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Issue 52
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BRILLIANCE**

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"A SUPERBLY ENGINEERED LOUDSPEAKER MAKING THE MOST OF ITS TECHNOLOGY TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR MUSIC"

HI FI PLUS / ISSUE 44 / ROY GREGORY / SUMMIT

"THE VANTAGE IS SOMETHING OF A GIFT AND ONE THAT KEEPS ON GIVING"

HFC THE COLLECTION / 06 / ALVIN GOLD / VANTAGE

Through their sheer beauty – both aural and visual – MartinLogan speakers have established hybrid electrostatic technology as the obvious choice for those who want state-of-the-art sound without suffering a profusion of ugly boxes. The company's name is now a byword for elegance in audio.

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MartinLogan has raised the bar even higher with the sublime Summit, a speaker that possess all of the virtues of the brand in a disarmingly compact form. To make its virtues available to a wider audience, the Summit has been followed by the smaller Vantage, and – for those with space or budget restrictions – the passive-woofer Vista. We have no doubt that they are the most satisfying MartinLogan speakers ever, magical blends of electrostatic openness and the kind of bass only available from a dynamic woofer. They can charm and excite in equal measure, dealing with everything from delicate, 'unplugged' music to massive orchestras, from funk to fusion.

To augment the Summit and its sisters, especially for home cinema applications, a new baby has been added to the range of MartinLogan subwoofers. The Abyss, coming above the very successful Dynamo but below the Grotto, features a 12in woofer, and it provides a new form of convenience for true flexibility: the Abyss, driven by its internal 300W amp, can be installed with either front- or downward-firing positions. It uses inverse mathematical equalisation, for sound to suit the environment.

New, too, for home theatre and environmental situations, are the Stage hybrid centre channel speaker and the Ticket, a compact and affordable in-wall model. The Stage fits into an enclosure only 34.6in wide, ideal for the new generation of wall-mounted plasma and LCD displays. Better still, a pair of flush-mounted Tickets will complement an in-wall monitor so unobtrusively that they're ideal for studies, bedrooms and anywhere else a secondary system is used.

MartinLogan: speaking a new language.

MARTIN LOGAN VISTA

MARTIN LOGAN SUMMIT


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Recently I enjoyed the opportunity to renew my acquaintance with Jonathan Carr, designer of the Lyra and Connoisseur products. He's a rare bird and seldom travels outside of Japan, leaving the international aspects of the business to his partner, Stig Borge. After all, whenever one reviews a product, especially one like the Skala that breaks the mould as far as accepted thinking goes, it's always nice to get the background from the designer himself. But in Jonathan's case the pleasure runs much deeper. Doing what I do, you get to meet a great many people responsible for the design of world-class products. Some are fascinated by and fascinating on the subject of their chosen technological field. Others are innovative or lateral thinkers and still others are simply meticulous engineers. In fact, most contain facets of all three. But Jonathan, as impressive as he is on the subject of his products and the reasoning behind them, gets really passionate once the subject turns to music. That's when you realise that his commitment to building the best products he can really is just a service to music itself. Why else start the current trend for mono versions of high-end cartridges. No one did it until Lyra, and when they did most people thought them mad. But Jonathon did it anyway, because without those cartridges the fantastic performances that exist only in mono would soon be lost forever, first as pale imitations of their former glory, then through the resulting indifference.

Talking to Jonathan is like talking to Harry Weisfeld of VPI, another whose interest in the business is driven by his passion for music and the desire to preserve and reproduce it to ever better standards. Of course, passion is no guarantee of design or business success, but it's interesting to take a look around the systems being used by Plus writers and count up just how many VPI, Lyra and Connoisseur products they contain. It certainly gives you pause for thought...

Ry Gregory



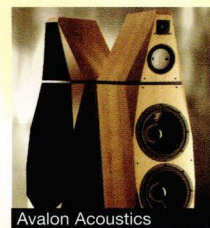
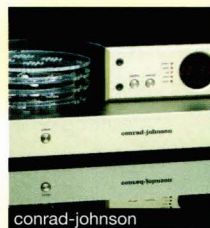
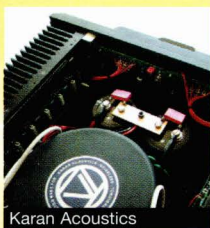
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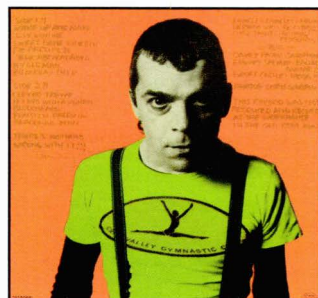
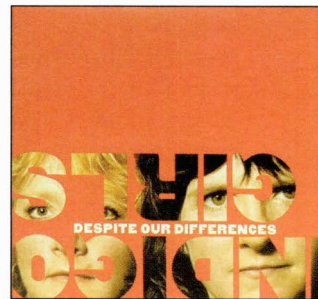
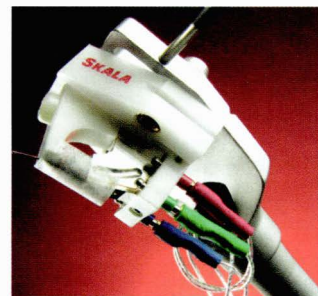
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PLAYING THE SYSTEM

by Roy Gregory

Dartzeel hit the audio scene with the launch of their exquisitely constructed and engineered power amp. Flawless anodising and the immaculate symmetry of the boards added to the inimitable sense of Swiss precision, factors that carried over into the subsequent pre-amp, a unit that boasted the same beautiful standards of construction and presentation. Until that is, you look a little closer. Nothing wrong in material terms I can assure you – it's just that rather than the volume control being labelled "Volume", "Gain" or any of the other monikers in general usage, the perfectly executed engraving underneath reads "Pleasure Control".

After I'd done a double take, my first response was "Naff", my second that here we have the proverbial moustache on the Mona Lisa, the large spot on the end of one's nose. But after I'd got over that knee-jerk response and actually started to think about things a little more, I wondered if I was underestimating the people behind the product. After all, the notion that increasing the volume increases your pleasure is pretty simplistic, yet one glance at the amps themselves tells you that simplistic they ain't. Indeed, ignoring the jarring impact of that front panel legend, the one thing that seems absolutely certain is that nothing, not one single miniscule aspect of these amps, the components used or the way they've been put together, has been anything other than carefully, repeatedly, microscopically considered. So why the facile label on the front-panel?

One of the insipient problems of hi-fi as a hobby, is the insidious influence of component envy. We all start out listening to music on cheap systems. Depending on age that might mean the parents' radiogram, a Bush table radio or a Japanese transistor (complete with single "ear-bud" – there really is nothing new under the sun). It might mean dad's discarded separates, a ghetto blaster or even, for the lucky few, a Denon mini-system. But for all who embark on the rocky road of first proper systems and subsequent upgrades, there's the looming danger, the enticing proposition of turning to the dark side – where

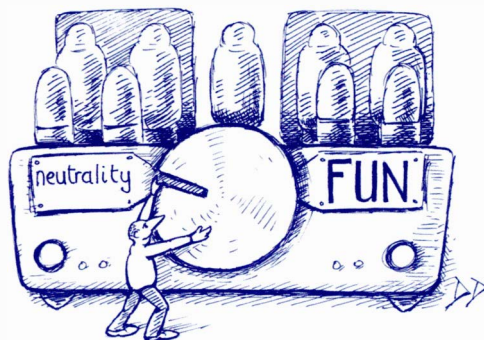
equipment becomes an end in itself, where "performance" takes on a different meaning, where "pride of ownership" is writ large and the products become more important than the music they produce. Take that wrong turn and the first casualty is fun. Soon you listen to the system, not the musicians; you upgrade to improve its performance not theirs; you listen for more rather than more often. And when you stop listening (because your ultra-definition, super-transparent and totally revealing set-up fails to engage you on a musical level) the answer lies on the path of perpetual upgrades to ever better (or at least more expensive) components; components like the Dartzeels.

Could it be, I wondered, if that label on the Dartzeel pre-amp, positioned just where you'll see it every time you use the system, is the designer's way of telling us not to take things too seriously, to kick back and listen to the music, not to the amplifiers delivering it. Could it be that this most precisely, perfectly sculpted icon of a product is reminding us that despite appearances, this hobby is supposed to be fun!

Of course, there are products out there that just can't help themselves. Take any smallish speaker with a thumping great bass unit; it just looks like it's going to be fun. Tannoy dual-concentrics are a case in point (12" and upwards, naturally). There were two of these, mounted in corner cabinets and hanging on the end of a Leak Stereo 20 in my student system. Hi-fi? Not exactly. Fun? Absolutely! In fact, speaker designers have it easier than most when it comes to injecting that vital

frisson, part fear, part anticipation that gets you wanting to fire something up just as soon as you possibly can. Personally I'd go further than that, suggesting that the move to slimmer cabinets with smaller bass drivers has robbed hi-fi – especially affordable hi-fi – of much of its immediate appeal. Whither the 8" two-way: its bass might be a little unruly but at least it has some, along with the sense of scale and dynamics that goes with it.

For amplifier manufacturers it's a little more tricky. Tubes help and a decent meter never does any harm



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► (which probably helps explain the enduring appeal of McIntosh electronics) but you need something more than that: something that shows you care, that you're prepared to go the extra, hard yards to deliver your vision. Of course, different works and cute too – like the Ayre MXRs, but for the best recent example to cross my path, look no further than the Emille KI-120 amplifiers (note the plural). This mono-block integrated design arrives in a pair of wooden chest that look like they've come straight from the set of the latest *Pirates Of The Caribbean* movie. Inside, each large – and I do mean large – mono amplifier is wrapped in a silk sheet. Whip that off and you're confronted with a beautifully machined, shoe-box format, open chassis amp, four 6550s open



to the sky and a bias/output meter on the front that looks like it's been swiped from a pre-war Heinkel. Heft it out of the crate and you realise that its dimensions are for more than just show, and that the depth of the thing means it's not going to fit on any rack you've actually got available. There are five control knobs on the front and balanced and single ended inputs round the back. But the best bit, the best bit of all, is that you need two of these monsters for stereo! Whoever designed and built these things has got to be slightly

unhinged – but I can't help loving them. Separate left and right volume controls and source select and not a remote control in sight: Now that's what I call hi-fi. Not exactly a moustache on the Mona Lisa, but definitely down on the upper lip. ➤+



SPEAKERS CORNER

by Paul Messenger

I don't mind admitting that the results of comparing the two versions of the ART loudspeaker reviewed in the last issue came as quite a shock. The Emotion and its Signature variation share the same drive units and enclosure, and differ only in a small matter of crossover component and internal wiring quality – and a not so small matter of £4,000 added to the pricetag.

And I don't mind admitting that I was thoroughly sceptical when I heard those bare facts about the physical differences and the price differential. I still don't know whether a dozen or so exotic inductors, capacitors and resistors, plus some classy internal wiring can really justify the Signature's price premium, though I do know that some of the very specialist components, like paper-in-oil capacitors and ribbon inductors, can be very costly.

Perhaps naively, I was really surprised by the dramatic improvement wrought by this change in crossover

components, but I'd never really had the chance to make such a direct and immediate comparison before. Now that I'm fully aware that the crossover components are as important as any of the other ingredients in the loudspeaker system, I can't help speculating about the advantages of eliminating passive crossover networks completely.

Perhaps the most obvious alternative is to 'go active', which means that each 'way' (in a typical two- or three-way speaker system) has its own power amp, but each power amp is only fed the relevant required frequency band for that 'way', usually via an electronic crossover, which is either an extension of the pre-amplifier, or built into the input of the power amp. Of course, it means your filter electronics have to be built to the same performance standard as your pre-amp, which is itself neither cheap nor easy and opens a whole different can of worms...

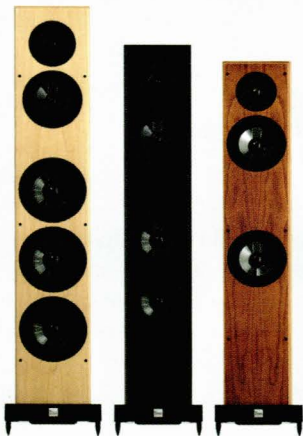
Yet it's a technique that's almost universally adopted ►

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Let not the attention to physical beauty permit the viewer to conclude that any less attention has been wrought in the core engineering. Finite element analysis results in unique cast XP3 cones, soft and quiet so as not to create false echoes that blur clarity, yet stiffened and reinforced by ribs in a weblike pattern that assures speed and slam. Out of sight, crossover inductors precision wound to tolerances of .7% ensure that soundstages will not collapse during dynamic passages, while expensive MKP capacitors allow only the silkiest of highs to emerge from expensive Scandinavian high frequency radiators.

Vienna Acoustics, the decision is a grand slam.



*From the left:
Beethoven Concert Grand,
Beethoven Baby Grand,
Mozart Grand*

Grand. Slam.

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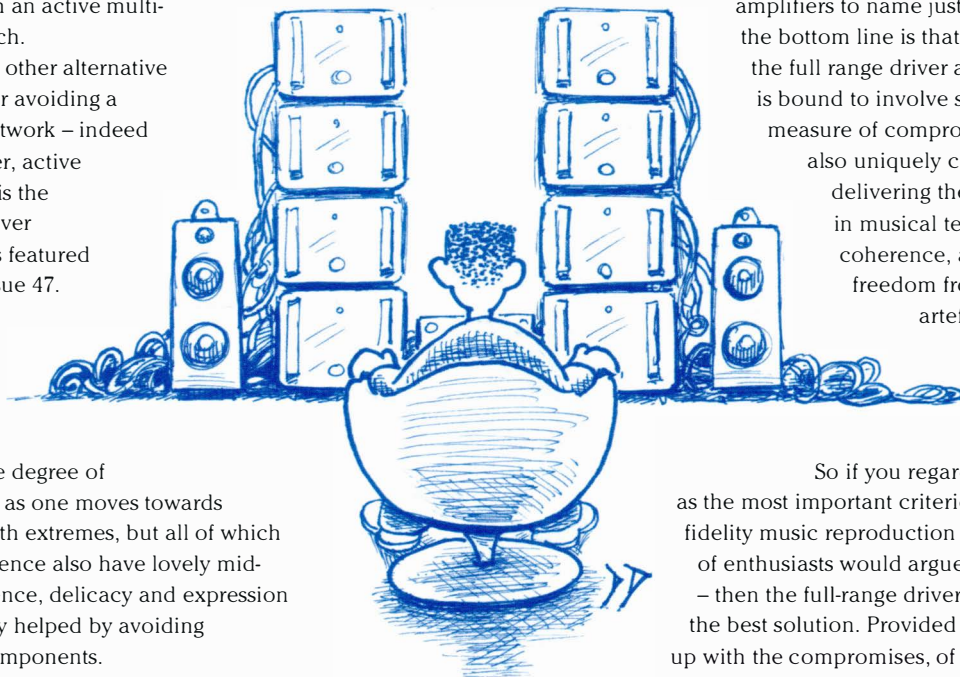
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► for serious monitoring in the professional sector. I had dinner with recording studio designer Philip Newell a few weeks back, and we got to talking about his preferred monitoring speakers, which use twin JBL bass drivers above and below a TAD horn tweeter. When I started asking about the crossover, he laughed and said he wouldn't consider anything other than an active multi-amp approach.

Despite being available for decades from at least four prominent British hi-fi brands (ATC, Linn, Meridian, Naim – plus of course B&O), active drive has had only a modest impact on the hi-fi scene. This is surprising, since active drive would seem to offer several very real advantages. Directly connecting power amp and drive unit should improve driver control and damping; the crossover filtering is carried out at low level with negligible power involved; each amplifier has a much simpler load to drive; and of course there are no regular crossover components to add their own distortions.

It's much harder to find equivalent arguments in favour of conventional passive operation, though it does have simplicity on its side, both in keeping the number of components and interconnections to a minimum, but perhaps more significantly in ensuring the signal remains a single coherent entity right through to the power amp output. A number of amp designers (valve and solid state) consider that it's important to restrict the number of output devices to a bare minimum for best coherence, which of course is not possible with an active multi-amp approach.

The only other alternative technique for avoiding a crossover network – indeed any crossover, active or passive – is the full-range driver approach, as featured heavily in Issue 47. These come in various forms, all of which invariably involve some degree of compromise as one moves towards the bandwidth extremes, but all of which in my experience also have lovely mid-band coherence, delicacy and expression – presumably helped by avoiding crossover components.



There are too many approaches to discuss all the options, but the type broadly splits into two types: direct radiators, and those which horn-load the rear of the driver. Direct radiators further sub-divide into singletons, such as the 4-inch drivers used in the Eclipse TD-series and Aurousal models, and series/parallel groups like the 4x2-inch vertical array which Ted Jordan himself uses at home, and which is also found in the Bandor-based Seventh Veil models.

While Lowther's 8-inchers have been the full-range driver of horn loading choice for decades, Fostex 4-inchers seem to be becoming an attractive alternative, as recently encountered in designs from Beauhorn, Lovington and Gemme Audio, and they allow the use of a smaller enclosure.

The pluses and minuses of these full range driver systems are quite complex. Most struggle at the very top end, in part because their distribution narrows, and devices like Lowther's 'whizzer' cone tends to create unevenness. Power handling will be limited, especially for singletons, and when combined with the modest cone area will restrict the loudness capability of the direct radiators. The horns supply good loudness through their intrinsically high efficiency, but genuinely deep bass is only available by using an impractically large (preferably architectural) horn.

One could mention all sorts of other topics, such as hybrid horns (eg Avantgarde etc), Manger drivers, transconductance amplifiers to name just three. But the bottom line is that although the full range driver approach is bound to involve some measure of compromise, it is also uniquely capable of delivering the ultimate in musical temporal coherence, as well as a freedom from crossover artefacts. You can't have one without the other.

So if you regard coherence as the most important criterion in high fidelity music reproduction – and plenty of enthusiasts would argue that it is – then the full-range driver speaker is the best solution. Provided you can put up with the compromises, of course. ➤

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or via the website at www.hifiplus.com

Dear Sir,

I have been a consistent reader of *Hi-Fi +* since Issue 6. Generally speaking I find its contents interesting and I think you should be congratulated on what you have created (at what expense of energy, one can only imagine!).

Despite my general enthusiasm, however, I finally decided to take a sabbatical (as a *Hi-Fi +* reader) shortly after Issue 29. What set my nerves on edge in that issue was the Blue Pearl review; more precisely the fact that one was being asked to embrace a very expensive product (I am not against high priced products on principle) on the grounds (inter alia) that [on the Blue Pearl/JEM] "she [Martzy] masters the score and shapes it, while the Clearaudio relies on the structure of the piece itself. Impressive as it is, it simply can't match the artistic vision delivered by the JEM". I balked at that, I am afraid. If you say that a given turntable has superior timing, or that it fleshes out notes better, or that it recreates the attack on a note more realistically or that it sustains note decay better, or that it somehow cleans up the undesirable artefacts of groove tracing (where other tables fail to do so), and that for any of these reasons (or all of them together) the logic of some specific musician's performance emerges more clearly or impressively, then I can go along with this. If not, I am in difficulty.

However that may be, what prompted me to cut short my 'sabbatical' (and what has indirectly prompted me to write this letter) was the cover of Issue 50 with the picture of the SME 20/12. I am an SME owner and immediately recognised much of my own experience (with the Model 30) in what you had to say about the Model 20/12, in particular regarding the need for painstaking adjustment of VTF, VTA etc. In fact, I have never sweated so much over arm/cartridge adjustment as I have since installing the Model 30 - and this despite having used the same arm - the SME 5 - on my previous table. My reading of your 20/12 review is as follows: if this turntable gives a more satisfactory overall result (than the other SME tables you have heard) it is largely because of the 12" arm. From this it follows that your less enthusiastic reaction to the other SME turntables is down to the 9" arms they are usually equipped with, in particular the Series 5. I think I understand what you mean about this arm (the sort of vice-like grip it exerts on the music) and my question is this: what is responsible (in your opinion) for this effect?

Is it the heavily damped arm-tube (something one can presumably do nothing about) or something less intrinsic to the design which could therefore be ameliorated, for instance the internal wiring? Or, assuming that the only way forward is to use another arm, which would be your choice? The obvious candidates are the Graham Phantom (another arm whose designer believes in damping, apparently), the Da Vinci Audio Labs arm (9" version), one of the Pluto arms (all of the aforementioned come conveniently with SME mounting plates), the Triplanar, the Breuer, or the new Pierre Lumé Septum (a sort of unipivot SME 5!)?

Yours,

Peter Taylor

Florence, Italy

Clearly no record player can enhance the quality of the performance captured on a disc. What I was attempting to express in the JEM review was the degree to which the different 'tables revealed Martzy's mastery, what she brings to the performance over and above the composition itself. I can only apologise for any confusion, begging your indulgence for the difficulties of trying to describe something as fragile and ephemeral as sound in words, without resorting to cliché. In doing so I try to explain how a piece of equipment impacts the music played; sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't (an adage that applies equally well to most hi-fi as well as those attempting to review it).

Your reading of the 20/12 review is spot on. Previous experience with SME decks has been underlined by lack of attention to set-up and my own personal (and it is very personal) response to the sound of the 5. The question is, was it the 12" arm-tube or the detachable headshell that made the difference? With a Model 30 on the way, complete with a detachable headshell 5, hopefully the conundrum will soon be solved. As to possible alternative arms or modifications, I'd always advocate a unified approach to cabling throughout your system, the coherence of the loom outweighing the choice of a specific cable per se. Like most other listeners, my experience of alternative arms on the 30 is limited, but I have heard excellent results from the Triplanar and intuitively, based on what I know of that arm's character (and my affection for it) that's probably the route I'd take if all else failed. Ed.



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The Price Of Power...

conrad-johnson's LP70S, LP140M and LP275M Power Amps

by Roy Gregory

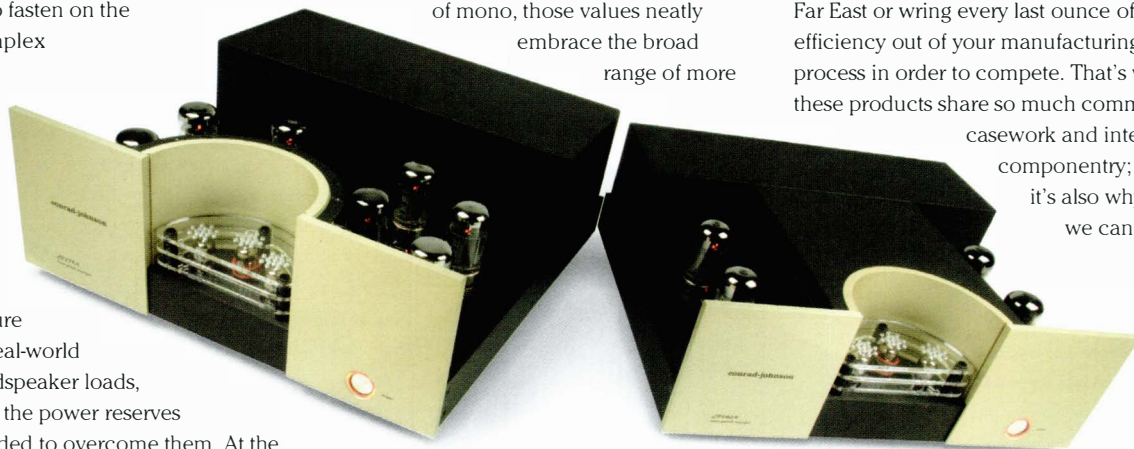
One of the most enduring debates in hi-fi revolves around the amount of power that's desirable for true hi-fi performance. On the one hand, the (often but not exclusively American) high-power advocates point to the dynamic range and bandwidth of live performance and the huge amounts of power required to match it from a moderately efficient full-range loudspeaker system. Then there are those slightly less extreme souls who fasten on the complex

two extremes lies a continuum of hotly contested argument, even around the broad middle ground and it's here that I want to focus our attention.

It's not often that we review three power amps from a single manufacturer, and certainly not three as closely related to one another as these. But in this case that's the whole point. Not only do these amps share identical circuitry, with output stages configured appropriately for 70 Watts of stereo, 140 or 275 Watts of mono, those values neatly embrace the broad range of more

the American auto industry to shape up or get shipped out, the established Western hi-fi manufacturers find themselves under increasing pressure from Chinese manufactured product, and nowhere more acutely than when it comes to loudspeakers and valve amplifiers. Add to that the fact that raw materials have quadrupled in price in recent years, a rise reflected in the price of components too, and the stark reality is either get your products built in the Far East or wring every last ounce of efficiency out of your manufacturing process in order to compete. That's why these products share so much common

casework and internal componentry; it's also why we can



nature of real-world loudspeaker loads, and the power reserves needed to overcome them. At the other theoretical extreme we find the high-efficiency speaker, flea-powered amplifier brigade, pointing out that it's easier to build efficiency into a speaker than power into an amp. They cite the critical importance of dynamic range and speed over both neutrality and bandwidth in capturing the nature of the live event. Their slightly less fundamentalist allies point to the sluggish performance of large power supplies and the problems of linearity associated with multiple pairs of output devices. Note of course, that the true high-efficiency maven won't even pair devices, single-ended being the only truth, the light and the way. Between the

"normal" hi-fi applications. They are also based on one of the classic amplifier topologies, employing push-pull 6550 tubes in the output stage. Even better, they allow us to compare that output stage, based on a single pair of output devices, to ones built around two pairs and four pairs of exactly the same devices. All in all, it's just too good a chance to miss.

Why the astonishing commonality between these amps? The reasoning and internal details are covered in the sidebar, as laid out by Bill Conrad and Lew Johnson, but the wider perspective is simple. Just as Japanese cars forced

undertake this comparison.

Talking of casework, you can't miss the shared styling of these amps. Indeed, the chassis used for the LP70S and LP140M is all but identical. The four extra output tubes of the LP275M require a deeper chassis, but even so, fascia elements are common (although the fascia itself is taller) and so too is the fully enclosed design. The distinctive look was first seen on the CT5 pre-amp and the more I lived with that the more I grew to like it. That process has continued with the power amps, especially the 275s and whilst the appearance of these units does

▶ divide opinion, I'd strongly suggest giving it time. Hey, even if you don't like it, at least your amps won't look like everybody else's'. The good news is that the fit and finish, if not exactly jewel like, is extremely solid and well executed. Tube cages are held in place by captive screws (which are easy to operate once you get the hang of it) and can be left off if so desired. The fixed bias output stages (the only sensible option with more powerful amps) employ c-j's proven LED based biasing system, making set-up simplicity itself. One word of warning: the tube boxes are numbered to identify the position of each valve – the valves themselves

are not. Only unpack one at a time! The input and phase splitter valves are positioned in the shrine sheltered by the fascia, and protected by Perspex fins; c-j provide a pair of damping rings for the input valve in order to minimise microphony. Inputs are single ended only and there's a single pair of five-way binding posts for each channel. And that's about as much as you need to know. These amps are about as straight forward and devoid of unnecessary frills as it's possible to be.

Listening was conducted using ARC CD7 and Wadia digital sources, Kuzma Stabi XL 4/Stogi 313 and VPI TNT6/JMW 12.7 front-ends: cartridges

were the Lyra Titan i and Skala on the VPI, the vdH Condor on the Kuzma. Pre-amps were the Connoisseur 4.2 P/L SE combination and the Ayre K-1x, while cabling was Nordost's Odin throughout, with a Valhalla/Thor mains loom and everything was supported on finite element HD Master Reference racks and platforms. Considerable thought went into the choice of speakers with two different pairs being used. One was the remarkable Eben C1, a stand-mounted two-way which is astonishingly critical of coherent musical delivery and surprisingly hungry for power. If the test of a big amp is how much bass it can get out of a little box then this

What's On The Inside...

The three amplifiers under test represent the latest generation in the long evolution of c-j's power amplification. As such, they contain developments in both styling and construction. The most obvious changes are in styling and the phase splitter, where a new 6922 based topology delivers lower impedance drive for the output devices. Otherwise, these amps are as near identical as it's possible to build them, given the different numbers of output devices. Their overall topology and ground runs are contained on a single, common PCB, while parts and componentry are also identical. Indeed, this is the first series of amps that c-j has built where component quality is consistent from top to bottom. All three amps use the latest CJD impregnated polypropylene caps in their reservoir stages, all coupling and bypass caps are now Teflon and Vishay resistors are used throughout. Although the old Premier classification has been dropped – basically because the company was building pretty much everything to Premier standard – these latest models actually represent a significant advance in overall component quality.

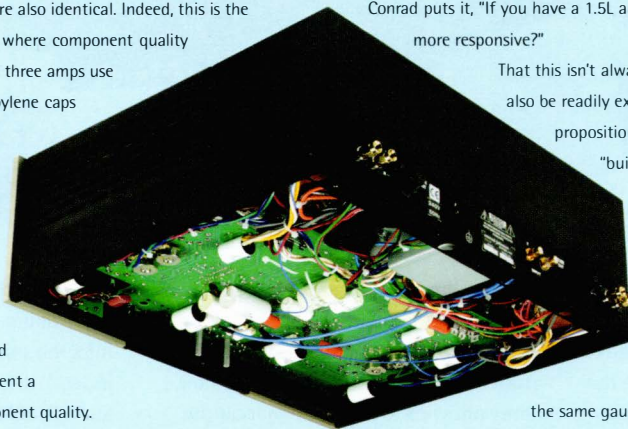
Differences between the trio are confined to the number of output devices and the subsequent adjustments in the driver stage and changes to the output and mains transformers they dictate. The larger amps also carry more reservoir capacitance, but this is created by simply multiplying the number of caps employed in the LP70S – the capacitors themselves are identical in type and value.

c-j suggest that all things being equal, with identical circuits and built to the same standard, the more powerful amp should always sound better. There are sound theoretical reasons for that belief. Increasing the number of output devices will decrease the turns ratio in the output transformer (by

half in the case of the LP275M as opposed to the LP70S) which will deliver wider bandwidth. The bigger amp will also have a slightly higher damping factor, but more crucially, will maintain it across a wider bandwidth too, whilst the move to mono chassis construction gives each power supply an entirely independent feed. These factors will deliver more air, extension and better transient response, while the availability of greater power reserves will allow the bigger amp to drive a wider range of speakers with greater control. As Bill Conrad puts it, "If you have a 1.5L and a 3.0L version of the same car, which is more responsive?"

That this isn't always the case when it comes to hi-fi can also be readily explained. The key phrases in the original proposition are "all things being equal" and "built to the same standard". All too often, when it comes to valve amps, much of the compromise lies in the output transformer. Increasing the output power needs a bigger transformer, which should in theory use thicker gauge wire for its windings. Instead, many transformer manufacturers will use

the same gauge wire that they do on smaller units, the result of which is increased loop resistance. In turn this causes loss of extension and detail at high frequencies, giving the amplifier a dark and heavy sound. Add the increased reservoir capacitance required into the mix and things get worse again. The large electrolytic caps used in the vast majority of power amplifiers are a major limiting factor in overall performance. Increase their number and you just make things worse. Increase their size and that's worse still. As the inimitable Mr Conrad has it, "I want to make my car more powerful so I'm going to put more diesel in its petrol tank!" Add the sluggish dynamic response to the heavy, dark sound described above and you can see where the idea that big amps sound worse than little ones gained its currency.



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the Power of Perfection....



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

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is the little box to use. The other was the Marten Coltrane Supreme, a large and ruinously expensive four cabinet system with its own active bass amp and cross-over. This might seem like an odd choice, but its 93dB efficiency and the fact that it only uses the driving amps above 50Hz or so means that it throws a clear spotlight on the midrange agility and dynamic response of the matching electronics – exactly where tradition has it that the smaller amp should score. Shorn of the need to deliver deep bass, and free from the overpowering impact of sheer numbers, this speaker should tell us in no uncertain terms just how those big amps deal with the necessary baggage they carry in order to deliver all that power. The results however, didn't quite work out that way...

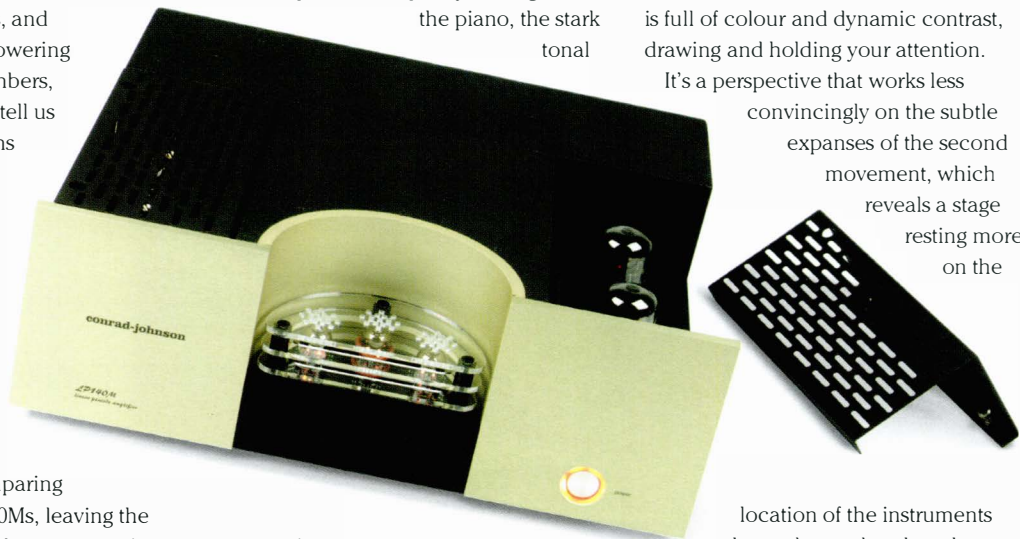
I started by comparing the LP70S and LP140Ms, leaving the late arriving 275s a chance to run in properly, something experience has taught me really matters with products containing Teflon components. In many ways, it's the logical place to start anyway, two amps being visually as well as internally identical, the 140s simply doubling up. Of course, I spent considerable time with both amps before settling down to directly compare their performance, noting differences along the way, but it wasn't until I used them side-by-side that I realized just why the gap in musical satisfaction was so wide.

The LP70S is a classically disposed and classic sounding, single output pair, push-pull amplifier. Listen to it and you are immediately struck by its direct and uncomplicated clarity. It has a lightness of touch and deft agility which is immediately familiar and familiarly

immediate. Here you have the sense of life and connection that has always made valve amps of this ilk so musically appealing. Voices have a natural vivacity and there's nothing plodding or earthbound about tempi or changes in level. Neil Young's nasal whine may not be the sort of voice we naturally gravitate to, but on the LP70S there's no missing the fragile delicacy he conjures on 'After The Goldrush', helped by the amp's range of tonal shading, the gently percussive quality it brings to the piano, the stark tonal

and readily identified. It's a performance full of drama and the 70 doesn't leave you short changed, delivering the reading pace and gusto. The interplay between Starker's cello and the orchestral voices is beautifully balanced, his instrument full of immediacy and a bite that gives his playing a sense of verve and panache. It's a presentation that leans towards the strings as opposed to the body of his instrument, but the directness of his playing, its presence front and centre of the stage is full of colour and dynamic contrast, drawing and holding your attention.

It's a perspective that works less convincingly on the subtle expanses of the second movement, which reveals a stage resting more on the



separation between it and the horn solo that offers the only instrumental contrast on the track.

That same ability to separate and hold an instrument or voice in space helps project Lloyd Cole's recessed vocal from the back of the stage on 'Cut Me Down'. The measured beat of the drum has a satisfying attack and impact, the tracks evolutionary changes of pace pinned to its contribution, the string accents full of drive and purpose. There's some confusion of the overlaid backing vocals, but it's a complex mix and hardly an audiophile recording. In contrast, the Starker/Dvorak *Cello Concerto* on Mercury has impeccable credentials. The slowly built opening crescendo that leads to the solo entry is beautifully paced and separated, each choir of instruments precisely placed

location of the instruments themselves rather than the dimensions and shape of the overall acoustic. Width is excellent and depth good for the price, which is reflected in the separation and impact of livelier passages, the uncluttered presentation of studio mixes, the decent sense of scale on orchestral works. It also brings a welcome intimacy to smaller scale acoustic recordings or solo instruments.

So far so good and the 70 is certainly no slouch, which makes the gulf in performance between it and the LP140Ms once you put them face to face so much more surprising. The mono-blocs bring a dramatic increase in weight, musical and harmonic complexity, instrumental body and presence, musical poise and authority. This is a big change: it's not a little bit more at the top, a little bit more at the

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▶ bottom, it's a wholesale reassessment of the musical performance – both of the recording itself and the system playing it. What's more, the difference is actually more apparent on the Marten speakers than it is on the Eben's, when you'd expect the reverse to be true. After all, doubling the power output ought to get considerably greater bottom-end weight and impact out of the small two-way (it does!). It's just that the differences in mid-bass and midrange performance are greater and musically more important still – and the Coltrane Supremes leave you in no doubt as to their nature.

Comparing track for track, the Lloyd Cole is crucial to understanding what's going on. The Starker delivers the increased weight and presence to instruments, the increased sense of bow and body in his sound, the greater range and complexity of the harmonics that result. Suddenly there's an overarching acoustic, a sense of the orchestra contained in a single space, but most important of all there's a poise and controlled purpose to the performance, a greater sense of emotional communication. The change is so great that you swap backwards and forwards, but each time the gulf remains the same. As I said, it's when you move on to 'Cut Me Down' that it all falls into place. Right from the start the 140s bring a sense of drive and energy to the track. Suddenly you are aware of so much more going on in the mid-bass, layers of texture added in the studio that fill it out and add a sense of solid foundation. Now you know why Cole's voice sounds recessed, the distance that's been created in the mix. It's no less intelligible, but it's where it should be in the stage. Now there's no confusion in

the backing vocals, tracked to appear in front of the lead, adding to the sense of dislocation and ennui: the song has more weight, more impact (musically and in terms of meaning), it makes much more sense.

But the real change revealed is tied to the drumbeat. On the 70S you'd swear that drummer Stephen Irvine and bass player Lawrence Donegan stretch out and condense their rhythm to alter the pace of the track. But play it on the 140s and you realise that their tempo is rock solid throughout. It's Cole and the rest of the band that slide off the beat before catching it up for the telling pause before each chorus, driven on by snare and guitar



accents. "So what?" you might be thinking, "It still sounded good on the 70S." But that extra information comes from deep within the amps' performance, revealing a combination of low-frequency authority and weight that locks the music together. The power and energy that fill's out the mid-bass is what brings the extra colour, harmonic complexity and presence, but it's the fact that it arrives precisely placed in time, along with all the other instruments, that opens up the extra expressive dimension. That

hesitation before each chorus on 'Cut Me Down' is far more purposeful and dramatic, the slow build in each verse has greater inevitability and momentum. It's what makes this a standout track. The 140s make it happen, let you hear how it's happening, but most important of all, make it clear that it is happening at all. I've heard this track live on more occasions than I care to consider and on countless systems too, so I know what it is I'm looking for. If I'd only ever heard the record via the 70S I'd blame the recording for the lack of that gloriously surging inevitability that makes this track a key part of the Commotions' live repertoire. The 140s banish any such thoughts.

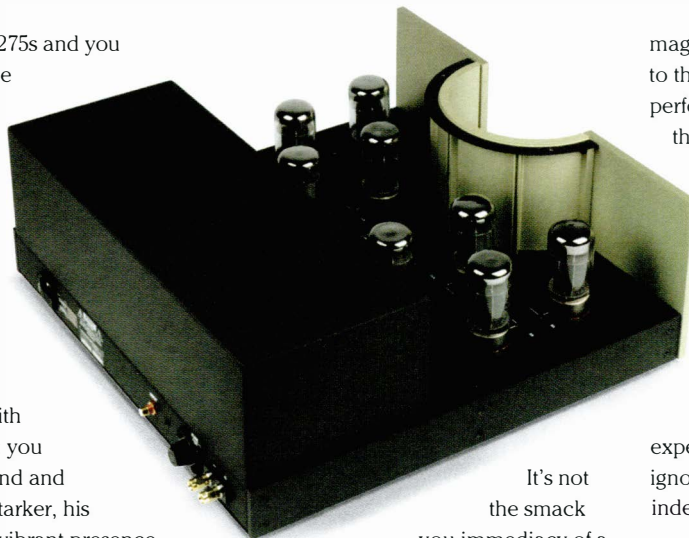
This isn't about creating a facsimile of the live event. It's far more fundamental than that – it's about unravelling the sense in music, what makes it music in the first place. So, with the 140s the poise and restrained passion that Starker brings to the second movement of the Dvorak has a majesty and emotive power that quite escapes the 70S.

The coherent acoustic and stability of the stage add to the presence and frisson of the performance, building on the interplay between soloist and orchestra, as does the sense of space and air between them. The added weight that underpins Nils Lofgren's piano on 'After The Goldrush' brings pathos and a studied solemnity to that track's measured pace, an emotive weight to the lyrics. As good as the 70S seems on first acquaintance, the 140s are in a different league. Time then, to bring on the 275s...

The flagship amps are, bigger and much heavier than the 140s, but sonically they're cut from the same ▶


cloth. Listen to the 275s and you get more of what the 140s deliver.

You get better separation and greater air: the overlapping bass guitar and drum on 'Cut Me Down' are perfectly distinct. You get a more defined acoustic with clearer boundaries: you hear the walls around and the floor beneath Starker, his instrument a solid, vibrant presence. You get even more dynamic range: an effortless, sinuous quality to the ebb and flow of the Lloyd Cole track. But beyond all that, you get more musical message, greater musical impact. With the 275, drumbeats are not just more solid, they're more emphatic. Musical accents and pauses have greater effect, the line of a melody, the intent in a phrase is more definite. It matters not whether we talk about Lloyd Cole or Janos Starker, Neil Young or any of the other myriad performers who've passed through the 275s, the result is always the same. The draw in the music is almost like an emotional undertow, pulling you in. You might start by listening to this track or that, but you finish up just listening. And you listen longer than you should, even whilst deadlines beckon. Yes, you can define what's happening in terms of extended bandwidth and quicker transient response, the temporal authority that they bring. You can talk about air and control, but the result of these qualities in combination is wonderfully, almost addictively compelling on a purely musical level. The 140's are extremely fine amps, sharing many of the qualities that make the 275s so special. But their big brothers take things that much further, go that much deeper into the music and the performance they produce is at once wonderfully unforced and immediate.



It's not the smack you immediacy of a horn, or the sudden jump of a small and agile amp; this is a contained delivery that projects the intent in a performance with such direct power that it connects straight to the listener, placing you in the same place as the performers. You feel the power and technique that Starker brings to bear on his instrument, but you also feel the guiding hand of Dorati as he directs and balances the performance, binding soloist and orchestra into a single whole. It's this that makes a great performance; it's this that the 275s deliver.

Listening to these three amplifiers has been a fascinating and surprising experience. I'd expected trade-offs and downsides where there are none, swings and roundabouts on the path to greater power. Instead I find each model significantly more capable than the one below it, extending every aspect of performance. It's a powerful confirmation of the designers' stance and proves once again the oldest adage in hi-fi – it's not what you do but how you do it that matters. There's no denying the step-change in expressive range and musical quality between the 70S and the 140Ms. The mono-blocs clearly have capabilities the stereo chassis simply can't approach. In comparison the mere extension of that performance envelope by the 275s might seem like small beer, but their

magic lies in the finer texture they bring to their bigger picture. By extending performance at both ends of the scale they tease so much more from the fabric of a recording. Common sense tells me that the LP140Ms clearly offer the best monetary value, the best balance of cost versus performance. But since when did common sense have anything to do with excellence? There's a real magic lurking in the elegantly bulky, ruinously expensive 275s and those who can ignore questions of value are lucky indeed... 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Push-pull vacuum-tube power amps
Valve Complement:	3x 6922, 4 or 8x 6550 per chassis
Sensitivity:	0.5V (LP70S, LP140M) 0.72V (LP275M)
Input Impedance:	100 kOhms
Output Impedance:	Factory set for 4, 8 or 16 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD) –	
LP70S/LP140M:	483 x 162 x 406mm
LP275M:	483 x 195 x 480mm
Weight –	
LP70S:	24kg
LP140M:	21kg ea.
LP275M:	40kg ea.
Prices –	
LP70S:	£5950
LP140M:	£11495 pr.
LP275M:	£19990 pr.

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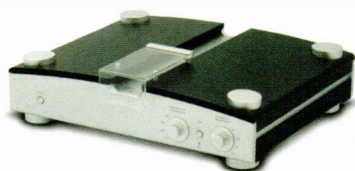
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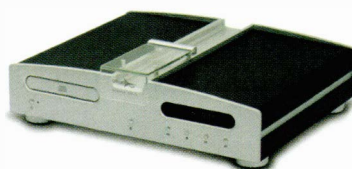
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Grand Designs...

£1k amplification from Creek, Cyrus, Pure Sound, Red Wine Audio and Neodio

by Chris Thomas

Just how good should a £1000 amplifier be? After all, this must be one of the most popular and competitive price bands for audio amplifiers and is probably also around the level where hi-fi begins to get serious. We chose the group to include a cross section of the different technologies and design approaches that you will find in the current market. Was it, as we suspected, going to result in horses for courses where the success of each amplifier was purely dependent on the system that was structured around it? Or was there a single amplifier that would shine brighter than the others? What started off as a bit of an uncertain leap into a variety of amplification styles soon became much more rewarding than I had expected and I ended up with considerable respect and admiration for what can be achieved within this budget.

In part that's because I slotted each amplifier into a system that was going to push them to the very limits of their capabilities. No mid-range, mid price partners here: Instead I fed them with copious levels of information from a Naim CD555 and asked them to drive a very revealing loudspeaker, a combination that would reveal just how good (or bad) they could be. I used the Micro Utopia Be and a full loom of Nordost Valhalla, including mains leads, although where the amplifier came equipped with one of their own, I did try that as well.

Instead of A/B/A comparisons, I lived with each amplifier in isolation. Obviously, preferences did manifest themselves and subliminal comparisons did occur. But the intention was never to compile a one to five list in order of performance, but rather to try and understand what sort of system each amplifier would be most comfortable in, taking into consideration their power outputs, tonal balance and their response to the real-world complexities of music.

Neodio Model 61

If you like your amplification clean, straightforward and completely unfussy in both looks and performance then the Neodio should be on your short list. This French built design delivers a

healthy 60 watts into 8 ohms and is constructed within a curved aluminium case and non-

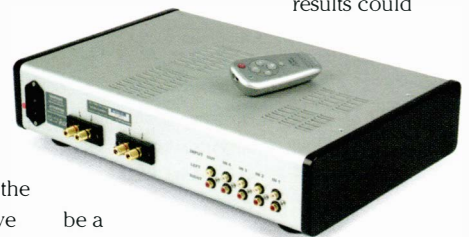
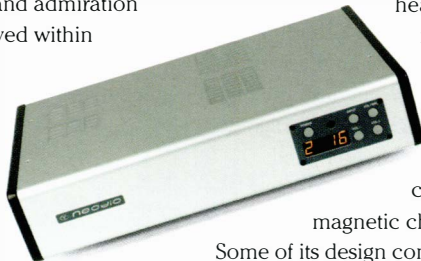
magnetic chassis.

Some of its design concepts are shared with the Lavardin and special attention has been paid to component quality and the elimination of memory effects within the circuit. The results are more impressive than the smooth though rather bland exterior might suggest.

The Model 61 has a superbly even tonal balance and presents a slightly dry picture of the music that never seems contrived or electronically re-constructed. Listen to it and you will

notice how even-handed it is across its whole bandwidth and how focussed it always sounds. It is tight and concise and extremely good when asked to manage highly complex musical situations, striking a very successful balance between sheer grip and rhythmic freedom. It can drive pretty hard with impressive control too, so it is going to be fine with anything other than the largest rooms and the most inefficient speakers.

Give the Neodio something to work with and it will impress you with its resolution and subtlety as it makes light of almost any musical demands. It could do with a bit more overall body and weight perhaps, and it can seem a little flimsy at low levels, but it is an amplifier that you grow used to very quickly as it simply has no vices. I could understand if it were to be described as slightly soulless as it paints such a clean, sharply defined soundstage and I would not recommend using it with ultra-cool balanced source or speakers as the results could



be a bit bland and unexciting. In contrast, it positively thrived on the level of musical information delivered by the CD 555 and managed to resolve it with remarkable finesse. At times, it can sound rather matter-of-fact and high frequencies ▶

▶ can be a little pinched, but these are small details and relatively unimportant within the scope of what the Neodio gets right. It was superb on Pat Metheny's *Map Of The World* (WB-47366-2) where the soundstage is used as a three-dimensional canvas for a succession of musical themes and backdrops. Its solidity and ability to etch the fine detail of the pieces in delicate relief gave the music a surprising sense of presence and articulation. But then again, when I listened to *Garcia/Grisman* (Acoustic Disc ACD-2) I found that the atmosphere and chemistry between these two great players fell by

the wayside and the intimacy of the recording which is created by it's clever simplicity never really ignited anything other than an academic interest in me, the real connection that I usually feel to this music passing me by. Which is somewhat surprising as the Neodio is a notable performer when dealing with the human voice. It was excellent on *Alison Krauss and Union Station Live* (RRCD 0515) where the ambience of the location and the great ensemble playing was beautifully, almost scientifically defined, as was the musical interplay. Where there is complexity this amplifier remains calm and brings a sense of order. I can see it appealing to those who prefer their world in the same way.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated amplifier
Power output:	60 watts into 8ohms
Inputs:	4x line-level (RCA)
Remote:	Yes
Dimensions (WxHxD):	440 x 110 x 290mm
Weight:	7Kg
Price:	£1400

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Red Wine Audio Signature 30

Vinnie Rossi's little integrated amplifier, made in Connecticut, USA has been causing something of a stir on the Internet review sites of late. This single-input Class-T amplifier looks and is very much a hand-made design and relies on battery power. It is fitted internally with a pair of 12v SLA (Sealed Lead-Acid) batteries, energised through an external charger that is left plugged into the mains. If you are thinking that the single input limits the amplifier's appeal then fear not as there is also a separate switching box available called the Signature 3S, which looks just like the amplifier and provides another

four line-level inputs.

The Signature 30 can also be used as a pre-amplifier, hence the second pair of RCA sockets at the rear.

As might be expected from a quality battery-powered amplifier, the first thing that strikes you is the black sonic backgrounds that are ever-present. The review model took a few days to really come on song and I found myself repeatedly revisiting it, to see how the sound would develop. Of all the amplifiers here this is, in many ways the most "different" sounding. Play some fairly straightforward music on it and its sense of poise and instrumental separation will amaze you. It is slightly dry, very tight and extremely well controlled across its bandwidth but particularly through the mid-band where it is exceptional. Listening to *Que Alegria* from John McLaughlin (Verve 837-280) I was very impressed with the tonality and sheer subtlety. It has great depth and yet maintains a degree of focus and clarity that, set against that black backdrop, is enormously appealing. With relatively uncluttered recordings it has good rhythmic cohesion and a feeling of freedom which makes listening to the percussive guidance of Trilok Gurtu and the way that he uses his skills to both shape and follow

the varying tempos and enhance the flavour and texture of each piece a really rewarding experience. But it also exposes the amplifier's slightly abrasive high frequency performance and it would certainly benefit from some of the mid-band's subtlety and texture here.

Push more and more dynamic music through it and it grows a little ragged and flustered and its bandwidth seems to shrink. Pianos



for instance, which at lower intensity levels seem so sure footed and balanced, become more compressed and the Red Wine can't deal with the individual notes with quite the same sense of aplomb and clear articulation. It begins to snatch at the note and the resolution of tempo suffers. The result is that the Signature 30 just doesn't swing with the same rhythmic intensity and verve as the Creek or the Neodio. It makes decent use of its limited output power but you will need to be more careful if you use it with inefficient speakers or if you listen to more complex music. It is, in many ways, an amplifier with a split personality, sounding rather beautiful one moment and all too obviously stressed the next. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Battery powered integrated amplifier
Power Output:	30 watts into 8 ohms
Inputs:	1x line-level (see text)
Batteries:	2x12v, 5Ah Sealed Lead-Acid. Playing time between charges, 24 hours
Remote:	Optional
Size (WxHxD):	305 x 75 x 205mm
Weight:	5kg
Price:	£1225

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► **Cyrus Pre vs2, 6 Power and 8 Power**

Although I am the first to admit that I've never been a fan of the Cyrus look, I've seldom been disappointed with their sound quality. As far as the latest pre/power combinations go, whilst I confess that I still find them as unattractive as ever, there is no denying that they make a very persuasive musical case for going down the pre/power route, with the added upgrade potential that this brings. I especially don't like the feel of the controls and specifically the volume

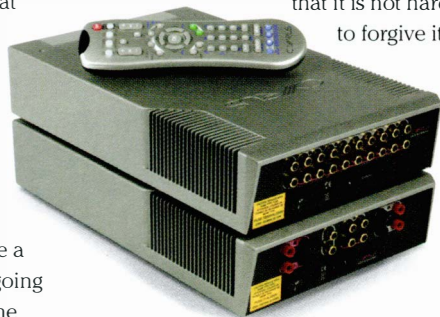


control that to me feels particularly cheap and rather nasty. Okay, I've got that off my chest so let's move on to the sound.

Under consideration initially is the Pre vs2 and the 6 Power although I also had the 8 Power to see just what musical benefits this not insubstantial financial upgrade bought.

Being part of an integrated system means that the Cyrus is very flexible with regards to both inputs and the addition of external boxes to provide improved power outputs and outboard power supplies. As a starter the Pre vs2 and the 6 Power will provide 50 watts into 8 ohms. I liked the sound of this combination from the word go despite the fact that it seemed quite forward and brash for the first few hours. It has a real sense of verve and impressive pinpoint imagery. The bass is always slightly softer

than you would ideally like but it has such great movement and pure speed that it is not hard to forgive its



lack of sheer weight. The soundstage is broad and deep which gives the music a really wide window to operate in and you'll be hard pushed to find a more agile performer at this price. This is also due to the impressive way that the Cyrus deals with transients, as it seems to dance through music with a delicate touch and surprisingly good resolution. Yes, it has a light tonal balance but combined with poise and control.

Substitute the 8 Power for the 6 Power and although the paper output may not seem much more, the reality is that the combination becomes notably more serious with considerable added weight and momentum. Almost as if to illustrate the fact that this is a different ball game, the tonality grows darker and denser. The music is now fuller and considerably more powerful and although it may seem that it lacks the delicate articulation and ability to change direction as quickly as the 6 Power, the bigger amplifier certainly provides the music with greater drive and control. With this added grip the sense of instrumental and vocal pitch is noticeably improved and the music takes on a more compelling and forceful nature. This is among the best amplifiers when it comes to conveying the mood of a piece and illustrating the nature of the instrumentation. It may not have the slightly frivolous charm of the smaller amp but it will drive whatever speakers you choose to partner it with a whole lot more conviction and pure energy. A really good amplification system which,

when employed in the right situation, makes a lot of sense.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

vs2
 Type: Solid-state line-stage
 Inputs: 5-line RCA
 Input Sensitivity: 500mV
 Input Impedance: 40kohm
 Remote: Yes
 Dimensions(WxHxD): 215 x 75 x 365mm
 Weight: 3.75Kg
 Price: £600

6 Power/8 Power
 Type: Power amplifiers
 Output Power –
 6 Power: 50Watts into 8 Ohms
 8 Power: 60 watts into 8 Ohms
 stereo
 Mono – 110 watts
 125 watts (with PSX-R)
 Dimensions(WxHxD): 215 x 75 x 365mm
 Prices –
 6 Power: £400
 8 Power: £700

Manufacturer
 Cyrus Audio Ltd
 Tel. (44)(0)1480 435577
 Net. www.cyrusaudio.com

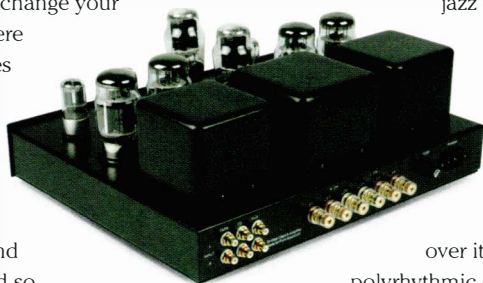


Puresound A30

Originally dubbed (and reviewed by *Hi-Fi+* as) the Bewitch A30, the name might have changed but the amp and its performance remain the same. This is a 32 Watt, class A, all-tube line integrated, built in China but specified by Guy Sargeant (ex-Audio Innovations). It uses a pair of 6550s a side and can be switched from ultra-linear to triode output, in which guise you'll get 18 Watts per channel. ►

► If you think you don't like valve amplifiers then this is very likely the design to change your mind. There were times during this review when the Pure Sound performed so incredibly well that I completely forgot that I was listening to an amplifier that costs a little over a £1000. Where this amplifier scores is in its impressive musical coherence across the bandwidth. It is not the fastest amplifier in this review, nor is it rhythmically the most urgent, but its sense of presence and immediacy is coupled with a glorious feeling of substance and weight that is ever-present, even at late-night listening levels when the solid state designs are struggling to introduce any instrumental scale. Couple this with the broadest tonal palette and a palpable and atmospheric acoustic and you have an amplifier that, if you operate within its comfort levels power-wise, is bound to delight you regardless of the level of equipment you are used to.

It is this sense of the occasion that elicited comments about the "soul" of the music. Never was this more evident than on *Garcia/Grisman* where the chemistry between the two main players is startlingly evident. Listen to 'Rockin' Chair' and its charming laid-back feel. On other amplifiers you may enjoy the lazy rolling playing styles and drowsy vocals, but here the Pure Sound delves further into the music and reveals two old ex-hippie stoners sitting around the fire in their rockin' chairs playing at a delicious drawling tempo yet with deceptive prowess. It is in moments like these that you really appreciate where the Pure Sound can take you emotionally. It draws you into the music and rarely fails to deliver. But, lest you think that this is a low tempo, high



colour amplifier, let me tell you that it is almost as impressive at high-energy jazz or rock. The bass is commendably full and rich and has real impact and the amplifier's remarkable coherence means that it never stumbles over itself when dealing with polyrhythmic conundrums. Of course it doesn't have the sheer speed, bass tightness and transient delivery of either the Creek or the Cyrus but it isn't that far behind either.

Saturday Night In Bombay (Verve 141642) is one of my favourite McLaughlin works. It is John in Shakti-mode and it is a really beautiful album, full of amazing musical moments. The track named 'Shringar' has the most haunting and lengthy intro by a very interesting instrument called the Santur, before the whole band kicks in. The Pure Sound positively drips with the ambience of the event and has a musical presence and range of tonal colours that sets it apart from the crowd. This is a really interesting amplifier and in many ways the most purely "musical" design here.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Class A valve line-integrated
Valve Complement:	2x 5U4, 2x 6SL7, 2x 6SN7, 4x 6550
Power output:	32 Watts into 8 ohms 18 Watts triode
Inputs:	3x line-level
Remote:	No
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435x180x405
Weight:	25kg
Price:	£1099
Manufacturer:	
Pure Sound	
Tel. (44)(0)1822 612449	
Net. www.puresound.info	

Creek Destiny

It's about 25 years since the company's inception and from the time I first reviewed one of Mike Creek's amplifiers, so the inclusion of the powerful Destiny in this review had a certain poignancy for me. It is extremely well specified amp with a good 100 watts per channel, plenty of inputs, two speaker outputs and it can also be used as a pre or power amplifier.

Mike's designs have always had a certain no-frills directness about them and this is no exception. The sheer strength and urgency grabs you from the first few bars. Music is taut, up front and pushed into the room as the Creek imposes its grip on the signal with real bite and an attitude to leading edge transients, a pure sense of latent power that no amplifier here can match.

The soundstage is broad



and there is superb separation between instruments that have real freedom both dynamically and spatially. It is one of those amplifiers that is able to make use of its considerable reserves of wattage at all levels and this, to some extent, also characterises the way it goes about its business. *Garcia/Grisman* sounds like a completely different album than it does when listening through the Puresound. Where the valve amp is all laid back and atmospheric, the Destiny is far more to the point and you would swear that the tempos are up, that the whole production is much less relaxed and much sharper. Both versions have their appeal and it illustrates perfectly just how different equipment can influence the nature of music in such a profound way.

▶ But don't get the idea that the Destiny is all power and no finesse. The sense of dynamic scaling that it brings to *Saturday Night In Bombay* gives dramatic presence and tremendous impact as well as a wide-open musical image and a pinpoint view of the musicians' positions on the stage. On less overtly dynamic music, like the Alison Krauss disc it sounded equally comfortable. Here it coped superbly with the rolling rhythms and complexities of resolving this mix of four or five stringed instruments, showing the band as that model of balance and taste that make them just about the finest acoustic outfit playing today.

Its tonal balance is perhaps slightly on the bright side but it took full advantage of the incredible resolution that the Beryllium tweeter and the Nordost Valhalla can bring to music by demonstrating notable finesse and a light rhythmic touch. I think it is this bringing together of power and delicacy that defines just where the real qualities of this amplifier lie. It has the power and control to drive most anything you ask of it with stunning effect, yet it is also well up to the task of dealing with high-resolution inputs and maintaining a real sense of focus and calm while doing so.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated amplifier
Power Output:	100 watts into 8 Ohms 160 watts into 4 Ohms
Inputs:	5 x line level plus tape
Outputs:	1x pre-out, 1x tape
Remote:	Yes
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 70 x 310mm
Weight:	10 kg
Price:	£1195

Manufacturer:
Creek Audio
Tel: (44)(0)1442 260146
Net. www.creekaudio.com

Conclusions

If these amplifiers are representative of the current standards in their price range then the outlook is healthy indeed. I was left impressed by what I have been hearing and somewhat surprised that the system I built around these designs didn't give them more problems. Even amplification systems costing £30K are far from perfect and need to be installed alongside components that have been chosen with care and it is no different for these models. Having said that I must admit that output levels, even from the lower powered designs were pretty healthy, though you should look seriously at their driving abilities, taking your speakers' efficiency and room size into account.

The Red Wine Signature 30 is probably the most different amplifier here as it uses SLA battery power to drive its Class T circuitry. It could both delight and frustrate in equal measure and this was entirely dependent on the intensity of the music that I played through it. When it was good it was superb and put in a performance to savour. But it needs more high frequency refinement and a more coherent attitude to complex musical arrangements. The Neodio is very different in its nature and is one of the best amplifiers here in that it has no real vices. It majors on an unflustered sense of clarity and a lack of colouration which allows you to listen to a huge range of musical styles without any fuss. It could perhaps do with a little more pure drive, but that's a minor criticism when set against its positives and there are bigger models in the range. I think we shall be looking at other products from this very interesting French company.

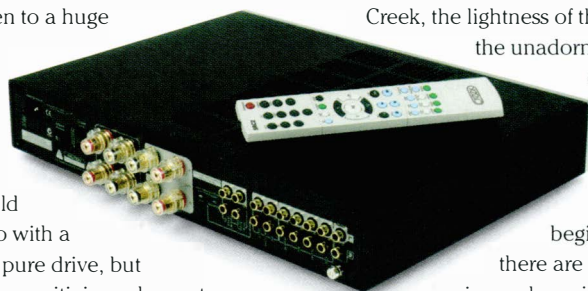
The Cyrus pre/power combinations make a strong case for the separates

approach. Not only did both power amplifiers impress me with their musical control but also the opportunity to upgrade the system even further is an attractive option. The 8 Power is a very accomplished power amplifier and will be the choice for those who like or need the considerable extra weight and power it can provide. But do not overlook the charms of the 6 Power. I thought its delicate touch tonally and especially rhythmically was charming.

The Pure sound A30 is in many ways both in a class of its own and just about the opposite of the Creek Destiny. Both of these amplifiers are powerful, but in different ways. The Creek is a classic solid-state design and can impose itself upon the speaker it is driving with its grip and direct feeling of momentum. It deals contemptuously with high-level transients and seldom sounds as if it will loose its total control over the music. It may be a tad bright but it is always exciting and demanding of your attention. The A30 tells a different story even with the same music. It is slower and more measured in its approach. It is musically powerful, more atmospheric and gives individual instruments and vocals more tonal expression though it lacks the needlepoint detail of the Creek. I find it a very involving amplifier for much of the time but then there are other occasions when I miss the verve of the

Creek, the lightness of the Cyrus or the unadorned clarity of the Neodio. As I said at the beginning, there are no outright winners here, just five

very interesting amplifiers, none of which cost a great deal of money. With such a broad range to choose from careful consideration should deliver exactly the musical results you want.



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The QUAD 2805 Electrostatic loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

A point of historical interest but relevant to this review; 2007 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the veritable Quad electrostatic loudspeaker. While the original '57 bears little or no resemblance to the current models, it served to point the way for the later ESL63 of which the 2805 is very much a direct descendent. Introduced in 1981 after a lengthy gestation - the 63 designation refers to the date of the first prototype - it served to address some of the problems associated with the earlier model while pushing the ideals of designer Peter Walker's 'perfect' loudspeaker further toward reality. Truly innovative and brilliant in its conception, the 63 set new standards in areas of performance such as distortion and phase linearity, and for many became a reference by which others should be judged. Many thousands were sold during nearly two decades of production in Huntingdon, and when the company was acquired by IAG (International Audio Group) reintroduction of an electrostatic was high on the agenda. Manufactured in China, the 988 was effectively an updated '63, while the taller 989 incorporated two extra bass panels in an attempt to improve upon two of the speakers major (or so their detractors would have it) flaws - bass extension and power handling. In theory, these models served to improve on the original, addressing some of the manufacturing difficulties that had plagued production in the UK and caused Ross Walker in a candid moment to admit "the company had never made a penny out of the damn things".

A qualified rather than a runaway

success, the new models gave IAG further insight into the specialist production techniques required by the electrostatics, and the problems of achieving consistent performance. A project guided by Steve Hewlett - head of engineering at the Chinese factory and a man with considerable heritage and experience in loudspeaker design - saw every aspect of the ESL put under the microscope, a painstaking process in which both subtle and quite dramatic changes ensued until he was a hundred percent happy with the process. The results are the 2805 and 2905; the former broadly equivalent to a '63 while the latter has the extra bass panels. And change they have, although the 2805 is reminiscent of the '63 in general size and shape (I believe that the panel is about the same size) it is altogether a more chunky affair. I've never been particularly good at estimating weight, but whereas I could readily carry the '63, the new version is much, much heavier, an altogether more rigid and substantial structure. Not only is it much more solid - a considerable amount of the plastic involved having been replaced with steel and aluminium - there is a large brace that runs between the top of the panel and the rear of the base which can be tensioned to provide a minimum amount of play within the whole assembly. The subject of considerable controversy over the

years, many ESL enthusiasts felt the lack of rigidity within the panel to be a major flaw in the performance of the original Quad designs. However, Peter Walker along with Peter Baxandall (a consultant for the company on the original '63) always maintained that the mass of the diaphragm was insignificant when compared to the weight of the frame, and thus could not exert any detrimental influence on performance. This of course ignores the mass of the air loading the diaphragm, which given the large radiating area of the Quad, suddenly becomes quite significant. Apocryphal evidence abounds but perhaps the best example is the modifications carried out by Alastair Robertson-Aikman, founder of SME. He used two pairs of '63s, stood at right angles, with each speaker braced in a frame weighing some 200lbs. That really does kill any movement and nobody who has heard the Quads in ARA's legendary music room has ever been less than impressed.

The general solidity of the 2805s is complemented by much improved fit and finish and everything about the product 'feels' more in keeping with a true, high-end product. Attention to detail is evident from the packaging to the beautifully machined supports/spikes, which make levelling and fine adjustments a joy. There are also flat rubber feet for polished floors. The speaker's base now extends

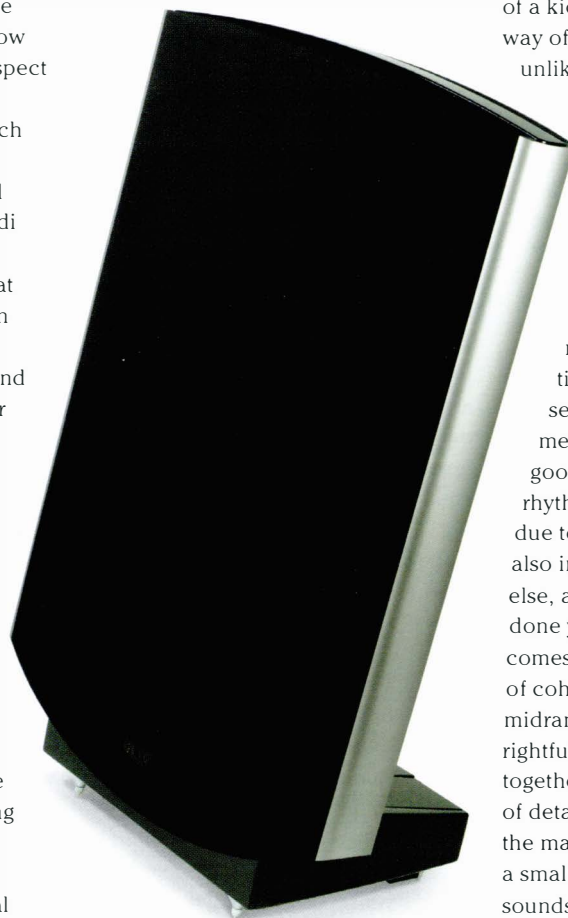


▶ far further back, which along with a ballast weight makes for a much more stable structure. There are also subtle but significant sonic advantages to the weight, as well as rendering the structure more balanced.

Internally most components have been upgraded, but in particular the step up transformers and delay lines, both of which the audio signal must pass through before it reaches the diaphragm. High purity wire is now used for their construction, an aspect that is likely to have a significant influence on performance, as each loudspeaker contains over five miles of fine copper. The general specification and *modus operandi* remains much as before, with a progressive protection system that initially senses the presence of an arc and clamps the input of the loudspeaker to earth in two-second bursts, at which point the listener will hopefully turn the system down. Saving the loudspeaker by shorting the amplifier has always been a bit contentious, although probably less so these days than when the '63 was first released and amplifiers were less robust. If the overload situation persists, a self re-setting fuse limits input power until it is reduced, and finally, the delicate diaphragm is protected by a string of Zener diodes that will clip the waveform above about 7 kV.

My familiarity with the original '63s (and the 988s reviewed in Issue 32) was a great help in setting up the 2805; a lot has changed but the basic geometry is the same, and I was quickly able to establish the right territory, a small amount of fine tuning fixing the most effective position. A dipole loudspeaker radiates sound from both the front and the rear, but out of phase, and behaves quite differently from a conventional box design when it comes to positioning

and driving the room, this in itself calls for a certain amount of readjustment in the way that one listens to and perceives electrostatics. Quite apart from running in, the Quads need a day or so to settle down; in particular (I think) to let the electrostatic charge dissipate evenly over the membrane. During this time they become noticeably louder

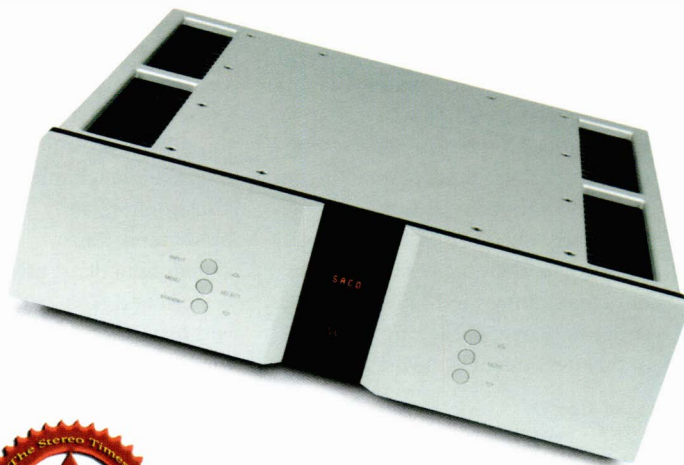
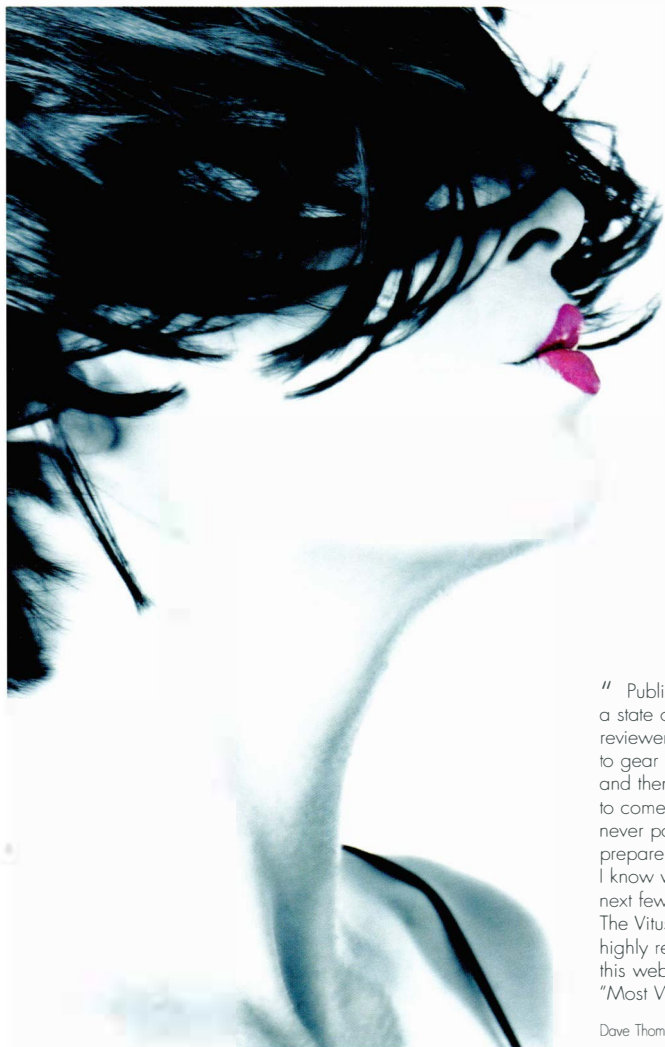


and more focused. Partnering equipment consisted of a brief spell with the awesome Bryston 28Bs followed by the Naim NAP300 and various valve amps, aided and abetted by an Audio Research SP10 pre-amp. Fine adjustments to the front to back angle have quite a large effect on tonal balance and imaging at the listening position, a factor not to overlook.

Like slipping on a giant pair of

headphones... that was always my first thought when listening to the Quads, such was the difference in the way these devices portrayed music; a dichotomy in that they had little in the way of persuasive grunt at the bottom end, but could present a soundstage that was both intimate and engulfing. No change with the new model. The pressure of a kick drum still has little in the way of weight behind it, and it's unlikely to hit you in the stomach with the power that a good full-range conventional loudspeaker can manage. But, there's also little in the way of overhang or wallow making it fast, and probably quite accurate. Other types of drums and percussion are rendered with an accurate timbral quality, with a full sense of texture, which actually means the 2805 is surprisingly good at getting the essence of rhythm and timing across, mainly due to the lack of smearing. Bass also integrates well with everything else, and assuming that you have done your homework when it comes to positioning, the sheer level of coherence that occurs in the midrange should get you excited, and rightfully so. The lack of colouration together with a natural presentation of detail separates the breed from the mainstream, all portrayed within a small but highly three-dimensional soundstage. That's where the intimacy comes in; with suitable material one has the feeling of being right in the room with the performer, such is the transparency of the reproduction. High frequencies are handled in a seamless manner that makes one only too aware of the compromises involved with conventional moving-coil drivers and a crossover. In comparison the Quad's slightly papery quality at the very top end rarely draws attention to itself. ▶

Take all those preconceptions about amplifiers and kiss them goodbye...



SS010



" Publisher Clement Perry, often speaks of a state of mind he calls "Audio Hell," where reviewers reside when they become exposed to gear that lifts them to a state of euphoria and then destroys them when they are forced to come to grips with the fact that they can never possess the gear that they love. As I prepare to ship the SS-010 back to Denmark, I know where it is that I will be residing for the next few months ... psychologically anyway. The Vitus Audio SS-010 amplifier is not just highly recommended it embodies the spirit of this webzine's highest honor, a "Most Wanted Component" award. "

Dave Thomas, The Stereo Times, June 07

" The Vitus brings all those things together in such an accessible and focussed way that it somehow seems to enhance the pure beauty of music to a point where the equipment is merely a tool and the music itself is the message. "

" For a hand-made amplifier of this quality I assure you that the asking price is not excessive. I think it is a great product - in many ways the most impressive I've heard since the Connoisseur, which is praise indeed. "

Chris Thomas, Hi-Fi+, Issue 49

SS010

VA

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► Quad electrostatics, due to their particular balance of virtues and shortcomings, have always favoured acoustic music over electronic and heavy rock, partly because of the bass and loudness issues. The degree to which they limit the listening material (and the way in which one listens to it) provides an interesting perspective on their performance, particularly for someone who can easily flit between the Kings of Leon* and Bach played by Segovia in the same evening. It is here that I think the 2805's show their superiority over earlier incarnations, and I guess that it is inevitable that I



should make some comparisons with their predecessors. To my recollection, the areas in which the '63 always excelled are

now just that little bit more refined. That hint of a chesty quality in the lower-mid (Old fashioned? A little bit BBC?) has gone to reveal, dare I say it, a faster, snappier presentation. I would imagine this has a lot to do with the improved mechanical construction, and predictably it has similar benefits at the bottom end. The 2805s will play considerably louder than previous models; certainly they seemed to take more

potent bass in their stride.

This could also be due to improvements in dynamic performance.

While the absolute extension is limited by the size of the panel, the bass sounds cleaner and again faster than it did before, but still with a characteristic hump before it falls off. Just like the '63, there are advantages to be gained by raising the unit off the floor, in this case with a couple of Sound organisation turntable stands, Ugly and somewhat impractical, it did serve to take away a degree of sluggishness (and a little of the weight) allowing for better integration and a more coherent sound overall.

While the 2805s do not radically alter the horizons of the Quad electrostatic loudspeaker, they have refined and improved many important aspects of their performance. While the new breed of MartinLogan hybrid designs successfully confront the traditional weaknesses of the genre, using a moving-coil bass unit to achieve higher volume levels and a

more acceptable (or familiar) low-end, there is a price to pay when it comes to ultimate transparency. This is where the Quads have always excelled, and the 2805 is the best example yet, pushing the boundaries a little further. If you are a fan, you will not be disappointed, and if you have never liked Quad electrostatics, now would be a good time to re-evaluate your prejudice. ➤+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Full-range electrostatic loudspeaker
Sensitivity:	86dB/1 Watt/Metre
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal variation 4 - 15 Ohms
Maximum input:	Continuous 10Volts RMS Peak program for undistorted output - 40 Volts Permitted peak input 55 Volts
Frequency response:	37Hz - 21KHz (-6dB)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	1040 x 695 x 385mm
Weight:	34.8 Kg
Price:	£4500

UK Distributor:
IAG (UK) Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)1480 447700
Net. www.quad-hifi.co.uk

* Kings Of Leon - *Because Of The Times*: heavy, and sometimes dark rock, this disc is the antithesis of the current wave of truly shitty sounding releases that generally have the dynamic range of a dead liver fluke. Produced by Ethan Johns - son of the legendary Glyn - it has a life and vitality reminiscent of the way recordings used to be done, i.e., properly.

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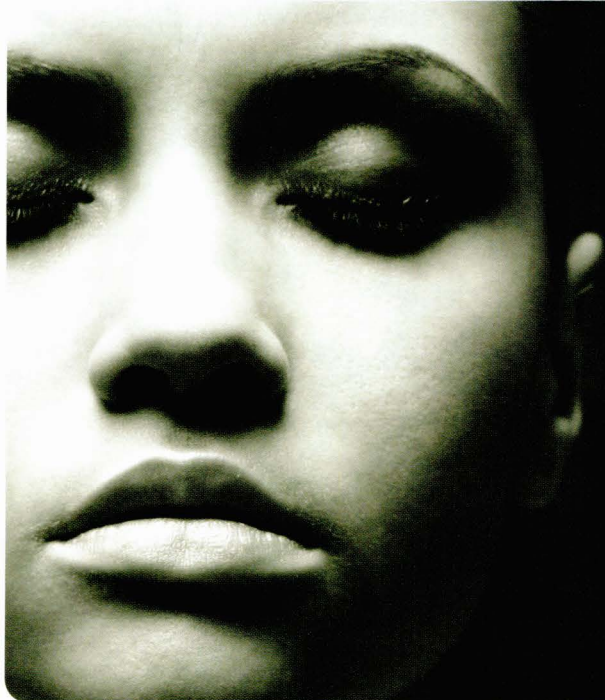
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(NEW) CD/SACD Player: SA-7S1

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(NEW) Pre-amplifier: SC-7S2

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Cream Of The Crop?

Cartridges with a difference from Lyra, Air Tight and Phase Tech

by Roy Gregory and Curtis Leeds

The Lyra Skala Moving-Coil Cartridge

Scantech's cartridges may not have been the first to dispose of the conventional metal body (that was probably vdH's EMT modifications) but they were the first that really exposed its sonic impact. Their original Spectral MCR and Tsurugi designs both allowed easy removal of the protective bodywork and thus simple a/b comparisons. It wasn't long before audiophiles were stripping their cartridges naked and reveling in the "free" upgrade that resulted. Since then, the company's own brand Lyra designs have become progressively simpler and more refined, both in structural and electromechanical terms, the latest Titan, Helikon, Dorian series offering greater linearity and the advantages of an open chassis combined with an extraordinarily effective stylus guard. Now, with the arrival of the Skala, we see the first in the next generation of Lyra cartridges and a step change in construction and performance.

Priced at £1849, the Skala represents an interim step between the much loved Helikon (although currently it offers neither mono nor the lower-output SL variants) and the flagship Titan i. At first glance its plastic chassis might seem like a step backwards, but in fact nothing could be further from the truth. But to appreciate just why that is we need to get back to the reasons for going naked in the first place.

A moving-coil phono cartridge is a device designed to measure incredibly small vibrations and convert them into

voltage. In doing so it faces a number of conflicting requirements. Any spurious vibration in the cartridge structure will distort the input, making structural rigidity a prime consideration. But at the same time, any non-linearities in the magnetic field used to generate the voltage will also introduce their own distortions, meaning that any excess metallic material close to that field is highly undesirable. So, on the one hand we want to mechanically close

couple the moving parts, but on the other we want to locate them in as near to free space as we can achieve.



Add in the geometrical considerations that govern the positioning of the coils in the field and you have the microscopic equivalent of a Rubik's cube; you can't alter one parameter without affecting others. Then of course there are the minor issues of tracking ability, compliance, overall mass and arm compatibility, which makes cartridge design like doing your Rubik's cube

blindfolded and with a single hand.

Look at the yokeless generator first developed for the Clavis DC and you can see how it simplifies the overall structure, eliminating the pole pieces. Likewise, the open-plan bodywork of the Helikon, with its complex curves and cutaway structure seeks to create a rigid, non-resonant foundation that doesn't impinge on the generator itself. It's an approach that is taken to its logical extreme in the savagely eroded titanium body of the Titan, a cartridge that's noticeably dense and inert when you pick it up. But it has been taken further still by the alternative structure now seen in the Skala. The heart of the new cartridge is a tiny but incredibly dense alloy spine that carries the generator and spaces it from the headshell. Lyra can only use this material because the lack of a conventional body or pole pieces reduces overall cartridge mass so much, allowing a wider choice of alloys for this vital component. Look at the rear of the cartridge and you can see the spine sticking up between the connecting pins. You can also see the tongues that engage the matching grooves in the plastic "body". Now view it from the side and you realise just how minimal that metal element is – and how effectively the design removes eddy currents from the proximity of the magnetic structure. Instead, the cartridge relies on a plastic shroud to carry the mounting hardware, pins, stylus guard and most crucially of all, to create a non-magnetic, non-metallic nose piece and front magnet carrier. Doesn't the use of plastic bodywork compromise rigidity? ▶

▶ No, because that dense alloy spine actually stands very slightly proud of the plastic top plate. Tighten the screws into the captive brass threads and you force the top of the generator carrier directly against the headshell. It's small surface area further concentrates the pressure and intimacy of the contact. At the same time, this approach creates a significantly simpler primary structure whose resonant characteristics are both more readily understood and damped by the clamping action of a dissimilar material (think tuning fork with an elastic band around it). Okay, you don't want to overdo it with the allen wrench, and it's worth taking care to tighten the bolts evenly so that you don't rock the cartridge in the headshell, but otherwise, the Skala retains the easy practicality of its older brothers. Its cantilever assembly is derived from the Titan i's and is combined with the 70x3 micron fine-line stylus used in all the Lyra models save the Dorian. Despite the enormous differences in their structures, one listen and there's no doubting that the Skala sits far closer to the Titan than it does to the Helikon.

Indeed, comparisons between the two are instructive. Side by side, you'll find that the Skala can't match the Titan's astonishing levels of transparency, focus, dynamic delicacy and discrimination. Listen to the Yepes/Rodrigo *Concierto de Aranjuez* and the Titan still tells you more of the how, more of the sheer effort and technique that goes into the playing. It has a captivating delicacy and intimacy that sets it apart from the competition irrespective of source. But let's not write off the Skala just yet: If it can't match the Titan in its strong suits, how about where the flagship is weaker? For many, the Titan i is too lean, too demanding of record quality and too unforgiving. If you want to hear the benefits of record-by-record VTA adjustment then the Titan's your cartridge. If you want to feel the last ounce of effort that's gone into the instrument reflected in the precise energy envelope it produces, then look

no further. But if all that sounds a little too academic, a little too much like hard work, then have I got a pick-up for you.

The Skala clearly, audibly has more than a strand or two of Lyra DNA (how could it be otherwise?) but this is also, definitely its own beast. Bigger and bolder, solid of presence and confident of step, this is a Lyra like no other. So, whilst it can't compete with the Titan in its strong suits (what can?), it actually does a remarkable job of ameliorating its failings without diluting those strengths too much. By all other standards, this is a precise and highly resolving cartridge, coupling those



qualities to a warmth and weight that results in impressive solidity and dynamic impact. The bottom end power and definition support a wonderfully dimensional acoustic, with clearly defined side and rear walls (where present). Orchestral perspectives are natural and well defined, ranked instruments clearly delineated in depth, but it's the collective coherence that's impressive. The Starker/Dvorak *Cello Concerto* is delivered with such gusto and explosive power that suddenly those premium price Mercury pressings don't seem so expensive after all. Starker's playing has a sweep and majesty, a lyrical authority that marks it out, his instrument rich and vibrant. But it is the orchestra that blows you away. Dorati's masterful control binds them into a single unit, a channel

for his passion and purpose. And for once the cartridge does nothing to dismantle that musical achievement in the name of hi-fi. Just as the space they occupy is coherent, so is their playing. It brings real emotional power and depth to romantic works, a sense of structure and line to the baroque. It picks an unerringly sure-footed path through the disjointed, staccato melody of Joni Mitchell's 'California', a track that all too often descends into a muddled mess of clashing guitars. It brings an overall shape and pattern to jazz as disparate as Coltrane's 'My Favorite Things' and 'A Love Supreme', one a masterful exposition on flexibility within a given

structure, the other almost completely freeform. It's this ability to retain not just the overall picture of the performance but it's sense and direction that makes the Skala so special. All too often you get one or the other. And it does it without the weight and warmth clogging or smearing the sound and separation of instruments and voices. Bach's *Musical Offering* (Menuhin/BFCO EMI ASD 414) mixes chamber orchestra with harpsichord and flute, yet the Skala never loses the subtle underpinnings of the cello, never confuses violin and viola and renders the continuo as satisfyingly solid. No scratchy, lightweight here, this harpsichord offers a complex, weighty foundation to its filigree contribution, justifying its role as rhythmic foundation.

Speed has always been a Lyra forte and in this respect the Skala is a chip off the old block. It's its speed through the gears that makes those orchestral swings so explosive, gives crescendos their power and impact. So it's not just about weight but also about the ability to deliver it on demand, irrespective ▶

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► of which end of the dynamic range its operating in. People talk about tracking ability, the ease with which a cartridge can trace a groove. The Skala is no slouch in this regard but what it really tracks is the music, responding to its changes in density and dynamic demands with a suddenness and ease that belies the effort required. You don't hear it working and that moves its contribution further into the background, moving the music further forward in your attention. And because it's right at the business end of the system, it makes the whole thing sound more effortless and less intrusive.

Yes, the Titan puts you closer to the individual performers, creates a more transparent acoustic space. But in doing so it also creates its own specific perspective. It's almost as if the Titan reads the performance from within, the Skala from without. That's one reason why the Titan demands such care and attention to set-up: it connects you so intimately that every blemish is revealed, whether it's a bum note, a poor edit, a surface glitch or less than perfect VTA. Indeed, owning a Titan means owning an arm that will really let you optimize its set-up, or you are only scratching the surface of its potential. The Skala doesn't dig nearly as deep as the Titan, which means it has a wider window when it comes to operational acceptability. Yes, you hear VTA changes, but where the Titan demands a setting down to the individual delineation on the JMW's scale, the Skala will sit happily within a range of ± 5 without protesting too loudly. That makes it an order of magnitude more likely that you'll actually realize the performance you've paid for – especially in arms without the operational elegance of the VPI.

So which do I prefer? Ultimately there's a special quality to the sheer

intimacy that's delivered by the Titan i. If you want reach out and touch then here it is. But there's no denying the addictive appeal of the Skala's substance, its grasp on the music as a whole. It's tempting to characterize one as the more cerebral, the other more visceral, but that's not only overstating the case, it's oversimplifying it too. These two cartridges start in much the same place, they just reach round the music in opposite directions, not quite meeting at the listener. I'll take the Titan thanks, but there are many who wouldn't. Offered a choice of Skala or Helikon there's no contest and that's really the point. The Skala doesn't match the Titan for performance, but it comes close in terms of appeal. In doing so it totally eclipses the Helikon, bringing forth from the darkness a new light. If this is the first in the next generation of Lyra cartridge designs then the future looks sunny indeed.

RG

Technical Panel

Type:	Low-output moving-coil
Stylus:	Lyra line-contact
Cantilever:	Boron rod
Output Voltage:	5.0mV (5cms/sec)
Internal Impedance:	5.5 Ohms
Weight:	9g
Compliance:	12cu
Tracking Force:	1.65 – 1.75g
Recommended Load:	Greater than 100 Ohms
Price:	£1849

UK Distributor:

Symmetry Systems Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488
Net. www.symmetry-systems.com

Manufacturer:

Lyra Co, Ltd.
Net. www.lyraaudio.com

The Air Tight PC-1 Moving-Coil Cartridge

As long ago as Issue 37, JK reviewed (and waxed lyrical) over the My Sonic Lab Eminent, an innovative MC design notable for its energetic, lucid and refined presentation. It's an enthusiasm that I can echo, having also used the Eminent extensively in the last year. But here we have the intriguing proposition of the Eminent's first cousin; the same novel core material but with modifications specified by Miura-san at Japanese high-end stalwarts Air Tight, renowned for their exquisitely constructed valve amplification.

In fact, the story starts nearly thirty-years ago, when Miura-san was working at Luxman and specified the MC-115C cartridge from the legendary Sugano-san at Koetsu. That project passed from the master to an apprentice, Mr. Y. Matsudaira. Some twenty-five years later, after working at just about every cartridge manufacturer of note in Japan, whilst working for Audio Craft he once again met Miura-san. Matsudaira-san finally set up on his own as My Sonic Lab in 2004, producing the Eminent as his first product. Its new former material finally delivered high output whilst maintaining low source impedance, holy grails of the original Luxman design. Miura-san quickly realized that here, with a few subtle modifications, was the opportunity to create the cartridge he'd always desired and so the PC-1 was born.

Outwardly, the two cartridges are quite distinct, but that's mainly down to the large, angular mounting block used by the PC-1 in place of the Eminent's circular top plate. This increases the cartridge's mass and interestingly it's screwed in place as opposed to bonded like the one on its cousin. Compare the body cans and hardware though, and the family resemblance is unmistakable, even if the My Sonic Lab product is all

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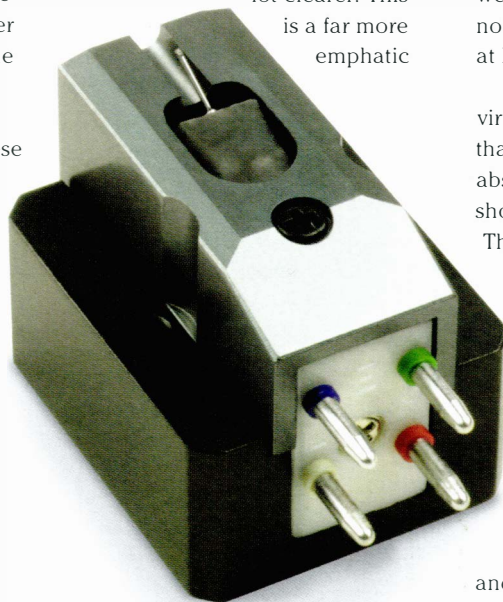
▶ rounded edges and delicate chamfers beside the Air Tight's harder edged appearance. The cans themselves are identical in size, the (slightly undersized) pins and rear plate are the same, as is the cantilever shroud and stylus guard. So, shape aside, the important changes are on the inside. Miura-san specified a slightly thicker coil wire with a few extra turns in order to raise the output. He also asked for a Boron rod cantilever instead of the Aluminium tube of the Eminent. Together with the closer mechanical coupling and greater mass delivered by that top-plate these should maximize energy transfer, further building on the benefits of the low internal impedance.

It's theory that's born out in practice – but only with a little care. It's not that the PC-1 is finicky; indeed, in many ways it's quite the opposite, but it is deceptive. Essentially warm and lush it is also surprisingly quick and dynamic, contrasting virtues that tend to throw off your normal responses when it comes to set up. Get the VTA too low and the bass gets soft and sluggish – but you tend to assume that that's just the way it is because it is still quick in itself, just a little late arriving, lacking a little air. Likewise, load it too high and everything gets a bit meandering and lackadaisical; lots of energy but lacking in musical purpose, direction and grip. The problem is, even like this the Air Tight has this familiar, rounded quality that many of us remember from early Koetsu and Supex designs. The real trick here is that the company has managed to throw out the bathwater while keeping a firm hold on its offspring, adding real speed and dynamics to the cuddly lushness of old. Lift the cartridge's tail and load it down and it's amazing how things snap into focus. I settled on 200 Ohms for the majority of my listening, a value

that still didn't constrict the PC-1's dynamic expression and energy. VTA was less critical than on many a cartridge at this price, and positively relaxed after the likes of the Titan i.

Once I'd got used to the idea that the Air Tight manages to step outside of normal expectations and adjusted my preconceptions to its balance of virtues things became a whole

lot clearer. This is a far more emphatic



and powerful performer than the MSL Eminent, although it lacks that cartridge's poise. Instead the PC-1 majors on up-front honesty and a direct presence. There's something wonderfully uncluttered about its presentation, seemingly cutting straight to the core of a piece. Playing the Starker/Dvorak *Cello Concerto* it's easy to assume, on the evidence of the opening bars that this is a typically warm and sweet cartridge, but one that lacks authority and dynamic clout. You'll go on thinking that about as far as the first crescendo, where the sheer explosive energy, the leap in dynamic range will pin you to the chair, wondering where on earth that came from? With an absence of edge and none

of the obvious leading edge speed and definition that so many moving-coils strive for, the PC-1 draws on body and dynamic range for its impact. The result is notes that are surprisingly solid and emphatic rather than blindingly quick, notes that tail off naturally, with a richness and length that escapes too many pick-ups. The sweet top-end is welcome too, and makes surface noise, if not an irrelevance, then at least far less intrusive.

Is the Air Tight's balance of virtues a good thing? In the sense that it offers a valid alternative, absolutely. Is it an alternative you should be rushing to acquire?

That depends on your musical point of view. In one sense the Air Tight is neither fish nor fowl.

It has the speed and dynamic response of a moving-coil allied to the substance and sweet top-end of a really good moving magnet. The converse of course is that it lacks the leading-edge definition, focus and transparency of the best coils

and still needs a moving-coil stage in your pre-amp (and a good one too, with readily available loading and gain adjustment). Indeed, in many respects the Air Tight's ideal customer is the vinyl romantic who never cottoned to coils in the first place. Tech-heads and those wed to CD probably shouldn't apply, but if you want drama and body, life and colour from your records, to feel the elemental emotion in a performance, to simply know that the band are sweating it rather than having to actually hear the drops hitting the floor before you believe it, this could be the cartridge for you. It even had me listening to Joni Mitchell – and that's no mean feat I can tell you! Perhaps more than any other cartridge I've used, this one puts the central message in the music first, hanging the rest of the

► performance around it.

Play the Yepes/Rodrigo mentioned in the Skala review and you hear none of the intimacy and astonishing detail of the Titan, little of the clarity of line and sure step of the Skala. Instead there's an inner logic to



the solo part, an effect, an overall impression created by the playing that dovetails perfectly with the orchestration. This is about atmosphere. This is less *Concierto* and all about *Aranjuez*, a whole rather than a collection of parts. Maybe it's this holistic quality that makes the Air Tight's music so dramatic, gives the cartridge so much impact. When you get an orchestral crescendo you really do get the whole orchestra all at once: together means together if it's the PC-1 doing the delivering. Big band jazz is simply fantastic, the power and dynamic contrast of Basie and Ellington arrangements a thing of beauty.

The proof of the pudding comes when you take the Air Tight out of your system. Will you suddenly cleave to the detail and leading edge definition you've been missing, or will you find the alternatives wimpy and lacking the explosive impact and substance of the PC-1's unique combination of body and sheer energy. I'm listening to Bowie's *Hunky Dory* and 'Oh You Pretty Things'

has a substance and menace that totally dispels the slightly fey quality that so often dominates my '70's flexidisc pressing. The increase in dynamic density that greets each chorus, the stability and presence of the piano, the staccato vocals, all are bound into a song of power and not a little anguish. It's an object lesson in just what the PC-1 can do, lifting music from grooves, freeing it from the constraints of pressing and recording quality. Your audiophile discs might not be quite as crystal clear, but if you just want to be able to play every disc

in your collection, look no further than Air Tight's cartridge. It might have taken Miura-san 30-years to realise his dream, but it was definitely worth the wait.

RG

Technical Panel

Type:	Low-output moving-coil
Cantilever:	Boron rod
Stylus Profile:	Line contact
Output:	0.6mV
Internal impedance:	2.5 Ohms
Loading:	200 Ohms
Weight:	12g
Price:	£3895

UK Distributor:

Select Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1900 813064

Review Sample Supplied By:

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The Phase Tech P-3 Alexandrite Moving-Coil Cartridge

Maybe Kermit the Frog is an audiophile. "It's not easy being green," he laments. Yet even with its pitfalls, including "not standing out like flashy sparkles," he concludes it's what he wants to be.

Isn't the same true of those of us who still listen to LPs? The format's pitfalls are legion. When LP playback is done properly, it rarely "sparkles" the way CDs often do. If you want to impress your neighbors, a big-screen TV is more likely to succeed than any turntable. But like Kermit, none of us would have it any other way.

Now, about those pitfalls.

Just as Kermit finally accepts his quirky green skin, many of us audiophiles are long past the most bothersome bits of LP playback. A good turntable and pickup arm and good electronics, along with proper attention to set up and good LP hygiene, are about all that's needed. Of course, that's asking a lot from anyone seeking "Plug and Play" simplicity. But never in the history of audio has so much good LP playback gear been available, and at so many price levels.

But the stumbling block for me has always been: the phono cartridge.

Let's face it – the phono cartridge is the ugly sister in our audio family, a necessary evil. What's not to dislike about them? They're difficult to select, because a cartridge's performance can vary widely depending on its associated equipment. Even modest cartridges are expensive. They're fragile. They're tricky to mount and tricky to align.

It's relatively easy to justify many audio purchases, especially because the best equipment is well built and really will provide long service. It's not too difficult to convince one's self that we're buying our "last turntable" or "last pre-amp."



► It's so easy, I've done it dozens of times! Yet only the deluded or terminally ill would believe that about any phono cartridge.

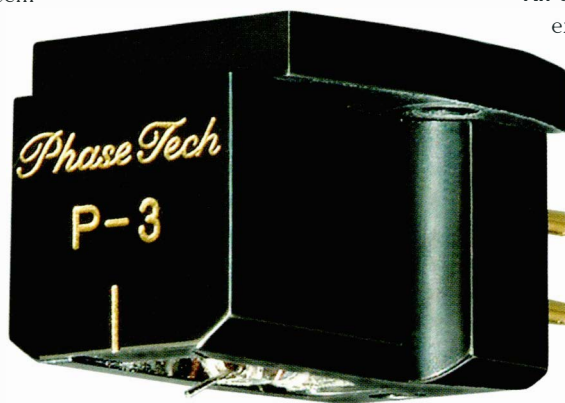
This is what really haunts me. A phono cartridge starts slowly decaying from the moment it's put into service, and you're lucky if you wear it out. (If you're not lucky, the cartridge gets broken during use, usually by unauthorized personnel.) Basically, phono cartridges are expendable, the audio equivalent of the automobile tire, yet many of them make a set of good Pirellis seem cheap. That makes it difficult for many of us to rationalize spending the megabucks needed to acquire one of the very best phono pickups.

That's why for me, the Holy Grail of audio has always been an ultra-high performance cartridge at a less than ultra-high price. So it made perfect sense when RG suggested I evaluate the Phase Tech P-3 Alexandrite. After all, I'd already flipped over its more expensive sibling, the P-1, back in Issue 45. The P-1 is already a proven bargain. Is the P-3 a bigger bargain still? The answer is: that depends.

Upon opening the box, the P-3 is a delight to behold. That's because it's shipped with an excellent stylus guard. You'd think making a decent stylus guard must be a Herculean task, based on how many cartridges are provided without them. (Guards are such cheap insurance against damage incurred while mounting a cartridge to a headshell that the only wonder is that every manufacturer doesn't consider them *de rigueur*.)

And – the P-3 is shipped with instructions! I'm one of those consumers who actually read these things (I do this even with boring appliances), because manufacturers often know more about their products

than their customers. Which is where a distant alarm bell started to irritate my skeptical sub-conscious. The P-3, like the P-1, is fitted with a line-contact stylus, a tip that in all too many affordable cartridges leads to a tizzy top-end. Then there's the manufacturer's antidote, an overly lush balance to cover the ills, if anything an even worse compromise that clogs a musician's individuality. It's a compromise I've tried, and found that I just can't accept long term. I want detail. I want colour.



I want ambiance. I want powerful dynamics and flat response. I want it all. I want the P-1, which delivers all these things. Can the P-3 do likewise?

The Japanese Asylum pressing of Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark* (P8412Y) is one of my favourite LPs, and it's a challenge to many LP playback systems. It makes many a badly compromised moving-coil sound "peaky." Joni's soaring voice, and the shimmering of the cymbals and high hat, trip up so many systems that some listeners blame the problems on the album's multi-tracked origins. Yet relatively neutral cartridges, and those that are free from obvious resonance, don't commit these sins. That includes the P-3, which maintains this album's balanced sound while also laying bare much of the inner detail that

makes this music so evocative. These are exactly the qualities I associate with a good line contact stylus.

Yet, the P-3 doesn't achieve this by romanticizing the sound. In 'Down To You' on the album's second side, the P-3 lets you enjoy the French horn's ebb and flow. Up and down the scale, in and out of the instrumentation, the instrument never wanders, and neither does it decay into some vague, unidentifiable horn sound as so often happens to this instrument.

An excellent recording for exposing an overly lush sounding system is the German RCA pressing of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. (RL 30397) This is an unusually rich recording, loaded with the delicate low-level detail and nuance that is the soul of this music, and it can sound uncannily natural and relaxed. This is too much for a romantic sounding cartridge and the

result is all the proof you'll ever need that it really is possible to have "too much of a good thing." With a lush cartridge, the sound will collapse into a muddy mush where all the subtlety of the music and instruments is lost in a confusing homogenous morass. It's a sound that won't offend, but neither will it excite. The P-3 avoids this trap. It seduces from the first note, then lets the music's inner detail and gentle pacing usher the listener through the experience naturally.

Bob Dylan's harmonica is another instrument that lush sounding cartridges embellish with a rose-colored hue. Rarely has it been well-recorded, so a certain stridency is to be expected from an accurate system. Who would want it any other way? That edge is part of what lends records such as

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In the old paradigm, the stereo is viewed as a window that allows us to see the original performance as it was recorded. Of course there are always imperfections in this (metaphorical) window. It may be dirty, scratched, tinted, warped, or otherwise distorted. Therefore the view through the window of the stereo system is never as good as the original recording. The difficulty with this model is that it leads us to the incorrect conclusion that a low quality recording will sound worse with a high performance system than a low performance system. The assumption (attractive, yet incorrect) is that the clearer window of the high performance system will more obviously reveal the shortcomings of the recording.

However, the old paradigm can not explain the sonic performance of the Ayre MX-R. These amplifiers unquestionably offer as much detail, resolution and transparency as any other competing design. Yet at the same time even previously "unlistenable" recordings become musically engaging. We are therefore forced to shift to a new sonic paradigm.

Under this new view a recording may be regarded as "poor", not because of any inherent flaws, but instead because its particular electrical signal can trigger misbehaviour in some part of the stereo playback system that leads to lowered sound quality. It then becomes obvious how to achieve the goal of designing an audio component that is musically engaging with all recordings. Simply ensure the circuit's immunity to misbehaviours triggered by any combination of input signals. The result is an unprecedented degree of both sonic transparency and musical enjoyment.

- Charles Hansen, President & CEO, March 2007

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Installation and care

The P-3 uses nuts and bolts rather than threaded inserts, which might make mounting fiddly but pays dividends in that it sounds best clamped really tightly to your headshell. No thread stripping anxiety attacks here.

The P-3 weighs a sensible 10.9g and the square-ish shaped body and clearly marked stylus reference line eases installation. (The stylus guard helps, too.) Like the P-1, this isn't a "nude" cartridge, but it does lack a dustcover and its coils are exposed.

Fear of dust accumulating on the exposed coils of the P-1 troubled me at first, but I haven't found it to be the source of any problem. With both cartridges, the coils do need to be occasionally cleaned. (This is done gently and cautiously, of course. I use a regular household vacuum cleaner, and always assure that the nozzle never actually touches any part of the cartridge. Really.)

The P-3 cartridge body is made of duralumin treated with DLC (Diamond Like Carbon). Regardless of its designation, the P-3's body isn't made from Alexandrite, which is a gemstone noted for its chameleon-like tendency to change color. Rather, Phase Tech gave it that name because the P-3's body has a similar tendency to shift in color, depending on the angle and quality of light that shines on it. I mounted the P-3 in my SME V arm with no damping applied and loaded at 100 ohms.

► *Highway 61 Revisited* their sense of urgency. The P-3 reveals this LP for what it is. It sounds edgy when the music is edgy; it sounds more relaxed when that's the groove.

The P-3's presentation is so musical, even charming, that its weaknesses are not immediately obvious. Where it lacks is in that elusive quality that some audiophiles call "authority." In this case, it's actually a thinness at the frequency extremes, which can't equal the rest of the audible range. It's not that the P-3's low and high frequencies are missing, but that they have a reticent quality. It's not a matter of reduced absolute level at those frequencies, but one of color and definition.

It's difficult to describe this characteristic. If you don't have full-range speakers, you might not notice the foundation missing from some of your records. Even on a full range system, this reticence is more apparent by direct comparison to other, more expensive cartridges, than it is by just listening.

If there's one album that's perfect for demonstrating this trait, it's Boston's self-titled first LP. You can ignore the original pressing and pass over the various CD releases

- there's only one audiophile-quality version of this album, and it's the CBS Mastersound half-speed master (HE34188). Much of what makes this album such timeless rock ear candy is the layering of sound on sound on sound, of highs and lows and soaring vocals, of crashing drums and sudden pianissimos, all happening at the same time – or within mere moments of each other. With the P-3, these high and low frequencies are plainly audible, but they recede into the mix, as though literally more distant from the mics. Boston's rock bass guitars are about much more than just sheer volume – they're about color. On my system, it sounds as though the P-3's palette is missing some of the shades it needs to portray this color – but only at the frequency extremes.

Of course, the Boston album is bombastic. Sometimes, the P-3's characteristic reticence is less readily apparent, such as when reticent high frequencies deprive a record of its "live" sound. You'll hear this on the Meters' *Look Ka - Py Py* (Josie JOS-4011), where the P-3's slightly-flawed highs seem to diminish some of the record's dynamics. As those dynamic shadings are suppressed, what's lost in this case is not so much an

incredible sense of "you-are-there," but that "they-are-here."

This reticence in the frequency extremes will likely bother some listeners more than others. I'd guess that it will affect those who love rock and blues more than those who listen to light classical, vocals or purely acoustic music. It's certainly less noticeable – perhaps even undetectable – on small systems.

What's nice about the P-3 is that it offers the audiophile a choice. For those who insist on more, the P-1 is not that much more expensive and still a bargain. At the price, the P-3 is really quite an achievement. It excels in retrieving inner detail but, like Kermit, doesn't "sparkle" where it shouldn't. For some audiophiles, that may be the deciding factor in choosing the Phase Tech. Striking this balance is no mean feat. The P-3 has a remarkable quality and you can prove it to yourself by listening. ►+

CL

Technical Panel

Type:	Moving-coil cartridge
Body:	Duralumin with DLC treatment
Cantilever:	Boron
Stylus Profile:	Line contact .03 x .003 mm
Magnet:	NeoDelta Magnet
Output Voltage:	> 0.27 mV
Compliance:	7.3 cu
Tracking Force:	1.7 to 2.0 g.
Internal Impedance:	4 Ohms
Weight:	10.9 g.
Price:	\$1800 US

Review sample supplied by:

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Focal-JMLab Electra 1037 Be Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Perceived value is a peculiar thing. When Focal launched their “cheaper than Utopia but a lot of the same technology and performance” 1000 Be series, the diminutive 1007 Be stand-mount, at £3K by the time you’d lifted it to listening height, was always going to look expensive, a fact rammed home unceremoniously by its bigger brother, the 1027 Be. With an identical footprint the floorstander managed to add twice the number of drivers and three times the cabinet volume for an extra thousand pounds. Mind you, that didn’t stop us choosing to review the 1007 Be, something of a no-brainer given our protracted love affair with the various Micro Utopias – and really liking what we heard. Being naturally cynical it was easy to wonder whether the 1027 might not be rather more show than go? Would it do enough extra in terms of bandwidth to overcome the inherent advantages and appealing clarity of the smaller two-way? It was a close call, with preferences tending to fall with individual listener’s musical demands rather than any inherent superiority on the part of one speaker or the other.

But, perceived value is a peculiar thing. Now we have the 1037 Be, the 27’s even bigger and more strapping brother. On the face of it you get an extra four inches of cabinet height and another bass driver to justify a substantial £2.4K jack in price, yet stand the two speakers next to each other, each with their cost prominently displayed and the 1037 still looks the better value: go figure. And that’s before you listen to them...

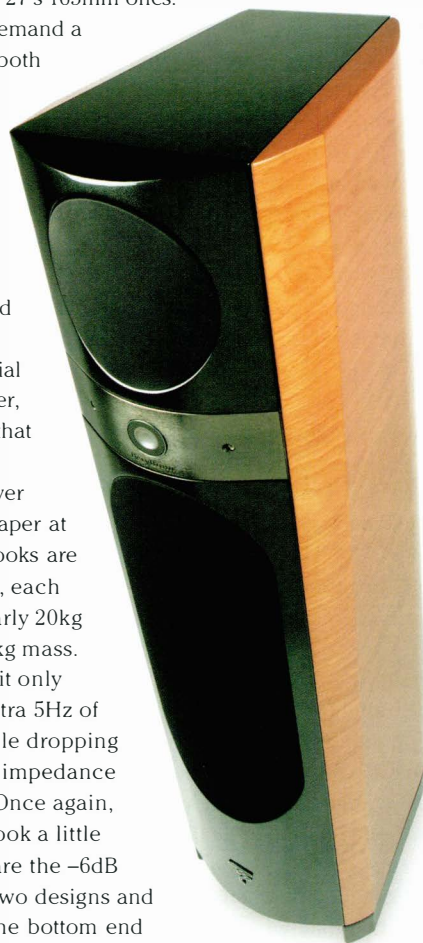
In practice, there’s far more to the 1037 Be than meets the rapid glance.

The 25mm pure beryllium tweeter and W-sandwich midrange unit are shared with the rest of the range (which naturally includes the necessary models for 5.1 channels or more). It’s the bass drivers where things get hinky. These are all-new 180mm units in place of the 27’s 165mm ones. In turn, they demand a cabinet that’s both a couple of inches wider and deeper, proportions hidden by the greater height. The end result is a far more substantial looking speaker, although one that shows modest advantages over the 1027 on paper at least. Those looks are not deceptive, each 37 adding nearly 20kg to the 27’s 33kg mass. Yet, in return it only delivers an extra 5Hz of extension while dropping the minimum impedance to 3.3 Ohms. Once again, you need to look a little closer: compare the –6dB point for the two designs and you see that the bottom end on the 37 is subtly fuller with a quicker roll-off. The crossover point is lower too, 230Hz as opposed to the 350Hz of the 27. And then there’s the efficiency; up 2dB, which may not

sound like much until you factor in that extra low-frequency extension. So that’s where all that extra swept area and internal volume have gone! Suddenly you look at the 1037 Be with new respect. This is one potentially potent package.

The bold styling of the Focals will either appeal to you or it won’t – but at least it’s not anonymously insipid. With “yellow” and “red” wood options to offset the grey and brushed aluminium baffles they should coexist happily in a broad range of environments. The speakers are single-wired and the base extensions allow for spiking as well as providing a controlled egress for the massive downward firing port. The grilles are neat but definitely best discarded for listening.

Of course, the real beauty of the 1037 Bes lies in their versatility. 93dB efficiency means that even relatively modest valve amps should have no problem driving them (as we found out in the system reviewed in Issue 50). A decent lump of metal at the output will deal with that low-ish impedance but the ▶



▶ bandwidth and low-frequency energy generated by this speaker will always place the emphasis on the extra grip of a push-pull output stage. Of course, there's also the option of a quick and agile solid-state design, or with 400W of power handling on offer you could go for broke. Whichever route you take you quickly discover that these Focals demand quality first – and that quality better be delivered in a musically coherent fashion.

Why the emphasis on coherence? Great speakers are all about balance: a balance of virtues; tonal balance; balancing one end against the other. This last is the one that really concerns us here – and it's partly about the design itself, partly about how you use it. Focal's 25mm IAL inverted dome beryllium tweeter may be a step down from the one used in the Utopia series but it delivers clean, extended and above all quick high-frequencies which would be the envy of many a flagship model. What makes the 1037 so special is that it's the most affordable speaker in the range where the bottom end can keep up, for quality and quantity. But "can" and "does" are two different things, and therein lies the rub.

As noted, the bass response is full but not especially deep, given the size of the speaker's cabinet. This is all about quality mid-bass, the crucial range that gives instruments so much of their solidity, music so much of its scale, impact and authority. The 1037s do mid-bass beautifully, projecting it with texture, punch and energy from those three drivers and their humungous port. But you need it to be working with the room and in time with the rest of the range or it all gets messy real quick. That means careful positioning and an amp that gets a grip on the bottom end – a question of nature as much as sheer power. Believe me, if this bass arrives low or a little late you're going to know about it, both because of the

bass weight itself and the contrast with the clarity and precision of the top-end.

I used the 1037s with amps as varied as the Ayre MXRs, the TEAD Linear Bs and a Naim 282/Hi-Cap/250 combination – the latter because of excited feedback from Naim dealers who've experienced this speaker and which, having lived with the combination, I can fully understand. Having said that, as impressive as each amplifier proved I know from past experience what an astonishing job the little Pure Sound A35 can do and I suspect the Sugden integrateds or a Super Nait might prove equally interesting – but more of that later.

Why was the Naim/Focal combination that little bit special? I suspect it's to do with the way the bottom-end of both products is voiced, the Naims always excelling in the area of mid-bass drive and punch, a voicing which accounts for their sense of



pace and timing – and which dovetails with the 1037's demands perfectly. Of course, whilst on the one hand the 250's grip was welcome, it's also an amp that likes to work a bit, and in the context of this Focal's relatively mild impedance demands (in Naim terms) and high efficiency, it was barely breaking sweat. It would be interesting

to investigate the swings and roundabouts of the lower powered alternatives in the range.



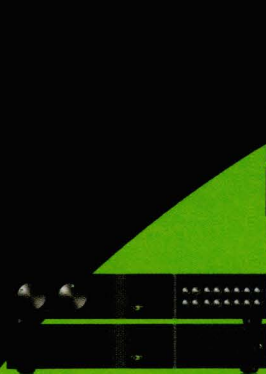
Once you've got them going (which means placed relative to side and rear walls with considerable care, absolutely vertical and toed-in just so*) you'll be rewarded with music of scale and unforced clarity. Such is the solidity of the performers, the focus and separation within the sound-field and the fluidity of the timing and pace of the music that the performance simply steps away from the system; you're listening to the players, not the system that's playing them. Too good to be true? Beer budget hi-fi heaven? No to the former but definitely a touch of the latter – but before you choke on the £6.4K asking price let me explain. Firstly – what these speakers don't do: they don't

set up a palpable acoustic space with real dimensionality and boundaries. Even driven by the MXRs, they simply don't have the low frequency extension for that. Nor do they change the scale of their presentation to match recordings the way that a full-range system does. So, the Art Pepper Quintet is spread across the same width as the Basie big band, it's the individuals who vary in size. Does that matter? Depends on your priorities, and how much value you place on this speaker's considerable strengths. ▶

* This is one place where I take issue with Focal; the spikes provided are beautifully polished but way too short and there's no option for polished surfaces. I stood the 1037s on an octet of finite elemente CeraPuc feet, threaded into their M8 ferrules. These interfaced perfectly with (as well as protecting) my wooden floor, as well as making minute positional changes and getting the speakers vertical an absolute doddle. Oh, and they looked pretty cool too...

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▶ The upside is all about musical presence and vitality. The solidity of voices and instruments is partly down to the focus and separation, the resolution of dynamic nuance, but it's also a function of the natural tonality and lack of edge. The 1037s manage to sound sweet, even warm, without being clogged or sluggish. Instead, they're dynamic and immediate, changing pace and jumping rhythmic hurdles without stuttering or breaking stride. There's drive and impact aplenty, and sure-footed bass lines to underpin the music. Whether it's the convoluted fluidity of Norman Watt-Roy or the grumbling bowed bass melodies of Gorecki's *Third Symphony*, notes are pitch definite enough to effortlessly follow their lines. There's also enough air and texture to float bass notes, keeping them live and unravelling overlapping layers.

The expressive, agile low-frequency foundation lends presence and immediacy to the mids, concentrating your attention on the music, pushing the system itself into the background. Whether it's the fragility of Nanci Griffiths or the more robust charms of Patti Smith, this speaker allows you to really appreciate the character, humour and humanity in a singer, the message in their song. The treble? It's almost an afterthought, which is praise indeed. Just like the various diamond tweeters, there's so little edge or fizz that it's completely unobtrusive. But where some have found the step-change to diamond hard to make, there's no apparent dullness or lack of energy here. Instead, it simply sounds so right you no longer bother to notice it.

Roll these things together, get them working in concert and you've got a phenomenal balance of musical virtues. Properly positioned, the 1037s make performances big, bold and engaging, without over-powering

them or lacking the subtlety for a string quartet. It's more about delivering the musicians' full expressive and emotional range, and allowing the music as much impact as it demands (but only when it demands). It's almost as if, somewhere in the design process, somebody wound the fun control round towards its end-stop.



This speaker delivers an awful lot of exactly what makes music important, in a package that (with the appropriate care) will work in the vast majority of rooms without visually dominating them. This may not be Focal's best speaker, but it's their best value design by a mile.

Which brings us back to that whole value thing. I can just see the outrage writ large on the faces of those who feel that any suggestion that a £6.4K product can be described

as a bargain. But consider this: you can't listen to a speaker, you can only listen to a system – and the system required to get great results out of the 1037 is astonishingly affordable. The various integrated amps I've mentioned barely break the £1K barrier. Add to that the fact that the speakers are single wired, and a seriously good system (a better system than most of us can dream of) can be had for £8K plus a source component. I never thought you could get this much music for that kind of money. Believe me, the results are astonishing. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way bass reflex
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm IAL inverted beryllium dome tweeter 1x 165mm W sandwich midrange 3x 180mm W sandwich woofers
Bandwidth:	33Hz – 40kHz ±3dB -6dB @ 26Hz
Efficiency:	93dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal 3.3 Ohms minimum
Crossover Points:	230Hz and 2kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	264 x 1110 x 350mm
Weight:	51kg ea.
Finishes:	Black baffles with Classic (red) or Signature (blonde) stained wood sides
Price:	£6399

UK Distributor:

Focal-JMLab (UK) Ltd
Tel. 0845 660 2680
Net. www.focal-uk.com



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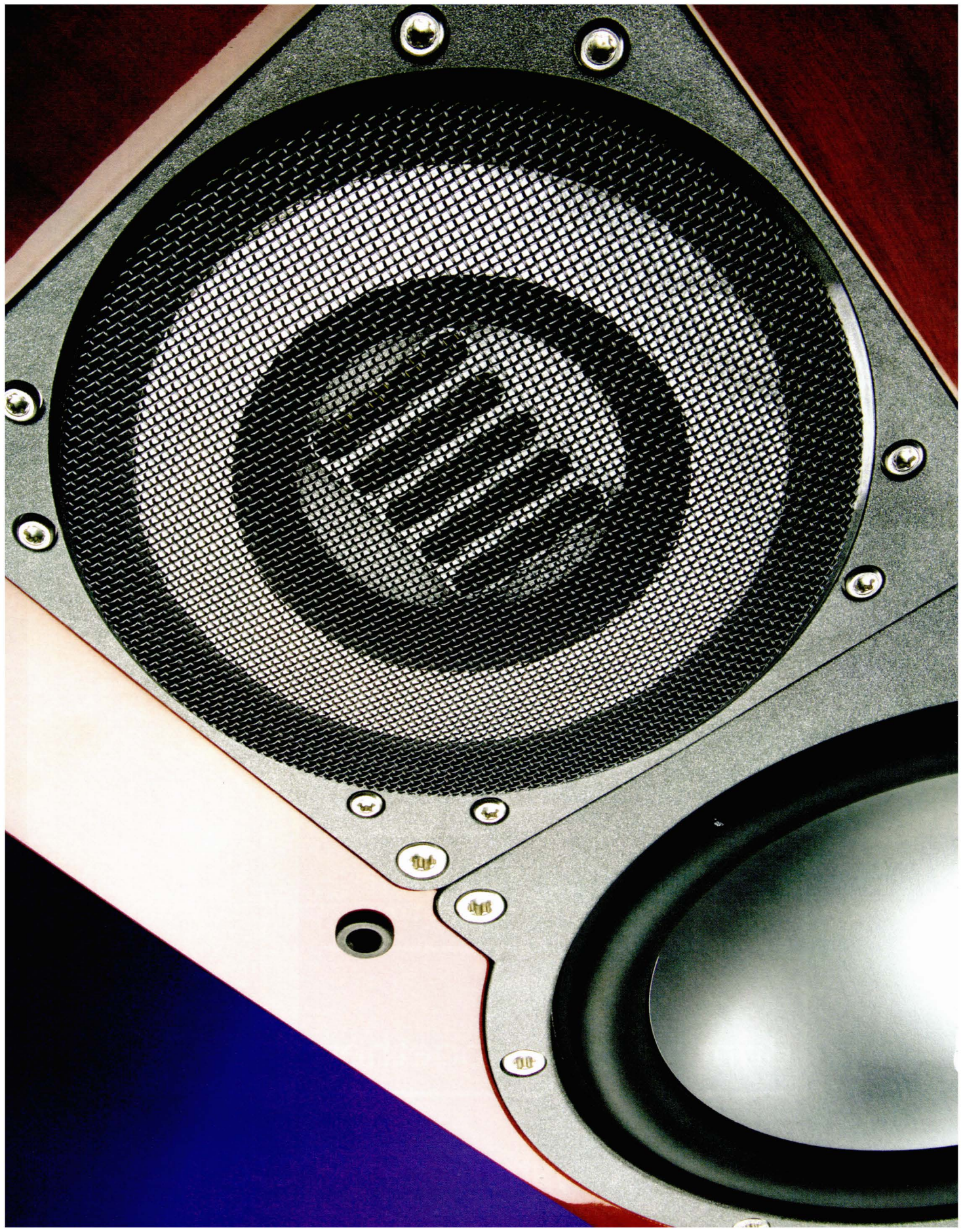
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The ELAC FS210 Anniversary Edition Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

ELAC might be best known in the UK for their range of compact, standmounted speakers featuring the company's JET tweeter, but those represent only the tip of a substantial iceberg. PC reviewed the distinctive CL310 model as far back as Issue 3 – and loved it. Read between the lines of that review and shadows of the bigger picture soon emerge. Add in the 4Pi super tweeter that I like so much and it soon becomes clear that ELAC (pronounced L-ac) designs some pretty distinctive high frequency units. What you can't tell just by looking is that they are all hand-built in the Company's plant in Kiel, Northern Germany – the same as all their mid and bass drivers. With a history in electro-acoustic research that dates back to 1926, and with clients such as Bugatti (who required drive units for the Veyron's ICE system) they are not afraid of innovation and also understand the requirement for precision assembly – both easier to achieve if you keep things in-house.

The FS210, named to mark ELAC's 80th anniversary is actually far more representative of the their extensive range of products, a catalogue that makes them more akin to a German B&W than the small niche manufacturer their presentation in the UK has suggested. Appropriately, it sports their latest driver development, the X-JET co-axial unit which combines the established JET tweeter, with a flat, honeycomb midrange diaphragm driven by a 78mm, edge-wound voice-coil. The resulting unit is incredibly compact, its shallow depth incorporating two separate neodymium magnet structures

that between them deliver a useable bandwidth from 400Hz to 50kHz and a sensitivity of 89dB. All from a coincident and phase coherent sound source around 115mm across. Such performance demands incredibly careful arrangement and shaping of the internal elements, just one indication of the time and care that's gone into this driver's design – which is why it's normally found in the Company's flagship 600 Series models, speakers that also use complex composite aluminium and MDF cabinets.

The twin 180mm bass drivers used in the FS210 are no less distinctive. Superficially similar to the ceramic "soup-bowl" drivers seen elsewhere, they are actually another in-house

development that bonds a thin aluminium bowl onto a conventional paper cone. At first sight that might sound like a cheat – trying to make standard drivers look fancy. In fact, it's a subtle and effective method of creating a composite structure

that combines the rigidity of a braced metal diaphragm with the damping properties and light weight of a thin, paper cone. Conceptually its actually most similar to the mixed materials approach employed by Focal for their W sandwich drivers. The different material properties allow the designer to tune the driver's mechanical behaviour according to function.

So, by developing the FS210, ELAC have made the driver technology from their top models available at a far more approachable price. Of course, something has to give, although in this case it's surprisingly little. The conventional MDF cabinet exploits the cost savings available from Chinese manufacturing, although given the fabulous finish and heavy internal bracing it's hard to consider this much

of a compromise. Inside you still find separate boards for each crossover leg and the carefully double flared reflex port, complete with concentric foam bungs to filter or block its output, easing room placement.

Externally, there are nice, solid bi-wiring terminals, a really stable plinth and adjustable feet that offer a clear rubber interface (that won't mark floors) or a choice of two spike lengths. And just to cap it off, all that technological content and the exemplary construction and finish are backed up by a 10-year warranty. Any way you look at it, a retail price of £3000 makes this an awful lot of speaker for the money.

In fact, the Elacs offer so much that, with an increasing number of "high-value" products that are more about ▶



▶ show than go gracing the high street, the cynical might become suspicious. Fortunately, the performance of the FS210 is just as impressive in practice as it looks on paper – as long as you take the requisite care. The clue lies in the bandwidth figures; despite comparatively compact dimensions and smallish drivers, Elac quote a –3dB figure of 28Hz from the reflex cabinet. Either that figure or the 89dB efficiency seems a bit optimistic, but play the 210s and there’s no doubting that they do go down further than you expect. Couple that to the exceptional coherence, speed and clarity of the co-axial X-JET and any lethargy at the bottom end will stand out liked a sore thumb. So, be prepared to spend time on positioning (and toe-in) and make sure you provide plenty of clean, quick power if you want to get the best out of these Elacs. Whilst they won’t exactly make AV receivers keel over in shock, take that route and you’ll never hear just what they’re capable of.

The upside is a wonderfully open and stable soundstage, with a dimensionality and acoustic coherence that I normally associate with speakers at a far higher price. There’s no tendency for the sound or instruments to clump around the speakers; turn the lights off and they all but disappear. There’s some discontinuity between the bass and midrange drivers, but its relatively unobtrusive on all but acoustic material, taking the form of a subtle sheen or whiteness that smoothes over the bite and texture on strings but actually serves to accentuate the leading edge attack of electric guitar. Whilst I normally frown on “compensatory”



matching I’ve a suspicion that the Cardas cables could prove the ideal partner for the FS210, adding a little warmth and roundness at the top.

Playing pop and rock there’s an attractive drive and urgency to the sound when required, a stark contrast to the poise and restraint that characterizes the live du Pre/Elgar Cello performance, demonstrating the Elacs’ ability to apply their bandwidth and substance to the musical demands. There’s no mistaking the intensity in du Pre’s playing, nor the joyous, bouncy energy of *Rattlesnakes* or *New Boots And Panties*. Drum pick-ups and changes in density from verse to chorus are really effective, while even the piled slabs of compression used to convey power on modern pop tracks had a satisfying impact and substance.

Changing discs or partnering equipment brought home just how unobtrusive the Elacs are, with each recording or amplifier bringing its own flavour to proceedings, devoid of any dominant overlay. If the 210s have an Achilles’ heel it’s a slight loss of low frequency attack and dynamic range, an effect that adds to the sense of substance they deliver at the cost of a slight thickening of texture and loss of jump to really explosive bass transients. Once again though, this is a harsh judgement at the price, reflecting the excellence of the X-JET and their overall performance in absolute terms. If you really want to improve things down below then you’ll need the more sophisticated cabinet from the 607 X-JET, with its composite construction and the company’s latest LLD bass drivers. But those things come at a price – a pretty substantial price. The beauty of the FS210 lies in its balance of virtues.

It’s a mistake to view it as a 600 series product on the cheap, to assess its performance in terms of shortfall from the flagship. Instead, understand just what (and how much) it delivers for the price, because the strength of the 210 comes from the care that’s gone into its overall balance. Its design allows the X-JET to breathe and provides the necessary foundation for its performance without leaving it sounding slugged or exposed.

There’s more to a great speaker than one great driver – something that Elac clearly understand. If the FS210 is anything to go by, their mainstream products will richly reward those prepared to search them out. ➤+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way bass reflex
Driver Complement:	1x X-JET 105mm co-axial M/HF 2x 180mm aluminium/paper cone bass
Bandwidth:	28Hz – 50kHz ± 3dB
Sensitivity:	89dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms (3 Ohms minimum)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	286 x 1114 x 348mm
Weight:	31kg ea.
Finishes:	High gloss red cherry, silver or titanium shadow
Price:	£3000

UK Distributor:

Onkyo Europe Electronics UK
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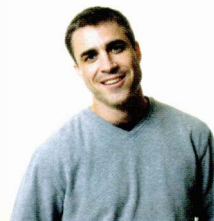
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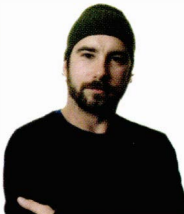
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Velodyne's DD12 sub-woofer and its self-diagnostic set up system compared to traditional approaches in the shape of REL's R505 and the Eclipse TD725sw

by Chris Binns

I confess that to date, I have found it extremely difficult to get excited about sub-woofers, and that's quite an admission from someone who will also own up to being a bit of a bass monster at times. For me, the very foundations of a lot of music and performance are defined by my perception of low frequencies, and when it is right, there is a far greater chance that other aspects of reproduction will fall into place. When it is wrong, the whole structure of the music becomes indistinct, and to a degree pointless. Which probably goes some way in explaining why I have a weakness for refined and compact high quality loudspeakers – I guess no bass is better than bad bass. But in an ideal world, I want the extension and power that exemplifies a really good full range system – and the possibility that it might be obtained without wardrobe size enclosures is an extremely attractive one.

But the sub-woofer solution has always presented too many compromises for my liking, and so far most 'additional' subs that I have heard have sounded rather ghastly. Let me qualify that; if a loudspeaker manufacturer has spent considerable time and money in getting a product to sound right, with particular care in integrating the low-frequency response to the room and voicing of the crossover, the idea that you can just 'add' another bass unit to enhance the performance seems ludicrous, and all too often sounds it. But my cynicism is not necessarily aimed so much at the products, more toward the way in which they are set up and used, and that is a factor that I can have some control over. So the opportunity to spend time evaluating some of the more interesting and contemporary sub-woofer products seemed like an interesting challenge, especially as this would be purely for the purposes of music replay rather than anything to do with home cinema and special effects. ▶



▶ A full range system consisting of smaller loudspeakers augmented by a sub should be quite cost effective (high quality £2k mini-monitors and a £1K sub) and possibly less of a challenge, aesthetically and domestically. In theory at least, the idea of splitting the bass from the rest of the frequency range offers an interesting solution with considerable flexibility when it comes to positioning for best imaging versus bass response (but also a multitude of opportunities to get it wrong). But get it right and the additional bandwidth can raise the bar of performance quite dramatically, and not always in the most obvious of ways. There is also a strong argument to suggest that if you extend the bandwidth of the system at one extreme, the results are considerably more beneficial if you address the other end of the spectrum as well. Recent years have seen radical improvements in many tweeter designs with the use of interesting new materials that are capable of extending high frequency response into the 40 – 50kHz region; as a result, the application of extra bass seems to be even more effective with many modern designs.

Although there were one or two sub-woofers around in the late seventies (the AudioPro models come to mind) they were a rare breed and it wasn't until the introduction of home cinema that the concept really took off. Enhancing the low frequency content of films, particularly the action adventure type, had been part of the cinema experience for years. Translated to a domestic level, the results often completely overpower the scale of the available image and with most demonstrations relying on room shaking explosions and special effects, it was easy to conclude that subs had little if anything to do with the subtleties of reproducing music.

But like everything else, things have changed. There have been a number of developments in sub-woofer design that have had a major influence on how

they perform and just as importantly, how they are set up. The appearance of viable Class D amplification has been a key issue in the development of the species, by allowing dramatically increased power output together with higher efficiency and reduced costs (although I still have my doubts about the effect switch mode amps and power supplies have on mains quality, but that is another issue). Drive-unit technology has moved on to accommodate the increased available power with high temperature voice coils and more rugged motor units, and the results are smaller, more cost effective designs boasting a far higher performance than would have been possible only a few years ago.

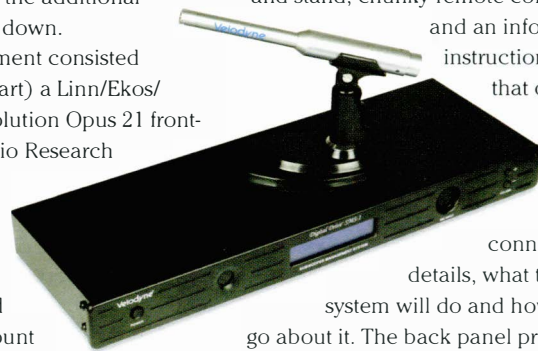
Loudspeakers used for the listening were the B&W Nautilus 805s. About the right size to usefully benefit from the use of a sub-woofer, they also have a reasonably extended top-end with which to balance the additional bandwidth lower down. Partnering equipment consisted of (for the most part) a Linn/Ekos/Helikon and Resolution Opus 21 front-ends with an Audio Research SP10 feeding a Naim NAP300, with Nordost cabling. While I was able to spend a reasonable amount of time with each of the units, listening through a wide range of material, there were several tracks that I selected to act as a reference to compare the differences between the three designs and as an aid to assess setting up.

The Velodyne Digital Drive and DD12 Sub-woofer

Velodyne have been involved in the production of sub-woofers long enough to be considered veterans of the art. The 'Digital drive' series differs from the norm by utilising (as the title suggests) digital processing to manage all aspects

of the loudspeaker's performance. The range covers drive units sized from ten to a substantial 18", the DD12 employing a single 12" driver driven by a 1250-Watt class D amplifier, closely coupled by a servo system wherein a sensor closely monitors driver behaviour and instructs the electronics accordingly. This is now managed within the digital domain, as are all other parameters, to provide flexible adjustment of all aspects of the unit's performance. But what really sets the Velodyne apart is the ability to measure the low-end response of both the main loudspeakers and the subwoofer in room, display and analyse the results on a screen, and apply correction in real time.

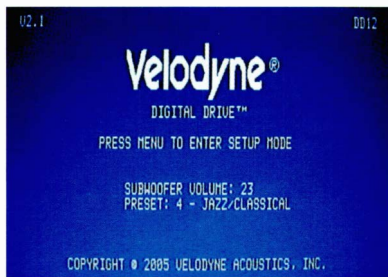
Compact and rather beautifully finished in piano black lacquer (conventional veneers are also available) the DD12 comes with a very professional looking microphone and stand, chunky remote control and an informative instruction manual that outlines



connection details, what the system will do and how to go about it. The back panel provides considerable options for hooking it up, including line-level and high-level input, balanced and single ended LFE input, 'through' and a filtered output, crossing over at 80Hz/6dB roll off to the main speakers. All parameters are accessed via the remote control. Getting the system up and running is really quite straightforward. The DD12 provides video output that can be monitored on any TV or display with an S-VHS or composite video input, and the 'EQ' outputs are connected to a spare input on the main amplifier. The microphone is supplied with a decent length of balanced cable that plugs ▶

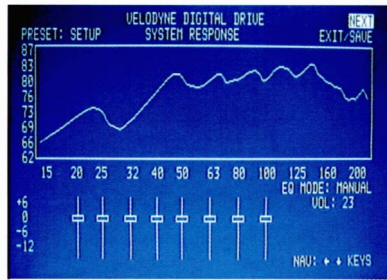
▶ into the rear of the sub-woofer; XLR extensions are easy enough to come by if greater length is required. The basic idea is that the microphone should be placed at the listening position and measurements taken with the sub in different positions, the less strenuous alternative for initial readings is to place the sub at the listening position and move the microphone around. Just remember to aim the remote at the sub rather than the display!

Once the unit is fired up, the introductory screen appears on the display inviting you to enter set up



mode. At this stage, it is worth pointing out that there is an automated option that will run through an abbreviated version of the measurement procedure and apply equalisation accordingly, a bit of experimentation suggests that for a quick set up the results were pretty impressive and not too far off the mark compared to a painstaking manual set up.

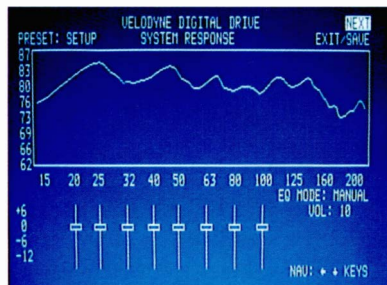
Pressing menu and entering in a code takes you into the EQ set up screen, and a sweep signal commences to cycle from 15 to 200 Hertz (about every five seconds) that should be heard through the main speakers and the sub. The first measurement should be taken with the sub muted to establish the low end of the system as is, in this case the B&W 805s running full range with no high pass filtering; the volume should be adjusted so that the curve is roughly centred around 76db. The next stage is to activate the sub and bring the level up to match the main speakers using the display



as the reference the output of the sub clearly has little or no integration with the rest of the system. Tempting as it



is to start fiddling with the available parameters, it is now that the hard graft begins, moving the sub (or microphone if you are doing it the other way round) to find the position(s) that yield the minimum number of peaks and troughs, i.e. the flattest overall response. Positioning is by far the most influential and critical of all the criteria in getting a good performance from the sub, and the electronic adjustments are there to tidy things up rather than radically alter behaviour.



Screen 4 shows the response after a considerable amount of experimentation with positioning, and offered one of the best compromises

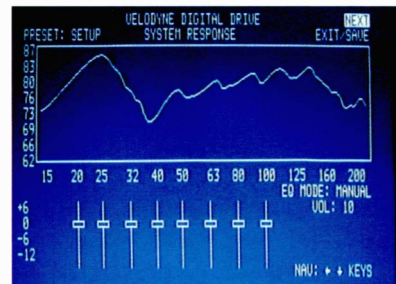
obtainable within the room without being too domestically obtrusive.

Navigating to the next screen brings up the 'system settings' screen and it is here that the parameters of crossover, sub-sonic filter, volume and phase can be adjusted, and by pressing the test button the display flits



back to the sweep graph to indicate the changes made to the response. Using information gleaned from the measurements taken with just the 805's on their own, the low pass crossover was set along with the slope, the display confirming that these figures were not too wide of the mark.

Adjusting the phase gradually up to 180 degrees showed a distinct deterioration of the response and was set back to zero, while inverting the polarity had a disastrous effect on the curve.



Quite what the difference is between inverting the polarity and putting the phase out by 180 degrees is I do not know, but at this stage I was happy to be guided by what the software was telling me.

The final stage in the set up is return to the system response screen ▶

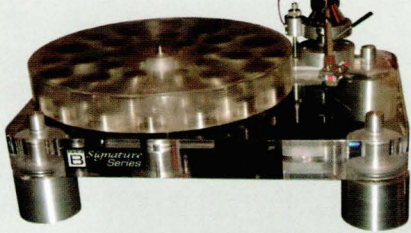
Walrus

11 New Quebec St, London W1



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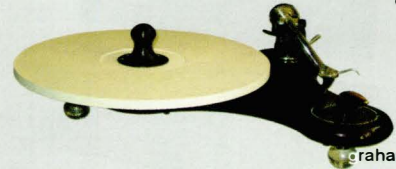


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- cartridge man
- cawsey
- clearaudio
- consonance
- decca london
- duevel
- dynavector
- ear yoshino
- emille
- emt
- funk firm
- goldring
- graham (tonearms)
- graham slee
- hadcock
- harmonix
- heed audio
- horning
- hyperion
- incognito
- isolda
- jadisi
- kibri
- klimo
- koetsu
- luxman
- lyra
- mbi
- mcintosh
- melody
- michell engineering
- morch
- musical fidelity
- nordost
- nottingham analogue
- origin live
- ortofon
- pro-ject
- pure sound
- rega (turntables)
- reimyo
- revolver
- ringmat
- roksan
- shun mook
- shanling
- shelter
- sme
- solid tech
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a



b



c



d



e



f

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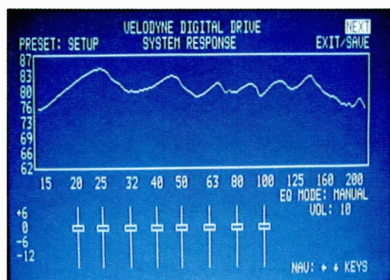
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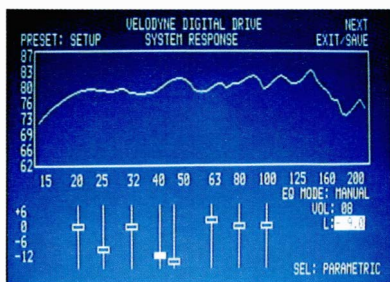
Demonstrations by appointment

Mondays to Saturdays 10:00 to 18:00.
It is advisable to call us before visiting.

Part exchange welcome. Ex-demonstration and previously owned equipment listed on our website: www.audioconsultants.co.uk



and use the 8-band equalisation to clear up any remaining irregularities in the response, this can be expanded to offer a parametric option where both the frequency and the Q can be adjusted alongside the amplitude to provide more comprehensive control. The manual usefully suggests that the peaks are relatively easy to address with the EQ, while troughs are often the result of cancellation modes within the room that extra adjustment will not fix; possibly further experimentation with positioning is the answer. The final



screen represents the first shot at full programming. Once the settings have been finalised, they can of course be stored to the internal flash memory. A small but interesting point, the system was easily able to pick up differences in the room acoustics with either the door or a window open, an effect that I have often heard - but its good to see it corroborated by measurement.

That basically outlines the process of using the Velodyne system for setting up of the sub-woofer. The question, of course is how effective is it? Initial listening suggested that the results were not far off the mark. It came as some relief to realise that the machine

generated set up was augmenting the basic response of the B&W's by only a small but significant degree, and probably not far from how I would have set the system up by ear, but over a considerably longer period.

Immediately apparent with the orchestral recordings was the benefit of much larger scale, not so much the nature of the low frequencies but the defined space around them. There seemed to be a greater presence that lent considerable weight to the drama of the performance, noticeable in particular with the BBC recording of the live Jacqueline du Pre/Elgar *Cello Concerto*. Kick drum and bass guitar with well-



recorded rock music had greater impact as one might expect, but there was an occasional inclination toward a slight smearing, not so much to do with timing but almost akin to a lack of contrast or a 'greying' of the colour at the bottom end. There was some dryness to the bass character. The sound stage seemed to gain size and solidity in every dimension, without losing precision when it came to positioning and image placement. Although progressive fine-tuning improved things, I never felt that the bass timing really gelled to the same degree as the REL or Eclipse, and I find myself wondering about issues of latency in the DSP software.

I tried using the high pass filter output of the Velodyne to drive the main loudspeakers with very mixed results. After resetting the sub to compensate for the changes, the system

was obviously able to play louder having relieved the B&W's of a certain amount of responsibility at the bass end, but the mid and top lost a lot of openness and resolution, effectively dropping a couple of notches in overall performance and sounding rather, dare I say it, digital. But hey, I'm nit picking here.

The Velodyne system impressed me with its whole approach to setting up a sub-woofer, and while there is no substitute for fine-tuning the results by ear, it is both time saving and convenient.

But in some ways I've saved the best bit for last. You can buy the Digital Drive box as a standalone unit, the SMS-1, either to simply set up or actively control other brands of sub - or even position full-range loudspeakers. Now there's an interesting proposition for dealers, or those with really problematic rooms!



Prices -
DD12BGE Sub-woofer: £2295
SMS-1 Room EQ. Unit: £575

UK Distributor:

Redline Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)131 555 3922
Net. [www. red-line.co.uk](http://www.red-line.co.uk)

The REL R505

By contrast to the Velodyne, the R505 is about as conventional as they come, and I quote: 'No phoney computers! No fussing about with a microphone and alleged optimisation programs that attempt to crudely approximate real world performance for REL.' That

▶ pretty much sets the scene, although the R505 is part of the R series which are the first REL products to use class D switching amplification, the company



having decided that the technology has only recently become viable. With five hundred Watts feeding into a custom designed twelve-inch unit the 505 is relatively compact; a small box under the front panel provides adjustment for input level, crossover frequency and absolute phase, a removable glass plate is fitted over these to prevent adjustment once the settings have been made. Rear connections are straightforward with an unbalanced LFE input and a single RCA for line level, which rather limits its use in this mode as a single sub for a stereo system.

Which could well be intentional. REL make a point of stating that the preferred interface is via the loudspeaker connections of the main amplifier, this modus operandi allows the signature of the system to be included in the feed to the sub. I will reserve judgement on this, but personally I find the idea of connecting anything to the outputs of an amplifier apart from speakers a bit disturbing and inelegant, and anyone using an amp that runs in bridged configuration (or indeed any amplifier where the negative terminal is not at earth potential) should read the comprehensive instruction book very carefully to avoid potentially costly damage. A long lead is provided with three bare wire connections for earth, left and right terminating in a

Neutrik Speakon for the 505, and this is the method I used. (Note that this type of connection presents a bit of a challenge when your power amp has only a single set of 4mm plugs for output, such as the NAP300).

Being a little mindful of REL's slightly cynical attitude toward the Velodyne software, I started off by positioning the 505 by ear, and over the course of a couple of hours ended up with more or less the same position that the DD12 had occupied. Adjustment of the settings is a little more awkward than with the other two units due to the lack of a remote but once optimized over a period of time there was little need to



change it.

The comparison with the Velodyne was interesting. With slightly less authority in the very deep bass, the R505 did sound a little more relaxed and open, and fractionally more in character with the B&W's, leading to a better sense of integration. The character and colour of bass instruments was much more apparent, and as before the benefits of increased scale added an extra dimension to music, in particular orchestral performances. The enhancement of timing and rhythmic expression offered far more insight into the structure and musical patterns within a track, be it as simple as the Art Pepper Quintet on *Smack Up* or the intricacies of densely recorded multi-tracked recordings. This consistency and the fact that it never drew unwarranted attention to itself,

even on simpler tracks, speaks highly of its performance. Yet the extra weight and impact made the opening track of the Kings of Leon album really quite scary and menacing; turn the sub off and it all sounded rather weak and inoffensive by comparison.

The REL might seem a little unsophisticated alongside the other two models, but it is also considerably cheaper. Thoroughly engineered, it succeeds admirably in what it is designed to do, demonstrating just how much can be achieved with suitable care in set up. It is capable of a very worthwhile and particularly musical performance.

Price: £995 Piano Black
£1150 Real Wood Veneers

Manufacturer:

REL Acoustics Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1656 768777
Net. www.rel.net

The Eclipse TD725sw

Considerably larger than both the Velodyne and the REL, the Eclipse again utilises a class D amplifier to produce 500 Watts of power output, shared between two ten-inch drive units mounted back to back on either side of the rigid, well braced cabinet. This approach, employing two smaller drivers in the place of a single large one, signalled another sea change in sub-woofer design, with a move towards speed and quality of response as opposed to sheer quantity (perhaps not surprising in this instance, given Eclipse's dedication to the single-driver speaker concept for its satellites). An aluminium shaft connects the motor assemblies of the units together to create a 'virtual ground' and in effect cancel out much of the unwanted vibration, while compliant mounting minimises energy transfer into the cabinet. The B&W PV1 uses a similar concept, while the rod coupling of ▶

TRACK

15

TOTAL

MIN 55 SEC 20

5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12
13	14	15	

MODE

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► opposed units was exploited by KEF in the bass department of the 104.2 model many years ago. Adjustments on the back panel are simple and straightforward, with input level and low pass filter frequency adjustable from 40 to 200 Hertz - this can be bypassed for use with appropriate LFE outputs. Stereo line-level balanced and single ended inputs are provided with the option of using loudspeaker signal if desired. Outputs are provided with the option of a high pass filter to the main loudspeakers, the crossover point is determined by the position of the low pass control, although the slopes involved are unspecified. A big plus is the provision of a remote control making adjustment that much easier from the listening position with access to volume, phase, mute and filter bypass.

Having defined a number of useful positions in the room via the Velodyne machinery, it seemed churlish not to use them as a starting point with the Eclipse. Out of the three, it seemed to be less critical of exact location, and easier to integrate with the main loudspeakers, possibly because of the speed of response inherent in its physical topology. Right from the word go, the Eclipse sounded incredibly musical, more open and basically less sub-woofer-ish than the two smaller units. The 'cleaner' presentation combined with that speed endowed it with considerable dynamic and rhythmic agility, always a contentious point with subs, although it did tend to lose some snap at really high volumes. Muting the Eclipse while listening never failed to highlight the contribution that it was

making to the system, but listening to it in isolation revealed that it seemed to be adding very little – yet by doing less it was adding more to the music. Not just in terms of scale or weight, but by opening up the fluidity and expressive range of the mid-band, improving space, dynamic range and separation and making it significantly easier to hear into the performance. In fact, exactly what extended low frequencies should be about!

I also tried the high pass filter in the 725, which actually proved to be quite successful, underlining just how well thought out and executed this unit is – albeit at a price. It might be a bit on the large size for some domestic set ups, but the Eclipse is much less about the crash and bang of

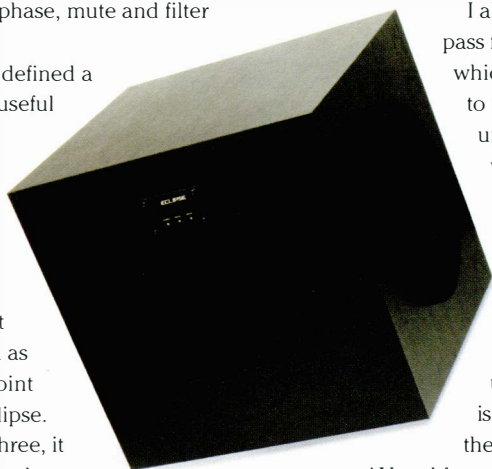
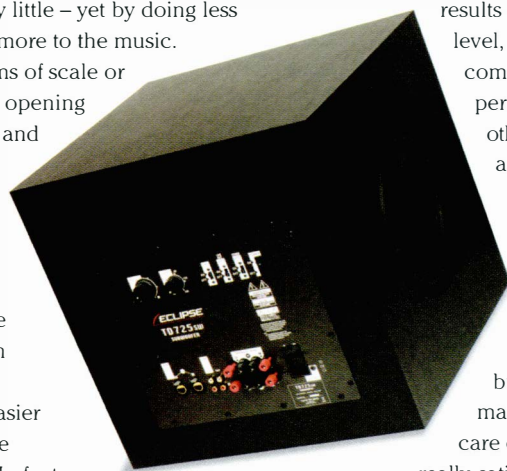
AV and far more inclined toward a musical performance, which is just fine with me.

task of setting up loudspeakers and subs. It's hard to quibble with the results on a technical level, but it's worth comparing its sonic performance to other approaches and products. The REL R505 offers a 'no frills' approach to the art of bass reinforcement, but with suitable matching and care can provide really satisfying results at a surprisingly reasonable price.

The Eclipse TD725 delivered a fine performance of both musical subtlety and authority. It was by far the most adept but also the most expensive unit here.

Evaluating these products has been a useful and enlightening experience, and served to restore some faith in the ability of the sub-woofer to enhance rather than distract from listening to music. The results also underline the two truisms of low-frequency reproduction: positioning outweighs all other adjustments and there's no substitute for sound engineering. On a final note, the one problem that was consistent throughout this review was nothing to do with the subs, but the lack of a practical solution to rolling off the bass to the main speakers; as it stands, running them full range inherently limits the practical volume level and dynamic capability, unlike a stand-alone full range design. What is needed is a really high quality, audiophile grade high-pass filter with a small amount of adjustment; this could potentially take the whole concept to a new level. Any takers?

The next round of listening tackles the thorny issue of one large sub versus two small ones. And I thought shifting these units around was a chore! ➤



Price: £2700

UK Distributor:
Eclipse TD (UK) Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)20 7328 4499
Net. www.eclipse-td.co.uk

Conclusion

The Velodyne 'Digital Drive' system really impressed me by bringing a degree of organisation to the tedious

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Up blind alleys? Thought you'd reached a dead end?
There is a light...*

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KR AUDIO

What better pedigree? Sublime music reproduction from amplifiers designed and produced by the valve manufacturers themselves, KR Audio of Prague. Here at Audiolincs we keep the international award winning Antares VA340 on demonstration at all times, an amplifier for truly refined ears, as well as the majestic KR Kronzilla DM monoblocks, for three years our personal choice for home listening. We also stock several KR Audio valves including models 300B, 300BXL, 845 and 611.



MUSIC FIRST MF1 Pre-amp

Many reviews rank this amazing pre-amp amongst the very best in the world. Both copper and silver wired versions available.



VERTEXaq Silver Jaya

Few of us notice the glass in our windows until it's cleaned! The Vertex Silver Jaya does the same thing to mains supply and, at just £545, we certainly wouldn't be without ours.



CONSONANCE Ref2.2 Linear

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It's Not What You Think...

The Meridian F80 table radio/disc player

by Roy Gregory

Meridian's F80 could just be the most important product the company has ever made. That's a pretty bold statement given their history of mold-breaking designs and technological development. After all, this is the design team that gave us the first interactive loudspeakers, the first decent sounding CD player, and in the 207 the first CD player it was all right for hair-shirt audiophiles to own. Mind you, they also gave us the MCA (Meridian Component Amplifier) and therein lies the rub. Ground breaking products don't just need to sound good and preferably look good too – they need to work and most importantly of all, they need to capture the public's imagination. Cutting-edge technology is always prone to problems as are alternative solutions, but it's that intangible quality that gives a product universal appeal that's so hard to pin down or predict. Some products just have it, and the F80 is one of them.

Which is kind of ironic really, given that – in technological terms at least – there's little particularly new or innovative here and even less that lays claim to hi-fi quality performance. In fact, anybody expecting the F80 to sound like a hi-fi system is going to be sorely disappointed. But then, they'll also have missed the point. The F80's innovation lies in the conceptual realm, combining the single box solution offered by the likes of the Arcam Solo with the simplicity and portability of the ghetto blaster. Along the way this bastard child actually does a much better job than either of its parents

– partly because the peculiarities of genetic development allow it to do it in a subtly different way.

So what exactly is the F80 – and if it's not hi-fi what's it doing in Hi-Fi+? Meridian's new baby is a combination CD/DVD player and DAB/analogue radio. It has two forward facing drivers



and a rear firing bass unit. Inside is all the necessary amplification and switching to make the thing work, while a row of sockets along the lower rear edge provide an unusual degree of connectivity – in and out. The whole shebang is built into a surprisingly compact and extremely elegant elliptical chassis. Pick it up using the perfectly placed integral handle and you get your first surprise – it's amazingly solid and much heavier than you expect. That's down to the die-cast aluminium chassis, available in five different colours. The second shock comes when you turn it on: this thing sounds huge. Not just loud but big, filling even quite large rooms with sound that's engagingly coherent and satisfyingly energetic.

That's when you realise that there's more here than meets the eye – and that “more”, courtesy of Meridian's well-established expertise in the area, is a full suite of DSP facilities, allowing the user to adjust the F80's balance for position, bass lift, overall tilt and stereo width. The result is a small unit that works with the room rather than fighting it, producing a sound that is frankly astonishing.

With excellent DVD and CD replay as well as superb FM reception (I'm in a DAB black spot so I can't comment on that) source quality – always a Meridian speciality – is way better than you expect, while the clever amplification/speaker engineering makes the most of that front-end quality. There's AM and, crucially as far as this

household is concerned, LW allowing access to the BBC World Service when abroad, and Test Match Special wherever. Frankly, for me that in itself is almost enough to justify purchasing the F80, but what makes it a no-brainer is the sheer scale, drama and musical satisfaction that the Meridian can generate. By enlisting the aid of its environment, and providing the owner with the ability to compensate for (the almost inevitable) positional shortcomings, the F80 creates a sound out of all proportion to its diminutive size, but one that's also refreshingly free of bloated bottom-end wobble or nasty, brittle top-end fizz. It doesn't match the separation or spatial aspects of a good hi-fi system ▶

▶ (be reasonable) but it has the wholesome solidity and overall coherence that results in the sort of unquestioning musical satisfaction

I fondly remember from my youth.

What we have here is a superb, portable, multi-media entertainment system. Take it with you and you can plug it into a TV to watch movies, plug your iPod into it or simply listen to discs or the radio: all in one incredibly compact unit. It's this combination of versatility, integration and portability that makes the F80 so special. And what makes it that rarest of beasts, a bridge product that stands astride two markets and two generations.

At £1500 a pop, the F80 is going to be bought by hi-fi buffs and design savvy professionals to fill their kitchens, conservatories and cottages in



France with fuss-free sound. That sound may not match their main system, but it doesn't make the same demands either: not of space, not of set-up and not of attention. Instead it relaxes and entertains in equal measure – which is exactly what you want.

Meanwhile their off-spring are going to feed the F80 from their mp3 players, discovering the joy of music



without earphones jammed in the side of your head. They're also going to discover that this one box meets their other media needs and that by playing with it a bit you can really affect the sound it produces. They'll also figure out just how great it would be to have an F80 in their bedroom or to take back to college. Which, if

I remember correctly, is where my fascination with hi-fi really started. In

producing the F80, Meridian might not have packed hi-fi performance into something the size of a handbag

but they have, instead, done something far more

important. By creating what amounts to a one-box, hand-held technology demonstrator for today's multi-media replay systems and DSP driven versatility, they've built a potential bridge between the aspirations and performance demands of the iPod generation and the realm of real hi-fi.

Oh, and along the way they've made it look pretty cool too...

Capture the public's imagination? They've imprisoned mine, creating an F80 sized hole in my bank account along the way – without so much as a dissenting murmur from Louise. Every home should have a table radio and as of now, the F80 is the one to have. I wonder if Meridian have a trade in scheme for orphaned Tivolis? ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated DVD/CD/FM/DAB player
External Inputs:	2x antennae 1x analogue 3.5mm stereo jack 1x optical digital 3.5mm optical mini-jack 1x multi-pin S-type dock connector
Outputs:	1x composite video (RCA/phono) 1x S-Video 1x headphone/optical digital 3.5 mini-jack
Dimensions (WxHxD):	408 x 230 x 185mm
Weight:	6.5kg
Colours:	Red, Yellow, Black, White, Silver
Price:	£1500

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Denon DCD-700AE CD Player and PMA-700AE Amplifier

by Steve Dickinson

My name is Steve and I like inexpensive hi-fi. There, I said it.

That's not to say I dislike the high-end stuff or that I can't appreciate it, it's simply that honest-to-goodness value is much harder to define at high-end prices, so there's always a sort of performance anxiety associated with a big-ticket piece of kit. Conversely, there's a kind of intellectual challenge in wringing the maximum performance from minimum budget which the puritan in me can't help but applaud. Just as it is with cars, it's comparatively easy to make a mid-upper price model interesting and impressive, but harder to make something memorable at the bargain basement end. So, for every gem like the Fiat Panda, there's also a CityRover. The trick is not to end up driving the Rover.

I recently reviewed some budget kit from Rotel which sells for £350 a box and suggested that it represented the entry price for "proper" hi-fi. By that, I mean equipment which is capable of extracting and presenting enough of the musical message in a coherent enough way that the music, and the musicians, communicate and connect with the listener. For any given piece of equipment, you can describe all sorts of parameters: bass and treble extension, detail, speed, clarity, timing and tunefulness, among others, and all these are useful touchstones – but if they don't add up

to a musically involving experience, can't raise the hairs on your arms, or show you something new in something old and familiar, then perhaps it's time to keep looking. That's certainly true for high-end, or even mid-price kit, but how much allowance do we have to make for budget gear? Where do you set the bar?



Denon is a curious brand, best known for entry level and inexpensive equipment over here, they also produce some seriously high-end product, perhaps better known in their home market in Japan. The DCD-2000AE SACD player and PMA-2000AE amp reviewed by AS in Issue 50 are impressive enough, but represent the lower slopes of a range that tops out at around £5000 a box. It's classic trickle-down engineering, but if the drop from £5K to £1.2K isn't too much of a stretch, how much of the stardust reaches all the way down to £250?

Based on appearance alone, you'd have to say, "Quite a lot." The 700 series sits one rung up the company ladder from entry-level. At about £250 a box it's around £100 a box more expensive than the cheapest 500 series, but both use much the same casework as the third-level, £500-ish, 1500 series. The Denon looks and feels far costlier than its modest price, making the more expensive Rotel looks somewhat self-effacing in its company.

Used as a pair, the DCD-700AE CD player and PMA-700AE amp deliver a punchy, forthright sound, quite clearly a significant improvement on MP3 docking stations, computer audio or portable boomboxes, for not a huge increase in cost. That they didn't fare particularly well on many of my regular 'calibration' discs is no real surprise, given the extremely modest price, but on less familiar material they could be engagingly bouncy; certainly enough to have me wanting to listen longer. For example: 'Birdcage Walk' from Jools Holland's *AtoZ Geographer's Guide To The Piano* is quick, punchy and lively, with plenty of foot-tapping jauntiness; Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* 'Hey hey' has a good sense of flow, nicely ▶

► musical albeit somewhat confused in the details. But, shortcomings fairly quickly make themselves apparent. In absolute terms, bass is poor, lacking in depth and tunefulness and ever so slightly out of step. In small bands it can sound almost like the bass player is the other side of a party wall.

purchaser to invest in supports, cables or other niceties. The mains leads are captive, which does tend to suggest plug-and-play, rather than setup-and-tweak.

By comparison, midrange and treble are fine, especially when it comes to obvious nasties at the top end. In fact cymbals and triangles are pleasantly clean, with rather more sparkle than the Rotel.

some vivid percussion which was, at times, downright fierce, sudden cracks which make you blink in surprise. Once again, that's what you expect if you push budget kit outside its comfort zone. That's why it costs what it does.

But that doesn't make everything rosy. The real problem, leaving aside specific aspects of the sound, is that whatever is playing, the listener is invariably drawn to the lead voice, and all the other musical material recedes into a fairly

amorphous background.

Again, the poorly defined bass is the main culprit.

The vagueness, manifested as a blurring of leading and trailing edges of notes means the bass fails to underpin the music.

The blurred timing can't carry you along as it should. So jazz,

for example Dave Brubeck's 'Blue Rondo' gives you a tune and

accompaniment, rather than a sense of several individuals with a common cause. The melody is treated like a game of pass the parcel and the same can be said for orchestral music, you don't hear the parts properly, unless it's their turn to take the lead.

Taken as individual pieces, it emerges that the CD player is much the better of the two components. Played into my regular amp, or even the Rotel budget amp, a lot of the criticisms recede significantly. There

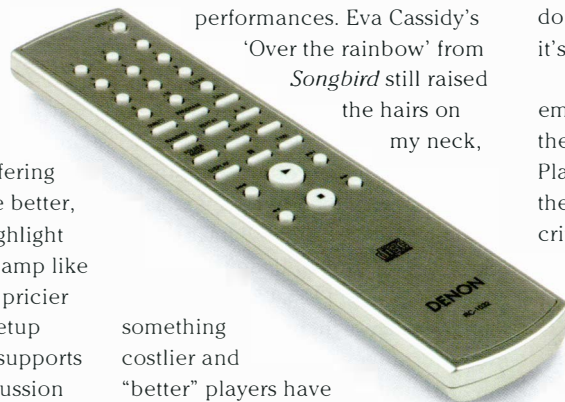
is still some treble edginess at times, but coupled with a more tuneful bass this is much less likely to stand out. Indeed many listeners may find themselves drawn to the more incisive, crisper sound of the Denon CD player. Compared to the Rotel, it sounds bright and shiny. If I were a



In large ensembles or orchestras, the timing is slightly smeared, so violins and violas are not in absolute synch with cellos and basses. To be fair, some of this may be down to my loudspeakers, and their 4 Ohm impedance in the bass. The Denon's quoted output is 50 Watts into 8 Ohms, but only 85 Watts into 4 Ohms, suggesting the power supply is less than happy with such a low impedance load. This would, to some extent, explain the woolly and flabby bass performance.

Simpler, cheaper speakers offering an easier load might well fare better, although this does tend to highlight the conpros inherent in an amp like the Denon as opposed to the pricier Rotel. Messing around with setup helped a little. Adding some supports under the kit made bass percussion sound more like a drum and less like a toddler hitting a cardboard box with a wooden spoon, but I suspect it won't even occur to a typical

What digital hash and noise there is, is fairly benign and seldom harsh. No complaints, but no real surprises either. Fans of "Girl and guitar" type music will find rewards here, with no real deep bass to miss, the treble gives an agreeable crystallinity to performances. Eva Cassidy's 'Over the rainbow' from *Songbird* still raised the hairs on my neck,



something costlier and "better" players have occasionally failed to do. Really push things and treble glare can sometimes intrude: Youssou n'Dour's 'Chimes of freedom' has

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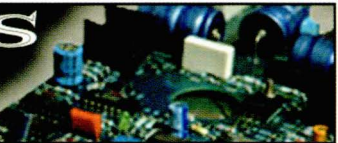
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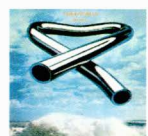
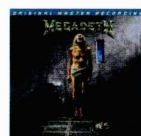
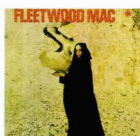
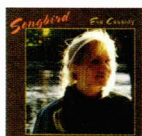
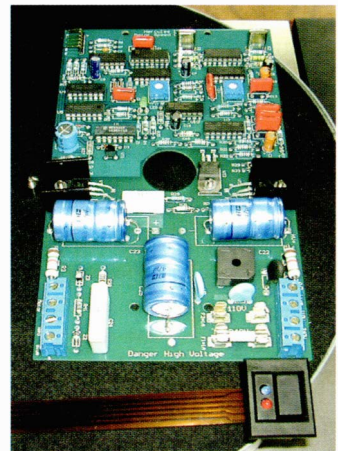
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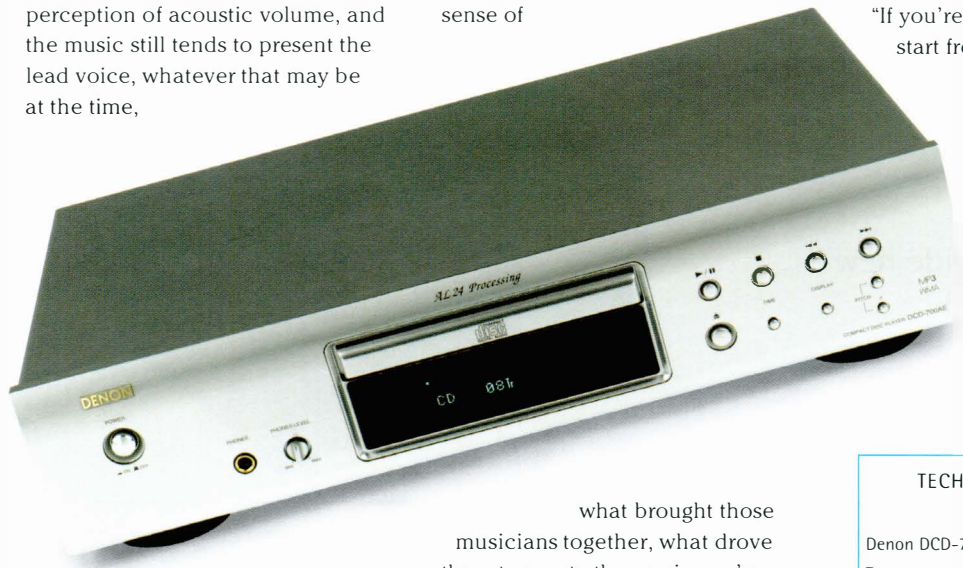
Vinyl Rules!

▶ Jackdaw, I'd take the Denon over the Rotel, every time.

In contrast to more costly kit, for example the £500 Creek Evo, there is less sense of flow, or impetus, the soundstage is flattened with less perception of acoustic volume, and the music still tends to present the lead voice, whatever that may be at the time,

which I take to mean a coherent and comprehensible musical message. Disregarding the easily-described parameters such as treble extension, timing, tunefulness et al, what we're seeking is involvement, a sense of

and planning a logical, considered upgrade strategy, my advice would be to wait a little longer, save a little harder and start a little further up the ladder. As the (alleged) Irishman once (allegedly) said, "If you're going there, I wouldn't start from here." ▶+



to the detriment of the supporting cast. This is particularly evident on more compressed recordings. Robbie Williams' 'Angels' needs a much more discriminating player than the Denon to sort out the musical message. Even the more expensive Rotel struggles with this sort of material, though, so this should not be taken as a serious criticism. Taken the other way round, with more expensive source components into the Denon amp, the improvements are rather more subtle and less musically significant, which does suggest that the amp is the limiting factor in this partnership.

So what have we found out? Equipment costing £250 a box doesn't sound as good as equipment costing £350 a box, which in turn sounds a lot less good than equipment costing £500 a box. So everything's in its place, all's right with the world. Except that that's not really the story. We're looking for hi-fi performance,

what brought those musicians together, what drove them to create the music you're listening to. Equipment like the £500 Creek Evo can do this in ways that more expensive kit often fails to do. The £350 Rotel hints at this capability, occasionally punching well above its weight.

The £250 Denons tend instead to concentrate on the headlines, to the detriment of the story. If you've really only got £250 a box to spend, then there are certainly lots of less deserving places for your money. For background music, or just casual listening, it does enough things well enough to justify an audition. It looks and feels much more expensive than it is and I know plenty of people who would never dream of spending more than this on a hi-fi system, for whom the DCD-700 and PMA-700 combo will be ideal. The problem is, the Denon does nothing to suggest they might be wrong; they'll never get more than an inkling of what we're on about. So if you take your music seriously, it doesn't really deliver enough of the goods. If you're looking longer term

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Denon DCD-700AE
 Type: 1-box CD player
 DAC: Burr-Brown PCM1791, 24-bit/192 kHz
 Outputs: 1pr RCA Phono analogue
 Toslink optical digital
 Output level: 2.0V
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 434x107x279 mm
 Weight: 4.2 kg
 Finishes: Premium silver; Black
 Price: £249.99

Denon PMA-700 AE
 Type: Integrated stereo amplifier
 Inputs: 5x line-level + mm phono
 Output power: 50W/ch into 8 Ohms
 85W/ch into 4 Ohms
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 434 x 121 x 337 mm
 Weight: 7 kg
 Finishes: Premium silver; Black
 Remote: system remote included
 Price: £249.99

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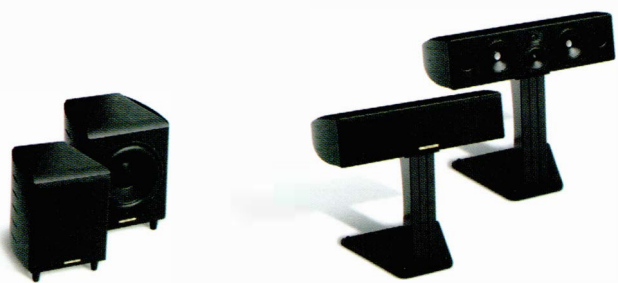
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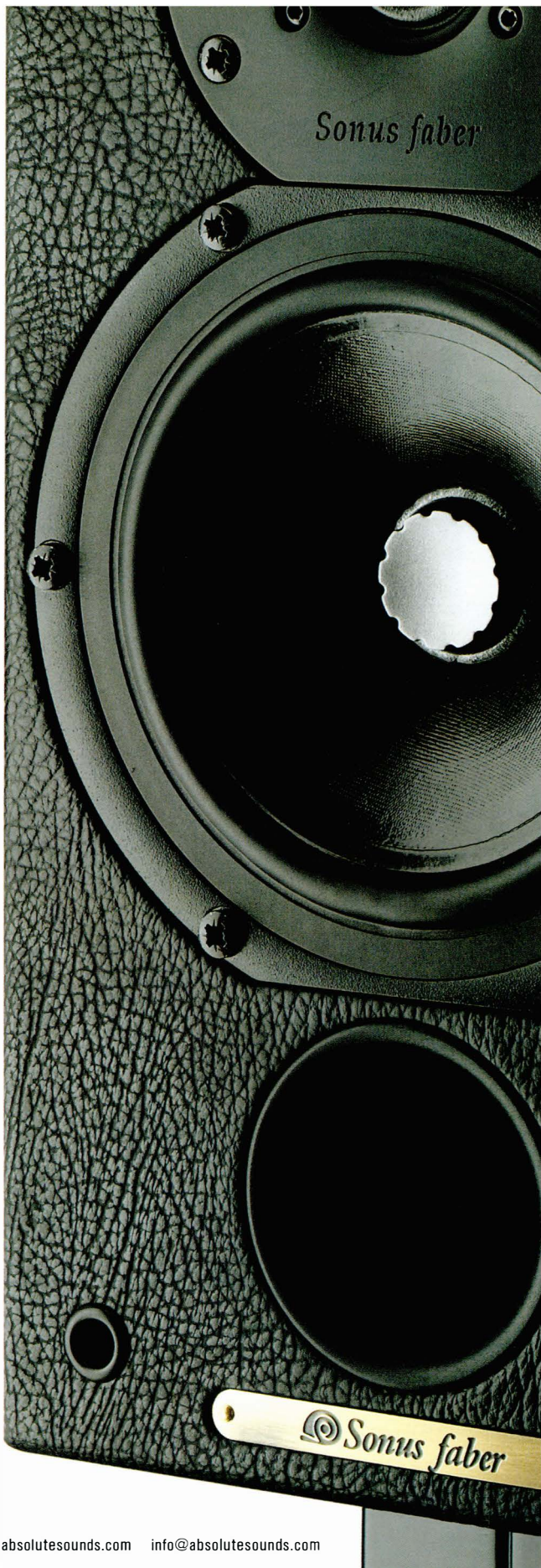
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The Soundsmith Dragonfly Loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom



Soundsmith is one of those small American speaker companies that are often overlooked in the British market, because we have so many UK designs. Scratch the surface though and things are very different. Few UK speaker companies are owned, designed and built in the UK these days. On the other hand, Soundsmith is US designed, built and owned... and sounds surprisingly like a classic British speaker.

The \$699 Dragonfly demonstrates this perfectly. It's a medium sized two-way bookshelf speaker, with bi-wire terminals and a rear-firing port. The finish is extremely good, with the review samples in a lovely shade of beech on the sides and back, with a rounded black front baffle. It's a quality finish, and that extends to details like the biwire terminals and the dinky little Dragonfly logo on the grille; elegant and understated.

The 100mm (well, four and a half inch, to be exact... American speakers, American measurements) long throw bass unit is a bright yellow, textured and doped paper cone with a hard phase plug, while the tweeter is a 25mm soft dome: oddly, on Soundsmith's website, it suggests an optional upgrade to a ribbon tweeter, although this adds \$700 to the price in the US.

The ribbon tweeter upgrade isn't the only unique feature to the Soundsmith design. Take off the grille and there's something that looks surprisingly like an oversized clear glass mains fuse in its socket. It's actually a glow-plug, acting as a limiter and is an ingenious method to stop people blowing up their speakers. Turn up the wick too much and the little 'fuse' begins to glow, acting both as warning light and protection circuit of sorts. The 'Firefly Lamp Limiter' only works with the tweeter, but to be honest unless you have pushed the bass to the limit (or are using something like DBX, as the Soundsmith instructions point out), you are more likely to send the tweeter to the great speaker builder in the sky. In truth, I never managed ▶

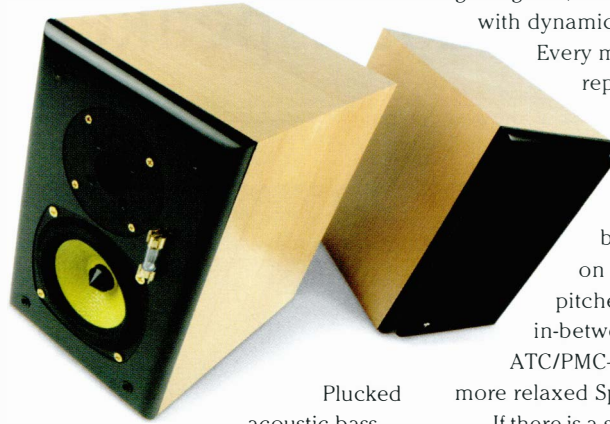
► to light up the limiter in the course of the review, so it's going to take some driving to trigger, despite the speaker's low 86.5dB sensitivity rating.

The Dragonflys were supplied with the company's Versa Stand, which costs an additional £325. This wooden pillar is readily adjustable for different heights and even allows adjustment of lateral angle. It's all slotted together like a Japanese puzzle and is an elegant solution to stand making, but those who get panicky at the sight of an Allen key would best steer well clear. Which is a shame, because they help bring out much of the sound of the speakers, just like the old adjustable wood Sonus Faber stands brought out the best in the brand's speakers of the time.

Both placement and run-in are important, here. Important as in 'critical'. Up against the wall with half an hour's play on them and you will start to wonder why you ever thought about importing them. A couple of dozen hours later, with the speakers clear of side and rear walls (and carefully placed to get the height just so) and you'll start to fall in love. The sound is surprisingly big for a small box: Big in bass depth, but perhaps better still, big in image, too. I found the speakers preferred to fire straight down the room, helped by a remarkably good off-axis response, almost as good as KEF UniQ models. You could wander round the room and the basic staging barely changed.

The bass is not cavernous, and goes for accuracy over aural appearance, but the 56Hz claim made by the company for the bottom-end seems accurate (as opposed to the more common

"optimistic"). Because of the lack of false emphasis this bass also plays clear notes.



Plucked acoustic bass strings, the whole bottom end of the orchestra, all are portrayed with accuracy and refinement, until the limits of the speaker are reached. It does have a warm tonal balance that trades off against absolute accuracy but this is wholly beneficial. Lack of richness coupled with zero really deep



bass spells a very intellectually honest but sonically bland sound. Here, the trade-off is just about right; not so rich as to cover up the fine detail, not so honest as to leave the sound uninspiring. In that manner, the speaker is reminiscent of the classic Acoustic Energy AE-1. The similarities end there, though; although this speaker sounds fast, it's in no way as pacy as a pair of AE-1s. But, few speakers this size are...

The review opened by calling this American speaker very British in approach. This is thanks almost totally to the tonal balance, which is classic BBC and very different to the US norm, which tends to the bigger and perhaps

more brash. It also drips detail. The Dragonfly serves up the music with great gusto, delivering the music with dynamic accuracy and detail.

Every musical nuance is reproduced perfectly, right down to the microscopic level. The Dragonfly hangs back from the bald-faced detail heard on ATC speakers, and pitches itself somewhere in-between the modern ATC/PMC-type sound and the more relaxed Spendor voicing.

If there is a shortcoming, it's in the rhythmic properties of the speaker. Those who want such temporal precision from their hi-fi that they set their watches by hi-fi time, will find the Dragonfly less impressive than some. But those who can look past this minor limitation are met with a big, precise and detailed sound; the perfect British speaker that the British never made. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	25mm soft-dome tweeter 100mm doped paper bass/mid
Bandwidth:	56Hz – 22kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	86.5dB
Dimensions (WxDxH):	190 x 305 x 267mm
Finishes:	Piano Black, Cherry and Beech real wood veneers
Price:	c. £700 landed in the UK

Manufacturer:

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The Wharfedale Diamond 9.1 Loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom



We each have our personal audio Holy Grail. Some seek the perfect cable regardless of price. Others look for the best sound possible for choral music. For me, it's finding the best possible products at the lowest possible price. Well that quest is over as far as loudspeakers are concerned – at least for now. Ladies and gentlemen, pray meet the Wharfedale Diamond 9.1.

The Diamond is a name with a long history, stretching back to 1981. Back then, although there were mighty changes in materials science taking place (which made the quality budget bookshelf a practical proposition), no company dared to bring down the size and price of the entry-level speaker. Legend has it that Wharfedale launched a range of speakers in which the Diamond was almost an afterthought. But the assembled press saw and heard the future and it was the budget speaker.

A lot has changed in 26 years. Wharfedale itself is no longer British made or even British owned and the Diamond is changed beyond all recognition. Well almost. It's still a small, ported two-way loudspeaker (although the Diamond range now extends through 11 models, from four bookshelves to the floorstanders, centres and sub-woofers demanded by the full gamut of multi-channel naughties). It's still extremely efficient and amplifier friendly. It's still cheap and it's still a giant killer.

The £180 Diamond 9.1 is the second smallest speaker in the range. It's a small, boat-backed bookshelf two-way speaker with a pair of front-firing ports. With a 25mm fabric dome tweeter and a single 125mm Kevlar main driver, it's doesn't deliver the deepest bass sound around. And with a claimed 86dB sensitivity and a recommendation of a 20-100W power handling, the speaker is never going to raise the roof. But a bald appraisal of the specs is somewhat missing the point. Ten years ago that list of

▶ physical attributes defined the serious high-end contenders.

Normally, cheap speakers that have comparatively low sensitivity and not much in the way of bass depth never sound that good with quality electronics. But not the Diamond 9.1. It loves good electronics... It sounds good with the cheap stuff naturally, but plonk a couple of thousand quid's worth of gear in front of the Diamond 9.1 and it still hasn't run out of steam. Hell, we used the little Wharfedales in a system where they were the single cheapest component in the package –including the old Target R1 speaker stands that were originally twice as expensive as the Diamonds are now.

Let's put this into context. It's a small speaker with all the benefits and limitations that brings. It's blindingly fast and extremely clean across the mid-band, but don't expect deep accurate bass or extended bat-eared high frequencies. Even in the small-sized rooms the speaker is designed for, bass is curtailed, especially if you give the speakers the sort of breathing room they desire (half a metre from the side and rear walls, on big heavy 60cm stands like those good old Target R1s is the best compromise position between good bass and open midrange).

However, like Diamonds of yore, Wharfedale has been canny with the bass, giving the speaker a distinct lift at the top end of the bass. This gives the impression of deep bass power way beyond what a speaker this size should be capable of. Of course, this is not strictly accurate and those

who listen to a lot of orchestral music or plucked acoustic bass will hear emphasis on upper bass frequencies and a swift roll off soon after. This is forgivable given the size and price and the



sort of equipment the Diamond is likely to live with: if a small speaker is intended to work with high-end solid-state electronics, bass should rolled off accurately, because the amplifier will grip the bass cone unrelentingly and honestly – you cannot have the same expectation when a speaker could be hooked up to some starter amp found at a car boot sale.

The lack of high frequency extension should not be overplayed either. In fact, it's thoroughly beneficial, both in terms of top to bottom balance and when viewed in the light of potential amp buddies. The speaker is nicely extended and has great highs compared to its peers, but doesn't sniff the rarified air of high-end HF, even though it's rated to 24kHz. But, given that cheap amps and CD

players tend to draw attention to their budget status in the treble, a bit of gentle smoothing over is no bad thing.

It's what's in between these two points that really makes the Diamond a little, er, diamond. That mid-band is expressive, perfectly pitched, times particularly well and when it errs, it errs on the side of caution. There's a degree of accuracy in the mid-band that is peculiar to small boxes, making the speaker sound all the world like a baby LS3/5a.

This makes it a remarkably able performer on a surprisingly wide range of musical styles and genres. There may be a better small bookshelf out there. There are still some we've not encountered in anger – the Q Acoustics models spring to mind. But, such bookshelves have a hard act to follow in the Diamond 9.1. It's the starting place for good speaker sound and you could spend a lot more and get a lot less, which makes it a bargain on stilts! ➤+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	25mm fabric dome tweeter 125mm Kevlar cone mid/bass
Frequency Response:	50-24k ±6dB
Sensitivity:	86dB
Nominal Impedance:	6ohm
Crossover Frequency	2.3k
Dimensions:	194 x 296 x 278mm
Finishes:	Maple, Cherry, Black, Silver
Price:	£180

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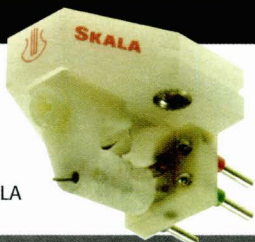
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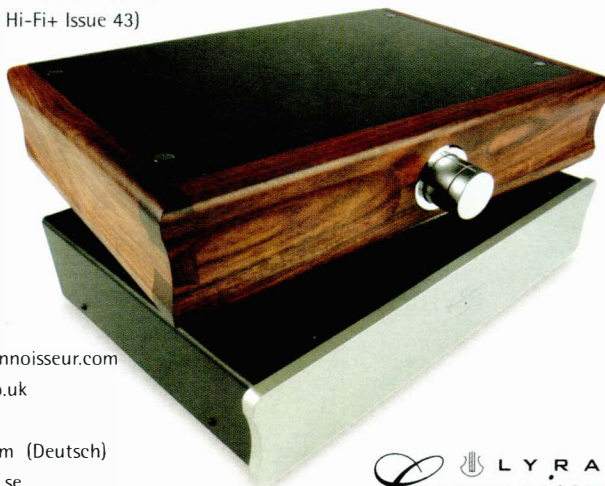
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(reviewed in Hi-Fi+ Issue 43)



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Space Odyssey...

Audio Aéro's electronics (finally) meet the Haliaetus speakers

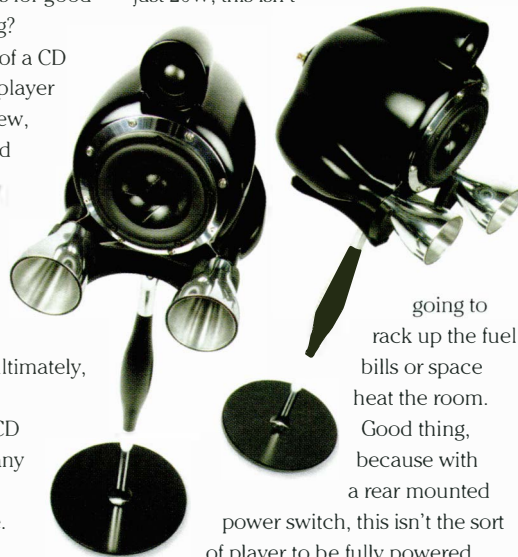
Alan Sircom

This was a system we struggled over; and it began months ago. It might be blowing the collective Hi-Fi+ trumpets, but it's a testament to the tenacity of the team that we didn't drop this off somewhere down the line or leave it as a partial assembly. Yet, it seems so simple on the surface: CD and amp from the same brand; speakers from the same distributor and the same country; plus a few extra details for good measure. What could go wrong?

Well, it started as a review of a CD player. The Audio Aéro Prima player was slated for its own solo review, several issues ago. It was a good player, with a lot of potential... but the magic seemed tantalizingly out of reach. At this point goes with what he has or digs deeper. The Audio Aéro Prima seemed like it was worth the dig. And ultimately, we weren't disappointed.

This is an interesting little CD player from – and there are many who will turn the page at the sight of the next word – France. That's a shame, because if you move past the knee-jerk Francophobe problem many have with Gallic hi-fi (and CD players in particular) this is a very decent player, with some serious audiophile intentions. It sports a centre-mounted Sony CD/CD-R/CD-RW laser mech, coupled with a Burr-Brown PCM1739E 24bit, 192kHz DAC, a low jitter clock and a nice deep, high quality buffer. Trouble is a similar spec can be had from almost any CD player these days. What makes this one so special – in circuit design at least – is that the player has a tiny valve – a 6021W sub-miniature

double triode – in the analogue stage of each channel. Don't bother looking for a valve seat or two, though; this thing's just 34mm high and 9mm across and is a mil-spec affair, soldered direct to the PCB. The other advantage of using a small mil-spec tube instead of a more commonplace double triode is its energy efficiency. With power consumption of just 20W, this isn't

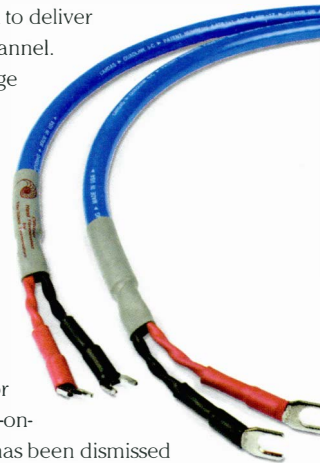


It's sleek, in its CNCd aluminium front panel with eight buttons and two-deck blue dot matrix display. It's also surprisingly well specified for seemingly so Spartan a player, with both balanced and single-ended analogue outputs and co-axial and toslink digital connectors. The logic is a little modal and as such slow at times – if you have the drawer open, only the open/close button works. Only when the disc is loaded and its table of contents read does pressing play actually do anything and it's difficult to

track skip until the disc is playing. And 'pause' puts the player into a suspended animation that is 'interesting' to escape from. But these are minor idiosyncrasies that are soon overcome. It's French... you expect these things.

Finding a natural partner for this CD player was the problem. You could tell there was a good sound inside the player, but it wasn't making it out through the usual amplifiers. And Audio Aéro was in the process of changing their own amplifier. Fortunately, the new Prima was the perfect match for the player. It's another hybrid design, using a tube-based pre-amp stage coupled to a DMOS power amp stage; that's a Double-Diffused Metal Oxide Semiconductor design - or, more simply, it's an amp on a chip, designed to deliver 100 watts per channel.

The pre-amp stage again features 6021W triodes to add a bit of warmth and smoothness to its five line inputs (including the balanced one) and tape monitor circuit. The amp-on-a-chip concept has been dismissed too readily by hi-fi enthusiasts; although early and cheap versions of the concept are best defined as 'sonically disgusting', the format is gaining ground, thanks to innovations like Tripath and ICEpower circuits used in stunning amps from Bel Canto and NuForce. So, don't dismiss the chip route out of hand.



► The look is identical to the CD player, right down to the two-deck blue display. And yes, that also includes the slightly twisty logic, but the amp's operation is not really that idiosyncratic. One thing that is at once very good and really, really frustrating on both products is the feet. Instead of the normal chrome discs or Sorbothane



squidgy things, these have three cones, with accompanying pin-points on the top plate of both CD and integrated amp. This means, the company thinks, the Prima products can be stacked one on top of the other. This also means, if you put the player on a glass shelf, pressing the buttons is more like ice-skating than ergonomics in action. Finite element stands are an excellent choice and even the Perspex top Quadraspire stand works well here, minimising the visible demonstration of Newton's Third Law of Motion on opening the CD drawer.

Now, we are getting somewhere. The CD and amp work together brilliantly. The CD delivering a vivid, detailed performance that is powerfully presented by the amp. Except that, in some settings, the sound is too thin. So you need a speaker that can bring out the best in the duo. And it's here that we resort to building the perfect mullet.

In the end, the speakers we settled upon were far outside the ordinary partners expected for products of the Prima duo's magnitude. In fact, what we settled on are far outside the normal parameters for any earth-based system. The speakers are the small and seriously

expensive Haliaetus HA-325 Firebirds. These are space-age speakers... literally (some of the funding for the initial design came from the European Space Agency). The curvy shape is reminiscent (from some angles, at least) of Scandyna speakers, like a Micropod writ huge. But not from the front, because then it looks like the south side of a north-bound spaceship. Two large, solid aluminium 'acoustic nozzles' extend from the front of the speaker,

while behind, the chamber they fire from looks all the world like it sits on two large gloss black chicken drumsticks. It's not a look everyone will take to. Some will love it, others will hate it and still more will just point and laugh. Let them.



Let them also try to get decent volumes and excellent dynamic range out of a single-wired, eight litre speaker with a bass driver just 148mm across. The speaker may not be a blindingly efficient powerhouse – it's rated at 87dB efficient and delivers bass down to just 50Hz in real-world terms – but in a small room it can raise the roof... and with pin-point precision. They stop laughing when they hear the Firebirds. They get

why those chicken legs are there to break up parasitic internal reflections and why those big rocket nozzles help to port the speakers without making it sound anything like a ported speaker.

We are almost there – it's just time for cabling. I am traditionally more than slightly dismissive of the benefits of expensive interconnects and speaker cables. Nevertheless, I am also of the opinion that speaker-led systems require a great deal of care in assembly and they invariably seem to improve sonically when the cables get exotic. But hey, we are already deep into 'out there' technology with this system, so why not go the whole hog.

We tried several cables, with varying degrees of success. Then we settled on Cardas Quadlink Five-C interconnect and speaker cables. And stayed there. Said to be designed for smaller audio systems, this cable is a pure copper quad-axial Litz construction, featuring a

Teflon dielectric and pale blue urethane jacket.

The internal lay of the cable is arranged in the unique 'golden section' arrangement George Cardas has used for years, and which harks back to classical art and Aristotelian aesthetics.

Well, if it was good enough for Da Vinci and Aristotle, who are we to argue? Now that all our ducks are in a row and it's nearly a year since the first product arrived, just how good is the system? Pretty damn fine, in fact. It's kind of optimised for a smaller room – those rocket ships don't take off in bigger settings, where the limited bottom end begins to notice – but in the right context it works brilliantly.

The sound of each component offsets the requirements of the others. It's a perfect closed loop system – in a small room, those pocket rockets deliver an exceptionally free midrange and

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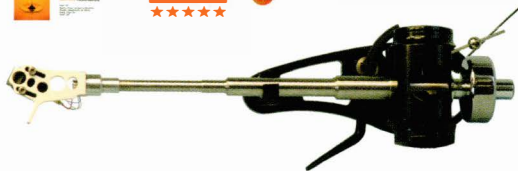
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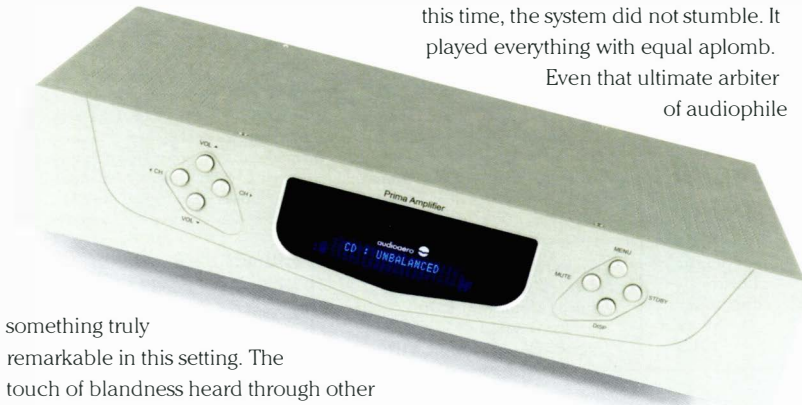
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▶ extended treble, but need a lot of driving, from an amp that enjoys being driven hard (“the temptation to succumb to bodice ripper speak is almost irresistible,” D’Arblay breathed, lustily). And the Prima likes being driven hard. But a very open sounding midrange and an amplifier that is being pushed hard could be a recipe for disaster. Fortunately, that disaster is averted by the sweet, slightly soft effect of the CD player. What began as a good but nothing special CD sound quickly turned into

and the speakers will never come to life. Change the speakers and you have a pair of products that only seem to balance one another when played flat out.

Normally, systems that rely on this much synergy can be tripped up. The sound of the system is all smoke and mirrors, and eventually you can see through the artifice and discover where the system is hiding its performance limits. And the place where this is most easily discovered is the replay of small-scale, acoustic recordings. Only this time, the system did not stumble. It played everything with equal aplomb.

Even that ultimate arbiter of audiophile



something truly remarkable in this setting. The touch of blandness heard through other amps was gone; in its place a sense of relaxed balance that made any recording sound as if it were freshly pressed. What sounded like a constricted, shut in soundstage instead sounds tight and perfectly focused with a deep stage between the speakers. And what sounded slightly soft in the bass simply helps the bottom end of the rest of the system from sounding too dry and tight.

If this is tone-shaping, so be it. But, is this the ‘right’ way of doing things? One could argue that each component should stand or fall in its own right, but why? If a run-of-the-mill audiophile-grade player replaced the Prima CD, the sound of this system would not benefit from the change. In fact, it would likely stumble and performance would suffer. The same applies throughout. Change the amp

performance – the unaccompanied live recording of female vocals – did well. And, as for the audiophile approved recordings like Jennifer ‘Bloody’ Warnes and her lucky blue coat... oh boy. It’s treat time! I happen to think that less good recordings are often a better test of a system. ‘Let Down’ by Toots & the Maytals (on the *Radioread* CD) is far from audiophile sound, but the insight the system brings to this brilliant up-beat take on the otherwise mardy track from *OK Computer* is remarkable.

What we have here is an

excellent engineered mullet system. A system carefully controlled and tuned to build upon the strengths of the individual components; the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. The refinement of the CD player couples well with the power of the amplifier. And that power is just what the speakers need

to come to life. A richer or even more dynamic CD player and the balance is changed for the worse. An amplifier that comes into its own lower down the volume scale... same thing. And the cables seem to help balance things out, too. Just don’t try breaking the main components up... they definitely work best in context.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Audio Aéro Prima CD player

Type:	Integrated CD player
Output Voltage:	2.3V RMS
Output Impedance:	100 ohms
Analogue Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA 1pr balanced XLR
Digital Outputs:	1x single-ended RCA 1x TOSLINK
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435 x 102 x 325mm
Weight:	8.9kg
Price:	£1495

Audio Aéro Prima amplifier

Type:	Hybrid integrated amp
Output Power:	100 W into 6 Ohms
Inputs:	4x single-ended RCA 1x balanced XLR
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435 x 102 x 325mm
Weight:	8.9kg
Price:	£1695

HA325 Firebird speaker

Drive Unit Complement:	28mm tweeter 148mm bass/mid
Frequency Response:	50Hz-20kHz (+/-3dB)
Impedance:	6ohms
Sensitivity:	87dB
Cabinet Material:	Injection moulded composite. Nozzles turned from solid aluminium
Internal volume:	8 litres
Dimensions (WxHxD):	270 x 310 x 400mm
Weight:	6kg ea.
Prices -	
Speaker:	£3495
Stands:	£1000

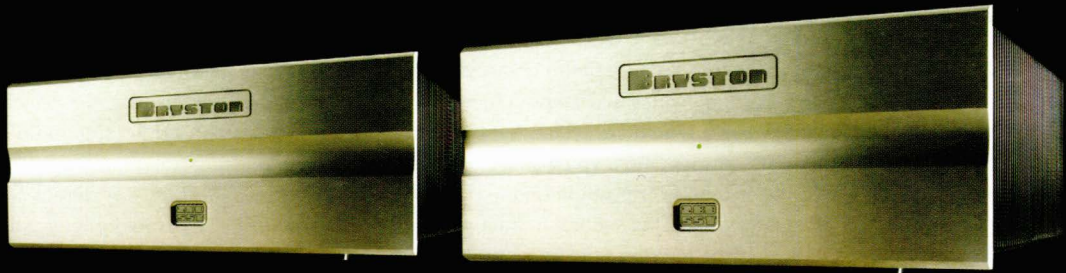
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IN CLOVER...

KUZMA'S STABI XL UPGRADE KIT

by Roy Gregory

Along with the Stogi 313 tonearm reviewed in the last issue, Kuzma delivered an optional upgrade package for the heavyweight Stabi XL deck which – surprise, surprise – makes the monster heavier still by turning the standard two motor arrangement into a four motor array. Open the box and inside you'll find two extra motor housings (along with din terminated power leads) a pair of male/female din Y-adaptors to enable connection of the extra motors to the power supply, two extra belts and a pair of disc spacers to lift the new motor housings to the correct height.

Installation couldn't be simpler; remove the platter and you get to the business end of the drive system. With the stock, twin drive set-up the two motor housings are snugged into deep arcs cut into the turntable's base, while a pair of belts encompasses both drive pulleys and the sub-platter. It's an incredibly dense and compact arrangement that sits within the circumference of the platter itself. However, it does also contribute to the 'table's slightly top-heavy appearance and a preference for the black rather than contrasting brass finish. But, add the motors and it's all change. Rather than sharing belts each motor now has its own independent drive, a change that requires their spacing away from the sub-platter. Start by sliding the existing motors sideways until you have 112mm between the periphery of the sub-platter and outer circumference of the drive pulleys (easier than it sounds given the sheer mass and

smooth base of the pods). Each drive pulley has two 'steps' to accommodate the twin drive set-up, but in the new arrangement you just use one belt in the lower position on the right-hand motor, the second in the upper slot on the left. Take the lower height spacing disc and place it and the motor with the badge on it in front of the deck, the taller spacer and its motor behind, repeating the single belt arrangement for each. Install the power leads, replace the platter and that's it – except for checking the speed.

Altogether, it's a task that takes more care than time, while the cost of the upgrade kit, at \$2950 is considerable. The broader footprint that results requires more space (finite elements make the special HD shelf shown for just this purpose, which elegantly extends the support area of their Master Reference racks to include their entire frame dimension) but also presents a more balanced appearance, restoring the sense of visual stability as well as the contrast between the materials. The question is, can the extra hardware and change in the support arrangements justify its cost in sonic and musical terms?

The answer to that is a definite and unequivocal yes. Not only does the four motor drive system deliver obvious musical improvements, it does so without any detectable downside. The root benefits can be summed up in terms of an increase in transparency, resolution and dynamic discrimination (the ability to accurately map the rate and extent of shifts in level). All very interesting, but what we really need to know is how this is reflected in the musical performance. The first thing you'll notice is not so much a case of greater depth within the soundstage but that it becomes more apparent – it's easier to hear. At the same time individual voices and instruments become better separated and more palpable, and remain so even as the music becomes more complex, the levels approach max. Playing the familiar 'Nimrod' from the Monteux *Enigma* (RCA LSC 2418) the ramps up to the final crescendo were far better defined, their progression more measured and, as a result, more musically effective. Even with the final climactic swell, instruments remained separate, more identifiable and more stable within the soundstage.

Allowing the music to run into the next variation demonstrates the increased delicacy and agility that the 'table now possesses, the vivid, sprightly melody a perfect balance of life and energy, but never losing its perfect pace and poise. This vivid sense of dynamic expression is, in many ways, the most substantial benefit from the ▶



► upgrade. Whether you play large-scale classical works or Lou Reed, Art Pepper or Salt'n'Pepper, you're going to revel in the increased presence and contrast. The Stabi XL always exhibited fabulous control and even-handedness; in its XL 4 form it adds a greater sense of musical involvement to the mix without diluting its essential neutrality. Fans of acoustic music and recordings will revel in the increased clarity and explicit nature of the staging and acoustic, while rock

and jazz listeners will value the increased energy, quicker dynamics and precision in the placement and spacing of notes. Drum patterns and convoluted jazz phrases are particular beneficiaries, while the extra stability, substance and nuance invested in voices makes them significantly more convincing and present.

These improvements in the Stabi XL's already impressive delivery elevate its performance to a higher level still, adding welcome zest for those who appreciate its unflustered control and musical manners, a necessary sense of life and involvement for those who previously might have admired its qualities rather than being warmed by them. This already great 'table just got even better.

Add to that its supreme practicality and versatility, the stability of the platform it provides and the ability to mount multiple arms and you've got seriously high-end analogue audio without the pain. And whilst the Stabi XL 4 could never be described as cheap, the prices asked for some of the competition make it look positively affordable: This is sound engineering – in every sense of the term. ➤



Prices:

Stabi XL	£11500
Stabi XL 4 (complete)	£13500
XL4 upgrade kit	£2950

UK Distributor:

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



NEAT, PETITE, FEET... AUDIO SERENITY SPIKE SHOES

by Roy Gregory

With the move away from glass shelves on equipment racks and the current fashion for bare wooden floors, the cones and spikes that support most hi-fi components have become public enemy number one – a fact reflected by the appearance of basic 'footers' in the bits bag of even the cheapest speaker and stands. But simple metal discs, whilst effective enough in one sense do very little to enhance the sound or the appearance of products. Enter then Audio Serenity and their Spike Shoes, beautifully turned conical feet with deep (and deeply practical) spike wells at

their apex and a thin but firm rubber layer on their underside. Even better, they come in nicely presented boxes of four or eight (making them ideal gifts for hard to please audiophile partners) and four different finishes to match just



about any system, rack or décor; you can choose from satin black, chrome, brushed stainless steel or polished brass. Prices are £15-95 for four, £31-90 for eight and don't let the rubber layer put you off; the best similar devices I've tried are the Harmonix feet and these include a felt layer.

In use the Audio Serenity feet are practicality personified. They ►

▶ don't slip, which means that altering the volume on your pre-amp doesn't risk propelling it over the back of your rack and your speakers, meticulously positioned to the millimeter stay exactly where you placed them, whether a marauding Hoover gets tangled in the speaker cable or not (I won't even consider the hidden impact of children, visitors or pets). The deep well in the top of each cone ensures that spikes don't inadvertently free themselves of its confines while the colour options ensure they won't debar you from entry in *Grand Designs*.

Sonically speaking their impact depends on circumstances. Used



(inappropriately) between the grounding feet of the Connoisseur pre-amp and the Stillpoints rack they dulled and rounded the sound.

Used beneath the stands of the cheap and remarkably cheerful Highland Oran 4301 loudspeakers they added a welcome sense of substance and a smoother treble. This is horses for courses time, but given the modest price and the money-back nature of the mail-order supply line they could be exactly what your system needs. A perfect antidote to poorly behaved metal dome tweeters and metal/glass racks, you can obtain these cute and extremely neat Spike Shoes from:

www.audioserenity.co.uk

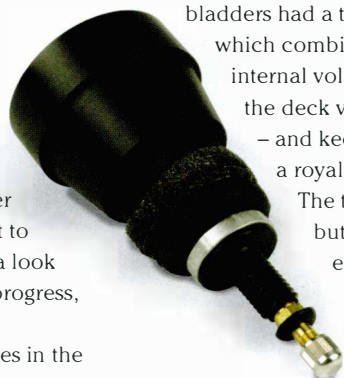


STEADY AS SHE GOES... SUSPENSION AND SUPPORT UPDATES FOR THE VPI TNT SERIES TURNTABLES

by Roy Gregory

Turntable updates are like double-deckers – you wait for ages and then three come along at once. Along with the Kuzma Stabi XL 4 kit, I've recently received updates for both the other resident 'tables. For the Clearaudio Master reference there's a new magnetically opposed bearing and a slew of other related parts, which I'll get to shortly. But first let's take a look at that perennial work in progress, Harry Weisfeld's VPI TNT.

One of the key upgrades in the



TNT's past was the move from springs to air bladders for the suspension medium. Whilst the sonic benefits were obvious, early examples of the bladders had a tendency to leak, which combined with their small internal volume made levelling the deck via air pressure – and keeping it level – a royal pain in the butt. The technique evolved, but it was never the easiest or most precise system to use. Well, the ever-inventive

Mr Weisfeld has finally come up with a solution: The air bladders are replaced with squash balls, interfaced to the deck through foam discs to get a sensible ride height. These in turn sit in delrin cups that screw into the existing feet, allowing height adjustment via simple knurled rings. The whole kit and caboodle fits into the existing legs, making it retrofittable to all TNTs – although very early ones might need their corner towers replacing at the same time.

Installation is a breeze – and so too is setting up and levelling the deck. The only downside is that



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PUTTING SOUND INTO FOCUS

▶ the legs are now separate items (you used to be able to pick up the entire chassis as a single piece) but that's a momentary inconvenience that's easily outweighed by the practical improvements embodied in the new arrangement. Does it sound any better? I can't say I noticed a huge difference in the sonic character or performance of the deck, but ease of use is transformed, so these upgrades get an enthusiastic thumbs up for all existing TNT users wanting to keep their tables "original".

Which makes it ironic that frustration with the previous arrangement was at least in part responsible for users experimenting with alternatives. Whilst some swear by the Stillpoints Component Stand – a set-up that requires spacers under the motor/flywheel housing to achieve correct height, a more complete offering has arrived from Symposium. This consists of one of their Ultra platforms* with a separate section in the top-plate to support the motor unit, and six aluminium couplers which, used in pairs to support Rollerblock Jrs, replace the 'tables feet and air suspension.

Now, at first sight this might seem like an either/or situation, but actually it isn't. As owners of the TNT will know, and prospective owners are

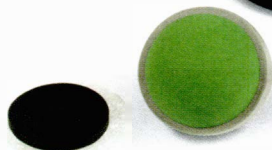
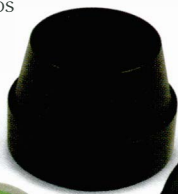
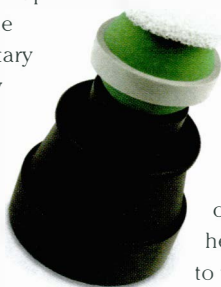
about to find out, this is one BIG turntable. What's more, its feet are in the extreme corners, meaning that your support needs to match every inch of its impressive footprint; no getting away with a bit of overhang and an inset shelf here. Most racks simply aren't up to the task, meaning that you have to provide some sort of auxiliary shelf or support. Over the years I've tried everything from slate and Perspex through to Bright Star sand boxes. But the best solution I've found was a pair of Aavik or Cambre shelves with a thin foam rubber skin between them, forming a constrained layer. Reasonably presentable it also worked better than anything else I've tried – until now. Symposium's special Ultra platform is simply superb. Nicely finished and perfectly dimensioned, its black surround and brushed aluminium surface is the ideal

aesthetic match to the TNT. Of course, it too is a constrained layer, but vastly more sophisticated than my ad hoc arrangement. Inserting it under the TNT6 wrought a significant improvement in low-level resolution, transparency, focus and dynamism. This last was really the product of the first three. With a more continuous,

more even balance through the lower registers, micro-dynamic life, speed and instrumental colour were all more vivid, dynamic shifts happening quicker and with more energy, performers more present and direct in their contribution. Dealing further with the lingering vestiges of the TNT's slightly cuddly mid-bass spread has given the music fresh impetus and a more solid foundation from which to launch its energy – at both ends of the scale, both ends of the spectrum. Indeed, so visually and sonically right is the Symposium that it becomes a no-brainer if you are using a TNT. Which begs the question, how best to support the 'table – and its motor?

The Symposium platform works extremely well in conjunction with VPI's upgraded suspension, as outlined above. But substituting the Symposium spacers, topped off with a trio of Rollerblock Jr couplers, for the delrin feet delivered an equally impressive step-up the performance ladder, further

extending the benefits already apparent with the platform alone. The additional increase in separation, particularly through the mid-bass, brought an astonishing improvement in articulation and the natural pacing of musical strands and lyrics. The opening track on Ian Dury's *New Boots And Panties!!* (a fabulous and forgotten classic) is underpinned by Norman Watt-Roy's heavily fingered bass line. Deep and mobile, it throbs and surges, driving the plaintive urgency that instils the lyrics with longing; "wake up and make ▶



* The Symposium platforms are available in a number of sizes or custom sized as required. This one fits the VPI but would also serve under any deck that shares its basic layout. Other configurations can also be provided, but this set-up is surprisingly versatile due to the oversized motor support platform. Cost is £895 including couplers (but no RollerBlocks) with an additional £300 for the motor cut-out.

► love to me” croons Dury as that bass, pushing and grinding, comes right from the source of the trouble. At least it does with the Symposium couplers in place. This is rude music for a rude mood, and rigidly coupled to the Ultra platform, the TNT gets down and positively dirty.

But it's not all about funky grooves, as satisfying as they are.



The 'table recovers far more low-level information, but also makes more sense of it. As Dury allows the last lyrics of 'Billericay Dickie' to die away the mic captures a sigh of release stage-left. At least it does now; I never noticed it before. And that's the key to what the couplers bring to this particular party. They don't just add to the information on offer, they make it more intelligible too – whether you are listening to Ian Dury, Gerry Mulligan or Sir Adrian Boult. In each case, and the records followed hard on each others heels, there was a far from subtle increase in the sense of life and presence in the performances. And, just as the band was more definite, so was its music, the emotional contrasts more emphatic, the playing more deeply felt.

Now, the Symposium set-up works by evacuating extraneous energy from the deck and sinking it into the platform. Given the benefits on the main platter/chassis assembly, what about the motors, busily vibrating away in their separate housing. Previous experiments along these lines have failed, foundering on the rock of common support: feed

the energy into the platform and that just transmits it more effectively into the main deck. But the Symposium Ultra provides separate support for the motors, promising the possibility of success. So began the search for supports with which to bypass the motors' rubber feet without drastically altering the pods' height.

I won't bore you with the details, but after working through steel, aluminium, RDC and titanium in various forms I settled on a set of discs from the Rollerblock Jrs; no great surprise, I guess, given the material continuity involved. Better? Yes, but not as huge a gap as I'd expected. Playing *Gerry Mulligan Meets Ben Webster*, separation



of the sax and piano stage left was markedly improved, the keyboard and its accompanying acoustic space moving back and between the speakers, where it had previously been superimposed on the sax. Definitely worthwhile, but more

icing on the cake than food in front of a starving man. Obviously VPI's high-mass housing is itself extremely effective.

So, as gloriously mucky as Mr Dury gets, as bluesy as Mulligan and Webster get on Billy Strayhorn's 'Chelsea Bridge', as wonderfully poised and expectant as Sir Adrian can be with RVW, the 'table enjoys a wider palette of expressive and emotional moods, imposing less of itself, allowing more of the original performance through. These improvements might seem subtle in quantitative terms; musically they are not. They take you several steps closer to the performers; along the way they lift an already excellent product into the stellar category.

Downsides? I'll leave you to decide on the looks, but I for one feel more comfortable with the VPI feet in place (devoid of their height adjusting cups). They serve no purpose other than to visually "ground" the chassis, which otherwise looks as if it's floating in space. You also lose the levelling facility, although at least the table itself is now rigidly coupled, meaning that it stays level once the Ultra platform (and rack) are level. Using couplers under the motor housing means that, over time it can slide, especially if you

switch the deck off to change records, so you need to check its spacing. Otherwise, the superiority of the Symposium couplers over the standard suspension is so great as to render ►

▶ this no-contest. Add the aesthetic and practical benefits of the Ultra platform, the musical coherence of the package as a whole and I can't recommend it highly enough. Anyone using a TNT should investigate without delay: those thinking of purchasing the deck should factor in the Symposium

platform and couplers. Yes, they add to the price – but they make the best

value high-end turntable on the market into an even bigger bargain. ▶+

VPI
Audiocraft
Tel. (44)(0)1895 253340
Net. www.audio-craft.co.uk

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



FINITE ELEMENTE CERABALL UNIVERSAL

by Roy Gregory

The finite elemente CeraBalls are among my favourite equipment supports. Reasonably priced and based on solid engineering principles, these small alloy “top-hats” provide an effective earth path for energy contained within equipment. I first reviewed them back in Issue 21 and they've been in more or less constant use ever since, despite being joined by the more expensive and even more effective CeraPucs and CeraBases. Their ability to clean up the performance and dynamic definition of budget electronics (their natural price partners) has proved invaluable. Well, now they've been improved, the new CeraBall Universal adding important refinements to the basic design.

Inside, there's still a single contact ceramic ball, with a rubber O-ring providing a damped junction between top and bottom parts. But now, the structure is beefed up, with a thicker base and a contoured top cap, providing greater mass, a larger contact area and spreading internal resonance



more evenly. The result looks nicer, feels far heavier and more solid and is more widely applicable. How so? The larger contact area increases stability and allows the CeraBalls use with heavier loads. In addition the base is now threaded meaning that you can use the isolators under speakers, not something I'd have remotely contemplated with the original design. You even get beautifully executed, threaded posts in both M8 and a stepped down M6 size to ensure compatibility. Given the plethora of affordable floor-standers out there and their history of cabinet related colouration problems, this is a welcome development indeed – especially as I've been using the much more expensive CeraPucs with such success in just this role (see the Focal 1037 review in this issue).

With but a single quartet of the new Universals to play with I headed straight for the CD player. Sure enough, even under a top-end machine like the Audio Research CD7 the little feet worked their magic, opening out the

soundstage, adding focus and presence to images, life to dynamics. And they did it without any tendency to thinness, which could bedevil the original version in some cases. Further experiments under budget electronics, the Herron phono-stage and an Arcam FMJ universal player all delivered consistent improvements in sound (and picture) quality. Looks like an allround improvement in an already impressive performer. . . Unreservedly recommended. ▶+



Prices:
CeraBall Universal (Black or Silver)
Set of three – £95
Set of four – £129

UK Distributor:
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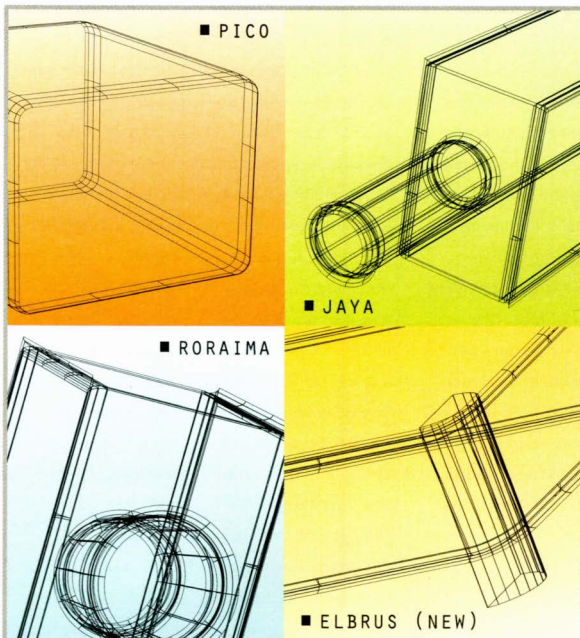


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Record Reviews

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

Key to Icons

	CD		120g LP
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	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		10" LP
	Double Disc		Availability As S/H LP
	DVD		Vinyl Double Album
	SACD		
	Hybrid SACD		
	Multi-Channel		



Ruby Turner

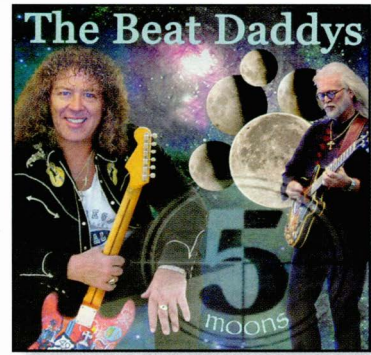
Live At Ronnie Scott's

RTR Productions RTRCD002

Ruby Turner is a regular on the live circuit and has been captivating crowds up and down the country with her fantastic voice and excellent backing band. Best known for the hits 'If You're Ready (Come Go With Me)' and 'I'd Rather Go Blind', both included here as extended workouts, Ruby remains one of the world's best loved soul singers.

Live At Ronnie Scott's was recorded just as the gig went down and is an excellent representation of what she's all about on stage. Her relaxed and easy going way with a crowd shines through and because it hasn't been tampered with in the studio the recording has that 'up close and personal' feel of being there, something so many live albums fail to capture. Support from the musicians is stellar; this is one red hot band and they definitely know how to bring the best out of Miss Ruby as she hollers, shouts, whispers and screams her way through a well-balanced set of originals and covers. The 'Ronnie' gig would have been a worthy purchase on its own but you lucky people get a bonus disc of a gig she did at the M.A.C. in 2003 which is just as good - if not slightly better - than the 'Scott's' one.

AH



The Beat Daddys

Five Moons

Beat Daddys Records 4416705762

Every once in a while your ears get a right royal bashing from a band you've never heard of. You put the CD on not knowing what to expect and by the time it draws to a close you're left gasping for breath, a heap on the floor. Well, dear reader, let me welcome you to the world of The Beat Daddys, a little ol' band from the USA you have just got to hear.

This is actually their sixth album (God knows where they've been hiding) and if by any chance your musical tastes take in the likes of Gary Moore, Joe Bonamassa, Walter Trout, Lynyrd Skynyrd and Bob Seger, you owe it to yourself to buy this album. It has just about everything you'll ever need from blues/rock; a rough, tough dirty singer, a pulsating lead guitarist, a finely honed rhythm section and a bevy of top notch tunes that just get better and better with every listen. As good as those songs are, two stand out from the pack. The first, 'Bad Streak', is a mid-paced lonesome number, the sort Bob Seger does so well, and the second is a divine slow blues called 'Everybody Needs Some' and trust me, you definitely need some of this! The last time I was this impressed was when I discovered Bonamassa, and that is most definitely a compliment of the highest order.

AH





Scott McKeon

Can't Take No More

Provogue Records 7213-2

Comparisons to Aynsley Lister can be readily made, for Scott McKeon bears more than a passing resemblance vocally and isn't a world away from the great man in terms of his guitar playing. Also, ex-Hoax man Jesse Davey produced, which he also did on Aynsley's *Everything I Need* album. For a 20 year old McKeon possesses a remarkable maturity, and he's already making inroads in the vast US market. If you can entice the likes of Buddy Guy, Sonny Landreth and The North Mississippi Allstars to give you shared space on their stages, then you definitely have it going on. McKeon's something of a musical chameleon for he also plays bass and drums on a fair few of the tracks, but it's obviously his guitar playing he's going to be judged on and it has to be said he knows his way around a fretboard. As well as the Lister comparisons you can throw SRV into the mix and to a lesser extent even Jimi Hendrix, although McKeon has a more precise and uncluttered approach. Davey's done a good job in the producer's chair and wheels out his guitar to take a solo on the slow burning 'Last Thing I Do', an 8 minute workout and album highlight. McKeon's not the finished article yet but he's got the talent to go far, so watch this space.

AH



Foley/Coleman/Potvin

Timebomb

Ruf Records RUF1129

Bringing three blues guitarists together on one album is not a new concept; Alligator Records did it with Albert Collins, Johnny Copeland and Robert Cray in the 70's and this very same label also did it with Aynsley Lister, Ian Parker and Erja Lyytinen last year. Marketing men being what they are, they obviously spotted the opportunity for a few sales by bringing these three talented ladies into the studio to repeat the process, so here we are with *Timebomb*. Of the three, Sue Foley probably has the highest profile, although Deborah Coleman has had reasonable success with a few albums on Blind Pig. The least well known is Canadian Roxanne Potvin, but that will change shortly as her second album has just been released by Ruf and is destined for great things. All the girls are excellent guitarists who take it in turns to rip off some wildly exciting licks, never more pulsating than on 'So Far', sung on this occasion by Foley who sounds very much like a female Bob Dylan. However, vocally the awards have to go to Potvin, who can rip it up with the best of them ('Hitting On Nothing') or sing the living soul out of a song as she does so wonderfully on 'Strong Enough To Hold You'. Explosive stuff indeed and an excellent addition to anyone's record collection - blues or otherwise.

AH



Gretchen Peters

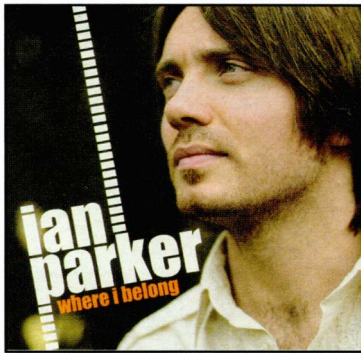
Burnt Toast And Offerings

Curb Records CURCD228

Gretchen Peters is a consummate songwriter who rightfully receives great acclaim in the press and from her fellow professionals for her talents with the pen. She doesn't always get the same accolades for her abilities as a singer though, something that definitely needs rectifying. Wogan does his best to raise her profile and this album should help too, as it offers more diversity than anything she's done before. Peters has a divine voice, as clear as the purest mountain stream, and when she marries it to her formidable songs it's a joy to behold. As mentioned, this is a slightly more eclectic Peters at work. The ability to take the listener on a journey through her eyes by way of a gentle country mellowness is still to the fore, but this time she adds in a little lounge bar jazz and even an up tempo bluesy number. That track, affectionately titled 'England Blues', clearly came about from a trip to this fair isle and mentions hotel rooms on the River Tyne, driving on the left hand side and leaving Nashville far behind. Up-tempo suits her and it's something she should definitely investigate further. *Burnt Toast...* is yet another cracking album from a supremely gifted talent who makes the art of songwriting seem like a stroll in the park. Young pretenders should buy, listen and learn.

AH





Ian Parker

Where I Belong

Ruf Records RUF1120 (CD)

Interesting that a German label should be home to two of England's finest blues/rock talents. Ian Parker and Aynsley Lister have built up a healthy following amongst fans in Europe thanks to their blistering live shows and excellent recorded output. They very often share the same bill but their styles are markedly different; Lister being the more rock oriented whilst Parker digs deep into soulful blues and singer/songwriter territory.

Where I Belong definitely pushes the boundaries more, although there's still plenty of mesmerizing guitar playing to wonder at. Oh, then there's that voice, capable of going from a throaty roar to a sensual whisper in an instant. Parker knows how to use it to maximum effect and to watch him lose himself in his singing and playing live is to witness one of the most passionate and mercurial talents in his field. This album takes a bit of getting into - no bad thing as they're usually the ones you return to again and again. Catchy numbers are there though; 'Waste My Days' has a magical chorus with a great horn arrangement and girly backing singers, and raspy ballad 'Coming Home' could easily have been lifted from one of Prince's classic records. Check him out live and then purchase his albums because he really belongs is in your collection.

AH



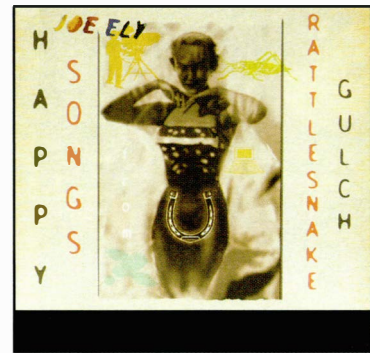
Scott Kinsey

Kinesthetics

Intuition INT/BirdJam34512 (CD)

A key member of Tribal Tech and a valued sideman and session player, Kinsey is both a distinctive soloist and an inventive practitioner of synthesizers. Kicking off with the distinctly Zawinal/Weather Report influenced title track, it's immediately apparent that this is going to be an enjoyable journey. Warm, dynamic and inventive with great percussion (Kinsey is variously joined in this recording by an army of talented drummers) the track is also powered by a driving bass line from Paul Shihadeeh. This great start is exceeded by the following number 'This is That' with a dialogue between gruff nasal and high pitched vocodered vocals punctuating an exotic blend that somehow manages to be both amusing and funky. The album is stuffed with invention and surprising textures whilst never letting go of a fluidity and groove that feel entirely natural and organic. "To me, it all breathes and has a certain conversational element to it, which are all-important elements in my music" says Kinsey. There's not a weak number here and the fun this talented ensemble are having just leaps from the speakers. Complemented by a warm, big-hearted recording that brings the best from the powerful platform of bass and percussion, this CD whilst it should gladden the heart of any Weather Report fan, will cast its net much wider than that and is strongly recommended.

DD



Joe Ely

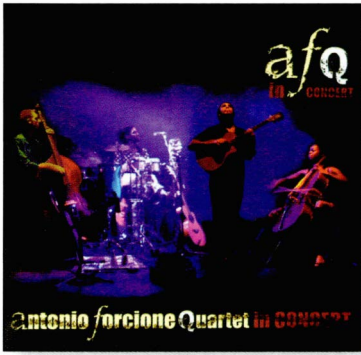
Happy Songs From Rattlesnake Gulch

Rack 'em Records RERCD1 (CD)

Flatlander, high school rebel rouser, rock 'n' roll outlaw, friend of The Clash; Joe Ely's covered a lot of ground in his eventful life. As well as amassing an enviable back catalogue, he's also written a couple of novels, worked for a circus and had a bit part in a film. His last album, 'Streets Of Sin', was a barnstormer of a record and he's kept the standard rolling on with this wonderful new collection. As the title suggests the songs are on the 'up' side and, as expected for someone so respected, there's a healthy gathering of tasty musicians along for the ride. Things get under way with a typical Ely rocker, 'Baby Needs A New Pair Of Shoes', all smoking guitars and snappy horns. It's hotly followed by the bopping 'Sue Me, Sue', a country rocker with great keyboard work from Joel Guzman. One of Ely's great strengths is the story song and here he weighs in with 'Miss Bonnie And Mr Clyde', an endearing tale about the gangsters that ends with our hero running off with the woman of the piece. The lyrics are fantastic and there's some wonderful wah wah guitar courtesy of Rob Gjersoe. There aren't many artists as consistently superb as Joe Ely. If you've yet to discover him, this is as good a place to start as any.

AH





Antonio Forcione

Antonio Forcione Quartet in Concert

naim cd099

Recorded at the Trinity Centre, Tunbridge Wells, Antonio Forcione is joined in this live set by Jenny Adejayan (cello), Adriano Adewale (percussion), and Nathan Thompson (double bass). This set was originally issued in 2006 by naim as a DVD, which proved so successful that its release as a CD became inevitable. Recorded completely live, with no overdubs naim have done an excellent job of capturing the performance in this format. Opening with the familiar notes of 'Heartbeat' such is the range and expression that Forcione wrings from his guitar that the number was more than half way through before I fully registered that he's taking this opening number solo. The band join him and further flesh out the sound for 'Acoustic Revenge', followed by 'Tears of Joy', the rather lovely 'African Dawn'. There's a protracted wander across the dark continent before they truly let rip with 'Tarantella'. This is followed by a storming encore of 'Maurizio's Party' that even takes in 'Smoke on the Water' amongst the displays of high-speed dexterity. A very enjoyable concert and a worthy companion to Forcione's excellent 2000 album *Live* (naim 054). Forcione might divide opinion, but if you like his work you'll love this.

DD



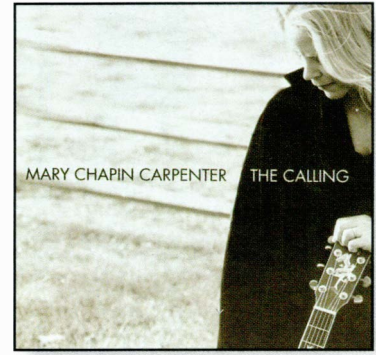
The Good, The Bad & The Queen

The Good, The Bad & The Queen

Parlophone

Artistically, this is beyond reproach. Give it time – which, as in the case of many superior albums, is necessary – and the music here coheres into a whole much greater than the sum of its parts. That whole is in turn an intriguing amalgam of English pessimism (a la, first and foremost, Ray Davies), tasteful electronica, deep bass dub, and quietly innovative percussion rooted in African music. In sum, intelligent and well-crafted music for grown-ups that mines rich and divergent influences, but in the end speaks with its own voice. What more could you want? Well, better sound to begin with. The electronically produced sounds here, predominant throughout the album, sound thin and cheap. The thinness of the acoustic guitar, an important instrument throughout, is equaled only by its nasty edge. Music as clearly influenced by dub as this cries out for a rich bass foundation that just isn't there. Maybe the sound presented here is the result of an "aesthetic judgment" – this is music about the inadequacies of the modern world, after all – but I doubt it. The sad thing is that the songwriting is here, the soul is here, the musicality is here. Where's George Martin when you need him?

PD



Mary Chapin Carpenter

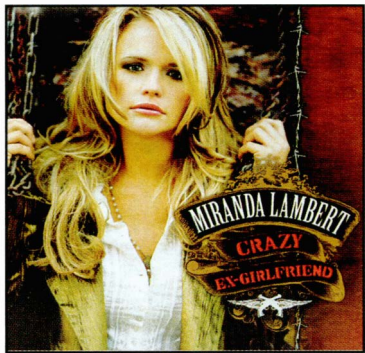
The Calling

Zoe Records 01143-1111-2

I remember the Sony rep coming in with Mary Chapin Carpenter's debut album muttering something about her being the next big thing, and after 10 albums and sales of 13 million it's difficult to argue with his foresight. *The Calling* sees her changing labels to Zoe/Rounder but she hasn't changed her style and why should she - 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it', as they say. As with most of her albums these songs might take a little time to worm their way into your affections, and if you're anything like me your opinions on which are the best songs will probably change the more you listen. I have a penchant for her quieter moments, I think it suits that lovely honey-coated voice better. The woman's a marvelous lyricist and she always paints her songs in a rich and vivid imagery. She's also not afraid to ruffle a few feathers and dedicates 'On With The Song' to The Dixie Chicks, in response to the ridiculous treatment that band received from certain quarters within the United States. Mind you, after New Orleans I doubt she'll get treated the same way as The Chicks! There's nothing as immediate as 'Shut Up And Kiss Me' here but I'm only on my 4th play. No doubt I'll have changed my mind by the 10th time around.

AH





Miranda Lambert

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend

Sony/BMG Records 82876 78932 2

Things are happening pretty fast for Miranda Lambert, a 23 year-old beauty from a small town in Texas. Her first album *Kerosene* contained mostly self-written material and debuted at number one on the country charts, almost unheard of for a relatively unknown singer. Apart from Patti Griffin's 'Getting Ready', Gillian Welch and David Rawlings' 'Dry Town' and the Carlene Carter/Susanna Clark chestnut 'Easy From Now On' this new album's songs are all originals or co-writes, and top notch they are too. Wariness creeps in when I see a pretty face on a major label country album as so many of them are saccharin sweet and nauseous in the extreme. Fortunately not this girl. She's a ferocious talent with a big voice who damn well knows how to write a good song. Take 'Gunpowder And Lead' for instance, a song that came to her in concealed handgun classes (!). Rarely have I heard a country album open with such a shitkickin' song; the guitars are cranked and sweaty, the lyrics hit hard and Lambert's voice thunders along in righteous glory. It's not the only one either; 'Crazy Ex-Girlfriend' hits with a snarling vocal as Miranda reminds all and sundry she's not a girl to mess with. She's one sassy lass is Miranda, any future boyfriends would do well to stay on the right side of her!

AH



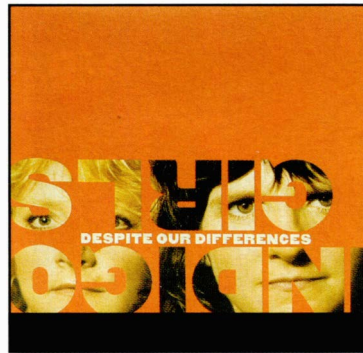
Nick Lowe

At My Age

Proper Records PRPCD030

The last three albums by perennial song master Nick Lowe have all been brilliant affairs; *At My Age* ushers in number four. He's definitely mellowing with, ahem, age; don't expect to find any brit rock/pub rock anthems like 'I Love The Sound Of Breaking Glass' here. No sir, ol' Basher's taken to country crooning like the proverbial duck to water, and it suits him just fine. It might take him a little longer between albums these days (this one's taken 6 years to complete) but who cares when he crafts something as wonderful as this. At the ripe old age of 58 Nick Lowe's seen a lot of life, and he's damn good at giving us his slant on it. And if we're to believe that 'Hope For Us All' is autobiographical our hero's found himself someone to love, too. "Even if I can find someone, there's hope for us all" he sings, in his own self-deprecating way. That song's not the only one likely to bring him admiring glances from the Tony Bennetts and Englebert Humperdinks of this world, and in no way is that meant as a put down. He might sing "in my life I've done things I'm not proud of" but the crafty old sod can be well pleased with his latest effort. He's an institution is Basher, God bless him.

AH



Indigo Girls

Despite Our Differences

Hollywood Records

To survive 20 years in an industry as fickle as the music business, you need to have something going for you. In the case of Amy Ray and Emily Saliers - aka The Indigo Girls - that something is an abundance of natural talent. *Despite Our Differences* finds them breaking away from their long association with Sony and hooking up with Hollywood Records and producer Mitchell Froom. Froom's home studio became the girls' halls of residency and the album was cut with the whole band in one room, resulting in that all-important 'live' feel. As a partnership highly dependant on harmonies, the girls needed someone with a keen ear for such things, and in Froom they found the perfect soul mate. He got the band living and breathing the songs and the freshness of sound married to the quality songwriting means the listener can buy with confidence, for this is definitely one of their finest efforts. Long time fan Pink lends a hand on the playful 'Rock 'n' Roll Heaven's Gate' and rising star Brandi Carlile (check out her excellent albums) provides dreamy harmonies for the beautiful country ballad 'Last Tears'. Throw in opener 'Pendulum Swing', a swipe at Bush's handling of the war on terrorism, plenty of acerbic lyrics and a crack band, and it all ends up being pretty damned close to the perfect album.

AH





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SECONDS OUT...ROUND ONE... THE GENESIS SACDs

by Richard Clews

At long last, the Genesis SACDs are starting to appear. Initiated back in 2004, these discs have seized the imagination of Genesis fans worldwide to a remarkable degree. With the burden of expectation upon them, thanks to the fervour of such a huge following, will the fans' wait be rewarded and the SACD format add more albums to its growing roll of honour?

Before the assessment, some clarification is called for. There are 14 studio albums in Virgin/EMI's re-master programme, each comprising a hybrid multichannel SACD and PAL standard DVD containing Dolby Digital and dts surround mixes, plus interviews and other footage. The live albums may be added to the list at a later date (here's a hint - buy all the SACDs and tell several thousand of your friends to do the same).

In April, the 1976-81 albums were released, together with a box-set containing the five discs plus a bonus collection of B-sides. Current plans are for the 1983-97 albums to be released this autumn, with the earlier albums featuring Peter Dinklage coming early next year. The reason for the unusual sequence lies partly with the current Genesis tour - it is hoped that Gabriel and guitarist Steve Hackett might join the band for a few dates next year, so by placing those releases last the potential exposure is maximised.

In the States, Rhino Records have released CD+DVD (NTSC) versions of the albums (ignore any websites that state the opposite, the discs are definitely not SACDs). If SACD holds no interest for you, but you have a home theatre set-up, these represent a good buy for listeners on either side of the pond (provided NTSC playback is not a problem). You might question the point of buying stereo CDs again when the albums were re-mastered back in 1994. Well, here's the controversial part... the stereo mixes, on both CD and SACD, are completely new. The original mixes will be not re-mastered again, so hang on to those '94 discs.

Before you cry 'Sacrilege!' and unleash a horde of rampaging Slippermen on EMI headquarters, take comfort from the fact that wholesale revisionism was not on the band's mind. Genesis engineer/co-producer Nick Davis



set out to replicate the feel of the original tracks as closely as possible, while at the same time improve the sound. Tony

Banks assessed the new mixes on a daily basis, while Messrs Collins, Hackett, Rutherford and Gabriel each gave feedback. Only one song has been radically changed, arguably for the better: 'Pigeons', a B-side exclusive to the box set, now features a 'gramophone' style EQ on Phil Collins' vocals - completely in-keeping with the arrangement. In terms of procedure, the original multi-track tapes were baked where necessary, before being transferred to a 24 bit/192 kHz ProTools system for mixing on the band's SSL console.

The decision to create new mixes, despite the inevitable reservations from fans, is true to the Genesis ethos. On several previous occasions it appeared the band should do one thing, yet surprised everyone by doing the complete opposite with enormous success. The first time was a genuine crisis: the departure of guitarist Anthony Phillips in 1970. Phillips had been with the band since their early days at Charterhouse, a famed English private school, which in the late Sixties discouraged its young charges from playing the blues (as Gabriel and Banks did whenever they could steal time).

It was largely with Phillips' encouragement that Genesis turned professional, recording *Trespass* in the year he left. Fortunately, Steve Hackett was the perfect successor and brought a biting lead guitar sound to the next album, *Nursery Crime*. In the same year, drummer John Mayhew was replaced by Phil Collins, whose sheer energy helped the band create less pastoral and more dynamic, faster-paced ►

► songs. The combination of intricate guitar arrangements, powerhouse drumming and Mellotron flourishes, topped by Gabriel's soulful vocals became the signature Genesis sound.

Over the next few years, the band produced a series of milestone albums, waymarks in the development of progressive rock. Via the twisted Edward Lear-like whimsy of *Nursery Cryme*, through *Foxtrot* with its epic 'Supper's Ready', yearning for an England past on *Selling England By The Pound*, and the horrors and delights experienced by the street punk Rael in *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, Genesis built themselves a massive fan-base and gained much critical respect.

When Gabriel left in 1975, the end seemed nigh. Nobody doubted their technical prowess (miles ahead of many of their contemporaries), but in Gabriel they had a charismatic and powerful front-man who was able to hold the audience's attention while the other band members tuned their 12 string guitars or wrestled with Tony Banks' unruly Mellotron. However the obituaries were premature, as the group thrived under pressure and brought the multi-talented Phil Collins centre-stage.

The first album with the revised line-up, *A Trick of the Tail*, surprised fans and critics alike. Much more accessible than the often surreal *Lamb...* *Trick* boasted some fine song-writing from Tony Banks and Mike Rutherford, whose central role in Genesis had been somewhat overlooked. 'Squonk' and 'Los Endos' weighed in as the band's heaviest tracks so far, taking them into Led Zeppelin territory. Demonstrating their range, 'Entangled' and 'Ripples' were warmly romantic songs, unencumbered by the references to classical literature or perverse characters who often popped up on earlier albums (no offence, Harold the Barrel!).

Wind and Wuthering was a partial return to the more pastoral sound of *Trespass* and *Foxtrot*, featuring Tony Banks' grandiose tale of false messiahs, 'One for the Vine', and the superb instrumental pairing 'Unquiet slumber for the Sleepers.... In that Quiet Earth' – arguably the highpoint of Steve Hackett's involvement with the band. The album features many striking arrangements, from the Weather

Report gymnastics of 'Wot Gorilla?' to the haunting Collins/Hackett collaboration 'Blood on the Rooftops' (also the Mellotron's finest hour).

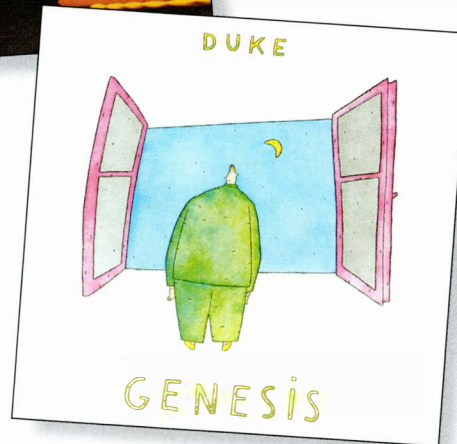
Buoyed by the success of his first solo album, and frustrated by lengthy touring and the dominance of the Rutherford/Banks writing team, Steve Hackett walked out of Genesis during the mixing of 1977's *Seconds Out* (arguably the best live rock recording from the Seventies). Ironically, his departure came at a time when his contribution was becoming much more recognised. With wry humour, the remaining trio presented *And Then There Were Three...*

Once again, expectations were blown away – Hackett's place was taken by Rutherford, who added lead guitar to his duties as rhythm and bass guitarist. The band made a rare foray into the singles chart with 'Follow You Follow Me', and the green light was given to finally shift focus away from the lengthy epics that had become their trademark. Much ink has been spilled concerning Genesis' transformation into a chart-busting singles machine. Or rather, their "perceived" transformation. The band themselves simply followed their instincts with a steely determination. It was three-minute singles that fired their enthusiasm for music in

the first place, and they always aspired to write catchy, memorable songs that people could easily relate to. Accordingly, *Duke* furthered the trend begun on *And Then...* with a song that has effectively become the dividing line in Genesis fandom, 'Turn it on Again'. In the late Eighties, the band's performances of this relentless groove tended

to veer off into medleys, enraging the Gabriel-era diehards. But in its original studio incarnation it is a fine piece of writing and engineering, and signalled Collins' arrival as a premier league vocalist.

If *Duke* got certain fans' backs up, 1981's *Abacab* must have been a dark night of the soul. Totally unlike any previous Genesis album, this stripped-down set of fairly abstract songs perplexed and alienated the cognoscenti in equal measure. However, some of them 'got it' straight away – stagnation was simply not an option in the commercial climate of the time, when fellow progressive 'musos' either simplified their sound or shut up shop. ►



► *Abacab*'s similarities to *Duke* were hidden by a radically different production style and the selection of more unfamiliar sounding tracks for singles (as the B-sides show, they hadn't jettisoned their earlier style entirely, just paired it down).

Following *Abacab*, the band's chart profile increased exponentially - assisted to a degree by Phil Collins' meteoric rise - and their other Eighties albums

Genesis and *Invisible Touch* saw them finally crack the UK and US top ten singles charts. Genesis were now officially one of the most successful bands of all time - not bad going for a bunch of shy schoolboys who once roamed up and down British motorways in a windowless bread van (top speed, 40mph). By the time *We Can't Dance* appeared in late 1991, the band were past the "household name" stage and in danger of becoming an institution. Such was the public identification with the three-man line-up that Peter Gabriel's involvement became a vague memory to transient fans. This had ramifications in 1997, when Rutherford and Banks tried to start afresh with vocalist Ray Wilson on *Calling All Stations*. The stations didn't respond, and a promising new phase for the band was over as soon as it had started.

None of this detracts from the appeal of Genesis' monolithic back catalogue, or the great skill with which Nick Davis has transferred it to SACD. *A Trick of the Tail* is an ideal test of the new re-masters' ability to preserve or enhance the material. The new stereo mix does not differ greatly from the original, but features two changes which are common to all the SACDs: Phil Collins' vocals are now much clearer in the mix and the drums sound a lot 'punchier'. Switching over to the multi-channel mix, 'Dance on a Volcano' has never sounded more immediate. Back in 1976, the song's placement at the start of the album showcased the band's skills and banished lingering doubts regarding their viability without Gabriel. Now in 2007 the song serves to prove that the surround re-mix was worth the effort. The new arrangement simply sounds 'right', and as Michael Caine might put it, "blows the bloody doors off". Another demo disc is born.

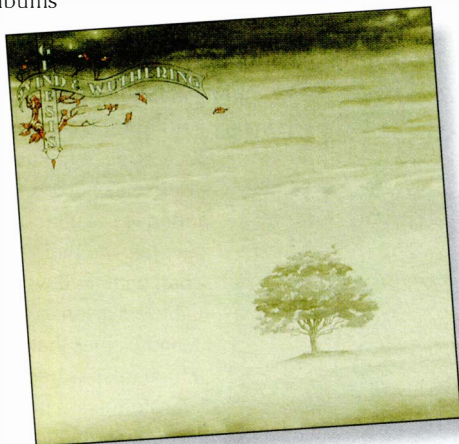
All the surround mixes are impressive - either in SACD or dts form - and in the case of *And Then There Were Three...* revelatory. The original mix of this album is one of the great mysteries of prog rock, defying all known laws of engineering logic! Regardless, many fans love it, but for anyone who suffered in hi-fi hell with this opus, the new mix is heaven sent. *Duke* was always a stunning sounding album,

benefiting from the state of the art Harrison console at Abba's Polar Studios. On SACD, some of its sonic fireworks have been placed slightly more to the background to aid vocal clarity, on 'Duchess' in particular. Perhaps some of its quirkiness has been lost in the process - again, a reason to keep hold of the 1994 CDs - but the enveloping warmth

of the surround mix more than compensates. *Abacab* sticks more closely to the original mix, with 'Dodo' and 'Keep It Dark' being especially hard-hitting in surround.

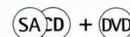
"Job well done" you might think after reading this torrent of praise. Yet the sternest test still awaits - how well do the early albums translate to surround, especially those with less separation on the original multitrack? Stay tuned, and keep watching the skies...

Many thanks to Alex Darling and Nick Davis for their assistance with this article.



A Trick of the Tail

Virgin CDSCDR 4001



Wind and Wuthering

Virgin CDSCDR 4005



...And Then There Were Three...

Virgin CDSCDR 4010



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Paul Messenger, HiFi+ Issue 51

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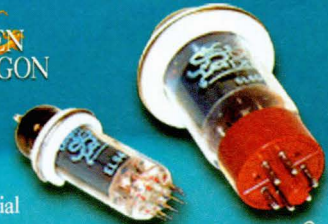
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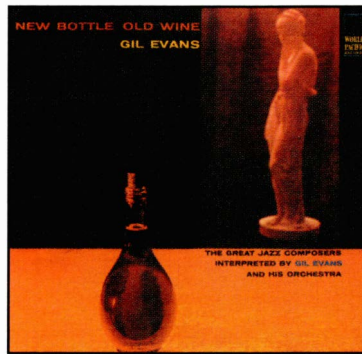
Tony Scott

A Jazz Life

Kind of Blue KOB 10015 

Tony Scott has always defied categorisation and as a result of his nomadic career has not enjoyed the recognition that is his due. Originally a leading bebop clarinetist, he left the US in 1959 to travel in Asia and Italy, which despite further wandering has now become his base. Over the years he has played with many jazz greats including Dorsey, Ellington, Gillespie, Webster and Billie Holiday. With a string of world music inspired releases behind him and now well into his eighties, the man's passion for music remains undiminished. He's assembled a great band of young musicians here and the band's take on Ellington's 'Caravan' injects a dose of exoticism, a real flavour of different cultures and countries that is so often missing from more pedestrian interpretations. Then there's the lovely 'Come Sunday' providing a showcase for Scott's clarinet, notes tailing off and hanging delicately in the air, before Endsley's fine, warm toned solo. And so it goes, the band working through a great set of standards along with a lissom and lively take on his own 'Nina's Dance' from Scott. Throughout Scott retains the power to surprise, always lyrical his approach remains fresh and far from the obvious. With a full-bodied and spacious recording and a bonus DVD of 5 numbers and interviews this is both a bargain and a great musical treat.

DD



Gil Evans

New Bottle Old Wine

Pure Pleasure/World Pacific ST 1011 

The great jazz arranger Gil Evans is best known for his collaborations with Miles Davis, but he also led a monster session for Impulse, *Out of the Cool*, a fabulous Verve date, *The Individualism of Gil Evans*, and several great releases on the Pacific Jazz/World Pacific label. This World Pacific re-issue features Julian "Cannonball" Adderly on alto, Frank Rehak on trombone, Johnny Coles on trumpet and Chuck Wayne on guitar, filled out with a handful of other players making up a modestly sized "big band". This is a neglected masterpiece, otherwise available only as an out of print Blue Note CD. The lack of a listing in the Penguin Guide reflects this state of neglect, which afflicts jazz records in general. This 1958 recording was Evans' second release as a leader, and it proved that he could fly solo. The session consists of classic jazz standards, among them 'St. Louis Blues', 'Round Midnight' and 'Lester Leaps In' and the interpretations are classic too. For years I've enjoyed my mono original and I sniffed a bit when I saw Pure Pleasure had remastered the stereo tapes. How wrong I was! This is a true stereo recording and an outstanding one at that, which I prefer to the mono. Highest recommendation.

DDD



Annie Ross and the Gerry Mulligan Trio/Quartet

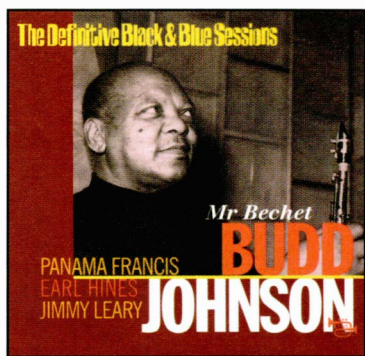
Sings a Song with Mulligan

Pure Pleasure/ World Pacific ST1253 

Although she's best known for her work with the ground-breaking Lambert, Hendricks and Ross, Annie Ross also carved a pretty successful career as a solo performer. This set, originally released in 1958, finds her at the peak of her powers and superbly accompanied by Mulligan's band. As if the sensitive, sinuous sound of Mulligan's baritone wasn't enough, and quite rightly he dominates the instrumental side of things here delivering many great solos, as in 'You Turned the Tables On Me' to underpin, emphasise and complement Ross's vocals, the bands include the trumpets of Chet Baker and/or Art Farmer, both in great form, along with Dave Bailey on drums, and Henry Grimes or Bill Crow on bass. Although it's labelled a stereo recording, the set includes four numbers in mono but this doesn't matter a jot, all are well captured with a very natural, warm recording that capture the best from her vocals and from Mulligan's fruity tones. Standouts include the sprightly opener 'I Feel Pretty', the aforementioned 'You Turned the Tables...', and particularly for some great fluid sparring between trumpet and baritone, 'Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea'. This is a very welcome re-issue and an essential component of any comprehensive jazz vocal collection.

DD





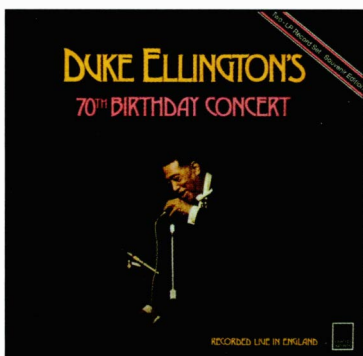
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Mr. Bechet

Pure Pleasure PPAN 006 

This is Pure Pleasure's second release from the French Black & Blue catalog. The label issued dozens of blues and traditional jazz titles, and knowledgeable collectors have been picking up any they happen across as they feature generally good performances in truly outstanding sound. This is a quartet recording from 1974, with Johnson on tenor and soprano saxophone, Hines on piano, Jimmy Leary on bass and Panama Francis on drums. Swing jazz records don't sell well, so this was a gutsy choice by Tony Hickmott. It was also an inspired one, as this set couples truly engaging music with audiophile sound. The title of the album is a tribute to the father of the soprano saxophone, Sidney Bechet. Johnson and Hines played together in the 1930s and their reunion forty years later can also be seen as a tribute to Earl Hines, one of the greats. I had never heard this record before and felt a sense of discovery halfway through the first cut. This is one of the gems of the Black & Blue catalog from a musical perspective. I don't know how good the original sounds, but this re-issue easily deserves a super disc sound rating. While great sounding re-issues are becoming more common, this is one of the few that has "reach out and touch me" sound quality. Don't miss it!

DDD



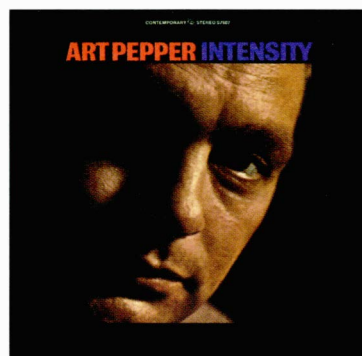
Duke Ellington & His Orchestra

70th Birthday Concert

Pure Pleasure/ United Artists UAD 60001 

Don't let the title put you off. This may have been Ellington's final decade and whilst this wouldn't be my first choice to kick off an Ellington collection (that would be something from the Blanton-Webster band) it constitutes one of his last great recordings and he and his band could still swing like hell. Recorded in Manchester and Bristol during the band's 1969 European tour, the line-up includes many of the greats such as Paul Gonzales, Cat Anderson, Cootie Williams, Lawrence Brown and Johnny Hodges, along with a guesting Wild Bill Davis. It's a great example of what a powerful force this band was and of course what a musical genius led them. It's jam-packed with highlights but particularly memorable sections include the tenor workout in the extended jam of 'In Triplicate', Cat Anderson reaching for high notes in a fabulous solo in 'Satin Doll' and a storming opener in 'Rockin' In Rhythm'. Adding to the atmosphere are Ellington's spoken exclamations and introductions and the whole thing makes me kick myself that at the time these great events were recorded I was probably rocking out to Shaking Stevens and the Sunsets. Ah well, my loss. With good, clean Pallas pressings this set forms a useful improvement over my well worn original and constitutes an essential purchase.

DD



Art Pepper

Intensity

Analogue Productions/Contemporary S7607 

While in the process of reviewing this 45-RPM deluxe package from Analogue Productions, I learned the sad news that Fantasy's new owner, Concord Records, is closing its fabulous tape vault and packing up the world's finest archive of jazz master tapes (from Prestige, Contemporary and many other labels) and storing them in a records storage facility used for musty old legal briefs. This will almost certainly put an end to the wonderful re-issues that we've become accustomed to, as there will be no archivist to hunt down the original master tapes. Next time a record is to be re-issued, a file clerk will be in charge. In the meantime, here is another great session that got through before the gate closed. One of Pepper's best sessions, he teams with Dolo Coker, Jimmy Bond and Frank Butler on this 1960 session recorded by the legendary Roy DuNann. This was the last of a string of classic LPs recorded by Pepper for Contemporary between 1957 and 1960, and all have been released by Analogue Productions as 45-RPM sets. This is another Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray mastering job and it has outstanding sound. It's one of the choice titles from this fourth batch from the Fantasy 45 Series. Great music, great sound engineering and great mastering add up to a winner.

DDD



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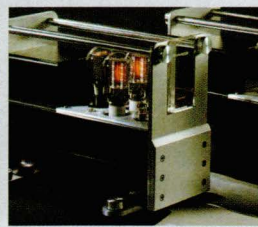


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RABIH ABOU-KHALIL

LOUD PLAYER, COMPOSER AND CULTURAL INTERMEDIARY

Interviewed by Anke Kathrin Bronner

Rabih Abou-Khalil's music will never fit the "elevator" category. It demands time, attention and listening to become familiar – to understand and warm to it. But isn't that what we should expect from Hi-Fi+ readers – for then you'll enjoy an extraordinary experience!

Rabih (which means "spring") Abou-Khalil fled from his hometown of Beirut, Lebanon, in 1978. After a short period studying flute at the Munich conservatory, he returned to his first instrument, the oud. It is his playing and influence that has made this lute-like stringed instrument popular in the West, building a bridge between two cultures.



RAK: Yes, indeed. It's from a family of seven oud makers, and each instrument is as beautiful as the next!

AKB: There just has to produce wonderful music!

RAK: Not necessarily so! (laughs)

AKB: Well, it has to be played! Did you make some modifications on your instrument?

RAK: Let me put it like this: I always have old instruments, one hundred years and older. Nowadays, the table often gets a varnish. They must have seen guitars being varnished and thought, well, an oud should be, too. But that makes the

AKB: Rabih, how would you describe the sound of your oud to somebody who has never listened to this instrument?

Rabih Abou-Khalil: I would not describe it at all! It's the same as trying to describe a taste, or a smell. How would you describe a taste? Or a colour? It's a green, but not really a green, rather a turquoise... Everyone will get a completely different idea! I think these are things you must experience. It cannot be described. It's a feeling and an oud will definitely sound different to everyone! When I sometimes read in a review about "a dry sound", I think to myself: "Well, I hear it as everything but dry! I hear it as lush!" I sometimes hear somebody saying, "The bone dry sound of the oud, the demure sound." Demure?!? It's so resonant and rich! That is the problem with individual perceptions...

AKB: You have a wonderful instrument!

instrument stiffer and the sound harder. So I remove the varnish, and thus to get a warmer and smoother sound!

AKB: And have you also adapted your technique to be able to play in a "Western style"?

RAK: I did. Of course, as I got to know European instrumental music – since I studied it – I also developed a different view of my instrument. That's natural if you cross from one culture to another and encounter other techniques. Thus, I have played many things differently to the way I learnt in Lebanon, added new techniques I've acquired via Western culture or the Western view on instrumental technique.

AKB: Do you think your musical style – the combination of East and West – would have been possible without you fleeing the Lebanon? ▶

► **RAK:** That has to be a hypothetical question: What if...? I don't know. I think I had already grown up in two different ways before I came to Europe. I'd listened to both Western and Arabian music in Lebanon, too. So, it is not that I only got to know these things when I came here. Definitely my life would have taken another course – just as yours would have if you were born in Bangladesh! But of course, everything I express in my art deals with my experiences.

AKB: What percentage of your music emanates from Western music and how much from Eastern?

RAK: 38.7 and 61.3!

AKB: Okay! I didn't want to know this precisely!

RAK: (laughs) You know, can anybody tell? I can neither ask nor answer this question! I can't ask you: What percentage of you is characterised by this and how much by that? I don't even think about things like that! When I am making music, I'm making music. When I am composing, I'm composing! I don't subdivide myself during the process. Whether my music is Arabian and if so by how much, shouldn't be of any interest for a musician. It's irrelevant. In the end, it is the expression, the sensuality of the musical expression that is important for me. What is going on either technically or stylistically, might be of interest for a musicologist, but doesn't concern the creative process!

AKB: But can we for instance say that the colourfulness and the colours themselves have come from Arabian music? When I listen to your music, that's where I hear the strongest Arabian influence.

RAK: Well, if you were to ask an Arab, he would tell you the opposite! Probably it is the unknown element that is strongest; not specifically Arabian. How well do you know Arabian music to estimate which influences are Arabian? Again, it is a hypothetic question! We could discuss it if you were really into Arabian music. But then, you probably would not ask this question! Instead, everything that is unfamiliar to you is classified as "Arabian". But an Arab has a totally different view! That's why I argued that it is difficult to classify. I use neither Arabian scales, nor Arabian rhythms – at least not traditional ones. I use other rhythms and a lot of rhythmic changes. I use a lot of chromatic shades that might be possible in Arabian music, but are just not used. And you can't find changing rhythmic in any music that I know! Some of the elements that are very specific to Arabian music can't be found in my work. What might seem Arabic to you is the fact that the rhythm – as in most musical styles within the world, except for European music that developed

in a certain direction – the rhythm has a position other than as placeholder. In Western music, you have the stress on one and three or two and four, depending on which type of music. And a four-four meter is a four-four meter, what means one, two, three, four. For most other types of music, that's not valid. In Arabian music a four-four meter doesn't mean anything at all. You need to know where the stresses are, how is the bar portioned, how is the rhythm, how is the rhythmic pattern. In this respect, my music is very Arabian. If I write a four-four meter, I don't relate that to a Western four-four meter. It could consist of two sections with five semiquavers and a section with six semiquavers – in total a four-four meter! But the sections are different. Thus, for me the rhythm is not a mere unit of measurement, dictating who has to play what and when, but holds a musical function. Within a composition, it comprises at least half of the expressive range!

AKB: And how is your music received in the Arabian world?

RAK: It is of course varying, as with everything new, wherever it might be done. There are those who go: It's fantastic. And others who go: It's not traditional enough. But the term "tradition" is always questionable! Nowadays, nobody asks anybody to compose in the style of Beethoven! That would be ridiculous! It is always questionable to demand from anybody to be in a tradition. And the term tradition is a virtual one anyway, because what's traditional today was revolutionary yesterday! In the arts in general, nothing exists forever!

Today, theoretically everybody could compose in the style of Beethoven or in the style of Bach; in the same pattern. It's not difficult because we can see how it's done, now that someone has done it before. Likewise, every art student could paint in the style of Van Gogh, because he has studied the technique. But that's not the point.

AKB: The point is that the new, the innovative, the inventive would cease to appear...

RAK: Why should anybody say the same again when it has been said five times before? Why should anybody say exactly the same again? Even in a classical interpretation: A new Beethoven's Fifth should not sound like the two thousand variations that went before, even if they have a certain right to exist!

AKB: What right does your music have to exist?

RAK: It is not up to me to say what right I have to exist... I try to find a right to exist by... Well, the reason why I make music is not a technical one. I have what I think each artist has as a matter of principle: The longing, a sort of inner ►

Biography Rabih Abou-Khalil

- 1957: Rabih Abou-Khalil was born on 17 August in Beirut, Lebanon
- 1961: First steps on the oud, the Arabian short-necked lute
- 1975: Studies at the Beirut conservatory Arabian and Western music: Oud with virtuoso Georges Farah and flute with Josef Severa, first flutist with the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra
- 1978: Due to the civil war, Rabih leaves the Lebanon and settles in Munich, Germany; studies in classical flute at the Academy of Music in Munich with Walter Theurer
- 1982: Release of his first flute album *Compositions Et Improvisations*; he then turns to his oud
- 1984: His first oud album *Bitter Harvest* is released
- 1986: Rabih signs with Enja Records; his first album on Enja, *Between Dusk and Dawn*, is released
- 1988: *Nafas*, his only album for ECM, is published; the first appearance at Berlin Horizonte Festival, Germany, marks the begin of an incredible series of performances at more than 100 international festivals
- 1992: The Turkish influenced album *Blue Camel* features alto saxophonist Charlie Mariano and flugelhorn player Kenny Wheeler; appearance with the Kronos Quartet at Jazz Summit Stuttgart
- 1995: Rabih releases *Arabian Waltz* with compositions for string quartet (the famous Balanescu Quartet) plus oud, tuba and frame drums
- 1998: Host of the 13-part TV documentary series *Visions of Music*
- 2002: Rabih is awarded the Honorary Prize of the German Record Critics for his complete works, an equivalent to a Grammy for Lifetime Achievement
- 2003: With the release of *Morton's Foot*, a new quintet with Michel Godard, Gabriele Mirabassi, Luciano Biondini und Jarrod Cagwin emerges.
- 2004: The Sardinian singer and saxophone player Gavino Murgia joins Morton's Foot
- 2005: *Journey to the Centre of an Egg* features a trio of oud, piano (Joachim Kühn, who doubles on alto saxophone) and drums
- 2007: Rabih celebrates his jubilees: 25 years of recording, and his 50th birthday with the release of *Songs for Sad Women*

Rabih Abou-Khalil has been awarded more than ten German Jazz Awards. He is a prolific live performer, appearing at festivals and concerts worldwide.

► pressure, to express what I can't express in words. In this respect, I think my music hasn't been expressed before, or at least is something I haven't heard before. If I wrote a piece and recognised something I had heard before, it would end up in the waste paper basket!

AKB: Do you try to express a political statement through your music? Critics like to entitle you as an "intermediary between the worlds" but is this how you feel?

RAK: As far as the music goes, I couldn't care less. It doesn't bother me, but it's not the reason why I make music. Of course, I have a political opinion, but music in my eyes is an expression of sensitivity – as is every other art form. Of course there is political music, and music with a political aspect, but I don't use any lyrics, so my music is essentially interpretative; ultimately, it could mean anything to anyone. For me, that is what characterizes the beauty of art: its interpretability, its universal nature. Not the definite expression of a single idea. Naturally, I have my own political opinions, but they are not what necessarily affects or directs my music.

AKB: In the past, you have played with Joachim Kühn and the Kronos Quartet, amongst others. How do these collaborations come about?

RAK: In most cases, I hear something that they are doing, and I perceive a quality... It is like your friends; not everybody fits together. Some of them won't mix well. Invite them all together and you'll create conflict. Yet they all get on with me. I select musicians as carefully as I select my friends! I choose them if I feel that they interpret and express music in the way I do. And also that they will be on good

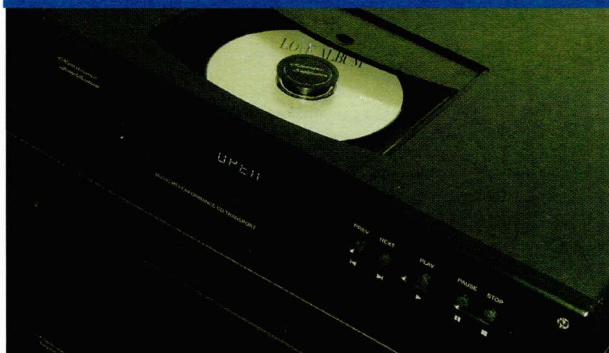
terms; that is important too. It makes no sense trying to make music with people who don't get along, musically or personally. You can find enough examples of that already!

AKB: Then you just have to overdub everything later on!

RAK: (laughs) I know, and that happens quite a lot! But then, the musical contact is missing. This is very, very far from me. Instead, I try to select musicians according to their musical personality: not even according to their instrument! I knew, for example, that I wanted a bass instrument. I didn't look specifically for a tuba, but then I found Michel Godard who made such an impression on me: Yes, we could create something great together – because great collaborations make each player sound better. That's not the case with everyone. There are excellent musicians, the best in the world within their own field, that I simply can't imagine working with. The most unbearable thing for me are those never-ending solos, where at the end of the solo nobody can remember what the song was all about. That makes no sense to me and destroys the sense of the music too! I select musicians because I want to make music with them – where "with" is an important word. Otherwise, I could perform as a soloist and would be the one and only! Another example: I don't actually like accordion. But Luciano Biondini, when he plays he has something different! And that's what I always tell my band: A musician should be able to transcend his instrument. Too much accordion is just unbearable; I don't like too much tuba either, or too much harmonica. But then I found Howard Levy, and I realised: It is not about the instrument! He is playing in a way that I just hear the music, not the harmonica itself.

AKB: Right! Because he is singing with the instrument? ►

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► **RAK:** Yes! And he allows himself to be a part of the band. I realise if I play with somebody and he doesn't listen; even if he doesn't play; even if somebody else is playing a solo. I also realise when we are sitting at a table and somebody doesn't listen to what the others are saying. Even if he doesn't say anything, you just realise it. And that disturbs me on stage! Because there is something that is always very, very important for me: That we all listen to each other, that we all understand that we all influence the others, just by being there. That's what I mean about everybody playing in a way that makes the others sound better! Then, you have a group, a band; then you have music. And it is not about the solos! Everybody can play a solo! I mean, if you study music and practise long enough, everybody can play tremendously fast. That's not the point! (laughs)

AKB: Is all your music already composed, or do you have some space for improvisation when you are doing a recording?

RAK: There is always room for improvisation! But it is important for me that the improvisation emerges from the composition! So that somebody listening will ask: Which part was composed, and which part was improvised? An improvisation should not sound like an improvisation, but should emerge from and end at the composition. As I said, if anybody finishes his solo and I can't remember where the music was actually going, what the song was about, how it started, how the main theme developed, then that solo doesn't make any sense at all!

AKB: What size of group do you feel most comfortable working with?

RAK: Each formation has its attractions. You can't compare! If I do something with orchestra, it has its attraction due to the mere dimensions; it is the colours and the impact you get from it. In smaller groups, you naturally have the spryness, the agility, the transparency. The smaller the group, the more flexible it is. The bigger the ensemble, the more you have to take care of composition and interpretation. There are different demands. Each has its attraction but, of course, the architecture of an orchestra, the power, the ability to go from small-small to a huge sound is always an outstanding compositional challenge!

AKB: We are talking about you as a composer, but what is

your self-image: do you think of yourself as a composer or as an instrumentalist?

RAK: It is one. I can't divide!

AKB: And what would you like to be called?

RAK: It is all the same to me! (laughs) I don't consider it libellous whether I'm labelled a composer or a musician. Even whilst improvising and playing I am a composer. And I am also an instrumentalist whilst composing! Both aspects are very important. For me, it is indivisible. I don't even think it should be divisible! There are many people who are, in the first instance, instrumentalists. There are



composers who don't play any instrument. You won't believe it, but I have met some of them and they just don't play any more. They say, "Well, wouldn't it be nice to play piano again?" How can you be a composer without playing?!? For example Pierre Boulez, although he is a conductor.

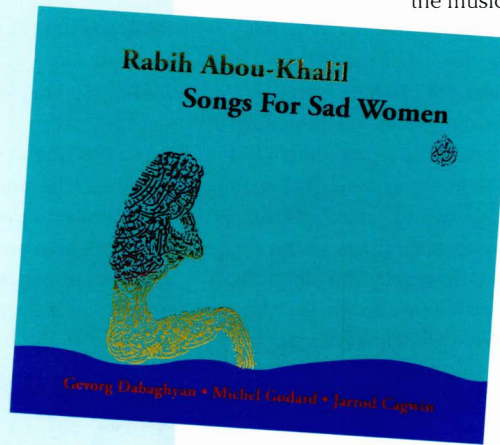
AKB: He plays the orchestra!

RAK: Yes, that's his instrument! That is where he can test the timbres! And he of course listens to it all the time. But there are composers just sitting at home, who know how to compose and just come up with something in their mind. I couldn't imagine that...



Discography:

- 1982: Compositions Et Improvisations (MMP 170857)
- 1984: Bitter Harvest (MMP 170884)
- 1986: Between Dusk and Dawn (ENJ-9371 2)
- 1988: Nafas (ECM 835781 2)
- 1989: Bukra (ENJ-9372 2)
- 1990: Roots And Sprouts (ENJ-9373 2)
- 1991: Al-Jadida (ENJ-6090)
- 1992: Blue Camel (ENJ-7053 2)
- 1993: Tarab (ENJ-7083 2)
- 1994: The Sultan's Picnic (ENJ-8078 2)
- 1995: Arabian Waltz (ENJ-9059 2)
- 1997: Odd Times (ENJ-9330 2)
- 1998: Yara (ENJ-9360 2)
- 2001: The Cactus of Knowledge (ENJ-9401 2)
- 2002: Il Sospiro (ENJ-9440 2)
- 2003: Morton's Foot (ENJ-9462 2)
- 2005: Journey to the Centre of an Egg (ENJ-9479 2)
- 2007: Songs For Sad Women (ENJ-9494 2)



And he places the musicians within that room to complete the music! But, of course, I am always there making sure that the musical statement doesn't get lost

behind the sound. You must maintain balance, because art has many facets. After all, a painting without a frame is... (looks at a painting on the wall) Well, this frame is a little bit questionable, isn't it? But otherwise... And where it is put and where it belongs and where it is placed... These are all part of what it says. To think that simply composing and playing the notes is enough, you lose

so much of music's potential. The potential to produce a synthesis of the arts instead of placing emphasis on just one facet. Thus, for me everything is important, from the recording to the cover!

AKB: Are you also interested in recording technique, equipment, microphones and so on? Or don't you care as long as it sounds as you expect it?

RAK: Well, I make sure I have somebody who understands more than me. That's always important. And it is the same with the musicians: I just tell the drummer if I don't like something, and I let him search for the alternative. Each person in a group – whether it's a band, a party or a dinner – in the end has their own role. And there is nobody who knows everything! You should have control, but there are specialists for every detail who know better than you! I take my audio engineer with me on tour as I have no idea about these things. And I don't want to! I just have a vague idea how to express what I'm after, e.g. if I am missing bass or treble. What he has to do to correct it, for me is like the difference between gynaecology and loving. It is a huge difference! In music, too, there are enough gynaecologists. But me, myself, I would prefer to be a lover than a gynaecologist! (laughter)

AKB: You recorded one of your first albums with ECM. But 20 years and 15 albums ago, you signed with Enja. Why? Didn't it work with ECM? Didn't you feel at home there?

RAK: No, I didn't feel at home, in any aspect, from A to Z. (laughs) It wasn't the sound I had in my head. It wasn't the musical relationship I was looking for. It all went too fast. Too little of it was what I wanted and too much was what

► **AKB:** It's incredible that they can imagine the sound without hearing it! As regards sound: how important is the sound of a recording for you? On your recent album, you even listed the audio engineer amongst the musicians. I know some musicians who don't tour without their own audio engineer!

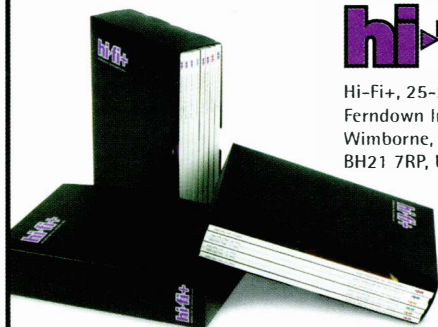
RAK: I also have an audio engineer on tour with me. (takes a deep breath) It is very important for me! I want to know that what I am playing is properly translated, especially when recording! There's nothing natural about a recording. Once you place a microphone in front of an instrument, it's not natural any more. No ear, no person is sitting like this.

It is an illusion to think the sound that results is natural. You are reproducing something, and most of the instruments we play were not made for the typically dry environment of a studio. They are built for concert halls, or, like trumpets, for outside. Most instruments need a room acoustic! And if you record them, you have to recreate this acoustic environment. It is just like a painting; it's not exactly the same as what you see in reality. Nobody wonders if the leaves are in exactly the same position as they are on the real tree. That's not the sense! The sense is in divining a certain aesthetic, going beyond the simple visual facts – or going beyond the acoustics of the studio. A good audio engineer, such as my engineer Walter Quintus, is able to imagine the acoustic environment. For me, that's impressive! Walter knows how a room looks, how it sounds. He is able to describe it to me as he recreates it. And he knows what an instrument sounds like in this room. It is almost the same as me knowing how a melody will sound: He imagines a sound and conjures it up.

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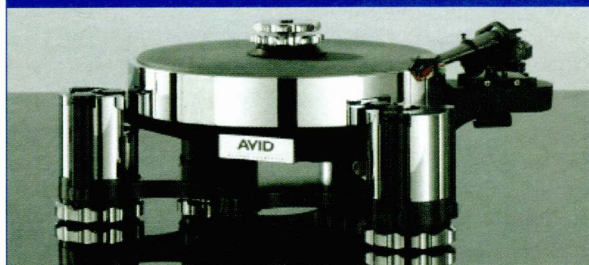
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▶ the producer wanted. Maybe it works with other artists, but not with me... And what about the pyramids on the album cover of *Nafas: I wash my hands of it!* (laughter) That was the icing on the cake! A pyramid! What the hell links the Lebanon with pyramids!?

AKB: What, in your opinion, was your most important album? Or is each album the most important in turn?

RAK: That is difficult to answer. Every album eventually becomes less important. It starts as soon as it is finished. It is of course important from the perspective of looking back, like old photographs: It is important for me that once I was 16 years old, and 18, and 20, and 22. It is also important in the sense that I know it is a step towards the next album. The album you are working on is always the most important.

Then there are records with a special personal meaning for me. I should mention *Yara*. That's the record I made when my father died. It has a very strong emotional meaning. Or the solo album *Il Sospiro*. It wasn't planned as a record. These were small, personal compositions that I wrote for friends as presents. Anyhow, it was released as a record... (laughs) And of course *The Cactus of Knowledge*, as it was very interesting for me to work with a big band and to see how you can handle such complex architectural structures! Thus, each album has its own characteristics!

AKB: And how do you avoid sinking in the marsh of triviality or irrelevance?

RAK: I try really hard!

AKB: Oh, good. (laughs)

RAK: I throw away considerably more material than I keep. To the producers' eternal regret, I spend long periods at the studio where I also delete a lot; and I always arrive with twice

as many titles as will be on a record. It is important: For me as a composer, for me as a person with his own language, for me as a person who is aware of having his own style! And I do have my own style! I am defined by my style. Mozart; Mozart can be recognized after ten seconds. Bach also. For Haydn, it takes five seconds. It is important having your own style. In turn, it is also important not to copy oneself. I am aware just how easy that is and avoid it at all costs!

AKB: Are you proud of yourself? Proud of what you have reached, proud that you can play with the greatest musicians, proud that you are giving people so much?



RAK: I don't know... I don't know if describe it in that way. Proud... I am happy if things work out. I don't know if you can talk about being proud in this context! Because... Maybe this sounds silly, but for me it was a natural development. It wasn't like I had to force myself to do this: I just couldn't do anything else! Pharmacy? No dice! Nor basketball either. Pope? Far from my thoughts. (laughs) Thus, I had no choice but music. And that's what I always wanted to do. I have always made music, as long as I can remember. That makes it difficult for me to separate myself from my music, to have an objective sense of pride. I am happy and glad. It is very satisfying for me.

AKB: Is it also gratifying to be on stage?

RAK: It is gratifying, sure, and I enjoy it. And I have had the privilege or the fortune of doing what I enjoy all my life. If I don't enjoy something, I am lucky enough not to have to do it. It is something I am very happy about, but I don't know, as I said before, if I am proud in this sense... Well, perhaps I am, if I was to think about it. But I can't say it ever occurs to me...

AKB: But you should be proud!

RAK: Hahaha! (laughs) Thank you!



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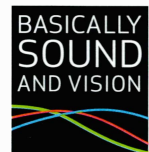
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ANGUS AND CO...

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A ROCK 'N' ROLL ORIGINAL

by Andrew Hobbs

Today's young pretenders have got nothing on Bon Scott, ultimate road warrior and original lead singer of Australia's most famous exports, AC/DC. Bon lived it larger than life, this rock 'n' roll lifestyle; the drink, the drugs, the copious quantities of sex, the madcap antics - he embraced them all with a passion and eagerness that even the rest of the band struggled to keep up with.

In 1978 Angus Young, AC/DC's pint-sized lead guitarist-in-a-schoolboy-outfit, paid a huge compliment to the oldest member of the group: "He's the dirtiest fucker I know," he said. "I learned most of what I know from him!"

Ronald Scott was born in 1946 in Kirriemuir, Scotland and emigrated to Australia with his family at the age of 5. He was something of a loose cannon in his formative years and had only just come out of hospital following a motorcycle accident when he first came into contact with the group.

AC/DC's lead singer at the time had something of a Gary Glitter fixation and refused to go on stage without his sequins. Angus takes up the story: "Bon volunteered to pick up the slot and we weren't in a position to refuse. He downed two bottles of Bourbon, speed, coke and some dope and said 'right, I'm ready'. And he was too!" As soon as Bon hit the stage he turned into some sort of madman. "He burst on stage, and next thing we knew he was running around yelling at the audience with his wife's knickers on his head!" Angus remembers, fondly.

My earliest recollection of AC/DC was seeing them perform on *The Old Grey Whistle Test*. I couldn't believe my eyes; there was this guy with the cheekiest of leers and a look of pure mischief on his face, bare-chested and in ludicrously tight jeans singing his lungs out, while in front of him a deranged midget in a schoolboy uniform and satchel, with a guitar that looked way too big, was

throwing fits and duck-walking across the stage like a man possessed. Meanwhile Malcolm, Angus' brother and the real driving force behind the band, stood in front of a stack of Marshalls, legs spread wide and shaking his head in unison with the rhythm. I'd never seen anything like it, and I've not seen anything since that comes remotely close to capturing the magic, the sheer bonhomie or

the raw energy of what I witnessed on my TV screen that night. I made it my mission in life to see them live and consider myself extremely fortunate to have witnessed them in concert twice - both times with Bon at the helm.

However, AC/DC would be nothing without great songs; fortunately the combination of Malcolm and Angus' driving music and Bon's dirty schoolboy lyrics created a stack of them. *High Voltage*, their debut album in this country and an amalgam of their first



two Aussie releases, included the immediate classics 'It's A Long Way To The Top (If You Wanna Rock 'n' Roll)', 'She's Got Balls' (Bon's touching tribute to his ex-wife) and instant crowd-pleaser 'The Jack', a song about the dubious delights of venereal disease and one of Bon's finest literary masterpieces.

Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap continued with more of the same; Angus and Malcolm's guitars melted into one as Bon got to grips with his sleazy side on charming little ditties like 'Love At First Feel' and 'Big Balls'. It also contained 'Ain't No Fun (Waiting Round To Be A Millionaire)', six and a half minutes of pure primeval boogie that's impossible not to move to, and 'Ride On', a slow-burning blues number and probably the closest Bon ever got to showing that even he sometimes felt the pain of loneliness and despair. "Another empty bottle, another empty bed, ain't too young to admit it, not too young to lie, I'm just another empty head" ►

▶ ...pretty philosophical lyrics to come from the same pen that gave us 'Big Balls'. Bon wasn't a morose navel gazer though, and later in the song, as he tells the listener that "one of these days, I'm gonna change my evil ways" he can't resist a little chuckle to let us know that "until then, I'll just ride on".

It has been said by those who think they know better that AC/DC are nothing more than the same three chords regurgitated over and over again. Well, three chord tricksters they may be, but like their UK counterparts Status Quo, AC/DC have the knack of making it sound fresh and exciting. And like Francis Rossi and Rick Parfitt, the Young Brothers have an almost telepathic understanding and the ability to make peoples bones and minds move to the groove.*

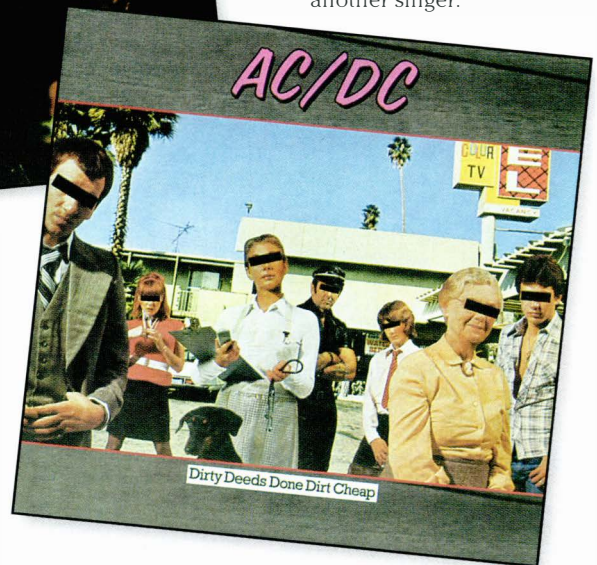
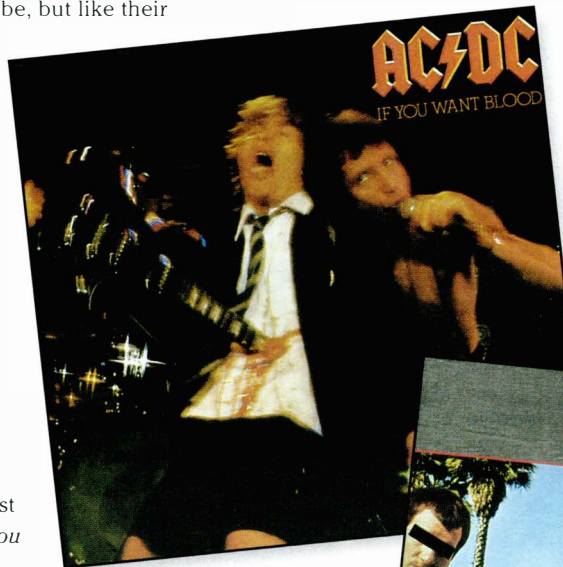
When it comes to open debate on which is AC/DC's finest album, I think it fair to say that most fans would plump for *If You Want Blood, You've Got It*, their superb live album that ranks alongside Thin Lizzy's *Live And Dangerous* as one of the greatest hard rock concert recordings ever. Here you will find definitive versions of 'Whole Lotta Rosie' (Bon's affectionate recollection of a night of unbridled passion with a Tasmanian lady of epic proportions who left her mark on the great man) and the previously mentioned 'The Jack', this time with amended lyrics and a couple of really tasty blues solos from Angus. Secretly I've always wished that Angus would cut a grimy, blues-soaked solo album because he has a great feel for the genre. Everything about the way he plays reeks of the blues, and he has such a wonderful lightness of touch when he wanders into those kind of waters. Take a listen to the first solo on 'The Jack' or either solo on 'Ride On' and you'll understand where I'm coming from.

Every album from the Bon era is a must have, but the one generally considered to be their finest studio

* Many bands have tried and failed to emulate AC/DC's sound, but most don't even come close. The only group I know of to get within a cat's whisker are a Californian outfit called Rhino Bucket. Their debut album of the same name could easily sit in amongst AC/DC's vast repertoire without sounding out of place, and if it's still available I suggest you go and get yourself a copy because it really is rather splendid.

recording is *Highway To Hell*. Produced by Robert John 'Mutt' Lange it gave AC/DC their biggest selling album in America. It also brought them into conflict with the hardcore religious fraternity who, wrongly as it happens, thought the band were Satanists. Their cause wasn't helped when serial killer Richard Ramirez was arrested apparently wearing an AC/DC T-shirt. It was also claimed that he left an AC/DC baseball cap at the scene of one of his murders.

Highway To Hell made the band worldwide superstars. How sad then that it ended up as Bon's swansong. One year after its release Scott was found dead in the backseat of a friend's car, asphyxiated by his own vomit after a typical night's hard drinking. The rest of the band were devastated and had no desire to continue, until Bon's dad convinced them at his son's funeral that they had to find another singer.



The replacement came in the shape of ex-Geordie frontman Brian Johnson, and with him AC/DC cut *Back In Black* as a tribute to their late singer. It sold in excess of 19 million copies and remains to this day the best post-Bon Scott album.

Brian Johnson has fitted seamlessly into the AC/DC 'family' and continues to do a fine job – but for many fans, myself included, there will only ever be one leader of this incredible band. Wherever he is now, be it treading heaven's rainbows or walking the highway to hell, you can be sure that Bon's partying hard, stripped to the waist with a bottle of bourbon in his hand and the cheekiest grin on his face.

God bless him, he was one of a kind.







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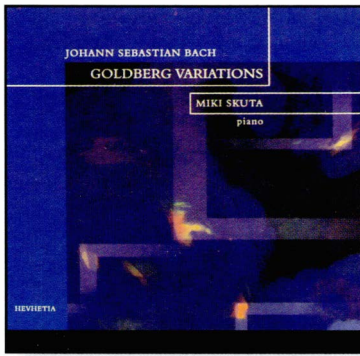

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Bach Goldberg Variations

Glenn Gould, pno (1955 performance.) A Zenph Re-Performance.

SonyClassical 88697-03350-2. 

This is the famous 1955 Gould performance. As described in the literature "Zenph takes audio recordings and turns them back into live performances, precisely replicating what was originally recorded. The software-based process extracts and encodes the details of how each note was played, including musical nuances such as volume, articulation and pedal actions. The encoding is played back on an acoustic grand piano fitted with sophisticated computers and hardware, allowing listeners to experience the performance as if they were in the room when the original recording was made. This "re-performance" is then recorded afresh using the latest recording techniques. The result is a sonic rediscovery of an iconic twentieth-century recording." What I've read about this "re-performance" is fascinating. The team was able to bring one of Glenn Gould's original piano tuners in to tune the nine foot Yamaha Disklavier Pro in the same manner as Gould would have had his piano tuned. The re-recording was done at the Glenn Gould Studios in Toronto in September of 2006. Tracks 1-32 are Re-performance stereo/surround versions, whilst tracks 33-64 are Binaural stereo versions. What you have is a masterful recreation in superb modern day sound of one of the most legendary performances ever recorded. A must own disc.

Supplier: sonyclassical.com

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Dinah Washington with Quincy Jones and his orchestra

the swingin' miss "D"...

Speakers Corner/EmArcy Records, MG36104 

I found an original of this LP the early part of this year. My first Dinah Washington album, it had me totally enthralled. I liked everything I heard. One of her best albums, this is another of those 'grab your gal, a bottle of wine and put on a fire' kind of outings. Lots of standards here including 'Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye', 'Makin' Woopee', 'Caravan', 'Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby', 'Perdido'... this is just a great female crooner, easy listening album you'll never get tired of. While I was happy with my original EmArcy, I wasn't prepared for the substantial increase in presence and sound quality contained in the reissue. Ruth Jones (Dinah Washington) is in the house! Actually, she's in your room. I am continually amazed when I hear quality reissues offering better-than-original sound on silent surfaces. As with too many artists, Ms. Washington had her share of substance problems and it certainly put a damper on her later career. This is a fine example of Dinah at her best and I'm sure you will enjoy these 1956 performances as much as I do. Top recommendation.

Supplier: speakerscornerrecords.com

RSF



Johannes Brahms Sonatas for Cello and Piano, Nos 1 (Op. 38) and 2 (Op. 99) Janos Starker, cello and Gyorgy Sebok, pno.

Speakers Corner/Mercury Living Presence SR90392. 

This is a stunning record. While I own an early original pressing, sonically speaking it doesn't hold a candle to the re-issue. Starker's cello is bold, woody and seated with proper perspective near Sebok's piano. The performances recorded here are lively, romantic and heartfelt. While the E-minor sonata is a somewhat early work for Brahms (composed prior to any of his symphonies) it would take be another 21 years before Brahms created Opus 99. The two sonatas performed here are among the finest of Brahms' chamber music output. These are "intensely" Classical pieces and undisputedly Brahmsian in flavour. If you'd never heard either sonata, the first time you did you'd say, "Brahms!" Starker and Sebok, whose individual performances are exceptional, here offer additional pleasure as a pair, sitting on an equal plane, musically speaking. The sonatas ARE for 'Cello AND Piano and that's exactly how they are expressed here by mature masters who know their craft so well. An outstanding pair of performances in equally outstanding sound. What more could you want?

This is a must own issue!

Supplier: www.speakerscorner.de

RSF





Johannes Brahms
Violin Concerto, Double Concerto;
Julia Fischer, violin;
Daniel Müller-Schott, cello;
Netherlands Phil. Orch.
Yakov Kreizberg, cond.

PentaTone PTC 5186 066 **SACD**

It's very nice to have these two Brahms works on one disc. It's especially nice to have such insightful performances on one disc. By now it's no secret that I am a fan of Ms. Fischer and Müller-Schott is fast joining my list. Since I seem to be fawning over the instrumentalists, I might as well go further and tell you that I'm equally impressed with Kreizberg and his Netherlands Philharmonic, having heard them live at the Concertgebouw. What I like about this disc is the integrity of the playing. I tend to gravitate toward performances of the double where soloists are on an equal footing. After all, it is a double concerto. In the violin concerto Fischer's tone is sublime. She seems so at home with this work and magical sound just flows from her instrument. In the Op. 102 Allegro the 'cello sounds out with a solid melodic voice and you just know you're in for a treat. Kreizberg and his orchestra are the ideal accompanists here and their integration is impeccable. It's unusual to have a performance of such internal harmony.

Another top recommendation.

Supplier: www.pentatonemusic.com

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Barber: Toccata Festiva
Poulenc: Concerto for Organ
Saint-Saëns: Symphony No. 3
Olivier Lartry, organist.
Philadelphia Orch.
Christoph Eschenbach, cond.

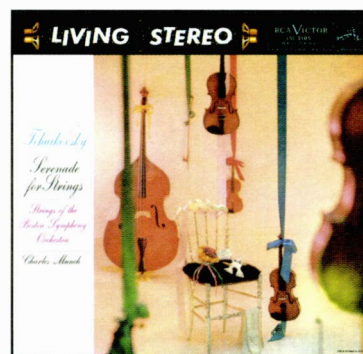
Ondine ODE 1094-5 **SACD**

In a word: spectacular. A near 80-minute outing, this disc is one of the finest SACDs I've heard. I first experienced it on a recent trip to Amsterdam where I visited the Polyhymnia studios in nearby Baarn. Polyhymnia's Everett Porter played it and I was immediately struck with the naturalness and power captured in these live performances. This is definitely a sonic tour-de-force and the electricity flies the minute Barber's *Toccata Festiva* commences; this alone is a thrilling 15+ minutes. While being bowled over with the sound, I was really enthralled with the outstanding playing of internationally recognized organist Olivier Lartry. He is a master of the King of Instruments. His credentials, like his playing, are impeccable. The Poulenc is one of my all time favorite works – I've always loved Guest and St. John's on Argo but I may have to rethink. Many conductors move too quickly though this score and it comes off cluttered. Eschenbach's tempo is perfect and as I've already said, the sound is to die for. No need to comment on the Saint-Saëns.

Not to be missed at any cost!

RSF

Supplier: www.ondine.net



Tchaikovsky: Serenade for strings,
Elgar: Introduction and allegro
for strings

Munch cond. the strings of the BSO

Cisco Music/RCA Living Stereo LSC 2105. **180g**

This Tchaikovsky was recorded on March 15, 1957, with the Elgar following on April 3. Listening to this excellent re-issue by Cisco, it's hard to believe these performances were committed to tape more than 50 years ago. I've enjoyed this album ever since I bought mine on the used market many years ago. Whilst it did suffer from a little brightness, the tape has been cleaned up, refreshed, and presented in stunning sound by Kevin Gray of AcousTech mastering and the folks at Cisco Music. These are elegant works and while there are many famous interpretations in the back catalogues, I'm not so sure there is anything available in the re-issue market. The RCA engineers (probably Lewis Layton with Richard Mohr producing) have captured the 'sound' of the late 1950's Boston Strings just to my liking. I think if the original had sounded as good as this re-issue, it would have been a big seller. Regardless, we now have great sound here to match the excellent performances. Another excellent Cisco release I'm pleased to have. Keep them coming.

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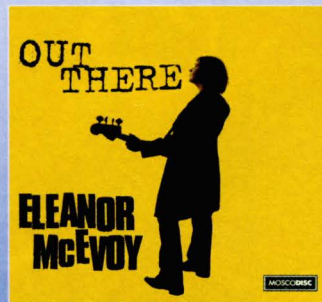
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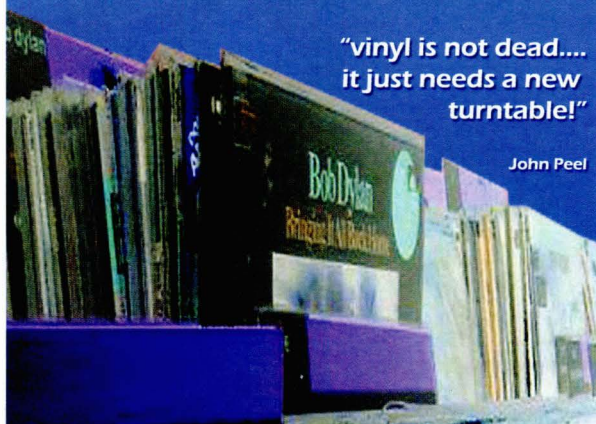
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ROCK ICONS...

THE FENDER STRATOCASTER AND THE GIBSON LES PAUL

by Chris Thomas

If you think that the world of Hi-Fi is full of bullshit spouted by unscrupulous people out to make a quick profit then you quite clearly haven't been involved in the world of electric, solid-bodied, vintage guitars. For the past 15 years or more there has been a growing boom in prices for older instruments and it must be said, a parallel rise in counterfeiting and even forgery. We're not talking Stradivarius-aged items here. The instruments in question all have their roots in the early 1950's when two guitars were born in the US, emerging from separate philosophies but each going on to become genuine icons of the coming age. The latter part of the 20th century was the era of the electric guitar. No other instrument captured so many hearts or souls in quite the same way and that legacy continues today. I am told that there were 1 million guitars sold in the UK last year and though I don't know precisely how many of those were solid-bodied electrics, I can tell you that their origins were born over 50 years ago when Gibson were listening to what a brilliantly innovative guitarist named Les Paul was suggesting to them and Leo Fender, no musician himself, was merely looking to introduce a more sophisticated version of his existing guitar, the Telecaster.

This is not a history of these guitars as that is an endlessly complex story in itself. Everything about them is surrounded in folklore and exaggeration and for every rule there is an exception. Even the exact origins of the guitars are somewhat contentious, vague and clouded by myth and rumour. But, after a few years around these lovely things, you learn that where vintage instruments that were essentially

hand-made are concerned, they are all quite different and there are no absolutes. However, the fact remains that practically every solid electric guitar made since has owed something to either the Les Paul or the Stratocaster and even today most modern guitars can be loosely categorised as being somehow related to Fender or Gibson in style.

Famous guitarists are often associated with one or the other and their individual sounds can be the source of much misunderstanding and confusion. It's difficult for me to think of Jimmy Hendrix with anything other than a Strat in his hands or of Jimmy Page without his Les Paul, although both guitarists did use other guitars. When I close my eyes I see Hendrix in his Woodstock outfit with a coloured bandana around his head and a white, right-handed Strat played upside down as a left hooker: and I see Page in a black suit emblazoned with brightly coloured dragons with a sunburst Les Paul slung low and playing that amazing opening riff to 'Since I've Been Loving You'. Iconic you see, frozen in time and it's likely to be the same for you, whoever your favourite players were or are. I see Jeff Beck with a white Strat, Stevie Ray Vaughan with a worn sunburst version with a black scratch plate and white pickup covers, the mighty Peter Green and Gary Moore with the same now-faded sunburst '59 Les Paul, a guitar which is one of the most legendary and desirable instruments

of all time, although Peter also played a Strat in Fleetwood Mac. Paul Kossoff, a Les Paul although he used a white Strat with Back Street Crawler after leaving Free. Deep Purple's Richie Blackmore, definitely a Strat man. Clapton a Strat ▶



▶ these days, but a Gibson 335 or SG perhaps with Cream. And let's not forget the daddy of English electric guitarists, Hank Marvin who reputedly bought one of the very first Fiesta Red Stratocasters to enter the country in the 50's from a shop in Charing Cross Road.

There are some players who are harder to identify with specific guitars. Zappa, McLaughlin and Santana for instance I don't identify with any single instrument although Carlos has, over recent years, become something of an ambassador for Paul Reed Smith guitars, themselves a kind of Gibson clone. All of these guys could be called vintage players and all made their names and sounds before the explosion of digital based music and effects which certainly made it much harder to hear and identify clearly just what guitar was being played. They gave these instruments their identities and logged their sounds into the heads of a million aspiring guitarists, like me, who wanted nothing more than to be able to play just like them. Through the 60's, 70's and the early part of the 80's you plugged your instrument into your amp, turned the volume to 11 and off you went, often making a shocking noise. Effects were usually small battery powered, foot operated boxes that supplemented the guitar's sound. Nowadays so much gear is rack mounted outboard studio type and heavily digital in character. There is now a generic electric guitar sound that I hear pouring out of the radio on song after song. Swimming in digital reverb, its only defining character is that it has none. But, for the duration of this article at least, let's forget that stuff and concentrate on the essence and purity of the two guitars that still command so much attention and wanton desire, the Strat and the Les Paul.

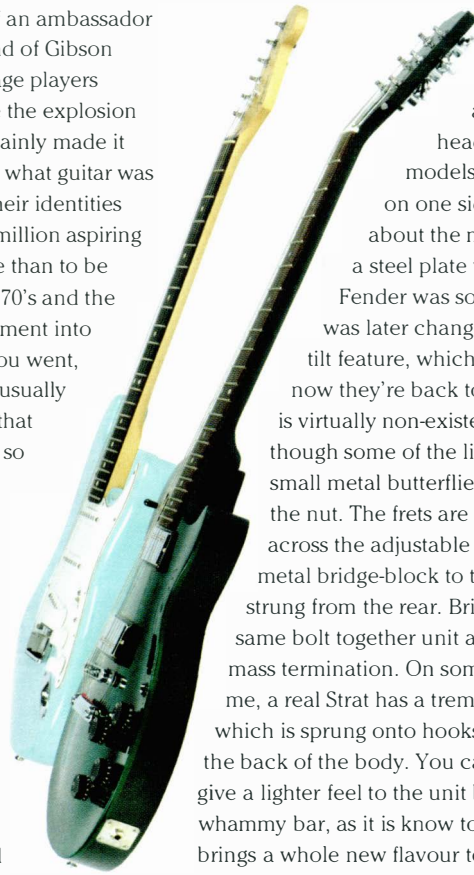
In appearance, feel and sound they could hardly be more different, yet both still manage to epitomise and define so much about the electric solid-bodied instrument. Stand them next to each other, follow the strings on their journey from end to end and you'll begin to better understand the sound that each has become famous for. The Les Paul is a chunky thing, almost like a piece of furniture. It has a sumptuously lacquered Mahogany body, arched Maple top and its neck is joined beneath the finish in a glued wooden joint, giving tremendous solidity to the feel of the guitar. The headstock is big and the angle from the neck is comparatively steep, giving the vibrating strings a sharp termination point at the nut. The neck itself is thick and fitted with big, fat frets and the bridge is mounted on bolts sunk deep into that squat but heavy body. This is where the intonation is adjusted and Gibson calls theirs a tune-o-matic bridge. Here you can micro-adjust the string lengths so the guitar plays in tune.

Then there's another steepish angle down to the tailpiece that is also secured by a pair of deeply located bolts. The whole set-up is designed to create fantastic sustain which is apparent even without plugging the guitar in.

Now check out the Strat. Here the body is lighter and fabulously enhanced with a series of horns, scallops and French curves which make the guitar such a comfortable fit, sitting or standing. Its lines remind me of a '50's American sports car. The neck is a lighter, less clubbish affair altogether with a smaller headstock, especially on earlier models, and has all the machine heads on one side. It is joined to the body in just about the most rudimentary way possible, a steel plate with four wood screws (after Fender was sold to CBS in the mid-sixties this was later changed to 3 fixings with a micro-tilt feature, which was a bit of a disaster – so now they're back to four). The headstock angle is virtually non-existent as it is a staggered design, though some of the lighter strings are retained under small metal butterflies to create sufficient angle to the nut. The frets are thinner and the stringing carries across the adjustable bridge and through a substantial metal bridge-block to the rear of the body. Strats are strung from the rear. Bridge and block are all part of the same bolt together unit and this gives the string a high-mass termination. On some Strats it ends there but, for me, a real Strat has a tremolo unit attached to this block which is sprung onto hooks fixed within the trem cavity on the back of the body. You can remove springs if you like to give a lighter feel to the unit but even if you never use the whammy bar, as it is know to Strat players, this arrangement brings a whole new flavour to the sound of the instrument as it is like having a spring-reverb built into the end of every string. Take a Strat, leave it unplugged and strike the strings hard, then immediately damp them with your hand. Listen carefully and you will hear the sound bouncing back and forth along the springs and living on within the tremolo unit.

The Gibson is a harder-strung and more solid feeling instrument than the Fender which has less pure sustain and is somehow a less "finished" looking guitar altogether. Fingerboard materials also contribute greatly to the sound with a loose rule being that the harder the wood the brighter the results. Les Pauls are Rosewood or Ebony on a mahogany neck, while the Strat is either Rosewood or the very different Maple, both on a Maple neck, which has a response, note envelope and sound character all of its own.

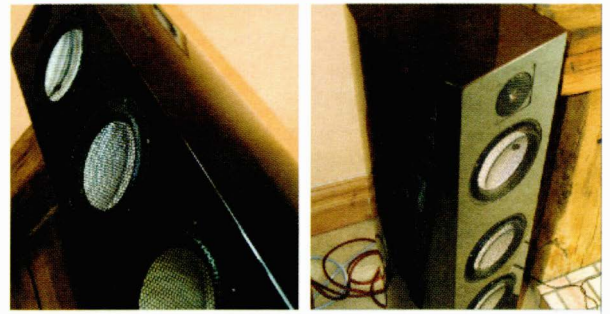
Their electrics too are completely different. To read the string vibration the Les Paul has two big twin pickups ▶





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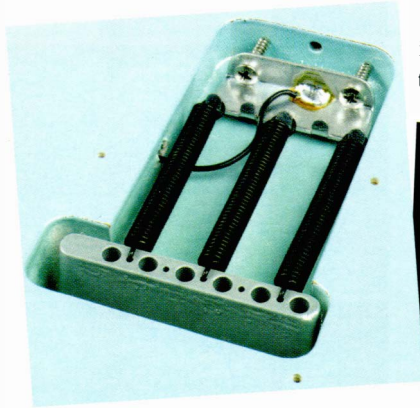
► known as humbuckers, again fixed directly to the body into neatly routed cavities, while the Strat boasts three single coil pickups mounted onto the scratchplate and never coming into direct contact with the wood of the body at all. Remove the large scratchplate on the Strat and all the electronics come with it including the selector switch, pickups, wiring and output socket. When you look at this, plus the bolt-on body you can easily see how much simpler a Strat is to assemble. The Les Paul has wiring running through the body to the three-way pickup selector mounted on the top front bout of the guitar, the individual

pickup volume and tone controls and to the jack output on the bottom edge. Each Gibson humbucker is quieter than the Fender's smaller single-coil designs and provides very roughly twice the output, hence the term humbucker

which means a pick-up that literally bucks the hum endemic to single-coil varieties which are notoriously susceptible to external interference, especially fluorescent lighting, which, as all Strat players know, can be infuriating.

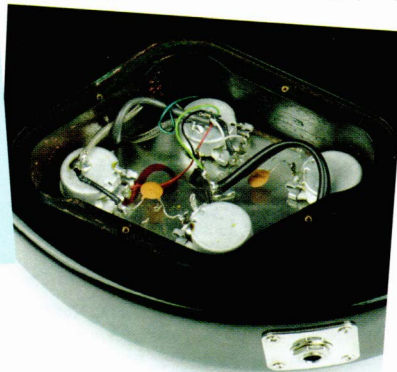
Stripping a Strat down to its component parts is quick and easy, even for a novice, but not so the Les Paul. To separate neck from body you would need to crack the finish and steam the glued joint apart, not something to be undertaken lightly except by an expert luthier.

Over the years of course there have been many variations on these two themes. Les Pauls with single-coil Gibson P90 pick-ups and Stratocasters with humbuckers, normally installed in the bridge position to boost their notoriously low output there. There are Strats without whammy bars and Les Pauls with Bigsby bolt-on tremolo units. Remember I said earlier that for every rule there is an exception, so there have been many attempts by both companies to broaden the appeal of each instrument by offering modified commemorative re-issues endorsed by one famous player or another. But the really sought-after and hence the most valuable guitars are the pre-CBS Stratocasters (pre circa 1965) and the Les Pauls from the 50's and 60's – and in particular the absolute holy-grail, the sunburst '59. To be top dollar items these must be completely original and believe me, such guitars are extremely rare despite what sellers will tell you. Any non-original parts or paint re-finishing damages the value of the instrument substantially and I



mean anything. Even replacement screws are a no-no. Any modifications from standard and the price they command will be compromised and this is completely regardless of their playability. Originality is absolutely the deciding factor where values are concerned. My advice when considering an investment in any such instrument is two-fold. Firstly, find someone who truly knows what they are doing to advise you as to genuine originality and secondly, even if you have the above then still be very, very careful. When dealing with vintage guitars, if something seems too good to be true, then it always is.

Trying to describe the sound of these two fine instruments is only really possible in general terms and is best done with the ears as opposed to words. Guitars have amongst the best and most expressive touch



sensitivity of any instrument. You can excite the note almost anywhere along the string and with just about anything, including plectrums, coins and various parts of the finger or nail, giving the flavour, shape and energy

of the note almost infinite possibilities. But I'd say that the Les Paul is certainly more powerful, thicker, darker, stronger and has a warmer and more rounded tonality. Leading edges are smooth and yet still extremely punchy and the sustain on any Humbucker equipped instrument is amazing. You can bang out unbelievably chunky power chords that will give the song that wall of sound backdrop so loved by heavier rock bands, while the soloing sounds are legendary. The bridge pick-up has real bite without losing its thick tone while the neck pick-up, with the tone backed off will give you that rounded and harmonically rich 'Woman' tone that works beautifully with slow, twelve-bar blues or even jazz. As a playing platform the Gibson is just so stable and with its big fretboard and chunky frets you can really put some work on the note in the form of variable vibratos, hammer-ons, slurs and accurate string bends which is helped enormously by that long and even sustain. With such a lengthy note envelope to play with the guitar is a real joy to handle, even if physically its balance can weigh down on the shoulder a bit after an hour or so of standing.

The Fender is a very different proposition. It seems to feel lighter, even though the difference may not always be borne out on the scales. For me it also has a lighter action and a thinner, leaner sound with a lot more "twang" to ►

▶ the note. The three pickups give a broad tonal range with the one at the bridge noticeably weaker although it has great cutting edge. The Strat has always seemed phasier too, particularly when combinations of front and middle and middle and back pickups are selected. But the note envelope carries a compressive blister at the leading edge and this really gives it a character all of its own, particularly on maple-necked models, which seem to emphasise this even more. It doesn't have the thick raw tonal power of the Les Paul and will never have the same awesome levels of pure sustain, but instead it has a lighter tonal colour which can be very clean and is great for choppy chord work. In many ways it is the archetypal electric guitar sound, locked into the minds of so many as the sound of The Shadows who used both its rhythmic and soloing sounds to lay the ground for so much of what was to follow.

When you consider the enormous range of playing techniques and the massive contribution that the amplifier with its overdriven inputs can make to a guitar's sound then it is, sometimes quite difficult to identify just which guitar is being used. But let me leave you with a few of the more archetypal examples of both instruments. Most of Jimmy Page's work with Led Zeppelin was with a Les Paul, as was the mercurial Peter Green's with Fleetwood Mac. 'Albatross' for instance shows the gentle warm, sweet tonality of the Les Paul beautifully. Turn the clock forward a couple of decades and check out Gary Moore playing that same '59 sunburst guitar on 'Still Got The Blues'. This is a guitar that I know personally, as it is now owned by a friend of mine. On the extended solo at the end of the track Gary really shows off the instrument's range with crying vibratos of full bloodied sustain and if you

listen you'll hear
him switch,
mid-solo,

from front to back pickup
as the sound gets edgier, angrier and
more aggressive. Slash, with Guns N'

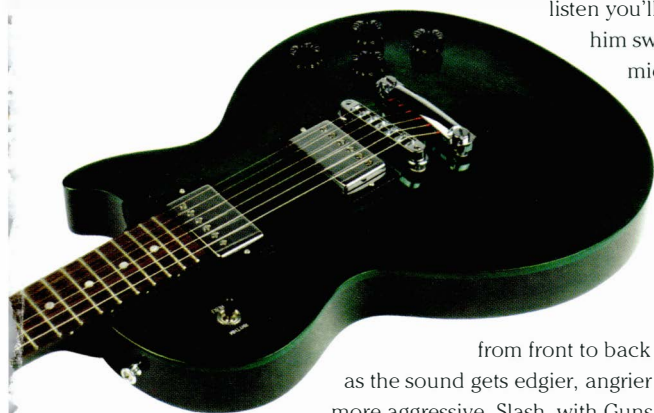
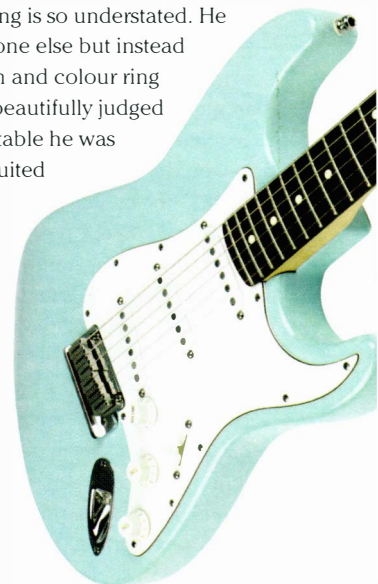
Roses, is another Les Paul player who uses the full power of the instrument. Listen to 'November Rain' for its power chords and chunky solos and of course 'Sweet Child 'O Mine' for its great opening riff and groin-based wah-wah solo. Few players can wring a Les Paul out in quite the same way as Slash, although I must admit that if you like pure guitar shredders then get a listen to Zakk Wylde and the crazy stuff

he can do with a Les Paul. Some of the rare '59's are so famous that they have their own identities and names such as the great Billy Gibbons example known as Pearly Gates, which he brings out every once in a while. But for a more considered vintage style then listen to Paul Kossoff with Free for the best and most subtle vibrato work you'll hear from an electric player and the way that his playing is so understated. He plays less notes than almost anyone else but instead he lets the guitar's natural sustain and colour ring through a series of languid and beautifully judged solos that show just how comfortable he was with the instrument and how it suited his style so wonderfully.

Virtually every electric guitarist is influenced in some way by Hendrix and for me he is THE Strat player. The way he played, the sound he managed to wring from it and even how he held the guitar still seem so fresh and exciting. Who else could play 'Voodoo Child' and how many times have you heard 'Little Wing' improved on, even by the great Stevie Ray Vaughan?

The amazing thing is that, being such a heavy tremolo user, Hendrix was so rarely in tune. But he used the sounds of the Fender and particularly that unique attack within his chord work to such great percussive effect that it was just about the perfect blend of instrument and style that I've heard, even 37 years after his tragic death. He did things that laid down a feel for all guitarists to borrow from. And while we're speaking of SRV, if you want to really understand what a Strat sounds like then look no further than this great player who just plugged in and really boogied. For a purer Strat tone listen to the music of Eric Johnson, one of the greatest artists of this guitar there has ever been. While thinking about this article I realised that there are more Strat players than ever these days and two of the best contemporary musicians who have made this guitar a massive part of their personal sound are John Mayer and Thomas Blug, both well worth seeking out and another pair who borrow from Hendrix in both style and feel but have their own approach and sound.

That's the most important thing for any guitarist I think, to create your own style and identity. It doesn't really matter how well you play technically, or whether you prefer a Les Paul or a Strat. As long as you really enjoy it you can learn so much by just listening. I regularly use my hi-fi system as a tool to blatantly rip-off the world's greatest guitarists, Oh, and a few hours regular practice won't do any harm either. Happy strumming.





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by Roy Gregory

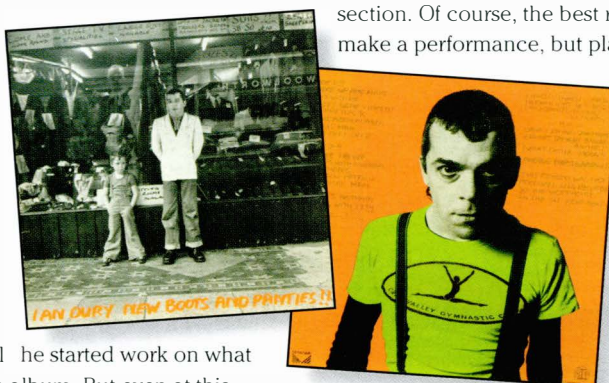
If parental advisory stickers had existed when Ian Dury and the Blockheads recorded *New Boots And Panties!!* then the cover would have been one great big one – and that’s just for the first line of ‘Plaistow Patricia’! And that’s leaving aside gems such as ‘Wake Up And Make Love To Me’, ‘I’m Partial To Your Abracadabra’ and ‘Billericay Dickie’. Mr Dury might have set new standards for sexual innuendo but he was far from afraid of full frontal assault – or should that be offense. But to get hung up on the language is missing the point, or at least the right parts of the language.

Born in 1942, polio victim Dury was an unlikely pop idol, but his unique perspective and cockney upbringing fuelled a sardonic intelligence and wicked wit, in turn manifested in songs and lyrics of disarming simplicity or crudity, each underpinned by incisive observation or hidden depths. His first outing was fronting Kilburn and the Highroads but when they folded in the mid-70s Dury found a home at the recently formed Stiff Records, a label that allowed his creativity full rein. Teamed with Chaz Jankel he started work on what was planned to be his first solo album. But even at this stage bassist Norman Watt-Roy and drummer Charley Charles (later to become core members of the Blockheads) were central to proceedings, defining the deeply funky groove that was to provide the propulsion for Jankel’s beautifully crafted melodies, giving him the freedom to ransack the popular music pantheon, grafting the most unlikely of arrangements and genres into superbly crafted four-minute masterpieces. And topping it off of course, was the dexterous, articulate, challenging intelligence of Dury’s half spoken lyrics.

Given the timing it’s easy to tar *New Boots...* with the punk/shock brush but if this music is anything, it’s certainly not generic in any sense of the word. Part funk, part honky-tonk, part music hall, part ballad but not afraid to rock the band simply grab whatever seems suitable to the moment and Dury’s sinuous delivery, itself part rhyming slang, part rap – long before anybody over here had even heard of rap. But no matter the subject or the vocabulary, that underlying

intelligence is a constant presence. Even the barrage of four letter words that assaults the senses at the start of ‘Plaistow Patricia’ transposes into graffiti sprayed on a wall, exactly the kind of vocal juxtaposition that Dury loved so much.

But the key ingredient in this album’s staggering success, one that’s so often overlooked, was the sheer excellence of the recording. Dury’s vocals are beautifully solid and kept separate in their own acoustic space. Likewise, the various instruments are naturally spaced and never clash or compete, allowing the elegance of the arrangements to work its magic, even on the straightahead thrash of ‘Blackmail Man’. And underneath it all lies the solid foundation of the bass and drums, an object lesson in how to record a rhythm section. Of course, the best recording in the world can’t make a performance, but players honed by years on the pub circuit can – and the Blockheads had that special chemistry. It was exactly the kind of easy intimacy that Dury needed to match his spiky, uncomfortably honest lyrics. Adult music for an adult audience, *New Boots...* was undoubtedly of the moment, but like all true masterworks, its power endures. ➤



Ian Dury

New Boots And Panties!!

Originally released on Stiff Records, Sept '77

Track Listing:

1. Wake Up And Make Love With Me
2. Sweet Gene Vincent
3. I'm Partial To Your Abracadabra
4. My Old Man
5. Billericay Dickie
6. Sex And Drugs And Rock And Roll (not listed)
7. Clever Trevor
8. If I Was With A Woman
9. Blockheads
10. Plaistow Patricia
11. Blackmail Man

Words: Dury
Music: Jankel

Personnel:

Ian Dury – vocals
Charley Charles – drums
Norman Watt-Roy – bass
Chaz Jankel – guitars and keyboards
Davey Payne – saxophones


Produced at the Workhouse by Peter Jenner, Laurie Latham and Rick Walton

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Aug '98 and Apr '00 on A Hit Label (AHLCD 57)
Jun '00 on REpertoire (REP 4546)

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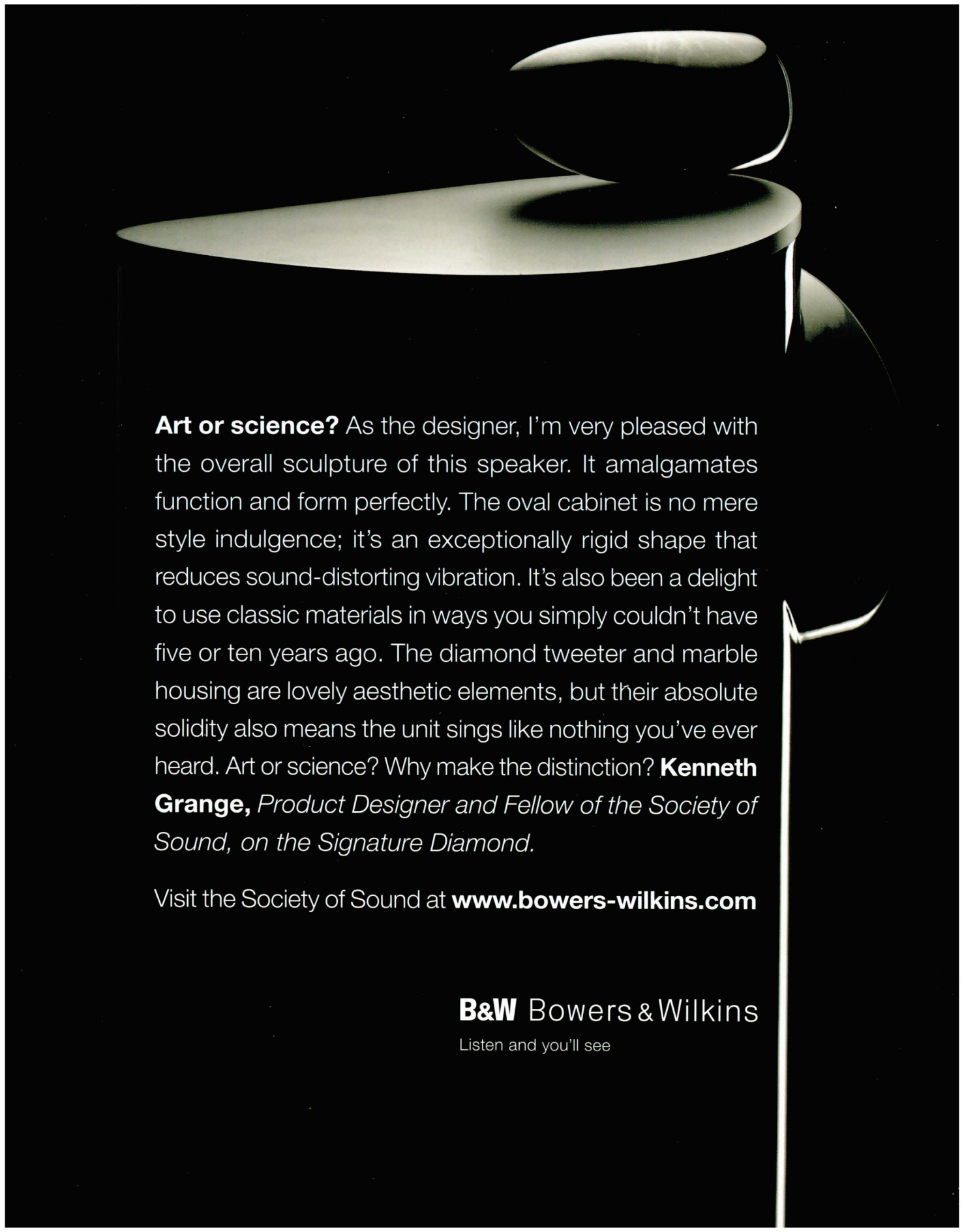
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