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Issue 16 - Mar / Apr 2002
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**AWARDS
ISSUE**

The Best 4x4... By Far!

► Front Ends First

Densen Beat B400 XS
VPI Aries Scout/JMW 9.0
Avid Volvere
Lyra Helikon SL

► Vacuum Tube Logic

conrad-johnson MV60
Antique Sound Labs AQ1009-DT
Lamm ML2

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Neat Ultimatum
Reference 3A
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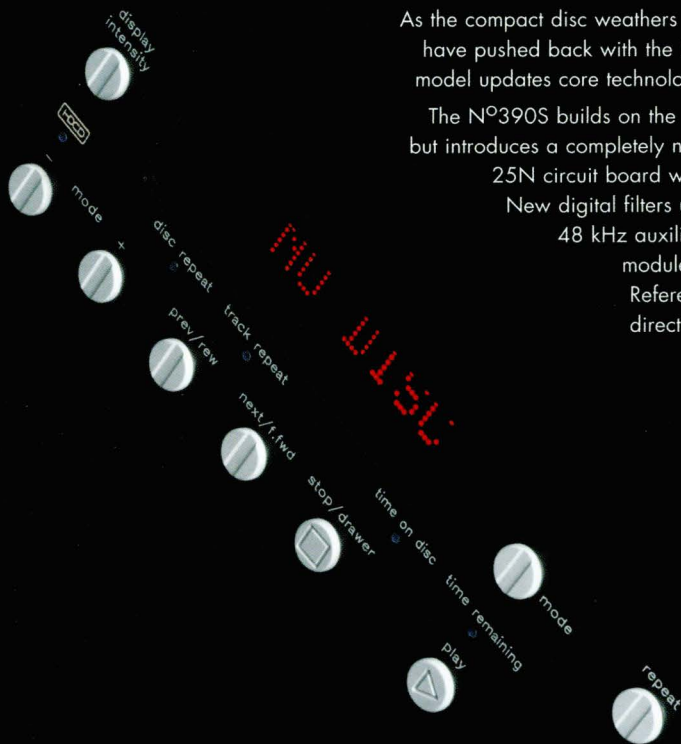
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Owners of the N°39 may obtain an upgrade to full 390S specification. Please contact your nearest Mark Levinson dealer for full details.

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to appear out of context.

I was saddened this month by news of the passing of Sugano-san, an event that has forced me to reflect as to how many of our hobby's founding fathers are no longer with us. At the same time, we are confronted with accelerating technological development, new high bit digital systems, multi-channel formats for music and the attempt to network home entertainment. It's a new century and a new era, and the new is clamouring for our attention, dazzling us with possibilities as yet unrealised. And therein lies the concern. It's so easy to become obsessed with the potential vistas spreading before us that we forget to ask whether they actually open in the right direction. New ideas, new technology and new designers, all embodied in new products, yet, new era or not the essential object of the exercise hasn't actually altered a jot. What's more, just as we found with CD, new technology doesn't mean we can ignore or side step hard-learned lessons from the past.

Thankfully, Sugano-san's artistry lives on and is preserved in the safe hands of his son, just as Dr Tominari's mantle has passed to his son, Taro. I only hope that we can preserve and appreciate the heritage of our industry just as carefully as we too pass it on.



Roy Gregory



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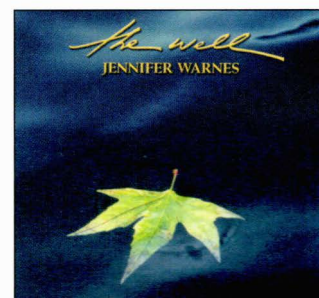
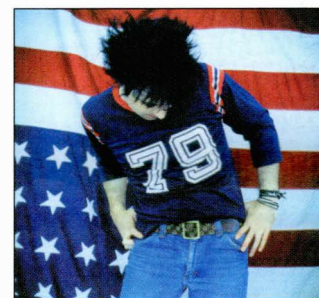
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Music Reviews

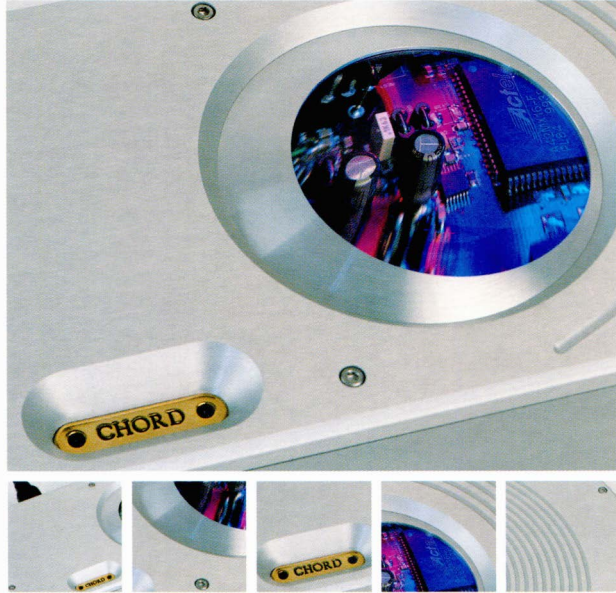
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Spring Show for London

Chesterfield Communications Ltd, organisers of the well-received and thoroughly entertaining Manchester Hi-Fi Show have announced a new spring event for London, which will debut this year on the 6th and 7th of April. This ambitious launch has meant cramming a year's preparation into around four months, and for that reason, exhibitor numbers will be capped at 55 for this first show. However, with the emphasis firmly on quality hi-fi, and somewhere in the region of 100 brands expected this could form the nucleus of exactly the kind of dedicated, sound-quality orientated event that the industry and show goers have been crying out for (and which the Novotel events so dismally failed to provide).

Venue marks a return to the recently refurbished Heathrow Renaissance Hotel (formerly the Penta) in a clear case of better the devil you know... Slotting in between the established Bristol and Frankfurt events, and with CES and Cedia in the US both timed for spring, this underlines a distinct shift in emphasis away from the traditional September show. And with chaos continuing

to reign over the prospects of various autumn events it throws further doubt over their viability.

Meanwhile, with both Dennis publishing (*Hi-Fi Choice*, *Home Entertainment* and *T3*) and ourselves offering support, hopefully we should be able to provide additional demonstrations and events to help keep you entertained. If you want more details then try the organisers website at www.chestergroup.org. Otherwise we'll see you there. I just hope they don't forget to provide a decent, direct bus link from Hatton Cross tube to the hotel.

The Heathrow High Fidelity Show
Heathrow Renaissance Hotel
April the 6th and 7th, 2002

For further information, contact:

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E-mail. roy@chestergroup.fsnet.co.uk



The Audio Consultants relocate

The Audio Consultants, the Camden, North London dealer featured in Issue 12 of Hi-Fi+, have moved out to the country – well, the M4 corridor anyway. Citing the problems of access and parking in central London as prime motivators, as well as a desire for more space and dem rooms, owner Stephan Harper has taken new premises in Aldermaston near Reading. Situated approximately 15 minutes drive from either Junction 12 on the M4 or Junction 6 on the M3, they offer two dem rooms and, glory be, free parking right next door. Whilst he's looking forward to stretching out, and maybe

expanding his products lines too (he's already added Rogue Audio, Living Voice and Wadia) Stephan is quick to point out that The Audio Consultants will continue to service both new and existing clients in the London area.

For further information:

The Audio Consultants
7 Comet House
Calleva Park, Aldermaston,
Reading, Berkshire RG7 8JA
Tel. 0118 981 9891



Obituary

Master Craftsman Yoshiaki Sugano March 15, 1907 – January 20, 2002

The creator of Koetsu phono cartridges passed away on Sunday January 20, 2002, just a couple of months short of reaching the age of 95. A wake was held in Chiba, Japan on January 22, and the funeral took place on the following day January 23, 2002.

The descendant of the Japanese medieval artist Honami Koetsu, Yoshiaki Sugano was brought up in a tradition of crafting swords. As a young man he practised boxing, including participation in events in China, and it is said that he never lost a fight. Later he joined the car company Toyota where he rose to the rank of executive in the domestic sales division before he retired at the age of 60. Even whilst working at Toyota, he was fascinated by musical reproduction in the home, and he took a special interest in phono cartridges, first studying and repairing broken samples of European imports, and later Japanese designs. Upon retiring from Toyota, he created his own Koetsu brand of MC cartridges, the name derived from his distant ancestor to whom a temple is dedicated in the ancient Japanese city of Kyoto.

I first met Yoshiaki Sugano in the early 1980s and he welcomed me into his home. I made repeated visits and these resulted in an article about his life and his work in audio. This was published in the Danish magazine High Fidelity in 1983. What fascinated me about his work with the Koetsu cartridges was his keen interest in high-purity materials like 6-nines copper and 5-nines iron. He also introduced me to platinum-iron magnets made in small quantities by a laboratory at the giant company Nippon Mining. He would then combine these high-tech materials with natural elements like wood and stone (e.g. ebony and onyx) in a symphony that resulted in the rich and lush sound of each Koetsu cartridge. On certain models he would also apply the traditional “Urushi” laquers of Japan. I think it is safe to say that Yoshiaki Sugano is the Master Craftsman that created the true high-end phono cartridge as a genre. For the first time the status of a phono cartridge could be said to be similar to that of the finest musical instruments like a Steinway grand piano or a Stradivarius

violin. For years, while living within an hours drive from Yoshiaki Sugano’s home, I would listen to my Koetsu Wood cartridge on a Koetsu tonearm via a Koetsu step-up transformer, and a rich, transparent, musical sound was the order of the day. Regularly I would visit the Master, and just as often as I found him occupied with cartridge making, I would also find him busy working on his oil paintings, another major passion of this incredibly interesting personality who had gone from sword-making, to phono cartridge design and manufacturing. While painting, he often enjoyed listening to music of Christian choral performances that set him in the right artistic mood for his brush strokes.

Perhaps the most positive side of Yoshiaki Sugano was his willingness to share and teach. Rather than being secretive and protective, he would willingly discuss his ideas and know-how, and in fact encouraged me to pursue a career in phono cartridge manufacturing myself. He introduced me to subcontractors who manufactured cartridge parts, and even let me have a stack of his valuable technical test records, so necessary for cartridge design. This led to a tremendous respect that allowed me to search for an alternative unique direction rather than copying the Master. I humbly look at him as my mentor and teacher.

Participating in his wake last Tuesday, together with his family and his friends, made me ponder over his wonderful human qualities and his accomplishments, not only as a cartridge designer and craftsman, but as a whole human being.

Yoshiaki Sugano is survived by several children, and his son Fumihiko Sugano was especially trained to take over the cartridge legacy from his father. This is why the world audio community is lucky to have a continuous supply of Koetsu cartridges today, even though the Grand Master himself has achieved eternal peace.

Stig I. Bjorge
CEO Scan-Tech/Lyra
Tokyo, Japan



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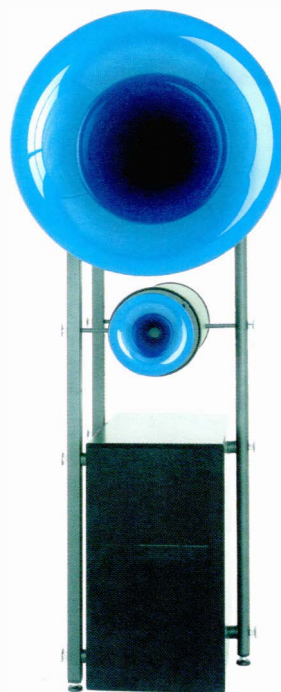
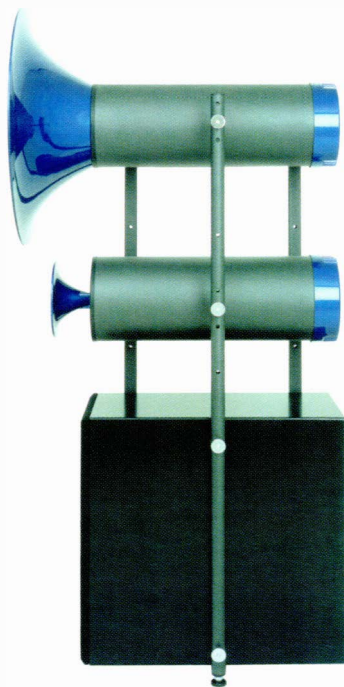
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Look forward to seeing you soon - Les and Pete.



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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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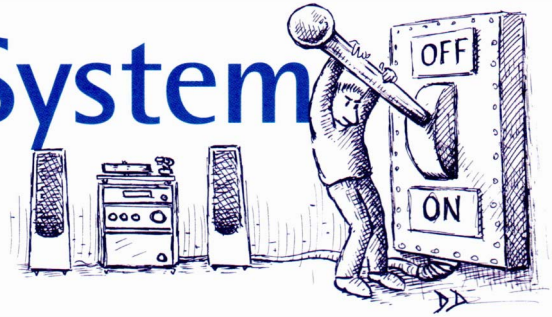
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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



Major League 3 – Back To The Minors may not be a cinematic masterpiece, but it does have its moments, most of them comic. But in one scene, the prototypical broken down pitcher addresses his old team-mate, who now owns the (ailing) Minnesota Twins. In response to his enquiry as to what's going wrong the reply goes something like this.

"I've got a short-stop whose not talking to my second baseman; they haven't completed a double play in over a month. My lead off hitter wants to move to New York because he thinks he'll get more press coverage. One of my pitchers is sulking because another's got a bigger shoe contract and my catcher's sulking because his model girlfriend's left him. I've got two players sitting out contracts because they become free agents at the end of the season and one who wants to go to Chicago to play with his brother. And Carlos? Carlos is in a love fest with himself."

"So Rog, out of the 30 odd players in your squad, how many have baseball as a primary concern?"

"Maybe nine."

I know how he feels. He's describing a Major League team – you know, the ones who are supposed to compete for the World Series. These guys cost their clubs a lot of money - you'd expect them to be up for it. Shades of the Premiership? More to the point, shades of hi-fi. Hi-fi? Oh yes! I'm beginning to really wonder how many high-end companies still have sound quality as a primary concern, and how many simply assume they're delivering it.

Increasingly, facilities and styling, the visible indicators of quality seem to be rising ever higher on the list of priorities, assuming commensurately larger slices of the design and production budget. Meanwhile there seems to be a creeping complacency when it comes to circuitry and electronic hardware. More and more people are expressing reservations about succeeding ranges and models from established manufacturers. It's a process that reached its height with the ostentatiously over engineered behemoths that many companies manufactured for the far-eastern market, one that ground to a near catastrophic halt with the bursting of that particular economic bubble. The problem is that there seem to be a few companies that haven't managed to find their way back to the practices and performance demands of a less exotic marketplace. They've actually forgotten how to develop a decent sounding product because they became so fixated

with other aspects of the product's presentation.

Over the last year I've discussed other, similarly corrosive tendencies. The emergence of the Wilson Grand Slam created a situation in which other speaker manufacturers suddenly felt that they too needed a \$70000 model just to be taken seriously. Then there's the audible difference brigade. As long as they can hear more of this or deeper that, they assume that they are advancing the musical performance of the product without ever stopping to examine its overall balance of virtues. Roll all these things together and you end up with a situation where too many of the products on offer to the public are no longer delivering the goods. Even more damagingly the worst offenders are also the most expensive.

The overall effect of this is entirely predictable. Price is even less of a guide to quality than it ever has been, and the failure of established companies has created a space for hungry, small outfits to establish themselves. That's why we see small companies like Living Voice and Rogue Audio, Lavardin and Tom Evans Audio Design thriving and producing mould breaking products. Those who can still see the path and have the confidence (or foolishness) to pursue it will find a ready market for products that offer a performance over and above the sea of mediocrity that is in danger of enveloping hi-fi. The industry is fond of complaining that people don't seem to listen to music at home anymore. My response is, whose fault is that? Give them systems that actually play music and they'll use them, enjoy them and might even upgrade them.

Does that mean that expensive products are a waste of money? Well, some are, but that's always been the case. The thing that worries me is that the proportion seems to be increasing. However, in exactly the same way as there's now space for enthusiast manufacturers at the bottom end of the market, the same is true at the top. Take the Connoisseur Definition 4.0 pre-amp pictured on the cover of this issue. Hardly a bargain at the wrong side of £25000, it's a price tag that would look extravagant in the price list of any manufacturer, regardless of reputation or standing. Yet here we have a totally minimalist product, beautifully made, internally and externally, with a single aim in mind – performance. The company has scored a bull's-eye,

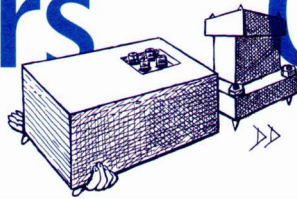
▶ producing a product that significantly extends the understanding of recording music. I shudder to think what the 3.0 does at two and a half times the price!

Of course, there are those amongst the major players who have kept the faith. Obvious examples that spring to mind are Mark Levinson, Spectral and, if rumour is to be believed, the latest Krells. Hopefully that last will be borne out in an upcoming review. There again, both the Audio Research LS25/2 and Conrad-Johnson MV60 have turned in stellar performances recently. But alongside those successes come an increasing number of failures. Few if any companies have ever produced a completely even range of products, where each offers the same overall value for money, irrespective of price. The problem is that the variation seems

to be getting greater, the truly outstanding performers fewer and farther between.

The same applies regardless of price. What's the biggest problem facing me with the advent of each issue? Finding the interesting, affordable products that are actually worth reviewing. The heady days of the Dual 505/NAD 3020/AR18 starter system (a set-up which could teach most budget systems today a thing or three) are long gone. Where are the solid, value for money, musical performers to take their place? With a £650 budget to spend for a single source, CD based system, what does one recommend to a first time buyer? A musically satisfying response to that question isn't limited to the rhetorical. Without it, the days of this hobby are numbered (no digi-phobic pun intended). ➤

Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

'Twas the mid 1970s when surround sound first tried to get itself established, and as far as music programming's concerned it's still trying, a full quarter century later. However, the pressure to move on from stereo to multi-channel sound has never been greater than it is today, prompting this examination of where we might be going, in the light of where we've come from.

Even though I never actually got involved in trying out that original 1970s surround sound kit, I'm just about old enough to remember much of the wheeling and dealing. Three (or was that four?) competing (vinyl) formats caused considerable chaos, while the pedants fiercely debated whether to call it quadraphony or quadrophony. Its ultimate lack of impact is vividly illustrated by the fact that my 1990s spellchecker shows a marked reluctance to recognise either word!

Various reasons lay behind quadraphony's failure, but a crucial long-term credibility question still hangs over whether surround sound really offers worthwhile benefits with music programming. Which helps explain why the second coming – about ten years later, and now invariably known as surround sound – was based on movie soundtracks rather than music. There is a case for surround sound music – indeed for surround sound in general – but movie soundtracks undoubtedly derive the most benefit.

Surround sound actually started accompanying movies in the cinema in the late 1970s. Prior to *Star Wars* (1977), movies

were nearly always monophonic, carrying the soundtrack in an optically-encoded form alongside the picture frames. The problem with going to stereo was that fitting two channels into the space occupied by one made the sound unacceptably hissy – at least until Ray Dolby came along and waved his magic noise reduction system wand.

This cinema sound system was therefore, logically enough, called Dolby Stereo, though the confusing bit is that it was actually a surround sound system, albeit of a rather primitive and limited nature. In fact the surround sound bits used an approach very similar to some of those quadraphonic vinyl systems, matrix-encoding an extra, limited-bandwidth rear/surround channel into the stereo pair.

Home replay of these surround sound movies, however, wasn't really possible until nearly a decade later. Early VCRs only had mono sound, and the Hi-Fi Stereo sound feature didn't appear until the mid-1980s. Even then it took a few years for the movie-on-video companies to get their collective act together and start releasing films with their cinematic surround-encoded stereo soundtracks.

It was probably sometime in 1988 that I managed to borrow a very clever Akai (remember Akai?) VCR that came fitted with a Dolby Surround decoder, plus a low powered amp for driving a couple of surround channel speakers. No I can't remember the type number, but I do remember hooking it up to a TV set and a regular stereo system, and then finding ▶

▶ a pair of tiny little speakers to place at the back of the room.

I then headed for my local video rental outlet and started hunting for movies with Dolby Stereo/Surround logos. There weren't many to choose from, but I found a film called *The Mission*, about which I knew little, but which turned out to be a much better choice than I'd any right to expect. In the first place it was set largely in a jungle, giving great scope for highly atmospheric surround effects, while the accompanying music was by Ennio Morricone, who just happens to be my favourite film music composer by a country mile.

I've gone on about this experience at some length because the end result was totally and thoroughly impressive – far more so than the specs or the ingredients would lead one to expect. The matrix decoding used by plain vanilla Dolby Surround actually offers very little front-to-rear separation, but it creates a surprisingly effective surround sound illusion nonetheless.

Sadly, Dolby Surround never became much of a big deal commercially, which is a real shame, because its essential simplicity is a major bonus, especially for those with audiophile tendencies.

In fact Dolby Surround is closely related to the Hafler surround sound approach (named after US hi-fi guru David Hafler), which dates back to the early 1970s. Hafler has had its fans going right back to the quadraphonic era, and has always provided a 'low tech' alternative to more formalised surround sound approaches. In its simplest form it works by extracting a 'stereo difference' signal from the two positive terminals of your amplifier, and feeds this to a pair of surround speakers.

I'll come back to Dolby Surround and Hafler before the end of this piece, for some very good reasons, but neither has had anything like the commercial impact of Dolby Surround's successor, Dolby Pro-Logic.

Pro-Logic operates only on the replay side, and on the same '2.5-channel' Dolby Stereo signal as Dolby Surround. The big difference is that it uses 'active' processing and steering logic, partly to improve front-to-rear separation, but also to generate an extra 'dialogue' channel at centre front.

Although Pro-Logic took centre stage through much of the 1990s, hindsight makes it clear that this was essentially an interim technology. It was – and is – useful where only analogue stereo movie soundtracks are available, ie with videotape and most broadcast sources. But the movie business was really gearing itself up for a multi-channel digital future with at least five entirely separate channels, and this is now very much a reality, both in the cinema, and at home via DVD-Video.

The short and very much simplified version is that there are two competing formats, Dolby Digital (aka AC3) and DTS (aka dts), both offering '5.1' channels – that's five full-bandwidth channels plus a limited-bandwidth LFE (low frequency effects) channel. (You don't want to know the complex version, which takes the Tower of Babel as its role model.)

The advantage of both these formats is that there are loads of DVD-Video players and AV amplifier/receiver/processors out there ready to play the software. The disadvantage, from both a musical and an audiophile perspective, is that both use psychoacoustic 'data reduction' techniques, so the amount of data is probably only 10 per cent of that used by CD's 16-bit/44.1kHz PCM format (never mind the new 'high band' DVD-A and SACD formats), and the sound quality is consequently significantly compromised.

That brings us pretty much up to the present day, and what could well amount to a 'second coming' for surround sound music. The really crucial issue is whether either or both of the new 'audiophile' multi-channel music software formats – DVD-A and SACD – will manage to get themselves established. Right now, it's quite impossible to predict the outcome.

Worryingly, there are clear signs that we might well end up with our surround sound music on DVD-Video instead, with all that that implies in terms of compromised sound quality. You only have to visit a major record store and check out the increasing number of music titles that are lurking amongst the DVD movies, to be aware that this is currently the fastest growing format for music programming.

Much as I might like to support the new 'high band' formats, my innate cynicism about the 'lowest common denominator' taste of the public at large makes me quite sceptical about their future prospects. However, the grim possibility of ultimately ending up with our music on Dolby Digital format, merely leaves me depressed.

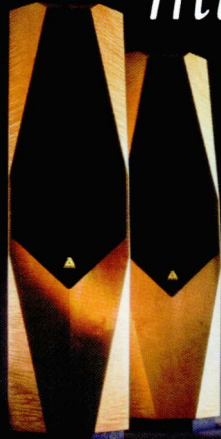
While I don't have the best record in predicting the future, there seems to me a very good chance that our current stereo formats – I'm talking CD and vinyl here – could well be as good as it's going to get. But even if our core music sources remain resolutely stereophonic, that needn't exclude any surround sound possibilities.

In my experience surround sound brings positive benefit to any system. But I don't want to hear instruments popping up behind my head, and therefore don't believe a full 5.1-channel system is needed in order to derive a worthwhile benefit. For me the major bonus of adding a surround dimension is the way it somehow seems to 'remove' the acoustic signature of the listening room subjectively, and replace it with something more closely related to the recording. Even the extra 'half' channel supplied by Dolby Surround or a Hafler system seems rather effective at accomplishing this.

The first priority in adding a surround dimension to a serious quality stereo system is to make sure that the stereo performance is not compromised in any way. It's crucial to adopt a 'minimal intrusion' approach, which leaves the precious stereo signal strictly alone and entirely unpolluted. No way should your precious stereo signal be allowed to go anywhere near Pro-Logic processing circuitry, for example. ▶

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The best way to ensure 'minimal intrusion' is to rely on your stereo pre-amp (or integrated amplifier) being equipped with a spare pair of 'pre-out' sockets, which can then be used to feed whatever arrangement you're using for the surround channels.

There are various possible ways of deriving and reproducing the surround channels. However, to the author's knowledge no brand still makes a Dolby Surround processor, and Hafler has always essentially been a DIY proposition. You can hook a Hafler arrangement up to your existing stereo amp (see below), but this is hardly 'minimal intrusion'. It therefore makes more sense to extract the 'stereo difference' signal at the pre-out sockets, and feed them to a second (cheap) amp which is used just to drive the surround speakers.

Alternatively, there are some seriously cheap AV amps around these days, and one such would be a usefully flexible device that could be fed from 'pre-out' socketry, using its various DSP programs just used to synthesise and drive a couple of surround speakers.

If those are low cost examples of how to add a surround dimension without compromising the core stereo performance, Japanese cartridge specialist Dynavecator has developed its own proprietary SuperStereo processor, which is expressly designed to improve on what the company claims are basic and inherent limitations in regular two-channel stereo.

The Adp-2 carries a \$795 pricetag, can be fed either in parallel or series from the speaker or the 'pre-out' terminals of the main stereo amp, and incorporates 2x15W amplification. This is to drive a pair of (preferably small) side/rear speakers,

although in this case they are placed in front of the listener, facing the main speakers.

Dynavecator's clever processing algorithms incorporate delay which varies with frequency, and the unit is simple yet flexible and easy to set up. It also works very well indeed, even when used alongside a distinctly 'high end' audiophile stereo system, avoiding compromising the core stereo performance yet also adding a 'room filling' dimension that regular two-channel systems never quite manage.

In some ways using the Adp-2 reminds me of the effects of changing from a regular front-panel-driver speaker to an omni-directional design – only much more so, with a rather better combination of stereo focus and around-the-room ambience, plus the flexibility to adjust this to taste and at will. At \$795 (plus speakers) it would seem to represent an excellent upgrade prospect for any top quality stereo system. Having set the scene, so to speak, look forward to a full review in the next issue, when both RG and I (two of audio's biggest technological sceptics) will be giving the Dynavecator a thorough going over. ➤➤

BASIC HAFLER SURROUND:

In its most basic form, Hafler surround uses a pair of small loudspeakers placed to the side or behind the listening seat, hooked up in series, with the negative speaker terminals connected to each other, and each positive speaker terminal connected to each positive terminal of the main stereo amplifier (the stereo difference signal).

For more on Hafler etc, check out the Elliott Sound Products website at:<http://sound.westhost.com/project18.htm>.

Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

Think of the most recent change you made to your hi-fi system. What criteria did you use to decide whether or not it made an improvement? Although people base their opinion of good or bad on all sorts of different things, often it hinges on perceived differences in sharpness. It might be expressed as improved focus, increased tightness, greater control, crisper detail, or extra immediacy. But it boils down to the same thing - a sharper sound.

You could almost say the whole evolution of sound reproduction has been geared towards increased sharpness.

LPs superseding shellac 78s; digital superseding analogue; CD superseding LP; transistors superseding valves; rigid coupling; spiked feet with everything; and so on. Sharpness is important. A key characteristic of good live sound is its explosive impact and attack. So it's not surprising to find hi-fi reproduction being measured by how sharp it sounds.

Alas, there are different kinds of sharpness. Sharpness is yours when bandwidth is wide and transient attack and decay are fast. It's about achieving a crisp abrupt start and stop to each note, with no smearing. Such crispness creates an ➤

► impression of tightness, immediacy, and control. But sharpness can be falsely enhanced by a bright treble-emphasised tonal balance. This exaggerates immediacy and dynamic attack, and taken too far creates a thin aggressive sound.

Unfortunately, More is not always Better. If you're making changes to your hi-fi, or perhaps auditioning a new component, it's easy to mistake exaggerations for genuine improvements. A change that peps up the sound, and gives things a bit more fizz and wallop, can be superficially impressive. But it's a one-way street. The treble exaggerations that 'improve' instruments like piano or drums make voices or massed violins sound edgy and sibilant.

That's why it's important to have a clear appreciation of how live un-amplified instruments sound. A cymbal, for example, has a crisp sharp transient attack. Struck with a stick, it gives a clean precise sound. But heard live it also has a big full-bodied tonal quality - especially if tapped at the edge. Most hi-fi systems make a reasonable job of recreating the transient impact of a struck cymbal, but fail to portray its shimmering golden tonality.

The resulting sound is more akin to a large aluminum ashtray being bashed! The subtle changes of tone colour as the cymbal is struck at different points and with differing degrees of force are lost. Nor do you hear the magical changes of pitch and tonal colour that occur as the sound diminishes. Instead, you're short-changed with a leaden grey sound that has no overtones or sustain - the note 'dies' as soon as it's struck.

I have a confession to make. I hate the sound most hi-fi systems make. To my ears, most are far too sharp. Sharp in the sense of being over-bright and excessively forward. When I listen, I feel I'm being assaulted by a welter of fast leading edges, making it difficult to discern subtle inner detail and fine gradations of pitch and tone. Brilliance and attack, when emphasised at the expense of smoothness and integration, invariably leads to a brash garish sound.

Even worse - the more elaborate and expensive the system, the more pronounced the problem often becomes. You see pictures of people's systems in magazines, and they're sitting a few feet away from powerful highly directional speakers with the grilles removed! How can the sound from such a set up be balanced and homogenous? Without hearing a note I already feel I know how things will sound; bright, forward, and very up-front in a way you never hear live in a good concert hall.

The ear is very accommodating. People with bright systems eventually become conditioned to a sharp, forward, in-your-face presentation. It's akin to the way your eyes adapt to bright light. Unfortunately, your brain has to do lots of processing to make sense of the music. And that makes extended listening fatiguing. With over-bright hi-fi systems you have to go through a learning/ acclimatisation process in order to accept the way

the music's being presented.

Having got used to a bright forward balance, it can be something of a shock to go to an orchestral concert and hear how woody and mellow real music sounds live and un-amplified. Yet this mellow warmth is deceptive. Massed violins, for example, might sound feathery soft, but the percussion will be brilliantly crisp and immediate. Most hi-fi systems superimpose a distinct consistent colour and texture on the music, while good live sound abounds in opposing contrasts - smooth/warm; brilliant/ lucid.

Unfortunately it's becoming less and less common for musicians to play live without amplification. Even buskers in the street use amplification! If you're into jazz or folk, it's likely that most acts you go to see/hear will use a PA system. That's true even if you're talking about a trio playing in a small venue. Why? I think it's because everyone's been conditioned to expect the brash forward presentation you get from most hi-fi systems.

Rather than hi-fi trying to recreate the sound of live acoustic music, live music tries to sound like hi-fi: Bad hi-fi. I once heard a big-band playing jazz in London's Royal Festival hall though a poorly balanced PA that completely distorted the relationships (tonal and dynamic) between the various instruments. I sat well back in the hall, and even then it was unpleasantly brash with deafening climaxes. At the end of the evening I was glad to get out - I felt as though my ears had been assaulted.

A jazz big band could easily fill the Festival Hall acoustically. Not in a brash loud up-front fashion, but with weight of tone, sonority, and a wide range of tone colours and contrasts. People talk about 'dynamics' as though all that mattered was ear-shattering loudness and impact. But to me dynamics means extremes. You can only have Loud if it's contrasted with Quiet. Music that's constantly loud quickly loses its impact as the ear's sensitivity adjusts.

I'm not against a little discrete sound reinforcement when needed. I once heard pianist Maurizio Pollini play Beethoven's *Appassionata* in the Festival Hall, and the piano simply wasn't loud enough to convey the titanic power and intensity of the music and Pollini's interpretation. It's when amplification takes over that I object. It's a crime to spoil the natural sound of voices and instruments in this way - like ruining good food by smothering it in tomato ketchup.

The 'sound' of music is such an important thing. Why else would a musician buy an expensive high quality instrument, or practise assiduously for years and years? Answer - to achieve a precise quality of tone - one that's rich, full, and expressive. Of course phrasing, timing, and overall interpretation are vital ingredients too. But these can also be submerged (or worse still, obliterated) by the gross distortions and colourations of a PA system. Not to mention hi-fi.



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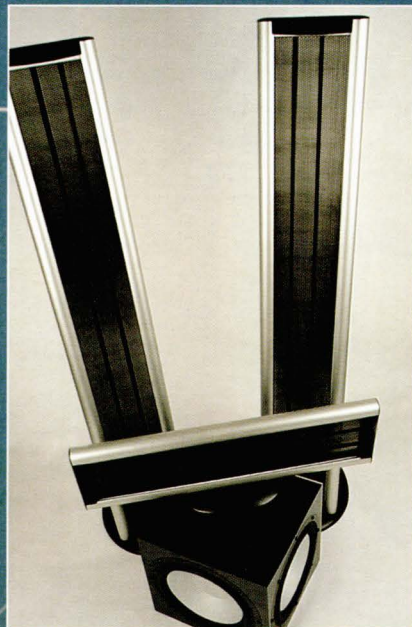
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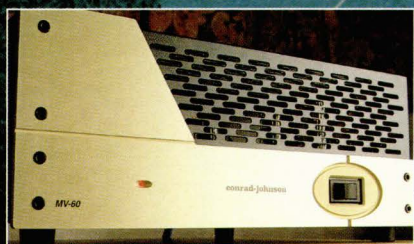
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Dear Roy

I think that I should really be writing to Jimmy Hughes, about Home Truths in July / August Hi Fi +.

My Wife has said many times over the last year that I am becoming a 'sad case'. She doesn't use the term 'sad bastard' quoted in Jimmy's article.

At time of writing this letter, I have 237 LP's of Mahler's music: And I am still looking for a few more! I don't need to say that not only do I have many different interpretations of every symphony, I also have many records duplicated. Recently I dropped my only Klemperer Mahler 9 and it took me many months to find a replacement. I have three copies of Bruno Walter's *Ninth*. I have only just managed to find his 'Das Lied von der Erde'. To me these are like Jimmy's Barbirolli Mahler *Fifth*. I heard these in childhood and at the time could not believe what I was listening to: 45 years later, the LP's still work.

Like so many other music/Hi Fi buffs, I joined the CD club in 1982 and continued in the eternal path of upgrading equipment in pursuit of the ultimate sound. So impressed were we about the noiseless background, the dynamic range and all those other 'advantages' of CD, the LP more or less disappeared into history. I did have problems. I occasionally bought various analogue re-issues of some of my old favourites, only to find that they did nothing for me. What moved me to tears in youth did nothing for me later on CD. Had I become bored with Boult's Elgar, Klemperer, Walter and Solti's Mahler? I convinced myself that I had. I became more obsessed with technology - equipment upgrades, expensive wires etc. than with music itself. When a CD of Klemperer's Mahler *Nine* failed to have any effect, I really should have taken note and started some investigations. Not until the end of 1999 did I realise what was wrong.

I have to say that I am of 'sound mind' and I am not under the influence of any drugs or psycho-medication. Now for the crunch:

In December 1999 I splashed out on an SACD player,

continuing the Hi-Fi buffs' eternal spending on ever more exotic pieces of equipment. The first observation was that the sound from most SACD's was AWESOME. Unlike conventional CD's I could listen to an entire work, start to finish and be seriously moved. I was listening to MUSIC again. Then after about 2 weeks of great excitement I suddenly realised that it all reminded me of my youth. A youth of valve amplifiers and, yes, you may have got it, LP's.

I immediately disappeared into my loft and rumaged about in various boxes and found my old Linn. I set it up, and went off to the local Oxfam shop and bought some LP's, including some Mahler. WOW! Here was the start of the slippery slope to Jimmy Hughes' 'sad bastard' status. I do not regret spending £1600 on an SACD player. Though it rarely gets used, without that excursion I may never have re-discovered the LP, and I may by now have abandoned recorded music altogether. With CD it was certainly going in that direction. I was getting more satisfaction out of reading history books about music than listening to it. I do feel as if I have been deceived. But I did have a choice, although the incessant drive to get better sound via technology got the better of me for rather too long.

Given that life expectancy is 3 score years and ten, I have wasted about one third of my adult life trying to get music from CD's. This is a bitter disappointment to me. I failed miserably; I got sound but no music. I now have about 2000 LP's in total. I started collecting them in January 2000. Most have been bought from Oxfam shops in Headingley, Henley and Marylebone High Street. Gibbs Bookshop in Manchester has been a good source together with Jim Watson in Dundee. I have recently discovered a brilliant shop on Notting Hill Gate. There are, I am sure, many other sources. Just to make Jimmy really jealous: I bought the Haitink boxed set of Mahler symphonies (1-9), in unplayed virgin condition, from an Oxfam shop for £20. Other examples: a Kubelik boxed Mahler symphonies (1-9), Oxfam again, £6.99; Beethoven boxed symphonies (1-9), Klemperer, ►

Oxfam, £25; Shostakovich symphonies (1-15) £5.99 from Oxfam, Beethoven piano sonatas (I can't remember how many there are), Barenboim, £20 from Oxfam. The costs are interesting, but not important. I would have bought these at just about any price.

Another joy is that speculative purchases are tremendously exciting. Many composers did not really interest me and I avoided the speculative purchase of CDs as I had always been very disappointed. Now I just buy LP's. I now have just about all Wagner's operas, all Verdi's Operas, all Britten's recorded music. I would never have bought all this on CD. For one thing it would have been too expensive and I now know that I would have got no pleasure from them anyway.

For those Mahler freaks who have SACD, I suggest you get the Delos recording of Mahler's *2nd symphony*, Andrew Litton and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. You can get this in about 2 days direct from Delos. Just phone and speak to Catharine. This will provide a truly awesome experience. The interesting thing is to try the CD layer afterwards. It sounds crap.

On a less significant note, don't expect all SACD'S to sound terrific. Some are really quite poor and don't count as Hi-Fi. The *Firebird* on Telarc is not that much better than a CD, and Stravinsky's own *Le Sacre* shows how poor the source material can be. The Bernstein Mahler one however, is fantastic.

You may be wondering what has happened, if anything to my original collection of CD's - about 1300 of them. Well I have sold, given, or thrown them away. I have given some away to gardening friends. They drill a little hole on the edge and hang them on string from sticks for scaring birds off their gardens. The CD era to me was an 'age of anxiety': a truly unpleasant, expensive and frustrating experience.

I am so happy to have re-discovered music. At the age of 59 I believe life is starting all over again. Incidentally next year my wife and I will be doing a bicycle tour based on Mahler's history in Austrian Tyrol. We have already done the Salzkammergut region and visited his first Komposierenhütte at Steinbach on Attersee. We expect to cover about 800 km in two weeks, going to Maiernigg and perhaps getting as far as Toblach. I have no doubt that I will return with excess baggage caused by the many LP's which I will buy on the tour.

I have just read an article in Hi-Fi World (September)

about Linn, doing a comparison between their CD player and the LP12 at the Grosvenor House Hotel in June. The results are very interesting: Three to one in favour of vinyl. Need any more be said.

Yours sincerely

Ricardo Fontannaz

Silsden, Beds

Dear Sir,

You seem to have developed something of a fixation with the subject of hi-fi shows. Frankly, it's about time. Given the opportunity to not just meet and greet their customers, but actually to demonstrate their goods as well, you'd think that manufacturers would be falling over themselves to sign up. I've been attending London shows for years, as have all the manufacturers. It's obvious to me that things have been on the slide for several years, but just recently that's more of a death plunge! If it's obvious to me it must be obvious to the manufacturers too. What should also be obvious is that if they don't get off their backsides soon, we, the visiting public will have given up the ghost.

Blame the hotel, blame the organiser, blame the A/V demonstration across the hall. They're probably all at fault. The point is that it's up to you to do something about it. All those aspects of show organisation are under your control. If you don't like the hotel or the organiser, change them. Shock, horror, you could even organise it yourself, or certainly between you. It's about taking responsibility for your own destiny. The more time you spend wingeing about how bad this or that is, the less time you'll have to repair the damage that's already been done.

I used to really look forward to the annual September show. Now I greet it with indifference. I love music and hi-fi, but if high quality audio is going to remain an interesting and vibrant hobby then it's up to you to rekindle the interest of me and the thousands of other disgruntled punters out here in the real world. Shows are one way of doing that, but you're going to have to make a damn sight more effort than I'm seeing now in order to pull it off.

Yours imploringly

N.C.Clowse

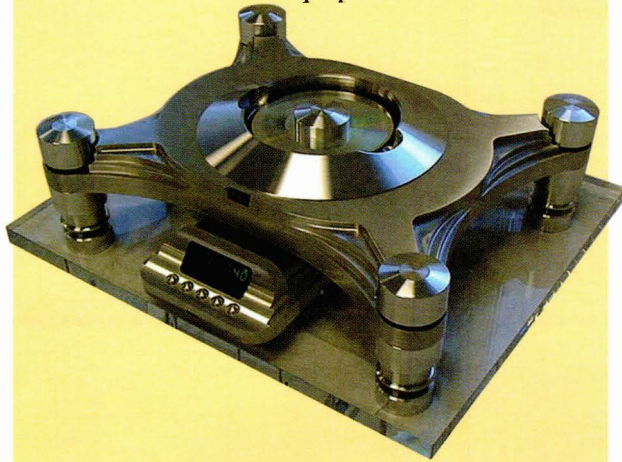
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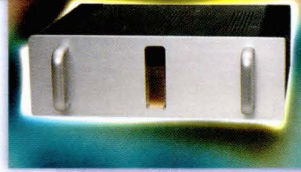


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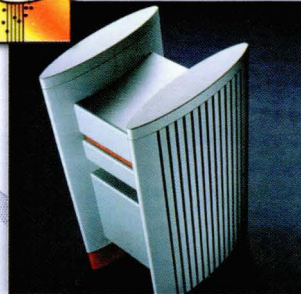
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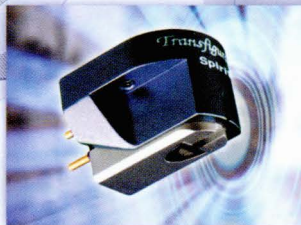
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An advertisement for Audiocraft. The background is split into a white left side and a green right side. On the left, a white Rogue Audio M-110 Mono Block 3 Amplifier is shown with a 'ROGUE AUDIO' logo. On the right, a black Lavardin RC-101 CD player is shown with a 'Lavardin RC-101' logo. The central text is on a dark blue background.

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Product Of The Year Awards 2001



The first issue of the new year rolls around, and once again it's time to cast an eye back over the last twelve months and recognise those products which we remember with a special warmth. We make no pretence about the fairness or validity of these awards: they aren't the outcome of some convoluted voting or jury process. Instead they are (proudly) completely arbitrary, simply reflecting those products that have most impressed our writers in the last year. If that seems harsh, consider this: committee decisions simply reflect the lowest common denominator that everyone can actually agree on. They are a strategy for, and tend to reward, mediocrity. Instead, we'd rather draw your attention to genuine excellence, those designs that stand out from the crowd. Here they are, the ones that impressed us the most, we bought, or really didn't want to give back. I hope you enjoy them as much as we did.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ry G...".



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Tel. (44)(0)1159-733222
Net. www.livingvoice.co.uk



This outwardly simple and conservative line-only integrated valve amp utterly seduced RG with its astonishing combination of power, grace, colour, authority and sheer musical enthusiasm. What's more, it did exactly the same to confirmed solid-state devotee CT! Living Voice's carefully considered modifications to the stock CA608 release the considerable potential contained in its well constructed 25 Watt push-pull interior. Add the Border Patrol power supply and prepare to be stunned. Scary good!

Audio Research LS2 Mk II Line Stage



Price: £5799

Reviewed in Issue 15

Manufacturer:
Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44) (0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.audioresearch.com



Audio Research's reputation in this country was built on the musical qualities of their pre-amps. Models like the SP8, SP10 and SP11 were revered for their warmth and tangible imaging when all else seemed obsessed with leading edge resolution. The middle period hybrids that followed the 11 met with mixed reviews, but CB found the LS2 Mk II a welcome return to form, offering a potent combination of the company's traditional strengths, along with greatly enhanced transparency and resolution, placing ARC right back at the front of the pre-amp field.

▶ **Mark Levinson No32 Reference Pre-amplifier**



Price: £15000 (+£2500 for onboard phono option)

Reviewed in Issue 11

Distributor:
Path Premier
Tel. (44) (0)1844 219000
Net. www.madrigal.com



For RG the year started with a bang, and a big surprise – and big was the operative word: The junior version of the Mark Levinson Reference System arrived to keep the No32 pre-amplifier company. The 33 power amps stayed home on the basis that they'd have needed electrical re-plumbing. Never mind, the half size 33Hs did just fine. The system as a whole provided a combination of musical access and operational finesse that makes this the fuss free first option for the well-heeled music lover. We may have only reviewed the pre-amp, but it was the completeness of the system approach as well as the superb overall musical performance that really impressed.

Monarchy Audio SM70 Power Amp



Price: £595

Reviewed in Issue 11

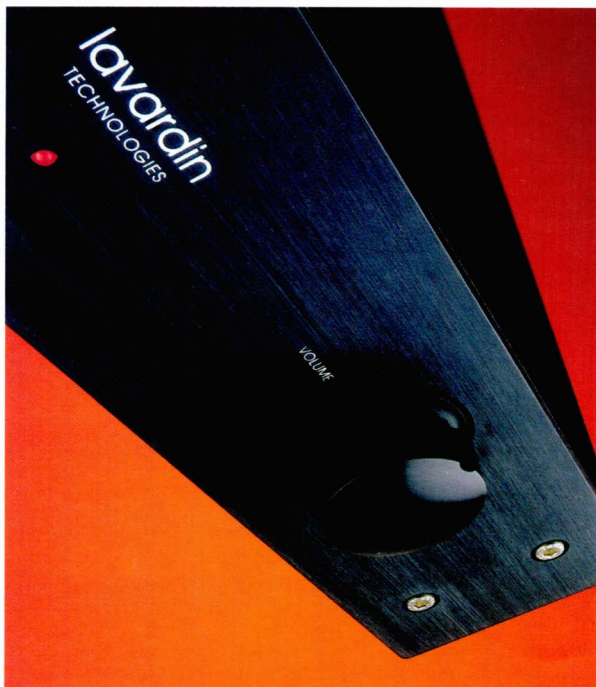
Distributor:
Wollaton Audio
Tel. (44)1159 284 4147
Net. www.monarchyaudio.com



Monarchy's diminutive SM70 is a distinctly surprising package. 20 Watts of feedback free, solid-state power packed into what looks like a traditional American casework suffering a bad case of "Honey, I shrunk the amplifier!" used within its envelope it offers considerably greater musical pleasure than many of its full sized relations. Unfailingly engaging and rhythmically fluid, it trades musical detail for overall sense and coherence. Definitely the most bangs for your buck, but whilst it will drive moderately efficient speakers and awkward loads, it really starts to sing once things reach about 92dB. But then, you could always use two of them.



▶ **Lavardin IS Reference Integrated Amplifier**



Price: £2200

Reviewed in Issue 13

Distributor:
Audiocraft
Tel. (44)(0)1895 253340
Net. www.lavardin.com



Lavardin burst onto the world stage with a range of solid-state amplifiers that put clarity and organisation top of their priorities. The result was almost unprecedented musical insight – at a price. The entry level IS was always good, but the rest of the range was extraordinary. Now, the second generation IS Reference kick-starts the baby's performance, lifting it into line with the legendary IT. No more power, just even more detail, transparency and musical integrity. Zero facilities, plain Jane looks, simply superb sound.

Klyne Model 7LX 3.5B Pre-amp and Model 7PX 3.5 Phono-stage



Price: From £3750 and £4450

Reviewed in Issues 12 & 13

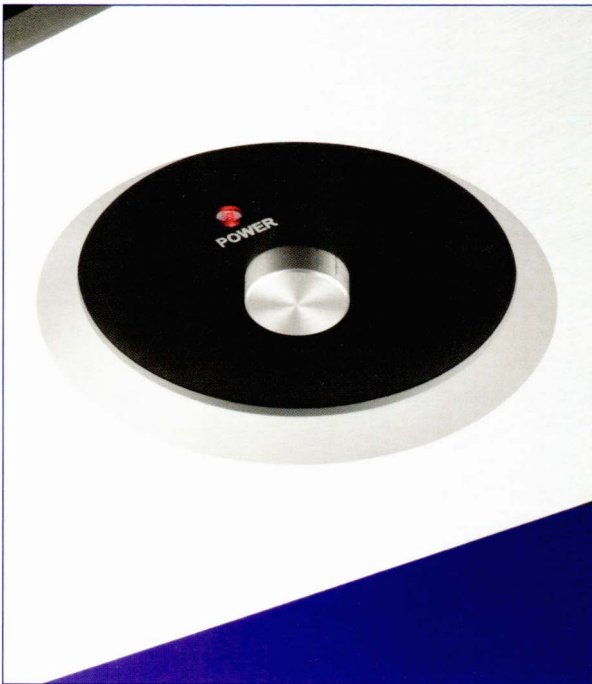
Distributor:
Wollaton Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1159-284147
Net. www.klyne.com



These products, separately and in tandem, left CT, PR and RG mightily impressed. With a whole host of options, including balanced inputs and outputs or an on board phono module for the pre-amp, costs and complexity vary, but even in its most sophisticated form the Klyne comes in at a bargain price compared to its sonic competition. Spec it down for your specific needs and the price looks even better. With a sound that oozes the warmth, substance, flow and musical involvement of the best valve pre-amps combined with the reliability, noise performance and versatility of solid state units the Klynes are products to cherish.



▶ **Rogue Audio 88 Power Amp**



Price: £1450

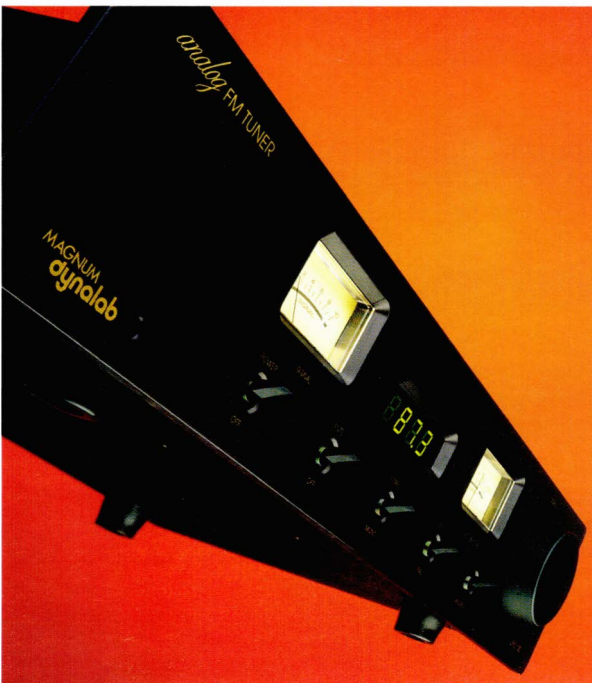
Reviewed in Issue 15

Distributor:
Audiocraft
Tel. (44)(0)1895 253340
Net. www.rogueaudio.com



A sensibly specified, beautifully constructed and versatile valve amplifier with an astonishingly affordable price tag. Push-pull KT88s deliver enough drive and control for real world speakers, while sound engineering and a technically innovative circuit deliver excellent sound quality. Add beautiful styling and the fact that it's come from the other side of the Atlantic and it's an even more surprising package.

Magnum Dynalab MD102 R



Price: £2490

Reviewed in Issue 13

Distributor:
Audiofreaks
Tel. (44) (0)20 8948 4153
Net. www.magnumdynamalab.com



Magnum Dynalab's well-respected range of tuners seems to have been a high-end benchmark for as long as I can remember. Resident radio addict PM finally got his hands on the basic MD100R in Issue 13, an encounter that convinced him to investigate the slightly more expensive MD102R. Whether it was the sweet tones of the Canadian import, the retro fascia or the remote control that lured him away from his long term Naim Nat-01, I couldn't possibly comment. Available without remote for traditionalists, no such hair shirted asceticism infected our intrepid reporter's hedonistic drive as he gladly shelled out the cash, bravely declaring the 102 to be "the best analogue tuner I've ever heard".



► Bryston 14B-ST Power Amp



Price: £4950

Reviewed in Issue 14

Distributor:
PMC
Tel. (44) (0)870 4441044
Net. www.bryston.ca

Long time valve devotee CB fell heavy and hard for this Canadian solid-state beefcake. Its no-nonsense presentation and input options betray its professional background, while its subtlety and graceful power delivery establish its hi-fi credentials. Treat it with respect, genuine power and slap dash habits are a speaker bursting combination – but boy is it musically compelling. Power hungry? Look no further!



VPI TNT Hot-Rod Turntable and JMW 12.5 Tonearm



Price: £6500

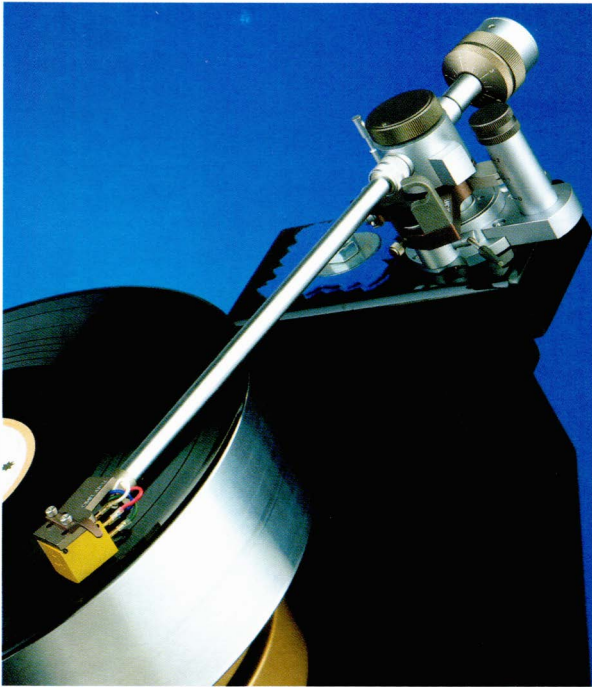
Reviewed in Issue 10

Manufacturer:
Cherished Record Co.
Tel. (44)(0)1579-363603
Net. www.vpiindustries.com

The latest incremental development in Harry Weisfeld's TNT odyssey, the Hot-Rod is exactly what the name suggests: a slimmed down and simplified version of the old trouper. With a lower price and the JMW 12.5 (surely the sanest and easiest to mount uni-pivot out there, as well as one of the best sounding) it's a powerful combination and a bargain for a genuinely top-flight turntable. The interchangeable arm assemblies and micrometer VTA adjustment makes optimising more than one cartridge simplicity itself, while both the 'table and tonearm put musical enjoyment firmly first.



▶ **Platine Verdier Turntable**



Price: From £4250

Reviewed in Issue 12

Manufacturer:

GT Audio

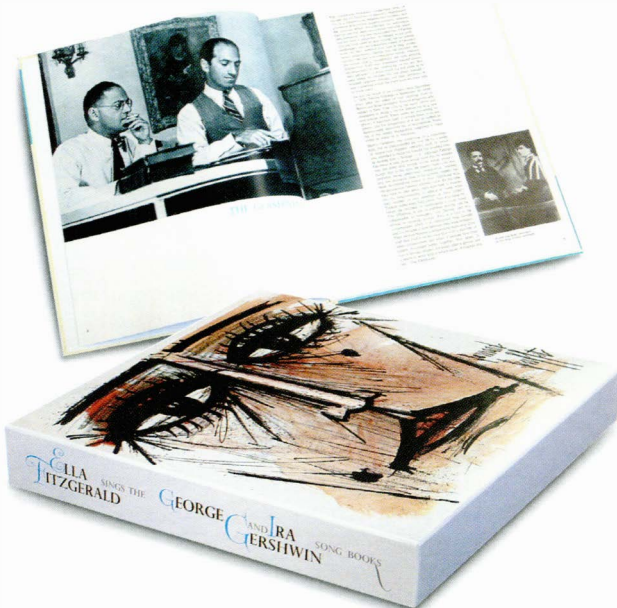
Tel. (44)(0)1895-833099

Net. www.gtaudio.com



What does the man that has had everything buy for himself? In the case of analogue addict PR the answer is the Platine Verdier, one part of a complete French turntable system that includes support, bearing and PSU options. Our reporter found it the most neutral and unobtrusive turntable he's yet used (and that list is long and distinguished, believe me). He was impressed enough to buy in, which is pretty impressive in itself.

Ella Fitzgerald sings the George and Ira Gershwin Song Books



Prices: £95

Reviewed in Issue 15

Distributor:

Speakers Corner

Available from audiophile record dealers

Net. www.speakerscorner.de



The art of the 180g re-issue reaches a new pinnacle with Speakers Corner's five and a half record box set. Original art work and a hard-back biography and song listing form the sumptuous packaging for perfect pressings of Ella's mainstream masterpiece. The playing is poised, the vocal performance peerless, the arrangements inventive and varied as they need to be with this many songs – and for once the records do it all justice. Speakers Corner took a brave decision in issuing this box set. The results are a handsome reward that we can all enjoy: If you buy nothing else for your hi-fi this year, at least treat it (and you) to this essential purchase.



▶ B&W DM303 Loudspeaker



Price: £180

Reviewed in Issue 13

Manufacturer:
B&W Loudspeakers Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1903-750750
www.bwspeakers.com



As the longstanding 601 reached Series 3 and marked the anniversary with another price rise, B&W needed a new model to step in below it. With the DM303 they hit pay dirt. Not too big, not too difficult to drive and with just enough bass to satisfy, this is one carefully considered package. Balance the whole thing with refinement and tonal sophistication that's rare at this price and you've got a classic budget speaker.

Border Patrol Power Supplies



Price: £650 - £1000

Reviewed in Issue 15

Distributor:
Border Patrol
Tel. (44) (0)1273 276716
E-mail. bp@borderpatrol.net



Given the loss to depreciation inherent in any upgrade, the notion of a universal add on to improve the performance of basic valve circuits is appealing indeed. Border Patrol have created a choke filtered unit that will replace the HT supply to a wide variety of circuits and output valves. The benefits have to be heard to be appreciated. The modification is straight forward and reversible, although to date no one has asked for it to be removed once they've heard the results. Cost effective engineering to extend the life and performance of existing amplifiers.



▶ Chord Electronics DAC 64



Price: £1900

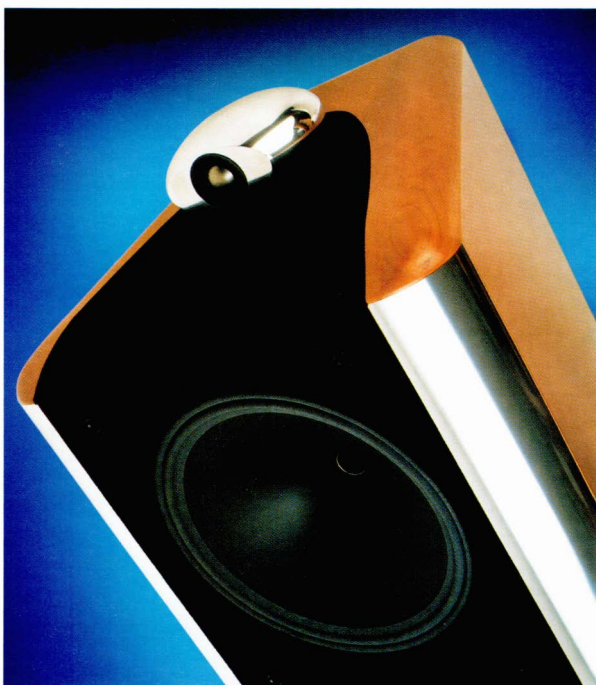
Reviewed in Issue 14



Distributor:
Chord Electronics
Tel. (44) (0)1622 721444
Net. www.chordelectronics.co.uk

The answer to JMH's digital prayers, the Chord DAC 64 uses gate array technology derived from the computer industry built into a typically bombproof casing. Special delay circuitry allows reorganisation of the data-stream, compensating for less than wonderful transports, while superior data handling brings new coherence to the sonic picture delivered from the little silver disc. If you thought Jimmy's review was enthusiastic you should hear what he says in private.

Tannoy TD12



Prices: £6500

Reviewed in Issue 13



Distributor:
Tannoy Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1236-420199
Net. www.tannoy.com

The latest (and sexiest) incarnation of Tannoy's large floorstanding dual-concentrics has taken the magazine fraternity by storm. No fewer than three of this country's most established speaker reviewers now employ the TD12 as a reference, a unique level of acceptance in my experience. Quizzed as to the reason PM pointed to the speakers' exceptional headroom and neutrality: He also waxed lyrical about the lack of room interaction with the sound, making the Tannoys the perfect tool if you want to listen through to the system, and more importantly, the original recording. A stylistic as well as a musical tour de force, the TD12 represents a thoroughly modern product from one of our oldest manufacturers.





15 sound reasons to feel good...

- A new Spring show for London, *just when you need it*
- Your ticket valid for two days, special Hotel rates, *great value*
- Manchester Hi-Fi & Home Cinema show organisers, *experienced*
- Symbolic venue - recent complete refit, *the one you know for Hi-Fi shows*
- Direct access by rail, bus, road & air, *easy access*
- Ties in with international product launches, *what shows are all about*
- Live music and entertainments, *making it special*
- Meet the experts: Distributors, Manufacturers, Retailers, Agencies & your magazines, *information & feedback*
- Medium to high end Hi-Fi and quality Home Cinema, *quality markets*
- You become a show saver and get reduced entrance to our other show in Manchester, Scotland & Ireland, *plus special 'intershow' product deals*
- From the 1st of March keep in touch and keep us on our toes via our website, *active*
- Admissions includes free programme, magazine and price draws, *refreshing*
- Free parking for up to 600 cars, *easing the pressure*
- 500 free tickets to be given away, *share with a friend and in effect go half price*
- Co-sponsored by Hi-Fi+ and Hi-Fi Choice (including T3 & Home Entertainment) *more to come*

...about a Spring Hi-Fi show for London

CCL Chesterfield Communications Ltd

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Fax: 01829 771258 Mobile: 07810 697123
email: roy@chestergroup.fsnet.co.uk.
www.chestergroup.org



Dear Readers.

It's always very nice to give good news. There is so much of the opposite these days isn't there? London is to get a brand new high quality Hi-Fi show this year - and no you won't have to wait several months to appreciate it! Less than a couple to be precise.

The 6/7 April.

Conceived, created and commenced entirely in January this year, it's only through real zest from the trade that it's been possible to achieve it. The Organisers, who already have a successful and established event in the North have compressed 12 months work into three and come up with an ambitious and fresh event. London of course has had it's own show in the Autumn for some time but future plans for this event have become confused and it's for this reason that many felt it essential that our calender was assured of a major show for the Capital.

The venue will be the **Renaissance Hotel at Heathrow** which many of you will remember as the birthplace of Hi-fi shows added to which the Renaissance has just undergone a major and expensive refit. Already backed by four of your favourite magazines 'Hi-Fi Choice', 'Home Entertainment', 'T3' and 'Plus sales of stands are well advanced and by the time you read this advertisement we should have our website fully operational so tune in for the latest details at www.chestergroup.org. Deliberately capped at 55 exhibitors for this year (although brands will exceed a 100) our entire focus is to ensure you get value for money, top quality presentation and a jolly good day out.

We very much look forward to meeting you all at what promises to be a fresh and thoroughly enjoyable weekend for all those interested in top quality sound and vision.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Roy Bird
Organiser
For Chesterfield Communications Ltd.





Connoisseur Definitions
4.0 LINE AMPLIFIER

Connoisseur Definitions

4.0 Phono and Line Stages

by Roy Gregory

Retired audio reviewers should be able to turn a healthy living as landscape gardeners, judging from the frequency with which we are accused of creating mountains out of molehills. Well, sharpen your quills all you audio cynics out there, 'cos here comes Everest, and it's only got one control knob!

Despite its rarity (rarely seen and never reviewed outside of its native Japan), modest stature and stratospheric pricing, the various incarnations and developments of Petr Mares' original circuit have held a near legendary fascination for show watchers and the audio cognoscenti. The 4.0 is the latest (and by a fair way the cheapest) version of the Connoisseur, yet it never failed to drop the jaw of even the most hardened listener and music lover. People who have seen and heard it all were routinely stopped in their tracks, such is the mind-boggling superiority and horizon expanding potential of this product. And everybody wanted it – badly.

If you are lucky enough to get to hear the 4.0 and you want a simple introduction to its capabilities, just play something you know really well.

Take the Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd *Jazz Samba* (Verve V6-84320) with its almost cliched opening on the first track 'Desafinado'. There's that familiar bass



line, but suddenly it's taken on a sinuous, convoluting quality that ripples beneath the locked beat of the insistent percussion, lifting and pushing against the constraints of the time frame, toying with, pushing but never breaking the self imposed rigidity of the rhythm. Getz' breathy sax is fluid, Byrd's guitar is soft and understated, underpinning and echoing the guitar line. Each entry is distinct, the instrument's place in space and the musical scheme of things absolutely secure. Each simply steps into what amounts to

a predetermined pattern, building up to that hesitation after the statement of the first sax theme. Ah, that hesitation.

With the 4.0 the pause hangs in the air, almost daring the musicians to break the silence. It's almost as if the music is saying

"Right, the boys are all here" before the band hit their stride in a perfect, single moment. I don't

know how many times I've heard that opening, but it was getting well towards the cringe level.

The Connoisseur has brought this familiar, verging

on the over exposed, music back to life, providing a depth of insight and understanding, drawing an emotive response, that I'd considered well beyond it. In response to the musical cliché I'll resort to a hi-fi one; it was like hearing it again for the first time. Why? Because the 4.0 was capable of presenting the track, the whole album, in a way that no hi-fi I've ever heard is capable of matching. Indeed, it has more of the zeitgeist of real, live music than any other component I've ever heard (and yes, I will come back to this).

So how does it do it? Listen to the Connoisseur and one of the first things that will strike you is the easy, unforced and relaxed quality of its

► music. This might lead you to think it tends to the slow or rounded. You couldn't be more wrong. The 4.0's greatest single strength is its incredible speed: speed that means that it always has time to deliver what it must, without ever sounding hurried. That speed of response allows it to shape a note, tracking its energy profile precisely, from opening transient to harmonic decay. More than that it allows it to place that note with equal precision relative both to the next note in the line and other notes around it. Musical strands are easier to separate and follow but so too are the interrelationships between them. It's that underlying chemistry that once revealed brings music dulled by familiarity back to life, that the Connoisseur shares with live performance. Instruments take on their own readily recognised identities, dynamic jumps are scaled without apparent effort or strain, and with real body and impact, based on sheer instrumental energy rather than a pumped up mid-bass. The music has an innate sense of naturalness and balance, coherence and life: it breathes, and in the case of Jazz Samba, boy does it swing.

Given its apparently modest exterior and paucity of facilities, why does the Connoisseur cost so much? I mean, I know it sounds good, better than anything else I've used, but £26000 is an awful lot of money for four boxes with only a dual-concentric volume control and source select between them. To understand what we are dealing with here, it's necessary to appreciate exactly where it has come from. As noted before, the Connoisseur products started life as the

work of Petr Mares, a Czech émigré who found work in the US as an engineer at Spectral. In 1987 he left to pursue his own design path, an approach that stressed the physical structure and construction of the amplifier.

In particular he developed the concept of the "air dielectric", in



which he employed a sandwich construction. The lower boards carried the DC and all its regulation, the upper the active components. This enabled him to place regulators immediately below the components they served, creating the shortest possible distance and lowest possible impedance, an advantage he extended by running the components own legs

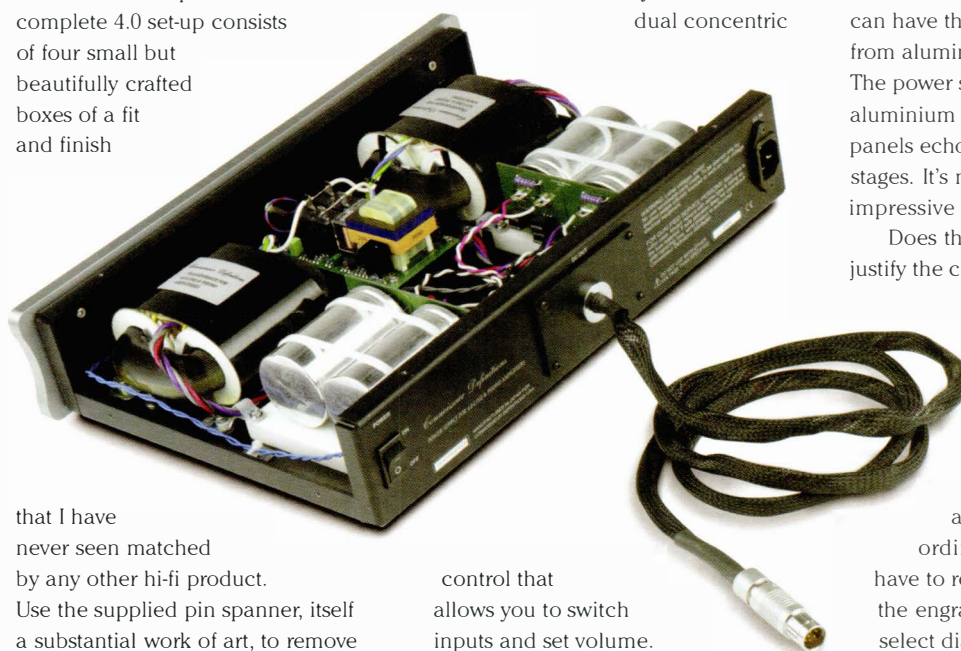
down to the lower board. It was an approach that yielded exceptional results but was incredibly complicated and difficult to produce.

Being so materials conscious it is hardly surprising that Mares settled on a wooden casework for his pre-amp, a sonically sensible choice that was nevertheless to prove his nemesis. The sheer degree of regulation and the number of regulators required by the circuit generated sufficient heat to have an adverse effect on the wooden casework. Deforming the structure in turn had an adverse effect on the delicate sandwich circuits and the long control rods used to operate the stepped attenuators. Soon the dual-concentric and dual mono knobs were rubbing. At this point, Lyra, the unit's Japanese distributor stepped in, ultimately setting up the Connoisseur Definition brand to re-engineer and manufacture the Mares design. That was in 1993, and led to the Connoisseur Definitions 2.5 pre-amplifier and ultimately, in 1999, to the 3.0. These were large, complex and costly designs that were essentially confined to their home market. ►



► However, Lyra's US distributor, Alan Perkins of Immedia, was keen for them to produce a simplified, less expensive and more serviceable version of the pre-amp, preferably with a separate phono stage, more suitable for export. Thus were born the 4.0 phono and line stages.

Less expensive? The 4.0 combination may retail for £26000, but in its home market, the three box 3.0 costs two and a half times the price of its baby brother! These products redefine our notion of exotic and expensive. The complete 4.0 set-up consists of four small but beautifully crafted boxes of a fit and finish



that I have never seen matched by any other hi-fi product. Use the supplied pin spanner, itself a substantial work of art, to remove the lids on the phono and line stages, and inside you'll discover individual examples of the Mares sandwich circuitry. Each sandwich consists of a pair of four layer boards, the upper carrying a selection of surface mount and more traditional components, the lower no fewer than 12 individual regulators. Despite the compact dimensions of the circuits, they are actually densely packed and complex. The circuitry itself is claimed to be novel, but frankly, I'm in no position to confirm or deny that fact.

The phono stage employs four identical sandwich sections, two per

channel, each one offering 36dB of gain, allowing 72dB overall. Input loading is set at 47K, although lower values can be accommodated if ordered. Inside the line stage are two more sandwiches, each identical to the ones used in the phono stage. 36dB of gain is an awful lot for a line stage, but the commonality of construction was essential if the cost and serviceability goals were to be met (the PSUs and most of the casework are common too). Running down the centre of the line stage is the beautifully constructed dual concentric

control that allows you to switch inputs and set volume. Based on Shallco switches, it provides six inputs (two balanced), as well as the hand built discrete stepped attenuators used to control level. Until you see it, it's hard to explain just what a beautiful construction this is. The line stage also provides a choice of single-ended or balanced outputs, but that's as far as the facilities go: Absolutely the bare bones and only the bones.

Externally, as I've already hinted, the standards of construction are peerless. The sculpted wooden casework is the best I've ever seen,

and as someone who normally abhors the tasteless slapping of solid timber onto bits of hi-fi, I'll admit to being completely seduced by the understated curves and superb artistry of the Connoisseurs' cases. Top panels offer a choice of milled aluminium, which looks superb, or perspex for superior sound. Thankfully, the company have solved this potential dilemma by discovering a perspex product that actually matches the appearance of the metal tops, although this wasn't available in time for the review. At the other extreme, organophobes can have the entire casework milled from aluminium – at an extra cost. The power supplies are simpler, aluminium affairs whose thick front panels echo the curves of the active stages. It's makes for a visually impressive contrast.

Does the beautiful casework justify the cost of these units? No, but it certainly helps. You only have to touch the silky smoothness of the wood, or marvel at the faultless execution and feel of the control knob to appreciate that this is no ordinary product. You only have to recognise the intricacy of the engraving on the volume/source select dial or the curved and inlaid name plate, or marvel at the clarity and quality of the rear panel layout and hard ware to realise the care and attention that has gone into these products. They may not impress your friends from a distance, but as an owner you'll be suffused with a warm glow of satisfaction every time you touch them.

Of course, analysing how the Connoisseur weaves its captivating spell was made a lot easier by comparisons and help from other equipment. In particular, the Lamm ML2s opened an invaluable window on the 4.0s' inner workings. ►

▶ Without the Lamm's unexaggerated transparency and dynamic discrimination it would have been much harder to appreciate just how far the Connoisseur really stretches the envelope. However, such is the choke hold exerted by most pre-amps over the signal they pass, that even amps as modest as the Rogue Audio 88 (at slightly less than one twentieth of the price) left you in no doubt as to the 4.0s superiority. It's just that you couldn't tell so clearly and obviously how that superiority was manifested.



Fortunately, I also had a veritable house full of exceptional pre-amps to provide multiple points of comparison. Units from Klyne, Lamm and Hovland all served as mirrors to the Connoisseurs' performance, but in each instance it wasn't a case of whether the 4.0s were better, but by how much. The breadth of that gap was, in all cases, astonishingly wide, yet these are all fine units in their own right. However, with each and every great product there always seems to be a seminal moment, a crystallising instant in which it all starts to make sense. In this case it was running a comparison with the Tom Evans designed The Groove phono stage which I have been using at home for a couple of years now. The Groove is an exceptional unit, and I've heard it now in a whole variety of systems and circumstances. Never once has its superiority or musical insight been seriously challenged. Listening to the

Connoisseur, with its wonderfully unforced and relaxed presentation I thought to myself, "Hmmm, it doesn't have the transparency, speed or dynamic range of The Groove". Confidently, I connected the plastic wonder to the 4.0 line stage and settled back for a listen. That's when I realised just how fast the Connoisseurs really are.

In comparison, The Groove sounded obvious, hurried and clumsy, tripping over itself to get notes out on time. In fact, exactly the way the Groove normally makes other phono-stages sound. The Connoisseur phono stage didn't just match The Groove's exceptional dynamic range, it did it with greater weight and substance, more precisely scaled and with correspondingly more impact and drama.

So why hadn't I twigged that immediately? Sonic perception is a strange thing and easily tricked. Despite its dynamic superiority, the Connoisseur's ability to present those dynamic shifts and jumps as part of a coherent, correctly proportioned whole actually rendered them less obviously impressive. A classic case

of listening for a single, and in this case wrong, aspect of musical performance. Rather than simply looking at apparent dynamic range I should have been looking at how those dynamic graduations worked in the context of the music and performance as a whole. Like I said, it's all in the chemistry.

The Connoisseurs bring a majesty and easy

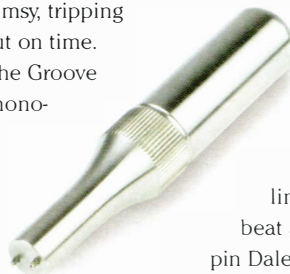
grace to great performers, wrapped around their inherent sense of balance and rightness. Plodding bass lines plod without ever sounding heavy or leaden. Tracks immediately seem to hit their stride.

Farmers Market Barbeque (Count Basie on Analogue Productions APJ023) provides the perfect example.

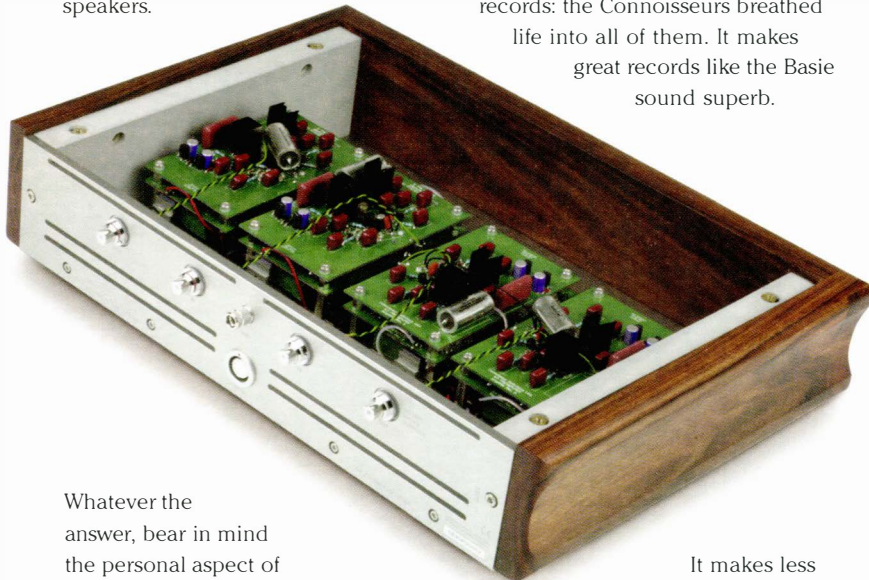
The languid tempo of 'St Louis Blues' (strangely appropriate on this Super Bowl weekend) never drags or slows the rhythm.

Basie's meandering piano line never strays from the beat and together they underpin Dale Carley's inspired trumpet solo, the hushed ensemble, almost Miller-esque brass, before the Count provides the perfectly poised coda. Then, without so much as a pause it's straight into the staccato part rhythm that opens the up-tempo swing of 'Beaver Junction'. This is one pre-amp whose superiority is stamped by a far wider margin that a single, late field goal.

Having said that, it doesn't match The Groove's absolute focus, immediacy and transparency, running with either the Lyra Helikon or the ▶



► Clearaudio Insider Reference. It never pulls off The Groove's party trick of putting you in the same acoustic as the performance. However, much of that is down to the insistence on loading the cartridge at 47K, a compromise which certainly produces voluminous soundstages, but definitely robs the cartridge of the damping and control that generate the exceptional focus and transparency that Groove is capable of. Mind you, there are those who swear by loading coils at 47K, amongst them such august personages as Hary Pearson himself. I think it's got a lot to do with the nature of your listening room, bandwidth, and in particular the radiation pattern of your speakers.



Whatever the answer, bear in mind the personal aspect of this. You can of course load the Connoisseur down if you choose, although I don't believe the circuit can accommodate the 100 Ohm load I prefer with The Groove. Horses for courses: I was so busy enjoying the 4.0s' musical coherence and captivating presence that it never occurred to me to miss that last ounce of transparency (and don't even think of suggesting that comparison to CD might solve the conundrum).

How to sum up such an

astonishingly musical performer? Whilst it is clearly the most engaging and informative, the most musically correct pre-amp I've ever used, that's not what really makes the Connoisseur combination so special. Whilst its exceptional coherence and control manage to extend in both directions, along the dynamic as well as the temporal continuum, and I guess we'd better not forget the spatial as well, that's not what makes it so special either. No, what really impressed the hell out of me was the way the Connoisseurs were able to apply all those hi-fi attributes without ever once allowing them to impede the music's life and flow. Bad records, old records, damaged records: the Connoisseurs breathed life into all of them. It makes great records like the Basic sound superb.

It makes less stellar recordings equally engaging, and musically just as valid – and that's really special.

Will I miss it when it's gone? Will I fight to hang onto it for as long as possible? You can put a big hell yes in both those boxes. But that's not really the point. I feel genuinely privileged to have spent time with these products. They've extended my understanding of what's actually possible via a hi-fi system, and at the same time they've provided

the strongest possible confirmation that we're not on some road to no where. The truth is out there, and at the moment it'll cost you \$26000.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

4.0 Line Stage

Inputs:	4x Single-ended RCA, 2x Balanced XLR
Outputs:	1x Single-ended RCA, 1x Balanced XLR (optional)
Input Impedance:	10kOhms
Output Impedance:	500hms
Gain:	36dB
Dimensions (WxHxD)	
Line Stage:	400 x 94 x 314mm
PSU:	400 x 94 x 270mm
Weight	
Line Stage:	6.5kg
PSU:	11kg
Price:	£13000

4.0 Phono Stage

Inputs:	1x Single-ended RCA
Outputs:	1x Single-ended RCA
Input Impedance:	47 kOhms (see text)
Output Impedance:	50 Ohms
Gain:	72dB
Dimensions:	As above.
Weight	
Phono Stage:	5kg
PSU:	As above
Price:	£13000

Manufacturer:

Scan-Tech Europa (Germany)
Tel. (49)(0)561-4759-0266
Fax. (49)(0)561-4759-0267
E-mail. scantech@gol.com
Net. www.lyraaudio.com



Neat Acoustics Ultimatum MF9 Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

This loudspeaker has been a long time coming. Neat Acoustics has been building its cult near-miniature Petite loudspeakers for more than a decade, so the time to produce something seriously large would seem to be well overdue.

And seriously large is a fair description for the Ultimatum MF9, if only because it stands 1.5m tall, and therefore looms over the seated listener in a mildly intimidating way. Although the sides and back are very nicely real wood veneered, I'd be hard pressed to call this a pretty loudspeaker, although the Editor disagrees. The currently unclothed front panel and top, finished in charcoal grey, looks handsome enough, but also has an undeniable severity. 'Stockingmask' type covers will be available for those who prefer to keep their drive units hidden from view.

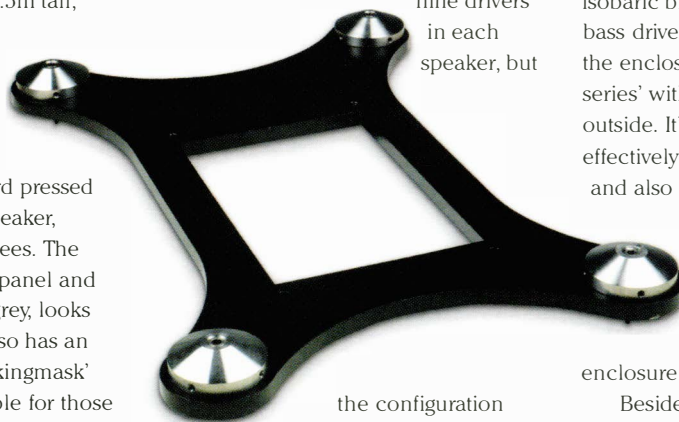
Hefty build is also part of the agenda, each enclosure totalling a massive 66kg, which goes a long way towards justifying a similarly hefty \$8,500/pair pricetag. That's a lot of money for a pair of speakers, to be sure, but this is a lot of loudspeaker in every way, using nine drive units in each seven-cavity enclosure.

The Catch 22 for all large loudspeakers is that simplicity is a virtue, while complexity is usually the enemy of ultimate sound quality. While big speakers certainly do have some benefits over tinies, it's a difficult trick for the designer to create a big speaker

with the advantages of deep bass and plenty of headroom, without compromising the overall delicacy and coherence along the way. Inevitably, some compromises and choices have to be made along the way.

Neat's Ultimatum solutions are both radical and original; both complex and simple. Let me explain. There might be

nine drivers
in each
speaker, but



the configuration and crossover network are both essentially very simple. This is at heart a two-and-a-half-way design, yet it is also a double-d'Appolito, acting somewhat as a line source, while the bass-only sections are port-loaded isobarics.

Let me explain! The classic d'Appolito configuration involves using two bass/mid drivers placed above and below a tweeter. The core basis of the Ultimatum is therefore a pair of 6.5-inch main drivers mounted above and below a solitary concave dome tweeter. Additional bass reinforcement is then provided by two more 6.5-inch drivers placed above and below those main drivers, hence the 'double

d'Appolito' soubriquet.

The combination of four 6.5-inchers all mounted in a line and delivering bass output might perhaps represent a 'line source', though in practice this is likely to have only marginal effect at these lowish frequencies, and is in any case further complicated by the ports mounted on the rear panel. The isobaric bit concerns two more 6.5-inch bass drivers which are hidden within the enclosure, operating in 'acoustic series' with those visible on the outside. It's an arrangement which effectively doubles the moving mass, and also doubles the electromotive 'shove', the actual benefits probably having as much to do with delivering good extension from a relatively compact enclosure as any other factor.

Besides hiding a pair of extra bass drivers inside the box, the Ultimatum also secretes a couple of extra upward-facing tweeters on its top surface - more in order to add a little extra air and space to proceedings than to provide the treble reproduction proper, I daresay.

As is usually the case with truly upmarket speakers, plenty of the devil is in the detail. The enclosure is mostly built from birch ply, which most will agree gives the best sonic characteristics of all. There's also a massively thick steel plinth, which dramatically extends the footprint and enhances the overall stability of this very tall speaker. The spikes themselves, and especially the

▶ polished steel bosses into which they fit, are similarly massively engineered, ensuring excellent mechanical integrity.

The driver-mounting baffles (front & top) are a bit special too, comprising a 45mm thick 'sandwich' of Birch Plywood, polyethylene and MDF, the polyethylene membrane decoupling the baffles from the main structure.

Those who know Neat's other loudspeakers will find some familiarity in the drivers. Neat has always based its speakers around a cast-frame 6.5-inch main driver with doped paper cone, and you get plenty of those in this MF9. Familiar too is the ribbon-type EMIT area-drive tweeter paired up on the top surface, which is similar to that used in the latest Petite.

However, the bass/mid drivers 6.5-inchers used in the Ultimatum differ from those used elsewhere in Neat's range. A protruding metal 'bullet' polepiece extension is the most visible sign of a driver variation that's deliberately oriented towards best midband performance in this instance.

The tweeter is new to Neat too, though familiar enough to hi-fi watchers as an upmarket Focal device (similar to those used in some JMLab and Wilson Audio designs). It has the characteristic inverted dome, in black oxide-coated titanium, modified here by the deliberate removal of a small phase compensator.

Attractive gunmetal-finish WBT terminals are fitted, two pairs permitting bi-wiring or bi-amping, splitting the tweeters from the rest at around 1.5kHz. That said, Neat's Bob Surgeoner was perfectly happy for me to use the relatively prosaic single-wire Naim NACA5 cable which we both like.

A minor snag with this pretty terminal is that it lacks the locking feature of WBT's more garish gilt examples.

With predominantly first-order slopes and mechanical roll-offs, the crossover network is a minimalist affair with just five elements, using tight tolerance air-cored inductors

and polypropylene film & foil capacitors.

Surprisingly, Neat doesn't make any attempt to measure its loudspeakers during development.

I, however, find some simple, basic measurements very useful indeed in pinning down the performance of a speaker. I say surprisingly, because the Ultimatum actually measures very well indeed in terms of overall neutrality and frequency balance, although Neat's claim for a 90dB sensitivity rating looks a tad optimistic. I'd give it around 88dB sensitivity myself, which isn't particularly high, but is actually a very

respectable result in context: in the first place, bass extension is amongst the very best I've ever measured, registering 0dB right down at 20Hz, while the amplifier load is also much easier for the amplifier to drive than most these days, staying above 6 Ohms through most of the range.

Not only is the absolute bass extension very impressive

here, but the Ultimatum manages the much more difficult trick of delivering this really low bass without messing it up with a load of midbass excess. Best results under my conditions were with the speakers kept well clear of nearby walls, and sited a little closer together than my normal arrangement.

Indeed, the in-room frequency balance is unusually flat and smooth, especially through the bass region, where few designs can match its combination of evenness and extension. Although it's as flat and neutral as any, there's still a touch of character here: the midbass is a little dry and lean, the upper midband is a tad laid back, and the treble a shade stronger than average, though all these comments should be taken not as criticisms but essentially just observations.

These factors certainly contribute towards the Ultimatum's overall character and presentation, which might perhaps be just a little

cold and clinical for some tastes.

Certainly the touch of extra brightness is both obvious and also rather effective in highlighting detail, bringing fine intelligibility and detail to voices by slightly emphasising consonants and sibilants. I like this effect a lot, because it makes it very easy to hear what's going on, even when the system is playing at whisper-quiet, very-late-at-night levels. But it's only fair to point out that my partner doesn't agree. She simply prefers speakers with a little less relative treble energy, and who am I to say that I am right and she is wrong?

That's all a matter of balance and personal preference of ▶



► course, but there's much more to a loud-speaker than those fairly superficial observations, and this one has so many very clear and obvious strengths, it's difficult to know where to start.

Above all perhaps, it combines the all the coherence and communication skills of a simple two-way, with most of the advantages of a much larger design. There's real speed and agility here, especially through a bass region which is exceptionally clean, clear and powerful.

The slight but unmistakable lack of warmth, alongside some reluctance to deliver midbass 'thump', might well deter more naive listeners, who tend to confuse quantity with quality. The big strength of this Ultimatum is that it simply doesn't drone on as an extra accompanist to the music, but gets right out of the way and lets the music itself come through, clean and unobstructed, with an evenness, deftness and literacy that's always highly convincing.

Piano reproduction is a notable strength, this instrument requiring a difficult combination of accurate tonality with true percussive impact. The Ultimatum accomplished these with considerable aplomb, and without 'muddying up' the natural warmth of the actual instrument.

When Arthur dropped in one evening, his first reaction was to query whether the Ultimatum had any bass. But that was merely because the music I was playing at the time had very little bass content. I changed the disc for something meatier with genuine deep bass content, and watched the smile spread across his face, as he quickly realised that the Ultimatum has seriously deep bass of very high quality indeed.

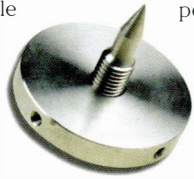
Over the long haul of several weeks, my respect for this speaker continued to grow. Its exceptional neutrality and freedom from boxiness not only gets itself well out of the way of the music,

it also made me very aware of the differences in character between the various sources I use, and indeed the wide variations in quality found between different recordings. This simple ability to lay bare such distinctions is very much the mark of a fine loudspeaker.

The vertical symmetry of the driver array does favour listening whilst seated which brings the ears too roughly the same height as the central tweeter. Here you get the best balance, and optimum stereo image focus and perspectives. The image here seems to sit quite high off the ground, giving a slightly disembodied overall effect, and I was quite intrigued to find that this speaker seemed relatively disinclined to shake the floor of my listening room - a good thing from a musical point of view, though not a phenomenon for which I can offer a ready explanation.

Whether the top-mounted 'super-tweeters' really justify their inclusion is perhaps debatable. Their contribution is certainly very subtle, though probably worthwhile in the final analysis, for that little bit of extra air and delicacy that they bring to the party. It's not difficult to block these tweeters off for purposes of comparison, and this makes it clear that they do make a contribution towards minimising the boxiness.

All loudspeakers involve some measure of compromise, and in opting for a two-and-a-half-way (rather than a three-way) configuration, the Ultimatum doesn't protect its midband drivers from the large excursions of bass frequencies. In consequence it's bound to make some sacrifice in power handling capability, but on the plus side, because there's no crossover filter between the amplifier and the midband driver, it should offer superior overall coherence. In truth, however, it seems most unlikely that the power handling limitations will turn out to have any practical consequences, for those simply



interested in listening to music (as distinct from attempting to intimidate the neighbourhood).

After a couple of months of continuous use, I've become very fond indeed of this loudspeaker. It does everything important very well indeed, and its little peccadilloes - like the slightly strong treble - suit my particular tastes to a T. The magnificent extension and free-from-thump bass end is arguably its best and most distinguished feature. But the whole is much more than the sum of the parts, and there's a beguiling completeness and totality which is thoroughly satisfying, making one very aware that the Ultimatum is a labour of love and the end result of painstaking development and refinement. Such quality doesn't come cheap, but Neat's Ultimatum deserves recognition as amongst the very best there is, irrespective of price. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Full-range two and a half way loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	2x Emit ribbon type super-tweeters 1x Focal 25mm titanium oxide inverted dome tweeter 2x 168mm doped paper bass-midrange 4x isobarically loaded 168mm doped paper bass drivers
Efficiency:	90dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Bandwidth:	20Hz - 30kHz \pm 3dB
Dimensions: (WxHxD)	Cabinet: 220x1600x370mm Footprint: 360x520mm
Weight:	66kg each
Finishes:	To order
Price:	From £8500

Manufacturer:

Neat Acoustics Ltd
Tel. (44) (0)1833 631021
E-mail. bob@neat.co.uk
Net. www.neat.co.uk

View from the top... ...keeping things grounded at c-j

As conrad-johnson celebrate a company lifespan that has been longer than most marriages, I spoke to Bill Conrad and Lou Johnson about twenty-five years at the top.

RG. conrad-johnson has been around for quarter of a century, and started life as a pure tube company: You've just produced your first solid-state Premiere product. What prompted that evolution?

BC. Well you'd have to be aware of something that isn't public knowledge, that we first started our work on a solid-state design in 1978, having released our first tube product in 1977. So we've been working in solid-state virtually as long as we have in tubes. One of our early questions which actually got us going in tubes was that among the many claimed virtues of solid-state (many of which actually existed) were definition and clarity. We could see no intrinsic reason why tubes shouldn't provide that, alongside what we think is some of the magic that they offer with so little effort. In the beginning we found a commercially available solid-state pre-amp that we used as a reference – an aiming point. When we went to do an amplifier we looked for a solid-state piece on the market to fulfil the same role, and we found a few, but nothing that seemed nearly good enough to serve as a reference. So, along with someone else we actually started work on a rather radical solid-state design, using a lot of video transistors. It was capable of handling an immense amount of current in the output stage and was actually a pretty good amp. It was not constrained to be a product so we didn't have to worry about protecting it. We used that until five or six years later when we first introduced a solid-state product.

RG. That was the Motif line?

BC. Yes, the Motif product, which was already about two generations beyond that original prototype.

LJ. So the short form summary is that solid-state isn't exactly new to us.

RG. It's just taken you a while to get it right?

LJ. Well, I don't actually think that anyone has got it absolutely right.

BC. But then we haven't got tubes right either. One of my lines that I always wanted to use for an advertising campaign, but never had the nerve, is that we are proud to announce another failure, because we haven't achieved our goal which is absolute perfection. Ultimately, that's what drives you, step by step.

RG. You've been consistently rooted in two-channel, and obviously the market is changing. How do you see that affecting your business in the future?

BC. Well, one of the things you find as time goes by is that there are a number of people who used to be in the stereo market, forming a sort of amalgam, those who were most interested in technology, and they've been drawn away because the computer offers such a rich field for that. Basically I think that home entertainment and video are competition for us, but in terms of reproducing music I've yet to hear a convincing multi-channel environment. I've heard it used to extract a complete hall ambience, but that doesn't seem to be what excites people. I've been in a couple of demonstrations with well regarded recording engineers who've merrily been showing how you can move the singer here or there. That's not what we're about.

LJ. Hearing the vocalist behind you is not a very compelling experience – for us.

BC. What we are about is trying to reproduce the musical event. Strangely enough, the one thing I've heard that should have been recorded in multi-channel was presented in stereo – live! Gabrielli brass, where originally the two brass choirs would be placed in the transepts of a church. They placed them on the two sides of a stage, turning it into a stereo image. So here is the one thing, and I don't know if I could sell a whole lot of multi-channel systems just for Gabrielli, but this is the one place where it's valid because multi-channel would there be used to recreate the actual experience as it should have been.

LJ. To us music is the thing that is compelling. That's the thing we are pursuing – the emotionally compelling reproduction of music. At the moment that continues

to be a stereo phenomenon, but that may change...

My experience with surround sound music dates back to the early seventies when I fooled around with the simple process of using a difference signal for the rear speaker (you only needed one), and whilst there were certainly recordings on which that produced a pleasing effect, when it was adjusted properly you really didn't notice the rear speaker.

BC. You weren't specifically aware of it as a source...

LJ. The way you would notice the rear speaker was to turn it off.

RG. Just like a decent sub-woofer?

LJ. Yes, exactly, and probably, unfortunately, every bit as abused. One wonders how many people are going to be interested in making the financial commitment required to provide that sort of information at a comparable level of quality to what they're doing with the front two channels.

BC. Or at least at a level that won't diminish the overall quality. And finally I have a comment about the video use of multi-channel. I find it very disconcerting. When I see the space taxis colliding there, but hear the collision over there I find it disturbing. When I see the car over there being stomped by a dinosaur (very realistically sonically speaking, that's exactly how I remember the sound of dinosaurs stomping cars) but the sound is completely surrounding me, I find that very disconcerting. When I hear a bullwhip cracking over my head but see it out front (LJ. Usually with a tremendous bass transient!) what does this mean?

So I have a second problem here. What I'm really interested in, and I guess we're both really musicians at heart, albeit of extremely limited talent, but it's love of music that's gotten us into this, and I don't see those systems serving that end. So when I see what people are choosing to demonstrate their video systems with I have to conclude that they are after something quite different to me, so I'm not going to be in a very good position to meet their needs, or figure out what it is that I'm trying to recreate.

RG. I think that Michael Fremer made an interesting point when he suggested that all those audiophiles who spent thousands of dollars on equipment just to play the same four tracks off the same four records, have now moved on from Jazz at the Pawnshop to the trainwreck from The Fugitive.

BC. Oh yes. Those people have definitely left us for video.

LJ. One theory put forth is that in fact dialogue, as well as sound effects, is effected by the quality of surround sound

reproduction. It's a much richer experience with a high quality system, and to an extent that's true. Maybe there's a limited market there for high quality, highly accurate audio electronics in Home Theatre systems but at present it's exactly that – limited.

BC. It's a young market and things do have a way of evolving. We saw the same compromise in the beginning of stereo, where the need for two speakers cut your budget in half.

LJ. If you think about what we just heard in the sound room, the way Buddy Holly was really working his voice, well, the same thing's true of actors.

RG. In fact, the purpose of a music system and the purpose of a home theatre system is exactly the same: to transport a performance into your front-room. Perhaps it's just taking the home cinema crowd longer to get over the 'ping-pong and steam engines' stage that afflicted stereo.

LJ. The problem is that surround sound processors of the necessary quality don't exist. You can't get beyond the crash/bang stage because the systems can't take you there. The processors can't match the audio quality of an ART, a Premier 16 or even a PV10. To build a surround processor to the quality of the ART would work out somewhere between 60 and 100 thousand dollars!

BC. If on the other hand we built one to the standard of a PV10, it would come out around the price of a current top quality unit, but would probably easily outperform it in terms of accurate music and voice reproduction. Indeed, we are actually working on something of that sort.

Recently, at a show we had a salutary experience. Two doors down was a friend of ours, using our electronics to demonstrate his speakers in a surround set-up: good equipment certainly capable of good results. He was playing music and alternating between a Premier 18 pre-amp and his surround sound decoder, and we could tell clearly, which he was using, without leaving our room! The theatre system really sounded unpleasant, and that's from two rooms away.

LJ. Frankly I think that both Bill and I were appalled. At the same show we met one of our dealers who is moving away from two channel into home theatre, basically because he's being forced to, and he told us that the music performance of that particular processor is actually pretty good compared to most others.

RG. Where do you see the current situation with the high-bit digital formats leading?



BC. Actually I'm pretty excited about it. We did some early work on the 24/96 stereo thing that, whilst it never became a product, largely because the software never really became available, what I found was that a large part of what I've been missing from vinyl was in there. Not all, but a good bit. It made you realise just how much ambient information and musical nuance is lost on a typical CD. It was beginning to approach the naturalness and ease that a good vinyl record allows. I think the real advantage of the high-bit systems is not the high-bit count but the sampling rate, the information rather than the bandwidth overshoot. What excites me is that it suggests that we can get quality back into recordings that most people have given up in favour of convenience. It'll be nice to be able to have both.

LJ. If the industry can ultimately solve the format wars, then either high-bit format would be a tremendous boon to music reproduction. Once we settle down to a single standard we'll all be able to progress.

RG. Does that mean you'll be getting involved with digital product?

LJ. Quite possibly, but more importantly, the justification for buying an ART or Premier 16 or 17 depends ultimately on the quality of the source: The better the quality of the source, the more compelling the argument for buying a better quality pre-amp and power amp.

BC. I've felt many times that CD is a great leveller. It's always better to have a better system, but it wasn't as compelling because CD as a source simply didn't demand it, or allow you to reveal as much. So I'd like to recover the resolution we used to have available to us and then go beyond it. One of the things that CD did show us was that speed stability was way more of a problem than anybody had realised. With a turntable, even a very good one, it just wasn't there. CD is superlative in that regard. Both the currently available options have got serious shortcomings while the newer formats promise to overcome those.

LJ. Whether we get involved in producing a digital front-end is clearly a huge issue for conrad-johnson, but ultimately what is more important still to c-j is the availability of a quality source.

RG. A few years ago, you acquired the assets of McCormack, which people in the UK probably remember better as Mod Squad. What did you actually acquire and why?

LJ. We acquired all of the physical assets as well as the intangible assets, the brand name, the designs, the intellectual property. It is now arranged as a separate

corporation owned by Bill and I, rather than conrad-johnson. It has its own independent research and development facility and that is headed by Steve McCormack, on a consultancy basis.

We felt that it was a brand that showed a similar dedication to the reproduction of music, had achieved considerable success in that regard, and Steve's designs had attracted a very strong and loyal customer base. That helped the overall viability of the brand, a brand that we felt deserved to continue to exist. It had fallen on hard times, mainly associated with personal reasons within the company, but it was more a tragic set of circumstances rather than anything else, and we felt that with new management and a sounder financial base the brand could be resurrected. That's taken longer than we anticipated, partly because of the downturn in the two-channel market, where McCormack's firmly grounded, but we're making progress and there's now a complete new line of product, all designed by Steve, and due very shortly. There's a new high powered amplifier and also a six-channel pre-amplifier and analogue processor. As we discussed earlier, this is a six-channel piece that is built to the same standards as the two-channel pre-amps in the line.

BC. It should perform really well on music making it simple to put together a good sounding system that will handle both your music and video.

LJ. Obviously, it will also handle the multi-channel analogue outputs from an SACD or DVDA player, so if that avenue is attractive then this product allows that without compromising sound quality. It's preposterous to take six channels of analogue sound out of the player, immediately convert it to digital, process it and then convert it back.

BC. That comes under the heading "DUMB".

LJ. What this product allows you to do is employ a high quality multi-channel source and a high quality two-channel source in the same system without compromising either, and without breaking the bank. We haven't set the price yet, but this is a McCormack product with all that implies in terms of performance and value.

BC. I'd anticipate it costing around \$2500 or so. There is an issue here in that I think it's a product that makes sense or we wouldn't be doing it, but a lot of people are pre-programmed to ask "does it do DTS, does it do eight-channel, does it do 12 channel?" It's a music and performance orientated product that we are going to try and sell into a market that may not yet be totally receptive. We'll have to wait and see.

RG. Going back to two-channel, you've announced a very impressive new flagship amplifier. What's behind that?

LJ. Sure. It's the Grand Anniversary Triode amplifier (GAT) which we hope to have out in celebration of our 25th anniversary. It is basically an answer to the question; How can I go about designing a zero feedback amplifier with a tube circuit? The problem as well is to keep it simple but provide sufficient power and bandwidth to drive real world speakers. There are a couple of issues to resolve. Typically the output impedance of a vacuum tube is very high, so if you use a transformer to couple it to the load, you match impedances which at 8 Ohms gives you a damping factor of one, which makes for some pretty comical response curves measured at the loudspeakers. We measured a typical single-ended design and you get peaks and valleys of 20 something dB into an electrostatic loudspeaker. And this was a unit with a far better bench performance than your typical single-ended design.

BC. In the GAT I think I have something in the region of half a dB, 20-20k, which is fairly phenomenal for a single-ended, output transformer coupled, zero feedback design.

LJ. Traditionally in a valve amplifier, the way you get around the impedance/damping factor issues is to apply negative feedback. But obviously if you are eliminating feedback from the design you've got to find some other way to couple the load.

At the same time we were looking at some of the more interesting triode output tubes. Typically a single triode output stage will produce anywhere from two to 15 Watts. You end up with a 10 Watt amplifier that into a real world speaker produces + 20dB, 50 to 15k because it's got no extension at either end anyway.

BC. Give it a break. You can do better than that. We picked a moderately bad speaker, but even on the Wilsons (Grand Slams) which are much more acceptable we still had six dB dips. That's just a feature of the electrical inadequacy of the amplifier, not the speaker.

LJ. So the idea is that we'll take a triode amplifier and we'll couple it to the speaker load via a buffer stage. That offers a couple of advantages: the buffer stage can have a very low output impedance, in the order of a tenth of an Ohm or so; and the buffer stage supplies current which means that you can have a lot more power. We are expecting the power output to be between 800 and 1000 Watts, derived from a single 300B.

BC. I can then also lightly load the 300B to keep it even more linear.

RG. What's the topology of the buffer stage?

BC. I couple my transformer into a basic bi-polar follower, a complementary bridge. Hence the large heatsink, which will accommodate up to 40 output devices.

RG. So technically this is a hybrid amplifier.

LJ. Technically it certainly is a hybrid...

BC. But I wouldn't choose to describe it that way because if we are successful with the output stage, which we've done before on a smaller scale, then the character of the amplifier will be dominated by the 300B. I've also been able to cut some breaks in the transformer, achieving a much lower turns ratio.

RG. Do you anticipate this to be as big a breakthrough as the ART?

LJ. That's a good question. That's the goal. A couple of years ago, once we started to get the industry's take on the ART it became apparent to us that we now had to do an amplifier. The reason the ART was such a big breakthrough was because it was a total break with our traditional approach: A real fresh start. We realised that the only way we could make a similar breakthrough in amplifiers was to make a break with what we'd already done and start over again.

RG. The ART has spawned a number of cheaper siblings in the shape of the Premier 16 and 17. Is the GAT technology something that lends itself to similar development?

BC. In much the same way that there are limits on what we can do with the ART, there'll be limits here too. Sure, we can come up with a junior version of GAT, even a baby version, but never a really inexpensive one. On the other hand, what we've learned over the years is that racing really does pay off in terms of what you learn, and perhaps you can apply that in different ways further down the range. So you may not have direct descendants but you do have influence.

LJ. Racing definitely improves the breed. So there are things that we learnt with the ART that have appeared in the PV10B.

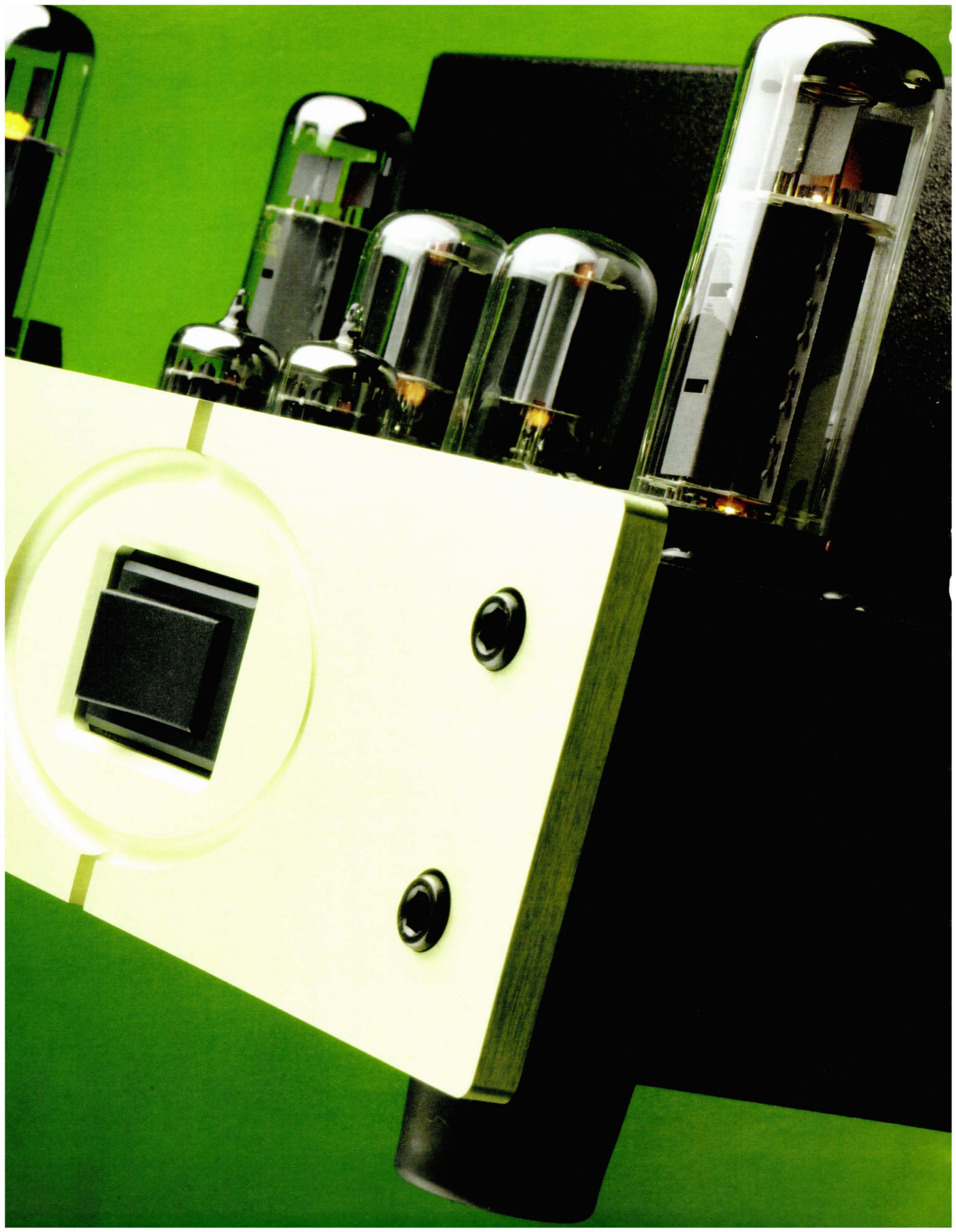
BC. And they are significant things. Many of the real improvements can be traced very directly to the ART.

RG. What do you anticipate the GATs costing and when will they be available?

LJ. Between 35 and 40 thousand dollars a pair and hopefully we should be in production by June of 2002.

BC. And to answer your next question, applying our experience with the ART, if we embody this concept and general approach into a cheaper version then I could see it maybe reaching down into the ten or \$12000 region, but no lower than that.





conrad-johnson MV60 Power-amplifier

by Roy Gregory

Sometimes it's difficult to be sensible. Why buy the fuel-efficient hatchback when the soft-top sports car beckons? Why buy the classic black court shoes when there are all those far more fashionable alternatives with big thick soles and associated posture problems? And therein lies the rub. Sensible products are sensible exactly because they are sensible. The hatchback will carry a week's shopping; you on holiday or the furniture back from Ikea. It won't cost you a bomb in insurance either. Those little black courts will be comfortable and versatile and you'll still be able to wear them right up to the day they finally wear out. And they won't cripple you. But that's always the way. More often than not the sexier, racier and more fashionable option comes with a table of associated costs that probably isn't immediately apparent, and even if it is, gets lost in the seductive glow of the main attraction.

Exactly the same rules apply to hi-fi as the rest of life. We suffer from fashion and testosterone induced momentary madness the same as the rest of the world. This month's star product is filling next year's second hand columns and all because the purchasers were blinded by the thrill of acquisition to the implications of

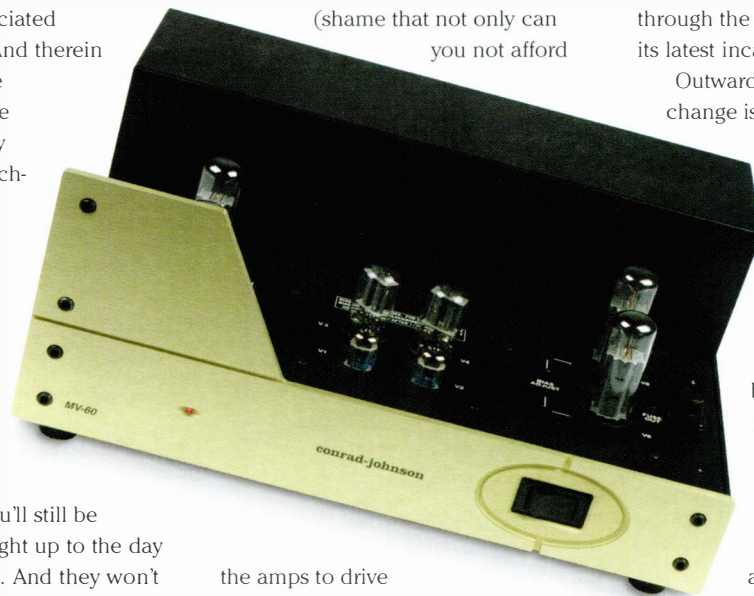
their purchase. That 8 Watt triode is just soooo sexy (shame it won't actually drive any speaker I can afford or accommodate). That full-range ribbon is soooo affordable for a genuine high-end speaker system (shame that not only can you not afford

that only EL34s seem to deliver. Meet then, the deeply unfashionable, utterly sensible and thoroughly dependable conrad-johnson MV60, latest in c-j's line of starter power-amps. It's a line that started with the MV50, developed through the 55 and now reaches this, its latest incarnation.

Outwardly, the most obvious change is the vertical extension

to the amplifier's front panel. Whilst this might seem merely aesthetic, it actually performs the dual purpose of helping fix the valve cover in place and making it look like it belongs there. As a result, it's one of the few valve amps that looks better with its grille in place than without. Incidentally, the grille's vertical fixings are now sprung, captive screws that make removing it to swap or bias the valves

simplicity itself. Under the hood you'll find the push-pull pairs of EL34s, each driven by a 12AX7A via a 6SN7 phase splitter. It's a classic configuration. The rear panel accepts single-ended inputs through a pair of phonos and offers a single pair of speaker binding posts for each channel. These strike the only inconvenient note as they'll accept nothing but spades. In practice this is more of an inconvenience to a reviewer than a long term owner, especially as excellent sounding spades (such as those from Cardas) ►



the amps to drive its pitiful efficiency and evil load, you can't even afford the electricity bill that goes with them!). Sorry to bring you down to earth with a bump guys and gals, but if you are into musical reward rather than simple purchasing pleasure then "sensible" wins every time.

In the carefully circumscribed world of hi-fi there are few things more sensible than an ultra-linear valve power-amp running a pair of EL34s for each channel. Even more sensible if you run it in class AB, which will yield 50 or so Watts of nice reliable valve power with the kind of midrange

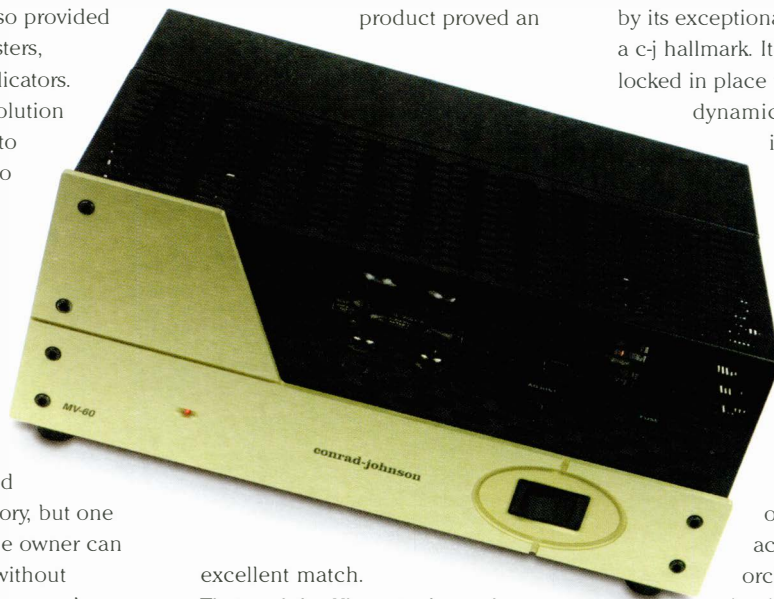
are readily available. You merely have to bear in mind that the purchase of an MV60 might well require the retermination of your speaker cables. Likewise, the amp arrives configured for 4 Ohm loads. It can be adjusted internally to match 8 or 16 Ohm speakers if necessary.

Unlike many of their competitors, conrad-johnson have opted for a fixed bias design, with the attendant benefits in low frequency performance. To avoid the need for a meter, probes and the like they've also provided a set of top plate adjusters, complete with LED indicators. It's a common sense solution that is simplicity itself to set and monitor. Add to that the fact that the EL34 is one of the few really dependable and readily available output valves still out there and it becomes apparent that c-j are intent on producing an amplifier that doesn't just sound good when it leaves the factory, but one whose performance the owner can continue to maintain without problems. Given the company's excellent reputation for the reliability of its products it's a situation that makes for long-term confidence. Add the 55 Watt rated output and the wide variety of speakers that it will accommodate and MV60 owners can look forward to a long and fruitful relationship with their new purchase.

Incidentally, there's an internal hardwired modification that allows you to reconfigure the output stage for triode operation. Normally I'm not a fan of switchable output stages, feeling that they should be optimised for one output topology or the other. However, c-j are adamant that the EL34 is the exception to this rule, so, if you only require 20 or so Watts then it might well be worth wielding the

soldering iron (assuming that you know what you're doing of course – personally I'd take it to your dealer). I didn't try the amp in this topology for the purposes of this review, although I'll admit to some curiosity. Perhaps a return fixture at some point in the future could be arranged, time and tide allowing.

Audiofreaks also supplied a Premier 18LS to accompany the MV60, and whilst it's not part of this review, the first solid-state Premier product proved an



excellent match.

That and the Klyne performed sterling duty in the pre-amp department, while speakers were either the Living Voice OBXs or the Audioplan Kontrast IIIs. Once I'd sorted out termination, cables were my normal Nordost Valhallas.

Now, whilst I'm not normally a fan of direct comparisons between products, the presence of Rogue Audio's 88 power amp, with its near identical specification and far cheaper price tag was simply too significant to ignore. But it was not without some trepidation that I hooked it up. I mean, what if the half the price Rogue cleaned the c-j's clocks? As it was, I needn't have worried, honours ending about even. The Rogue reinforced its status as a sonic

bargain, but the MV60's greater subtlety and sophistication were readily apparent, obvious in its richer tonal balance, wider tonal palette, deeper soundstage and greater overall coherence.

The sound of the conrad-johnson is rooted in that holistic stability. There is a convincing completeness to the picture it paints, built on a solid bass foundation. It's almost as if the amp has a lowered suspension, a slightly dropped centre of gravity, reinforced by its exceptional mid-bass energy, a c-j hallmark. It keeps the soundstage locked in place through large-scale dynamic swings, keeps

individual instruments and images intimate and believable.

Playing the Classic Records re-issue of the Sibelius *Violin Concerto* (LSC-2435),

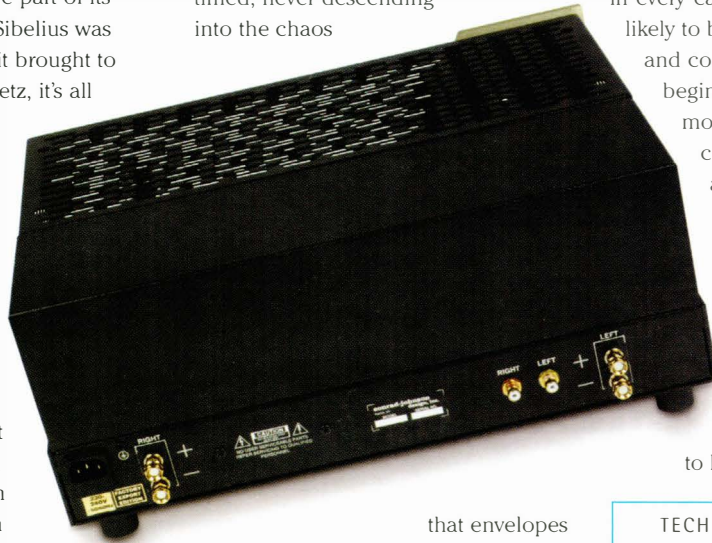
Heifetz's instrument is large, central and forward (just how he liked it) but it still occupies the same acoustic space as the orchestra. The stage is wide, deep and

has excellent height, but is also warm and enveloping, with none of the exaggerated space and focus that comes from pinching and constricting harmonic development. The bass and cello lines that underpin the opening are woody and resonant, swelling from a pre-defined space rather than simply appearing out of nowhere. Pizzicato bass notes are slightly softened as the amp's bass energy tails off at really low frequencies, but they are held in the right space and time.

At the other end of the spectrum there's a perfectly balanced sense of space and air to stop that bass foundation sounding earthbound or overly heavy. Again, there's not the limitless extension that comes from

▶ wide bandwidth solid-state amps driving ribbons, but it gets the slightly rounded upper registers that typify the sound of Living Stereos just right. Lest you consider that a happy coincidence of machine and material, it brought the same sense of correctness to the greater extension on SXL2000s and other, more modern recordings. But the really impressive part of its performance with the Sibelius was the drama and pathos it brought to proceedings. With Heifetz, it's all too easy for the technique to dominate the substance of the music, especially the ethereal quality of this most difficult work. It's as much a fault of the system as the playing or recording. Get the front to back balance wrong and suddenly the violin stands out like a tree in the middle of a field: Lose the micro-dynamic resolution and harmonic intricacy and the complex energy patterns produced by Heifetz' manipulation of bow angle and pressure are smoothed over and congealed into a schmaltzy cartoon. That ability to control the microscopic elements that build into the energy budget, and to do so across the complete depth of the soundstage is what makes the MV60 special: Not so much a lowered centre of gravity but a heightened sense of musical gravity. It recreates the tension and impact of the original performance not through trying to pump up the dynamics or manipulate the weight but by reproducing the original internal balance of instrumental forces. It's something that conrad-johnson have been working towards from day one, and in this respect the MV60 represents a major step forward at its price.

Apply the same performance attributes to more modern material and the results are just as impressive. Playing the Bugge Wesseltoft album *Moving* (Jazzland 013 534-1) the complex percussion patterns that fill the musical space around and behind the sparse piano line of the title track are perfectly placed and timed, never descending into the chaos



that envelopes less balanced amps. Enter the saxophone and everything drops away to silence with just the odd, sporadic beat to remind you of the rhythmic grid. As the track builds again the sense of order and rhythmic correctness holds the disparate (and I mean disparate) elements apart, allowing the piano to inject part phrases and note sprays that add to the whole rather than distracting the listener.

Vocals are just as impressive, whether it's the incomparable Ella singing the *Gershwin Songbooks* (from Speakers Corner) or Sarah Vaughn's range and power on *You're Mine You* (from Classic, and thank God someone's finally got around to the Roulette back catalogue – now let's have some Basie please). Once again, the MV60 resists the temptation to push the vocalist so far forward that they lose touch with their backing. It effortlessly switches gear between a ballad like

'Maria' and the straightahead jazz of 'Baubles, Bangles and Beads'.

Whilst the hi-fi aspects of the MV60's performance are all present, correct and tidily executed, look and you'll find a competitor with greater focus, more bass slam or more hi-fi brownie points, fancier parts and definitely, more modern technology. In every case the price you'll pay is likely to be overall musical balance and coherence. Like I said at the beginning, you don't get much more sensible than the baby conrad-johnson, just so long as it's music that you're interested in. Approach with confidence – stay for a while. This is an exceptional amplifier that also happens to be exceptionally sensible. It would be a big mistake to hold that against it. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Fixed bias, ultra-linear valve amplifier
Valve Complement:	2x 12AU7A, 2x 6SN7, 4x EL34
Input Sensitivity:	0.8 V
Input Impedance:	100 Ohms
Output Power:	55 Watts into 4 Ohms (30Hz – 15kHz)
Dimensions (WxDxH):	17.6 x 7 x 13.25
Weight:	20kg
Finish:	Champagne gold with black metalwork
Price:	£2895

UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks
Tel. (44) (0)208 948 4153
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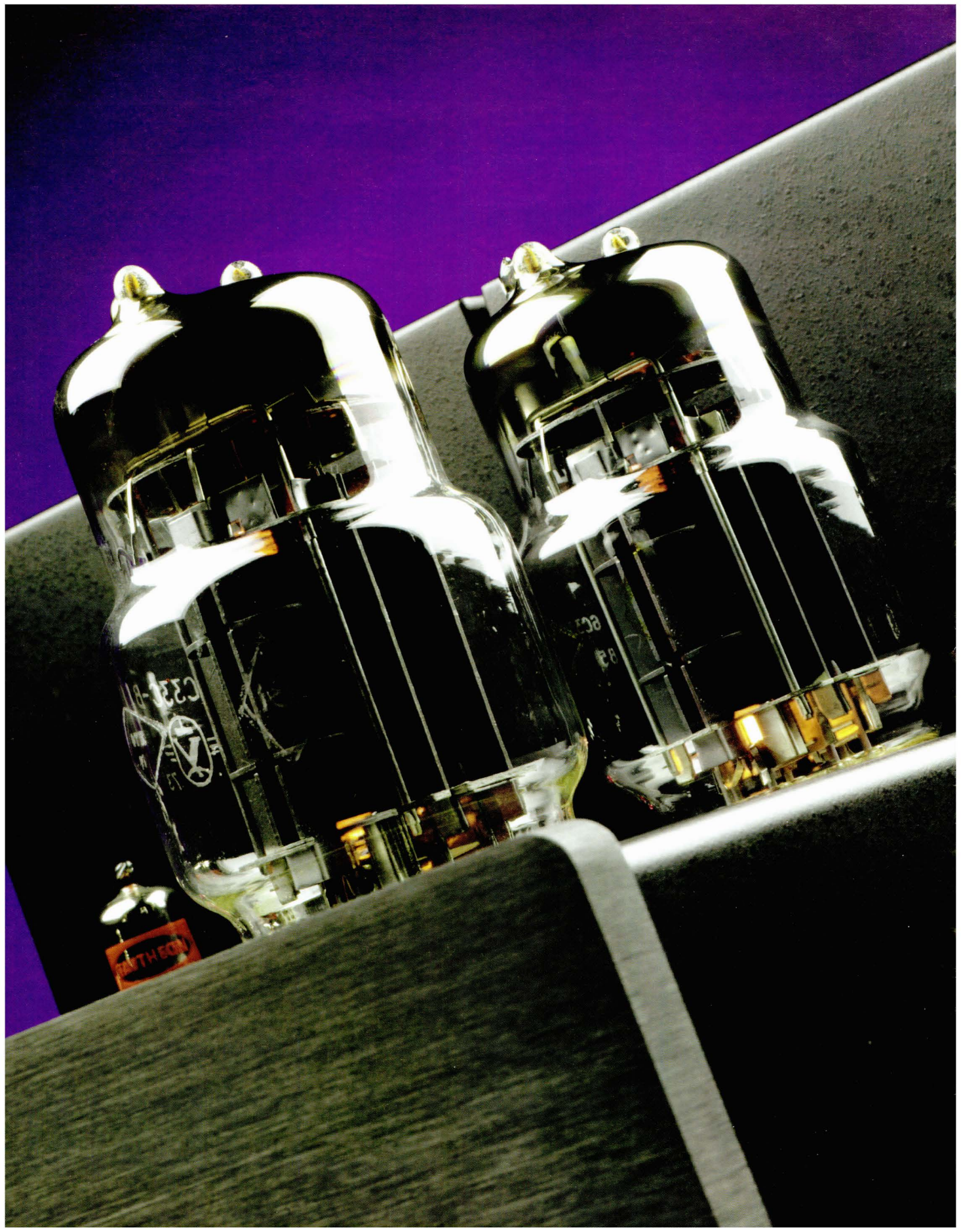
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The Lamm ML2 Monoblock

by Roy Gregory

How exactly would you react to the arrival of a pair of massively expensive monoblock amplifiers, preceded by their equally massive reputation? What if they turned out to be large, fairly heavy but otherwise visually austere to the point of drabness? No shiny knobs, jewel like casework, big shiny badges or even bigger shiny valves (although they can muster half a dozen pretty impressive nipples a side). In fact, with such a resolutely unimpressive exterior you'd be left with little choice but to actually listen to them, which is exactly what I did.

That's where the problems start, because this is, without reservation, one of the finest yet least overtly impressive amplifiers I have ever heard. So, what's the problem? I hear you ask. Ah, if only you knew. I think that many of you who read hi-fi magazines look longingly at the masthead, imagining the pleasure to be had reviewing an endless stream of expensive and exotic equipment. Unfortunately, reality is rather different: equipment that arrives late, doesn't work or disappoints, endless promises from manufacturers, seldom fulfilled. All of which pales into insignificance compared to the situation we have here: Those are mere practicalities, this is an intellectual challenge. Confronted with a product that genuinely extends our appreciation of what is possible, it

is the reviewer's task to explain why and how it does it.

Listening to the Lamm ML2s presents me with music in a more lucid and understandable way than ever before. But it is not an impressive sound in a hi-fi sense.



Instead it is astonishingly natural and unforced, simply clean, clear and transparent, consistent with the recording and nothing else. It is also surprisingly consistent with different speakers and source components, undisturbed by the load the amplifiers see, faithful to the signal they are fed. Whether driving the Living Voice OBX-Rs, the Reference 3A MM de Capos or the Audioplan Kontrast IIIs, the Lamms extended the speakers' capabilities, adding a clarity, directness and separation to their performance that was previously missing, but never more than with

the de Capos and their directly connected bass-mid drivers. It's an effect that I noted with the similarly configured Kharma Exquisite Reference speakers, driven with a poise and authority that should have been well beyond the modest power output of the ML2s, especially given that speaker's bandwidth and sub 90dB efficiency. Suddenly you can hear the sonic damage done by the crossover, the degree of pollution it introduces, pollution that passes unnoticed in so many systems, but which stands as obvious as a scarlet stain in the mountain stream like clarity of the Lamms' presentation.

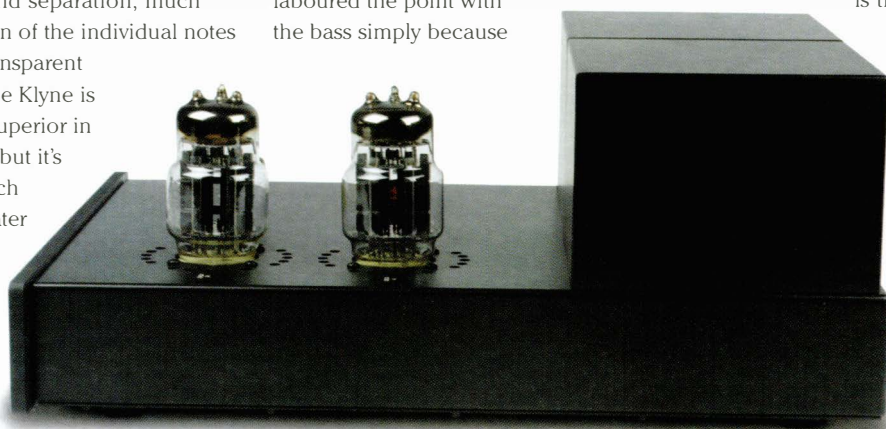
With any such transparent device, choice of pre-amp is critical. I was fortunate enough to have access to the Klyne Model 7, Lamm's own L2 Reference line-stage as well as the astonishing Connoisseur Definitions 4.0, while I had the ML2s at home. Each was equally distinctive, it's individual character equally apparent, but a unit of this quality will be an essential partner for the Lamm monoblocks. Interestingly, although the fruity, vivid colours and rounded substance of the Lamm L2 Reference couldn't match the spatial and leading edge definition of the Klyne, the extra weight (definitely not a Klyne deficiency) the own-brand pre-amplifier brought to the ML2s' sound was welcome and actually

► created a more musically coherent result. Even the mighty ML2 can use some help!

Playing 'Safeway Cart' (Neil Young *Sleeps With Angels* Reprise 9 45749-1) really brought home both the differences between the pre-amps and the real strengths of the ML2s. The Lamm L2 placed the vocals forward of the speaker plane, surrounding them with a solid and powerful backing that surges with the beat. It's at once organised and even, balanced and driven. The Klyne offers better detail and separation, much better definition of the individual notes and a more transparent soundstage. The Klyne is undoubtedly superior in the hi-fi sense, but it's the Lamm which makes the greater musical sense, coherently and evenly, from top to bottom. It's an interesting discovery

because what it shows is designer Vladimir Lamm's innate appreciation of musical balance. He's quite prepared to sacrifice hi-fi attributes in a product in order to achieve a more musically satisfying overall result. It makes the ML2s' stellar hi-fi performance all the more remarkable, for this is above all, a musically natural sounding amplifier. It presents the entire bandwidth, from deepest bass to as far up the treble range as it reaches, as a single continuous, coherent whole. There is no discernible discontinuity or change in the nature of the sound. Instead, the speed, resolution and propagation of musical energy is completely even regardless of frequency. A bass guitar string has its own natural vibrance and pellucid thrumm, with just as much attack and air as the strings of Narcisco Yepes' guitar in the Argenta Rodrigo.

It's this ability to accurately shape and deliver the energy profile of a note that sets the Lamm apart: That and the fact that it achieves the trick regardless of frequency, a particularly difficult feat for an amplifier that is driving a dynamic load. So the bass isn't just deep and powerful, fast with natural weight; it's tuneful and harmonically rich and vibrant. It's got life and detail, texture and shape. It's as far removed from "hi-fi" slam as it's possible to be. It sounds real. So does the mid-band, and so too does the upper register. I've laboured the point with the bass simply because



it's so unexpected. That's where you'll notice it first. But the fact is, the important fact that is, is that that same degree of insight and dynamic/harmonic resolution spreads right up the frequency band, in a single continuous sweep (and I just love that sentence).

Whether you ask it to play voice or bass, brass or woodwind, the Lamm rises effortlessly to the occasion. Its quality lies not just in the delivery of musical energy, but the manner of its delivery. Like all great hi-fi, you don't hear it working. That grace extends across the range. Whereas some amplifiers can deliver in specific bands, the JA30s' midrange being a classic case in point, the ML2 is completely consistent, ensuring that changes in space, texture and perspective imposed by the amplifier never distract the

listener from the music.

I haven't spent a lot of time discussing the Lamms' technology or topology. In fact, until now, apart from letting slip the fact that they aren't very powerful I haven't mentioned it at all. Or their price for that matter. That's partly because I didn't want technological ideology to obscure the musical value of these amps. I didn't want people making up their mind about them before I'd had a chance to describe exactly how wonderful their performance is. The other reason

is that when an amplifier, or in this case a pair of amplifiers, cost £26900 any relevance to cheaper devices which happen to employ the same output valve or general topology is, frankly, nil. I know that

price isn't a guarantee of quality, but in this case that quality does indeed come at a price.

So for the record, the ML2 is a single-ended triode amp based around a single 6C33C output tube per side. It delivers 18 Watts of Class A power into loads from 4 to 16 Ohms. But more than that, it goes for £13450 a go, and you need two of them. Don't think of this as a triode. Think of it as a really, really expensive amplifier. That'll actually tell you a whole lot more

It offers both single-ended and balanced connection and is, as I've already stated, plain in appearance to the point of utilitarian affectation. It's almost as if the designer has deliberately eschewed the normally impressive metal work that goes with amps at this price because he only ►

► wants people to buy them for the right reasons. Squatting darkly in their rack the Lamms almost seem to challenge you: "You'd better like the way I sound 'cos there's nothing much else to like!"

Why is it so expensive? Well, it uses an innovative circuit, built from extremely high-grade parts. That consists of a two stage driver (a 12AX7, connected in parallel, driving a 6N6Pi, a unique Russian tube) that delivers extremely high voltage gain. The plate voltage of the 6C33C output tube is regulated by a tube circuit consisting of a 6AK5, a 5651



and the other 6C33C. But much of the money goes on a unique and complex output transformer claimed to suffer no bandwidth or linearity limitations from around 16Hz to well over 40 kHz. I can't comment on that, or Lamm's claims regarding the extraordinary linearity of the design as a whole, other than to say that that is exactly how it sounds, a conclusion I'd reached long before I read his technical treatise on the subject.

Leaving all that aside, the ML2 presents the listener with a classic conundrum. Here is a low powered amplifier that will drive the whole audible spectrum with authority, speed and transparency. It will also drive awkward loads of the type that give most triodes, single-ended or not, a severe case of the heeby-jeebies accompanied by that sorry soggy

bottom sensation. At the end of the day, 18 Watts is still only 18 Watts so if you want serious levels then you'd better be looking for speakers the right side of 90dB, but that's not actually difficult these days. Having said that, if you've got the money for ML2s then the world's pretty much your oyster and there are various speaker models from Wilson, Avante Garde, JM Labs and others that will more than fit the bill.

Back in the real world, the Lamms performed flawlessly with everything I threw at them. They are the nearest thing to an invisible power-amp I've ever come, so natural is their overall

presentation. There are flaws (the most obvious being a lack of extreme top end extension that leaves the soundstage a little bit shut-in and lacking in air, the upper mid slightly dark and rich), but they are of a lower order than in any other amp I've used, and far less intrusive. And therein lies the rub. In the same way that the ML2s' exterior is studiously unimpressive, so too is their sound: at least if you expect it to knock your socks off hi-fi, or even worse, A/V style. Where these amps excel is in the sheer access they allow to music. In the same way that the Groove phono stage makes greater sense of the signal it's fed, making it easier for you to hear what the musicians are playing, the absolute evenness and lack of exaggeration in the Lamms' musical reproduction leaves everything exactly where it should be, relationships and relative dynamic levels intact, harmonics all present and correct.

The ML2s don't come with rose tinted spectacles, or any of the other triode baggage. In fact, they don't sound like the traditional model of

a triode at all. They aren't finicky in terms of matching, or fiddly in terms of use. Operationally speaking they are one of the best thought-out valve amps I've ever come across (they even have externally switchable international voltages). Then of course, there's the sound, which is peerless in my experience (and I've heard the amps in a whole variety of systems, situations and rooms): Triodes without the limitations, valves without the trouble. Throw out your prejudices and pre-conceptions; throw out your limited horizons too. The Lamms arrive with none of the stunted aspirations that afflict the majority of hi-fi. They also arrive with a way hefty price tag. They're worth every penny.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

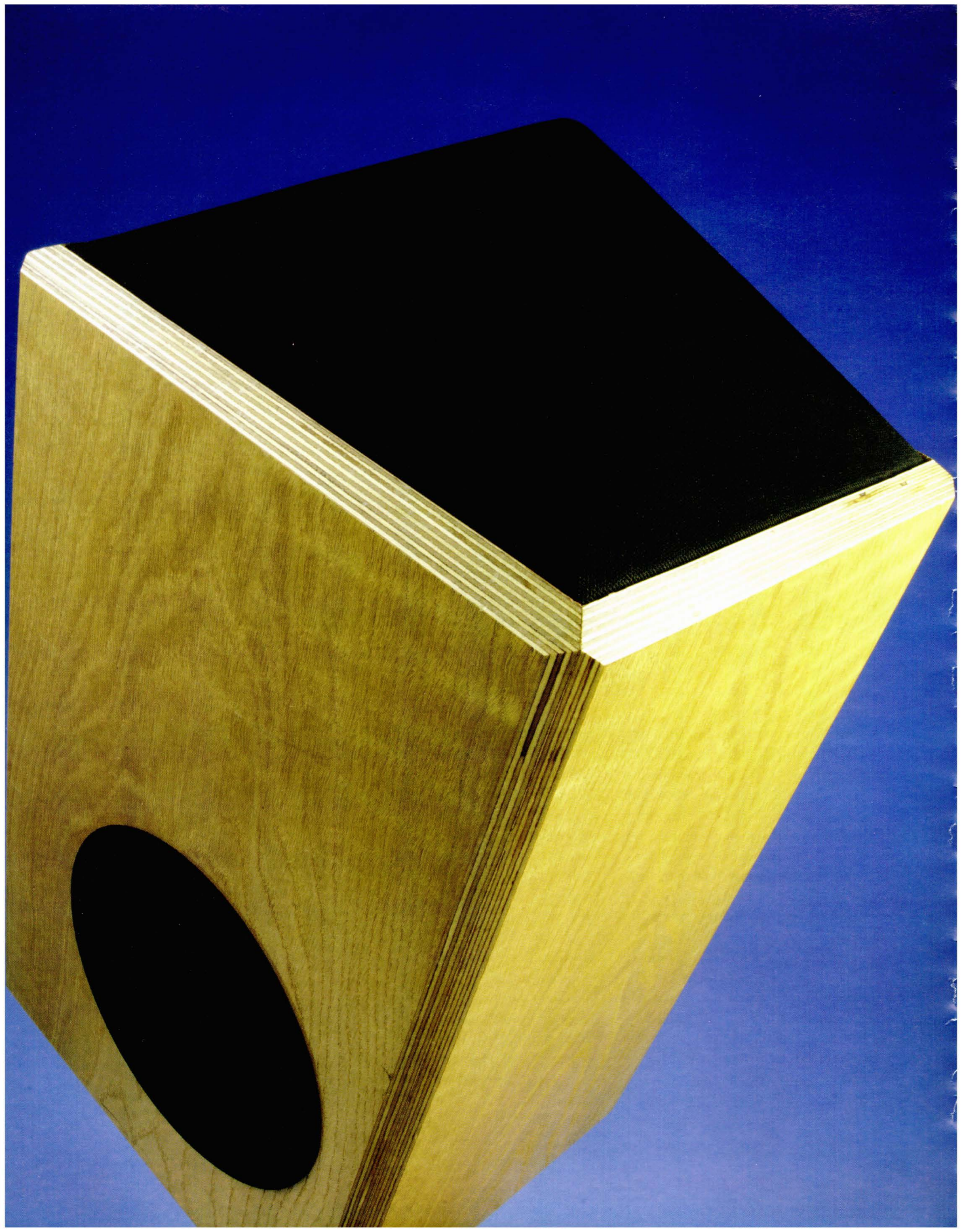
Type:	Single-ended, class A mono-block
Valve Complement:	1x 12AX7, 1x 6N6Pi, 1x 6AK5, 1x 5651, 2x 6C33C
Inputs:	1x Single-ended RCA 1x Balanced XLR
Input Sensitivity:	775 mV
Input Impedance:	41 kOhms
Power Output:	18 Watts, 4-16 Ohms
Damping Factor:	9.5 @ 16 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	404x210x440mm
Weight:	31 kg ea.
Finish:	Black, black and more black
Price:	£26900/pr

Distributor:

Integrated Engineering Solutions
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Manufacturer:

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Shahinian Obelisk Loudspeaker

by Jason Hector

There are many larger than life personalities in hi-fi design. In fact audio engineering seems to attract men with a vision, or heretics by any other name. Richard Shahinian, the owner creator of Shahinian Acoustics, is one such man. It is beyond the scope of this review to delve deeply into Shahinian's beliefs when it comes to speaker design. These will be explored in this magazine in considerable detail in a forthcoming interview with Dick himself. Suffice it to say he does not believe in the common direct radiating loudspeaker concept, claiming it does not adequately represent the soundfield of real instruments and so is inherently flawed. Shahinian is convinced that speakers should radiate sound in all directions to more realistically portray instruments. I am not qualified to pass technical comment on these views, but what I can say with absolute certainty is that Shahinian speakers are capable of an effortless and organic musical reproduction, which fills any listening space with a very real sense of scale and performance. The characteristic sound of a pair of Shahinians, and believe me when I say that the whole range from the little Super Elf to the majestic Diapason share a family sound, majors on portraying integrated musical performances in a low distortion and above all natural manner. The whole range is available in the UK through John Burns of Pear Audio.



I have been a fan of Shahinians for quite a few years now since I first heard Arcs at my dealer's. I was busy chatting away at the back of the demonstration room when the music started. Within two minutes the Arcs had completely captivated me. On closer listen they seemed a tad laid-back (bear in mind I was using Linn Kans at this time) and seemed lacking in some detail, but this concern quickly disappeared as I got used to their unusually natural presentation. After a few minutes I realised that I would have to have a pair because of their ability to communicate music like no other speakers I had heard. What was truly

surprising about this reaction was that the system was CD fronted and being a bit of a vinyl head I have always failed to see the attraction of the silver disc and to be honest I used to struggle to listen to music from CD. I feel that most speakers try to pull CD apart, but Shahinians manage to emphasise the different aspects of the medium resulting in a persuasive and enjoyable whole.

After I had bought a pair of Shahinian Arcs and felt happy with them I made a common hi-fi mistake, I listened to something that I couldn't afford but from then on felt a need to have. The product in question was the Shahinian Obelisks, the next speaker model up from the Arcs. Now that I have been able to put the pennies together (I would not have allowed them into my house until I could afford a pair!) it is the Obelisk that is the subject of this review. However I've actually only gone and done it again with the Obelisks big brothers the Hawks (will it never end? Will I ever learn?). Therapy, namely a firm hand from my wife, is keeping this particular lust under control - along with the risk of bankruptcy.

The Obelisk was the first speaker designed and built by Shahinian and it appeared in 1977, giving it the sort of product lifetime normally reserved for a Salisbury amplifier or a certain Scottish turntable to name but two. In a similar vein, and perhaps even ►

► more than these other designs, the Obelisk has been continuously improved over the years, to the extent that today's Obelisk could simply not have been built in 1977. The Obelisk has always been a pseudo-omni or poly-directional loudspeaker of compact dimensions, to use Shahinians own description, that is ideally suited to modern living spaces. Well, my front room anyway. The speaker cabinet is constructed from 19mm thick ply made from 13 sheets of Finland birch. All four of the major surfaces are finished in a variety of available veneers. The corners are shaved off to expose the ply structure and that alone certainly gives the speaker an interesting and distinctive look. But add in the rest of the design and we are clear of the prevailing orthodoxy of loudspeaker design.

A true three-way design, the Obelisk bass frequencies are courtesy of a front mounted eight-inch polypropylene drive unit which is mounted off centre, I guess to avoid baffle standing waves, although the speakers are not supplied as a mirror pair. The bass driver is loaded by a folded transmission line that terminates in a rear mounted passive radiator. This rather complex arrangement allows the use of a low Q drive unit and a high Q radiator to generate a fast and tight loudspeaker that is surprisingly still capable of sounding rich, powerful and both tonally and harmonically correct. I say surprisingly since many loudspeakers that sound fast and

damped in the bass also sound lean and incapable of generating the palpable pulse of sound that many bass instruments produce when live. Either that or the bass is under-damped and left to wallow completely at will, with the end result in the worst case that the listener seems to be presented with two tunes when one is intended.

The Obelisk allows you to have your cake and eat it. This is ably demonstrated with the perennial *Sheffield Steel* by Joe Cocker, an extremely dynamic recording, especially the drums on tracks like Ruby Lee. You immediately appreciate the speed of the Obelisk bass, its

extension but also the ability to experience the power and harmonic content of a whole drum response truly involving you in the rhythm of this track. These speakers thrive on material like this. The interaction between musicians is well presented and the whole is integrated very persuasively; you can't help but be swept along with the musical message.

Setting a Shahinian tradition for the company's larger speakers, the Obelisk takes a multiple drive unit approach. Rather than the single midrange and treble unit firing toward the listener found in typical three ways, the Obelisk has two

38mm Titanium dome midranges, and four Titanium/polyamide dome "supertweeters". These six drivers are mounted on the faces of a pyramidal structure with a midrange and treble unit firing fore and aft and the other two tweeters firing into and out of the plane made by the loudspeakers. This arrangement achieves the poly-radial radiation pattern preferred by Shahinian and is taken to its extreme in the Diapason loudspeaker with its 14 (yep 14!) mid and high frequency drive units per channel plus two driven bass and two passive units of course. The pyramid of mid and high frequency drivers is atop the ply cabinet and all the active drive units are covered by protective "grilles" which should be left on during use. The end result is a speaker that looks not dissimilar to a shortened version of the London office block Canary Wharf, although fortunately the entry price is significantly lower. The crossovers in this speaker are yet another unusual design as they do not



include Zobel networks or resistors and are tuned by ear. This is a strategy that can lead to problems as it makes it that much more difficult to match the drive units in the speaker to give an even response, especially when you up the ante by including so many. So the Obelisks even, in room tonal balance (measured, simply, ►

► at the listening position with an RS audio power meter and test tone sweeps from a sinusoidal signal generator and of course by ear) is a great result.

Sharing power across all of these drive units must also help to explain why the Obelisk is unburstable, and try as I might, since I first heard these speakers I have yet to hear them harden at high volumes. This is particularly obvious with a large choral work like the Mozart *Requiem Mass*. We are presented with a beguiling all enveloping sound field that the listener has no difficulty falling into, and a fascinating rendition of the scale of the acoustic space which is simply missing in most systems. On this sort of program liberal application of the volume control causes many speakers to start to screech as control of the tweeter becomes a thing of the past. Not with the Obelisk. They are always in control and I am certain that they will keep going long after you or the amplifier have waved the white flag. These speakers do not require behemoth amplifiers to perform in most situations, but they do appreciate current capability because of their pretty peaky (it's actually the high frequency impedance troughs that have tended to upset some amplifiers in the past) impedance curve. I would certainly expect some valve amps to struggle. The Lavardin IS Reference could not quite cope, even at moderate levels, while regular readers will know I have used the beefy Rotel integrated to drive these speakers during my review time with it to good effect. But they really appreciate the drive of a Naim NAP250 as a minimum (a pair of 135's are preferred) or my current favourite devices, the Dynavector HX75 or HX1.2 power amplifiers.

Now take Mahlers *5th Symphony* and the second part, the *Scherzo*. A constantly changing piece of music where we find the orchestra following several instrumental themes. With the Obelisk each is easy to follow with the various instruments presented with timbral accuracy, the brass rasps powerfully, the strike of timpani washes over you and around the massed strings in the foreground.



But the whole is allowed to be greater than the sum of these parts as intended by Mahler. Here we also find the one area where the Obelisk will not be appreciated by all: that is the lack of pinpoint, tightly focused Wilson-esque stereo image. The Obelisk (and other Shahinians) present a wide sound-field, that is more than capable of filling very large spaces and which does extend into three dimensions but the image

is more diffuse than with some direct radiating speakers. To me this is a non-issue for several reasons: firstly stereo imaging is of secondary importance to the musical performance and message, and secondly the Shahinian style of imaging seems more genuine and less forced and contrived anyway. As a consequence of their radiation pattern there is also a huge sweet spot (more like a sweet acre) allowing more enjoyment for off axis listeners and making a pair or more of these speakers excellent for home cinema use. What these speakers do extremely well is portraying a realistic sense of scale, a difficult concept to explain. Take the comparison between a solo singer and a full choir (back to the Mozart *Requiem*). With some systems the soloist seems to grow to fill the same aural space as the full choir and seem overblown, not with the Obelisk. When the full choir takes up the lead the power and their physical size is accurately portrayed without losing any of the subtlety of the single exposed soloist.

Electrical connection is to multiway binding posts which are mounted under the speakers. A tidy solution but make sure your plugs are a good fit to avoid them dropping out. Shahinian supply pairs of moulded banana plugs with their speakers that provide a good fit and do not allow the amplifier outputs to be shorted but be warned if you use your own plugs. Spade connectors and a spanner are a safer solution. The bottom connection plate also contains a fuse holder and at the end of describing the construction and design of this speaker we come to the final anachronism, the supports that keep each speaker off the

► floor. Surprisingly for a speaker with this high level of performance (and price) each Obelisk is mounted on four plastic castors. Well Shahinians are nothing if not consistently different! Some of you reading this may now have trouble taking these speakers seriously but let me reassure you that if anything sounded better it would be used. I should know after the fruitless experimentation I undertook to try to bypass the anonymous and rounded plastic feet of the Shahinian Arcs; big sharp spikes = good speaker, right? Wrong. Theoretically the castors do allow you to store the speaker against the wall and bring them out for listening, although I would not recommend this as the speakers do seem to sound best when left in-situ, despite the fact that they are remarkably unfussy when it comes to actual placement. They do require at least 12" of free space behind them and prefer space to their sides. I found best results with them a little further apart than I was away from them. This relaxed behaviour with respect to room position is a characteristic of the Shahinian range and stems again from the sound radiation pattern.

One word of warning, these speakers have the longest and most tortuous run in of any loudspeaker I and anybody else who has experienced them have ever heard. Straight out of the box they sound rough, with little and badly defined bass. After a few hours they seem to have settled and sound pretty good, great you think, that was painless then over the next month you enter a frustrating roller coaster period where they seem to improve then go backwards. I ran them in during my day at work by leaving the TV playing through them and this helped speed the process but I never could predict what I would find on returning home. At times the treble and midrange sound muffled, at others the bass had no connection to the

rest of the music. The bassist wasn't just playing with poor timing, he seemed to be in a different band and playing another song! After a fortnight I seriously considered returning them to John Burns thinking there was a fault. "Bear with them" I was told. Great advice when I had just looked a right idiot in front of a work colleague (they sound like that and you paid how much!?) who wanted to hear them! Fortunately John's experience proved correct and they gradually achieved their consistent high performance. All I can advise is to persevere and make sure the demonstration pair you hear are fully run in. Because once they are settled in, your biggest worry is how to get enough sleep as frequent early morning listening sessions will become unavoidable.

The Obelisk is not just about playing large massively dynamic music Witness the beauty and emotion in a vocal performance like Rickie Lee Jones' - *Its like this* (a great album that you all should own) on the Obelisk and you will be entranced. Or take the portrayal of the tension in the spaghetti-Western like tracks on Calexicos *The Black Light*, acapella brass beautifully rendered with the rasp of trumpet fully intact and correctly grating at times. Excellent and most impressive is the ability to communicate these rhythmic and seemingly simple tracks with an enthusiasm that is infectious, reveling in the complex interplay of the band members. When presented with such a complete musical ability it seems somewhat churlish to dissect the sound by frequency, so I won't dwell on this. I've already mentioned the bass which is very impressive for the cabinet dimensions, the mid range and treble are both extremely clear and free from distortion, in fact the Obelisk is almost panel like in this respect. When you are used to listening to a pair of Shahinians

other speakers sound broken and disjointed when you listen to them. They lack the complete integration of musical strands and natural exuberance of these speakers. Indeed it takes me a fair time to readjust to a directly radiating speaker. All of which lends an inescapable credence to Shahinians views; it may not be the only way to design speakers but it surely is an effective one.

I'll leave it for Dick Shahinian to sum up the Obelisk in his own oh so correct words and style "For its size and price, its actual response is nothing short of remarkable ... It recreates space . . . and possesses a sense of scale. It is still unique; it makes music!"



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

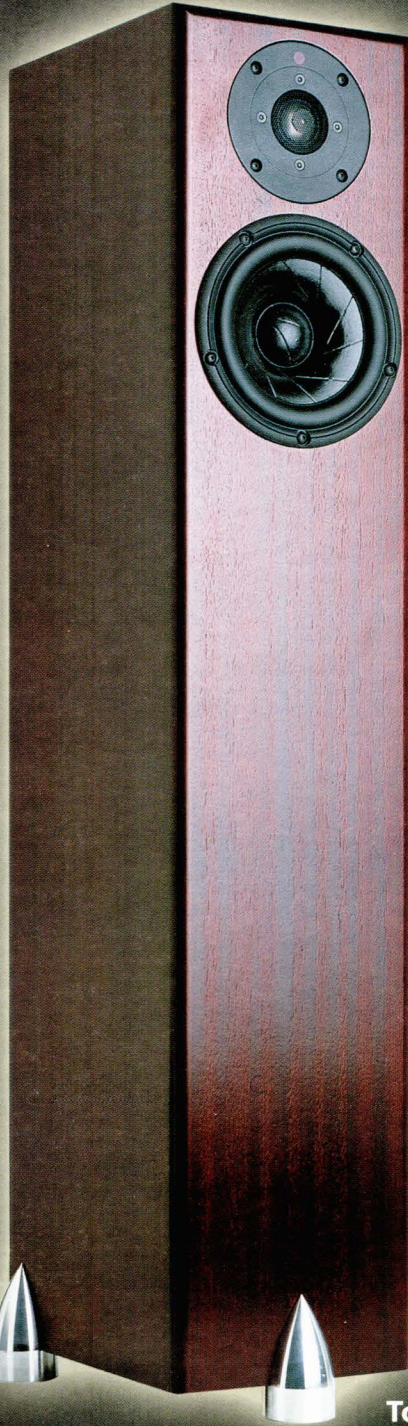
Type:	Pseudo omni-directional
Power handling:	200W max
Bandwidth:	28-18,000 Hz. -3dB
Nominal Impedance:	6 ohms.
Sensitivity:	89 dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	15" x 30" x 13"
Finish:	Oak, Walnut, Cherry, or Rosewood
Weight:	50 lbs
Cost:	£3595

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Analog Sound Lab
AQ-1000

ANALOG SOUND LAB
634

100

VR4

Antique Sound Labs AQ-1009DT Monoblocks

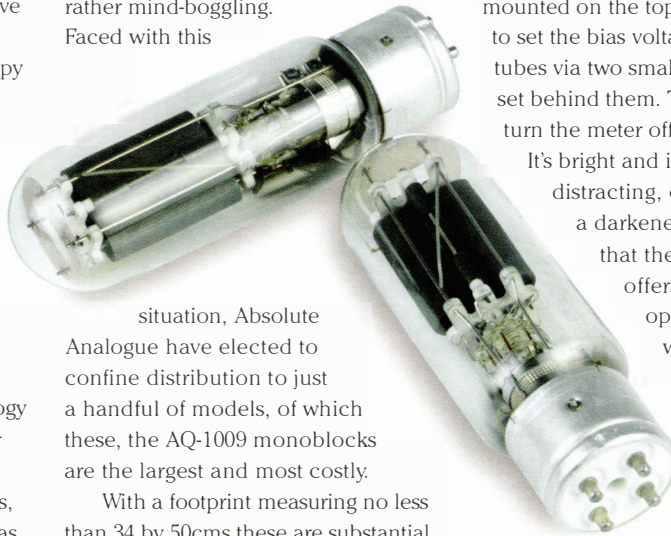
by Roy Gregory

China is the great white hope of the hi-fi industry. Every company you talk to wants to export product to the country, or have its own products built there. Given the market potential and the price of labour there's an obvious appeal to the idea, but it does rather cast the Chinese themselves as passive partners in the arrangement, a role I suspect they'll be reluctant to occupy for long. If the Red Rose solid-state amplification can be built there and sold credibly in the West for several thousand pounds a time, how long will it be before Chinese factories start to spread their wings? The answer is that they've already started, and where better than with valves.

In exactly the same way that the Soviet bloc employed valve technology in all kinds of applications long after the technologically more 'advanced' West had abandoned it for transistors, so too did the Peoples Republic. It has created a legacy of vacuum tube factories and engineers familiar with the use of valves. High quality audio circuits might not have been part of their previous brief, but these guys are quick learners. After all, we're not talking cutting edge technology here. Rather it's a case of audio archaeology and rediscovering and reapplying the practices of the past. And let's face it, they've got more, and more recent, experience in the field than we have.

Enter then Antique Sound Labs, manufacturers of an astonishing range and variety of valve amplifiers, built in China and marketed through

Divergent Technologies in Canada. And when I say astonishing I mean it. Just check out their web-site if you want confirmation. Add to that the fact that they also produce specific versions for different markets and the sheer range of product becomes rather mind-boggling. Faced with this



situation, Absolute Analogue have elected to confine distribution to just a handful of models, of which these, the AQ-1009 monoblocks are the largest and most costly.

With a footprint measuring no less than 34 by 50cms these are substantial units. Don't let the photos fool you. There might only be two output valves a side, but these are 845 triodes, fully seven inches from base to apex and over two inches in diameter. Add to that a spine crunching weight of 29kg for each monoblock, largely concentrated in the five transformers per chassis and you can see that we are talking some seriously heavy engineering here.

The circuit is scarcely less impressive. 12AU7s are used for input and phase splitting duties; EL34s drive the push-pull 845s via a coupling transformer. There are separate transformers for the LT and HT

supplies, as well as a choke filter circuit similar to the stand alone units manufactured by Border Patrol and reviewed so favourably in Issue 15. The circuit is hardwired apart from a couple of small sub circuits mounted on PCBs, while a large LED meter mounted on the top plate allows you to set the bias voltage for the output tubes via two small rotary controls set behind them. Thankfully you can turn the meter off when listening.

It's bright and its flickering gets distracting, especially in a darkened room! Given that the manufacturer offers an analogue option, I'd seize it with both hands.

General construction is tidy rather than particularly impressive, suffering for

instance in comparison to the stylistically similar Jadis JA30s. The top mounted pots are less than tidy although I understand that this is an early sample from which to gauge options, and that these details should be sorted out for the production units. The instructions could also do with a bit of work. The back panel sports a single phono input socket and individual output binding posts for four, eight and 15 Ohm loads. The production amps will also come with a valve cage, a necessary precaution given the surface area of the 845 and its operating temperature. Approach ►

▶ with caution. Even the cats took one look and scuttled for cover!

Hook-up is fairly straightforward once you've twigged that the 845s are a push and twist fit. The binding posts will accept plenty of wiring options, while switch on and biasing proved uneventful. In fact, the biggest problem facing you is going to be accommodating the beasts. Fortunately the similarly sized Lamm ML2s arrived with a suitable Base rack that was pressed into service. Without something similar you'll be facing significant erosion of your floorspace.

Although these are triodes, they are sodding great big ones. The push-pull 845s deliver around 60 Watts into an eight Ohm load which significantly broadens your options when it comes to matching speakers. I ran the AQ-1009s with everything from the Monitor Audio Gold 60s through to the Living Voice OBX-Rs, options that embrace 89 to 94dB efficiencies, without experiencing any problems (although none of the speakers I tried presents a really awkward loud). But the bulk of my listening was with the astonishing little Reference 3A MM de Capo speakers, also distributed by Divergent Technologies and imported by Absolute Analogue.

Sonically, the Antique Sound Labs amps sound rather like they look: big, solid and slightly rounded. Given the well documented deficiencies of so many triodes (exacerbated if they're used single-ended) when it comes to bottom end timing and rhythmic integrity, one of the first albums I reached for was The Cure's *Seventeen Seconds* (Fiction FIX 004). Rather than the soft, vague and plodding drum

sound I feared and half expected I was greeted by a huge soundstage with a taut, insistent drum kit driving along 'Play For Today'. Okay, so it lacked a little definition around the edges but the centres were there, solid and in exactly the right place. The AQ-1009DTs even picked up the odd hesitation and slur in Lol Tolhurst's less than metronomic snare work.



Simon Gallup's bass was similarly impressive, particularly in the descending arpeggios that characterise 'Secrets'. Once again the pitch, spacing and placement of the individual notes was surefooted, the complete lines easy to follow. However, the notes themselves lacked texture and once again, leading edge definition, almost as if you were hearing the core or centre of each note rather than its constituent elements, the pluck, release and decay. It's a recipe that provides enormous drive and momentum to music, even if it misses the finer bottom end nuances.

The rest of the song's structure sat happily on these solid foundations, the sparse melodies and careful layering helped by the sheer presence and solidity of the amp's sound. There is an almost physical quality to the music, a palpable density that fills the space between, around and behind the

speakers. At the same time it's a sound that lacks a degree of immediacy. The soundstage is definitely set back, rather than including the listener. It also lacks the clarity, transparency and sheer lucidity that comes from an amp like the Lamm ML-2. Playing The Cure this was less of a problem than it might have been. It's music that thrives on the sheer propulsive weight of an amp like the AQ-1009. Its rhythms throb

and pulse with a driven sense of order, the edgy guitar and vocals floating on the supportive groundswell. The question of course was how the big triodes would cope with something more intricate and complex. For a combination

of intricate acoustic instruments and powerful dynamic shifts you'll do well to better *Tea For The Tillerman* (Island 842 352-1). Sure enough, the transparency and complexity of the recording exposed the AQ-1009s' lack of mid-band clarity and micro-dynamic discrimination. The end result, and again in comparison to the Lamms and the JA30s, sounded slightly muddled and congested, unable to respond to the sudden dynamic shifts demanded by the sheer power in the acoustic playing. Whereas the smaller amps sorted out the interlocking guitar lines effortlessly, and when the music told them to jump they simply asked how high, the Antique Sound Labs mono-blocks were left sounding ponderous and confused.

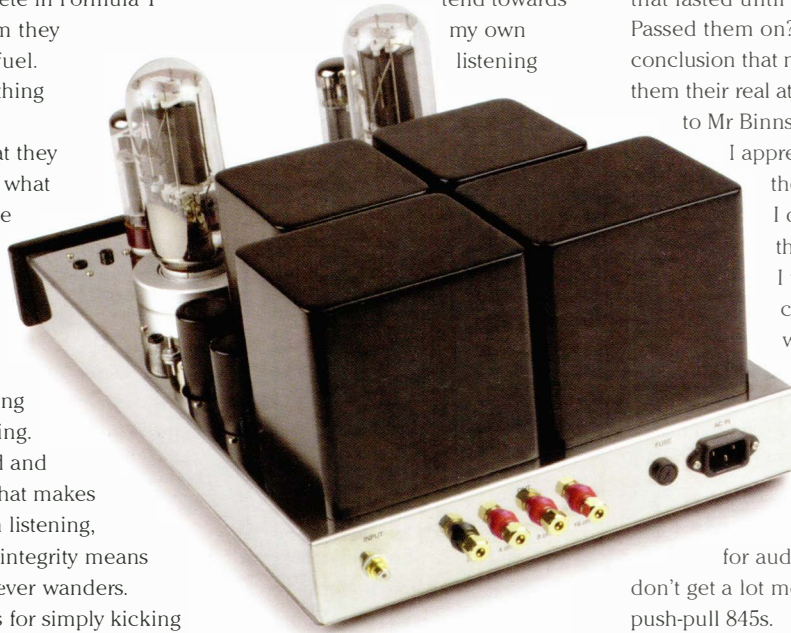
But don't go jumping to conclusions. The sound was still impressively present and solid, with tremendous tonal colour and that underlying sense of limitless power. The AQ-1009s might not match the Lamms and Jadis when it comes to the more intricate aspects of midrange resolution but those amps are pretty much the vacuum tube world champs when it comes to this ▶

▶ aspect of musical reproduction. The Jadis also come with severe limitations when it comes to matching speakers, the Lamms with a seriously prohibitive price tag. And just to really cap it all, those particular aspects of performance are what this reviewer looks for above all else. It's a bit like asking Antique Sound Labs to compete in Formula 1 and then telling them they can only use diesel fuel. It puts them at something of a disadvantage.

So, we know what they don't do. How about what they do do? Well, take their combination of colour, momentum and sheer presence and you have a sound that is tremendously engaging and musically satisfying. They have a rounded and rather kind top-end that makes for relaxed long term listening, while their rhythmic integrity means that your attention never wanders. These are great amps for simply kicking

back and enjoying music. Forget about hi-fi and the performance demands that go with it, just enjoy what's on offer. Okay, so I demand a greater level of overall musical insight than these amps want to provide. Even with my assembled range of matching equipment options (which naturally

tend towards my own listening



biases) they never once failed to entertain. Whether it was their effortless sense of substance, scale and power, the purpose they instilled in music, or their natural, unforced tonality, I ended up listening to a lot of music on these amps before I passed them onto CB, including a parting shot that lasted until two in the morning. Passed them on? Well, I came to the conclusion that much as I was enjoying them their real attributes would appeal to Mr Binns rather more directly.

I appreciated and enjoyed the amps (a lot) but I didn't want to damn them with faint praise: I wanted to see if they could do even better with a listener who is not averse to decent levels and uses seriously powerful amps as a matter of course. Besides, CB has a penchant

for audio excess, and you don't get a lot more excessive than push-pull 845s.

Second Thoughts

by Chris Binn

'So I only get to listen to them after you've reviewed them?'

Do not be deceived, readers – it seems that I am not the only one into the odd bit of audio overkill. Mr Gregory kept very quiet about the Antique Sound Lab amplifiers until he'd had a good go with them, and reluctantly conceded that a second opinion was in order. But then again, he knows that mention of the triode word does not automatically get my

juices flowing, as I don't have the most comfortable relationship with this form of amplification. To put it bluntly, by and large triodes just don't do what I want an amp to do. But is that because they don't usually have the necessary grunt for my purposes, or is it a generic function of the device itself? It would seem that the Antique Sound Labs AQ 1009-DT would provide an interesting opportunity to find out.

While vacuum tube aficionados

argue the merits of different types of output valve, the 845 power triode must reign as one of the biggest devices commonly used for audio amplification. Originally designed in the late 1920's for use in radio transmitter equipment, it is in fact something of a baby as far as this type of device goes, but has seen a resurgence in audio in the last fifteen years or so. Visually, it is never less than impressive. It is large, and ▶

▶ due to the heating filament being the cathode (i.e. directly heated) produces a healthy amount of light when in use, together with prodigious amounts of heat – that’s where half of your power supply energy goes.

I had always said that if I was going to get into triodes, the 845 would be the one for me – mainly because a pair of them could produce a reasonable amount of power and simultaneously impress your friends. But my own experiments were cut short by learning the hard way the difference between the 450 volts required for an average pentode and the 1000 volts necessary to operate an 845. The former would involve a considerable amount of cursing and bad language while the latter threw me across the workshop and necessitated dialling 999 for an ambulance.

So I had more than an academic interest in trying out the AQ 1009 amps. With 60 Watts of class A triode, here was an example of the genre that should not bottle out of driving less than super efficient loudspeakers, and I was interested to find out if they would demonstrate the attributes for which triodes are renowned. And more to the point, whether the more generous power output available would avoid some of the negative aspects I associate with the breed.

As RG has already described, the Antique sound labs present a visually awesome spread of hardware, in one hell of a big lump. While 60 Watts is a generous output by triode standards, as testimony to their inefficiency compare the size and weight with an equivalent solid state amp, say a Naim NAP 150. But then that never was the point with valves, and triodes in particular. Whilst the overall finish was not as good as one would expect with a product of this price, I gather this is being attended to with future production units, and it is a hell of a lot of amp for anybody’s money.

One of the problems in using


a valve such as the 845 is that it requires a considerable amount of signal power at its input to drive it successfully. In the case of the AQ1009 the driver stage comprises a couple of EL34s coupled through a transformer to the output stage – in itself amounting to an amplifier of not inconsiderable power capability; indeed many commercial designs revolve around a pair of these to produce sixty Watts or so. From a purist point of view, one could argue that bolting on a pair of triodes to a pentode amplifier is somewhat pointless and tantamount to poisoning the water, compromising the legendary purity of triodes.

Any such misgivings I might have had regarding the AQ 1009s were soon dismissed when I started listening to them. Somewhat unceremoniously plonked into my system, within a couple of minutes they seemed to be on song and delivering music with tremendous enthusiasm. With my Primary Monitors connected to the 4 Ohm tap there was no shortage of drive into this awkward load, and immediately these amplifiers gave an impression of just wanting to get on with the job. I think that this was the fundamental characteristic that showed through whatever kind of material I played - these amplifiers sounded like they were having a really good time, and almost encouraged you to do the same.

Such is their performance that they manage to effectively conceal their sonic character by engaging you with the music, and it was only after some considerable time that I was able to pin down the more ‘hi-fi’ aspects of their performance. Sound staging was good and stable, particularly from left to right, although not as deep as I had hoped for. Individual placement of instruments was not in the ‘holographic’ league, tending toward a vague slightly ethereal presentation, but believable none the less. Bass performance had plenty of weight and depth, and although lacking in tautness and definition, timing was good allowing

proper integration with everything else and underpinning rhythmic music effectively.

Mid-range was almost liquid in the way that it flowed from the speakers, rich and full bodied, glossing over detail in favour of a warm, engaging and emotional quality. Treble performance again traded some fine detail for smoothness, but was not reticent or rolled off, although it had just a trace of artificial silkiness to it that could make you forget that a violin produces sound from the junction of horse hair and cat gut.

At the risk of offending with an often used cliché, the ASLs entertain you with music rather than hi-fi, and proved thoroughly enjoyable to use. Going some considerable way to appeasing my prejudices against triodes, they demonstrate enough of the plus points with their musically cohesive delivery, yet behave themselves admirably with less than kind loudspeakers. All round a thoroughly enjoyable product. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Push-pull direct heated triode
Power output:	60 Watts
Frequency response:	20 Hz – 25 KHz
Distortion at full power:	<3%
Input impedance:	100 K Ohms
Input sensitivity:	1 Volt
Power consumption:	400 Watts
Dimensions:	315x530x210 w x d x h
Weight:	29 Kg
Finish:	Black and chrome
Price:	£5000/pr

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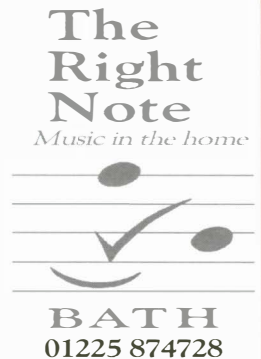
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Avid Volvere turntable

by Jimmy Hughes

It's more than a year now since I reviewed Avid's Acutus turntable in these pages. And a mightily impressive reference-standard it turned out to be, redefining the capabilities of my vinyl records. But oh the cost! At a cool £5000 for the turntable alone, it's beyond reach for most of us. So I was intrigued when Avid designer Conrad Mas hinted that a cheaper model was in the pipeline. If Avid could offer a taste of the Acutus at a more affordable price, there'd clearly be a lot of interest...

Enter the Volvere, priced at £2000 plus arm and cartridge. It certainly offers more than a taste of the Acutus. And while the cheaper turntable does inevitably fall short in certain key areas, its overall performance is exceptionally fine. Indeed, without a direct A/B comparison, there could be times when you'd be hard pressed to tell the difference.

The Volvere might not be the ultimate turntable on the planet, but it needs no excuses making for it. None at all.

My review Volvere was supplied with an Avid badged Rega RB-300 tonearm fitted with an Ortofon Kontrapunkt moving coil cartridge - the total package coming in at well under £3000. Agreed, it's still a lot of money, especially in these days of £99 DVD players and free mobile phones. But your cash buys plenty of good solid engineering - the Volvere looks and feels the class act it is. And, anyway,

good turntables never were cheap...

The massive ribbed sub-chassis is exceptionally rigid, with cut-outs ready to take a variety of tonearms, including SME, Rega, and Linn. Which means the Volvere can be used with most arms on the market with no need for separate arm boards or drilling - useful if you're thinking of changing arms at some future date. For Rega arm users there's a special plate that screws into the base of the arm, allowing cartridge vta to be adjusted.



The sprung sub-chassis is centred by three rubber O rings, keeping the whole platter/arm assembly stable in relation to the drive motor while allowing up and down movement. This ensures excellent isolation, while taking away the tendency for the whole assembly to move in a lateral direction when excited. The system itself is very simple but effective. 33 and 45rpm speeds are available at the touch of a button, and the platter is fitted with a thick rubber ring to damp resonance.

Conrad himself installed the Volvere for me, and overall it seems

pretty easy to set up. Once installed, it shouldn't need much (if any) adjustment. It's designed to be non-tweaky. But what of the sound? First impressions aren't always reliable, but the thing that immediately stood out with the Volvere combination was its exceptional rock-like stability; the music sounded solid and focussed.

It sounded like the stylus was in total contact with the groove wall at all times, and thus able to follow each undulation with precision and ease. I was very impressed by the Ortofon Kontrapunkt's tracking ability - it really handled difficult loud sections with aplomb, making light of passages that can easily cause other good pickups to splutter and breakup. Only the most 'impossible' discs will tax this cartridge.

The sound was extremely clean and refined, lending a smooth effortless quality to the reproduction. At the same time, dynamics were wide and the music sounded powerful and solidly focussed. These days when I play LPs, I don't want to be reminded about the tortuous mechanics of a diamond stylus being dragged around an undulating vinyl groove. I don't want to sit there worried in case the whole sound suddenly hits a patch of turbulence and falls apart. Leaving aside individual preferences on things like tonal balance, ▶

▶ dynamics, and fine detail, the fact that a turntable sounds solid and cohesive is perhaps the best indication that all the important fundamentals are right. If the stylus isn't able to follow the groove cleanly and precisely, then reproduction will prove frustratingly variable, and you won't be able to relax when you listen. In my book, this sort of security is priceless.

So the Volvere immediately created a positive impression by virtue of its sheer unflappability. Of course the arm and cartridge played their part too. But, without a solid foundation, even the best arm and cartridge will lose control. Clearly, the Volvere was providing a firm stable support, allowing both arm and cartridge to give of their best. Surface noise was extremely low, as was extraneous hiss and rumble. Speed stability was rock solid.

Overall, the music had a CD-like focus and precision, but minus CD's tendency to be clinical and overly analytical. Tonally, the sound was full-bodied and smooth, but not overly warm or rich. Bass was very firm and tight, while the upper treble was extended yet quite sweet and often surprisingly smooth and mellow. Although I'd describe the Volvere's musical presentation as detailed and crisp, rather than warm and beguiling, never was the sound cold or stark.

Priorities vary from person to person. When I play LP, I want reliable consistent musical presentation above all. Indeed, I'd be happy to sacrifice the last 'nth degree of sonic performance if it meant improved consistency and freedom from all the vicissitudes that can bedevil vinyl reproduction. I want an inky-black quiet background, no peak level distortion, no pitch waver, and no clicks and pops.

Unreasonable? You bet. But the

Volvere gets close to that impossible ideal - closer than you've any right to expect given the crudeness of a stylus tracing a wobbly groove in a bit of plastic. The trick is to maximise LP's intrinsically high resolution so that you're able to play music at what sounds like room filling volume,

without it actually being that loud.



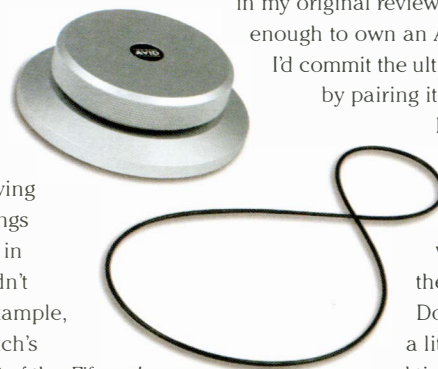
Its LP's increased detail and presence that create the impression of a big sound against a quiet background.

The Volvere arrived just before Christmas. To give it a fair hearing, I made the entire holiday period a CD free zone. In any case, it was high time I got re-acquainted with my LP collection! During the review period I had a binge on Shostakovitch, playing various LP recordings of the symphonies in performances I didn't have on CD. For example, Maxim Shostakovitch's pioneering 1971 LP of the *Fifteenth Symphony*, and Kyrill Kondrashin's 1967 account of the sixth - both originating from Melodiya tapes. I had excellent HMV LPs pressed in the West, and these provided good sound. But it proved more interesting and instructive to sample Kondrashin's Shostakovitch *Sixth* in an original Russian Melodiya pressing. By the highest standards

most Russian Melodiya LPs are not particularly good; surfaces are often coarse and crackly, cutting levels are low, and the frequency range is limited at both bass and treble extremes. My Melodiya pressing of Shostakovitch's *Sixth Symphony* has fairly quiet surfaces, but the sound itself lacks the brilliance and range of the UK HMV transfer.

Yet although dynamics were a shade compressed, and the frequency range restricted, it was remarkable to hear how effectively the Volvere presented the information present in the grooves. The result was a solid, focussed and surprisingly crisp sound. I used to avoid Melodiya LPs like the plague, feeling they fell below acceptable standards. But, played on a very good turntable, it was clear that the standard was actually more than acceptable...

The Acutus was a real eye/ear opener, redefining the capabilities of the vinyl LP. Yet listening to it wasn't all sweetness and light. At times it was almost too stark and contrasty, giving a sharp and highly detailed presentation so immediate it almost hurt. As I said in my original review, were I lucky enough to own an Acutus myself, I'd commit the ultimate blasphemy by pairing it with a QR



Developments

Ringmat while using a Shun Mook Mpingo weight in place of the supplied clamp. Doing so sacrifices a little sharpness

and tightness, but this is offset by gains in ease and naturalness. The Volvere sounds sweeter and rounder. Partly because it features a comparatively soft 'lossy' cork and rubber composite mat, it's less forward and immediate than the Acutus with its acrylic mat. As a consequence, I felt little or no need to try the Ringmat. When I finally did, there ▶

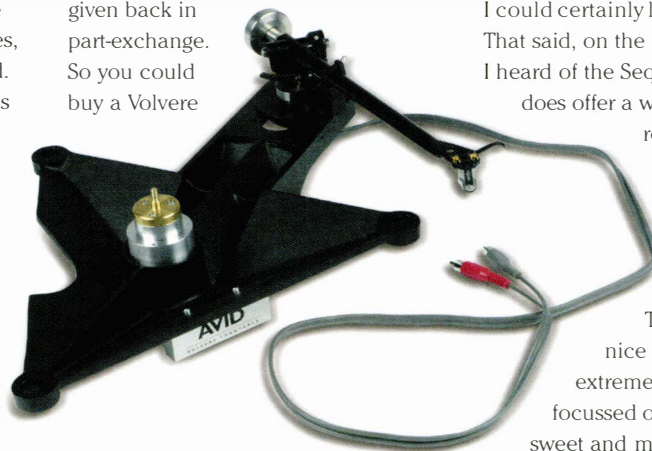
► wasn't really any improvement. So I mostly used the Volvere as supplied.

The Avid record clamp is brilliant at flattening warped LPs. The clamp fitted to the Volvere is simpler than the one that comes with the Acutus, and its rubber protection ring means it doesn't mark LP record labels. Sonically, the clamp firms up the lower frequencies, resulting in a tighter punchier sound. You could use the Volvere without its clamp, but the raised circle near the spindle tends to lift the centre of the LP off the platter. This is done deliberately so that, with the clamp tightened, vibration is channelled down through the centre spindle that acts as an energy path for mechanical resonance. With the centre of the LP raised slightly, and a clamp pressing down on the edge of the label, the grooved portion is pushed down hard on the platter, thereby flattening even quite badly warped and dished LPs. Not everyone approves of record clamps, but there's little question that Avid's has many positive benefits.

One other reason why the Volvere sounds less sharp and immediate than the Acutus is that the former uses a smaller, less powerful motor. The Volvere's 5kg platter is half the weight of the Acutus' 10kg platter, and therefore needs less torque to drive it. The Volvere's built-in power supply is likewise smaller and less powerful. This really makes a difference. Although the Volvere's power supply is entirely adequate, a bigger supply nevertheless improves tightness and focus.

I mention this because Conrad played me a more ambitious version of the Volvere called The Sequel. To be launched at the Bristol show, February 2002, it features (you guessed it)

a bigger more powerful motor and a beefier outboard power supply. The Sequel will retail for £3500, but existing Volvere owners will be able to upgrade by buying the improved power supply and motor for £1600 - or £1500 if the old motor and PSU are given back in part-exchange. So you could buy a Volvere



now, then perhaps a year or so later update it to the Sequel by getting the new motor and power supply. Comparing the Volvere to the Sequel, the latter offers a crisper more immediate presentation. Rhythmically, it sounds 'faster' and musically more purposeful. Bass and treble extremes are slightly more extended, and there's a marginal increase in dynamics and overall loudness too. It's a tighter more athletic sound.

Sonically, the Acutus is ahead of the Sequel in ways that are similar - it's even sharper, tighter, and more crisply focussed. The Sequel is reasonably close to the Acutus, in terms of sharpness, but has something of Volvere's tonal sweetness. Only you can say whether or not the differences in sound quality are reflected by differences in price. Although the Sequel and Acutus do undoubtedly offer superior sharpness and detail, the poor old 'cooking' Volvere is hardly lacking in such areas - it's all a matter

of degree.

Much depends on how source-dependent your hi-fi is. In mine, the Volvere sounded impressively crisp, lucid, and focussed - to the point where further improvements might almost seem an unnecessary luxury. I could certainly live with the Volvere. That said, on the evidence of what I heard of the Sequel, I'd say the latter

does offer a worthwhile increase in resolution - especially if the music you listen to thrives on rhythmic drive.

How sharp do you want it to be?

The Volvere strikes a nice balance between extremes, being crisp and focussed on the one hand, yet sweet and mellifluous on the other. The more expensive Avid turntables tip the scales towards increased brilliance and immediacy, with the Sequel offering what is perhaps the best compromise in terms of price and performance. Assuming you hear all three, agree with my assessment, but can't afford a Sequel, it's good to know you can buy a Volvere and upgrade it later with no price penalty. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Belt-driven, three point suspended sub-chassis
Speeds:	33 and 45 RPM, electronically switched
Clamp:	Yes
Lid:	No
Arm mounts:	Pre-cut for Linn and SME. Adapter plate for Rega.
Dimensions:	420x290x300 mm
Weight:	12.2 kg
Finish:	Black and Silver
Price:	£2000

Manufacturer:

Avid
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Roy Gregory

LIVING VOICE



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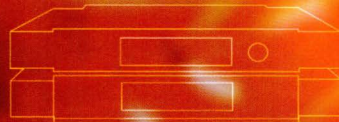
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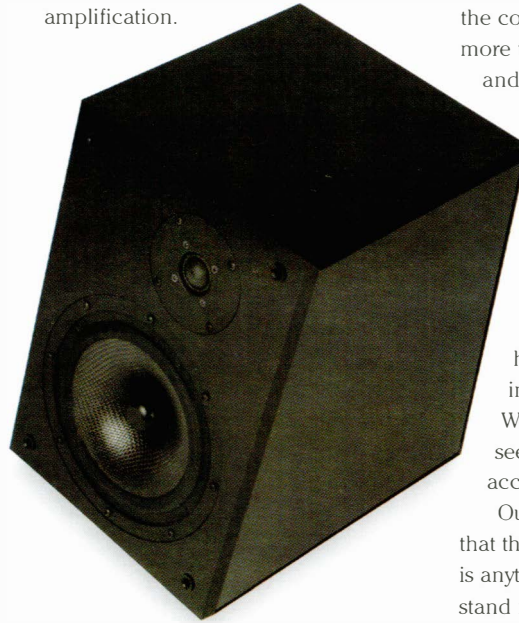
Reference 3A MM de Capo Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Anybody out there remember the AR18, a budget speaker whose musical performance belied its basic, almost crude exterior? It was a design that, as a retailer, gave me kittens for years afterwards, every time that someone came looking for an upgrade. More modern speakers with their smaller and more sophisticated drivers and more compact enclosures could best the elderly AR easily when it came to finesse, detail or neutrality. They were undoubtedly better hi-fi. The problem was that they simply couldn't match the sheer communication and involvement available from the 18. They just weren't as much fun – a fact that became only too apparent as soon as you embarked on any kind of comparison.

There are all kinds of reasons for that state of affairs, but the real quality of the AR design derived from its directly coupled, lightweight paper coned bass-mid driver. In fact, its crossover was confined to a single capacitor used to roll in the tweeter above the 8" driver. It's an approach that's surfaced time and again, in part no doubt due to the appeal of its simplicity. After all, direct coupling the bass-mid driver to the amplifier offers all sorts of advantages. You get rid of the nasty reactive loads that often typify crossovers, you gain the efficiency that they normally rob you of and you allow the amp closer control over the driver to which it's supposed to be dictating terms. You also lose the cost of the crossover parts. In fact, its advocates would

argue that you gain all the benefits of an active system across the musically important mid-band, without the cost, considerable difficulty and complexity of incorporating an active crossover and additional amplification.



Which begs the question of course, why doesn't everybody do it? Because for every upside there's also a downside. What you need to remember is that whilst crossovers are subtractive (of energy and information) and therefore an inherently "bad thing", they also cover a multitude of sins. Direct couple a driver and run it wide open and you quickly discover all kinds of nasty things about how it behaves at frequency extremes, as well as nasty things about the rest of the system:

Things that are normally glossed over or filtered out by the crossover.

Because of this it's an approach that has been generally confined to either very cheap or very expensive designs. At the bottom of the market, the cost savings and musical vitality more than outweigh any rough edges, and sheer volume of sales means that a company can engineer drivers to maximise the benefits whilst minimising the flaws, as spectacularly demonstrated by AR. At the other end of the spectrum, design budgets allow the incorporation of exotic or highly modified drivers as seen in the Kharma and Eggleston Works designs. What we haven't seen is the mid-price designs accessible to the real enthusiast.

Outwardly, there's little to suggest that the Reference 3A MM de Capo is anything other than just another stand mounted two-way. Indeed, it's a rather dumpy example with an unfashionably large bass-mid driver, and its appearance does nothing to prepare you for the sonic delights it offers, or the \$2200 price tag that goes with them. Of course, it'll come as no surprise that it employs a directly coupled main driver. What you probably don't know is that Reference 3A designer Daniel Dehay has been refining that technology in the shape of his own hand assembled bass-mid drivers for close to twenty years. Originally built in Switzerland, that made the speakers very expensive ▶

▶ in their major market, the US, so now the cabinets are built and the speakers assembled in Canada by new owners Divergent Technology. The de Capo is the smallest and cheapest design in a 5 model range. For a stand mounted two-way, its squat dimensions enclose a surprising volume, while the cabinet itself is constructed from critically braced MDF finished in a piano black lacquer, with bevelled edges and slightly inset side panels. The sloping baffle supports the latex treated 25mm fabric dome tweeter and the company's own bass-mid unit.

This employs a substantial 7" woven fibre cone surrounding a solid, fixed phase plug. It is attached with no fewer than eight large Philips screws, which for once, were nice and tight straight out of the box. The rear of the driver basket is graced by a large, cylindrical 'Vibra-puck', bonded to the back of the motor. Apparently, the epoxy suspended multi-material nature of the puck (shades of RDC) and the special glue used to attach it, help dissipate spurious energy from within the driver frame, helping overall clarity and the smooth transition to the treble driver.

The rear baffle contains the tapered, rear facing reflex port, a right-angled corner that is far more substantial than the normal plastic tube, and the plastic bi-wiring terminal block that isn't. So far so good, but the real story starts to surface with the numbers that go with this understated package. The amplifier gets to see a flat 8 Ohm load while the 7" driver and reasonable cabinet volume deliver 92dB per Watt with a -3dB point in the upper 40s. That's quite a surprising combination of virtues for one so small, and if that's tickled your taste

buds then believe me when I say that it's only the barest hint of what's to come.

Set-up couldn't be simpler. The de Capos' need a little space between them and the rear wall, 16" in my room, and fire straight ahead on stands that measure at least 24" tall.



I used the excellent Garricks, reviewed elsewhere in this issue. Apart from that, the only real peculiarity is that the offset tweeters are placed to the outside of the cabinets, while the interface to the stands should be four blobs of Blutak with a front to back strip running between them. Take off

the grilles and you're ready to go – except for the 200 hour run-in period. Yep, 200 hours. Time for the reader frustration warning: You'll only get the results described once the speakers are well and truly run-in. The manufacturer's estimate is about right. But boy is it worth the wait!

Three words to describe the de Capos; coherent, convincing, engaging. From the moment the needle hits the groove the music has a presence and palpable believability that seduces and beguiles the listener. No holding back here, the Reference 3As just open the windows wide and invite you straight in. The Speakers Corner *Gershwin Songbook*

is a perfect example. Five albums, ten sides, plus the extra EP but I ran through it from end to end in a single session. Never has Ella sounded more convincing, not for a moment did it even occur to me to take a break. There is a naturalness and directness about the de Capos' delivery that sets aside normal hi-fi constraints.

It's almost a crime to break down this speaker's performance, but it's important to understand what's going on here. Part of it is the degree of control exerted over the bass driver, the transparency and immediacy that comes from the absence of cross-over components. But more than that is the way the rest of the elements fit around and complement that strength. Time and again listeners were shocked by the convincing nature of the bass coming from the Reference 3As. The deep, electric bass line on Neil Young's 'Trans Am' (*Sleeps With Angels* Reprise 9 45749-1) is presented with an unerring sense of pace, pitch and texture. It has shape and power too.



All from a small box perched atop a pair of two foot high stands. And if that's impressive wait until it rolls into the musical mayhem of 'Piece Of Crap' with out so much as a hesitation. Even amidst the maelstrom there's still a sense of real musicians playing (or should that be hitting) real instruments.

Now, we know that the speaker doesn't really go that deep, so the ability to convince doesn't come from sheer extension. Instead it's a function of quality. The de Capo simply makes the most of its available bass performance – to such an

► extent that a lot of much larger and supposedly more capable designs are put to shame. The speed, shape, texture and above all the temporal accuracy of the bass is what separates it from the crowd. It's recognisable and it arrives on time. And you don't notice when it runs out of steam really deep down because the top end has been carefully balanced not to draw attention to it. A lot of small speakers with really, really extended treble simply emphasise their lack of bass. Fine for monitoring, less great for musical appreciation. In absolute terms the 3As lack a little air and some of the textural fineness that I get from the Living Voice OBX-Rs, and whilst I know that's the case it doesn't impinge on my musical pleasure, testament to their near perfect balancing act.

Their second great strength is their continuity, with no obvious change in their character as duties pass to the high frequency unit. Really close listening will actually reveal a subtle loss of texture and energy at higher frequencies (which also contribute to the slight lack of air) but it's well hidden in the overall picture, standing as it does in the shade of that tactile and ultra-communicative midrange. It also speaks volumes for the development that's gone into the upper roll-off of the bass-mid unit.

The third thing that will strike you (a natural extension of the first two and the lack of phase shift associated with a cross-over) is the tremendous scale the de Capos are capable of reproducing. The large yet warm acoustic of the Heifetz Sibelius *Violin Concerto* (Classic RCA LSC 2435) is beautifully captured, with depth, width and height. The last owes much to the size of the individual images produced. As well as being convincingly solid the images are also much larger than the size of the speaker would lead you to expect.

Along with that sense of scale comes real dynamic range. The 3As

don't just do the small scale intimate thing (although that they certainly do) but when things get loud they swell effortlessly. The full orchestral heights of the Sibelius were scaled without a hint of strain or restraint, and believe me when I say that I was playing it very loud indeed. On a more general note, drum beats and percussion have real snap, while pizzicato playing enjoys real attack and emphasis.

The de Capo's reasonable efficiency and benign load make it a natural partner for low powered valve amps. The combination with the Lamm ML2s was spectacular, and outings with the JA30 and Antique Sound Labs AQ-1009s were equally successful, if distinctly different. And therein lies the Reference 3As greatest strength of all, and also its greatest weakness. Its immediate and transparent sound means that it tells you exactly what's going on upstream. I was privileged to use it with some seriously fine partnering equipment: The Lamms and other power amps already mentioned as well as the Lamm, Klyne and most memorably of all, the Connoisseur Definition 4.0 pre-amp and phono stages. Every one of those would cost several times the price of the de Capos, yet they make perfect partners for each other. They're also all valve power amps. Don't get the idea that the Reference 3As won't work with solid state. Indeed, they thrive on its speed and precision. But when it comes to valves they simply let them do more of what valves do well; texture, colour, micro dynamics and presence. They also tell you exactly what the system isn't doing, which is where solid-state could come unstuck. Likewise, more modest partnering equipment like the Canary CA-608 LV, Lavardin IS Reference or Monarchy SM70 power amp will all deliver with the de Capos, but it's because of their inherent and unusual sense of balance. Lesser products will be

ruthlessly exposed, and budget CD players don't bear thinking about.

But hang these modest looking speakers on the end of a really well balanced chain and you could be in for a major surprise as well as considerable musical rewards. There is a small but growing band of speakers that are both affordable and capable. The Reference 3A de Capo goes straight to the head of that group. Now, if only we can get people to take them more seriously than the price suggests we might actually be getting somewhere. These I could happily live with. Indeed, if I get my way then they'll not be going anywhere for a while!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Rear reflex ported two-way
Drivers:	175mm woven fibre bass-mid 25mm latex treated fabric dome tweeter
Efficiency:	92dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Bandwidth:	44Hz - 20 kHz \pm 3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	280x380x330 mm
Weight:	10kg each
Finish:	Piano Black
Price:	£2200

UK Distributor:

Absolute Analogue
Tel. (44) (0)208 459 8115
E-mail. Absolute_Analogue@email.msn.com

Worldwide Distributor:

Divergent Technologies
Net. www.divertech.com

The Lyra Helikon SL Phono Cartridge

by Chris Binns

How time flies....

It is well over a year since I reviewed the Lyra Helikon cartridge in issue number nine. I concluded at the time that it not only justified the idea of spending a thousand pounds on a cartridge, it set new standards for all round performance at the price. Hundreds of records later, I am just as enthusiastic, and it has never failed to provide considerable pleasure while listening to music.

But recently the calm waters of contentment have been disturbed by the rumour of another Helikon cartridge – a new version with the letters SL as a suffix. Damn it - the SL must stand for special, selected or, er, something - and my overactive imagination immediately led me to assume that it must be an improved version of my original model. It stands to reason, doesn't it? Before curiosity made a complete fool of me, fate stepped in and I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to speak to Stig Borge, of Scan-Tech, the company who design and manufacture the Lyra cartridges. Over a fine Sunday lunch I was able to get the story straight from the horses mouth as it were, and even better, an opportunity to try the SL for myself.

First things first – the SL is not, as I had first assumed, an upgraded,



selected or special edition of the existing Helikon. It is rather a variation on the design, with a slightly different application in mind. In the standard version the coils that go to form part of the generator assembly are wound in two layers – necessary to accommodate the right amount of wire to produce the required output voltage of 0.4 millivolts. The SL (single layer) version with half the windings will only provide half the output, around 0.22 millivolts, although still not bad by moving coil standards. But hey, less wire on the coils means less weight, which in turn means that the stylus has a lower mass to contend with at the other end of the cantilever, with considerable benefits to sound

quality. To put it simply, the stylus should be able to respond better to the information in the groove with less weight on its shoulders. The downside is that a lower output places greater demands on the phono stage, particularly as far as the

noise floor is concerned.

I think that one of the great strengths of the standard version has been its flexibility, due mainly to its healthy

output, allowing use with

a wide range of amplification.

A good example of this occurred while reviewing the Rogue 99 valve pre-amp, a combination that from a technical viewpoint looked disastrous, but in practice sounded surprisingly good.

But for Scan-Tech, other factors had been at work to instigate the conception of the SL. There are those that feel that despite the healthy output, the compromises involved with a dual layer coil affect the 'purity' of music reproduction, and a single layer version would be sonically preferable. At the same time, Scan Tech had received a request from Chris Koster of Naim Audio America to build him a lower output version specifically for use with their amplification. He felt that good though the standard version was, it was not compatible with the

► Naim phono stages, resulting in a less than inspiring performance. A prototype SL was supplied and by all accounts was a resounding success, so there you go – the Helikon SL came in to being.

The two cartridges are virtually indistinguishable, save for the SL having a blue logo instead of the red of the standard version. They are geometrically the same, and so I gave in to my first impulse to substitute the SL into my Linn/Ekos as soon as possible. The original Lyra had sounded pretty good straight from the box, with a subtle but distinct addition of extra authority occurring after about twenty hours or so, where upon it also seemed to favour knocking back the tracking force to about 1.6 grams. I started the SL off at the higher limit of 1.75g and got stuck in with a few old favourites. Maybe I was lucky first time round with the original Helikon; the SL sounded rough to begin with, not helped I suspect by the sub zero temperatures we were experiencing just before Christmas. Running in was a gradual process, sounding better with each successive record that I played, until it reached a degree of consistency. Once this had happened I was able to play around with the loading, eventually arriving at a value of 500 Ohms, no coincidence considering Naim's preferred input impedance of 470 Ohms. The gain difference was not as great as the figures would suggest; in practice I found that I was running the volume control at about twelve o'clock as opposed to ten for the same typical listening levels.

The family bloodline runs strong through the SL, and the trademark qualities that serve the standard version so well are much in evidence. It's that combination of dynamic performance coupled with subtlety that

make using a Helikon so rewarding, and has always made vinyl sound particularly exciting and full of energy. The standard Helikon has a very muscular approach to making music, particularly in the upper bass and lower midrange. Instruments such as drums, percussion and bass guitar are reproduced with tremendous dynamics and slam, while voices and strings have a beguiling and seductive quality that lends a real sense of Integrity to the music.

The SL trades some of this to produce a leaner sound, particularly at the bass end. Shedding the slightly overblown, fruity quality gives the impression of being faster and more tactile, with greater precision and less of a tendency to overshadow the mid range.

As a result of this, detail is more evident with the SL; a lower surface noise threshold also contributes to this.

However, I was not as impressed with the high frequency performance – whereas the standard version expertly managed the illusion of having no limits to the bandwidth, the SL could sometimes sound as if the top end had been curtailed, lacking in sparkle.

However, the obvious next step was to run the SL into a Naim phono stage.

The company were good enough to loan me a Pre-Fix, along with a Supercap, and while it was a bit tedious to fit and then reset the LP12, results proved more than worthwhile. If the thought of the relatively modest Pre-Fix partnered with such a mammoth power supply seems faintly ludicrous, think again. Naim have always been advocates of the importance of power supplies; hell they probably invented the whole philosophy. It is a long time since I have used a Naim pre-amp, but the

results with the Helikon were good, really good. My doubts about the top end disappeared, while the rhythmic integrity was nothing short of awesome. Here was a combination that I could, and did listen to for hours on end, while the Naim electronics reawakened my interest in just how good their phono stage (the basic circuit is pretty much unchanged for over 25 years) could be. Admittedly the character was on the dry side, but the connection with the music, of whatever type, was totally addictive.

Thankfully, the conclusions here are obvious. The two versions share a lot of common ground in terms of their character, which for me represents exactly what vinyl replay is all about. While the SL is a more even, polite and refined performer, the standard version is less academic and a bit more fun in its approach to reproducing music. Its healthy output places less of a demand on the phono stage, and thus gives it wider appeal, particularly with valve amplification. But with careful selection of a phono stage, or if you are the owner of a Naim system, you really should check out the SL – synergy doesn't come much better than this. Which version you'll prefer is going to depend entirely on your system context. Either way, both the Helikon and the SL are damn fine cartridges. ➤



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cartridge weight:	8.0 G
Output voltage:	0.22 mV
Recommended tracking force:	1.6 – 1.75 G
Recommended load:	10 Ohms – 47 K Ohms
Cantilever system:	Solid boron with line contact stylus
Internal impedance:	3 Ohms
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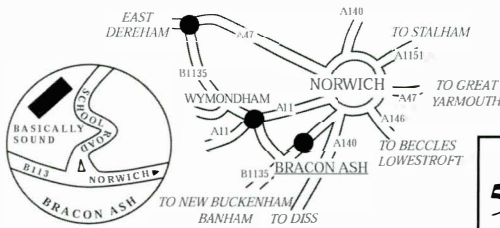


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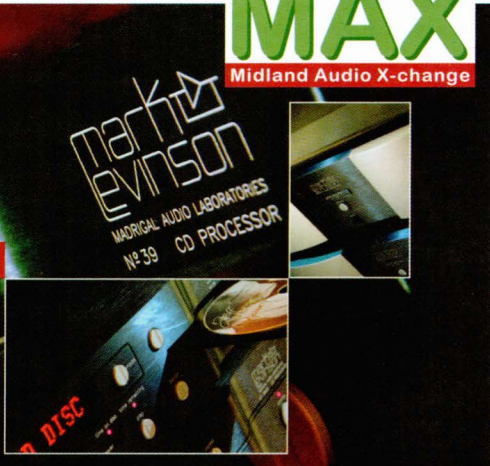
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The Densen B400 XS CD player

by Chris Binns

It cannot be mere coincidence that recently three people have made similar observations while listening to music in my living room – there is now less difference between the sound of CD and vinyl reproduction in my system. Due to the review of the new Helikon SL cartridge (in this issue) my turntable has recently received plenty of attention and is sounding pretty damn good at the moment, and the acquisition of yet more records has meant that I have spent a lot of time listening to it. But I have not been disappointed while listening to compact discs - far from it in fact as my enthusiasm has been somewhat renewed, and the credit for this must lie with the Densen B400 XS CD player that I have been using for the last couple of months.

Without wishing to cover old ground, most people who have suffered reading my previous reviews will know that I use CD because it is here and now, and there is an awful lot of music out there that I want to hear that is not available on vinyl. And so that is why a lot of my more recent taste in music is represented by this format, particularly as there are so many bargains to be had in the budget classical music sector, and I can live with that. I have grown used to the convenience of CD, but for ultimate involvement in music, vinyl is still my preferred medium. Going further, personally I still think that there are limitations with digital recording, not just CD, – you may laugh but I think that that to date the best recordings that

have ever been made were captured using large format analogue tape.

So surely I should be enthusiastic about the emergence of DVD-A and SACD? Well, yes and no. I cannot help but think that there is a certain irony in the fact that after threatening the very existence of records, CD is, after a brief

reign as the most popular commercial medium for music, itself under threat from the supposedly superior formats. With all this new and bewildering array technology looming, I am not surprised at the reaction of an acquaintance of mine who suggested that spending a lot of money on a high end CD player was a bit foolish to say the least.

It took me a long time to actually get round to buying a CD player, and it only occurred when I could no longer easily buy the music that I wanted on vinyl - and I suspect that will be the case with anything new such as DVD.

Head in the sand? Well yes, to a degree, as apart from anything else I cannot bear to witness large, greedy conglomerate companies wasting enough money to sort out the third world on legalities and petty squabbling

over formats. Remember Betamax versus VHS? I will say no more. And I haven't even started on copy protection and watermarking. So as far as I am concerned, I'm still interested in getting more enjoyment out of my present collection of music on CD, regardless of what the future might bring, which is just as well really.

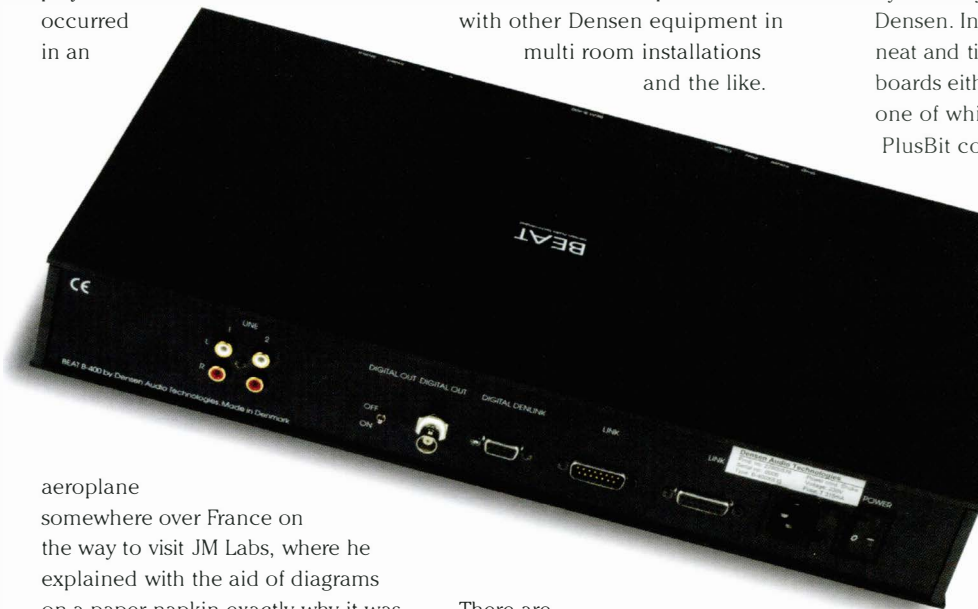
Densen have been making hi-fi equipment for quite a while now, and certainly their amplification has been well received in this country, as indeed has the less expensive model of the machine I have recently been using. With a name like 'Beat' for a range of equipment and a company motto that states

'life is too short for boring hi-fi', you know to a certain extent where they are coming from. Much like the Naim Audio philosophy in the eighties, the emphasis is on involvement with the music rather than the equipment, to the extent that you should be excited enough to stand up and wave your arms about playing an imaginary guitar, or conducting the orchestra. Mmm. The less said about that the better.

But to meet Thomas Sillesen, ▶



▶ who is Densen Audio Technologies, puts it all in perspective. A man full of infectious enthusiasm, on the various occasions he has been to visit me he has spent most of the time on his hands and knees – nothing funny you understand, he has just been more interested in trawling through my record collection than talking hi-fi. The first mention of his new CD player occurred in an



aeroplane somewhere over France on the way to visit JM Labs, where he explained with the aid of diagrams on a paper napkin exactly why it was so good. On his last visit to my house, we spent a pleasant evening talking and listening to music, and generally putting the world to rights until the small hours. It wasn't until the following morning and he was due to leave that he casually mentioned that he had the CD player in the car and maybe I should listen to it. So much for the hard sell.

Aesthetically, the B400 XS is both elegant and nicely understated. Constructed from thick aluminium plate, the black casework is well finished off and reassuringly solid, however the edges are extremely sharp; not only does this make them vulnerable to knocks, be warned they are capable of drawing blood. The eight function buttons (gold or silver – your choice) cover basic

functions and sit either side of the red LED display, this can be switched to display information when a button is activated and then dim to off while playing.

Two sets of fixed audio outputs are provided, while the BNC digital output is switched, circumnavigating any possible sonic degradation. The remaining connections are communication ports for use with other Densen equipment in multi room installations and the like.

There are a couple of other interesting features like the provision of a phase switch, and a circuit that produces a high frequency 'pulse' to de magnetise the signal path, every time the draw is opened.

The B400 does not come with a remote control as standard, unfortunately this will cost you an extra £250, which seems a bit steep, unless you are using Densen amplification in which case it will control that as well. Called the Gizmo, it is not the most intuitive device I have used, as it requires a degree of concentration to find the desired function, although once there the small buttons are positive to the touch. But it really works. Upside down, from the depths of the settee, facing any direction you like it works – every

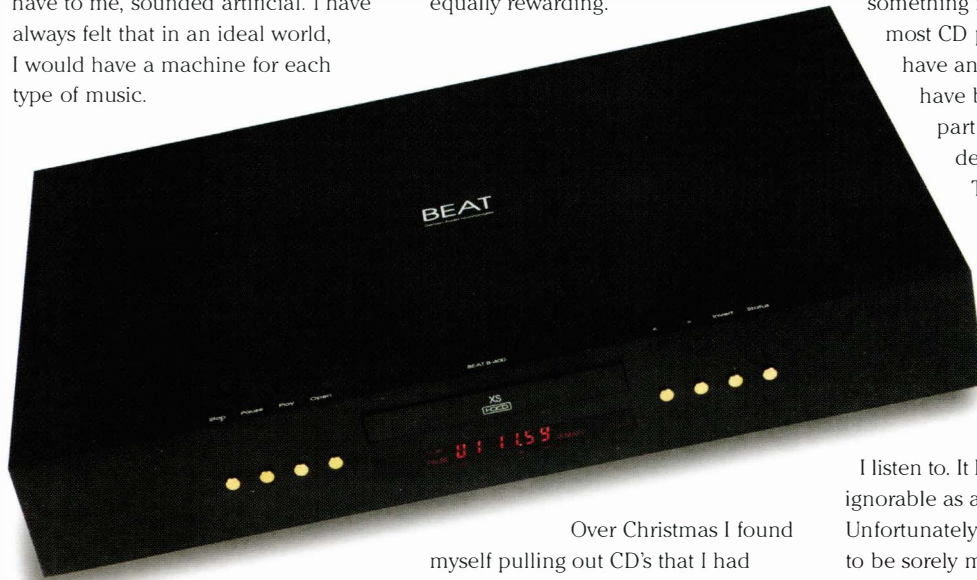
time. The only other remote system I have used with similar remote efficiency is the B&O system I have in my bedroom, which funnily enough is also Danish – you can draw your own conclusions.

The electronics are based around a Sony transport, which utilises glass rather than the more usual plastic for the optical assembly, it is controlled by circuitry designed in house by Densen. Internally, construction is neat and tidy, with two large circuit boards either side of the transport, one of which is exclusively for the PlusBit converter. Extensive use is made of surface mount technology, my only area of concern is with the use of self adhesive clips to support the boards, a year or two down the line I suspect they will lose their grip allowing the boards to slop around.

It is with the digital to analogue converter however that the B400 XS claims to be radically different. Christened 'PlusBit' technology, apparently it can mathematically improve the digital signal by adding bits to the original source material, and effectively double the resolution of the CD. I am going to gracefully back out of this one by saying that my understanding of digital technology is patchy to say the least, and despite diagrams and technoblabr I am none the wiser. The proof of the pudding...

Given a few days to run in, the XS was substituted for the Meridian 508.24 CD player that I usually use in my system. The main reason that I have stuck with this player for the last three years is because it is extremely comfortable to listen to. Other players have highlighted its shortcomings, in particular when it comes to rhythm and timing; bottom end slam is ▶

▶ something that it just doesn't do. But given that a large part of my CD collection consists of orchestral and string music, I have been unwilling to sacrifice its highly natural and spacious presentation in preference to a player which makes rock music sound good. By comparison, most of the machines I have tried that major on dynamics and timing are not as relaxing to listen to when playing string quartets, and have to me, sounded artificial. I have always felt that in an ideal world, I would have a machine for each type of music.



Well, the B400 XS went a long way in satisfying all of my musical tastes. Using it on a day to day basis, I was constantly struck by how engaging it was, regardless of material. The top end was smooth and sweet, with plenty of openness and detail, and while being somewhat more forward and having extra bite than the Meridian, though it was never in your face or oppressive. Strings had a very natural feel to them, and while sounding delicate where required there was an agility that endowed the music with more vitality than I had previously heard. The Bartok string quartets sounded a little more alive, more believable, and more dynamic, while the sultry opening of the first quartet was exactly that, a little dark and full of misgiving. But as it progresses, the

music begins to lift and soar, and the change of temperament was well conveyed by the Densen. Presentation and imagery were good, and although the soundstage did not project behind the loudspeakers in the way that it did with the Meridian, it was altogether tighter and better focused with less of the vague lushness that the 508 had.

Balanced against this, results with rock and pop music were equally rewarding.

Over Christmas I found myself pulling out CD's that I had previously dismissed as being unlistenable, due I suspect to poor transfers from the master tapes. One such example was Marvin Gaye 'Whats going on' – having lost my original some years ago I replaced it with the CD, and never listened to it again. Much to the credit of the Densen, it managed to actually inject some life into this anaemic disc, and made it worth listening to. Given better material to work with, the results were wholly engaging, the precision and timing of the bottom end laying a firm foundation for the openness of the mid and top. In this respect, I was reminded of the Resolution Audio CD player reviewed in this magazine some months ago, and in a similar fashion the Densen really had the ability to pick up the groove and run with it. Any number of tracks that I played

served to demonstrate this, but the first Jeff Buckley album stands out as being memorable, the drums and percussion were awesome in their dynamics and impact. There was such a sense of coherence and solidity that made music really enjoyable, and much as I hate to say it, more analogue in its presentation, which can only be a good thing.

For me, the B400 XS has achieved something rather special. To date, most CD players I have used and have any chance of affording have been good in one particular area, to the detriment of others.

The Densen is a cake and eat it product – it has sophisticated refinement alongside the dynamic and rhythmic capabilities that allow me to enjoy the wide range of music that

I listen to. It has all too easily become ignorable as a piece of hi-fi equipment. Unfortunately its performance is going to be sorely missed. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Conversion system:	PlusBit technology
Outputs:	2 sets analogue RCA 1 Digital BNC
Output Level:	2 V (est.)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	444x310x64 mm
Weight:	7.5 Kg
Finish:	Black with Gold or Chrome buttons
Price:	£2500

Manufacturer:

Densen Audio Technologies
Tel. (45)7518-1214
Fax. (45)7545-3938
E-mail. mail@densen.dk
Net. www.densen.com



VPI Aries Scout Turntable and JMW 9.0 Tonearm

by Roy Gregory

It suddenly occurred to me the other day that the world has changed. Gradually, bit by bit, without you even noticing, the status quo is overturned and things just aren't what they used to be. You wake up and realise that some self-evident truth that you'd always taken for granted was simply no longer the case. It can come as quite a shock. I mean, who would ever have thought the day would come when serious turntables used anything other than a suspended sub-chassis? But the truth is plain. There are plenty of new turntable designs hitting the market, and fewer and fewer of them employ a floating sub-chassis. Instead, the new hegemony revolves around solid, damped plinths with motors placed in separate mass loaded housings. It's not hard to understand a sprung sub-chassis and you are using that suspension to isolate the stylus record interface from vibrational energy emanating from the motor. This is unquestionably a good thing. However, it has its down sides too, most notably the poor coupling between the motor and the platter leading to lousy speed stability and limited dynamic range. Of course, when that was all we had, we knew no better, but once CD came along, especially once we actually got it to work, suddenly poor speed stability and compressed dynamics were only too obvious to all who heard them. From that day onward, even though we didn't realise it, the classic three-point suspended turntable was a dying breed. They still exist, but for the most part they represent designs

that hail from analogue's heyday. Likewise, there are still seriously expensive designs that employ the approach but that merely underlines the precision, cost and effort it takes to get around the associated problems.

Instead, we see designs from Clearaudio, Kuzma, Amazon, Verdier, Project, Well Tempered and VPI which all employ the simplified approach. Don't they suffer from motor noise contaminating the signal they produce?

Yes they do, to varying degrees, but it's a problem that can be mitigated by today's improved isolation platforms and motor power supplies. And they all benefit from dramatic improvements in speed stability and dynamic range, as well as other things we'll get to.

But the other thing that I realised was even more interesting. Out goes the old in comes the new. But along with the departing thinking go all the associated rules. We always used to spend the lion's share of the budget on a turntable, followed in turn by the arm and finally the cartridge. The Rega RB300 already put a dent in that theory, but remove the expensive suspension and the complexity that entails and you're really starting to go places. Given the stability possible from a basic solid plinth, just how good an arm can you sit on it? Enter then the VPI Aries Scout turntable and JMW 9.0 tonearm, an £1100 combination that burns half the budget holding the cartridge up. It's a proposition that would have been

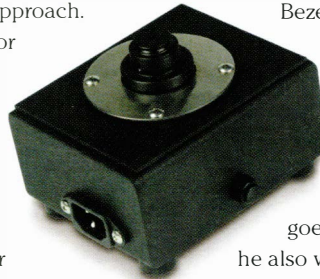
completely unmarketable a few years ago.

Of course, there's more to the Scout/9.0 set-up than that. Harry Weisfeld has been making turntables for far too long to miss a trick. Having said that, the original impetus for the design came from this side of the pond.

VPI's Dutch distributor, Johan Bezem of Audio Classics, wanted something that embodied the ease of set-up and compact practicality of the Aries in a cheaper package. It goes without saying that

he also wanted to maintain as much of the Aries' performance as possible. We'll see in a moment whether or not the Scout meets that stiff brief, but in the meantime we'll see how Harry set about it.

No prizes for guessing that the basic structure remains the same. The Scout uses a solid plinth, isolated on four conical feet, the motor mounted in its own separate housing. Although the plinth is thinner than that on the Aries, it's still a pretty substantial lump, constructed from a sandwich of 30mm MDF with a slab of steel bonded to its underside. That creates a self damping combination, the glue acting as a constrained layer. The conical feet are mounted on threaded posts allowing for levelling. In the Scout these dispense with the compliant mountings of the Aries, seating instead against delrin discs. The feet themselves are more than simple aluminium cones, each being



► tipped with a ball bearing. However, like all such arrangements it's best to leave the cones screwed tight against the plinth, levelling the supporting surface instead. The other major cost saving on the deck itself is the platter, a simple solid acrylic disc rather than the mass loaded composite TNT III platter employed by its dearer cousin. The Scout uses the same standing bearing design.

In the name of simplicity (and in line with the TNT Hot-Rod) the Scout also does away with an armboard, the tonearm mounting directly to the plinth. It's cheaper and more rigid that way. Cannily, the cut-out will accept a Rega arm as well as the company's own JMW 9.0, designed to use the same geometry as the popular budget design. One last thing that needs mention is the turntable's excellent black satin finish, preferable if anything



to the piano black of the more expensive model.

For once, appearance hasn't suffered in the cost cutting exercise. The Scout is a classy looking beast whose presentation belies its budget price.

A major slice of the Aries price tag is accounted for by its inclusion of the complex, excellent but expensive JMW 10.5 uni-pivot tonearm. Essential in reducing the overall cost was a simplified version of the arm, so out went the intricate micrometer VTA adjustment, replaced with a simple

post and socket arrangement of the type that's been deemed acceptable on British built tonearms for years past. Gone as well is the concentric damping bath that surrounds the arm's pivot point, along with the complicated machining necessary to produce it. What stays is the bearing itself, the tonearm structure and excellent set-up tools. The counter-weight moves on a tight thread, making downforce refreshingly easy to set accurately, while the low-slung eccentric mass that surrounds and stabilises the bearing housing makes azimuth equally easy to adjust (helped by the horizontal rod that's provided to sit in the lateral groove across the headshell).

The most controversial aspect of the JMW design remains. Following Harry's "simple is better" mantra, bias is applied by the tension in the twisted lead-out wire as it loops to the plinth mounted terminal block. It's an arrangement that drives purists and technocrats crazy.

It certainly works on my JMW 12.5 and I've noticed no

deleterious wear or stylus sag in any of the cartridges I've been using. The arm that arrived for review was the first produced, but full production versions will also feature the Lemo connector between the lead-out wire and the terminal box, allowing owners to swap whole tonearm assemblies (although not correct the VTA as on the more expensive models). It's an impressive list of attributes, especially at the price,

but then any arm that is going to survive needs to better the redoubtable Rega RB300 in terms of both sound and facilities.

I've been using the Lyra Helikon mounted in an Incognitoed RB300 on the Clearlight Recovery for some time. With CB reviewing the Helikon SL I borrowed his standard version and mounted it in the Scout. It made for an interesting comparison. Bear in mind also that the Recovery is the very same set-up that favourably impressed the



assembled populace at our Manchester show comparison between SACD, DVD-A and LP. It's a turntable that majors on natural colour and perspectives. Well, playing the Classic Records re-issue of the Dvorak *Cello Concerto* (Piatigorsky, Munch and the BSO LSC-2490), the baby VPI combination couldn't match the superb midrange palette or low level resolution of the much more expensive Recovery. However in other important regards it was able to match or better it.

Let's start with the soundstage, always a VPI strongpoint. The Scout projects a wider and much more coherent soundstage, especially laterally and vertically. (The tendency to clump images around the speakers and drop the bass lower in the soundstage are known RB300 shortcomings.) The heavy bass bowing that underpins the opening of the first movement is better defined, with better shape and texture and far more energy. It also separated the timp rolls from the bowed bass arpeggios that reach a climax just before the entry of the ►

► solo cello. It imbues that crescendo with greater drama and impact, conveying the depth and complexity, the range of instrumental forces employed. Piatigorsky's instrument is bigger, more dimensional and placed slightly further forward. It's full of vibrant energy and purpose, the virtuosity of the playing plain to hear. In fact the whole sound could best be described as big and full of controlled energy. It's a sound that will be familiar to anybody who has heard one of the bigger VPI turntables:

It's a sound that runs through the range of JMW tonearms: It's a sound that gives you the shape and flow of the musical dynamic. It's a sound that I once described (in reviewing the original TNT) as meaty, beaty, big and bouncy, and I find it remarkable that a table that uses such different technology and materials can still display such a heavy print of the company DNA.

What I also find fascinating is the sophistication of the musical presentation. Using the JMW 12.5 on the Recovery tells me where that internal intricacy comes from. The impressive thing is the extent to which that capability is embodied in the cheaper arm and released by the simpler deck. What is more, further experimentation with the Clearaudio Accurate Power supply confirmed that the basic platform embodies serious further potential, just waiting to be unlocked. And the really scary bit is that even in this form the Scout would still only set you back around £2K. Of course, VPI produce their own turntable power supply that would also do the trick, and expect a range of other hop-ups such as an add on fly-wheel to appear in short order.

Of course, the Scout/9.0 combination isn't perfect. It lacks the air and soundstage volume of a turntable like the TNT, the definition of the space between and around the

instruments. It also has a lighter overall balance, something effected by the surface on which it stands (and one of the variables introduced by a solid plinth). But at the price it presents a broader bandwidth and greater

energy and drive than anything else out there, which combined with the spatial evenness and inter-instrumental sophistication of the tonearm makes it a powerful contender.

Take this player's sense of musical shape and substance and add its considerable organisational and rhythmic coherence and it'll come as no surprise that it excels when it comes to reproducing vocals, especially multiple voices or duets. *Ray Charles and Betty Carter* (DCC LPZ-2005) proves the point. Okay, so there's some loss of texture and inner detail compared to the best, a smoothing and rounding of syllables, but if anything it makes the musical lines flow even clearer, making their interlocking patterns even more explicit. The result is both expressive and involving.

The bottom line? The VPI Scout/JMW 9.0 turntable takes what analogue does well and by reassessing its engineering approach and budgetary allocation, brings excellent performance down to a new price level. It's a case of carefully blending the sonic strengths and mechanical simplicity of a solid plinth and separate motor assembly with the balance, refinement and expressive sophistication that come with a better arm. It's a combination that offers even greater musical value

from your investment. High definition digital formats might be making all the noise, but on this evidence turntables are doing music better and cheaper than ever. VPI are offering you a triumphant example of simple



engineering delivering musical excellence. It also offers a clear and cost effective upgrade path. What more can you ask for? At this price, absolutely nothing! ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Belt drive, solid plinth turntable and uni-pivot tonearm
Speeds:	33 and 45 RPM (+ optional 78)
Clamp:	One-piece screw down
Tonearm Length:	230 mm
Effective Mass:	8.7 g
Output:	2x RCA phonos
Lid:	Optional extra
Dimensions (WxHxD):	483x178x330mm
Weight:	14 Kgs
Finish:	Satin black
Price:	£1100

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DISPLAY

OPEN

STOP

PLAY/PAUSE

CD Player

The Real Deal Exposure 2010 Series

by Chris Thomas

Many moons have passed since an Exposure amplifier was last heard chez Thomas. The south coast company founded in the 70's by John Farlowe has been through a few ups and downs over in the intervening years but recently, with a much needed injection of Malaysian money and John back in the fold, a new group of products has gradually appeared. The Exposure catalogue still features a powerful pre/power combo and now a more affordable group of components. This comprises a CD player, an integrated amplifier, a separate power amplifier and tuner and is collectively known as the 2010 series.

Sales-wise Exposure always had one big problem through the 70's and 80's and that was Naim Audio. Both companies made amplifiers of similar power outputs at similar prices that seemed, outwardly at least, to embrace some of the same design philosophies such as separate power supplies for their pre-amplifiers. In use I always felt that though they sounded superficially similar they were musically quite different, with my preference being for the sharper, faster and more dynamically eloquent Naim, though there were those who thought the Exposure a little easier on the ear. But this is a new century and a new ball game yet, even in 2002, Exposure's latest products find themselves once again in market competition with the Salisbury based company, but this time in the shape of their 5 series. And by

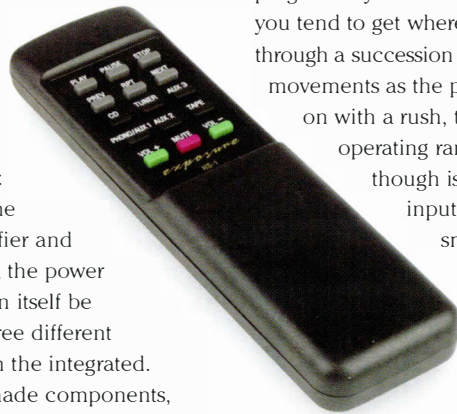
a peculiar twist of something or other it is now Exposure who are offering the more radical sounding electronics as the introduction of their impeccably mannered entry-level 5 series has somewhat broadened Naim's appeal to the masses.

I have had three pieces of the 2010 range at home recently. The CD player, the integrated amplifier and its running mate, the power amplifier that can itself be configured in three different ways for use with the integrated. These are well made components, still hand built in the Exposure factory with all aluminium cases, a silvery (or black) finish and attractive electric blue illumination. The CD player and the integrated amplifier are remote-controlled though I believe a manual version of the amplifier is available. Both are operated from a common remote control though I do wish there was a complete numeric keyboard rather than just a Next and Previous function as, thanks to JMH, I have found that every CD player I try sounds better when you go through Stop between tracks. Also the volume control buttons seem the wrong way round to me which can be especially irritating until you get used to it. And while I am talking about the volume control I should add that it is a little

too abrupt in operation and this makes accurate first-time level setting next to impossible. I like level controls that seem to do very little in the first 30% of their range and then come on progressively. With the Exposure remote you tend to get where you're going through a succession of small stabbing movements as the power comes

on with a rush, too low in the operating range. What is neat though is the motorised input selector that smoothly rotates to the CD input if any of the CD function buttons on the remote are touched.

The CD player is built around a Sony transport and a 24bit/96kHz DAC. It offers two digital outputs (Coaxial and Optical) and a decent display, generally readable from across the room. The instruction book says that it can be scrolled through two levels of brightness or off, though my example only achieved one or the other: But, if you listen very carefully, it does afford a very small sonic improvement. The integrated amplifier produces a healthy 50 watts per channel into 8ohms through its mosfet output stage and has 6 gold plated phono line inputs plus tape outputs. There is also an internal phono card option available (£89) for those with vinyl inclinations. Anticipating that ►



▶ you may want to add the power amplifier at some stage there are a pair of pre-outs while speaker connections are via 4mm sockets, though two pairs are provided for bi-wiring. The power amplifier which obviously has the same speaker connections, can be used in one of three ways, each selected by a slider switch on



the rear panel.

Use it as a straight stereo amplifier, a monoblock where it drives one channel while the power section in the integrated looks after the other, or as half of a bi-amped set-up. I think this is a very neat arrangement especially as the power section of the integrated does not necessarily become redundant when the separate power amplifier is added.

It became pretty obvious to me right through the running-in period that this was a set-up that needed a bit of careful attention if its strong points were to hold sway. I mounted it on a glass-shelved Target three-tier and began by using just the CD player and the integrated amplifier to drive a pair of Neat Petite loudspeakers, all connected by Nordost Blue Heaven cabling. Fun, forward, involving, exciting, bright, transparent, very fast. I scrawled all of these words during my very first session with the system. I also wrote that it bordered on harshness at times, grew too brittle, compressed and confused at volume and could be quite fatiguing. Over the next few days the system calmed down

quite a bit, particularly at higher levels where it was beginning to show a little more decorum, but essentially my original thoughts still seemed generally accurate. Here was a reasonably priced set-up that, with the right music was, in some respects, quite remarkable. It was blindingly fast and transparent and this along with its tautness and control gave it a really exciting edge with music that

relied on that rhythmic pulse to propel it. Tonally it was a little chilly though, but went some way towards making up for it by its splendid note control and definition. Bass too was fast and compact though it was difficult to judge its absolute extension with the Petites. It was

time to try and wring a more even-balanced performance from this system so I moved the electronics to the Naim Fraim and substituted Naim NACA5 for the Blue Heaven speaker cable. Something of a relief I thought. It may have lost a little of the fireworks and that finely etched detail but it gained enormously in sheer listenability by losing some of that breathless and relentless edge. I am not suggesting that you need to site the Exposure electronics on a Fraim to get the best out of it, merely that it is quite susceptible to support effects. I would even suggest that glass might not ultimately be the best surface, as the Exposure really does not need any additional mid/high lift, hence my preference for the more rounded and full-bodied

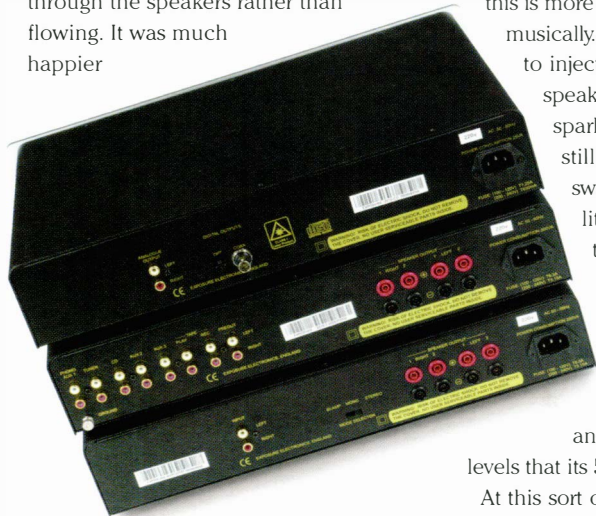
Naim cable over the leaner Nordost.

After trying the power amplifier in all three modes I found that I preferred to use it as one half of a monoblock set-up though this could change with different speakers and their individual reaction to bi-amping. The extra power bought the hoped for improvements all round and moved the calibre of the entire system up a few notches. Even at low levels the amplifier now sounded more comfortable and assured. Useable bandwidth broadened and the sense of tonality and body of the instruments was somewhat better. But the good points remained. The pace and lightness of touch, together with the relative forwardness of the presentation are ingredients for an exciting sound and this is where the Exposure combination really gained my admiration. I listen to a lot of guitar music, electric and acoustic, both live and studio-recorded, and one of the things that I really enjoyed about the Exposure set-up was its ability to



recreate that feeling of string tension and resonance. Even very expensive systems often feel over-relaxed when confronted with this sort of material. But stand as close to an acoustic guitar as the microphone and there is an edge in the air that charges the atmosphere. It comes from the lightness and responsiveness of the body, the tension and windings of the strings and the way in which the fingers or plectrum fill the wooden instrument with energy. Add the guitars unique ▶

► high-impact leading edge and the Exposure feels like a bit of a stripped down racer as it carries no artificial weight in its sound. Its ability to push the instruments into the room along with lightening responses give such music a real sense of atmosphere and anticipation. If I listened exclusively to this type of material then I would opt for the excitement of equipment like the Exposure every time. But when I tried some small scale classical pieces, choral works or even some mindless three-chord funk the experience became immediately less enjoyable as if the music was being forced through the speakers rather than flowing. It was much happier



having a nice sharp leading edge to grab hold of. There is still however that ever-present coolness to its tonal balance, a feeling that the instruments have been bleached of some of their colour. As a result the music seems less real and less engaging when sustaining instruments are to the fore.

It was time for a little detective work so I spent a few days chopping and changing components to try and get to the bottom of why I could like the system so much and yet feel so ambivalent to it five minutes later. I won't bore you by telling you all the combinations I ran through but the conclusions were interesting. Substituting the CD player bought

about the biggest change and I soon realised that the Exposure player was having a massive influence, as might be expected from a source component, on the forward nature of the sound. This is no velvety paragon of tonal sweetness but rather a very lively performer that lives on the edge. I could not argue with what it does. As far as resolution, dynamics and rhythmic ability go, it's very decent. But as for the way it does it; it needs to add weight, body and tonal breadth to its repertoire. The integrated amplifier on the other hand is certainly a more accomplished all round performer. It is still lively though but this is more successfully channelled musically. It can be relied upon to inject a bit of life into speakers that have little sparkle of their own. While still not sounding exactly sweet it remains a dynamic little bundle of energy though I am still concerned that it runs out of useable volume too quickly. Pushing the volume up leads to it growing hard and compressed at lower levels that its 50 watts would suggest.

At this sort of money the Exposure trio is competitively priced, especially the integrated. As a first serious upgrade it's an easy recommendation. Bear in mind that there are some very average sounding amplifiers out there in this price range. Designs so flat, soft and undynamic that it amazes me that anyone could find them musically rewarding. People tell me that their attraction is their smoothness but one mans smoothness is another mans absolute tedium. Certainly no one could accuse the Exposure of this and when you consider that there is a healthy next-upgrade improvement on offer in the shape of the power amplifier it makes sense. Please, please make absolutely sure that you audition them with your own speakers though. I am

not quite as keen on the CD player and feel that it needs refining. Having said that though, its bright dynamism and forward presentation make it a heady combination and I cannot help thinking that many dealers probably have a dullard floor-stander or two just waiting for a good kicking from a set-up just like the Exposure. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

CD Player

Output Level:	2V rms
Frequency Response:	20Hz-20KHz +/- 0.02dB
Digital Outputs:	Coaxial and Optical
Weight:	6 Kg.
Size (HxWxD):	80x440x300mm
Price:	£599

Integrated Amplifier

Power Output:	50W/CH 8 Ohms
Input Impedance:	Unbalanced: 10 kOhms
THD Distortion:	20Hz-20kHz 0.3%
	Typically 0.01 at 1kHz rated power
Noise:	CCIR weighted minimum -80dB
Channel Separation:	20Hz-20kHz: -80dB
Phono Card (optional):	£89
Weight:	6 Kg
Size:	90x440x310mm
Price:	£599

Power Amplifier

Power Output stereo:	60W/Ch 8 Ohms RMS
Power Output mono:	100W 8Ohms
Input Impedance:	Unbalanced 10kOhms
THD Distortion:	20Hz-20kHz 0.3%
	Typically 0.01 at 1 kHz rated power
Weight:	7 Kg
Size:	85x430x300mm
Price:	£499

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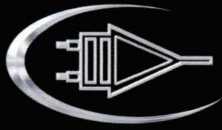
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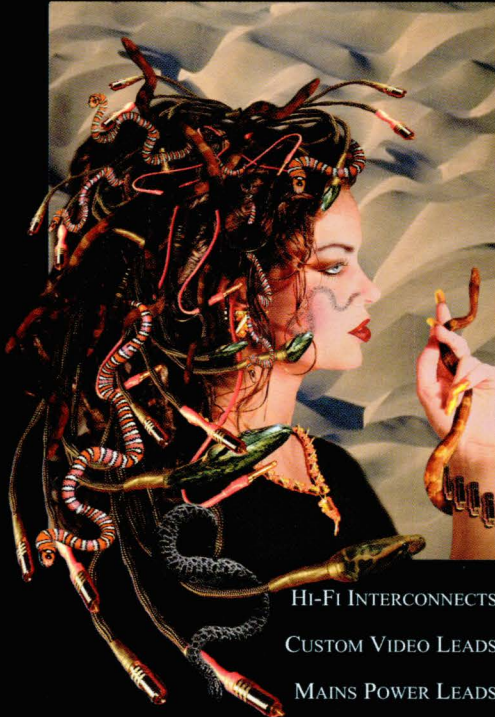
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Interconnects

The Renaissance RA-01 Amplifiers and the Western Electric 300B

by Roy Gregory

Much has been written about 300B output tubes and the expensive Western Electric version in particular (indeed, the internet might have been invented for the purpose). And, in that rarest of situations for the hi-fi industry, everybody seems to agree. Every single 300B amplifier we have tested has either arrived with the Western Electrics installed or offered as a cost option. Especially given the price (c.£300 per tube, more for matched pairs or quartets) it seemed to be sensible to discover whether this is more than simply a fashion.

The Renaissance RA-01 amps reviewed in Issue 15 arrived in standard form, fitted with Russian Electro-harmonix tubes, but offer the WE option, so it seemed like too good a chance to miss. Renaissance duly supplied a matched quartet of the expensive American bottles, beautifully presented in wooden casework and, in their own way more impressive still, individual padded boxes, complete with data sheets and warranty cards! Given that valves wear out, it's nice to know that your investment is protected.

Of course, with only one pair of amps comparing valves is fraught with difficulty. You can't just whip out one set and drop in the others stone cold. At least not if you want meaningful



results anyway. In the end I resorted to both long term listening and a series of direct comparisons after timed warm-up periods, and whilst it is nice to know that you've done things properly, as it happens I probably needn't have bothered, so obvious are the differences.

When I reviewed the Renaissance amps (fitted with the Electro-harmonix tubes) I reported a sound that majored on the space, colour and beauty in the music at the expense of authority and immediacy. Swapping in the WE 300Bs wrought a transformation in the amps' transparency, focus, body and

weight. Notes took on a solidity and concentrated sense of energy that had been entirely lacking from the original performance. With it came a subtlety and shape to notes and musical lines that lent them much greater purpose and direction. They are changes that speak

volumes about the Western Electrics' low level linearity and micro-dynamic discrimination, qualities that inject

the life and colour into music. With the WE valves

installed the music took on a vibrant, vivid quality helped by their superb leading edge definition. Notes sound cleaner and start much quicker. Much of the listening for the structured comparisons was carried out using Cat Stevens' *Tea For The Tillerman* (Island 842 352-1), a superb recording that majors in these very attributes, through the astonishingly clear window provided by the Reference 3A MM de Capo speakers. It's a combination that made the differences especially obvious, but the extended listening with a whole variety of music had already made the differences pretty clear. Clear enough to throw the original review's conclusions into doubt. Yes, they accurately report the amps' performance as supplied, but the improvement that comes with the WE 300Bs (as well as the



► increase in price) almost constitutes a new model in its own right.

The changes are readily appreciated and musically important. Despite the cost involved I'd have to say that they represent excellent value for money, especially in the context of the Renaissance amplifiers, where they impact directly on the amps' perceived weaknesses with lesser glassware. Whether the differences will be as obvious or important in the context of other amplifiers I can't say, but on the evidence of this experience it is definitely something

that any 300B user should investigate. The RA-01 is a push-pull design which means that tube matching also contributes directly to the performance aspects I've described. Perhaps it benefits from a double whammy? Whatever the reason, the results are spectacular enough to warrant Western Electric 300Bs going straight to the top of the Renaissance owner's upgrade list. Life span is reportedly excellent (one experienced manufacturer put it at three to four times that of lesser varieties), which helps to offset the cost, but the

benefits are such that mere practical concerns hardly seem relevant.

For once the hype is to be believed. The Western Electric 300Bs delivered everything that rumour promised. ►+

For further information on prices and availability, contact your amplifier manufacturer or any supplier of high quality valves, such as:

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Tel. (44) (0)1634 848500

The cd-str5 Isolation Feet

by David Ayers

In the world of accessory feet there are a number of approaches that can be taken. Energy grounding, e.g. spikes, lossy coupling, e.g. spongy feet, and isolation. It is into the latter category that the cd-str5 feet fall. An unusual design, they are constructed with a fairly large outer ring, through which is threaded a non-stretch string in a criss-cross pattern forming a kind of spider's web, in the centre of which sits a small plastic bed, inset with a rubber disc. The thread is also attached to a nut and bolt which can then be used to tension the whole affair according to the weight of the equipment used. This adjustment also allows the equipment to be levelled

where the weight distribution is uneven. Hi-fi-accessories.com can also supply metal discs and spikes to replace the rubber insert, but these were not included for review. In most cases I opted to use the cd-str5's under the equipment's own feet, but in the case of my Trichord CD transport which has long since had the original feet removed, I used Russ Andrews oak cones pointy side down.

The cd-str5 feet are also suitable for use under loudspeakers, and will support weights of up to 100Kg, making them suitable for use under even the largest. In the time available I was unable to test them under mine, as the footprint of the base plinth on

my speakers is too small to allow wide enough spacing of the cd-str5 feet to make them stable. In the end I decided to use the feet under my CD player and also under my Alecto Mono-blocks. The former had not performed synergistically with the otherwise excellent Ringmat products reviewed in Issue 14, and the Alectos, due to their unusual design, could also not be used with the Ringmat domes. One question I wanted to answer was, would this mix and match approach work, or would it, as in the case of cables, cause more problems than solutions.

With light equipment, setting up takes only a few minutes. Simply ►

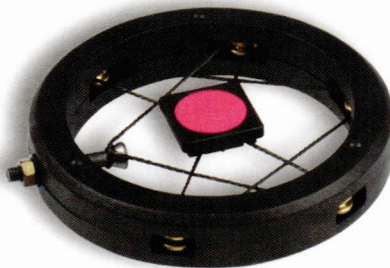
► place the equipment on top of the feet, and use the tensioning screws to level it. As I had used only three of the feet, I only need to adjust one to level the transport. A further tuning process can be carried out by varying the tension in all the feet, and apparently an optimum tension can be found for each item so supported. In the case of the transport I found that once I had it level, the factory settings suited the player best anyway, any more tension and the sound became slightly constricted.

I started out by playing 'Charlie Big Potato' from Skunk Anansie's *Post Orgasmic Chill* CD, a favourite test track of mine. With cones under the transport this track is firmly rooted in the stop start of the rhythm guitar, the speed and precision is there, but the overall sound is a little harsh and two dimensional. Also, on the denser sections of the track, the soundstage loses separation, making it difficult to hear each instrumentalist. Having said that, the sense of performance was never undermined, and that is something I value highly.

With the cd-str5 feet in place the track was transformed from a 2D picture to a real 3D experience occurring in a real (or rather studio created) acoustic. Without losing the rhythmic precision, the band had noticeably relaxed. On the denser passages the instrumental separation was maintained, but, joy of joys, without losing the sense of a band working together as a unit. A layer of grain was also removed from the mid

and treble, removing a certain 'gritted teeth' quality to the vocal and guitars. A better balance was brought to the bass and kick drum, separating them much more clearly, and allowing the bass player's sterling work to be much better appreciated.

Moving on to Muse's magnificent *Origin Of Symmetry* CD was very informative. This album features vast dynamics, but when I was playing the CD for RG previously we both commented that the system seemed to be holding back. At the



time I think we both suspected the CD had been compressed.

Not so, with the cd-str5 feet in place, suddenly the crescendos bloomed into full flower, the jumps from quiet to loud were unrestrained, as was my jumping off the sofa in shock (I like it LOUD). At the same time the resolution had increased enormously, once again mostly due to the reduction in grain. None of this was at the expense of any softening of the transients or rounding off of treble. In fact cymbals were now brought out of the mix much more clearly, with a considerably more natural

decay pattern.

Used under the Alecto power amps, the cd-str5 feet brought out further improvements. In this case it is not so much an improvement to the structure of the music as a cleaning of the aural window by another reduction in the level of grain in the treble and mid-range. In other words, having got the performance right by using the cd-str5 feet under the CD transport, using the feet under the power amps let me hear more of that 'rightness'.

It's worth noting that during this listening session I was using the Ringmat feet under the DAC and the feet and domes under the pre-amp. In my system this combination gives a remarkably balanced

performance, showing that unlike cables, accessory equipment supports can be mixed to good effect.

I was very pleased with the cd-str5 feet and feel they are worth further investigation, especially as loudspeaker supports, so expect a few follow up comments in a coming issue. ➤

For further Information:

Price: £45 for 3, £59 for 4, including p&tp.

Distributor:

Hi-fi-accessories.com

Tel. (44) (0)1568 708739

E-mail. cd-str5@talk21.com

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Using The Ringmat Feet and Domes As Speaker Supports

by Dave Ayers

Back in the mists of time the earth was flat - truth. Why was it true? Because everybody knew it, and something that everyone knows has to be true. Now the Earth may have miraculously rounded itself off, and the dragons at the edge of the world may be no more, but we still have our own truths that everyone knows. Look back to the late seventies, when everybody (in the UK) knew that the Linn LP12 was the best turntable that anyone could buy. Around this time, any other turntable was also ran as far as the press was concerned, and by inference so was any other turntable manufacturer. The only chance for such a company to survive was to produce 'me too' products, meaning belt drive, suspended sub-chassis, etc. etc. Fast forward to the present, and very few of the worlds high-end turntables utilise a suspended sub-chassis, even if belt drive is still de riguer. The fact is that no-one has found the undisputed magic formula for turntable design, and each approach has its benefits and disadvantages, so, as in cooking, the end result depends not so much on the base ingredients, but on the skill of the chef.

And the purpose of this preamble? To discuss another one of those 'truths',

i.e. that the only way to make speakers sound good is to spike them to the floor (via a stand in the case of smaller speakers). Before you dismiss this as the ramblings of a demented idiot, it's worth noting that not only is there a groundswell of designers out in Europe who are eschewing the now traditional spiked approach, but also here in the UK, Max Townshend has been making air suspended speaker platforms for some time. In fact RG and DD favourably reviewed a system using these platforms way back in Issue 3. Now we have Ringmat advocating the use of their feet and domes under speakers, as well as hi-fi-accessories.com suggesting that their cd-str5 feet, reviewed on page 100, can also be successfully used as speaker supports.

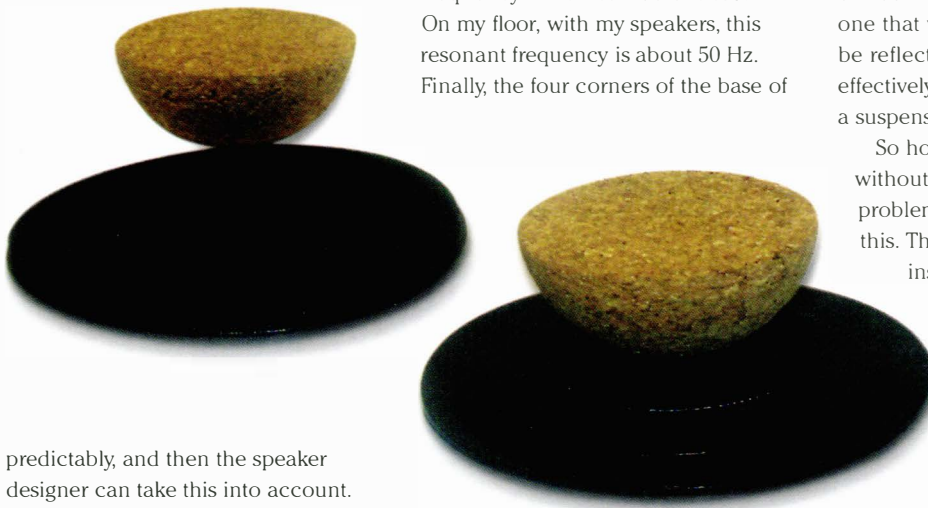
So what's going on? Have these people suddenly taken leave of their senses? After all, everybody knows that the only way to support speakers is on spikes. In order to understand this thinking it is necessary to wind the clock back to those flat earth days of yore, when the LP12 was the king of all it surveyed, and when the discussion of support furniture was limited to the turntable and Ivor Tiefenbrun recommended that the

LP12 be used atop a light coffee table. In those days floorstanding speakers would have plastic feet which would rest directly on your carpet or floor. You would rarely even find any adjustment for levelling. Bookshelf speakers were just that, and speaker stands were viewed, in the main, as a method of raising the tweeter to ear height. Speakers atop such stands would often wobble about frighteningly at the merest touch.

In an ideal speaker system, the only parts that would move are the driver diaphragms. Unfortunately, due to Newton's Law, every time the cone moves forward the equal and opposite reaction moves the driving magnet backwards and vice versa. This energy is then transmitted through the basket to the baffle, and hence the rest of the speaker. The air inside the cabinet also vibrates, passing further energy into the structure. If this energy is allowed to move the cabinet backwards and forwards then it will rob the speaker of information and energy, reducing definition and clarity.

Spiking speakers and speaker stands is a very predictable way of controlling the interface between the speaker and its environment. Speakers sat on carpets, with or

▶ without stands, will move about in an undefined manner. The resonant frequency of speaker wobble on carpet cannot be predicted as no two carpets are the same. Spikes pass through the carpet, sitting directly on the floor. They can be adjusted to remove wobble, and the small surface area of the spike creates a huge psi, which in theory will improve the situation still further. The use of feet or spikes between a speaker cabinet and its stand (or the floor) also gives the bottom of the cabinet room to flex



predictably, and then the speaker designer can take this into account.

Now it is an immutable fact in our physical world that energy cannot be lost. It can be transmitted and it can be converted from one form into another, but not lost. So these are your two options when trying to deal with unwanted energy. In the case of spiking, the theory is that it will allow energy transmission into the physical structure of the floor, removing it from the cabinet and out of harms way, but energy transmission is easier said than done, especially at interface points such as the contact point between the spike and the floor. In fact you are just as likely to get the energy reflected back into the system as transmitted out of it if you are not careful. Try hitting a concrete block with a small metal hammer to see what I mean, not only does it bounce off, but the resulting

feedback will vibrate up the handle into your hand and up your arm. Apply this to a speaker and you can easily see that the results are certainly going to be unfortunate.

Spikes provide a better energy interface to wooden floors by virtue of the fact that they tend to bury themselves into the surface, forming a friction bond between the two. This has the unfortunate side effect with floorstanders that the speaker will be effectively sprung by the floorboards, and every spring has a resonant frequency which can be excited. On my floor, with my speakers, this resonant frequency is about 50 Hz. Finally, the four corners of the base of

a speaker cabinet are not necessarily the ideal points at which to drain the energy within the system.

The alternative method is to try and convert the energy into a less harmful form, typically heat. This is the thinking behind the sand filled cabinet walls advocated in the past by Gilbert Briggs and others. Sand is a great medium for converting movement energy into heat via friction. One of the major problems with such an approach is that the cabinets are incredibly difficult to produce, and thus very expensive. Also it does not stop the entire cabinet moving in response to vibrational energy, although its extra weight would reduce such movement. Thus

the effect tends to be to concentrate resonant energy as much as to dissipate it. I, for one, won't be holding my breath waiting to see an affordable product using such an approach to hit the high street.

So to sum up, spiking speakers may stop gross cabinet movement, but the solution is not without problems of its own, and it's these problems that the dissenters are trying to solve. In the case of the Ringmat feet and domes, the solution is to couple the speakers to the stand or floor using a lossy mechanism, one that will not allow energy to be reflected back into the system, effectively providing the speaker with a suspension of its own.

So how do we use such a system without reacquiring all the pre-spike problems? I have strong views about this. The feet and domes should be

inserted between the speaker cabinet and support, and this means different things for floorstand and standmount speakers.

For floorstanders, if you have no carpet, and your floor is fairly level, then

you can simply place the feet on the floor with the domes flat side down on top. The speaker will then sit directly on top, and levelling can be achieved by slight repositioning of the feet under the speaker to redistribute the weight. The speakers will wobble, but the frequency should be in the range 5-10 Hz, meaning that it shouldn't be excited by the speaker output. If you have carpet, or an uneven floor, then a plinth is going to be necessary, which should be spiked as normal. This then provides a stable platform for the feet to sit on. The spike problems discussed above will not be a problem, as the amount of energy actually transmitted into the plinth will be minimal.

For stand mounted speakers, the stand should be left spiked to the

► floor as normal, the feet and domes are placed on the top plate of the stand (after removing any upward facing spikes), and the speaker should sit on top of these. The principle is exactly the same as before, we want to produce a very stable platform, but with a clearly specified amount of de-coupling between the speaker cabinet and the stand. Bear in mind that this isn't going to work with skeletal stands, as the feet must have enough surface area to sit correctly.

As luck would have it, the Audiovector floorstanding speakers I use already have a spiked plinth. As originally supplied, this plinth is firmly screwed to the bottom of the cabinet, but with spacers separating the two by about 1 cm. This was ideal for me, as I have a carpeted and very uneven floor, so I unscrewed the plinths from the bottom of the cabinets, removed the spacers, and replaced them with the Ringmat feet and domes. I used four of each per speaker, as the unusual shape of the Audiovectors made the whole system unstable when I only used three. The whole operation only took me around two hours, although I had to rope my son in when it came to actually siting the speakers on the domes.

I wasn't too sure what to expect when I settled back to listen. I hadn't reread RG's experience of the Townshend platforms deliberately so I wouldn't be influenced by the article. First up on the system, a bit of Skunk Anansie and 'Charlie Big Potato'. This track has a staccato rhythm that is very hard to reproduce. To be honest I was disappointed, the bass drum lacked impact and a level of excitement seemed to have been stripped away. What I hadn't bargained for is that the feet and domes needs to run in, which in the case of this application seems to mean that they need to settle under the weight of the speaker cabinets. Left alone for a couple of days, and after checking the speakers were still

level, I tried again. Now the bass drum had impact aplenty, but the presentation had changed. Instead of being all skin and thud, it now had weight, timbre, and decay. In fact it was like the difference between using a kick drum with and without a sandbag inside (sandbags are often used to deaden kick drums for live performances). In fact the separation between bass drum and bass guitar was much more marked, each floating free, making the rhythm much less mechanical, and far more like real musicians playing together. However this was not at the expense of the tightness of the rhythm section, which still stopped and started in a pinhead. Elsewhere in the spectrum a layer of aural grit had been removed, adding sweetness to Skin's voice plus a layer of acoustic that had gone previously unnoticed. Also some of the edginess to the rhythm guitar had been removed, which could be perceived by some as robbing the track of a little excitement, but I felt that the presentation was truer to the original, and this kind of false excitement generated by having a few rough and ready leading edges to a system can be very wearing on a long listening session.

Moving across to vinyl, 'Backstreet Slide' from the Richard and Linda Thompson Album *Shoot Out The Lights* was an even better illustration of the benefits of the de-coupling. On this track the kick drum is very weighty, and fairly prominent in the mix and it can be overpowering on an unbalanced system. Add to that Thompson's fierce guitar and Linda's vocal, and you have a recipe for a serious headache. Up till now my system always felt on the edge with this song, the guitar always a little shrill and course, Linda's vocal thin and recessed, the kick drum thudding out slightly removed from the rest of the action. With the Ringmat products in place, suddenly there was

coherence. The kick drum given more depth whilst being reigned back, letting it rejoin the rest of the instruments, Richard's guitar was given more depth, losing its sting without losing the attack. Linda stepped forward to take her place as lead vocalist.

But, and there is a but, this is one of those situations where a short A/B comparison could lead you to the conclusion that the use of the Ringmat products is detrimental to the sound. By evening out the energy spectrum, and removing the edginess from the system, a quick comparison may prove disappointing. This is akin to the way that brighter speakers can appeal on the shop floor. However, over the long term it becomes apparent that in fact there is nothing missing, and that what has been removed shouldn't have been there in the first place.

The Ringmat domes and feet come in at around £115 per complete set (4), and you will need two sets for a pair of speakers. Once they have settled in, no further adjustment is required. But bear in mind that the feet will only support a maximum of 22kg*. There is an extra heavy duty version on the way though. In the context of my system, this is an absolute bargain. Since using them I have harboured no desire to go back to the prior arrangement, so score another one for the de-coupling brigade. ➤

* For ideal results.

For further Information:

Prices, Ringmat HD feet:

Set of 3 - £67.50 Set of 4 - £85.00

Prices, Ringmat Domes:

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Garrick Loudspeaker Stands

by Roy Gregory

Ignorance must be bliss, otherwise somebody would have actually worked out what it is that a loudspeaker stand contributes to the sound of the speaker it supports. I mean really worked out. None of that trial and error "Oh this speaker works best on that stand" kind of thing, but a rigorous investigation of the interface/interaction between cabinet and the outside world.

Still, they haven't and I'm not sure I've got the time, equipment or understanding. Looks like we'll have to settle for a few basic observations (and they'll upset a few appecarts, I'm sure!).

Speaker cabinets consist of a box containing moving parts. Those moving parts might not be very big or heavy, but they're moving fast, and that generates a lot of energy (the stuff you hear). But there's just as much energy going backwards as forwards. Just stand behind an electrostatic if you don't believe me. That energy has to go somewhere, and that somewhere is into the structure of the box.

That makes the box resonate, and because the box is connected to the driver baskets, it makes the drivers shake, which is of course how they generate sound. Consequently, the driver "hears" a delayed version of its own output via the box it lives in, which modifies the signal it's currently producing. That's why we talk about being able to hear the box – and why open baffle speakers suffer less from this particular problem (but don't worry, they've got other issues which are just as problematic).

Speaker designers are aware of all this (at least we hope so), and take various steps to avoid or ameliorate the problem. They can fill their cabinets with various materials to help absorb or break-up some of that energy. They can make the cabinet very light so that it dissipates energy very quickly (as heat). They can make it very stiff, so that its resonant frequency is pushed up to a higher point where it might be easier to deal with (or at least less audible). They can use

constrained layer techniques to absorb that energy into the cabinet material itself (as heat), or in a variation of that theme they can construct the cabinet out of different materials to help spread and dissipate the dominant resonance. But all these approaches have one thing in common – they are expensive and complex to execute. That's fine of course if you are talking about expensive speakers where the budget is there to accommodate those techniques, but for most of us that simply isn't the case, and fancy cabinets only really start to make an appearance at fairly elevated price levels. Let's just mention Wilson Audio, JM Labs Utopia, Rockport and the Celestion SL700 to underline that point. You get my drift.

You'll notice that I haven't mentioned high-mass cabinets. That really is a non-starter. Why? Well, let's put it this way: the only speaker I know that applies that approach with any success at all is the Kharma Exquisite Reference ►

► 1b. It's large (around the size of a telephone kiosk), takes half a dozen people to move it and it isn't even full range. And even this behemoth actually reinforces the mass with multiple constrained layers. Read my lips: there is no way you can apply enough mass to absorb the energy and stop the cabinet shaking. Remember that because it's important.

Back in the real world, the rest of us are probably looking at plywood, chipboard (worse) or MDF (worst of all). If we're lucky, the designer might have the budget to indulge in asymmetrical cabinet panels and/or a bit of bracing to stiffen things up. The problem, as always, is that each additional measure the designer takes eats further into his budget, and gets spent on invisible benefits. Especially at the lower end of the market, sales pressure dictates nice, visible USPs (Unique Selling Points) and that dictates a disproportionate expenditure on drivers and the like.

The bottom line here is that your speaker cabinets are going to vibrate. The cheaper the speaker the more likely they are to shake their booty, in or out of time to the music. The question is, what happens when you sit them on a stand? It interferes with that process. It could improve things, it could make them worse, but it's sure as hell going to change them. Traditionally, a stand is supposed to hold a speaker still. Well, we know that isn't going to happen, so we'd better start worrying about what happens to all that energy when a stand sticks its oar into the equation.

Generally speaking, stands come in two distinct varieties: lightweight open frames or hollow, mass loaded columns. Each has its advocates, and its problems. Light rigidly coupled frames should take energy fed to

them by the speaker cabinet and dissipate it as heat. Of course, in vibrating themselves they will also feed energy back into the cabinet and do so as spikes at particular frequencies. Consequently they will tend to reduce overall cabinet vibration, but will also alter its spectrum, and thus



the spectral balance of the speaker. Mass loaded stands are more efficient energy converters, dumping more of the cabinet's vibration, but having a much more concentrated resonant frequency of their own. This tends to have a thickening and slurring effect on bass timing, although adding an attractive sense of weight. You pay your money, you choose your compromise, but whichever way you go you are introducing an unpredictable element into the designer's carefully considered balancing act. That's why you

should always start with the manufacturer's stand if they offer one. Of course, they could have got it wrong...

Which introduction is an extremely roundabout route to the subject of the Garrick stands, which you might have noticed cropping up in a number of reviews recently. I've been using them for a while now, with some considerable success. As you can see from the picture, they are a stone design, which means that they are going to behave rather differently. The stone in question is Limber an extremely fine grain, pale coloured and lightly figured sedimentary rock from Egypt. Fortunately it doesn't have the layered grain of slate, or the sheering problems that have plagued stands made from that material. The Garricks are also a bonded design, so no welds mean no stress risers to generate energy spikes, and no bolts mean no pinch points or resonant patterns between the parts. The other benefit of the material is that it creates

a near homogenous structure (glue aside). That means, that unlike a filled stand that consists of a fast, resonant skin and a deadening filling, the Garrick stand dissipates a broad-band of energy very evenly across ►

► its entire structure.

Practically speaking, the Garricks have a smallish footprint, although they gain considerable stability from the thickness of the base plate. That's spiked of course, with four good quality spikes. The column is tapered which helps lighten the visual impression, if not the physical load, and the top plate is of a similar thickness to the base. As all Garrick stands are made to order, dimensions, shape and design are down to the user, although a range of standard options act as a price guide. If you want something really different then Garrick are happy to provide, as their brochure makes abundantly clear.

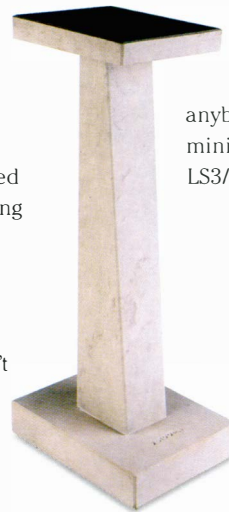
By way of comparison I had a pair of ageing HBS1s, old but still one of the best open frame designs I've used, as well as a couple of heavy weight columns of bolted or welded construction. And as I've been using the Garricks for quite some time I've had the opportunity to hear how this stable of stands has worked under a variety of speakers. The results are remarkably consistent and, not surprisingly, follow the broad outline above. The open frame stands inject energy into the bass, lifting and pushing the lower frequencies by truncating and concentrating the energy there. That dynamic enhancement comes at the expense of a lightened mid-band and grainy, spiky treble. The

metal heavyweights smoothed out the treble, filled out the mid and brought a heaviness and lack of mobility to the lower frequencies. Swings and roundabouts, depending on the speaker involved and your own personal preferences, although neither (despite the best attempts of a designer working on a matching speaker) are going to be either accurate or ideal.

The Garricks offer a significantly smoother top to bottom performance. Bass is both more even and more extended. That makes for more natural weight and proportion to bass lines, making pitch, timing and emphasis far easier to follow. So bass is better in every respect than the other stands I have in house. However, the benefits don't stop there. The clean clear foundation extends up into and opens out the mid-band. The result is a nice stable soundstage with good transparency and focus. Really good recordings like the Sonora disc *Music For Violin And Guitar* will deliver solid, dimensional and realistically proportioned images. Accurate soundstaging is one of the first casualties of poor stands: bigger, deeper or wider quite possibly, but not more accurate. The Garricks aren't perfect. They exhibit a rounded treble response, smoothed

and robbed of some energy and air, but that's a small price to pay for their other strengths, and there are circumstances in which it's a welcome aberration.

The even energy dissipation of the Garrick stands, aided by the lossy interface of traditional Blutak* certainly delivers on the promise of better sound from compact speakers – at a price. The Garricks are more expensive than any of my stable of alternatives, as well as being sonically superior. More expensive metal designs might challenge the stone stands, but not in my experience. Then there are also the various “soft options” available, although these tend to be fairly pricey and their unstable nature can be problematic in certain situations, particularly where smallish speakers are concerned. With their bespoke service and array of options, the Garricks should be seriously considered by anybody using high quality mini-monitors, from LS3/5as upwards.



Reference 3A suggested a special pattern of Blutak between their speakers and stands: four blobs in the corners with a front to back strip down the middle. It worked too, on their speakers and a couple of others I tried, cleaning up the mid-bass and opening out the midrange. Worth a try under any speaker, what have you got to lose?

Price: From £409

Manufacturer:

Garrick

Contact Sean Stevenson

Tel. 01202 591922

Fax. 01202 591923

Net. www.garrickstone.com

The Voodoo Airtek Air Isolation Platform

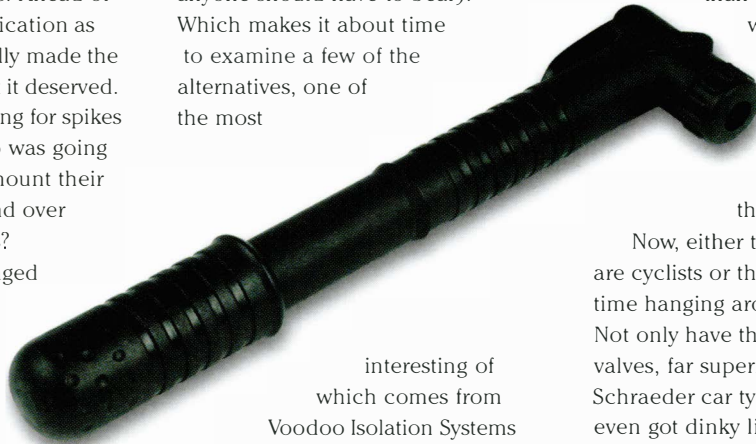
by Roy Gregory

Max Townshend has never been short of good ideas or the marketing nous to back them up. Just witness the Seismic Sink, the brilliantly named and only slightly less brilliantly conceived grand-daddy of air isolation platforms. Ahead of its time in terms of application as well as price it never really made the initial dent in the market it deserved. With everyone else looking for spikes and rigid coupling, who was going to go out on a limb to mount their equipment on pricey and over complex wobble-boards?

But times have changed and so have peoples' budgets when it comes to isolation. Later, simpler and more affordable versions of the original Seismic Sink have broadened its appeal to the point where there are even special versions to float your speakers. And with that wider appeal has come a crop of imitators. After all, the basic idea isn't that complicated: simply sandwich a bicycle inner tube between two flat surfaces and hey-presto. There's nothing to stop you having a go yourself, the combination of a paving slab and inner tube enjoying brief popularity a few years ago. The trouble is that it's big, bulky and ugly, all things the current Seismic Sinks avoid.

Having said that, it's not all

sweetness and light. Sleeker than the units of old they still can't claim to be things of beauty, whilst even now they suffer more deflationary moments than a Manchester City fan (and that's a heavier cross than anyone should have to bear). Which makes it about time to examine a few of the alternatives, one of the most



interesting of which comes from Voodoo Isolation Systems and is dubbed the Airtek.

Quite sensibly what Voodoo have done is looked at the Seismic Sink and set out to eliminate its weaknesses. On the whole they've done a pretty thorough job. First comes the structure itself, which eliminates the steel of the original, along with its attendant sonic and finishing problems, replacing it with a mixture of plywood and MDF, even down to the four oak dome feet. The standard Airtek also uses a pair of inner-tubes rather than the single item on the Townshend version. Whilst that makes for two valves it also allows levelling of products with asymmetric weight distribution, like a lot of valve

amps, often the units which benefit most from improved isolation. (There's also a three tube version to allow for levelling in both planes, for perfectionists and turntable owners.) The end result is thicker than a Seismic Sink, but with the option of an oak veneer finish at no extra cost, offers a more acceptable appearance than the slimmer unit.

Now, either the Voodoo guys are cyclists or they spend too much time hanging around in bike shops. Not only have they opted for Presta valves, far superior to the awful Schraeder car type, but they've even got dinky little bullet shaped valve covers. These are not only better performers when it comes to keeping air in, it's far easier to regulate letting small amounts out. Then there's the dinky mini-pump supplied for inflation. It's smaller air volume makes inflating in prescribed steps far easier, although I'm not sure I'd leave it clipped to the unit's back side (I guess that free frame mount was just too good to ignore!). And if that isn't enough, then what about that dodgy purple anodising on the valve caps, a taste violation that's also infected the company logo. Sure-fire indicator of a bike-tart if ever there was one!

So, to sum-up, we have an



▶ operationally and aesthetically superior take on an established theme. The question is, does it deliver the sonic goods as well? Absolutely. I used the Airtek under a variety of equipment, including valve pre-amps and CD players, but the biggest difference it made was under the



Klyne phono stage. In case you missed the review, the Klyne is supplied with its own isolation system in the shape of three elastomer balls that sit in sockets cut into the heavy damping base. Substituting the Airtek for the balls between the Klyne and the RDC shelf it had been sitting on produced a significant improvement in the sound. Playing 'Fascinatin' Rhythm' from the Ella Fitzgerald *George and Ira Gershwin Songbook* the benefits were obvious from the opening notes. The drum and cymbal work is more coherent, locked into a single space to the rear left of the stage, as is the upright bass, each of whose notes is more secure in its pitch, placement and shape. As with most air suspension systems dynamics are initially less obvious, but listen longer and you realise that they start at a lower level and are much more realistically proportioned.

That, and the more sophisticated timing, makes the most of Ella's sublime phrasing and the carefully scaled brass tuttis. The combined effect is to make the song really

swing, making perfect sense of the slower tempo set by Ella.

At the other end of the spectrum P J Harvey's *Stories From The City, Stories From The Sea* blossoms into its full mesmeric beauty. Repeated guitar riffs weave a complexly fascinating backdrop to the burgeoning beauty of Polly Jean's voice. What can sound edgy and insistent without the Airtek makes perfect, beautiful sense with the platform in place. It's not a subtle difference, and it's one that robs

tracks like 'This Is Love' of none of their raw power. On the contrary, the increased depth and access enhance their impact and presence, especially when PJ goes all 'Ray Of Light'.

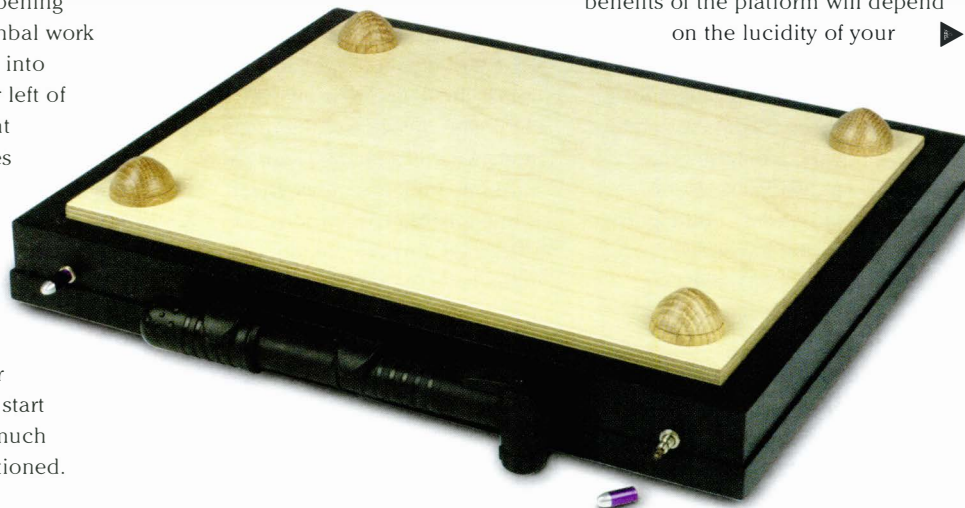
The ability to separate the tonal character and identity of individual instruments has always been an air suspension strength but I think the Airtek takes it to new levels. I don't

have a current Seismic Sink for direct comparison (that's on its way)

but the Voodoo unit is especially impressive in this regard. Brass is a particular beneficiary,

with individual instruments taking on a naturally convincing identity, whether played loud or soft. The muted backing on the Gershwin records is a thing of genuine beauty. It's tempting to point to the all wood construction but that sort of conclusion needs a little more listening.

It's this spatial, tonal and temporal naturalness that typifies the effect of the Airtek. It divorces the soundstage from the plane of your speakers, the performers from the grip of your electronics. It helps you forget about the effect of the system, allowing you to enjoy the effect of the platform. Of course, the benefits of the platform will depend on the lucidity of your ▶




► set-up, but then, if you get no benefit that tells you something else entirely.

As well as the two and three tube platforms, Voodoo offer speaker platforms and a custom service to accommodate larger or unusually shaped equipment. About the only serious suggestion that I can offer is that three feet might be better than four. In fact, given that the oak cones are mounted with their own screws, drilling six holes (or even

eight) in the underside of the plywood base would allow users to arrange the cones as best suits their purpose.

Do I recommend the Voodoo Airtek? At £180 (plus carriage, \$200 for the three tube version) with a 14 day money back guarantee I don't really see how you can go wrong. Like all such devices its application will depend on circumstances, but I'd give the

Airtek a much better than average chance of success. Try it, see if you agree. 

For further information:

Voodoo Isolation Systems

Tel. (44)(0)1643-822128

Fax. (44)(0)1643-851351

E-mail. Voodootek@hotmail.com

More on the Bryston 14B-ST

by *Chris Binns*


For reasons that will become clear in due course, I have managed to hang on to the Bryston 14B-ST for considerably longer than the normal (generous) time allocated for review. To say I was reluctant to let it go would be something of an understatement; despite using it almost every day for several months it never failed to surprise me in one way or another. In the original review I suggested that the Bryston did everything that I would expect a good solid state amp to do, in retrospect that would seem to be damning it with faint praise. So I will now qualify that by saying that I have come across precious few products that do fulfil that criteria.

I freely admit that the concept of almost unlimited power output is an attractive one – all else being equal, which of course it never is. With the 14B-ST this manifests itself in the way one would expect: tremendous control at the bottom end, and a bass

performance that is incredibly tight and precise. OK, so there are plenty of big power amps that can boast this, but the Bryston manages to preserve the timing of the music in a fashion that most other amps do not. Then there is the dynamic range – again normally the forte of muscular amplification, but it is important to distinguish between playing music at high average levels and the ability to respond to musical dynamics. One of the most interesting points about the 14B is that despite the enormous power reserves, you do not have to play music loudly, the musical dynamics are available at whatever listening level you choose.

A cautionary tale – the large amount of power available does not come without a degree of responsibility. One Saturday afternoon while I was out, the house experienced a power cut. There is a little switch at the back of the Bryston that allows it to become fully operational on the application of

mains, this had been inadvertently moved, probably while connecting leads. My pre-amplifier is normally left permanently on, and unfortunately has no timed relay in the output... The 14B had dutifully amplified a few volts of DC to fatal levels, and I returned to a room full of acrid smoke coming from my loudspeakers in their death throws. You did not want to know me that weekend.

But what really distinguishes the Bryston from so many other big power amps is the incredibly tactile presentation. It does not have the massive sound stage that my big Primary valve amps can provide, and a quick comparison would suggest that it is not as immediately communicative, damn it, not as comfortable to listen to. But the Bryston has something, or rather a lack of it that reminded me distinctly of the Lavardin IS. The only way I can describe it is by suggesting that the background from which 

► instruments appear is somehow blacker – as if there is less muck filling the gaps. The result is that music sounds more intuitive and easy to follow, while the secondary benefit is an amazing resolution and detail. The similarity with the Lavardin is not entirely coincidental, as they both share a development that revolves around the elimination of distortion. In the case of the French company they are specifically looking at the time domain and memory effects of the circuitry, and although Bryston

are not so specific in their research one would imagine there is some common ground.

Either way, the result is quite captivating, and not necessarily with the kind of music one would associate with a large power amplifier. Given that your average rock/pop type music benefited greatly from the cracking bass control, more often than not I was captivated by solo instruments, voice and string quartets where the sheer cleanliness and musical dynamics of the sound made it so pleasurable.

So, yes it has gone, and I really miss it. But one way or another, I hope to get it back, even if it means considerable financial rearrangements to the tune of £4950. I really don't think the asking price is a lot to pay for performance like this – it really is that good. ➤

For further information:

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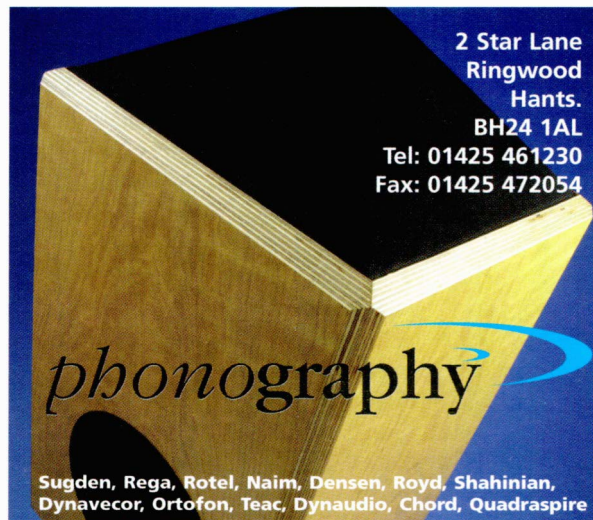
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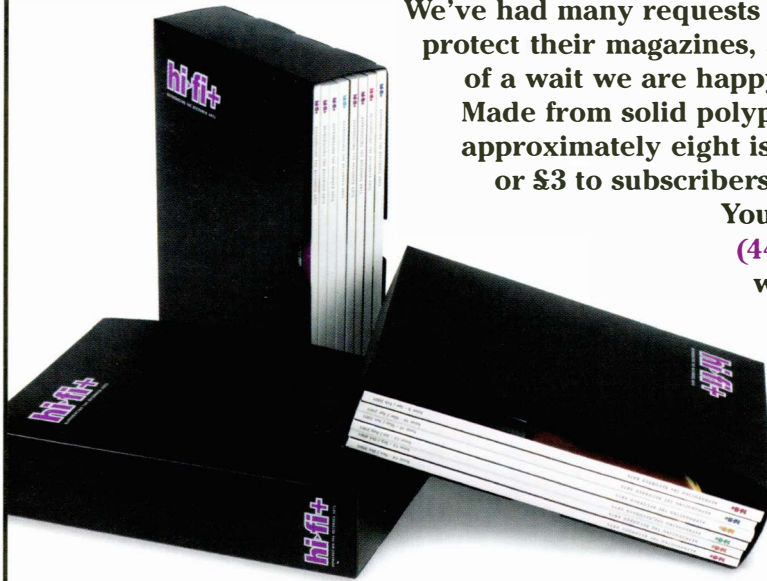


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Record Reviews

How To Read Them














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, Simon Groome.


Key to Icons

-  CD
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-  XRCD
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-  120g LP
-  150g LP
-  180g LP
-  Availability As S/H LP
-  Vinyl Double Album




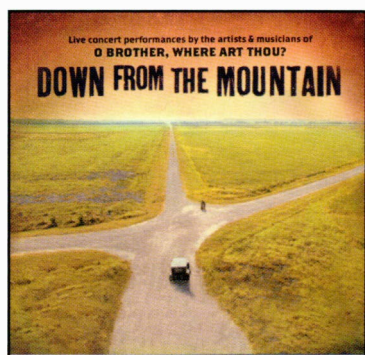
Christy Moore

This is the Day

Columbia 503 255-2 

"King Puck" is back running a soft brogue across eleven folk songs suffused with an infectious and uncommon idealism. Of these, nine are covers from the pens of gifted fellow travellers like Jackson Browne (How Long), Dan Penn (Cry Like A Man) and Mike Waterson (A Stitch In Time). All have anecdotal liner notes accompanying them, which goes some way to explaining why they receive Moore's personal seal of approval. Most memorable, though, have to be those written in an overtly political vein. Revolution and revolutionaries, human rights and human resolve have long provided sustenance to his vision. Here, close to home, it was his own requiem to a murdered Veronica Guerin (Veronica) with it's assertion that "... you'll never silence her / Your story will be written / Her spirit won't rest easy / Until her job is done". Further afield, an evocative rendition of Arlo Guthrie's moving tribute to singer and activist, Victor Jara, recounts how he was caged, tortured and finally executed for his beliefs under the Pinochet regime. Then there is Companeros – a song Moore tells us he learnt Thirty Two years ago from the singing of the writer Ewen McColl. Christy Moore, whether you accept his beliefs or not, should at least be admired for an unwavering strength in those convictions, and for the intelligence and beautiful craftsmanship found in the music that clothes them.

RP
RECORDING 
MUSIC



Alison Krauss, Emmylou Harris, Gillian Welch et al.

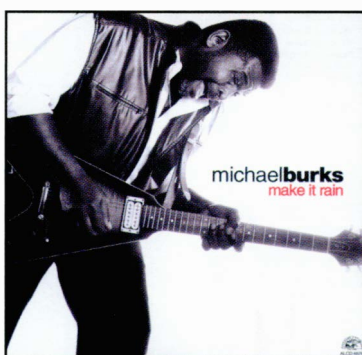
Down From The Mountain

Lost Highway 088 170 221-2

Having praised Gillian Welch's contribution to the *O Brother Where Art Thou* soundtrack in the last issue, here's the soundtrack itself – sort of. In fact it's the album of the concert of the bands playing the music from the soundtrack. So, now that's clear we can get on to the content. Welch contributes two tracks (neither of which actually appear in the movie but fit its feel so well that show producers the Coen brothers insisted she sing them) as well as backing and accompaniment to Emmylou. However, her piece de resistance is the closing duet with Alison Krauss where she introduces some much needed traditional grit to Krauss' often overly sweet tone. In fact, those familiar with the smoothly manicured studio delivery of Krauss are in for a treat (or a shock if they belong to her middle of the country road fan base). The music on this album is pure, traditional folk country, heavily laced with blue grass: the music of the depression. Blue it may be but depressing it's not. This is music from people with little else to lift them. It's the deepest roots of what is now known as country and stands in stark contrast to its spruced up, brushed down offspring. With the likes of the Cox Family present, and the Fairfield Four, authenticity is guaranteed – and so is quality.

RG

SONICS
OVERALL



Michael Burks

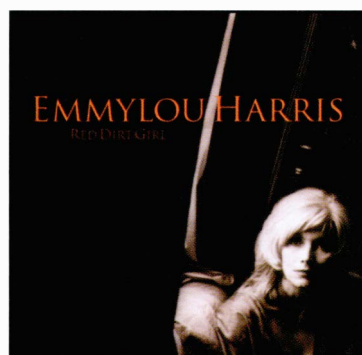
Make it Rain

Alligator – ALCD 4878

The first person that comes to mind when you glance at Michael Burks crouched over his Gibson Flying V on the sleeve of his alligator debut is Albert King. Once you get locked into the grooves other great masters like Albert Collins, BB King, Freddie King and Luther Allison spring to mind. Michael Burks has shades of all these greats in him, and like the above-mentioned players he's not somebody who likes to hold back. For the most part he attacks his guitar with utter ferocity, his rich, deep BB style vocals mirroring his instrument perfectly. The excellent band – Vasti Jackson on rhythm guitar, Ernest Williamson on keyboards, David Smith on bass and Steve Potts on drums – lay down rock solid backing but never try and steal Burks' fire. Opener 'Hit the Ground Running', kicks off the party, Michael's guitar blazing away and locking into a groove that stays with the listener for 54 blues-soaked minutes. Even when he slows it down the guitar still manages to burn a hole in your soul, and when he combines it with his gospel tinged vocals (as he does on the beautiful 'What can a man do?') the results are truly astonishing. Burks pays homage to Albert King on 'Everybody's got their hand out' – bet Albert's roaring his approval in Blues Guitar Heaven

AH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Emmylou Harris

Red Dirt Girl

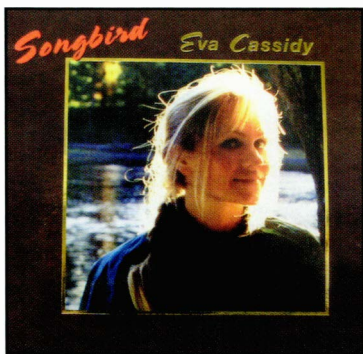
GRAPEVINE GRACD 103

Since being dropped by Warner Brothers almost a decade ago, Emmylou Harris has audaciously switched codes – ditching all too familiar country-sounding arrangements in favour of a far more ambitious, and richly textured, folk-pop idiom. Under the Grapevine umbrella, a committed core of accomplished musicians, have lent their support while this legendary figure of the country scene has reinvented herself. If the stunningly produced *Wrecking Ball* (1995) and a musically autobiographical "live" album, *Spyboy* (1998) tilled soil and planted seeds, then her most recent CD, *Red Dirt Girl*, is a GM harvest. This is a contemplative and spiritual release that cleverly juxtaposes vivid religious symbolism within its secular storytelling. Sermoniser or wit? Take your pick. But Emmylou's grasp of the striking image, either to reinforce or undermine a subject, is enviable. Perhaps the mantra-like, "We took the wrong train to/ Kingdom Come now/ No more damage/ Can be done baby", through an echo of the Lord's prayer, puts irony ahead of doctrine. Great folk compositions, such as the title song, which describes in detail the hopelessness of Lillian, an Alabama woman from the wrong side of the tracks; the five kids by the age of 27, her shattered dreams and the descent into booze, drugs and an early grave, is an irresistible requiem that effortlessly beds in uncomfortable lyrics and fine music.

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC





Eva Cassidy

Songbird

HOT RECORDS G1-10045 **180g**

Unless you've lead a suspiciously devout monastic existence, then the posthumous "Eva Cassidy" phenomenon could not have passed you by. A movement fuelled by a sublime and unblemished voice, one cruelly cut down by cancer, has through selective and enterprising marketing, grabbed with both hands a collective emotional psyche to propel an artist of modest ambitions to previously unthought of heights. Call me cynical, but believe that there are many anonymous, fledgling talents of similar ability out there, who achieve no artistic or commercial recognition, so I think I'm correct in saying that it takes an unusual set of circumstances and a degree of opportunism to develop the momentum for this type of band-wagon. In it's latest guise we are treated to a belated 180g virgin vinyl release of *Songbird*: The compilation album which draws tracks from a self-conscious, *Live At Blues Alley*, *The Other Side*, where Cassidy duets with Chuck Brown, and her exquisite, *Eva By Heart*. A sympathetic Nick Webb Abbey Road remaster reveals the crystalline vocal innocence from a performer who possessed (in abundance) a seamless versatility needed to cross the musical genres of folk, jazz, gospel and R&TB. The pressing quality (courtesy of Pallas in Germany) is of the highest order and the run, limited to 10,000 copies, will undoubtedly fail to meet demand.

Cherished Record Company
01579 363603



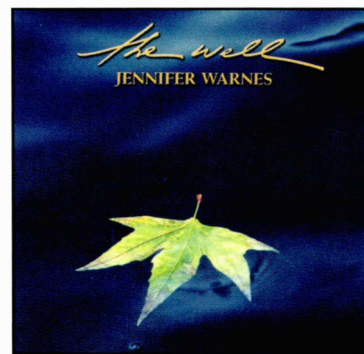
Gaby Cole, Marco Pezzenati

Just For A While

Fone 010 SACD **SA^(5.1)** **SA**

Jazz vocal and percussion might seem like a scary combination, and truth be told, there are points on this disc where it certainly is, but don't let that put you off. Gaby Cole's mannered, even exaggerated, vocal delivery may not be everybody's cup of tea, but given the sparse acoustic environment and the lack of textural and dimensional options open to the performers, this is actually its most natural habitat. Marco Pezzenati's percussive interjections are more thoughtful and less over bearing than is generally the case when a musician gets this much space to fill (especially drummers). The results are musically much more varied than you might expect, turning a new and familiar eye on a collection of jazz standards that range from Ellington's 'Mood Indigo', through 'The girl From Ipanema' to the Gershwins' 'I Got Rhythm'. The recording is in Fone's normal excellent style, right down to the coherent and transparent soundstage and wide dynamics. Stand out tracks include a wonderfully languid 'Summertime' and a strangely haunting 'These Foolish Things' and whilst ultimately this is an album you'll probably end up dipping into rather than listening to in its entirety, the sonic excellence and offbeat presentation make it a diversion well worth taking. A dem disc in the making? I have that horrible sinking feeling..

RG



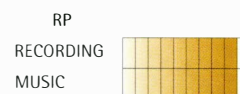
Jennifer Warnes

The Well

RYKO/SDR SD8960 **CD**

Once a darling of the hi-fi world through her sartorial celebration of rubberwear in blue; Jennifer Warnes, has after nine years unveiled a lavish Martin Davich co-production that showcases five Warnes original songs and six covers. They include a Tom Waits coffeeshop waitress ballad, 'Invitation To The Blues', and the wry, Arlo Guthrie penned, 'Patriot's Dream', on which the modern Godfather of American folk, himself, guests on vocals. These two tracks and Jenny's, 'Praire Melancholy' and 'The Panther', exude class. Opulent arrangements for violins, violas, mandolin, piano and ambient synths, are several rungs up from a traditional, earthy folk-blues. Yet there's no denying their effectiveness in underscoring those perfectly timed and beautifully enunciated syllables. In the delivery of lines such as, "... sometimes my heart feels like a dandelion/ seeds scattered in a careless wind/ and nothin' to show for my life and time but/ innocent wonder in the face of thunder/ feelin' like something is about to begin" (The Well) she shapes, forms and manipulates language with a craftsman's feel. Her vocal chords perfectly measure, plane or cut the lyric with the grain of the song, never against it, to peel away layers of meaning that younger (less mature) aspirants simply dream of. Magnificent recording to match.

Cherished Record Company
01579 363603





Rammstein

Mutter

CD Motor 549 639-2 

German band Rammstein are an interesting proposition, defying all the odds by enjoying growing global success whilst resolutely refusing to sing in anything but their mother tongue. I have even heard that there are Rammstein tribute bands in the USA, which is really quite amazing for a band that are only on their third album. *Mutter*, which means mother, puts Rammstein at the same point that Metallica were a few years ago with their eponymously titled black album, i.e. they have introduced just enough commercial appeal to break into the big time without betraying their heavy metal roots. Marching along to a distinctly Teutonic beat, the band throw out guitar chords like great slabs of concrete, whilst the keyboards burble and warble around the soundstage. The singer, whilst undoubtedly gruff, makes sterling work of the big choruses that are commonplace here. 'Ich Will' (I Want), which they played at the last MTV Europe awards bash is a case in point, starting with the singer chanting the title over the twiddly keyboards until the riffs jump in, and then they're away into a punch the air chorus and back again. Make no mistake Rammstein are going to be big, Keraang have even started using the rif from 'Sonne' (Sun) to back their self promoting advertising. Add to this the fact that this is a superb recording, and if you have any affinity for heavy metal then you have to put Mutter on your must buy list for this year.

DA

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Dusty Springfield

A Very Fine Love

Columbia 478508-1 

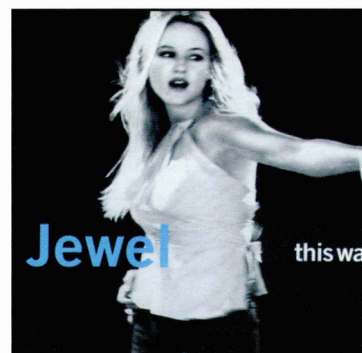
Not a great LP like *Dusty In Memphis*, nor a modern classic such as *Reputation*, but a last lesson from probably the finest soul/pop singer this country has produced, which fills empty songs with warmth and propels those with a slightly higher pedigree nearer the spine-tingling category. Crucial cuts, here, include 'Wherever Would I Be': A polished, Diane Warren penned duet for Dusty and Daryl Hall; the introspective ballad, 'Where Is A Women To Go', on which Mary Chapin Carpenter provides backing vocals, and the off-camber, 'I Can't Help The Way I Don't Feel'. *A Very Fine Love* is, as I've suggested, a record of close calls. In playback, Dusty's unique voice, that can soar, tremble, hold a note and fashion or even amplify meaning buried deep within lyrics, which would by most standards sound trite, here distils a degree of integrity and emotional urgency from tired and overworked lines like, "There is a wind tonight/ That blows and chills me to the bone/ Here by the fireside/ Even the heat can't keep me warm". (You Are The Storm). Combine her inspirational qualities as a performer with Tom Shapiro's luscious production and some solid Brian Tankersley engineering, and the results are persuasive.

Cherished Record Company

01579 363603


RP

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Jewel

This Way

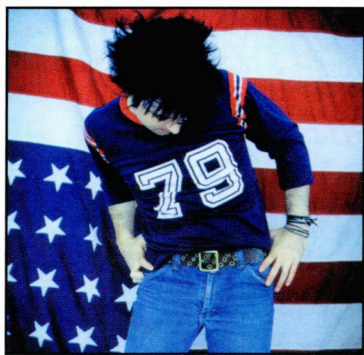
(Atlantic - 835192) 

A few years ago a friend and I went along to Southampton Guildhall to watch Jewel expecting a couple of hours of gentle acoustic folk and for the first hour that's exactly what we got. What we got for the second half though was totally unexpected as Jewel strapped on an electric guitar, plugged in and proceeded to rock the place stupid. We were mesmerised and came away hoping that the next album would be plugged in and rocking, so it's pleasing to report that *This Way* is exactly that – a full band affair. So far, every review I've read on *This Way* has been pretty lukewarm and had I not bought it before the (UK) reviews I'd have been very reluctant to shell out my hard earned cash. I'm bloody glad I did because the new style really suits her.

Jewel has such a versatile voice that the transition to Rock/Gospel singer is no effort for her. She's also a fine songwriter and lyricist who knows how to write a memory lingering hook. Fine examples are the glorious 'Everybody needs someone sometime', 'Cleveland', (a country rocker with an irresistible chorus) and the raucousness of 'Love Me, Just Leave Me Alone', a belter with a stunning slide intro from ex-Giant guitarist Dan Huff. If you're looking for folk album number 3 look elsewhere. If you want to hear an artist expanding her mesmeric talents, purchase now.

AH

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Ryan Adams

Gold

Lost Highway 170 62-2

Speculative comparisons to Dylan and Neil Young are exaggerated, but not without merit. Adams is an observant and intelligent writer of songs which frequently blend distinct and uncomfortable images. Scenes where all-night bars, streetwise cops, or that tell-tale picture of a teenage mother prostituting herself to pay for medical school (Tina Toledo's *Street Walkin' Blues*) are wed to touching, romantic interludes that mull over loves: successful, fractured and unrequited. Ryan rocks. Yet does so with a lyrical dexterity and delicacy of touch that can command and accommodate quite disparate descriptive moments in a whim. "Riot on the streets, the touch beneath the sheets. It's only gonna make you love me more.... Moonlight on the beach, sweet amphetamines. It's only gonna make me love you more" is a minor case in point. When he rakes over the lines for 'Firecracker', backed by Hammond B3, harmonica and acoustic guitar, it's pure Dylan, but without that sawing voice. While, elsewhere, 'Nobody Girl' and 'Sylvia Plath', minus those nose-candied pinched vocals, could be straight out of the Neil Young songbook. Ryan's delivery here is smoother, though his singing still possesses the character and deeper textures needed to sustain the seriousness of these vivid impressions of life displayed in seventeen modern vignettes.

RP



Curtis Salgado

Soul Activated

Shanachie – SHCD 9028

Those of you out there longing for a return to real soul (and I'm talking Otis Redding, Al Green, Syl Johnson – you get the picture) this little beauty will be right up your street. Curtis Salgado served a quality apprenticeship working alongside greats like Robert Cray, Steve Miller (as harp player) and Roomful of Blues where he gained valuable experience and a deep affection for quality soulful blues. However, whilst *Soul Activated* is deep and bluesy it has more of a Stax and Hi-records Soul feel, allowing Salgado's voice to swoop and soar with gritty passion. There is a well-balanced mix of originals and cover versions on display here. Salgado rips through Jimmy Cliff's reggae classic 'The Harder They Come', transforming it into a full-blooded Stax romp to startling effect. He also covers Daryl Halls 'Every time you go away' and although the song has had plenty of exposure Salgado still manages to breathe new life into the old dog. Also on display is a rip-snorting version of Freddie King's magnificent 'I'd rather be blind'. Salgado is a mean harp player, his blowing on instrumental 'Lip whippin' reminiscent of the Fabulous Thunderbirds' Kim Wilson, and he's a more than competent songwriter. Best of all is 'Hip Hip Baby', a swinging duet with Lou Ann Barton featuring Jimmy Vaughan on Guitar. Tasty, very tasty indeed.

AH



Acoustic Triangle

Interactions

audio-b SABC 5012

The kind of band name and album title that all too often send shivers down my spine. The haunting shades of salon jazz and the mindless chant of D-M-P rise darkly in the back of my psyche, only to be banished by the first notes that issue forth from the speakers. Ravel's *Trois Poemes de Stephane Mallarme* beautifully and thoughtfully arranged for jazz trio. An unexpected (you know reviewers never read the instructions) pleasure indeed, that had me rapidly scanning the other tracks for similar nuggets. Well, nothing else quite scaled those sublime heights (but then nothing else stole its melodies from Maurice), and on occasions it dipped dangerously close to Take Five land, but those occasionally inane meanderings were the exception to the rule. The rest of the set stayed well this side of the line in the sand where any self-respecting player's auto eject cuts in. The result is a relaxing, tuneful and at times rather thought provoking album, which would be worth it for the opening tracks alone. Add in a decent, natural sounding rather than sonically spectacular recording, and this one's a grower. Real jazz, available on a hybrid SACD, rather than some tired re-release or demo disc: That's got to be a first. That the carefully crafted music actually suits the sonic benefits available from the format really is the icing on the cake.

RG



Rare Fruit

A guide to the best available Classical Super Audio CDs

by Simon Groome

In issue 9, I concluded my first Super Audio CD review with the words "I think I have just heard the future!" With a number of labels now backing the format, along with the associated increase in the rate of release, and the advent of excellent sounding, affordable players, the future is now upon us. But what releases are currently available for the classical enthusiast, and which discs are worth tracking down?

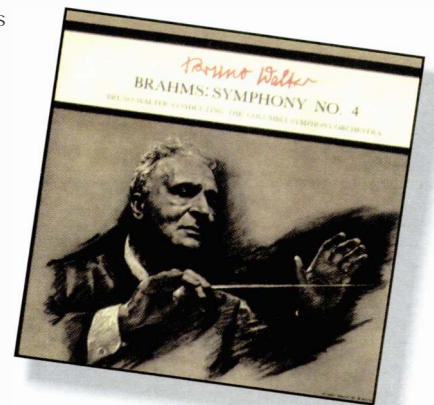
With Sony, one of the primary forces behind the development of SACD, it is hardly surprising that they should emerge as the major player, at least in terms of the number of discs released. The majority of their releases come from their back catalogue, including great performances by conductors of the calibre of Bernstein, Szell and Walter. But some have been released as they first appeared on vinyl, complete

with only around forty minutes of music, and unfortunately, they are not hybrid discs, so will only be of interest to owners of SACD players*.

Bruno Walter was one of the great conductors of the 20th Century. All his

SACD releases are worth collecting, exhibiting wonderfully stirring direction, worthy of a pupil of Mahler. Unfortunately, Sony is yet to release any of his wonderful performances of that great composer's *Symphonies*, but there are other excellent recordings by him available. His Beethoven performances are affectionate and enthusiastic, including a *Pastoral Symphony* (SS 6012) replete with all the contentment of a balmy summer's day,

but let down by some tape hiss. His dramatic interpretation of the *5th Symphony*, also with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra, coupled with Schubert's *Unfinished*, made with the New York Philharmonic (SS 6506), just lacks a little in tension, however his magnificently intense performance of the *4th Symphony* has not yet been issued on SACD.

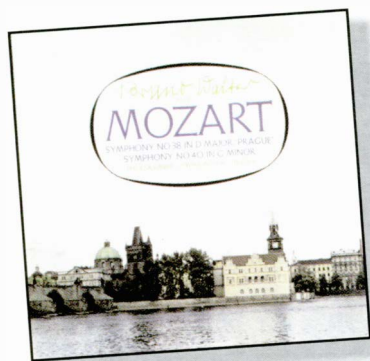


* Some releases in this review have been indicated to be hybrid discs, which contain both a high-density (HD) layer and a normal CD layer. The HD layer can only be picked up by a dedicated SACD player, while any machine that will play standard CDs can read the lower-density layer.



▶ Walter's lyrical Brahms' *Symphony No. 4* (SS 9113) has an underlying sense of command and conviction, with the conductor showing great concentration and enthusiasm to reveal the full tonal colours.

Walter's most outstanding SACD release to date though accommodates his demonstrative view of Mozart's *Symphonies Nos. 38 and 40* (SS 6494). He gained his insight into Mozart's works from Mahler, and it shows, with expressive form and triumphal majesty more prominent than any sense of academic precision. There is a kind of appreciative reverence at work, with Walter able to truly reveal the composer's greatness. Recorded in 1959, the sound never shows its age, being full, with a wonderful sweetness to the tone, but still plenty of detail and a nice acoustic. There is also plenty of bite and power that is extraordinary for its age.



CD, allowing the power of the orchestra to stand out.

There are a number of SACDs with performances by George Szell, including two excellent Schumann recordings, in which he proves himself an outstanding exponent, providing exhilarating readings, especially in *Symphonies Nos. 1 and 3* (SS 89381), but more impressive still is Szell's recording with the Cleveland Orchestra of Dvorák's *Slavonic Dances* (SS 7208). They are full of exuberance, revealing the brilliant textures in the work's composition, and display a predominant feeling of affection for the music. The Cleveland Orchestra's playing is marvellous, performed with elegance and charisma, and the recording, helped by a warm acoustic, is very good.

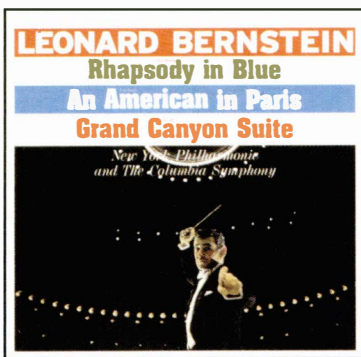
The same orchestra provides an even more breathtaking performance in Szell's passionate interpretation of Wagner's Great Orchestral Highlights from the *Ring of the Nibelungs* (SS 89035), with Prelude and Love-Death from *Tristan and Isolde* and *The Prelude* from *Die Meistersinger Von Nürnberg* added to the contents of the original LP. He manages to generate great tension in the two scenes from *Götterdämmerung*, while the *Liebestod* from *Tristan* has never been played



with more concentrated passion.

The sound is quite forward, but while there is a lack of a natural acoustic this does not restrict the dynamic range, and there is plenty of detail.

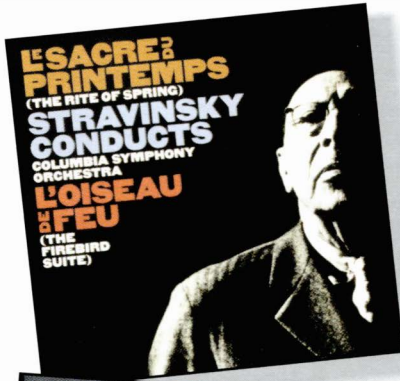
No one performs Stravinsky's work like the composer himself, and on his recording, with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra, of *The Rite of Spring* and *The Firebird Suite* (SS 89062), he balances expressive warmth and the bizarre with total mastery. The full ▶



Although Leonard Bernstein was also a great Mahlerian, and although accomplished, his recording of *Symphony No. 1* (SS 7069) is not his finest interpretation. Far more significant are his performances of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *American in Paris*, coupled with Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite*

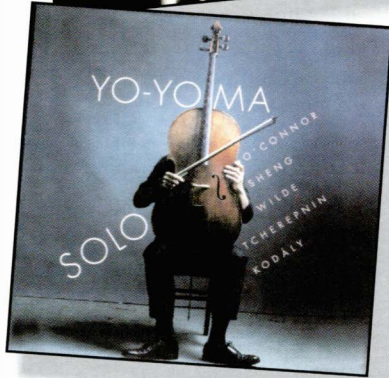
(SS 89033). These wonderfully spontaneous performances are still the ones with which all others are ultimately judged. Recorded when the conductor was at his compositional peak, this is a truly inspirational performance, revealing the wonderful characterisations and impressionistic details in all their glory. There is a certain brashness, but this is just unashamed Americana, with the marvellous phrasing and timing done only as a great American orchestra like the NYPO can. The sound, while not perfect, is a great improvement over the





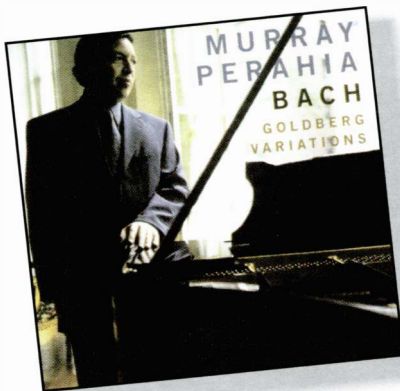
dynamics of these great works are wonderfully demonstrated, with violence and tension comprehensively played out and assisted by a recording that reveals the thrilling percussive impact in all its glory, especially in *The Rite*.

From Sony's more recent recordings, Yo-Yo Ma's *Solo* (SS 64114) impresses even more than the CD reviewed in issue 8. The SACD simply makes the Stradivarius sound



even more palpable, extracting even more of the expression in this heartfelt experience.

Murray Perahia's Mozart has always been excellent, but his recording of *Piano Concertos Nos. 20 and 27* (SS 42241) are not quite as magically illuminating as Curzon's performances. His award-winning recording of



Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (SS 89243) is superb though, being more vivacious than Glenn Gould's 1981 performance, also on SACD (SS 37779), and revealing

assured virtuosity of the highest order.

This disc exhibits warmer tones than the CD (see issue 13), giving more depth and life to the recording, and toning down any harshness.

Telarc are becoming the major producer of SACDs after Sony, with a number of classical recordings already available. They launched their SACD catalogue with an impressively recorded, but ultimately uninspiring

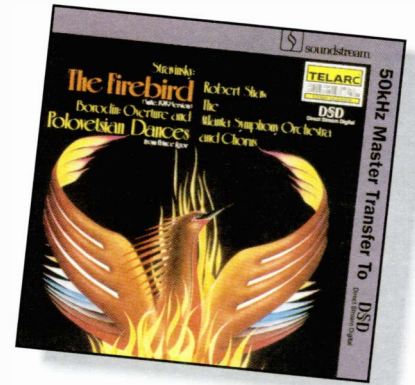
performance of the *1812 Overture*, and continue to back the format wholeheartedly.

Robert Shaw's performance of Stravinsky's *The Firebird Suite* (SACD-60039 - hybrid) may not exhibit the composer's understanding, but like its coupling, Borodin's *Music from Prince Igor*, it shows plenty of enthusiasm, achieving some wonderfully dramatic effects that are enhanced by demonstration class sound. As does

Lorin Maazel's richly presented disc of Moussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* and *Night on Bald Mountain* (SACD-60042 - hybrid), with the Cleveland Orchestra. These Pictures are strongly characterised, without showing the same excellence as Reiner's performance, while his recording of Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5* and Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet, Fantasy-Overture* (SACD-60561 - hybrid) is also recommended for its spectacular engineering.

Here the tempos are on the faster side, but with a clearly focused approach he directs some lovely playing, particularly from the sweetly toned strings.

There is also a wonderful new Telarc recording. Donald Runnicles' performance of Orff's *Carmina Burana* (SACD-60575 - multichannel



► hybrid), with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, is lively, with wonderfully flowing tempos that reveal the total breadth of colour in this dramatic composition. The playing and singing are first rate and the recording now sets new standards for the work, with superb dynamics, and each voice clearly defined.

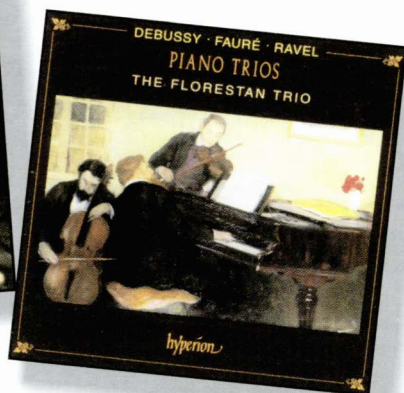
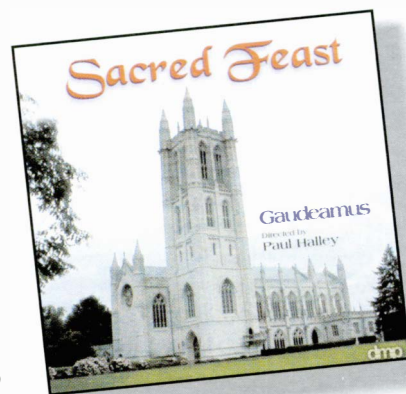
While Isaac Stern's warm recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, (Sony SS 89039) and Seiji Ozawa's superb sounding issue, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra (Telarc SACD-60070 - hybrid), have both made it onto the format, it is the Italian audiophile label, Foné, that has issued the most coherent release of this often recorded work. The Foné Ensemble's vivid disc (005 SACD - hybrid) displays a more profound approach, being performed with precision and great understanding. The playing is full of virtuosity and displays a love of this work that is rarely heard. The recording is beautifully detailed, and enhances the feeling of intimacy.

Elsewhere, Hyperion have issued a lovely performance by the splendid King's Consort of both Boccherini's and D'Astorga's *Stabat Mater* (SACDA67108), but better still is their disc of *Piano Trios* by Fauré, Debussy



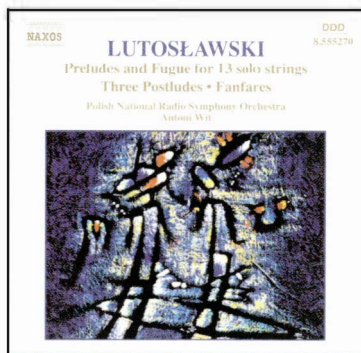
and Ravel, played by the immaculate Florestan Trio (SACDA67114 – hybrid disc). This beautiful release is performed with the most sublime tenderness and virtuosity and captured in one of Tony Faulkner's most sympathetic recordings. *Sacred Feast* performed by Gaudeamus on the DMP label (SACD-09 – multichannel hybrid) is a beautiful disc of sacred polyphony from composers as diverse as Thomas Tallis and Anton Bruckner, but sounds remarkably consistent throughout. The performances are excellent, with flowing phrases of tonal beauty that provide a rich tapestry of vocal colour, and the atmospheric recording captures each individual voice within a superbly real acoustic.

These are the highlights of the currently available SACD catalogue, and there's more than enough here to whet the classical listener's appetite while we await wider coverage of the enormous possible repertoire. Sonically, original DSD recordings like the Hyperion discs are clearly superior to those derived from analogue masters, although these too offer clear benefits over the original CD releases. Performance of the new format can only improve, as will



the capabilities of recording and mastering engineers, which makes the future look rosy indeed (especially given the number of hybrid discs being issued, allowing you to buy now and pay later – for your SACD player that is). All we need now is for the retail outlets to catch on, making it easier to buy these discs.





Lutoslawski
Preludes and Fugue for 13 solo strings/Three Postludes/Fanfares/Mini Overture
Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra/Wit

Naxos 8.555270

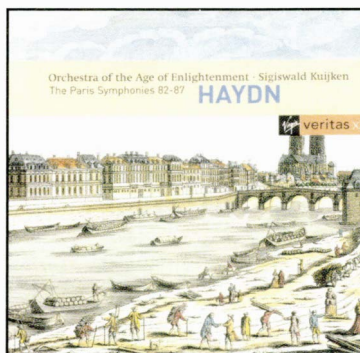
This is the seventh volume in Naxos' complete and highly regarded survey of Lutoslawski's orchestral music, and includes a number of rarely heard works. The CD opens with the *Three Postludes*, which are bizarrely disjointed pieces that stand between his folk-intoned creations of the early 1950's and the sequentially subjected music that would launch the composer's reputation later that decade. But it is the *Preludes and Fugue for 13 solo strings* that are the masterpiece here, being a superb illustration of the composer's ability to create an entirely original melodic composition and infuse it with authority and emotion. The final works are a group of the occasional pieces that he used to show his gratitude for the honours bestowed upon him, and reveal the proficient technique in his writing.

The performances are more than satisfactory throughout, but lack a little of the flair that enlightens Lutoslawski's compositions, and the recording is very good, revealing a substantial, naturally presented soundstage.

While this CD is not up there with some of the previous releases in the series, it is adequate enough to make it a recommendation to those interested in this important music of the 20th Century.

SG

RECORDING
MUSIC



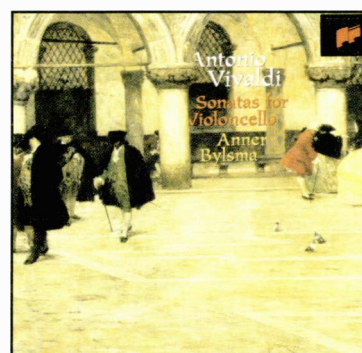
Franz Joseph Haydn
The Six Paris symphonies
Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment
Sigiswald Kuijken

Virgin Veritas VBD 5 61659-2

Speaking as one who discovered the Haydn symphonies through Antal Dorati's neatly-played but for the most part rather careful and pedestrian Decca LP complete edition, I mistakenly thought Haydn a pleasant but bland composer. Hearing keen fiery authentic-instrument performances (like Kuijken's) always comes as a welcome if somewhat invigorating shock. Kuijken sets brisk tempi and makes sure rhythms are keenly sprung. This, plus the crisp attack and lean open textures produced by period forces, makes sure the music retains the power to shock and surprise. Of course, all six symphonies are justly celebrated and show Haydn at the height of his powers - imperious, witty, charming, inventive, and always able at a stroke to take the music in unpredictable directions. The use of original instruments creates some lovely sonorities - for example, the drone basses that open the *finale* of *Symphony no 82*, overlaid with chortling bassoon, rustic oboe, silvery luminous flute doubling strings, and delicate trumpets. It's a light forwardly-balanced orchestral sound, without much bottom-end, and may seem a touch over-bright on some systems. However, that extra brightness helps reveal more detail, giving the music a crisper leaner presentation. But the upper strings may sound thin and edgy on some systems, with a touch of congestion during tutti passages.

JMH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Vivaldi
Sonatas for Violoncello and Basso Continuo
Bylsma/Galligioni/Zanenghi/Sbrogiò/Marcon

Sony SK 51350

These six sonatas are taken from a publication made in the *Parisian Mercure de France*, probably by a third party, in 1740. Despite their having been rearranged or even rewritten on occasions by those who may have been confused over their authenticity, they have received a number of commendable and authentic recordings. While both Wispelwey (Channel Classics) and Watkin (Hyperion) present proficient but distinct releases, this recording by the veteran Dutch cellist Anner Bylsma offers an authentic, period performance of even greater expression and imagination. The playing is full of enthusiasm and exhibits supreme proficiency, not only from Bylsma, but also from the excellent accompaniment that is always circumspect, yet never too indistinct. While there will always be a question over phrasing, these arrangements are totally credible, and never extend beyond the boundaries of accepted scholarly perception. Sony's engineering is rich in both detail and tone, with just the right amount of resonance, producing a result that sounds very natural. Despite the lack of historic proof that these works are a true collection, this CD offers beautiful playing and delightful interpretations of some of Vivaldi's most sophisticated sonatas, produced by those who clearly comprehend and value the composer's work.

SG

RECORDING
MUSIC





Palestrina
Song of Songs

Magnificat/Cave

Linn CKD 174

The *Canticum Canticorum* or motets from *The Song of Songs* are a collection of works dedicated to Pope Gregory XIII. Published in 1584, these motets are taken from the most erotic sections of the Old Testament, expressing "the divine love of Christ for...the Soul", as the composer described them. To 16th Century listeners they were also regarded as "more lively" than other sacred works by Palestrina, and while these differences may seem trivial there is certainly a prominent fullness to these passages.

None of the 29 pieces is much over three minutes long, and Philip Cave acquires complementary presentations from his singers in each; from the truly sensual *Duo ubera tua*, to the lively rhythms of *Vox dilecti mei*. But there is also a notable cohesiveness to the entire CD, and despite a fairly insignificant problem with the challenging chord changes in *Pulchrae sunt genae tuae*, the performers' attentiveness and technical aptitude to tackle the elaborate stylistic effects is excellent. With a splendid assortment of vocal tones, this ensemble has a superbly balanced quality that creates wonderful shades of intensity. The recording is clear, with a natural ambience and superb detail, highlighting another beautiful recording by Magnificat.

SG



Molinaro
Fantasie, Canzoni e Balli

Paul O'Dette

Harmonia Mundi HMU 907295

The lute was gaining far-reaching popularity by the later half of the sixteenth century, and the work of the great Italian master, Simone Molinaro, exhibits much of the beauty and refinement of the time. His continuous lines of counterpoint - evidently from the original vocal music from which the composer's decorated transcriptions come - make many of these pieces exceptionally challenging to the lutenist. So it is particularly striking how effortlessly Paul O'Dette performs, in an almost continuous flow, revealing the poise and charm inherent in many of these pieces. His technique is superb, with playing beyond reproach, managing to demonstrate subtle and dynamic nuances without seeming to try. Also included in this collection of short works are a few pieces by Giovanni Battista dalla Gostena, Molinaro's uncle and tutor, whose murder deeply affected his nephew, and one by the Neapolitan lutenist Giulio Serverino, that are just as strikingly graceful, but also give the CD greater distinction. With sound that is intimate and detailed, but not too close, and exhibits wonderful acoustics that give the music superb life, this disc is a great example of Renaissance lute music, performed by one of the greatest modern virtuosos.

SG



Gustav Mahler
Symphony No 2 'Resurrection'

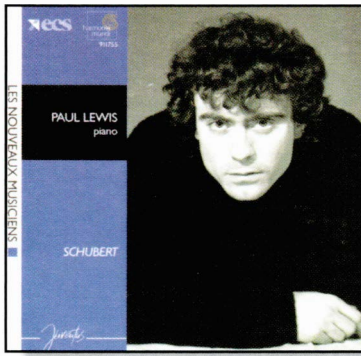
Soloists and chorus
Robert Schumann Phil./Caetini

ARTS 47600-2

To convincingly record and reproduce the vast forces Mahler calls for in his mighty *Resurrection symphony* has always been a stiff challenge, even for the best equipment. Technically, this live recording succeeds better than most, giving a real sense of the huge dynamic range involved. The hall acoustic is a shade dry, but clarity is good and the orchestra plays extremely well. Caetini (a Boulanger pupil) doesn't rush his fences, taking a measured, even at times slightly cautious approach to the music. Tempi are relaxed, but the big moments have plenty of impact - helped it must be said by the recording, which packs quite a punch. Caetini's performance is not a truly exciting sweat-drenched Bernsteinesque one; overall, the impression is more of scrupulous control rather than caution being thrown to the wind. But the mighty close is fervent enough, as if to say *Resurrection* is a pretty serious business and something not to be undertaken flippantly. The 'Audiophile' recording, made using 24bit/96kHz technology, sounds impressively clean and natural, encompassing the wide shifts of dynamic terrain with comparative ease. Not a first choice then, but good fun and well worth sampling especially at budget price. Incidentally, the booklet says conductor/composer Igor Markevitch was Nadia Boulanger's father - shurely shome mishtake???

JMH





Schubert Piano Sonatas, Nos. 14 and 19

Paul Lewis

Harmonia Mundi Les Nouveaux
Musiciens HMN 911755 

On another excellent release in Les Nouveaux Musiciens series, Paul Lewis balances many of Schubert's musical characters with total success. The blend of the composer's elegant tones and the splendour of his supreme arrangements are handled with true artistry, and Lewis' technique is perfectly illustrated by a recording that is pretty much an ideal example of what a piano recording should sound like, with the Steinway sounding large, but not too close, together with wonderful textures and plenty of acoustic presence. Many performers are tempted to over-dramatise the power and vigour in these works, without fully understanding their refinement. This is entirely revealed in *Sonata No. 19*, with contrasting moods running through its four movements. Here, Lewis manages to reveal jollity and optimistic qualities amid those of dark polyphony, captivating the listener with the piece's reticence. Again, the earlier sonata is full of contradictory ideas, with sweetness and anxiety both conveyed by the pianist's sympathetic approach and awareness. Lewis, a pupil of Alfred Brendel, demonstrates that he is an accomplished performer, providing a delightfully instinctive disc of two of Schubert's most masterful works that would make his old mentor proud, without actually overshadowing the great pianist's own recordings.

SG

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Vaughan Williams – Symphony No. 2 (A London Symphony) –

**Original 1913 version
LSO/Hickox**

Chandos CHAN 9902 

Due to the composer's self-doubt, *A London Symphony* was withdrawn following its premier, with revisions made before the tighter, definitive version was published in 1936. With his widow sanctioning the original score, there will be no further performances of this version, either live or recorded, making this release a unique experience. The 1913 version is about twenty minutes longer, and while the opening *Lento-Allegro risoluto* is unchanged, the individual passions and compelling expressions of Vaughan Williams in that extra third, allow the work to flourish and develop. There are elements that delightfully echo Ravel, with perceptive shadows that envelop the second movement, but generally this version holds even darker, yet more poignant feelings and sentiments, making for a far richer experience. With the LSO probably the world's most suited orchestra to this music, and Hickox directing with both warmth and control, the performance is superb. There is a definite feeling of expression and prevailing contrast, and Chandos' superbly dynamic and detailed recording enhances these. George Butterworth's *The Banks of Green Willow*, is a lovely and valuable filler. It hardly matters that there can be no alternative release when this disc holds one of the most glorious performances of Vaughan Williams' work ever recorded.

SG

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Jean Sibelius Lemminkäinen Suite Pohjola's Daughter; The Bard LSO, Sir Colin Davis

RCA 74321 68945-2 

With RCA having massively scaled down their classical recording activities, it was something of a surprise to get a further instalment in Sir Colin's superb cycle of Sibelius' orchestral music. I actually heard him conduct *Lemminkäinen* with the LSO at the Barbican about three or four years ago, and it was absolutely fabulous. The orchestra plays brilliantly, and Davis has the measure of the work, bringing out its other-worldly mystery and dark brooding atmosphere. Tempi are measured, but crisp phrasing keeps rhythms taut and the music moving forward. At the time of the concert I wondered if he'd already taped the work, but actually the recording was made as recently as January 2000. Earlier Davis/LSO/Sibelius RCA CDs had impressively forward detailed sound - Tony Faulkner engineered the symphonies - but the present disc has a different Tonmeister, Ben Turner, who's gone for a slightly smoother more recessed balanced. Bass could be a touch firmer and deeper - those massive bass drum rolls don't quite shake the floor as they can and do in Segerstam's sensational Ondine recording. *Pohjola's Daughter* and *The Bard* are highly original works, and Davis brings out the strange haunting twilight atmosphere that only Sibelius could create.

JMH

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Verdi Requiem

Abbado/Scala Orchestra & Chorus

Speakers Corner/DGG 2707 120

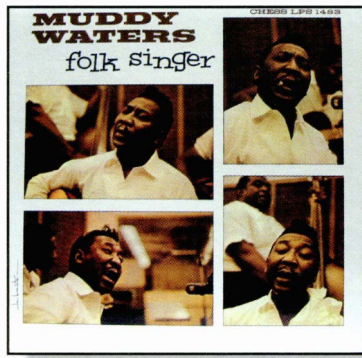


Great music; a beautiful transfer of an excellent 1980 Deutsche Grammophon recording; sumptuous gatefold artwork and text, but some less than wholehearted performances by an eminent cast of vocal principles. It's difficult to say exactly why Katia Ricciarelli, Shirley Verrett, Placido Domingo and Nicolai Ghiaurov are so uncommitted. This should on paper be a sweeping operatic, highly charged and lyrical account. Moreover, in Claudio Abbado at the podium, we have one of the finest Verdian exponents of the 1970s and 1980s. The ingredients were all present, yet something still went awry at the business end of proceedings. Even the choral entry on *Te decet hymnus* becomes infected with this lacklustre and frequently drowsy aspect that dilutes the tension throughout. Best not to get me started on the *Dies Irae* – suffice to say that while it's all there, present and correct, I yearned for the cutting edge excitement one might expect from massed choral forces, but this chorus just sounds too small and ineffectual. However, a Verdi *Requiem* was needed and until someone sees fit to recut either a breathlessly paced and unashamedly passionate Muti/Philharmonia account (EMI SLS 5185) or one of the Solti Decca or RCA recordings, where the soloists engage in more sensitive and characterful singing, then we will have to live with this modest offering.

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RP



Muddy Waters

Folk Singer

Classic Records/Chess LPS 1483



Oh well, it was going to happen sooner or later, and predictably its Classic Records, with a firm eye on the main chance, who have released yet another version of the Muddy Waters classic, *Folk Singer*. It's a record that featured heavily in our Records To Die From listings not so long ago, and unfortunately this is only likely to exacerbate the over exposure.

The good news is that Classic have executed the pressing with their by now customary excellence. Utilising their Quix SV vinyl, they've surpassed the performance of the highly touted Mo-Fi version, offering a more natural tonal balance, more coherent sense of acoustic and better tonal palette. Both the guitars and Muddy's voice have great shape and character, while the bass, indistinct to say the least, is both deeper and better defined. If you really must have this record and its appeal hasn't been totally destroyed by over exposure, then this is the version to have. Personally, I can think of hundreds of more worthy subjects for re-issue treatment. But then every cloud has a silver lining: Just think what this release does to the value of all those sealed Mo-Fis being hoarded by cynical opportunists!

RG

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk



Genesis

Selling England By The Pound

Classic Records

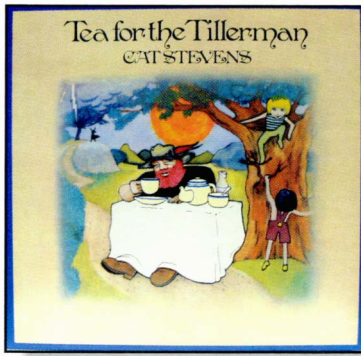


I can remember being somewhat disappointed by this album when it was first released. It seemed to me that most of the edges had been polished off the Genesis sound, added to which the LP was cut at a very low level in order to accommodate the 28 minute B side, reducing the sonic impact still further. Of course I'd been fooled by Genesis' substitution of the full on dynamic crashes of earlier material by the slow swelling to full power that was introduced here, and was later to become something of a trademark. The standout track here is 'Firth of Fifth', which highlights Steve Hackett's fantastically languid guitar, underscored by Tony Banks' huge mellotron backdrop. Despite this track, *Selling England* comes across as Banks' album, shot through as it is with major keyboard solos and inserts. Two firm live favourites emerged from the album, the aforementioned 'Firth' and 'Cinema Show / Aisle of Plenty', the latter maintaining the prog tradition of unusual time-signatures. This Classic re-issue is a great improvement over their previous, already good, Genesis releases, showing a lot less tape hiss and dynamically very crisp. The cut is still slightly bass shy to fit it all in, and would have benefited from diverging from the original format and being pressed as a double disc. However, it is a definite upgrade from my original pressing.

DA

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk





Cat Stevens

Tea for the Tillerman

Island 842 352-1 **180g** **4**

If ever there was an album deserving a quality 180g pressing, this has to be it. Cat Stevens' seminal 1970 recording has been re-released on countless occasions, often with sadly deficient sonics to match the flimsy vinyl. Only MFSL have ever done a decent job and their pressings are long gone, rare and expensive second hand, to the extent that I've always managed to avoid that particular temptation. Of the four various pressings I own, my original issue is still the best sounding. Until now that is.

But why the fuss? Because this is one of those all too rare occasions when great songs meet a great performance and are captured in a great recording (monitored on Magnaplanars, believe it or not). Don't dismiss this as a hippy folk trip. There's real meat in the acoustic instruments and a seriously heartfelt delivery. This German re-pressing might not match the explosive dynamics of my original, but then the tape's got dynamics to burn and it's a trade I'll willingly make for the extra weight, solidity and tonal refinement that comes instead. No more brash top end when things get really exciting. Even the lyrics have worn better than you might expect, making this one of the best considered and welcome re-issues in quite some time. An essential purchase.

RG

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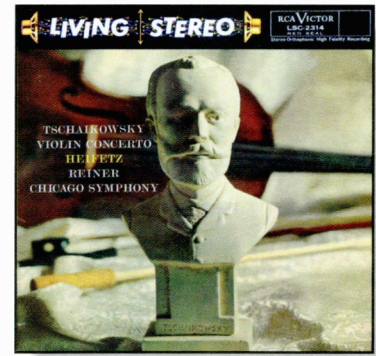
Mendelssohn/Prokofiev Violin Concerto in E Violin Concerto No. 2 Heifetz/Munch BSO

JVC JMCXR - 0010 XRCD **XR** **1**

Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D Heifetz/Reiner CSO

JVC JMCXR - 0009 XRCD **XR** **2**

My personal XRCD bug-bears are the absence (unless you're Japanese) of meaningful biographical liner notes and miserly running times. The Tchaikovsky *Concerto* extends to a mean twenty nine minutes and thirty seven seconds. Yes, it is nice to retain the original LP artwork and match it to a single CD release, but at over twenty quid a time we perhaps deserve a little more. When Wilma Cozart-Fine supervised the Philips Mercury remasters, albums were spliced together without detriment to either aesthetics or sound quality, and then sold at mid-price. That said, musically, these Heifetz readings are electrifying. The Mendelssohn/Prokofiev performances were reviewed as a 180gr vinyl release in Hi Fi + Issue 7, and can be summarised as dynamic, virtuoso displays, where the tempo is so rapid that only a violinist possessing Jascha Heifetz's stature, and an impeccable technique, could hope to carry off interpretations of such ambition. XRCD presentation of the violin in terms of focus, tone, body and through a terrific reproduction of the middle-register strings, is a translucent one, especially for the Prokofiev *Second Violin Concerto* that was cut on 24th February 1959. The Mendelssohn *E minor Concerto* was clearly a little more problematic. Initially recorded on February 23rd, all parties returned to Orchestra Hall, Boston



on February 25th to again work on earlier takes. However, the outcome is another fleet-footed and exciting account which will appeal to lovers of red blooded music. Charles Munch and the orchestral accompaniment, here, have to be heard to be believed. Even if, sonically, the BSO players do not quite receive such generous help from the two Johns (Crawford and Pfeiffer) who can't quite deliver that last ounce of transparency. Recorded on April 19th 1957, at Orchestra Hall, Chicago, this nationalistic Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto* that so obviously flirts with Slavonic folk music, has in some quarters gained a reputation for being Heifetz, yet Low-Fi. A shade harsh, I feel, on Pfeiffer and Lewis Layton who spotlight our soloist and, in doing so, reveal the violin's fine detail, superb small-scale dynamics and a delicious timbral quality. These virtues extend into their reproduction of bass, horns and orchestral strings throughout. Nevertheless, the resolution of this new, multi-bit transfer cannot disguise the age or pedigree of an original, two-track recording. The focal point, however, is a dazzling, no, make that, phenomenal Heifetz exhibition of gorgeous lyrical playing. There are many facets to his bow work that make this tense and powerful reading a truly great one. Not least amongst them is an ideal marriage of tenderness and passion for the slow movement. Thoughtful and touching.

RP

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MENDELSSOHN/PROKOFIEV



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Unsung Heroine – the recorded history of eclectic genius Ida Haendel

by Reuben Parry

Boris Karloff's Gothic monster was revived for *The Bride of Frankenstein*, and its' macabre humour and sophisticated parody was played out in movie theatres on both sides of the Atlantic. Larger horrors at that time were looming across Europe, yet most were ignorant of those omens. In the arts, the 1935 International Wieniawski Violinist's Competition was won by a virtuoso sixteen year old Ginette Neveu and, while the Second Prize was taken by David Oistrach, it was a little girl from Chelm in Poland, who captured the imagination with a performance of J. S. Bach's *Adagio and Fugue* from *Sonata No. 1*. This pupil of Professor Carl Flesch was none other than Ida Haendel, who at the tender age of seven was not only a finalist at this prestigious event, but took the Seventh Prize.

Ida Haendel was the classically gifted child prodigy. A precocious talent revealing itself from an early age in one of those typically anecdotal ways that always seem to be associated with musicians who have greatness at their fingertips. At three years old, when most of us are struggling through potty training, Ida simply took the violin out of the hands of her elder sister and proceeded to play on it a song she had earlier heard her mother singing. Lessons commenced six months later and Ida was soon accepted at the Warsaw Conservatoire, where, under Michalowicz, her basic studies in form and technique were to be completed. Unsurprisingly, by the age of nine, little Miss Haendel had taken the Conservatoire's Gold Medal and been the recipient of the very first Bronislaw Hubermann prize in the National competition for children of special musical ability.

While so many child prodigies implode, falling by the wayside unable to cope with the psychological demands



and loss of childhood, Ida was an exception. Although receiving a requisite amount of support from her parents, it was not over-encouragement beyond the level of Ida's ambitions. Although set apart from other children, she knew that her future would be irrevocably linked to music and, consequently, accepted the sacrifices needed with good grace. It is, perhaps, important to remember and place into historical context this

formative period in Haendel's life. As well as the anticipated cycle of tuition, practice, performance and travel to concert venues throughout Western Europe, (occasions which were not cushioned by patronage or family wealth), there was a terrifying backcloth of Nazism playing out before the Worldwide audience. Understandably, her parents, having foreseen a bleak time ahead for Poland, moved to the relative safety afforded by London.

A love affair with English audiences began in 1937 on her debut in the Queen's Hall, under the baton of Sir Henry Wood. This was the first in a number of performances that season, which included an appearance at the Dvorak Centenary Promenade *Concert* and an acclaimed rendition of the Brahms Concerto. It was shortly before one of the Sunday afternoon recitals that a certain amount of confusion occurred regarding Ida's age. A question which has dogged her ever since. Because legally at that time no child under the age of fourteen was allowed to perform on a Sunday, her manager (to ensure her appearance) assured the authorities she was indeed fourteen and that it was for promotional reasons alone, that they had tried to pass her off as being younger. Ida was, of course, only nine years old, having been born on December 15th 1928. ▶

► Naturally, at this age, she was far from the finished article. However, the presence of two eminent, yet quite different, mentors in Carl Flesch and Georges Enesco was to quickly develop her intuitive instinct for drama and romance, alongside an enhanced understanding of those latent structures that lie at the core of any composition. From out of these divergent influences a balanced and mature artist was forged.

As war raged, Haendel regularly played at the National Gallery, which was to bring her into closer contact with many luminaries of the day, including Myra Hess. These performances, together with the far less glamorous concert tours entertaining the Armed Forces around the country, not only endeared Ida to audiences who appreciated such modesty and candour, but they also taught an impressionable teenager valuable lessons in temperament, expression, execution and humility. Sometimes, when these recitals were played out in the absence of either an orchestra or even a pianist, she would revert to a virtuoso exhibition of Bach's works for solo violin. Their shattering emotional content and complex anatomical-like structures seemed to absorb an intensity and purpose present in the surrounding conflicts.

Bach has remained in her blood.

From that pre-emptive prize-winning *Adagio and Fugue* he was engrained upon her psyche. Expert tutoring at the hands of Romanian master and Bach visionary, Georges Enesco, gave Ida that yardstick by which all interpretations were to be measured. And, naturally, during a celebrated career, she has frequently returned to this music both in the concert hall and recording studio.

One of her more recent excursions was captured on 3M 966 high level analogue tape in the famous No. 1 Studio at Abbey Road, during the September and November of 1995. This translucent Alex Marcou recording (produced by Paul Baily) is ideally matched to an incisive account of the J.S. Bach *Sonatas & Partitas For Solo Violin* (SBTLP 3090). Spread across three 180gr records, these works are given plenty of head room, as one *Sonata* or *Partita* is cut on to each of the six sides. Acres of vinyl, then, for a panoramic and quite astonishing reading, where Haendel navigates a huge range and depth of emotion with her technical adeptness communicating the minutia and complexity of textures present. The violin probes and teases at this microcosm of a world populated by human thought and feeling sketched there on the page in notes and chords. Whether played upon Ida's Guarnieri or 1696 Stradivari violin,

there remains no better way to elicit an empathic response to these sentiments than through those tonal qualities so reminiscent of the voice.

This source, Testament, are well-known in audiophile circles for revisiting the master tapes of the EMI back catalogue and cutting, once again, famous LPs like the du Pre Elgar *Cello Concerto* and the Carl Schuricht Bruckner *Nine*. An original recording of Haendel's *Sonatas and Partitas* broke new ground for them, though they have always been quick to recognise and promote the important of quiet, beautifully pressed and clean-sounding vinyl for smaller scale or unaccompanied instrumental works. Which is pretty well indicative of the care and attention to detail brought to every

stage in the recording or remastering process. Moreover, anyone who has listened to their smartly chosen CDs can not doubt that this commitment also extends into the more mainstream digital Testament releases. Amongst those discs can be found several powerful Haendel readings, including Brahms and Tchaikovsky *Concertos* conducted by Sergin Celibidache, and the remaster of an Elgar *Violin Concerto* EMI ASD 3598 with the LPO under Sir Adrian Boult's baton. The latter is coupled to a piece that has become synonymous with this violinist – the *Partita No. 2 Chaconne*. Whilst this much



earlier interpretation has notable conviction and a deep emotional subtext, perhaps lacks the finesse found in their own, 1995, in-house recording. Decades of accrued wisdom enamel and enrich every sweep of her bow for an inspired and heartfelt performance, very much in the grand style. As Ida Haendel says on the liner notes, "My aim in performing Bach is to be totally faithful to the score, yet to incorporate, in a controlled way and within the framework of the piece, all the emotions that are so clear to me". Modestly understating those tempestuous passions or contrasting moments of soothing beauty that, as a wily artist, she can effortlessly define within these dance forms. Then again, none of this would be possible, but for the creative, conceptual and compositional brilliant in evidence throughout this Testament LP.

Having waxed lyrical over the high standards of interpretation and technique, a mention for Alex Marcou's good works would also be in order. A stream of engineering superlatives announce themselves from the opening *Adagio* in the *First Sonata*. Here, Haendel's violin is presented with exemplary tonal, spatial and textural accuracy. The lightest touch and softest of changes in emphasis, (which offer key insights to this music), are drawn out by this finely detailed ►

▶ and transparent recording. Acoustic properties of this calibre, with a measure of warmth and airiness around the bow and strings thrown in, help distinguish this Bach box set from its' competitors – making it an effortless recommendation.

Chronologically backtracking to just after the war, we find Ida Haendel, in 1946, crossing the Atlantic to debut before American audiences. The North American continent was, in 1952, to become her permanent home with a move to the Mount Royal district of Montreal. Much later, in 1979, she was to settle south of the Canadian border in Miami.

However, before then, there were many more exhilarating concert and recorded performances across the globe. In 1948 it was England and the recording of Beethoven and Bruch *Concertos* alongside the musicians of a Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Rafael Kubelik. As far as I am aware these are not presently available on CD, but for those who appreciate a historical dimension, do not despair. A decade ago, Pearl/Koch released a collection of Josef Hassid and Ida Haendel violin works from 1940. It features encore favourites: *Tzigane* (Ravel), *Danse Espagnole* (Falla), *Zigeunerweisen* (Sarasate) and the complete Franz Schubert *Sonatine for violin and piano in G Minor*, D.408, OP.137. They reveal an intoxicating blend of youthful enthusiasm, lively spontaneity and a solid grasp of the music's demands.

If a bigger slice of her early musical fayre is required, then there are the Dutton Laboratories' transfer of the Saint-Saens *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* and a renowned Tchaikovsky Concerto, which remains unmissable because of her vitality and divine playing. A full helping on this CD is guaranteed with an inclusion of the Dvorak *Violin Concerto*. All three works feature the National Symphony Orchestra, with Karl Rankl and Basil Cameron sharing podium duties.

The excitement continues on a 1996 recording that finds Haendel and Ashkenazy in celebratory mood. The thrills are found, not so much in their noble and vigorous pursuit of Eastern European folk-based Szymanowski, Enescu and Bartok showpieces, but,

instead, through a bonus disc containing transcriptions of Ida Haendel Decca 78 Gramophone recordings. Yes, as anticipated, the sound is archaic, yet once you get beyond this haze, there is no denying the presence of a youthful virtuosity overflowing with passion and exuberance. Supporting duties are shared between pianists: Noel Mewton-Wood, Adela Kotowska and Ivor Newton. They span Beethoven's *Violin and Piano Sonata No. 8*, Kreisler's *Tambourin Chinois* and six Bartok *Romanian Folk Dances*.



So why, in a magazine devoted to a variety of equipment and SACD, HDCD, XRCd, and 180gr LP formats, which deliver the best in recorded sound, have I dwelt on these dubious sources? For me, it's more than idle historical curiosity. When I listen, for example, to the Testament records, I want, no, need, to know what has gone before. In this instance, how a great and largely unheralded musician has shaped her performances, grown in stature and now imparted such impeccable insights. All the biographical paragraphs written, to my mind, simply could not be as persuasive as a single hour spent listening to music nurtured across some six decades.

I encourage you to do the same. Well-listened is very much like being well-read.

Now, if you happen to be someone who ritually revisits the secondhand bins in an often fruitless search for desirable RCA, Decca or Mercury LPs, then you will probably have run your fingers past Haendel records with no more than a passing thought. There are the recitals with Gerald Moore on the HMV CLP

label and, I think, a Goossens/RPO Tchaikovsky fiddle to investigate. But I am sure it's the stereo recordings which will ultimately attract more interest from today's readers. The two labels on which she appears most frequently are, in the Sixties, Supraphon, and, in the Seventies, later releases from the EMI ASD series.

Generally, the Czechoslovakian Supraphon LPs, despite the presence of accomplished soloists and conductors like Josef Suk and Karel Ancerl, command little interest from collectors. Consequently, their tariffs are small. Here, in the U.K, a couple of quid for an LP is the norm. At that price I'd be tempted to blacken my nose a bit. So, there are no

► good monetary excuses for overlooking these recordings. Contrary to popular belief, I do not own every classical record pressed. My Ida Haendel Supraphon releases being limited to just the three albums. These are the Glazunov/Wieniawski *Violin Concertos* (SUA ST 50687), a Lalo/Ravel *Symphonie Espagnole/ Tzigane* (SUA ST 50615) and the recital collection of infamous Tartini, Pugnani, Wieniawski, Sarasate, Brahms, Paganini, Kroll and Ravel lollipops, where she is joined by pianist, Alfred Holecek. (SUA ST 50465). All bought for a song.

First on to the turntable was Alexander Glazunov's skilfully contrived *Violin Concerto in A minor*. It's a *Concerto* where the Prague Symphony Orchestra players under conductor, Vaclav Smetacek, are forced to roll their sleeves up and break a sweat, because this is one of those rare continuous pieces that join together first movement, slow movement, scherzo and finale. To the uninitiated it may seem unusual, but charming orchestration and tuneful music wins through in the end. Haendel, who was, I think, in her Thirties at the time, gives a rounded performance. She's strong on lyricism, yet, inexplicably, seems much less inclined to pursue those breathtaking opportunities for solo fireworks. Again, this is also true of the Henryk Wieniawski *Second Violin Concerto in D minor*. I admit to being pretty disappointed by these serviceable, "safety first", renditions: A feeling that was amplified through my having recently listened to the awesome bravura playing of Jascha Heifetz. Though there is some compensation to be had in the form of a nicely detailed acoustic, which constantly leaches colour, this, too, falls at the final hurdle with an edgy presentation of the upper register violin strings.

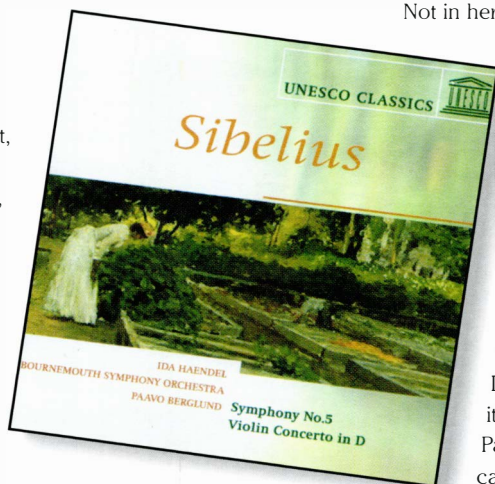
For the *Symphonie Espagnole/Tzigane*, which is available as a Supraphon CD, their engineers have placed her nearer to the microphone – positioning that helps to convey a degree of sensitivity in what is another quite literal account. This still does not absolve the technical team of residual, high pitched sins heard on the Glazunov recording. However, this 1980s repressing artfully manages an orchestral balance that draws its strength from a firm sense of instrumental location, focus and stereo imaging. Good news for Karel Ancerl and the Czech Phil. Less so for the soloist. On the *Tzigane*, Haendel, also, does not do herself justice. An occasional lighting strike of virtuoso brilliance is insufficient on a work which cries out for a more and more extrovert display. You're left wondering when the real Ida Haendel will step forward to be counted.

Fortunately, she does so on her 1962 recording of works that form the bedrock repertoire for any violinist. Combining well with Alfred Holecek, she stylishly interprets all the contrasting nuances, whether it's an opening Tartini *Devil's Trill*, a Brahms *Hungarian Dance*, or the electrifying and scintilla-like Maurice Ravel *Habanera*, that closes this recital. Vibrant tonal colours, dynamism, flair and a comforting secure technique shines through. I was also left feeling relieved and, then, reassured by what I was hearing from the Supraphon engineers: A very warm ambient sound. A touch soft focused, perhaps, but accurate and informative. What I really needed now was a stunning stereo concerto or two. I knew just where to look....

Not in her autobiography, "Woman with Violin", published in 1970.

The recordings I had in mind were made a little later in that decade for EMI. Unusually, within their stable of top orchestras and conductors, there were several provincial outfits that really shone: the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic with Sir Charles Groves, Fremantle's City of Birmingham Symphony. Down on the sleepy South Coast, it was a Finnish maestro in residence, Paavo Berglund, who for many years cast an educated eye over the Bournemouth Symphony players.

All produced musicians of the highest calibre, but it was with the least likely of them that Haendel recorded. The year was 1976 and it had plenty to recommend it. Being branded by a gloriously hot summer was a bonus and another was the temperature rising out of Jean Sibelius' *Violin Concerto in D minor, OP47* (EMI ASD 3199). The premiere of his two *Serenades*, and a marvellously atmospheric *Humoresque No. 5*, can also be found on this LP. Haendel is in tremendous form. Her richly impressive tone, in a memorably phrased and delicately balanced reading, combines a deeply moving lyricism with a well-defined sense of purpose, that is sympathetically accompanied by Berglund's enjoyable Scandinavian slant on proceedings. At the time, alongside the Kyung-Wha Chung/Previn/LSO Decca pressing, this was one of the strongest interpretations to be found in the catalogue. A hypnotic recording, too, which deploys warmth, dynamism and delicacy in equally successful amounts, still holds up surprisingly well considering the passage of time. Some twenty five years after the BSO musicians travelled down the A31 for those sessions at Southampton Guildhall, the music is still available on EMI's budget Classics label or, ►

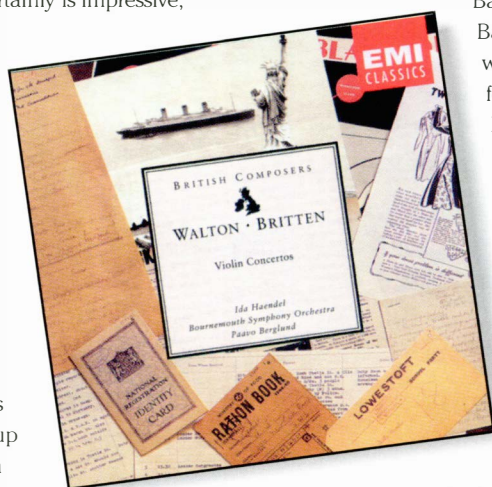


▶ alternatively, on the UNESCO DCL 707242 disc, where this Concerto is coupled with a handsome Berglund/Bournemouth rendition of the *Fifth Symphony*. Both CDs also offer excellent value for money at \$5.99 each. Sonically, the LP is their superior and worth the trouble hunting down.

Confirmation that Haendel was indeed a supreme interpreter of this Scandinavian genius, (as if it was necessary), came in 1982 when she became a worthy recipient of the Sibelius Prize for those many distinguished performances of his emotive and beautifully crafted *Concerto*. An award that probably meant much more than a CBE presented by the Queen in 1991, or the honorary doctorate from the Royal College of Music that followed in 2000.

Though the Sibelius certainly is impressive, it is equally certainly eclipsed by another Guildhall recording made on the 12th and 13th June 1977, of two quintessentially English works. These are the Britten and Walton *Violin Concertos* (EMI ASD 3483). For the Britten, producer David Mottley and balance engineer Neville Boyling, vividly spotlight our soloist's sublime technique. "Close-up and personal" makes for an expressive and tremendously engaging reading. Sonically spacious, especially around her velvety and diaphanous string tone, this recording contrastingly reveals, in formidable detail, the sombre sense of foreboding inherently present in a work that was overshadowed by the prospects of a second World War. At the same time, a juxtaposition of lyrical melodies and unsettling harmonic clashes clearly provides the tempi for this concerto. Conviction, spirit and panache punctuate every nook and cranny, with Berglund and the BSO confidently despatching each of these movements with a sensational authority.

The Walton, for which Kyung-Wha Chung and Previn on Decca again provide the most dangerous competition, has a much more natural overall balance. Haendel responds with a reading of unrivalled lyrical warmth and colour, which offers a thoughtful contrast to the agility and flamboyance embedded in this Heifetz commissioned score. Even when demanding the ultimate in virtuosity during a second movement *Scherzo Presto Capriccioso*, Haendel crisply delivers. An equally perceptive and eloquent level of orchestral support ensures that this is one of the most



noteworthy late EMI releases. It is also worth mentioning that these tonally rich qualities can be heard in the *Swan Lake* highlights (EMI ASD 3491), or complete ballet (EMI SLS 5070), where Haendel, Previn and the LSO excel within a sumptuously realised acoustic. A must for her legion of supporters, as is the EMI Classics CD transfer of the Britten and Walton *Concertos* (0777 7 6420226).

My parting shots, which will undoubtedly appeal to both the Ida Haendel completists and dyed-in-the-wool fans alike, begins with the three Canadian live recordings from the Doremi label. I have them on order from Amazon, so, at this time, I can only impart recording and repertoire details. Volume 1 DHR-7726, was a 1968 CBC recital in

Montreal, where Ida is joined by pianist Derek Bampton for a trip through the Bach, Mozart, Bartok and Ravel standards. Volume 2 DHR-7733, was taped at the 1967 Montreal EXPO and features Claude Champagne's *Habanera*, the Beethoven *Sonata for violin and piano No. 7*, and a trade-mark Bach *Chaconne*. Piano duties by John Newmark. Volume 3 DHR-7733, hails from Toronto in 1980. Enesco's *Sonata for violin and piano No. 3*, the Brahms *Sonata No. 1*, a Weber *Air Russe and Rondo*, together with Tartini's *Audante and Presto*, are mouth watering prospects. Keyboards by Ronald Turini. Watch this space for further developments. Lastly, I feel that when a composer writes a work with a particular musician in mind, you

can take it as read that there is an industry stamp of approval for that person. Allan Pettersson's Mahlerian-like, but sometimes self-indulgent, *Violin Concerto No.2* is an "Ida Haendel" kite mark.

Although this was specifically written for her, it is by no means a cakewalk. Greatness comes with a fair old price to pay, and this exacting Pettersson *Concerto* is no exception. Like the Glazunov and, for that matter, many of Pettersson's thirteen symphonies, it is a single movement work that runs to just under an hour. In concert, this must be a nightmare to play, but as recordings provide the opportunity to revisit and re-record any slips, there are no problems here. In fact this is a seamless and definitive performance by all parties. Ida produces heart stopping moments with abandon and the Swedish RSO conducted by Blomstedt, are unequivocal in their treatment of even the most garulous interludes. For those who are tempted by Pettersson's diatonic, direct and sometimes self-pitying utterances, this Caprice (CAP1200) LP will not be a disappointment. Just remember that Pettersson (very much like Ida Haendel herself) is an acquired taste, who musically excites the allegiance of some and the impatience of others.





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