trend that's been particularly apparent is the recent rise and rise of the audiophile re-issue. Once Mobile Fidelity had ceased vinyl production the first time round, it took Chesky's re-issues of Living Stereo and Readers Digest recordings to really get things rolling. Those early releases never really got the attention (or reputation) they deserved, while the sound quality of the subsequent Classic Records releases failed to live up to the considerable hype, and elsewhere

pressing quality was variable to say the least. But latterly, those false starts have been put behind us, with Speakers corner really hitting a groove and new labels like Pure Pleasure and Music Matters giving the old established names a run for their money. But within this trend there's an even more refined development at work, with companies finally delivering on the promise of 45RPM cuts. Early attempts never really did it for me, but Analog Productions nailed it with their Fantasy 45 jazz re-issues, and now Music Matters have joined the party with a stunning series of releases that just seem to get better and better with each new title. Indeed, the one really black cloud on the horizon (aside from oil and thus vinyl prices) is the demise of Cisco, a promising label that after a quirky start had just started to really deliver outstanding results. Victim of an impatient parent (and a few misguided programme choices) it will be sadly missed, even as the momentum it started to build in the audiophile LP market continues to move onwards and upwards.

Elsewhere, vinyl releases of current pop and jazz albums have never been so plentiful, with record sales continuing their growth and sleeves becoming ever more adventurous and impressive in quality. With Mo-Fi back in the game, ever increasing numbers of SACD titles (some with simply astonishing sound quality) and a record industry that finally seems to be getting to grips with the real potential of surround sound music, who knows what might happen next? 

the ones we listen to the most, the ones that have delivered lasting pleasure.

Of course, the upside is that they also represent a list of personal favourites, a shopping list of potential purchases for your consideration – great music to live with and enjoy. Not everything listed is going to appeal, but even if you don't





DAVE DAVIES



A very laid back choice but I have, through a pretty demanding year, found myself consistently returning to this recording as a tonic and general soother of the soul. The three expert musicians deliver a set that combines their own compositions with composers as varied as Ravel, Jobim and even Trenet. There's not a weak number here though I particularly love their version of Trenet's 'Que Reste-t-il de Nos Amours?' and also the delicate reading, arranged by Galliano, of a section of Ravel's *Ma Mere L'Oye*. The unusual mix of trumpet, accordion and piano might not immediately appeal, but don't deny yourself the chance to bathe in this compelling and quite beautiful music.

Another absolute favourite this year has been Pure Pleasure's terrific vinyl re-issue of Charles Mingus' *Mingus Dynasty* (Columbia/Pure Pleasure PPAN CS8236). Crammed to the gills with innovative and energetic playing and although a studio recording it has all the impact of a live set. It's not up there with the all-time classic *Mingus Ah Um* but runs it pretty close and a listen to just about any track, 'Gunslinging Bird' or their version of Ellington's 'Things Aint What They Used To Be' to take two examples, will rapidly convince you of the quality of the music making here.

e.s.t. *Live In Hamburg* (ACT 6002-2) summed up all their strengths in a remarkable set capturing them at the peak of their powers. With the recent tragic death of Esbjorn Svensson this recording makes a fitting and lasting testimonial to a hugely talented band. But I can't let this opportunity pass without also mentioning major returns to form from two master of their craft in Randy Newman's *Harp and Angels* (Nonesuch 7559-79989-3), and Ry Cooder's *I, Flathead* (Nonesuch 465916-2).

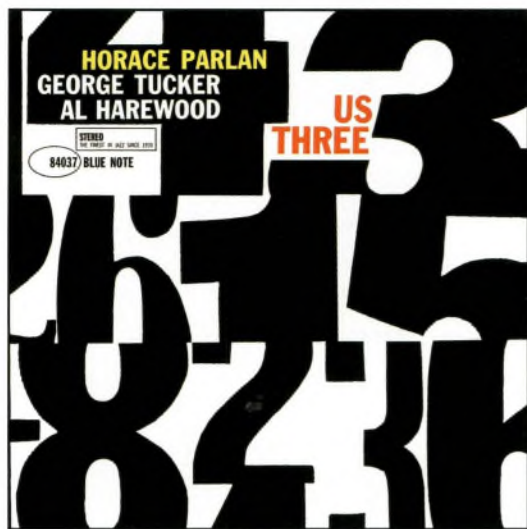
IAN HARRIS



My number one is the thirty-plus year overdue return of *Heartworn Highways* and Monument Records alumnus, Larry Jon Wilson to the studio. OK, not so much the studio - rather, a beachside condominium in Perdido Key on the Florida-Alabama border. Here, Larry apparently ambled, as and when the fancy took him, to lay down the twelve tracks on this eponymous album. As always, that seismic, gravel-infused voice is a thing of elemental wonder, while the delicate guitar accompaniment is so beautifully played, it is barely credible that all but one track involved just one take. The songs are slow-burners, rather than being instantly accessible, but the reflective tone is somehow appropriate, with 'Heartlands' having particularly poignant contemporary overtones. When you take a larynx fully deserving of UNESCO World Heritage status, add intimate but low key production, you are not so much buying a CD as a comfortable seat in that 15th floor condo.

Runner up is the recent release from Lindsey Buckingham. *Under The Skin* was a hard act to follow but, more than a third of a century after *Buckingham Nicks*, *Gift Of Screws* proves that, creatively, the years are still sitting lightly on the Maestro's shoulders. If you want Fleetwood Mac references, you'll find them, but they are just as likely to be from the Peter Green era as the Californian one. In fact, it's difficult to credit an album so comprehensively tying this many different themes into a coherent whole. *Gift Of Screws* succeeds brilliantly due to one over-riding constant - at least one guaranteed irresistible hook in every track.

In third place, the re-issue of *Steve McQueen* has Prefab Sprout's eleven slices of sheer 1980's pop perfection morphing into nineteen, courtesy of a second disc of eight "unplugged" versions. While the acoustic takes are a worthy release in their own right, for this listener at least, they also emphasize just how good the original arrangements were. Add significantly improved digital mastering and this is a recommended purchase for previous owners and first time buyers alike.



DENNIS DAVIS

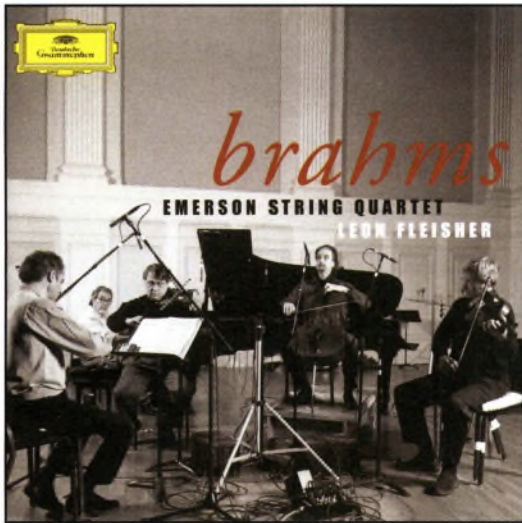


It's been a year rich in 45 rpm vinyl treasures from the Music Matters/Blue Note catalog, almost to the point where each new release is in such rarified company that it's hard to stand out from the crowd. But for me, this title not only stood but also leapt out from the crowd. Had I been asked to vet a list of Music Matters's future releases and rate those I was most excited about, I must concede that I would not have placed *Us Three* near the top of my list. Sure, I'd heard the music and even owned the Mosaic box, but had never really HEARD the music until this gem from the Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray mastering team landed on my VPI. It redefined for me how good the best of the Blue Notes could sound. It stands out for a stellar musical performance as well as for the best sound on Blue Note or any other label of the period. Blue Note is not my top pick for greatest jazz label of all time (that would be Impulse!) and quite a bit of its hard bop wears thin for me over time. This session stands far above that crowd—inventive at every turn. Piano trios are probably the hardest jazz LPs to sell unless your name was Bill Evans, because most people want to hear a horn on the front line. Kudos to Ron Rambach and Joe Harley for plucking an unappreciated gem and giving it the polish it deserves.

Cannonball Adderley—*Somethin' Else* on Blue Note 1595. Analogue Productions has matched Music Matters with a superb selection of Blue Note reissues, using the same mastering team of Hoffman and Gray. The main difference lies in the selection of titles. Analogue Productions got the rights to more of the famous titles, while Music Matters picked off more of the discerning little known titles. I wish I could have been there when Chad Kassem arm-wrestled Ron Rambach for title selection. This year has seen the release of some monster titles from Analogue Productions, including John Coltrane's *Blue Train* and Art

Blakey's *Moanin'*, and the Grant Green and Ike Quebec titles coming down the line offer great music and some of Blue Note's best sound. But for me, it's going to be hard to top this title, one of my favorite LPs and unique as one of the rare Miles Davis sideman efforts. The sound does not quite scale the heights of *Us Three*, but it's nonetheless among the best sounding Blue Notes. I have stereo and mono originals in perfect shape, and they do not compare to this re-issue.

Tie for third: Peggy Lee—*Black Coffee* on Decca DL 8358 and Irene Kral—*Where is Love?* on Choice CRS 1012. Maybe it's cheating having a tie and sneaking in two third place titles, so sue me! Pure Pleasure released the Kral duet album with Alan Broadbent, a stunning LP with great presence. This LP should be much better known than it is, as it is recognized as a classic vocal performance. Kral suffered a short career and came along after the "classic" jazz period. The LP, released in the 70's is relatively easy to find, so has never been especially sought after. But Pure Pleasure improved on the mastering and pressed the LP on perfect Pallas vinyl, setting it heads and shoulders above the 1975 original. In a few spots the voice is recorded a little hot, but it is a fabulous recording with great presence. Speakers Corner's entry in this tie reaches back to the mid 1950's with one of my favorite records of any genre. *Black Coffee* originally saw life as a 10" LP in 1953. A later session was tacked on and the record became a 12" LP in 1957. Near mint copies of the 10" LP are extinct, and collectable copies of the 12" LP are much sought after and priced accordingly. This Speakers Corner re-issue moots the need for an original—the sweet midrange and ambience are a match for the early pressings. Manna from heaven for the masses!



JIMMY HUGHES



The three Brahms quartets are my favourite string quartets. As a body of work, Beethoven's quartets undoubtedly constitute a greater edifice. But, there's something about the three Brahms quartets that keeps one coming back for more. I like their terseness and concentration. Even by Brahms' standards, the writing is densely contrapuntal and highly concentrated. Especially in the two *Op 51* quartets, the music has a restless urgent quality that hardly relaxes. As with all Brahms chamber works, the music is intensely personal, but the quartets show a side of the composer that isn't often glimpsed. The final *Op 67* quartet is more playful, yet one senses a coiled spring ready and waiting to snap shut at any moment. Technically, the Emersons are a formidable ensemble, and they have the command necessary to meet the demands of this music. However, the playing is surprisingly lyrical. Like most modern quartets, a typical Emerson performance is perhaps more notable for its incisive intellectual rigour than its warmth or sweetness. To be sure, their playing of these Brahms quartets is very focused, with crisp attack and some brisk tempi. Yet the music is given time to breathe, and even the densest busiest textures are clarified. There could perhaps be a little more inwardness at times; this is very intimate music, for all its bold rhetoric. The second disc features veteran pianist Leon Fleisher in a powerful and at times abrasive account of the deeply serious Piano Quintet *Op 34* – a work that finds Brahms at his most uncompromising. The recordings are close and clear, yet reasonably spacious and remarkably detailed. You hear every note with great clarity, yet the actual sound of the four players is captured with convincing naturalness. Even the most powerful tutti passages sound refined and clean – despite the forward balance. Session pictures show the microphones placed close to the players, but the sound has plenty of space despite the immediate balance.

By the time Sinopoli recorded Mahler's *9th symphony* for DG in 1993 (the penultimate release in his cycle of the complete symphonies), his relationship with

the Philharmonia orchestra was frosty, to put it kindly. As a result, the performance failed to gel, despite some impressive moments. This Dresden performance was taped in April 1997, and it's much better than the earlier DG. Tempi are incredibly slow, with a first movement lasting almost 33 minutes, and a finale taking around 29 minutes. Indeed, overall, this is the broadest most spacious Mahler *9* ever recorded. Here, with an orchestra he loved (and players who admired and respected him), Sinopoli gives the music acres of space to unfold. The playing of the Staatskapelle has far more heart and sinew than the Philharmonia, and the result is deeply felt and immensely moving, an account that stretches this symphony almost to breaking point. The end result does not always make for comfortable listening, but perhaps that's how it should be. The filler is Richard Strauss' *Tod und Verklarung*, given a transcendent performance of great power and presence. Both recordings emanate from live concerts, but the sound is very good – spacious and rich, with wide dynamic range.

Rattle's earlier (1998) Mahler *9*, recorded live with the Vienna Philharmonic, gave the impression of a work in progress. It had all the hallmarks of a fresh and exciting competitive encounter between conductor and orchestra, but sometimes Mahler's music got caught in the crossfire. This new live Berlin performance is much better conceived, and is one of the best Mahler recordings released in the last few years. It doesn't quite equal classic readings from Giulini, Karajan, or Bernstein (all DG), nor does it have the incredible weight and sonority of Sinopoli's amazingly broad Dresden account (see above). But it's a good performance that's well worth hearing. Tempi are a shade faster than the versions mentioned, but not quite fast enough for the work to fit on a single disc. Dynamics are scrupulously observed, and the performance is highly detailed. Yet at the same time, the music does not sound stifled or over-interpreted. After so many soporific EMI recordings from Berlin, it's nice to hear one that has a bit of bite and detail. Recorded in the Philharmonie, the sound has good range and excellent clarity.



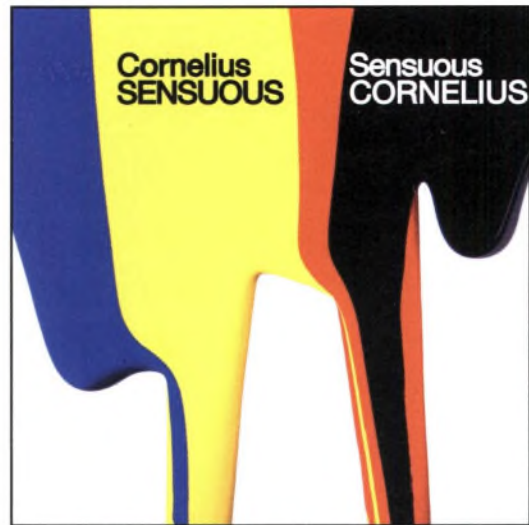
PAUL MESSENGER



I met the person who recommended this album at the Heathrow hi-fi show the other day, and thanked him sincerely. He'd recently heard Mavis live, and been very disappointed with her performance, so perhaps this great voice has passed its peak, or maybe the recording studio is a better environment for a voice that's been belting it out for nearly 60 years. She's certainly in fine voice on this CD, delivering the civil rights anthems that lay at the core of The Staples Singers close relationship with Dr Martin Luther King with heart, passion and true feeling. Matching Mavis' voice as the main influence on this album, and undoubtedly responsible for the excellent recording quality, is Ry Cooder's contribution, both as musician and producer. His influence is as pervasive as Mavis', so much so that by simply listening to the disc without reference to the artwork, one might easily assume that this is a Cooder album, graced by Mavis' vocals, especially since he's previously recorded some of the songs on his own albums (eg 'Down in Mississippi', 'Jesus is on the Main Line'). Besides the excellent recording quality, general familiarity with much of the material makes this a very easy album to get into, a bit like slipping on a comfortable pair of slippers. The title, *We'll Never Turn Back* gives a clue to an overall concept that brings together a collection of the classic songs of religious and racial freedom. The Staples started out as a pure gospel group, subsequently featuring strongly in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. And it's the way these two major influences – the religious and the political – come together that somehow gives this album extra power and authority. Whatever one's personal views on religion, there's no denying Mavis' beliefs and commitment. Cooder's 'Jesus on the Mainline' (from *Paradise and Lunch*) has long been a favourite of mine in his repertoire, yet Mavis and her gospel style backing singers give the song an extra dimension of genuine authenticity that is hard to ignore.

Heartworn Highways; various artists HackTone Records DK37457

On every occasion I played this disc to visitors, they immediately demanded to know what it is and how to get hold of it. There can be no higher recommendation, especially as it's straight unadorned country music, mainly just solo guitar and voice, and was originally recorded more than thirty years ago. *Heartworn Highways* started out as a documentary film, made in 1975/6 by Jim Szalapski, who wanted to make a record of the emerging 'outlaw country' scene featuring a new and less 'showbiz' performer. The film (now available with bonus material on DVD) proved particularly prescient, as many of its subjects have since gone on to become (country music) household names. I haven't seen the film yet, but this same name CD released at the same time was never intended to be a straight soundtrack. Rather it consists of a coherent selection songs, some used on the soundtrack others from the outtakes, all fully restored and reproduced in their entirety, and able to fit on a single 79 minute 29 second CD. I don't consider myself a particular fan of country music, but even I've heard of artists like Steve Earle, Steve Young and Guy Clark. As I played through the 26 tracks, I was delighted to encounter a couple I knew and had long loved from other artists (Mallard's 'Desperadoes Waiting for a Train' and Emmylou Harris' 'Pancho and Lefty') performed simply, solo and beautifully by their respective songwriters (Clark and Townes Van Zant). By grabbing these future stars before they'd made it, sitting them and their guitars down in familiar surroundings with simple high quality recording gear, Alvar Stugard, the original recording engineer, captured original performances that are unusually 'live', fresh and vivid. These have been lovingly restored, mixed and mastered by Alan Silverman, who used no noise reduction and mixed using Rupert Neve's analogue Legendary Audio Masterpiece. Silverman concludes his sleeve note: "Warning: after hearing the naturalness and honesty of the performances... listening to modern recordings may prove difficult." I couldn't agree more.



JASON KENNEDY



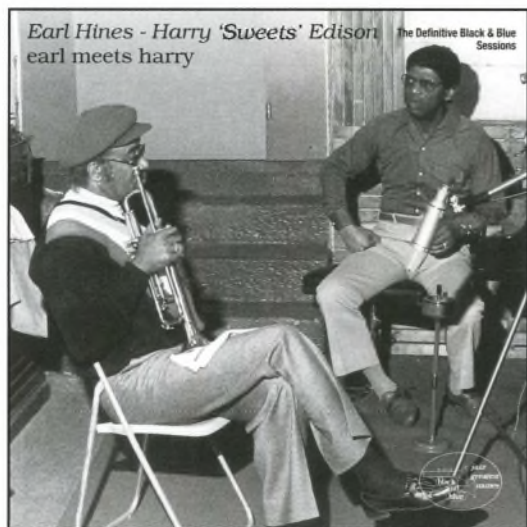
Ennio Morricone *The Soundtracks* Recording Arts 5X031

I'd never taken much notice of film music until Morricone's contribution to Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns made me realise just how important it can be. Morricone is an original, especially in his very unconventional use of percussion and voices. One can argue that his music draws too much attention to itself, to the point where it can start to distract from the film, but in my opinion his name is a major plus on any movie credits. His score for *The Mission* did much to turn me on to the joys of home cinema surround sound twenty years ago, long before Dolby had even gone Pro-Logic, never mind Digital. Until recently my sole Morricone was a *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* soundtrack purchased on vinyl way back in the 1970s. A few years back I went looking for his soundtracks in London's largest record stores, only to be disappointed by the very poor selection. Then in the January sales I found this compilation on the HMV website. A five CD set at £9.99 seemed altogether too good to be true, so expectations weren't great. It was only after playing Disc 1 that I realised what a gem I'd bought, worth its price for that first disc alone, never mind the other four, with recording quality consistently good verging on the spectacular. Sadly there's very little information on the provenance of these Italian recordings, either in the sleeve note booklet or that I've been able to find on the web. Certainly its GBU tracks are quite different from those on my Original Soundtrack album, so exactly when and where these recordings were made, or by whom, remains something of a mystery – not that it mars the enjoyment too much. While it's probably true that Morricone's best work was in those early years on Leone's Westerns, and some of the 70-something tracks are better skipped over lightly, exploring all five discs is great fun, thanks to Morricone's fine wit and sparkling sense of humour, which ensures a constant stream of mostly pleasant surprises. Brilliant recordings and music at a silly price.

It has been a good year for high quality vinyl reissues from the likes of Pure Pleasure and Speakers Corner among many, and it's one of the latter's recreations that has been on the turntable more than most. The Mahavishnu Orchestra's 1971 debut, *The Inner Mounting Flame*, is a work of considerable majesty, power and density by a group of musicians who would go on to power the jazz rock scene for the remainder of the seventies. John McLaughlin and Billy Cobham in particular show their consummate skill and artistry to full effect on the remarkably high-energy tracks and Speaker's Corner has done a great job of cleaning up the recording so that you can enjoy its full splendour.

There is always an ECM disc near the top of my listening pile and usually it's a Keith Jarrett, but I cited his Carnegie Hall recording last year so this time I'm picking the Tord Gustavsen Trio's *The Ground*. It came out in 2004 but I discovered the band when they played at the Barbican earlier this year and was an instant convert. The music they make is almost minimalist and one suspects that Erik Satie is among Mr Gustavsen's influences but there is plenty of life to go with the serenity of this crisp and shimmering recording.

My top pick would have to be Cornelius' *Sensuous* which is one of the most dynamic and exciting records I've heard from a contemporary artist in years. Cornelius is Keigo Oyamada, a one time DJ who has moved on from remixing other people's music to recording it himself. He is clearly obsessed with sound because this is one of the most precise and clean recordings around. It contains a wide variety of instruments and voices but there are more wind chimes than usual and some fabulous bass drums. Cornelius keeps things wide in both dynamic and bandwidth terms and has a mastery of timing that is rare. He also inclines toward metal on occasion and this combination works a treat for me. If you can only hear one track make it 'Scum', the most screwed up version of 'Star Spangled Banner' yet put on record.



REUBEN PARRY



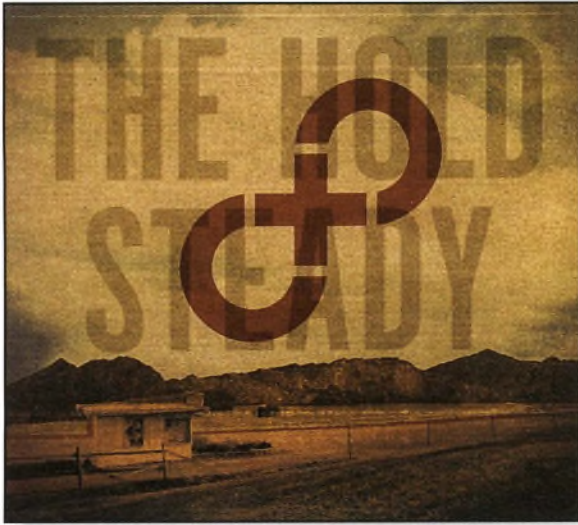
Only when I sat back to think about this annual and highly subjective musical excursion did it strike me what an astonishing year it has been across the genres and throughout the formats. I can't, for example, praise enough the Speaker's Corner Mercury Dorati *Stravinsky Ballet Suites*. Stunning golden age performances lovingly transferred from the analogue master tapes and pressed onto pristine 180g vinyl that's to die for.

Elsewhere, female vocalists are once again strongly represented. Mobile Fidelity beautifully repackaged Linda Ronstadt's 1973 record, *Don't Cry Now* (MFSL 1-300) although I'd have preferred to see them tackle *Winter Light* or *Cry Like A Rainstorm*. Nor can I overlook their significant Santana and Little Feat re-issues, which were quite brilliant. Returning to the ladies, Pure Pleasure Records delivered an even better cut in *Any Day Now* (VSD 79306/7) where Joan Baez vividly invokes the social and poetic compositional genius of Bob Dylan with a contrasting vocal purity. Thea Gilmore, an edgy, challenging and wonderfully gifted contemporary artisan, delivered another powerful and evocative album. *Liejocker* (Fullfill FCCD109) cemented her trans-Atlantic singer-songwriter credentials and is another strong candidate for top spot. So too is Eleanor McEvoy's *Love Must Be Tough* (Moscodisc MOSACD304); hardly a year goes by without her name being in the running. *Tough Love*, like *Liejocker*, was mastered at Metropolis, but Eleanor's sublime combination of covers and self-penned gems, especially in the finely tooled SACD version of the album, exposes all of life's fractures and fissures in the most musically complete and satisfying experience since *Yola*.

However, I'm duty bound to follow head and heart in this matter and my choice as a winning recording comes from a canon of releases that have caused me to re-evaluate and sometimes realign my musical sympathies. Last year, I unreservedly praised Tony Hickmott of Pure Pleasure Records for his personal

labour of love – a series of jazz and blues re-masters – but I still didn't award him the gold medal. The records have kept coming at quite a pace and this time one of them gets the nod. But which one will it be? It's not the eponymous and passionately innovative Keb Mo album (Okeh / Epic 57863). Neither is it the Joe Pass debut, *Sounds Of Synanon* (Pacific Jazz ST48) or for that matter a Stan Getz masterpiece in the shape of *Captain Marvel* (Columbia PPAAN 32706). But it could have been. I was tempted by both the classic ballads sung by Irene Kral on *Where Is Love* (Choice CRS 1012) and captivated by Betty Carter's stylish interpretations in *Now It's My Turn* (Roulette SR 5005). An outrageously talented Illinois Jacquet wowed me with *God Bless My Solo* (Black Et Blue PPAAN 008). Yet, it was not to be. Instead, I wanted to reward performances that have affected me through their combination of understated eloquence, intimacy and mesmerising brilliance. Harry "Sweets" Edison and Earl "Fatha" Hines achieved this and far more for *Earl Meets Harry* (Black Et Blue PPAAN 007) that was originally recorded in 1978 for the French label. This recommendation of course comes with a loud disclaimer: It's a deeply personal selection

Earl Meets Harry is simply a beautifully conceived piece from an age-defying and phenomenally inventive pair. Pianist Hines, who was enjoying an Indian summer in the studio having lost none of that astonishing technique, commands our attention with his drama and dynamism. Trumpeter Edison, an exquisite horn player, brings his trademark sober repetition of single notes and a laconic wit to proceedings. They create between them a relaxed and confidential atmosphere with an easy swinging style that delights the ear on 'But Not For Me', 'Mean To Me', 'Just You Just Me', 'I Surrender Dear', 'I Cover The Waterfront', 'Just Squeeze Me' and in the closing 'The One I Love Belongs To Somebody Else' as well. It's fascinating stuff to find such worn old blades this sharp. This album's a little gem you'll come to treasure.



ALAN SIRCOM



Minneapolis-based The Hold Steady is a hard act to pin down. Imagine if alt-rock kings Hüsker Dü, the Replacements and REM all sat round and wrote lyrics for Bruce Springsteen with Led Zep, Thin Lizzy, The Band and The Stranglers as backing band and you're half way there. Then have the result produced by John Agnello (who made 'that sound' for Sonic Youth and Dinosaur Jr). But, don't think this is some by-the-numbers band lifting 1980s alt-rock sounds like Oasis plundered the Beatles back-catalogue; The Hold Steady's music speaks for itself. Unfortunately although not exactly lo-fi, audiophile-chummy it ain't, but tracks like 'Lord I'm Discouraged' remind you that you don't need to be young, pretty and vapid to make good post-punk rock. *Stay Positive* is The Hold Steady's fourth album – and their follow-up to the band's break-out *Boys and Girls in America* album from 2006.

Stay Positive is a grower of an album, which is always a good sign. And strangely, despite some of the most dour lyrics this side of a My Chemical Romance/ Radiohead double-bill, it's an uplifting and ultimately hugely entertaining ride. It's also an album that could – uniquely – find old rockers, 1980s indie survivors and die-hard fans of The Boss loving the album on very different levels, but loving the album all the same. Best of all though, there's not a bad track on it (of course, die-hards will point to earlier before-they-were-famous albums for extra cred points), and arguably the best US indie CD since 2005's Sufjan Stevens' *Come On Feel the Illinoise*.

The Blessing – *All Is Yes*

Warning – Jazz alert! Like the Neil Cowley Trio, The Blessing is at the forefront of today's British jazz movement; both bands take some of the more cerebral musicians from rock and dance (in the case of The Blessing, the rhythm section from Portishead) to turn their attention to tightly constructed jazz that is far removed from overplayed 'coffee shop' recordings from the 1950s. Well recorded

– if close mic'd and claustrophobic at times – the album has shades of Roni Size sandwiched next to Ornette Coleman wig-outs as sax and trumpet begin playing off one another. And yet, *All Is Yes* remains on the right side of jazz fascism; not so pretentious and self-absorbed that it is inaccessible to those who lack a solid understanding of the use of non-diatonic notes within the C Ionian mode, but still with enough jazz credentials to keep the stroky-beard types almost happy. If you think of jazz as something that crooned itself to death in the 1940s or disappeared up its own goatee in the late 1960s, guess again. Like many good jazz acts these days, *All Is Yes* shows that jazz may have started in America but ended up a truly European art form.

Oli Brown – *Open Road*

Blues is having a purple patch at the moment. Sadly, one of the best albums in the genre this year – Jeff Healey's *Mess of Blues* – was released just after the too-early death of the guitar legend from cancer. But recent albums from Joe Bonamassa, Buddy Whittington, Walter Trout, Eric Bibb – plus the US-based adoration of on-again/off-again Jennifer Aniston squeeze John Mayer and especially hobo turned music biz darling Seasick Steve – all breathe a bit of much-needed life into the blues. However, it's the first album from a Norfolk-based blues power trio fronted by one Oli Brown that really hit home in 2008. Not because it's a particularly good recording (although it's reasonably open, lively and not compressed... which is a bonus these days), not even because the music really takes the blues to a new place. No, Oli Brown is worthy of inclusion just because he is so disturbingly young and talented; listening to *Open Road* is like catching a young Stevie Ray Vaughan before he cut *Texas Flood*. Granted, Oli Brown's vocals (a little like a Roachford-wannabe) and his lyrics (a bit too predictable) need to catch up with the guitar playing. The guitar is a forgive-all thing though, because his playing is far more mature than his 18 years might suggest.



RICHARD S FOSTER



Determining just what musical offerings are deserved of awards always seems to tie me up in knots. There is so much great music and great discs out there, it's very hard to name just one. This year RG allowed me to pick three of my favorites and I have to say even that was hard – so I cheated with box-sets!

Stravinsky: *The Three Early Ballets*. Speakers Corner/Mercury
Without a doubt the Speakers Corner box set of Stravinsky's three early ballets (*The Firebird*, *Petrouchka* and *The Rite of Spring*) clearly falls into the award category. These records are of major importance to vinyl collectors, and while there may be some discussion regarding the performances of *Petrouchka* and *The Rite of Spring*, this *Firebird* is an unassailable monument to the art of the vinyl record. It combines a near perfect, powerhouse performance with a recording quality that is second to none. It also showcases both Dorati's skills as a conductor and the vivid playing of the London Symphony Orchestra, which is quite simply stunning. An essential addition to any serious record collection!

Sibelius: *Complete Symphonies, Violin Concerto, Finlandia*. Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Leif Segerstam. Pekka Kuusisto, violin. The Polytech Male Choir. Ondine 1075-20.
While the individual recordings contained in this wonderful compilation CD box set had been individually released over a ten year period, it was a smart idea by Ondine to put this set together at a medium price for the consumer. It was back in Issue 54, our last Awards Issue, that I reviewed this set and I can say without a doubt that I am as enthusiastically pleased to have these performances today as I was then. Many of you know that I'm partial to the symphonies of Sibelius, but if I could only have one set on CD or SACD, this would be it. There are many individual performances on vinyl by Beecham,

Barbirolli, Berglund, Davis, Dorati, Gibson, Maazel, Monteux, Szell and Von Karajan that are stunning in their own right. Each of these conductors has something insightful in interesting to say about Sibelius. But orchestral colour is a hallmark of the Sibelius symphonies as well as taut orchestral control. Segerstam paints pictures that no other conductor has been able to do in any other complete cycle. While the sound quality varies slightly in some of these performances, it never gets worse than really good. It's almost as if the Finnish composer's melodic lines are played anew under the unwavering hand of Segerstam and by the high quality musicianship of the Helsinki Philharmonic. If you know these works and you think you've heard everything Sibelius has to offer, I humbly suggest you take it upon yourself to explore these discs.

Johannes Brahms: *Sonatas Op. 38, Op. 78 and Op. 120 number 1*
Pieter Wispelwey, violoncello; Dejan Lazic, piano.
Channel Classics CCSA 24707.

Actually, we have here two of the Brahms *Violoncello Sonatas* and Wispelwey's own transcription of the *Clarinet/Viola Sonata*. The collaborative efforts of these two outstanding artists have already given us one of the finest sets of Beethoven *Sonatas* I've ever had the pleasure of listening to and I was immensely pleased to discover these artists performing the Brahms *Sonatas* as they rank amongst my favorite chamber music. This disc delivers not only offers great musical rewards with its spectacular playing of these timeless works, but also the benefit of exceptional sound quality too. Wispelwey and Lazic achieve that elusive goal of musical equality, the violoncello never detracting from the piano or vice-versa. Jared Sacks gives us exceptional sound quality on both layers of this disc making it a real treat for the aficionado and the classical/audio beginner alike.



STEVE DICKINSON



L'Arpeggiata, Christina Pluhar – *Los Impossibles*, Naïve V5055
 Oops, nearly forgot about this one. I purchased this disc round about the time of last year's awards issue, played it endlessly for ages but, fickle and shallow as I am, almost overlooked it for this year's awards issue. That it still hits the spot, still enthuses, excites and enthral's me with every play makes this most definitely a 'keeper'. Pluhar, and L'Arpeggiata seem to have a talent for discovering forgotten medieval and baroque gems which most certainly deserve a wider airing. This is no dusty, academic reconstruction, nor yet a modern reinterpretation – L'Arpeggiata use ancient instruments I've barely heard of, but a rather compelling blend of the two. I've heard what they do described as 'medieval jazz' which is pithy and apposite and I like the idea it conveys but it is not, perhaps, entirely fair to either genre. This collection of eighteenth century Mexican pieces, stop fidgeting at the back, combines wonderful baroque harmonies with the precision, drama and élan of Spanish flamenco guitar. Nor are these museum curiosities, one track, 'Olvidate de mi' could almost be a Bond theme, fresh from the pen of John Barry – buy the CD, imagine the vocal sung instead by Shirley Bassey and tell me I'm wrong... The King's Singers contribute memorably to several tracks and close the album with a luminous à capella rendering of 'Villancico catalan'. Stirring, moving and entertaining in equal measure, this is one of those CDs it is impossible to cherry-pick favourite tracks from, downright hard not to simply play it from start to finish every time.

Roberto Fonseca – *Zamazu*, Enja ENJ-9499 2

I wasn't initially sure if my decision was influenced by the fact that, along with several dozen other clamouring converts brandishing fistfuls of cash, I bought this CD in the lobby after a truly effervescent gig, but then I thought, "What

the heck?..." and here it is, my runner-up recording of the year for 2008 and but for *Los Impossibles*, above, it might easily have taken the top spot. Fonseca is a remarkable and talented pianist who cut his musical teeth with the Buena Vista Social Club, but this solo album also shows his versatility as a songwriter. Leading a five-piece band, he swings, jams and rocks his way through a 14-strong set, from the gentle and sublime duet with double bassist Cachaito Lopez, 'Llegó Cachaito', to the pacy and insistent 'Ishmael' there is variety and interest in virtually every track. It's not as good as the live gig, but then again, it was a pretty memorable gig and what recording ever is? If you weren't there, this is the next best thing.

Prokofiev, *Piano Concerto No.2*, Ravel *Piano Concerto in G*

Yundi Li, soloist, Berlin Philharmonic/Seiji Ozawa, DG 00289 477 6593

My third choice is a recording of the Prokofiev *Second Piano Concerto*, a firm personal favourite. I've had the Ashkenazy/LSO/Previn version on vinyl and CD for years and always felt that Ashkenazy made rather heavy weather of the first movement. Sorry, Vlad, everyone's a critic - would that I could play even half the notes with such authority. Nevertheless...this disc was recommended to me and it does capture the drama and sheer exuberance of the work in ways that the more academic Ashkenazy leaves to one side, particularly in the first movement's phenomenally taxing cadenza. It's not perfect, however: the *Scherzo* second movement, a moto perpetuo of some renown is taken at breakneck pace, much to the detriment of articulation. In this, Ashkenazy's rendering is far superior but overall, Yundi Li produces a breathtaking reading. But for the *Scherzo*, it would have been my first choice. A wonderfully Gershwin-esque rendering of Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G* completes this album delightfully.



ROY GREGORY



It's an even year, so it must be an Eleanor McEvoy album that's up for an award. Following in the footsteps of *Yola* and *Out There*, this year's offering from the Irish chanteuse, *Love Must Be Tough*, excels even the exalted standards set by its predecessors. What started out as a collection of covers, songs she wanted to sing from a woman's perspective, rather than in their more normal male voice, soon grew into something more – much, much more.

Opening up with an inspired version of 'Mother's Little Helper', the transposition from Jagger's misogynistic delivery is disturbingly effective, while the onward path through what has to be the definitive 'Lubbock Woman', laced with a scattering of McEvoy's own songs makes this possibly her most personal and reflective album yet. It's a record whose track listing reflects a world of life and love that hasn't turned out quite the way she thought it would: that and the inexorable march of time. But it's far from being all doom and gloom. The wry humour of 'Old, New, Borrowed And Blue' and 'The Night May Be Young, But I Am Not' signal a burgeoning song-writing partnership with Dave Rotheray, while outings in the company of Johnny Rivers (the fantastic title track) one B. Parker and the inimitable Rodney Crowell bring a depth and variety to these songs that easily matches the classic covers. The recording quality is superb, the music breathing with life and vitality, an intimate, detailed perspective that complements these most personal of performances perfectly. And just to cap it off, it's available in every major format. The CD is good, but it's not a patch on the SACD or 180g vinyl releases.

For anyone who fears they might be approaching a certain age, or thinks they never will, this album should be required listening. Life's a serious business, but there's always the odd laugh to be had. McEvoy's riotous take on 'I Knew The Bride (When She Used To Rock 'n Roll)' tells you that.

Honourable mentions go to a pair of re-issue discs. Speakers Corner continue to excel with both the frequency, quality and selection of their discs, steering a steady path between those recordings with audiophile cred and those that constitute great music that deserves the best medium available. *Johnny Cash At San Quentin* is definitely one of the latter, but it's also a record that all right-thinking individuals should own. From the iconic cover to the gritty realism and presence of the live recording, the dark humour of the verbal interludes to the stellar track selection, if you only ever own one album by the Man In Black, make it this one. It's only the curtailing of 'Folsom Prison Blues' that stops it sharing the top step.

Second up comes Cisco's stunning pressing of the Heifetz *Kreutzer Sonata*, lifted from RCA's Living Stereo tapes. I never 'got' the Heifetz reading of this, my favourite Beethoven *Sonata*, but that's because I'd never really heard it. Picked up and dusted off by the Cisco team, what's revealed is a fabulous musical tour de force, showcasing Heifetz's astonishing levels of control and dynamic contrast, his ability to skitter through passages at a seemingly impossible pace, yet without slurring or skipping a note. The playing is quite literally breathtaking, as you suck it up, just waiting for the inevitable musical train wreck, only to see the locomotive and all the carriages go careering by, somehow anchored to the track, a lone pianist clinging precariously to the caboose! If the only Heifetz you've ever heard is his Tchaikovsky *Concerto*, hear this and your jaw will hit the floor. No, the recording isn't the sweetest and it doesn't have the most natural of perspectives, but frankly, I don't give a fig. This is music at its most elemental and powerful – just pray your system can keep up and pray too, that you find a copy in time. With Cisco's untimely demise, once they're gone, they're gone and you should accept no substitute. A towering epitaph if ever there was one...



CHRIS THOMAS



I have been a fan of Joni Mitchell's music for 30 years now. The early albums especially contain some of the best and most interesting songs that I have ever heard but they are extremely closely identified to her performances. Likewise, Herbie Hancock has always been one of my favourite musicians and I have followed him through the years of musical change from straight jazz to synthesiser excess. But I have always loved his touch on the acoustic piano in particular. So when I heard that he had made an album of, largely, Joni Mitchell songs I thought that this will either be brilliant or a real shocker. I shouldn't have worried. Class and taste combined with Hancock's prodigious talent and feel make this my favourite album of the year. Joni's songs contain so much of her that it has taken a musician of sheer genius to give us a different look at them. By keeping the essential but loosening the structures and opening them up with some extraordinary playing Hancock has made something special. Minimalism is the key and an inspired choice of vocalists sing the poetry that are Joni's lyrics. Nora Jones, Corinne Bailey Rae and good old Lenny Cohen are superb but it is Tina (Screamer) Turner who surprises me most with her, thankfully, restrained take on 'Edith And The Kingpin', one of my particular favourites. Wayne Shorter adds dashes of breathy colour as he has done on so many of the original songs and subtle rhythm sections come no better than Vinnie Colaiuta and Dave Holland. But it is Herbie himself who dictates everything with quite exquisite note and chord selection and a sense of timing that straddles the whole album. He plays inside, outside and through the middle with such quality that it leaves me breathless and lost in admiration for the depth of experience and love that he brings to these great songs. The recording quality is very good too though, being a large piano, it really needs a quality system to maintain focus so you can appreciate the flavour and nuance of tonal colour to say nothing of the delicacy of the phrasing and timing.

Vicente Amigo – *En Momento En El Sol*

Whether you think of it as New Flamenco or are traditional and mad enough to view his music as a corruption of the great art, for me Vicente Amigo is The Man when it comes to Spanish guitar and this is his best release to date. Armed with a technique that is, quite frankly, terrifying in its intensity I am in awe of the sheer focus and dedication that it takes to produce music of this calibre. Flamenco guitar is an impossible instrument to master being half guitar and half percussive but the variations of tone that Vicente specialises in move my soul and on this album he continues his move away from the traditional and into new areas of melodic inspiration. But the gypsy is still there and those blistering runs still take the breath away. The man is as pure a musician and artist as I have ever heard. He has a gentle side though but the scent of Spain permeates everything he does. I saw him a few years back from a front seat at the Barbican and I'm still getting over it. Fantastic stuff.

Shelby Lynne – *Just a Little Lovin'*

This album should be credited to both Shelby Lynne and producer Phil Ramone. She has the voice and the material, which features some Dusty Springfield classics among others, but Ramone has given her the canvas to work on. Simple, but beautifully recorded, the man understands when less is more and it works a treat. This is an exceptionally finely wrought piece of work with no excess flab or musical excess whatsoever but listen to it on a really, really fine system and you'll discover that it is denser than you first thought.



ESBJÖRN SVENSSON R.I.P.

by Jason Kennedy

It was a shock earlier in the year when I learnt about the sudden death of Esbjörn Svensson, the Swedish piano player and composer who made his name in e.s.t. the Esbjörn Svensson Trio. On June the 14th he lost his life in a diving accident at the age of 44 and we, the music loving fraternity, lost a musician of talent, self-awareness and creativity.

Svensson was born in April 1964 in Västerås, Sweden to a mother that played classical piano and a father who appreciated Duke Ellington. Naturally Svensson decided to play the drums but had piano lessons for three years, which came in handy when he finally decided on his vocation. He played in bands at school and got to know another drummer, Magnus Öström with whom he would eventually form e.s.t. Their desire to play music together lead Svensson to take up the piano once more, but the vestiges of his drumming past are not hard to hear in the percussive approach he took to the instrument in later years. They didn't form the band until after Svensson went to university in Stockholm where he spent four years studying music.

Svensson and Öström worked as sidemen on the Swedish and Danish jazz scenes during the eighties and formed a trio in 1990 but it wasn't until they met bassist Dan Berglund in 1993 that e.s.t. was formed. Despite the inference in the name the trio's approach was one of equality between members, and while the piano is

the natural 'voice' in such a line-up, it never dominates proceedings. That said on the occasions I've seen them play live it's always been Svensson who does the talking.

They produced 12 albums over the last 15 years, three of them live recordings made in various European cities, that part of the world where they seemed to find their biggest fan-base. I was surprised to see that their



profile on the US based All Music website is virtually non existent; clearly they hadn't managed to conquer America despite such impressive crossover sales elsewhere. The lack of an obvious category for the music may have been part of the problem. While e.s.t. is generally considered to be jazz, this is largely because of the band's trio format and acoustic instruments. Yet the music they played was clearly informed by a rhythmic sensibility that has its roots in blues, and its hard to find many other 'jazz' bands that sound anything like them. The only one that springs to mind is the Avishai Cohen Trio,

which is US based but two-thirds Israeli in origin.

In Scandinavia e.s.t. have a strong following outside of the usual jazz scene, which isn't surprising given that only about a third of their recorded work could be categorised as such.

While e.s.t. garnered success in Scandinavia in the nineties it was not until 1999 when ACT Music + Vision released *From Gagarin's Point of View*, that they managed to penetrate the international market. ►

► This album was toured at festivals including JazzBaltica and Montreux and included numbers like 'Dodge The Dodo' that turned up on last year's *Live in Hamburg* release. It has all the e.s.t. hallmarks, with Svensson's playing showing the influence of Thelonius Monk on some tracks and Keith Jarrett on others, but the sound is essentially their own. The title track for instance, is an expansive and chilled out tune of a style that cannot easily be categorised. It reminded me that e.s.t. was one of the key pioneers behind the Scandinavian "invasion", along with bands like Bugge Wesseltoft's *New Conception of Jazz*, a movement that has got to the point where the Norwegian Punk Festival is coming to London this year.

In 2000 *Good Morning Susie Soho* came out with a brighter and more open sound that worked rather better. It contains one of the band's few cover versions (outside of the *Plays Monk* album), 'The Face Of Love' being a track covered by Lalo Schifrin and Eddie Vedder among others. Eddie, as you may recall, is the singer in Pearl Jam, a band acknowledged in the sleeve notes for *Susie Soho* and thus a likely reason for the choice. It might seem strange for a jazz oriented trio to be citing a grunge rock band, but if you let the disc play on for a minute and a half after the final

track you will hear e.s.t. literally rock out, with the double bass treated to sound like an electric guitar. This was the first occasion that they included a hidden track on an album, something that was to become a feature of subsequent releases.

The next album, *Strange Place for Snow* garnered awards across Europe and saw e.s.t. touring

Europe, USA and Japan. It was also used in the sound track of French film *Dans Ma Peau*. In many respects it marked a high point for the band, combining groove oriented keyboard work with tight but imaginative drums and double bass to tremendously engaging effect. Svensson producing rolling bass lines reminiscent

of Ramsay Lewis at his funkier – his left hand delivering a solidity and drive missing from previous recordings. There's a strong ambient element at work as well, this is not straightforward jazz but neither is

in your face, at least not until the hidden track right at the end of the disc – then, as per *Susie Soho*, all sorts of demons are let loose.

With *Seven Days of Falling* in 2003, e.s.t. broke into several European pop charts and toured the US supporting KD Lang – not the most obvious pairing ►





▶ perhaps but it got them in front of plenty of Americans, albeit possibly not the right ones if the subsequent lack of profile is any indicator. The album itself reveals Svensson in particular, getting heavily into piano treatment. When I asked him about this technique he explained: “Maybe from growing up with vinyl records and hearing the piano distorting so many times, and also through recording myself with small cassette players, you get a sort of very compressed sometimes even distorted sound and I’ve grown to like that sound”. On the opening track Svensson used a guitar effect called the Pod, which makes it hard to tell whether it’s the recording or the instrument that’s distorted, but either way it makes for uncomfortable listening. Fortunately things improve thereafter and there are several fine tracks, often with a more rock than jazz sound. The hidden track on this occasion is a song called ‘Love is Real’; who is singing it is not clear but it has jazz credentials having been written by Josh Haden (son of jazz bassist Charlie).

The albums that followed; *Tuesday Wonderland*, *Viaticum* and *Live in Hamburg* cover similar ground. There is a progression for sure and some tracks on

Tuesday Wonderland are excellent, but by and large they build on the previous work. Only e.s.t.’s final album *Leucocyte* suggested a change of direction. It’s a live session recorded by the band while on tour in Australia and is more free-form than previous studio work. At its best it’s an engaging and explorative set which does make you wonder what would have come next. The albums prior to *Gagarin* are also good if not quite as strong. I’d say that *Estjörn Svensson Trio Plays Monk* is the highlight and well worth seeking out if you get a taste for the band.

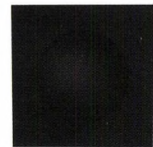
It’s a solid catalogue from an artist who put the music first. I was fortunate enough to be able to interview him during the *Tuesday Wonderland* tour and found him both relaxed and expansive, with a remarkably contained ego. He was also a very hard worker, seemingly constantly on tour or in the studio. I asked him if he liked things that way and he said “this is fantastic, exactly what I’ve been wanting and asking for and trying to achieve with my musical life. Because I think it’s important what we’re doing, I think we have a music that is actually speaking to some people”. I have to agree, which makes it even more sad that he is no longer with us. ▶+

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