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*Living Voice Avatar OBX
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► Novotel Show Report

*'Don't look back in anger'
 or "Goodbye to all that"?*



Nº 2001 PLAYLIST

mark levinson
MADRIGAL AUDIO LABORATORIES

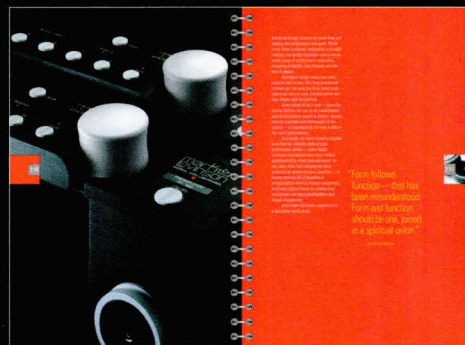
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Editorial

Banned In Hammersmith

Those of you who came to the Hi-Fi News Show in September expecting to visit us may have been surprised by our absence. Indeed, hiforsale.com ordered stock of both Issue 13 and the back issues, specifically to sell at the show. But Hi-Fi News had other ideas. In an unprecedented move, the exhibitors' contracts had a new clause added this year banning them from selling or distributing, in part or in whole, any publication. Faced with these legalities hiforsale.com had no choice but to withdraw hi-fi+ (losing the associated income) or be expelled from the show.

So what else should we expect? We are the competition after all, and it is the HFN show. It's very easy to take the view that HFN have the right to protect their territory, especially as our previous show reports have been critical. (Actually most of the criticisms voiced in the last two years have come from within the industry, criticisms that HFN do not seem to want to hear.)

On the other hand HFN promote the show as an 'industry show', an industry of which hi-fi magazines are an essential part. The presence of as many magazines at a show as possible is beneficial to both exhibitors, whose equipment has been reviewed, and the public who get to question the reviewers directly as well as the opportunity to pick up back issues and put their own point of view. At the Bristol Show which is organised by retailers Audio Excellence and Audio T there is no such problem. This year our stand was right next to the Hi-Fi World stand and not a drop of blood was spilt. So one's forced to ask who benefits from our absence. The answer is HFN and no one else, which makes this a crass case of them placing their interests before those of their exhibitors and the general public. And I thought competition was supposed to be healthy!

Finally, *The Absolute Sound* and a veritable host of other publications were to be found on sale (not to mention all the review reprints scattered round the show, each of which constitutes a part of a publication). Strangely the stand holder was not given a cease and desist order. If one were paranoid, one could even begin to believe that such an action had a specific target. Fortunately next year there should be at least one alternative London show, at which all the hi-fi magazines, including HFN, will be welcome and I for one hope they turn up. Assuming it happens as planned, we'll see you there.

David Ayers

Publisher



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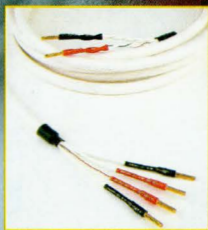


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Music Reviews

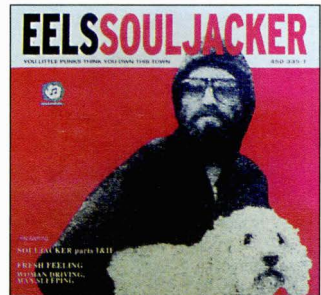
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New models from Spendor

Spendor, one of this country's most highly respected speaker companies seemed destined for obscurity until their recent acquisition by Philip Swift, ex of Audiolab. Now they have announced the first fruits of that meeting. Whereas the existing Classic series will continue, based on traditional products like the BC1 and LS3/5a, the new S series is distinctly more modern in its approach. The audio industry has been eager to see how Spendor would develop into a progressive modern company whilst maintaining the Spendor fundamentals of engineering, innovation and natural sound.

The 'S' series is the result of a product development programme in which Spendor's engineering expertise and in-house drive-unit technology has been applied simultaneously with elegant modern industrial design and fresh technical input. There are six models for stereo and surround sound finished in Maple or Cherry real wood veneers.

Technical advances include acoustically engineered grilles. Swift says, 'I know most manufacturers still prefer their loudspeakers to be used with the grilles off, but I believe that discerning customers value design aesthetics as highly as they value sound quality. That is why our grilles are acoustically engineered for optimum sound and they do not have to be removed.' The flexible particle board plinths used

on many contemporary loudspeaker cabinets affects their sound. To solve this limitation all floorstanding models (S6, S8, S9) have a rigid metal stabiliser integrated into the cabinet base. The S8 and S9 have an innovative 'Linear-flow' bass reflex port. It is designed to offer exceptionally clean and controlled bass whilst eliminating spurious mid-band output from the port. For the most transparent sound all internal wiring uses high purity, mono-crystal copper conductors with silver plating. Crossover networks have low loss polypropylene capacitors and high linearity magnetics for power handling and wide dynamic range. Air-cored inductors are used extensively, and special hand-made auto-transformer inductors allow each pair of Spendor loudspeakers to be accurately matched to within 1dB. Drive unit and crossover design is totally integrated to ensure that all models have a correct extended and even frequency, phase and dispersion response so that the Spendor 'magic' sound can be enjoyed in a wide variety of modern living environments with both music and film.

The 'S' series model range includes S3 for stand and also shelf or surround location, priced at £599.90; the floorstanding models are the S6 at £1,299.90, S8 at £1,699.90 and S9 at £2,499.90. For A/V or multi-channel use there's also the SC3 centre channel at £429.90 and SUB-3 active sub-woofer at £699.90.





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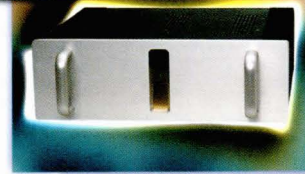
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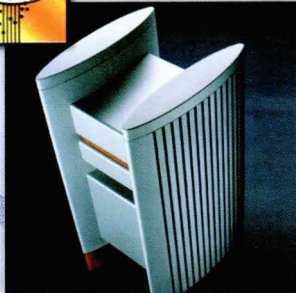
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Arguably the best speakers ...

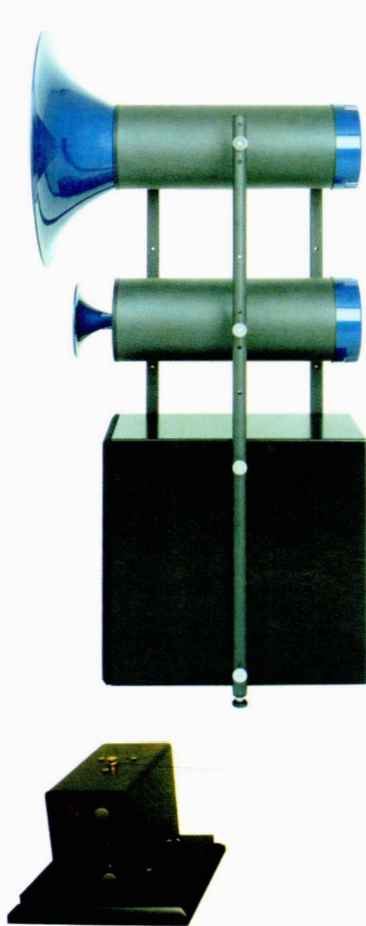
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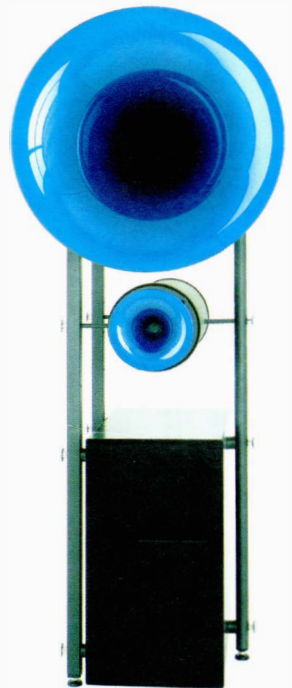
Look forward to seeing you soon - Les and Pete.



Avantgarde Uno (Midnight Blue) - £6809 - the ultimate high sensitivity speaker. In fact, maybe the ultimate speaker period (with the exception of Avantgarde's own bigger models!).

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JC Verdier "Platine Verdier" - £4250 (arm and cart extra) - shouldn't need introduction to well-versed audiophiles. This magnetically levitated platter turntable system with outboard motor is widely regarded as one of the finest analogue sources in the world.



Musical Fidelity Nuvista CD - £2999 - Yes, I know we don't get out of bed for digital products normally, but this one is too exceptional to ignore! The Nuvista would be good value at twice the price; it brings to CD the life and vitality more usually associated with Vinyl. Sit back and enjoy!



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Loricraft discover analogue Missing Link

It's weird how products seem to come in fits and starts. One minute you can't find a decent, affordable box to do whatever it is that you need, the next you can't move for them. The current rush concerns budget phono stages, sufficient to provoke a fresh cycle of reviews in upcoming issues, but here's a taster of what to expect.

I never realised that the Alamo was in deepest Berkshire, but that's where you'll find Garrard/Loricraft, still intent on perfecting the idler drive turntable and a whole host of other analogue accessories so essential to an ongoing vinyl habit. Finally, they've taken the plunge and decided to offer not one but two phono stages, aimed at making high quality vinyl replay more affordable.

First up is the Missing Link, a small extruded aluminium case containing a moving-coil or moving magnet to line stage, in one end and out the other. Powered from a carefully modified external moulded block supply, the circuit can be factory set for gain and loading. Internally, everything is hard wired and the sound it delivers is exactly the rich, robust and musical one we've come to expect from Loricraft. Priced at around the £400 mark initial listening suggests that it offers excellent value.

The other unit hails from Germany and is called the Gibbart, after its designer. Slightly more expensive at around £500, it's a fascinating device, and unique in my experience. Many of you will have heard of the ruinously expensive FM Acoustics 222 phono stage which offers a whole host of 78, microgroove and early LP replay equalisations, so that collectors can achieve correct tonal balance from their early recordings. The problem is that the five figure price tag puts it way out of reach for all but the fortunate or obsessive few.

The Gibbart offers something similar but different at a



fraction of the price. Extensive research by the designer has revealed that although it's widely assumed that RIAA equalisation was, indeed is, used as standard in the recording industry, this isn't in fact the case. Records cut in Britain and Europe as often as not employed different curves, resulting in tonal deviation when replayed with a standard RIAA circuit. The

Gibbart has a front panel switch that allows you to select between curves it describes as RIAA, London and CCIR, thus achieving correct tonal balance from records pressed up to and including the present day. No more weedy sounding British pressings; no more tubby, bloated DGs. Obviously attractive to serious collectors of sixties vinyl it's actually equally applicable to current record buyers, even the latest Madonna album benefiting from corrected equalisation.

To find such a facility included in a unit at this price level is unprecedented. The bad news is that it's only available in moving-magnet, reflecting its designer's purist attitude and interest in early mono material. It also offers two inputs so that it can accommodate a second arm and cartridge for 78s, with both inputs switchable for mono. Construction

is best described as basic, and availability of the hand built unit is strictly limited so you might have to

wait for one. But anybody

interested in getting the best from an extensive record collection should certainly consider adding the Geppart to their replay armoury. I can't wait to enjoy an extended audition. Until then, you can get more information on both it and the Missing Link from Loricraft at:

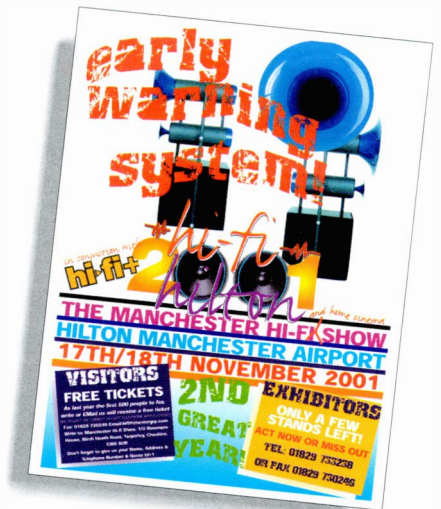
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hi-fi+ at Hi-Fi 2001

17th/18th November, Hilton Manchester Airport



Shows are fast becoming one of the prime talking points in the hi-fi industry. With the Novotel event going from bad to worse, interest in alternative and regional shows is growing, so that now, as well as the established Bristol show we have two shows in Manchester, one in Dublin and one in Edinburgh. That's not counting the host of alternatives being offered in the wake of this year's Novotel fiasco.

The Manchester Hilton show received excellent reports from last year's exhibitors and visitors alike.

The interest

and enthusiasm of the public in the Midlands and North of England more than justifies a specialist hi-fi show (or

two) and as vociferous supporters of such events it's time we put our efforts and money where our mouth is. We've long said that it's not enough for magazines to simply send someone along to shows to write up a report. It should present the public with a unique opportunity to provide a bit of direct feedback and the writers with a chance to demonstrate some of what they're hearing and discussing in the magazine. Thus, when we agreed to sponsor the Hilton show, it was on the grounds that we'd be provided with a demonstration area. The question then becomes, what are we going to demonstrate?

The obvious choice has to be the new high-resolution digital formats. Of course, these have been played to death at shows for the last two years, but let's face it, comparisons between the two have been hard to come by, and the systems they've been played through haven't had a lot to do with the kind of kit most of us are using at home. Instead they've tending to rely on expensive, available in Japan only, amps and speakers.

In fact, the problems of judgement run much deeper than that, as we've been discussing in both this issue and the last. With issues over the quality, pedigree and availability of software limiting our options, not to mention the plethora of different replay scenarios available, the target isn't so much moving as constantly changing. So, under the circumstances, it seemed sensible to give you, the public, a taste of what we're up against.

With that in mind we are organising a demonstration that will compare and contrast the performance available from both the new high-resolution formats and the existing replay standards. To that end, we'll have available to listen to,



► SACD and DVD-A as well as a high quality CD player and a top-notch turntable. We'll be replaying them in both stereo and multi-channel through a system consisting of Canary valve amps and Living Voice speakers. The exact line up is going to depend on availability and what we can make work together, but expect to see the likes of the Wadia 861 or Chord DAC64 (both reviewed in this issue) hopefully alongside the multi-standard player from Pioneer.

As we've already said, direct comparison is almost impossible, so don't think of this as a shootout. Instead it's a



chance to hear the current state of play using excellent examples of the various technological options. The demonstrations will be ticketed and timed, and seating will be limited in order to ensure that all the listeners get a decent position. So make sure you visit the hi-fi stand nice and early in order to get your ticket as they're going to be in demand.

Of course, there's also the rest of the show, with companies demonstrating their wares and with designers available to talk to. Then there's software from the likes of Vivante and hard to find accessories from hi-forsale.com. We'll have back issues and we might even have binders by then. But one thing's for certain. We'll be there and so should you. ➤+

RUSS ANDREWS 15th Anniversary

Russ Andrews marked the 15th anniversary of his accessories business by launching a new range of interconnects, appropriately dubbed the Crystals. In true Kimber fashion, the same basic construction is rendered in a variety of different metals, from copper through to pure silver. In this case they use a four wire construction for better bandwidth and RFI cancellation, whilst the basic conductors equate to the one used in the existing PBJ, Silver Streak and KCAG leads. Prices start at £115 for a metre pair of the Crystal-CU, rise to £298 for the Crystal-H and top out at £570 for the Crystal-AG. They all use the excellent Kimber Ultraplato phono plugs.

The other big news is the arrival at last of a silver equivalent of the High Current Power Kord. Employing 16 Teflon insulated conductors, protected by a braided sheath, it comes fitted with a Wattgate IEC connector and a SuperClamp as standard. Given the long time existence of all

the raw materials for the product it's a mystery as to why it's taken the mad Scottish maestro quite so long to put it all together. He's not normally noted for such restraint in his dogged pursuit of better sound. Even Russ is at a loss to explain it – especially when he goes on to regale you with tales of its sonic superiority. The stellar performance is just as well, as the price is definitely in the "if you have to ask" category. Oh, alright then - £950 for a three foot lead, with another £250 for each additional foot! Of course in order to review it properly I'll be needing a 16 Amp version to feed the PowerBlock and seven 13 Amp ones for the system...

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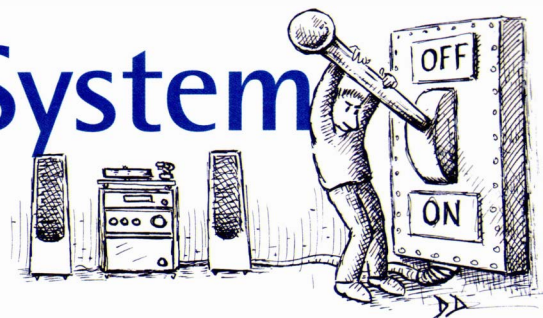
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Ivor Humphreys, HiFi News

Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



Building systems is a case of part experience and part luck. Knowing what you're doing clearly helps, but the tools for the job are kind of important too. That means the bits and pieces, the kit, the equipment that we all spend so much time obsessing (or should that be drooling) over. After all, few of us are in the market for a complete system. Most of us live in the fond hope that we'll miraculously discover that perfect component, the one that offers the seamless, final part of the jigsaw fit with the stuff we already own, transforming the heap of disparate boxes in the corner into a sure fire staircase to audio nirvana. Perhaps that's why magazines have become fixated on individual components. The problem is that it's systems that we should really be concerned with: The way they work, the way the parts interact.

One of my favourite aphorisms is that systems consist of two parts (that's front and back, not left and right, for the wags in the cheap seats). The relationship between amplifier and speaker is so intimate that it is impossible and certainly foolhardy to consider either in isolation. Likewise the correct termination of a phono cartridge, or the interfacing of a digital front-end and whatever is going to control the volume. Of course, your range of options is limited by availability, but every so often you chance across a happy accident. The first such experience I enjoyed was during a search for the perfect amplifier to drive a pair of Magneplanar MG1bs. Torn between then current faves the Krell KSA50 and the Audio Research D70, my dealer persuaded me to carry home the much cheaper Beard P100 as well. The magazines all told me the American amps were the ones to go for. They had to be better because they cost so much more. Besides, I really, really wanted one. But come Monday it was the two imports that were loaded up for the return trip. The sigh of relief that accompanied the closing of the car boot (I lived in a fourth floor flat at the time) was doubtless echoed by my over stretched bank account, and I'd learnt an important lesson.

Over the years the same thing has happened time and again, happy accidents where the musical whole more than exceeds the simple sum of the parts. But just recently I've happened across an example of such stunning performance that it's occupied a considerable part of my listening time. The components in question? The \$600 Monarchy Audio

SM70 power amp driving a pair of Living Voice Avatar loudspeakers, and more recently the upgraded OBX version with the external cross-over.

Then last Issue I got to enjoy a similar happy match in the shape of George Hadcock's venerable GH242 SE tonearm loaded with the much improved Cartridge Man Music Maker II moving-iron pick-up. Which of course got me thinking. Here I had the back end of a system together with the best part of the front, and all comprising products capable of offering performance way beyond their distinctly real world (if not exactly give away) price tags. Just add a suitable turntable and pre-amp and I'd be away, the bonus being that on top of the considerable personal musical pleasure, not to mention self gratification such an exercise delivers, it would also form the basis for an interesting article. In fact, the more I thought about it the more the possibilities developed. This didn't just offer the chance for a single, interesting system review, but the opportunity to investigate the whole dynamic of system matching and upgrades. That's way too good to miss, I thought with my editor's hat on, while my musical mits rubbed each other in barely suppressed anticipation. All those nice, small, manageable boxes, and all that music too. I was definitely sold on this one, and given that I'm the only one to be convinced it was a done deal. Well, almost. There was still the small matter of joining up the front and back with a suitable middle.

Being a uni-pivot the Hadcock requires a nice, stable platform which had me scratching my head for a while until I remembered that all-time budget favourite, the VPI HW19Jr. This chopped down version of VPI's longest running turntable offers a wobble free sorbothane suspension, acrylic platter and a lid (an increasingly overlooked but vital part of any easy to operate and live with turntable). Given that the emphasis in this system was to be pure, fuss-free musical performance, the 19Jr definitely fitted the bill. Add to that it's upgradeability, all the way to full Mk IV status if the mood takes you, and the decision was made. In fact, even when you upgrade to the springy suspension the HW19 still retains its suitability, ►

► due to the massive weight of its suspended section and its resulting stability.

Which brings us to the pre-amp, always a dodgy decision when money is tight. Of course, the Music Maker II's high output solves one of the biggest problems by doing away with the need for an MC stage, a factor which was crucial in the decision to undertake this project in the first place. It also opened the door to the possibility of using a valve unit, which is often the best way to go when money is tight. Options range from various Croft units to imports like the conrad-johnson PV10b (warmly received in Issue 10), and I may well visit those places in Issues to come. But for a starting point I settled on the Klimo Merlin: because I like it, it fits the bill and it happened to be to hand. Besides, you have to love a product that still doesn't label any of its line inputs for CD! A quick experiment showed that my confidence was well placed.

Which completes the bare-bones line-up, at least as far as boxes are concerned. Cables and support are quite another matter, especially given the 19's large footprint, but I'm working on that. There're also some rather interesting cables under consideration that could well fit the signal and mains slots without breaking the bank. So, come time to start reviewing in earnest things should be firming up nicely.

Then I suddenly realised that I was guilty of format myopia. After all, not everybody is as happy as me to rely on vinyl. Ooops! But being inventive I saw this oversight as an opportunity. How about trying to mirror the front-end performance/price equation in digital? It turned out to be an easier task than I envisaged. Monarchy offer an excellent

DAC, complete with line switching and a volume control. Combine it with their DIP external re-clocking unit and you have the heart of an extremely cost effective digital front-end, complete with 24/96 capability and the ability to accept other analogue inputs, like a basic record player for instance. It'll also make the most of an existing player as a transport. As they say in the smoke, sorted!

So to recap, the final line-up looks something like this:


VPI HW19Jr turntable
Hadcock GH242 SE tone-arm
Cartridge Man Music Maker II cartridge
Klimo Merlin pre-amplifier

Or;

Existing CD Player
Monarchy Audio DIP
Monarchy Audio M33 DAC

Feeding;

Monarchy Audio SM70 power-amp
Living Voice Auditorium loudspeakers


If we can get all the bits in place then we can make a start in Issue15, a possibility I'm really looking forward to, especially when it comes to ringing the changes and passing the results round to other reviewers for further comment. Should prove interesting. 

And now for something completely different...

In his column in the last issue, PM spent some time discussing the virtues of stands – speaker stands that is. And his conclusion? Not a real big surprise – rigidity helps. Let's face it, most of the better stands on the market are solid bonded or welded structures. Whether they're open frames or mass loaded monsters, pre-fab just doesn't cut it. Which is a bit of a pain when it comes to getting them home (or storing them if you are a reviewer), but hey that's life and your hobby wouldn't be fun if you didn't have to suffer just a little bit once in a while. That's life and it's just the way it is. Your speaker stands have a profound effect on the sound you get out of your speakers so you live with the practical compromises. After all, once you've got 'em placed they pretty much stay there so what's the problem?

Now, let's think about positioning. It seems like every time I review a half-decent speaker (and I don't bother with

the ones that aren't) I end up including some cautionary tale about how critical it is to get them positioned just so if you want to enjoy their full performance. Believe me when I say that I'm not overstating the case. Until someone who knows what they're doing demonstrates how moving a speaker an inch or even less, can really make or break its performance it's hard to credit. Of course, you can do it yourself, or even better, with a friend, but you don't get the full ghastly effect unless the speaker is positioned absolutely optimally to start with. More than likely you'll be comparing one mediocre result with another.

So how do you get your speakers positioned just so? Well there are various approaches offered by different authorities. Perhaps the best known is associated with Wilson Audio and involves precise, step by step movement of the speakers in a symmetrical fashion. And by precise 

▶ and symmetrical I'm talking about taping out a grid on the floor so that you can make repeatable adjustments of a centimetre at a time. Second up is AudioPhysic whose approach also involves minute steps but eschews symmetry in pursuit of spreading the room nodes excited by the speakers. Then there's another approach that comes from Pentacone and another from... Well, you get the picture. The point is that, when it comes to positioning speakers you need a precise and systematic approach that deals with the speakers' interaction with the room. That means knowing about its relationship with the room boundaries – the front walls, the side walls (which everybody knows about) the ceiling and the floor. The ceiling and floor? Oh yes. Speakers live in a three dimensional environment; sound energy goes up and down too!

Which is where we came in. If moving a speaker one centimetre sideways can kill its sound, how about a centimetre up or down? I don't have an answer to this as all the stands I have to hand are solid structures. However, I'm working on the whole question of speaker set-up at present and this is going to work its way in there. In the meantime, whilst the match between speakers and their stands will always be critical, don't forget that they have to match the room too. The best stand in the dealer's showroom needn't be the best in your listening room. I'm afraid it introduces yet another variable into the equation, but if you're having trouble getting the performance you expect out of a pair of stand mounted speakers and you've exhausted the conventional possibilities, then think in terms of stand height. Now, how about spike height anyone? ▶+

Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

You're often told to ignore first-impressions when evaluating hi-fi. Especially if the product (or system) in question initially seems mightily impressive. The implication is that hi-fi which makes a massive first-impression might not prove satisfying in the long term. There's something in this. Yet at the same time, what's wrong with being impressed?

If you listen to a Megabucks CD player costing (say) ten times as much as the machine you're currently using, shouldn't you hear a big difference? Why spend vast amounts, only to get a tiny improvement you can barely hear? Agreed, you might be paying for exceptional build quality and beautiful finish. But shouldn't there be a significant audible difference too?

Of course, the danger is that something impresses because it's exaggerating particular aspects of the sound. By emphasising particular areas you can enhance certain types of music. However, what works for one CD may not work for another. Hence the importance of neutrality - the avoidance of excessive emphasis and exaggeration.

Many hi-fi enthusiasts have eclectic music tastes - tastes that might well encompass rock, pop, indie, grunge, jazz, and classical. The broader your taste in music, the more you need a hi-fi system that offers neutral balanced results. If proper balance is not achieved, you'll find your system

sounds great on some material and dire on others.

The sort of exaggerations that make electronic pop sound punchy and 'dynamic' may result in simply-miked classical music or acoustic jazz sounding garish and brash. Added 'presence' undoubtedly gives percussion extra impact and brass plenty of bite. But it also makes vocals sound husky and sibilant and massed violins thin and screechy. I could go on, but by now you get the picture...

Because the bulk of my listening is to classical music, I prize things like natural tonal balance, good clarity and separation, plus the ability to cope with wide dynamic range swings. With large choral or orchestral works it's vital that quiet passages remain clear and focused, while climaxes sound exciting and 'big' without becoming raucous or overbearing.

Timing is important too - by which I mean the convincing recreation of forward momentum and 'drive', so that the pulse of the music is portrayed. But subjectively I find that good timing sometimes conflicts with tonal balance. Tonally, the more 'forward' the upper mid-range sounds, the greater the impression of drive and attack.

Conversely, systems that are excessively open tonally can sound flaccid in terms of drive and dynamics. The sound may be beautifully sweet and open, but there's no sense of forward momentum nor any feeling of phrases ▶

► being shaped. There's no change of mood - everything sounds the same – the individuality that gives a performance its unique character seems diluted.

But how do you know when the balance is right? Obviously, if you're moved and excited by what you hear it's a good thing - it shows the system is communicating the spirit of the music. But what about naturalness and realism? How do you gauge that? Very difficult! It's ultimately a subjective judgement. Here, some experience of live acoustic music is very useful.

A solo violin, for example, has a beautifully mellow woody sweetness and warmth that very few hi-fi systems can convincingly recreate. It's often quite a shock to hear a solo fiddle or massed strings live; compared to a typical hi-fi system the sound has a feathery softness that almost sounds as if the treble has been rolled off.

Yet, at the same time, there's a crispness of attack and sense of focus that's seemingly at odds with the mellowness of the sound tonally. Unfortunately, when many hi-fi systems sound smooth, they also sound dull and unexciting - the smoothness stems from a lack of range and poor transient attack, rather than being the result of exceptional refinement and linearity.

A lively forward tonal balance can be fun, disguising any lack of resolution by creating a sound that highlights detail at the expense of naturalness. It's like increasing the contrast on your TV set; the picture looks more vivid because colour differences have been exaggerated. But take it too far and people start to look like they've got a severe drink problem - or are incredibly embarrassed.

There's nothing wrong with pumped up colours - so long as it's understood that that's what's happening. Most of the

things we encounter in modern day living are exaggerated and adulterated - from food and drink to so-called 'News' in the papers. Some people prefer fizzy orange squash to freshly-squeezed orange juice, or processed peas to fresh peas. So what? Isn't it all down to personal taste?

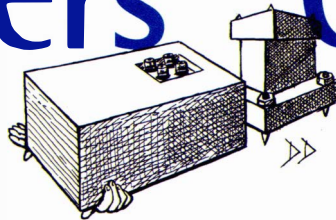
Of course it is. What I'm saying is - understand what's what and choose accordingly. Don't spend extra on the best fresh orange juice, and then whinge because it's not as 'good' as Fanta and has all these nasty horrible bits floating in it! In the same way, avoid hi-fi that's been designed to give the purest most natural sound possible if your taste is for something flashy and loud.

In some ways, the two types of sound described - one natural and unexaggerated, the other brilliant and exciting - would seem to exist at opposite extremes. However, a really outstanding system can encompass both sides of the coin; natural and unexaggerated, plus lively and engaging. The first set of conditions does not exclude the second.

Having excellent transient attack and exceptional fine detail, allied to a natural tonal balance, creates conditions that benefit most kinds of music. The clarity and separation that large choral or orchestral works need is equally beneficial on complex multi-tracked electronic music. After all, hi-fi systems do not recognise music as such - only the demands it makes.

Successful reproduction of music is all about coping with extremes - extremes of loud and soft, high and low, sharp and smooth - especially when these extremes occur at once. A system able to cope with a wide range of extremes is not easily fazed by difficult taxing pieces of music. In my opinion, this ability to handle wide contrasts is crucial to the enjoyment of music. ➤

Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

I think it's time for some updates, to pick up on a few loose threads from previous issues. First there's the Magnum Dyalab MD100 FM tuner which I reviewed in issue 13. In the final paragraph I mentioned that I was hoping to try the next model up the range, the MD102.

This I have done, and it has fully lived up to my

expectations, supplying the extra top end sweetness and delicacy that the '100 couldn't quite manage, but with the same lovely scale and warmth lower down – and that remote control, which has become an increasingly essential part of my 'control freak' lifestyle. It was cheque book time, and while I don't have to pay ►

► full retail price, it still set me thinking about the cost of high quality FM tuners, and whether they still make sense in today's technology-led digital world.

In buying a new and decidedly expensive FM tuner, I'm taking a gamble that the powers that be won't be turning off existing FM radio transmissions in around ten years time. They'd like to, of course, in order to free up valuable spectrum space (FM is very spectrum-inefficient compared to DAB), to rent out at 100 per cent profit to mobile comms companies.

That of course will depend on DAB becoming an effective replacement, not just in terms of transmission coverage but also in terms of receiver take-up in households (and cars). I foresee some potentially tricky problems in both those areas, and think it's very probable that we'll still have our FM until beyond 2015.

Looking backwards in time, a high quality FM tuner has been a very good investment. It must have been the mid-1980s when I bought my Naim NAT01, which I recall then cost around £700. A new one would be more than twice that today, so I could probably get a good chunk of my original stake back on the secondhand market. And since I've no intention of selling it, fifteen years of wonderful radio has only cost me \$50/year thus far – and still could have another twenty to go.

Hi-Fi+ No12 included my review of the big Tannoy TD12 loudspeakers, which I carried out mostly with my regular Naim NACA5 cable. Tannoy's Paul Mills, with some help from LFD's Richard Bewes, has come up with a new Tannoy Reference cable specifically for use with these speakers. (It's pure coincidence that Tannoy has just taken over UK distribution for the van den Hul brand.) Some samples of Reference arrived during the course of the original review, but they were only 4m lengths. However, since my power amp is around 4.2m from the more distant speaker, I couldn't give them a proper listen.

It took a while to get some 6m lengths made up, as these cables are hand-made, but at last a set has turned up, and I've had a chance to try them properly. And I'm very impressed indeed. I can't tell you much about them, because Paul is on holiday as I write, but you actually get five conductors within each, four to make the bi-wire connections, and a fifth to earth the driver chassis to the amplifier. The price hasn't even been fixed yet either, but it's going to cost a lot more than NACA5 for sure, and I guess we're probably talking about at least £1,000 for the pair.

I still like NACA5, because it doesn't cost the earth and delivers righteous dynamic expression and drama, though it certainly does add some of its own character and coloration to the proceedings. Before hooking up both channels with Tannoy's Reference cable,

I did a quick mono comparison between, and the strengths of good ol' NACA5 still shone through, whereas the Tannoy undoubtedly sounded cleaner and sweeter, if a little 'softer'.

It was when I went full stereo with Reference cable that the penny really dropped, as the speakers seemed almost to 'disappear' as acoustic sources, leaving just the soundfield where it should be. The sound might have a little less 'punch', but it showed improved imaging, reduced coloration, and ultimately simply sounded more natural and effortless, with an obvious reduction in 'boxy' effects.

This raises a very interesting general point. One reason I use Naim's NACA5 speaker cable is because it's what the amplifier manufacturer recommends. (Well they would, wouldn't they!) But Naim amps (and Lavardins for that matter) can be fussy, and do need to avoid low inductance/high capacitance cables, as I've discovered, not without trauma, in the past. So there is logic in doing what the amp maker suggests.

Tannoy's new cable, however, makes a strong and coherent case for an alternative view: that the choice of cable should maybe be down to the speaker rather than the amplifier maker. It's certainly obvious that this cable and speaker are very well matched to work symbiotically together and get the best out of the combination. I can think of instances where speaker cables are specified as part of complete systems, but can't recall a major speaker brand ever going to the lengths of developing and sourcing a specific speaker cable before.

There is of course also a third view: that the speaker cable should be left to the speaker cable specialist, and the choice thereof to the dealer or customer. Fine; no problem; go ahead and do your own thing. But I think we can all do with a little help and guidance, in a jungle where many thousands of possible permutations exist.

I don't have much personal experience or expertise in cables, but my longstanding colleague and friend Martin Colloms knows as much or more than anyone about the things. He's another a big fan of the Tannoy TD12, has tried the Reference cable with it too, and is as impressed as I am with the results. He reckoned you'd probably have to spend substantially more to achieve comparable performance from specialist cables that were not specifically 'matched' to the speaker.

I know that Tannoy's 'dedicated' Reference cables have significantly enhanced my enjoyment and appreciation of this fine loudspeaker. And if it gives Tannoy a competitive advantage, then it won't be long before the competition starts following a similar path. Do I detect the beginning of a new trend?



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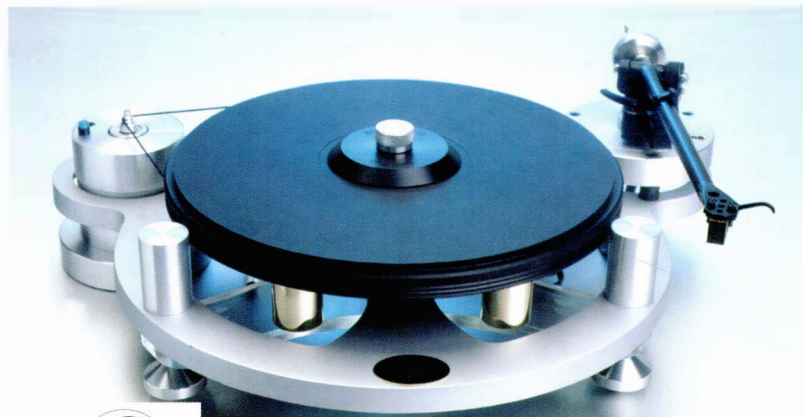
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Dear Sir

At last Hi-Fi+ has addressed the issue of the new digital technologies and the question of DVD-A versus SACD. You clearly explain the difference between DVD-A's 24bit/192kHz PCM recording system and SACD's DSD single-bit recording system, and conclude that DVD-A seems to offer theoretical benefits whilst SACD begins to look like a clever case of smoke and mirrors, but at the same time avoid any definitive judgement.

I find this very confusing. In an interview reported in the October 2000 edition of Hi-Fi News Mark Levinson (a man I have always assumed to have some knowledge and experience of high-end systems) states "... when music is recorded and reproduced in PCM digital ... it has negative effects on people" and goes on to say "DVD is PCM digital. It's old. It's antique. Recording engineers know it, mastering engineers know it, musicians know it, people who hear it know it." Clearly, Hi-Fi+ does not know it! Furthermore, Levinson adds "DSD is the only digital recording system that does not have these effects" and "DSD is probably the only hope of salvation for the music world as we know it." Whilst recognising that judgements about hi-fi systems will always involve a high degree of personal taste and preference, I do have some difficulty in reconciling such conflicting points of view. Your comments on this would be welcome, especially as I believe that a magazine like Hi-Fi+ should be prepared to come off the fence and make every effort to steer the industry in the direction of the highest quality sound reproduction system possible. History tells us that left to the dictates of the marketplace (and the large corporations) we will end up with an unsatisfactory compromise.

Yours sincerely

Ron Kirkpatrick

via e-mail

Mr Levinson is a man of forthright (and interesting) opinions. That's why we are going to interview him (planned to appear in Issue 15). However, just because Mr Levinson believes something doesn't necessarily make it so. In fact, there are no shortage of people who are prepared to expound vociferous views for or against both the new high resolution formats.

Unfortunately, most of them have a direct financial interest one way or the other. The fact is that both the recording industry and the hi-fi industry are split on this issue, to the extent that I could take a straw poll of 'experts' and depending who I chose I could get an answer either way. Just as an example, Bob Stuart at Meridian, Madrigal (who now own the Mark Levinson brand) and Wadia are all firmly behind DVD-A or PCM technology. Their views, I'd suggest, are just as valid as Mr Levinson's, who having dismissed PCM as "old fashioned" has just turned to valves for his first Red Rose amps. Sometimes things, especially statements, are not as simple as they seem. If you read the article again you'll see that it actually says that both DVD-A and SACD are guilty of using smoke and mirrors. It also goes to great lengths to explain (supported by the follow up piece in this Issue) just why it's actually impossible, even undesirable, to make the kind of definitive judgements you are asking for. As the editor of the magazine I'm responsible for its overall policy. A keystone of that policy is to write it how we see and hear it. However, if that means admitting when we don't or can't know, so be it. In that case we'll do our best to explain why so that our readers have the benefit of the same information that we do.

As regards our responsibility to the industry as a whole, we take it very seriously, which is why we're not prepared to reach unsupported (or supportable) conclusions. But we'd be deluding ourselves if we thought that one magazine, even the industry as a whole, can have any serious influence on the outcome of this kind of format war. The decision actually has nothing whatsoever to do with maximising sound quality, and everything to do with the maximising and distribution of profit. Why else would DVD-A risk delays that jeopardise its entire future simply over the question of copy protection? Ed.

Dear Sir,

I find your recent review of the Audio Analogue Maestro integrated to be very strange. Indeed, I have had the opportunity to listen, and subsequently buy the Audio Analogue Maestro, and would like to point out several comments that you made which I find VERY unfair :
"The remote is a small lacquered metal device offering



▶ basic functions of mute, volume and input selection.”
 Small laquered device ? Is that what you call this heavy duty aluminium remote control ? You must have seen a million remote controls on high end audio, can you honestly say that big makers like Krell, Mark Levinson, Spectral etc. make as polished, refined and well designed remote controls?
 “It would also be nice to have some visual indication as to the position of the volume control, as switching sources could sometimes prove a bithazardous with unmatched levels”.
 There is a visual indication. There’s a grey dot indicating the position of the volume, like 75% of the market’s pre-amp/amps do. I don’t understand why you bring this up in this review....
 “One thing to note, the mains connection is not the normal IEC type; instead a 16 amp socket has been used. Fortunately the supplied lead looks to be of good quality.”
 Looks to be of good quality ? Same as the remote, do you know of any manufacturer which includes, free of charge (not an option), a custom made power cord and an aluminium remote control for under £3000? Surely this is a good thing...and yet you do not praise Audio Analogue for this, which I find regrettable. Most other manufacturers charge extra for a crappy remote, and include a stock grade mains power cord.
 I would also have preferred your review to be a bit more professional and precise; the following sentences are far from that.
 “Fortunately the supplied lead looks to be of good quality”
 “Undemeath these lie what looks to be a generous amount of reservoir capacitance”
 Finally, how you could write up a review without even mentioning the AA Maestro with a CD Player is beyond me. Not all audiophiles are vinyl only, including me.
 I was disappointed by your review. It isn’t fair to the product, and I just hope that people will appreciate the effort made by AA to provide fantastic sound quality at an amazing price. They should be encouraged, and not treated as an oddity like your review seems to suggest.

Cheers

Xavier Ehret

via e-mail

Ho hum. I guess you can't please all of the people all of the time. For the record, this was an extremely positive review, but like all our reviews does criticise some aspects of the product, the perfect unit remaining still to be built. As to the specifics: The volume control does feature a grey dot to indicate level – on a silver knob. It's all but invisible from any distance, which given that this is a remote control device is certainly a concern. I find CB's description of the remote to be a model of precise elegance. It gets no more or less attention than anybody else's remote controls. If you want the reviewer to wax lyrical about such a peripheral component then try reading the purple prose

in a few of the other magazines. Personally I don't find it adds to my understanding.

The issue of the mains lead is simple. It's a good thing that it is a good one because it's non-standard. The review clearly states that it is of good quality.

Finally, the musical examples chosen are to demonstrate specific aspects of the unit's performance. Whether they are derived from analogue or vinyl sources is actually irrelevant unless you are making a point about the phono stage itself (which is unusual in a product of this type and price, and thus worthy of specific comment).

I can only repeat that this was an extremely positive review that was at pains to point out the excellent value offered by the Maestro. Perhaps comparison with the Plinius CD.LAD review in this issue (a sub £3000 unit that includes both a heavy-duty remote and a specialist mains lead) might prove the point.

We treated the Maestro in exactly the way we treat all products. Our job is to supply information and an opinion, not dress the product up into something it isn't. The nice thing is how many manufacturers are beginning to appreciate this level headed approach rather than the build 'em up, knock 'em down, five star, "I want to have its babies" style of tabloid hyperbole so popular elsewhere. Reviews should accurately reflect the nature of a product. The review process shouldn't be an exaggerated form of Russian roulette in which you either win or die.

The Audio Analogue Maestro offers exceptional value. It isn't the best amp in the world and it isn't perfect. Ed.

Dear Sir,

I am in the unfortunate position of owning a Manticore Musician tone-arm that's in need of some tender loving care. Manticore are no more, but do you know anybody out there who's in a position to help? Is Doug Hewett himself still about?

I would really appreciate some help to get my arm back on the road.

Thanks and regards

Simon Griffin

via e-mail.

Help is at hand in the shape of Moth Marketing, who as an extension of their work with the Incognito re-wiring kit have become reluctant experts on the insides, bearings and assembly of all kinds of weird and wonderful tonearms. They claim to stand undefeated to date, so this would definitely be my first port of call. You can contact Moth on (44)(0)1234-741152 or via the web at www.britishaudio.co.uk. Unfortunately, I have no idea where you might contact Doug Hewett, so it looks like Moth is the best bet for you or anybody else in a similar situation. Ed.





301 CD PLAYER

Wadia

Running Scared...

the London Novotel Hi-Fi Show, 2001

by Roy Gregory

The September show has become such a permanent part of the UK hi-fi scene that the notion of abandoning it is hard to contemplate. Indeed, three years ago it had grown to such a size that it overflowed the Penta/Ramada/Renaissance and took up the entire conferencing facilities of the Excelsior Hotel across the road as well. I don't have the show guide for that year to hand, but exhibitors must have numbered somewhere well in excess of 300. Who can forget Tag/Maclaren's massive launch stand complete with Formula 1 car and driver.

Three shows and an enforced change of venue later, the 2001 event managed around 80 exhibitors! Yet this catastrophic decline has been met with such blithe indifference by organisers Hi-Fi News that one's forced to conclude that had they been passengers on the Titanic then they'd have been busy filling out their breakfast orders rather than heading for the lifeboats. With large rooms at a premium and faced with trying to make a decent sound in the dreadful Novotel bedrooms exhibitors have voted with their feet and stayed away in droves (and so did the public). To make matters worse, it was exactly the small companies to whom sound quality is most important that were the first to jump ship. In another example of exactly why magazines shouldn't organise hi-fi shows, HFN responded by putting up prices in an effort to protect the income from their cash cow. This destructive spiral was allowed to continue and accelerate to the point where this year visitors were charged £8 for entry and even the exhibitors

were expected to shell out another £1 for the A5 pamphlet that passed for a show guide. All for the skeletal remains of a show that has dwindled to a shadow of its former self. Whichever way you look at it Novotel 2001 was an unmitigated disaster, poor judgement on the part of the organisers having finally reduced it to an also ran, trailing in the wake of the better organised and still growing Bristol Show. Whilst this has actually only confirmed what most of us have realised for a while, to have it so graphically illustrated still comes as a shock. And it's not just exhibitors who are disgruntled. Many visitors that I spoke to doubted whether they'd bother to make the trip next year.

The most graphic examples of the situation come from opposite ends of the industry scale. On the one hand, international giant B&W, faced with launching their new bread and butter 600 Series 3 products (as well as a first public appearance for the new Nautilus 800 flagship on home territory) opted to hold an industry only evening

event at the nearby Riverside Studio (www.bwspeakers.com). On the other, Mark Levinson's Red Rose, a company that has set out its stall to demonstrate that you don't need to spend huge budgets for genuinely high-end sound relied on a static display. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not criticising Red Rose importer Musical Design Company. On the contrary, I can understand exactly why they took this decision. Given the chances of actually making their point in the horrendous acoustic environment of a Novotel bedroom I'd have gone for a static display too! However, in the process they also denied us all the opportunity to experience the superb and superbly conceived Wadia products, including the new 301 CD player, the first in a new and more affordable range of machines set to include DVD replay, surround sound decoding and amplifiers. Considering the purpose of the show this is a fairly damning indictment of the venue. (www.mdc-hifi.co.uk) ▶



I am penning this after returning from Hammersmith where I have been spending a day at the Novotel hotel attending what should be, indeed used to be, the premiere event of the year for the British Hi-Fi industry and the public that buy their products. I made a big mistake leading up to this years London show: I started to look forward to it. A chance to see old friends and listen to some unusual kit that doesn't usually make it to the usually smaller (but better formed) Bristol event? Well that should be fun.

Well, after the experience all I can say is that if this really is the premiere event for the industry then could the last one out turn off the lights? I'm not saying it was bad: It was a lot worse than that, and without a shadow of a doubt the most disappointing show I've ever attended. Now I suspect that the organisers (HiFi News) will blame the woeful turn out of both manufacturers (down to just 85 or so from over 130 last year!) and punters on the tragic events in the States. Well that must mean that the Hi-Fi industry and its consumers are more

caring than most because it was standing room only on my train out of Victoria station and the tube was just as busy as usual for a Saturday. So is the poor industry turnout my only gripe? No, because the general sound quality was pretty dire too. Some of those companies that did exhibit were making reasonable sounds (more on these later) which was a pleasant change, but they were the exception, and few of the exhibitors felt they could do justice to their products. If that is the case what is the point of them or us going? Well Arcam, Meridian and B&W to name three major brands in the UK firmament obviously asked themselves the same question and decided that it just wasn't worth it. Is this really the best we can do?

Ever cloud has a silver lining, and at least the reduced public attendance meant that you could actually walk down the claustrophobic corridors and get in and out of the rooms. Even the bar was quieter! But that aside, here are the rooms that did catch my ear



Naim Audio were demonstrating the new Allae (pronounced Ally, according to Mr Stephenson). They were good enough to show how good the CDS2, 52 and 500 are and this was one of the best sounds Naim have achieved for a few years. Perhaps the Allaes weren't upsetting the room as much as the bigger NBLs they used last year. Naim are also attempting to become the Ikea of the UK scene (More like The Conran Shop! Ed) with an AV table and CD racks in the Fraim style. On static display was the multi room amp and the new AV processor which featured, horror of horrors, phono sockets!

Path Premieres AV show, including free popcorn for all, was as awesome as ever with Mark Levinson 400 series amplification and a Revel speaker system. It managing to sound truly impressive and natural on both movies and music and these dems are fast coming to



▶ In an industry that seems incapable of putting its own house in order, the announcement of a parallel event next year, back at the airport, was greeted with relief. With attendance at Novotel further blighted by the events in New York and Washington (which occurred on the Tuesday before the show), the existing contract expired and no new venue announced, it's questionable whether the HFN event will even be

viable next year. Perhaps the best thing that can be said about the 2001 show is that what ever happens we won't be back at Novotel next year. A sad epitaph for what was once the high-point of the UK's hi-fi year. And if you are wondering why we didn't have a stand or anywhere for you to buy back copies and the like, it was because our publication was banned by Hi-Fi News. For more on that subject, see the

editorial on page one.

Obviously, with such a parlous turnout exciting new products were a bit few and far between. Worst kept secret of the year has to be Naim's entry into the multi-channel market with a svelte surround sound processor in a 5 Series case, and a six channel amp in a NAP250 box, both to be available by the end of the year. Neither was playing (a bit of a ▶

occupy the position and status that Absolute Sounds used to enjoy back in the halcyon days at Penta. A good thing too, as it's absolutely essential that there's at least one room at a show that can take the public and blow their socks off, both metaphorically and physically in this case.

Synthesis were showing how pretty valve amps can look while Lamm were showing how menacing (obviously styled by Satre in a bad mood). Both these products were sounding good in very different ways and through very different systems, although both were musically satisfying. Creek and Epos were blasting out the goods with some systems that were simply cracking value, while Audiocraft were showing that Lavardin amps are indeed something to look out for with a sound that was crystal clear and very fast through Amphion loudspeakers. This system had the elusive X factor which kept you listening to track after track, especially as they were only to happy to play whatever I offered up from the discs I was carrying. Now there's a nice change and one that speaks volumes about their confidence in the system.

Vinyl was in evidence in quite a few rooms and those distributors of all things analogue Henley designs were showing the new Project RPM9. Fresh from the factory they weren't sure what it was going to sound like. Well by the end of Saturday it was doing the business through Roksan electronics including a new phono stage in a full width box. The turntable makes use of an off-board motor to drive a thick acrylic platter which is supported on an inverted bearing. The chassis of the table is a thick, teardrop shaped piece of painted MDF, the full assembly looking very classy indeed. The modified arm coupled the familiar bearing



cradle to a carbon fibre arm tube and the turntable and arm package will cost just £1000. Further evidence if any were needed that vinyl is fast becoming the value for money medium.

It seemed like Neat were trying to be more Naim than Naim, with a stack of black boxes driving the Vito speakers and a super fast, edge of your seat sound. The system seemed to be material dependant but I am sure that was due to the crappy room. They also had the huge Ultimatum speakers at the show, which look mighty impressive but would doubtless cause even more sonic problems.

One very good moment was finally listening to some music that I know well and enjoy on the Spectral amplifiers. Boy are they musical. I was very impressed with the way they managed to

mix the hi-fi attributes of big American kit with the rhythmic integrity of my preferred brands. Good stuff and well worth seeking out.

The above selection weren't the only decent sounds; Sugden, Exposure, Audiofreaks, Leema and Audio Reference were also making the most of the poor acoustics, but that doesn't bode well for the future of the industry or the show. I have to say that, professional commitments aside, as a member of the public and a punter myself, I'll not be bothering next year. Unfortunately, what should be the year's highlight has instead become a depressing and expensive low-point. Roll on Bristol!

Jason Hector



► theme at this show), but the static examples showed the company's normal neat construction and attention to detail. The die-hard Naim owners might have been shaking their heads and muttering "sell-out" under their breaths, but that simply serves to high-light how difficult the traditional hi-fi companies (and their customers) are finding it to come to terms with the whole multi-channel movement.

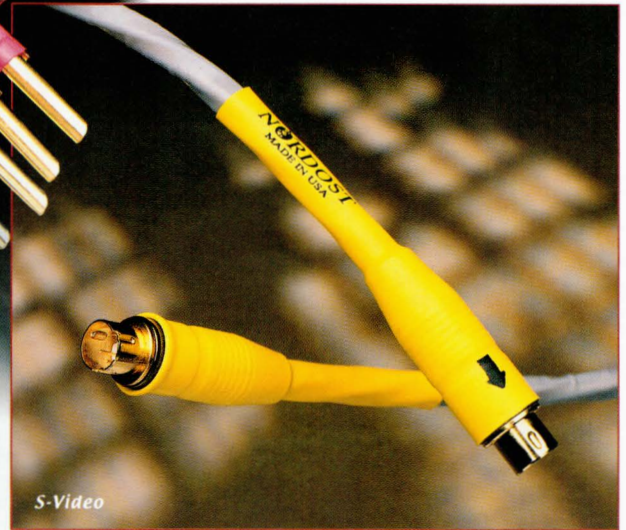
Shades of CD all over again? Possibly, except that even the staunchest critics of the technology understand that it's commercial suicide to get caught fence sitting this time round. On more traditional ground, Naim once again showed how to get the most out of expensive extrusion tooling by showing CD storage racks and a TV sized table, all based on their Fram design. (www.naim-audio.com)

The Bit-wars seem to have settled down to an uneasy stalemate, the two sides seemingly having realised that it's the software question (and those who produce it) which is going to decide which if either of the high-resolution digital formats ultimately succeeds. Sony got on with establishing their new multi-channel models, complete with a six channel surround set-up conforming to the most likely ►

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► surround standard once all parties get around to agreeing that particular little detail. With five equidistant speakers arranged like the spokes on an alloy wheel (as described in Issue 13, page 25) this inadvertently demonstrated



both the system's potential and its complete domestic unacceptability. There is no way this is going to fly in the home environment, which probably means that we start looking at delay lines and all kinds of sonically detrimental solutions. Multi-channel is still a long, long way from being a commercial reality, regardless of what the marketing men and "music is just home cinema's poor relation" brigade might think or say. In fact, from the consumer's point of view, the most significant event was Pioneer's confirmation of their multi-standard DVD-A/SACD machine, with a target price of around £1200 and availability planned for December (just don't set your heart on one for Christmas, as every other launch date in the DVD-A calendar has somehow managed to slip).

Biggest surprise had to be the KEF room. No sooner was I remarking how low key the Maidstone companies' profile had become in the UK than they appear at the show with complete revamps of their entire range. Alongside the radically updated styling and cabinetwork was some seriously aggressive pricing, signalling a major assault on the marketplace. If the

separate chamber construction and curved cabinetry of the new Reference series seems reminiscent of the B&W Nautilus range then KEF were quick to point out their historical interest in the approach, dating back to the original 105. And don't assume that what seems like a separate tweeter nodule atop the midrange egg signals abandonment of the Uni-Q arrangement. It actually contains a super tweeter extending bandwidth beyond 50kHz. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the styling argument, these are very different designs from the Nautilus range and employ completely different technology. How good they are remains to be seen, but initial impressions were extremely promising. (www.kef.com)



The rejuvenated Sugden continued to impress with the announcement of the new Masterclass Integrated amp. Despite a relatively modest 34 Watt Class A output it is reputedly happier with lower impedance loads than previous integrated models from the Yorkshire company. However, their



most interesting news arrived in the shape of an as yet unnamed Tuner housed in casework to match the Bijou series. Pressed for a price the best they could offer was "around £850" and whilst details were thin on the ground, given Sugden's reputation for mastering the airwaves this is one to watch out for. (www.audiosynergy.co.uk)

Under a Works In Progress sub-heading came a host of on-going projects creeping nearer to completion. First up was the physically impressive Mark Levinson No 40 Media Console. This substantial two chassis unit totally separates audio and video signals as well as providing a bewildering range of decoding and control options. The large casework and card-cage construction allow space for future upgrades and the socketry they might demand, protecting the owner's investment against future developments in this fast moving field. The demonstration served to prove how effectively the Madrigal designers have managed to protect two-channel performance, whilst also managing

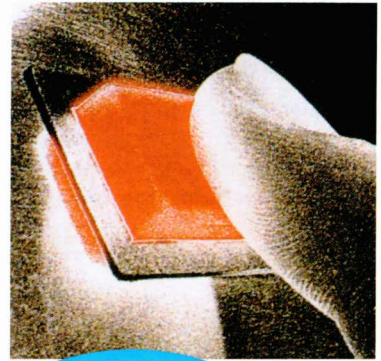


to hint at the potential waiting to be unleashed once recording engineers get to grips with multi-channel techniques (and the decoding silicon improves).

Also on show was the new No 390S CD player, an upgrade on the existing No 39, Levinson's entry level machine and one that stays in the range. ►

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► Featuring a new fully balanced circuit in both the digital and analogue domains, the latter is built on an Arlon circuit board in a spin-off of the technology developed in the No 32 Reference pre-amp. Decoding includes “up-sampling” to 24bit/352kHz although Madrigal eschew that nomenclature, whilst the analogue output can be controlled in 0.1dB steps once you engage the optional volume control. Having enjoyed this circuitry in a number of Levinson products I can vouch for just how audible such seemingly innocuous volume changes are. Existing No 39s can be upgraded for around £1295, a new front panel with the correct numbering being a £495 option if money’s no object.

Lurking on static display was the new Revel Performa F50 floorstanding loudspeaker. A three-way design with a far slimmer and more compact

cabinet than existing Revel designs, the F50 uses a fascinating new composite ceramic/fibre-glass cone material for the midrange and multiple bass drivers. Given that ceramic is fast becoming the hot new material in speaker design I’m looking forward to hearing what these can do at home, especially as their smaller cabinets are going to be easier to

accommodate than Revel’s existing floorstanders in the UK’s smaller listening rooms. (www.madrigal.com)

The interesting Chapter Audio amplifier was present for the second year. The product of one of those cleavings that seem to characterise the hi-fi industry, this is a compact high-powered switched-mode design that bears no similarity at all to the

established Chord electronics. Regardless of the internals the styling is definitely more subtle while the sound seems refreshingly fluid. Once again, time will tell. (www.chapteraudio.com)

Tim de Paravicini launched his first ever solid-state designs under the EAR/Yoshino banner. The 312 pre-amp is partnered by the massive M100A mono-blocks, single-ended pure class A designs. Superb construction and imposing appearance is matched by equally impressive price tags - £10000 for the pre and £20000 a pair for the power amps. Sound through the excellent little Amphion Argon loudspeakers was impressively lucid and transparent, although I’m sure that prospective purchasers will expect an extended home audition. (www.ear-yoshino.com)

Talking of the Amphions, they will now be available in the UK through Lavardin/Rogue Audio distributor Audiocraft. Beautifully finished and presented, and attractively priced to boot, there is enough different and interesting thinking in these speakers for them to carve themselves a niche. Most interesting of all has to be the top of the range Xenon with its novel hyper-cardioid midrange dispersion and 28Hz to 20kHz bandwidth, all in an extremely elegant, slimline floor-stander costing £1990 and £2350 depending on finish. (www.amphion.fi)

Wilson-Benesch showed a cut down development of their flagship Bishop loudspeaker. Dubbed the Bishop 2, the outwardly similar head unit features a downward facing ABR, while the bass tower utilises a pair of the Tactic isobaric bass units. At £14000 it also represents a significant saving in terms of space and cash. Joined by the small Arc stand mounted two-way

(£2400 a pair including stands) and the Centre at £1650, all using a one-piece shaped carbon-fibre enclosure, they clearly move W-B into the multi-channel arena.

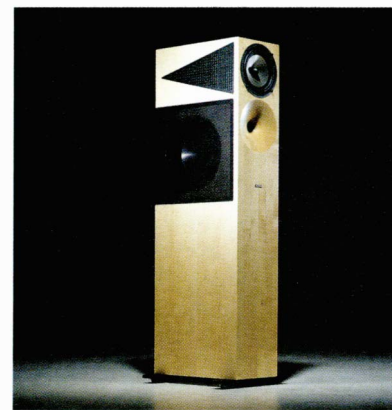
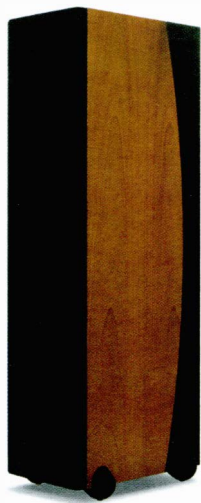
One new name to me was Usher from Taiwan. They showed an impressive range of serious speaker models, if rather

derivative, with strong shades of Hales, Thiel and J.M.Labs in evidence, not to mention a touch of Sonus Faber. Pricing was genuinely impressive, and even assuming that those prices are likely to rise if they achieve distribution, this is a

product line that could seriously upset a few applecarts. Time will tell whether they sound as good as they look, but initial impressions were certainly promising. Oh and they produce seriously over the top solid state amps too.

(E-mail. usher@ms11.hinet.net)

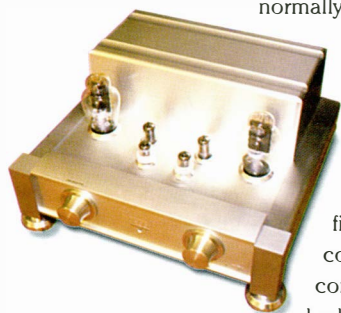
Meanwhile, old favourites PMC showed a 3x250 Watt amp from Bryston, the 6B costing c£3500, and a new and very cute sub employing twin drivers and the active amplification module from the AML1. Set to cost around £1100, this is one sub-woofer which will definitely avoid the classic Achilles heal of a cheap, off the



▶ shelf amplification module. Its slim footprint also promises to make it easier to position, so watch out for this one.

Eminent Audio were showing both Croft and Loth X products, including the large Lowther lookalike horns. However, the most attractive item on show was a beautifully finished Loth J1300 amp. A single ended 300B integrated design it showed all the craftsmanship and engineering excellence that you

normally



only see in high-end Japanese magazines. In the flesh, its beautifully finished yet compact contours looked worth

every penny of the £10K asking price, but unfortunately this was yet another desirable item on static display.

Analogue announcements were few and far between, but there were one or two items of note. Loricraft showed a full suite of the eclectic Schroeder arms, ranging from £1000 to £4000 for the Reference model. Hanging from a thread, superficial similarities to the Well Tempered designs are misleading. The Reference uses a single thread "bearing", and like all the Schroeder arms, is magnetically damped. There's also silicon damping to inhibit lateral rocking, while the tonearm itself is available in a variety of different materials, mainly woods, so that effective mass can be optimised for your cartridge.



Lyra announced a special version of the Helikon optimised for high-gain, low noise, active m/c stages, and aimed in part at Naim users amongst others. At 0.22mV output is much lower than the standard model and the contrast between that and the new SL option should prove interesting. Meanwhile, re-issue label Speakers Corner announced a new series of Westminster releases as well as a five record Ella Fitzgerald Gershwin Songbook, complete with hardback booklet.

Project showed the new RPM9 turntable, a skeletal design that at first glance might be taken for a Clearaudio clone. Not so, although the teardrop chassis and separate motor housing carry clear echoes of similar solidly coupled designs. The RPM uses a substantial acrylic platter, inverted bearing and massive record weight. The chassis sits on three adjustable feet. Nothing new there then, except that the feet include a compliant coupling similar to but rather floppier than the Sorbothane blobs on the VPI HW19jr. The motor housing sits



on its own weighted base, providing additional de-coupling. The tonearm is a progressive development of Project's familiar design, but now featuring a tapered carbon-fibre arm tube. The unit shown had a bonded alloy headshell but final versions are planned with a one-piece carbon-fibre assembly. At a combined price of £1000 for the arm and table this looks like another bargain from Project, and it will be interesting to see how it compares with their three-point suspended designs.

Audio reference continued their

one company assault on the world's agencies with two more electronics brands added to their already extensive portfolio. This time it's the unusual and stylish Aloia amps from Italy along with the highly rated Gamut designs from Denmark. Then of course, there was nearly £30000 of Halcro mono-blocks, wedged into a hotel bedroom with the



Acapella speakers, Clearaudio Master Reference record player and the CAT pre-amp. If anything really underlined the ridiculous nature of this show then this was it. (www.audioreference.co.uk)

Meanwhile Absolute Sounds have re-started low-key demonstrations, which is a welcome development indeed. Amidst new electronics from Theta, including the Dreadnought amplifiers, and speakers from Krell and Martin Logan, the stand-out demonstration was in the Wilson room where the new £11000 three-way floor-standing Sophia set new standards of appearance for a Wilson product along with enviable sound driven by the biggest Audio Research amps. This could be the breakthrough product for Wilson, with looks and size to suit any home, sound to satisfy the die-hard audiophile and a price-tag which looks almost like a bargain against the companies' other products. But the really impressive bit was the £10000 worth of seriously ugly sub-woofer. Okay, so it might undo the good work done on the aesthetic front by the Sophia but this is one sub whose breathtaking performance will satisfy the most demanding listener. ▶

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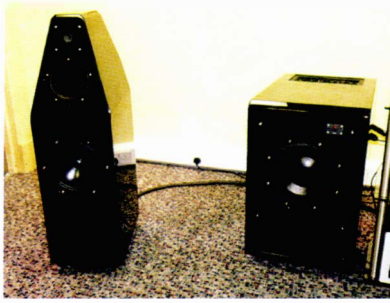


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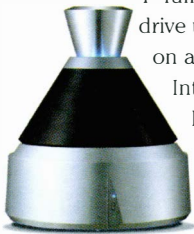
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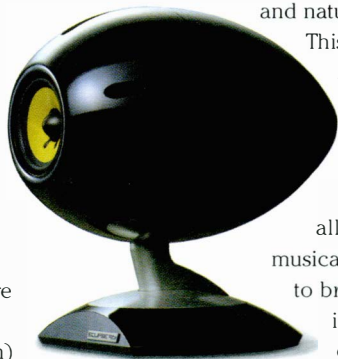
No show would be complete without at least one Japanese product which seemingly sets out to challenge all our pre-conceptions and assumptions, and this year, following in the footsteps of Final Music and 47Labs, Fujitsu Ten launched their Eclipse TD speaker system. Designed for near field monitoring, each egg shaped enclosure contains a single



4" full-range carbon fibre drive unit, and is mounted on a short integral stand.

Internally, the driver is heavily mass loaded and de-coupled from the enclosure. The £2600 price includes an

incredibly stylish, single input, conical 30W amplifier whose volume control sits on top. Even in a pre-fabricated "sound booth" the sound was impressively clean, open and dimensional, with impressive extension and weight at the bottom end for such a tiny driver/enclosure combination. (www.eclipse-td.com)



Which brings us, finally, to both the best sound and the most impressive new product at the show. Audiofreaks maintained their record for sonic excellence, surpassing previous efforts with the considerable help of the Karan KAS 450 power amp. Designed and built in

Yugoslavia, this superbly constructed and finished product wouldn't be out of place in any leading manufacturer's portfolio. Styling is different enough to stand out without crossing any boundaries. The amplifier itself uses bi-polar output devices in a fully balanced DC coupled topology and claims pure class A operation, although the temperature of the heatsinks and 450 W/ch output suggest otherwise. Hooked up to the

Avalon Acoustics Eclipse Classics and driven from the conrad-johnson Premier 18LS (another World first sighting as well as the first ever all solid-state Premier product) the sound was wonderfully lucid and transparent in the style of small amps, yet with effortless authority and tremendous tonal colour. Solo piano was particularly impressive with an incredibly realistic combination of weight, sonority, attack and natural speed.

This system never sounded hurried or congested, slow or over controlled, allowing the musical performance to breath convincingly and expressively.



Whilst that also reflects the quality of the Kuzma/Tri-Planar VI A/Benz-Micro and Metronome/Muse front ends, there was a wonderfully relaxed yet involving quality that only comes

from a really well driven speaker.

If £13000 is a little on the rich side for you, then the equally impressive looking Karan

KA-I 180 integrated amp promises great things at around £4000, and there's also a DAC and a two box pre-amp in the range. Given the combination of build quality and performance, I'd predict that this is one brand that will successfully challenge the established American products that currently dominate this marketplace. (www.audiofreaks.co.uk)



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SACD, DVD-A, sound quality and the state of play

by Roy Gregory

How much do you actually know about the new high-resolution formats? If you've been following the press then the answer is probably quite a bit, at least in terms of information. The problem is that it might not actually add up to a lot of knowledge. In fact, think about digital systems in general and you have an almost perfect metaphor for the confusion over the new formats. After all, how many CD players have you heard which manage to produce a welter of information without actually making any kind of musical sense at all? Unfortunately not only is the value of what we're told difficult to judge, but more often than not, we're not even asking the right questions.

As soon as we start thinking in terms of "Format War" we think in terms of A against B and a head to head confrontation. Is this one better than that one: which one will win? Which is our first big mistake. History tells us that it's far from certain that the "better" system will also be the "winner". Just think Beta and VHS. In fact, the whole question of "better" is far more complex than it might at first seem, with issues of ultimate market presence and industry support just as crucial as performance. In other words, it's no good having something that performs brilliantly if it isn't possible to manufacture it reliably or if it won't attract software support. In fact, in this instance it's not even possible to make that most basic of judgements, which one does sound best. Nor is it actually particularly relevant. Which might sound like heresy but let me explain.

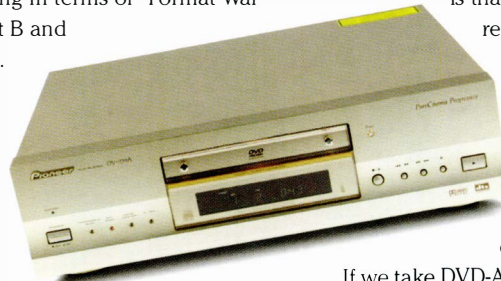
Any test of a prospective new format must explore all aspects of that format. If it's just a new storage format such as Mini-Disc, then existing master recordings can be used. That's not the case with the new high-resolution formats where the whole promise of their superior sonic performance rests with the recording itself. That makes complete knowledge of the history of a given recording central to

its validity in any assessment or comparative process. Which in turn means that we are comparing recording processes as much as replay hardware. Now factor in that the software companies are divided just as diametrically as the hardware manufacturers that produce the system and we have a situation in which we are going to find it virtually impossible to compare the same recording on both formats. What's more, until the technology gains some measure of acceptance in the recording industry most of the releases in the new formats will be derived from existing masters, which in the case of digital recordings are encoded at an inherently lower resolution anyway (16bit/44.1kHz). The ironic thing

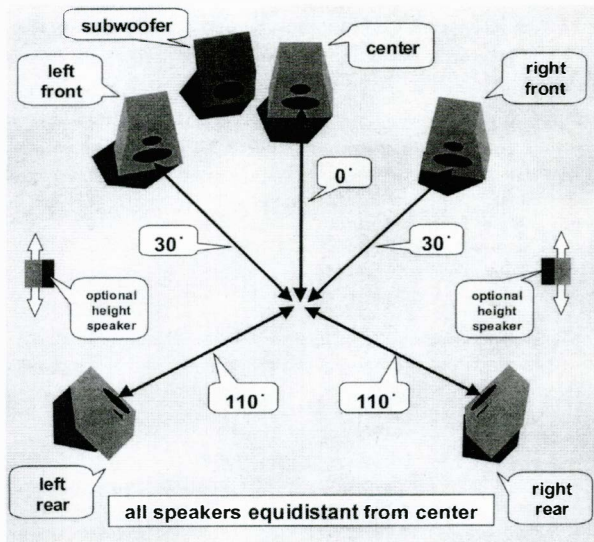
is that until we do get a steady flow of original recordings, our best chance of assessing the absolute quality of the new formats rests with re-encoding old analogue tapes! The water gets muddier still once we stop to consider the plastic nature of the new formats, both of which simply offer storage space on a disc which can be configured in any of a number of ways.

If we take DVD-A as an example, it will support a whole variety of encoding options. At one end of the spectrum you could load it with hours and hours of 44.1kHz/16bit stereo, at the other it will support just over one hour of 192kHz/24bit stereo, with options on anything in between including compressed and uncompressed multi-channel in a whole array of different configurations. In fact, depending on space considerations an engineer can even mix and match high-resolution front channels with lower resolution or compressed rear and effects channels. All of which makes comparison between the two different technologies even more complicated because it becomes increasingly difficult to know exactly what you are listening too, especially as experience shows that it's foolhardy to trust the information supplied on record sleeves.

Add to that the fact that there is as yet no agreed standard for the configuration of multi-channel music replay systems, with all kinds of options being bandied about and the whole situation becomes akin to wading



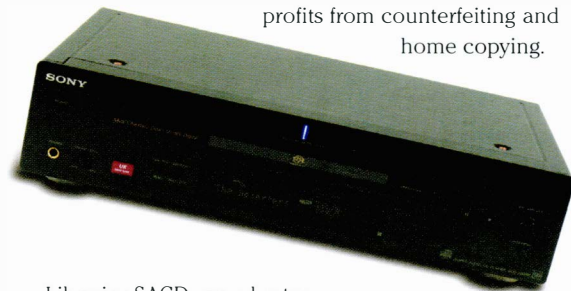
► through porridge. Returning to the question of practicality and existing in the real world of listener's homes let's take a look at Sony's proposal. This involves using five identical speakers set equidistant from a central listening seat. The front array consists of a central speaker with left and right 30 degrees to either side of it. The rear channels are positioned at the 120 degree point, just over the listener's shoulders. A quick glance at the diagram will show just how wide this rear spacing is. It will also give you some idea of the domestic impact of such an arrangement. Now consider that it is incompatible with 5.1 and THX thus requiring either extra speakers or a complete separate system for home movies and you begin to realise how completely unrealistic (not to mention costly) this proposition really is. Somewhere along the line we'll settle down to an agreed standard, but until we do it's just another variable queering the pitch.



Likewise, until multi-channel standards are adopted I can't see too many audiophiles establishing multi-channel systems. That means that stereo is going to remain the pre-eminent source of serious music for the immediate future (I don't even want to think about multi-channel re-mixes of stereo masters). However, despite that the software companies are going to be looking ahead and encoding everything they can in some form of multi-channel, which in turn means that the 96kHz/24bit standard takes on a new significance. Not only is it the highest resolution signal that can be got off of the disc in six discrete channels, it's also the de facto default position should both DVD-A and SACD fall by the wayside. Why? Because it exists as a high quality two-channel option enshrined in the DVD-V format, which is why JMH is looking at Chord Electronics 96kHz/24bit capable DAC in the companion review to this piece.

The final nail in the coffin is the speed of technological

advance. So rapidly do technologies develop in this day and age that the chances are that you'll simply get the best results from the latest generation iteration of each format, turn and turn about. Add to that the fact that SACD has a year's head start and you begin to realise that not only are the two competitors not actually in the same race, they're not even running the same course. The DVD-A working group contains software manufacturers such as Warners. On the face of it that should be an advantage, guaranteeing a flow of software titles, except that the music industry's concerns over copy-writing and their full pound of flesh have led to seemingly endless wrangles over copy protection and water-marking. Disputes that have caused further regrettable delays to the launch of DVD-A (delays which could yet prove fatal). And that's before we stop to consider the sonic effect of such processes on a format whose whole *raison d'être* is sound quality. Just the suspicion that the effects are audible could be enough to curse the format as far as the audiophile community is concerned. Sony in contrast, as owners of Sony Music, have simply pushed ahead with unprotected releases via the neat expedient of omitting any form of digital output from their players. If they can carry it off then the chances are that the rest of the recording industry will fall into line, more afraid of lost profits through missing the boat than the lost profits from counterfeiting and home copying.



Likewise SACD encodes two channel and six channel information separately whereas DVD-A relies on an internal fold-down performed by the machine playing the disc, a factor which further underlines the influence of the replay hardware in any comparison.

It gets murkier still if you consider that SACD is itself derived from DSD, an encoding process that has been in widespread use within the recording industry for several years. Not only does this mean that engineers and producers have greater familiarity with SACD and its antecedents, but that they'll almost certainly be further along the learning curve towards extracting the technology's potential. In other words, in the majority of cases, give the same engineer the same performance to record and he'll produce better results on SACD than DVD-A. Obviously this conclusion isn't universal and will depend on the specific experience of the engineer involved, but don't underestimate how much work Sony and Philips have put into the pro market. In this respect at ►

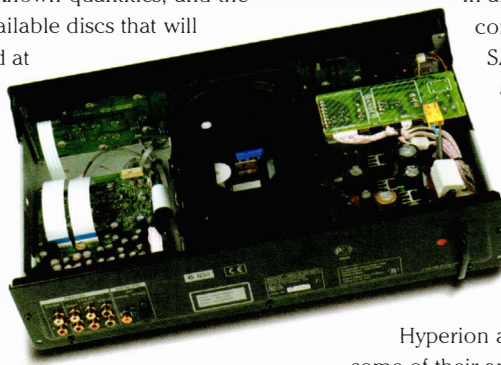
▶ least they have displayed superior strategy to DVD-As protagonists, recognising that it's the recording industry that is ultimately going to decide the outcome of this particular contest.

Faced with a situation in which listening to the two formats involves trying to unravel questions of; the quality of the players themselves; the recordings and the engineers who made them; as well as the precise nature of the recordings being used, meaningful comparisons between the two competing formats become impossible. You simply can't eradicate the variables. (See the first article in this series, published in Issue 13, for a more detailed discussion of these issues.)

Why then am I sitting down to compare SACD and DVD-V? Because there are questions that are relevant and to which we can provide meaningful answers. Namely, how does the current generation of high-resolution players compare to the existing digital maturity represented by CD, and what general conclusions can we draw as to the essential character of the two formats. The latter is fraught with all the problems I've described, yet, as we shall see there are consistent artefacts associated with the two different technologies. Whether these will be eradicated with further development is a moot point as you first have to identify them before you can eliminate them. Whether they are inherent to the technology, the hardware or some unrecognised aspect of the recording process, they exist and thus bear examination.

Listening In

The first and most debilitating problem facing any such project is the absence of decent, useable software. New recordings are of course unknown quantities, and the number of commercially available discs that will play in both a CD player and at high resolution is small indeed. Of course the disc or recording that will play in all three simply doesn't exist. Software wise we can divide the listening into two separate sections: recordings that only exist in high-resolution formats, and transcribed recordings that are available both as original CDs and as DVD-As or SACDs. Finally, in the case of SACD, there are a small number of hybrid discs that will play in both SACD and CD machines.



By way of control I employed the Tom Evans Audio Design Eikos CD player, a fair representation of CD's state of advance. The machines were played through Klyne and Plinius line stages and Monarchy Audio SM70, Plinius SA100 and Jadis JA30 amps. Speakers were the Living Voice Avatar OBX and Audioplan Kontrast IIIs. Considerable care was taken to avoid interaction between the various machines, with Audioplan mains leads and isolation transformers used at all times.



Finally, I ought to reiterate what should be self-evident. The nature of this test is investigative, aiming at establishing some guidelines and a state of play. Readers expecting a "best

of test" type conclusion or a definitive answer are going to be disappointed. Still, I'd rather disappoint than pretend to know something I don't. Hopefully, the preceding pages will explain why anybody else who claims such knowledge is either a liar or deluding them self. Just make sure they don't delude you too.

Part 1 - SACD and CD

In almost all respects this is the easiest comparison to make. Not only will the Hybrid SACD discs actually replay the same recording at both SACD and CD resolution, they'll do it in the same machine, or alternatively at CD resolution in another player. Thus the same disc represents all the options. It's also helped by the fact that there's a far wider range of SACD releases out there, including a greater number of original recordings from labels such as

Hyperion and Fone, whilst Opus 3 have re-encoded some of their analogue tapes.

The player used for the listening was a Sony SCD-XB770, one of the latest generation multi-channel machines and one that you'd expect to pay around £400 for. Naturally, at this point in the process all listening was done in Stereo. ▶

► First order of business was to assess the XB770's CD performance against the Eikos control. I have to admit that I was pleasantly surprised by the big, robust and energetic presentation of the Sony player. It didn't have the resolution, dynamic discrimination or temporal subtlety of the Eikos, but it got things pretty much in the right place and was certainly engaging to listen too. The wonderful Hyperion disc of *French Piano Trios* (SACD 671140 1), a Tony Faulkner tour de force, displayed admirable instrumental warmth and solidity, with a reasonable sense of the music's shape and flow. The Eikos of course offered better separation, more natural colours and a far greater sense of the delicate inner detail that brings a recording like this to life. There was far more sense of the players' bowing, pianist Susan Tomes varying the weight of her notes, of the communication between the players. That ranks the XB770 as a good but not spectacular performer in terms of CD replay, in absolute terms. At its price it's impressive. Its sins are confined to a general murkiness and lack of resolution and subtlety with the implications that those faults hold for music in general. It was the shortfall in low level information that proved most troublesome, which is of course exactly where you'd expect SACD replay to score.

Comparing the Hyperion disc replayed as both a CD and an SACD on the XB770 proved instructive. SACD replay added a welcome degree of focus and detail to the instruments but at the same time, whilst it was clearly better than the CD version of events, the sound also had a creamy, homogenous smoothness which robbed notes of leading edge definition and bite. The warmth and weight was still apparent, but now with a sheen laid across it, rendering it dynamically soft focus. And if this was apparent on the classical *Trios*, it was even more obvious on the Eric Bibb disc *Spirit and the Blues* (Opus 3 CD19411). In practice the Eikos playing the same disc's CD layer was far and away the most musical option.

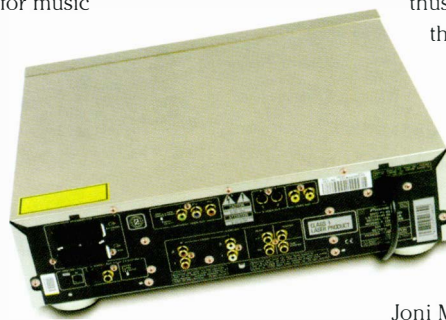
But just to highlight the difficulties of trying to reach any general conclusion, the Fone *Four Seasons* (Fone 005SACD) was far more successful, the SACD replay getting far closer to the standard offered by the Eikos, and significantly superior to the CD layer played back on the Sony. Now, whether this is down to the great clarity, even slightly astringent nature of the Fone original instruments recordings being better able to accommodate these replay artefacts than the warmer Hyperion and Opus 3 recordings is open to conjecture. But in this instance at least, the SACD recording performed extremely impressively, especially when you consider the price of the player being used. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to back up the time I spent with the

machines and recordings at home with a session with Max Townshend, who was keen to demonstrate the considerable benefits of his new super tweeter. Being Max, nothing is ever quite as it seems and he also wanted to show me some work in progress: a couple of highly modified SACD and DVD-A machines. Replaying the *French Piano Trios* in this context demonstrated conclusively the superiority of the SACD layer over the standard CD, and was also devoid of the smoothing that marred the sound of the XB770. In fact, the SACD replay from the modified machine was exceptionally tactile and fluid, with excellent transparency and focus. And just for the record, the super tweeters were pretty impressive too.

Part 2 - DVD-A and CD

In the context of this listening DVD-A finds itself at a disadvantage in terms of the available recordings. Most are derived from older originals and thus won't necessarily demonstrate the full potential of the system.

However, on the plus side, the player used was a DV-939A, a really substantial offering whose appearance and slick engineering go a long way to justifying its £1200 price tag. Given the limited options available I settled on the



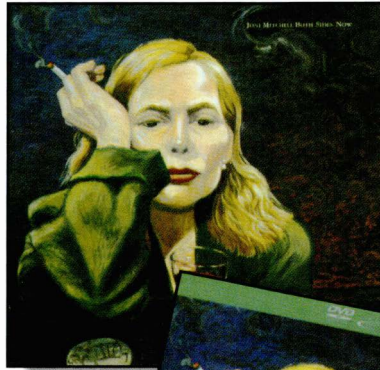
Joni Mitchell album *Both Sides Now*

(Warner 47620-9).

Using the track 'Stormy Weather' the difference between the CD (actually an HDCD) and the DVD-A (a 24/96 multi-channel fold down) both played on the Pioneer, was far from subtle. The DVD-A offered serious benefits in terms of resolution, separation, soundstage depth and overall presence. The CD sounded crude and clumsy in comparison, with bass being particularly heavy and lacking in texture. However, there were also major differences in presentation, with the balance of the DVD-A being far closer to mid hall, the orchestra being set well back in a cavernous acoustic. Whether this is a function of the fold-down I don't know, but overall I have to say that I preferred the original balance rather than the distant presentation of the higher resolution version. It's tempting to conclude that the engineers wanted to make darned sure that we heard a difference/benefit from the new technology ñ exactly the kind of artistic licence that worries me about the whole multi-channel movement.

Once again, the Eikos offered by far the most musically engaging rendition, revealing a strangely halting quality in the performance of the DVD-A machine. The higher

▶ resolution format never managed to match the musical flow and sophisticated timing of the heavily modified CD player, always sounding slightly processed. It was as if the music was being regulated rather than proceeding at its own pace, an effect that tends to rob performances of their tension and chemistry. While there's no denying the tonal and harmonic attractions of DVD-A, its ability to cut to the heart of a performance remains limited. What's more, it's a characteristic that was consistent across a variety of discs and in both the systems used. Chez Max, the difference in character between the DVD-A player and the SACD was even more marked: the inability of music to breathe on the DVD-A recordings even more apparent.



Conclusions

So where do all these mixed results leave us? The first and most important conclusion is that, price for price, both SACD and DVD-A offer the possibility of better sound than CD. The benefits however, are not evenly spread, and whilst both options offer audible improvements in resolution and low level information neither is a de facto improvement over existing standards. In other words, a basic new-format player isn't going to render your existing high quality CD player redundant. The theoretical benefits of the higher sampling and information rates offered by the new formats are just as prone to the vagaries of implementation as any other media. In fact, they are arguably more effected than most, as their sonic benefits operate in exactly the areas where existing analogue circuitry, components and power supplies are beginning to struggle to keep up. It's no good putting on the disc and getting it off if you lose it in the analogue output stage.

Current listening also suggests, indeed reinforces the impression that the two competing formats offer rather different characters, one to the other. To my ears, DVD-A is still very much an aural extension of existing PCM technology. As such it enjoys excellent substance and detail but still carries a discernible 'digital' thumbprint. This takes the form of a haze that fills the space within the soundstage with a fine grain and a lack of rhythmic freedom that limits the expressive qualities in the music. The better CD players, like the Eikos, Wadia 861 and Levinsons demonstrate that you can engineer these flaws out of the final product. Ironically, it's not a capability that I've heard from the various

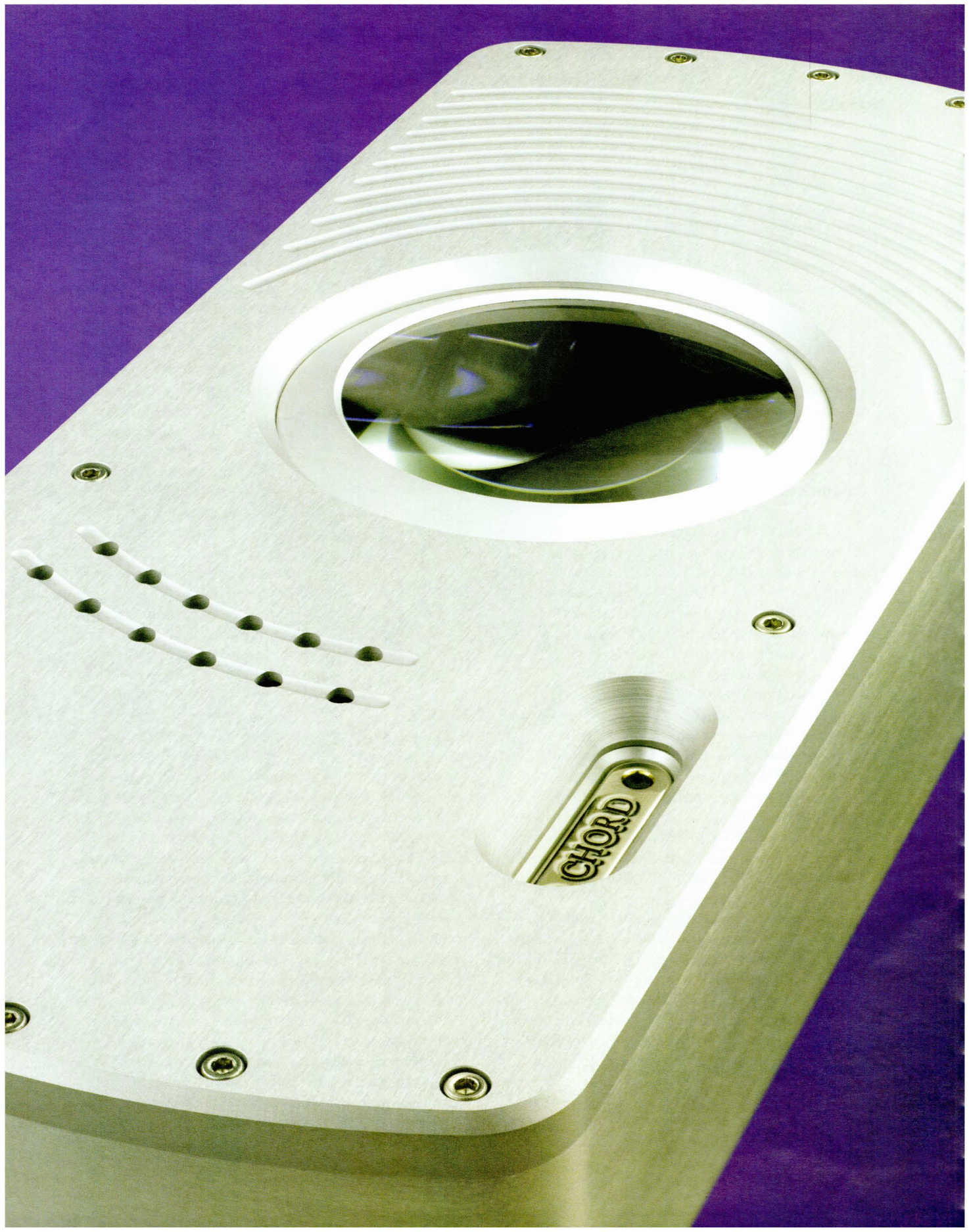
up-sampling machines that I've listened too, while the cheap filter-less models from Sugden and Morgan Audio also manage to carry it off. What this suggests to me is that we are developing experience and an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the mechanics of CD replay. We are yet to develop a similar understanding of SACD and DVD-A hardware ñ hardly surprising given the short time for which it has been available. However, the experience I enjoyed with the Townshend system demonstrates categorically that the potential is in there. We just have to get it out.

SACD isn't devoid of its own flaws.

I remain unconvinced about its dynamic discrimination and whilst the beguiling smoothness is exactly that ñ beguiling, I'm not sure it's not just as insidious as the temporal reticence of the PCM based systems. The advantage that it enjoys is that as an unfamiliar failing it's harder to actually put your finger squarely on both cause and effect. Give us time though, give us time...

Currently, we are seeing (hearing) better results from SACD, although that in itself reflects the format's head start. In setting up this project I purposely avoided putting two similarly priced players head to head. The purpose as I've already explained, was to avoid the impression of arriving at any kind of definitive judgement. Pretending that we know something when we don't doesn't help anybody. To date, the best results I've heard are from the Townshend modified SACD player. In this respect DVD-A has some catching up to do. Whether it makes up the ground only time will tell, but with the first multi-standard player from Pioneer due to go on sale in December, it's something we can afford to sit back and observe from a distance. Meanwhile results so far give cause for optimism. Whether we end up with DVD-A, SACD or the first fall back of DVD-V, the potential to exceed the performance of CD is clearly there, even if we aren't necessarily realising it yet. The best I've heard is impressive indeed. As good as vinyl? Let's just say that for the first time ever I can actually see the humble LP being given a run for its money. Not just yet a while though. There's a few things to sort out first, but at least there are grounds for opti-





Chord Electronics DAC64

by Jimmy Hughes

Just when it seemed as though CD had reached the end of the road, up pops a product to challenge old beliefs and confound prejudices. I mean, we all think we know how it is - right? CD's limited 16bit 44.kHz specification is what stops it from achieving the highest possible standards; so you only have to up the sampling rate to 96kHz and go to 24bit resolution to reach Audio Nirvana.

Well, maybe not. If the above encapsulates your views on matters digital, think again. Chord's DAC64 addresses the real problem with digital audio - a problem 24/96 won't solve! Their solution makes CD sound better than you could ever have imagined. It's not inexpensive; breakthroughs never are. But it's probably cheaper than replacing your entire CD collection...

One thing needs underlining from the start. The special filtering/buffering in Chord's DAC64 is not an enhancement device. We're not talking about circuits that superimpose a feel-good factor onto the music making it sound 'better'. Rather, the WAC filter and RAM buffer act as liberating devices - allowing you to hear your recordings as they were meant to sound.

The RAM Buffer has three settings; off, minimum buffering and maximum buffering. It sequentially takes all the data, re-times it, and then sends it out. This ensures jitter-free local clock operation without needing to send back a clock signal to the digital source. With maximum buffering

there's a delay of about four seconds before you hear music; with minimum buffering it's about one second.

Maximum buffering really does wonderful things to the sound, correcting the timing errors that cause

seconds were lost when a new track was selected. Pressing Play, then Pause, and waiting a few seconds for the start of the track to cue, solved this.

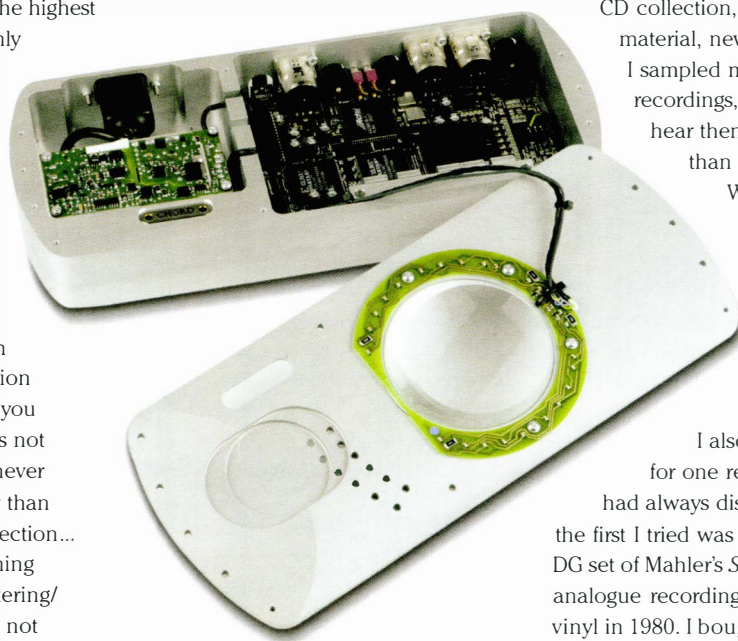
With the DAC64 finally up and running, I started going through my CD collection, playing all sorts of material, new and old. Naturally, I sampled many of my best recordings, and was pleased to hear them sounding better than ever before.

Whether from digital or analogue masters, the beauty and freshness of the sound impressed time and time again.

At the same time I also dug out discs that for one reason or another had always disappointed. One of the first I tried was Claudio Abbado's DG set of Mahler's *Sixth symphony* - an analogue recording first released on vinyl in 1980. I bought the LPs when they came out, and was distinctly underwhelmed by what I heard.

Unlike DG's excellent 1978 Karajan recording of the same work, Abbado's sounded cramped and boxed in - as though the original multi-track tapes had been mixed down to a ferric-oxide compact cassette. The sound lacked range and depth, with little impression of the vast orchestral forces used in this powerful symphony. The CD, released six or seven years later, seemed much the same...

Played on the DAC64 with four-second buffer, Abbado's Mahler 6 miraculously acquired superb



poor sound quality. This doesn't mean that as a result Chord's DAC64 is totally uninfluenced by the absolute quality of the CD/DVD transport used. But it's probably fair to say it's much less sensitive than usual. I used a cheapie Marantz CD-6000 OSE with stunning results

I had interfacing problems using the DAC64 with a Pioneer DVD-545; crackling interference occurred and could not be eliminated. Going to a Denon DVD-2500 cured this, but there was a problem playing 24/96 music DVDs; the opening couple of



▶ depth, space, scale, and separation - the very qualities that seemed to be totally absent. Suddenly, hall ambience was apparent. Soundstaging was 3D holographic rather than pancake-flat, and the stereo was vivid and highly detailed.

Yet the tonal balance was rich, warm, and smooth - the increased clarity wasn't being artificially enhanced by frequency response shifts. It was as though the true qualities of this recording were being revealed for the first time. I've known this recording for more than twenty years and played it on lots of different systems. It's never sounded any good: Until now.

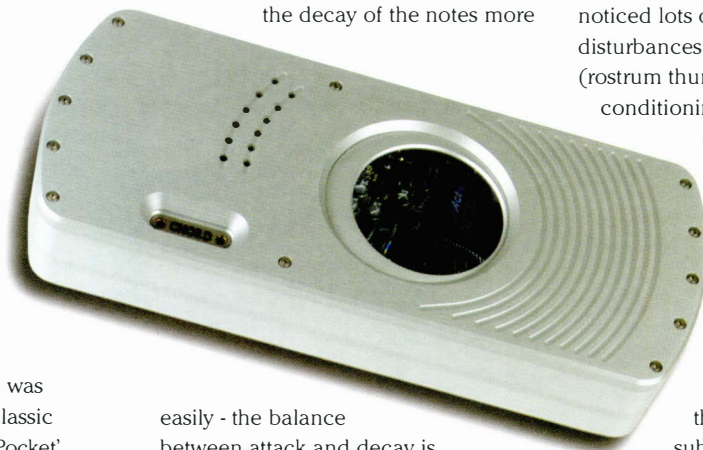
Even more remarkable was the transformation of the classic Pretenders track 'Brass in Pocket'. My late '80s CD pressing sounds thin, hissy, dynamically flat, and colourless - a text book example of how CD highlights everything that's wrong with a recording, and misses all the things that are right. Played on the DAC64 without buffering, the sound was clear and detailed, but still rather 'flat'.

Switching in the four-second RAM buffer changed things completely. Now, the music sounded vivid and three-dimensional. Chrissie Hynde's voice was always recessed and well-back in the mix; now it was projecting powerfully into the room. The whole sound was bigger and musically more engaging. Rhythmically, there was much greater forward momentum and drive.

Going from the four-second buffer to the one-second buffer, the soundstage collapsed to a degree. Guitars and drums were less projected, and the vocals lost their much of their

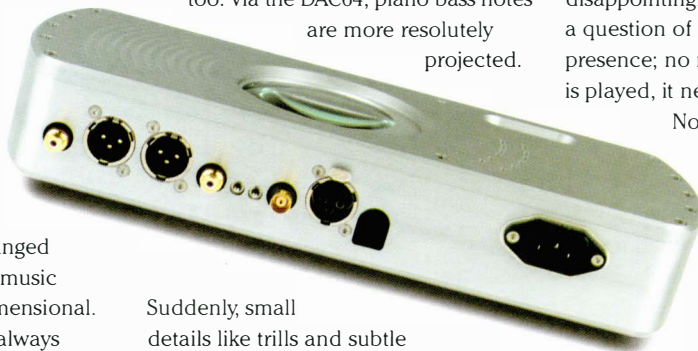
superb holographic out-of-the-box forwardness and immediacy. Not a bad sound, and scads better than no buffer. But the magic was no longer quite as apparent.

Solo Piano showed the benefits of buffering very clearly. There's a greater sense of notes starting from nothing, quickly reaching their peak, then dying away. You can definitely follow the decay of the notes more



easily - the balance between attack and decay is much more even. That 'broken bottles' brittle top-end you sometimes get with CD piano was completely absent.

Low frequency clarity improved too. Via the DAC64, piano bass notes are more resolutely projected.



Suddenly, small details like trills and subtle dynamic inflections tell with far greater authority. Instead of being vague and shadowy, left-hand detail is clearly articulated. The notes making up a chord are more precisely defined so that harmony is enriched.

Result? Fuller more focussed piano tone. No longer do you have to play the music loudly to create a big room-filling sound. Subjectively, this increases the signal to noise ratio.

Tape hiss can be very pronounced on CD because (unconsciously) one often turns up the volume to achieve a sense of presence and immediacy. With the DAC64 this isn't as necessary.

Deep bass definitely seems fuller and weightier, especially when the four-second buffer is engaged. Bass drums show noticeably greater power and solidity, and I consistently noticed lots of subtle low frequency disturbances on classical CDs (rostrum thumps, traffic noise, air conditioning) that usually pass unheard. Good bass helps create a sense of scale, plus a feeling of expansion in climaxes.

CD, for all its superficial sharpness and attack, often lacks power and weight - the very qualities that subjectively create a big sound. One of my favourite 12in singles is Randy Crawford's 'Street Life' - it sounds awesomely huge and exciting on vinyl, but disappointingly tame on CD. It's not a question of loudness, but scale and presence; no matter how loud the CD is played, it never really projects.

Now, had you asked me a few weeks ago, I'd have said it was absolutely impossible for CD to offer impact comparable to a good 45rpm 12" single like 'Street Life'. But the DAC64 in four-second buffer mode via its balanced audio outputs, produced levels of scale and power that almost equalled the 12" single played on a top-class turntable with state-of-the-art moving-coil cartridge.

One of analogue's greatest attributes is its ability to produce results that exceed than the sum of its parts. Digital is often the opposite - despite boasting excellent ▶

► specifications, results may be sonically less good than you'd expect. Just because there's no background noise and low peak level distortion, it doesn't mean reproduction will be musically engaging.

From the recording engineer's standpoint, digital is regarded as truthful but unforgiving - an exacting medium to work in. Analogue is said to be kinder and more forgiving. People say analogue alters the sound in ways the ear finds pleasant, whereas digital gives you the truth pure and unvarnished. Really? I strongly disagree. Chord's DAC64 surely explodes both these old chestnuts.

What impressed time and again was the way Chord's DAC64 (maximum buffer) consistently revealed the strengths of a recording, not its weaknesses. You heard what was right with a track, rather than what's wrong with it. A perfect example was Otis Spann's 'Goin' Down Slow' from the Fi/Analogue Productions sampler CD - track 4. Technically, it's not a great recording. Tape hiss is high, and there's some background hum. But just listen to the way the piano leaps out of the speakers. Listen to the dynamic quality of the voice; the live feel to the performance. This is exactly the sort of track that normally sounds spellbinding on good analogue. And an absolute dog's dinner on CD...

The soundstage is huge. Yet it's not brute-force dynamics; more a subjective feeling of power and expansion as things get loud. The soundstage diminishes noticeably when you go from the four-second buffer to one-second. And when the buffer is switched out altogether the sound becomes very 'flat' indeed. Subjectively, it's like singer and piano have moved back from the microphone.

Most tracks on the Fi sampler demonstrate the enormous benefits produced by the DAC 64, especially

Technical description

The heart of Chord's DAC 64 is a radically new type of digital filter, WTA - Watts Transient Aligned. There's also has an improved fourth-generation Pulse Array DAC, 64bit filter and DAC architecture, plus a new all-digital receiver chip. Chord claim the WTA filter has taken some twenty years to develop.

Chord believe that the claimed sonic superiority of higher sampling rates is not due to the recording and reproduction of supersonic information. Rather, it's the fact that timing errors are reduced as sampling rates rise. The ear is sensitive to timing changes in the order of a few microseconds.

Therefore, to resolve timing of one microsecond an impossibly high sampling rate of 1mHz is needed.

Luckily, 44.1kHz sampling can be made to accurately resolve transients by means of digital filtering. Unfortunately, to do this the filter needs infinitely long tap lengths. Chord say all present reconstruction filters offer relatively short tap lengths - the longest commercially available device has about 256 taps.

The combination of short tap lengths, and the filter algorithm employed, generates transient timing errors - errors that are very detrimental

to the final sound. Apparently, going from 256 taps to 1024 taps gave what Chord describe as massively improved sound quality - much smoother and better focussed, with soundstaging of increased depth and precision.

Chord's experiments initially seemed to indicate that infinitely-long tap lengths were necessary - going from 1024 taps to 2048 gave a further significant improvement. At this stage a new type of algorithm, the WTA filter, was developed. It was designed to minimise transient errors from the outset, thereby reducing the need for very long tap lengths.

Chord claim their WTA filter (using 256 taps) outperformed all other commercial filters - even when the latter used 1024 taps. However, WTA filters still benefit from long tap lengths, and currently Chord are using 1024 taps. The filters are implemented in Field Programmable Gate Arrays using a specially-designed 64bit DSP core. Fourth-generation Pulse Array DACs are used, employing 64bit 7th order noise shaping and 2048 times oversampling. Chord claim this gives improved measured performance, better resolution of detail, and smoother more focussed sound quality. The unit will run from 30V to 300V AC without adjustment, incidentally.

when used with its four-second buffer. Previously, when I listened to this disc using an ordinary CD player, only Janis Ian's 'Breaking Silence' (track 9) impressed. This is superbly engineered, with low background noise and clean climaxes. It's the sort of production that sounds good on most systems

Other tracks on the disc are not so impeccably engineered, but this is deceptive. Many have qualities that transcend their superficial limitations, producing results greater than the sum of the parts. Interestingly, 'Breaking Silence' was less improved by the four second buffer than other supposedly 'poorer' tracks. The DAC64 reveals detail in recordings that ordinary CD players often obscure.

Making a choice between the one and four second buffers is essentially down to personal taste. The four second option gives the greatest depth, space, and separation. On suitable material you hear a marvellously refined sumptuous sound: One that's rich, weighty, full-bodied, exquisitely subtle and holographically dynamic. Yet this too is only part of the story.

Playing Jethro Tull's *Songs from the Wood*, the sharpness and detail of the sound was fantastic. With the buffer on four seconds, the many tricky tempo changes were fantastically crisp. The production is not particularly sophisticated, but the instrumentation is complex with large numbers ►

▶ of over-dubs. Every detail was audible; clarity and cleanness were something to marvel at.

I definitely prefer the four second buffer. But for times when a leaner more forward balance is required, the one-second option is useful. On certain discs, the increased sharpness is definitely preferable. Bass can sometimes be a little too rich and warm

discs (replayed on a Denon machine) over CD seemed fairly minor. Encounters with 24/96 have so far left me feeling mildly impressed and slightly disappointed. Yes, there's a difference. But it's less than I'd have hoped.

Frankly, if I couldn't live with CD, I couldn't live with DVD either - it's not significantly better.

sonically. The breadth of music available on CD is quite awesome. And it's cheap!

Ordinary CD has far more to offer than most of us ever realised. Using the DAC64, I've been hearing my CD collection as never before. It's not often a product leaves me gobs-macked, but Chord's DAC64 has done just that. I don't think I can live without one. CD was 18 years old in March 2001. With a little help from Chord's DAC64 it may finally have come of age!

During use, the unit gets quite warm. Operation is fairly simple, but the toggle switches for input selection and buffering are not marked. Nor is there an illustration in the handbook to say which is which. The illuminated porthole in the top gives the unit a fantastic appearance, and nearly everyone who's seen a DAC 64 wants to buy one - on looks alone. Nice to see people have their priorities right! ➤+



when set to four-seconds. If this is the case, switching to the one-second buffer produces a drier leaner sonic impression.

Whether or not the four second buffer was helping to disguise the timing limitations of the Marantz CD-6000 OSE player is not clear. Alas, my heavily re-clocked Pioneer PD-75 is still away being repaired - I think it may've had it's chips - literally! Actually, when this review was originally mooted, it was supposed to be about DVD and the potential of its 24bit /96kHz technology.

However, the Pioneer DVD player I was going to use didn't interface properly with the DAC64, and in any case the improvement with the 24/96

If Chord are right about the causes of disappointing digital sound, then it's hardly surprising 24/96 only sounds slightly better than 16/44. What this implies for the future is hard to predict. There's no guarantee that 'better' formats like SACD and DVD-A will survive in the long term.

You can, however, invest in a Chord DAC 64 and in doing so upgrade your entire CD collection at a stroke, as well as buying a DAC capable of accepting any of the new PCM derived 'high-resolution' technologies (although not SACD for the present). Speaking as someone with a big CD collection, that route looks far more interesting than worrying about future systems that may or may not deliver the goods

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

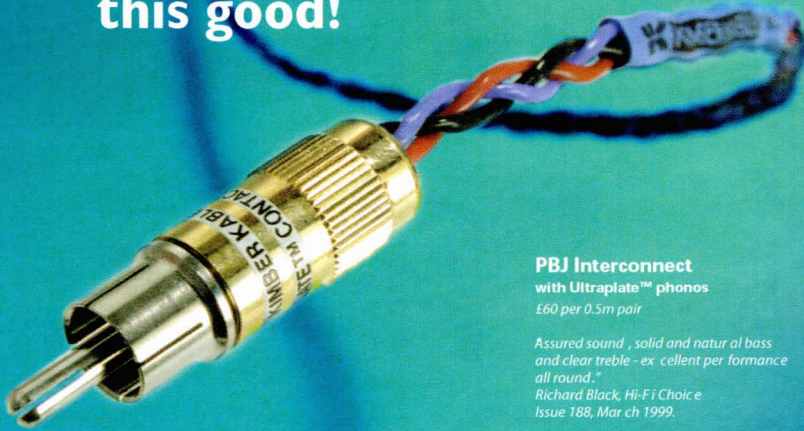
Type:	Multi input standard 64-bit DAC
DAC chips:	Chord specified Gate Arrays
Inputs:	AES/EBU, BNC, Toslink
Outputs:	Balanced XLR + Phonos
Dimensions:	338x60x145mm
Weight:	7kg
Finish:	Silver or Black
Price:	£1900

Manufacturer:

Chord Electronics Ltd.
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Fax. (44)(0)1622-411388
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Wadia 861 CD Player

by Roy Gregory

The Wadia 861 is an improved version of the already impressive 860x reviewed in Issue 4. It's big, and it's expensive, yet, as a CD player you might be forgiven for wondering why we're bothering with it. After all, aren't CD's days numbered, the medium about to be swept aside by SACD and DVD? Well, no. Things really aren't that simple and whilst we can see an end to CD's new-release life, there are the millions of discs out there (hundreds in your own collection) that will still need playing. Of course, SACD and DVD machines will both replay CD discs, but you have to ask yourself just how high on the agenda that aspect of performance is going to be, especially given that the whole *raison d'être* of the new hi-bit formats is improved sound quality.*

So, assuming you still want to extract the best performance from your existing silver disc collection you're going to need either a decent CD player or transport. If the Eikos (reviewed by JMH in Issue 13) represents the application of everything we've learnt about digital replay applied to a good basic machine, the audio equivalent of a hot-hatch like a Subaru Impreza, then the Wadia turns that concept on its head. This is no after market bolt-on. The 861 represents a complete ground-up, inside to out reassessment of the problem, conceptually more akin to an Aston Martin than a souped up saloon car. The problem of course is that all that engineering costs, so the price is more like an Aston Martin too.

Of course, there are any number of

expensively built and presented CD players on the market, but what sets the Wadia apart is the elegance of its conception. It might look like a (very) large and somewhat austere single box player, but as so often with things audio, all is not what it seems. Although it is indeed in a single box, the 861 is better understood if you think of it as a CD transport and a dedicated,



switchable input, variable output DAC. Look around the back and you'll see socketry for four digital inputs, four digital outputs and both single-ended and balanced analogue outputs. Further, the DAC is already 24bit/96kHz capable making it compatible with DVD-V sources, and will also allow further future updating to accommodate SACD or DVD-A once the dust settles on their minor format tiff. So in reality, the Wadia promises to let you have your cake and eat it by providing both serious CD replay and a future proof DAC that should allow you to enjoy your investment with the new formats, albeit only in two-channel format.

The 861 shares all of the above with the 860x. However, it adds a series of

refinements all of its own. The inputs and outputs are now all disengaged if not in use and the player now incorporates extensive RFI filtering. But the really big news is all to do with the digital filter and analogue output stage. Wadia's progressively developed Digimaster filter algorithm has long been the heart of their decoders, but now, for the first time it offers user switchable characteristics, with three options allowing the owner to tailor the player to suit the character of his or her system. The analogue stage has been completely redesigned to incorporate lessons learnt in the development of the hideously complex and expensive Power-Dac project. Finally, Wadia have finally tackled one of the biggest operational criticisms involving the digital volume control. The problem with any volume control that operates in the digital domain is that as you reduce the level you also reduce the system's resolution. Thus it's vital to keep the control running near the top of its range. Unfortunately, if you were running the 860x straight into a power amp then its 4V output level made that problematic to say the least, especially with the move towards more efficient systems. The 861 solves this problem by providing an internal adjustment of maximum output level, variable between 0.25 and 4.2V, which should enable you to match it to any system out there.

In use, the 861 demands a lot of real estate in your rack, both horizontally and vertically, as well as taking an unconscionable amount of time to ►

► warm up. Weeks rather than days in fact, so a quick listen is out of the question if you want to hear this player at its best. But believe me, its best is impressive indeed, and well worth the effort if you want maximum return from your investment in silver discs. For the majority of the review period I ran the Wadia with the Klyne or Plinius line stages, feeding either Monarchy Audio SM70 or Jadis JA30 amps driving the Living Voice Avatar OBX speakers. Cabling was Nordost Valhalla throughout.

By way of experiment I also ran the 861 directly into the SM70s, a topology of which Monarchy also approve (see my *Playing The System* column), and rang the changes with the Ars Acoustica Divas and Acoustic Solutions Model 8 speakers, the latter in the course of investigating the switchable filter topology. On which subject the answer is yes, you can hear clear differences between the three options. Configuration A equates to the standard Digimaster topology as supplied with the 860X and that's where I started. It was a bit like meeting an old friend, with all the power, solidity and presence that I remembered so fondly from the original review. It's the sheer substance and momentum that it brings to the music that sets the Wadia apart.

Engaging Configuration B added air and space to the soundstage, but overall I felt it lacked the immediacy and sense of temporal precision that came with A. Playing the superb new Reference Recordings disc of Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* (Eiji Oue, Minnesota Orchestra RR96) clearly demonstrated the differences. Where A offered tremendous substance and purpose with an almost brooding atmosphere, B opened up the air and space of the Minneapolis Orchestra



Hall, lightening the mood and presentation at the cost of that sense of sheer drive and power, qualities which I think this music needs.

Moving to C retained the presentation of B but moved the overall perspective

back to something behind a mid-hall view, again further robbing the performance of immediacy.

From which it should be clear that I opted for Configuration A for most of my listening, which is kind of reassuring in the sense that it's also Wadia's preferred option.



Are the switchable filters a waste of time? Not at all. I happen to like A. It suits both my system and the way I like my music presented. However I can easily perceive situations in which another listener in another room and with different equipment might opt for B; or how, presented with an impossibly forward recording or speaker I might engage C. That's the beauty of what Wadia have done. Not only does it allow you to vary the presentation to suit your needs and system, but it's so quick to do (about half a minute) that you can even adapt it to individual discs if

necessary. Experimentation with the different speakers proved the point with subtly different effects in each case. I wouldn't put the facility top of my shopping list but then I've got a well balanced system and a room in which it takes absolute precedence. I can see situations in which it could be a life saver, and given the structural integrity and upgradeability of the 861 this is one player that you buy for the long haul, so adding adaptability to its list of attributes is no bad thing.

This One's For Blanton (Analogue Productions CAPJ 015) is exactly the sort of disc to get audiophiles a bad name and send their less enlightened partners rushing from the room. A 'jazz sonata for double bass' that description probably tells you everything you need to know.

And yes, on a lot of systems it can descend into a mess of wallowing bass notes and irrelevant piano parts. Put it on the Wadia and it serves to demonstrate precisely what makes this player special. The dynamic discrimination is exceptional. Whether it's differentiating the speed, pacing and attack of Ray Brown's upright

bass notes, or separating the emphatic, stabbed full stops at the end of Ellington's convoluted, rolling melodies, the 861 speaks with complete authority. The instruments are fixed solidly in the soundstage, never wandering with level or the instrumental balance, but simply placed on the stage as they would be live. The problem is that all too often this solidity and stability comes at the expense of life and immediacy, control crushing the breath from the performance. Not here. The sure footed agility of the Wadia never fails as it tracks the intricate and varied steps of the bass, never confuses the relationship between it and the faster, darting ►

▶ piano notes, shifting effortlessly between stabbed emphasis and more languid melodic lines.

The end result is that it manages to make perfect sense of this most demanding (in both musical and hi-fi terms) performance.

It's a trick that it carries over to the instrumental excess of Slobberbone (*Everything You Thought Was Right Was Wrong Today*, New West Records). This bizarre mix of grunge meets country is remarkable mainly for the denseness of its mix and the attitude of the playing. This'll clear rooms but for a completely different reason. Playing 'That Is All' the first thing you notice is how easily the Wadia sorts out the competing instruments, allowing them all to jostle for position without ever swamping the lyrics, which are for once perfectly intelligible. The first, seering guitar break comes as no real surprise except for the grace with which it's delivered. What's more impressive is the subsequent insertions from harmonica and mandolin(!) each of which stands with equal integrity. Even the closing chords leave you hanging ... just waiting for the abrupt little Coda.

The Wadia's real ability is to reveal not just the structural bones of a performance, something which it does extremely well, but to flesh them out into a believable whole. I returned to the Sonora disc *Music For Violin And Guitar* (SACC 102) which impressed me so much on the 860x. If anything the 861 offers slightly greater focus and transparency, representing a small but worthwhile gain over its predecessor. In its own way that's as reassuring as my preference for Filter Configuration A. It's yet another example of Wadia moving slowly and purposefully

towards their goal, refining their product by increments rather than trying to hit a home run every time. The fact is, that if you've got it fundamentally right it's easier to mess it up than improve things.

Thankfully that hasn't happened here and the 861 is just as impressive, and comes just as highly recommended as the 860x. Owners of the earlier player

should contact the importer to discuss upgrades, whilst first time buyers should consider the far more beautiful silver finish, an option which unfortunately wasn't available for photography (you'll just have to take my word for it).

If the true worth of a product can be measured by the reluctance with which it is returned to its rightful owner, then the 861 is a star indeed. There are few CD players that can offer its sonic performance or its continuing relevance and upgradeability. A seminal product in the short history of CD reproduction, it promises to remain so for the foreseeable future. It will probably still be just as relevant by the time I can actually afford one.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Decoding Software:	3 User Selectable Algorithms including 32x Re-Sampling Digimaster
Digital Processing Capability:	24 bits
Digital Resolution:	21 bits
Digital Inputs:	1 x Glass Optic (ST) 1 x AES/EBU (XLR) 1 x SP/DIF (BNC) 1 x Plastic Optical (Toslink)
Digital Outputs:	1 x Glass Optic (ST) 1 x AES/EBU (XLR) 1 x SP/DIF (BNC) 1 x Plastic Optical (Toslink)
Analogue Outputs:	1 pr Balanced XLR 1 pr Un-Balanced RCA (Both can be connected simultaneously)
Output Impedance:	Less Than 15 ohms
Dimensions (HxWxD):	17" x 16" x 7" (including feet)
Weight:	48 lbs
Price:-	861 player: £7950 Upgrade to 860/860x: £1500

Distributor:
Musical Design Company
PO Box 4146, Epping, Essex CM16 - 6HJ
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Fax. 0044(0)-1992-574030
E-mail. mdc.hifi@virgin.net
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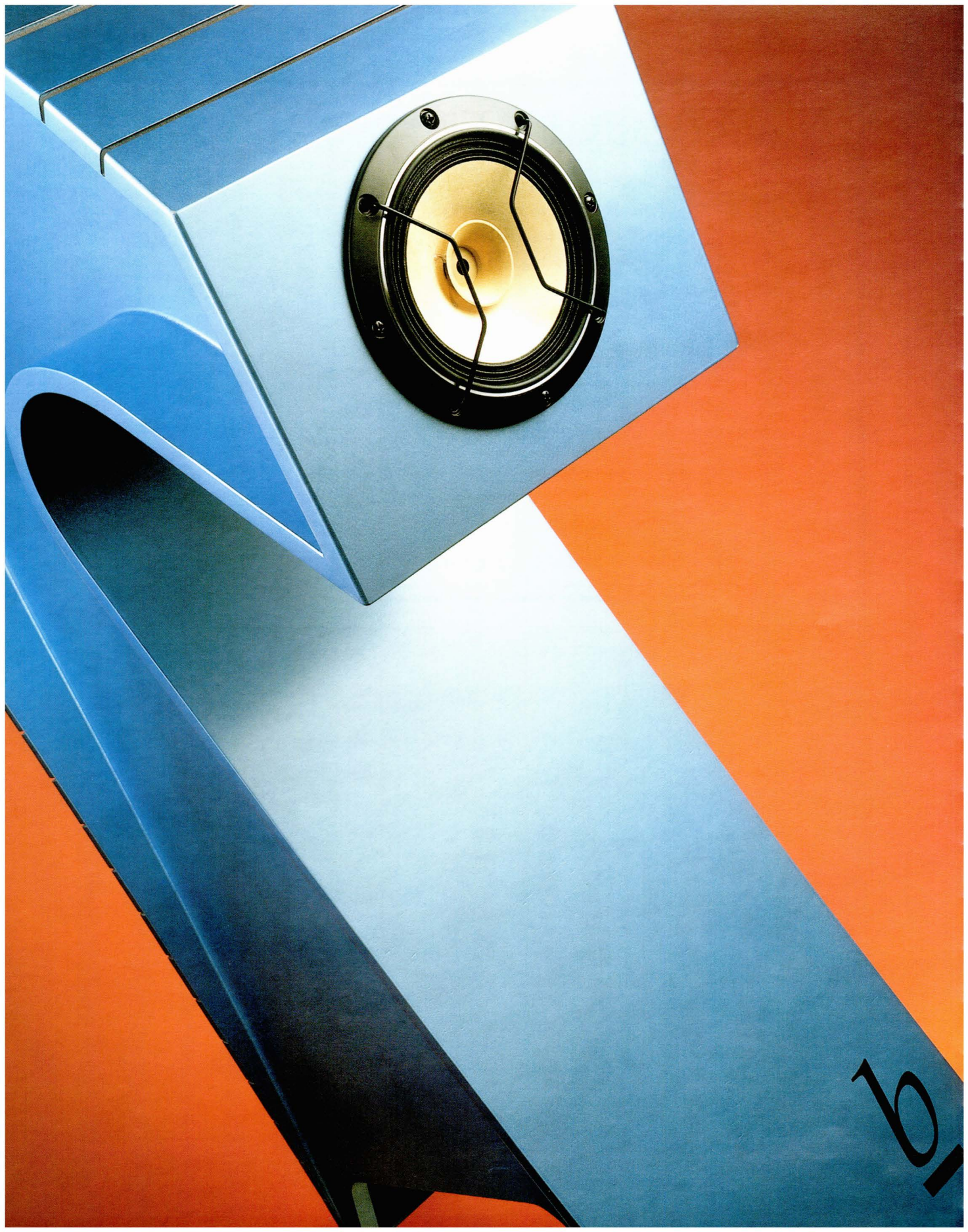
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Beauhorn B2 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

What is it about horn speakers anyway? Large, coloured and more often than not congenitally ugly, why would anybody bother? It's an attitude that's easy to understand in these days of marketing imperatives and domestic acceptability, especially when you take the implications of the move towards multi-channel music into account. If it's hard to accommodate two of these things then what chance five? Yet, despite all this there's a hardcore of two (or even single) channel users who wouldn't give a XXXX for anything else. Like I said, what is it about horn speakers anyway?

Well, consider this from the other end of the equation: what they do rather than what they are. Think about a medieval trumpet, one of those long ones with a flag hanging on it that Hollywood directors like so much. You blow in one end and the sound comes out the other louder. No, make that much louder. Suddenly you can see the attraction. In their constant battle to match the dynamic range of real life you can understand why a speaker designer would want to harness this effect. The problem is that few people actually want a pair of 16' (or longer) pipes in their front room: Or on a battlefield for that matter. Enter the bugle, basically the same thing rolled up, and lo and behold, the folded horn is born.

Of course it isn't actually quite

as simple as that. In practice, everything from the precise flare to the positioning of the corners to the smoothness of the surface can be heard, magnified as it is by the horn itself. That's why we've seen the move towards spherical horns like the Avantgardes: no corners, perfect flares and mirror smooth surfaces. Trouble is that they represent a major step backward in terms of space efficiency, and even the monster Trio with its one metre mid-bass trumpet only reaches down to 100Hz or so. That's not as far as the LS3/5a, and necessitates a separate sub-woofer (or four in the case of the Trio) with all the compromises that entails, along with the added complexity of trying to engineer a successful hybrid system. Then there's the cross-over to consider.

It's a classic case of choose your compromise. Historically, Beauhorn



have worn their heart on their sleeve and opted for the single driver, folded horn approach, refining it to

the impressive point reviewed in Issues 7 and 13. The problem is that the search for extreme efficiency coupled with the route chosen necessitates heinously expensive drivers combined with complex (and thus expensive) cabinetry. Hey, and guess what, the end result is expensive too! The problem comes in trying to make the product available

to a wider audience. Cut corners and the compromises are only too audible. Unless that is, you apply a bit of lateral thinking. Enter then the Beauhorn B2 (and I promise not to use a single Stealth bomber joke!).

First casualty in the savage economy drive is the venerable Lowther drive unit, a fixture in every previous Beauhorn product. Here it's replaced with another high



▶ efficiency, composite cone design from Fostex. The cone material is still paper, but the small high frequency cone is smaller than the Lowther's, your first real indication of where the money has been saved. This driver doesn't even begin to approach the c105dB efficiency of the DX4, which means it doesn't need the Lowther's massive and massively expensive magnetic assembly.

But the really clever part is the cabinet, a model of simple structural elegance. Take a simple exponential pipe, stand it on its mouth and tip the other end over to point forward and there you have it. Simple side panels brace the continuous curves of the front and back, while sideways vents allow the low frequencies to escape. Additional bracing is provided by a lateral dowel that links the side panels around a third of the way up the cabinet. And that's pretty much it. The result is visually striking, if hardly compact, but the saving is considerable: the B2 costs less than half the price of the Beauhorn Virtuoso. The open curve makes for a bigger external volume than the more familiar model, while the lower efficiency of the drive unit makes for a lower overall system sensitivity for similar bandwidth. And bandwidth is as good a place to start as any with these speakers.

Just like their more expensive brethren, the B2s are hyper critical of room placement. Get it wrong and the bass suffers – big time. There's

either not enough or there's loads, all of it at one frequency. Believe me when I say that you haven't heard one note bass in all its resonating, clogging awfulness until you've heard it propagated

by a horn! This means laborious shifting of the speakers until you find that magic spot, and I'm talking half an inch at a time here. Once you get it right, and you'll know when you do, you're half way home. Half way because, like their big

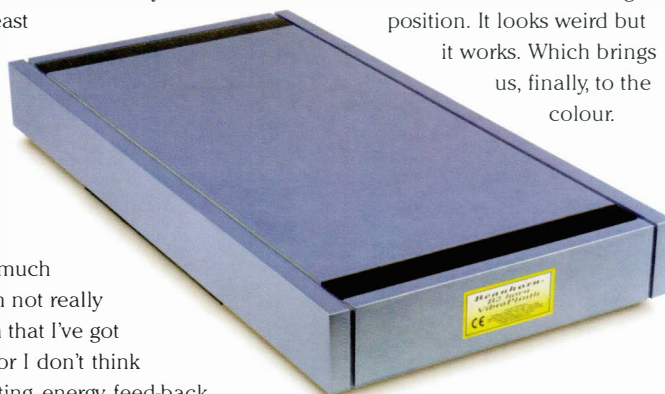
brothers, the B2s have optional air suspension platforms.

These are an extra cost but having lived with and without I have to say that I consider them absolutely essential. At least you can buy them later, so spreading the cost, but buy them you will. Why do they make so much difference? I'm not really sure, but given that I've got a concrete floor I don't think they're preventing energy feed-back. I suspect that they're actually providing a sink for bass energy from the horn structure itself, but I've no proof of this. That's just what it sounds like. Whatever the reason, use the platforms and the bass goes deeper

more tunefully and the midrange opens out, losing a nasty nasal honk that intrudes into the performance of the rigidly mounted speakers.

Beauhorn rate the sensitivity of the B2s at around 95dB, but I'd have to put it higher than that (so do they now). It might just be the mid-band energy transfer, but driven from a single Monarchy Audio SM70 amp they were crisp, dynamic and loud: Much louder than the Living Voice Avatar OBXs that they replaced, and those were bi-amped with the SM70s! Part of this is the lack of cross-over in the B2 and their benign load, but the bottom line is that 15 Watts of power will be perfectly adequate for most people's requirements. Once again though I caution against all but the best single-ended triodes. Unless its got a serious power supply (like the Border Patrol) the bottom end is going to get into all sorts of trouble, and for the most part push-pull is going to be the way to go. I settled quite happily with the Monarchy amp, although I also used the Papworth designed and built TVA8 from Walrus, which uses a pair of EL34s a side. The speakers were widely spaced and severely toed-in to cross in front of the listening

position. It looks weird but it works. Which brings us, finally, to the colour.



The B2 uses a paint finish (although I understand that in future laminate is being considered). The review pair is in a rather unusual pale blue that in the right (modern) surroundings could look

▶ spectacularly sculptural. I rather like it, but no other speaker has polarised aesthetic opinions in the way that this one has. There are those who like it – and there are those who don't. Fortunately Beauhorn will take your aesthetic sensibilities into account and offer a whole range of colour options to customer order.

Once you get location and toe-in right the B2 is very definitely a Beauhorn. It has the same tactile immediacy and directness that its more sophisticated elder brother possesses. It also has the same ultra-revealing character, and tiny changes in set-up, not just of the speaker but of the system as a whole, make clearly audible differences to the sound. Change the amp, or what it sits on and you'll hear it. Change the cables and again it will be obvious. Don't misunderstand me here. I'm not saying that, in the style of some speakers, the B2s are unforgiving, sounding awful on the end of all but a perfect system. In fact it's quite the opposite. Their musical exuberance is such that they always seem to make the most of what you feed them and whilst that isn't always positive (the overblown one note bass if poorly positioned springs to mind) they never seem to be pulling the music apart or actively destroying its structure. Unfortunately just such a destructive tendency is all too common with many highly engineered designs these days.

Take Ray Brown's bass on *This One's For Blanton* (which seems to be flavour of this particular month, partly because it's ideal for optimising

a speaker's placement, partly because it's inherently revealing). Given the limited bandwidth of the B2 this is hardly an ideal musical choice, yet the



baby Beauhorn sails through with aplomb. The very lowest notes start to cramp, their extension slightly curtailed, their pitch slightly ambiguous, but the instrument itself; the energy and vibrant character of its plucked strings have such natural attack and solidity that you can easily forgive its foibles on the very deepest notes. And once again the failing is benign: More a smudging than wholesale musical larceny. Besides, the upper bass punch so beloved of the electronic music industry and hi-fi buffs alike is spectacular.

Further up the range there is a slightly cupped quality to the mid-band, most noticeable on vocals, and even on their floating stands a hint of nasality remains. Having said that, if ultra low coloration is your bag then you are in the wrong store. The B2, in common with every horn speaker I've heard, takes liberties with the tonal balance of instruments. It's actually less intrusive than many in this respect, although not a match for the Virtuoso. What it does get spot on is the dynamic envelope of each note: its energy spectrum and the way it is propagated into space. As it's this failing in most systems that tells us most clearly that we are listening to hi-fi rather than live music it's a capability that shouldn't be underestimated.

In fact the biggest concern with the B2 is its leaning toward the intimate at the expense of the larger scale picture.

What it gives away to the more expensive model (apart from the pristine midrange clarity) is the ability to convince on the bigger recordings. The more bombastic classical repertoire can sound a shade distant and detached, shorn of the foundation of really deep bass. The Virtuoso gets away with a combination of immediacy and captivating delicacy. The B2 can't quite manage the same sleight of hand.

Where does that leave us? The B2 won't suit everybody or all systems – no surprises there then. Nor is it without some character of its own which it duly imposes on the music – again no great surprise. What it does do is bring the musical insight and dynamic discrimination of a single driver horn speaker down to something like an attainable price. Look around and you'll see that the world isn't exactly full of similarly priced competition. It's efficient enough and on the whole it goes deep enough to satisfy most musical tastes. It's also large and visually imposing. It's a brave product, and it's one that deserves to succeed. Life's too short for boring hi-fi and the B2 is anything but. Bravo Beauhorn! ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single Driver Folded Horn
Drive Unit:	Fostex
Efficiency:	98dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Bandwidth:	-3dB at 75Hz - 20kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	340x1300x740mm (on stands)
Finish:	Various
Price - Speaker:	£2445-00
Stand:	£556-00

Manufacturer:

Thomas Transducers
Tel. (44)(0)1424-813888
Fax. (44)(0)1424-812755
E-mail. ThomTrans@beauhorn.u-net.com
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Living Voice Avatar OBX Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

And here at last is Daddy Bear, biggest in price (if not in size) of Living Voice's three sensible speaker models. Don't even think about the non-sensible ones!

Of course, sensible is a relative term and you'd be forgiven for asking why anyone in their right mind would part with £4000 when they could get something visually identical from the same company for a mere fifteen hundred. Which is also exactly what makes the Living Voice speakers so fascinating. Here we have a range of three models spread between these two price limits, each offering the same dimensions and basic paper performance, yet also each providing exceptional musical capabilities for the money at their individual price points. As such they provide something of a primer when it comes to prioritising both musical and design attributes. If you want to know what each part of the speaker pie contributes then the Auditorium/Avatar/OBX are a good place to look.

So for those who haven't been paying attention a quick recap is in order. The range started from the premise of the largest floorstanding cabinet that would be generally acceptable in a domestic environment. Given the company's history with high

efficiency horn designs, it's not surprising that sensitivity was high on the agenda, and given a fixed cabinet volume it became a case of balancing that against bandwidth. Designer Kevin Scott finally settled on a d'Appolito arrangement using a pair of 6" paper coned drivers that yielded 94dB efficiency, a -3dB point at 35Hz and a benign 6 Ohm load. The end result offers a near perfect balance between practicality, bandwidth and the kind of drive requirements and sensitivity that make the use of small, high quality amps a real possibility.

So much for the overview, what about the specifics.

The Auditorium majors on delivering the scale and dynamic envelope of the musical performance.

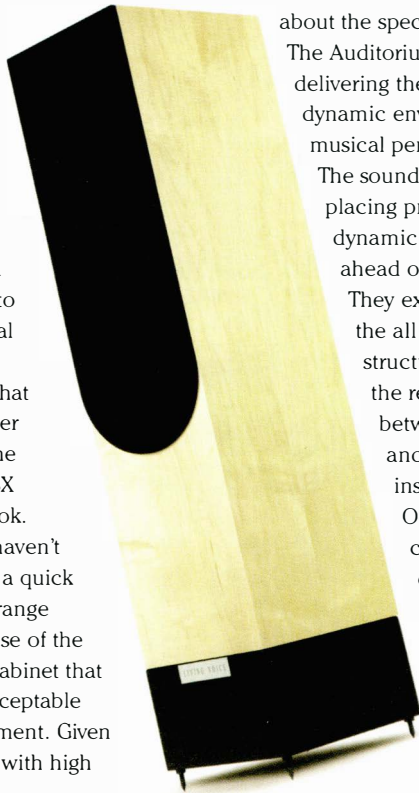
The sound is big and live, placing presence and dynamic discrimination ahead of tonal finesse.

They excel at revealing the all important structure of the music, the relationship between the players and the various instruments.

Occasionally they can get a little excitable but it's a small price to pay for convincing musical dynamics and energy.

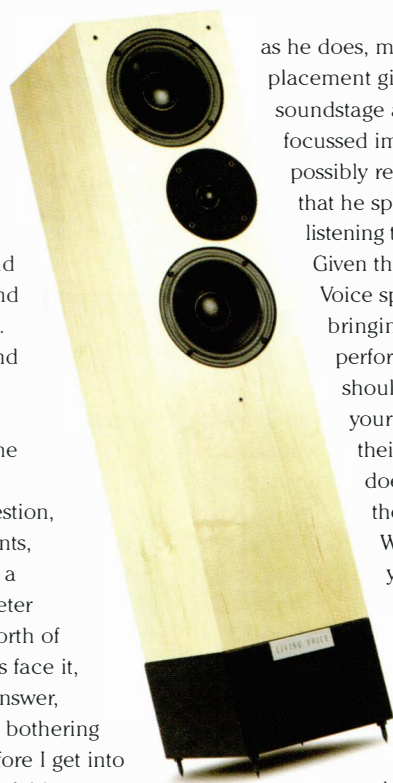
Next up the range comes the £2500 Avatar. This adds much bigger motors on the bass drivers, better components in the crossover and a far better tweeter, the Scanspeak D2905/95 (generally found in speakers at around twice this price). The results of these changes are far from subtle, and whilst the Avatar retains the Auditorium's sense of musical scale and enthusiasm, it adds considerable finesse at both frequency extremes along with greater overall clarity and a far broader tonal palette. Instruments are better separated and take on a more individual identity. It's not until you listen to the Avatar that you realise how fast and loose the Auditorium plays its hand, so skilfully does the cheaper speaker cover its tracks.

Which finally brings us to the OBX, a carefully considered exercise in extracting the absolute maximum from the basic concept. Out goes the D2905/95 to be replaced by Scan's top of the range D2905/99 Revelator, an impressive and impressively expensive unit. The bass drivers are specially selected, but it's the crossovers that receive the lion's share of the effort. Built into substantial, separate enclosures, these take the basic topology of the Avatar crossover and mount it on a large 10mm MDF board, backed with felt on which it free floats in the cabinet. The rigorously selected components are widely spaced and orientated for minimum crosstalk, whilst the cabinets themselves are stood on large (and very sharp) cones. Did I say rigorous?



▶ The components employed in the OBX crossover include Hovland capacitors, hand trimmed and matched Clarostat non-inductive wire wound resistors and air cored inductors, hand wound on the premises. All components are hand matched at the same ambient temperature to ensure consistency in the matching process itself.

Which begs the question, can selecting components, putting the crossover in a separate box and a tweeter upgrade make £1500 worth of musical difference? Let's face it, you already know the answer, otherwise I wouldn't be bothering with this review. But before I get into that there are a couple of things regarding set-up that you need to know. The first is that the external crossovers necessitate an extra set of short bi-wired speaker cables. It is essential that these are exactly the same type of cable as your main speaker cables or you risk losing many of the gains made by separating the crossovers in the first place. In fact, experiments with four runs of identical cheap cable proved the point, sounding better than a mix and match pairing of far more expensive designs from a couple of different manufacturers. In the same way, you will have to be obsessive when it comes to speaker placement and levelling. The OBXs will tell you all too clearly exactly what the effects of even tiny positional shifts are. The good news is that once they're placed the serious spikes provided mean they stay well and truly put. Kevin favours a wider than average stance for the speakers, providing massive scale and relying on their excellent pair matching to avoid the hole in the middle syndrome. I wouldn't go so far

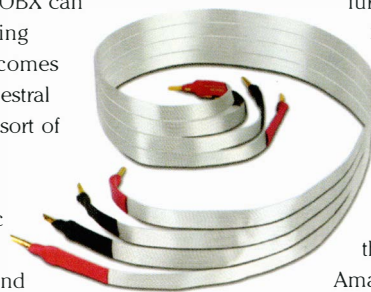


as he does, my slightly narrower placement giving a tighter soundstage and more focussed images, but that possibly reflects the fact that he spends more time listening to horns than I do. Given that all the Living Voice speakers put bringing the performance home (or should that be into your home?) top of their agenda, what does the OBX add to the presentation? What do you get for your extra money? Well, let's start with the details and, in time honoured fashion, at the bottom end. Compared to

the Avatar (by memory) the OBX's bass is faster and cleaner, a combination that also gives it more impact and presence. In fact, considering the fact that on paper it goes no deeper, the extra sense of power is actually remarkable. With that power comes precision and with that, transparency. The OBX can speak with surprising authority when it comes to large scale orchestral crescendos or the sort of subterranean bass burps that litter modern electronic music. Work on their positioning and you'll get satisfying weight and depth, even if they don't really plumb the lower reaches of big organs. But it's at the other end of the scale that things get really interesting. Listen to Ray Brown's upright on *This One's For Blanton* (the Analogue Productions gold CD, replayed this time on the fabulous Wadia 861) and not only will

you hear the marvellously lucid flow of his fingering, but you'll hear each note as a complex composite of the string, the sounding post, the body of the instrument; you'll ear the odd ghost note as his fingers brush the open string next door, the physical difficulty of the contortions in his left hand. Well you won't actually hear the contortions but you can clearly hear the slight hesitation in the flow, the touch of clumsiness in the steps as he plays a particularly difficult figure. It's the depth of this texture that makes the OBX special.

And it's not just in the bass. The unusual low end transparency (especially for a compact box like this one reaps ample dividends in the mid-band. There's no clogging or congestion. When the Duke hits his keys the energy transfer is immediate and direct. Right from those insistent, repeated opening notes the quality is clear. Again, each note is a complex, vital, vibrant thing: again you hear the structure of the mechanism that plays it. This isn't just a hammer, it's a whole collection of wood and metal parts, all contributing to the whole. So it should be no surprise that instrumental colour is high on the list of OBX attributes. In fact, I'm tempted to take it a stage



further and describe it as instrumental character. Playing the Fone disc *I Violini di Cremona*, the separate tone and nature of the different instruments is incredibly clear. From the astringence of the Amati through the nutty, rounded warmth of the Guarneri to the vibrant vivacity of the Stradivari, each is immediately identifiable. But each is also equally valid, bringing the instrument's particular beauty to the playing. This even handedness is central to the OBX's performance, the way in which it fails to favour one aspect of performance over

▶ another, voice over instrumentation, bass over mid-band. It is, as far as I can tell, as near devoid of editorial tendencies as any speaker I've ever used, being genuinely at home with whatever you throw at it. Indeed, the low level resolution is such, the preservation and presentation of those tiny amounts of vibrational energy, that you might be forgiven for ascribing the speaker musical enthusiasm. Play music and it almost seems to come to life.

The high frequencies continue the theme, and you only need to look at the way in which the OBX presents the shimmer and spray of cymbals to appreciate how much detail and texture is present without any of the normal hype and exaggeration that comes from so many speakers engineered for an impressive high-frequency response. Brush work is never detached from or overlaid on the music. Instead it is always locked in place, temporally and spatially, nailing the beat, which is exactly what it's supposed to do.

Which brings us back to what I was saying about speaker positioning. The OBX's special trick, what they bring to the party over and above the Avatar, is their spatial resolution. All the Living Voice speakers are spatially coherent, it's a key element in the scale and presence of a performance. What the OBX adds is a healthy dose of transparency, focus and stability to the overall picture. That and subtlety, which whilst it's the less obvious aspect is actually the most important of all. Think about Ray Brown's bass again. When I replay it in my mind I can picture the whole

instrument. I can hear its height and volume; I can place its position. I'm not talking about the kind of pin-point holography that comes from small cabinets and creative frequency responses. What I'm referring to is the creation of a believable whole, the presence of all its essential elements.

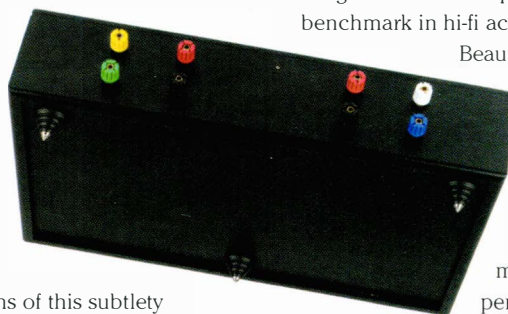
The depths of this subtlety actually creep up on you somewhat unawares. The scale of the presentation, the dynamics and overall dynamic range are what grab your attention.

But it's the low-level details that actually put the flesh on the structural bones of the music, filling out the shape and texture of the notes, the energy and intent of the players. It makes no difference whether we are talking about Salvatore Accardo sawing away at his Amati or Greg Safarty sticking it to his blond Telecaster, the import of the message is just as crucial to understanding the performance. The Living Voice speakers concentrate on delivering the musical performance to your front room. The OBX simply delivers more of it. More in fact and more in effect. The result is a level of musical insight and involvement that belies the outward simplicity of the speakers. Listen and you'll know it makes sense - both the music and the design approach. Easy to accommodate, easier to drive, the

OBX might not be that easy to afford, but with its near perfect balance of virtues and the money you save on not having to buy several hundred Watts of high quality power, it's well worth saving for. For me it represents a benchmark in hi-fi achievement.

Beautifully balanced and beautifully engineered, it delivers a more complete musical performance for your money than

anything else I've heard at even close to this price. It also stands as a monument to the value of obsessive attention to detail and a healthy scepticism when it comes to measurements. Like I said, other manufacturers could learn a thing or two from the OBX. ➤



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive Units -

Tweeter:	29mm Fabric Dome
Bass/Mid:	2 x 150mm Doped Paper
Bass Loading:	Rear Reflex Port
Impedance:	6 Ohms
Sensitivity:	94dB
Bandwidth:	-3dB at 35 Hz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	220 x 280 x 1035mm
Weight:	17 Kg
Finishes:	Various
Price:	£4000.00

Manufacturer:

Living Voice
 Stanhope House
 Harrington Mills
 Leopold St
 Long Eaton
 NG10 4QE
 United Kingdom
 Tel. (44)(0)1159 733222
 Fax. (44)(0)1159 733666
 E-mail. shout@livingvoice.co.uk
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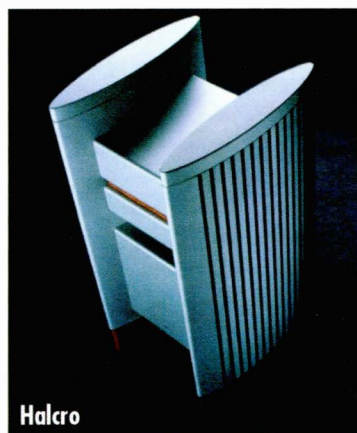


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Auditorium Avatar

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Hi-Fi Plus *Product of the Year*

Hi-Fi Choice *Editor's Choice*



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Roy Gregory

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JMLab Micro Utopia Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

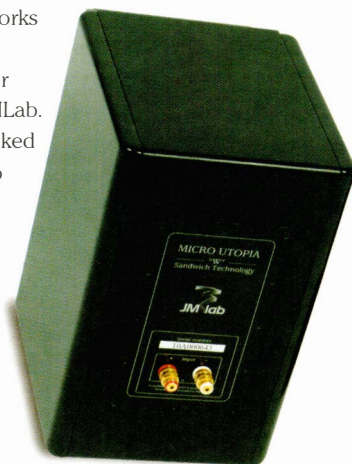
Although it's not without a twinge of unpatriotic guilt, I've become rather fond of French loudspeakers. Their cooking, wine and weather isn't bad either, so I know where to settle if I get drummed out of Britain. Come to think of it, Dominic Baker (lately of Hi-Fi World and Tannoy) has already moved over there, and is enjoying his new life in St Etienne, where he works alongside patron Jacques Mahul on the new speaker developments at Focal/JMLab.

I'd already tried and liked various Cabasse, Rehdeko and Triangle speakers before JMLab even came on the UK scene (around 1997). And the reason I'd enjoyed them, I reckon, had much to do with their individuality and idiosyncrasies; and the different insights these could bring. At the same time, such character and individuality perhaps explains why they've enjoyed only limited success outside their home market.

Not so JMLab, which is now the biggest of the French hi-fi speaker brands, and has rapidly become a serious operator across the world stage. Its speakers have their idiosyncrasies too, but they are somehow just a little less extreme, and therefore more broadly acceptable across the boundaries of international taste.

One thing that distinguishes all four of these French brands is that

each makes its own drive units, and that fact alone is, I believe, the major reason behind their individuality and charm. (The same is true of a number of British brands too of course, but many others - probably the majority - rely on OEM suppliers from Scandinavia or further afield.)



Indeed, JMLab originally started out as drive unit specialist Focal, selling to respected brands like Wilson Audio, and also enjoying considerable success amongst the in-car fraternity. The expertise that's been built up on the driver side (and earlier, when Jacques was chief engineer at Audax) is I'm sure a key reason behind the success the complete speaker systems are enjoying today.

So, let's get to the point, which is that I'm supposed to be reviewing

a compact JM Labs speaker called the Micro Utopia. It's a simple two-way stand-mount, based on a single 6.5-inch/165mm main driver and a 25mm tweeter, a configuration that is in every sense the stereotype of the hi-fi speaker today.

Unlike most examples, however, the Micro Utopia is extravagantly expensive. The Utopia's are JMLabs' very top-of-the-line range, the largest Grande Utopia model carrying a £34,000/pr price-tag. The Micro isn't quite so extreme, but £2,749/pair is still a considerable sum for a speaker of its size/type. Ours, known as Ebony, came in predominantly black lacquer finish: The Standard, with real wood bits, will set you back £3,099. The matching stands don't come cheap either, adding £749/799 respectively.

It's a very classy looking speaker, notably in the high standard of surface finish, and the complexity of the three-part front baffle. However, I couldn't call it elegant, like the floorstanding Mezzo Utopia, which provided my first experience of JMLab's Utopias back in 1998 (and which is currently one of Alvin Gold's favourites too - we can't both be wrong!) In contrast, the Micro's shape is, frankly, a little dumpy, and the term Micro seems

▶ a trifle misleading too, conjuring up a much smaller box than the reality (there was already a Mini Utopia in the range, using twin 6.5-inchers). You couldn't describe this as the miniature its name might suggest: rather it's a good size stand-mount, with around 25 litres of internal volume, and which takes up around 40 litres of room space.

If you're shooting at the moon, you've got use the very finest ingredients. The enclosure feels exceptionally solid. It's thick MDF, heavily braced and uses lead panels for mass loading/damping. The total weight here is 20kg, which probably makes it the heaviest speaker for its size I've yet encountered. Other internal damping materials are used only sparingly - there's just a lining about an inch thick of a resistive (ie non-reactive) wool-like material around the sides. Special hawser-like multi-strand cables connect the drivers to a quite complex cross-over that uses only the finest ingredients. JMLab is not into bi-wiring, so just a single pair of WBT terminals are fitted, directly through the rear panel.

The three-section front baffle is interesting, as it deliberately separates the tweeter mounting from the section to which the main driver is attached. The latter has a slight upward tilt, in the interests of driver time-alignment, while two discreet slots above and below the tweeter baffle act as reflex ports for the main driver and enclosure.

That's all very well and sensible, though no more than any other manufacturer could do. What really distinguishes the Micro from the competition is the fact that it uses the very best drive units that Focal can make. Whether they're any better or worse than the competition is of

course a matter of debate and dispute, but they are at least unique, and the company has a pretty good story to tell, on both counts.

Focal's 25mm inverted (concave) dome tweeters have long been a particular trademark of the brand, and to my mind make rather more sense than our conventional convex domes, for at least two (maybe three!) reasons. In a convex dome, the voice-coil directly drives the edge of the dome: some damping is available in the suspension outside the coil/dome, but none within the dome itself (which might be why soft self-damping fabrics are popular).

The inverted dome, however, is much more like a baby version of a regular cone driver. The coil/former behind

Focal's 25mm inverted dome is just 19mm in diameter (and therefore has lower inductance and greater high frequency extension), while a degree of damping control is also available at the dome edge. There are claims too that the inverted dome also suffers from less inherent time-smear because of its shape, and it's probably true that the whole structure ought to be inherently more rigid than an edge-driven dome.

The Utopia tweeters use titanium diaphragms, deliberately coated with a black oxide to add some surface damping. However, I suspect their real secret lies in the motor metalwork,

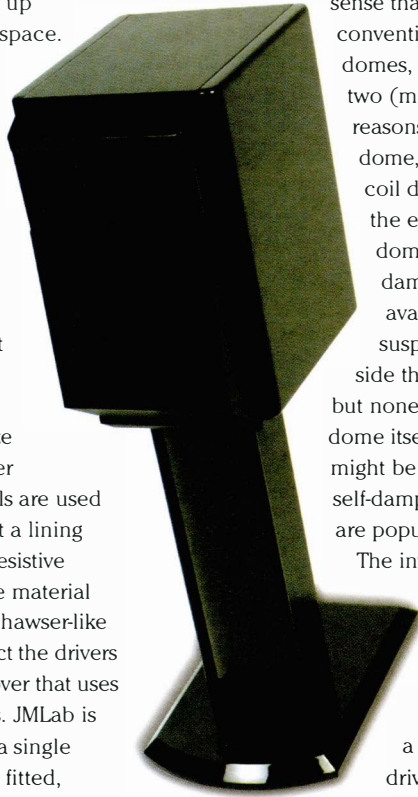
which is made from a special high purity (low carbon) Telar 57 steel. By eliminating carbon from the mix, the steel can support a much more powerful flux without magnetic saturation. (Associated problems are that it has to be made as a special forging, at considerable expense, and is also very difficult to machine.)

The 6.5-inch bass/mid driver seems conventional enough in most respects, but has a 115mm diameter cone made from a composite 'sandwich' material quite different from those used by other brands. It's called a 'W-sandwich', because what we call a 'double-u', the French call a 'double-v'. The French for glass is 'verre', and the cone here consists of a layer of structural foam held between sheets of woven and resin-impregnated glass fibres.

The extra thickness of a foam sandwich construction makes intuitive sense when trying to optimise the conflicting requirement for high stiffness and low-mass. It's not a new technique, and I'm sure many will remember the Don Barlowe designed Leak Sandwich speakers from the 1960s, which enjoyed some success in their day. Quite why the idea fell out of favour is hard to tell - perhaps consistency was a problem back then, and it has always been difficult to control the break-up modes of very stiff cones.

However, there's a far, far wider choice of synthetic foams, skins and techniques available in the 21st century than there was forty years ago, giving a much greater chance of coming up with a combination that optimises stiffness, weight and self-damping.

Enough of the story, how does this little speaker little work out in practice? I did my usual room measurements, because it always helps to know what sort of tonal balance anomalies your dealing with. Not surprisingly, the Micro Utopia was fundamentally well behaved, and essentially very smooth and even across the broad midband. In the JM Labs (and perhaps



► French) tradition, treble output looks about 1-2dB stronger than my across-the-board average. There's a slight dip in the presence zone, while bass extension is pretty limited, but also thankfully showing very good control. Interestingly, the port is tuned to a highish 70Hz, and therefore doesn't excite my 55Hz room mode.

Also interestingly, the bass alignment was somewhat smoother on JM Labs' own 53cm stands than with 60cm examples which are more or less the industry norm.

After some weeks enjoying the large and imposing Tannoy TD12s (reviewed in Issue 12), changing them for the Micro Utopias was bound to be a bit of a shock. Inevitably I missed the warmth, weight and scale of the big Tannoys, but was immediately won over by the Micro's wonderful openness and magnificent sparkle.

'It's that tweeter again', I thought, immediately recalling the Mezzo Utopia, as well as some recent Cobalts. There's just something about this little device - especially in its Utopia version - that sends a shiver up my spine. It's very fast, very clean and very good at bringing out subtle details. It brings a genuine extra sparkle to the music that I found very attractive, though my partner always complained that these speakers had rather too much top end, so I guess it's maybe at least partly a matter of personal taste and preference.

I'm speculating here, but do wonder whether JMLab runs its tweeters a little strong because they're so inherently clean, and can therefore get away with it. However, the Micro is the smallest of the Utopiae, and therefore inevitably the least weighty at the bass end of things, and that in turn leaves the top end just that little bit more exposed. I like it, but you

need to make sure you like it too if you're contemplating this speaker.

I don't know whether it's in any way associated with the brightness, but I did find this speaker remarkably articulate, especially when replaying speech at very low levels.

I've gone on a bit about this bright character because it's the first thing

you notice, and one reason you notice it is that the rest of this speaker is so good. It took a little while to adjust to the slightly lightweight bottom end, and I missed the sort of scale that a large

loudspeaker brings to full orchestral music. (It was the middle of the Proms season at the time, which is when a lot of orchestral music gets played in this household.) But what bassthere is has considerable verve, life and agility. Much more than most, there's virtually no box

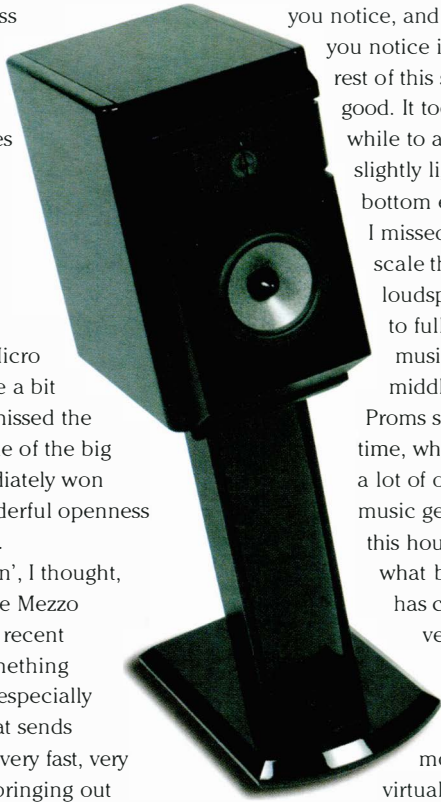
signature here, and since the bass alignment is essentially tight, and free from heavy port output, so you hear just what the driver and port are doing, largely unencumbered by cabinet coloration. The agility and clarity is so good, the mild lack of ultimate weight and warmth soon seems to fade into the background and lose much of its importance.

The mid-band is quite delightful. It's substantially free from coloration, barring a slight nasality on speech, and delivers lively and subtle dynamic expression with a notably wide dynamic range. I've never been very good at picking up on the lyrics of

some of my favourite musicians, and quickly found the Micros unravelling some longstanding mysteries. Fine overall coherence and a compact box are the perfect recipe for the sort of stereo image precision that few large speakers can match.

But arguably most impressive of all is this speaker's remarkable powers of analysis. I had a collection of different speaker stands around at the time, and was deeply impressed at how easy it was to distinguish between them when using the Micros. The same is true of other components, whether electronic or merely conductive, such as cables.

This is probably not the ideal speaker if you want to be enveloped in a warm and romantic sound. A daresay some may find the Micro Utopia a tad clinical and maybe a little too analytical. Others will love its lively openness, and the effortless way it tells you so much about your music and your system. I'm firmly in the latter camp. If there's a better stand-mount out there, I've yet to hear it. ►+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way bass reflex
Drivers - HF:	25mm ti-oxide inverted dome
LF:	160mm W sandwich cone
Efficiency:	90dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms (4.8 minimum)
Bandwidth:	50Hz - 25kHz ±3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	265x430x415mm
Weight:	20kg
Finishes:	lack or Anigre Veneer with piano black baffle
Prices:	See Text

UK Distributor:

FJ UK
Tel 012-616-5126
E-mail. info@focal-jmlabs.co.uk
Net. www.focal-jmlabs.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Focal Jmlab
Net. www.focal-jmlab.fr

THE INNER EAR REPORT



Gershman Acoustics Opera Sauvage Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

This review represents another contribution from Canadian magazine The Inner Ear Report, offering us the opportunity to bring you news and views on products that have yet to see the light of day on this side of the Atlantic. In this case, Editor Ernie Fisher gets more than a little carried away over a new flagship model from one of Canada's most interesting speaker designers...

Well, we saw it coming, or more precisely, our Editor saw it in development and heard this no-holds-barred design prior to completion. The Opera Sauvage is the Gershman's flagship model which took two years to develop and another few months to get it right. Sauvage, by the way, is the French word for "wild or savage", "fierce" and "intense" (as we shall see later on, the OSs could be considered "savage beasts" and they may cause "intense" listening). This unusual design, shaped like a canoe that has been cut in half, is the crowning achievement of Eli Gershman's career as a designer and a quantum leap from the company's humble beginnings eight years ago. Gershman has introduced new models almost every year and now boasts a line-up of nine models ranging in price from Cdn \$1,600. None of the Gershman speakers are inexpensive, but all designs are priced in line with performance, and performance cannot be measured in terms of cash value alone. Let's get right to the Opera Sauvage...

Appearance:

As mentioned above and visible

from the photograph, these large boat-shaped speakers look surprisingly smaller in a living/listening room. Their footprint is 15 inches deep and 18 inches wide and they stand 52 inches high. Finished in immaculate veneers, the front baffle is covered with a black grille, stretched over a relatively heavy frame. The cabinets rest on cones, rather than spikes, to eliminate potential resonance-based interference. The rear of each enclosure accommodates the (tuning) port and four massive five-way, gold plated binding posts to allow bi-wiring or bi-amping. Though large, these loudspeakers are easy to set up in a small listening room, but will fill an auditorium-size listening environment with sound. When placing these speakers, you would be well advised to ask a couple of your strongest friends to help, as they each weigh 210 pounds. Once placed, they offer an exceptionally beautiful addition, easily integrating with almost any decor.

Technology:

This is where it begins to be interesting, as the design addresses a loudspeaker's most common problem - vibration and the resulting resonances. When we first saw the shape of these cabinets we knew that something special was at work here,



but we couldn't compute how it was done. Of course, we missed the obvious. The Opera Sauvage cabinets are made from eighteen layers of 1 inch MDF cut to the shape of the external dimensions, thereby creating an enclosure of outstanding rigidity. The layers of MDF are glued together and when assembled, form three rounded, arch-like, separate internal chambers. A 100 litre chamber accommodates two ten-inch dual voice coil woofers, a 10 litre

chamber holds the six-inch midrange driver and another small chamber contains the tweeter. As these chambers form a natural, asymmetric environment for the drivers, internal standing waves and other acoustic problems are eliminated. The shape also eliminates the need for additional bracing - often another source of interference. The bass and midrange drivers are customized Gershman designs, while the tweeter is made by Dyneaudio. The system is crossed over at 150Hz and 2kHz with a first-order crossover from mid to bass and a second-order from mid to highs. Polypropylene caps, air-core and iron core inductors and OFC wiring complete the system(s). Frequency response is from 19Hz (-4dB) to 20kHz (-2dB); nominal impedance is

▶ 8 ohms, efficiency is 89dB @1w/1m. All in all, except for the enclosures' construction technique, nothing here is far beyond the usual in speaker design, until we get to...

The Sound:

For our auditioning sessions we used the new Wyetech Lab Topaz and the Redgum monoblocks. Thus we had two very different amplifiers, representing a superb vacuum tube design, and a particularly excellent (Australian) amp/pre-amp combination. With the Topaz power amplifier, we used the Wyetech Lab Opal pre-amplifier. For some of our listening sessions, we used Nordost's SPM speaker cable and Quattro Fil interconnects. For later sessions, however, we used Nordost's brand new Valhalla interconnects and speaker cables. Source components included our regular Elite transport and Audio Alchemist DAC/DTI Pro, as well as the Audio Aero CD player. (Talk about high-end).

First impressions: Wow! As we began playing back the first CD, well-known and loved by every panellist, most of us couldn't believe the sheer energy, dynamics and bass (as deep as a bottomless well). The new Topaz was a match made in audio heaven, complementing the Gershmans by providing enough power for authentic dynamics, exercising absolute control over bass and fulfilling exquisite culmination at midrange and high frequencies. We then bombarded the system with jazz, classical and folk to find out if what we first noted was possible with all program material. It was, and, as a bonus, some rather ordinarily produced albums were now 'listenable'. Our Editor noted that vocal reproduction almost forced him to listen to the words that (habitually) he

ignores. We noticed that some material actually contained bass energy we had never heard before: that's low bass at its best resolution and allowing harmonics below the fundamentals to literally rise to the occasion. Highs, midrange and bass are in complete harmony and come across seamlessly, clear, resolute and ever-so-spatial. Considering the size of these speakers, imaging can be called multi-dimensional, with absolute focus on instruments and voices, on a wide and very deep sound stage.

With the Redgum system, the OSs sounded a little more on the soft side, but still managed exemplary resolution across the audible bandwidth. Whereas the Topaz introduced more overall transparency to the sound, the Redgum radiated pleasant musicality with slightly diminished frequency extremes.

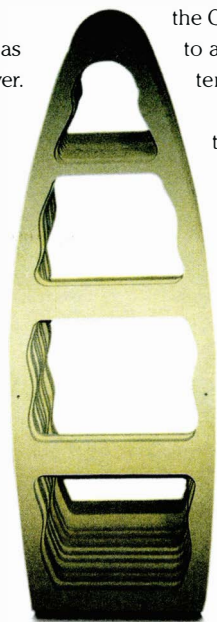
The overall sound, however, was entirely pleasing and showed that the Gershmans will adapt readily to amplifier/pre-amplifier systems of good quality.

The change of cables from the "ordinary" Nordost SPM/Quattro Fil to the new (and expensive) Valhalla models increased the spatial information, introduced deeper, more robust bass information and upped the overall sound by another 10% or so. A huge improvement in terms of high-end audio; and at a huge expense. However, when a great system can be improved, we believe that the additional investment is justified.

As the OSs are full-range designs with utmost resolving calibre, they will sound their best when the volume (gain) is high enough to produce around 80dB sound pressure levels: that's loud enough for serious listening, but may be a touch too loud for late night listening - and this may be their only draw-back.

Synopsis & Commentary:

In this business, surprises are few and far between for the seasoned reviewer. Though we had heard these speakers on at least three occasions, we had never heard what they could achieve when components are chosen to complement the system. Never before had the Opera Sauvage speakers sounded as fulfilling as they did in our studio. This should alert potential buyers to select their components with the utmost care and thoughtful attention. The amplifiers used for this evaluation rendered absolutely fascinating sound, but the degree of accuracy is in the hands of the buyer. It must be understood that amplifiers and back-up components are of the utmost importance when assembling a system that includes \$12,000 loudspeakers and it stands to reason that an inexpensive amplifier simply doesn't cut it. However, our in-house amplifiers did a wonderful job and we are certain that many more can be considered for a synergistic system. As in our tests, one amplifier may supply accuracy and musicality, another may offer more musicality than accuracy and another still might offer more resolving calibre. The choice is the end-user's based on personal taste - a luxury out of reviewers' hands. As reviewers, however, we can say that the Opera Sauvages are capable of handling all information with both accuracy and musicality - a combination achieved only by the best in the business. With the Opera Sauvage, Gershman has succeeded in producing loudspeakers that belong in the world-class category. The rating is done by our Editor who stated that "if our rating system had five musical notes, the Gershmans would qualify".



Price: \$15,500.00 US £12,500.00
 Rating: 4 musical notes
 Source: Gershman Acoustics

Equipment supports – wake up at the back! – might not seem exciting but how about saving the cost of a system upgrade? There are serious benefits.

Squidgy – or solid?

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squidgy isolation devices trap these tremors, softening sound-staging.

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OPERA SP-1 Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

Simplicity in audio design is rarely a bad thing. When it comes to small loudspeakers there is an undeniable elegance in keeping things straightforward and uncomplicated and such clarity of thought here is often rewarded with clarity of musical expression farther along the line. All designers who work on small loudspeakers are looking for that bit extra and this usually means low frequency extension. After all, how many times have you heard the phrase "That's got good bass-for such a small speaker"? Bass! It's complicated and unfriendly stuff isn't it? All components, whether we're talking CD players, turntables, amplifiers, cables, equipment supports or of course loudspeakers, have enormous problems with it. And even if we can wring an understandable version of it from our systems, we have problems fitting it into our listening rooms where it gets trapped in corners, bounces about all over the place, doubles up on itself and makes things rattle, including the equipment that we are trying to play it through in the first place. Most bass players I know have a love/ hate relationship with the stuff too and have embarked on a life-long journey through mountains of instruments, strings, amplifiers and electronic gadgetry in an effort to make their undoubted prowess understandable or even audible to their audience. Beautifully characterised by Derek Smalls from *Spinal Tap* they are prepared to sacrifice the glamour and the fiddly bits to the lead guitarist while they themselves are more concerned with being solid, profound,



dependable and at one with the drummer. They are team players, darker in character where the lead guitarists are mavericks who can only afford to take so many rhythmic liberties because the bass player and drummer are back home, holding the fort, locked in time. Oh, and the lead guitarist gets all the girls too.

Loudspeaker bass is a problem as well. There is either too much, too little or it is not well enough controlled and the interactions between our loudspeakers and our rooms are still as troublesome as they always have been. But there is a solution, especially for

small rooms. Small speakers solve many of the problems that bass brings by simply not having any. Manufacturers might claim, through measurement, that their designs plumb the frequency depths, but a small driver in a small box plus the laws of physics say otherwise. This is not such a bad thing in many ways. A good littl'un will let you understand exactly what is going on down there note-wise but won't have the extension, weight or energy to rattle your rib-cage with sheer physical presence.

On the other hand they can bring an unrestricted view of the all-important mid-band, which is where most of the musical information resides and I think this is one of the reasons they are growing in popularity. Have you noticed how many high-quality small box loudspeakers are arriving on the market these days?

For the past several weeks I have been living with a very small loudspeaker in the shape of the Opera SP-1. This is the smallest of a four speaker range from the Italian company, all of which are characterised by the use of both solid hardwoods and boat-backs in their cabinets. There is an undeniable look and finish to the Operas which suggests furniture and a precise build quality that hints at musical instrument construction. One of the big benefits open to the designer of cabinets of such meagre proportions is the chance to achieve exceptional rigidity and the tremendous benefits that brings in terms of resonance control. The cabinet of the SP-1 is made from only four parts – body, baffle, top and

▶ bottom. The body is the most interesting due to its shape which is formed, like the sides of an acoustic guitar, by the application of heat as it is gradually bent over a former. This oval boat-back gives the speaker certain advantages internally, helping to eliminate standing waves by denying any corners or parallel edges to the acoustic energy within. Even the top is fitted at an angle. Cabinet walls are 25mm thick hardwood which is tongue and grooved all round and then glued making for a very rigid little enclosure indeed. The baffle too is hardwood and is almost entirely filled with the two drivers and a reflex port, slightly flared to reduce turbulence around its leading edge.

While most comparatively sized/priced competitors I have heard have a tendency to cut costs at the tweeter the SP-1 designers have shrewdly specified a quality SEAS unit from their top series of drivers. This is a 27mm silk dome type modified specifically for use in the SP series. The bass unit is also sourced from SEAS and is a mere 11cm in size (and shielded). The tweeter is slightly offset on the baffle to make way for the reflex port though I was slightly surprised that they were not supplied in mirror image pairs and that Opera had chosen a hard framed clip-in grille. Given that quality speakers of such limited dimensions usually excel at pin-point imagery I would have thought that putting a surrounding of hard edges around it might be undesirable and that a Velcro attached foam type might have been preferable. There is a single pair of WBT-type gold-plated rear connectors so bi-wiring is not an option.

As with all loudspeakers you can make or break the performance of the

SP-1 quite easily depending on how and what you use them with. Small speakers such as this require just as much consideration as floor standing designs and often a lot more, as their bass performance energy-wise is so marginal. Firstly, the SP-1 is inefficient at only 86dB and can soak up power like a sponge so I would say that an amplifier with a good 30 watts output is the minimum requirement.



A Naim Nait 5 will do the job, providing you don't require really high levels but given this you will also need an amplifier that has a bit of weight and strength to its sound. Thin, weedy amplifiers, regardless of their ability to supply detail should be avoided. A bit of flesh on the bone is desirable. Supports are also going to be critical and although Opera can supply stands that are adorned with matching slabs of wood, these were not provided. I settled on a pair of Kudos S60's though the extra height of the S100's would probably be an even better bet

in my room. The biggest challenge will come when choosing a position for them. Put simply, you are going to have to utilise the wall effect to augment the Opera's bass performance to some extent and just how close to a rear wall you site them is going to depend on your own individual circumstances. Pulled away from the wall and out into the room I found them far too lean and strident and after much experimentation ended up using them a mere 8 inches from the rear wall and far closer

to a corner than I expected. Only in this position did the speaker have anything like a reasonable balance across its bandwidth. Anyone who has heard Italian speakers surely cannot have failed to notice that they generally seem to have a smooth, rounded treble with a somewhat safe, even muted overall balance. Some less charitable souls have even called them boring and undynamic and though ▶

► I would not go that far, I can recall struggling before resorting to brute power to rouse certain Sonus Faber's from their slumbers with very little effect. Coincidentally I quite recently heard a pair of the larger floor standing Opera speakers, though not from the SP series and found those too to be very laid back and even a little soft. So the SP-1 came as something of a shock with its relative forwardness and cutting edge. In short it's a bit bright. But the good news is that the tweeter can handle it and this helps give the speaker terrific articulation right through the range and though I think that the designer has been quite bold by settling on this particular balance I still feel it does run a little hot. Adding the grilles though manages to rein things in a little and this certainly helps integrate the sound into presenting a more even balanced picture.

At low levels they are not at their best. But they do gather themselves up as more power is applied and finally click into focus as the centre fills with sound. Now there is a very detailed and wide soundstage, unhindered by blurred bass. Depth is not that great and the musical picture before you starts at the plane of the speakers and extends forward into the room rather than behind. With such a small bass driver and tight cabinet their responsiveness to the music is tremendously fast and dynamic as the system can gain and lose energy really quickly and this makes for an involving listening experience. Not always relaxed you understand, but always interesting. Not that comfortable listening has ever been on the top of Jeff Beck's list of priorities as his last two CD releases have shown. The aptly named *You Had It Coming* (EPIC 501018 2) offers proof that, though he must be well into his 50's, Beck remains one of the most pushy and innovative electric guitarists around. He has absolutely refused to allow himself to slip into a comfortable and lucrative

niche like Clapton or Santana who are both still playing essentially the same licks that they were 30 years ago. Beck is different and he puts his music together in another way altogether. And though he is capable of the most beautifully sensitive playing ('Declan', from his previous album *Who Else!* won my personal award for Most Emotional Bit Of Guitar Playing of last year), much of his music mirrors and mimics the raw shredding power of one of his beloved American V8 hot-rod engines. To be honest I didn't give the SP-1 a lot of chance on this music but, thanks in no small part to that expansive mid-band and tweeter they really surprised me. Take track two 'Roy's Toy' where the sharp start-stop control of the speaker rams the rhythmic message home like a sharp dig in the ribs. This is not a situation where finesse or delicately coloured tonality is needed, though Beck's playing is wonderfully and deceptively precise. It must be played very loud and is surely meant to be a little uncomfortable and any system that sanitises it is missing the point. The SP-1 was real edge-of-the-seat here.

I liked the way the Operas dealt with Tony Joe Whites *Lake Placid Blues* (Remark 537 530-2). His voice is the star and though he is not overly concerned with singing in tune, there is a wonderful lived-in atmosphere to the vocal that contrasts with the sweet thinness of his vintage Strat absolutely perfectly. It is this contrast that the SP-1's handle so well. For such a small speaker and limited sized bass/mid unit there is wonderful separation and musical space here. The vocal and the balance pushes Tony Joe's angst and general moodiness right into the room with you, which is what close-miking is all about. The chugging, swampy feel of the up-tempo tracks as the musicians just lay off the beat slightly to give it that rhythmic drawl are opened up by the terrific integration and speed of the two drivers.

While some small speakers perform well in larger spaces the Opera SP-1 is, to me, a small-room speaker that needs care and understanding, particularly in the choice of amplifier, if it is to deliver its considerable potential. It's a speaker for those who prize quality above quantity. It is very limited in the bass department as far as extension goes; perhaps too limited for many that could easily accommodate a speaker of greater size and wider bandwidth, all of which Opera themselves can supply with their other models. While in itself the limitations in extension are absolutely understandable, given the diminutive size of the cabinet, there is a lack of body and weight to the sound that admittedly vanishes to a large degree, with level. Don't let that overshadow the plus points: the eloquent quality of both the mid-band and tweeter that is exceptional in a speaker of this price. It might not be the easy choice, but it might just be the most rewarding. My appetite has been whetted enough to want to hear the rest of the range. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Design:	Two-way reflex loaded
Drive Units - HF:	SEAS 27mm Silk Dome
Type - Bass/Mid:	SEAS 11.1cm Shielded
Sensitivity:	86dB
Bandwidth:	60-20,000 Hz
Impedance:	8 Ohm (min. 6 Ohm)
Dimensions (HxDxW):	285x225x155mm
Finishes:	Check for availability.
Weight:	10kgs. Pair
Price:	£525 per pair.

UK Distributor:

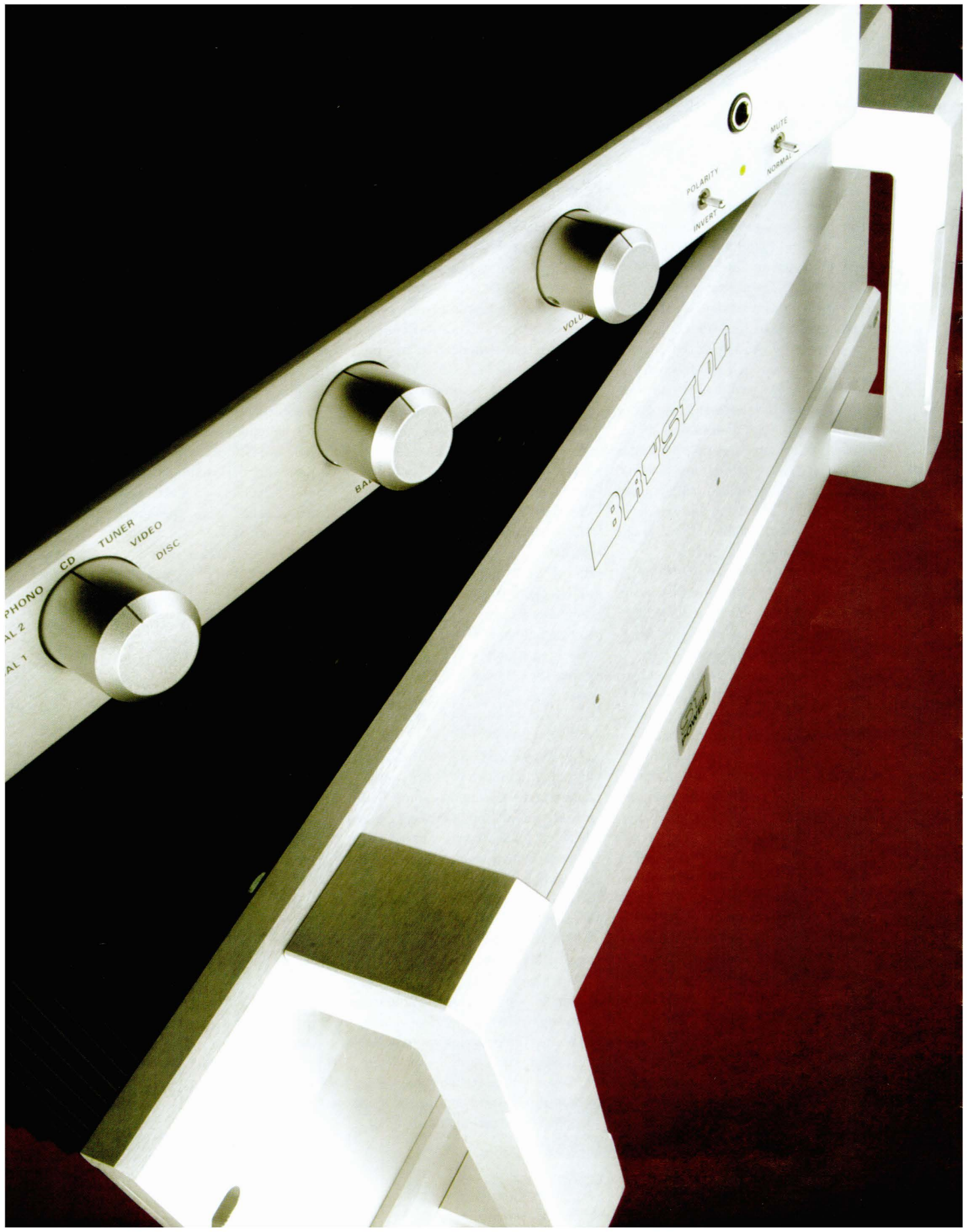
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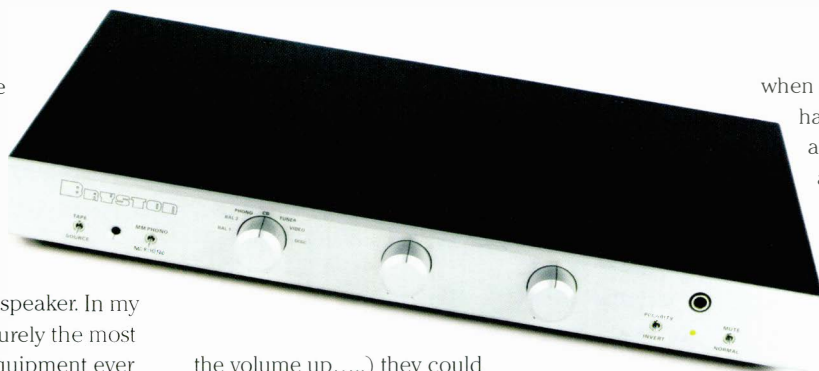
The Bryston BP25 Pre-amplifier and 14B-ST Power Amplifier

by Chris Binns

Looking back, there are certain hi-fi products I have owned that I regard with a degree of affection, and regret getting rid of. One such example

is the Gale GS 401 loudspeaker. In my estimation, they were surely the most elegant piece of hi fi equipment ever made, and this might go some way to explaining the enormous lengths that I went to in order to get them sounding good. Due to their inefficiency and cruel load they were apt to destroy amplifiers on a regular basis, and if that sounds suprising don't forget that this was 1977 and amps were not what they are today. To make matters worse it seemed to me that the 401 only began to work properly when you wound it up, which suited my musical tastes if not my neighbours. But finding an amplifier that sounded good while being capable of sustaining this kind of abuse was proving to be no easy task - the Naim 250 sounded great, but used to thermally shut down after half an hour or so of loud music.

The world of professional amplification wasn't much help either. At the time, the heavy weight contenders that were most often seen in recording studios were the Amcron DC 300a and BGW. Designed to be bomb proof, and withstand the antics of bored engineers (putting 9" of solder across the output terminals and turning



when the situation has necessitated a powerful amplifier. Sadly, that has included the indignities of being used for everything from studio monitoring through to the

the volume up.....) they could certainly deliver masses of power all day long, but must rank as some of the most musically dull and uninteresting amplifiers that have ever existed.

And then I encountered the Bryston. A friend of mine had purchased a power amplifier in the states and brought it back with him, and a session with the Gales suggested that here was an amplifier with all the right credentials for professional use, but with a dynamic and musical performance to boot. As luck would have it, London hi-fi retailer KJ Leisuresound had obviously reached a similar conclusion and started bringing them in to the country, so I ended up buying a 4B power amp. Big, black and ugly, there was nothing externally to distinguish it from any other large professional amplifier.

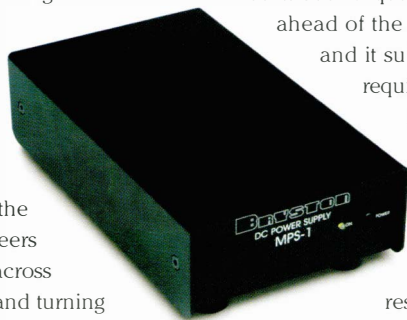
But its sound quality was streets ahead of the competition, and it suited my requirements perfectly.

I've still got it. Although no longer in the front line of my hi fi system, it has come to the rescue many times

odd PA, and as such it enjoys the accolade of surviving the fateful task of amplifying my voice in the heady days of my singing career. The Bryston has been through every torture possible, with never a squeak or blown fuse of complaint.

But get this. The guarantee only ran out last September. Twenty years! If that doesn't inspire confidence in a product, nothing will.

Now distributed in this country by PMC loudspeakers, there has been a gentle but painstaking evolution based on the original models introduced over twenty years ago. The objectives then were to produce amplification that would drive any loudspeaker with great accuracy and very low levels of distortion, a challenge that continues to preoccupy the company to this day. This must in one respect make Bryston pretty unfashionable in the hi-fi industry, where technical measurement would seem to have gone by the board, and judging by the success of SET amplification, low distortion is not a priority. But, for once the recording industry's continued fascination for specification first, sound quality second has at least worked in its



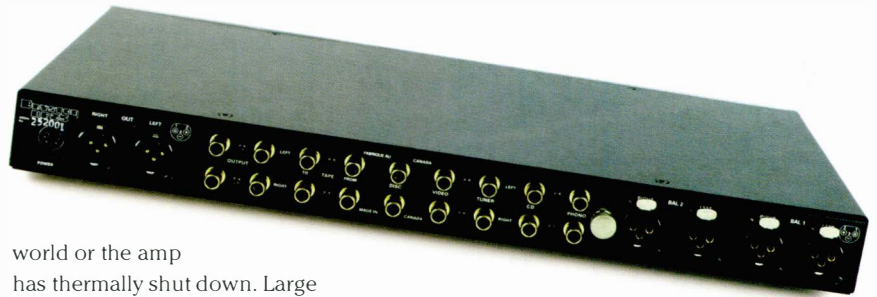
► favour and means that the Bryston has been accepted with open arms, and is used extensively by many large studios such as the Townhouse in London. Which traditionally, of course, is no recommendation for a hi-fi amp.

For review I actually received not just a power amp but a pre-power combination. The BP 25 is a straightforward remote controlled pre-amplifier with an integral MM/MC phono stage and five line inputs, two of which are balanced. One tape loop is provided, while remaining controls are for balance, MC/MM selection, mute and phase invert.

The moving coil input is based around the use of transformers rather than an active section, which means that load adjustment is not available. The remote control caters for volume, mute and phase, and although the buttons feel a bit tacky, it works – for once with a decent range and acceptance angle.

Good quality connectors are used, while the power supply is housed in a separate box that can be sited away from the main unit and left switched on. Slim and elegant, the BP25 retains just enough of its professional heritage to look functional, and is available in silver or black.

The 14B ST is something of a lump. An elegant purposeful looking lump however, the silver front panel bereft of any controls save the touch sensitive switch that activates the unit out of standby. Two led's turn from red to green after a few seconds and indicate that the unit is ready for use, in the unlikely event that you manage to drive the amplifier into clipping, they will flash red. If, heaven forbid they go to orange, it is either the end of the



world or the amp has thermally shut down. Large heatsinks run down either side of the unit, and the back panel carries the power/breaker switch, balanced and unbalanced inputs and a single set of hefty output terminals. Useful additions include remote standby switching from a pre-amp and a selectable extra 6dB of sensitivity on the balanced input.



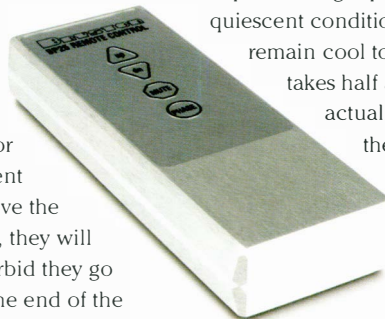
Internal construction is to a high standard, and is effectively a dual mono design, where each channel consists of two power amplifiers in a bridge arrangement, fed from its own massive power supply. The ST suffix on the Bryston power amps refers to designer Stuart Taylor, who has re-engineered the layout around new Motorola bi-polar output devices to even further reduce noise and distortion. The 14B is unusual in that despite leaving it powered up, under quiescent conditions the heat sinks remain cool to the touch, and it takes half an hour or so of

actually playing music for the output stage to reach its operating temperature and thus realise its full potential. Which, of course

is quite considerable, just in terms of its prodigious output capabilities. With 500 Watts available into 8 Ohms and nigh on a Kilowatt into four, this must rate as one of the biggest amplifiers I have used in a domestic system. So what? The days in which this kind of thing impressed me have long since gone (really...) and there are aspects of an amplifiers performance that I value far more, most of which seem to bear no relation to measured performance. So it was quite easy to be patient and let the brand new Bryston combination run in for a couple of weeks.

Where to begin? The BP 25 seemed to be equally at home with CD or vinyl, while the internal phono stage was good enough to not have to think about a separate unit. Compared to the Pass Labs Aleph Ono (itself the price of the Bryston) it was characterised by a warmer sound, with slightly less definition and apparent detail, but held its own very effectively with rhythm and pace.

As a relatively long term user of valve amplification, when I get to listen to a large solid state set up in my system the first thing I notice is the quality of the bass, where traditionally superior current delivery and control come in to their own. Closely followed by frustration at the curious inability of most large amplifiers to project music away from the loudspeakers to allow for a more intimate connection with the music. Well, score one for the bass performance, which is the best I have ever heard coming from the Primary monitors. There was a coupling here that allowed incredible grip, speed ►



► and dynamics, with an extension that revealed hitherto unexplored depths. In particular, kick drum was conveyed with incredible precision and lack of overhang, allowing you to hear all other bass information without any smearing and thus startling clarity. The Bryston had the loudspeakers well and truly in its grip and wouldn't let go, regardless of level or program material.

What I didn't expect was everything else. With such a firm foundation to build upon, mid and top performance was clean, detailed and articulate, indeed, as it should be, but there was that wonderful elusive quality that allows music to wrap itself around you and demand your full attention. So far, most of the squeaky clean variety of high power solid state amplifiers that pass through my living room have singularly failed to achieve this, and ultimately have left me unmoved with their performance. Not unrelated to this is a lack of discrimination over listening levels – the Bryston system allowed probably some of the loudest sustained listening sessions I have had, with no apparent restrictions on dynamics, apart from potentially blowing up my loudspeakers. But despite its heroic capabilities, it doesn't have to be operated at full tilt, and is quite capable of providing a musically satisfying performance while keeping the dynamic envelope intact at more modest levels, much to the relief of the rest of the household.

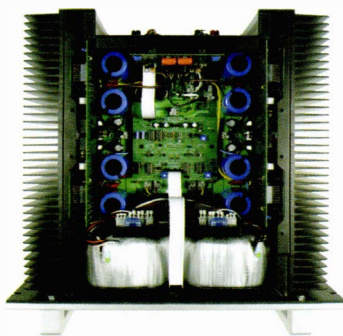
But I couldn't help turning the wick up while listening to some old Traffic albums, in particular *John Barleycorn Must Die* which still stands as one of the greatest arguments for analogue recording circa 1970. The sound of the drums, in particular was so real as to be an embarrassment to many modern recordings, and despite owning this

record for nigh on thirty years, I think this is the most exciting I have ever heard it. It goes without saying that there then followed a night of extreme nostalgia for which I offer no excuses – I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

But the Bryston also had the capability of being subtle when required, revealed in all its glory when playing string music. Playing a new recording of Gerald Finzi's *Cello Concerto* on Naxos demonstrated a wonderful range of tonal colour and texture, rich and full bodied, without the rather bleached emaciated quality some solid state amps possess.

The Bryston does everything I would expect from a high quality solid state amplifier. If that sounds like a guarded statement, it is – but I will go on to say that it is also one of the very few designs that has managed to turn my head away from valve amplification. The combination of that fluid and engaging quality with no apparent restriction of the operating envelope forms a temptation that I find difficult to resist. So there we have it.

An amplifier with a spectacular specification, which for once hasn't resulted in a technically marvellous but musically boring and uninvolved product. And if the thought of an amplifier with a professional heritage starts to ring alarm bells, turn them off. For once you can have your cake and eat it. And bear in mind that there is a good chance that the next disc you buy could have been mixed on a Bryston amplifier.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

14B-ST power amplifier

Power output:	500 Watts into 8 Ohms
Input impedance:	15 K Ohms balanced 50 K Ohms unbalanced
Input sensitivity:	1 Volt for 100 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD)	482.5 x 177.5 x 482.5mm
Weight:	38.5 Kg
Finishes:	Black or Silver
Price:	£4950

BP 25 Pre amplifier

Inputs:	2 balanced 4 line and 1 disc
Input sensitivity:	
Balanced:	1 volt / 15 K Ohms
Unbalanced:	500 mV / 50 K Ohms
Phono:	5 mV / 47 K Ohms
M/C:	0.35 mV / 180 Ohms
Outputs:	1 balanced, 2 RCA, 1 tape output
Output level:	> 15volts into 600 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432 x 45 x 320mm
Finishes:	Black or Silver
Price:	£2175

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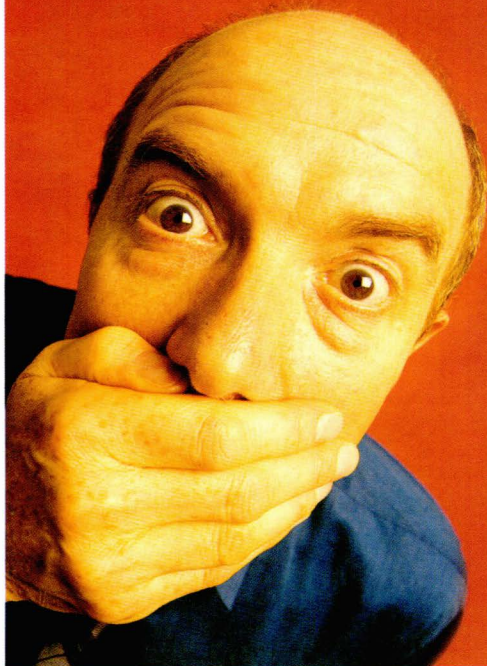
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Dynavector HX75 Power Amplifier

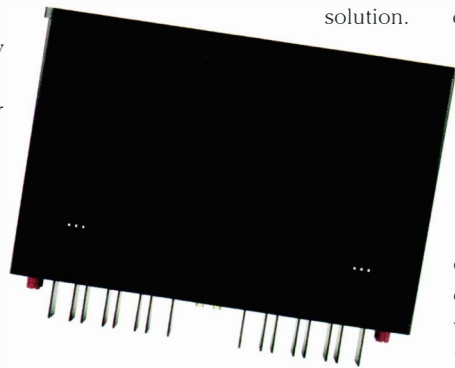
by Jason Hector

The times they are a changing, and so is my system. In fact, going back to re-read the original profile that I wrote for Issue 1 of Hi-Fi+ I was astonished to see just how much had changed, constituting something of a swerve from a previously well-trodden path. Basically, I've always considered myself part of the hard-line flat-earth fraternity: musical timing and rhythmic coherence was the absolute key for me. In the past though this meant losing some transparency, bandwidth at the frequency extremes and tonal accuracy (the last of these was probably compromised the least) in my quest for that last ounce of rhythmic intensity. Now, through hearing various bits of kit I have realised that perhaps I don't need to lose quite so much to attain the musical coherence I constantly pursue. In fact I think my particular Holy Grail was actually slightly false and the sort of metronomic leading edge timing I was looking for doesn't exist in reality, or at least it doesn't exist all of the time. More importantly it simply wasn't beneficial to my long term enjoyment of my record collection.

One piece of equipment that particularly impressed and really forced me to reconsider my final goal was the Lavardin IS Reference, an amplifier which although under powered with my speakers offered a new insight into many recordings. So the hunt was on to find an amplifier that offers similar gains in musicality

but is capable of driving my speakers of choice. The amplifier that has eventually stuck its head over the parapet without having it knocked off is the Dynavector HX75.

The Dynavector amplifiers are distributed in the UK by John Burns of Pear Audio. They, along with my favourite Shahinian loudspeakers, the Well Tempered turntables and Dynavector cartridges form a complete Pear Audio record playing solution.



But although Dynavector is the brand name, the amps are actually designed in Australia and manufactured in New Zealand. The whys and wherefores are a little complex and read like a Hi-Fi soap script but here goes; in the seventies Dick Shahinian and Stuart Hegeman worked at Harman Kardon and had a serious influence on each other. A few years later and Hegeman having moved on to collaborate with Bedini, whose subsequent amplifiers were famous for using Hexfet transistors to produce both enormous power and

considerable musical quality on the odd occasion when they weren't producing lots of black smoke (through their poor reliability). Frank Denson imports hi-fi into New Zealand including the Shahinian speakers. Trouble was, like a lot of people, he didn't really have a satisfying amplifier to drive them (power hungry beasts that they can be). Rather than scour the planet for the legendary big amplifier that's actually musical, he decided that the Bedinis could be used as a basis for a new range of amps to be designed by Jonathon Davies (the Australian connection and fellow Shahinian user, but also influenced by Hegeman). So the Dynavectors were born. Dynavectors? Why Dynavectors? Don't they make cartridges? Yep they do and it turns out that Frank Denson is good friends with (and New Zealand importer for) cartridge guru Dr. Tominari of Dynavector. Dr. T. allowed Frank to use his brand name to sell the amps, so you see it all links up in the end.

In this review I'll be describing the performance of the baby power amp, the HX75. Baby it is, but only because the other power amp in the range is the big HX1.2, an amp that, by reputation, can drive any loudspeaker. Priced at £2000 and rated at 100 Watts it is half the price of the HX1.2 and about the same price and similar paper power as the NAP250 which usually performs power amplifier duties in my system. It proved to be an interesting

► comparison. As the Dynavector amps were partially conceived to drive Shahinians and I use a pair of Obelisks, I was expecting good results. But for some unfathomable reason it turns out that not everyone has a pair of Shahinians in their system, so I made sure that I also did plenty of listening with the Royd RR1 (reviewed in Issue 13) and their bigger brothers the RR2. As it turned out both the Royds and the Shahinians thrived equally on the fast, clean, powerful and musical HX75.

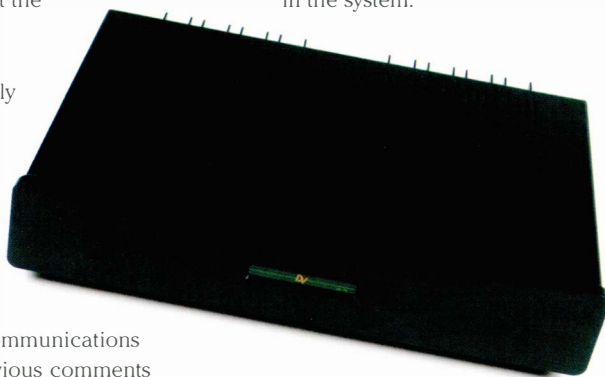
The build quality and finish is solid if slightly basic. From the front you see a thick panel with a milled slot from which a back-lit red DV logo subtly glows. The case is all aluminium, as Jonathon Davies knows all about the harm that comes from ferrous materials. The Spartan rear panel sports a pair of phono inputs, an

IEC socket/switch block and a single pair of 4mm binding posts per channel. Not a lot, but then what else do you really need a power amp to have? Oh some decent sized heat sinks: those stick out at the back as well.

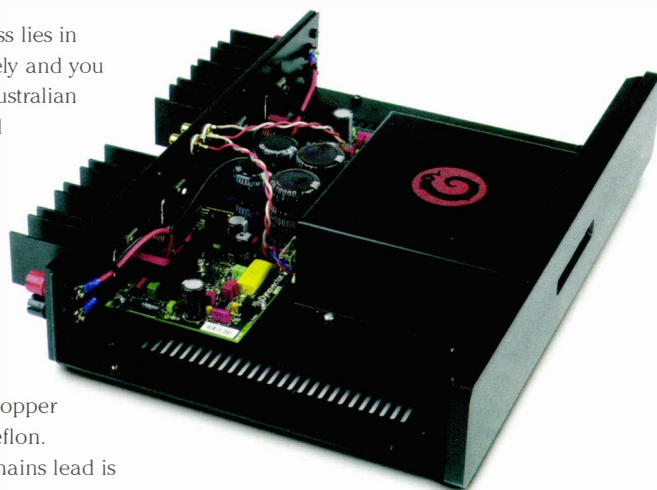
The Dynavector amplifiers are outwardly simple but internally it's a different story. Here they make use of some advanced technology that Jonathon Davies gets to see in his other job as a designer of communications electronics. Given previous comments and the Bedini connection you might be forgiven for thinking that HX stands for Hexfet. Well it doesn't. Those exotic devices proved to be just too temperamental in practice. Instead, the HX amplifiers employ ultra linear FETs in an extremely efficient circuit, both in terms of components and power consumption. In fact, even driven hard the HX75 barely gets warm and with its clothes off it all looks very simple. As usual the devil

and the key to success lies in the detail. Look closely and you will find ultra-pure Australian copper which is used to form the windings of the specially designed low impedance toroidal transformer and the tracks of the PCBs. All of the internal wiring is drawn from the same ultra-pure copper and insulated with Teflon.

Interestingly no mains lead is supplied in the wooden screwed down case and I tried both a Naim Audio mains lead and one from Musicworks. The Musicworks lead offered real improvements in resolution and a drop in the noise floor, but I suspect that experimentation in your own system would be worthwhile. The audio signal 0V and the mains earth are also joined in the HX75 and anybody using the amplifier should ensure no earth loops are formed with this amplifier in the system.



John Burns supplied the HX75 with the sort of matching pre-amplifier, the \$1000 L200. This pre-amp also makes use of some interesting technology and is deserving of a review in its own right. In this context it was good, very good, and capable of surprising musicality. Overall though I got better results with the NAC82, which isn't much of a surprise given that, with its power supplies it weighs in at around four



times the price! However, exposure to this Dynavector pre-amplifier has inspired me to try out the soon to arrive L300 top of the range model.

I put the HX75 amplifier straight into my system and hooked it up using my usual Naim NACA5 speaker cable and chord company (DIN to phono) interconnects. It was immediately obvious that the HX75 was special. It has a very pure sound, with very low distortion and a sense of musical completeness that is very rare at any price (or outside of the few brands that actually seem to know what music should sound like).

On to a few specifics then and a very live live recording from Ani Di Franco - *Living in Clip*. It's a bit Hi-Fi enthusiast and Lillith Fair at times but still a wonderful example of a band interacting (and covering mistakes) as well as the breadth of Miss (should that be Ms?) Di Franco's talents. The HX75 is revealed as a wide bandwidth amplifier that manages to go very deep but always stays in control. I found myself happily following the advice in the sleeve notes "don't adjust your set, just revel in the beauty of live performance." Damn right!

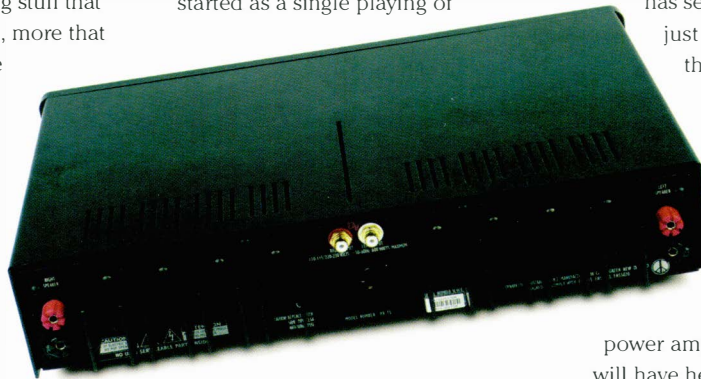
Another review favourite is Victoria Williams - *Happy Come Home*. It is one of those records I have heard too much to really enjoy anymore, and ►

▶ while this makes it a good comparative test I tend not to listen to the whole album. Well the fresh presentation by the HX75 certainly changed that. It wasn't a case of hearing stuff that I had never heard before, more that the music coming off the record was simply more interesting. I was enjoying it more than ever before. The high frequency end of the audio spectrum is very open and well extended, cymbals especially benefiting with a more metallic and realistic shimmer that was previously absent. The midrange of this amplifier is very articulate, with fast sung or spoken lyrics clearly understood. Notes that can bleed into each other are separated and presented without smearing which all adds up to a sound that is very tonally and temporally natural. Instruments have that immediately recognisable quality that I associate with their live sound. This amplifier demands ancillaries that are both fast and capable of playing tunes. Hmmm? Not so very different then.

From an excellent recording to an extremely average one! *Bob Marley - One Love*, the latest Best Of collection of the Jamaican bard's work. I bought this following several trips to Zurich. Not exactly a hotbed of Reggae music, but in a Jazz bar (the Casa Bare if you are ever in that fair city) the lead singer was doing a wonderful job on Marley's most famous songs and I felt the lack of something in my record collection. With the HX75 in the system realistic bass was not a problem and again with these simple recordings we have a very real sense of Marley leading the band.

I found myself playing a really wide range of music during the review period, and while that was partly an attempt to catch the amplifier out, it actually shows just what a versatile and

musically even handed performer it is. Something I hadn't played for some time was the Unplugged recording from grunge-meister Neil Young. What started as a single playing of



one album quickly turned into an evening with his back catalogue: Record after record made an appearance on the platter, all great fun. The presentation of this amplifier is all about bands playing tunes, and the tunes the members of the band are playing to create that whole. Musically it makes tremendous overall sense but at the same time it allows individuals the space to do their own thing. But whereas some really high definition systems almost seem to separate the individual strands to such an extent that they no longer even connect, the HX75 always retains that creative tension that makes the performance. The music just flowed out of the speakers with all the interactions present but still allowing you to concentrate at will on a specific musical thread.

Moving into the indie / Lo-Fi side of my collection to the *Tindersticks - Tindersticks* (second album) and a harrowing track "my sister". This song is all about emotion and it hadn't managed to move me like this since the first time I heard it. The midrange lacks any artificial glare and allowed all of the emotion to be wrung from the lead singers largely spoken vocal. Dynamic contrast was extremely well handled and even with the volume low the system was still extremely engaging.

So was I dissatisfied at all? Sometimes the presentation felt slightly laid-back compared to the Naim NAP250. Don't get me wrong, the HX75 has serious slam and punch, it just never shouts at you, unless the performer does, and even this slight concern has faded over my time with this amplifier. It just seems to allow the music more time to happen, and to happen at its own pace.

The Dynavektor HX75 power amplifier is a product that few will have heard but many would love. It is capable of the sort of musical presentation that is missing in many components across all price bands, but it also manages to be very neutral in the pure hi-fi sense (and how often can you say that?). I have no hesitation in recommending this amplifier. In fact, I recommended it to myself, and now I've bought one. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Stereo Power Amplifier
Inputs:	1pr Phonos
Input Sensitivity:	1.5Vrms
Outputs:	1pr Binding Posts/Channel
Rated Output:	100W into 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	440x90x350mm
Weight:	15kg
Finish:	Black
Price:	£1995

UK Distributor:

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Tel. (44)(0)1665-830862
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Manufacturer:

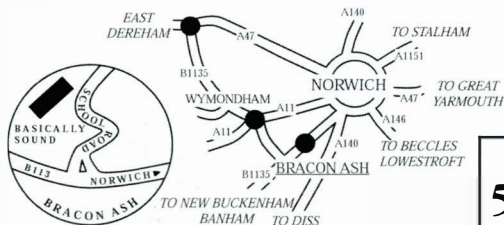
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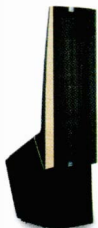
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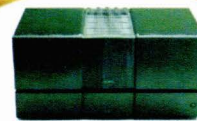
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Croft Series 5c Power Amp and Epoch Elite Pre-amp

by Peter Russell

What do you think of when you hear the name Croft? If the first thing that springs to mind is Lara then you are probably reading the wrong magazine. Whilst *Tomb Raider* holds sway in the Games arena Glen Croft is one of those mavens of hi fi whose name inspires respect and in some place awe. For those fanatics the name Crofters has been coined. And no it does not mean that they all live in cottages pursuing a craft industry in isolated parts of northern Scotland.

Glen Croft's products are the antithesis of the industrial design school of presentation. You know; half-inch thick faceplates, chassis hewn out of billets of rare metals, unusual illumination and a parts list from the most expensive suppliers of components you can find. I can remember going into a dealer's showroom some years back and him revealing, with enormous pride, his latest acquisition. He encouraged me to try to lift the power amp and then the power supply to the preamp, to feel the thickness of the metal and count the number of hex headed bolts that held the thing together, to marvel at the parts count and the names of the components.

He finally told me the price as if all this audio foreplay was a pre-cursor to justify an extortionate figure. When I tentatively enquired as to what it sounded like, he said the he wasn't quite sure, but that it sounded ok!



Anyway, he revealed that his customers were more concerned with making an audio statement and unless it was sufficiently wallet damaging they would not be interested.

Here of course lies the problem. For many people, dealers and customers alike, unless a product is expensive, it cannot sound good. Now this proposition is obviously nonsense. Unfortunately the market, and I include some hi-fi magazines

here, are hell bent on ensuring that the audio aspirations of the likes of you and me can only be satisfied by acquisition of more and more expensive products. Apart from the cynical commercialism implicit here there is an assumption that aspirations ignore the search for that elusive product that will either, complete a system and produce

something greater than the sum of its parts, or, because of its elusiveness, when it is found, give pleasure out of all proportion to its price. Its value, however, is often inestimable. Think of the search for one of the holy grails of hi-fi, the best amp to drive the old Quad ELS 57! When

I actually found one, I bought it without hesitating and I could not put a value on it.

The challenge of course is to be able to put a system together which, through its synergy, provides you with sufficient pleasure in the music of your choice that you do not question what you hear. There has to be sufficient coherence in the elements of the presentation for you not to notice what it is not doing. Of course as a reviewer this is a luxury one cannot always indulge in, but the Croft pre and



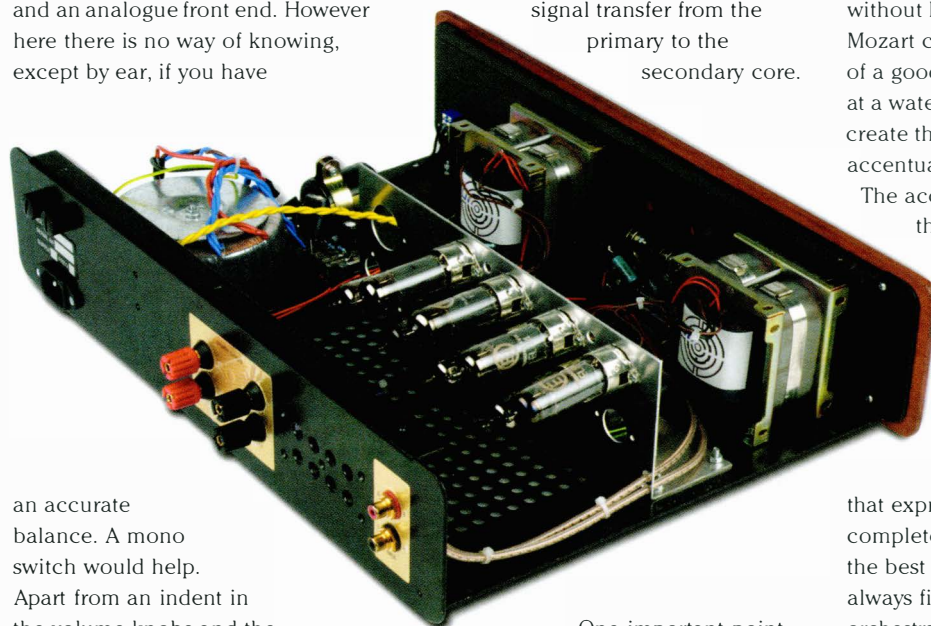
▶ power amps under review here are just such a combination.

Out of the box it is difficult not to be disappointed. You are presented with a pressed metal casing, one size fits all, and a wooden face piece which on the power amplifier just has an on/off toggle switch and a red light behind the Croft logo to indicate activity. At the rear, apart from the IEC mains socket there are the two RCA inputs and the speaker connections. The preamp sports the same on/of switch on the front and three 'gold' knobs, grouped together in the middle of the fascia. Now I have to admit that, along with RG, I happen to prefer separate left and right volume controls like these, especially with tube equipment and an analogue front end. However here there is no way of knowing, except by ear, if you have

an accurate balance. A mono switch would help. Apart from an indent in the volume knobs and the grub screw fixing it, there is no calibration on the front plate to help you balance the volume. The central knob covers the selection of inputs: phono, mute, tuner, tape and CD. There is an additional mute position between the tape and CD, which is useful and a thoughtful touch. The rear of the pre-amp has the usual single ended inputs and outputs including a tape out, as

well as a grounding post.

So far this is all very minimalist and this approach is mirrored in the internal construction. You could be forgiven for thinking that what you are paying for with the Epoch is a lot of air. You would be right, but this is more to do with the sonic qualities of the equipment. Glen Croft goes to enormous trouble to ensure that anything that does not need to be there is absent. Everything is hard-wired with PTFE sleeved silver wire and solid core copper. Capacitors are paper in oil and flat foil polypropylene whilst the output transformers in the power amp are C-core. The point about these transformers is that when constructed properly they can optimise the signal transfer from the primary to the secondary core.



One important point is that the power amp is principally designed to work with high efficiency speakers, preferably higher than 90 db and with impedance that does not fall below 8ohms.

Most of my listening was conducted with an analogue front end and I also had my own Vitale SC pre-amp to play with as well as a rebuilt Radford STA 15. The only speakers I had were the aforementioned

Quad ESL57s, the Rethms having departed these shores. It is a long time since I have just sat down, closed my eyes and immersed myself in music. This is what this combination did to me. I spent a much longer time just playing records, relaxing and enjoying the performances; whether it was some of my old Fleetwood Mac albums, my opera favourites or baroque choral works. I had to drag myself screaming to sit and actually analyse what I was experiencing.

Put very simply, there is nothing in the music that you would not want to hear. There is nothing that irritates or is sufficiently exaggerated to draw attention to itself. String tones have a richness, which wash over you without loosing out to lack of detail. Mozart can sound almost too much of a good thing! It is a bit like looking at a watercolour painting. The washes create the background on which to accentuate the figurative composition.

The accents, whilst the subject of the emphasis, never appear removed from their context. Unlike some oil paintings where the images can be portrayed as cardboard cut outs only just preserving links to the background. Here with the Croft we have

that expression of integrity and completeness that you expect from the best of tube amps but do not always find. Depth and scale of orchestral passages are in proportion, with complex instrumental passages having sufficient differentiation in the tonal register for the loss of detail not to matter too much. I suppose that it is here where you begin to notice that things are not as they perhaps should be. I am not talking here about that etched and pinpoint detail which some components throw at you which, whilst initially attention grabbing, ▶

► after a while just gets too much. Here we are focussing on a loss of information in which the low-level background information is only hinted at rather than given its rightful place in the musical structure. It is not something that shouts at you, rather if you are looking for it and you know it should be there; you can't always find it.

unless you can hear them both together. Replace the Series 5C with the Radford STA15 and it is very clear that the power amp rounds the leading edges of notes and has a benign energy spectrum. In orchestral passages, whilst there is a rightness about the frequency balance, there is a

and get your hands on this pre-amp: it is unlikely to disappoint. The 5C, like any power amp, will depend on the partnering speaker, but follow the manufacturer's recommendations and you could be pleasantly surprised. The Croft set up is a particular statement in a world that often emphasises form over substance, where it is more important to be seen to be part of the pack than lead the pack. Thank goodness that we still have people who advocate a simple philosophy, execute it in a consistent manner and provide real performance at a real world price. ➤



One of my favourite recordings is Beethoven's *Choral Fantasia* where the piano creates a series of motifs and themes, which eventually transform into the choral melody, finally building to a finale similar to that in his 9th Symphony. Whilst the Croft presents the piano in a believable manner, it does so with a delicacy in which the energy of the note is released gradually, rather than with the explosive leading edges that my Radford delivers. It is not always obvious that the piano is a percussive instrument when heard through the Croft combination. This difference makes you wonder whether the power amp or the pre amp is contributing most to the presentation. Well certainly the Epoch Elite is a significant improvement on the Vitale SC, which is difficult to believe

diminution of the leading edges that contributes to the sense of effortless flow of the music. Having said that, the Quads could hardly be considered the ideal load, either in terms of efficiency or impedance. I'd expect this softness to diminish with a more benign partner.

I did have the opportunity to explore the MM phono stage in the preamp as I had the Dynavector PHA 100, a traditional step-up that amplifies MCs to moving-magnet level. Well, whilst it could not compete with the Claritas phono stage directly into the Epoch Elite (at a mere £4000), it did demonstrate the quality of the MM stage and tell me how transparent the Croft pre-amp really is. With a sensibly priced step up the Epoch Elite would be difficult to beat at twice the price. There is little doubt that if you value the ability to perform over the visual wow factor then try

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Epoch Elite Pre-amp

Inputs:	MM phono, 2x line, 1x tape
Outputs:	1x main out, 1x tape out
Valve Complement:	3x ECC83, 1x ECC82, 1x ECL85, 1x 85A2
Dimensions (WxHxD):	442x105x355mm
Weight:	4.5 Kg
Price:	£999

Series 5C Power Amp

Type:	Ultralinear valve power amp
Rated Output:	30W/80hms
Valve Complement:	1x ECC81, 2x ECC82, 8x EL84
Dimensions (WxHxD):	442x105x355mm
Weight:	11 Kg
Price:	£1250

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TAG McLaren T23R Tuner

by Paul Messenger

The subject of this issue's 'high end' tuner review couldn't present a greater contrast with the subject of a couple of month's back. Where Magnum Dynalab pursues a defiantly analogue approach to grabbing the airwaves, TAG McLaren's Tuner AvantGarde T32R is equally defiantly digital. Where the MD gave you FM stereo, just FM stereo and nothing (not even RDS) but FM stereo, the T32R gives you everything you might possibly want, and a fair bit more besides. Yes it's an FM tuner, but it also does MW and LW AM bands, and the UK's DAB digital services too.

Sleek and silver sitting up there on the shelf, it looks absolutely gorgeous - very Formula One, very desirable, very 21st century. Not cheap, mind you: this all-singing-and-dancing version costs a considerable 2299.90. It's available without DAB 1399.90, and the DAB module may be added later for 899.90.

Even before I'd got it out of the box, it had made a strong impression, and I'm not just talking about the very slick designer packaging. For a tuner this is an unusually heavy unit, and not the sort of thing that can be lifted and carried with one hand, as is usually the case. It's just a shade intimidating too, because there are an awful lot of little buttons on the front, an awful lot of sockets (for a tuner) on the back, a 60 page instruction book, and a 42-button handset.

I shrugged, plugged in the FM aerial and connected the two audio out sockets, fired the thing up, and, rather to my surprise it worked immediately and very nicely; no sweat. Getting properly to grips with the T32R, however, does involve considerably more

perspiration. Philosophically I like the idea of a truly comprehensive tuner like this, one which does everything whatever waveband it's on.

At the same time, it took me a while to figure out why you might want to use AM if you've already got DAB. I doubt you would if you only want to listen to UK stations, but neither DAB nor (for the most part) FM cross national boundaries in the way that AM does, especially on the Long Wave band. If you're into picking up Allouis, Luxembourg etc, there's still clearly a case for AM.

AM used to be necessary mainly as a fill-in, to cope with the very limited capacity of the FM band, but DAB has no such limitations, so if you're only interested in UK stations and have DAB, it's hard to see why you're going to use AM.

It's the job of the reviewer to pick nits, and for all its slickness and initial friendliness, there are a certainly a few niggles. I don't mind cheap plastic handsets per se - fancy metal ones can be unnecessarily heavy and clunkily more awkward to handle. But I did find the superfluity of buttons (42, all identical in shape!), coupled with very tiny legends which are almost illegible under subdued room lighting, all a bit of a trial. And the facts that one is labelled 'snooze' and another 'wake up' didn't fill me with confidence.

I have to add that the same complaint of difficult legibility applies

to the buttons on the front panel. TMA justifies the large handset button-count on the grounds that a single press is all that's needed for all the most common instructions, but I'm far from convinced this is the best approach, especially when the device being addressed has a high quality alphanumeric display, as here.

I'll repeat a moan I've expressed more than once before: why is it that the handsets supplied to operate TV sets and VCRs are so much better designed, laid out and therefore easier to use than those supplied by the makers of hi-fi equipment? When it comes to legibility, however, the display is quite superb, and I have to admit I even started finding RadioText a useful extra feature (over and beyond simple station ID). I tend to 'browse' between Radios 3 and 4 a lot, and RadioText (on FM or DAB) provides a very handy way to preview either, DAB usually providing rather more information on the programmes. (It would be even more useful to be able to pick up programme content data relating to the stations you're not listening to, rather in the manner of digital TV, but maybe that's asking a bit too much!)

Finding one's way around the display's menu-driven options can be a bit of a pain, it must be said, but again only because of silly button disposition on that dratted handset. Even the signal strength metering seems unusually useful here, deftly avoiding the usual - and largely



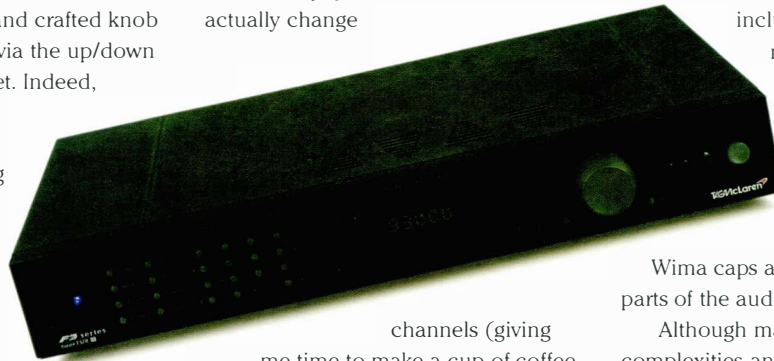
▶ useless – ‘full-scale-deflection-at-the-merest-sniff-of-a-signal’ syndrome. The manual states that each of the twenty segments on the scale represent 8dB (or maybe 4dB; it’s a little ambiguous), though I was just a shade disappointed that the scale wasn’t actually calibrated in, or convertible into, say, microvolts. I suppose most people tune in using pre-sets these days, but I particularly liked the way this tuner scanned the FM band, whether driven from the beautifully weighted and crafted knob on the tuner itself, or via the up/down buttons on the handset. Indeed, operation of the latter is so slick, it hardly seemed worth loading up the pre-sets.

This is a pleasure, incidentally, which you don’t get with DAB, where each station is just one notch away from its neighbour, and there’s always that exasperating little delay after selection, which prevents rapid channel zapping. Using the supplied loop antenna, I didn’t have any luck at all when initially trying to scan either of the AM bands from the handset – the tuner just carried on searching ad infinitum, and failed to find anything.

I subsequently discovered (on page 41) that the auto-tune sensitivity threshold has low/med/high adjustable. In a classic Goldilocks syndrome, the default ‘med’ was fine for FM but useless with AM; ‘high’ picked up MW stations (but none on LW) but was too sensitive for FM. The best way to remote-access any AM stations you might want is obviously therefore to set them up on the pre-sets. There are 99 available here, so with a slight feeling of dread I set about this. I suspected it wouldn’t be easy or straightforward, and my fears were fully realised. Like every software-based system I can think of, there are idiosyncracies that initially confuse and irritate. It didn’t help

that ‘my’ tuner came from another magazine, with pre-sets already stored: when I tried to put in my own stations, the display politely enquired: “replace memory?” Failing to find a button marked ‘yes’ left me nonplussed (‘enter’ eventually did the trick).

Another of my problems was clearly impatience. I was surprised to find that it took the microprocessor 16 seconds to react to a single-button ‘direct entry’ pre-set command and actually change



channels (giving me time to make a cup of coffee, have a quick pee, and put the cat out. I think the silly thing was waiting for me to put in a second digit.). Ironically, by far the fastest way to zap between stations is to put the analogue ones on sequential pre-sets and +/- cycle through them. (DAB-zapping, by whatever means, is invariably exasperatingly slow.) This is such a complex and flexible piece of kit, it’s difficult to know what to include, and what to leave out. The alarm-clock-radio features seem faintly demeaning in such a product, but basics such as mono/stereo and adjustable IF bandwidth (for rooting out weak stations under crowded FM conditions) are both included, and it’s hard to think of anything of significance that’s been left out.

‘Future-proofing’ is a key element in the design, so all the firmware is stored in a FLASH re-programmable memory. Upgrades may be downloaded from the website (www.tagmclarenaudio.com), and there’s also a ‘TAGtronic’ communications bus socket for possible future expansion, and also

to output radio data information (from RDS or DAB). The T32R, for example can be used alongside an AV32R processor to display RDS data on your TV screen. There are two separate FM aerial inputs, for users who might want to integrate both antenna and cable feeds, and (three) digital outputs alongside the analogue pair. The latter has a generous output, and a low enough output impedance to drive long cables.

The internal ‘building blocks’ include a Siemens control microprocessor, a substantially modified Mitsumi FM front end, and a Bosch DAB module. High class Vishay resistors and

Wima caps are used in critical parts of the audio circuitry.

Although mastering the complexities and flexibilities of the control system took quite a while, actually getting to listen to the T32R proved very quick and easy, and very rewarding too, it must be said. I started off with FM, ‘cos it’s my favourite and I know more or less where I stand with this segment of the spectrum. It took a little while to get the TAG tuned into my system, because it has a slightly more ‘forward’ balance than I was used to. It’s a little more CD- than vinyl-like in character, by way of analogy, and sounded just a little too ‘shiny’ initially. I say initially because a change of speaker cables (!) seemed to sort the problem pretty effectively. It’s one of those subtle things that catch you by surprise, yet the way the ‘character’ of any two components can interact ‘destructively’ can matter much more than you might expect. When I started to use the Tannoy TD 12s with their own Reference cables (in place of Naim NACA5), the ‘shine’ seemed to have largely disappeared. The slight ‘forwardness’ remained, but it was now hard to say whether the TAG or my regular references was the

► more neutral.

The T32R isn't what you'd call a romantic sounding tuner, and does perhaps err a little on the clinical side for my personal taste (and prejudices). But it also got under my skin big time for a subtly different reason, and my respect has continued to grow the more time I've spent with it. It always sounds so exceptionally clean, accurate and precise that it somehow seems to suppress the 'mechanics' of the whole FM chain. You hear the music clearly and beautifully, but are much less aware of the medium that's bringing it to you. The distractions of the radio medium don't seem to intrude to the usual extent. At the same time, there was a slight lack of ultimate 'air' and transparency, so the sound as a whole is just a little matter-of-fact.

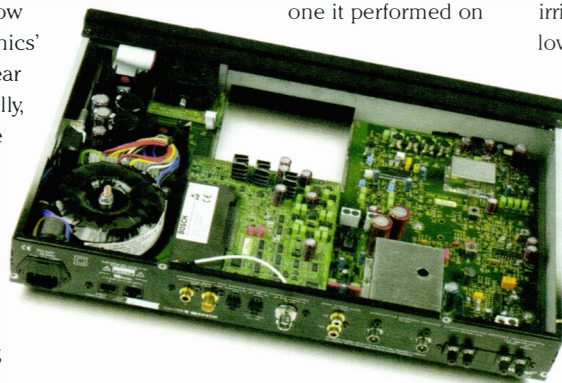
The tuner's DAB impressed me more than I'd expected, though on the actual day that I'm writing this things started to go wrong. Signal levels started fluctuating quite dramatically, to the point where the digital signal started to break up and become unlistenable. Eventually the tuner reminded me that it's actually a computer in disguise, by locking up or 'crashing'. Since high pressure had just settled in over Benelux, I initially suspected that the signal fluctuations and break-up were a consequence of dreaded co-channel effects (which can afflict all terrestrial transmission systems, analogue or digital) coming in from the continent. Just such an effect is all too common with digital terrestrial TV.

I can't say for sure whether the problem came from the tuner or the transmissions, but it seems likely that it was the transmissions that aggravated the tuner, as another DAB tuner I used as a check consistently muted itself.

Initially the TAG 're-booted' easily enough, just by switching off and on the

mains switch, but it took longer each time I did this, and now it's stopped completely.

Yesterday DAB was going fine, however, and while I still think FM sounds that bit more natural (as well as noisier of course!), the TAG does seem to do a first class job of maximising the strengths of the new medium, showing a similar trick to the one it performed on



the FM band, and somehow minimising the intrusion of the medium into the message.

I don't know all the ins and outs of the compression techniques adopted by broadcasters today, but do know that they're one reason why Radio 1 must be regarded with deep suspicion as a hi-fi source. And I certainly got the impression that the DAB version of this station sounded both cleaner and less 'processed' than its FM equivalent, and was therefore arguably preferable overall.

The real plus sides of DAB are of course twofold. First, you get a whole lot of new stations to choose from (even though I subscribe to the cynical view that more means less, in both radio and TV media). And it's important too that DAB can reach places where good FM reception may be impossible.

I didn't spend a lot of time on the AM bands (have a heart!), but both seemed to work 'as advertised', and the ability to pull in weak stations like Radio Monte Carlo was roughly on a par with the venerable but exceedingly capable Hacker transistor radio I keep

in the bathroom. These services are quite useable, though a full-on hi-fi system is not ideal for their reproduction, as it reveals the bandwidth limitations and interference all too clearly. (You can't use AM within ten feet of a 100Hz TV set!)

Summing up this tuner is as difficult as the device itself is complex. On balance I liked it a lot, despite some irritation with the ergonomics. It looks lovely, does everything, and would be fun to live with long term. And if it isn't quite the last word in transparency, it does a fine job of removing any intrusion of the radio medium onto the musical message. With deadlines looming there wasn't time to get to the bottom of the problem which afflicted DAB reception right at the end of the review. Hopefully it was just an isolated hiccup. Besides, it gives me the perfect excuse to arrange another sample and play some more. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	FM/MW/LW tuner with DAB option.
Aerial Inputs:	2x FM C0-axial 2x AM 1x DAB
Outputs:	1pr Single-ended (phonos) 1x Digital (phono) 1x Digital (BNC) 1x Optical Digital (Tos-link) 1x Radio Data (Tos-link)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	445x75x338mm
Weight:	7kg
Price:	See Text

Manufacturer:

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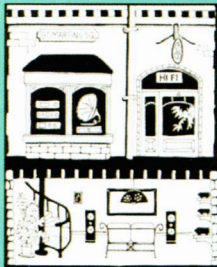
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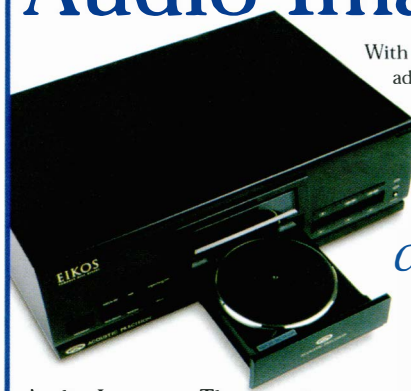
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The Greig IK 1 Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

Size is important.

In a world where most technology is getting smaller, loudspeakers are still governed by the same basic laws of physics that they have always been subject to. If you want full range performance with high volume levels, you will need a large loudspeaker. Fortunately for the domestic enjoyment and reproduction of music there are other criteria which come into play, which have enabled smaller speaker designs to quite convincingly hold their own.

Much has been said about the benefits of smaller enclosures, and in my review of the ALR Jordan (Issue 4) I blathered on at length about some of the more positive aspects of their performance.

In essence, smaller cabinet dimensions means that there is less panel area to resonate and thus colour the sound, and controlling cabinet behaviour becomes a far easier task. The smaller baffle area presented to the room helps with imaging, allowing the speaker to 'disappear' more effectively than larger designs. But invariably what a small cabinet cannot do is provide oodles of bass extension with high SPLs – that involves moving large amounts of air and the physical limitations just don't allow it.

Even if domestically you have no problem with large loudspeakers, getting them to work effectively in

a limited space can be something of a challenge. Witness the saga of a friend of mine; after splitting up with his girlfriend (who could not abide hi-fi in the living room) he recently moved in to a beautiful but very small flat in central London. As he put it, one of the



happier aspects of living alone was that he could again use his large and much treasured floor standing loudspeakers without constant complaining. After several hours of messing about it became painfully obvious that they were just not going

to work – they sounded truly awful. Apart from physically dominating the living space, the large bass drivers were overpowering the room resulting in a totally unbalanced performance, a conclusion that his neighbours were quick to concur with. Ironically, having auditioned a number of smaller stand mounted loudspeakers that

provided a far better solution in his not very big living room, he has lost the bass freak tendencies that had led him to believe that no small cabinets could ever satisfy him musically. It would seem that this is not an uncommon scenario at Leicester Hi-Fi. Having the benefit of being able to talk to customers directly, the Greig loudspeaker was born out of a requirement for a very small cabinet that wouldn't disappoint sonically – not that there's anything new in that. Loudspeaker manufacturers have been on the same course for many years. But I bet that most of them haven't had same degree of customer feedback that these guys have had.

The Greig is small. With a frontal area no bigger than an LS35/A or a Linn Kan, it is however considerably deeper, and at a rough guess I would say about twice the volume.

The cabinets are made from solid wood with rounded corners, which in the case of the review pair was oiled and polished oak, with

▶ an excellent finish only slightly marred by the presence of an obvious join all the way round. Aesthetic considerations aside, there is a strong argument for using hardwoods as opposed to composites such as MDF, and certainly the cabinet feels reassuringly solid to the touch. Internally there is no bracing, nor are the panels damped in any way. The minimal crossover electronics are mounted on the back of the terminal panel, and have been heavily coated with a bitumen like substance to reduce vibrational interference. Two sets of terminals are provided for bi-wiring, and above these is the bass loading port of basic construction with no tapering or contouring.

Both of these items have a rather cheap and insubstantial plastic feel and appear a bit 'home constructor'; as if they have been added on as an afterthought, somewhat out of place with a design at this kind of price level.

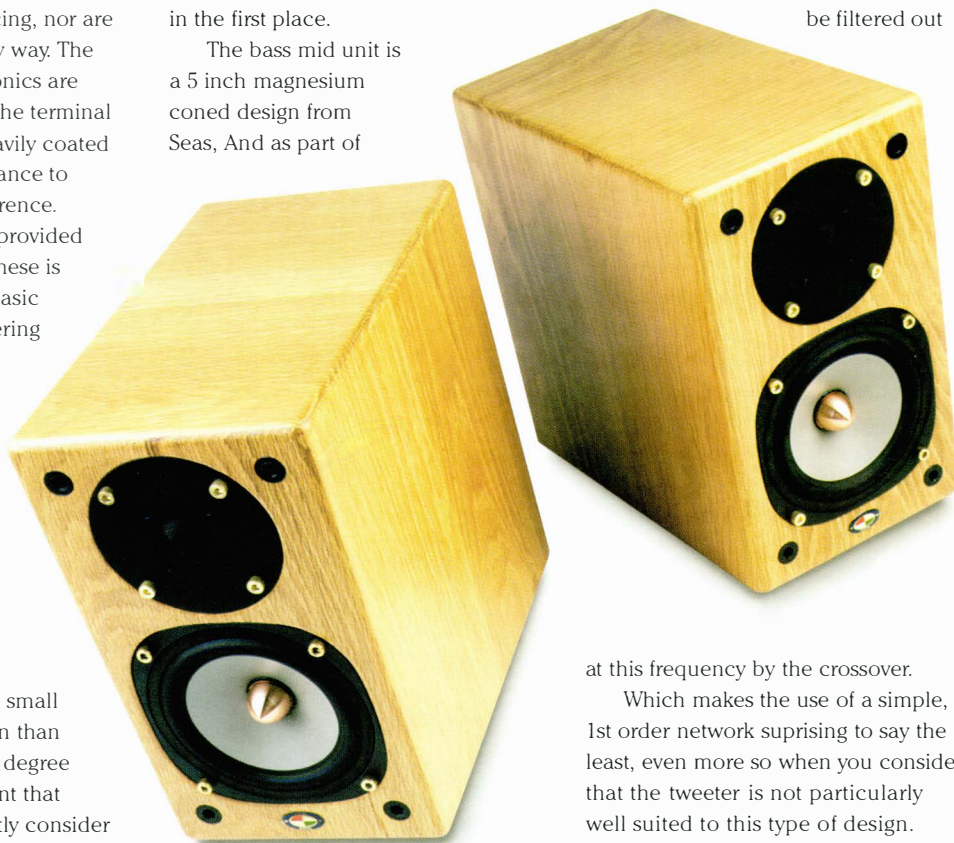
The performance of a small loudspeaker is, more often than not, influenced to a large degree by its support, to the extent that many manufacturers rightly consider it to be an integral part of the design. So Leicester Hi-Fi sensibly decided to make their own stand to match the IK. Lightweight but rigid, this rather novel design offers easy height and level adjustment, and looks extremely elegant in a sort of 50's science fiction manner, a bit like something that has fallen off the Sputnik.

Drive units consist of an Audax 1 inch soft dome tweeter, which I believe is the latest incarnation of what used to be the D25 unit which must by now surely qualify as the longest standing HF unit still in production. It first appeared in the early seventies, and soon became

something of a standard with widespread use in many loudspeakers. Somewhat less fashionable through the eighties, a time when lest we forget, you could not sell a product unless it had a metal dome tweeter, it has emerged again to illustrate why we liked soft diaphragm units in the first place.

The bass mid unit is a 5 inch magnesium coned design from Seas, And as part of

the weight, low coloration and good transient response with minimal overhang. The price one pays for all of this comes in the form of a rather large and undamped bell like resonance at around 10 kHz or so – but this would normally remain unexcited as the unit would be filtered out



their Excel range is an expensive and refined unit. Apart from the unusual choice of diaphragm material, it has a number of features that distinguish it from the average drive unit, such as extensive use of copper for the phase correction plug and the rings that surround the pole piece. Apart from looking nice, this is claimed to reduce Eddy currents within the motor unit and so reduce distortion, while all units are built to an unusually high tolerance and attention to detail. The surface treated magnesium cone is said to offer exceptional rigidity for

at this frequency by the crossover.

Which makes the use of a simple, 1st order network surprising to say the least, even more so when you consider that the tweeter is not particularly well suited to this type of design. Theoretically, this means that both units are provided with a signal that rolls off gradually, and as a result the inherent driver resonances that would normally be out of bandwidth start to become prominent. Balanced against this are the benefits of a minimal crossover – fewer components between the drive units and the amplifier, and better phase characteristics that can have a great influence on sound quality. On paper at least, the two units used in the Greig would not seem suitable for this type of operation.

In practice, the IK 1 points two fingers firmly in the direction of ▶

► theory. Despite the extensive use of computers, good loudspeaker design still remains something of a black art, and what looks good on paper doesn't necessarily sound great. And vice – versa. Set up in my living room in the usual position they did look a little lost, but with the large Primary valve amplifiers driving them had no problem filling the room with sound. Despite their diminutive size, the Greigs seemed to thrive on plenty of power, and although deep bass was lacking they gave a suprisingly full performance, in what is after all, a large room. Bear in mind, too that they did not have the benefit of a rear wall to reinforce bass output. Use them too near the back wall and they produce a horrible lumpy bass that continually threatens to engulf everything else, due I suspect to the proximity of the rear firing port.

Over a period of a few days the Greigs began to settle down and shed a mildly aggressive character in favour of a more civilised sound which was immediately listenable and musically engaging. With no obvious preference for musical material, the only limitations that I came across pertaining to their small size was when listening to vinyl with loads of bass energy. A degree of caution was necessary with the volume control, as the combination of subsonic record noise and bass drum could sometimes cause over excursion of the bass unit. To be fair though, my living room is large enough to present quite a challenge for a small loudspeaker.

Bass performance was extended enough to not harbour thoughts of sub woofers, and had plenty of weight behind it, although I was sometimes aware of a slight lack of speed with complex rhythmical music. In a cabinet this size there has to

be a trade off somewhere, and I think this has been well judged. Mid band performance was open and detailed, with a highly communicative quality evident in particular with female voice, while the top end was articulate and lively. Listening to this treble unit, I understand even less the huge popularity of cheap metal dome units in the 1980's.



Swapping power amplifiers proved interesting, and the use of the new Cyrus APA 7 monoblocks was an immediate hit. The new found bass authority of these units complimented the Greigs very effectively to produce a dynamic and lively sound, no where more evident than on the Talking Heads album *Remain In Light*. There is so much going on within this music that it takes a good system to portray it correctly, without confusion, and the IK's coped well by keeping things organised.

One slight caveat. The Greigs are a loudspeaker that require you to sit pretty much on axis with the drive units – I noticed at various times that

the response became quite uneven, almost aggressive when sitting off to one side. Voices and strings would have a distinct hard edge to them, while percussion (in particular hi hats) became splashy and indistinct. I suspect that this is the result of the particular combination of drive units and the first order crossover.

For some people, size is the most important factor, and floor standing loudspeakers are not a practical option. There is an ever increasing number of high quality miniatures available, and amongst them the Greig manages to hide the inevitable compromises better than most to produce a genuinely rewarding loudspeaker. Definitely worth checking out. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Greig IK 1 loudspeaker tech panel

System type:	2 way reflex
Recommended amplifier:	25 to 100 Watts
Sensitivity:	87 dB 1 watt 1 metre
Crossover point:	5 kHz
Crossover type:	1st order Butterworth
Dimensions (WxHxD):	165 x 282 x 285mm
Finishes:	Light Oak or Stained to customer specification
Price:	£1450

Manufacturer:

Leicester Hi-Fi
Tel. (44) (0)116 253 9753
Net. www.leicesterhifi.co.uk
Email, info@leicesterhifi.co.uk



CD-LAD

CD LAD
00:00

PLINIUS

SOURCE
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REPEAT
SKIP
POWER

Plinius CD·LAD Line Stage

by Roy Gregory

Whilst everybody seems to like the idea of something for nothing, such is the human psyche that when we actually get offered it we immediately become suspicious. We always need to know why it's such a bargain. Did it fall off a lorry? Did it pass through some back door or was there a cancelled order? The funny thing is that once we've been given a rationale, no matter how unlikely, we just go ahead and jump right in. But as my mum used to say: "A bargain's only a bargain if you actually want what they're selling." Good advice and particularly relevant to hi-fi, where a good story and a couple of well recognised code words (like "Best Buy", "Five Stars" or "Special Edition") go an especially long way towards separating the buying public from their hard earned cash.

There's a long tradition of cut-down, hot rod

versions in high-end hi-fi. It's hardly surprising, given the all pervasive influence of the less is more philosophy. Fewer controls? It has to sound better! The less you see the more you get, or so the logic goes, entrenched by now in a furrow started all those years ago by Naim Audio and their lack of tone controls. The problem is that like just about everything else, it's an approach that is open to abuse. Let's take as an example a simple integrated amp from a major manufacturer that appears in a cheaper, chopped down SE version. The inference is that, if you are prepared to forego the extra controls and flexibility then you can have the

same sound quality for

less money. But we all know that less is more, so it's actually going to sound better, right? Well that depends on what's been done. Fewer inputs won't make any sonic difference if there are simply fewer of them connected to the same control. In fact, if the manufacturer uses the same board then eliminating bits here and there will have less effect than it might because all the connections for the absent controls will have to be bridged by jumpers. Likewise, money saving is just as

powerful an incentive to manufacturers as it is to the general public. Less is more? Not if it applies to the power supply it isn't!

So we have to be careful before we jump to too many conclusions. We should rely on the evidence of our ears, rather than our eyes, but that's easily said. Far too many retailers and reviewers are only too willing to be visually seduced, and if they don't know better why should their customers? When a company sets out to offer a hot-rod version of an already successful product, we need to look at what's been done and then consider its sonic effect. Less is more might be an attractively simple proposition, but you have to ask yourself less of what?

I've always been suspicious of the power of marketing. More often than not it seems to be a tool for selling people something that they don't actually want. So whilst I applaud Plinius, faced with naming their new cut down line-stage, for avoiding the Straight Line or Special Edition cliches, who on earth came up with CD.LAD? If there's a prize for dumbest name in hi-fi this one shoulders aside all those Japanese linguistic faux pas on the basis that they can't even blame it on translation. However, if we leave the name aside for a moment, what we discover on closer examination is a well thought out and nicely executed exercise in hi-fi minimalism. This is a hot-rod the way it should be done, shorn of baggage rather than



▶ sonics, and offering everything the discerning user is likely to need.

But the CD.LAD isn't a chopped down anything. Its basic circuit might be theoretically similar to the one in the top of the line M16L line stage reviewed in Issue 7 but this is actually a totally new product in its own right. The first thing to go was the record out selector, closely followed by most of the inputs. Along the way it gained a micro-processor driven switching circuit that enables the user to drive inputs and unit status from the remote control via the front panel LCD display. The result, despite the incredibly plain fascia is far more sophisticated than it appears.

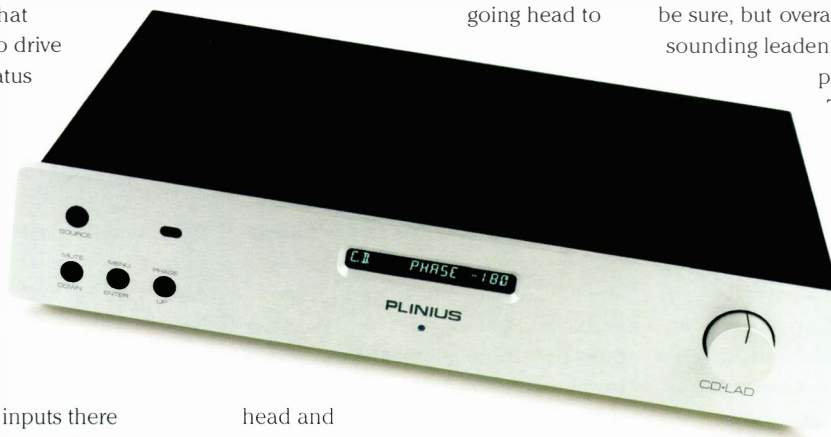
Starting at the inputs there are connections for three line sources, one of them offering a balanced option. This should be enough for most serious music listeners, accommodating two disc sources and an extra such as a tuner. Bear in mind also that more and more DACs are offering multiple source connections and switching, which further takes the strain from the line stage.

Outputs consist of two pairs of single-ended and a single set of balanced connections. There's no tape output, but sensibly there is a switch to float the unit's earth.

As well as the basic ins and outs, you also get a choice of remote or front panel control of volume, balance, absolute phase, mute and display brightness, the latter in no fewer than 31 discrete steps. The remote itself is satisfyingly chunky without being absurdly heavy, whilst its buttons are large and clearly marked. They are very positive in action and for once the acceptance angle is usefully wide.

The front-panel is similarly no-nonsense with a simple brushed aluminium finish available in silver or black.

Add the sensible design approach to a UK pricing policy which ensures that the Plinius products are available at price levels significantly below those of the American imports they so obviously resemble and you've got the makings of a bargain. Especially when you consider that Plinius have gained an enviable reputation in the US, going head to



head and price for price with those same products in their home market. Once again, relative prices are no guide to quality. After all, where do you compare them? As luck would have it the CD.LAD got shoe-horned into my system immediately after the Klyne, exactly the sort of high quality, high priced, full facilities unit to which it offers an alternative. As such it got to partner both the Monarchy Audio SM70s and its own matching SA100 power amp, which, as we shall see was just as well.

The first thing that strikes you about the sound of the Plinius is its clean, focussed transparency. Lateral separation is superb, with a really wide and open soundstage. Listening to the opening of the Sarah Masen track 'Give A Little Bit' (*The Dreamlife Of Angels*) you are presented with an electronic knock/rasp far left, electric guitar melody far right, backed by the beautifully separated piping keyboard. Then all of a sudden it's wallop and

the acoustic guitars and voice explode out of centre stage. It's not a case of volume or a massive dynamic leap, more one of sheer presence. It's this combination of focus and substance that makes the CD.LAD rather special; the problem is combining it with other, less tangible musical attributes.

On first listen, single-ended via the SM70, the clean, open presentation was marred by a clumsy, stilted rhythmic performance. Impressive substance to be sure, but overall, the music was left sounding leaden and lacking in

purpose and drive. The subtle shaping of notes, the accent and direction of the players was lost. It was almost as if the musical energy was arriving in square shaped packets, which given the unit's other clear strengths was

disappointing to say the least. Which is when I remembered a similar problem with the M16L, which was always happier with the SA250 than any of the other units I tried it with. Sure enough, plug in the SA100 and the performance came to life. Even more substance and a healthy dose of dynamic wallop as you'd expect from a 100 Watt class A design, but great agility and expression too. Why this should be is hard to say. There's nothing particularly unusual about the CD.LAD's output level or impedance yet the effect is far from subtle. How universal it is I can't be sure, but if you are considering using the Plinius with an amp from another manufacturer (and given its near unique combination of facilities that's far from unlikely) then you'll need to suck it and see.

With the SA100 duly ensconced (a surprisingly successful match ▶

▶ with the OBXs and one whose sheer enthusiasm encouraged liberal application of the volume control) listening proceeded apace, always a good sign. Further comparisons with the superb Klyne proved instructive. Take for example the new Reference Recordings Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* (RR-96CD). The Klyne offers up a sumptuous soundstage with clearly defined walls and a coherent acoustic that holds the instruments in a perfect relationship one to another. This almost valve-like presentation extends to the effortless sweep and flow of the music. The Plinius in comparison offers a crisper and slightly closer, wider and slightly shallower stage. Instruments lack some of the warmth of the Klyne, being more closely focused, and the bass is both deeper and heavier. But where the real difference lies is in the area of coherence and flow. Where the Klyne scores is in the nebulous area of musicality. It manages to convey more of the feel of a live performance. The Plinius is a higher definition device that sees more clearly the individual elements of the orchestra, and sees deeper and higher in the musical range, throwing off the slightly dark, velvety tonal shroud of the Klyne. It also throws off some 60% of the

purchase price. All things being equal I'd choose the Klyne, but they aren't, and even if they were the differences are close enough that not everyone would agree with me anyway. It depends where your priority lies: toward the emotional and organic elements of the performance or the fact of it. Take into consideration the price difference and the conclusion is simple. The Plinius is doing an excellent job of offering a slice of genuine high-end performance at something that approaches a real world price.

Its presentation is high-end, from the casework and remote control to the sonic style it projects. This is muscular and dynamic music making in a fashion that's familiar from across the pond. But don't get the idea that this a simple copy cat design. The Plinius makes music the way New Zealanders play rugby: fast, powerful and with irresistible force. It may not be the most agile or rhythmically fluid, but it is possessed of boundless energy coupled to a solid foundation. It holds instruments firmly in space and supplies them with the power to play as loudly or softly as required. It creates a stable and intelligible whole and lays it out for you to listen to. It does it without fuss or favour (except in its choice of partners). In the words of

the advert: "It does exactly what it says on the tin".

With the strong proviso that you try the CD.LAD with its intended partner before purchase it can be heartily recommended. It provides the perfect balance between inputs and genuinely useful facilities (like balance and absolute phase) and will perform the switching and volume control duties in some really quite exalted company as long as three inputs meets your needs. Plinius already has a reputation for superior performance. The UK prices are exceptionally attractive and the performance on offer here simply extends that reputation further. If the CD.LAD works for you and in your system then it offers a lot of music for the money. ➤+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Line Stage
Inputs:	2x single-ended only 1x balanced or single-ended optional
Outputs:	2x single-ended 1x balanced
Input Impedance:	50kOhms
Input Sensitivity:	230mV
Output Impedance:	1kOhm
Output Level:	20V maximum
Dimensions (WxHxD):	450 x 90 x 370mm
Weight:	8 kg
Finish:	Black or Silver
Price:	£2250

UK Distributor:

Absolute Analogue,
PO Box 30429, London, NW6 7GY
Tel. (44)(0)20 8459 8113
Fax. (44)(0)20 8459 8113
E-mail. Absolute_Analogue@email.msn.com

Manufacturer:

Audible Technologies Ltd
Net. www.pliniusaudio.com



Rega Jupiter CD Player

by Roy Gregory

Way back when, Rega were a doyen of the analogue resistance, fighting the forlorn rear guard in the face of the digital onslaught. Like their fellow outcasts they were finally forced to bite the digital bullet, but being Rega when they finally launched a CD player it represented a complete departure from the norm. For starters and despite its lowly price, it contrived by typically clever engineering to include a top-loading transport, previously the exclusive preserve of expensive high-end exotica. It also offered a rigid die-cast chassis, minimal controls and the option of a remote for a small extra cost. In fact, it couldn't have been much more different to the competition if it had tried. But then being a Rega product that's probably exactly what it did.

The Planet (named after Rega's original turntable) was followed by a two-box transport and DAC combination called the Jupiter and Io. Two-box because the additional circuitry and power-supplies required to improve the sound quality couldn't be shoe-horned into the limited confines of the cast chassis. Two-box

despite the complications that introduces in interfacing the separate halves of the player. Never an ideal situation the concerns over its implementation proved to be well founded.



As our review in Issue 2 discovered, although the Jupiter/Io combination handily outperformed the Planet with its supplied cable, its full potential was only revealed with a digital interconnect that cost nearly as much as either of the electronic boxes involved. Yet the excellence of the basic transport arrangement was easy to hear.

The same space limitations were cramping the style of other Rega electronics too and that hastened the demise of the old clamshell cast casework. It was replaced with a more conventional box, and in the case of the rejuvenated Planet, a centrally positioned and re-engineered version

of the top-loading transport. The extra space was put to good use, the new one-box machine holding its price but outperforming the older two-box version. It was only a matter

of time before the new Jupiter/Io replacement appeared and when it did, it was in a single box as God and Roy Gandy intended.

Compared to the visually virtually identical Planet, the Jupiter boasts dual differential DACs and twice the number of power supplies (along with a beefier transformer to drive them). Outwardly it differs only in the stainless steel disc puck it uses for the transport, and the heat sinking on the base, employed to cope with the extra heat generated by the circuitry. Otherwise there's little to distinguish one from the other. Both employ the same squidgy isolation feet and minimal buttons (just stop, go and track skip in both directions): Both arrive without a remote, but can be driven from the Solar system remote that will cost you an extra £25. Everything's changed, nothing's changed: The Rega players are still the most distinctive on the market. The soundness of the design

▶ remains intact; the sonic improvements that accrued to the Planet apply equally to its stable mate. So too does the carefully balanced validity of its musical presentation.

The easy way to impress a customer with your budget beating special edition player is to cram the sound with detail. Just listen to all that extra information. Impresses the hell out of me. Except that there's more to music than just raw information. Rega come at the problem from the other end. Unlike just about

dose of detail and transparency to the original mix. Now music lovers don't have to pay such a heavy price in hi-fi terms in order to enjoy the Rega's engaging performance. This is the backdrop against which the Jupiter 2000 makes its entrance. Does it come out punching? Oh yes, and how!

Start with the dense, intense textures of 'Khmer' (Nils Petter Molvaer, *Khmer* ECM 1560), all dark

greater focus, transparency and detail. What it doesn't do is begin to chip the surface of what it all means in musical terms. For that we need Nils, his trumpet and the track as a whole. It's good on the Planet, which sorts out the different elements that build into the track as a whole, but it lacks the cavernous atmosphere and unerring temporal precision of the Jupiter. The percussion motifs and cymbal shimmers that provide counterpoint to the solo instrument make perfect sense as well as being instruments rather than just sounds.

And that instrument. Molvaer's trumpet takes on layers of depth and texture that the Planet simply glosses over.

It's a living, breathing extension of the player. Ever wondered what Miles might have done with a sampler, or where some weird

cross between *Siesta* or *Sketches* and *TuTu* might have led. Buy this album and you'll have a fair idea. Mind you, you'll need a good player to make the most of it. The Jupiter will do just fine.

So how good is good? Well it isn't an Eikos, or even close if you do the comparison. The more expensive machine is better in every single respect, doing everything that the Jupiter does but more so. But think about that for a second. The Eikos is a mighty impressive machine. It blew JMH's socks off and mine, which is why it's still here. Indeed it's impressed everyone who has heard it. The Jupiter, at less than a third of the Eikos's bargain price can't compete. The impressive thing is that it does the same job in the same way, and a few tracks after the comparison you've forgotten about ▶



every other affordable player on the market, the Planet and Jupiter concentrate on the structure of the music, the vitally important framework that all the information has to hang on. That way they ensure that the information they do produce is presented in the right place and at the right time. It's a neat trick if you can do it and the original Planet did just that. It might have sounded a generation or even two behind its contemporaries in terms of sheer detail. The difference was that, unlike the vast majority of them it actually made musical sense, and was the most satisfying budget player of the period as a result.

The new model, or Planet 2000 as it's officially known, adds a significant

guitars, deep drums and haunting percussion underpinning the plaintive incursions of Molvaer's trumpet. That deep thudding beat that opens stage left is beautifully, roundly positioned by the Planet: Play it again on the Jupiter and it's a tighter more focussed impact, more insistent and coming from way beyond the left-hand speaker. Likewise, the drum patterns that build in the left and right foreground are crisper and deeper on the Jupiter. Each beat has greater texture, greater shape, each an individual note rather than just another in a tumbling series flying forth.

That establishes the key differences: deeper bass, wider dynamic range,

▶ the bigger machine. In fact you've forgotten about the Jupiter too, because by then it's sucked you into the music.

Play something simple, even hackneyed, like the Bill Evans 'Waltz For Debby' (*Waltz For Debby* XRCD VICJ-60141) and the Jupiter presents it with enough life and enough organisation to bring those familiar patterns up all shiny and new. Balancing left and right hands in a way that few affordable players can, it ensures that it sounds like a single instrument rather than two, or worse, two playing out of step. The rest of the band are equally well treated, and sound as if they're open for business, which is no mean feat on a disc as familiar as this.

Female vocals have always been something of a Rega obsession and the Jupiter doesn't disappoint. Current favourite Sarah Masen was given an outing with the upbeat 'Girl On Fire' whose driven insistent drumming and up front guitars can swamp her fragile voice. Go for a rounded, warmed up machine and the track loses its urgency (and much of its musical sense). Too much oomph and the voice recedes, too much detail and the instruments lack body and substance. It needs a careful balancing act to pull it off, the kind of natural, unforced presentation that separates the really musical from the merely hi-fi. That's exactly what the Rega gives you. Plenty of drive and snap in the drumming, plenty of attitude from the guitars. And the vocals? Just the right height, nicely separated and plenty expressive. Sarah Masen has a special voice and it's worth hearing, but not at the

expense of the band as a whole. Here you get the whole caboodle, that nice build into the chorus, driving along the song as Masen delivers her excellent vocals.

It's not really until you go looking for failings that you can pick holes in the Jupiter's musical performance.



Playing the excellent new Finzi *Cello Concerto* recording on Naxos (Finzi recordings are just like buses: neglected for years then three arrive at once) the Rega player can't match the Eikos for sheer scale or drama, inner detail or dynamic range. But it makes just as much sense of the sumptuous score and whilst you don't get the 'you are there' goose bumps there's no shortage of musical communication. The stately progression of the solo part after the dynamic drama of the opening, playing as I type, unrolls with an effortlessly graceful gait. The contrast with the supporting orchestral cast retains the creative tension so necessary to this piece.

And that's the bottom line with the Rega. It extracts your music from those funny little silver discs. It does it in a balanced and detailed enough way to happily convince, but it only convinces because it is music. There's little of the hi-fi system about this player, and it's all the better for it. That's what makes the Jupiter an even bigger bargain than

the Planet. Nearly twice the price of its little brother, it doesn't deliver twice the goods, at least not in quantitative terms. Instead it takes the stellar structural, temporal and organisational musical qualities of the cheaper machine and grafts on enough hi-fi to enhance but not so much as to intrude. When the day comes that I have to get rid of all the fancy toys and live with a real world system, I'm playing the silver stuff on one of these. But it's going to be one of the funky silver ones. They just look so cool...



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single-box CD player
Dacs:	2x 24bit IC40 Delta Sigma
Outputs:	1pr Analogue (phono) 1x Digital (phono) 1x Optical (Tos-link)
Output Level:	2.0V
Remote Control:	Optional extra
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435x100x270mm
Finishes:	Black or Silver
Price:	£998

Manufacturer:

Rega Research Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1702 333071
Net. www.rega.co.uk

Jan Allearts MC1b Moving-Coil Cartridge

by Peter Russell

There is always something special about opening a present, especially if it is gift-wrapped. You know, the anticipation as you struggle with the wrapping, the initial sight of the object of desire as it reveals itself from its final box. I had seen pictures of the Allearts cartridge and had glimpsed the gold block suspended from various tone arms at Hi-Fi shows. However nothing really prepared me for the seeing it and feeling it in the flesh. It comes in what can be best described as the sort of box you normally associate with housing fine jewellery in a jeweller's window. Once you open the cantilevered lid the gold cartridge sits there as if it was hewn from a solid block of precious metal or was the culmination of a Belgian chocolate artist. It isn't of course, but the gold casing invites you to peel the wrapping away to experience the filling. The small watch screws in the sides of the casing tell you however that you are looking at a precision instrument. And this is the point; there is a remarkable amount of detail and care that has gone into the development and final production of, not only this cartridge but also all the cartridges that Jan Allearts makes.

It all started over twenty years ago when Jan was refurbishing existing cartridges and became absorbed in the maintenance of micro-mechanical parts, and as one thing led to another, he decided that he was in a position to manufacture his own cartridge. It took him five years

to finalise the materials and the tooling before he felt ready to commit to his first cartridge. This obsession with the search for perfection is reflected in the fact that not only are the cartridges all hand made, but he limits his production to 75 a year! Mass production is not part of Jan's vocabulary. There is purity both of purpose as well as execution associated with anything in which the alnico magnets are carved rather than machined to preserve their mechanical structure and strength. The coil windings are hand wound, as it is impossible to buy a machine to handle the 1.5gms breaking strain of the copper and silver wire (Dynavector have the only one). And in a world dominated by nudity it is rare to find a completely clothed body. Here the casing contains felt to dampen the mechanical resonances and act as a Faraday shield, and as a final touch, the pins are made of 14c gold! This is a cartridge, which is crafted not manufactured.

Mounting the MC1B is a breeze and given the precision and attention to detail, you can align the stylus, confident that it is set at right angles to the body. Tracking was set at the recommended 2gms and with the vta perfectly horizontal, azimuth adjustment saw the body of the cartridge perfectly level with the record playing surface. Apart from admiring the cartridge on the arm there was nothing else to do but get on with playing the music. If attention to detail, precision and mechanical

integrity are the hallmarks of how the Allearts cartridges are built then it also sums up perfectly how this cartridge sounds.

The moment the stylus hits the groove you are struck by the transparency of the presentation. There is a see through quality, which allows you to penetrate dense musical passages, as if a thin curtain has been parted and the detail which underpins complex structures becomes revealed. Normally this is not necessarily evident; if you do not know it is there in the first place then you do not miss it. However once heard it is difficult to hear a piece of music without its absence drawing attention to itself. It would be easy to conclude that all one was hearing was just more information but that's only part of the story. Because the cartridge seems to have enormous bandwidth, the frequency range becomes extended without any particular emphasis being evident. This completeness can come as a shock as not only do you experience more information, but also the relationships between instruments become redefined. Supporting melodies that were either only vaguely hinted at or not there at all, make their appearance and redefine the musical emphasis and therefore the performance. Palestrina's Lassus contains a wealth of complex vocal layering that, whilst evident when listening through the Insider and the Grasshopper, take on a very different presentation with the Allearts. Here ▶

▶ the Sopranos, Altos and Tenors are delineated in such a way as to lay bare their tonal relationships, whilst the various choirs participating in the polyphony create a layering that is only hinted at through other cartridges. This ability to create a seamless embracing soundstage makes large orchestral passages particularly involving, even when heard through a pair of Quad ELS57's!

One of my favourite pieces of music is not the very often-overworked *Pines of Rome* by Respighi, but his *Ancient Airs and Dances* that grew



out of his scholarly interest in the antiquarian music of Monteverdi and Vitali. Here he translates the delicacy, elegance and changes in tempo of the period into a more modern arrangement where the full orchestra and soloists re-educate the listener into a new fusion. In some ways this music is made for the Allearts, with its rhythmic intensity, melodic richness, large-scale string interludes and ensemble playing. Here the cartridge's natural delicacy of touch, timbral precision and presentation of depth are exploited to the full. I ended up listening to both sides of the album on more than one occasion.

It would be a mistake to assume that the Allearts cannot beat the drum along with the best of them. It can.

The problem here is that because of its other virtues it does not appear to have that vice like authority that some cartridges possess; in which a singer's voice is projected from out of the background and held in front of you as if dislocated from the music. This cartridge enfolds a singer like Aretha Franklin or Ute Lemper into the music as if she is as organic to it as the rhythmic bass lines. There is a unity and integrity about such a presentation, which, can at times, make you question the frequency balance and presentation of other cartridges. Its overall coherence is such that you are never in doubt as to who's leading and who's following, musically speaking. If you value your low frequencies over and above tonal and harmonic integrity then you might struggle with the Allearts.

part with the difference in price.

In some ways this cartridge does little to draw attention to itself. It does not carve out its soundstage as if from granite, nor does it have that bloom and smoothness that can envelope you. It doesn't make you sit up and say wow that's impressive. What it does do is make you smile. It reminds me of when I used to sit with 'customers' when they drove round Silverstone in various high performance cars and the smile on their faces when, on the odd occasion, they 'got it right'. That is what the Allearts did for me; it made me smile when it mattered. I can't wait to get hold of their other models and convert the smile to a permanent grin.



Of course you would be denied the rest of its virtues, but if you had never had them in the first place....

So should you rush out and buy this cartridge? If you want to, you probably can't as the limited production entails waiting lists. However if you get your hands on one you will not want to let it go that easily and at £1299 it is practically a bargain. The real beauty here is that the cost of ownership is sensible. A rebuild, assuming that it has not been abused, will cost you about £200 and if you want to upgrade to the next model, of which there are three, then all you will have to do is

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type	Moving coil
Impedance	22ohms
Tracking	2gm
Output voltage	0.5mV
Magnet	Alnico
Cantilever	Boron
Weight	10gms
Price	£1299

Distributor:

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Loricraft PRC2 Record Cleaning Machine

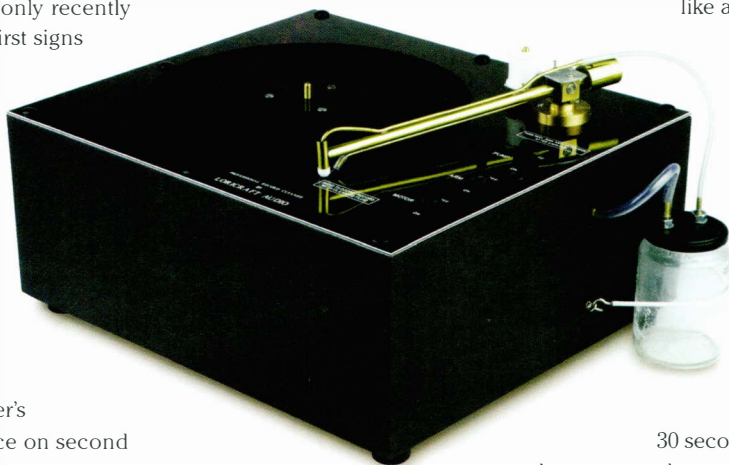
by Roy Gregory

For some reason that has always escaped me, the British public has stubbornly maintained a complete blind spot when it comes to record cleaning. The blame for this often gets laid at the door of none other than Ivor Tiefenbrun and his infamous "let the stylus clean the record" statement, but I don't think even Ivor would claim to be that influential. Whatever the reason, it's a persistent prejudice and one that has only recently shown even the first signs of cracking. Yet, elsewhere in the world, a proper wet record cleaner has long been regarded as an audiophile essential, the more so since the advent of CD and the vinyl lover's increasing reliance on second hand supplies.

Just stop for a moment and consider the value of your record player. Now add in the value of your record collection (and let's face it, even a hundred records have a value of at least a thousand pounds). What are a few hundred pounds spent on maintaining and protecting that investment? Not to mention the savings inherent in increased access to the vinyl lake of cheap used records (or expensive ones if you prefer). In fact,

record cleaners are just so damned sensible and cost effective that it's no exaggeration to say that everybody who's even half-serious about playing records should get one.

So what are your options. If we assume vacuum fluid removal as a minimum standard then things start at \$450 (or £255 if you are prepared to build up a kit). There are a few manual machines out there, but



unless money is really tight I'd go for one of the electric ones. The simple fact is that the easier and quicker a cleaner is to use then the more use it will get. The genuine aqua-vacs come in a variety of forms. The cheapest machines use a record width suction slot that is positioned in the top plate and sucks the fluid from the underside of the record. Easier to engineer and with no problems in adjusting for record

thickness, you can't see what you're doing and you have to flip the record over half way through the cleaning process. The best of these models is the Moth, which further underlines its value by being offered in kit form.

Next up are the VPIs which use a downward facing slot sucking from above, with a tube mounted in a pivoting turret. It makes them easier and quicker to use, although like all slot suckers the size of the vacuum aperture necessitates a seal between slot and record surface and makes them noisy.

My budget favourite is still the venerable VPI HW16.5, a basic machine with manual fluid application. Its comprehensive range of accessories allow it to clean records of any size (up to 12") and whilst it's noisy it's also quick – about 30 seconds to dry each side. In fact it's about all the machine that most people will ever need. But for those with slightly deeper pockets there's the HW17F, a fan cooled machine which is quieter and will run longer than the 16.5. It also has an automatic fluid dispenser, making it ideal for use with two-pot solutions, and for some reason that I've never worked out it also seems to do a slightly better job than its smaller brother. If you can afford the extra over the 16.5 then for a long time this was the machine to go for. ▶

At higher prices still we finally get to the two domestic offerings, the rare and hard to find Keith Monks, and its more readily available derivative, the Loricraft PRC2 which operates on a similar principal – a narrow vacuum nozzle that traverses across the record. The Loricraft is a substantial and expensive two box machine whose main claim to fame is its near silent operation. But at this point I'll admit to my own personal prejudice. I never took the Loricraft seriously, dismissing it on the grounds of size, price, the fact that it is based on a remanufactured Garrard SP25 and that its silent operation seemed like an unnecessary luxury. I was also uncomfortable with reports that the similar Keith monks could actually damage record surfaces if poorly adjusted. Like most prejudices it was based on a mixture of fact and fiction, rumour and hearsay. It also came under concerted assault from Terry O'Sullivan of Loricraft, who probably didn't single me out for special attention but such is his enthusiasm that it certainly seemed like it.

Such was the state of play, a seemingly stable and constant situation against the ever shifting backdrop of the hi-fi industry. Until recently that is. The irrepressible Terry called to inform me that he now has a new model the PRC3 that has undermined my objections at a stroke. Not only is it cheaper but it's a single box that's entirely manufactured by Loricraft. With my defences crumbling (we do cling to our prejudices) the irrepressible Terry closed in for the kill, extracted my address and duly delivered his new baby (nurse, the screens please!).

The PRC3 is exactly as advertised. A single box, it's a little larger than the 16.5 and has a far more purposeful and finished air than the more expensive PRC2. However, despite the physical differences the mode of operation remains the same, and as it's a source of some confusion it bears examining

in some detail. Fluid is squirted onto the revolving record from a small handheld bottle and then brushed across its surface. Once it's evenly covered you can suck it off using the vacuum 'tonearm'. Switch it on and place it on the record. This is the bit that confuses people. Mounted beside the arm is a cotton reel of nylon thread. This passes down a tube to the end of the arm where it travels under the tip and up the vacuum nozzle in the centre of the hard plastic hemisphere that sits where the cartridge would be. From there it travels back along the tube that leads to the waste fluid reservoir. This thread is what runs on the record, keeping the arm off of its surface. It rests on the bumps, not in the grooves. The vacuum nozzle doesn't actually touch the record at all but floats above it resting on the thread. The arm is driven across the record by a motor under its base, via a magnetic coupling. The vacuum sucks the thread through to the reservoir ensuring that only clean thread ever touches the record. It takes about a minute and a half to Hoover a side.

That's the theory, how is it in practice? The answer is, a lot simpler than it sounds. Put a record on the platter, wash it and swing the arm across, hitting the switches to activate the arm drive and vacuum. It works and it's quiet. Not as quiet as the PRC2, but quieter than an HW17F if memory serves. And as it seems to be a day for admissions, I have to say that the noise thing matters. I'm not saying that I can't live with the 16.5 anymore, but the lower noise levels of the PRC2 were certainly welcome, the more so on extended cleaning sessions. The small nozzle also ensures serious suck, regardless of the thickness or size of



the record, making for good fluid removal. The constantly moving thread means that no dirty surfaces ever contact your clean record, which can be a problem with slot cleaners if you don't keep the velvet seals they rely on scrupulously clean. In fact, the only serious criticism that I have of the PRC2 is that it uses a fixed mat, meaning that it will get contaminated by the dirty underside of the record you are cleaning. Flip the record over to do the other side and you place the newly cleaned side on the dirty mat. The only way round this is to have either two mats or one mat with a clean and a dirty side. The fixed mat on the Loricraft precludes either option, although I'm sure you could get round this with a little ingenuity. Otherwise, operationally everything is really well sorted, and even replacing the thread when it runs out is simplicity itself.

Of course, the machine is only half the story, and the fluid you use is at least as important. That's the subject for another article though. In the meantime Loricraft's PRC3 is a welcome addition to the ranks of thoroughly recommendable record cleaners. In fact, I'd go further and say that along with the VPI HW17F it is now the machine of choice for serious collectors. The VPI is a bit quicker and a bit noisier; the Loricraft does a slightly better job of removing the fluid even if it takes longer about it. I'd be perfectly happy to use either, and they both promise a long working life. The choice as they say, is yours, but I think I might just be keeping the review sample. ➤

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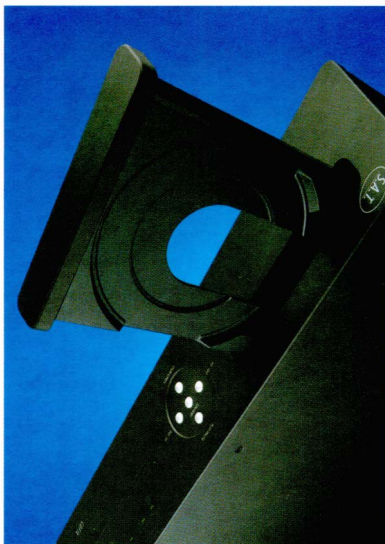
Revisiting the Swedish Audio Technology CD-Fix CD player -

by Chris Binns

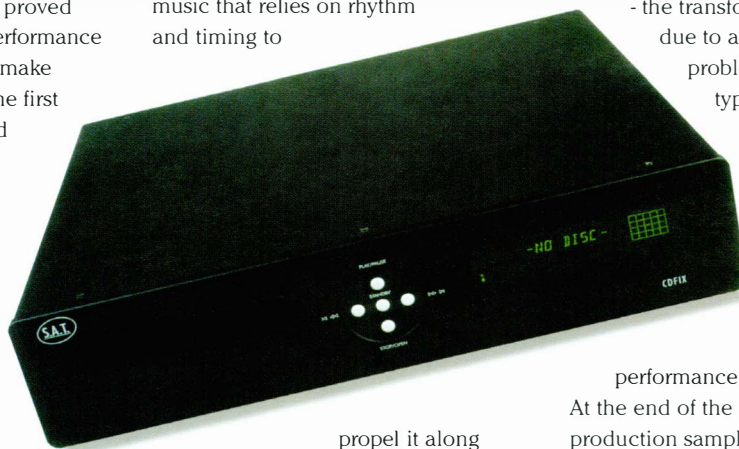
I originally reviewed the CD-Fix in issue 11, and not to put to fine a point on it, found it sadly wanting. It reminded me all too much of CD players circa 1984: mechanical and uninteresting, in fact damn well annoying to listen to. Deadlines meant that review had to go ahead, much to the consternation of the importer and several proud new owners. We'd already requested a second sample, but by the time it had arrived and burnt in for a couple of months (something we know to be essential with this brand) several more deadlines had been and gone.

As I still had the original sample plugged in and ready to go, I played a few tracks on it to confirm my original findings, and sure enough it was about as musically satisfying as a Michael Bolton concert. Switching over to the run-in and warmed-up second sample proved one hell of a relief, with a performance that was so far ahead as to make further comparisons with the first sample pointless - there had to be something amiss.

In essence, the newer model sounded much more fluid, detailed and generally more like a current generation machine should do. Presentation was relaxed and open, but above all, easy to listen to. It worked well with orchestral music, and voices came over particularly well, with plenty of air and space around the performers.



However, the bottom end lacked some bite and definition, (compared to say, some of the Naim machines) and music that relies on rhythm and timing to



propel it along could sound a bit limp. As with the first sample, the same compromise regarding the up - sampling circuitry applies here - disabling it slightly

improves the bass definition at the expense of some top end sweetness. The strengths of this machine lie with its clean, polished presentation, offering a degree of refinement that many users will find attractive.

A quick look inside the machine offered some explanation as to the vast difference in performance. Most obvious was a different power transformer. Our original unit had two PCB mounted encapsulated devices while the later machine had one large toroidal transformer mounted on the chassis. Also noticeable were different capacitors, both make and value, while the new machine is a lot heavier due to the top cover being mild steel as opposed to aluminium. Quite what this all means I'm not sure, but a phone call from SAT offered some explanation


- the transformer substitution is due to a mechanical noise problem with the PCB types, while the different capacitors found their way into a small batch only and were not the specified type. And yes, they could make or break the performance of the machine.

At the end of the day, current production samples should now be consistent and if any customers have a problem with mechanical noise from their machine, SAT will be happy to replace the transformers

► under guarantee. Sods law dictated that one of the dodgy samples arrived for review, and circumstances compounded the problem by preventing an alternative arriving in time to check its performance (although, ironically, its transformers were ghostly quiet, otherwise that would have necessitated a

replacement).

Performing as intended, the CD-Fix is a far more impressive machine. Hardly surprising really – it couldn't have got a lot worse. Its strengths are firmly in the areas of detail and crisp, clear definition. It's an unforced transparency that it shares with Mike Bladelius's other designs for both SAT

and Advantage. Those looking for the last word in foot tapping involvement will end up settling elsewhere, but others will find its cool, controlled sound just what they've been looking for. It's nice to be right, but sometimes it's better to be wrong. Sometimes of course, you can be both at once. 

Platine Verdier Revisited

by Peter Russell

There is always a danger in revisiting somewhere you once knew in the past. You know, going back home after a long absence, driving a car you once owned or going back to a favoured restaurant. Memories are a mixture of filtered past events and expectations of the present. I am normally hesitant of reliving something I previously enjoyed because I am so often disappointed. In this case I will have to revise that view. In Issue 12 I commented that I had not really got to the bottom of the character of the Platine Verdier. Two turntables later and after reinstalling my Well Tempered Signature in a new but smaller listening room has meant that I have had the opportunity to revisit the Verdier and listen to it with a variety of differently priced cartridges. I think that by now I have a fairly clear view as to what this exercise in levitation is all about.


Let me first of all make a comparison; over the last couple of months I had the opportunity, courtesy

of a friend, to listen to a Forsell Reference in my system. Now there is not a lot of similarity between that turntable and the Verdier is there? You would be right and you would be wrong. What they do have in common is a remarkable ability to portray the rhythm and timing in a performance as well as a total

experience is more important than the complete event: Where we listen to music as a sound bite rather than as a performance. The Verdier presents you with a performance, encouraging you to just place the



absence of grain. There is one other thing that they do well; the music seems to pour out of the platter. It is effortless and fluid. This latter quality is something that all 'air bearing' decks seem to share. It is the antithesis of the digital age where the episodic

record on the platter and then forget that you are listening to a mechanical device. Its naturalness is its overwhelming characteristic. This artlessness is demonstrated in its ability not to impose artefact between you and the music. If you have a poorly recorded LP then it will be presented as being poorly recorded with all 

▶ the multi-miked imbalances. If the strings shriek at you it is because that is how they are. This deck will not make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. There are number of recordings that I have enjoyed listening to in the past but having heard them again on the Verdier, I am no longer so sure that I will be as keen to spin them again. Some appear thin and harsh whilst others have lost the body and substance one remembers from previous listening sessions on other turntables with other arms and cartridges.

This fidelity to the source was commented on in the original review and implies that the turntable does not have a particular character, which would be tempting fate too much. If anything, it is too revealing, which is why it is so easy to 'tune' this deck with the choice of tonearm. For me, listening to the different timbral contrasts of the Cremona violins on the Fone album was a real delight, just as dragging out my Billy Holiday albums, both the originals and the

remastered ones was both a joy and a disappointment. Not all the recordings were capable of portray that plaintive pathos in her performance, or her emotional intensity. At one point I succumbed to going through my Albert Lee albums on both the Verdier, the Well Tempered and the Forsell, using the same cartridge on each turntable supported on a BCD stand. All three turntables have their strengths and this is not the place to present a detailed comparison. I will say that the Verdier's strengths lay in its ability to capture the raw energy and sheer attack as Lee went through his numbers. The distinction between nylon, steel and gut strings on the various guitars was more obvious and the presentation of the energy spectrum and authority and control over the music meant that the supporting percussive and stringed instruments created a richer and more involving listening experience.

It would be tempting to try to make a final statement about the Verdier as

the preferred analogue partner in any set up. This is not only dangerous, it leaves too many assumptions about the reviewer and the equipment unexplored. The committed analogue fanatic has a bewildering choice of record decks to select from at the moment and is probably spoilt for choice. All I can say is that in all the various system combinations, arms and cartridges that I have been able to listen to with this deck, it has a fundamental fidelity to the source that will make you reappraise your album collection. But if you are thinking of buying one, don't forget to factor in the hidden cost of ownership - all the extra albums you'll be buying as a result. ➤

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Ringmat Feet And Domes

by David Ayers

Equipment supports are definitely a growth industry, whether racks or something to put under your individual equipment. For each product there are situations in which it works, and others where it doesn't. Ringmat recently supplied me with some cork domes to try in conjunction with their feet that I've been using for a while. It was an instructive experience.

Ringmat feet, available in sets of three or four, come in one of two varieties depending on the weight of the equipment to be placed on them. One of the feet in each set is slightly

different, and is marked with a blue dot. Positioning of this foot in relation to the others is explained in the accompanying instructions. Each foot is made from plastic discs varying in diameter, linked together by damping material, and sitting on two felt rings. In use they appear to act like a highly damped trampoline. Used on their own they are placed between the equipment's own feet and the support surface. Thus the number of feet required per item depends on the number of feet the equipment possesses. Each set also comes with

a Statfoot, which is the support equivalent of the Ringmat Statmat for CDs. This thin plastic sheet is intended to dissipate any stray electrostatic energy from the component. As the Statfoot comes with the feet, I did not assess it on its own.

Ringmat Domes, also available in sets of three or four, also come in two varieties depending on the load of the equipment. They are made from lightweight compressed cork, and like the feet, one of the domes differs from the rest. This odd one out is made from a mixed cork and rubber ▶

► compound, and is used with the 'blue dot' foot. The domes are best used on top of the Ringmat feet, directly under the surface of the equipment to be supported, i.e. replacing the component's own feet.

Using the track 'Back Street Slide' from Richard and Linda Thompson's superb *Shoot Out The Lights LP* I started off by using just the feet under Tom Evan's Groove phono stage. The most obvious effect was in the bass, where the kick drum had much more slam and impact. The overall separation of the instruments was improved with better timing leading to a greater understanding of the interplay between the musicians.

The only downside was that the extra weight in the kick drum put the balance slightly out compared to the other instruments.

Keeping the feet under the Groove, and adding the feet under the Argo HR Pre-amp, and it's power supply produced another shift in the presentation. Now the kick drum receded slightly to assume a more rightful place in the mix, but at the expense of the upper mid and treble. Thompson's lead guitar was sharpened considerably, which was somewhat unpleasant as he normally adopts a somewhat incisive tonality anyway. Sibilance was slightly emphasised, yet perversely the overall musical coherence was improved. The overall result was a bit like putting on dirty glasses, the view may come more into focus, but through a slight overall haze. In the end I found the system more musical, but not necessarily more likeable. Must be time to add the domes.

Adding the domes first to the Groove and then the Argo was a big leap forward, or rather it was when I

realised that the foot/dome combination should always be used in sets of three under electronic components, and not four. Now there was a greatly increased sense of a band of real people playing together and off each other. Thompson's voice had much more body, and more importantly was much more expressive. Those micro dynamics where a singer very slightly stresses a particular word were much clearer.

Moving on to CD as a source, I tried using the feet under the player.



Unfortunately this was a case of emperor's new clothes, as my initial, highly impressed, reaction palled after extended listening. Yes there were improvements in certain areas, such as bass impact and overall dynamics, but this was at the expense of the rest of the instruments. Timing was being dominated by the sheer thrust and weight of the bass drum making everything leaden and heavy footed. It was a classic mistake. I had been wowed by the sheer impact of the drum kit, without noticing what was being sacrificed in the process.

Finally I tried the feet with and without the domes under the Pulsar DAC. Oddly here the feet alone were much more satisfactory than the foot/dome combination. With the feet used on their own, the results were very similar to the feet used with the domes under the Groove and the Argo. For example, playing another Richard Thompson track 'Uninhabited Man'

from the CD *Mock Tudor* showed a staggering amount of extra bass depth, the kind of extra depth that adds hugely to the overall recorded ambience.

The whole soundstage was bigger and had more acoustic. When you manage to achieve this sort of effect in your system, you suddenly find yourself able to hear more easily into the recording, separating the musical strands and giving greater insight into the interaction of the musicians. Conversely, adding the domes caused the sound to become indistinct, with imaging, a strong point in my system, becoming vague. Frankly,

such was the deterioration that I stopped using them within minutes.

Until now I haven't tried the feet or domes with my Alecto Power amps. Also the feet and domes are unsuitable for use

with my Michell Orbe due to its design, but Ringmat inform me that some of their customers have had great success with other turntables.

In my system, the Ringmat feet and domes are a mixed success. Where they work, they work very well indeed, but they don't work in all situations. I think this is a very worthwhile product in the right circumstances, but at the risk of repeating myself, you really need to try them for yourselves.

At Ringmat's suggestion I also tried the feet and domes under my loudspeakers, but the results of that experiment will have to wait until next issue.



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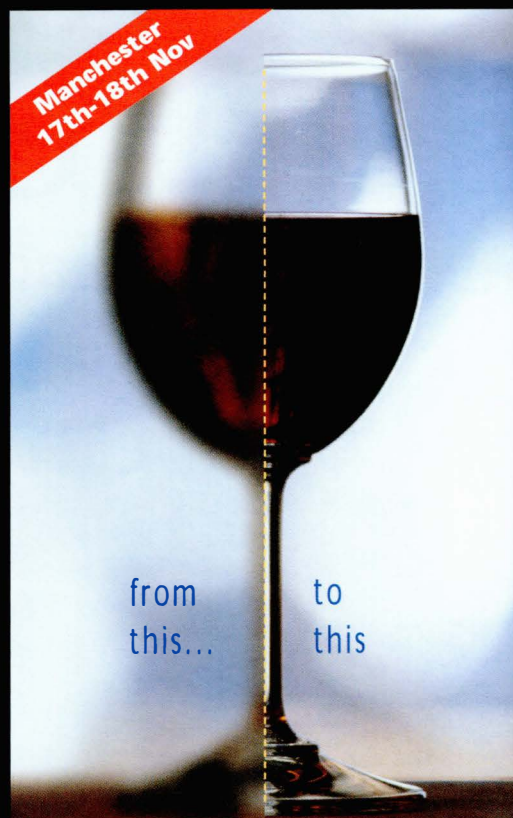
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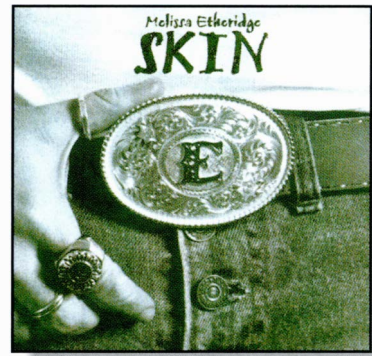
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RINGMAT

RINGMAT: A REVOLUTION IN SOUND

Record Reviews

How To Read Them



Melissa Etheridge

Skin

ISLAND 548 661-2 

Melissa's well-publicised gender preference naturally makes for an interesting twist to any of those "love crazy" songs that have been the mainstay of her albums throughout the Nineties. Ten new loves, founded here on old-fashioned virtues, again reveal the strength she possesses both as a writer and interpreter of up-tempo alternative rock. A husky, deprecating voice and brooding personality, which suffers fools not at all, is a volatile and hard-hitting combination. Quality lyrics pluck prickly insights from out of those everyday mundane experiences: "I washed the dishes poured out the old wine / Called a new friend for the second time / It's not bad this brand new life / It's clean and it's sharp like a brand new knife" ('Goodnight') proves she is an articulate wordsmith who scrubs away at a commonplace image to show that sexuality is merely *Skin* deep. Peel away at any relationship and it's obvious that all of us happen to be identical underneath. Indifference and neglect are shared slights. Saying that "My heart is a traitor / It led me down this road" ('Down To One') speaks for everyone at some time or another. Of course it's easier to dwell upon the pain, so on balance, Etheridge's perspective is a pessimistic and vulnerable one.

RP














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

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

The reviewers are identified by their initials. They are:- Chris Binns, Pete Christie, Dave Davies, Roy Gregory, Jason Hector, James Michael Hughes, Jon Maple, Reuben Parry, Dave Ayers, Andrew Hobbs, Chris Thomas, Mark Childs.

Key to Icons

-  CD
-  Gold CD
-  HDCD
-  XRCD
-  Double Disc
-  SACD
-  120g LP
-  150g LP
-  180g LP
-  Availability As S/H LP
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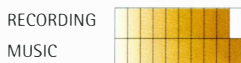
Nils Petter Molvaer

Khmer

ECM 1506 


ECM have an enviable reputation for producing exemplary recordings. Unfortunately the music tends to spread from the obscure to the impenetrable via the obtusely eclectic. Recognise a single name on the cover of an ECM LP and you'll a) be doing well, and b) be unlikely to recognise any of the other contributors, which can make buying them something of a lottery. *Khmer* offers the familiar mix of western Jazz influence mixed with complex, oriental tinged percussion, but this time creatively married to multiple guitar sounds and samples. The result is a heady brew with Molvaer's trumpet sounding uncannily like the ghost of Miles as he makes a far better fist of this kind of collaborative sprawl than his most obvious influence ever did. Music of pattern and texture, this is a dense, intense and occasionally disturbing concoction which will give you and your system a serious emotional workout. Slabs of bass, wailing guitars and a haunting, tortured trumpet – and that's just the first couple of tracks. This is at least one new direction for Jazz, and whilst it will probably offend the traditionalists, or even frighten them, it's the most exciting new Jazz I've heard for a long time. Buy with confidence: Approach with caution!

RG



Fiona Apple

When The Pawn

CLEAN SLATE/EPIC 496 428-2 

Fiona's impressive 1996 debut disc, *Tidal*, confirmed her position as the young queen of melancholia. A precocious talent who evoked disquieting tableaux through the dark, shifting emotional undercurrents of her lyrics and laments, was for me far more crab-apple than golden delicious. Perhaps it is the hard edge in such a youthful voice, or the dirge-like speeds of songs which seemed to suggest life experiences of someone much older that made *Tidal* bitter to the taste. Certainly, the gothic black and white images of a gaunt, undernourished and haunted-looking Fiona Apple did little to dispel feelings that she had aged before her time, and that saddened me. *When The Pawn*, is a considerably happier affair. Ten introspective songs including, 'Get Gone', 'Love Ridden' and 'Paper Bag', focus upon love and heartbreak, optimism and despair, vulnerability and determination. Mature, perceptive and robust lyrics dissect her dilemmas. For every piercing, bitter line like, "So call me crazy, hold me down/Make me cry; get off now baby - /It won't be long till you'll be/Lying limp in your own hand" ('Limp') there's another of the quality of "I'm gonna make a mistake - /I'm gonna do it on purpose... Cuz I'm full as a tick/And I'm scratching at the surface/... I've acquired quite a taste/For a well made mistake" ('Mistake') which exudes self-confidence. Apple's spirit can be bent but it will not be broken.

RP



Appalachia Waltz

Yo-Yo Ma/Edgar Meyer/Mark O'Connor

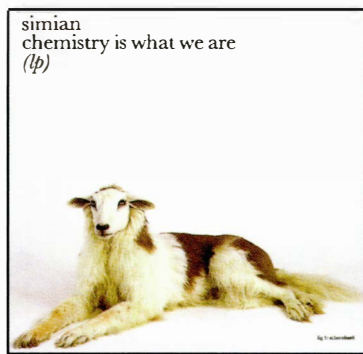
Sony SK 68460 

The collaboration of these three accomplished performers produces music of imaginative interaction that bridges the gaps of a number of musical styles, from bluegrass and country to Celtic and classical chamber. As well as these recognised genres, the music here contains certain contrasting harmonies and rhythms, and expressive improvisations found in jazz. Each performer supplies their own style and technique, but at the same time each learns and modifies from the other two, giving a certain integration to the group. Each is allowed an individual expression, but none overwhelms the others. The performance is full of contrasting melodies and provocative counterpoint that lay at the musical heart of the album, but there is also a tremendous sense of enjoyment and fun. These players certainly have a sense of humour. The sound is good, with a palpable presence to each player within the soundstage, and a certain amount of bite from their instruments, but it just lacks the ultimate in transient response found on the best recordings.

This is a thought-provoking disc that also entertains. For a sample of this and Sony's other releases of Appalachian music there is now an excellent anthology – *Heartland* (Sony SK 89683).

SG





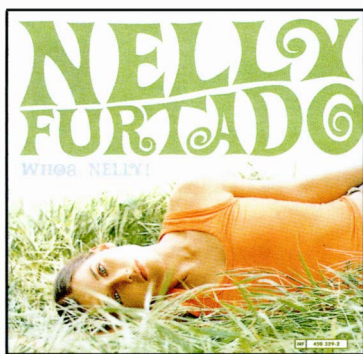
Simian

chemistry is what we are

Cdsour021 (CD)

Simian are several shadowy characters that produce superb music. Beyond that I'm not sure, and to be fair, I'm not sure anyone else is either. The music they produce is singularly unique. It consists of a blend of trance, café chic and poetry. 'The Wisp' for instance appears to combine throbbing bass, squelchy white noise and plain-song chant. It's a hard pill to swallow, lying as it does so far outside the bounds of popular music, but it's sure to do you good. What is actually surprising is how conservative they have been on this album, considering the more avant-garde offerings they have issued before. In fact this album sounds suspiciously similar to some of the later Boo Radleys material: if someone had stolen Martins Carr's guitar and left him with a Moog and a sampler you could imagine him producing something not entirely dissimilar. It's a delicate album, and at times just slightly disturbing, the haunting melodies, with their awkward harmonies, drift over incredibly intense sub-bass. 'chemistry is what you are' contains surprises at every turn, and can delight with every one. Let there be no doubt that Simian are moving music forwards, and in entirely the right direction.

MC



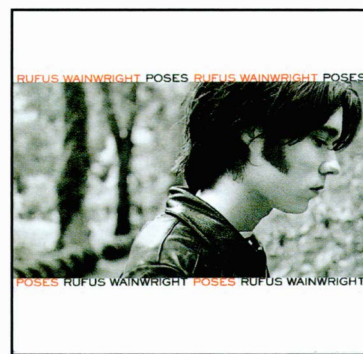
Nelly Furtado

Whoa, Nelly

Dreamworks 450 329-2 (CD)

OK, OK, so you might be suffering from Nelly overexposure, as it seems like you can't escape from 'I'm Like A Bird', the fifth track on this album, anywhere you turn this summer. Don't let that put you off, for whilst the aforementioned track is a fine song, it's not entirely representative of the album. In fact, the new single 'Turn Off The Light' is much closer to the overall feel of the CD, with its quick tongue tripping lyric and hip-hop tinged style. Although born in Canada, Ms Furtado has Portuguese origins, and these come through on tracks like 'Onde Estás', which is sung in her forefather's tongue - thankfully she provides us with a translation and whilst Nelly's not a lyricist beyond her years, there are a few nice flourishes along the way. For example: 'I'm cleaning my dirty mind like a toilet but it won't give in' and '... I'm sorry that I made myself feel better by making you feel never good enough', the latter showing a burgeoning insight into the human psyche. Watching her perform with such incredible confidence on Later.... with Jools Holland was a revelation, here is one performer who is going to be around for some time, and I for one say good luck.

DA



Rufus Wainwright

Poses

Dreamworks 0044-50237-2 (CD)

Comparison between this album and the Eels latest (also reviewed in this issue) is interesting and informative, *Poses* is more melodic but is saturated with a similar whimsical style of understated presentation, particularly of the lyrics which are, similarly, very subtle but no less noteworthy. With this album Mr. Wainwright makes a strong statement of his credentials as a poet of note. Reporting in song lyrics on the state of society isn't new but this album manages the balance of entertaining musically and commenting social better than most. For example what at first seems to be a standard West-Coast influence on 'California' turns out to be anything but. Listen to the lyrics "life is the longest death in California" and you are suddenly aware of the disparity between the upbeat tone and the sentiment expressed. He manages a range of emotions from dreamy and uplifting through to great tension in 'Evil Angel' and it's all helped along by the complex song construction. Here we find a mix of a great many instruments strings, guitars and percussion all well organised to add depth to these songs its all very complete. An excellent and largely complete album that you will keep coming back to, it's just a pity Rufus can't really manage to sing in tune.


JH





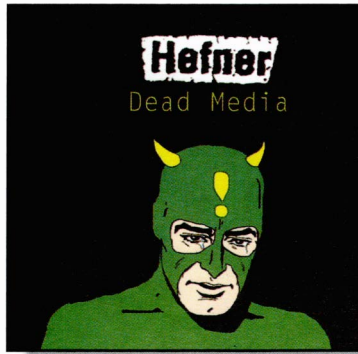
Oasis

Definitely Maybe

CRECD169 Creation 1994 

Ten years after their first ever live performance, Oasis are climbing back into the limelight, so I thought it might be a good idea to take a look at the album that raised them to fame back in 1994. Lets be clear about this, *Definitely Maybe* contains not one original idea. For five albums since, they have been struggling to show they can be fresh and creative, and for five albums since they have sounded tired and faded. And for what? Because their debut album, whilst being a virtual facsimile of 60s and 70s rock, bristles with an excitement and intensity that no band have recaptured. What is still striking about the album is that it really does convey a sense of innocence, it really does convince the listener that here are five lads from Manchester you could meet on any night down the local, a sense long since lost. And that's the key, every track is imbued with a slightly grimy quality, every song simple and effective, and all played with such naïve energy. And it sounds great. Noel may not have been a genius on the guitar, but in Liam they had a truly great singer, spitting out lyrics like every word was a personal affront. Forget your prejudices, forget the tabloids, forget all that happened since. Put it on, turn it up and see just why Oasis rose so fast. And whilst you're there, listen to 'Bring It On Down' and wonder just how loud those guitars must have been.

MC



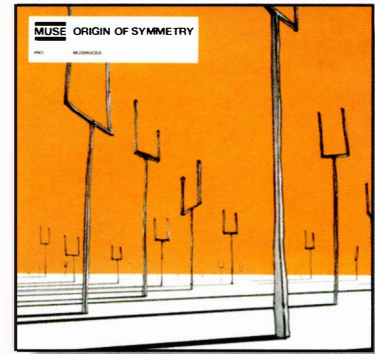
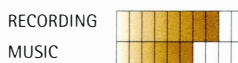
Hefner

Dead Media

PURE115CD Too Pure 2001 


What were Hefner thinking when they let Darren Hayman sing? He may represent one of the most intelligent, witty and emotional song writers of all time, but he sure can't sing. If you haven't heard Hefner before, then you have been missing out. For four previous albums they have been putting stories of breathtaking frankness and normality to music, in ways that are moving and satirical in equal measure. This album marks a change in Hefners style, where previous albums mixed sharp, incisive lyrics with heartfelt delivery, this album courts chart success ever more desperately. *'Dead Media'* finds the band dallying with electronica for the first time, ditching their skillful steel guitar for vintage analogue sequencers. And that's the problem, because Hefner, whatever they do, will never be cool. There still remains a fine set of classic songs, enhanced, rather than ruined by the addition of synthesizers. But gone are the ballads of missed opportunities, and gone are the anthems of discontent. Darren's voice is undoubtedly less hostile to the casual listener, but it never really reaches its full howl. This is by no means a bad Hefner album, it's just that all the things which made Hefner so brilliant and unique in the past have been let slip. Hefner's other albums sound strangely personal, *'Dead Media'* sounds mass produced.

MC



Muse

Origin Of Symmetry

Mushroom MUSH93CDX  

Origin of Symmetry is a dramatic album, or rather melodramatic in an American soap – mugging to the camera – sort of way. By forming a melange of ELP, Queen, Rainbow, and Bach topped off with lashing of millennium attitude, Muse have managed to produce an album that is simultaneously fresh and familiar, at least if you're an ageing prog-rocker like me. Singer and songwriter Matthew Bellamy comes over like a cross between Van Der Graaf Generator era Peter Hammill and Freddy Mercury. Whilst not having Hammill's subtlety, or either's voice, his approach lies firmly in the box marked 'intensity', possibly with a 'camp' sub-title. Lurking towards the end of the album there are a couple of reflective tracks, such as 'Screenager', but most of the album is firmly in the full-on, in your face category. This is an album that makes you want to furrow the brow and sing it out (bet you can't make the top notes on 'Micro Cuts'). Probably better not to stick it in the CD Walkman when you're on the train. Not since Moloko's *Things To Make And Do*, and before that Skunk Anansie's *Post Orgasmic Chill* has an album so firmly glued itself into my CD player. One to add to my desert island discs.



DA





Eels

Souljacker

Dreamworks 450 335-1  

The founder and inspiration of the Eels is Mark Oliver Everett, the son of Hugh Everett the author of the many worlds theory of quantum physics. Fortunately for us Mark did not take to quantum physics but fell instead into music and in 1995 formed the Eels. The rest is now history with three highly acclaimed albums behind them they have recently released their fourth studio album *Souljacker*.

So where does the new album fit in? Superficially less accessible than *Beautiful Freak* or *Daisies for the Galaxy* but thankfully lacking the bleak bottom of the heart, soul wrenching of *Electro-Shock Blues*, the Eels have further cemented their position as a very serious force on the alternative scene with this album.

Souljacker illuminates a band that are still experimenting despite finding a popular sound which has to mark them out for greatness, a simple rehash would have kept most people happy! One influence that is a little less than original is the inclusion of the usual suspects - dancy beats. Fortunately the integration with the rest of the songs has been done well. Possibly the best Eels album to date, but I'll need to hear it a few more times to be sure.

JH



The Strokes

Is this it

RTRADECD030 

A lot has been said about The Strokes in the media recently. And justifiably so, for a small band from New York City to burst so suddenly and so explosively into the UK music scene is quite an achievement. The unexpected success of The Strokes is representative of a growing interest in guitar driven music which concentrates on the content rather than the gloss. With a handful of American groups behind them (White Stripes etc) and a host of excellent British bands waiting to take advantage of their success, *Is this it* may prove to be the most important release this year. Which is a shame, because it fails to deliver the excitement that was promised.

However, every song has style, every song has swagger. The Strokes have a sound which is unique and timeless, even allowing for the obvious quality issues. And yet something isn't quite right; there is simply too much filler, and not enough killer songs.

But it isn't all bad, not by a long way. The Strokes sound laid-back and confident, full of attitude and sharp enough to cut themselves. The singles rock, and even when the songs lack substance, they don't want for pure attitude.

A good album then, perhaps even the spark that lights the fire, but at the very least a breath of freshness amidst the chart pap.

MC



Suzanne Vega

Songs In Red And Gray

A&M RECORDS 493 111-2 

A single moment convinced me that Vega was a phenomenal performer: courageous and immensely talented. She stood in front of a packed Albert Hall, hushed an expectant audience, waved away the band and found perfect pitch to hit the right key for an unaccompanied vocal rendition of 'Tom's Diner'. Totally stunning. This rich voice has always caressed the listener's ear until the most gentle delivery of a lyric successfully lulled us into a false sense of security before heaping the real substance of those highly literate songs upon us. *Songs In Red And Gray* returns to this formula with a vengeance through lines like, "The Virgin Mary on a chain has hit me in the mouth again as we explore the carnal scare of sacred and profane". ('It Makes Me Wonder'). All thirteen tracks, here, are underpinned by her seriously good acoustic guitar, while bass men, Mike Visceglia and Rupert Hine, together with some carefully considered drum work, provide an understated but essential musical foundation to this album. Thematically, her material has not much altered, either. Picking over the bones of doomed marriages ('Soap And Water'). Trading in broken promises ('Songs In Red And Gray'). Observing how easily violence against women is committed (If I Were A Weapon). Angst disarmingly wrapped, for which her distinctive, warm cadences are so much more than packaging.

RP




Sonic Satori

by Michael Mercer

Various Artists, mixed by Everything But The Girl

Back To Mine


Ultra Records 

The folks at DMC have come up with a brilliant idea for interesting compilations. This epiphany came at the right time, with all the greatest hits volumes and poorly thrown together anthologies out there on the market. Who wants to spend the extra shekles for a collection of songs that you already own that just happened to be sequenced differently. Enter the *Back To Mine* series. The concept: Asking DJs to mix a set of records that they would spin themselves, in the comfort of their own homes after a long night working the club scene. The result is a looking glass into the eclectic and imaginary tastes of the DJs outside of their work environment. Songs range from hip-hop to classic soul, and grant us insight into the inspiration behind the sets that these turntable wizards play. Some have utilized the opportunity to express their back-at-home emotional state, and others spin their influences. Worldwide talents Groove Armada, Danny Tenaglia, Nick Warren, and Faithless have all contributed to the series. Tracey Thorn and Ben Watt, better known as Everything But The Girl have given us a gorgeous look into their flip sides with this installment. Not surprising, as any true EBTG fan knows they've done everything from acoustic folk to dance together (if you get my drift). The duo have managed to seamlessly mix a wide range of music, and their sequencing is sublime, which is a necessity for any worthwhile compilation. Brilliant picks from Beth Orton ('Stars All Seem To Weep'), Ananda Project ('Cascades of Colour', the Wamdue Black remix), and Deadly Avenger ('Bayou') make this worth

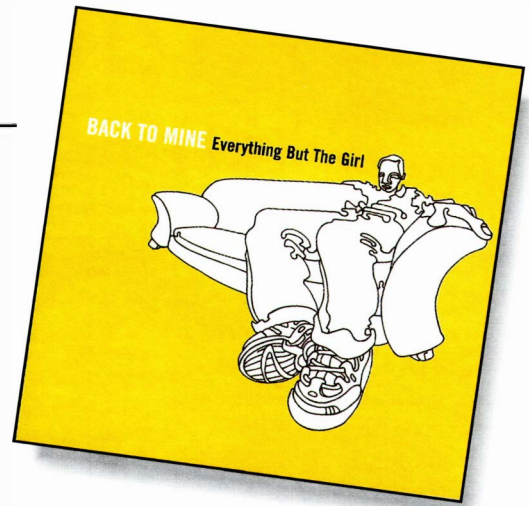
the downtime on the couch. And how could a true music appreciator go wrong with Donny Hathaway's 'Someday We'll All Be Free?' EBTG have outdone themselves here. This *Back To Mine* record is just that, a reason to crack a bottle of that sweet Merlot you've been saving, turn the ringer off and slide over next to the partner you barely see these days.

Rickie Lee Jones

It's like this

Artemis 

It's a difficult task trying to find a genuinely well-produced and engaging album in the rock/pop genre these days. With the advent of new recording/mixing/sequencing (and every other -ing you can think of) technology the realness of records seems to be fading. The soul of the studio has been replaced by convenience and expediency. Sometimes a gem sneaks through the corporate clutches and we get to marvel at its authenticity. It's like this, the latest from Rickie Lee Jones, is a much-needed antidote to the pro-tooled world of contemporary music. This album is deliciously sparse. Jones vocal delivery has only gotten sexier with age. The deep, sultry nuances of her voice glide across the soundstage like rain on a windshield. Her phrasing is completely unique, this is Rickie the way she wants to be. It's not difficult to understand why she is in such good form here; the record is a compilation of her favorite classics. And with accompanying musicians like Ben Folds you are guaranteed



good musicianship. Jones' cover of the late Marvin Gaye's 'Trouble Man' is simply stunning. She brings a bare bones interpretation to the track and does it with true style. Steely Dan's 'Show Biz Kids' sounds as if it were written for her. The most intriguing element of this record is the captured space. The sound stands out at first breath. You can actually hear the air around the vocal mic. Imaging is sublimely focused. It's almost eerie, how "real" the soundscape is. There is a defining sense of dimension and depth. Instruments exhibit their true characteristics without being trimmed or EQ'd to death. Bruce Brody, who co-produced the record with Jones, deserves an award for his efforts. Unfortunately the record probably didn't sell enough units to attract Grammy attention. If you've ever been in a booth, or a live room and really heard (or felt) the way the sound behaves you are going to love this album.

Back To Mine

RECORDING 
MUSIC

It's like this

RECORDING 
MUSIC

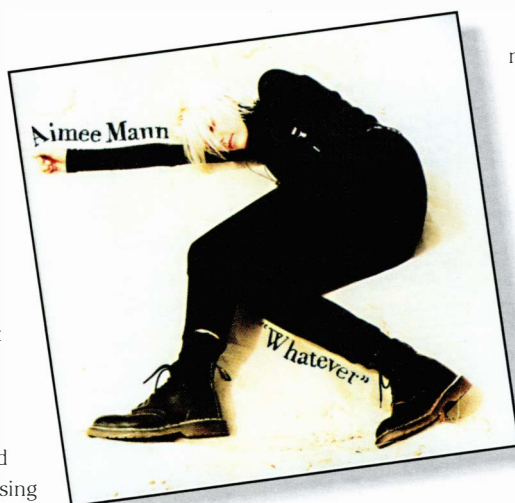
Aimee Mann

Her Aim Is True

by Reuben Parry

Channel hop around MTV or simply dial through the commercial radio stations and it's clear that today's popular scene is an increasingly frustrating and often quite depressing experience for anyone searching out intelligent creative songwriting. A succession of cosmetically manufactured, powder-puff bands can be heard knocking out banal "tweenie" tunes or dishing up further helpings of what I'd loosely describe as "burger" music: Those flavourless samples, cover versions and remixes which remain about as appetising as a plate of mechanically recovered meat, and seem just as likely to turn your mind to mush. Of course there have been and will continue to be exceptions. Drawn largely from Independent labels (and criminally underplayed as a consequence) the likes of Thea Gilmore, Laura Cantrell, Stewboss and Foo Foo & The Boy, put wholesome fare back on the menu. When you first encounter these CDs there is a discernible moment where faith in the system fleetingly resurfaces, but this only lasts until the next formulaic single courtesy of Atomic Kitten or HearSay receives yet more undeserved airplay.

One of my fairly recent musical Epiphany's was a case of rediscovery rather than new discovery. *Bachelor No.2* (SUPER EGO/V2 RECORD WR1015872) opening with a rhetorical, 'How Am I Different', reintroduced me to the richly attractive voice and urbane pen of Aimee Mann. Either I've eaten out of too many aluminium pans lately, or I'm simply getting old because for the life of me I couldn't remember where I'd heard her before. Then she sought of fell into place. It was the early-Eighties popsters and WBCN Radio Boston "battle of the bands" winner, 'Til Tuesday. Aimee was the quartet's lead vocalist. Phew! She was seriously hot back then and, to be honest, she's still hot today! Perhaps it was those skin-deep assets alone that propelled them up the charts? MTV loved her to the point where they certainly fanned the flames to such an intensity with their constant exposure that a strong



mainstream 1985 debut album, *Voices Carry*, went gold in just seven short months. The obligatory dollop of irony? Well, there's nothing superficial about Mann. As the lenses lingered longingly on those features real impetus was given to this increasingly literate and opinionated songwriter – one who would eventually employ her skills to damn the ephemeral nature of the music business.

It must have been after the band's break up in 1989 when

I lost sight of Aimee Mann. Through three albums she'd remained a focal point in Til Tuesday's shifting roster, but though a solo recording career always seemed imminent, it was another four years before she surfaced with an intelligently crafted and contemporary revival of pop's traditions. A collaboration with former Byrd's guitarist, Roger McGuinn, lent a distinctive 12-string back-cloth to lyrics now infused with plenty of personal emotional baggage and barbed corporate criticism. Understandably, *Whatever* (GEFFEN GFLD 19319) received plaudits across-the-board. But Elvis Costello's praise for this album probably counted the most as he figures strongly among her career influences. However, she has remained very much her own person.

Wilful from the outset, Mann followed her instincts, placing them ahead of obvious pressures to conform with perceived wisdom. A summer music course suggested by her father led in 1978 to full-time acceptance at the prestigious Berklee School of Music, initially as a vocal major, but soon she switched to bass so that she could learn how to read music. The security offered by that institution was almost as quickly rejected. Mann left to form her first band – the self-consciously punkish Young Snakes - just when New Romanticism was taking off elsewhere. Devo and John Lydon of The Sex Pistols were named among her teenage idols, and their anarchic inducements were obvious here. Although there was an LP, *Bark Along with The Young Snakes*, this

► opportunity to pogo to an unmelodic, chordless art-noise was thankfully short-lived. When they broke up in 1982, she and fellow Berklee drop-out, Michael Hausman (drums) joined up with Joey Pesce (keyboard) and Robert Holmes (guitar) to form a decidedly more mainstream 'Til Tuesday. Clearly a practical response to record labels that were no longer interested in signing radically different bands. Their Boston radio contest win leading directly to an Epic recording contract. For a while pragmatism prevailed. A successful single, 'Voices Carry', and Mike Thorn's smartly produced LP of the same name, revealed Aimee's fledgling talent as both lyricist and musician. Its' underlying theme, that of a women finding – and keeping – her voice, was prophetic. Predictably, perhaps, Mann's vocal delivery here was a touch lightweight, but through each successive performance she grew in stature, and the band's later releases were to reflect that assurance. Although these are currently deleted in the U.K., the three 'Til Tuesday LPs/CDs are worth searching out because they map Mann's progress as a bass player and elevation to the status of serious songwriter.

Behind the scenes, though, there was an increasingly fraught relationship with the record label.

Epic, who wanted chart success more than anything, replaced Thorne with Rhett Davies for an impeccably fashioned follow up LP, *Welcome Home*. Mann, who was by this time writing most of the songs alone, went head-to-head with the Record Executives about which direction the album should take. The results were acrimonious and unsatisfactory. Epic's marketing strategy was (pointedly) less than enthusiastic, while Mann roundly accused them of "politicking" and "intransigence". When new groups are so often judged by that all-important second album, this pissing contest was to prove near fatal. Artistic differences continued, and a third release, *Everything's Different Now* (1989), barely made it into the record racks. Epic had asked Mann to write with Diane Warren: instead she responded by collaborating with kindred spirit, Elvis Costello and lover, Jules Shear. It proved to be in many ways a swan song.

By now 'Til Tuesday's line up consisted of Mann and Michael Hausman, who later gave up the skins to become Aimee's manager. She and Epic soon parted company, (although it was another four years before Mann was finally freed from her contract), and by the time of *Everything's* release Mann and Jules Shear had also gone their separate ways. This record is a fascinating and frequently voyeuristic

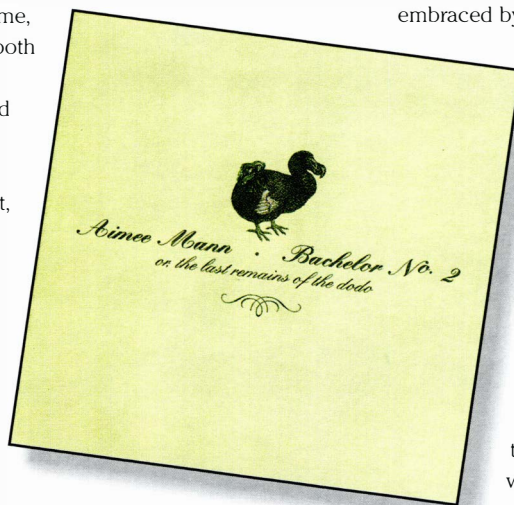
experience. Shear's lyrics in the title track express his happiness at falling for this leggy, blue-eyed blonde. Mann then uses the jilted Shear's music with her lyrics on, '(Believed You Were) Lucky', to explore and tease out their parting feelings. A touch bizarre when the relationship was barely cold. Still, once you get beyond this expose, there's an important collaboration, 'The Other End (Of The Telescope)', sung with Costello. It marked the coming of age as a songwriter in the eyes of her peers. An articulate Mann's perspective on this association is something of a revelation in itself: "I'm embraced by those interested in songwriters

and not by those interested in attitude. For them, evidence of craftsmanship betrays attitude": Clearly, a well-thought out philosophy.

'Til Tuesday will, of course, largely be remembered for Mann the icon. A visual treat who flaunted her New Wave hairdo with some abandon. But this was a role that she, surprisingly, did and does not enjoy, saying, "Posing for pictures and videos and schmoozing is the thing I'm least competent at. But writing lyrics and putting songs together and recording them – that part I'm good at. To thwart that and

then encourage the thing that I can only be mediocre at is just very stressful". Understandably, this aversion to the starmaking machine placed her further at odds with her corporate bosses. However, the 'Til Tuesday years are best thought of as a necessary rites of passage. The powerful title song on that debut album, which dealt so effectively with themes of an oppressed girl and her verbally abusive boyfriend, was so far removed from the usual New Romantic material that it provided an early clue to her potential. Moreover, later compositions tended to leave behind drum machines and synthesisers in favour of songs based around acoustic guitar. Musically, this stylistic shift (fully realised on the solo LPs) instils a greater sense of seriousness, heaping enhanced credibility and authority upon her material. So, to a degree, probing amongst these works prepares a way for the excellent writing and musicianship that was to come in the Nineties. But an enforced four years hiatus between *Everything's Different Now* and *Whatever* was to effectively blindsides the critics and a cadre of adoring fans. None of us were prepared for *Whatever's* arrival.

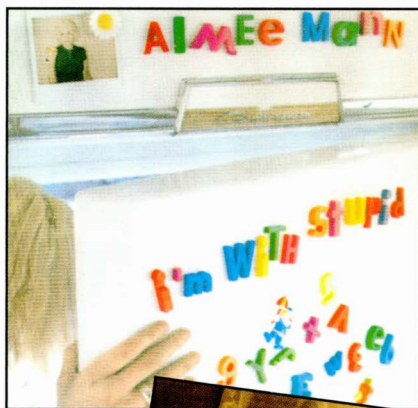
Blending rock, pop and folk for a richly embroidered, guitar-based sound in songs like 'I Should've Known', 'Put Me On Top' 'Stupid Thing' or 'I Could Hurt You Now' show that the album's structure goes well-beyond that needed for



► a tirade against record companies and ex-lovers. As Joni Mitchell wisely observed Aimee Mann has “dared to put back the anxiety” into rock, while Mann, herself, was even quicker to dismiss any obvious, potted analysis of these songs, stressing, that when she writes about relationships, “...sometimes a song is ironic or from another perspective. Sometimes it’s from the guy’s point of view ...But a relationship refers to two or more things interacting.

Boy-girl is more narrow than my scope. For example, it could also be between parent and child... I like to get inside situations, search for answers. Songs are explorations, trying to gain understanding, getting to the bottom of it. Some people look away but I believe facing it is what makes it get better. It’s what you don’t know that hurts you the most. I’m a person who wants to know”.

Looking more closely at Mann’s life exposes the complexity of her personal demons and reveals the extent to which music might be used as a vehicle to unravel them. With parents who were diametrically different in nature a drama-filled childhood was almost certainly guaranteed. Her father was a painter and her mother a psychiatrist. They soon divorced and the three year old Aimee was taken off to London by her mother and her new lover. Within the year a devoted father had employed a private detective to track them down and whisk Aimee back to the States. It was not until well into adulthood that she met with her mother again. Meanwhile the bond with her father became an exceptionally close one. The relationship with her stepmother was more perplexing, possibly because Aimee lived the life of a precocious tomboy. Apply some basic amateur psychology and it’s not difficult to conclude how early traumatic experiences, as well as that close knit father/daughter affiliation, could have informed Mann’s own volatile love life and career moves. It places the songs on a CD like *Whatever* into a different context. Ignore the acerbic accusations levelled by critics who have called her “a melancholic languishing in self-pity”. She is, by far, a more complicated person whose music reflects those complexities both through her lyrics and within a framework of distinctive chords. Sometimes this is expressed through quite unexpected (almost indulgent) tracks. Here, I am thinking of the visual imagery of ‘Jacob Marley’s Chain’.



Its’ swirling, fairground overtones achieved by the use of unusual instruments including pump organ, mellotron, chamberlin, harmonium and kazoo mark this out as an experimental and invigorating departure from the surrounding guitar-pop songs.

When considering Aimee Mann’s uneasy alliance with each successive record label, I’m tempted to inwardly sigh in exasperation. Her output could have been that much greater – though perhaps the artistic restrictions would have compromised quality. Still, at least for the 1993 *Whatever* these problems were not of her making. The album, which was originally released by Imago, was eventually picked up for distribution by Geffen following Imago’s bankruptcy. It happened to be another of those occasions when Mann, in the short-term, would find herself at a loose end. Much of 1994 was spent in London writing the songs which would form the bedrock for her second solo effort.

Another year. Another label.

Another album. Signing for Geffen imprint DGC in the summer of 1995, a wickedly titled, *I’m With Stupid* (DGCD – 24951) appeared before the year was out. Once again the technical niceties were handled by ex – ‘Til Tuesday member, Jon Brion. For a number of reasons he figures quite prominently amongst its’ thirteen tracks. A capricious three year affair with Mann provided plenty of grist to the mill. ‘That’s Just What You Are’ dealt with

Brion’s (admitted) appalling behaviour, while ‘Amateur’ (co-written with Brion) sought to understand why they finally broke up. Mann’s catchy three-minute kiss-offs are disarmingly direct and perceptive observations of romantic disillusionment, where any hostility is frequently tempered by humour. *Stupid* was widely and loudly acclaimed. Critics at *Rolling Stone*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *Time* magazine were eager to compare her skills to that of a McCartney or Neil Young. Praise indeed.

Unfortunately for Mann, events would conspire to again frustrate her career. Interscope Records’ take-over of a sympathetic Geffen organisation was like a bad dream. Once again Elvis Costello was not considered to be a good enough co-writer. Their ‘Fall Of The World’s Own Optimist’ did not satisfy the label’s demand for a radio-friendly hit ►

▶ single. Fortunately, Interscope's merger with Universal, and their subsequent lack of interest in all but blockbuster artists, allowed Mann to successfully negotiate a release from her contract, and more importantly buy back the masters for *Bachelor No 2*, which would become her third solo album, and first independent release in 1999/2000.

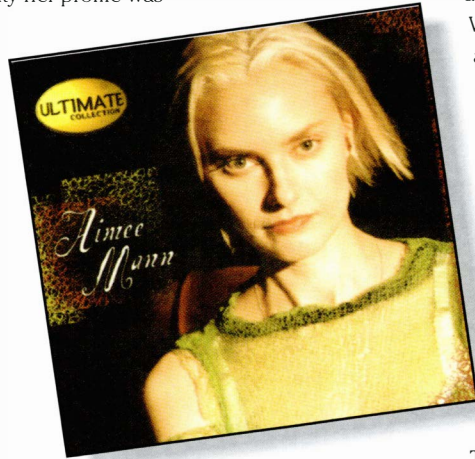
During this period of relative inactivity her profile was significantly raised by the soundtrack for Paul Thomas Anderson's film, *Magnolia*. True, Aimee Mann compositions had previously been heard in films as diverse as *Jerry Maguire*, *Cruel Intentions* and *Sliding Doors*, but *Magnolia* was something else. She provided a crucial part of the psychological soul for this movie. Featuring no fewer than eight Mann songs (including a cover of Harry Nilsson's 'One' for its opening theme) Anderson wanted her music to achieve a similar effect to that in *The Graduate*.

Aimee's songs are adapted into the screenplay until both are inseparably linked. Although this Academy Award and Golden Globe nominated soundtrack duplicates some of the material to be found on *Bachelor No.2*, there are certain tracks that are not available on other discs. Consequently, *Magnolia* has attained a cult film music status for her patient army of fans.

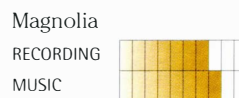
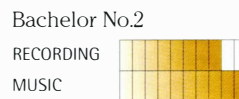
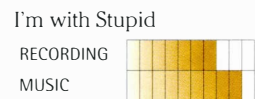
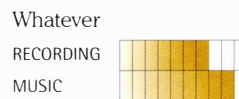
Written mostly during a period of emotional stability in 1998 following the marriage to fellow singer/songwriter, Michael Penn, *Bachelor No.2*, quizzically subtitled, "Or, the last remains of the dodo", is a fiercely independent album full of pointed lyrics: Typical Mann. All fraught the one moment, melodic and humorous the next. Uncompromising poses, with the emotional ebb and flow mirroring an early idealism that was only partly diminished by the fractured relationships in business and the bedroom. Little barbed lines like, "The critics at their worst could never criticise the way that you do..." from 'Nothing Is Good Enough' reflecting both. Thirteen brilliant songs on the U.S Import, fourteen and a slightly different track listing for our U.K release. Sparkling production, too, by Mann with assists from Brendan O'Brien and Buddy Judge, who also throws in some drum programmes and backing vocals for good measure. Fine musicianship all-round as Michael Lockwood (electric guitar), Patrick Warren (keyboards), Benmont Tench (piano and chamberlin), alongside four drum-stick merchants in John Sands, Dan MacCarroll, Rick Manck and the versatile John Brion (who doubles up on electric guitar for 'Deathly') intuitively lend their support. There's even a little slide work from hubby, Michael Penn. All memorably contribute to an excellent, visionary CD that reverses the negative

connotations which surround much of today's popular music. When so many knowingly second rate and poorly crafted songs receive wall-to-wall airplay this is a release where every song's a stand out, but for all the right reasons. Heavier on ballads than her previous discs, and thoughtfully

produced with Mann singling out a couple of tracks for a Dionne Warwick style treatment, this is acutely well-written. A mature, engaging and thoroughly inspired lyricism confirms Aimee Mann to be at the height of her powers. As a postscript, Hip-o Records (a subsidiary of Universal Music) have in an overstated, "band wagon jumping", fashion given us the grandly titled, *Aimee Mann – Ultimate Collection* (314 524 760-2). It's a blatant act that actually has some obvious merit. Firstly, there are three 'Til



Tuesday numbers: 'Voices Carry', 'Everything's Different Now' and 'Sign Of Love'. Then consider this as an opportunity to hear tracks which do not appear on any of the solo recordings. They include, 'Driving With One Hand On The Wheel', taken from a U.K single release, "Long Shot": 'Baby Blue' and 'Take It Back' also came off a single "I Should've Known": While 'Jimmy Hoffa Jokes' could previously only be found on the promotional single, "Say Anything". Throw in soundtrack releases 'Wise Up' (*Jerry Maguire*) and 'Sign Of Love' (*Back to the Beach*), together with a further eleven songs lifted from *Whatever* and *I'm with Stupid*, and the *Ultimate Collection* seems a lot less commercial and a lot more agreeable – much like Aimee herself.





**Mark-Antony Turnage
Music to Hear**

The Nash Ensemble

Black Box BBM 1065 **CD**

This recording features a collection of instrumental chamber works by one of the most important British composers of recent years. While much of his compositional output is gritty, with a kind of flamboyance and even violence that has achieved an appeal with contemporary audiences, this music is far more intimate and moving. Here are elegies, farewells and memorials to friends and colleagues, with this mourning and sentimental outpouring seductively expressed. Turnage's influences are laid bare, with his love of modern jazz being central to the identity of these pieces. Simple phrases are plainly executed, but then extended and added to, opening to reveal moods of melancholia and tranquillity. Fragments of romanticism interject to add an emotional feel and response, but the composer's privacy manages to hold on to its identity.

The performance of The Nash Ensemble, for whom some of these works were commissioned, is very polished, and is full of feeling and character. The recording is generally very good, but is let down by the sound of the piano, which in places is far too close.

This is a significant release in many ways, revealing a new side to Turnage's talents.

SG



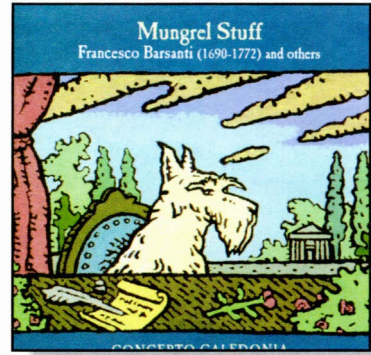
**Gerald Finzi
Cello Concerto, Eclogue and
Grand Fantasia for Piano and
Strings. Hugh(c), Donohoe(p),
Griffiths, Northern Sinfonia**

Naxos 8.555766 **CD**

Ever since Jacqueline Du Pre recorded her coruscating interpretation of the Elgar it's almost as if the rest of the British Cello repertoire has crawled quietly into the shade and given up the game. But lurking in those shadows are masterworks from Walton, Britten and the aforementioned Finzi. Finzi's *Cello Concerto* recorded by Yo-Yo Ma for Lyrita has long been a favourite of mine. The trouble is that the Lyrita does tend to both the rare and the expensive, so I was exceptionally pleased to see that Chandos have recently re-released a coupling with the Leighton, only to be disappointed when I tried to actually buy it. "Never mind" responded the assistant, "what about this one on Naxos?" For a fiver how could I resist?

The *Cello Concerto* is excellent; bold and dramatic when it has to be, sweeping and sumptuous when it should be. The shades of Dvorak and Walton look benevolently on and if the recording doesn't match the Lyrita, Tim Hugh's performance blows it away. But the real joy was discovering the *Eclogue* for piano and strings, a piece of both depth and beauty that manages to remain beautifully accessible. Much more than just a filler, and a major contribution to one of the best fivers you'll ever spend.

RG



**Mungrel Stuff – Scottish-Italian
music by Francesco Barsanti and
others**

Concerto Caledonia

Linn CKD 140 **HD**

Although many of the Italian composers whose work is featured here, interspersed by compositions by obscure homegrown talent, spent either little or no time at all in Scotland, their fascination and love for things Scottish still shines through. Barsanti even went on to marry a Scots lass. The Scottish compositions reveal a suave and sublime deftness at times that is obviously Italian. It is this amalgamation of two distinct cultures throughout the 18th Century that gives this album its banal title. This fusion is so complete that it is often difficult to accurately attribute the nationality of a composer to any given work.

The music is infectiously played and sung by the 18th Century Scottish musical specialists Concerto Caledonia, with Mhairi Lawson (soprano) and Jamie MacDougall (tenor). It is just a pity about Lorenzo Bocchi's *A Scots Cantata*, which includes an awful, coarsely accented text by Allan Ramsay. The recorded sound is detailed and lively, but not quite up to the standards set by the absolute best. This enduring and compelling CD is only let down by *A Scots Cantata*, but even this cannot spoil an occasionally bizarre, yet ultimately enjoyable listening experience.

SG





Haydn Complete Cello Concertos

Kliegel/Cologne Chamber
O./Müller-Brühl

Naxos 8.555041

These delightful works have been questioned over their authenticity, with the *C major* only being given a relatively recent first modern performance, and the *Concerto in D major (Hob.VIb:4)* only now making its welcome first appearance on disc. Alternatively they are typical of Haydn, combining masterly composition with memorable subject material and inventive orchestration. Naxos has already recorded Haydn's *Cello Concerti*, but Maria Kliegel's style compliments these well, especially in her impressive *C major*, presenting sensitivity and vigour. But even here the performance is letdown by her cautious cadenzas. The readings come across as coherent and resonant, but she sometimes appears a little laboured, lacking the verve found with Du Pré or Walevska. There is a pleasing vitality, but this comes from the brisk tempi of Müller-Brühl and the Cologne Chamber Orchestra, who play enchantingly, and the performance lacks the poise and grace shown by Truls Mørk. The recording is not one of Naxos' best, with the harpsichord too close and intrusive, but it does have a nice, warm acoustic. This CD is a useful budget offering, as it includes the second *Concerto in D major*, but Kliegel does not have the individualism to make it a thorough recommendation.

SG



Buxtehude – Membra Jesu Nostrī

The Symphony of Harmony and
Invention/The
Sixteen/Christophers

Linn CKD 141

This cycle of seven cantatas are a passion, or meditation, on the death of Christ, with each individually referring to a part of his body on the cross. While these works may be regarded as grave or sombre, they do encapsulate sensuality and contemplation, encouraging an intimacy with, and understanding of, Buxtehude's expressive writing. The grief and melancholy in these works contribute to a performance of rapt feeling and beauty. Each piece opens with an instrumental sonata, performed with an insight and feeling by The Symphony of Harmony and Invention. The five singers of The Sixteen perform the vocal pieces with grace and precision, as well as periodic releases of power, which creates polyphonic patterns and textures that move across the surface of each movement. The performers, complemented by Harry Christophers' admirable direction, play and sing in great unity, extracting the colours and textures that the composer threaded into the fascinating tapestry of these striking works. The sound is good, with a natural and pleasant acoustic, but it also manages to be a touch bright in tone at times. This is ravishing music, performed with both intrinsic emotion and great intensity to captivate and move the listener.

SG



Dvorak Symphonies 7 and 9 From the New World

Vienna Philharmonic Orch./Kubelik

Decca Legends 466 994-2

Perhaps because Decca began a stereo Dvorak symphonies cycle with Istvan Kertez and the LSO in the early '60s, Kubelik's Vienna recordings of 7 and 9 from October 1956 were forgotten. In the UK, 9 was issued on LP in stereo on Decca's mid-price Ace of Diamonds label in sound of thrilling brilliance and immediacy - early Decca stereo at its vivid best! The stereo sound is excellent, reproducing very well in this new CD transfer - detailed and crisp, with only a little of the tonal thinness common to many orchestral recordings made by Decca in Vienna in the 1950s. Kubelik's performances are intensely felt and emotionally-charged, with flexible tempi and some exciting committed playing from the Vienna Philharmonic. Interestingly, producer John Culshaw (in his book *Putting the Record Straight*) says Kubelik was unable to control the orchestra properly, creating a diffuse swimmy sound. Yet there's little evidence of this in the finished recordings. Agreed, the VPO's playing is not as taut or disciplined as that of the Berlin Philharmonic in Kubelik's better-known DG Dvorak cycle, but there's no way you'd describe it as sloppy or diffuse. The sound here is extremely sharp and vivid, with excellent detail and plenty of impact. Stereo is wide-ranging and almost holographic at times. A classic reissue!

JMH





Mozart – String Quartets K499 "Hoffmeister"/K589 "Prussian"

Quatuor Mosaïques

Naïve Astrée E8834

The wonderful Quatuor Mosaïques are probably my favourite chamber ensemble, and have been releasing performances of the highest order for a number of years. This CD is one of the more outstanding. Whether live or recorded, this ensemble continues to produce performances of almost flawless beauty. They play with finesse, delicacy and perfect poise, but also manage to produce music of wonderful conviction and vigour, when the composition demands it. Here the results are graceful and natural, revealing Mozart's melodic charm and ingenious wit. Their accomplished musicianship is further enhanced by the superb interplay of the instruments, which coax and shape the composer's dynamically written contrasts and affectionate phrasing. There is a resulting dialogue between the players that produces a colourful tapestry of textures and rhythms, resulting in a performance that never allows the listener's attention to relax. The recorded sound is also superb, with the clear and sympathetic acoustic perfectly assisting in the presentation of both the fabric of the music and the performance. There is a lushness and richness to the tone, not always heard from period instruments, and the group's wonderful vibrato has been caught beautifully. I cannot think of a finer recording of Mozart's chamber music.

SG



Rimsky-Korsakov – Scheherazade/Russian Easter Overture

Atlanta Symphony O./Spano

Telarc CD-80568

This is the premier release by Robert Spano since he joined forces with The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Telarc, with the two works recorded chosen to highlight the principal players of the conductor's new charges. Spano comes with an excellent set of recommendations, having directed some of the world's leading orchestras, and his talents are revealed here. The readings are dependable and fairly cautious, but the resulting performance is very good indeed. While there may not quite be the emotion and imagery of Beecham's recording (EMI) or the verve and excitement of Reiner's (RCA) there is plenty to recommend this performance. The playing is excellent throughout, with the especially superb solo violin of Cecylia Arzenweski just standing out for topmost praise among the group of very good leading players, and the sound produced by the Atlanta strings and brass is also very agreeable. The recorded sound is State-of-the-art, with Telarc using Sony's DSD, high-resolution, to the full, enhancing Spano's use of detailed textures. The bass is excellent, revealing both weight and feeling in the deepest notes, and the soundstage is wonderfully 3-dimensional. This CD comes highly recommended, with exceptional sound and a performance that ranks close to the very best.

SG



Manuel de Falla
The Three Cornered Hat;
Love the Magician.

Ansermet / OSR

Decca Legends 466 991-2

Ansermet gave the first performance of *El Sombrero de Tres Picos* (The Three Cornered Hat) in 1919, so his interpretation of this vivid colourful score has unique authority. He made a recording of the work in mono in the early 1950s, but this 1961 stereo remake is his definitive performance – captured in wide ranging brilliant Decca sound. It's a performance of great vitality and panache, even if the orchestral playing hasn't the virtuoso brilliance or idiomatic Spanish temperament of Rafael Fruhbeck de Burgos' famous 1964 HMV account with the Philharmonia. Ansermet's recording has been out on CD before, but this new 96kHz/24bit remastering offers greater presence and clarity plus increased dynamic range and fine detail. The tonal balance is good too, with firm bass and open treble. *El Amor Brujo* (Love the Magician) was taped in 1955, and sounds slightly less full-bodied and rich than the main work; a slight increase in volume helps bring the music into focus, and then the sound is extremely good - amazingly detailed and crisp for 1955. The performance is outstanding too, with some impressively fiery moments. Mezzo Marina de Gabarain is simply wonderful. She sings her solos with earthy Spanish passion; a husky voice and crisp consonants making it sound as though the words were being spat out! No messing with this chick, boys...


JMH





Rachmaninov – Symphony No. 2/Vocalise (Orchestral Version)

Cincinnati Symphony Orch.
López-Cobos

Telarc CD-80543 

This CD follows that of The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra/Zinman issue from the same label (CD-80312). This *Vocalise* is the Orchestral Version, as opposed to the last of *The Fourteen Songs* performed immaculately by Sylvia McNair on the earlier release. Unfortunately for López-Cobos, it is through this comparison with Zinman's CD, that his lack of drive and communication of musical energy, so well executed in Baltimore, are fully revealed. Here the conductor wallows in romantic mire during the opening, giving the performance a slow, ponderous attitude that is never fully abandoned. The *Vocalise* does not possess the profound beauty of the song from which it comes, adding to the overall lack of imagination. While The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra perform admirably, they are eclipsed by the precision of the Baltimore unit who provide a wonderful depth of tonal expression. The recording has a natural soundstage and plenty of detail, but tonally it is slightly on the warm side, being over-ripe, which does not suit the dark, quixotic flow of the performance.


This CD does not compare well with Zinman's, and although the sound is good, it only emphasises López-Cobos' lack of subtlety and understanding for the composer.

SG



Capritio – Instrumental music from 14th Century Italy

Tragicomedia

Harmonia Mundi HMU 907294 


This is the first Harmonia Mundi release by the ensemble Tragicomedia, and contains a lively and intriguing performance of some little-known triumphs of the Italian baroque. The quartet performs with vigour and imagination, exhibiting excellent rhythmic characteristics and marvellous polyphony. There is a kaleidoscope of musical textures, to which each instrument brings its own distinct hues, as well as a delightful inventiveness and spontaneity to the performance. Erin Headley's performance on the viola de gamba reveals a rare eloquence, especially in *Susanne ung jour*, while Paul O'Dette's virtuosity throughout is splendid. Stephen Stubbs (baroque guitar and chitarrone) and Alexander Weimann (keyboards) perform with a wonderful enthusiasm, with the former superbly revealing the folk-like qualities of Matteis' Suite from "The False Consequences of Music". The sound, recorded at Skywalker Sound, is exceptional, with the harpsichord in *Settima Toccata* being the best I have heard from CD. Elsewhere there is plenty of life and the textures are revealed precisely, with all the instruments realistically portrayed. This is a disc of simple, but delightful music that I will cherish for many years, and so comes highly recommended.

SG



Berlioz – Symphonie Fantastique/Love scene from Roméo et Juliette

Cincinnati Symphony Orch./Järvi

Telarc CD-80578 

This autumn, Paavo Järvi takes-up the baton in Cincinnati, and to celebrate its new recording team, Telarc have released this CD.

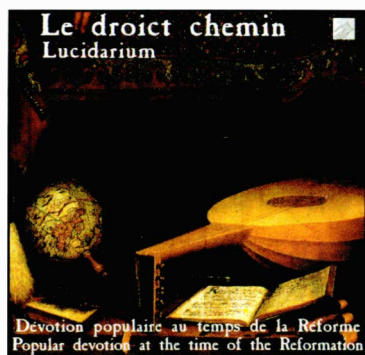
While there are better *Symphonies Fantastiques*, this is still a very good example, with Järvi and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra producing both faultless playing and detailed phrasing. The string section sounds particularly first-rate. There is a majestic control that matures but never fully develops, as is the case with Beecham or Davis, but this is probably down to youth with Paavo, as I cannot imagine the same lack of commitment coming from his father, Neeme. Having said that, this youthfulness generates the passion of *Roméo et Juliette* superbly, with the younger conductor's sensitive direction paying dividends, and his restraint here matches the respectful sophistication of the piece perfectly.

The recording, made in Cincinnati's Music Hall, using tube microphone amps, is superb. The three-dimensional soundstage is enormous, containing palpable images of the various players within it. There is plenty of detail throughout, and it has sufficient impact and power in reserve, for when the moment arises.

With a number of recordings lined up for this team, I look forward to future releases. This is a promising first CD together.

SG





Le Droit Chemin –Popular devotion at the time of the Reformation

Lucidarium

L'Empreinte Digitale ED 13126

These works are a collection of 16th Century chansons that contain a mixture of polyphonic, secular songs and spirituals, and the simple, rustic qualities of the folk music of the time. Composed for the entertainment of the French upper classes, they were written with many theatrical virtues, which include some risqué elements in their texts and many dance-like rhythms, to enliven the performances.

The Ensemble Lucidarium have an exceptionally varied and colourful set of textures and timbres from which to draw and arrange their instrumental and vocal performances, which reinforces the individual compositional styles prevalent throughout the album. They manage to produce musical contrasts that bring each composition to life by displaying the individual qualities and perceived feelings of each piece. The playing and singing is wonderfully alive and full of adoration and devotional feeling, as well as respect and reverence for the music. The sound is very good – helped by distant microphone placement – which produces some very natural soundstages and excellent acoustics.

This is a very pleasant album of music that should entertain listeners today as much as it did many of the Catholics and Protestants at the time of the Reformation.

SG



Schubert Symphony Nr 8 'Unfinished' Mendelssohn Symphony Nr 4 'Italian' Sinopoli/ Philharmonia Orch.

DG Masters 445 514-2

Although it wasn't his first recording, this was the disc that launched the late Giuseppe Sinopoli's mainstream conducting career in 1984. In his hands, Schubert's *'Unfinished'* lasts almost half an hour, receiving a performance of dark glowering passion that brings out the tragic pathos of the work – not to mention its incredible originality. There's nothing saccharine about Sinopoli's Schubert; at all times one senses the demonic power behind the notes. Although tempi are broad, the performance doesn't sound slow – just weighty and inexorable. Schubert's *'Unfinished'* was never quite the same again for me after I'd experienced Sinopoli's interpretation! The reissue CD booklet includes Sinopoli's deeply intellectual psychological (the less kind called it absurdly pretentious) article – Dream and Memory in Schubert's *'Unfinished'* – that accompanied the original full-price CD. After Schubert's cosmic utterances on the meaning of life, Mendelssohn's effervescent *Italian symphony* strikes a wholly different chord. Sinopoli's performance is vivacious and high spirited, with fast tempi and crisp phrasing. The recording, one of the last to be made in London's legendary Kingsway Hall, sounds spacious and airy reverberant ambience. The recessed sound suits Schubert better than Mendelssohn, and a touch of glare afflicts the upper strings despite DG's best attempts.

JMH



Handel – Complete Violin Sonatas

Manze/Egarr

Harmonia Mundi HMU 907259

While this recording contains two works that modern research of the composer's work has exposed as fakes, it is Andrew Manze's exceptional virtuosity and expressive inventiveness that prevail over any worries about authenticity. Manze relishes flamboyance and takes full advantage of Handel's great sense of theatrical composition. This exhilarating recital of these miniature masterpieces is imbued with both colourful splendour and distinct outbursts of confident agility and wit, perfectly revealed by the avoidance of the modern practise of adding a cello to add melody, and so reducing the harpsichord to merely providing harmonic filling. Richard Egaar's keyboard work matches Manze's playing perfectly, with passionate understanding for the music and of his partner, creating a wonderful sense of harmony between the duo. Skywalker Sound must once again be congratulated on the excellent sound they have produced. The superb transients match Manze's technique superbly, giving the whole performance life and great definition, and the timbre of both instruments is spot-on. Manze provides baroque violin playing that is outstanding in every way and he is certainly without peer within this generation of artists, providing the listener with a thrilling experience.

SG



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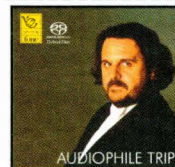
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Led Zeppelin

3

Classic Records/Atlantic 507201 **180g** **3**

Led Zeppelin have long had an association with Fairport Convention, so I suppose it was inevitable that they would eventually incorporate a folk influence into their material. *Led Zeppelin 3* was the album where that influence came to bear, opening up new horizons for their work. While the opener 'Immigrant Song' gave no hint of what was to come by storming in with one of Rock's most memorable riffs, later songs such as 'Tangerine' and most notably 'Gallows Pole' showed that Zeppelin were not to be constrained by their earlier work. Ultimately *3* is not one of their most satisfying albums due to the sheer diversity of material on offer, from Rock to Blues to Folk, which makes the album feel at times like a sampler. However, at the end of the day second string Zeppelin is still much better than most bands can offer, so who's complaining. As with the *1* and *2*, Classic Records have made a tremendous job with the re-issue, even reproducing the expensive to produce thumb-wheel cover design. The recording quality here is not fantastic, but the transfer makes the best of the master tapes. Never before have I heard the squeak of John Bonham's bass drum pedal on 'Since I've Been Loving You' so clearly and with such rhythmic integrity (no really, it makes it much less irritating).

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DA



Knud Jörgensen Jazz Trio

Opus 3 LP 8401 **180g**

The Swedes have a major interest in jazz, but with albums like *Jazz at the Pawnshop*, Scandinavian musician's reputation is for being too stiff and unadventurous. This is generally not the case here, with fine piano jazz played with firmness and some imagination by Jörgensen, and skilfully assisted by Sture Akerberg (Bass) and Johan Dielmans (drums). 'Satin Doll' is a little polite, but from then on things start to swing, despite Jörgensen not quite really cutting loose. The slower, ballad-like numbers, such as 'Too Late Now' and 'It Might As Well Be Spring' are probably the musical highlights on the album – being more suited to this kind of performance. Unlike the contrived sound on *Jazz at the Pawnshop* this record sounds very natural. There is great clarity and transients are tight, enhancing Jörgensen's attention to dynamics, and leading to a wonderful recreation of a live event. But it does sound a little closer than other recordings from this label, causing the piano to lack some richness in tone. Opus 3 are now pressing records with Pallas, in Germany, and this LP has excellent surfaces and near perfect sound, yet contains a fine performance that should not embarrass jazz aficionados.

Available from www.hififorsale.com

SG



Schubert

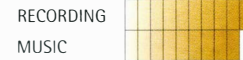
**String Quintet in C major, D956
Auryn Quartet/Christian Pottera (cello)**

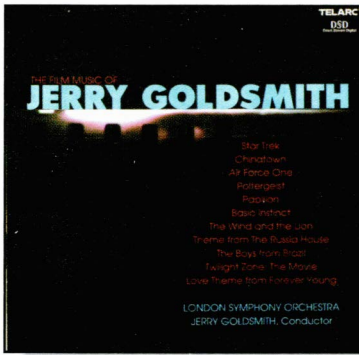
TACET L110 **180g** CD

Think Schubert. Think *Trout Quintet*? Think again. Comparable to his *Great C major Symphony*, D956 not only shares the same key but it also exhibits that same intellectual strength throughout an absolute investigation of tone-colour. The communication skills and unwavering concentration of these Auryn players is so all-embracing that the velocity of every single note registers as the musicians and the audience become emersed deep within the very centre of the work. In each of these four movements, the suddenness of dynamic contrasts, rapid harmonic shifts and flashy, chameleon-like textural changes are caught faithfully in a stunning recreation cut for Tacet by the mercurial Wilfred Zahn. In a playful *Scherzo* the restraint is palpable, as are those simple utterances of compelling beauty which have been so lovingly distilled from a sublime *Adagio*. Here, the level of inner tension achieved (especially in the softest of moments) compellingly and sensitively conveys a profundity of vision. Meanwhile, the perfect balance between instruments, together with the tonally accurate and wonderfully ripe reproduction of Christian Pottera's 1739 "Sleeping Beauty" cello, are resonant images that remain prominent in the mind long after the record is over. Technically and musically brilliant.

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RP





The Film Music of Jerry Goldsmith

LSO/Goldsmith

Telarc CD-80433

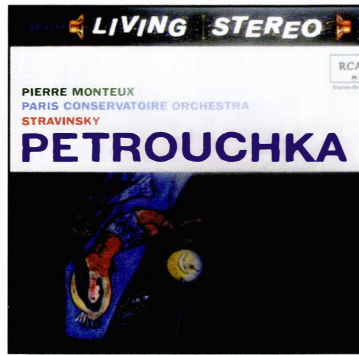
Jerry Goldsmith has been at the pinnacle of both motion picture and television music for around a quarter of a century. This release brings back memories of some of the most successful and best-loved scores from that period. There are a number of complete film themes as well as two medleys (one for film, the other for TV music), with the music conjuring up moods of their associated film or show. This is where Goldsmith really "scores" best, through his compositional skills and his study of individual characters and their emotions, he manages to supply the illusion of scenes from the listener's memories. Titles from the silver screen, such as *Star Trek*, *Airforce One*, *Basic Instinct* and *Chinatown*, rub shoulders with *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, *Dr Kildare* and *The Waltons*. The LSO, who are well established as leaders in the field of soundtrack recording, play with their usual polished verve, and with feeling and poise.

The recording, made at Abbey Road, is excellent, and the tremendous dynamic range totally befits the emotional, and sometimes rather moody, character of the music.

This release is a must for all fans of movie and TV music, as well as audiophiles alike.

Available from www.hififorsale.com

SG



Stravinsky

Petrouchka/Firebird Monteux PCO

Classic Records RCA LSC - 2113

An indispensable addition to any classical record collection, with two of the Stravinsky "big three" ballet scores. This double-barrelled release under Monteux's erudite baton returned him to the city in which they received their World premieres some ninety years ago. Again, in the case of *Petrouchka* and *Rites*, it was a remarkable Pierre Monteux who had the privilege to be the first to conduct these widely exotic, dazzling and highly original pieces. A reading of *Petrouchka* and *The Firebird (Suite no.2 version)* from this source is, to my mind, irresistible. Alright, just occasionally the Paris Conservatoire brass and wind players are overcome with Gallic enthusiasm, and their musicianship becomes a shade wayward, as a result. But this is tempered by the maestro's consciousness of those colourful, ever-present dance rhythms. His grip remains firm. There is, too, a real bonus in that Julius Katchen, no less, caresses the keys for the piano parts in *Petrouchka*. The recording (by Decca for RCA) is another engineering triumph for Kenneth Wilkinson. Bold, rich and vividly accurate, it compares very favourably to my early, British (RCA SB-2037) Decca 1k pressing. A touch more tape hiss is a small price to pay for that infusion of precise tonal detail which reveals the slightest instrumental nuances in a fine, sympathetic and satisfying performance of both works.

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RP



Chico Hamilton

El Chico

Speakers Corner/Impulse AS-9102

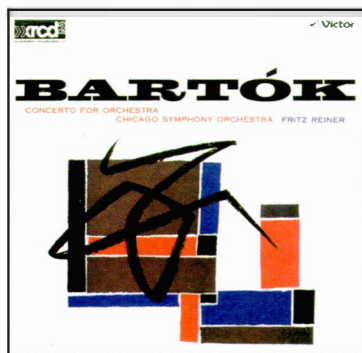
Chico goes Latin. Recorded in 1965 this was Hamilton's first flirtation with the rhythms from south of the border. In the familiar style of his various 'Formations' he again shows that he's not afraid to surround himself with talent, or give it the room to breathe. His drumming is as solid and surefooted as ever, mastering the complex Latin beats with effortless grace and rhythmic security, giving the rest of the band the foundation on which to build.

Here it's the guitar of Gabor Szabo that takes the honours, bringing an alien, Hungarian gypsy tinge to the now familiar Latin melodies. His playing might lack the flow and delicacy of a Charlie Bird, but there's substance and shape to his lines that might at first sound clumsy until you appreciate how emotionally intense it is. Add the cultured, understated contributions of Sadao Watanabe on sax and flute, and percussion work that avoids the flashy and overbearing and you've the basis of an excellent set. Underneath though, it's always Chico that binds it all together. The recording is rhythmically and tonally excellent - especially the bass. The spatial aspects might not be in the same league, but that rarely detracts from a performance that feeds on the band's chemistry. Superbly played and presented, this is music to revel in.

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RG





Bartók
Concerto for Orchestra
 Reiner CSO

JMCXR-0007 XR 1

Respighi
Pines and Fountains of Rome
 Reiner CSO

JMCXR-0008 XR 1

Debussy/Ibert
La Mer/Escales
 Munch BSO

JMCXR-0003 XR 1

Time has barely diminished the stature of these early RCA recordings. After close on half a century they continue to command considerable affection and, certainly in the case of those Reiner Chicago performances, remain held in the highest esteem. Dr. Reiner's memorable reading of the popular Respighi tone poems, and for that matter a masterful Bela Bartok *Concerto for Orchestra*, can correctly be regarded as definitive interpretations of all three works. For anyone fortunate enough to be in possession of an original "mint condition" 1S/1S living stereo LP pressing of the *Pines and Fountains* (LSC-2436) the rewards could have been even greater – at its peak these records regularly changed hands for upwards of £400.00! Sanity returned, somewhat, with excellent re-cuts made available by Classic Records and a Nineties economic downturn that suppressed the bullish Far Eastern secondhand vinyl market. Owners of CD players, meanwhile, were left to ponder upon exactly what all the fuss had been about because, although brilliant direction and playing were always apparent, the characteristically stunning dynamics, imaging, definition and transparency of



these master tapes were seldom present in the standard CD transfers of the day. Enter JVC and their 20 bit extended resolution process that proves to be something of a curtain raiser where these particular re-masters are concerned. From a technical standpoint each of the original tapes did benefit from the mighty presence of Lewis Layton (engineer) and Richard Mohr (producer) overseeing events. This renown partnership was responsible for many of the finest sounding RCAs of the 50s and 60s and it's a great platform from which to now deliver audiophile CDs that seek to emulate the reputation of their forbears.

The Respighi disc with a stylistic variety that combines power and delicacy is the most effective. The XRCD format is, for example, totally at ease with that strident and densely textured opening, 'Pines of the Villa Barachese', extracting extraordinary detail, definition and space for all those competing instrumental voices which have been known to falter so badly in the past on less expert transfers. There is none of the smeared messiness that congeals around the edges until the soundstage is reduced to an indistinguishable glutinous mess. Chicago Symphony Hall, to its fullest dimension, breathes with every dynamic requirement of this Orchestra.

A stunning *Concerto* is unquestionably one of the truly great recorded performances. Reiner, steeped in a Central European tradition, draws upon his close friendship with Bartok to give a satisfyingly clear sighted account that possesses plenty of cutting edge but none of the decorative and frivolous touches enjoyed by other conductors. This recording, though very good, is not perfect. Reproduction of the strings is uneven. Always detailed and transparent they are on occasions over assertive. But the depth and ambience of Orchestra Hall, coupled to a



soundstage that reveals the fine division between instruments, is adequate compensation. Things really move into credit with the sonorous, warm-throated notes delivered by the wind and horn sections. For gorgeous, translucent strings though look no farther than Boston Symphony Hall. Charles Munch consistently teased a vibrant, diaphanous and finely-spun tone from his violin, viola and cello players – here to a magical effect in *Escales* which also possesses superbly resonant low-end strings. Tremendous virtuosity and dexterity from the BSO on both works enhances what is already thoroughly evocative and richly textured music. Munch, here, secures an unlikely and extremely impressive balance between excitement, colour, emotion, momentum and control. With so many decent versions of *La Mer* and *Escales* to choose from this is one that stands out as a recording and a rendition. Do I have any serious gripes where these CDs are concerned? Well, only one. They can not be hailed for their generosity – none extends beyond 39 minutes playing time.

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 RP

Bartok



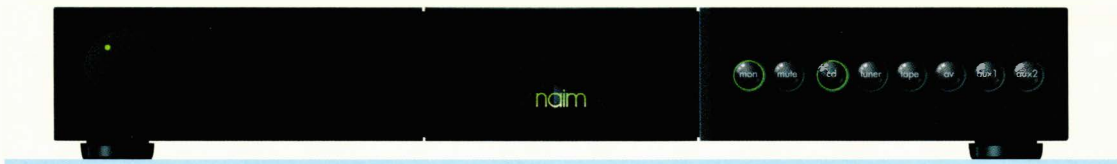
Respighi



Debussy/Ibert



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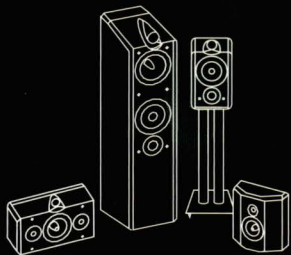
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