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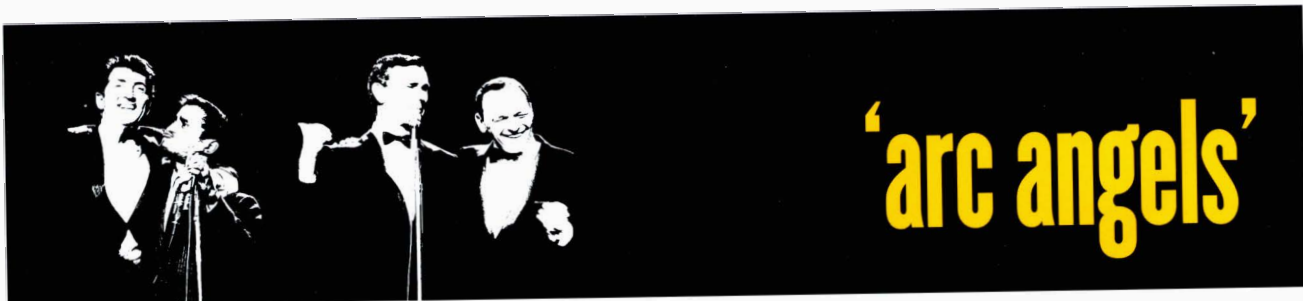
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IN THE NEWS / OCTOBER 05 / IEN KESSLER / PPT 4

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**"THE SOUND OF THE PH7 IS WHAT COUNTS AND
IT'S A STUNNER"**

HI-FI PLUS / ISSUE 45 / ROY GREGORY / PPT

AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE PH7 VACUUM TUBE PRE- PRE AMPLIFIER



**"IT JUST SOUNDS LIKE YOU ALWAYS HOPED
CD COULD SOUND, IF CD WAS DONE RIGHT"**

THE COLLECTOR / MAY '06 / ALAN GROOM / CD7

AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE CD 7 VACUUM TUBE CD PLAYER

Audio Research has always used the knowledge gained through designing their Reference series components to benefit every model in their range. Phono stages, pre-amplifiers, power amps – Audio Research believes, like Formula 1 car designers, that the benefits gained at the cutting edge should be shared.

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I know it's only May, but the year comes round so quickly, especially when your issues are two months apart. Which means that it's time to start thinking about the Autumn shows again...

Having run a public demonstration in Denver last year, and dabbled a little with one in Bristol, it's time to firm-up plans for future events, making our demonstrations more frequent and more accessible. The problem has always been that the demonstrations need considerable planning and effort (both by ourselves and those companies loaning equipment) and in order to work effectively, they have to be closed door, ticketed presentations: which limits the number of people who get to see the results of all the hard work. So, with the Bristol and Manchester shows within a month of each other each spring, London and Denver enjoying similar proximity in the Autumn, why not create a demonstration for each pair of shows? That way we maximize on the planning and twice as many people get to see each demo. Okay, so we can't use the same actual system in London and Denver, but at least we're cutting down on duplication.

The other big frustration for readers is when tickets run out. This was a problem in Manchester this year and a near crisis in Denver, where the organizers had rather underestimated the popularity of the demonstrations. With that in mind we've got a much larger space in Denver and we've organized a similarly large room in London, although that means that it will have to be in the Renaissance Hotel across the Bath Road (along with a number of other companies choosing to exhibit "off-site"). No, this isn't an attempt to create a rival show – it's just a necessary step to ensure we get the right conditions for our presentation and we will of course also be present at the main site. Which brings me finally, to the question of tickets. We will be trialing advanced ticketing for the London and Denver demonstrations, open to subscribers only. Details will be released in the next issue so watch this space...



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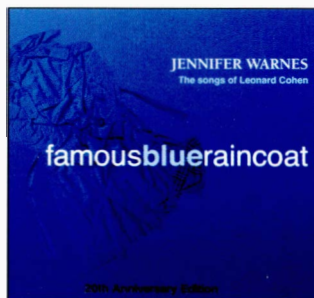
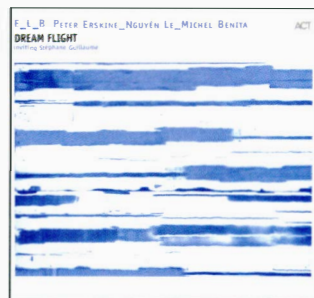
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Sprezzatura


Famous for his 'Il Libro Del Cortegiano' (The Book of the Courtier, 1528), Renaissance humanist Baldesar Castiglione coined the word 'sprezzatura' to describe the ideal for courtly behaviour. He insisted that in order to be worthy, exceptional virtuosity should be conveyed with an unaffected, effortless dignity. In essence, sprezzatura is the art of making something difficult look easy. Created from the finest materials and complex technologies, our superlative Platinum loudspeakers are a sophisticated blend of craftsmanship and science, but make music so gracefully that it sounds naturally effortless.

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HOME TRUTHS...

by Jimmy Hughes

No matter how good your hi-fi system is, or how much it cost, I'm willing to bet there's at least one type of music, or musical instrument, it fails to reproduce successfully. Given the broad variety of music out there, and the huge range of instruments available, this is hardly surprising. That said, hi-fi systems know nothing about music. They're simply dealing with information and turning it into sound – sound that (hopefully) strikes the listener as convincing and believable. The aesthetic distinctions we make between different types of music - rock, jazz, classical, etc - are simply not there for hi-fi systems.

Put like that it sounds easy. But music is complex and demanding, and the ear is subtle and discerning. Each musical instrument has its own special signature – its own unique characteristic. The qualities needed to reproduce (say) a huge pipe organ are not the same as those required for an acoustic guitar. Human voice requires something different again. Yet, while the various instruments each have different sounds and are separate and individual, they're nonetheless closely related and inter-dependant. It may seem counter-intuitive, but what makes a solo soprano voice sound better, also works for a bass guitar. . .

Now, my hi-fi system appeared to work pretty successfully on most types of music, producing a convincing portrayal of virtually all instruments. Least, that's how it seemed to me. Yet one instrument never sounded quite right, and has given me much trouble over the past twenty or so years - the Harpsichord. Maybe I just don't like the sound of the instrument, but (as recorded) it nearly always seems thin, harsh, and clattery. Sir Thomas Beecham famously described the sound of the harpsichord as being akin to two skeletons copulating on a tin roof, and you can see his point. At it's worst, the harpsichord can sound brittle and aggressive, with a rough jangly treble that results in a dense congested quality when chords are played. Take something like the finale to Bach's *Italian Concerto* – just try and find a recording that doesn't sound like two blocks of sandpaper being rubbed together. . . Many years ago I was at Abbey Road Studios during the re-mastering of the Spanish Columbia stereo recordings made in the late 1950s by Atalufo Argenta. When we got to the tape of Falla's *Harpsichord*

Concerto, everyone (bar me and the engineer) got up and left the room! The sound was that unpleasant. . .

Actually, the harpsichord is one of the few instruments I've never heard properly in real life. I have never experienced a solo recital in a small or medium sized room. The last time I heard a harpsichord was at a Carols by Candlelight concert at the Royal Albert Hall Dec 2007. It was discreetly amplified, but still sounded gorgeous. The tone was rich and resonant, with nice depth and warmth. But the instrument

was only being used for continuo purposes, and wasn't played loudly. It's different when the instrument is being played solo. Perhaps to create the impression of a bigger sound, engineers tend to close-mike it, and that's when the fun starts. . .

My problem is, I don't know if the brightness/harshness I hear is due to the instrument itself, or something that gets added during the record/replay process. It may well be that, if you stick your head close-up, the sound is bright and edgy. Also, much depends on the instrument – there are many different types and sizes

of harpsichord. In the LP era, I used to find harpsichord discs would sound okay over (say) the first two thirds of the side, after which the sound would grow more and more congested. CD sort of solved that problem, only now the sound had an unpleasant 'edge' over the whole dam side – perhaps due to digital artefacts and suchlike.

I think the harpsichord is uniquely difficult to record and reproduce. Its mean dynamic level is very low, but the transient attack is very high. The overtones are very rich. It's very easy to record it at too a high a level - a problem exacerbated by placing microphones too close to the instrument. More than most instruments, the harpsichord needs space to breathe. It needs to be heard at a certain distance so that the ambience of the room can bathe its bright tones in an attractive warm light. In this respect, it's my belief that harpsichord recordings have largely gotten worse since the digital era.

If someone came over to my house and asked to hear a good harpsichord recording, I'd almost certainly choose something off LP, recorded during the 1970s – say Gustav Leonardt's set ▶



▶ of the Bach *English and French suites* briefly available in a boxed set on the Philips/Seon label. Leonardt actually re-recorded the Bach *suites* for EMI/Reflexe in the early '80s, but these digital recordings have a brighter/thinner less ingratiating sound than the earlier analogue recordings. The latter are no less incisive and detailed, but there's a cleaner more comfortable and spacious quality that the later recordings lack.

While I had the Aspara speakers for review some months back, I tried some CDs of harpsichord music, and found the results slightly less thin-sounding that I'm used to with my Impulse H-1s. When the Asparas went back, I had a look at the crossovers in my H-1s, and found (to my horror!) that the tweeter-damping resistor was just 1 Ohm. This is a very low value. Which means, the treble will be brighter and more immediate. For some instruments (like cymbals) this can be beneficial – you get a greater sense of stick on metal. But for instruments like Harpsichord it's not so good. So I removed the old resistors, and fitted new ones of 6 Ohms. With these in place, the result was a smoother more integrated treble, plus a better balance between midrange and high frequencies. Trying a couple of difficult harpsichord CDs, I noticed the sound was much fuller and cleaner, with less of that thin/jangly treble problem I'd grown to dislike so much.

But, encouraged by the way things were sounding, I purchased a boxed set of JS Bach's complete keyboard music on the Brilliant label – 23CDs for under £30. What a bargain! Or was I buying 20+ hours of sonic torture? I'd seen this set on sale several times before, but - because all the performances were on the harpsichord – I'd shunned it, despite the *Brilliant* price. Had the music been played on a piano I'd have bought it like a shot. But Harpsichord? I wasn't sure I could stand the pain.

The set features several different players/instruments, and is the product of more than one record label. Inevitably, the sound is not consistent. But it actually proved to be surprisingly good throughout – very listenable. Given a choice, I'd still prefer the piano, but at least my ears weren't bleeding at the end of each disc. I can't say I've noticed any downsides after replacing the tweeter damping resistors in my speakers. It's not made harpsichord sound better at the expense of making (say) guitar or piano worse. Actually, everything sounds better – not just harpsichord. Making this change has resulted in a smoother cleaner better-balanced sound. I now realise my system wasn't quite as well balanced as I'd previously thought. The results had been fine on nearly all instruments, or so it seemed. But harpsichord was highlighting a problem because of its unique combination of bright tonal balance and sharp transient attack.

And the moral of this story? Only that any instrument or style/type of music that fails to sound right, may actually be telling you something about your system and the way it's set up and voiced. The fault may only show on certain instruments, but it's affecting everything you listen to – to a greater or lesser degree. Only when the problem is cured will you realise how serious its effects were on overall sound quality. For the most part there was nothing 'wrong' with my hi-fi system – indeed, I think most people would've been happy indeed with the sound I was getting. On most music most of the time it sounded extremely good. But, the one instrument it consistently failed to reproduce convincingly, pointed to something that was wrong. It's easy to put the blame elsewhere. It's easy to say that digital is the problem, or excessively close-miking. These things may well be issues. But it could also be that you hi-fi has problems, and reacts badly when fed with a certain type of signal. ➤



MUSIC MATTERS

by Alan Sircom

You can dig up half a dozen different 'this is the future of hi-fi' products on every corridor of every hi-fi show. Whether that future is a revolutionary mains block, a new disc cleaner, a damping material that's just been declassified by NASA or a wholly new type of resistor made by specially trained hobbits... it's guaranteed to change the way we listen to hi-fi! But one thing we can't ignore, even in our little world; the way we are buying and storing our music really is changing.

If you are looking for new products in audio, it's becoming

hard to ignore the hard disk player and music server element of modern hi-fi. At the Munich High-End Show this year, hair-shirt stalwarts Naim Audio got into the hard disk market with its new HDX player, joining the likes of Linn and Arcam (among others) to produce products that can treat the CD as simply yet another data carrier. Of the three, perhaps Linn has taken the boldest steps into what might be the hi-fi of tomorrow; several of the company's latest products (Klimax DS, Akurate DS and Sneaky Music DS), ▶

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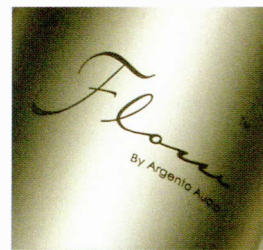
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the Power of Perfection....



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

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▶ are dubbed 'digital stream players' and don't even include a transport mechanism. Linn suggests either transferring your disc collection using your own PC, or getting a third party to populate a suitable NAS (network attached storage) box.

Both Linn and Naim hold an extra ace or two – both have experience of custom install servers... and both have record labels. Although these labels still offer their recorded output on LP, CD and – in Linn's case, at least – SACD, both are migrating an increasing proportion of their catalogues online. As well as MP3 and CD-level files, this means audiophile-

grade downloads; essentially SACDs without the sliver of polycarbonate. With the promise of limited moving parts, seamless back-ups to other hard disk drives and potentially thousands of discs' worth of music accessible (kind of) instantaneously, the hard disk player offers more than a CD player ever could; In theory, at least.

Until recently, the music server and hard disk player were a little too Britney in showing off their underwear. It wasn't hard to see that beneath the thick alloy front panel and the pseudo-audiophile mannerisms, there lay a PC. Some audiophiles have embraced this change rather too enthusiastically, dumping decades of hi-fi knowledge and experience for a Mac or PC front end. In truth, there are substantial advantages to moving those bits from the CD to a hard disk drive, though; most notably, that you can repeatedly re-run the disc datastream to create a bit-perfect copy, instead of relying on error correction 'on the fly'. But this benefit overlooks the fact that the way that data is handled in the digital domain and converted to analogue remains the crucial element in any digital audio player. In most cases, this data handling was woefully inadequate inside a PC and the Mac – though slightly better suited for the task – could still be substantially improved.

Now with audiophile-driven companies getting involved with making hard disk players and music servers, things are looking distinctly better for stored music. That the likes of Arcam, Linn and Naim are even entering this market shakes up the audiophile world on a fundamental level. These are not companies new to hi-fi, nor are they brands that deal

with a diverse range of consumer electronics. Instead, these are dyed-in-the-wool, best of British Hi-Fi brands; the Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin of the flat earth revolution. Remember, it was only a couple of decades ago that Ivor Tiefenbrun of Linn was rumoured to be turfing people out of demonstration rooms for wearing a digital watch (from a purely horological perspective, this is a move that deserves applause). That's one dirty great paradigm shift, and they may just take the rest of the UK hi-fi industry with them in the process.

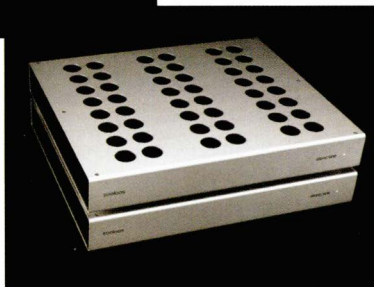
The big excitement in music storage isn't from a British company, though; it's not even from a company with a long audiophile history. It's from a company called Sooloos in America. The company makes a music server that not only looks good enough to be used outside the plant room of custom installers, but also makes the whole interactive nature of a music server come to life.

A typical Sooloos system is divided up into three sections; control, source and store. Control (typified by the control:one unit) combines a touchscreen with a slot-CD drive. This slowly rips the CD and stores it to the pair of 'mirrored' source:one terabyte drives. These files

are accessed by the user thanks to the control:one touchscreen and driven by the source:one player/head unit/brains of the operation. Aside from making the storage system proprietary, this

is almost identical to any server-based system. What sets the Sooloos apart from most of the other offerings is its incredibly rich handling of music.

It accesses the AMG (all music guide) database, which populates the Sooloos with all manner of metadata. All the usuals are there including artist, album and track details, but with these come cover art, information on the composers, musicians, record producer, genre information, reviews and practically anything you can think of. And the Sooloos puts this metadata to good use. Suddenly, you become an instant musicologist, and a dab hand at the musical equivalent of Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon, instantly linking one album to another thanks to the bassist or the engineer. This is why Sooloos has 'swims' as well as 'playlists'; you swim (drift, actually) from album to album by many different methods, taking the music in and out of the swim as you feel fit. ▶



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'This arm/turntable combo is the most graceful-sounding analogue front-end I've heard'.

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

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▶ According to the Sooloos website, it is taking the swim concept still further by preloading whole genre packages of CDs and handing you in effect, both the server and a suitcase full of discs. In some cases, this means you will swim through music you didn't know you had!

The one remaining question is what happens to the CD player? In the Sooloos system, this isn't necessarily a question in need of an answer – a standalone system merely gains an extra Sooloos source. It's the future of a Naim CD player in a

system that sports a Naim HDX that is more questionable; the HDX is designed to slot in the same spaces as a CD player and does the same things (albeit a little slowly by comparison) and then some. Think about it this way... if you want to play a particular CD and it's preloaded into your hard disk player, why would you play it on your CD player? Even if the quality of the CD replay was better than the hard disk player, there comes a point where convenience wins over performance. And that's the start of the slippery slope. ▶+



PLAYING THE SYSTEM

by Roy Gregory

As previously reported, high-end connector manufacturer WBT took the unusual step at this year's CES of not just demonstrating their products, but demonstrating them against fake versions manufactured in the Far East. Using a specially adapted pair of Audio Physic speakers, they were able to compare the sonic performance of their NextGen and Economy Line terminals to a pair of cheap imitation ones. The results were so interesting and impressive that I decided (with WBT's help) to develop the demonstration still further and present it to readers at the Bristol show.

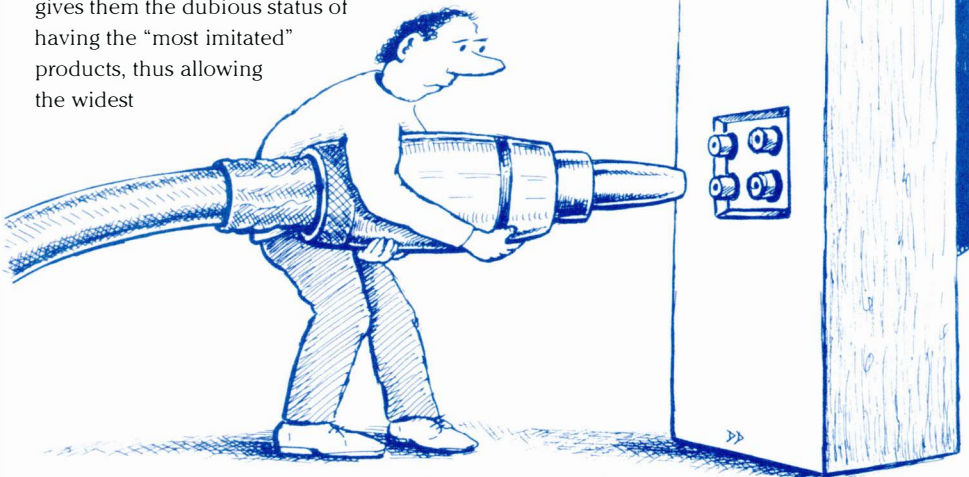
Normally our demos are not company/product specific; in fact, despite appearances, neither was this one. It's actually about connector quality in general. It's just that WBT's position as market leader gives them the dubious status of having the "most imitated" products, thus allowing the widest

possible comparison of apparently similar items. Using the same pair of Audio Physic speakers, I had the Chord Co. produce three sets of identical length Cobra interconnects, one standard, one with WBT NextGen plugs and the last (you guessed it) with fake WBTs. They were also burnt-in for identical periods before the show.

I won't spell out the demonstration in detail, but clearly the set up allowed us to change interconnects and speaker terminals in turn – and each time the difference was clearly audible. But the real shock was going from the all-

NextGen to the all-fake set

up, a difference that can only be described as huge. Using a Bill Malonee track, the music went from interesting, engaging, intimate and enjoyable to a disjointed, grainy, nasty and frankly rather unpleasant facsimile of itself. Indeed, it was hard to credit that this was the same track. And note that these were not fancy, high-priced cables in some super critical system. Note also that the differences weren't hi-fi in nature but ▶



▶ musical, turning a great performance by a great singer into something not worth listening to. Impressive stuff for just a couple of connectors!

But this is still only half the story. What about the speaker plugs and the sockets on the electronics? Well, marking the launch of their new 4mm plug at the Munich show, WBT went the whole hog, bringing speaker cables and specially adapted electronics into the mix. In practice, swapping between the RCA sockets proved a step too far for a show situation (the potential for disaster being just too great) but just the ability to hear an all NextGen system, equipped from end to end was a treat in itself – and the results didn't disappoint. Here was an even starker contrast between the system's capabilities, open, unforced and natural as compared to grainy and dislocated. Using the fake plugs and speaker terminals turned the music into a flat, two-dimensional collage – like the images that David Hockney used to produce from multiple, close-up Polaroid shots; some details and shapes got distorted, some disappeared altogether. Compare that to the solid, three-dimensional, coherent whole presented by the NextGens and that's quite a shock.

Where does this leave us? Well, it does two things, throwing a stark spot-light on the issue of connector quality and also pointing the way towards the next big battlefield in the cable wars. Ulrik Madsen of Argento cables showed me some beautifully executed prototypes of the low-mass plugs he's developing for his latest assault on the state of the art, and several other manufacturers are whispering darkly about designing their own connectors. Tellingly, the main object of their loathing seems to be the XLR, a plug where none of the commercial versions sound any good! Read the Hovland STRATOS review and you'll see that I preferred the amp connected via its RCA inputs – despite the fact that it's a fully balanced design. And guess what? The differences I heard were exactly the type of differences I hear between the best connectors and their mediocre equivalents.

Of course, manufacturing small numbers of specially designed connectors is going to be costly, threatening to push the price of already scarily expensive cables out beyond the stratosphere. A really well designed OEM solution will always be more cost effective and by far the best option for those manufacturers who lack the knowledge, capability or scale of operations to create their own designs. Besides which, WBT have another card up their sleeve; those still to be heard socket comparisons they're now equipped to demonstrate. Hopefully it's an opportunity I'll be getting sooner rather than later, but between you and me, I've a sneaking suspicion that plugs are only half the story and that the female half of the connector equation might just represent the final frontier when it comes to signal transmission. ➤

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The Hovland STRATOS Mono-Bloc Amplifiers

by Roy Gregory

The notion that (in hi-fi terms at least) real power comes with a heavy cost attached had become something of an article of faith around these particular parts, not least because the sonic price paid all too often seemed even greater than the financial one. For many years, any amplifier offering much more than a hundred or so Watts seemed to become increasingly bludgeoning and muscle bound as its power rating climbed, reason enough to seek out speakers that offer a less demanding load. But then came the Karan KA M1200s, massive and massively impractical, there was no escaping the fact that, faced with the awkward load and extended bandwidth presented by Avalon's Eidolon Diamond they were both much more capable and more musical than lower powered alternatives. Well, you can always stick a finger in the dyke of dogma, but when the latest range of Conrad-Johnson amplifiers gave the rare opportunity to compare genuinely similar designs at three different power levels, the intellectual temptation was simply overpowering. The result merely confirmed the suspicion raised by the Karans that it's not the quantity that's the problem, it's executing its delivery, the LPM275s offering up a truly memorable performance.

Meanwhile, recent developments in loudspeaker design, most notably the Eidolon's bigger brother the Isis, have made a genuinely powerful amplifier of real musical merit (and one that you might actually be able to pick up and move by

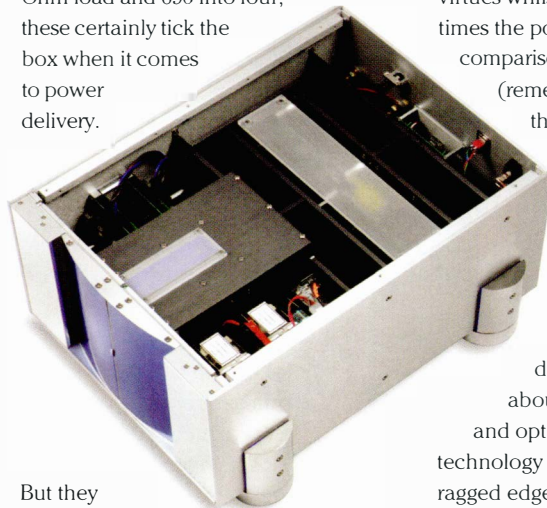
oneself) an even more desirable (for a reviewer read "essential") commodity. Enter then the stiffest test yet of my new found optimism when it comes to higher output power: the Hovland STRATOS mono-blocs. Rated at 400 Watts into an 8 Ohm load and 690 into four, these certainly tick the box when it comes to power delivery.

But they follow directly in the footsteps of Hovland's RADIA, a 125 Watt stereo chassis that's been my amp of choice for some five years. And in all that time, nothing save the two hideously expensive amps mentioned above has threatened its sonic superiority. Its innate balance of agility and resolution, lively dynamics and power on demand have given it the

ability to sound like a small amp but drive all

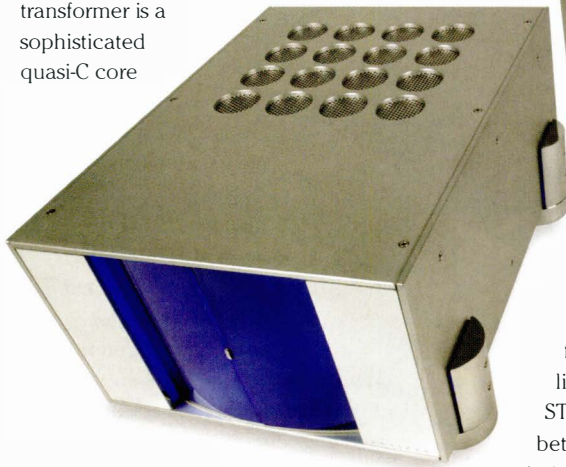
but the most difficult loads. Now, the Karan and c-j designs have surpassed its performance, the Ayre MXRs have equaled it – and all are more capable with difficult loudspeakers. The question is can the STRATOS retain the RADIA's virtues whilst delivering nearly four times the power? The directness of the comparison will make for a stiff test (remember just how impressive the RADIA is, how well it does the small things) but then Hovland have a way of meeting such challenges and coming out on top.

Externally there's no mistaking the STRATOS lineage. Like all Hovland designs these are more about the careful execution and optimization of proven technology than the creation of ragged edge circuitry, more about a deep understanding of the elements comprising the design and their interaction than the invention of new distortion types to justify a price tag. The sheer care and attention that goes into every aspect of circuit layout, component selection and mechanical construction, the functional elegance of the final physical form make these the most Bauhaus products I've come across. Just like the RADIA, enormous care goes into the creation of a non-resonant chassis that acts to drain destructive vibrational energy away from the active components. The beautifully milled casework is edge to edge constructed from panels of differing thickness to inhibit eddy currents and damp structural resonance, helped by sandwich construction with



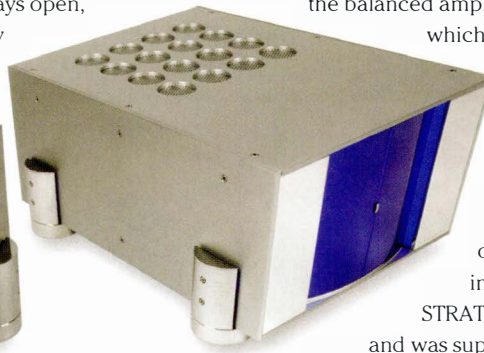
▶ appliqué Perspex slabs that create non-resonant sub-assemblies. The heavy cylindrical feet shroud adjustable cones to ensure stable placement and mechanical grounding of the amplifier's substantial 40.5kg bulk. The shoulders can be replaced with extensions allowing the amps to be stacked, although sonically speaking I'd avoid this in all except the direst situations, as the uprights lack the sophisticated mechanical coupling of the chassis itself, thus negating its effectiveness. Having said that, they sure do look purdy...

Inside, these amps are beautifully constructed. The mains transformer is a sophisticated quasi-C core



design which like the one in the RADIA is physically decoupled from the chassis, but unlike the relative simplicity of the arrangements in the stereo amp, here the transformer is both fully suspended and enclosed in its own separate housing to completely isolate mechanical noise and vibration. Metal-bodied, bi-polar output devices are close coupled to massive internal heatsinks, in turn arranged to mechanically damp the transistors and cool them via the efficient natural convection currents created by the chassis' chimney vents. With 80000 microF of reservoir capacitance provided by a bank of high-speed, slit-foil capacitors, the amplifiers' agility and dynamic response is further enhanced by ultra-short signal paths.

Of course, this wouldn't be a Hovland product without the signature blue illumination and the STRATOS doesn't disappoint, the curved fascia edge lit by a wash of light. However, like all the other Hovland designs the light show can be switched off, leaving only the central blue line that acts as both standby and full power indicator. A switch on the back allows the user to select "low" or "high" standby modes, the latter running the audio circuits at idle but with the signal and speaker relays open, significantly



shortening the time the amp takes to reach full performance. Also like the other designs, the STRATOS sound noticeably better in "stealth" mode with their illumination switched off. The results (the removal of a haze that in turn creates greater transparency and delicacy, and more effective phrasing) are so obvious that I wonder that anyone would actually use the amps "fully lit" – although it's easy enough to switch on the lights if you are not listening and just like their look. In line with their functional elegance, the review pair were delivered in a simple brushed aluminium finish, although black is also available with matching black chrome trim. And while we're on the subject of appearance let's be clear about one thing: proportionally speaking, this is the most satisfying Hovland yet – and that's saying something!

Where the STRATOS do differ from

the RADIA, is in providing a choice of balanced or single-ended inputs (the stereo chassis must be specced as one or the other) and two-pairs of binding posts per channel (which only accept spades, but at least do so really securely without resorting to a socket wrench). This reflects in part the fully balanced topology employed in both this amp and the RADIA, but also the development of a sophisticated new active circuit to enable the single-ended input to properly drive the balanced amplifier, a circuit

which is bypassed with the balanced connection.

Although the HP200 pre-amp is now equipped with balanced outputs (using the inverse version of the STRATOS input circuit)

and was supplied in this form along with the amps, a fully differential pre-amp and hard-disc derived digital front-end that match the look of the STRATOS were shown at this year's CES. I used the amps in both modes, driven from either my Connoisseur line-stage, the Ayre K1-xe or the HP200 pre-amp. Cabling was Nordost Odin or Hovland's own, while support was provided by finite-elemente platforms.

One especially nice touch is that the large cylindrical feet and their associated cones are designed to allow easy replacement of the latter with an alternative should owners so decide. Those supplied are Black Diamond Racing cones, but the threaded studs that attach them will readily accept the likes of a Symposium RollerBlock without disturbing the appearance of the amps or leaving them looking perched on some sort of afterthought. I tried both the Rollerblocks and Stillpoints cones and the latter represent a significant improvement, providing enough extra presence, body and harmonic texture, as well as allowing ▶



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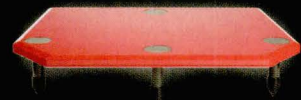
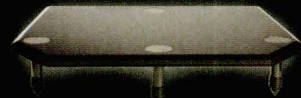
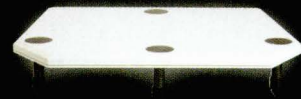
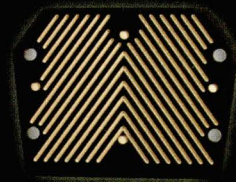
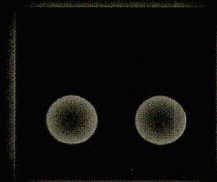
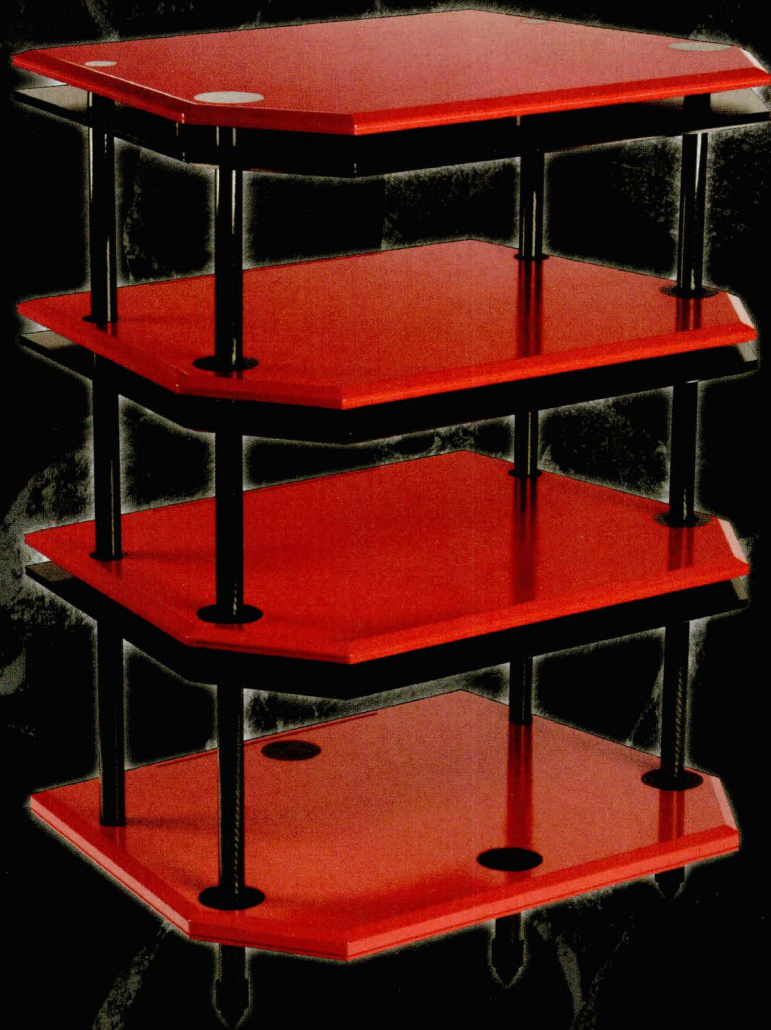
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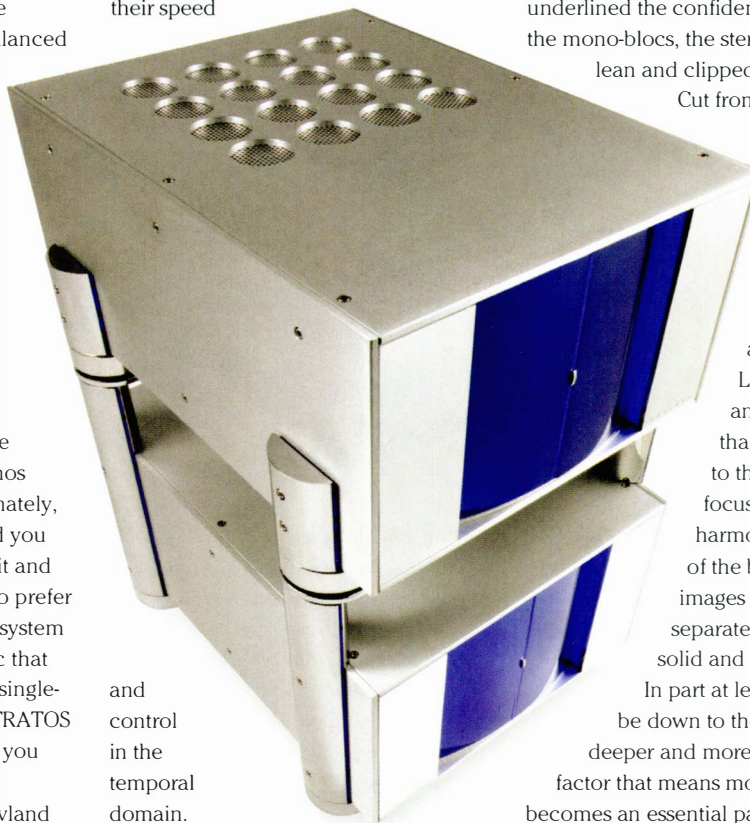
► images to focus and step away from the loudspeakers. Others might prefer the alternatives, but full marks to Hovland for offering a properly integrated solution. Just remember to make sure that the amps are evenly supported on all four feet, with no freedom to rock.

Hovland are adamant that the STRATOS sounds superior in balanced mode and there's no denying the added focus and grounded sense of stability that comes with the XLR connections. However, for me they also cost you some of the very fluidity and expressive verve that makes this amp so special, dynamically flattening the sound and introducing a restraint to the sense of musical momentum. Given the identical cables this could be down to the superiority of the NextGen phonos over the XLR connectors. Fortunately, with both connections provided you don't have to take my word for it and there will certainly be those who prefer the balanced option. But in my system at least, there is a musical magic that is effortlessly apparent with the single-ended cables. If you own the STRATOS you'll have paid your money so you can take your choice...

If the STRATOS look like a Hovland product, their sonic fingerprint is even more apparent. Putting the mono-blocs into the system simply to ensure that they were working properly after their journey it was four days before I realized that they were still there, quietly going about their business. That level of instant acceptance, even before I started playing with lights, cones and cabling is impressive indeed, reflecting the fact that these amps have that trick (one enjoyed by so few hi-fi components) of simply sounding right. Time and trouble spent working on wringing the last ounce of performance out of them just increases that effect, producing results that will have you sitting back with a silly

(and slightly self satisfied) grin on your face as you do that hi-fi rite of passage, the ritual wading through recordings old, new, borrowed and blues.

Keyword to describe the STRATOS' way with music has to be coherence, both for their even projection of energy across the frequency range but also for their speed



and control in the temporal domain.

Whether it's the pizzicato bass lines that usher in the second movement of Barbirolli's *Sibelius 2* with the LSO (tubby and blurred on the recording but kept jauntily up to speed by the STRATOS) or the massive synthetic shipyard soundscape that opens Jackie Leven's 'Defending Ancient Springs' (I told you I was pulling out the old favourites!) the notes and sounds are precisely placed in space and time, happening when and where they should for maximum musical effect. But it's not just leading edge precision that's important here. The STRATOS also deliver a natural life and weight to notes, body to their centre,

length to their tail that ensures their duration is right too. Music never sounds clipped or hurried, a quality I've been aware of but never fully appreciated until the arrival of the Grand Prix Audio turntable, a product for which the STRATOS offer the perfect foil.

Wheeling in the RADIA simply underlined the confident superiority of the mono-blocs, the stereo sounding lean and clipped in comparison.

Cut from the same cloth it wasn't so

much that the STRATOS offered better separation, just that it was more natural and intelligible. Listen longer and you'll realise that this is down to the greater focus, presence and harmonic resolution of the bigger amp; images aren't more separate, they are more solid and concentrated.

In part at least that has to be down to the mono design's deeper and more solid bass, a factor that means moving speakers becomes an essential part of any direct comparison. Simply drop the STRATOS into a system optimized for the RADIA and it will indeed sound sluggish and somewhat leaden. Pull the speakers forward an inch or so and the life and balance will fall back into place.

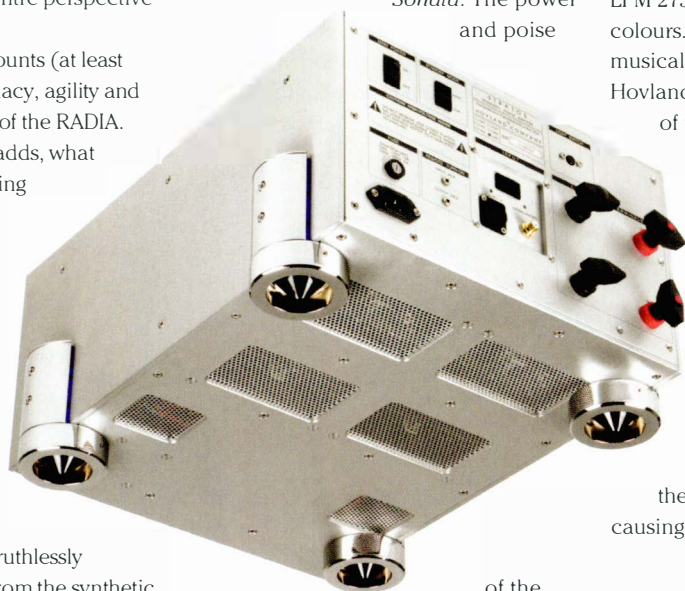
Where the Hovland signature is unmistakable with these amps is in their perspective. Some amplifiers, notably the Karans, establish the musical event in a coherent acoustic, allowing the listener to hear into the performance. The Hovlands do things the other way round. Their transparency, immediacy and presence put you in front of the performers, listening out, their emphasis on the individual instruments rather ►

▶ than the acoustic as a whole. That doesn't mean that they pull music apart – they're far too coherent for that. But it does mean that they offer a distinctly front and centre perspective – which is fine by me.

Clearly, this also accounts (at least in part) for their immediacy, agility and intimacy – all attributes of the RADIA. But what the STRATOS adds, what makes them so convincing and musically satisfying is the sheer substance and emphatic presence they bring to the performance. Believe me, when using the STRATOS when someone hits a drum it stays hit, while the rhythmic, harmonic and dynamic resolution and subtlety ruthlessly distinguish real drums from the synthetic. It's that level of insight, natural tonality and musical purpose that makes the STRATOS such a compelling and emotionally effective communicator. It also places it in quite a different league to the still impressive RADIA.

Paired with the Grand Prix Audio Monaco turntable (carrying the Triplanar VII and Lyra Titan i) along with the Connoisseur 4.2 LSE and PSE, the Reference 3A Grand Veenas and the Nordost Odin cable loom, the results achieved were remarkable for the naturalness of their weight, pace and timing. The GPA Monaco has delivered a new level of performance in this regard, as well as the signal the Connoisseurs have always been craving. The tactile clarity and musical sophistication of the Grand Veena delivers the message intact. But the real lesson here is just how comfortable the STRATOS is in such company, revealing new aspects to and stretching the performance of such seriously heavyweight partners. The proof of that pudding is in just how deliciously accessible it makes

recordings, how easily it sorts them out, from the densest of Protools bass mixes to the stark wonder of Cisco's (latest and greatest) Heifetz *Kreutzer Sonata*. The power and poise



of the maestro's bowing, his effortless combination of grace and bite, his ability to stretch a note or pause, to accelerate into a blindingly fast phrase or glissando is in its own way a remarkable metaphor for the performance of these Hovland amplifiers: a single instrument holds you fascinated, captivated, the extreme dexterity of the playing at once impressively pyrotechnic and deeply musical, supremely confident yet perfectly balanced against the accompanying piano. One player, one instrument: a microcosm of musical range and power. To listen to this record on the STRATOS is to revel in Heifetz' talent and technique so completely as to forget the system conjuring the magic and recreating it in your room and is there a higher compliment than that?

Where previous Hovland designs have always delivered remarkable musical coherence and value for money the STRATOS is quite a different beast. An out and out flagship designed to fear no competition, it has

met the company's target with ease. The Karan offers a more coherent sense of acoustic space and more comfortably mid-hall perspective, while the c-j LPM 275s offer richer and more vivid colours. But for immediacy and sheer musical articulation neither touches the Hovlands. It's both a natural extension of the house sound and a towering performance, albeit one that arrives hobbled by a heavy price tag. Listeners will need to weigh the cost/benefit and sonic attributes of the available options with care, but if Hovland's intent was to place a marker on the highest point then they've certainly succeeded. Somehow, I don't see the fact that having got there they have to jostle for space causing them any sleepless nights. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Fully Differential solid-state mono-bloc power amp
Inputs:	1x balanced XLR 1x single-ended phono
Input Impedance:	50 kOhms (unbalanced) 100 kOhms (balanced)
Output Power:	400 Watts into 8 Ohms 675 Watts into 4 Ohms
Output Connections:	2prs of spade only binding posts/ch
Dimensions (WxHxD):	400 x 250 x 475mm
Finishes:	Black or natural aluminium with matching chrome
Weight:	40.5kg ea.
Price:	£23000

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The darTZeel NHB-18NS preamplifier

by Chris Binns

Of all of the components that make up a hi-fi system, experience shows that it is the pre-amplifier that presents the biggest enigma. The task it has to perform is, in theory, pretty straightforward; directing the signal from the desired source component and controlling the volume.

Compared to the process of extracting information from the reflective surface of a CD or the groove of an LP, or driving massive amounts of power into a loudspeaker whose job consists of converting electricity back into recognisable audio, it should be a walk in the park. Its not even as if there is any gain needed, as the output from an average CD player is more than enough to drive most power amplifiers into clipping. Hence passives, although in the real world, considerations such as input/output impedance and the capacitance of the cables hinder the attainable performance, while active circuitry provides a degree of isolation and stability against such effects.

Why then, am I so often forced to conclude that the pre-amplifier is the defining component of a systems ultimate performance. And, while the limitations of a poor source component or compromised power amp/ loudspeaker combination are relatively easy to identify, the pre-amp often seems to be a constriction or compromise to sound quality that manifests itself in a far more subtle way. Of all audio components, the pre is the one that we expect to be

the most sonically pure and devoid of character, adding nothing while acting as the 'gateway' for the system that everything else connects to. And the truth is that for all the interesting and highly competent audio equipment I have auditioned in a system at home, the number of truly great pre-amps that have left a lasting impression can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

The NHB 108 power amplifier was the first product to appear from Swiss based daRTzeel. A 100 Watt per channel design that was the embodiment of simple, elegant and beautifully symmetrical circuitry, it had a build quality and attention to detail second to none. It also sounded staggeringly good. I was therefore only too happy to have it back while auditioning the 18NS pre-amp, which is built as you might expect, in much the same fashion. Imagine Swiss watch precision applied to virtually every aspect and



you begin to get the picture; attention to detail and refinement is the order of the day. Aesthetically the daRTzeel is quite conventional in its shape and mechanical construction, but the metalwork is finished in an industrial

red anodising with a mustard gold front panel (which incidentally is much darker than the power amplifier) and I guess this is a look that you will either love or hate – me, I'm making no comment. Further enhancing the 'glitz' factor is the gold plated nameplate that you send back to the manufacturer to have engraved with the serial number and your name once you have purchased the unit. Front panel controls consist of a power button, small toggles for mute and mono (hurrah!) and two rotary controls for input selection and volume that are labelled 'Enjoyment Source' and 'Pleasure Control'. A sense of humour lurking under the serious exterior?

Internal construction is about as good as it gets, using selected components and no less than twelve input boards on which the connectors in one of the neatest Finally, three multi-coloured Led indicators indicate the status and operating conditions of the pre amplifier.

The 18NS has four single-ended line-inputs together with one balanced; the RCA's are duplicated by (darTZeel's proprietary) 50 Ohm BNC's and there is a phono input; yep, the darTZeel has a fully fledged phono-stage on board, a trend that seems to be returning. Outputs consist of the usual fixed level tape, balanced and RCA options, augmented by three separately buffered BNC's specifically for the 108 power amp (the instruction manual ▶

► talks of incorporating filters for bi or tri-amping at a future stage).

The electronic design has a number of interesting aspects and some shared philosophy with the power amplifier. Thus the circuitry employs a simple, symmetrical configuration utilising discrete components (rather than op-amps) where the signal passes through only six transistors in the main gain stage. This delivers an impressively wide bandwidth, claimed to be within 1dB from 1Hz to 1MHz, with no overall feedback applied. Each input has its own dedicated gain stage, which remains permanently connected and is activated when required, thus avoiding any kind of switching in the signal path. Likewise, there is no potentiometer or resistor network in line with the audio, volume control being by passive attenuation governed by a dedicated processor via analogue optical couplers, offering 192 steps in increments of 0.5dB. This leaves the volume knob whirling like a dervish to make any ground, while the remote rather over compensates with sudden lurches up or down. Acceptance angle is narrow but otherwise it is a simple, tactile handset (unlike so many others). For once the balance control is subtle in action, rather than swinging wildly left and right. The phono-stage follows similar design criteria to the line-stage, utilising discrete components to provide 60 db of gain, although both this and the loading are internally adjustable using a soldering iron; good for sound, bad for convenience.

The darTZeel comes with a separate power supply housed in

a small, unobtrusive stainless steel box, although this actually functions as a charger for the 18NS' onboard batteries. I will confess to initial scepticism;



previous experience (now many years ago) with various designs involving re-chargeable Ni-Cads led me to conclude that the complications of using battery power were not worth the lack of reliability and frustration that went with it – not to mention smoke and blown drive units. But things have changed; battery technology has moved on in leaps and bounds over the last few years due to our insatiable demand for mobile technology, and the state of the mains supply is considerably worse, partly due to the rise of switch mode power supplies that are now literally everywhere. The prospect of completely isolating the audio circuitry is now more attractive than ever. Which is exactly what the darTZeel does, once the power switch is activated, relays disconnect the power supply from the internal batteries, which then

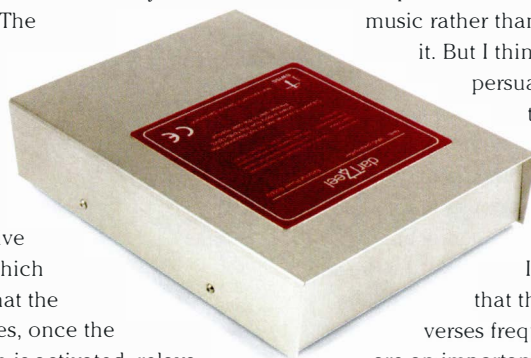
deliver up to twelve hours listening in this mode. When switched off the unit charges the batteries, and in the event of them being completely flat the 18 will run, with slightly diminished performance, using the mains supply. Not that I was able to investigate

this, as a testimony to the effectiveness of the power supply management this was a situation that never occurred, and as with all other aspects of the 18's operation it performed seamlessly throughout the review. For those of us used to leaving gear powered up, it's a new discipline having to remember to turn it off after a session, but tellingly I could hear very little difference in quality between a cold start and a few hours of use.

It could well be the combination of a number of different but related attributes, but I had an immediate sense of a very clean, transparent presentation with no detectable fuzz or smearing to cloud the leading edges and subsequent body of sounds. And a wealth of detail; not of the "I've played this track for years and never heard the drummer fart variety" but more constructive information on note shape and textural qualities that enrich the

music rather than distract from it. But I think the most persuasive aspect of the darTZeel has to do with wide bandwidth coherence.

I'm convinced that the timing verses frequency issues are an important part of breaking down psycho – acoustic barriers that allow music a more ►



Electra S



When Focal decided to accompany the successful Electra Be range with a speaker line bearing similar attributes but at a substantially lower price, the challenge seemed at first to be very difficult. After all, the Be has proved to be the perfect speaker for many music lovers - and altering a classic recipe does not always guarantee savoury results

In the end, the answer proved very simple. Change very little

A new tweeter; an AL/Mg alloy unit in place of the exotic beryllium dome, a perfectly matched crossover to ensure each and every sound is faithfully reproduced and a simpler finish choice of Classic (left) or Macassar Ebony

And that's about it - apart from the smaller pricetag of course

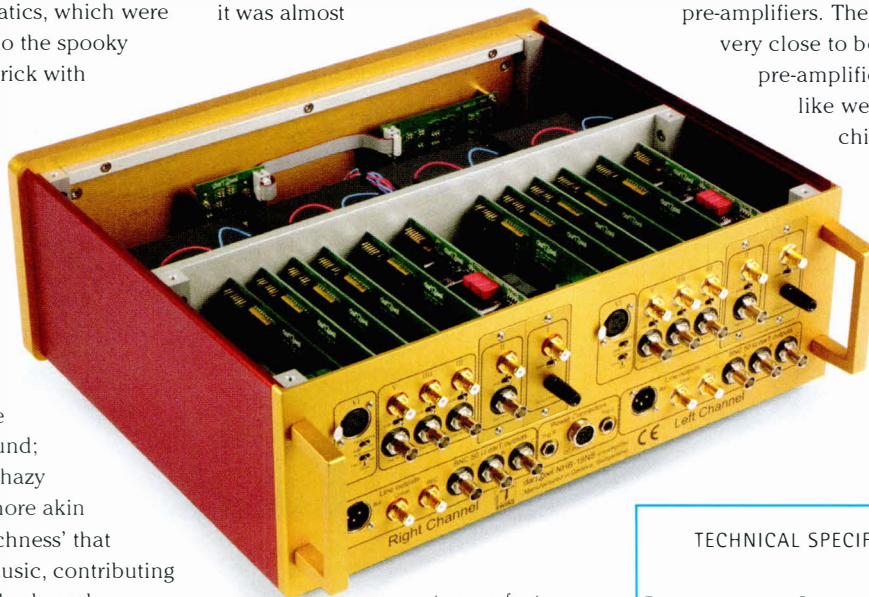
Simple.

▶ direct connection to the relevant parts of the brain. In other words, the better a piece of equipment is at doing this, the more relaxed I am listening to it and as a consequence less aware of the hi-fi. This particular aspect of performance was highlighted by the Quad 2805 electrostatics, which were far more willing to do the spooky holographic image trick with the darTZeel in the system, often completely disappearing.

While the character of the 18NS was essentially neutral, I was always conscious of a very slight sense of warmth to the sound; not in an indistinct, hazy valve-like way but more akin to a slight hint of 'richness' that accompanied the music, contributing to a tactile sense of body and substance with natural instruments and voices. Slightly more apparent using the phono-stage, reproduction from vinyl was supremely confident and assured in a way that had me wishing I never had to play CDs again. It majored on flow and involvement over laid bare, concise (and possibly clinical) retrieval of detail that one or two other high-end phono stages are better at.

The darTZeel power amplifier allowed me to examine differences between the pre-amp's three output options. Designer Herve Deletraz has some passionate and distinctive views on cables and signal transmission; hence the unusual 50 Ohm BNC sockets and the matching cables supplied with the unit. Not unexpectedly, these provided the best results with an obvious synergy between the two units: balanced operation via the XLRs seemed sluggish and indistinct by comparison

while single-ended connection was considerably better, but still falling short of the custom interface in terms of speed and focus. Using the darTZeel pre and power together proved an awesome combination, but I occasionally felt that it was almost



too perfect: perhaps a slightly sickly sweetness that could occasionally have you yearning for a bit of aggression or rudeness with certain music. Can you have too much of a good thing? Maybe, but then both the Quads and the Spendor SP100R are on the polite side. DarTZeel employ Rhedeko loudspeakers for product development – which constitute quite a contrast...

Ironically, sometimes the better a product is the less there is to write about it, and after a couple of months spent listening to the darTZeel I am still struggling to define certain aspects of its performance. As one would expect of a high-end product of this calibre, it ticks all the right hi-fi boxes, but also makes the important step forward that ultimately cuts the ties that hold so many products earthbound when it comes to letting the music flow. And that, as I suggested earlier, is

more important in a pre-amp than any other component in the system. The NHB 18NS is a highly desirable product, and one of the very few that could successfully fill the void left by the Ayre K-1xe, a design that already rearranged my views on pre-amplifiers. The darTZeel is very close to being my ideal pre-amplifier; one that, like well behaved children, is seen but never heard. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Battery powered solid-state pre-amplifier
Inputs:	4x line-level (RCA and 50 Ohm BNC) 1x line-level (balanced XLR) 1x phono (MM or MC)
Gain:	Line – 11dB Phono – 30 to 66dB
Bandwidth:	1Hz – 1MHz +0 -6dB
Outputs:	1x RCA 1x balanced XLR 3x 50 Ohm BNC
Dimensions (WxHxD):	440 x 170 x 335mm
Weight:	Pre-amp 23Kg Power supply 3 Kg
Price:	£15900

UK Distributor:
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Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:
darTZeel Audio SA
Net. www.dartzeel.com

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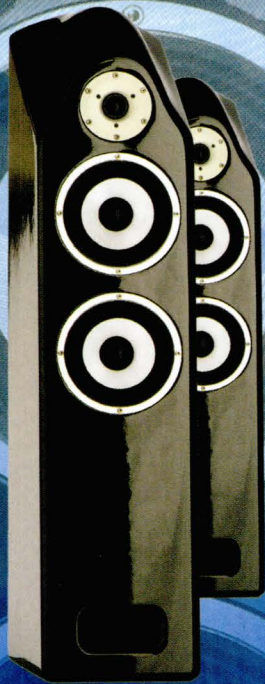
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HOVLAND

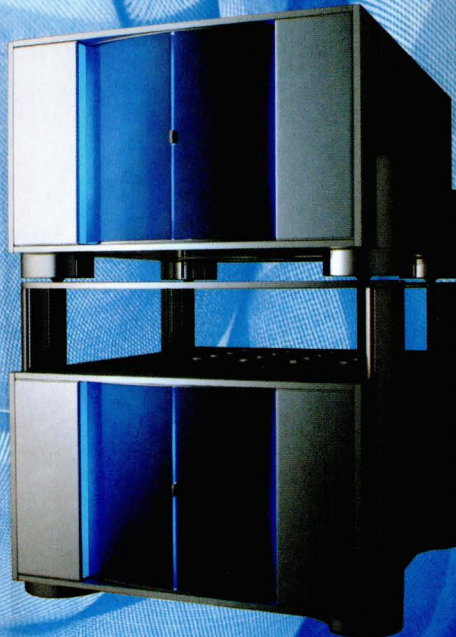
Lumley

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Hansen
[masters of sound reproduction]
Hansen Knight model shown.



Hovland
[state-of-the-art amplification]
NEW - Stratos model shown.



Lumley
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Stratosphere model shown.

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A photograph of a book spine, likely for a CD or DVD set, titled "The Groove". The spine is black with numerous thin, parallel white lines. The title "The Groove" is printed in a white, serif font, with a small graphic logo to the right. The book is set against a background of a bright orange-to-yellow gradient. Two circular metallic fasteners are visible on the black surface.

The Groove 

The Fine Art of Compromise...

User adjustable phono-stages from Tom Evans Audio Design, Keith Herron and Graham Slee

by Roy Gregory

Not so long ago the phono-stage was an integral (albeit central) element in every single serious pre-amp. But with the advent of CD the audio landscape shifted, and as vinyl fell from favour, designers were only too happy to dispense with the tricky and expensive necessity of providing onboard phono equalization and amplification. Pretty soon the phono-stage became first an optional extra and then a standalone purchase, turning turntables into line-level sources like everything else – a step which naturally also added the cost of a dedicated power supply and casework to their price as well as adding another box and set of interconnects to your system.

But it wasn't all bad news. Truth be told, a separate box is probably pretty much a pre-requisite for serious performance, as is an independent power supply. So, although phono-stages became (in some cases, much) more expensive, they also started to deliver results that previously we'd only ever dreamed of. And as they, of necessity, became a more specialist item, they also became more specialized, with committed vinyl listeners prepared to countenance ever higher prices in pursuit of ever greater improvements in performance. But, as is so often the case, this specialization took two routes, routes with apparently conflicting goals. On the one hand, manufacturers sought to offer increasing flexibility and user configurable parameters. On the other,

the ever increasing transparency and resolution of the latest phono-stages was ruthless in revealing the subtlest of changes in circuitry or componentry, driving a move towards ever simpler and more straight-line designs, an approach which had become pretty much de rigueur by the end of the 20th Century.

But the times they are a changing, and so is the audience for vinyl – or at least the vinyl they're listening to. Ever increasing interest in older stereo and now even mono recordings is presenting new challenges to the designers of today's phono-stages, while all that increased resolution has opening the window on turntable and cartridge performance, throwing the whole question of cartridge loading into stark relief. Suddenly, the adjustability of phono-stages and the variety of parameters those adjustments must address has become a hot topic: gain, loading (resistive and capacitive) and equalization are all back on the agenda. So much so that the question has ceased to be whether we should switch or not, but how to switch better? So with that in mind, I've assemble this contrasting trio of phono-stages, each with a different take on what you should adjust and just how you might set about it. Let the games begin...

But before they do, a quick word on source components. I used two record players for the listening: the Grand Prix Audio Monaco with Triplanar VII tonearm and Lyra Titan i cartridge and the VPI TNT VI with its JMW 12"

tonearm and the latest rim-drive set-up. The JMW's interchangeable arm-tops allowed me to run a variety of cartridges, including the Lyra Skala, the vdH Condor, the Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue and the latest Cartridge Man Music Maker, the latter representing high-output moving-iron designs. Together these options certainly allowed me to ring the changes and investigate the effects and benefits (or otherwise) of loading on different cartridges.

The TEAD Groove Plus SRX

The extended family tree that culminates in the various TEAD Groove models has its roots firmly planted in the original Michell Iso. Designed by Evans for the late John Michell, the Iso might not have been the first standalone MC to line-level phono-stage (lagging behind the Vendetta Research in the US and the FM Acoustics in Europe) but as far as the UK was concerned it was the one that established the breed. Built around Evans' novel IC-based phase corrective circuitry, it offered a performance whose resolution and transparency (if not its harmonic development and sense of instrumental substance) challenged the then state of the art, in a compact and affordable package that rewrote the rules of record replay almost overnight.

The design has developed and grown from that beginning, improving the performance in areas of weakness, further evolving the technology that ►

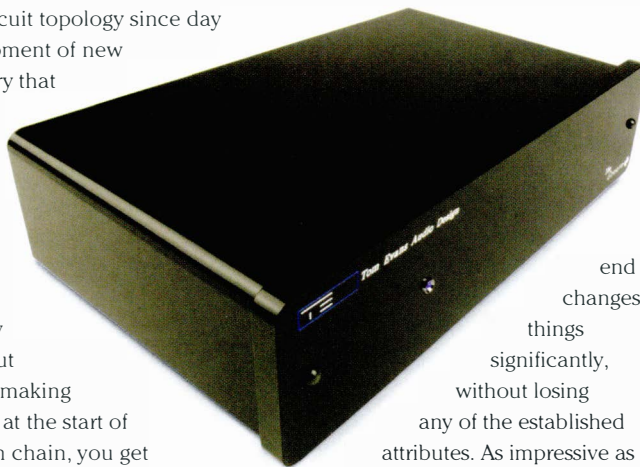
► has always delivered its significant strengths – as well as adding a new twist in the shape of the ultra-quiet Lithos regulation circuitry. But one thing has remained constant throughout; the Evans phono-stages have always been relentlessly minimalist – until now. Whereas previous models have been factory set for gain and loading, the latest iteration finally makes available the option of user adjustable resistive and capacitive loading. But whilst that's the most obvious difference compared to the standard Groove Plus, the SRX version delivers a more fundamental step change in performance. The X in the nomenclature refers to the parallel circuit board, e-X-ternal to the signal path, that incorporates the banks of dip-switches for nine different resistive and five different capacitive loads. The SR stands for "Super Resolution" and indicates possibly the biggest change to the overall circuit topology since day one, the development of new front-end circuitry that drops noise and distortion by over 50%. And let's not forget that the standard Groove Plus was already pretty exemplary in that regard. But what's more, by making these gains right at the start of the amplification chain, you get the benefits at each and every stage thereafter. As we shall see, the resulting increase in sound quality is far from subtle, easily maintaining the Groove's place at hi-fi's top table.

But there's more good news for existing owners or potential purchasers. Both the SR and the X options are exactly that, meaning that the SR board can be added to any existing Groove Plus for a cost of £705, while the X board can be retrofitted to or specced for any Groove model at a price premium of £235. There's even a simplified version of the X

board (offering only five discrete resistive loading values and no capacitive ones) for the various Micro-Grooves. Bought new, a fully loaded SRX costs £4400, as compared to £3800 for the Groove Plus, making this one of the more cost effective upgrades I've come across!

Having a Groove Plus on hand, already loaded for the Titan i, and an SRX with identical gain, it was possible to run back to back comparisons, taking the effects of loading out of the equation. I have to say that this is possibly the biggest single performance improvement I've heard from the Groove since its inception. It always had great transparency, focus, detail and dynamic resolution, coupled to a temporal and spatial organization that made for that winning combination of simultaneous musical insight and involvement. It was also exceptionally even, top to bottom.

Adding the SR front-



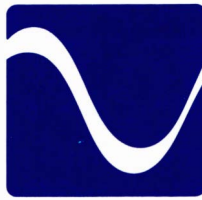
end changes things significantly, without losing any of the established attributes. As impressive as the Groove Plus is, it's not until

you hear the benefits of solidity and overall coherence that come with the SR version, that those strengths really get bound together into a musical whole. But such is the way of hi-fi (and a good thing it is too) that with such sins of omission, until you hear that difference you don't register the lack.

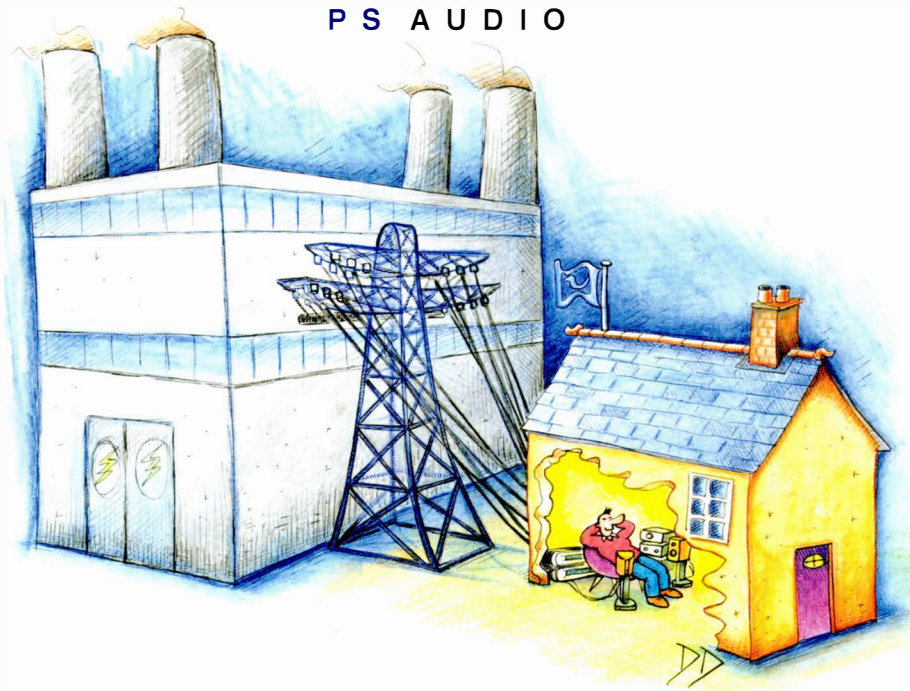
Swapping from the Groove Plus to the SRX, the first thing you'll notice is the dramatic (and I use that word deliberately) increase in sheer substance and colour. Listening to a

complex pop mix like Lloyd Cole's 'Lost Weekend', the SRX makes the Plus sound thin and bleached, lacking in separation and presence. The SR board brings a weight, tonal richness and body to the sound that gives Cole's familiar voice its correct character and scale, creating a convincing image that has a physical dimension as well as a location. That richness extends to the instruments, giving each one greater individuality, the tonal separation I've talked about before – the ability to separate a player and his contribution as much by the harmonic character and the energy pattern of his instrument as its location in space. So the harmonium drone that gives the track its infectious Waltz rhythm is lifted out of the complex mix, an instrument and a musical intent rather than just aural wallpaper filling in the gaps.

What's responsible for the change? In large part it seems to be about the low frequencies, which definitely go deeper but also provide a foundation that roots the instruments and music in time and space. There's a new-found weight and stability to the Groove sound, a sense of authority and poise that was lacking before when compared to the likes of the Connoisseur or Zanden. Interestingly, it can be heard as a heaviness in direct comparison to the Plus, hence my choice of 'Lost Weekend' where the earlier version initially sounds fleet of foot and more toe-tappingly involving. But a proper ABA session will soon underline the additional fluidity and the far more complex rhythmic picture that emerges from the SR, the track taking on a proper, undulating feel rather than the helter-skelter onrush of the Plus, which now sounds hurried and tumbling over itself. Switch to slower tracks like 'James' or 'Perfect Blue' and the difference becomes even more marked, the SR imbuing the music with a poise, a stately inevitability to the pacing that adds dramatic weight and pathos to the songs. And all the while, the extra space around and behind instruments ►



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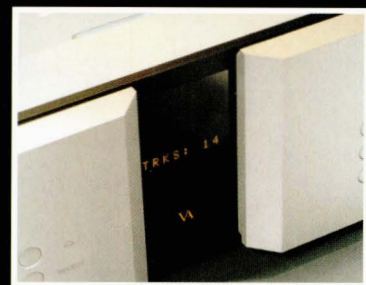
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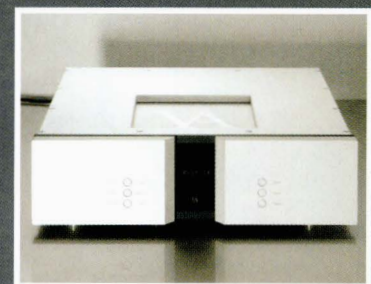
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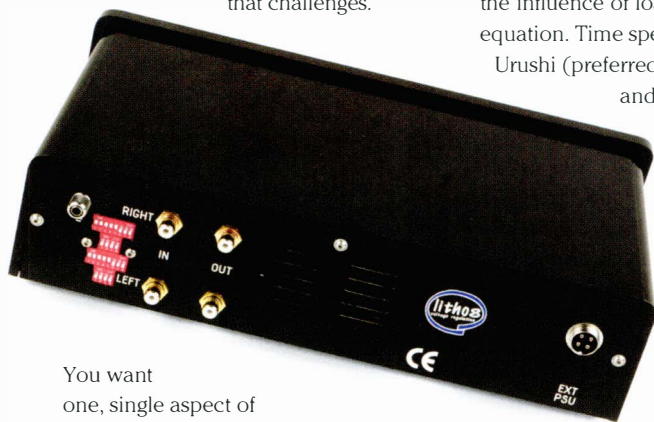
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► (musically and dimensionally) makes the multiple layers, the interlocking elements of all these tracks so much easier to hear, a pleasure that titillates rather than a test that challenges.



You want one, single aspect of performance that will encapsulate the difference between these two, the advance and new confidence represented by the SR? Select a single instrument in a natural acoustic; I used the Tacet recording of the Bach *Partita III* with Florin Paul. Here the Plus presents a quicksilver account, the instrument small in the large and cold acoustic space. Swap to the SR and the violin snaps into focus, more concentrated, more physically present, richer and more harmonically complex. The phrasing of the playing, the bowing and the shape of the melody, the shape that Paul brings to it, all emerge. Where the Plus pushed the speed and quickness of the playing to the fore, the SR adds a whole dimension of meaning and artistry. It also adds a sense of height. Not the height of the acoustic per se, but the height of the instrument within it – which has a surprising effect on just how convincing the sonic picture is. But the big, big difference in presentational terms is the way in which the acoustic space is presented. With the Plus you are aware that it's large, but it is wider than it is deep and it's also rather diffuse with ill-defined boundaries. The SR locks the instrument into a solid space, with a real sense of depth that now goes way back. The boundaries are much more obvious, particularly the rear corners, and the

notion that this is a three dimensional event (and that all three dimensions matter) suddenly makes itself felt.

Of course, using the Titan i eliminated the influence of loading from the sonic equation. Time spent with the Koetsu Urushi (preferred loading 200 Ohms)

and the vdH Condor (which was happier at 500 Ohms) actually underlined the differences even more. Running these cartridges at 100 Ohms (as per the Plus) actually reduced the benefits of the SR mods slightly, but

as soon as you dialled in the correct loading the differences became wider still, especially with the Koetsu, which could sound a little pinched and tight at the lower setting, but really blossomed and hit its rhythmic stride once it saw its preferred load. What I found particularly fascinating though, was the difference between 200 and 250 Ohms, which should be barely significant, but in practice proved quite the opposite, music losing its sense of urgency and pace, tilting over into lazy.

Those who prefer things laid back might actually like the effect, but for me it both robbed the music of life and drama and underlined just how critical all aspects of phono optimization really are – and how easy it ease to undermine the end result. Close enough is, I'm afraid, simply not good enough... 44

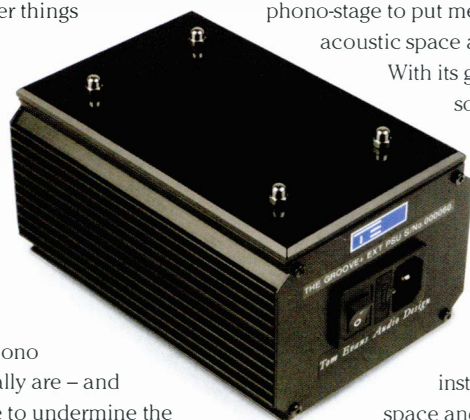
Which brings us to the second (and even more contentious) bank of switches. These allow users to trim

the capacitive load in five discrete steps, between the standard value of 100pF and a maximum of 500pF. More commonly associated with moving-magnet stages, why bother to offer the facility on a moving-coil stage? Because increasing capacitance will roll off the high-frequencies – and what do almost all moving-coils have in common? Correct – a rising high-frequency response.

Back to the Bach *Partita* and the Titan i; increasing the capacitive load from 100 to 300pF shut down the space and the sense of life and sparkle in the playing, but 200pF was quite a different matter. Compared to the 100pF setting the slightly higher value removed the coldness from the acoustic, locking the dimensions even more firmly in place and improving the sense of musical flow still further. Definitely a good thing.

But enough of these tedious comparisons; where do these changes leave the Groove Plus SRX with respect to its peers? Where once the Groove, and before it the various Isos, were the audio tearaways, young tyros trading warmth and weight for ground breaking speed, resolution and transparency, the SRX takes a step back – but does so without sacrificing any of its traditional strengths. The Groove was the first phono-stage to put me in the same acoustic space as the performers.

With its greater weight, solidity and stability, its deeper soundstage and more dimensional images, the SRX keeps you in that space but allows the instruments more space and crucially, more time. Sitting in the midst of a band is undoubtedly exciting and immediate, but it's also rather seat of your pants. The SRX introduces a more natural acoustic, to go with its more ►



▶ natural tonality and richer harmonic balance, allowing music to convince and seduce rather than simply grab you by the throat.

The sense of space between the instruments and within the music elevates the Groove SRX to a new level of sonic performance and musical expression. Whether it's the thudding substance and rooted presence of those deep thuds that open 'Wholly Humble Heart', or the plaintive quality that so defines Martin Stephenson's voice and gives the song its contrast, the SRX offers a more convincing and more engaging whole, depending less on sheer impact and much, much more on the way the song has been put together, the instrumental contrasts and shifts in density.

Likewise, the pauses between notes that are so central to the expressive range of pianists are far more apparent, so the rhythmic evolutions of Bill Evans' 'Waltz For Debbie' become more central to the constant ebb and flow of the piece, but also extend its emotional range. The monolithic chord structures that drive Carole King's '(You make me feel like) a Natural Woman' are more emphatic, more deliberately placed, with a greater range of weight and emphasis. The way they add to and accent the lyric becomes more dramatic and effective, both because of the greater sense of placement and pacing, and also the rooted solidity and weight that the SRX brings to the instrument. What I'm talking about here is musical and dynamic authority. The Groove has always had instrumental and spatial detail to burn, leaning on its resolution to hold things together. Its new found temporal stability now delivers a far firmer foundation and with it a more relaxed and confident performance.

What the SRX upgrades do for the Groove is place it firmly back at the top table of vinyl replay. It is also, by some distance, the most affordable of the various options I see seated there. This latest round of

refinements to an established theme have added flexibility, allowing you to further optimize matching to and the performance of your cartridge, as well as extending the performance of the Groove itself in exactly those areas where it was weakest. The result is a more accomplished, a more versatile, a more balanced but above all a more natural performer.

And as a postscript, let's not forget that the SRX mods have implications for existing Tom Evans owners too, in that they offer both an upgrade path for Groove owners and the option for cartridge matching across the range, enhancing the performance available to MicroGroove users as well.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

The TEAD Groove Plus SRX	
Type:	Standalone phono-stage
Gain:	User specified
Loading:	112, 126, 144, 168, 200, 250, 333, 500 and 1000 Ohms 100, 200, 300, 400 and 500pF
Replay EQ:	RIAA
Dimensions(WxHxD):	330 x 85 x 180mm
Price:	£4400
Manufacturer:	
Tom Evans Audio Design	
Tel. (44)(0)1443 833570	
Net. www.audiodesign.co.uk	

The Herron Audio VTPH-2 Vacuum Tube Phono Pre-amplifier

While tubes have a long and honourable history when it comes to amplifying the signal from moving-magnet cartridges, moving-coil stages relying on thermionic devices are altogether more rarified and tend to be temperamental. So, given Herron Audio's reputation for sound engineering, solid technical performance and exceptional consistency, it's no surprise to find that, whilst Keith Herron's VTPH-1 standalone phono-stage coupled passive RIAA equalization with tubes for its moving-magnet section, the moving-coil version added a solid-state stage to provide the necessary extra gain. Otherwise, the unit was business as usual for a Herron design: thoughtful and conservative engineering (for which read "solid" as opposed to the all too frequent "flaky"), matched parts, exemplary technical performance, almost obsessive attention to detail. And like the other Herron products, the result was a performance that belied the surprisingly modest price-tag. Which was a bit of a problem. You see, the VTPH-1 was a no-holds-barred, minimalist design intended for a few analogue die-hards of Keith's acquaintance. Unfortunately, the word got round and demand rapidly outstripped supply, causing a rapid reappraisal of the situation – and a far less rapid evolution of the design into a more manufacturable and user friendly device. Along the way component choice and tolerances

were further



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► refined, along with some of the thinking behind the product.

Enter then the VTPH-2, visually essentially identical to the VTPH-1 – at least from the front: the same compact and solidly constructed chassis, the same three LEDs to

indicate the start-up sequence and operating status (blue now rather than green, to match the latest line-stages). But round the back things get a whole lot more adventurous, with double the socket count for starters. So, whilst the VTPH-1 was a dedicated design, either moving-magnet or moving-coil, the -2 is a switchable device, with inputs for both high and low output pick-ups. Also, where the high-gain version of the -1 required a technician to solder resistors across the inputs to fix loading, parallel sockets and loading plugs make user adjustment a doddle. And yes, hard-wired loading resistors do sound better so that option remains, once of course you've decided on the optimum value. Incidentally, Herron encourage you to at least try the moving-coil inputs as supplied, wide open or in effect, with an infinite loading value – of which more later.

Much of the circuit topology itself remains essentially the same, the MM section and power supply arrangements being almost identical to the earlier

version. There's also the sophisticated three-stage slow-start arrangement, designed to protect the performance of the valves so critical to noise performance. But the solid-state gain-stage is all-new, employing different FETs and a new



circuit. Couple this with various refinements and improved component quality and matching elsewhere and you've got sound reasons for the uplift in performance over the -1. And yes, the -2 does sound better. . .

Supplied as standard with a quartet of 12AX7s and a single 12AT7, offering 69dB of gain in moving-coil mode and 48dB with moving-magnets, replacing two of the 12AX7s with 12AT7s will trim the gain in both instances by 5dB, a useful option when it comes to matching cartridge output and overall system gain for optimum results. Finally, there's a mains polarity switch on the rear panel, something that should really be obligatory on all electronics – and yet another example of Keith Herron's no-nonsense approach to engineering that matters. And you get all that for \$3650. Yes,

US dollars; inexplicably the Herron products have no UK distribution at present, although they can be purchased in 230V versions from Herron direct – just remember to add shipping, duty and VAT.

Even leaving aside the increased versatility of the VTPH-2 it is still a clearly superior unit to the original version. Side by side comparison with both phono-stages loaded at 47K, the -2 immediately displays superior transparency, separation, a broader tonal palette and more harmonic texture. Voices and instruments are more easily differentiated, the way they fit together much more obvious. Remove the input loading plugs and run the unit wide open and there's a further gain in tonal purity and immediacy, an easy, breathy quality and



delicacy that makes this mode a really worthwhile alternative to those who prefer not to load their coils down. However, personally speaking I've never followed that path. Load the input down (interestingly the Titan i preferred a 200 Ohm load on the Herron as opposed to 100 Ohms elsewhere*) and the sense of focus, spatial separation and control all increase significantly.

Your first listen to the Herron's MC inputs will likely be a fascinating example of audio expectation. The large, coherent acoustic it creates, the fabulous texture it reveals

*Perhaps Keith Herron knows something I don't (actually, I'm sure he does) but it's uncanny that he chose to supply a second set of loading plugs for 200 Ohms, this time using metal oxide resistors as opposed to the metal film ones generally employed. It's certainly a salutary demonstration as to just how critical components at this point in the signal path can be! The metal oxide resistors shrink the soundstage, diminish dynamic resolution and range, killing the communicative qualities of the system.

► in instruments, especially at low frequencies, will have you nodding sagely and muttering, “Ahhh... tubes” under your breath. Yet listen a little longer and you’ll discover some distinctly un-tubelike qualities too. For a start, noise levels are extremely low and what noise you hear with your ear to the speaker is extremely stable, a low hiss with not a trace of whisper or distracting modulation. Then there’s the bass which isn’t just deep and powerful, but transparent and solidly propulsive as well, with air and space around the notes that lets you hear underneath them. There’s plenty of weight and wallop here. Finally, there’s the tonality, warm and natural but without any hint of bloom, roundness or cloying sweetness to congest or slow the midrange. The end result is a sound that’s neutral and inviting, insightful and musically generous. The Herron lets you hear what’s happening as well as filling you with anticipation for what’s about to arrive.

Pick up an acoustic instrument and the better it is, the greater the sense of life, of energy just waiting to burst forth. This is exactly the quality that the Herron phono-stage captures. All that texture it brings to instruments is built on micro-dynamic definition and the ability to capture the harmonic envelope, the pattern of energy that extends from instruments. So, playing the measured, slowly building opening movement of the Sibelius *Second Symphony* (Berglund and the Bournemouth on EMI) the sense of constrained power, the players holding back under the conductor’s baton is almost palpable, lending even greater scale and emotional power to the giant sweep of the eventual release. Berglund’s bold use of the brass brings colour and impact, yet never swamps the supporting strings, while the pizzicato bass notes that punctuate the first movement are always pregnant with

energy, a pluck and release with poise and purpose, rather than the leaden thuds you so often hear from systems playing this disc.

Now translate those qualities to the start of the second movement. The drum roll that opens proceedings is beautifully present, deep in the soundstage, the skin a vibrant and complex thing that sets up the extending, solo bass introduction. Again, the instrument is held within the soundstage, the subtle variations and development of its extended melody secure in pitch and pace, drawing you into the burgeoning layers to come. And boy do they come. The colour and ability to reveal each step in the growing intensity of a crescendo mark out the beautiful balance that the VTPH-2 strikes between the instrumental detail that gives music its beauty and the body and presence that gives it its drama and so much of its passion.

No, the Herron doesn’t have the astonishing transparency and planted stability that gives the Groove its absolute authority. Nor does it match the Groove’s ability to shade tiny, tiny graduations in level. Instead it treads a more benign path yet still allows the music to speak for itself. Its musicality is built on the ability to give instrumental character full reign whilst retaining the coherent sense of space, separation, presence and dynamic range that translates individuals into a performance. As I wrote above, there’s no clogging of the midrange or slowing of dynamic response, no rounding of what should be sharp edges, no allowances made to warmth or a comfortable, rosy glow. So, play Nanci’s ‘Listen To The Radio’ and you get all the insistent, infectious urgency of the driven tempo, while the fearful, angry snarl of Attila The Stockbroker delivering his nihilistic masterpiece ‘A Bang And A Wimpey’, constantly on the verge of corpsing,

has just the right sense of desolation and that added hint of hysteria.

This phono-stage is a musical chameleon, shifting both shape and colour to catch the mood of a recording. But what makes it special is that (short of the likes of the Groove Plus SRX, the Connoisseur or the Zanden) it has sufficient resolution, detail and transparency to satisfy all but the definition uber alles brigade; or if you will, all the benefits of tubes with few if any of the costs – sonically speaking at least. The VTPH-2 is colourful, dynamic and spacious, yet still offers the sort of noise levels, linearity, separation and precision that we more often associate with solid-state designs. The best of both worlds? For many a listener who wants the clarity that comes from silicon without the edgy bleaching that all too often accompanies it, or to release the beauty and emotion from records played on a dry and over-damped turntable, I suspect it will come as mana from musical heaven. ►

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

The Herron Audio VTPH-2 Vacuum Tube Phono Pre-amplifier

Type:	Standalone phono-stage
Gain:	64 or 69dB (MC) 43 or 48dB (MM)
Loading:	User defined, up to an infinite load (MC) 47 kOhms (MM)
Replay EQ:	RIAA
Output Impedance:	500 Ohms
Dimensions(WxHxD):	444 x 100 x 240mm
Price:	\$3650 US

Manufacturer:

Herron Audio

Tel. (001) 314 434 5416

Net. www.herronaudio.com

► The Graham Slee Revelation Phono-Stage and Elevator EXP Moving-Coil Head Amplifier

In recent years, Graham Slee has garnered an excellent and well-deserved reputation for his standalone phono-stages. Diminutive solid-state units, their feet are placed firmly on the commercial path first blazed by the Iso, but possess a strong individual identity and an ethos that's all their own. Indeed, Graham first started work on phono to line stages for professional/mastering applications as early as 1982, although the first domestic products appeared some ten years ago. Not surprisingly, the circuits are based on high-speed ICs and components specifically selected to minimize propagation delay and phase error.

Originally presented in the simplest of black painted casework, with "beyond basic" graphics, recent production has benefited from a dramatic improvement in aesthetic quality, the review samples arriving in still simple but beautifully executed silver chassis work, with neat and clearly legible screen printing for the controls – very necessary as we shall see. The aesthetic sensibilities even extend to the external, plastic moulded PSU 1 supplies that power both units, which are noticeably nicer than your average wall-warts.

Flying in the face of fashion, Graham is a great believer in the intrinsic superiority of moving-magnet cartridges, believing that fundamental flaws in the electrical and mechanical characteristics of the moving-coil present huge obstacles to overcome – obstacles avoided by moving-magnet designs. It's a philosophy that informs the structure of the Graham Slee range, which concentrates on moving-magnet compatible stages with the extra gain required by moving-coils offered instead as a standalone option. So, the Revelation reviewed here is a

Phono EQ, or... I thought we'd seen the back of all that!

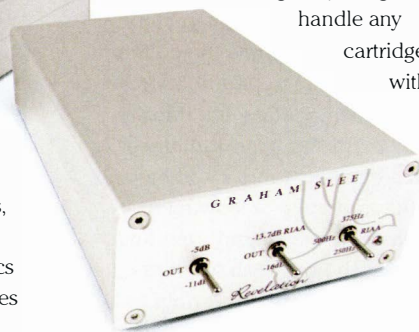
The vexed question of record replay curves seems fated never to die. But for those brought up on the RIAA standard and nothing else (myself included) this can all get a bit confusing. So – here's a potted history as best as I can manage: those with additional information, please contact the magazine so that we can fill in the blanks.

When micro-groove records first appeared, they were a response to the call for longer playing times. But as well as narrower grooves they also depended on equalizing the signal before it was cut, and then applying inverse EQ on replay. The problem is that each record company worked to its own EQ curve, meaning that if you look at a vintage pre-amp, you'll find half a dozen replay curves, identified by record label. But this only chipped the surface, and there were around 90 or so different curves in common use by the mid-50s. At which point the industry got together and agreed on a standard, the RIAA curve, an agreement reached I believe in 1958.

Of course, all the electronics manufacturers adopted the new standard with alacrity. After all, it made their jobs a lot easier. Unfortunately, the record companies weren't quite as keen, despite signing up to the deal. For them it meant both investing in new equipment and dropping a curve with which they were familiar and could achieve predictable results. Not surprisingly, the upshot was chaos, with many companies slow or sporadic in their adoption of the new standard and just as many ignoring it altogether. And not just small labels either: Decca, EMI, Columbia and DGG all continued to use their own, non-RIAA curves for some considerable time, in some cases right up to the first collapse of record production precipitated by the arrival of CD.

The problem is that if you don't have the correct EQ curve at replay, then the tonal balance and energy spectrum, dynamic range and rhythmic integrity of the music will all be undermined. And this doesn't just apply to old classical albums. What about all the Columbia pop pressings from the 70's? Or those brilliant Verve and Blue Note jazz albums? Believe me when I say, "you haven't heard them until you've heard them with the correct EQ curve".

But don't cut your wrists just yet. Help is at hand. Despite the sheer number of curves used they can be effectively grouped into three or four families for stereo pressings, twice that for mono. Which is exactly what the Graham Slee Revelation does, its three front-panel toggle switches allowing you to alter bass boost and treble cut to match the curve required. It sounds complicated but you get a handy guide to major labels with the unit, and it soon becomes second nature to trim the response accordingly. Which is good, given that there's little consistency even within labels. The rule of thumb is simple; "If it sounds right it is right." And you WILL know when it's right!



moving-magnet only phono-stage, providing a fairly standard 42dB of gain (enough to handle any cartridge with

an output in excess of 2mV) and the necessary phono-equalization for correct vinyl replay. Now, whilst the company does produce RIAA only designs, one of the things that makes the Revelation (and also the Jazz Club model based on

the Era Gold) so interesting is that it offers switchable EQ curves of the type we demonstrated at shows in both Denver and Manchester. It also offers an optional mono switch, although this is on the back panel. But most importantly of all, it offers this versatility at a price that actually fits the public pocket.

To use the Revelation with a low-output moving-coil you'll need to add the Elevator EXP head-amp to the package, a straight 22.5dB gain-stage that also provides seven discrete resistive loading settings via its two front-panel toggle switches. That's enough gain to deal with all but the lowest output cartridges, and with the current trend towards healthier outputs you should have no noise or level issues at all. The combination costs \$740 for the Revelation and a further \$510 for the Elevator EXP (plus the cost of

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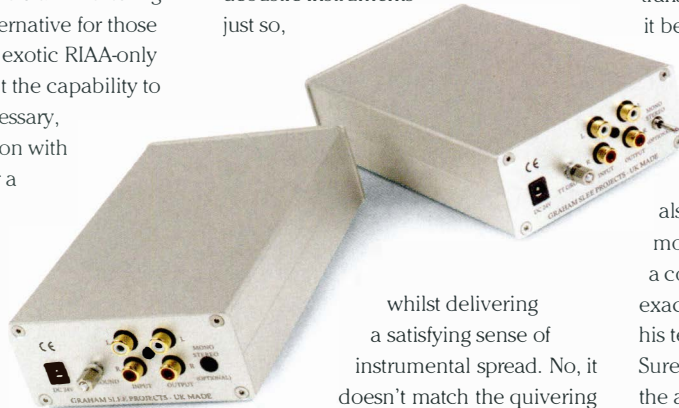
▶ decent, shielded interconnects to join them together).

Clearly, the Revelation and Elevator combination can be considered as part of a primary phono-replay chain, a role which their performance more than justifies. But it also offers an interesting and cost effective alternative for those who already own an exotic RIAA-only phono-stage but want the capability to adjust EQ where necessary, probably in association with a second arm and/or a mono cartridge.

I used the Graham Slee units both as a pair and individually, the Revelation with the Music Maker cartridge and the Elevator to feed the MM inputs of the Herron. It was an interesting experience to be able to isolate the contribution of the separate stages in this way, and there's no doubt that whilst they work as standalone items, the Elevator gives its best results feeding the Revelation. Into the Herron it sounded slightly veiled and grainy, characteristics that disappeared (or at least became far less apparent) when using its own, matching MM stage. Whilst this might well reflect the superior transparency of the Herron overall, as well as the elimination of a pair of interconnects and the connections that go with them, it also stands testimony to Mr Slee's ability to match the performance of his units and extract the maximum performance at a given price (rather than building in capability that isn't exploited). Undoubtedly impressive in isolation, the whole in this instance is definitely greater than the sum of the parts – unless you are going to run a moving-magnet, but that's another story.

Used together, the Revelation/Elevator combination (hereafter referred to as the Rev/EI) delivers a sound that is impressive for its solidity, presence and sense of musical flow. It never tips over

into solid-state leanness in search of the sort of etched resolution that can be initially impressive but ultimately frustrating. Instead it treads a fine line between transparency and warmth, getting the weight and harmonics of acoustic instruments just so,



whilst delivering a satisfying sense of instrumental spread. No, it doesn't match the quivering expectancy of the Herron, its

sense of an overarching acoustic. Nor does it match the solidity and stability, the rooted authority of the Groove Plus SRX. But then it doesn't approach them in price either – and it's got an ace up its sleeve in the shape of its switchable EQ.

Running the Rev/EI as a straight RIAA stage and optimizing the front-end loading, the performance is more than impressive for the price. But as soon as you start using the EQ facilities on the MM stage, the musical delivery steps up several levels – to the extent that with certain records it starts to challenge the musical virtues (as opposed to the sonic qualities) of the more expensive units here. The Previn/LSO Rachmaninov *2nd Symphony*, a 1972 EMI recording is a good example of this. A wonderfully lyrical reading,

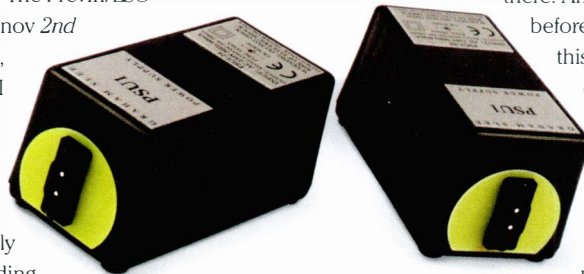
this is an early pressing of an otherwise unremarkable record you might easily pick up in a charity shop/thrift store, or at a bottom dollar price from a specialist secondhand dealer. Played via the RIAA

only Groove and Herron stages it's a nice but rather run-of-the-mill outing, a shade stilted and constrained. It sounds much the same via the Rev/EI when it's set to RIAA EQ. But switch it to the preferred setting for EMI recordings and the transformation is astonishing. Suddenly it becomes sumptuously fluid and

powerful, graceful and sweeping; suddenly it has you wanting to conduct the orchestra, a sure sign that it has taken on a new level of musical involvement but also that there's a natural weight and momentum at work. Previn becomes a commanding, directing presence – exactly as he should be – full of poise, his tempi drawing the music into life. Sure, the stereo picture still lacks the acoustic space of the Herron, the absolute dynamic range of the Groove, but I know which one I'd rather listen to – and which is the more musically rewarding with this disc.

The extent of these differences will vary from disc to disc and switchable EQ can't make a musical silk purse out of a recorded sow's ear. But once you hear what adjustable EQ can achieve you'll be loath to do without it, whether you've got a stack of old or secondhand records or not. Because if you don't already, you soon will have! That's the real beauty of the Graham Slee units; not just what they do with the records you have, but the access they give you to the heaps of affordable secondhand vinyl that's out

there. And as I've said before, don't think this is a solely classical preserve. Jazz and pop are just as prone to non-RIAA pressings, especially those originating in the USA or mainland Europe. If I was being picky I'd like an extra loading setting (or two) somewhere between the 100 Ohm and 840 Ohm ▶



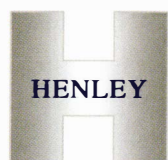
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► options, but frankly, it seems churlish to complain, especially about something as personal as preferred loadings.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Revelation

Type:	Standalone MM phono-stage
Gain:	42dB
Loading:	47 kOhms
Replay EQ:	Switchable to 12 different settings
Dimensions(WxHxD):	107 x 50 x 187mm
Weight:	1.5kg inc. PSU
Price:	£740

Elevator EXP

Type:	Standalone MC gain-stage
Gain:	22.5dB
Loading:	23, 30, 100, 840, 1000, 5100 and 47000 Ohms 100, 200, 300, 400 and 500pF
Replay EQ:	None
Dimensions(WxHxD):	107 x 50 x 187mm
Weight:	1.5kg inc. PSU
Price:	£510

UK Distributor:

Hi-Audio
Tel. 08450 525259
Net. www.hiaudio.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Graham Slee Projects Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1226 244908
Net. www.gspaudio.co.uk

But what of the Revelation as a standalone MM stage?

Dispensing with the Elevator EXP loses you the extra gain required for a moving-coil cartridge, along with the loading requirements that go with it. It also loses £510 off the bill, and a pair of interconnects too. So, you have to “slum it” with a moving-iron cartridge, but let’s not forget that Graham Slee actually prefers to read his records that way. Perhaps not surprisingly, Hi-Audio, distributors of the Graham Slee products

are also involved with the Cartridge Man, and his MusicMaker is a perfect partner for the Revelation, their combined price of £1335 plays well the wrong side of the £5K attached to the Rev/EI-Titan combination. Sure, there are more affordable coils out there, but the economics are self-evident. The question is, what do you lose for all that money you gain?

The short answer is, maybe not as much as you might think. The long answer takes a bit more explaining but goes something along the lines of, not so much better or worse as different. Moving from the Titan i to the MusicMaker there’s no disguising the loss of transparency and dynamic range, the missing detail and texture. But making the same transition from the Dorian, and near price parity with the MusicMaker, is more a case of swings and roundabouts. The moving-coil still offers greater detail and transparency, but the MusicMaker delivers a sense of power and majestic orchestral sweep that the Dorian can’t get close to. Add to that an unforced evenness and natural tonality, the easy momentum of the EQ adjusted Revelation and the ghostly quiet phono-stage and you’ve got a recipe for real dynamic power and intensity coupled to a complete absence of strain. The sound of the MusicMaker fed straight into the revelation is sumptuously smooth and lush, powerful and solid. Yes, it lacks the level of insight and detail, the sheer immediacy of a really top-flight coil – but it also lacks the price tag that goes with it. Will I be giving up on the Titan, Koetsu et al? Sorry, the answer is an emphatic no. But if I was on a budget I’d seriously consider the moving-iron option. Indeed, I did. My first Linn carried a Syrinx PU3 and a Grado Signature 8 – first cousin to the MusicMaker. What goes round comes around and I still remember the power and vivid colours of that combination, the more so given recent experience!

The Revelation/MusicMaker

combination will give moving-coils (and associated paraphernalia) at twice the price a serious run for their money. If you really value natural tonality and perspectives, top to bottom linearity and power devoid of strain, you can push that bar higher still. Unless you are seriously set on the analogue summit you’d do well to treat this route as more than just a viable alternative. Your wallet will certainly thank you for it – and your ears too.

Conclusions

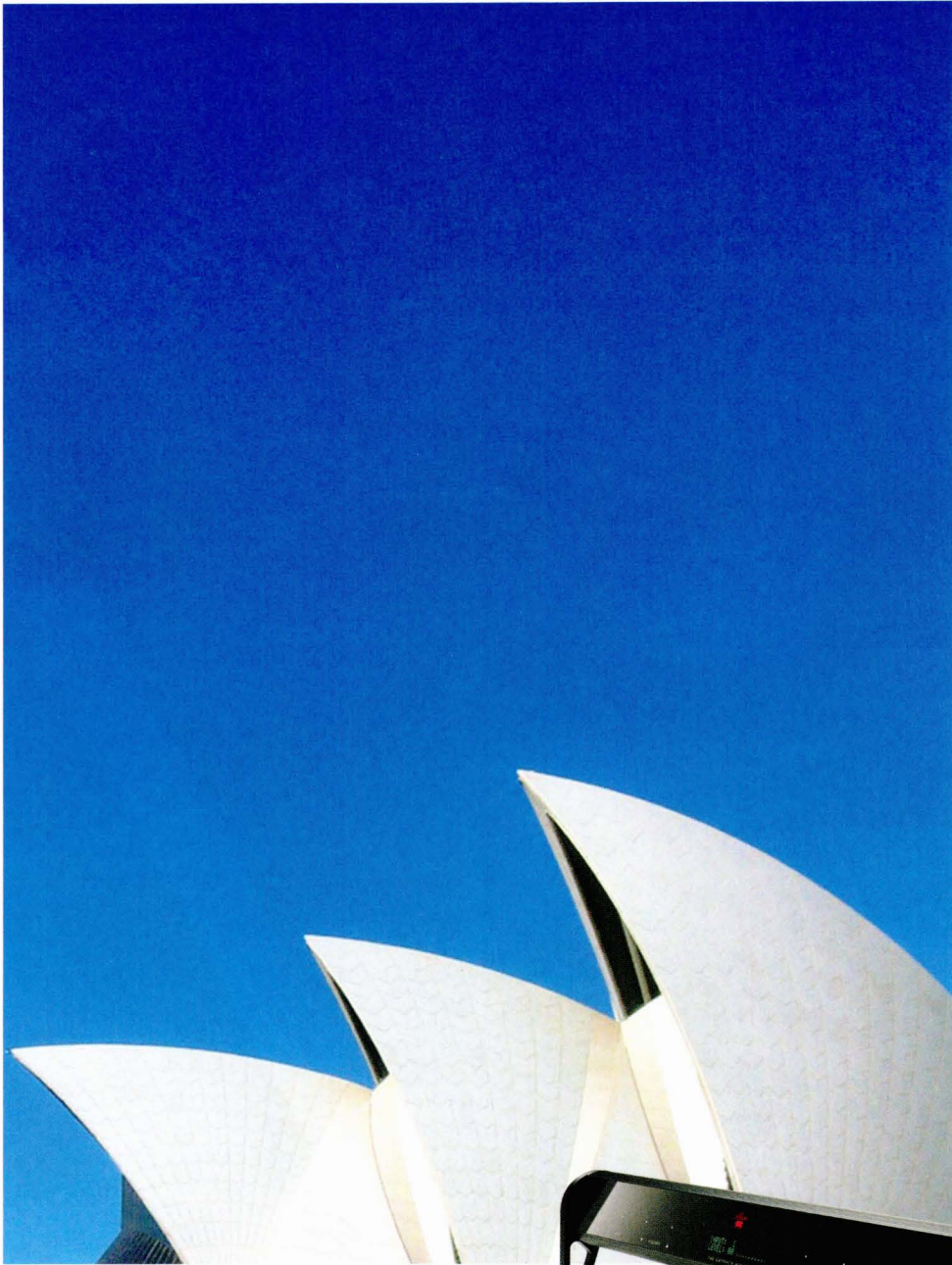
For once the conclusions here are simple. Yes, adjustability matters if you want to get the best out of your phono replay. And yes, each of these phono-stages is a bargain in its own way.

The SRX mods allow the Groove to keep pace with the competition whilst still costing considerably less – rather like the Titan i that matches its performance so well. One listen will convince; the SRX is a phono-stage that speaks for itself.

The Herron VTPS-2 gives listeners all the benefits of a tube unit with few of the failings and a text-book technical performance to boot. It offers a level of vacuum-tube engineering (carefully combined with solid-state circuitry) that’s rare at any price, unheard of at this one.

But the real steal is undoubtedly the Graham Slee combination. Offering solid performance at an extremely affordable price, it also provides the listener with a beautifully engineered, switchable EQ set-up that brings older records to vivid life. The benefits are hard to credit until you experience them, so critical are they to proper vinyl replay and the full musical enjoyment of recorded performances that every serious phono-stage should offer the facility. The Revelation is well-named, and along with a decent high-output cartridge represents the gateway to true high-end analogue performance. It says on the instruction manual, “Welcome to a new world of musical realism”. For once, I don’t think that’s overstating the case; record collectors everywhere should hear one of these!





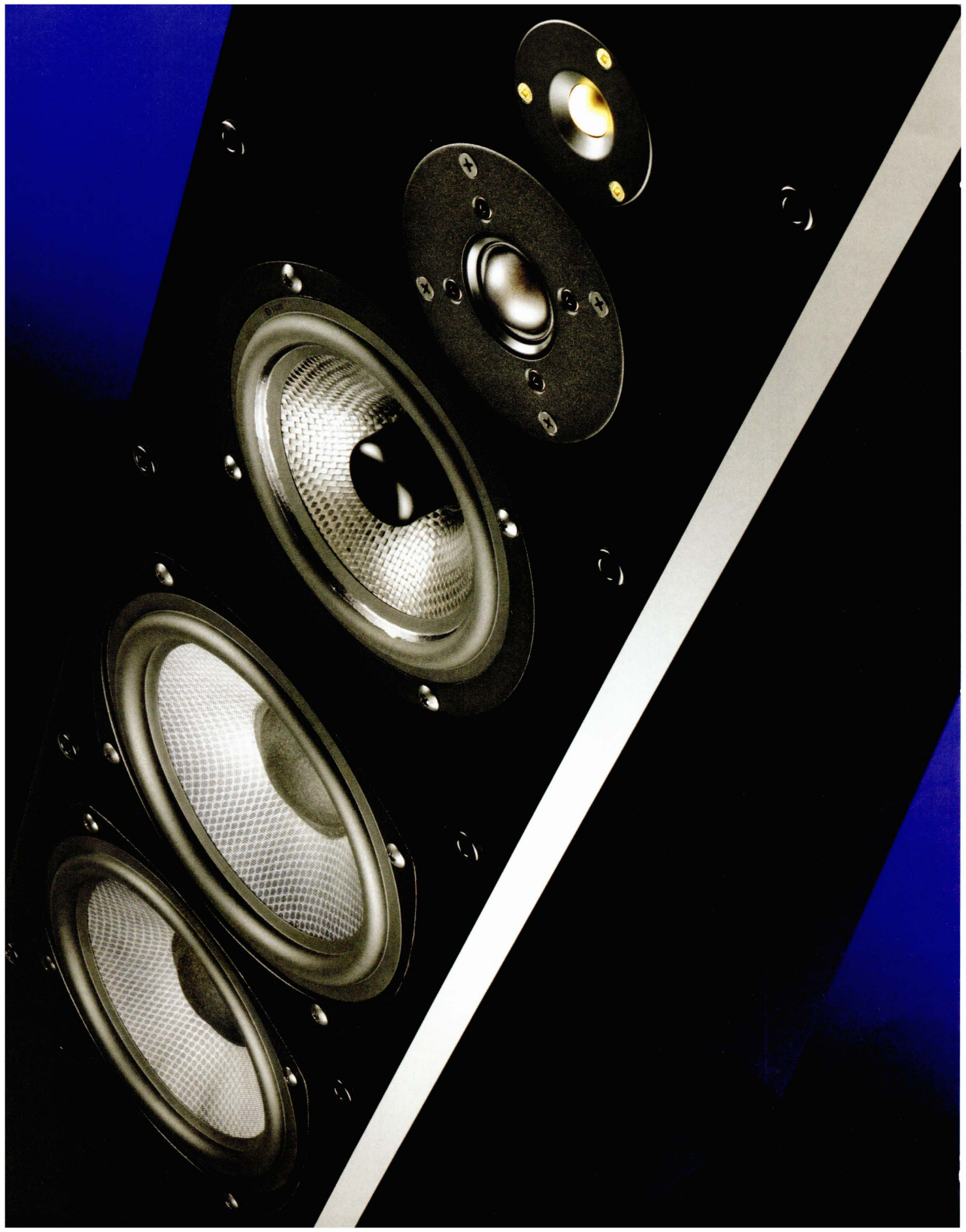
The shape of music

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



THE
GRYPHON





Reference 3A Grand Veena Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Reference 3A loudspeakers have always met with a warm welcome at Hi-Fi Plus. Indeed, the Da Capo is something of a benchmark product chez Gregory, its combination of efficiency, an easy drive characteristic and the company's trade-mark direct-coupled bass-mid driver delivering an astonishing sense of musical scale and tactile communication from its comparatively compact, stand-mounted cabinet. Likewise, PM was suitably entertained by the hot-rod Royal Virtuoso version of the Da Capo, while CT positively swooned over the diminutive Dulcet. But what we have here is about as far from a two-way stand-mount as you can get. Given that the potential for success in any speaker design plummets exponentially with each increase in the number of drivers, can Reference 3A really translate the virtues of their simple, direct approach to an imposing four-way, five driver floor-stander?

On the face of it, the Grand Veena represents quite a stretch, but look a little closer and we actually find evolution rather than revolution. What the designer has actually done is graft a few of the more consistent emerging trends in loudspeaker design onto his existing concept and then further refined the mechanics and construction. So, the heart of the Grand Veena is its 180mm direct-connected, woven carbon-fibre midrange unit. Derived from the in-house unit employed in the smaller Veena model, it runs from around 94Hz with useful

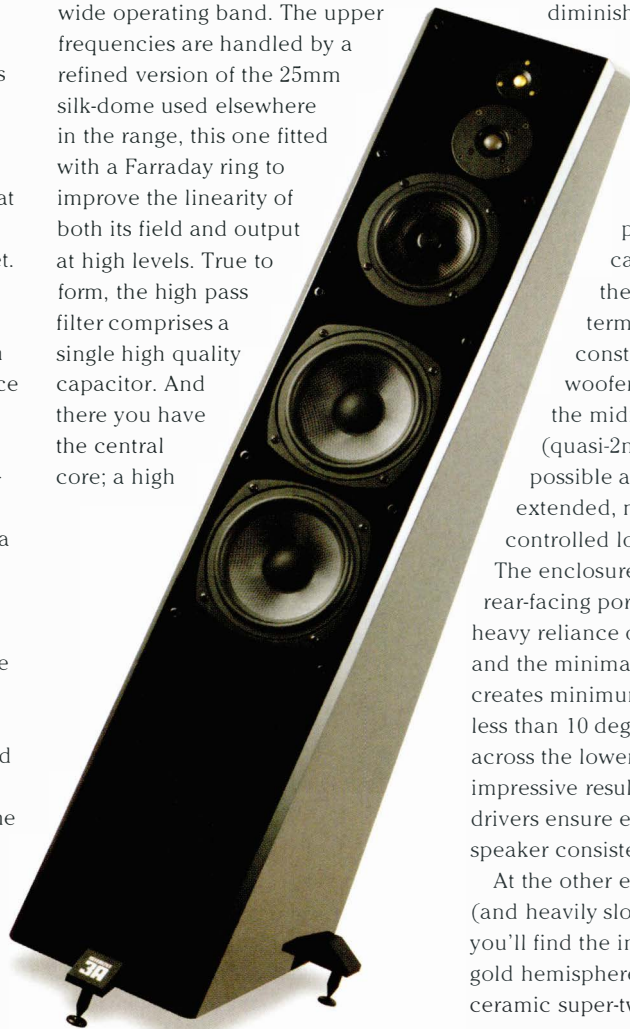
output up to 8kHz. It's bandwidth is entirely mechanically controlled, the gentle low-end roll-off a result of the separate, sealed volume that loads it, whilst the company makes extensive use of AVM damping fluid on the voice coil, around the cone's periphery and at strategic points on its surface to further control colouration across its very wide operating band. The upper frequencies are handled by a refined version of the 25mm silk-dome used elsewhere in the range, this one fitted with a Faraday ring to improve the linearity of both its field and output at high levels. True to form, the high pass filter comprises a single high quality capacitor. And there you have the central core; a high

performance two-way with a direct-coupled midrange driver and minimal crossover to the tweeter – just like all those other two-way designs from Reference 3A we like so much.

But what makes the Grand Veena special (and it is very special) is the fact that it successfully extends the bandwidth and evenness of the concept without in any way diminishing the virtues; in fact, quite the opposite.

The twin 200mm bass drivers are again designed and built in-house, from the company's preferred woven carbon-fibre. With their own enclosure and terminals, they effectively constitute a passive sub-woofer system, matched to the midrange with the gentlest (quasi-2nd order) slope possible and with an extremely extended, mechanically controlled low-frequency roll-off. The enclosure is loaded by a large, rear-facing port tuned to 36Hz. The heavy reliance on mechanical control and the minimal cross-over also creates minimum phase shift, with less than 10 degrees of phase error across the lower frequencies – an impressive result, while pair-matched drivers ensure excellent speaker to speaker consistency.

At the other end of the spectrum (and heavily sloped front baffle) you'll find the increasing familiar gold hemisphere of a Murata 12mm ceramic super-tweeter. Much has



▶ been written in these pages, both about the benefits of extended high-frequencies and the importance of balancing their output at the bottom-end, so I won't repeat it all here. Needless to say, the Grand Veena achieves both goals and definitely reaps the sonic harvest.

But the really impressive thing is the attention to detail that's gone into the execution of the cabinet and other aspects of the design. The sloping baffle certainly makes for a striking, even imposing appearance, but it also creates a stiffer cabinet, with non-parallel sides. The structure itself is MDF, but opposing walls vary in thickness by around 10% in order to help minimize the material signature. Each panel then receives a layer of specifically selected bi-component acoustic felt. This layered natural/synthetic mix is highly tunable and has been developed in Canada (whence Reference 3A hail) specifically for the motor industry. A further, free mounted roll of this felt is positioned at the acoustic centre of the bass cabinet, an unusual technique but one I've seen used in other speakers that I've also enjoyed. Both the midrange and tweeter are fitted with a pair of Bibee filters, while the wiring and all the solder joints receive a coating of AVM damping fluid.

The speaker stands on three

a cast metal outrigger. The result is extremely stable, while the hexagon profile of the spikes and large knurled locking screws make precise angular adjustments extremely easy. The

speakers offer an overall efficiency of 90dB

and while impedance is a low-ish 5 Ohms, it stays within ± 0.5 Ohms of this, making for a very easy drive characteristic.

Set up and system matching are thus fairly straightforward, the speakers designed to work best with a three to two ratio between listening distance and spacing. Positioned thus they will require minimal if any toe-in and a dead vertical stance. If you end up sitting closer, a little extra toe-in

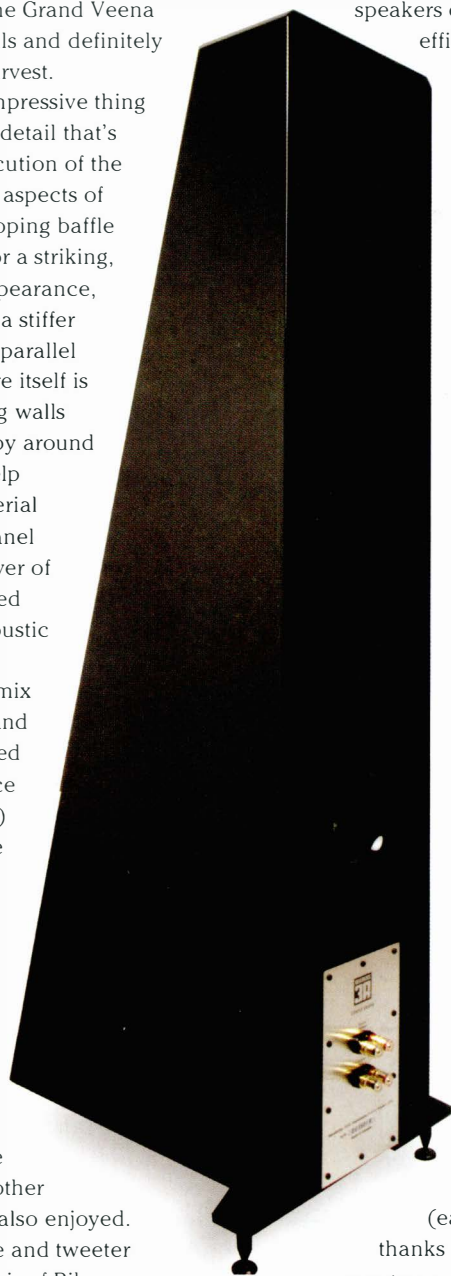
and dropping the front of the speaker slightly

(easily achieved thanks to the spiking arrangement) will snap

the soundstage into focus. Amp matching should clearly present few problems and I achieved superb results with both the Hovland RADIA and the VAS valve mono-blocs.

However, the biggest surprise was the happy match with the 400 Watt Hovland Stratos, not something I would have predicted on paper, making this one of the most versatile speakers I've ever used. It's also one of the best value speakers I've reviewed. As I hope by now you've gathered, there's a lot of material and engineering effort gone into this design, and not a little care. The Grand Veena stands roughly four and a half feet high and each one weighs 75lbs. Anyway you look at it this is a substantial speaker. The price tag, starting at £6895 is substantial too, but given the content and versatility (not to mention the performance) they are worth every penny – and more.

However, the ease of drive and adjustment shouldn't lull you into a false sense of security. Just like the Wilson Duette, the Grand Veenas sound so good from the off it's tempting to leave well alone, but the requisite care spent on really precise adjustment of toe-in and tilt (a laser pointer is pretty much a prerequisite given the visually confusing shape of the speaker, and do not forget to compensate for rear wall spacing) will pay real dividends in terms of sound stage focus, transparency and the creation of a natural perspective. In the absence of genuinely subterranean bass, staging does tend to favour instruments over acoustic, proportion over scale, but that's to be expected. The important thing with the Grand Veenas is that the soundstage is naturally presented and believable, consistent within itself so that – vagaries of the recording aside – it doesn't bend the performers, or more importantly the relationship between them, out of shape. Work on position and toe-in until the you've got the spatial balance just so and along the way the sense of musical timing and integration ▶



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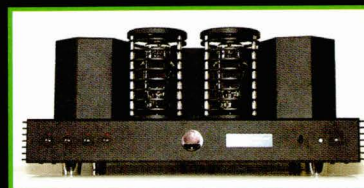
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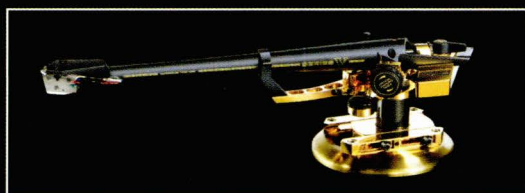
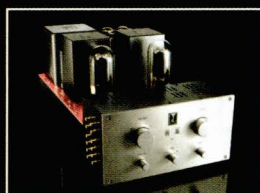
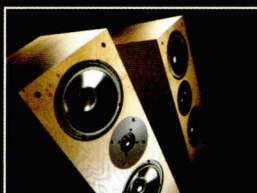
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DEFINITIVE AUDIO



Main image: KSL Kondo Gakuon Mono Valve Amplifiers



▶ will lock in and the performance will spring to life.

The other thing you'll notice as soon as you hook these speakers up is no shortage of



apparent bandwidth – more than the numbers might lead

you to expect (ever a Reference 3A trick). Their bass is quick, tuneful and powerful. The question is, has it been added at the expense of the communicative, lively and direct mid-band that makes Reference 3A's two-way designs so musically appealing? In a word, no. In fact, quite

the opposite, with the Grand Veena actually building on the strengths of models like the Da Capo, extending their performance envelope up and down, dimensionally and in terms of micro-dynamic resolution.

So, play girl and guitar, be it the delicacy of Nanci Griffiths or the more driven style of a KT Tunstall and you'll

get all the immediacy and appeal of the small speakers – but more so. You'll get a greater sense of presence, body and personality, more intimacy, space around the voice and instruments, a greater sense of life and emotional communication. Play something stellar like the direct to two-track 'Some People's Lives' from Janis Ian's *Breaking Silence* and the sense of physical presence, the natural inflexions in the vocal, the subtle shifts in the pace and phrasing conjures the sort of picture that demonstrates to unbelievers just what a good hi-fi system is capable of. The weighting of each piano note is so precise, its placement so clear that the fragile balance between lyric and the instrumental underpinning is beautifully preserved, and with it the emotional weight, the sense of sadness and loss in the song.

But what's fascinating above and beyond the superbly convincing nature of the rendition is the part played in achieving it by the frequency extremes. The melody is not bass heavy, with a sparing use of lower left hand, yet the added extension brings presence, body and harmonic substance to the piano. It adds a greater sense of space around the performer and instrument, adds a convincing solidity and stability to the picture. At the other extreme, the Murata ceramic dome operates out to well beyond audibility, but like all good super-tweeters its effects are heard right across the mid-band and bass. Yes, there's an added sense of air, transparency and focus, but the real musical impact is in the clarity and precision it brings to the music. A well-balanced super-tweeter instills a sense of order and organization, purpose and structure on the music. Suddenly there's a place for everything and everything is in that place. That's exactly what you're hearing with the Janis Ian track. ▶

► Each note from the piano is clearly defined, its weight, placement and position in the phrase natural and predictable. It's this feeling of natural spacing and progression that makes the music so convincing and affecting, ironing out the subtle ripples in the timing that jar against our perception. No surprise then, that high-frequency extension is high on the list of high-end speaker designers' priorities. No surprise too that the excellent (if pricey) Murata dome is becoming an increasingly common sight.

But the other neat trick in the Grand Veenas' hand is the nature of the bass. They don't have a huge internal volume to play with while their basically flat impedance also limits their ultimate bass weight and extension. But, placed against those limitations the benefits of building their own drivers in-house (and the control that affords over their mechanical behaviour) and the ease of drive that results from the minimal crossover this makes possible and you have the foundations for a carefully executed balancing act – one that's been judged to a 'T'. The port loading augments low-frequency output, but unlike most reflex speakers the Grand Veenas don't die away quickly, the carefully tailored driver response maintaining useful output well down into the upper 20s. Add in the ease with which the amp can get a grip on those drivers, courtesy of the lack of large crossover elements and you've got considerable punch and weight through the vital mid-bass where so much of music's drive and energy originates, underpinned by more than just a vestige of the deeper fundamentals. Just listen to Aston Barrett's joyously energetic and agile bass lines from *Babylon By Bus*, the Reference 3As endowing them with a proper propulsive energy and characteristically undulating pitch, always sure footed, tactile and weighty.

At their upper reaches, the bass drivers meet seamlessly with the midrange, neither tripping the timing nor blurring the point of transition. Reference 3A's gentle slopes certainly help smooth the journey from one unit to another, although I can't help wonder to what extent they contribute to one of the Grand Veena's few flaws, a subtle lack of texture and range to their tonal palette the further you travel from their gloriously tactile mid-band. It's a limitation that only becomes apparent compared to (far) more expensive speakers, generally those endowed with real low-frequency extension. The suppressed energy in the bowing of the extended bass passages that open the Gorecki *3rd Symphony* is less apparent, but it's a tendency that also afflicts broad swathes of both Du Pre's cello and Ricci's fiddle.

If that criticism seems somewhat equivocal it also reflects the difficulty of pinning this speaker down. Its tactile mid-band and lucid overall musical coherence mean that chasing the tendency by changing the partnering amp or source tends to draw attention to the differences between the matching equipment rather than the constants imposed by the speaker. As a failing, it's also neither intrusive nor even particularly apparent (save with reference to those much more expensive alternatives) and most owners will remain blissfully unconcerned, instead spending their time on what the Grand Veena's do best – allowing you to really connect with the music.

Reference 3A's Grand Veena will be many things to many people. It is an impressive evolution (and validation) of the company's conceptual approach, a genuine flagship. It is also an impressively neutral, tractable and versatile performer that promises to deliver its full potential in a wide variety of systems and settings. But perhaps most impressive of all is its

engaging musical enthusiasm, the effortless way it seems to pull you into music as different as Bela Fleck and Bela Bartok, Franz Schubert and Franz Ferdinand. There are two threads of authenticity running through the Grand Veena: its feel for the music and its realization of the hi-fi promise. It delivers the first by delivering on the second. You want music at home – real music? You need look no further than Reference 3A's Grand Veena. No floorstander that I've heard near the price is anywhere near as much fun. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way reflex loaded loudspeaker with super-tweeter
Driver Complement:	1x Ceramic hemisphere UHF 1x 25mm silk dome HF 1x 180mm woven carbon-fiber MF 2x 200mm woven carbon-fiber LF
Sensitivity:	90 dB
Impedance:	5 Ohms (±0.5)
Bandwidth:	36Hz - 20kHz ±3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	260 x 1290 x 480mm
Weight:	34kg ea.
Prices:	£6895 (wood veneer) £7495 (piano black)

UK Distributor:

Absolute Analogue
Tel. (44)(0)20 8459 8113
Net. www.absoluteanalogue.co.uk

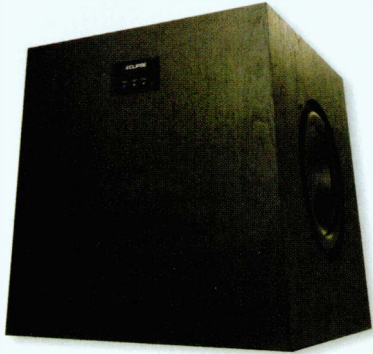
Manufacturer:

Reference 3A
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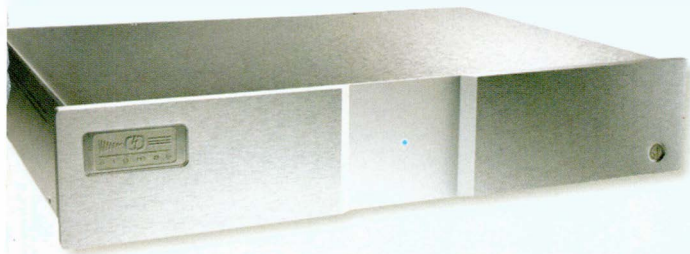
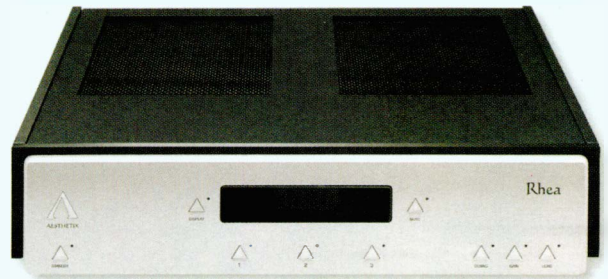
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PMC EB1i Transmission Line Loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy

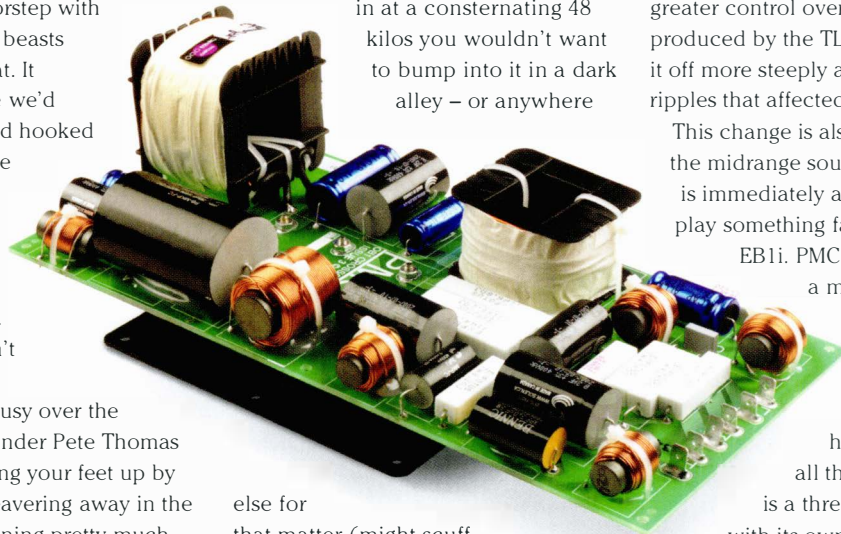
Big PMC speakers are always great fun. Big speakers have an intrinsic advantage when it comes to moving air and, all other things being equal, can do this in more entertaining fashion than small ones. Small speakers can seem more fi, but personally I'm in this game for the joy of music rather than the minutiae of soundstaging. So it was with some enthusiasm that I greeted PMC's artist in residence Keith Tonge when he arrived on my doorstep with these magnificent beasts filling up his Passat. It wasn't long before we'd lugged them in and hooked them up so that the fun could begin, fun that we managed to spin out for the rest of the day. Sometimes this isn't such a bad job!

PMC has been busy over the winter. Not for founder Pete Thomas the luxury of putting your feet up by the fire; he was beavering away in the listening room refining pretty much the company's full range of domestic loudspeakers, prompted by the arrival of a new tweeter from SEAS called Sonolex, a drive unit that PMC had helped develop.

This resulted in the i series, which has swept through the PMC range like wildfire though without the usual destructive results. In fact, if the blurb is to be believed the tweeter

has wrought big improvements. I reviewed the EB1, the largest domestic floorstander that PMC makes, only last year so it was a surprise to see it turn up again so soon. But the tweeter is now green and the finish that little bit smoother, while the process of integrating the tweeter has also brought about other changes.

The EB1i is still a substantial loudspeaker of course. Standing well over a metre high and weighing in at a consternating 48 kilos you wouldn't want to bump into it in a dark alley – or anywhere



else for that matter (might scuff the lacquer!). It features a ten-inch bass driver with a flat carbon fibre and Nomex diaphragm, backed up by PMC's trademark transmission line (TL) loading, although the EB1i deviates slightly in this department. It has an extra chamber at the end of the line, above the place where it vents. The purpose of the TL is to augment the speaker's output at

very low frequencies, by channelling output from the rear of the bass driver down a long, heavily damped "pipe" that's designed to remove all but the lowest frequencies. In effect it's a mechanical low pass filter that has the benefit of loading the bass driver resistively and which is said to produce the lowest octaves in phase with the direct output.

The purpose of the additional chamber in the i series is to give greater control over the response produced by the TL, effectively rolling it off more steeply and smoothing out ripples that affected the original.

This change is also claimed to make the midrange sound clearer which is immediately apparent when you play something familiar through the EB1i. PMC's have always had a more obviously open balance than average but this is even more noticeable here. The source of all that mid-band detail is a three-inch fabric dome, with its own plastic enclosure.

PMC goes to great lengths to make sure that this enclosure is well damped, using bitumastic sheets and carefully selected foam, which is said to absorb the rearward energy from the driver. The size of the housing also damps the dome acoustically and allows it to operate cleanly down to the 380Hz crossover point.

Other revisions for the i series also ►

▶ include veneer on all faces of the slightly higher density MDF cabinet, plinths that you no longer have to bolt on yourself and a rather nice chrome and enamel automotive style badge.

I wondered why it had taken so long to come up with the secondary chamber idea. According to designer Pete Thomas: "One of things I have a bee in my bonnet about is distortion in the bottom-end. All speakers are actually appalling if you measure the distortion at low-frequencies. One of the reasons I like transmission lines was not the amount of bass or how low they go but how low the distortion is. The only other speaker I ever liked were electrostatics, which don't have the punch and power but do have very low distortion. The lovely thing about the line is that it absorbs the rear radiation from the woofer, acting as an acoustic crossover, and the steeper the roll-off the more accurately we can match the driver to the TL. The extra chamber increases the roll-off of the line."

"One of the problems with TLs is that they are complex to analyse mathematically as well as sonically, so our speakers have evolved over 20-years. This extra chamber is quite a jump and we did consider filing a patent for it, but using a chamber as another filter was really part of the slow evolution of our designs. We have had products with smaller chambers in but they didn't have the effect that the one in the EB1 does. I have probably reduced the distortion by about 50%."

I had more difficulty than usual finding the right places to put the EB1s

in my room and wondered whether their much-vaunted wide dispersion might not be a problem. Pete says the reason for having it is image placement, but there is a delicate



balance between that and the nasty effects of early reflections from the room. "In the recording environment you record

180 degrees of whatever is making the sound, you're recording this side of the instrument or voice, so to reproduce that in the recording studio you need a speaker that can reproduce that radiation pattern. If you can get a reasonably flat response up to about ± 60 degrees then you can reproduce a recording pretty accurately. The reason why speakers sound different is not the on axis response because they're nearly all reasonably flat, it's the off axis response that is crucial. Because if the off axis response isn't flat then the reflection from the wall won't be flat either. I will make the on axis response slightly worse in favour

of the off axis and will measure from -60 to +60 degrees around the axis and go for a balanced response.

"If you listen to directional versus wide dispersion speakers the latter will present a much deeper, wider, higher image which is our goal."

Given the size of the EB1i I was surprised that it doesn't have higher sensitivity than its specified 89dB at 4 ohms: "We sacrifice sensitivity to the drivers and to the fourth order crossover in order to achieve a more neutral result. I can't say that sensitivity is such a high priority because people who buy speakers like this tend to be able to afford powerful amplifiers. With the smaller models we go for the maximum sensitivity that can be achieved."

Installing the EB1i in place of the more expensive B&W 802D brought about a fairly big change in balance. Essentially the midrange seemed more prominent, a factor that had a dramatic effect on albums like Gillian Welch's *Time The Revelator*. This recording has often hinted at a slight edginess but in the PMC's hands became almost uncomfortable due to that exposure through the mid-band. Conversely material that had seemed a little dense or thick in the past opens up to reveal a wealth of detail and space, Fink's *Biscuits For Breakfast* being a prime example. The title track was transformed into a far more revealing piece and his take on 'All Cried Out' seems far more cutting and powerful.

The EB1i sounds more efficient than the specs suggest, which is probably because of the TL factor, the bass is seemingly more open and easy than usual, almost as if it doesn't require as much effort on the amplifier's behalf. As the power amp being used was a Classé CA-2200, reserves in the amperage department were unlikely to have been stretched anyhow, but it's an interesting and appealing effect. ▶

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▶ This low frequency ease reveals a lot of the stuff you aren't supposed to hear, like people knocking a mic stand or tapping feet on a board floor. Of course it also makes full use of the sound that the mic is supposed to be capturing; the full-bodied timbre of a double bass and the heavy chug of dub are both delivered in convincing and unforced fashion. I particularly enjoyed Tosca's marvellously named *Chocolate Elvis* with its heavy manipulating of the nether notes. But whilst this is the sort of speaker that has you digging out discs that have "great bass" on other speakers, it can sometimes reveal that what had previously worked so well may well have been a result of bass distortion rather than the recording. With bass that's as clean as the EB1i offers, you are getting a lot closer to the truth than most passive systems can reveal.

It also images well, John Surman's saxophone on the album *Thimar* seemingly disconnected from the cabinets altogether. These speakers are remarkably good at getting out of the way and letting the character of the music take the lead. Thus Barb Jungr's rendition of 'Who Do You Love?' is vibrant and crisp, with lovely tone from double bass, acoustic guitar and voice alike.

The new tweeter makes itself heard when you play some trumpet, like Avanim's *Third World Love*. This has tremendous immediacy and spatial resolution. What's more there's none of the usual break up that trumpets seem to induce in tweeter domes. Rather late in the day I realised that I was

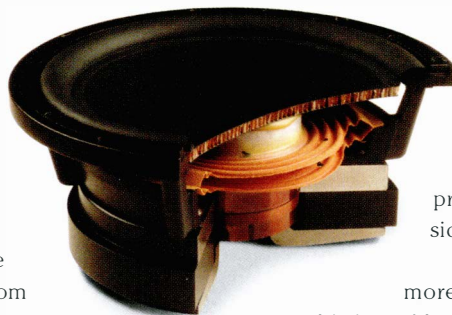
using a DNM interconnect on the Resolution Audio Opus 21 rather than my preferred Living Voice cable; switching them over both beefed up the bass and calmed the mid and was far better suited to the job (note to self: use the right wire for the job!). I could now turn it up more without the room joining in and continued playing as many favourite albums as I could lay my hands on. Rather a pleasant experience as you might imagine and one that I could happily carry on with if it weren't for these darn deadlines.

Another late revelation was that despite its size and bandwidth the EB1i needs a little bit of rear wall reinforcement to produce the best results. Most of my listening was done with them at the more open end of the room where the floor is more solid and the wall two or more metres back, but switching things around so that the wall was only a metre behind the front baffle seemed to work better. Cuts with excessive bass sounded excessively bassy, but most sounded better balanced. The Fink album in particular turning into a rather better recording than had

previously been apparent. The low distortion is still the hallmark that allows you to hear so much fine detail and space from every record that is spun, but with this

setup I found it was possible to listen at higher levels without discomfort – despite the presence of closer side-walls.

The EB1i is a more open and sophisticated loudspeaker than its predecessor. The changes to tweeter, crossover and cabinet have brought about a reduction in distortion across the board that makes for a highly revealing and damned enjoyable loudspeaker. Now, what excuse can I find to hold onto them for a few months? ➤



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way transmission line
Driver Complement:	1x 27mm fabric dome 1x 75mm fabric dome 1x 250mm carbon fiber Et Nomex
Crossover:	4th order
Sensitivity:	89dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Effective line length:	3.5m
Dimensions (WxHxD):	294 x 1200 x 465mm
Weight:	48kg ea.
Finishes:	Black, cherry or walnut veneer
Price:	£5,950 pr.
Manufacturer:	PMC Limited
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Roy Gregory, Hi-Fi+ Issue 53

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MONITOR AUDIO

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Small - but perfectly formed... The Monitor Audio PL100

by Jason Kennedy

For relatively old lags like myself the Monitor Audio name will forever be associated with its charismatic founder Mo Iqbal, a larger than life character whose favourite catchphrase was 'gold domes matey', a reference to the gold anodised finish that distinguished the firm's top-line models in his day. One look at the new Platinum Line that now occupies the high ground in MA's portfolio will reveal that that phrase is no longer appropriate; there are no domes in evidence, gold or otherwise. Instead the three models in the Platinum range carry a ribbon tweeter in their luxuriously finished cabinets, marking a distinct change of direction for the company.

The Platinum series consists of the \$2,300 PL100 stand-mount under consideration, the \$5,000 PL300 floorstander which adds a pair of eight inch bass drivers to the PL100's bass/mid and treble units and the \$2,300 PL350C three-way, four-driver centre channel. Custom designed stands are also made for the two smaller models and a pair was bolted onto the PL100s for this review; at \$350 a pair they're not cheap but they are very nicely conceived and executed. A large, sculpted ARC plinth (anti-resonance composite,

which is a polymer based material that is apparently similar to Bakolite) sits on large but shallow bullet shaped spikes that can be adjusted from above. Alternatively they can be removed leaving chunky rubber O-rings to interface



with a hard floor surface. The main column is in powder coated aluminium and has a cable routing slot in the rear that will take reasonably thick cables but probably not the sort of

thing you'd expect to use with a speaker of this price. The column is bitumen damped to kill any ringing. On top there are two steel top plates separated by chrome spacers with bolts running through them into the cabinet itself, with damping washers between cabinet and metalwork to further prevent ringing in the stand. Without spikes this stand raises the speaker 630mm off the ground, the spikes add another 25mm but will usually sink into the carpet.

The cabinet has a deep and luxurious finish on its veneered parts, equal to any other speaker this size, regardless of price, an impression underpinned by the beautifully machined and platinum plated WBT terminals on the rear and the leather upholstery on the front baffle. The veneer on this pair is Santos rosewood, but ebony is also an option. Each is coated with 11 layers of polyester lacquer to produce that deep sheen for hours of buffing pleasure. The front baffle is covered in Strathspey leather that is so uniform that the uninitiated might mistake it for the increasingly convincing leatherettes available nowadays. Look closely however and you can see variations in the grain, sniff closely and you can tell it once adorned a cow, albeit in a slightly more furry state.

The actual cabinet is made from 15 thin wooden laminates that end up

► being 25mm thick, shaped to produce the curved sides and back panel and then internally braced. The whole cabinet is tensioned with a large bolt whose head sits between the reflex port and the terminals, the idea being that any remaining resonances can be tuned out. The front baffle is also made out of ARC, which looks like cast aluminium but doesn't have the same tendency to ring – which is quite useful.

What differentiates the Platinums from the rest of the MA range and quite a few other speakers is that ribbon tweeter. This was developed by Dean Hartley and MA's design team, and while it's based on existing technology it does differ in subtle but important ways. I asked Dean why he chose to go down this relatively difficult route, rather than picking a proven unit from an OEM supplier. By making it in-house MA can ensure consistency of production and long-term stability, as well as being able to engineer the response to fit in with the 165mm mid-bass drive unit, a pairing that means that the ribbon has to extend down to 2.5kHz, something which he found few OEM units were capable of doing. He decided to make the change to a ribbon because of a desire to achieve very high frequency extension, something that ribbons are inherently better at, the purpose being to provide a wide-band speaker that could make the most of high-resolution formats.

The mid-bass driver has to be pretty nimble to match the characteristics of the ribbon so MA developed a new

cone. This is made of a sandwich of ceramic coated aluminium/magnesium (C-CAM) either side of a Nomex honeycomb centre which provides rigidity. MA has

managed to produce a very lightweight drive unit that uses the same C-CAM material as the ribbon tweeter in its construction and is said to be significantly more rigid than a traditional metal cone.

Each drive-unit is housed in a die-cast alloy chassis. The bass mid basket curved to match the baffle.

Its motor system was developed using FEA software to minimise distortion and maximise linearity and its reflex port fashioned to allow

rapid, turbulence free movement of air; standard stuff but still reassuring.

Most of the

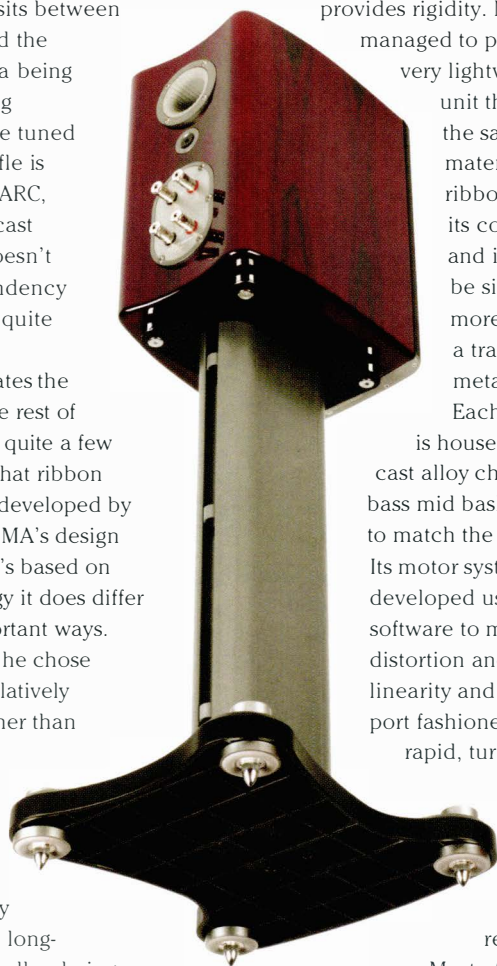
listening was conducted with a Resolution Audio Opus 21 disc spinner, a Classé CP-700 pre-amp and CA-2200 power amp, an amplifier combination whose smooth resolution and reserves of power were ideal for this open and revealing loudspeaker. While being an exceptional all-round design, where it scores over often larger and more expensive speakers is at higher frequencies, where that ribbon gives it an unfair advantage. This unit combined with the small and inert nature of the cabinet makes for superb imaging, producing instruments and voices that are in the

room and totally disconnected from the loudspeakers themselves, which is a nice trick if it can be done in an even-handed fashion. And the PL100 can; it has enough bass extension and power to create palpability and weight which underpins the mid and treble and gives great recordings the gravitas they deserve. It is not going to compete in the bass with larger speakers but you are not left wanting. Everything from a piano to a kick drum has the body that it warrants.

Rodrigo y Gabriela's *Live in Manchester and Dublin* is an album which keeps on surprising with its subtlety and realism, especially in the company of speakers like this. The quieter moments deliver a vivacity and presence that is uncanny. The quality of the treble is definitely a factor here; it has a naturalness that some might find too smooth but which is in fact simply devoid of the usual problems found in dome tweeters. The rewards it brings are 'worth the candle' so to speak. This is because it has genuine speed without edginess so the leading and trailing edges of each note are properly defined without embellishment or distortion. In practice this means that no matter how dense the material, if the amplifier can deliver it in one piece this speaker can reproduce it.

Robert Glasper's piano playing along with drum and bass revealed generous helpings of fine detail in the PL100's hands, the lines from all three musician's being easy to follow and separate without the result seeming overly analytical, the subtlest notes, delivering the musical message in as successful a fashion as the power chords, if not more so because there is more room for expression when the player is not trying to hit hard.

This Monitor Audio is also pretty handy with dynamics and dynamic range, being sensitive to both small and large changes in level and tracking them with ease thanks to ►



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▶ its fleetness of foot. Just listen to the way Gillian Welch's 'Time (The Revelator)' builds. The mid-band on this particular track can often seem a shade hard but via the PL100s this is not an issue. Instead this well-worn test track regained much of its beguiling charm. You can hear that the recording has been pushed close to the limit at some stage in its travels but the speaker stops this technicality from intruding on musical integrity.

Results inevitably hinge on the quality of the signal, more so than most because of the resolution on offer. So Burnt Friedman's dub excursions don't really hack it while Keith Jarrett's solo piano does the opposite, convincing you that it's worth putting up with his musical mannerisms to hear those fleeting glimpses of God that appear when he's in the zone. This is when this speaker's ability to show you what's happening in the quietest passages is really valuable. Loudspeakers aren't supposed to have a noise floor but the fact that one like this can deliver so much detail at such low levels would suggest otherwise.

It's qualities continued to shine with female voices including those of Rickie Lee Jones and Diana Krall, the former sounding no less nasal than usual but devoid of the strain that can appear with less capable speakers. The PL100 manages to combine remarkable openness with an effortlessness that really benefits a good recording. There is a body at high frequencies that you rarely hear and this allows female vocals to deliver captivating performances with ease.

During the course of this review I listened to a number of components from Leema including its new Stream CD player and Pulse amplifier, which seemed a good opportunity to try alternative source and amplification with the PL100. What this revealed is that the Monitor Audio is fussy

about what it's used with, the upbeat and excellently timed qualities of these c£1,000 components was not clean enough to warrant the degree of exposure offered by the speaker. Pioneer's smoother sounding DV-LX50 universal player proved a better fit, proving that character rather than cost is the key factor with system synergy.

I also tried different room orientations to give the speaker the opportunity to give of its best, most of the listening was done with them relatively close to one another (c2m) and with the reviewer about 3-4m away. Swinging things around so I sat closer to more widely spaced speakers increased the sense of energy they could deliver. Led Zeppelin's live rendition of 'Immigrant Song' coming across in



such effective fashion that one got a good impression of the awesome experience that being at the live event might have offered, without playing back at silly levels. John Paul Jones proving as ever to be the lynchpin, fleshing out the sound behind the

explosive antics of Bonham and Page. Mind you Bonzo's onslaught on 'Over The Hills' is something to behold.

I also got to briefly compare the MA with a passing pair of Focal 816WSE floorstanders. At £900 less expensive this wasn't a sensible comparison, but it was interesting to hear that the extra bass extension of the Focal could not compensate for its relative

shortcomings in terms of speed and dynamics.

I have to admit that prior to hearing this speaker my hopes were not that high; as a rule I prefer larger loudspeakers with more potential in the girth department. The PL100 beat off this barrier with ease and delivered a result that is both charming and revealing. Forget cheaper alternatives, when it comes to punching above its weight, MA's PL100 is in a class of its own. ✚

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loaded
Driver Complement:	60mm ribbon HF 165mm bass/midrange
Frequency response:	42 Hz - 100 KHz
Sensitivity:	88 dB
Nominal Impedance:	4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	225 x 370 x 285mm
Stand (WxHxD):	340 x 615 x 365mm
Weight:	13 Kg
Finishes:	Santos rosewood, ebony
Price:	£2,300

Manufacturer:

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The Rogue Audio Chronus Integrated Amplifier (and Stealth Phono-Stage)

by Roy Gregory



Back in Issue 40 I reviewed Rogue Audio's fascinating take on the budget valve recipe, the Metis pre-amp and Atlas power amp: fascinating because in this day age most budget valve designs are built in the China (the Rogues hail from Pennsylvania); fascinating too, for the compromises chosen and the clever engineering solutions adopted to maximize performance. At a total cost of £2385, it was a winning combination.

Well now we have another two-box Rogue Audio pairing vying for your budget buck, but this time round the physical split is rather different. Designer Mark O'Brien has combined what amounts to an Atlas and a Metis into a single box, at the expense of a simplified pre-amp power supply. The up-side is the cost saving that comes from losing the second chassis. You even still get the built in MM phono-stage for those who want access to occasional vinyl usage. The end result is a cut in price to £1600, a figure that leaves room for a lot of extra discs – or just enough space in the budget for a separate, standalone phono-stage for those who want to take record replay rather more seriously – which brings us to the Stealth phono-stage. Housed in the simplest of chassis work, Rogue's budget phono option is priced at £695 and does rather hide its light under a bushel. Derived from the excellent MM/MC stage that's built into the Company's 99 pre-amp, the Stealth is a solid-state unit that offers user adjustable gain, capacitive and resistive loading via dip-switches located on the main circuit board. You need to remove the lid to reach them so make sure the power is off before making any adjustments! Add to the performance we heard and liked so much in the 99 the benefits of a dedicated chassis and power supply and not surprisingly, the Stealth is impressive indeed.

With any user adjustable unit, care and attention in set-up reaps huge rewards, a rule that applies to both these units. The Stealth offers a choice of ▶

▶ two capacitive loadings, four gain settings and four different resistive loads. It's a well chosen spread, embracing both MM and MC cartridges, one that will repay careful selection of not just loading but also the gain, matching the cartridge to the sensitivity and overall gain of the system. (See the phono-stage group test on page 28 for much, much more on this).

In comparison the Chronus integrated amp seems straight-forward; three line-inputs and a MM phono-stage, a balance control and remote volume. There aren't even different output terminals for the loudspeakers (impedance being hard-wired internally for 4 or 8 Ohms) although there is a headphone output! Well, don't be fooled. This is a fixed bias amp – meaning (perversely) that you have to adjust it. Fortunately this is easily done, using the tool supplied, the meter fitted into the top-plate and the four toggle-switches and trim-pots hidden under the hatch just behind the right-hand output tubes. The instructions are clear and easy to follow and it's important that you do, because the correct bias on the power tubes maximizes both their output and their sense of musical grip, helping explain the 55 Watt rated output. Otherwise, set-up is straightforward; pay attention to the supporting surface to reduce microphony and decide whether you want to use the supplied valve cage or not (in the absence of kids and kittens I didn't).

One thing I really liked about the Atlas power amp was its substantial mains supply, a much larger transformer than you expect being bolted straight to the chassis base-plate, reducing the unit's visual bulk. The Chronus employs exactly the same arrangement as well as the two pairs of EL34 output tubes.

These might lack the power and bottom-end grunt of 6550s, but their mid-band is legendary and for products at this price that's what counts. Hooked up to either the Eben X-Babies or the Sendor SA1's

the Chronus produced a sound that was warm, sweet and

matter how frenetic the material, how pro-tools glassy the recording.

Moving up in resolution to SACD and Eleanor McEvoy's *Love Must Be Tough* and you confirm that the subtle rounding and smoothing that you've got used to with CD is the amp and not the recordings. This is not a high-definition device, with both transparency and resolution limited in absolute terms.

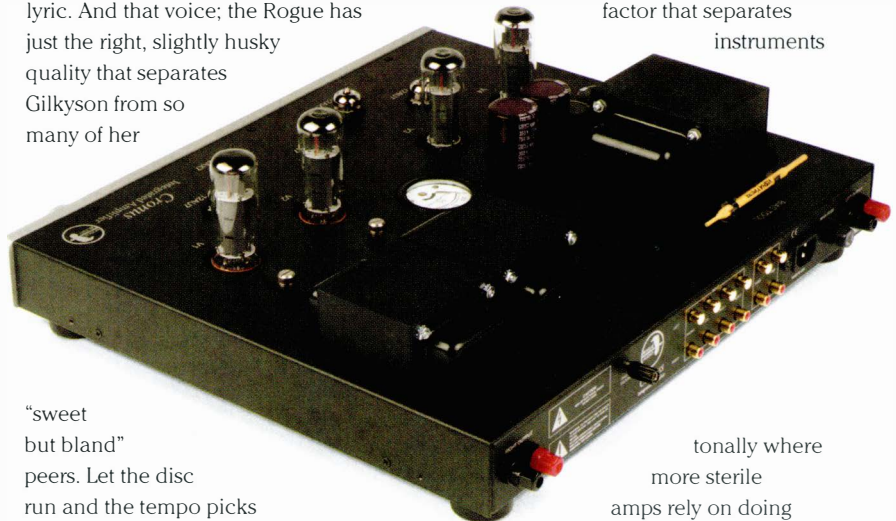
But fear not, what's much more important is that the colours are right and the notes are in the right place – things that leaner, meaner, cleaner designs at this sort of price so often get wrong. So the jaunty clip of 'Easy In Love' retains all its infectious enthusiasm, even when things evolve from the almost simplistic opening into

the far busier and more congested finale. And, as well as that sense of unforced momentum, you get the full range of instrumental colours, a factor that separates instruments

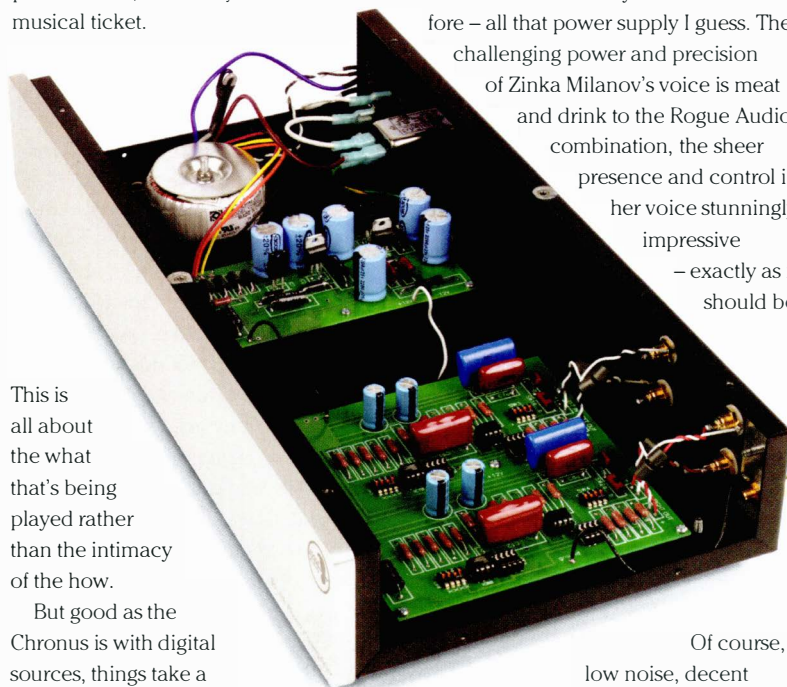
intimate but never sluggish. Eliza Gilkyson's 'Separated' never lags despite its measured pace, its natural sense of contained restraint. The stately bass-line and subtle drum-work is a joy, perfectly underpinning the fragile beauty of the lyric. And that voice; the Rogue has just the right, slightly husky quality that separates Gilkyson from so many of her

"sweet but bland" peers. Let the disc run and the tempo picks up perfectly, but once again it's the pain and anguish in the vocal that carries the 'Ballad Of Yvonne Johnson'. Music is delivered with an enticing warmth that draws you in, providing long-term, fatigue-free listening no

tonally where more sterile amps rely on doing so spatially. Large-scale orchestral works might lack really well defined acoustic boundaries (hardly a surprise given the price of the Chronus) but they definitely have a satisfying spread and sense of scale. ▶



► The Gunther Wand/NDR-Symphonie performance of the Beethoven *Sixth Symphony* is bold and spacious, combining a sprightly life and agility with a convincing sense of orchestral weight, ebb and flow. Balance is definitely mid-hall, both in terms of warmth and also distance, but there's no ignoring the pleasingly engaging and evocative performance, which is just the musical ticket.



This is all about the what that's being played rather than the intimacy of the how.

But good as the Chronus is with digital sources, things take a massive step up as soon as you bring the Stealth phono-stage into play. Impressively quiet and with well-chosen gain and loading values, it is easy to optimize the performance of any matching cartridge. I used both the Lyra Titan i and a Clearaudio Accurate in the VPI TNT/JMW combination (just to stretch the envelope a bit) as well as a Dynavector DV20X at a rather more realistic price level. As impressive as the Stealth was with the high-end cartridges, what I really liked was the way it made the most of the Dynavector, revealing its combination of natural colours and forceful rhythmic integrity despite the modest output. The ability to bring out the best in and capitalize on the strengths of a partnering cartridge is an underrated and rarely achieved gift, one that should

be cherished. Add to it the Stealth's perfect fit with the sonic character of the Chronus and things are definitely on the up. What the combination of the Stealth and a vinyl front-end deliver is greater depth, transparency and separation, better focus and increased dynamic range. Feed that little lot into the Chronus and suddenly the amplifier's substance and solidity comes to the fore – all that power supply I guess. The challenging power and precision of Zinka Milanov's voice is meat and drink to the Rogue Audio combination, the sheer presence and control in her voice stunningly impressive – exactly as it should be.

Of course, low noise, decent resolution and best of all, a real poise, continuity and balance to the top to bottom range will stand the Stealth in good stead, whatever the company. But there's no denying (and no surprise in discovering) the happy match it enjoys with the Chronus. Add in the carefully judged adjustability and carefully chosen balance of virtues – not so warm as to sound woolly, not so detailed and transparent as to sound stark or clinical – and you've got a serious new contender in the sub-£1K phono-stage stakes.

So which is better, the Metis/Atlas combination or the Chronus matched to the Stealth? Actually it's a moot point. For dedicated digiphiles the £800 difference in price makes it a no-brainer while for those wed to vinyl the Stealth presents a compelling performance

benefit over the MM-only stage in the Metis. In either role these Rogue audio components will form a convincing and beguiling musical heart to a two-channel system. Yes, there are electronics out there that offer more detail and superficially sharper and more impressive sound. None I've heard in this price range can better the Rogues' all-round musical ability, the way they put performers in the room with you, drawing you to the music rather than the system. The Chronus arrives as a distinctive and decidedly different alternative to the made in China crowd; the Stealth just reinforces its appeal. Aply named, Rogue Audio prove that there's life in the old dog yet... ►+

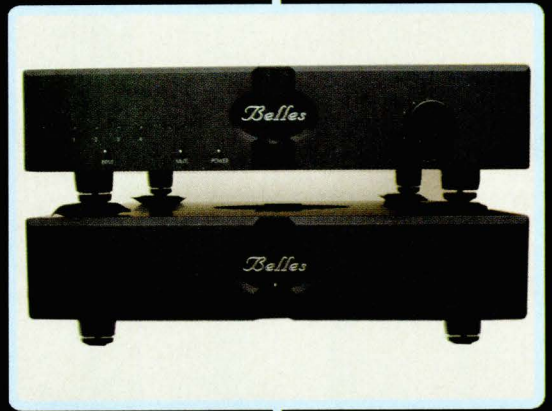
TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Chronus Integrated Amplifier
 Type: Vacuum-tube integrated amp
 Valve Complement: 3x 12AU7
 2x 12AX7
 4x EL34
 Inputs: 3x line-level
 1x MM phono
 Outputs: 1x fixed
 1x variable
 1x headphone
 1pr spkr binding posts/ch
 Rated Output Power: 55 Watts/ch
 Tube Cage: Yes
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 455 x 140 x 440mm
 Weight: 23kg
 Finishes: Black or silver
 Price: £1600

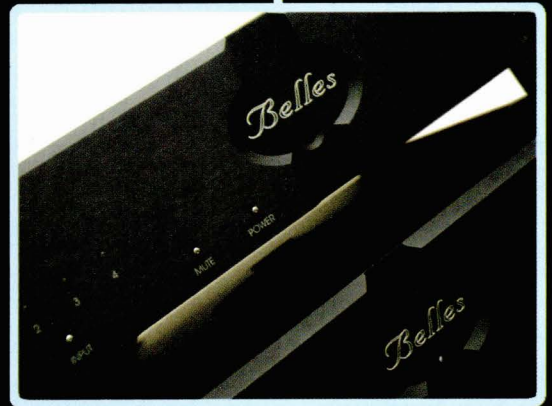
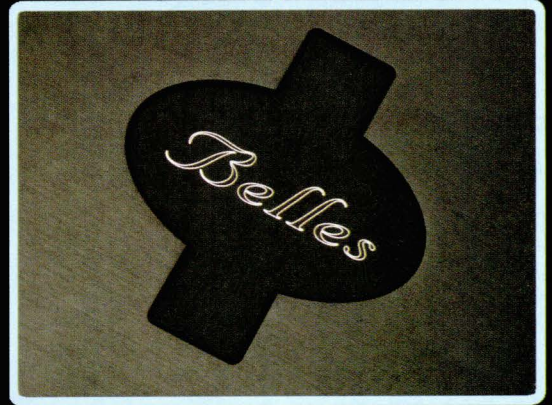
Stealth Phono-Stage
 Type: Solid-state MM/MC phono-stage
 Gain: 46, 50, 60 or 65dB
 Loading: 100, 300, 1100, 47000 Ohms
 Capacitance: 0 or 150pF
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 432 x 85 x 212mm
 Finishes: Black or silver
 Price: £695

UK Distributor:
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The Electrocompaniet ECC-1 CD Player and ECI-5 Integrated Amp

by Chris Thomas

This CD player and amplifier combination have a sound that's easy to like. Even from cold it makes a powerful and compelling musical statement, especially with complex, dynamic material. It's twenty-something years ago that I first enjoyed the original and well-known 25-watt class A amplifier from this Norwegian company and I think it is fair to say that, at that time, sound-wise they were ahead of the game. But the thought of that experience still invokes some painful memories. I can never think of that particular amplifier without remembering the terribly sharp edges that they left on their casework – and the day that one of the faceplate handles came loose as I lifted it, causing the razor-keen edge to open my finger in a full-length precision cut a surgeon would have been proud of. I also recall that I had a practice session with a south London reggae band that evening and had an impossible time wedging the plectrum between my thumb and the copious quantities of plaster I had wrapped around the finger in an effort to keep it straight. Luckily I only had to play a couple of hours worth of offbeat upstrokes which, given my peculiar angle of attack, gave me tendonitis. In stark contrast to its casework, the amplifier sounded as smooth as silk.

Fast-forward more than two decades and here I am listening to more Electrocompaniet equipment, only this time the company is under new ownership. The range on offer these days is vast in comparison and I am pleased to say that the edges are smooth now, although from a personal point of view I can't get too



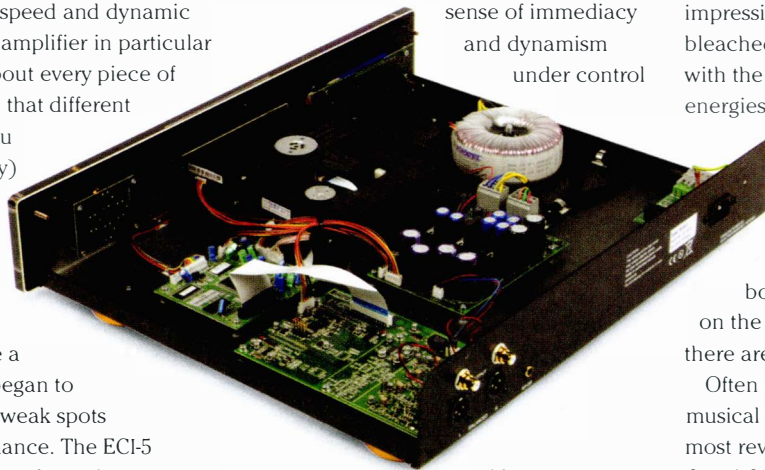
excited with their appearance. Marketing men tell me that we purchase with our eyes. I'd like to believe we use our ears too, because to me these components make a slightly awkward visual statement. They use an attractive black acrylic fascia, but here Electrocompaniet have decided to incorporate brass coloured buttons. They look too bling, like fittings from a footballers bathroom, and do the amplifier and CD player no favours at all. In attempting to give the electronics a classy look I'm afraid they have

succeeded in doing the opposite. So, I humbly suggest that they stick to the steel versions as fitted to the lower priced models. But, that aside, they are conventionally functional with both the ECI-5 integrated and the ECC-1 CD player coming under the banner of their Classic Line. Delivering 120 watts into 8 Ohms the amplifier is a substantial and powerful proposition for a moderately priced integrated.

Inputs are comprehensive with two sets of balanced sockets, single-ended RCAs for another three line-level components plus a tape loop and a unity gain home theatre input. There is also a set of balanced pre-amp outputs and single pairs of sturdy gold-plated speaker connections. It is fully remote operated and all selections are made via the navigation window on the front panel, while a neat display around the company logo indicates the volume setting. The CD player utilises the Cirrus Logic 24Bit/192kHz DAC and has both single-ended and balanced outputs, plus a S/PDIF RCA digital output. It incorporates a Philips transport and a front-loading disc tray fitted with an internal suspension system.

With nothing in particular to distinguish them from the crowd externally, it was a pleasant surprise to hear just how bold they are when ▶

asked to do some work. This is no laid-back, cosy sound. From the very beginning this combination had a distinctive sonic signature, intrinsically linked with the speed and dynamic impact that the amplifier in particular brings to just about every piece of music. I believe that different systems lead you (subconsciously) towards playing specific types of music that suit them, and it was quite a while before I began to notice any real weak spots in their performance. The ECI-5 shows its speed and transient reserves at every opportunity and is something of a mini-powerhouse. Used as a pair they are full of momentum and drive. The bandwidth is excellent and it is both tautly controlled and focussed too, applying its power with strength and precision. But don't get the idea that the music is lean or remotely lightweight. The amplifier's abilities when it comes to delivering the big transient swings are notable but its recovery for the next event is even more so. When the musical rhythms are hot and contain many percussive elements, this combination never drops a stitch. I was quite taken aback with the enthusiastic way it dealt with the title track of Antonio Forcione's *Touch Wood* (Naim cd069), which is a bristling amalgamation of guitar playing and body slapping, as he becomes a kind of one-man-band of rhythmic and melodic interplay. This track is food and drink to the Electrocompaniet combo. The sheer tempo and the dynamism of the playing shows that Forcione has formidable technique, but it also poses specific questions of any system asked to make sense of the shape of the whole piece. Many will give you a breathless interpretation but substitute pure, furious excitement



for musical focus. But I was impressed by the uncluttered way the Electros handled this, helped enormously by the persuasive way the amplifier kept its sense of immediacy and dynamism under control

without over damping any of the guitar-thumping percussion. The track 'Alhambra' is one of my favourites, featuring the fretless and complex Uddan guitar, with its unique voice and flavour. It captures the Spanish Sierras and the glorious city of Granada exquisitely and for me, shows Antonio at his best. I love the Flamenco-scented rhythms and flow of the piece. The swaying tempo, unusual shape and growing character of the leading edge of each unfretted note were impressively handled. There is a slightly bright shading to the tonal balance, but I don't see it as a problem, just something to bear in mind when thinking about cables and speakers.

But, it was listening to Pat Metheny's *A Map Of The World* (WB 47366-2) that I first noticed a very unusual character to his instrument: it sounded too twangy, lacking in its full sustain and almost a little banjo-like. The sweeping strings and the whole ambient presence of the orchestral backdrops were majestic and as pictorial as they should be, but that guitar sound had me stumped, sounding like a different instrument to the one I had heard so many times before. I began to run through some other discs that I thought

might highlight the same thing and decided to use both the CD player and the amplifier in separate systems. The results confirmed my earlier impression that the amplifier is a little bleached at times and though it copes with the initial impact of individual energies and voices extremely well,

it comes up slightly short when dealing with the tonal colours and hues of plucked strings and vibrating instrumental bodies. This is hardly noticeable on the vast majority of material but there are discs that will highlight it.

Often the simplest of musical structures are the most revealing. Take Shelby Lynne's *Just A Little Lovin'* CD (Lost Highway B00097789-02), a masterful production by Phil Ramone who has gone for a sparse, dry and simple recording without the slightest hint of flash musicianship to be found. Instead he has avoided the reverb control, left her vocals as natural as possible and as a result her interpretations of the well-known Dusty Springfield songs are as minimal as the backing tracks. But there is a sense of intimacy here as she sings well within herself against the accomplished and understated support. Otherwise the simplicity of her expression and her own phrasing are stylised only by the occasional slight break in her voice. Her careful approach to pitch with a mere whiff of Country twang thrown in lend the whole disc a wonderful air of balance and delicacy which I am sure is what Ramone was looking for. But these feelings are difficult for any hi-fi system to convey, as within that superficially simple structure lives an extraordinarily complex series of relationships: vocals, instrumentation, the spaces around them and the time frame they exist in. This is where the Electros surprised me with their ability to layer musical performance and technique with nuance and fit

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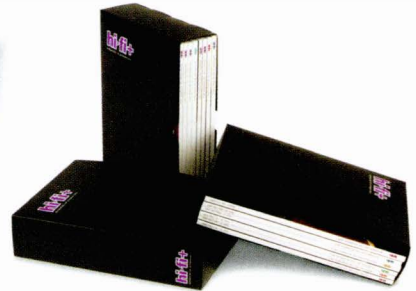
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▶ it all together, preserving that elusive sense of quiet and stillness that both characterises this album and attracts me to it. The better the system, the easier it is to appreciate these subtleties and the exploration of such contrasts is one of those areas where re-visiting a recording will always be more interesting than the live event. Okay, so this combination can be a little rough around the edges too. The cymbals do not ring with quite the alluring metallic shimmer that I have heard on other (more expensive) systems and her vocal is slightly pinched and a bit too nasal. But I can forgive its lack of tonal richness and diversity because, as well as the feeling of movement, there is a sense of powerful stability, even on such restrained music, that constantly underpins the performance. No matter how great the demands on the amplifier get, it always feels as if it has something in reserve.

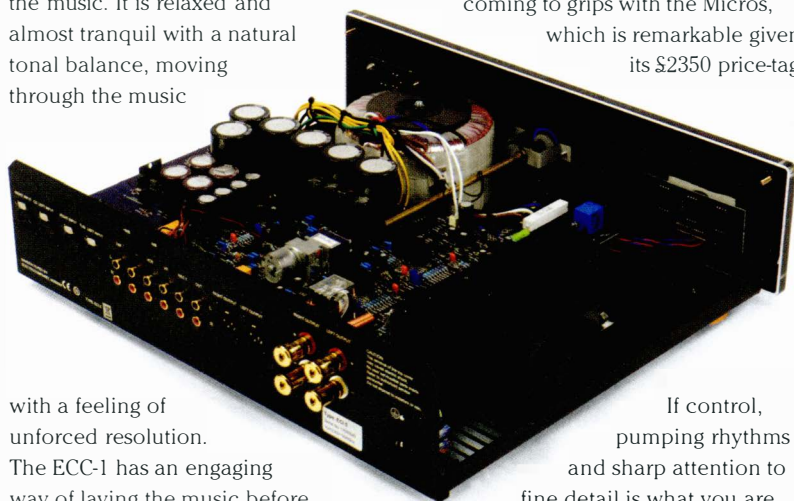
Of the two, it is the CD player that has a greater sense of order and calm. Listening to it with a different amplifier, I was constantly struck by the neatness and general organisation it brought to the music. It is relaxed and almost tranquil with a natural tonal balance, moving through the music

with a feeling of unforced resolution. The ECC-1 has an engaging way of laying the music before you, with a notable ability to focus fine musical detail into a broad, coherent soundstage. The amplifier then seizes hold of this and drives it into the room so that, with a decent pair of speakers like the JMLabs Micro Utopia Be, the

sound can be quite forward. The soundstages they create together are firm and broad rather than lush and deep, and you definitely get a front row seat with these components.

I might have my own reservations about their cosmetics, but I'll say again that this is a very easy combination to like. They have a bold and very occasionally brash character but it would be wrong to characterise them solely in this way. It's combined with a sense of clear musical organization and stability that's unusual at any price, and rare indeed at the cost of these units. I'd listened for quite a while before I discovered their prices; when I did they came as a very pleasant surprise indeed. For such an accomplished performer I think that \$1590 for the CD player is an absolute bargain: especially for a machine that would work well in so many systems. Electrocompaniet amplifiers might have a reputation for being warm and smooth but that's not how I found the ECI-5. Instead, it is powerful and very dynamic, with the ability to drive a loudspeaker really hard. It certainly had no trouble at all coming to grips with the Micros,

which is remarkable given its \$2350 price-tag.



If control, pumping rhythms and sharp attention to fine detail is what you are looking for then this amplifier will not disappoint. Not as even-handed as the ECC-1 it is not quite such an astonishing bargain, especially given the quality of the competition (not least from Electrocompaniet

themselves). But, as a combination there is something special about this pairing and the sum of their musical performance easily outweighs that of the individual parts, making their arrival a very welcome return indeed. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ECC-1 COMPACT DISC PLAYER

Type: Single-box CD player
 Transport: Philips
 Audio Outputs: 1x balanced (XLR)
 1x unbalanced (RCA)
 D/A Conversion: Cirrus 24Bit/192kHz
 Output Impedance: 100 Ohms
 Output Level: Unbalanced - 2.3V
 Balanced - 4.6V
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 483 x 75 x 385mm (HxWxD)
 Weight: 9 kg
 Price: £1590.00

ECI-5 AMPLIFIER

Type: Two-channel integrated amplifier
 Inputs: 2x balanced (XLR)
 3x single-ended (RCA)
 1x tape (RCA)
 1x Home Theatre (RCA)
 Outputs: 1x balanced (XLR)
 1x tape (RCA)
 1 set speaker binding posts
 Output Power: 120 W - 8 ohms
 200 W - 4 ohms
 350 W - 2 ohms
 Nominal Input Impedance: 330 kOhms
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 483 x 135 x 405 mm
 Weight: 16 Kg
 Price: £2350.00

UK distributor:

NSS Limited
 Tel. (44)(0) 20 8893 5835
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Manufacturer:

Electrocompaniet, Norway.
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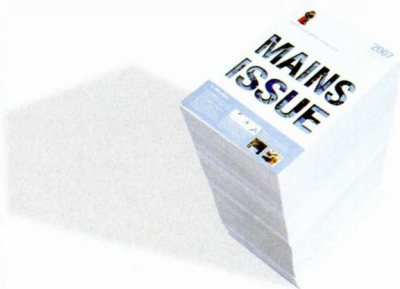


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The Origin Live Calypso Turntable

by Jimmy Hughes

Origin Live's Calypso is an updated version of the Aurora Gold - a turntable I've been using for a couple of years now. It's broadly similar in concept, but has a new motor housing, different belt and platter, better main bearing, and an improved chassis. In other words, much the same but completely different!

I like the Aurora Gold very much, and have few complaints about its performance. The new turntable has a similar 'skeletal' type chassis, but the Calypso has been beefed up at a couple of points and has better decoupling. The motor - a DC type - remains the same, but the housing is much bigger and more solid. The platter is made from a different material. Like the Aurora Gold, it's Acrylic but apparently what's called a 'loaded Acrylic'. Origin Live are being a bit secretive about the exact material but it has a smoother, shinier surface than normal acrylic, and looks a little like imitation marble. Designer Mark Baker tells me that it isn't the main reason for the Calypso's improved sound anyway. That's down to a combination of factors, of which the platter is just one. For example, the way the belt drives the platter is very important. The Aurora Gold featured a main platter that sat on a

smaller a sub-platter, driven by a flat belt. The Calypso has a round belt, and the platter is driven from its outside edge. The motor now runs at a higher rotational speed, and Mark reckons having the belt around the outside gives extra drive and 'leverage'.

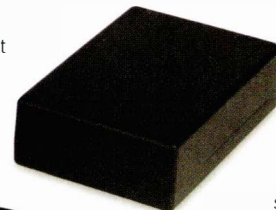
The usual 33/45rpm speeds are offered, with fine speed adjustment. Because the motor is housed in a separate outboard assembly, there's a degree of choice regarding the placement of the motor in relation to the platter. While Origin Live claims that



performance is not broadly affected, there are some differences. Moving the motor further away increases belt tension and (depending on how tight the belt is stretched) reduces platter speed slightly. Origin Live recommend having the motor about 214mm to 221mm from the centre bearing, but say a little deviation from this is not critical for sound quality. The belt is a made from another material Mark would rather not

specify. It's quite a bit stiffer and less stretchy than Nitrile and is spliced, as it is impossible to get a one-piece belt made in this material.

The new turntable has a thicker main spindle, and this works very well with the special lubricating oil used, creating a low friction, exceptionally low-noise bearing. Apparently the effect is as though the bearing walls were floating in an oil bath, yet properly 'grounded' on the point of rotation. The bearing takes a few seconds to bed-down as the oil is pushed out of the way. The tolerance here



is claimed to be 0.00001", and it takes about ten minutes for the bearing to settle down and run in.

When fully run in and full of oil, the bearing is near-silent. This perhaps explains the 'quietness' of the Calypso; its low noise floor and clean definition during quiet passages. Surface noise and vinyl roar are very low, and this (added to the increased dynamics) seems to create a stronger, cleaner, more noise-free end-result.

The sub-chassis is pre-adjusted at the factory, and it's not recommended that you change the various settings. For example, some bolts are deliberately left slightly loose to create a bit of decoupling. The whole design is



► carefully tuned, and performance is degraded if you thoughtlessly tighten everything up.

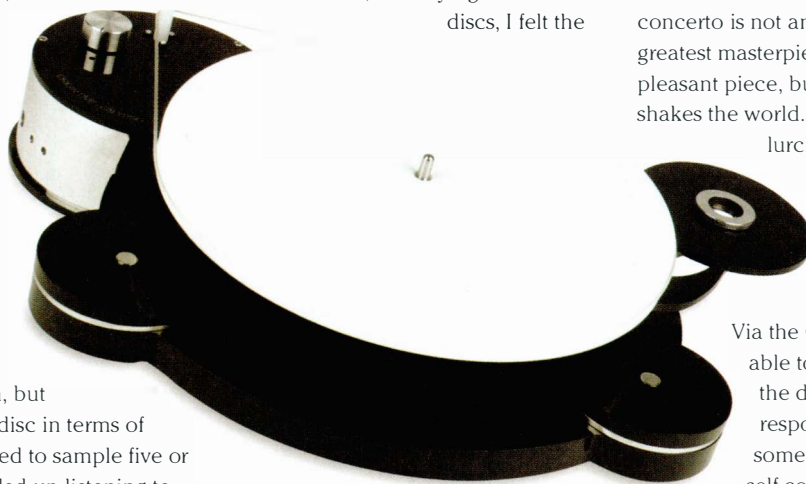
Mark Baker is the sort of designer who tries lots of alternatives; shapes, sizes, materials - he listens carefully to them all. His designs are based on scientific principles, but the ear is always the final arbiter. He's been making turntables for over twenty-five years now, and his products are highly refined. All of which sounds very promising. But, what might the Calypso offer in terms of improvements over the Aurora Gold? I was supplied with the turntable on its own, the idea being to use the Origin Live arm and Transfiguration cartridge I have on my existing Aurora Gold with the new one. Later on, I tried Lyra's Argo cartridge. The deck is very easy to set up, and once set up it should not need tweaking. Once you've levelled the chassis, set the arm height, and dressed the arm cable, you're 75% of the way there.

But, first things first. Before starting on the new turntable, I sat down and listened carefully to the old one, choosing a 1960s DG recording of Mozart's *Piano concerto No 15* with Geza Anda as soloist/conductor. It's a good 'average' sort of recording - smooth, well balanced, and clean, but hardly a 'reference' disc in terms of sonics. I only intended to sample five or ten minutes, but ended up listening to the whole work. I didn't want the music to stop. The sound was beautifully warm and nicely 'distanced', exuding a smooth almost sensuous quality. There was plenty of detail to catch the ear, but what struck me most was the effortless ease of the sound.

The Calypso was going to have its

work cut out to better this, I thought. Anyway, the tonearm was duly swapped, and listening began again. I deliberately kept amplifier volume levels unchanged, and played the same disc. Tonally, the sound was slightly brighter and more forward, with a touch more detail and presence. It seemed a shade louder too, and dynamic extremes were wider. Climaxes definitely seemed to project more forcibly, creating a sound with greater forwardness and immediacy. In most respects it was an improvement on what I'd just heard with the Aurora Gold - though I did slightly miss the latter's beguiling sweetness and ease. That acknowledged, Geza Anda's performance (via the Calypso) sounded more engaged and committed. The playing seemed to have a greater expressive range, with far more tonal shading, and a broader range of dynamics. I previously said the recording was a good 'average'; suddenly, it was sounding quite a bit better than that.

Nevertheless, after trying a few more discs, I felt the



top-end was perhaps a little too sharp, and experimented with vta, lowering the arm slightly. After a bit of trial and error, the tonal balance seemed smother and more even - the upper treble less exposed. The Calypso was starting to assert itself. All the

major benefits - improved focus and better control - were there from the off, but what about the relaxed ease and smoothness of the Aurora Gold? You can't always have your cake and eat it, but after making a few more adjustments, the new deck began to show its mettle.

Without question, the Calypso gives increased fine detail and tonal colour. It produces a far more precise sound than the Aurora Gold. Not in the clinical sense of the word, but in terms of keeping everything together and properly separated. The new deck was perhaps not quite as mellifluous as the old, but in every other aspect it was superior.

Staying with Mozart, I sampled several different recordings of his *Violin Concerto No 2*, and was impressed by the way the turntable focused the solo instrument. There's a bit in the finale - a couple of minutes in - where the solo part suddenly enters the minor key. It's one of those special magical moments. By Mozartian standards, the second violin concerto is not among its composer's greatest masterpieces. It's a lovely pleasant piece, but it isn't music that shakes the world. Yet that sudden

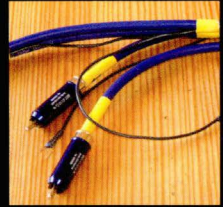
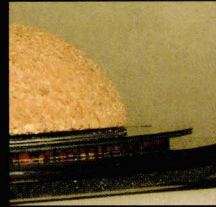
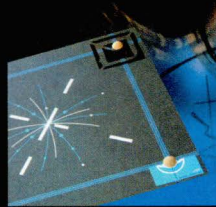
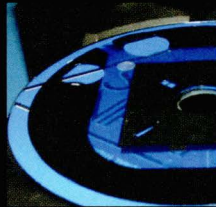
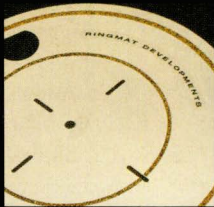
lurch to the minor key is a brief moment of genius. I always get goose bumps when I hear it. It's so unexpected...

Via the Calypso, I was able to hear clearly how the different soloists responded to this passage; some dramatically, others self-consciously. But, you could always tell that each

player registered this moment as a musical turning point. I felt I could hear every little nuance of phrasing and dynamics, while tonally the individuality of the soloist was very pronounced. The sound had a CD-like precision and focus, but went ►

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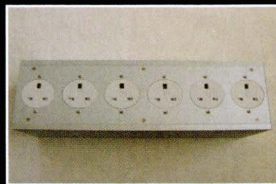
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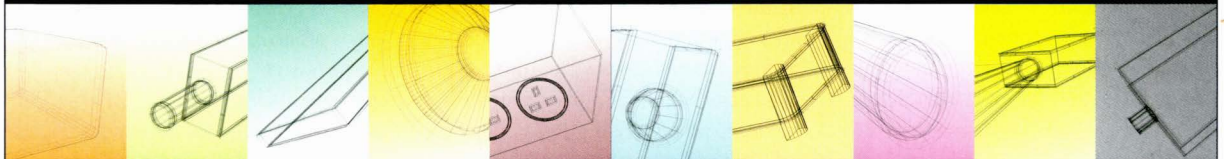
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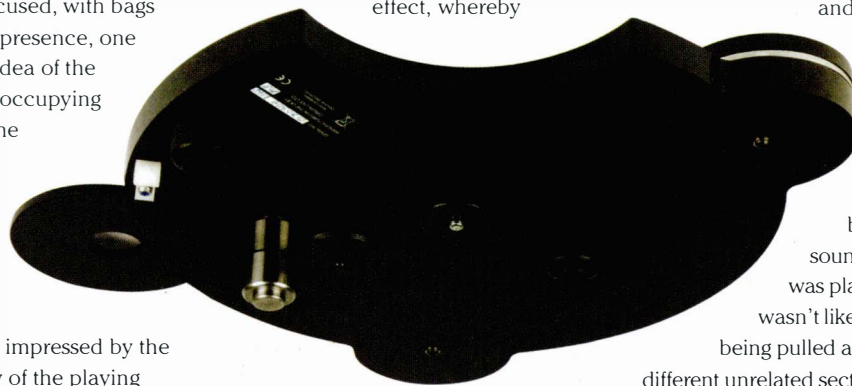
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► further in terms of tonal colouring and subtle-shaded micro dynamics. The music had greater forward momentum and scale, too. Via the Calypso, music sounds crisp and focused, with bags of individuality and presence, one got a much clearer idea of the various instruments occupying a defined space in the hall, with a better impression of ambience. I ended up sampling four or five different recordings, and was impressed by the distinct individuality of the playing (and sound) in each case.

So far so good, but one important area where CD does have a big advantage over LP is speed (pitch) stability. Providing the original source recordings are stable, CD does not add wow and flutter. Speaking personally, I'm very sensitive to variations in speed, and in this respect the Calypso wasn't always as rock-steady as I'd have liked. There are several points to bear in mind here. The first is that individuals vary in their sensitivity to wow. In my experience, most listeners are not overly sensitive to this problem unless it's pretty obvious. The second is that an LP needs to be pressed absolutely concentrically to produce perfectly stable pitch. If it's pressed off-centre (and probably 7 out of 10 discs are at least slightly off) you'll risk hearing wow – even if the turntable and original recording are perfect. The third is that small variations in pitch can sometimes occur naturally - even in all digital recordings off CD. People play out of tune, and instruments go out of tune.

Playing the Geza Anda LP recording of Mozart's *Piano concerto No 15*, I was aware that the pitch was not 100% steady. So, I got out the CD and played that. Guess what? It wasn't 100% stable either! However, it was better than the LP via the Calypso – and the Aurora too for that matter. I think it's possible that

the combination of a turntable with slight wow, and a recording with some inherent wow (or perhaps a pressing that's off centre), have an additive effect, whereby



two small problems combine to make a bigger one. But I'm still unsure as to how critical one can be of any turntable on this point.

A phone call to Origin Live resulted in a revised motor unit being sent. With this in place, the Calypso sounded far more stable. The new motor made a big difference, and reduced the problem by a significant degree. There was still the odd 'twinge' now and then, but overall things sounded noticeably more secure. Analogue LP is never going to be as pitch-perfect as digital CD, and you have to accept that. But, with a good deck, it can be extremely good. Incidentally, my wife (who used to be a professional musician and has a good ear) could not detect any speed variation, and half-suggested I was imagining it!

She did, however, notice the various strengths of the Calypso, and pointed out (more than once) how much better it sounded than CD – and even SACD come to that. I have to agree. Using Transfiguration's Temper W cartridge, I was consistently entranced by the combination of crisp fine detail, and smooth relaxed ease. The bass sounded very full yet clear, and bass lines have weight and power, while retaining plenty of articulation. A good source component always gives the impression that instruments and voices


are separate and individual – able to do their own thing, without being affected by other voices and instruments.

The Calypso sounded very cohesive and 'together'.

Voices and instruments were kept well separated and retained their individuality, but it always sounded like everyone was playing together. It wasn't like the music was being pulled apart and split into

different unrelated sections. Surface noise is very low, and the Calypso gives quiet inky-black backgrounds.

Sound quality is a relative (rather than an absolute) thing. It's all about having your expectations fulfilled, rather than achieving an arbitrary standard. Certainly, while listening to the Origin Live at its best I thought, "It doesn't get much better than this." But that's a dangerous thing to say, given that the Calypso isn't even OL's top model.

Indeed, I'd actually be slightly worried about having a turntable that did sound significantly better than this. It might mean I no longer wanted to listen to CD or SACD ever again. And that would never do... 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Belt-drive turntable
Speeds:	33 and 45 RPM, with electronic switching and fine pitch control
Bearing:	Standing post
Platter:	Loaded acrylic
Price:	£1470

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



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The SRM Arezzo Ultra Turntable

by Jimmy Hughes



Oscar Wilde claimed to have the simplest of tastes; he was always satisfied with the best. But, while many of us would no-doubt - like Oscar - be more than happy with the most expensive product in a manufacturer's range, there is the small matter of cost. Your available budget doesn't always run to the best...

So, a product that's keenly priced to begin with and easily upgradeable, has distinct benefits and appeal. It means you can start with the standard model, and then upgrade as funds permit. That's the big selling point of SRM's Arezzo turntable. There are three versions: the basic Arezzo; The Arezzo Kinetic; and the Arezzo Ultra.

The Arezzo costs £599 and features a resonance-controlled three part acrylic plinth with three-point isolation. The AC synchronous motor drives the platter via a 'Duo Drive' twin belt system. The Arezzo Kinetic costs £998, and adds a balanced flywheel alongside the motor, with drive using five (yes, FIVE!) belts.

The Arezzo Ultra is similar to the Kinetic, but comes with a high-current power supply, isolation platform, and lift on/off acrylic dust cover. It costs £1498. The various Arezzo upgrades are as follows. The Kinetic Drive costs £399. The high Current PSU costs £399. The isolation platform and dust cover cost £249. The deck can be bought ready-fitted with the Moth (Rega) arm. The basic Moth Mk 1 (RB-250) with SRM Resonance-Controlled Counterweight costs £130. With Incognito wiring, this increases to £245. The Moth Mk 3 (RB-300) with SRM Resonance Controlled Counterweight costs £165; with Incognito wiring it's £305.

I was pleased to see a lid supplied. With open 'skeletal' decks like this one, I always feel the stylus is exposed to danger - especially with cartridges that do not have a proper stylus guard. If the turntable is not your main source, and something only used every now and then, having a ►

► lid helps protect it – and keeps it free from dust.

The deck is supplied with a spongy rubber mat, but the makers suggest you listen with and without to see which of the two options you prefer.

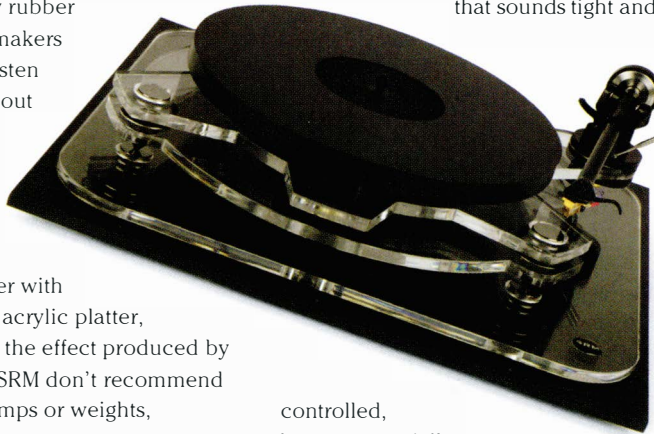
I felt things sounded better with the LP on the acrylic platter, but also liked the effect produced by the Ringmat. SRM don't recommend the use of clamps or weights, especially if heavy.

The platter runs at 33rpm and 45rpm, but needs the belts shifting over to achieve speed change. As previously mentioned, fitting the belts and getting them running as intended, can be a bit of a palaver. So, while the deck can be used at 45rpm, you probably wouldn't want to swap the belts about too often.

I began with the 'Full Monty' Arezzo Ultra, and later tried 'downgrading' to the different options. It's probably better if you go the other way, as you always get a slightly negative reaction when standards drop. But, while Ultra offers a big improvement over the other versions, even the basic Arezzo is very good. Set-up and installation is fairly straightforward, though correctly fitting the five belt system requires a certain knack. You have to fit each belt so there's a slight twist, and each 'twist' has to go in the same direction so that the belts run with the correct spacing. It proved a bit fiddly, but I soon had things up and running.

First impressions were very favourable. The Arezzo Ultra produced a bright, open, clear and uncomplicated musical presentation. It's crisp and focused, with excellent fine detail and strongly-profiled dynamics. The sound was open and airy, rather than rich and warm – definitely no false 'analogue warmth'

here! The bass is reasonably full, but not overly powerful. The low-end has a tidy, slightly contained quality that sounds tight and



controlled, but not especially deep or voluminous. However, it's likely a different and better arm (I had the Moth Mk 1 with Incognito wiring) would change this.

I'm not saying the bass was lacking, or in any way a problem, merely that it didn't quite have the power and weight you often get with turntables. In this respect, the Arezzo Ultra gave a CD like tonal balance that sounded neutral and balanced. This wasn't the only thing that reminded me of CD... Something I noticed from the start was how solid and stable the Arezzo Ultra sounded. Not just in terms of image placement and clarity, but pitch. There was almost no pitch waver – something you rarely encounter with LP. It was almost like listening to CD – and I mean that as the highest of compliments. Difficult piano LPs had the sort of pitch stability I'd previously encountered only once or twice – and that was with Oscar territory turntables having ridiculously heavy platters, huge motors, and massive Wildean price tags.

Given enough mass and a small engine you should get a stable drive!

However, the Arezzo avoids the Brute Strength and Ignorance approach, taking a different path. It has a (comparatively) light acrylic platter and normal-sized motor – albeit a higher torque version than other manufacturer's use. Yet it achieves outstanding speed stability. How come? It's secret seems to be its multi-belt drive. Designer Stuart Michell believes the motor is the 'governor', and therefore wants it to drive the platter without loss of torque. Thus, there is very little decoupling between motor and platter, and the square section belts are deliberately kept short and tight to minimise springiness.

Now, I'd have predicted that the basic Arezzo (without Kinetic drive) would be noticeably less stable than the Kinetic or Ultra models. However, if there is a difference, it's a fairly small one. There's a change in sound quality; the Kinetic sounds better), but the stability of the drive seems hardly compromised. The Kinetic and Ultra upgrades produce a subtler more finely shaded sound that has greater detail and dynamics compared to the standard version. The music has more colour and range, and there's an increase in definition and clarity. But, even the basic Arezzo offers good sound and firm pitch stability.

It's much the same story with the high current power supply. The difference is a



better sound. The music sounds a tad more dynamic and seems to have greater tonal variation. But there is little if any improvement in stability. This is good. It shows that even the basic Arezzo is not unduly compromised. Listening to the Arezzo Ultra, I found myself able to relax in a way that is not always possible with vinyl. One of the great things about CD is its sheer security; it hardly ever breaks up, gets stuck, hits you with background noise, or suffers speed (pitch) irregularities. It may have it's own troublesome faults, but not these ones. Being a turntable, the Arezzo Ultra is intrinsically prone to such misdemeanours. But subjectively, it performs as though it isn't. It is remarkably solid and assured and hardly ever sounds as if it's about to go off the rails. It's difficult to put into words. But it just sounds unflappable.

LPs with highly modulated climaxes seem to reproduce very comfortably. The pickup sounds as if it's having an easier time of things, and gives the impression of being better able to cope with whatever's happening in the grooves. So, when a disc



does have a bit of turbulence, it's invariably handled with a certain relaxed ease. In the past, I've had turntables that offered something similar, but again they're always big and expensive. That the Arezzo Ultra does what it does with (comparatively) modest resources is little short of incredible, and it's largely down to the drive system used.

Designer Stuart Michell tells me he chose a special higher-torque version of the Premotec AC motor. This motor is a derivative of the old Phillips motor - as used in the Linn and Rega - but has more poke. Indeed, Stuart claims the standard motor would not have the necessary torque to drive the Kinetic flywheel. Because of the multi-belt drive, the motor is most definitely 'in charge' of the platter. Some turntables operate on the basis of the motor getting the platter up to speed, and after that, speed stability is maintained by flywheel effect. With the Arezzo, the motor is the driving force. Perhaps as a result, the bigger power supply makes

more of a difference to the sound. The music sounds better focused and cleaner, with more light and shade, and increased fine detail. You can try to analyse the difference, but fundamentally things just sound better – there's an overall improvement.

For me, the exceptional pitch stability of the Arezzo is its main virtue. Given the choice, I would prefer to use the Arezzo Ultra against other, more expensive better-sounding turntables that were less stable. While I couldn't say the Arezzo Ultra is the very best-sounding turntable out there, it certainly ranks high among the best, especially when it comes to sitting down and enjoying



music. It has a way of making it very accessible and communicative. Somehow, the various faults that can affect your enjoyment are minimized. Given that it does what it does with a pretty inexpensive tonearm, that's quite an achievement. Used with something better there's no doubt results would be outstanding. So maybe Oscar is right; it's just that "best" and "most expensive" aren't always the same. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Belt drive record deck
Speeds:	33 and 45 RPM (manual shift)
Bearing type:	Standing post with PTFE pad
Platter:	Acrylic
Dimensions (WxHxD):	438 x 140 x 390mm 462 x 145 x 418mm with lid
Prices –	
Arezzo:	£599
Arezzo Kinetic:	£998
Arezzo Ultra:	£1498

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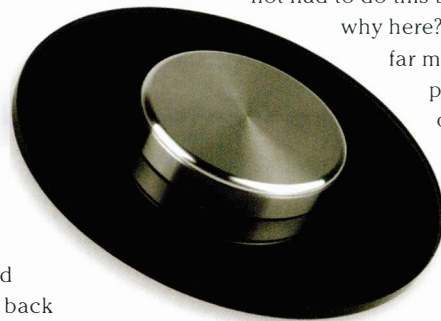
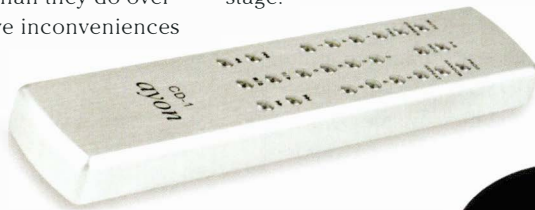
The Ayon Audio CD1 CD Player

by Jason Kennedy

Ayon represent a new breed of hi-fi manufacturer, one that designs its products in Europe and manufactures them in China. The economics of the arrangement are very hard to beat; man hours on that side of the world cost so much less than they do over here where we have inconveniences like a high cost of living to deal with, let alone a raft of legislation that is so daunting it's a wonder anyone wants to start their own company. What's more, the sonic results of such an arrangement can be extremely impressive. China seems to be turning the QC corner in no uncertain terms and within five years could well be competing with Japan in the build quality department. At that point western brands will be in dire straits if they don't find some cosy niche.

Ayon are based in Gratkorn, Austria where they make loudspeakers in-house. They also produce a range of valve electronics and have even designed their own monster output triode, the 21cm tall 62B. However, the CD1 is their first source component and perhaps naturally also features glowing bottles inside its curvy aluminium casework. There are four of them, two 6H30 and two 6922 from Electro-Harmonix, but they do not run so warm that any ventilation is required. Nor, more

surprisingly, could I clearly detect their presence in the player's sound, even when compared with solid state alternatives, which is unusual but very welcome as I'd much rather be listening to the music than the output stage.



When first powered up a red light on the back panel was illuminated which seemed odd enough for me to look at the manual (all I found on the player is the word 'phase' next to the light). You won't be surprised to hear that this relates to the phase of the mains supply, but as every standard lead I tried failed to defeat the LED, you might need to rewire yours.

The Ayon's casework is very nice, the curved corners and top-loading tray in machined aluminium giving the impression of a rather more expensive player (an impression let down a little by the rather basic screen printed lettering and the feel of the acrylic disc cover and

blue bling LEDs of the control buttons). The light show is hidden when looking at the front so can be forgiven, but the idiosyncrasies of operation are a little more wilfully unnecessary. In order to get the CD1 to read a disc once you have pucked it in place, it's necessary to press the stop button twice in quick succession. I've reviewed numerous top loading players in my time and not had to do this before, so

why here? Still I've had far more obscure players to operate and in truth this is a minor foible.

Once in the system there's not a lot to grab hold of with this player. It has to be the most neutral valve powered disc spinner I've come across, which is not very helpful if you are trying to write a review, but desirable if you want to listen to your music and not a piece of hardware. Despite the enthusiasm which some have for the sound of valves, it is still essentially a colouration rather than an enhancement. It may sound like it is making up for what the recording process has lost, by adding certain harmonics, but that is not what high fidelity is supposed to be about.

The Ayon arrived at the same

▶ time as the Boulder 865 integrated amplifier (of considerable cost and not inconsiderable transparency). Combining the two was not a great success, but certainly served to reveal the Ayon as a sophisticated sounding machine with good clean high frequencies and maybe as a result, an ability to reproduce reverb with ease. It is also usefully quiet, allowing you to hear low-level sounds without difficulty, and delivering excellent dynamic range. Instrumental timbre is also well served; not so much so that you think ah, there's the valve sound, but it is the one factor that makes you wonder.

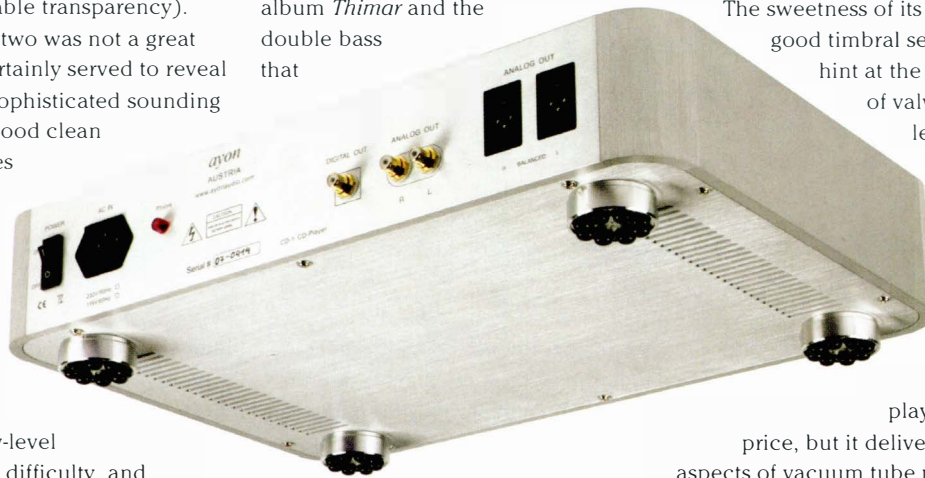
bandwidth as well. John Surman's saxophone is big and rich on the album *Thimar* and the double bass that

build quality but styling that will suit some tastes better than others.

The sweetness of its top-end and good timbral separation hint at the presence of valves without

letting their excesses clog up the works. It is neither the most exciting nor the most subtle player at the

price, but it delivers the best aspects of vacuum tube performance without making that fact obvious, an admirable stance which might not make it stand out but one that justifies its consideration. ▶+



follows it actually manages to maintain ones attention – which can't be bad for a bass solo. Barb Jung's rendition of 'Who Do You Love' on a Linn SACD is a fabulously snappy piece of music with which the Ayon does decent service, keeping your toes twitching



My solid-state Resolution Audio Opus 21 reference costs 50% more and gives you a better focused and more subtle sound, but it doesn't extract much more detail or texture in the timbral department, qualities that set the Ayon apart from its price peers.

The CD1 also has nicely mobile and weighty bass. Manu Katché's kick drum really kicks while his snare reveals plenty of reverb and space in the recording. It's a tight sound and one that seems to have broad

and at the same time letting you hear the fingers on the tabla which sits down in the mix but provides much of the pulse. It also managed to keep Zappa's guitar from going white-out on the somewhat angular 'Filthy Habits' from *Sleep Dirt*, keeping it just the right side of the edgy/uncomfortable divide.

Ayon's CD1 is a refined and rhythmically crisp player with good

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Top-loading CD player
Conversion Rate:	192kHz/24-bit
Tube complement:	2x 6H30 EH, 2x 6922 EH
Output level:	5V
Outputs:	1pr single ended 1pr balanced 1x coaxial digital
Dimensions (WxHxD):	460 x 100 x 310mm
Weight:	11kg
Price:	£2050

UK Distributor:
Metropolis Music
Tel. 44(0)1435 865212
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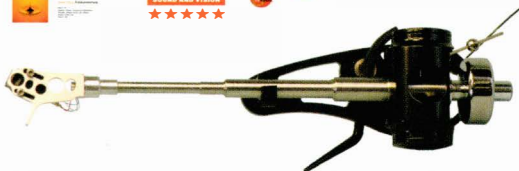
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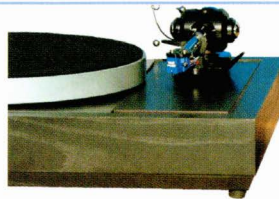
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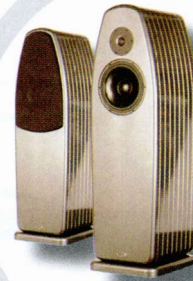
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The Cairn Tornado CD Player

by Steve Dickinson



I admit, I became so attached to the Cairn Fog3 CD player, that when it came time to hand it back, Cairn's distributors had to distract me with a shiny new toy, giving them enough time to grab the Fog3 and scurry away while my attention was diverted. That was a dirty trick, guys.

The new toy was the £850 Tornado, smaller sibling to the Fog3. It uses a similar transport and (single) DAC, but without the 192kHz sampling rate of the larger player. It also lacks the adjustable filters, digital input, variable output and balanced options that make the Fog3 a versatile DAC and digital pre-amp into the bargain (although there is an upgrade option to a new 192kHz board with adjustable filtering à la Fog3 which I haven't tried). This review concerns the standard 96kHz version. I also borrowed another Fog3, the better to make detailed comparisons; they're going to want it back but this time, I'll be ready..

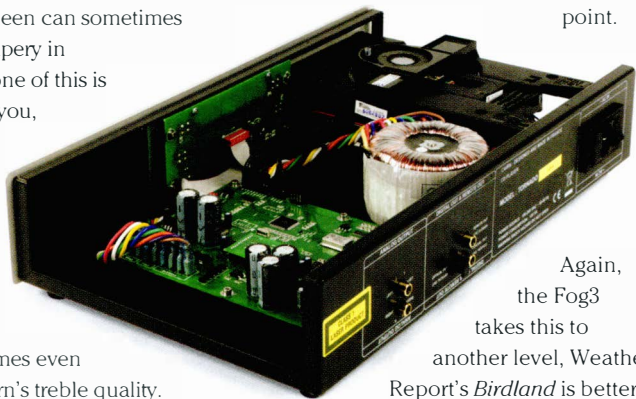
Physically, the Tornado is smaller than the Fog3, with a less substantial front plate. The chassis is shallower and somewhat lighter, although still satisfyingly weighty. The styling is similar to the other Cairn products, with a central circular display, in this case cropped top and bottom. It is perfectly clear and legible, but evidently of lower quality than the bigger player. It retains the eccentric controls of the Fog3, but the standard remote supplied by Cairn, and shared across the range, has improved.

First the bad news, the Tornado is no Fog3. Mind you, if you've recently been persuaded to spend £2K on the Fog, that's probably good news. Reassuringly for Tornado customers though, this is still an extremely accomplished unit which has much in common with the senior player. Compared to the more expensive model it sounds a little tubby, a little rounder in the bass, a shade less insightful in the midrange and

► treble, but bearing in mind the likelihood that the Tornado will be partnered by similarly inexpensive amplification and, quite possibly, smallish, standmounted loudspeakers, this voicing makes sense. One thing Cairn haven't compromised on is the extremely keen sense of pitch. Tunefulness and tonal evenness are among the best I've heard, including players at many times the price. This implies very good handling of high frequencies, particularly harmonics, and indeed, the treble is sweet and clean and makes similarly priced, and otherwise worthy, competitors sound grainy and grey in comparison. I've been partnering the Tornado with an Accuphase 213 integrated amp and the excellent ELAC FS210 Anniversary loudspeakers, which have a quite phenomenal ribbon tweeter, and the Cairn player has never betrayed its relatively modest status with any roughness or lack of finesse. Quite the contrary, this turning out to be an extremely musical and engaging combination.

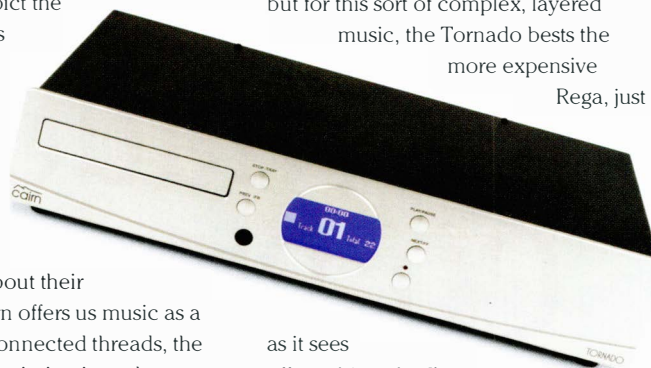
Sticking with the treble for a moment longer, I made some comparisons with my usual (and more expensive) Rega Saturn. The Rega is not as quick, or finely etched in the treble, and lacks the ultimate pitch accuracy of the Cairn, making the latter the more dramatic of the two. Indeed the Cairn sound majors on dynamics and liveliness. What the Rega has, however, is a more fully rounded sense of tonal colour, the Cairn's treble sheen can sometimes sound a little papery in comparison. None of this is intrusive, mind you, and I refer you to my earlier comment: I haven't heard another player at this price which comes even close to the Cairn's treble quality.

But the Tornado's defining characteristic, is the player's ability to control and depict the different threads in a musical performance. Some players present the music en bloc, there is a sense of wholeness about their sound. The Cairn offers us music as a weave of interconnected threads, the instrumental discrimination taken to a more individual level. This is wonderful for jazz but also, significantly, for large-scale stuff. In the second movement of the Shostakovich *Symphony No.5*, the bassoon is not only prominent in its solo passages, but can be easily followed through some of the heavier tuttis which, for such a self-effacing instrument, is quite remarkable. This has the effect of making the music seem more alive; coupled with a well-defined soundstage and accurate, and unwavering, instrumental placement the performance gains a strong sense of the intimacy and directness one associates with live performance. Compared to the Fog3, or the Rega for that matter, it lacks some of the body and shape of instruments, and the soundstage is not so deep, but the music has a linearity, a feeling of interwoven-ness and flow, a sense of interplay and communication which is quite rare, and almost unheard of at the sub-£1000 point.




Again, the Fog3 takes this to another level, Weather Report's *Birdland* is better

resolved where the Tornado softens and rounds-off the innermost detail, but for this sort of complex, layered music, the Tornado bests the more expensive Rega, just



as it sees off anything else I've heard at its price.

One small word of warning: the Tornado needs to warm-up to give of its best. If you go for a back-to-back audition, be sure to give the Cairn player a couple of tracks to come on-song. When you do, you'll be rewarded with some of the most engaging and communicative sounds, a sense of sheer musicianship and emotional connectedness hitherto unavailable at this price. Indeed, the Tornado will acquit itself with honour among considerably more expensive partnering equipment. This Cairn rocks. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD player
Sample Rate:	24 bit, 96kHz (optional upgrade to 192kHz with switchable filters)
Outputs:	1pr analogue 1x digital
Output Level:	2.0 V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432 x 92 x 245mm
Weight:	7kg
Price:	£850

UK Distributor:

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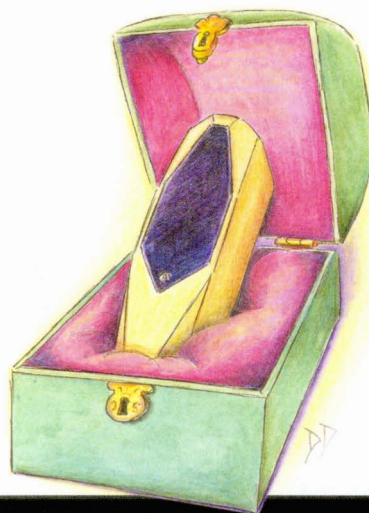
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Neat, Petite and Off-Beat... The Sonus Faber Auditor Elipsa

by Roy Gregory



Once upon a time, long, long ago and in a land far, far away (at least that's how it seems now) all speakers hugged the wall. Popular models like the Linns Kann and Sara and the little AR18 spawned a slew of imitators and pretty soon you didn't just stand your speakers close to the wall, you braced them against it. Of course, doing so delivered serious amounts of bass weight and scale from the diminutive cabinets that were all the average British home could accommodate, whilst sound-staging and imagery (the main performance areas to suffer) were dismissed as irrelevant at best, the work of the devil at worst.

But, like so many things, the Celestion SL6 changed all that. Speakers could still be small, but now they and their stands demanded the kind of free space previously demanded by large floorstanding transmission lines (it was a long, long time ago...). Reduced frontal area and slim, tall stands were the sop to aesthetics that justified the kind of demand for *lebensraum* that would have made even Hitler blush. And so it has been ever since. It's got so that the seriousness of any small speaker design seems to be directly proportional to its impact your domestic space.

Finally it seems, the natives are revolting, although in this case it's not the British. First that doyen of the high-end, Dave Wilson, produced the Duetto, a two-way speaker with a near-wall alignment option, and now Sonus Faber (a key player in the move to let small speakers dominate their surroundings) have produced a near-wall design of their own. Okay, so the little Italian is actually intended as a rear channel speaker in surround systems, but that hasn't stopped enterprising two-channel aficionados spotting and exploiting the potential lurking therein.

The Auditor Elipsa is a tiny two-way design – at least in terms of internal volume. The cabinet shape echoes the other wise but shallow Elipsa models, ►

▶ but in this case it's reduced to postage stamp proportions. So, although the speaker is only 155mm deep (224mm including the neat wall bracket that's supplied with it), its frontal aspect is pretty much a foot (340mm) square. What might otherwise be a rather bluff appearance is softened by the contoured side cheeks and contrasting vertical stripes of baffle and wooden cabinet, the latter available in light graphite or natural maple. Drivers are the established 25mm ring-radiator, teamed with a rear reflex loaded 150mm compressed natural fibre cone and integrated via a simple second-order cross-over. Connections are limited to a single set of binding posts. Impedance is a flat 4 Ohms, efficiency 89dB and, despite the tiny internal volume, bandwidth is quoted as 55Hz to 30kHz; ahhh... the joys of wall reinforcement.

The Auditor Elipsa proved refreshingly easy to drive, with a range of amps more than equal to the task, but including both the Emille KI-40L and the Rogue Audio Cronus 40 Watt valve integrated amps. Indeed, these seemed perfect in most regards. Even with the speaker wedged against the wall there seemed to be no ill effects from the rear-firing port, while the sheer scale, presence and weight of the sound produced was astonishing – until I remembered how we used to listen!

Just because the little Sonus live against the wall, don't go thinking you can take liberties with them. There are two keys to getting the best out of these speakers: the precise distance behind them (too much and they lose their low frequency weight and substance) and the distance you are sitting from them. I found they gave the best results on a perfect equilateral triangle with just a touch of toe-in. Sit any further away and they start to sound soft and rounded; if not muddled then

anything but explicit. But up close and personal they're undeniably rich yet also quick, dynamic, vibrant complex and immediate. As with any speaker, the bass alignment is critical, and I'd be lying if I said the Elipsas possess the best-textured or sculpted bottom end I've heard. In truth, bass notes are a tad wooden and thickened – homogenous lumps rather than complex waves. But, and it's a big but, they're in the right



place, there's no overhang and they have nice, precise pitch, meaning that musically speaking they do what the bass is meant to do, even if they don't float the notes or a voluminous acoustic space. Just don't inch the speakers forward to lighten things up – the mid and top get awfully thin awfully quickly if you do.

With the speakers carefully placed mid-band and treble is pure Sonus, taking after their superb free-space namesakes. Voices are natural and expressive, while the power of the mid-bass, with its firm foundation from the wall, gives them a wonderful sense of life and presence. Electric bass has drive and drums have a wonderful sense of impact. Above all, these speakers feed off the energy in a performance, making music fun and reminding us what more than

a few modern designs appear to have forgotten. Their sense of scale and easy power mean they're just as comfortable with a late Beethoven symphony as they are with girl and guitar. In both cases they major on the directness of communication, rather than the hi-fi niceties (although they manage a better

sense of orchestral staging than you might expect, partly by extending the acoustic space forwards).

If space is at a premium and music matters, you need not despair. Here's one genuinely high quality, versatile solution that will sit equally happily on stand or shelf, delivering the musical bits that matter and making a pretty good stab at those that don't. Sonus Faber might have designed the Auditor Elipsa for surround use but don't let that deceive you. Either by luck or good judgment, they've actually produced quite possibly the ultimate compact speaker for compact spaces. This much musical fun hasn't come in packages this small since the arrival of Chaka Khan! ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loaded speaker for near-wall placement
Driver Complement:	25mm ring radiator 150mm fibre-coned mid/bass
Sensitivity:	89dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Bandwidth:	55Hz – 30kHz ±3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	340 x 341 x 155mm
Weight:	7.6kg ea.
Price:	£2690

UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds
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New Chip Off An Old Block...

The Acoustic Energy AE22 Passive Monitor

by Chris Binns



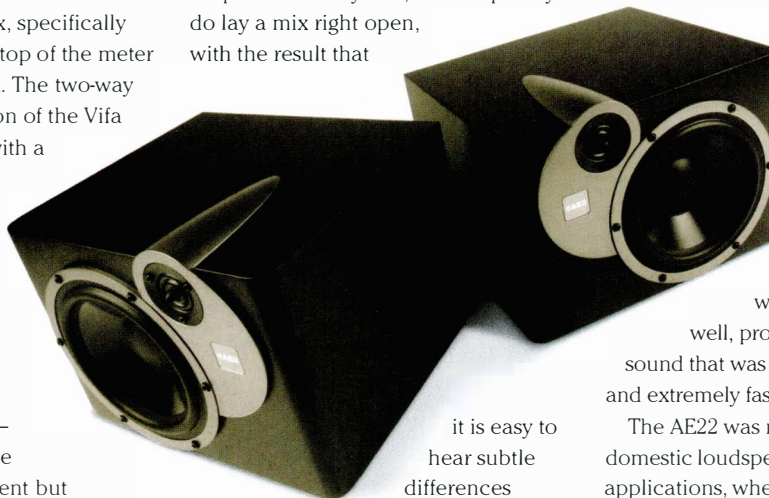
Of the two longest standing jokes in the music/professional recording industry, one definitely involves variations on a theme regarding drummers. The other could well be the one that concerns the Yamaha NS10 loudspeaker; rarely has a product achieved the iconic status of 'industry standard' in quite the fashion that this little black box has. Often derided for its brash and headache inducing sound quality – part of the aforementioned joke involves the use of toilet paper to cover the tweeter – it has still managed to become the most common loudspeaker in recording studios the world over. The reason comes down to the fact that as a tool for monitoring it provides an incisive and unflattering window on a mix that is ruthlessly revealing of problems, while still managing to provide a framework or balance that translates well to other systems; once that is you have compensated for the acerbic top end delivery. From a technical viewpoint, its only fairly recently that the secret to the Yamaha's success has been revealed; compared to most other near-field monitors in its class it has exceptionally low distortion together with a very well behaved time domain response, which goes a long way towards explaining its popularity within the professional recording industry. Interestingly, the NS10 was originally introduced some thirty years ago – as a hi-fi loudspeaker! It was from the opposite end of the range topped by the spectacular NS1000. And you thought Beryllium drive units were new?

With the NS10 no longer in production, the market for near-field monitors (and I use the term loosely) is saturated with products from an enormous number of manufacturers. But what sets the AE22 apart from the competition is that it would appear to be the only one that has set out to analyse and expand on the attributes that made the Yamaha so successful. Whereas most products seem intent on producing as much

► bass as possible and hang the quality, designer Phil Ward has engineered the 22 for low distortion, together with a clean time decay response – rather than generating huge amounts of flabby and under-damped bottom end. To that end, the AE22 is a medium-sized, infinite baffle box, specifically engineered to work on top of the meter bridge of a mixing desk. The two-way design employs a version of the Vifa ring radiator tweeter (with a heat-sinked, rare-earth magnet) coupled to an impressively engineered custom 8" bass-mid unit. This metal coned driver employs a cast chassis with a short voice-coil, long gap motor system – more expensive than the conventional arrangement but with considerable benefits in terms of distortion. Finished in a textured black, the cabinet features a moulding around the tweeter that is both distinctive and adds an air of individuality to the aesthetics. Sensitivity is quoted at 87 dB. Acoustic Energy suggests amplification of 70 Watts or more, which figures when you are dealing with uncompressed signal straight from the mixing desk.

The AE22 has already achieved a certain amount of success within the pro industry, where a number of major recording studios have adopted it over and above the in-house NS10's; they have also proved a success with a number of big name engineers. They tend toward a lively, bright presentation. No real surprise as they have been engineered with a mild lift between 300 Hz and 3 kHz. Bass is undoubtedly dry, but very even with a gentle roll off. Positioned on top of a mixing desk they sound considerably less muddy at the bottom-end than most other similarly sized monitors that I have tried. It is this overall sense of 'cleanliness' that epitomises the sound

of the AEs, which combined with the forward character produces a very direct sound with real speed and snap when it comes to dynamics; this is all the more noticeable due to the lack of overhang and confusion at lower frequencies. They can, and frequently do lay a mix right open, with the result that



it is easy to hear subtle differences between for example, types of reverb. While editing say, a vocal track, the sheer lucid clarity is a real help when it comes to fine adjustments. Unfortunately the open and revealing nature will work both ways, as they are discerning of the amplification used to drive them, sometimes a difficult concept to get across in the recording studio. While the power requirement is not usually an issue in such environments, quality often is and I have heard the 22s squealing like a pair of stuck pigs on the end of one of the many 'budget' pro amps that are available. But driven by something which possesses a degree of refinement (the Bryston SST series and the Naim NAP 250 Pro have been great successes) the AE22s manage to really hit the mark, providing an extremely detailed yet listenable view of work in progress.

Impressive though they are, these attributes do not necessarily make for an easy listening hi-fi loudspeaker. Out of the studio, their forwardness might prove a little too much, but placing them hard against the wall redresses their balance

quite effectively, and having used them extensively for work projects I thought it would be interesting to try them in my listening room. Clearly, you should steer clear of bright source components or amplification, or the result will be too

relentless for comfortable listening. But a recent requirement to reassess some vintage valve amplification led to some interesting results. A refurbished Radford STA25 working particularly well, producing a well-balanced sound that was articulate, very detailed and extremely fast.

The AE22 was never intended as a domestic loudspeaker, but for certain applications, where for example the speakers have to be positioned close against a wall, they provide a lively and very dynamic performance that can offer an interesting alternative to some of the more popular options when it comes to hi-fi loudspeakers. In engineering terms they represent really good value for money and they certainly have a striking appearance. Just don't ask for them in a wood veneer... ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way sealed box
Drive units:	25mm ring radiator HF 200mm aluminium coned bass
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Frequency response:	60Hz – 40kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	87dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	350 x 250 x 300mm
Price:	£500 pr.

Manufacturer:

Acoustic Energy
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Grand Designs

Sub-£1K speakers from Bowers & Wilkins, Focal, KEF and Tannoy

by Paul Messenger

Reviewing a single hi-fi component in isolation is often appropriate, especially when the item in question has unique qualities. But a group test can often be a more powerful and useful exercise, because the group as a whole sets an overall context against which individual models may be compared and contrasted.

The four models gathered together for this group test have been deliberately chosen for their contrast as much as their commonality. All come from major, high profile brands: the Focal and Tannoy are stand-mounts; the B&W and KEF are floorstanders. Prices range from £630 for the Focal up to £900 for the B&W, though in practice the cost of stands will bring the Focal and Tannoy into line with the other two.

Age rarely withers loudspeaker designs but, although many 'new' models are merely cosmetic variations on predecessors, some technical evolution does take place. KEF's iQ-series first appeared in 2005, making it the oldest of our four, and at least two stages behind the current state of the Uni-Q driver art. Focal's latest Chorus 700V and 800V models were first introduced about two years ago. The latest 680-series variants on B&W's long running, budget price 600-series first appeared in 2007. Tannoy's Revolution Signature models are brand new, the rather clumsy name used to distinguish these luxury versions from simpler and less costly unsigned variations on a

similar theme.

The two floorstanders have most in common. Both are full three-way designs, with twin bass units to give good cone area with slim enclosures, though the Bowers & Wilkins is significantly larger and heavier overall. Both also have unusual proprietary midrange drivers – a surroundless FST in the Bowers & Wilkins, and a co-axial Uni-Q in the KEF. The Tannoy also has a co-axial driver, this time a Dual Concentric that operates through the bass as well as the midrange and treble. The Focal might be a conventional two-way, but again its drive unit technology is unique to the company, and quite distinctive.

Give or take the occasional variation, the speakers were mostly auditioned on the end of my regular Naim-based system, with a Rega/Linn hybrid vinyl source, Rega Ios phono stage, Naim CDS3 with 555PS supply and Burmester 001 CD players, Magnum Dynalab MD 106 tuner, NAC552 pre-amp and NAP500 power amp. A Unison P70 with EAT valves provided a thermionic alternative. Supports and cables were from Vertex AQ, the Chord Company and Naim Audio.

Frequency response measurements were made with a venerable but effective Neutrik analogue pen chart recorder, using a far-field in-room averaged technique to generate an integrated power response. This also formed the basis of the sensitivity rating.

Bowers & Wilkins 683

B&W is currently in the process of reverting to its original Bowers & Wilkins name – which, incidentally, first appeared on the front of a Worthing electrical shop way back in the 1960s. However, the reason behind the change is apparently to avoid possible confusion with German motor manufacturer BMW, an issue that has become rather more significant since B&W forged an alliance to develop in-car sound systems for Jaguar.

Whatever it's called, this company, still based in Worthing, is now the biggest specialist hi-fi speaker maker on the planet. A huge range of different models are created in its very impressive research labs, and if the first fruits appear in the luxury, upmarket models, at least some of the technology trickles down to less costly 600-series speakers like this 683.

The 600s have long been the company's budget bedrock. To help keep the price down, they come in a vinyl woodprint finish, and this latest 680-series has followed the seemingly inevitable trend of sourcing the actual manufacturing from China. The range currently consists of four stereo pairs plus a number of AV add-ons, the largest being this, the £900/pair 683 – higher numbers mean smaller speakers in the wacky world of Bowers & Wilkins!

The whole thing weighs a very substantial 26kg (nearly 10kg more than the slightly smaller KEF), and construction feels very solid and

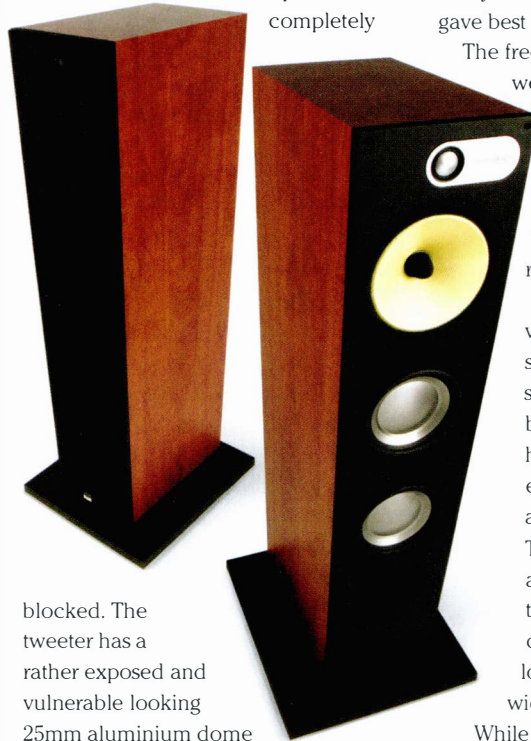


▶ hefty. It's not a particularly pretty speaker, it must be said, but it looks purposeful enough and you do get plenty for your money. The vinyl woodprint comes in a choice of four finishes: 'cherry', 'light oak', 'black' and a dull brown called 'wenge'.

A full three-way floorstanding design, its most distinctive feature is a version of the 'surroundless' FST (Fixed Suspension Transducer) midrange drive unit that was originally pioneered in the Nautilus 800 series some years back. Such a driver can only be used in a multi-way configuration, because it relies on the fact that midrange frequencies, unlike those at the bass end of the spectrum, don't require the cone to move fore'n'aft to any significant degree. Although many multi-way designs have midrange drivers that are much the same as (or a smaller version of) the bass units, the conventional 'long travel' cone surround normally used to allow bass excursion is actually unnecessary for midrange duties. Bowers & Wilkins has therefore developed a surround expressly optimised to absorb edge-of-cone vibrations, and which is not

actually fixed to the 143mm diameter Kevlar cone.

The twin 165mm bass drivers have 120mm diameter aluminium/paper/Kevlar diaphragms, stiffened by oversize central domes. A front port provides reflex loading, and useful two-part foam bungs allow the ports to be re-tuned and damped, or completely



blocked. The tweeter has a rather exposed and vulnerable looking 25mm aluminium dome diaphragm, loaded at the rear by an internal tapering tube. Though any three-way crossover is bound to be complex, this one has fewer components than its predecessors, and is fed from twin pairs of terminals.

When I first encountered the 683 some months ago, no plinth was supplied or available. Second time around I found a huge, almost square and rather ugly plastic'n'rubber affair inside the box. This undoubtedly meets EEC requirements for 'knockover' resistance, and provides effective spike fixing, but was maybe included in protest, as it certainly falls short of the company's usual design refinement. It definitely provides great stability, but I kept catching my pinkies on the sharp

corners, and have the bruises to prove it.

The 90dB sensitivity claim seems a shade optimistic, as the mid-band is closer to 88-89dB under far-field averaged conditions, and the amplifier load is rather demanding too. However, the bass goes seriously deep, especially with the ports wide open (32Hz tuning). In my room the hollow foam port lining gave best results.

The frequency response is pretty well ordered, albeit with some lack of energy at the lower end of the midrange driver (300-500Hz), and some presence restraint (2-3kHz). The treble is smooth and also rather restrained.

First impressions were very positive, largely I suspect because the 683 has significantly more and deeper bass than the others gathered here, and delivers this bottom-end with enthusiasm and gusto as well as impressive evenness. The top-end brings plenty of air and spaciousness to the party too, while that special FST driver delivers a midrange with low coloration and a notably wide dynamic range.

While this speaker is undoubtedly easy on the ears, a degree of dissatisfaction set in over some lack of overall coherence. The different types of driver used for each of the three ways didn't quite seem to come together convincingly, and the midrange in particular seemed a little detached and lacking in vigorous expression. The top-end too seemed a trifle obvious, and might have been sweeter, though it did provide the soundstage with an attractive airiness.

The 683 really comes into its own when the volume is wound up high with some heavyweight music playing. It handles power extremely well, the bass provides plenty of impetus to drive the music along, and the overall character avoids becoming aggressive even ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way ported floorstander
Driver Complement:	2x 165mm bass 1x 150mm FST midrange 1x 25mm Al dome tweeter
Specified Bandwidth:	38Hz - 22kHz (±3dB)
Measured Bandwidth:	20Hz - 19kHz (±5dB in-room)
Specified Sensitivity:	90dB
Measured Sensitivity:	89dB
Nominal Impedance:	5 Ohms
Minimum Impedance:	3 Ohms @ 110Hz
Crossover:	350Hz, 4kHz
Power Handling:	200W
Dimensions (WxHxD):	200 x 985 x 340mm
Net Weight:	26kg ea.
Price:	£900

Manufacturer:
Bowers & Wilkins
Tel. (44)(0)1903 221500
Net. www.bowers-wilkins.com

► when the whole system is working hard. It is, however, rather less happy with more delicate material played at modest levels, where the midrange restraint and lack of coherence seems to be a more obvious impediment.

The strength of the 683 is that it represents a very safe choice. It might not be the most immediately communicative speaker around, but the sound it delivers is unlikely to become untidy or offensive, and the bass authority and weight is a welcome plus.

Focal Chorus 807V

After some years heading up the development department at France's leading driver manufacturer Audax in North West France, at the beginning of the 1980s the urbane Jacques Mahul returned to his family engineering business down in the South East. His home town of St. Etienne is France's equivalent to Sheffield, the heartland of metal-bashing expertise, and he initially founded Focal as a drive unit specialist, supplying speaker system builders (including Wilson Audio) and the in-car aftermarket with unique and advanced designs.

Some years later Focal decided to make its own complete speaker systems. Initially marketed under the Jmlab brand, the company has now reverted to the original Focal name. It grew rapidly into France's number one hi-fi speaker brand, and quickly became a major player on the international scene.

In 2006 Focal decided to make a serious effort to ginger up the somewhat depressed budget sector of the market, by simultaneously launching no fewer than ten stereo pairs (plus AV add-ons) in two separate ranges. The Chorus 700V-series replaced the previous Chorus models while the more costly Chorus 800Vs effectively take the place of the Cobalts, and both ranges come with more interesting styling than is usually encountered in budget price loudspeakers.

The £379/pair 706Vs might well

represent the best value for money across the two Chorus ranges; the 806V has a similar driver line-up in a superior construction and finish enclosure for £500/pair, but I've not tried them. However, at £629/pair the Chorus 807V is a little larger and heftier than either '06V model, and the greater cone area of the bass/mid driver is likely to deliver a rather more authoritative and dynamic sound. While I mourn the fact that the 8inch two-way stand-mount seems close to extinction, I still reckon a 7-incher has an advantage over the more common 6.5-incher.



Slightly tapered sides

will help spread internal standing waves a little, and the 800V-series enclosures look and feel more substantial than those found in the 700Vs, largely because the front, back, top and base are all finished in a high gloss laminate rather than woodprint vinyl. The crossover networks have superior components too. A distinctive V-shaped grille leaves the tweeter uncovered, though it has its own removable protective mesh cover.

The Polyglass main driver has a 125mm paper cone coated with glass 'micro-sphere' damping. The type-TNV tweeters use a version of Focal's familiar inverted dome made from an aluminium/magnesium alloy, with a claimed bandwidth to 28kHz.

Although the enclosures are built in low-wage territories, both drive units are made in France.

Stands will be needed here, and Focal supplies some MDF affairs at £125, with neat retractable spikes, a decent footprint, and the facility to bolt the speakers onto the top. Last time I tried these I found that they perceptibly 'softened' the sound compared to my regular metal Kudos S100s, which are significantly more rigid and gave the sound greater precision. Less expensive alternatives from specialists like Partington and Atacama might

well prove the most cost effective option.

Sensitivity is a healthy enough 90dB, though that's somewhat less than the optimistic 92dB claimed, and the impedance is fairly demanding through the bass region. The impedance trace has quite a complex characteristic, ►

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way ported stand-mount
Driver Complement:	1x 180mm bass/midrange 1x 25mm Al/Mg TNV inverted dome tweeter
Specified Bandwidth:	50Hz - 28kHz (±3dB)
Measured Bandwidth:	38Hz - 20kHz (+/-5dB in-room)
Specified Sensitivity:	92dB
Measured Sensitivity:	90dB
Nominal Impedance:	7 Ohms
Minimum Impedance:	4.5ohms @ 170Hz
Crossover:	3kHz
Power Handling:	160W
Magnetic shielding:	Yes
Dimensions (WxHxD):	237 x 450 x 333mm
Net Weight:	10.1kg ea.
Price:	£629 Stands. £129

Manufacturer:

FocalTel. (44)(0)845 660 2680
Net. www.focal-fr.com

▶ with a rather obvious 'wrinkle' at around 900Hz which directly corresponds to a dip in the frequency response.

The in-room frequency response is rather uneven through the upper mid-band, though it stays within ± 3 dB limits above 300Hz. Below that the upper bass and lower mid is a shade strong, with a gentle roll-off below 100Hz that indicates a little wall reinforcement might be helpful here, though the alignment is probably best suited to free space siting. The tweeter output is smooth, flat and well extended, but also a little stronger than average.



This isn't the smoothest, most neutral or least coloured speaker around, but it disguises its limitations quite effectively and certainly knows how to rock and roll. Above all it has a lively disposition that communicates the content of music and speech most effectively, and largely transcends its minor aberrations.

At these sort of prices the stand-mount usually has an advantage, partly because it has half the enclosure area of a floorstander, and partly because it sits off the ground with fresh air underneath. The net result in this case is compact speaker with a natural warmth and richness alongside a freedom from the thickening textures that often accompany floorstanders with a similar balance. This combination of crispness and warmth together is actually quite

unusual, as smaller ported two-way stand-mounts are often rather lean in the portion of the audio band between the port output and the main midrange.

A simple and straightforward coherence helps the 807V communicate with impressive directness. One might wish for a little more mid-band smoothness, especially towards the top of the main driver's operating range, and the top end is unquestionably on the bright side of normal, giving a slightly shiny overall character, but also emphasising detail and intelligibility assisted by the fine dynamic expressiveness. Dynamic range is also impressive, ensuring the effective rendition of venue ambience (where appropriate), fine discrimination amongst the players and highlighting any deficiencies in microphone technique.

Stereo imaging shows good coherence and focus, with an essentially neutral perspective and decent portrayal of image depth. Mid-band boxiness is pretty well controlled, though speech does reveal a little nasal coloration.

Genuinely deep bass might not be on the agenda here, but the 807V drives the music along with considerable enthusiasm and a fine sense of purpose. The top end might be a bit too obvious for some tastes, but colorations are well enough controlled to avoid spoiling the fine dynamic expression of a speaker that makes a strong case for the advantages of a stand-mount over an equivalent floorstander.

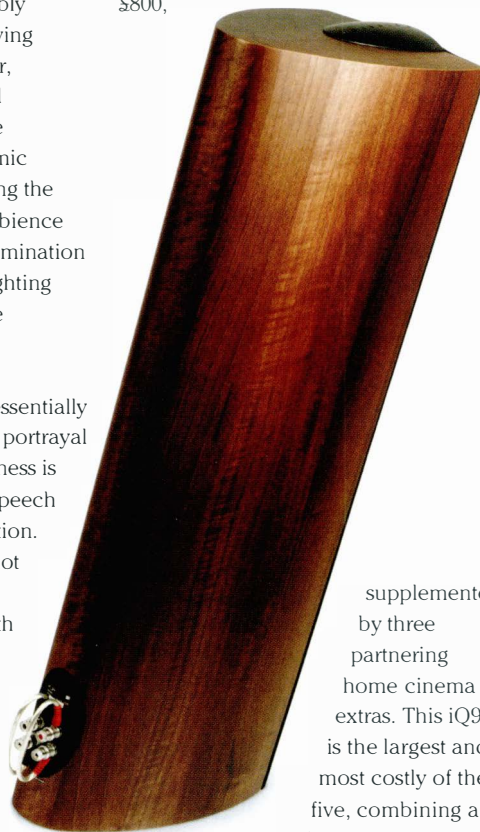
KEF iQ9

Although KEF is now owned by Chinese interests and its main manufacturing base is in China, the company's initials stand for Kent Engineering Foundries, its headquarters is still in Maidstone, and in many ways it still stays true to the technology that has been its bedrock since the early 1960s.

In recent years the company has

enjoyed particular success with its tiny egg-shaped, home cinema oriented KHT satellites, but these, and indeed the vast majority of KEF's current product line-up, are based on the clever Uni-Q drive unit technology first introduced twenty years ago.

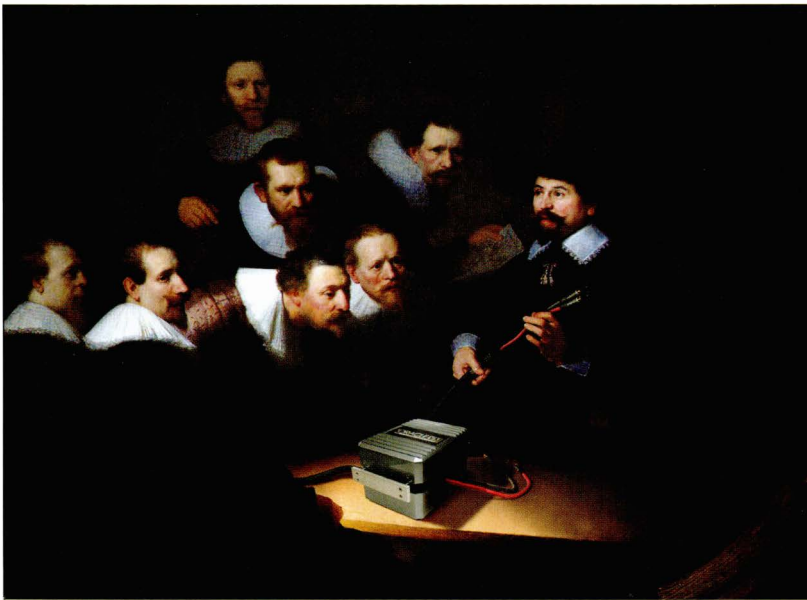
The iQ-series is the company's current near-budget range, consisting of five stereo pairs ranging from £230 up to £800,



supplemented by three partnering home cinema extras. This iQ9 is the largest and most costly of the five, combining a 165mm Uni-Q driver

for midrange and treble with two extra 165mm bass drivers, each in its own ported section of the floorstanding enclosure.

The back and sides of the enclosure are formed into a continuous curve, tightening at the back, which not only looks unusually attractive, but should also improve overall stiffness and avoid focusing the internal lateral standing waves. The front panel too is very gently curved. The enclosure comes in a choice of maple, walnut, dark apple, or black ash vinyl woodprint, and a ▶



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► moulded black 'bump' covers much of the top surface, matching the curve of the Uni-Q driver frame.

Much of the difference between the new iQ-series and its predecessors lies in improvements to the Uni-Q drive unit, which now incorporates a die-cast frame, stiffer, titanium coated 125mm plastic cone, longer throw suspension, a copper-plated flat aluminium wired voice-coil, and elliptical-profile tweeter domes. However, that was some three years ago, since when the Uni-Q has undergone at least two further stages of evolution – the cone edge/surround waveguide introduced in 2007's Reference series, and the 'tangerine' tweeter waveguide featured in the new XQ series.

The Uni-Q used here is therefore not quite to the latest and most advanced specification, though it still has the inherent features of the type. The key element is the small 19mm tweeter mounted on the pole-piece at the 'acoustic centre' of the main cone. This helps accomplish a smooth

crossover transition, and also ensures consistent off-axis responses.

The iQ9's Uni-Q driver operates in a sealed box section of the enclosure, while each of the 165mm plastic cone bass drivers has its own ported sub-enclosure. The whole speaker sits on 8mm spikes, but since no additional plinth or outrigger arrangement is supplied, overall stability is far from generous – indeed this must be one of the iQ9's most obvious liabilities.



bungs are also supplied, which might be useful if the speakers are placed close to a wall.

The iQ9 delivered some slightly surprising measurements. Despite the promise of substantial bass output from those twin bass drivers and their associated twin ports, its bottom end alignment is actually quite dry. The low port tuning frequency of 34Hz gives good ultimate extension below 30Hz and helps avoid mid-bass excess. Frankly, there seems little point in contemplating the use of those bungs,

and some case can be made for positioning the speaker rather closer to the wall than the driver configuration might suggest.

Sensitivity is a healthy 90dB or thereabouts, though that's due in no small part to a quite demanding impedance that stays close to 4 Ohms throughout the lower mid-band. The overall frequency balance is mostly very impressive indeed – relatively smooth

and even, with good crossover integration and a well-judged top-end – though peaks liable to add some coloration were recorded at 95Hz and 750Hz.

That dry bass alignment means that the iQ9 tends to lead with its mid-band, which is entirely appropriate as that mid-band is, for the most part, smooth, even and neutral. While the bass end does its stuff competently enough, with decent weight and extension, it does seem a little lacking in grip and authority, and doesn't really drive things along with the enthusiasm found elsewhere. There's an occasional tendency to add some unwanted upper bass 'thump', and a slightly thickened texture is audible on male speech.

Alongside an attractively open and beautifully judged tonal balance, the overall sound is superbly coherent through the mid and top-end, which greatly facilitates musical communication. However, some mid-band edginess can make listening at high levels a shade uncomfortable with some material, and the top-end is not particularly sweet or transparent: it supplies plenty of detail in pretty good order, but lacks some airiness and tends to draw a little too much attention to itself.

However, in a price context these criticisms are frankly only to be expected, and are relatively minor in degree. Indeed, the lack of any plinth or outrigger arrangement to improve physical stability is arguable more serious.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way, twin-ported floorstander
Driver Complement:	2x 165mm bass 1x 165mm Uni-Q midrange 19mm Al dome tweeter
Specified Bandwidth:	38Hz - 40kHz (±3dB)
Measured Bandwidth:	25Hz - 17kHz (±5dB in-room)
Measured Sensitivity:	90dB
Nominal Impedance:	8 Ohms
Minimum Impedance:	4.5 Ohms
Crossover:	250Hz, 2.8kHz
Power Handling:	200W
Magnetic Shielding:	Yes
Dimensions (WxHxD):	220 x 942 x 327mm
Net Weight:	16.6kg
Price:	£800

Manufacturer:
KEF(UK)Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1622 672261
Net. www.kef.com

Twin terminal pairs are provided, and optional port-blocking foam

► Bouncy, lively and impressively coherent, the real strength of the iQ9 lies in its thoroughgoing all round competence, and an ability, rare in modestly priced floorstanders, to make the best possible use of a generous enclosure and driver array. Decent bass extension and sensitivity, a wide dynamic range, and superior neutrality with quite modest levels of coloration, are all positives that add up to a fine overall value for money package.

Tannoy Revolution Signature DC6

Tannoy might be one of the oldest names in British hi-fi, but it has changed hands a number of times, and has always been just as heavily involved in Pro Audio as hi-fi activities. Current owner is the Danish TC Group, a public address and digital processing specialist which took over several years ago, since when Tannoy seems to have focused most of its attention on the Pro sector, while its hi-fi activities have been a little subdued.

It's therefore good to find two new ranges of high quality mid-price loudspeakers, reviving the Revolution name that the company last used around a decade back, though there are also echoes of the Definition series from the mid-1990s. The 'standard' Revolution range has four models including two stereo pairs. Both the latter – one stand-mount and one floorstander – feature a small, 4-inch Dual Concentric driver in a real wood trapezoidal enclosure, the floorstander equipped with an additional bass-only drive unit.

However, the Revolution Signature range goes a couple of steps further. It has four rather than two stereo pairs, as there are versions with both 4-inch and 6-inch Dual Concentric drivers, with appropriately matching bass-only drivers in the floorstanders, plus real wood enclosures with attractively curved sides.

This Revolution Signature DC6 is the

compact two-way stand-mount based on a solitary 6-inch Dual-Concentric driver. It's a fairly pricey proposition for its size, at £800/pair, but it does come with an elegant and shapely enclosure, finished in an attractive pale light oak or much darker (and apparently more popular) 'espresso' real wood veneer. The decidedly matt finish with nice grain is probably of East European origin, and is preferable to the much glossier surfaces favoured by Far East suppliers – at least to these eyes.

The Dual-Concentric drive unit has been a hallmark of Tannoy's engineering since 1948, so the



company has had plenty of practice building them. It started out as a large (15-inch) unit intended for open-air public address, but became popular for recording studio monitoring and amongst hi-fi enthusiasts, especially in the Far East. The DC driver has evolved through a huge variety of types and sizes, the latest being the 4-incher used in the DC4 Revolution models, though past experience suggests that the 6-incher in our DC6 variant is probably the minimum requirement for driving my relatively generous 14x8.5x18ft room.

The key feature of the DC driver is that the tweeter is a horn-loaded device that fires through the centre of the bass/

mid cone via a 'tulip waveguide'. This 'point source' gives a fully symmetric off-axis performance and apparently provides constant directivity through the c1.8kHz crossover region. The driver has a 150mm cast alloy frame and a 115mm flared doped paper bass/mid cone, driven from a high power handling 44mm voice-coil. Claiming extension to 54kHz, the 25mm diameter tweeter's titanium dome is just 25 microns thick, and well protected from prying fingers by the horn.

Although the top and base are flat and parallel, the enclosure sides are quite tightly curved, stiffening the sides, defocusing horizontal standing waves, and dispersing reflections. The 11-litre enclosure is loaded by a front port, below the solitary dual concentric drive unit. The front panel has to accommodate the 6-inch driver, but the back panel is only just wide enough for a strip of five terminals – one pair each for the two drivers plus an extra one to earth the driver chassis to the amplifier to reduce RF interference (should you happen to have a 5-core cable handy – it's a Tannoy thing, which cable

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way ported stand-mount
Driver Complement:	1x160mm Dual Concentric 25mm horn-loaded titanium dome tweeter
Specified Bandwidth:	46Hz - 35kHz (±6dB)
Measured Bandwidth:	40Hz - 10kHz (±3dB in-room)
Measured Sensitivity:	88dB
Nominal Impedance:	8 Ohms
Minimum Impedance:	6 Ohms @ 200Hz
Crossover:	1.8kHz
Power Handling:	75/300W continuous/peak
Magnetic Shielding:	Yes
Dimensions (WxHxD):	226 x 365 x 225mm
Net Weight:	7.2kg
Price:	£800

Manufacturer:

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

► companies have hitherto resolutely ignored).

Measurements reveal a loudspeaker that's quite different from the norm in tonal balance terms, but which by no means deserves censure for following its own distinctive path. With the speakers clear of walls, the far field averaged in-room trace is strongest through the upper mid-band and presence, and although the overall response holds within +/-3dB between 90Hz and 10kHz, the bass has a very dry alignment, rolling off slowly but surely below 210Hz.

Close-to-wall siting provides a useful boost between 50 and 100Hz, though the lower mid-band remains rather lean nonetheless. Apart from a mild dip around 2k, the upper mid-band and treble is smooth and well integrated, if a tad prominent, though the treble rolls off a little more rapidly than usual above 5kHz.

Our sensitivity rating matches the 88dB claimed, and does so alongside a relatively straightforward 8 Ohm load, with an easy-to-drive 6 Ohm minimum at around 200Hz. With the port tuned to around 52Hz, there's little bass output of note below 40Hz.

As the measurements predicted, this Tannoy has its own rather different take on tonal balance. In our quite large room the result is a very cool, dry character, which suggests that this speaker might be better suited to relatively small rooms.

That said, if the balance suits the room, listener and system, there is much to like here. While the extreme top-end lacks a little air, the upper mid-band is beautifully coherent as well as slightly forward, so voices are unusually clear and open, making lyrics and speech very easy to make out, aided by a notable absence of boxy colorations.

The downside is that it isn't kind to

aggressive and forward recordings, as the combination of coinciding characteristics in both speaker and recording can make for uncomfortable listening. Certainly a warmer and richer midrange would give the DC6s a more sumptuous and convincing overall character, but they do show great coherence which is a real strength on massed strings, choirs and brass, while the bottom-end brings an agility and sense of purpose to rock material that should be the envy of many larger and more complex designs.



Conclusion

This small group of speakers might fit into a fairly modest price window, but the differences between them, in size, shape, presentation, configuration, and above all sound quality, are surprisingly large. Each

has particular strengths that the others lack, so picking a winner will depend very much on a particular individual's personal priorities.

In loudspeakerland no 'magic ingredient' guarantees success, though there are some clues here as to how function may follow form. The Tannoy and KEF speakers both use their own individual variations on the co-axial main driver theme, where the tweeter output is generated from the centre of the midrange (or bass/mid) cone.

Such an arrangement has several pluses and minuses compared to a conventional, separated tweeter. For example, the amount of wide off-axis output, and therefore the in-room 'airiness' will be reduced, but symmetrical radiation will be maintained through the crossover region, assisting integration. And there's no denying the KEF and Tannoy did

show particularly good voice coherence through the crossover region (as well as a little less 'air!').

Because these speakers are so different from one another, it's hard to state categorically that one is better value than another. The little Tannoy might look costly compared to the two floorstanders, but that's at least partly because it's dressed up in very nice real wood veneer. It has high-class ingredients throughout, performs very well within its size limitations, and would certainly suit someone looking for a pretty and discreet speaker for a modest size room.

To fill a really large room, you would be better to check out the Bowers & Wilkins 683, and its full, deep bass will need no extra sub-woofer assistance even when reproducing movie soundtracks, although it will need a capable amp to drive it.

If pressed I'd have to say that the KEF probably provides the best sound for the money, because of the way it supplies excellent voice band coherence alongside decent bass weight.

But an equally strong case can also be made for the Focal's warmth and lively dynamic exuberance, which has the sort of airiness and freedom from box colour that comes with the stand-mount territory.

It's also important to bear in mind that a pair of speakers (unlike headphones) doesn't operate in isolation: what you hear is a combination of the speakers and the room in which they're used, and the influence of the room is arguably the hardest thing to pin down.

While the differences one might find between any group of four CD players costing between £629 and £900 will probably be quite subtle, that's certainly not the case with these speakers. It is of course true that a speaker can only reproduce the signal it is fed, but it's equally true that the variations between different speakers are relatively huge. Which is why it's important to take extra care when choosing a pair. ►+

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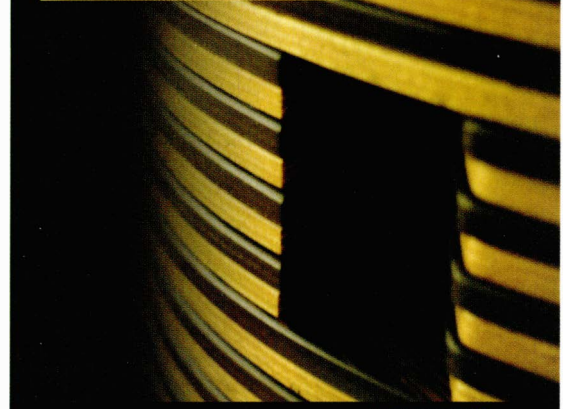
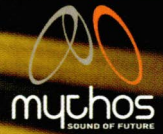
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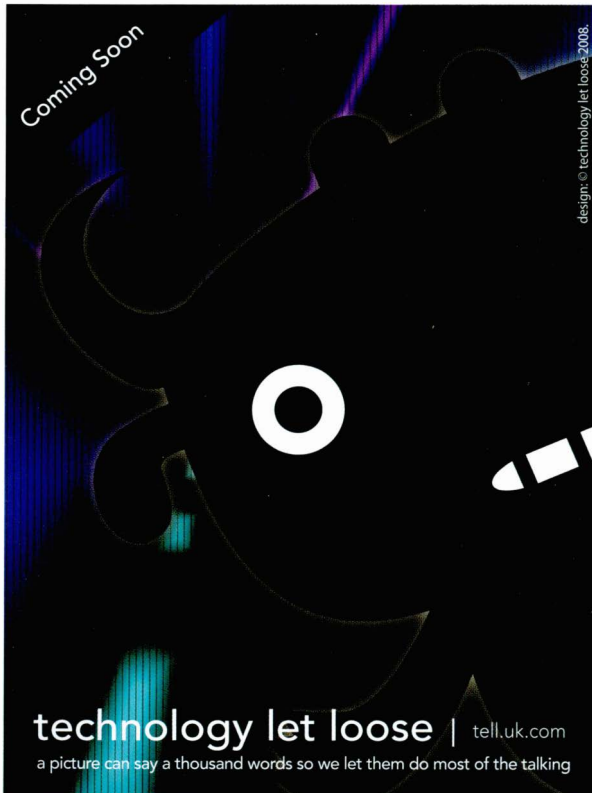
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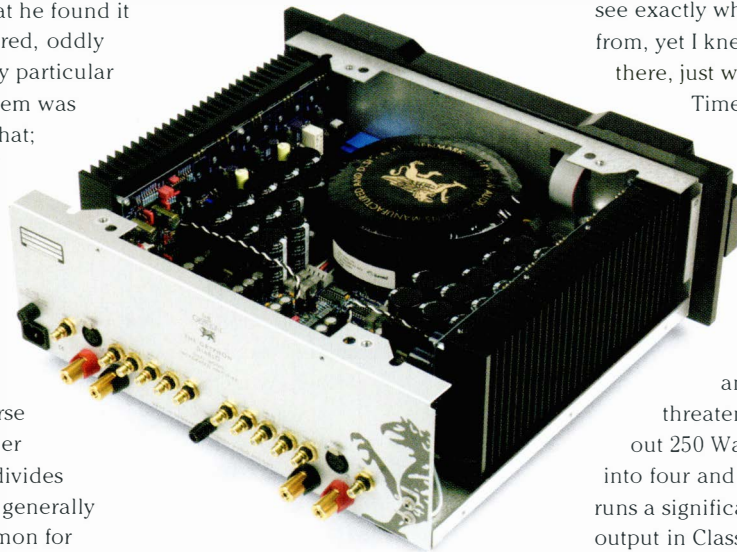
by Roy Gregory

The world of hi-fi is full of products that divide opinion and listeners, attracting loyal fans and (often scathing) criticism with equal ease. Given the vagaries of performance and human taste it's not all that surprising. However, I was surprised by CT's reaction to the Gryphon Diablo amplifier that he reviewed in Issue 56. It wasn't that he found it grossly flawed or coloured, oddly voiced or lacking in any particular sonic ability. The problem was more ephemeral than that; he simply didn't "click" with the sound.

And the reason for my surprise? I'd used the Diablo at home and found it a riotously enthusiastic and unfailingly engaging beast. Of course this could be just another of those products that divides listeners – but CT and I generally have too much in common for that to be the case, and I trust his judgement too much to question his description of what he was hearing. Which points a finger at (and creates the opportunity to investigate) that third great imponderable, system matching. So, with both the Diablo and its matching Mikado CD player still to hand, here's a system review with a difference; one that's looking for a system rather than starting with one already assembled.

First step was to recreate CT's

experience as closely as possible. Now, I don't have the Micro Utopia Bes available, but speakers are one thing I'm not short of so that didn't worry me too much. The first place to start was the electronics themselves, their supports and the cables used to lace them together. CT had tried the Gryphon



electronics on both a Naim Fraim and a Quadraspire Reference rack, wiring the system up with his normal Nordost Valhalla cables. Well, Valhalla and Quadraspire I have, so that's where I started, initially using the Reference 3A Grand Veena speakers (it was easier than moving them). To say I was shocked is an understatement. I know the system was cold but this was beyond recognition. A brief flirtation with glass shelves just made

things worse. Neither the electronics nor the speakers were delivering what I expected and previous experience told me they were capable of. Hard, opaque and mechanical, the sound was anything but musical, and if things loosened up as the electronics warmed through, somehow the sound never gelled. Listening to this I could see exactly where CT was coming from, yet I knew there was music in there, just wanting to get out.

Time to consider the options – and the evidence.

The Diablo is a substantial amplifier by any measure – and one that runs "hot" in every sense of the word. Physically large and weighing a back threatening 30kgs, it puts out 250 Watts into 8 Ohms, 500 into four and 800 into two. It also runs a significant proportion of its output in Class A, if the temperature of the casework is anything to go by, all factors that suggest a large power supply and an even larger transformer feeding it. Add in a rigidly constructed and reinforced chassis and battleship internal construction and you've got the potential for a lot of mechanical energy for the supporting surface to deal with. Take a look under the (slightly less massive) Mikado and you'll see a large conical spike acting as a mechanical earth, giving that

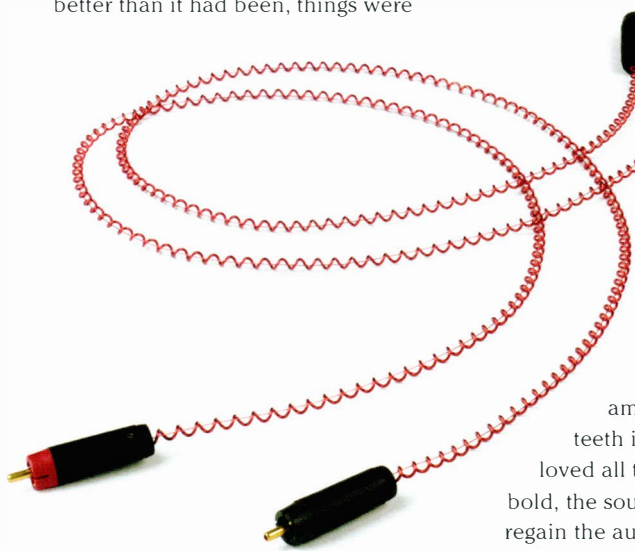


► energy a route out of the chassis. The Diablo offers no such facility, possibly because its extra mass would simply drive the spike into whatever it's sat on. Taking all that into account, it seems likely that glass would be a less than sympathetic surface, bouncing the mechanical energy back up into the electronics, while the light weight and modular nature of the Quadraspire might struggle with the scale of the problem.

Examining support options means moving heavy equipment, so before I got to that, the first port of call was the Nordost cables. Rooting through the available options I settled on alternative looms from Chord (Signature interconnects and speaker cables with Power Chords to match) and a complete Hovland suite. Starting with the Hovlands it was immediately obvious that Gryphon and Nordost is the hi-fi equivalent of Sir Paul and Heather Mills. Plugging in the alternative looms brought a sense of integration and balance to proceedings that had previously been hard to imagine. The Chords brought greater weight and energy but less control and a subtle rhythmic clumsiness suggesting "system overload" once again, so it was back to the Hovlands for now. But though better than it had been, things were

still far from perfect; time for some heavy lifting.

My previous encounter with the Diablo had seen it sitting on the Cambre Core rack, with or without a Vertex AQ Kinabalu platform underneath it. Conceptually similar in construction to the Quadraspire, the Core is far more massive as well as employing clever grooving in the underside of its shelves to help dissipate energy. The latest version now incorporates the Lodestone couplers between levels, making it even more effective. With the electronics repositioned on a three tier rack, an empty level between them things were really starting to look up, with that old sense of energy and enthusiasm starting to rear its head again, even if things were still a little on the lazy side. Here was a system which you could listen to and enjoy, stable and commanding if not the most involving – despite sheer entertainment being high on the list of attributes I'd draw up for both the electronics and speakers. Clearly the Grand Veenas had to go, but what to use in their place. I wanted something quick, agile and dynamic, capable of making the most of the Gryphon's transparency and detail; I chose the



Eben Ayra C1s, a small two-way with a sense of speed and scale that belies its size – but which matches the Veenas for price!

Now we were cooking with gas. The speakers gave the amp something to get its teeth into while they simply loved all that power. Big and bold, the sound was starting to regain the authority I had been

Anti Establishment...

The Anti-Cables have been creating quite a buzz on web-sites in their native USA, both for their performance and simplicity, and for their

low cost.

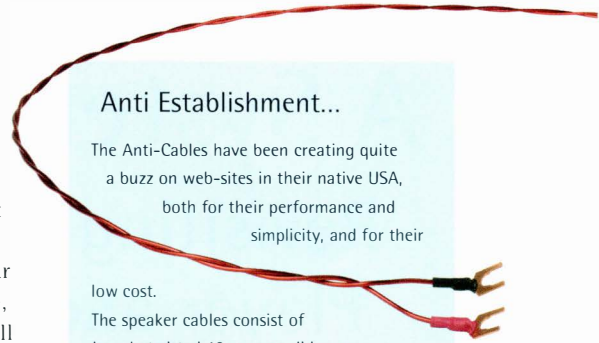
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Anti-Cables are available via mail-order only on a 30-day trial, from www.anticables.com. So add postage and any tax or duty to the cost when ordering.

expecting all along.

Which brings me to my final round of changes. The C1s were sounding smoothed and rounded compared to their crisp and clear best, but the Nordost cables with which they are normally used were clearly out of the question. I could have tried Odin, but that's a cost too far; besides which a more intriguing possibility presented itself in the shape of the astonishingly simple and affordable Anti-Cables I've been playing with recently. These minimalist solid-core wires delivered exactly the sort of uncluttered clarity and pace the system demanded – and did so at an astonishingly affordable price*.

Last step was to look at a more sophisticated support, and as well as the Vertex platforms I also had a ►



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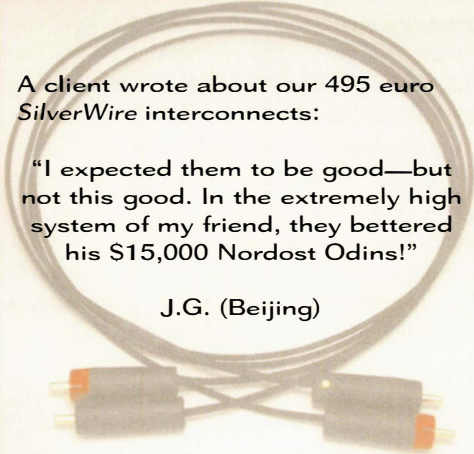
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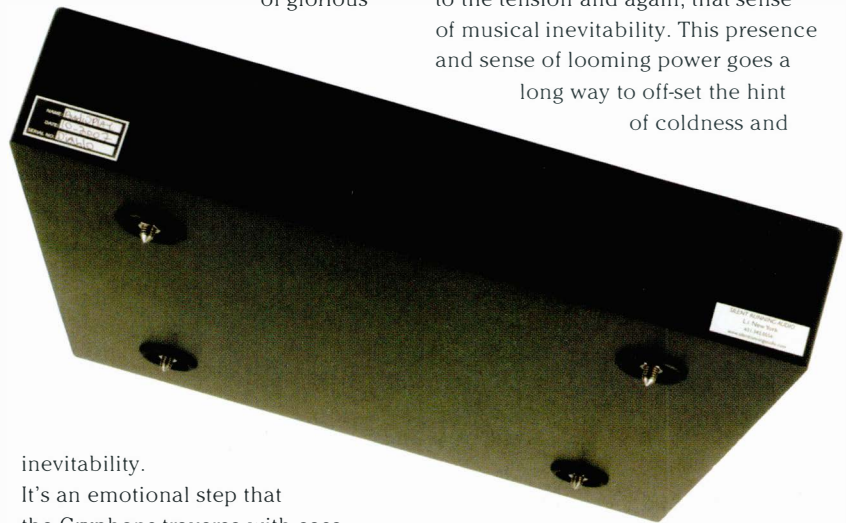
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▶ dedicated SRA Ohio slab to hand, purpose built for the Diablo. This handsome black base adds around 100mm to the height of an already substantial amp, but the sonic results are well worthwhile. Incredibly sophisticated (derived from the “quieting” measures employed on Ohio class missile submarines) the SRA slabs will get their own review shortly so I won’t go into the detail here, but with one designed specifically for the ARC CD7 also available I tried that under the Mikado with similarly impressive results. Now the system was really singing, the platforms binding the sound together, giving it the same sense of flow and momentum I’d experienced with the Vertex, but with a calmer and more controlled overall feel. Shifting the amp and CD onto the SRA platforms had necessitated momentary disconnection from the mains, so everything was left to settle for a couple of days before serious listening commenced. Once it did the system delivered an engaging and commanding musical experience.

The first thing you’ll notice with this set-up is its combination of scale, presence and life. Dynamics are quick and uninhibited, instruments presented nicely focussed in a large, transparent space. Even with the limited low frequency extension available from the Ebens, the system reproduced a real sense of the acoustic volume in which instruments were placed (assuming of course there was one). Playing Purcell’s *Music For Queen Mary* (EMI0946 344438 2) the drum processional



clearly defines both the side and rear walls of the King’s College Chapel, as well as the distance to and movement of the drum within those boundaries. It’s steady beat and measured advance sets a properly sombre tone for the funeral music to follow, played on a quartet of flatt trumpets, their particular tonality unmistakable, their ascending phrases ushering the spirit upward, creating an uplifting transition of glorious



inevitability. It’s an emotional step that the Gryphons traverse with ease, and which points to the foundation that underpins their musical performance. Those four trumpets, with their beautifully layered interlocking phrases are at once

separate contributors and a coherent whole: individual instruments each with presence, substance and personality, and solid steps in a gloriously illuminated flight of heavenly steps. There’s no missing the musical symbolism, and it’s built on an architectural quality inherent in the electronics. You can change the ancillary elements or speakers in the system, but that substance and separation will still be there – to a greater or lesser extent. The trick to getting the best possible performance from the Gryphons is to unveil that strength and keep it central to the system’s performance.

The Barbirolli *Sibelius 2* is a perfect example. Its measured, almost meandering opening can lose musical focus and a sense of purpose, but with the Gryphon based system the easy swell of each orchestral passage, its ebb and flow, the unmistakable power that builds towards the first crescendo, it doesn’t just hold the attention, it sucks you in. The spacing of the phrases, the leisurely pace with which they arrive and build just adds to the tension and again, that sense of musical inevitability. This presence and sense of looming power goes a long way to off-set the hint of coldness and

darkness that characterizes these electronics. Get it wrong and they can sound hollow; get it right and that hollowness becomes space and transparency. ▶

► As impressive as the stately grace and substance of the Sibelius is, upping the tempo just serves to show how unflustered and responsive the amplifier in particular really is. Bill Maloney's 'Goes Without Saying' is a joyous romp that pores forth from the little Ebens with a drive and energy that fair gallops along yet never tumbles over itself. Nor is this some simple, headlong rush, just getting as much sound as quickly as possible, the amp racing to keep up. As dense as this mix gets, again the strands are held separate, while a track like 'Nothing Like A Train' is held beautifully in check by the lazy but persistent drumming, a calming counterpoint to the fractious lyric that the Gryphon captures perfectly. Art Pepper's *Smack Up* is laden with dirty, funky rhythms, more often than not prodded and insinuated into proceedings by the piano. This system grabs those grooves and anchors the horn playing to them so that your hips start to undulate, your step locks and suddenly you're dancing across the room rather than simply walking to the kitchen.

Of course, the amp can't exist on its own; hence the earlier discussions regarding cables, supports and speakers, but don't underestimate the extent to which the detailed, organized and dynamic sound of the Mikado dovetails with the Diablo. All that substance and layering that you are hearing is not just the amplifier's

ability to resolve instrumental harmonics and define subtle but distinct dynamic levels, its root lies in the CD player's ability to lift that information off the disc and sort it into an intelligible and coherent musical whole. But as impressive as the results are – and there's no escaping the boisterous enthusiasm this system brings to rock and pop, the sheer power and presence that underpins large scale classic works, the palpable space that surrounds smaller acoustic ensembles – getting the very best from these products involves preserving the process and providing the optimum working environment. Such is their potential (both sonically and in terms of stored energy) and musical honesty, that each step down from that pinnacle of performance will be clearly audible. Pick the path carefully and you'll retain their musical integrity; take a wrong turn and you could quickly start to undermine their musical bearings – which is what clearly happened to CT. It's not that

the system sounds bad; the Gryphon's are far too capable and controlled for that. It's just that there's a subtle, almost insidious disruption of their inner stability that at its worst leaves music disjointed and aimless.

How do I know this? Having got this system to fly I worked back through the process, noting the impact of each step along the way. Fascinatingly, the detail, the dynamic range, the physical elements that make up the music were retained pretty much intact. Sure we lost some dynamic range and separation but those things point to a deeper problem. It wasn't the information itself that went absent, but the system's ability to deal with it. It no longer separated as effortlessly or delivered the same sense of power and impact, because the pattern of musical events no longer made the same degree of sense. It wasn't presented with the same clarity and consequently lost its purpose.

Take a look at what I've spent on getting the best out of these amps and you might well say something along the lines of, "I should darned well think so!" and assume that the Gryphon's demand expensive ancillaries if they're going to work. But that's not the final conclusion to be drawn here. Indeed, it's not the price of the ancillaries that matters, but choosing the right ones. Substituting the Vertex AQ Kinabalu platforms (at around a third of the price) for the SRAs and a pair of Vertex mains leads for the Hovlands brings expenditure well within the bounds of the expected, given the price of the electronics – especially taking the price of the Anti-Cables into account. The Ebens are wonderful speakers but I got remarkably good results from far more affordable models too, including the baby Sonus Faber Ellipsa and the crystal clarity of the supremely expressive little ►



► Spendor SA1. The scope of this review has tended to encompass mini-monitors, speakers that thrive on the Diablo's heft, precision and control, but I suspect that its qualities are just as suited to the likes of PMC or B&W floorstanders.

In fact, the Gryphon's are no different to many other products; all are governed by the inviolable rule that the higher you climb the further you can fall. The fantastic results

I was able to achieve are totally dependent on their design and its execution: In those physical facts lie too the seeds of failure – if you inadvertently make the wrong decisions or match the units badly. There's no substitute for experience with a product (or a dealer who knows it) – and failing that there's no substitute for a shed-load of alternative bits and pieces to try. Why was I ultimately able to get more out of the Gryphon pairing than CT? It's simple really (and not for want of trying on his part). I've got way more kit in my house than he's got in his, the benefit of hindsight and his experience – and the sheer dumb luck to hit a happy combination the first time I plugged the Diablo in.

I embarked on this review with two objects in mind. I wanted to re-examine the Diablo and see just what it was capable of – and I wasn't disappointed. But just as importantly, I wanted to understand and I wanted readers to understand how two reviewers can reach such different

conclusions. It's not a case of one being right and the other wrong. Indeed, CT reported faithfully on his experiences – exactly as you and I would expect him to. I know this



because his review contained all the pertinent details that enabled me to reproduce those experiences. With the Gryphons, support is important but cabling (at least as far as the Nordost is concerned) is critical – something I'm far better placed to investigate than Chris. The bottom line here is plain; don't underestimate the hidden importance of context in the review process.

Ultimately, you can't listen to an amp, only a system – and there's a limit to just how much time and equipment we can throw at an individual review. It's not the reviewer that needs to be right, it's the system that needs to be right for the product under review. The Gryphon Diablo and Mikado are certainly proof of that particular pudding. Get the system right and they'll reward you with a rare combination of musical enthusiasm and real authority, resolution that's tied to a sense of musical purpose.

We might have had to persevere, but we got there in the end. Hopefully you can enjoy the fruits of our odyssey and in turn, a shorter path to the considerable musical merits of these impressive electronics. ►+

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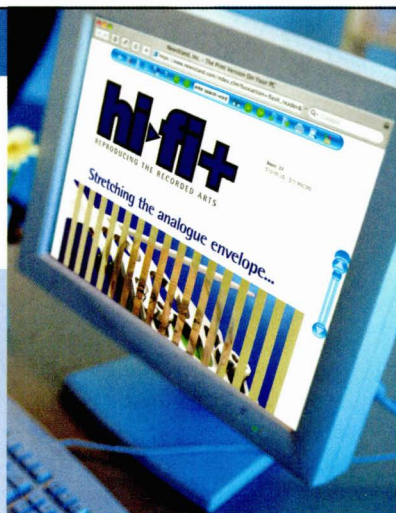
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ARIES AUDIO DESIGN 1 TURNTABLE

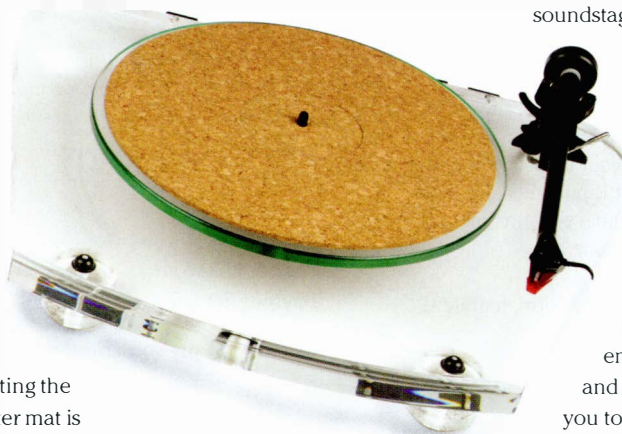
by Roy Gregory

Building budget turntables is a thankless task in a market dominated by the twin giants, Rega and Pro-ject. To survive a product has to offer something different. To survive for any length of time it has to offer something better. Aries Audio attempts exactly that with a pair of decks. The clear and curvaceous Design 1 reviewed here, and the rather more conventional (in appearance at least) Design 2. But there's much more to the D1 than just a pretty shape, and like all good budget designs it mixes carefully selected parts and materials with a little bit of lateral thinking.

The heart of any 'table is the platter and drive system and for these the D1 (sensibly) draws heavily on the competition. The glass platter spins freely on a moulded sub-platter and standing bearing of distinctly Rega derivation – a sure way of maintaining quality without busting the parts budget. However, the platter mat is a nicely executed cork design, complete with label recess. The motor is bolted securely to the 25mm thick plinth, close coupled to the sub-platter by a short rubber belt: so far (mat apart) so very Rega. But this is where the D1 starts to diverge from its spiritual mentor (and organ donor). The plinth is cut from a single sheet of clear acrylic, carefully shaped, beautifully polished and with a careful radius on the upper edge that lends a smooth and luxurious feel to it. Which brings us to the feet, and the really clever/simple part of the equation. The plinth is supported on three, free-standing pucks turned from the same 25mm acrylic. These have a course felt pad underneath, just like the scuff

pads you stick to the legs of chairs, and a hemispherical rubber nipple on top, providing a mixed compliance energy path and a degree of decoupling in a single, elegant element. The one thing they don't provide is levelling, but then, you can't have everything.

The other big difference between this and most of the competition is that the D1 runs from an external power supply, which further isolates the electronics from the stylus/record interface. This is a simple on/off device and speed



change still relies on a stepped pulley, but it's a worthwhile exercise when it comes to sound quality. Tonearm is the Moth Marketing version of the ubiquitous Rega RB250, but equipped with the latest three-screw mounting, derived from the one on the RB1000. Rega claim superior sound from the arrangement, but it does do away with even the rudimentary VTA adjustment available from the various threaded collars on the market; one step forward and two steps back methinks. Arm height is set in this case with a simple triangular plate that looks to be cut from Perspex, and which could usefully have been a little thicker. The D1 arrived

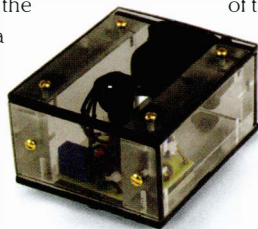
with an Ortofon 2M Red moving-magnet cartridge mounted, a good physical match for the Rega arm which retails for around £60, but I also used it with a Dynavector DV 20X, both aligned with the Feickert protractor rather than the rudimentary Rega one-point item (resulting in something like a 2mm difference in overhang).

The Aries Audio D1 is characterized by the calm, stable clarity of its sound. Compared to a Rega P5 it offers a bigger, far deeper and better-defined soundstage with the extra separation, detail and focus that implies. Where the Rega has an appealingly sense of substance and momentum, scoring high on the traditional toe-tap test, switching to the Aries leaves it sounding grey, grainy and congested, the acrylic deck placing more emphasis on the individuals and their contribution, allowing you to see further into the mix, appreciate the power of ensemble and arrangement. But, at the same time it does so without the music losing its sense of purpose or energy. It's just that now you can hear why its moving forward and what's driving it.

The D1 works wonders on the grungy morass of Warner's *Neil Young Greatest Hits*, bringing a space and delicacy to 'After The Goldrush' to complement the direction and unflustered organisation it instils in the meandering excursion of 'Down By The River'. The contrasting guitar lines are kept separate, supporting and anchoring each other, binding together a track that can all too easily subside into a meaningless jumble. The Aries Audio deck doesn't just unravel ►

► the musical facts, it manages to make sense of them too. Of course, the price you often pay for clarity and separation is a lack of substance or power when the musical density ramps up. Let the stylus run on into 'Cowgirl In The Sand' and whilst the slabs of sound that build into the track's opening aren't quite as solid and rooted as they are with the Rega 'table, there's more texture, a clearer relationship between the stabbed rhythm guitar and the power chords of the lead, a relationship that's vital as the track climbs into the first verse.

Play the sort of discs that sound good whatever the system and the differences become more



academic. So Benny Carter's *Further Definitions* is suitably motive on the Rega, more subtle and creatively layered on the D1, the greater range of colour and extra space helping sort out the elegance of the arrangements. But turn to less polished performers and recordings and the added poise and insight of the Aries design comes to the fore, consistently sorting out the densest of mixes without pulling them apart. Add a cartridge of the quality

of the DV 20X or a Lyra Dorian and you build still further on those strengths, while the



use of the Moth arm allows the option of an Incognito wiring upgrade that I'd certainly consider. But even in basic form this is an impressively communicative and musical performer that will provide an excellent vinyl source, whether as a starter deck or to play second fiddle to digital with an existing record collection. It's an attractive and capable addition to the market. ►+

Design 1 Turntable: £499

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TEAC ESOTERIC X-01 D2 SACD PLAYER

by Chris Thomas

Ever since we were mistakenly and somewhat naively promised "perfect sound" back at the launch of Compact Disc in the early 80's, the format has suffered at the hands of those who continuously compare it unfavourably with analogue. So, I constantly read and hear people saying that CD player A is better than B because it sounds more like a record player. My advice is that if you want an analogue source then buy a turntable and all that goes along with it, but certainly do not waste your time comparing it to an Esoteric. What Teac have done over the past few years is to considerably refine their flagship CD players, but they are most definitely digital music machines and sound unlike any record player I have ever heard.

But, despite that, there is no doubt that in the D2 version of the established X-01 they have produced one of the very best single-box players around.

Over the past couple of years I have spent time with both the original X-01 and the improved SE version. Both were interesting machines, built around that impressive VRDS-NEO transport and able to extract more sheer detail from CD than just about any of their competitors. In Japan they are regarded primarily as SACD machines (reflecting the much greater availability of SACD titles in the Japanese market) but I always viewed them as CD players that happen to play SACD discs. The only problem with those previous models for me was that they had a cool, somewhat impersonal

steeliness about them that was a touch over-analytical for my tastes. In some ways they personified those aspects of digital replay that so many analogue die-hards still object to. You could certainly subdue these traits somewhat with careful choice of support and cables, but it never really went away and characterized those players to the extent where I admired them but never really felt the overwhelming urge to own one. But, someone back in Japan was smart enough to recognise exactly where their musical shortcomings were and the result is that the D2 version has addressed the problems admirably.

The new machine looks superficially the same but has several worthwhile improvements internally and ►

▶ externally. The tray still slides in and out with that wonderfully silky action, but now it is concealed behind a motorised flap, borrowed from the more expensive models, which locks tightly shut, sealing the disc bay from light, dust, vibration and the outside world in general. With each individual electronic and mechanical function of this player, the Esoteric illustrates perfectly just how a high-end machine should operate. Every time you use it, it reminds you that this is a truly beautifully constructed piece of audio electronics, with a fit and finish that most others can only dream about. But, given Esoteric's probable R&D budget perhaps that isn't so surprising.

The D2 version allows you to select from three DAC modes and the one that you prefer will likely depend on the disc in the tray, the characteristics of your system, and to a certain extent your personal taste. In fact I found that it could even depend on which track you happened to be playing when you made your selection. The choices are single-bit, multi-bit and DSD and it would be hard to characterize them here in anything other than a general sense, as you really have to compare them in situ and in real-time. You also have a reference setting that allows the machine to automatically choose the most obvious alternative. Its performance on properly formatted SACD can be stunning in the breadth and weight it brings to instruments and it has made me a staunch convert to the format. It's a little late I hear you say. Correct, but I have never heard quite such a persuasive case as the D2 makes and if I owned one I would seek out as many of these discs as I possibly could.

With these and other electronic improvements, what Teac have added sonically to the previous X-01 armoury is a huge dose of reality and humanity. No

longer does the impressive resolution sound like an academic exercise in detail retrieval. The tonal balance is a just about perfect fit for most high-end systems and the instrumental and vocal textures are denser, leaving the whole sound far, far more organic. Now that the slight stridency has all but vanished the D2 is much easier to live with. You will be impressed with not only the bandwidth but also with the superb top to bottom control and focus that the machine provides. I would never call it warm (or remotely analogue), but the way it can exert such



grip and sheer articulation without sounding contrived or detached really sets it apart. It is one of those rare players that is powerfully rock solid, yet can produce layer upon layer of impossibly finely shaded detail that extends from the instrumental, through the harmonic and into the ambient.

At high frequencies the Esoteric is very comfortable, endlessly open and revealing and has replaced the icy coolness of the previous models with a refined, multi-coloured tonality and explosive dynamics. I used it with the Lyra Connoisseur 4.2L SE preamplifier and a pair of Ayre MX-R power amplifiers driving JMLabs Micro Utopia speakers through a complete Nordost Valhalla cable loom and I couldn't get enough of the sheer vigour and enthusiasm that made this stunningly coherent and musically involving system

one of the very best I have ever had at home. For pure clarity of expression the D2 is hugely impressive in its explicit nature and uncanny ability to unravel the music into perfectly understandable elements. It is one of those machines that positively thrive on complexity and even the densest of recordings are laid bare and locked within that broad, deep soundstage. Ask it any musical question and it will come up with a perfectly coherent and lucid answer. But it is, like all great equipment at this level, endlessly demanding of its partnering electronics. This is a lean sounding player with no superfluous body or added warmth

but it is tremendously fast, very rhythmically persuasive and will give the rest of your system a real examination in speed, resolution and dynamics. To get the best from the D2 you still have to pay serious attention to every aspect of the installation, but if you do then you will end up with one hell of a system, especially if you seek high resolution. This is a very impressive CD player indeed and when I weigh up its attributes sonically, factor in the amazing build quality and then look at the competition, I have to admit that even at this price, it actually represents decent value for money. Now, finally, it's a machine I would like to own. ➤

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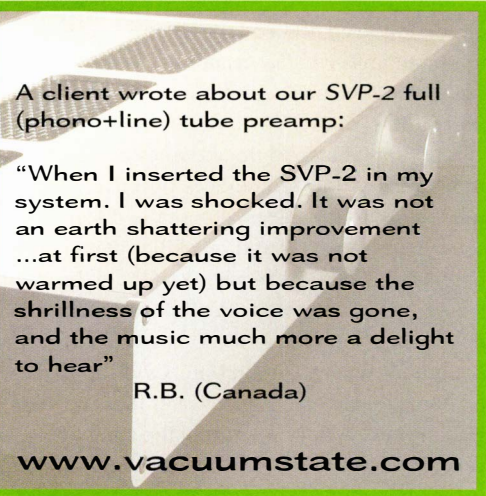
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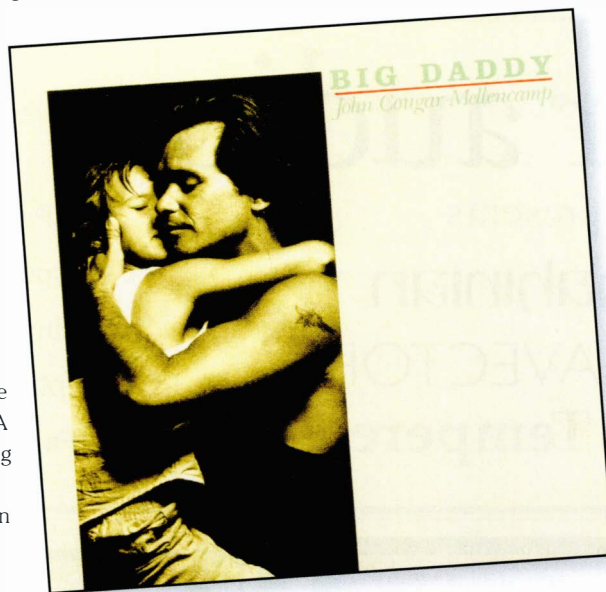
QUIET DRIVE...

THE CHANGING FACE OF JOHN MELLENCAMP

by Andrew Hobbs

Mention Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty, Steve Earle or Bob Seger and most serious music buffs in this country will say they have at least one of their albums in their collections. John Mellencamp, on the other hand, is one name that seems to pass a lot of them by. He's often referred to as 'a poor man's Bruce Springsteen', a cruel and unwarranted tag for an artist with a back catalogue as rich and glorious as his. So, to set the record straight let's take a wander through the life, times and recorded work of this hugely gifted but fiercely private individual.

Mellencamp was born in Seymour, Indiana in 1951. His first break in the music business came when he sent a demo of his songs to David Bowie's management group, Mainman. He got signed and released *Chestnut Street Incident*, a pretty unremarkable collection of songs on the MCA label. At the time the marketing moguls decided on a name change, and he became known as Johnny Cougar. One more album followed, the equally unremarkable *The Kid Inside* before Mellencamp signed for Rod Stewart's label, Riva. At this point - at least musically - his writing tightened up and one of the early albums, *A Biography* showed immense promise. Although a little rough around the edges, it contained some pretty tough sounding street rock and one killer ballad - the hugely neglected 'Taxi Dancer'. The song told the story of a woman who goes to New York with dreams of becoming a famous dancer but ends up in dead-end jobs and late night bars, where "an old butch will slip a quarter in the jukebox, and she'll stagger to her feet and dance with that girl for free". A later version of the song appeared on *John Cougar* but it's this one you really need to hear. Someone, somewhere must still hold a deep affection for this record



because it resurfaced when Mellencamp's back catalogue underwent an extensive re-mastering programme. Unavailable on any format for many years, it now sounds better than ever and still deserves to be heard.

By now, Mellencamp had gone through another name change and presented himself as plain old John Cougar. A further two albums hit the streets in quick succession - 1979's self-titled opus and 1980's *Nothing Matters And What If It Did*; both containing their fair share of good songs but with little indication of what was still to come. Enter *American Fool*, with it's massive number one single 'Jack And Diane' and the almost as big 'Hurts So Good'. This was the sound of Mellencamp revving his engine to the max; the guitars burst past eleven, the band rocked with new-found fervour and the song writing was crisp, exciting and commercially

memorable. Suddenly he was all over American radio, with 'Jack And Diane' also finding its way onto UK play lists and into the charts. Much to the chagrin of his record company Mellencamp decided to change his working name again, this time to John Cougar Mellencamp, and in 1983 he released the extraordinary *Uh-Huh*. An ass-kickin' bitch of a record, *Uh-Huh* was recorded in just sixteen days and had a fast, loose and aggressive vibe. It's often referred to as his *Exile On Main Street* moment; not difficult to understand why when the likes of 'Authority Song', 'Crumblin' Down', 'Lovin' Mother Fo' Ya' and 'Play Guitar' come snarling out of the speakers with the severity of a pissed off tiger. Larry Crane and Mike Wanchic's guitars hiss and spit with real venom, whilst in the engine room Kenny Aronoff ►

► (surely one of rock 'n' roll's greatest-ever drummers) and Toby Myers supply the fiercest of backbeats. *Uh-Huh* also spawned another massive hit, the socially biting 'Pink Houses', a really vitriolic blast at America's conscience and still one of the best blue-collar anthems out there.

In 1985 Bob Geldof became the darling of the good cause with his Live Aid concerts, an event Mellencamp was invited to attend.

He turned the offer down and instead joined forces with Willie Nelson to form Farm Aid, his way of bringing the plight of the Midwest's crumbling farming community to the attention of the masses. A series of concerts ensued with all sorts of big names lending their talents to the cause. Mellencamp kept the heat on with his next release - the mighty *Scarecrow*.

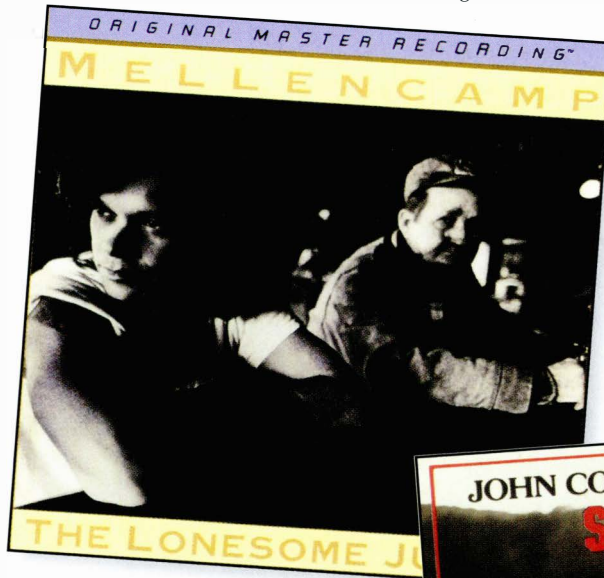
The songs were more thoughtful and lyrically introspective, whilst the music was beginning to find a rootsier centre; he'd become a spokesman for his generation and he didn't pull any punches. Even so, there was still room for a little light-hearted rock 'n' roll in the form of 'R.O.C.K. in the USA', Mellencamp name checking some of his heroes in the song's lyrics. Rickie Lee Jones also dropped by to sing a duet (the gorgeous 'Minutes To Memories') and the band he'd assembled for the album were every bit as good as Springsteen's celebrated E-Street Band.

In 1987 Mellencamp unleashed what many fans and critics consider his masterpiece, *The Lonesome Jubilee*. John Cascella's prominent accordion and Lisa Germano's frantic bursts of violin, along with a host of dulcimers, banjos, dobros and mandolins, handed *The Lonesome Jubilee* its distinctive sound. In no way was it a country album though; the twin guitar attack and Aronoff's frightening powerhouse drumming made sure that rock 'n' roll remained firmly at its heart. The lyrics were some of Mellencamp's most poignant and continued to highlight the struggles ordinary folk had to contend

with in America's wasteland. 'Down And Out In Paradise' read like an open letter to the powers that were; it told of "living in the suburbs a long way from Washington DC", where "it looks like the milk and honey, done run out on me." If the lyrical content touched on depressing matters there was still plenty of fun to be had; 'Cherry Bomb' and the delightfully rambunctious 'Rooty Toot Toot' bounced along on the most infectious grooves imaginable. It's not difficult to hear why *The Lonesome*

Jubilee is so widely regarded.

The next offering, 1989's *Big Daddy*, was a much more sober affair. At that time Mellencamp was in the midst of a messy and painful relationship split, and in no mood to party. He was also becoming increasingly irritated by the shenanigans of the music business and poured out those frustrations in 'Pop Singer' ("never wanted to be no pop singer, didn't ever want to write



no pop song, never had no weird head to get my songs over, never wanted to hang out after the show"). He still felt the urge to champion the lost and the less fortunate ('Jackie Brown') but also let the listener in to his private world of pain with the hugely sad 'Void In My Heart'. He sang of having "a big house on the hill and a hundred dollar bill in my pocket" but then dampened the joy by declaring there to be "a void in my heart, that I just can't seem to fill." Fed up with the demands of being a "pop singer", he refused ►

► to tour or do interviews in support of the album and instead threw himself into his new love - painting. Two years would pass before the world caught sight of John Mellencamp again.

When he returned it was with a new guitarist and a sound that harked back to the *American Fool/Uh-Huh* era; loud stroppy guitars and rebel-rousing anthems full of passion, drive and new-found belief. Whenever We Wanted ripped along on a full head of speed, new guitarist Dave Grissom (of Joe Ely fame) dueling mercilessly with old hand Mike Wanchic, whilst Mellencamp vented his spleen furiously on tracks like 'Love And Happiness' and 'I Ain't Ever Satisfied'. The break obviously rekindled the inner flame and it continued to burn brightly with 1993's *Human Wheels* - generally considered to be one of his finest moments.

Just after the release of 1994's mini-album *Dance Naked* Mellencamp suffered a heart attack, possibly the result of his chain-smoking cigarette habit. He returned undeterred a few months later and played a series of rousing club shows... chain-smoking cigarettes!

Never one to stand still for very long, he returned to the studio and released his most ambitious project to date - *Mr Happy Go Lucky*. Eyebrows were raised amongst his fans when they learned of the inclusion of top dance producer

Junior Vasquez and various programmers and loop merchants. It was the most unlikely of alliances - the blue-collar rocker and the hip-hop prince - but against all the odds it turned out to be a real winner. Clearly, the band were enjoying themselves, a point not lost on Mellencamp when he wrote in the liner notes: "...I think this is my fourteenth album, and I've never seen the band more focused or having so much fun. I am a very fortunate man". Fortunate or not, *Mr Happy Go Lucky's* infusion of backbeats, loops and rootsy rocking was an intoxicating breath of fresh air, and a fine tribute to Mellencamp's vision and artistry.

In 1998 his long association with Mercury/Riva came to an end and he signed a new contract with Columbia Records. The resulting self-titled album didn't feature Junior Vasquez and Mellencamp produced himself, although he did retain Moe-Z on keys and loops. The

band were practically unrecognisable from the one that featured throughout his golden period with only Mike Wanchic and Toby Myers surviving, but there were guest appearances from Lisa Germano and original backing vocalist Pat Petersen. Two special guests also lent a hand; Tom Petty's drummer Stan Lynch and Guns 'n' Roses rhythm guitarist Izzy Stradlin. The album contained twelve choice cuts of prime Mellencamp song writing and received heaps of praise from critics and fans around the world.

Evidently, after twenty odd years in the business the wily old fox still had plenty to say, even if he had absolutely nothing to prove - least of all himself. There have been a clutch of releases since *John Mellencamp* but, to be honest, none have managed to climb to heights as dizzy as this one did. They all have noteworthy

tracks and his voice is as good as it ever was, but they don't consistently hit the mark. In the good old days of music retail I was fortunate enough to be invited to a showcase gig in Camden Town in support of the *Mr Happy Go Lucky* album. 300 people witnessed an incredible set, with one lucky punter even getting the chance to share the microphone with his hero. His face wore a smile the width of the Thames when he eventually got off stage, and he no doubt toddled back to wherever



he came from still not quite believing his luck. However, Mellencamp doesn't tour these shores that often, which might be one of the reasons why he doesn't share the popularity of some of his fellow artists. It's difficult to see that as the main reason though - after all, Elvis never even set foot in the country and it didn't do his career any harm!

For this writer (and long time fan) Mellencamp stands as one of the most important and talented singer/songwriters in the history of rock music. He never was a "pop singer" or "a poor man's Bruce Springsteen", or the next this, that or anything else; he's John Mellencamp, and if you've yet to discover him make it soon, because you are missing out on something really special.



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, David Stirling.

Key to Icons

	CD		120g LP
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	SACD		
	Hybrid SACD		
	Multi-Channel		



Wentus Blues Band

Family Meeting

Ruf Records

To celebrate 20 years in the business, Finland's Wentus Blues Band decided to throw a party... Band style! They gathered together a group of famous friends, set the cameras rolling and produced a memorable evening of scintillating blues - their very own Last Waltz. Invited to the party were Mick Taylor, Eddie Kirkland, Kim Wilson, Eric Bibb, Guy Davis, Barrence Whitfield and a host of others, and across two CD's and 23 songs of originals and covers, they let their hair down with passion, gusto and boogie. There are two Stones covers, a down and dirty 'Ventilator Blues' and a near 10-minute moody instrumental version of 'Can't You Hear Me Knocking', both featuring Mick Taylor and the latter decorated with particularly feisty saxophone. Other highlights include a dripping-with-emotion cover of Omar Dykes' 'Angel Blues' with the man himself on guitar and vocals, a foot-tapping romp through 'Stop Twistin' My Arm' with Barrence Whitfield at the helm and a lovely version of Gary Davis' 'I Heard The Angels Singing', soulfully rendered his own by Eric Bibb. There are also two tracks performed backstage and acoustic; 'Ride On Red' featuring Louisiana Red, and 'Lonesome Fugitive', sung by Lazy Lester and sounding as authentic as a hot and sticky night in the Mississippi Delta.

If two CD's aren't enough for you the show's also available as a DVD, for your consummate viewing pleasure.

AH



The Cinematic Orchestra

Live At The Royal Albert Hall

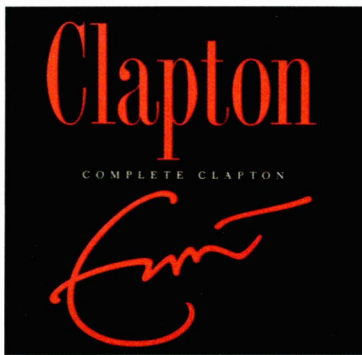
Ninja Tune ZEN141

Last year was a hectic one for Jason Swinscoe's Cinematic Orchestra; they released the *Ma Fleur* album and toured it extensively, a journey that culminated in the RAH event from which these nine tracks are taken. Having been at that concert but sat up in the gods, I was pleasantly surprised at how much better things sounded down at the mixing desk (but then again the venue is notorious in this respect).

What TCO's first live album delivers is the band's ability to reinvent and interpret its own material. Aided in no small way by the 24-piece Heritage orchestra and with Patrick Carpenter once more on turntables, they produce some fascinating variations on material from *Ma Fleur* and earlier. I particularly enjoyed 'Familiar Ground' with its guitar opening, and the powerful rendering of 'Breathe' with Lou Rhodes (formerly with Lamb) on vocals. Patrick Watson, whose fragile voice brought a different feel to *Ma Fleur*, was not singing, but Grey Reverend's take on 'To Build A Home' with guitar backing is certainly different. And there's a special treat for those of us that have followed the band from the early days; an acoustic jazz workout of 'Ode To The Big Sea'.


JK





Eric Clapton

Complete Clapton

Reprise Records 294332-1 

"Definitive" and "complete" this is not. Stan Ricker's sub-audiophile but half-speed mastered collection, while neatly dividing the material into two periods between 1966-1981 and 1982-2006, does include tracks recorded with Cream, Blind Faith, Derek Et The Dominos and those polished hits from an inconsistent solo career, but it remains reticent on the subject of the formative days Clapton spent as a Yardbird. The preference is to blend those well known classics like 'Layla', 'Presence Of The Lord', 'White Room' and 'I Shot The Sheriff' with more recent radio friendly tunes in the shape of 'It's In The Way That You Use It', 'Tears In Heaven', 'Sweet Home Chicago' and 'Riding With The King'. The technical and compositional accomplishments can be admired but we rarely more than touch upon that almost spiritual quality which made this man a guitar God. Revelatory moments and priceless insights are relatively few and far between, and that's frustrating. It's easier to think of Complete Clapton as a series of familiar intros promising much more than they actually deliver. The inherently fragmented nature of any compilation is partly responsible. However, for the barely or uninitiated this should offer sufficient encouragement to explore the substance, continuity and heart stopping work found throughout the better Clapton albums.

RP



Shelby Lynne

Just A Little Lovin'

Lost Highway 0602517609181  

It's hard to believe, but the idea for Shelby to cut an album of songs made famous by Dusty Springfield came from none other than Barry Manilow! He sent her an e-mail suggesting it but at the time Shelby was busy touring and put it to the back of her mind. However, great ideas have a way of circling the brain and eventually she embraced Manilow's keen vision. Lynne wasn't interested in a straight covers album, she wanted it done her way...stripped to the bone, slow and sexy. She hired legendary producer Phil Ramone and top engineer Al Schmitt, surrounded herself with a small but sympathetic band of musicians and set about recording what is probably the finest album of her career. Shelby's warm, southern voice wraps itself around the songs in knowing appreciation, and their timeless quality is there for all to hear. They haven't been done like this before though; the pace is mellow, the playing perfectly captures the mood and the recording - devoid of Pro-tools and overdub interference - is spacious, and draped in a rich, honeyed sound. The one non-Dusty song is 'Pretend', a Shelby original that slots seamlessly into the fold. Dusty would have loved it. I never thought I'd say it but Barry Manilow deserves a pat on the back for his brainwave, because this really is something special.

AH



Ecki

Mono

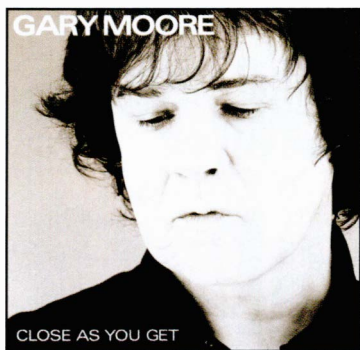
Product Records PRODUCT035 

Ecki brings a photographer's eye to this contemporary acoustic duel with his demons. A fractured personal life; the sacrifices and the career choices that have been made in pursuit of largely thwarted musical ambitions - all are exposed in ten skeletal but thought provoking songs. *Mono* is cathartic soul searching and sometimes prophetic storytelling of the highest order. Its images though are far from black and white. Recent comparisons to a young Richard Thompson are still much exaggerated because Ecky has yet to develop the great man's steeliness, social conscience or guitar god status. However, there is undeniably that same sense of idealism, confidence, ability, honesty, self-belief and thoroughness present in songs like 'A Little Bit Of Hope', 'I Can't Sing That Song Anymore' and 'Passion'. The rest will surely follow. Minimalist arrangements help this material to really resonate and when we do get that extra oomph from within a swollen bass line then it's like proudly wearing a fat lip - an almost visual thematic reinforcement through the score. Impressively detailed, transparent and secure, this recording adds to a sense of intimacy and personal appeal that is so endearing. The future is surely safest in these capable hands.

Supplier: [Frontier uk@btconnect.com](mailto:Frontier_uk@btconnect.com)

RP





Gary Moore

Close As It Gets

Eagle Records EAGCD346 (CD)

Last year I went to see Gary Moore at Portsmouth Guildhall, a gig destined to live long in my memory for all the right reasons. The highlight for me was a near 10-minute rendition of a song I hadn't heard at the time, a number called 'I Had A Dream'. It was one of those transcendent moments, an exhibition of masterful playing where the notes travel inward and transport you to a different realm. I didn't want it to end; if it had been double the length I still would've wanted more.

That track is on this album, albeit in slightly shortened form, but there's still over seven minutes of some of the most exquisite sounds you will ever here come out of a guitar. The tone, the sustain, the holding and bending of notes in all the right places... my God, it's all there. If he never plays again, those seven minutes carve his name in history as one of the greatest guitarists ever – and he's turning into a damn fine singer too. If you want further proof of this man's other-worldly talents try 'Trouble At Home', 'Eyesight To The Blind' or 'Sundown' – the first time he's cut an acoustic number on one of his blues records. This could be his best album yet, and it comes with a recording as immense as the songs.

AH



Jeff Healey

Mess Of Blues

Ruf Records (CD)

As I write this, news has just filtered through of the sad passing of Jeff Healey, cruelly taken from us by cancer at the age of 41. Healey was no stranger to the disease, being blinded in both eyes by its disgusting hatred of life at the age of one. Undeterred, Healey felt his way around a guitar and learned to play in an unorthodox way; hand over the neck and using the thumb as a fifth finger. Watching him live was a revelation; he would commence, sat in the middle of the stage, guitar on lap, then when the mood took him would leap up and rip off solos of quite frightening intensity – feeling every note and bending the strings like a man possessed – before somehow making his way back to the waiting chair. A great example of his unique style is Freddie King's 'Hideaway' (to be found on debut album *See The Light*), a scorching mass of high intensity blues bettered only by the original. *Mess Of Blues* – a part live/part studio recording – is a fitting tribute to the man's talent, and features the band giving their all on ten superb renditions of old favourites. It's the best thing he'd done in a long time, how sad he's no longer with us to revel in its glow.

R.I.P. Jeff, and thanks for the memories.

AH



The Landau Orchestra

Janus Plays Telephone

Milan 399 156-2 (CD)

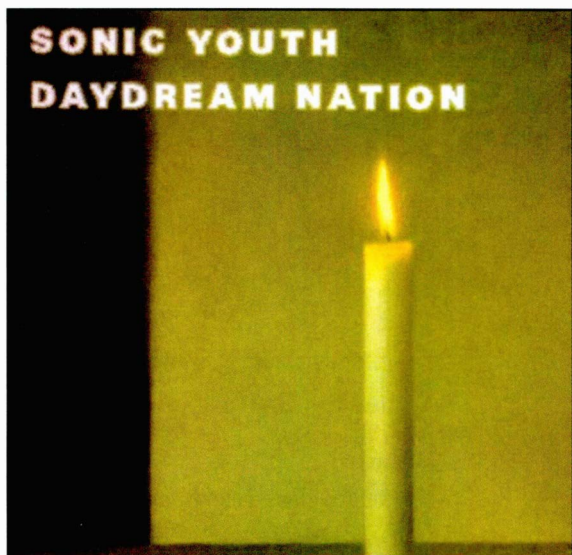
Originally formed in 1998, The Landau Orchestra, a team of four songwriter/ producers was about creating melodic electronic music, IDM: Intelligent Dance Music as they called it. This release sees them, now a considerably larger ensemble, evolving into something new, blending real orchestral elements with a pair of turntables, a laptop and a Rhodes – and combining traditional and experimental jazz composition with electronic production.

Surprisingly this works pretty well, the electronic overlays having been sensitively and judiciously applied to add texture and often another voice to realise an atmospheric and spacious result. The pieces often evoke a sort of film soundtrack and appropriately the set includes a couple of remixes of music from Javier Navarrete's score for the excellent *Pan's Labyrinth*.

This is a refreshingly different set that attempts, mostly very successfully, to bring together very different types of music making. I can't help feeling that some of the more straightforward tracks might have been stronger orchestrated entirely traditionally but then no sooner does that thought form whilst listening to this set than something fresh and different will come along that really does add to the experience, making this album both a success and a thoroughly intriguing listen.

DD





Sonic Youth

Daydream Nation

Goofin G00-013  

Probably the best rock record of 1988, Sonic Youth's *Daydream Nation* constituted a major reinvention of melodic electric guitar rock through the use of exotic scales, intertwining melodic lines, sound effects, harmonics, and good old fashioned rhythm and noise. The album's twentieth anniversary serves as the occasion for this four-LP box set re-issue (on the band's own Goofin' Records label, but also available as a two-CD 'Deluxe Edition' from, yes, Geffen Records). This music stands up exceptionally well two decades on. *Daydream Nation* is hardly an audiophile recording. That's unfortunate, because music as strong, complex and interesting as this would certainly benefit from superior sound. It's easy to accept that distortion is part of what the album's electric sound sculptures are about, but it would still be nice to hear the group's weird scales and intertwining lines more clearly delineated. This version of the original album has been re-mastered, and there is no doubt that the new vinyl pressing is very enjoyable. Still, the

main focus of the re-mastering appears to have been to make everything loud, a mixed blessing, even with music of this sort. There is no deep bass and not much dimension to the drums. The reduced dynamics typical of this approach give an overall impression of a sonic mass rather than individuals playing together.

The box set is filled out with three sides of excellent live recordings from the late Eighties. The sound of these is quite good, with the live tracks actually having better vocal and bass definition than the re-master of *Daydream Nation* itself. There is also a side of studio rarities from the same period, including a nicely energized version of George Harrison's 'Within You Without You' from a New Musical Express compilation paying homage to *Sgt Pepper*. Notwithstanding my comments on sound issues, this set is highly recommended for those who enjoy this sort of music. Although the discs are of only ordinary weight, the pressings are very good.

PD



Eleanor McEvoy

Love Must Be Tough

Moscodisc MOSCD404   

Eleanor McEvoy's last album *Out There* was very much made to satisfy herself (her "me, myself and I" album, she called it) but for this record she's decided to open up and become, shall we say, a tad more playful. The track listing contains a smattering of McEvoy co-writes (pop legend Johnny Rivers and the Beautiful South's Dave Rotheray being two of the contributors) that sit comfortably alongside tunes by some of the best writers in the business. There's a jaunty little romp through Jagger and Richards' 'Mother's Little Helper', a stunning interpretation of Terry Allen's ode to fading looks and missing love (Lubbock Woman) and what must surely come to be known as the definitive version of Rodney Crowell's bittersweet love song, 'Shame On The Moon'. Also in attendance is a spirited rendition of Nick Lowe's 'I Knew The Bride (When She Used To Rock 'n' Roll)', but the outstanding pearl in this very tasty shell is 'Easy In Love'. Written by McEvoy and one B. Parker it's a testament to the power of everlasting love, and should those narrow-minded playlisters at the daytime radio stations ever get their heads out of their arses for long enough to play it, then McEvoy would undoubtedly have a number one record on her hands. We can but dream.

AH





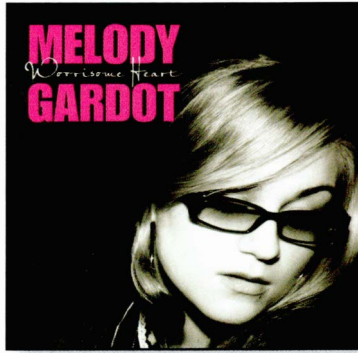
Lander Mason

The Reason

Lama Records LAMA004 

I'm not normally drawn to this kind of music, I find much of it bland and uninspiring - perfect for elevators and hotel lobbies but almost impossible to actually sit down and listen to. This though, is different. Lander Mason are essentially Fiona Lander and Paul Mason, a highly versatile and extremely gifted duo who take the finer elements of folk and then decorate them with a light dusting of jazz. They've only been together since 2000 but this is their third album, and it's a real corker. Fiona has the voice of an angel, her singing could coax the birds down from the trees and melt the hardest of hearts. She turns the penny whistle into an art form, blows sensuous sax, plays a mean clarinet and tickles the ivories 'til they purr. Paul also sings, and when the two voices collide a delicious swirl of harmonies ensues - it's enough to warm the most jaded listener's soul. Most of the songs are self-written, but even the traditional tunes are revitalized by the sheer enthusiasm and skill these two bring to them. Mason's acoustic playing is another highlight; crisply picked notes tumble eagerly forth to delight the senses as they weave in and out of the beautiful arrangements. At 70-plus minutes it's a long album, but time just seems to float by on a sea of unhurried bliss. Gorgeous.

AH



Melody Gardot

Worrisome Heart

UCJ 

Melody Gardot is a combination of fragility, beauty and a seductive voice that has been compared to Janis Ian - but with equal amounts of Marilyn Monroe in the mix! Charm is not in short supply but fortunately neither is quality, with singing and playing on most of the tracks which is very fine indeed. The album is on Universal's Classics and jazz label, but it's probably there because it's doesn't fit into any other category and there is the occasional trumpet to be heard. If it's jazz it's of the easily approached but not overly smooth variety. The songs are well honed and the arrangements put down by some very polished players have vitality without threatening to dominate the voice. All in all a well crafted collection. On a casual listen it sounds pretty good too, but listen longer and you'll hear that it suffers rather from the loudness effect. It's quite high level and clearly compressed. You can hear plenty of timbral detail and the stereo ain't bad on the voice but there's a hardness that's hard to ignore. One expects more of mastering legend Bernie Grundman but the result is probably what the artist or record company thinks will sell; unfortunately they are probably right.

JK



Hr-Bigband featuring Jack Bruce

Live

Hr Musik HRMJ038-07 

I must confess I wasn't sure I was going to like this. Jazz ensembles aren't normally my port of call, but respect needs to be shown to one prepared to work with the legend that is Jack Bruce. Bruce incites adulation, he is one of the greatest musicians to ever grace the rock circuit, garnering immense critical acclaim for his work with Cream and his diverse solo output. So, how does a collaboration between Bruce and one of Germany's finest Jazz Orchestra's stack up? As it happens, pretty impressively. For starters, the Hr-Bigband are one of the most flexible and avant-garde around. They don't just sit there blowing a lot of brass for the sake of it; they enhance a song with subtle textures and encourage it to take on a new persona, but never at the expense of the song's original structure. Then there's Bruce himself, still in great voice and still a fabulous bass player. It sounds like he had a blast with the Bigband, their obvious talents and gentle cajoling has helped him breathe new life into old bones. However, just in case you think Jack Bruce has gone jump-jive, I think it prudent to point out that this is still very much a rock record. Bruce hasn't sold out or gone AWOL, he's just trying something new, and it works - spectacularly.

AH





DRUM AND BASS...

CLIVE DEAMER AND JIM BARR OF THE BLESSING

Interviewed by Jason Kennedy

The Blessing is a new band, based in Bristol and rising from the shadow of Portishead. Drummer Clive Deamer, bassist Jim Barr and tenor sax player Jake McMurchie were all members of or played with the band, and are joined here by trumpeter Pete Judge. The PR bumf describes them as post-jazz rockers, which seems quite apt for a band that combines jazz horns with a free style rock rhythm section.

The Blessing was formed in 2000 but has only just released its first album, *All Is Yes*, from which the seven inch single 'Bleach Cake' has been released. Talking to Clive and Jim it's clear that the project was formed with the idea of having a bit of fun, to let loose and play what they want to play rather than what the people who write the material in the various bands they work with compose. It reminds me of Pigbag, the early eighties post-punk jazzers with a penchant for James Brown. The Blessing cite Ornette Coleman as a major influence and the reason they got together in the first place, and if you are familiar with the album *Something Else!!!!* you can hear where they are coming from – well sometimes at least.

There's a statement on the cover of the album which sums them after rather better:

the endless 70's car chase will not stop. fuzzi accelerator, harmolodic brakes, go faster pipe. roof gone. running on grunge vapour. Swarmsofheatednotes attack your hair and beard. involuntary hip hop head nod. here comes the blessing.

I caught up with Clive and Jim prior to the last gig of Portishead's UK tour and chatted about Carol Kaye, hi-fi and, more importantly, cake.

JK: You seem to be quite keen on cake, what with the track 'Bleach Cake' and the reference to Domestos Danishes in the liner notes, what's that about?

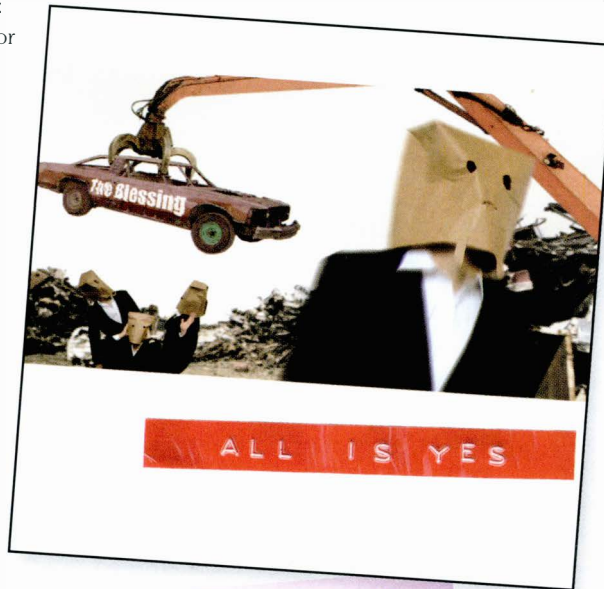
Clive Deamer: Every time we managed to steal time to get together and record ideas for the album, usually in the days after we'd done a gig where something had occurred to us collectively, we'd thought we've gotta get that down and would wait till Jim had some down time in his studio. We'd only ever have a couple of hours at the most and usually one or several of us would bring cakes as something to eat while we were recording. We'd spend the first hour eating cakes. One day we had the Bleach Cake incident; Jake McMurchie the tenor sax player, he'd brought some cakes in and they'd obviously

come from a cake shop where they'd been a bit over zealous with the cleaning because there was this distinct waft of bleach. But we ate them anyway!

JK: There's another track called Cake Hole?

CD: That's a Jeff Beck quote, if you check on YouTube there's a fantastic clip of him doing an interview in about

1973. He's a soft spoken kind of guy, he doesn't like to say a lot and after being interviewed by this presenter who looked like he'd walked out of the Open University in a brown woollen suit, and he'd asked all these questions about his guitar, pick-ups and the amp and stuff, he finally got around to what became known as the voice box; the same thing that Peter Frampton used but Jeff Beck was the



► first person to have one on TV. A voice box is an incredibly simple thing but all he showed you was a pipe that went into a bag, a rock star leather bag. He explained it as “The sound comes up this tube, the guitar sound, there’s no voice at all, it’s just going into my cake hole”. [Jeff Beck 1974 part 2]

JK: Where did you get the band’s name?

Jim Barr: ‘The Blessing’ is an Ornette Coleman tune. When we first got together we just wanted to play basically, we weren’t thinking of doing any gigs not even local gigs, we just wanted to get together and play without any chords. The material, a lot of it was early Ornette Coleman. I’d heard ‘The Blessing’ first on a Coltrane and Don Cherry record that was one of the first jazz records that I really loved. It sounded really punky to me, angular and raw in a way that I hadn’t heard before. So that was the real inspiration for using it and it took me a while to persuade the others to use it and now we’re regretting it, because somebody else is trying to sue us for using it!

JK: There’s a statement in the liner notes that starts off “The Endless 70’s car chase will not stop” is this a quote or a mission statement?

JB: We wanted to do something that was cinematic and funky in that way, not funky in a kind of funk way but in a Lalo Schifrin or David Axelrod way. I’m really into that way of playing, really minimal things and then really big things so your looking at one scene and there’s just a high hat and then a car comes round the corner and it’s full on; we were really into that but do it in a slightly different more humorous way. Crap car chase, car comes round the corner and the springs fall out of the suspension. Carol Kaye is one of my bass heroes, she played for the Beach Boys, The Doors, a really huge LA session player and she’s got that sound and she’s so, on it.

CD: A really distinctive picked bass line

JB: A very dry but driving, picked sound. There was a brilliant spread in Record Collector about the making of *Pet Sounds* and there’s this picture of her with this little Ampeg studio rig and a kind of P-Bass with a massive block of foam in it. Sat there in knee length boots looking like an LA housewife but looking so cool with headphones on.

JK: Is *The Blessing* a reaction to the downbeat sound of Portishead?



CD: Not in any conscious way, maybe unconsciously it might be, certainly for me it might be because there’s a lot of things that I get to do as a drummer where I’m constricted by the musical rules of whoever the artist is. Within Portishead, and for Jim as well, it is a very scripted thing. You have to play in those boundaries you can’t start taking liberties with it.

JB: In most things the die is fairly well set for bass and drums. If you start freaking out on somebody else’s songs it’s just wrong, so we needed to find a way to freak out.

CD: Maybe deep down there is an element of that in there. Once we got a bit further down the track with making the album we discovered this sound that we had just by using electric bass and not double bass. Jim’s sound evolved and the way

that I was playing drums in response to what he started to do on the bass – and that as a contrast to the two horns; the sound really emerged at that point. That spurred us on to be more daring and irresponsible and use more humour and intensity; a desire not to get caught up in particular forms or pre-scripted ideas. Jim made a good point that the next record we’ll make, it’ll be about doing the same as we did before, where we don’t sit about thinking what’s our next album going to be? As soon as we have a new idea we’ll go in the studio and bung it down. As quickly as possible, with as little talk, and review it later and decide if it works. We’re looking for spontaneity and a raw feel. ►

► **JB:** Embracing the accidental; not necessarily seeking it out but really jumping on it when it comes along. One of the ways that we have written stuff is if we do something at a gig and someone does something randomly different we'll go off in that direction. We'll work on it later and maybe a new tune will happen just based on a mad groove that happened at the gig.

JK: So your gigs are more free form than the album?

JB: There's two kinds of gigs that we do: it tends to be either a kind of a rocky gig or a jazz gig and sometimes something in between. So when we've got more time to stretch out then it can go anywhere. The rock gigs – they're pretty wild.

CD: It depends what the audience looks like.

JB: It depends on how much spliff you can smell!

JK: Are any of the album tracks like the live stuff?

JB: We tried to keep the album fairly concise. We weren't trying not to make a jazz record, but we were trying not to make too jazzier a record with long solos and stuff. It's more compact than the live stuff, where a tune can go on for 15-minutes or more.

JK: Which artists are your main influences?

JB: The Stranglers, Morphine, millions of things. Lots of jazz things but lots of heavy rock things

CD: If we play a jazz gig, it'll be almost as if we got invited to slightly the wrong party, so you behave accordingly and start word associating and playing off the top of your head. If you're playing a tune, you might want to interpret it because of something that's going on in the room and play it in a different way, with a different attitude, then that's what happens. The other three will always respond, either adding to it or half taking the micky. Anything is potentially an influence.

JB: Because the stuff's so spacious there's room to make a big racket individually, you can make mad noises and do what you want because no one else is going to cloud your sound. So there's room for really nasty bass sounds and room for clattery drum sounds.

CD: There's a great tune that Jim came up with, a really triumphant fanfare that's on the B-side of the seven inch (Bleach Cake) where I'm quoting bits of 70s bubblegum rock one minute, then cinematic sounds the next and then depending on how much Jim...



JB: I'm just quoting Lemmie all the way through! We are literally playing like that. Clive is playing almost like rock cliché but very very, well and I'm just playing Lemmie. The horns make the difference; you could put double bass and nice jazz drums behind it and it would be a 60s...

CD: ...actors workshop!

JK: Which contemporary artists do you like?

JB: The people that are in the same bag as us, like Acoustic Ladyland and the Neil Cowan Trio, but then there's the Kings of Leon and the Strokes which I find more interesting.

JK: Do either of you have a decent hi-fi?

CD: I wish I did. I grew up with that term in the 70s and remember going to buy one with a set of Wharfedale speakers. Then in the last 25-years that whole idea seems to have gone out the window. Because of the way the digital revolution has changed the way we use music and transfer it and most of the time all I ever get is files and CDs. I have some decent speakers in my home studio but, it's just my age I suppose, I'm hankering after the idea of having a proper turntable.

JB: I've got some amazing speakers in my studio, which are ATC 100s which have been upgraded to SL, but my hi-fi at home is shite.


The Blessing will be touring the UK in June and July, for dates go to www.theblessing.co.uk





ELB: Peter Erskine, Nguyen Le, Michael Benita

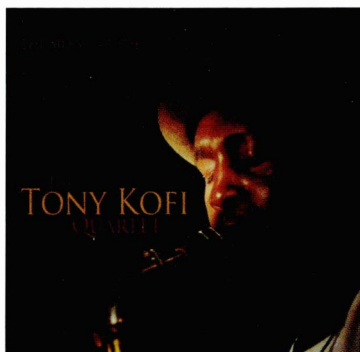
Dream Flight

ACT 9467-2 

This is only the second CD from this highly talented transcontinental trio. The conflicting demands on the musicians coupled with a bout of serious illness that temporarily incapacitated guitarist Nguyen Le resulted in a seven year wait for this release. Recorded immediately after a tour the session was, in the band's words 'relaxed, focused and fast.' This comes over in spades with absolutely terrific playing from all three. Erskine, a Weather Report veteran, contributes crisp, propulsive and economical percussion; Nguyen Le understated at times, at others wringing extraordinary sounds from his guitar is clearly in his element in this setting; Benita's warm, flexible bass playing is vital to holding the whole complex mix together. The trio are also joined by Stephane Guillaume's sax on several tracks, adding welcome additional texture to the mix.

It's such a strong set and so well balanced between the heavier faster paced numbers like 'Rotha and Priska', spacey, open textured pieces like the title track (with some really extraordinary work from Le), and ballads such as the tender 'Song for Jaco' with more superb playing from Le and appropriately a particularly good solo from Benita, that the album demands to be played from start to finish. This is a great ensemble captured here at their very best. Play it loud.

DD



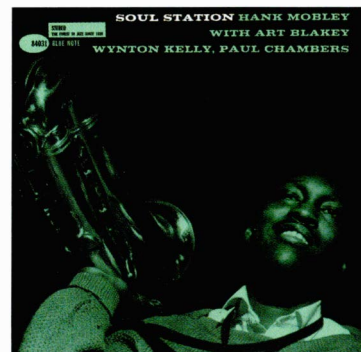
The Tony Kofi Quartet

The Silent Truth

Specific Jazz Spec008 

Coming two years after his previous album, *Future Passed*, a strong trio album built around solid, repetitive grooves with its funky flavour enhanced by a Hammond B3, this quartet set is much freer and follows Kofi's interim work including the Herculean task of twice performing the complete works of Thelonius Monk at the London Jazz Festival. The band is the same as that which originally recorded versions of Monk's tunes on Kofi's album *All I Know* but here is focused on original compositions from its members. The absence of jazz standards doesn't detract a whit from the quality of the music. All the compositions are strong and the ensemble playing is outstanding. The mood shifts between the tender lyricism of 'First Breath' a particularly lovely ballad that Kofi composed on seeing the birth of his son, to harder driving pieces like 'I Spoke My Mind' and, an older composition from Kofi 'Bishops Move' that he says has 'matured like fine wine'. There's great playing from all the band throughout the set with many superb solos from Kofi and really strong work throughout from Jonathan Gee on piano. All four musicians convey real passion in their realisation of this fresh, engaging and very enjoyable set.

DD



Hank Mobley

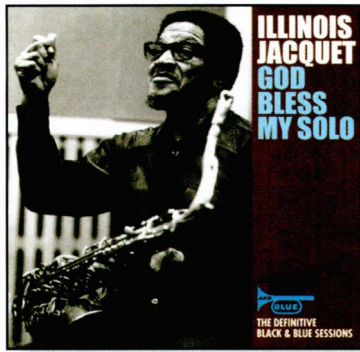
Soul Station

Blue Note/Music Matters 84031 

Hank Mobley leads an all-star line up of Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers and Art Blakey in one of Blue Note's most sought after and re-issued titles. Mobley's talents as a soloist and writer were seldom on better display, and given his record count (over twenty) with the label, that says a lot. This 1960 session falls right in the sweet spot of the Blue Note catalogue, both in terms of music and sound. As good as Mobley's 1950's sessions are, this title (and the underappreciated *A Caddy For Daddy*) show Mobley at his most creative. Here he plays one beautiful tune after another and his horn sound was never so voluptuous. While not the creative genius of some of the other horn players of his generation, at his best Mobley helped define the Blue Note bop sound. One thing that certainly sets this release apart from the pack are the exceptional sonics. Each instrument is captured perfectly and Mobley's horn sound is to die for. Blakey's drum kit never sounded better and Kelly's piano sounds like Rudy forgot to throw his usual blanket over it. *Soul Station* has been re-issued many times, most recently in audiophile weight by Classic Records. The cost of this or any earlier Mobley original is astronomical. No matter, as this re-issue jumps way out in front of the class; Another outstanding release from Music Matters.

DDD





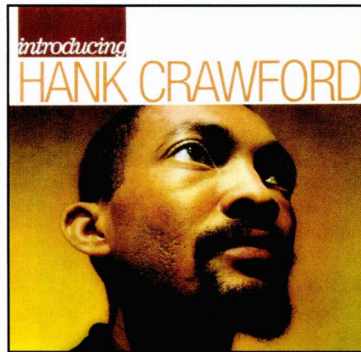
Illinois Jacquet

God Bless My Solo

Black & Blue/Pure Pleasure PPA008 **180g**

Jacquet's big tenor sax sound comes on strong from the first beat and never lets up in this outstanding release from the French Black & Blue label. Recorded at the excellent Barclay Studio in Paris in 1978, Jacquet is accompanied by an all-star line-up of Hank Jones on piano, George Duvivier on bass and J. C. Heard on drums. Jacquet, who had been a featured performer with some of the great big bands, was in his mid-50s when he recorded these sessions, but his tone and energy belie his age. He has an R & B sound all his own that lends a real groove to swing jazz, sounding more like music associated with Kansas City than Jacquet's Louisiana roots would suggest. Black & Blue delivered top-notch sound across the board with its recordings and all are worth a listen, as they can be picked up for small change. This release, however, is in their first tier—great sound married to a terrific performance. Every cut is outstanding. Jacquet's horn sound is voluptuous, and the rhythm section is well recorded and reproduced in an ideal space with no artificial highlighting. Pure Pleasure has done a good job of selecting a little known gem, mastering it well and pressing it on pristine Pallas vinyl. This is one their best releases.

DDD



Hank Crawford

Introducing Hank Crawford

Warner Music WCJ 8122799393 **CD**

Bringing together tracks from what is arguably Hank Crawford's strongest period (through the 1960's with Atlantic) this set draws from some great albums including: *More Soul, The Soul Clinic, From the Heart, Soul of the Ballad, True Blue*, but sadly not from the best of the lot the 1966 release *After Hours*. The fact that the word soul features in so many titles in Crawford's work is no mistake. His playing is drenched in it, his distinctive tone pretty much defining soul-jazz with his treatment of ballads, his sax often taking on the role of a lead-singer. All the numbers in this collection are strong but particularly good are the opening 'Angel Eyes', 'Baby, Let Me Hold Your Hand' (a Ray Charles number and very evocative since Crawford played with Charles and was, until 1963 his musical director and arranger), a lovely reading of 'Stardust' with the Marty Paich Orchestra that works despite some syrupy strings, and a fluid and no-nonsense treatment of James Moody's 'Boo's Tune'. This CD forms a really good introduction to Crawford and makes for an enjoyable listen in itself, whilst inspiring you to search out copies of *More Soul* and *After Hours* – for starters.

DD



Louis Prima

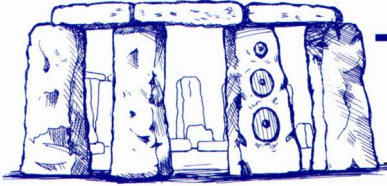
The WILDEST!

Capitol T755/Pure Pleasure **180g**

Showman Prima shares the stage here with his wife, singer Keely Smith and a band led by jump blues tenor saxophone player Sam Butera. Prima's singing and trumpet playing are modeled heavily on Louis Armstrong, although it's a decidedly Italian-American version. Prima was first and foremost an entertainer and if you approach these infectious and downright fun numbers with that in mind, this album won't fail to reward repeated listening. Recorded in 1956, this was Prima's first and best album for Capitol. It doesn't have a single dud tune. He jumps from song to song, leaving you breathless at his pace, and begging for more when the album finally winds up with '(I'll Be Glad When You're Dead) You Rascal You'. While Louis Prima may be an acquired taste for those who prefer only "serious" or avant-garde jazz, no one else should let such fussiness stop them from having fun with this album. Fans of Peggy Lee's 1950s Capitol recordings will recognize the fat, tube-like Capitol house sound of that period on this release. While it sometimes gets a bit congested and certainly isn't up to the best of today's recordings, it more than compensates with a special warmth and flow that is missing from today's recordings and Sean Magee at Abbey Road Studios has done a faithful job in mastering this album.

DDD





The History Man...

by Richard S. Foster

EMI, The Art continues... The Legacy of David Munrow

Whilst David Munrow may be best known to the classical music masses for his work on the recorder, he was in fact a multi-talented, hugely gifted musician whose short career left a lasting legacy. Born in Birmingham in August 1942, he attended local primary and secondary schools where he played piano, recorder and bassoon and sang as a chorister at Birmingham College.

In 1960 he went to Peru to teach English and returned with a variety of South American folk instruments. He continued his education in English at Pembroke College, Cambridge, all the while performing and organizing concerts. After graduation he joined the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Wind Band playing for productions in Stratford and London. Initially playing bassoon, he was encouraged by the company's musical director to experiment with the instruments of Shakespeare's time as well. It was an important step and Munrow quickly became wed to the notion of early music, forming in 1967 (with friends like James Bowman, Oliver Brookes and Christopher Hogwood) the Early Music Consort of London, arguably the birth of the Early Music movement.

Of course, 'early music' is a loose classification, embracing anything from the 14th century to the early 17th century Baroque period, encompassing Medieval and Renaissance music too. Indeed, in later years, if the early music movement has a problem it is that it's too catholic in its tastes; I'm afraid that even I draw the line at "original instruments" Beethoven.

Munrow however, was a stickler for authenticity. Although he recorded several albums for Decca's Argo label, his finest work appeared on EMI. One of Munrow's earliest EMI releases was HQS 1249, *Two Renaissance Dance Bands*. This consists of Tielman Susato's *Twelve Dances* from *The Danserye* (1551) on side one; and on side two, *Dances for Broken Consort* from Thomas Morley's *First Booke of Consort Lessons*, 1559. A two Christopher's production (Christopher Bishop, producer and Christopher Parker, Balance Engineer), this record contains great music recorded in fabulous sound

at All Saints Church in London. There are a dozen tracks on side one and this alone is a great introduction to the art of David Munrow. Ideal for the early music novice this album is very accessible. Side two contains works by Byrd, Dowland, Nicholson and Morley. The outstanding sound quality really allows those unfamiliar with this music to focus on the engaging, timeless quality of this music.

But it is two box sets that form the core of Munrow's legacy. In 1973 EMI released SLS 863, *The Art of Courty Love*. It contains three volumes: *Guillaume de Machaut and his Age*, *Late Fourteenth Century Avant Garde* and *The Court of Burgundy*.

Basically, it's a collection of French secular music from the time of Guillaume de Machaut to Guillaume Dufay. It won a Grammy award for the best Chamber Music performance, reflecting the beauty of both the music and the playing. As with other Munrow recordings, the engineers gave him superb sound quality.

One of the most interesting sets Munrow recorded for EMI is SLS 988, *Instruments of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* '...designed to illustrate the principal types of instruments in use in Europe before 1600.' It is accompanied by a 96-page book containing a plethora of information, that can be followed and experienced first hand across the four sides of the recording, via the book itself or a simplified text insert. If you want to hear and identify the individual (and often unfamiliar) instruments, this set is invaluable. It is readily available on the used market and I have seen it, book and text included, sell for £7!

While I cannot locate my copy of EMI SLS 5022. *The Art of the Recorder* (this is what I get for loaning records) it is a landmark recording and possibly the jewel in Munrow's crown (along with the Early Music Consort's, *Art of the Netherlands*). The purity of his playing reminds you of his ability as a fantastic musician, a talent to match his historical and educational influence.

Although David Munrow wasn't with us all that long, the legacy of he left is long and deep. Take the time to explore his world – you'll be glad you did.





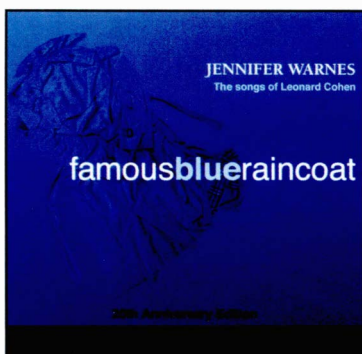
Ida Haendel In Recital

**Ida Haendel (violin)
Valentina Lisitsa, piano**

VAI AUDIO VAIA 1219 

Ida Haendel's collaboration with the young Ukrainian pianist Valentina Lisitsa recorded "live" at the Newport Music Festival in 2000 is an infectious, fluid and frequently charming passage through a musical programme that balances the beauty, delicacy and contemplative qualities of Beethoven's *Sonata No.7* and the Mozart *Sonata in B flat major K.378* with the inherent virtuosity found in this violinist's signature piece, J.S. Bach's *Chaconne* from *Partita No.2*. The remaining works: Wieniawski's *Polonaise No.1* and the Dvorak *Romantic Pieces OP.75* are respectively delivered with sparkle and tremendous affection. While this is not one of those chamber partnerships that has been forged over decades, there is still a genuine sense of togetherness within the performances, partly because the grand dame of violin is so generous. Allowing Lisitsa the appropriate opportunities to influence the musical development is a tour de force that adds to that collective sense of continuity, momentum and flow. The result is an authoritative, sincere and intelligent recital, the qualities of which seem to have underwhelmed or completely passed by an audience that must have anticipated the emotional strip mining of these works. These are much more deserving accounts than their muted applause suggests.

RP



Jennifer Warnes

**Famous Blue Raincoat
20th Anniversary Edition**

Shout Factory/Cisco Records CIS 7060 

FBR is an iconic audiophile record and Jennifer Warnes is by reputation a perfectionist of the first order in just about every facet of her music. This also extends to all matters where reissues and re-masters of her albums are concerned. She is an extremely possessive and hands on artist and I imagine her collaboration with Bernie Grundman and Cisco was far from straight forward during the re-mastering process. However, the results are spectacular and put simply, Jenny sings Lenny like you've never heard it before. This is a sumptuous sounding and beautifully presented three-record box. Cut at 45rpm, *FBR* now has an improved momentum and a deeper bass, which strengthens the rhythmic sense of Jenny's delivery as it propels us through these exceptional and well-loved Leonard Cohen songs. The transparency, delineation and overall presentation of her delicious vocals are verisimilitude in vinyl. Additional tracks: a live 'Joan Of Arc'; 'If It Be Your Will'; 'Ballad Of The Runaway Horse'; 'Night Comes On' and an amazing demo version of 'A Singer Must Die' are worth the entrance fee alone. They also serve another important purpose. Their presence rejuvenates an album known so intimately by so many. It prevents any chance of familiarity breeding contempt.

Supplier: www.redsparkmusic.com

RP



**Mendelssohn
Complete String Symphonies**

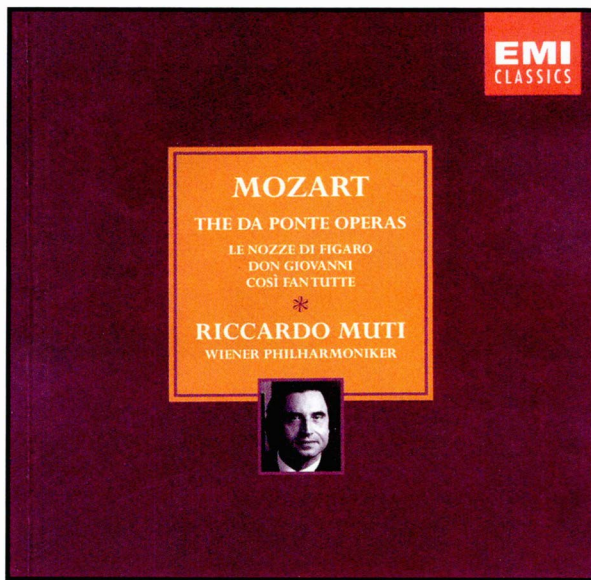
**Amsterdam Sinfonietta
Lev Markiz**

BIS-SACD-1738 

The complete Mendelssohn *String Symphonies* on a single disc? Impossible – surely? – unless you play everything at four or five times normal speed. Well, actually, very possible, if you transfer the recordings to SACD, but avoid using the Surround and CD layers. Doing this enables you to exploit the maximum playing time of the SACD – in excess of four hours. These performances were originally recorded between 1993-6, and released on four separate CDs. Indeed, you can buy them in a specially-priced 4CD boxed set – BIS-CD 738/40. Or – if you have an SACD player – get them on this single disc, which costs under £15. The performances are spirited and disciplined, yet at the same time free and imaginative – beautifully played in every respect – and the BIS recordings (16 bit digital), sound spacious and natural. If you're interested, there's a companion BIS SACD containing the complete concertos of Mendelssohn. Using the SACD format in this way opens up all sorts of new possibilities. For example, with over four hours playing time, you could at last issue complete operas on a single disc, avoiding breaks between acts. Could this be the future? Nah – far too sensible...

JMH





Mozart The DaPonte Operas (Le nozze di Figaro, Don Giovanni, Così fan tutte)

Various soloists – Wiener Philharmoniker/Riccardo Muti

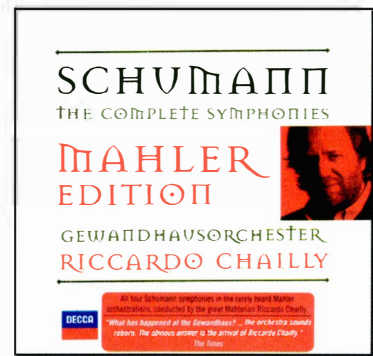
EMI 5 75535-2 

I really hate re-issues, no matter how good they may be. Under the pretence of making things cheaper for the consumer, record companies often increase profit through royalty-free music. And, equally often, re-issues sound much worse than the originals, irrespective of format. On the other hand, I absolutely adore Riccardo Muti's operatic work, especially when he uses the Vienna Philharmonic or State Opera Orchestra. EMI's re-release of the three Mozart operas for which Lorenzo DaPonte wrote the libretti are an equally total and absolute exception to the aforementioned rules and the sound is excellent. These are amongst the best renditions of the *Marriage* (1987), *Don Giovanni* (1991) and *Così* (1983) and you simply have to have them as foundation stones in any operatic collection! So, even if the review ends here, let's take a moment to appreciate what Maestro Muti brings to the studio or stage. It began during his La Scala years and continues now, even when he (selectively) performs elsewhere, Vienna State Opera

being one of his eternal darlings. He is sickeningly choosy in his casts (with good reason) but it is his manner of playing Mozart that is unique, in that he combines total precision with the articulation of every note, phrase or aria; Yet – all this without losing an ounce of equally deep expression, artistic conviction and aesthetic beauty. A very few conductors can reach one of those levels, but nevermore than that; Muti simply does it all, a complete masterpiece! "Worst" of all, when you listen to any of the arias from the three Mozart operas in this set, you won't even notice what I have just described. Why? Because it all happens in a perfectly "normal" and natural way. Singers? Pick and choose: Kathleen Battle, Cheryl Studer, Agnes Baltsa, Samuel Ramey, Thomas Allen, Frank Lopardo, Francisco Araiza, etc. Yes, all great names, but it is the masterwork of Riccardo Muti that makes them all members of a "dream team" rather than individual stars. (Perhaps that's the reason why Muti occasionally cancels; if those he wants to sing are not available.) Make sure you get this budget set of Mozart's DaPonte operas. You will never regret it and will play them more often than you think. Every time I go back to these recordings, I enjoy them even more – and I was lucky enough to see Muti conduct two of the three in Vienna live!


DS

RECORDING
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Schumann (arr Mahler) The Four Symphonies

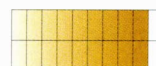
Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra
Riccardo Chailly

Decca 478 0037 

Mahler re-orchestrated a number of 19th century works, including the *Ninth symphonies* of Beethoven and Schubert. But his most far-reaching work was done on the four Schumann symphonies – long castigated for their 'thick' orchestration. Mahler's wholesale changes clarify textures, and make it easier to hear Schumann's use of counterpoint. The whole exercise gives a fascinating insight into the way one great composer regarded the music of another. Chailly and the Gewandhaus make the best possible case for these arrangements – you could not wish to hear them better played. Even the brief cut in the coda of the second symphony's finale sounds convincing, given such committed conducting and playing. Perhaps the only slight disappointment is the way the solo horn theme is handled in the first-movement of the *Rhenish* – Schumann's original sounds far more poetic than Mahler's re-write. Annoyingly, Decca had already released symphonies 2 and 4 coupled together; now, they've released all four symphonies in a double pack – albeit priced as one. Schumann's symphonies are not easy to record, but in Mahler's scoring the extra transparency leads to increased detail. Tonally, the recordings sound gorgeously rich and full, and climaxes have unexpected power and drive – a bit like Solti's supercharged old Vienna Philharmonic set from the '60s.

JMH

RECORDING
MUSIC



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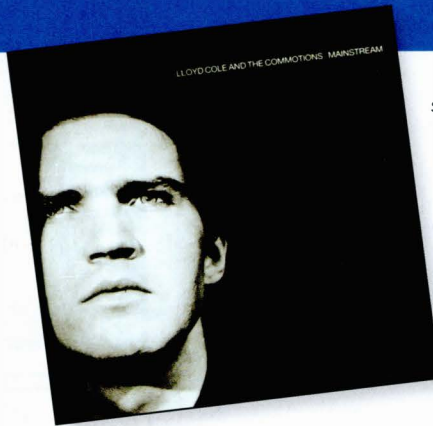
EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE ONE

IN PRAISE OF THE UNDER-RATED, UNDER-APPRECIATED OR JUST PLAIN DISCARDED MUSICAL MAS-TERPIECE

by Reuben Parry

Mainstream released in 1987 is the third and final album from a band that had debuted three years earlier with one of the records of the decade in *Rattlesnakes*. Their reputation for intelligent lyrics and catchy song writing was further enhanced through by the radio friendly and similarly critically well-received follow up album, *Easy Pieces*, appearing in 1985. Although, during their fifteen minutes of fame, the Commotions never quite reached dizzying commercial heights, they were at least prepared to and did push out the boundaries of pop music - raising our expectations at a time when uninspiring New Romantic acts over populated the charts. But the ultimate price for all those literary, philosophical and cinematic allusions that continued to permeate their lyrics was glorious failure - something we British are spectacularly good at. The band never quite shook off the art house or elitist tags to achieve widespread appeal. If nothing else this suggests that the dumb-down culture is not such a recent phenomenon. Lloyd Cole & The Commotions were, in my opinion, badly misrepresented; it was the intellectual depth to their music that made them so special and musically exciting. Anyway, they didn't sell out, nor did they sell enough albums and the unashamedly bright *Mainstream* was their swansong. From its black and white film noir front cover artwork to the penetrating irony of an album title that sits in stark juxtaposition to all that lies within, nothing about this record is commonplace.

The personnel on *Mainstream* were: Neil Clark (guitar), Lloyd Cole (vocals), Lawrence Donegan (bass guitar) and Stephen Irvine (drums). Blair Cowan, who provided keyboards on the first two albums became a part-time player, appearing at live dates only. As musicians they may not have been the most individually accomplished but they knew each other inside out, and their familiar interplay on this album is still palpable. It was front man Cole who provided the photogenic and brooding focal point for a band who'd formed during their studies in Scotland. His often-haunting voice, visually intense lyrics and innate sense of anguish made the band and ultimately, I think, this led to its destruction. Cole, the brilliant lyricist, possessed a genius and enough arrogance to believe that his future now lay in a solo career. The writing on the wall was there to see and hear if you listened hard enough and on *Mainstream* it's all encapsulated in the song 'Mister Malcontent'. Peel away the layers, look beyond the obvious, that tale of the derelict Johnny and the fact that this



song is a metaphor for Cole himself becomes inescapable. Lines like "... cut off my nose despite my face and I will not more longer wait" and with that simple small twist in his use of "despite" instead of "to spite" he conjures up several meanings. The Malcontent was the protagonist of Jacobean tragic drama, the character so dissatisfied with his lot that his machinations destroy

all around him as he sets out to promote himself.

Consciously, or unconsciously Cole has cast himself in that role. If you are knowledgeable you are rewarded, as this and other songs open out into complex, beautifully organised and almost limitless vistas for the imagination.

Some of these stories offer a broader social commentary on the 1980s psyche, examples filtering through the cityscape backcloth to 'Sean Penn Blues'. Others like 'These Days' and 'Jennifer She Said' make bold and memorable statements about those fractures and fissures of the heart, material that Cole has returned to again and again. His insights on love, that most human, most uplifting and yet sometimes the most debilitating of conditions criss-cross between personal sentiments, ubiquitous truths and telling observations. Imagery, the uncommon classic allusions and references to popular culture dovetail, while the instrumental scoring for keyboards, drums and guitars delivers signature pop music. The lyrics, well they are modern-day poetry. *Mainstream* remains a turning point, a transitional moment as band members prepared to go their own ways. Lloyd Cole began a solo career that continues to this day, but it has never quite fulfilled the musical promise of the Commotions. ➤

Lloyd Cole and the Commotions

Mainstream

My Bag
From The Hip
29
Mainstream
Jennifer She Said
Mister Malcontent
Sean Penn Blues
Big Snake

Hey Rusty
These Days

Personnel

Lloyd Cole - vocals, guitar
Neil Clark - guitar
Lawrence Donegan - bass
Stephen Irvine - Drums

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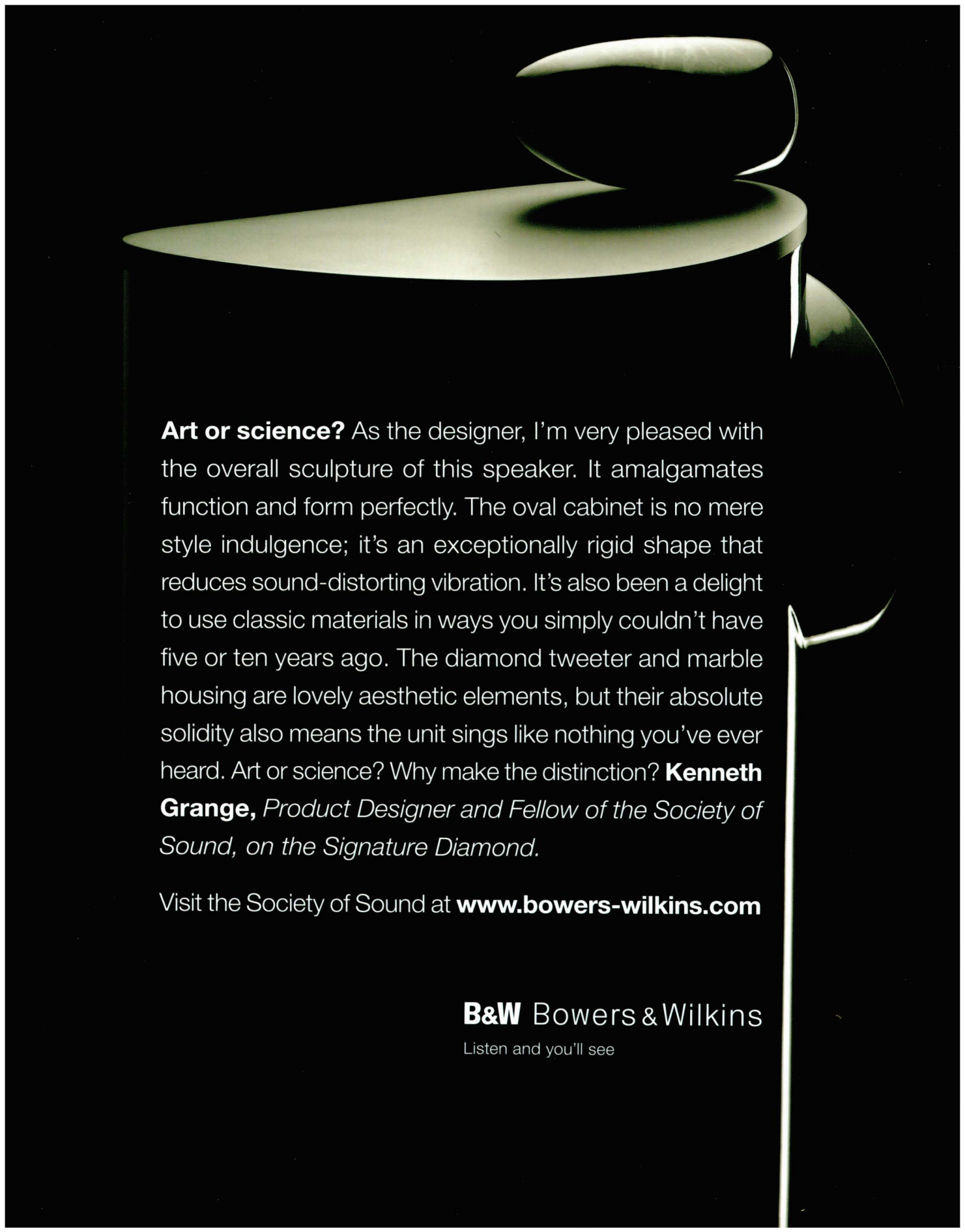


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