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HI FI NEWS / JULY 06 / KEN KESSLER / DUETTE

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HI FI PLUS / ISSUE 47 / ROY GREGORY / DUETTE

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



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For many years it was an article of faith with many listeners that each and every record had a precisely correct listening level. With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight you can see that this might have more to do with the high-powered/low-efficiency systems prevalent at the time, as well as the quality of the vinyl. The best current speaker systems, with their much more even spectral balance and lower levels of stored energy, are far less volume dependent as well as much more satisfying at lower levels.

But I recently encountered another example of this phenomenon. Paying my first visit to the newly refurbished Festival Hall, the first half of the concert featured the Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto*, surely one of the most romantically lush and richly hued of compositions. Yet, following on from the *Coq d'Or*, the scaled back orchestra (Rimsky did like to augment his orchestral nether regions) balanced against the solo instrument, sounded flat and bland, the soloist thin and reedy, the whole lacking sweep and drama. Oh dear, I thought, row CC is clearly not the place to be. F or G would have been more like it.

But after the interval we were treated to a fantastic performance of the Tanayev *4th Symphony* – with the orchestra restored to something approaching the scale of its Rimsky complement, and unrestrained by the niceties of not swamping a soloist. CC was just fine for this, the music easily filling the hall, the orchestra having more than enough power and substance to bridge the “dynamic compression” so evident in the Tchaikovsky, even in the quieter passages.

So next time your system sounds a little flat and you are reaching for the volume control, just thank your lucky stars that art doesn't have to follow life – or vice versa. And I'll thank mine that the next Concerto I'll be hearing at the Festival Hall involves Martha Argerich doing her worst to a very large piano.



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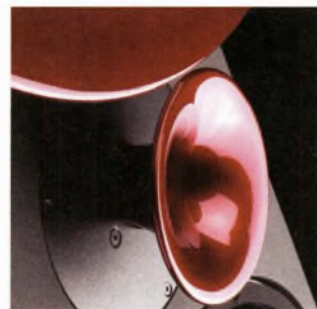
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SPEAKERS CORNER

by Paul Messenger

Room treatment has always struck me as one of hi-fi's thornier topics, full of pitfalls capable of trapping even the wariest practitioner. Some rooms are certainly much better for hi-fi listening than others, due to variations in basic dimensions and construction materials and techniques.

So often have I heard tales of dealers and magazines creating purpose-built listening rooms with disastrous results, that it's not just laziness that has made 'leave well alone' one of my major guiding principles – alongside 'choose a good basic room to start with'.

These two maxims have served me well, and my current listening room has worked very nicely for the past 20 years. For the record, it's part of a house built by my architect grandfather for his own use in 1908. It's solidly brick built, with a suspended wooden floor and plaster ceiling, the former mostly covered by a light wool rug, the latter decorated by three substantial beams. Dimensions are basically 14x8.5x18ft (wxhxd), interrupted by a fireplace, a recessed doorway, and a very large (10ft diameter, semicircular) bow window. By most standards the bass end is reasonably smooth and even, room mode peaks (30Hz, 52Hz) and troughs (34Hz) typically staying within +/-4dB limits when a pair is measured under far-field conditions. The room is well cluttered, mostly with racks of hi-fi hardware and about 20ft of distributed LP storage.

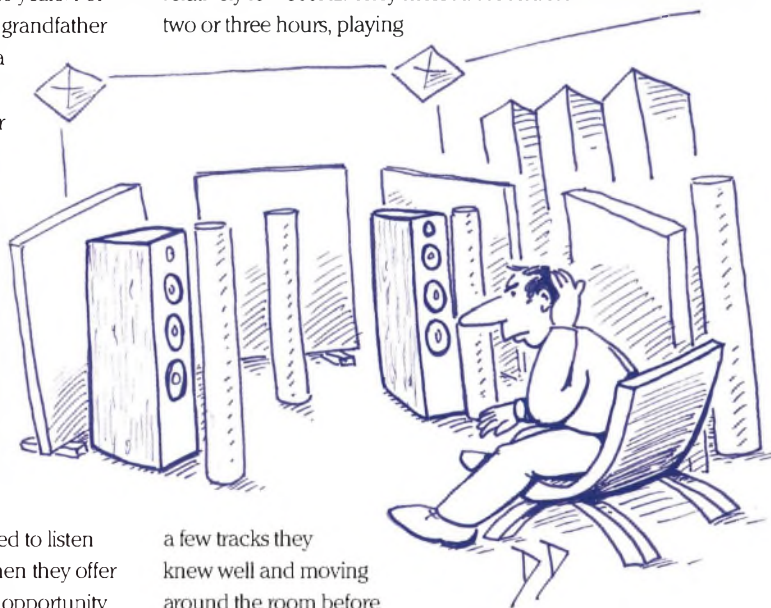
Although I've been reluctant to monkey around with my room acoustics, I'm always prepared to listen to those with more experience than I, especially when they offer constructive suggestions. I therefore welcomed the opportunity when PMC's main man Pete Thomas recently offered to come down and carry out some experiments in (and on) my room. Peter had felt that I hadn't really appreciated the superiority of his three-way OBI (the one with the big soft-dome midrange driver) over his similar size, simpler, two-way FB1+ when I'd reviewed them back in 2003/4, and had come to the conclusion that my listening room characteristics might be responsible.

Why should he know how to help? Simply because, from a standing start some 20 years ago, PMC has put its speakers into a substantial number of the world's recording studios, and recording studios manipulate their acoustic environments drastically and as a matter of course. Over the years, PMC's principals have therefore built up considerable experience in manipulating room acoustics, and because it's a relatively young and small company, those same individuals also oversee the

domestic hi-fi activities, with products that are usually closely related to the Pro models.

Actually, when I directly compared the new OBI and FB1i models prior to carrying out any room treatment, it was pretty obvious that the three-way was comfortably superior. However, whether it could really justify the extra £1,100 on the price-tag was a rather more debatable point. It was time to see what effect the room treatment might have.

Peter and his Marketing Manager Keith Tonge had driven down in cars stuffed with panels of Melatech acoustic absorbent – a melamine foam that apparently acts as an absorber down to a relatively low 300Hz. They messed around for two or three hours, playing



a few tracks they knew well and moving around the room before deciding where to place the foam panels.

One set of panels, roughly eight square feet in size, was suspended between two of the beams about six inches below the ceiling, effectively blocking/absorbing the first ceiling reflection between speakers and listeners, and preventing these two beams acting as a reflection trap. The second and much larger panels (mounted in free-standing units) essentially blocked off nearly all the bow window, again preventing this from acting as a reflection trap.


Once they'd done this, I was quite astonished at the improvement these had wrought, particularly in the focus and precision of the stereo imaging, and also in the clarity and discrimination of the bass. It was clearly a very worthwhile upgrade, making it significantly easier to distinguish between different loudspeaker models. With the improved overall

▶ sound quality, the difference between the two PMC models was that much more obvious, and the OBI was clearly worth that hefty price premium over the FBI.

The practical problems, of course, were that blocking off the bow window dramatically reduced any daylight coming into the room, prevented me from looking out, and also made access to the window area difficult.

Working out how to combine the acoustic improvements with a room that remained practical living space initially took a bit of head-scratching, but the solution we arrived at turned out to be quite simple, elegant and practical. Floor-to-ceiling curtains had always been used at night time to separate the bow window from the rest of the room, and this arrangement was extended by installing a double curtain rail that now extended

right across the width of the room. The normal curtains were hung on the room side, while the two Melatech foam panels, each 1m wide and 2m high, were wrapped in curtain lining material and hung from the rail on the window side.

It was now possible to draw the acoustic foam curtains to and fro independently of the main curtains, so they could be drawn back across the wall during daylight hours, or drawn across the bow window for critical listening. It's an arrangement that works beautifully, and Melatech is clearly an invaluable tool for the acoustician, though I should add that this approach was only successful here because of the experience that Pete and Keith brought to bear. Simply adding acoustic treatments without the benefit of such expertise is just as likely to do harm as good. 



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

by Harry Pearson


Suppose we take a look, this time out, at the other side of the equation, the manufacturer's take, both on the reviewers themselves and the magazines they work for. It is not a subject discussed in the pages of most magazines, although it is part and parcel of the process. You might easily imagine why. Keep in mind that I shall be see-sawing back and forth between one side and the other.

The audio field is, for the most part, relatively small, and, often, the most innovative products arise from smaller new firms, sometimes operating out of garages or basements and the like (at first). Once that firm survives the hardships of a new, risky business and becomes large, rather than pursuing innovative designs, it will more than likely divide up different slices of the audio market into price-point products – with, just maybe, a solitary state-of-the-art contender to cast an aura of sexy excitement on the products downstream.

Audio magazines, themselves, often start out as underground or alternative small "rags". They may grow but don't become "mass" in the sense of big budget, multi-million subscriber operations. (Indeed, the more swollen they get, the blander.) Nevertheless, all have to cut close to the edge (usually) to show a profit. Even with a comfortable financial margin, they don't or can't afford to purchase the equipment they review. Instead, one and all, the audio journals borrow equipment on loan from the manufacturer, usually for specified times, flexible or otherwise. And herein lies the potential for stickier, see-saw situations.

The magazines need the equipment loans; the manufacturers the "publicity" inherent in a review. Because what the manufacturers expect to get in return – hardly an unconscious expectation - is "publicity" for their product. And what do the magazine's owners usually expect from the entire process, if not from individual reviews? Advertising. Outside of the trade, few know that the subscription and newsstand prices of publications of all kinds barely cover the cost of circulation; it is the advertising dollar that pays the bills. And the advertising rate, with few exceptions, is based on the magazine's circulation (with subscribers counting more than newsstand sales). Again, the see-saw. It is not supposed to be a quid pro quo: good reviews in exchange for advertising. But, these days?

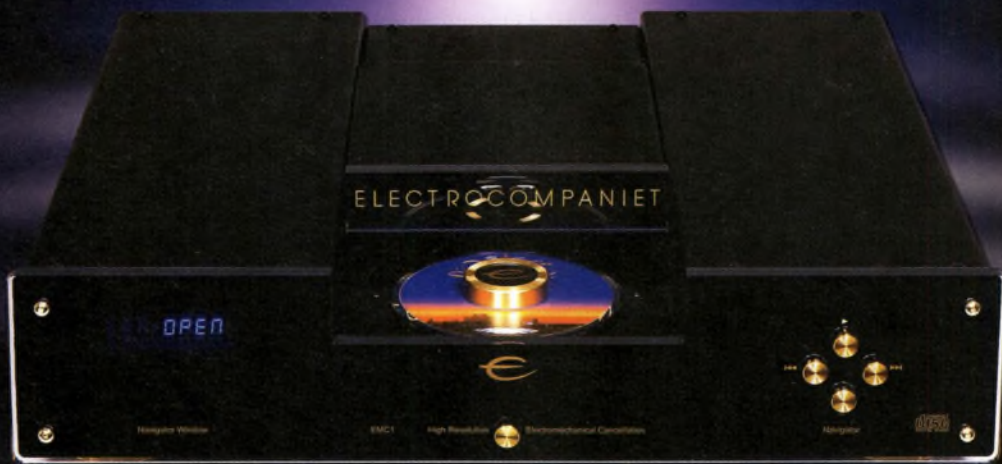
So the question for the honorable magazine is how to maintain its integrity in the face of such pressures, and, for the honorable designer/manufacturer, how to keep cool and bemused in the face of a critical review. Merely submitting equipment to be reviewed is a kind of gamble, and, to that end, the manufacturer has to develop strategies to minimize the uncertainties, i.e., to increase the odds in his favor for getting that "good" publicity to insure a good, if not absolutely fair review of his "baby".

The inter-commentary system, in which different reviewers (and the manufacturer) commented on the product under review, at its best, tended to insure a degree of fairness seldom seen since. But logistical pressures and the 



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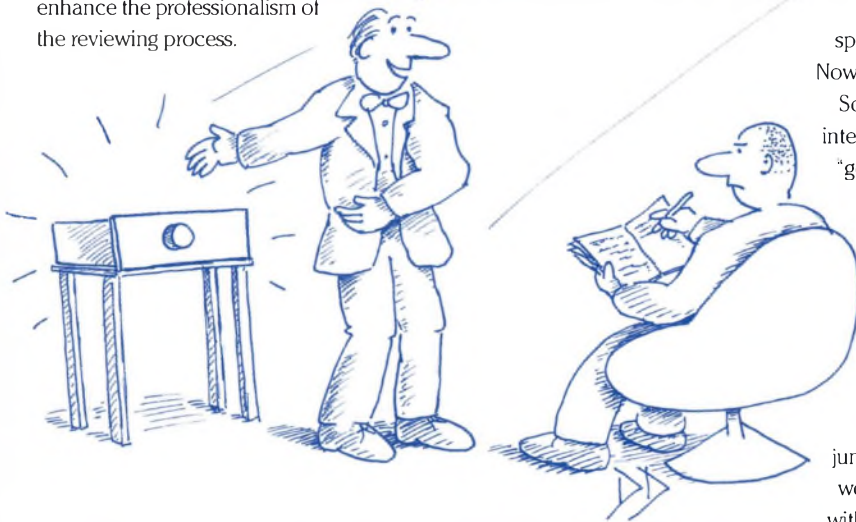
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► inability of most manufacturers to take an active role in the process undermined it long ago.

Approaching the Editor

There are several things the manufacturer can do: one, is to try to get the editor to channel the equipment to a "known" or "star" reviewer. To this end, he can employ "persuasive" tactics with the assigning editor. Otherwise he might well feel he is playing a kind of Russian roulette if his gear is assigned to a new or unknown writer. Consider his point of view: audio magazines are not always up-front about their reviewers' credentials, new reviewers popping into print without so much as a howdy-do, or bio note that would establish his (or her) qualifications or background. A short page of bio notes on the reviewers contributing to each issue (or note at the end of the review as do the book review journals) would enhance the professionalism of the reviewing process.



Remember that there are not, nor can there be any guarantees of a "good" review, if the magazine is honorable and feels a responsibility to all of its readers instead of the singular manufacturer here and there. After all, readers use the reviews as a guide, often as not, even a buying guide, and this depends on the magazine's "rep" for telling the truth.

And this is not necessarily a bad thing if the manufacturer wants an impartial review (which can portend the fate of the product in the marketplace). The smaller his company is, the more likely he is to have such an attitude. The bigger the company – and its advertising budget – the more tender the treatment it usually either wishes or requires. Not a few editors feel a pressure from the top to handle the big boys with patent leather gloves.

Approaching the Reviewer Directly

Another strategy the manufacturer has available is to approach the writer he wants to do the review in an end-run, as he sees it, to increase the odds of a favorable review. This practice is more

common than you might think, and the more personal power a specific reviewer has, the more likely it is that he will be directly approached. To be sure, given the amount of informality in the business, sometimes this works in reverse. Reviewers, especially those with a "rep" go after a manufacturer to get a product. Especially at audio shows which can descend into a frantic feeding frenzy around the more high-profile manufacturers.

There are two more options we might consider. First, the positive side. Many honest equipment designers trust well-known individual reviewers to give an honest (but not sycophantic) evaluation. This based on their experiences with that reviewer in the past. And they are prepared for a somewhat negative review

in the course of such a relationship as part of the risk of doing business or the risk of not knocking it out of the park each and every time. Thus you find certain "star" or veteran reviewers

specializing in certain designs.

Now, the negative:

Some reviewers, even those with intellectual pretensions, always give "good" reviews to every big name or sexy component from a specific manufacturer. Honest reviewers are thus shut out of a loaned sample. (This practice is more common than you might suppose.)

There is no financial trade-off, ever – not in American audio journalism (and not in the UK either. Ed.), but there are perks, e.g., paid "factory" inspections, junkets, little favors. And why, you might ask, would any reviewer always love the one he's with? I'd say, from experience, that it's a desire

for celebrity and power as an audio writer.

Cultivating the Reviewer

The area of cultivated friendships is tricky. The high-end audio business is a small field in which almost everybody knows everybody. The connections are close, and the "gossip" usually just good reportage, since the field is chock full of dealers in the written word. You can hardly help getting to know, and know well, audio designers, manufacturers and their assistants. And there are, truth to tell, many "characters" and irresistibly charming folk toiling in these vineyards, with scalawags and scoundrels few by comparison (and well known as such in the trade), and even slightly sleazy reviewers who breach the wall between church and state. What a classy reviewer will do is warn manufacturers with whom he is developing a friendship that it won't buy a good review and that that inevitable day of the not-so-good review will arrive. I can tell you from personal experience that I always give such a warning when I like the personality (as opposed to the design) of a designer, and have, on occasion found a ►

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

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▶ somewhat negative review inciting some long-term enmity.

But since these are their “children”, some equipment purveyors consider anything less than rays shining down from the heavens on their gear to be a negative review, and then, sometimes, they try to get the review cancelled. And sometimes they succeed. But not where I work. I’m not saying it doesn’t happen elsewhere – I know it does, but never from a magazine that respects its readers, not one whose reviews are indistinguishable from advertising copy.

No component is perfect, and a review that does not note

shortcomings in a product is simply wrong, except in those rare cases where, on first blush, the gear simply leaves one speechless. Something better will come along, inevitably.

I could have named names and given examples in this short essay, but that wasn’t my purpose. The thoughtful audiophile ought to know such things – and what they say about reviewers and manufacturers. Of more moment is how we develop a policy or practice that is free and fair; and how, inevitably this will change the (often self-assumed) God-like status of audio reviewers and the weight we give their words. ▶+



PLAYING THE SYSTEM

by Roy Gregory

One of the abiding frustrations for hi-fi buyers and magazine readers alike is the question of good advice and where to find it, especially when it comes to purchasing equipment. Yet, a quick glance at any one of the many web forums devoted to things hi-fi will quickly reveal that our little world seems divided into those who feel no need for help (other than to dispense it) and those with no idea where to begin. But if, on occasions, the horizon seems dauntingly distant and the way to reach it less than clear, just who should you look to for directions?

The problem is, that each and every situation, each and every system and each and every individual are exactly that – individual. There is no one size fits all, one brand meets all needs solution to the range of problems and conundrums we meet in our perhaps naïve pursuit of audio and musical enlightenment. Which rather narrows the field when it comes to potential advisors.

The web certainly scores when it comes to immediacy and variety, a sheer range of views that can in itself be less than helpful. Yet there are hidden depths and reefs to navigate when it comes to establishing just who (or what) you are dealing with. Firstly, spend any time looking at the various forums out there and it quickly becomes apparent that in many cases the postings (or certainly the responses) are dominated by a surprisingly small number of people, with an equally narrow range of views or brand loyalties – we’ll go plural here just to give them the benefit of the doubt. Then consider the anonymity built into the screen-names behind which most forum respondents hide, anonymity which serves two specific purposes amongst others: it allows them to fling around the most outrageous claims and opinions without being held to account, and it allows them to pursue personal agendas without their actions being apparent – the latter normally by dint of the former. After all, how much effort does it take to create a groundswell of public opinion in

favour of or, more likely, against a given brand or product? A few widely reported incidents or bad experiences, generated from a single person with a few different screen-names and the ball is well and truly rolling. Simply bring them up every time the brand or product crops up and repetition does the rest. If there is no interest, simply seed the site with an appropriate question and off you go... Sometimes I think that all forums should come with a background soundtrack of axes grinding and teeth gnashing.

Sound far-fetched and paranoid? You wouldn’t think so if you knew just how many manufacturers and designers are regular, anonymous contributors to popular forums. Come on down guys and announce yourselves – before somebody else outs you to the all too trusting public hanging on your every word*. For this reason and this alone, I’d discard any site that allows screen-names in place of proper identities, and fails to provide interest annotations of the type that Audio Asylum applies. Here respondents are generally identified by name, with reviewers, manufacturers and other interested parties identified as such, which actually makes their posts much more interesting and enlightening as a result. There is absolutely no reason why other sites shouldn’t follow suit.

Of course, there are those on forums with no agenda and nothing but good intentions, but you generally have no way of knowing who they are, of separating the wheat from the chaff. Nor do you have any idea of their experience, musical or sonic tastes, or the transparency with which they dispense their pearls of wisdom. In fact, accepting buying advice over the internet is a bit like accepting a medical diagnosis by the same route, without benefit of a direct physical examination, medical history, or

*Now, there’s an interesting thought. Fancy a little publicity lads, the only difference being that we actually give people the opportunity to refute the allegations if they are mistaken... ▶



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▶ checking the credentials of the “doctor” delivering the verdict.

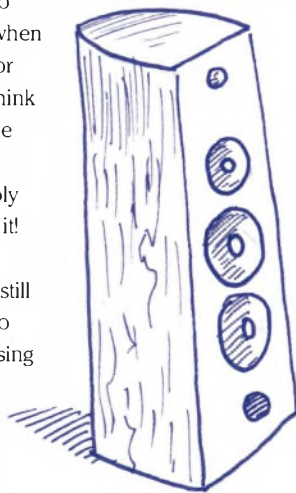
By now you are probably assuming that this is all designed to do down the internet in favour of the printed word, but sorry to disappoint you, nothing could be further from the truth. If rule one is to disregard the advice of self-appointed online gurus, rule two is don't expect reviewers to tell you what to buy either. In fact, whilst you've got a better chance of divining the nature of the beast, they've got no chance of divining yours. A brief e-mail exchange is no substitute for actual personal knowledge or a site visit, whilst reading a reviewer's entire written output isn't the same as knowing them. But more to the point, reviewers actually aren't best placed to advise you anyway. They spend quite a lot of time listening to a very small cross section of equipment in a relatively limited system context. That equipment they've heard they can tell you about. What they can't tell you is whether or not it is the right piece for you or your system and situation. There are just too many variables involved, making direct purchasing advice no more reliable than the scattergun opinions to be found on the net.

And for those reviewers all too willing to overstep the mark when it comes to giving ill-advised or ill-founded advice? I always think that reviewing is a little like the US Presidency; anybody who actually wants the job probably shouldn't be allowed to have it!

Which begs two questions: what use are reviews and that still unanswered chestnut, just who should you rely on for purchasing decisions?

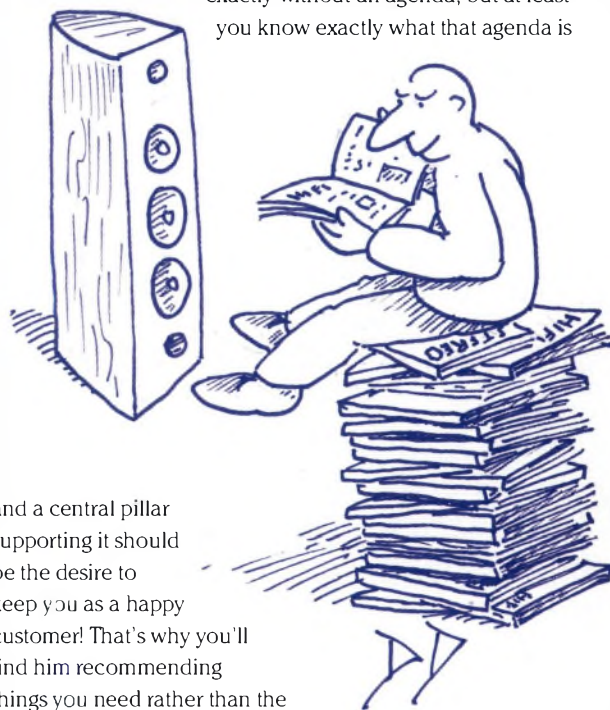
Actually, the answers to both these are related. They go something like this...

A review tells you about the piece of equipment under test. But don't assume it gives you all the answers. Look at the reviewer, the system context, his musical tastes and what else he has reviewed that you've actually heard. They constitute the filter through which you need to sift the conclusions. Then consider how much of the review is to do with the equipment under test and how much of it is about the reviewer himself. As I repeatedly point out to the reviewers on this magazine, the least useful piece of information in any review is whether or not the writer liked the kit he was listening too. What it's trying to do, how it sets about it, whether it succeeds and where it fails; that's all useful. Whether or not the reviewer likes it? You might as well let a complete stranger select your meal next time you're eating out. Oh, and don't give him the benefit of guidelines or a list of allergies, just to keep things exciting – exciting like Russian roulette, that is!



Extracting raw information from reviews is a bit of an art, and certainly takes practice, but hey, most of us spend so much time ogling mags anyway it's not like we couldn't do with a sense of purpose. Besides which, it's also when you start to realize that the better reviews work on a number of different levels, telling you about systems and the approach to listening, as well as a specific piece of equipment. That's why it's worth reading about equipment that might not directly appeal or necessarily work in your system – because it opens up opportunities to discover other aspects of performance or ways of looking at things.

In other words, reviews are about empowering the reader, providing them with the information and tools to make decisions for themselves, rather than relying on guesswork from others. Still need some help – and who doesn't? That's what your dealer is for. Just think about it... Okay, so he's not exactly without an agenda, but at least you know exactly what that agenda is



and a central pillar supporting it should be the desire to keep you as a happy customer! That's why you'll find him recommending things you need rather than the things you want. It's advice you should heed because it's where your interests and his coincide. What's even more important is that he knows you, your agenda, your system and set-up – all of which makes him by far the best source of advice you've got, so work with him and develop a relationship. Listen to what he says, give him the chance to demonstrate it and make your own mind up. But at the end of the day it has to be your decision and yours alone. Or you could always turn to some anonymous altruist on the internet; after all, he's bound to have your best interests at heart... and no interest in self aggrandizement, personal enrichment, petty revenge or the sound of his own voice – I mean keystrokes. Heaven forefend!



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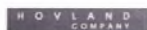
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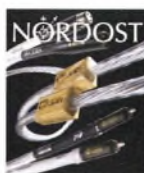
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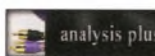
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Incoming!

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

Dear Sir,

Having read the recent review on the David Bering's Quadrature Z Mono blocs, I would like to make you aware of another OTL amplifier (Eternal Arts OTL-2) that was recently introduced to the market and which I purchased six-months ago. It's based on the Julius Futterman 50's design but now available upgraded and reliable. You may have heard of the designer, Dr Burkhardt Schwaebe, who ran the Grundig Fine Art division in the 80's and moved to Sennheiser, I believe, before starting his own company a few years ago.

I am extremely pleased with the sound of the amplifier, having compared it to the likes of amps such as the Dartzeel which, living in Geneva, I had the chance to audition. The recent rave reviews in both *Image Hi-Fi* and *LP* magazines in Germany led me to the conclusion that perhaps you should listen to the Eternal Arts amplifier.

I am a subscriber of *Hi-Fi Plus* and look forward to reading the new issues. I have even ordered years of back issues from your colleague Jackie.

Yours sincerely,

Alistair Botterill

Via e-mail

OTL amplifiers as such are not that unusual, with quite a few offerings on the market. The original Futterman designs are indeed legendary, as much for their pyrotechnic as their sonic capabilities. An updated and reliable version is a welcome development indeed. However, what sets the Bering amplifiers apart is their success in combining both the benefits of a high-power OTL output stage with remarkable load tolerance. Just how remarkable remains to be seen, but they are, as far as I know, unique in this regard. Ed

Dear Sir,

My name is Alan Mainwaring, I am a regular subscriber to *Hi-Fi Plus* despite currently living in Bangkok, Thailand. My audio system consists of a Naim CDS3 with 555 Power Supply, Naim NAC 52 pre-amp (now 10 years old), NAP 300 Power Amp, Living Voice Auditorium Avatar Speakers

In issue 56, Roy Gregory reviewed the Thorens TD160HD Turntable. I was rather taken with the review (plus one I read in another Hi-Fi journal on the Thorens 2030...which is about 30% more expensive) and I am in the process of committing myself to one of these players.

I have an SME V tonearm which has sat redundant on my old Voyd Turntable back in the UK (which I haven't used for 12 years) that I shall remove and bring back with me to Thailand to fit onto the new turntable.

My first question would be, which would be the most suitable Thorens turntable to partner an SMEV. The HD160 has a suspended sub-chassis; would this be OK to use with SME V or should I go for the solid acrylic chassis of the 2030?

Should I stick with Thorens's badged Rega 250? Is the SMEV suited better to other turntables (in the same price range)?

I have just been offered a chance to buy a Linn LP12 circa 1985-ish complete with an Ittok tonearm and a Lingo Power supply (for £1,000). Would this be a good alternative or will I be able to get a potentially better sound from my Thorens/SMEV combination?

Not knowing the sort of sound I like to listen to I know this is not an easy question to answer. Nevertheless, I would very much appreciate your input as there is no chance of auditioning out here (and no Naim dealer) and I have to buy on the strength of reviews and advice.

On a totally different subject - what are your feelings about using Naim Kit with the Living Voice speakers? Mine are mixed, but my criticisms may well be attributed to the noisy mains and bad quality mains cable that I have to suffer (in my rented apartment). I'm also swamped with an RF soup from all the wireless routers being used in the neighboring apartments!

If you could find time to just answer even a couple of these questions I would be most grateful,

Thanks and best regards,

Alan

Via e-mail

The SME will work fine on either of the Thorens decks and I believe is an option offered by Thorens themselves, certainly on the TD160HD. That is the model I would go for. The weight of the arm is not an issue as the deck uses isolating grommets rather than springs, with very little vertical movement. It can also be ordered with an SME armboard, considerably easing assembly.

Having said that, I would take several additional steps to ensure good sound quality:

1. *Ensure also that you have the full suite of SME set-up tools in order to achieve optimum alignment. If not, then consider* ►

- ▶ *acquiring the Feickert protractor, which might be expensive but more than justifies its price in terms of its sonic impact.*
2. *Ensure that the cartridge is an appropriate, low-compliance design.*
 3. *Replace the SME arm-cable with a plug-in alternative from the likes of Incognito. Discard the finger lift, damping trough (if you are not using it) bearing bridge, which is purely cosmetic.*
 4. *Think about a better power supply for the Thorens. One option would be the FS Audio Power Plant Premier, which would give you the option of feeding the whole set-up. This suggestion will have Naim-ites rolling in their graves, but remember – you can try it and see which you prefer, with each element in the system in turn, and also en masse. If your AC supply is as bad as you say, this could be a real step forward and would also allow you to convert the system (at least from the PFP onwards) to better UK or US type plugs and cables.*
 5. *A Quantum mains purifier might be a considerable aid to your RF issues. I'd also think about using Kimber leads, both for mains and signal/speaker cables. Russ Andrews supplies Naim configured versions and the power cords will work fine with the PFP.*
 6. *Naim and Living Voice? Not a combination you'd immediately consider I'll grant. On the whole, the Naim amps prefer to work into a more demanding load than the Avatars offer, suggesting that whilst all your pieces are individually excellent, they may not constitute a system. Given the relative investment, it seems to make more sense to change the speakers than the electronics – which is where I run out of advice, save to say that the Spendor speakers are well-regarded by many Naim dealers and (tonally speaking) wouldn't throw the Living Voice baby out with the bath water. Ed.*

Dear Sir,

I see that your reviewer preferred SACD through the EMM unit he just reviewed. This was surprising - others who have reviewed this unit did not report this. Not that he is wrong - but is SACD really better? The only way to find out is by listening to an all-out, CD-only unit; "Mixed" format players are always a compromise.

But there might be an exception - the latest DCS super-stack is a case in point. Audiophiles are reporting that CD sounds superior (overall) to SACD through this unit. And Meridian's latest reference player is making waves as well. Compare this unit to EMM's SACD and you might be surprised.

Zanden and Reimyo fired the first shots in showing us that CD could be superior - due to the solid format that it rests on. As you (should) know, CDs contain near 20-bit resolution, via re-dithering in the studio. And thanks to companies like Meridian, we can finally hear and appreciate this super-sound.

John Peters

Via e-mail

Is SACD better than CD? That depends on what you are listening to, with format alone incapable of guaranteeing quality. However, discs such as Eleanor McEvoy's Yola, with optimized CD and SACD versions, do suggest that the high resolution format is capable of superior results – as well as offering the option of multi-channel sound. AHC currently has the Meridian for review, while RSF uses the DCS stack. He also consistently prefers the sound of good quality SACD recordings. I guess the conclusion must be horses for courses, but players like Wadia's new 581se do offer uncompromised performance from both formats, giving listeners that option. Perhaps we should just be glad of the recent advances in CD reproduction and ignore issues of good, better, best. Otherwise the analogue brigade will be beating down the door... Ed.



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Standing Firm...

Show Demonstrations In London and Denver

by Roy Gregory

It's Showtime; and for *Hi-Fi Plus* that means organizing another demonstration for readers and visitors alike. By now, most of you will know that we tend to build our demonstrations around products that we've recently reviewed, but also issues that have loomed large in recent magazines – and generally, the more contentious the better. So, why not take on one of the biggest assumptions in audio; one that is perpetuated by magazines and dealers alike; one that undermines the performance of more systems in more homes than I care to think about. Why not slaughter the sacred cow?

We've been rattling on about cable looms and equipment supports, system strategies and firm foundations for quite a while now. It's a holistic approach that stresses the importance of what have generally been considered ancillaries and suggests a reallocation of budget and reassessment of priorities. But more importantly, it challenges the governing hegemony that concentrates on products in isolation and by extension, assumes that the answer to every audio problem is to buy a different, a better, but always a more expensive box. It's an understandably popular stance amongst those people that build boxes, and those magazines that want to attract their advertising dollars. But does it make sense in performance terms? Does it actually deliver results?

The 'foundations first' approach that we've been investigating suggests not. In fact it goes further than that and, taken to its logical extreme, actually suggests that we've been building systems backwards for years. But on a more manageable level its implications are clear; don't change your system until you are sure that you know what it is actually capable of. Indeed, it can be quite remarkable just how much musical performance can be extracted from even a pretty basic set of electronics and speakers – as long as you make their job easy enough. That's where those firm foundations come in...

The question is, how best to demonstrate this fact? Well, that's exactly what we set out to do at both the London Show and the *Rocky Mountain Audio Fest*. The programme we came up with is one of the most ambitious demonstrations we've ever attempted, rivaling the CD, DVD-A, SACD, LP comparison that we arranged many moons ago in Manchester. Rather than taking a system and working with it throughout the demo, we quickly realized that what we really needed was three identical systems, but each with a different approach to set-up and ancillaries. In other words, three sets of identical electronics and speakers, but

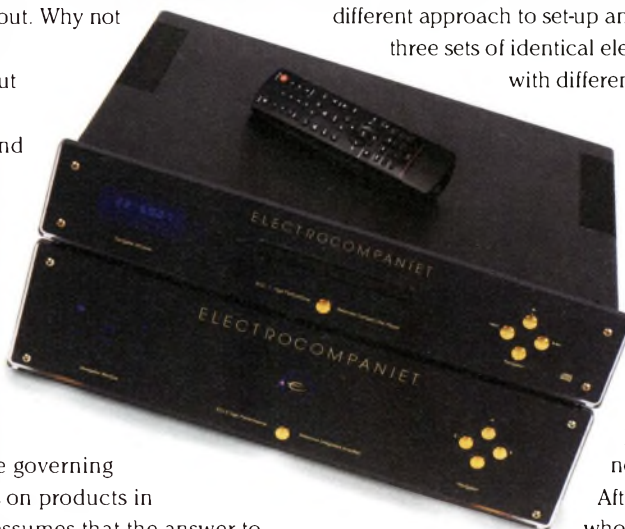
with different levels of system support, cable loom and accessories. Which is when you quickly realize that there are only a few companies capable of amassing sufficient loan stock to supply your needs.

In addition, our first priority was to work in the real world, with products that would be familiar in price and type to listeners, if not from specific experience.

After all, in this instance the whole point of the exercise was to show how big a difference we could

make to an affordable system, not something that most of us can only dream about. In London we settled on the tried and tested combination of Electrocompaniet electronics and KEF speakers, using the ECC-1 CD player and ECI-5 integrated amp recently reviewed by CT, paired with KEF's Reference 205 loudspeakers. In Denver, we rang the changes, relying on local suppliers to deliver our long-time favourites, the Ayre C-5 CD/SACD player and AX-7 integrated amp, coupled with Avalon NP2 loudspeakers. Both are simple systems of good quality and value: exactly the sort of products which we have reviewed enthusiastically and which many of our readers actually own.

Thereafter, both demonstrations followed the same path and employed virtually identical ancillaries. So, from here on in, I'm only going to discuss the changes we made, rather than the electronics or speakers we were working with. ►



Good practice makes perfect...



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

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

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

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

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

MAKING TRICKLE-DOWN A TORRENT

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

REAL FAMILY VALUES

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

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



NORDOST

MAKING THE CONNECTION

WYREWIZARD – SPELLBINDING PERFORMANCE YOU'VE ONLY DREAMED ABOUT

With the Wyrewizard range of cables you can upgrade the performance of your system to a level you've previously only dreamed of. Indeed, the result of Nordost's applied physics and state of the art technology will elevate the degree of clarity, detail, and accuracy of your system to new heights.

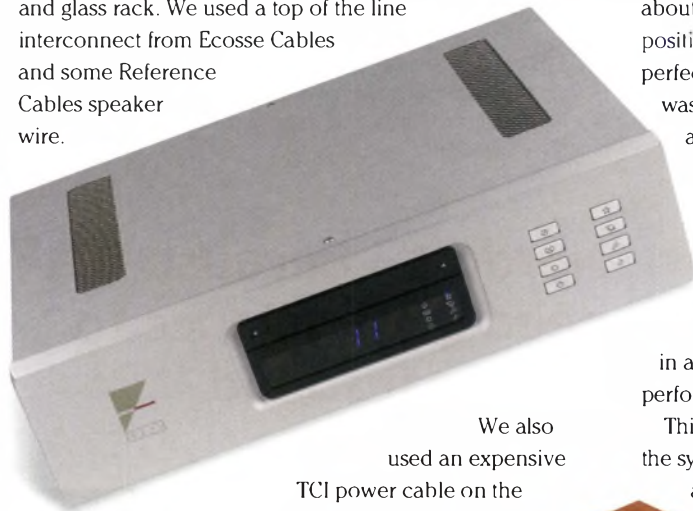
Cable your complete system with Wyrewizard and you'll inject new life into your separate components, ensuring that they work as a whole and enabling them to deliver a spellbinding degree of emotional involvement.

Nordost – because you need good science to get great sound



► That's because results were totally consistent between the two set-ups, further underlining the value in the approach.

Our starting point was exactly the sort of system and set-up you might expect to find in someone's home. The electronics were placed on a pretty but rather old-fashioned steel and glass rack. We used a top of the line interconnect from Ecosse Cables and some Reference Cables speaker wire.



We also used an expensive TCI power cable on the amplifier but a standard power

cord on the CD player. The speakers were placed in positions close to ideal, but they weren't perfectly level and they weren't totally stable. In short, exactly what a lot of dealers come across when they visit a customer's home.

The first thing we played was a bit of solo voice and guitar (Jackson Browne, *Live Acoustic Vol. 2*) – the sort of recording so beloved of the hi-fi industry, simply because it sounds at least pretty good on almost any system. And sure enough, the results were nice enough. But even a modest increase in bandwidth and complexity quickly revealed the system's limitations. Moving up to Joe Cocker's iconic rendition of 'Many Rivers To Cross' (*Sheffield Steel*) revealed a listless vocal performance, with none of the power and passion he's renowned for. Even the opening fell over, the contrasting wind effect and organ line reduced to a congested wash of background sound, devoid of space or atmosphere, sprinkled with disjointed and irritating cymbal work. Once the bass line started in earnest, the bloated, wallowing mess that resulted was all the incentive we needed to reach for the stop button.

Time to wheel in system two, in which the steel and glass rack had been replaced by a far more sophisticated, non-ferrous design. The finite-elemente Signature E14 combines

maple shelves with extruded aluminium uprights, coupled via innovative, horizontally disposed cones. The mix and match cable loom was gone too, replaced now by a set of Chord Co. cables, with Power Chords, Anthem interconnects and Epic speaker cable. Finally, the speakers were moved about an inch, into spots that were both optimum for positioning but also afforded each one with a stable and perfectly upright stance. Playing the track again, the result was shockingly superior. Now, Joe's voice had power, angst and a sense of purpose; that irritating cymbal had locked step with the music, clearing demarcating the bars, while the keyboard backdrop was spacious and atmospheric. But the real killer was the bass, which wasn't just tighter, but suddenly far more tuneful and purposeful, setting the song's tempo in stone and binding the whole thing together, so that now, in addition to the hi-fi benefits, you had music and a performance that both made sense.

This was no small difference, reflecting the way in which the system's infrastructure was dovetailing together to deliver a significant improvement in overall performance.



The superiority of the rack's structure and materials delivered tonal and timing benefits, improving isolation of the electronics from outside energy as well as offering an effective sink for vibrational energy generated within the chassis themselves. The coherent cable loom delivers an equally coherent overall sound, while the small shift in the position and footing of the speakers also contributed a surprising improvement in soundstage delineation and bass linearity, pitch security and timing. Finally, just getting everything perfectly level and stable delivers a sense of focus, presence and unwavering space that makes the music more convincing and easier to enjoy.

The upshot? The system moved from being a musical mess that totally failed to serve up a meaningful musical performance, to something that was enjoyable, engaging and worthwhile to listen too – from a waste of money to money well spent. But the most interesting thing about these two systems is that the total expenditure was identical! You could spend your money one way and get ►

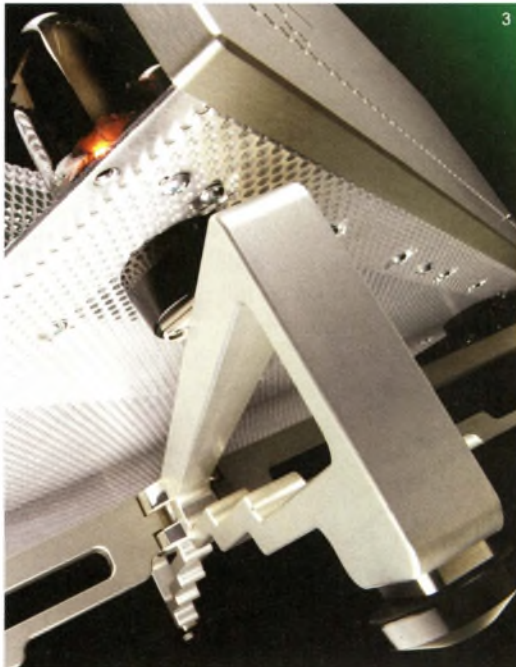
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- 1. Focal Grande Utopia EM
- 2. Stillpoints Equipment Support System
- 3. David Berning Quadrature Z mono power
- 4. dCS Paganini CD/SACD playback system



AudioDeskSysteme - Avalon Acoustics - conrad-johnson
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► one result – or spend it the other, with all the benefits that went with it. Nobody who heard the comparison was in any doubt as to which route they'd take...

Time then for a quick caveat; this isn't about the rack or the cables in each system. It doesn't prove that a Power Chord sounds better than the much more expensive TCI Constrictor. What it shows is that you need to adopt a coherent and considered approach, rather than a mix and match, anything goes attitude to set-up. It's a case of what you do and how you do it – and that's just as important as what you do it with. So, rather than fixating on the identities of those products contributing to the better performance, consider instead the thinking behind them: a well-constructed rack, built from sensible materials; a coherent cable loom; speakers (and everything else) optimally positioned and leveled.

But what was actually more shocking to listeners, was the next step in the process, because as good as the revised set-up sounded, I'd consider that level of care and attention to component choice and application an absolute minimum if you are expecting to achieve hi-fi performance. Even here, it was surprisingly easy to expose the system's weaknesses. Track of choice for the purpose? Art Pepper's 'Las Cuevas De Mario', with its repetitive rhythms and dirty, sinuous groove. Not that you'd have known about those, playing it on his system. The opening bass notes were thuddy, slow and shapeless, lacking both pitch and timing. The piano was disconnected and fractured, its chords brittle and clumsy, while the drummer might have been playing a different track altogether. Once the horns finally enter, there was no connection between them and the musical foundation. Far from one of the tightest quintets ever recorded, this sounded like five buskers who'd just met at a bus stop!

Time then for a wholesale change and a move up to a cost no object set-up. Out went the finite-element rack, replaced by a Stillpoints ESS, with heavy duty cross bars and shelves. The speakers too, were stood on Stillpoints Component Stands, while the cables were changed for a complete Vertex AQ loom, including an Elbrus balanced mode mains supply and a Silver Jaya RFI filter. We also added a Quantum Q-x4 for good measure...

All told, this lo adds up to a pretty penny, but the results more than spoke for themselves. It was like the band had

been changed, drafting in a whole new set of musicians. The newfound poise and pitch security of the bass notes was just a harbinger of things to come. Set in space, the transparency and dimensionality just added to the sense of connection with a newly urgent piano, the rhythmic hesitation and emphasis, the weight and accent of the chords picking up the meter and driving the track forwards, so that when the drums enter, they lock step with the piano and add solidity to proceedings. Finally, when the horns enter, the firm footing provided anchors their convoluted lines, setting up the track's languorous groove. This was a hand you'd pay to hear.

What was responsible for this monumental difference? The short answer is that we were finally allowing the electronics and speakers to get on with their jobs unimpeded, but the detail is a little more complex. If we start at the end – and why not – the Component Stands under the speakers were providing a wider and more stable stance. But more importantly, they both isolated the speakers from external, structure borne energy and, more importantly, provided a sink and dissipation for mechanical energy that would otherwise have been stored and (eventually) released by the cabinet. The ESS rack achieved exactly the same result for the electronics, drawing mechanical energy out of their chassis so that it was no longer able to interfere with the signal. In a similar fashion, the Vertex cables (with their in-line mechanical damping) prevented the flow of energy between the components. Thus, the mechanical energy generated by the speakers' bass drivers was prevented from passing back down the cables to shake, rattle and roll the amplifier's output devices, with



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▶ similar barriers to mechanical energy placed within the interconnects and mains supply. Finally, the use of the Elbrus and Q-x4 resulted in a cleaner and far more precise AC waveform, itself reducing distortion and mechanical side effects elsewhere in the system.

How important is this mutual isolation of mechanical energy within the system and between its elements? Moving the CD player from a standard shelf to a position on top of a component stand and Stillpoints cones, adding more effective sinking by bypassing the



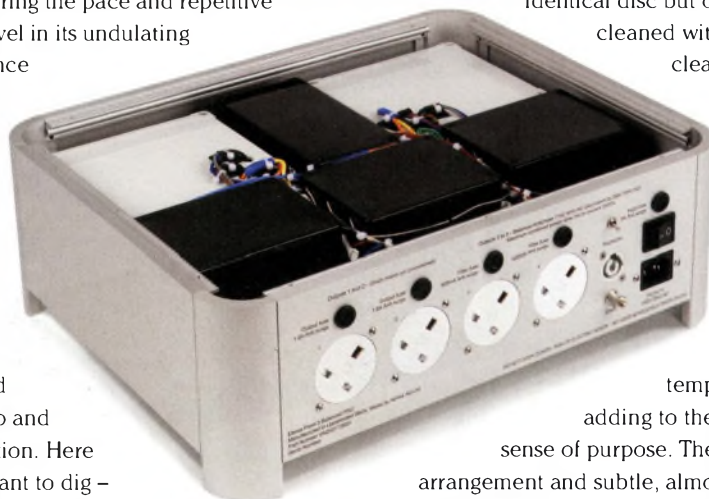
manufacturers feet, as well as two additional layers of isolation, resulted in yet another increase in performance – and not a small one...

Now, when the bass notes started, there was a real sense of shape, a feeling of pluck and release to each one. The piano chords had added structure and texture, a greater sense of the weight and purpose behind the playing. But it was the drums that really benefited. Now they had snap and attack, a pace and weight that imposed itself on the music, setting the rhythm and anchoring the pace and repetitive motif, allowing the bass to revel in its undulating line, adding weight and balance while the piano was allowed to dart and push, its accents and subtle digs bringing range and expression to the simple, repeated phrases. Now. The horns were both present and separate, the convoluted and sinuously interlocking weave of their extended lines locked around each other and into the bump and grind of the rhythmic foundation. Here was the dirt the track was meant to dig – here was the playing that justifies the APQ's stellar reputation – here was music made for dancing...

But even more than that, this change reveals two important aspects of the process. Once you start building the system a firm foundation, each additional element contributes to the whole, that whole becoming ever greater than the sum of its parts. Secondly, the shifting relationships within the rhythm

section reveal just how critical this aspect of performance is when it comes to musical enjoyment – and just how far you need to go to get it right. With the second system, it was the bass that achieved prominence, its turgid, slothful delivery dragging back the whole track. Moving up to the Stillpoints ESS based set-up shifted the emphasis onto the piano, adding welcome drive and urgency to the music. But it wasn't until the addition of the extra Component Stand under the CD player that the correct balance was achieved, allowing each musician to play his part, the music to achieve its full emotive and expressive impact.

Just to underline the first of these points, the next step was to demonstrate just how important external niceties become, once you have a system that allows this level of musical insight. With that in mind, we played that old audiophile chestnut, Rickie Lee Jones' 'Last Chance Texaco', a slow, languid track that requires perfect pacing to keep it alive. Playing the disc straight out of its jewel case, the result was always the same; around 15 seconds in peoples' attention started to wander... They'd look at their feet, the equipment, the room; they'd shift in their seats or have a scratch; they'd start to do almost anything except listen to the music. Then there were those who sat, rigid with concentration, eyes shut, forehead furrowed. After about a minute their minds would wander, in some cases their heads would start to drop as the warmth of the room overtook them... hardly a musically riveting result.

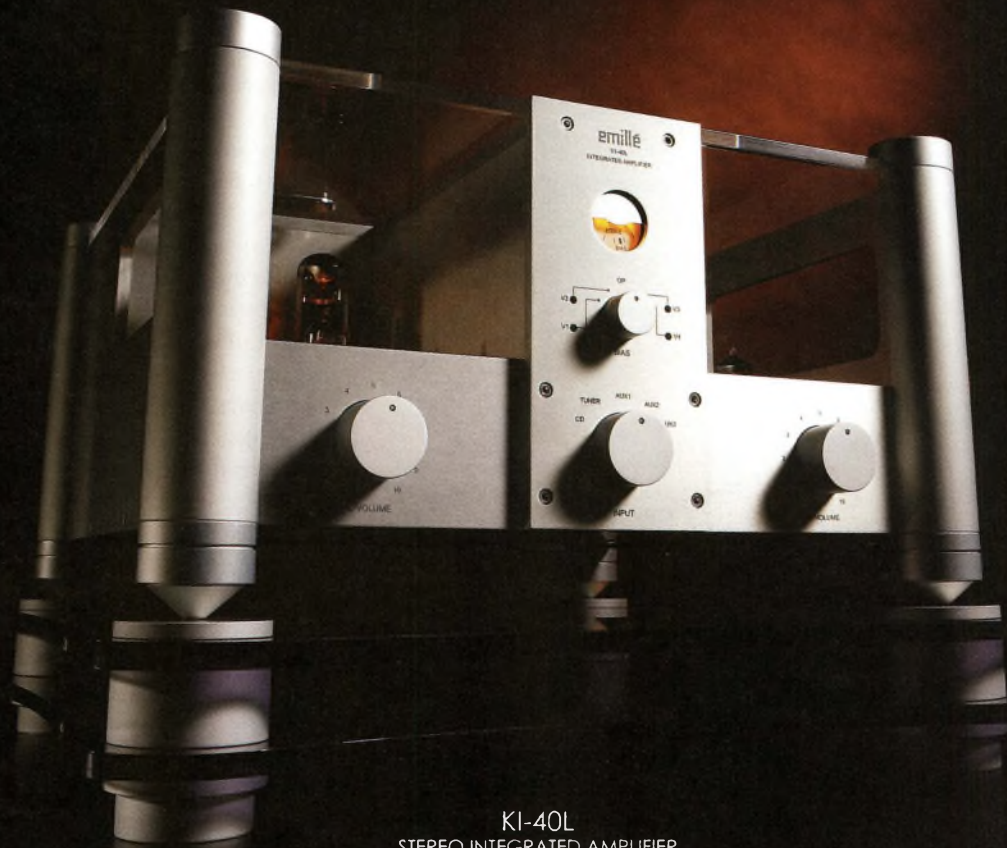


Next, we played the track again, but this time from an identical disc but one that had been cleaned with L'Art Du Son CD cleaner. The difference was, frankly, astonishing. The vocal was much more natural, intimate and involving, its careful phrasing controlling the track's measured tempo, the slow pace adding to the atmosphere and sense of purpose. The carefully structured arrangement and subtle, almost imperceptible way in which the track builds and fills was far more effective, the end result a compelling and engaging musical treat.

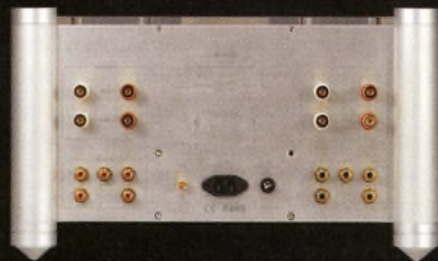
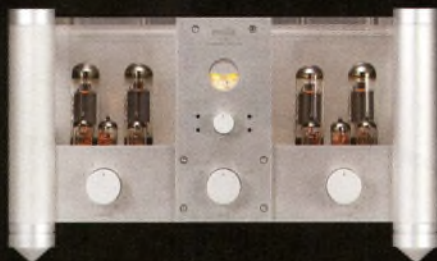
Of course, we all know that cleaning discs makes them sound better, but few of us expect this kind of difference, the sort of improvement that transforms a disc from a "ho-hum, why did I bother to buy that?" purchase into a much loved and listened too favourite. Once your system is really ▶

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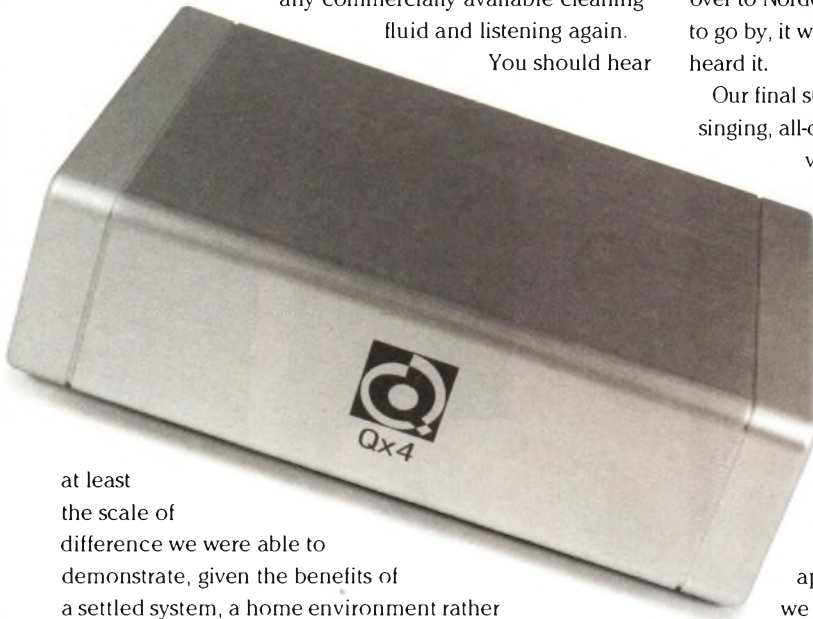
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▶ working, and your electronics and speakers are delivering the performance they're really capable of, the result is increased access to music, with more discs and more performances revealed in all their glory. Interestingly, this is a demonstration both of the effectiveness of cleaning discs and (good as the L'Art Du Son cleaner is) the ability of the system to reveal the benefits. So, anybody who witnessed the demonstration could conduct their own home litmus test, simply by listening to an uncleaned disc, cleaning it with any commercially available cleaning fluid and listening again.

You should hear




at least the scale of difference we were able to demonstrate, given the benefits of a settled system, a home environment rather than a hotel room and more controlled circumstances. If you don't – it suggests your system could do with some serious TLC...

The last difference we demonstrated was the impact of the Q-x4. As usual, we always like to show people something that's been recently reviewed. This serves the dual purpose of allowing readers to calibrate what they've read with what we demonstrate, and acting as a reality check for us: standing in front of 20 people and trying to demonstrate something that they don't hear makes you feel like a right prat! It also inhibits any tendency to exaggerate or guild the lily in reviews.

Using the Jackson Browne track with which we started proceedings, we played it with the Quantum unit switched off, and then again with it switched on, asking listeners to pay particular attention to the crowd noise that opens the recording. With the Q-x4 active, there was a real sense of acoustic space as the recording opened up, the hall filled with an excited buzz of anticipation. Over it all, background music was playing, music you barely noticed the first time through. As JB appears on stage there's an excited explosion of individual claps and whistles, so much more dramatic

than the previous playing, with much more detail and texture to the myriad sounds that create the whole. So much so that you can hear the mixed pleasure and surprise in the artist's greeting. His playing is fuller and more fluid too, with more subtlety and inflexion in his vocals. In short, the life and energy, the presence of the hall and JB himself all make for a greater sense of being there, a sound that's much more like life. Again, this was not a subtle difference, and if the number of people leaving our demo in Denver and heading straight over to Nordost's demonstration of the Quantum is anything to go by, it was one that surprised and impressed all who heard it.

Our final step was to play one more track on the all-singing, all-dancing set up before reverting back to the very first system we'd used. For this we played either the Joe Cocker track in London or Jackie Leven's 'Single Father' (from *Defending Ancient Springs*) in Denver. It was a sobering experience, serving to show just how far we'd brought the performance of what was a very simple basic system.

Thanks are due to all those who took the time and trouble to attend these demonstrations. They are an essential part of what we do, allowing us to discuss the content with readers whilst simultaneously keeping us honest. Having said that, apparently there are those out there who think we rigged the whole thing, at least if their forum contributions are anything to go by. To them I simply ask two things: how and why? Everything we did was perfectly visible and repeatable. Indeed, we repeated it nearly 30 times all told, explaining exactly what was being done each time. The differences are real enough, it's only the conclusions that are uncomfortable. Thanks also go to all those companies that loaned equipment to make the demonstrations possible and gave time to help set them up. If you have any comments or questions on what you heard, please don't hesitate to contact us via the website or office e-mail at accounts@hifiplus.com. Hopefully, we've given you a little food for thought... 



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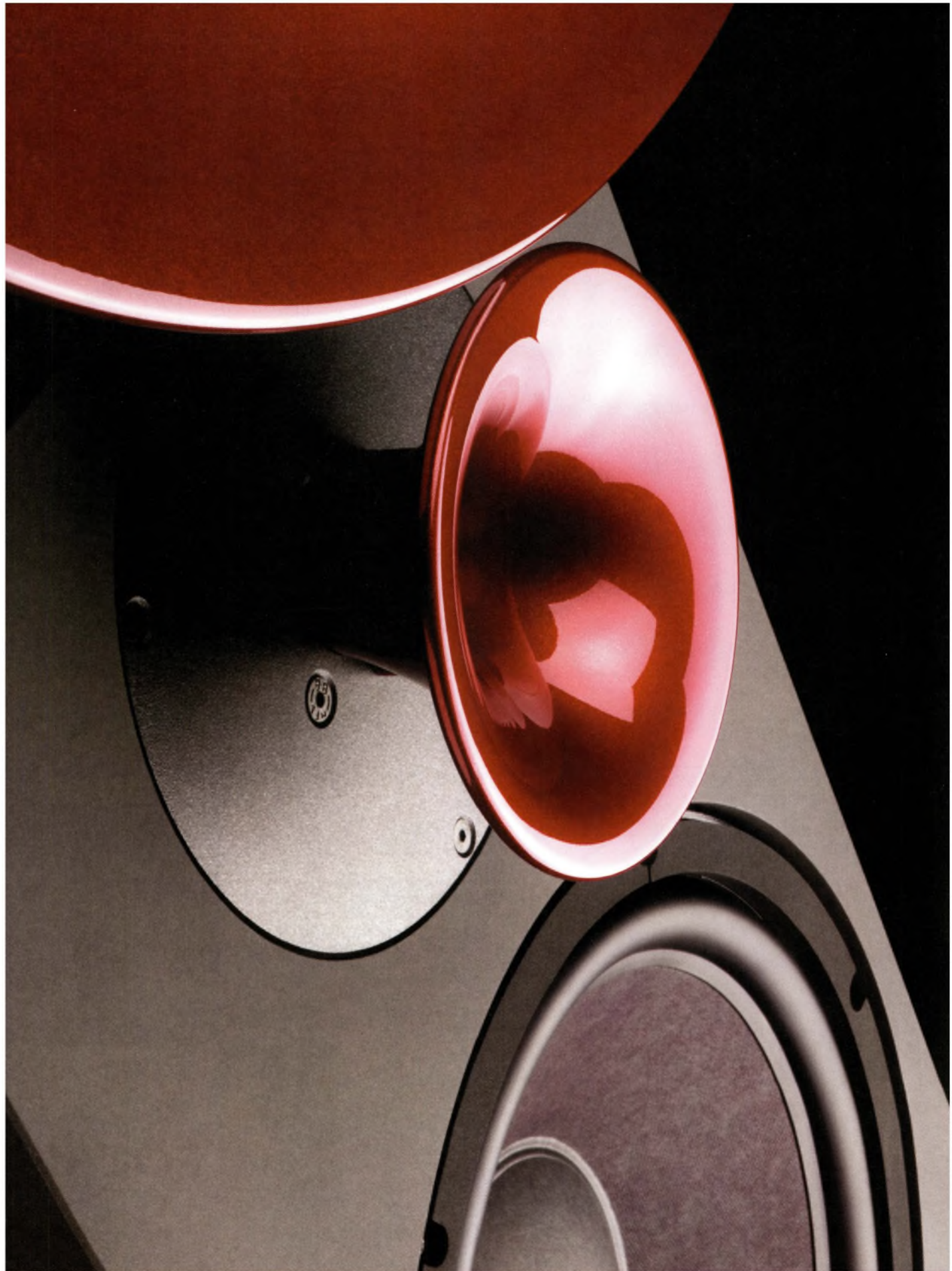
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Strange Fruit...

Avantgarde Acoustic Uno Nano Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Avantgarde's physically and visually impressive and imposing Trio speakers have been on the end of at least two of the top ten systems I've ever heard. There again, they probably also occupy a similar number of places in the equivalent lowerarchy... and there's the rub. Their demands for lebensraum pale into insignificance when compared to the dictatorship they impose on matching systems and set up. This is one large speaker system you don't want to buy without trying it at home!

At least in part, that reflects the fact that, with horn designs, the strengths are so obvious, so pronounced, that the challenge becomes one of ameliorating their weaknesses rather than the other way around. And as great as the strengths are, the weaknesses can be catastrophic, making this not just a balancing act but a full on exercise in palliative care involving not just speaker design but the system, the room and in some cases even the listener.

Which is what makes the Uno Nano so intriguing. By full-range horn speaker standards it's almost compact, even manageable. That makes it easier to transport and better able to deal with smaller rooms, making the whole home audition thing much less of a leap of faith, more an exercise in controlled anticipation. However, the way it deals with different systems remains to be seen...

The three-way Trios present a "once seen, never forgotten" face to the world, their three,

brightly coloured spherical horns unmistakable, the largest fully 950mm in diameter. But even that massive trumpet has limited low frequency extension, meaning that Avantgarde offer an array of sub-woofer options to owners, culminating in a six-pack of active bass-horns. More modest systems can rely on a pair of more conventional, active, moving-coil subs. At the opposite end of the range, the company also offers smaller systems, again spherical horn, hybrid designs, but two-way, with less of the range handled by the horn drivers. The original Duo and Uno models employed vertical arrays, which were both attractive and bulky, their widely spaced elements taking up significant space. The Uno Nano is a deliberate attempt to overcome this issue, and physically at least, it has to be considered a success.

The sub-woofer cabinet, which doubles as the central structural element, is topped off by the 50cm midrange horn that dominates the appearance. The tweeter horn sits below and behind

this, emerging from its own separate chamber in the top of, but visually contiguous with the bass unit. Three legs locate both the midrange horn and bass cabinet in space, while the speaker connections and sub-woofer controls are all on the rear.

With any hybrid design, the key to success lies in the successful integration of the various components. In the case of the Uno Nano, the problem that presents is exacerbated by the fact that the horn-loaded midrange driver is not just super explicit, it is also super revealing due to the absence of any crossover and its direct connection to the amplifier. That's great news from the point of view of musical immediacy and transparency, but potentially scary if you are a designer (or listener) used to having a crossover to hide a multitude of system sins. Fortunately, Avantgarde have been doing this for a while, and their sub-woofer designs have come a long, long way since those early Uno and Duo models.

The sub in the Nano is something of a tour de force. The basic



► ingredients are a pair of 250mm bass drivers per side, each pair driven by a conventional 250 Watt, Class AB amplifier. No wimpy switching power supplies or Class D output stages here, while the amp and drivers are tied together by a sophisticated real-time feedback loop to minimize distortion. There's also a plethora of input and control options to ease interface and set-up. Inputs are either speaker level (via WBT connectors) or balanced XLR at line level. Avantgarde also supply a length of speaker wire to join the speaker terminals on the sub to the input terminals on the midrange horn, although proper bi-wiring with a matched pair of cables is a noticeably better solution. Rear panel controls allow you to set low-frequency roll-off, high-pass frequency and level. There's also an input selection switch and an earth post, while the power switch is a three-way one, allowing remote switch-on if required. With the physical relationship between the sub and its satellite horns defined by the speaker framework, no phase switch is needed.

The trumpets that provide the horn loading are molded from ABS and painted in high-gloss automotive finishes. There's a good range of standard finishes, but beyond these, almost anything is possible. The directly connected midrange driver is based around a 75mm cellulose dome

and covers the range from 290Hz to 3kHz. The matching tweeter is connected via a simple, second order crossover to the amplifier, its 13cm horn matched to a special aluminium dome which is driven by a 3kg magnet assembly in order to match the 104dB output level of the rest of the system. You can

begin to understand why the sub needs a pair of 250mm drivers and a 250 Watt amp to keep up!

The whole thing stands 50cm wide, 50 deep and 127 tall, which is hardly compact in general terms, but represents a 21cm reduction in height and a 20cm reduction in depth over the original Uno – which is not to be sniffed at. As noted, efficiency is extremely high at 104 dB, with a flat 8 Ohm load and 20 Hz to 20 kHz bandwidth, making this a potent performer for one so small and attractive.

Aside from the 68kg

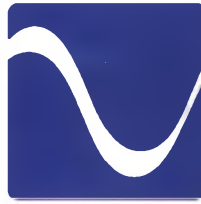
weight of each speaker, initial handling and positioning is disarmingly straightforward. The cabinet arrives with flat, felt covered feet on the bottom of each of its three legs, which makes placement and small adjustments a piece of cake. The three legs make leveling

equally easy, which is just as well as a perfectly upright stance is essential (even more so than normal) to proper performance. I experimented at length with toe-in, only to discover that the trumpets need to point directly at the listener – as per the manual (Note to reviewer – RTFB). What is far more critical to the overall balance and soundstaging is the bass level and distance to the rear wall. In my room I started with the speakers positioned normally as regards rear spacing, with the sub-woofer controls set at factory levels. A combination of tiny shifts fore and aft helped the overall balance, but the tonality and staging really locked in when I increased the bass level by one click (that's about half a notch on the scale) and got the rear wall distance absolutely identical – an indication of just how potent the sub-woofer section of the Uno Nano really is. With positioning finalized, it was down to the niceties of spiking or locking off the feet, wiring and system matching. Well, the first of these was straightforward enough...

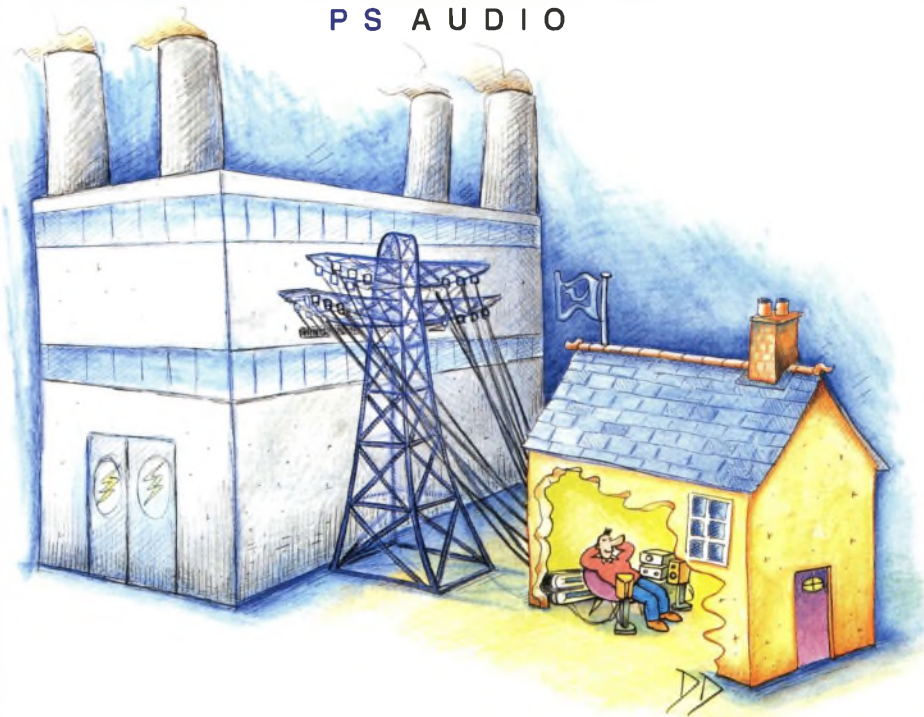
When it comes to hooking up the Nano to an amplifier, there are two rules: Rule one – if you have to single wire then connect to the terminals of the midrange unit, not the lower, more accessible terminals on the back of the bass cabinet. Rule two – then, run a set of identical cables down to the bass unit; the straps supplied by Avantgarde should be considered in the same light as the nasty metal plates that come with most other bi-wirable speakers! And use the best cable you can – you will hear the difference. Don't even consider bi-wiring until you've got the best cables you can. Then, and only then, it makes sense.

Which brings us, finally, to the vexed question of matching amplification. Avantgarde supplied one of their Model Three integrated amplifiers along with the Uno ►





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► Nanos – which proved to be something of a mixed blessing. One of the most elegant and attractive units I've recently laid hands on, it is also shockingly effective in combination with the company's speakers. Its modest power output, dimensions and price, combined with an innovative cascode output stage and minimal feedback deliver exactly what the Nanos demand – and the Duos, Trios and all the rest. Now, I'm not saying that this is the only amp you can use with the Avantgarde speakers, but the only other amps I had in the house that sounded better than the Model Three were the Vacuum State mono-blocs, at around three times its \$4750 asking price. So, there are amps that can get even better sound out of the Nanos, but whether they make economic sense is another matter – as it ever was with horn speakers. After all, remove the demand for power delivery and load tolerance and the amp's job gets a lot easier, and easier still as the speakers get larger, more efficient and more expensive, turning conventional hi-fi logic on its head. Just as well then, that the Model Three is as attractive and svelte as it is!

By now you'll have gathered that the Nanos have to be something special in order to justify this preamble. Leaving their looks aside, which I love but others might not find so appealing, it's the sound that matters and it's here that the Avantgardes really score. In a world of me-too speaker designs, here's a product that raises the bar just as high sonically as it does visually. Of course, it's all about integration and getting the speaker to work as a single, coherent whole, but the effort that takes is well worthwhile, the rewards spectacularly engaging and musical. There's a strange, nagging

familiarity about their sound that those who listen mainly to hi-fi might take time to place; it's the sound of life...

Maybe it's the proximity of the horn-loaded drivers, or maybe that they don't try to cover too much of the range, but coherence, the traditional Achilles' Heel of horn designs, just isn't a problem here. Get the bass integrated properly and the quality of the sound that results

is both remarkably consistent and spatially seamless, with no awkward joints or shelves in the sound produced. Of course, the bass drivers can't match the speed and attack of the mid-band, but unless you go looking for the discontinuity you'll not notice it. Sparse, acoustic recordings reveal it; solo piano suffers a loss of percussive impact to left hand notes when compared to the clarity and precision of the right, but timing and melodic flow are undisturbed. The Jean Muller disc of Chopin pieces on Turtle

Records reveals both the quicksilver agility of the playing, the leading edge precision of the notes, their pattern and placing, and also the way the speakers let their weight fall on the first half of the note. It's a subtle emphasis that brings a lightness of touch to the music, which is very much a



part of the Nano experience. Staging is impressive, again a traditional horn weakness, too often undermined by limited low frequency extension. Here that isn't a problem, the subs delivering all the bottom end you need. The result has tremendous scale and width, although depth tends to be curtailed. This is as much a result of the way the sound seems to sit

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▶ around instruments, as any real spatial foreshortening. What you hear is the air immediately surrounding each player, rather than the acoustic as a whole. The result is a pleasing sense of air and space, even if you can't tell precisely where that space ends, lacking as it does, clearly defined boundaries.

But enough of looking for problems; let's look at the Nanos' considerable musical strengths. Like any horn based design, they offer an impressive sense of immediacy and dynamic range. Add that to their deft touch and effortless sense of weight and scale and the result is a powerful and impressive performance that's full of life, presence and detail. Move up from Chopin to Murray Perahia playing Bach and those strengths come into their own. Perahia's fluid lines, set against the complexity of the orchestration, create wonderful patterns and contrasts, his subtle weighting of notes and phrases revealed despite the quickness and lightness of his touch. The precision of both his playing and the Academy's accompaniment are beautifully unraveled, leaving you to marvel at the sublime beauty of the musical structures. Perahia's cascades of crisp, rapid notes are unconstrained, joyously vibrant and percussive, while the discipline in this most complex of music is a thing of soaring, symmetrical wonder rather than a limitation to be overcome. It is this effortless separation and organization, the way the speakers reveal the juxtaposition between phrases,

between notes within phrases that makes the Avantgardes' musical delivery so compelling.

Does that slight tonal lightness bother me? I have to say, no. Soprano voices have a subtle, almost piping lilt

to them that brings superb clarity and precision to the singing, a quality that, once applied to the earthier end of the vocal range,



could be described as leaning to the spit and tonsils school of delivery, rather than really letting you hear a singer's chest. Likewise, pianos take on a Steinway-esque crispness and attack, irrespective of their DNA. Purists might demur, but play less than wonderful recordings and the ability to sort through the mush more than

compensates. Cue up Steve Earle's *Copperhead Road* and you'll see what I mean. This monumental slab of towering roots rock is all about power, impact and musical swagger. The heavy drumbeats that kick the title song along, that crashing, rumbling, landslide of a chord that opens the track proper, have real weight but attack and texture too. And if Earle's vocals lack that last abrasive, gravely edge, the ability to unravel the lyrics and articulate the all-important story behind each song is more than adequate compensation. The musical results are moving and motive; much, much more subtle than the stacked power chords and dense mix would have you believe. Suddenly it's all about the depth of feelings, the power of emotion, rather than simply turning the volume up to 11.

The direct connection of the mid driver is largely responsible for the tactile sense of attack and life in the playing – whether it's renaissance lute, Charlie Byrd or one of Jimmy Page's less restrained moments. The lack of a subtractive network allows the notes to flow unimpeded, their pitch, placement and dynamic spacing utterly explicit.

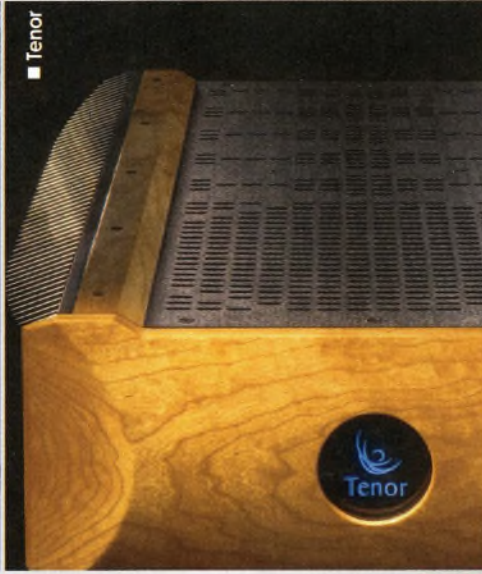
The result is music with both delicacy (when required) and a sense of purpose. Less obvious, but just as important to the overall effect, is the surefootness, the unambiguous nature of the rhythm, pace and timing of musical phrases and passages. Dance music was a joy – and I'm not just talking electro-pop here. Just stop and consider how much music was written for dancing, or written based on the rhythms and patterns of formal dances. These Avantgardes leave you in no doubt, unearthing the strands and steps of musical structure from beneath the densest of orchestration. Yet the precision of their delivery never imposes or ▶

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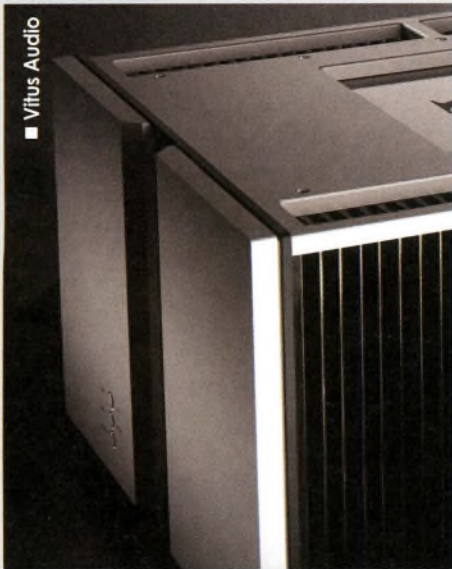
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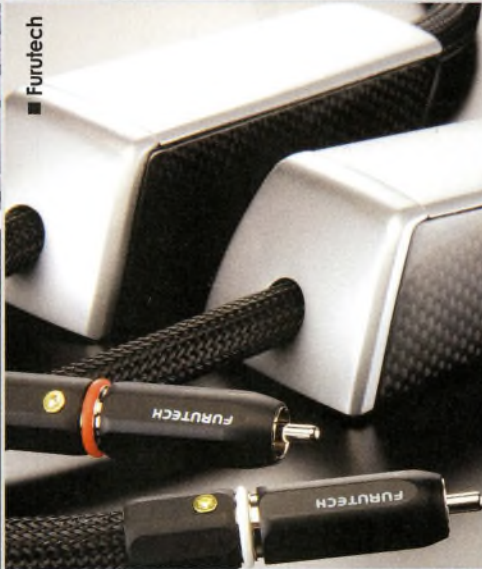
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► restricts, their poise never constrains. Instead it gives the music a grounded stability and confidence. You never doubt where it's come from, you never wonder where it's going, you simply let it carry you there.


Tick all the boxes that go with these speakers and you'll quickly and rightly realize that Jazz will be meat and drink to them. Yet the same rhythmic integrity, speed and clarity, attack and separation that make sense of the most convoluted of free-form meanderings, convey other forms of music with equal ease. Sure, spherical horns do have a way with trumpets and other brass instruments – beautifully breathy and at the same time uninhibited – but if ever a speaker revealed the lie in the notion that certain products favour particular types of music, then the Nano is it. If a product will only play one musical genre it is because that music fails to show up its weaknesses. I've spent most of this review talking about the music that the Uno Nano shouldn't play – but it most certainly does. In the time I've had them at home they've treated me to a plethora of surprising and memorable musical moments, from a captivating and poignant *Così*

Fan Tutti to raw, unpolished live tracks from Steve Earle, the Heifetz/Piatigorsky chamber recordings to Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* and the Mingus Sextet at Cornell. Every time I think I've fastened on what these speakers do (or don't do) they go and surprise me. Every time I unearth some aged gem I've not listened to in years, they remind me just why I bought it in the first place.

The Uno Nano is a far from perfect speaker – at least in the classical sense.

They don't look like other speakers and for the most part they don't sound like them either – by which I mean, they don't suffer the muddled, constricted and turgid response that's all too recognizable in more "conventional" approaches. They play loud (actually, they play soft; they have dynamic range that gets close to life and scale

and weight that's sufficient to all but the most warped and unreasonable purpose. They offer that all-important bandwidth without the oft-associated demands for power and if they are picky about partnering amps at least that pickiness doesn't also impose a high price. You can go looking for their tonal aberrations,

their discontinuities, but you know what – more often than not you'll find yourself pulled away from that quest and into the music instead. The formality and correctness of Bach will leave them unfazed (and you charmed), the delicacy of solo female vocal allows them to open their tubes (and you to marvel at a singer's control and technique). It's not long before you stop trying to catch them out and simply catch on to what they do – which is cut straight to the essential heart of the music. Listen and you'll remember. Avantgarde's smallest full-range speaker is both challenging and disarming, which is no bad thing to be. Those with open minds will welcome them with open arms. 



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hybrid spherical horn with active bass
Driver Complement:	1x 13cm treble horn 1x 50cm midrange horn 2x 25cm pulp-cone bass
Bass Amplifier:	250 Watt Class AB
Crossover Frequencies:	290Hz and 3kHz
Sensitivity:	104dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Bandwidth:	20Hz – 20kHz ±3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	500x1270x520mm
Weight:	68kg ea.
Prices -	
Uno Nano Loudspeakers:	£9000
Model 3 Integrated Amp:	£4750

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The Sonics Amerigo Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

With ever more, compact floorstanding speakers joining an already crowded market place, one wonders when we'll reach the point where there are more models than there are customers; not more speakers than people want to buy, but more different designs than there are individual buyers!

Okay, so maybe I exaggerate, but if you've attended a hi-fi show recently you'll know what I mean. With so many superficially similar speakers on offer, where on earth do you start? For that matter, why start with the Sonics Amerigo, a speaker with little apparent to set it apart from the crowd, save a neater than average fit, finish and appearance – matched by a suitably elevated price-tag. Indeed, the slightly bluff but elegantly proportioned Amerigo seems almost invisible amongst the competition, so understated is its appearance. The simple column of its cabinet perches on a neatly spaced plinth, even the classic three-way driver line-up (as opposed to the multiple 165mm units found in so many speakers these days) is executed so neatly that it draws little comment. But, on closer examination, that and both the veneer and the flawless surfaces suggest a more luxurious pedigree, a little more thought than goes into many a high value, high feature count box. Indeed, it's exactly that pedigree that attracted me to the Amerigo and that sets it apart from the crowd, for Sonics is the current brainchild of Audio Physic founder Joachim Gerhard – and that's definitely worthy of note.

Unlike the often visually distinctive designs he penned in the past, the

Amerigo is a model of discrete decorum, living proof that the best design is no design – or at least no obvious evidence of design. But closer examination reveals the wealth of thought and detail that's gone into the prosaic persona of this speaker. The cabinet is beautifully constructed and finished, a genuine cut above the norm, the satin lacquer adding to the feel of understated opulence. The darker shades of the Zebrano veneer on the review pair offer an attractive contrast with the metallic cones on the drivers, which can be hidden with a two-part grille if you wish. The slightly sloped top section of the baffle adds a degree of both time alignment and visual interest.

The drivers are unusual too, both in type and configuration. All sourced from Scandinavian giant SEAS, the bass unit is a full 220mm in diameter and employs a magnesium cone, a material shared by the 150mm midrange driver. Crossover between the two is at a lower than normal 250Hz, with the tweeter also taking over surprisingly early, at just 2250Hz. And talking of tweeters, contrary to the obvious visual evidence, the Amerigo uses the SEAS interpretation of the Ring Radiator theme, a two-piece construction with a tiny, central magnesium alloy dome. The crossover – always something of a Gerhard speciality – is single wired, while the carefully braced cabinet is rear reflex loaded by a large, flared port. Figures of 87dB for sensitivity and a –3dB point at 45 Hz, coupled with that large bass driver suggest that the speaker has been voiced for a satisfying sense of weight and scale, rather than sheer extension, and sure enough, the roll-off

below that 45 Hz point is quick and clean.

Two things always separated the original Audio Physic designs from the crowd; their phenomenal staging and a set up protocol that tended to fire them across rather than down the room, spacing them well apart and well away from rear walls. Sure enough, the DNA is alive and kicking, the Amerigos preferring to stand forward of the position adopted by other speakers in my listening room, as well as wider apart. Their low-ish sensitivity is offset by a fairly benign 7 Ohm load, and the speakers proved at home with an astonishingly wide range of different amps. I ran them with everything from 50 Watts of push-pull 6550 to the 125 solid-state Watts delivered by the Hovland RADIA. But perhaps the most telling – and in some ways the most fun – pairing was with the Avantgarde Model Three integrated. At just 38 Watts into an 8 Ohm load, this amp is neither powerful nor particularly load tolerant. It's also proved to be something of a revelation. Pair its lucid clarity and lightning quick dynamic response with the Amerigos' flattish impedance and sensitivity (and high levels) be damned. The results are intimate, immediate, agile and incredibly engaging. Of course, any combination that's greater than the sum of its parts leans on both components, but it's the speakers that are making the most of the amplifier's eager delivery, giving its musical enthusiasm a warm welcome rather than a hard time. Add to that the Amerigos' own considerable strengths and you've got something really special.



► What exactly do the Sonics speakers bring to the party? Even a brief listen to the Amerigo will reveal their impressively expansive soundstage and musically fluid delivery, both things that many (even most) speakers struggle with. So how do the Sonics accomplish this neat and not so little trick? It's the culmination of achieving three apparently simple things. Firstly and crucially, they are extremely consistent and coherent top to bottom, with no breaks or bulges in their frequency balance or energy spectrum. In no small part this has to be down to the consistent materials used across all three drivers.

Secondly, they have sufficient bandwidth to present satisfying and convincing weight and scale. Whether its full-on orchestral tuttis or the kind of studio antics that produce piledriver rock tracks, the Amerigos manage to embrace their demands without apparent stress or limitation. Of course, the bass isn't really that deep and the treble isn't obviously extended, but the skill is in balancing the two and also voicing the bottom-end. It might not be strictly accurate, but all really successful speakers that are less than full-range have to play this game. It's about the sense of the music rather than the facts, and sense is something the Sonics understand.

Finally, the least obvious, hardest to achieve but most important goal of all, is to arrive at a design that's musically unobstructive. This of course, is intimately related to the first two points; try to get too much bass out of a given box and you are heading for trouble, allow bands of energy to escape from the confines of decorum and you've already found it. The part of the puzzle responsible for lacing the whole thing together and keeping it all in place is the crossover, and it represents the most delicate balancing act of all. The filter slopes need to blend the driver outputs effectively, as well as dealing with any mechanical requirements they

might have – especially prevalent with the latest generation of high-technology cone materials. The skill lies in providing just enough crossover and not too much, enough to shape the musical energy and dynamics into a coherent whole, without obstructing their sense of flow and musical integrity.

What makes the Amerigo so successful is that it scores on all three counts. These speakers just flat out disappear – and I don't just mean spatially.



The music is delivered with a fluidity and lucid clarity that belies the mechanics of reproduction. The effect is that, with decent recordings the system sets up a coherent and beautifully defined soundstage that exists totally independent of the speakers. Turn

the lights out and you'll hear a single acoustic space, with nicely defined boundaries (if they're on the recording) with no cues or telltale direct sounds to locate the speakers or distract from the musicians and their performance. You'll also find yourself drawn into the lines the players are following, the way they work against each other,

the subtle rhythmic slurs and deviations that allow for musical expression within the constraints of the otherwise rigid structure that holds the whole together. It's a quality that's most obvious with small group jazz, pulling you into the centre of the band as one instrument stretches out to solo over the secure footing of the others, but it's equally important with other music, and often more notable for its absence.

There's nothing that makes this exclusively a speaker problem, but it's remarkable how many speakers exhibit it, partly because they're transducers and partly because getting the crossover wrong has such a detrimental effect on the spectral balance of a speaker – the wider the bandwidth the worse the problem. Which helps explain why small two-ways are so often musically engaging. But the Amerigo is a three-way with surprisingly wide bandwidth given its modest dimensions; precisely where you'd expect the biggest problems. That the speaker banishes them so utterly and completely is testament to the clarity of purpose and execution on the part of the designer. At the same time, the crossover clearly does enough to deal with any driver related issues without ever imposing ►



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► itself on the sound. That alone would set the Amerigo apart, but throw in a cabinet that contributes little if anything to the sound and suddenly you've got the makings of a really special speaker.

Sure enough, the sound is quick, unforced, open and refreshingly free of excess weight or warmth to slow it down. There's plenty of musical weight,

but it follows the orchestration rather than clumping around a single pitch. Separation is excellent, both spatially and tonally, with chorusing brass instruments readily identified and dynamics are integral to the playing, a natural extension of the player's technique and his instrument, so added attack or accents simply grow out of the performance itself. At one end of the scale, that allows Keith Jarrett to build, layer on layer, from deceptively simple beginnings into repeated phrases of ever-increasing intensity. At the other, the stacked electronic slabs of Moby, the power-chords of Neil Young on *Sleeps With Angels* or the vibrant transitions that characterize the almost Copland-esque colours and shapes of Takashi Yoshimatsu's *4th Symphony* have a

presence and space that allows the music to pulse and breathe, never weighed down by scale or power, but always with purpose. It's this lack of restraint that allows recordings to sound so intimate and expressive, dramatic and affecting, key qualities when it comes to a compelling performance.

Nor are these Audio Physic clones. Indeed, in at least one important regard they easily trump Gerhard's earlier work. Those first designs had startling imagery, so much so that in some respects it detracted from the musical performance as a whole. The Amerigo pulls things back into balance, by matching that spatial freedom and coherence with equally unimpeded temporal expression. Now the space is just a natural extension of the performance itself, adding to the event rather than vying with it.

The result is a real sense of scale and impact, weight and unexaggerated warmth that, stepping away from the speakers brings the music right into the room.

Along with Avalon's NP2 (a long time *Plus* favourite) the Sonics Amerigo represents a new generation of beautifully balanced floorstanding

designs that are manageable, drivable, affordable and capable. They deliver just enough of just about everything to offer an astonishingly complete musical performance without costing the earth to own or run. The Amerigo goes deep enough to underpin all but the most demanding of material, while its wide-open sound, easy transparency, fluid rhythmic and dynamic expression keeps performers alive, performances vibrant and vital. There are speakers that go deeper and there are certainly speakers that are warmer and arguably more forgiving, but the Sonics will reward the simple coherence and communication that comes from well-balanced electronics that don't need to break the bank. Then they'll grow, as a system grows and, as I discovered, they reward better and better inputs, better and better amps, traveling further than you might think possible. It comes from good manners and there own, inherently well-balanced nature – good upbringing, if you will. I guess breeding will out.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way, reflex loaded loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	22mm metal dome ring radiator HF 150mm metal cone MF 220mm metal cone LF
Bandwidth:	45Hz – 25kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	87dB
Impedance:	7 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	305 x 1002 x 355mm
Weight:	24kg
Finishes:	Black, birdseye maple, zebirano and macassar ebony
Price:	\$5500

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Live Wire... The Adam HM2 Loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy



Adam Professional Audio is a loudspeaker brand that I've previously come across at the Munich show; you can't miss its humungous OSS system with its four cabinets per channel and sixty drive units per pair. But it would seem that this is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of its range, which has both professional and domestic sections, including active systems, subs et al.

Adam is in fact an acronym for advanced dynamic audio monitors, but it still has a digital apple as its logo. Apart from the unusually shaped cabinet all Adam speakers feature a distinctive tweeter, which it says is built using ART, an acronym for Accelerating Ribbon Technology. This is Adam's take on the Air Motion Transformer (AMT) design created by Oskar Heil in 1972. While it looks similar to a ribbon transducer it actually operates on a principle that's rather like an accordion, as sound is produced when a signal passing through a track on a corrugated polyester diaphragm causes the corrugations to compress together. As with ribbons, the AMT design requires very powerful magnets and is not very efficient, and John Borwick (in his *Loudspeaker and Headphone Handbook*) pointed out that "the uniform output over the whole diaphragm causes difficulties in achieving a suitable directivity characteristic."

According to Adam its advantage is that the principle achieves a 4:1 ratio of air to transducer, or fold, movement and that for this reason it is a better impedance match to air than a traditional piston driver unit with a 1:1 ratio. The company claims that its ART tweeters have 93dB sensitivity and an impedance of 3.2 ohms (+/- 0.05 ohms). I note that it describes directivity as 'reasonable' which might suggest that this is a weak point, as manufacturer's claims are usually on the optimistic

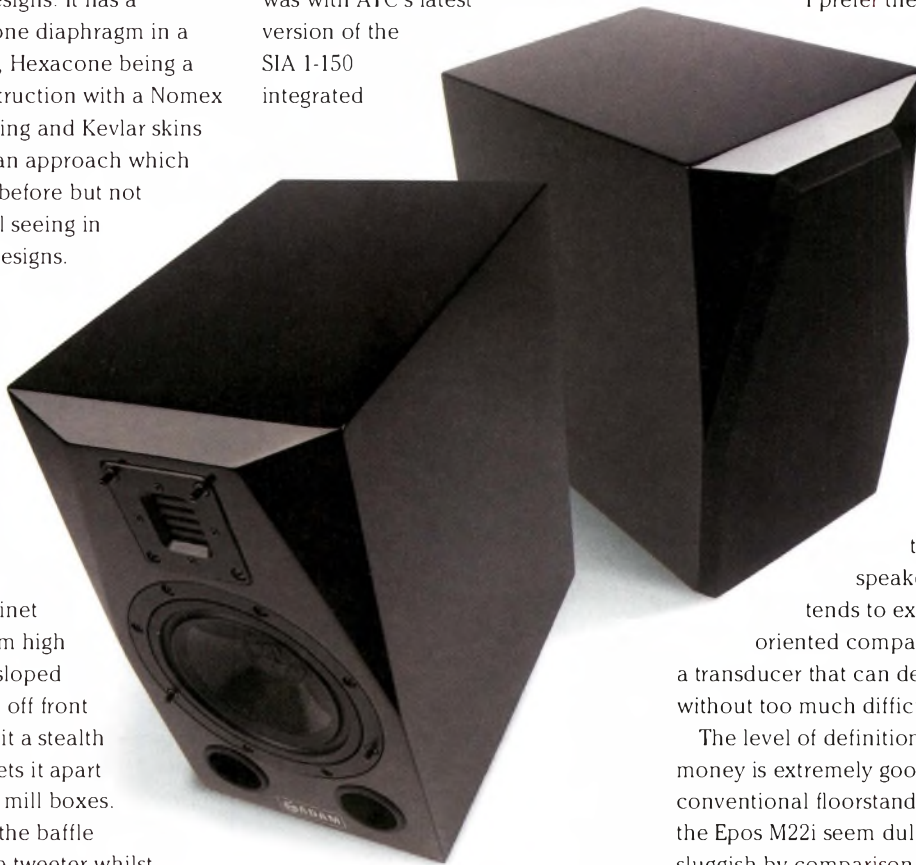
▶ side, even in Germany. Adam also builds a midrange ART driver with a bandwidth of 600Hz – 3.2kHz, but that is reserved for bigger speakers than the HM2.

This is the larger of two stand mounts in the Home Monitor range, but this series lies at the entry-level end of Adam's extensive catalogue of designs. It has a 120mm Hexacone diaphragm in a 177mm chassis, Hexacone being a sandwich construction with a Nomex honeycomb filling and Kevlar skins on both sides, an approach which has been used before but not one that I recall seeing in many current designs.

Essentially it should create significant stiffness in the cone, in much the same way that Rohacel foam does in some of B&W's cones. The cabinet is a decent 37cm high and features a sloped top and lopped off front corners to give it a stealth aesthetic that sets it apart from run of the mill boxes. It also reduces the baffle area around the tweeter whilst placing sound diffracting corners close to the driver.

The standard of construction is very slick and the piano black finish beautifully shiny, offsetting the polished stainless finish of the binding posts on the back. Out of the box these bi-wire terminals are connected with speaker cable jumpers rather than the usual gold plated bus bars, a very encouraging touch that suggests Adam has listened to the effect of the popular solution and coughed up for something superior.

Above the terminals there is a switch that adjusts treble output by plus or minus 1.5dB, which should make it easier to balance the speaker to suit a given room. I started out using it in the 0dB flat position but ended up selecting the down tilted -1.5dB option, but I do prefer a smoother top end. Initial listening was with ATC's latest version of the SIA 1-150 integrated



amplifier, a £2,203 powerhouse from a brand that has similar pro/domestic tendencies. This pairing produced a good, open sound that escapes the boxes well and has a good sense of pace. It also revealed that the Adam needs a bit of wall reinforcement if it's to deliver low frequency grunt, those two forward firing reflex ports do little to discourage this and in my room they worked best with only about four inches behind the closest corner of the speaker when they were toed in.

The HM2s have a pretty lively sound that brings out the vibrancy in music and makes speakers like ATC's own SCM19 seem restrained across the mid and top. When playing at normal and lower volume levels this helps to bring out detail and makes the music feel more intimate, material allowing. At higher levels however

I prefer the control on

offer from the more expensive (£1,495) ATCs as they are a lot calmer under fire. This could be because the room is a little big for the Adam but it's not that small a speaker and one tends to expect a pro oriented company to make a transducer that can deliver level without too much difficulty.

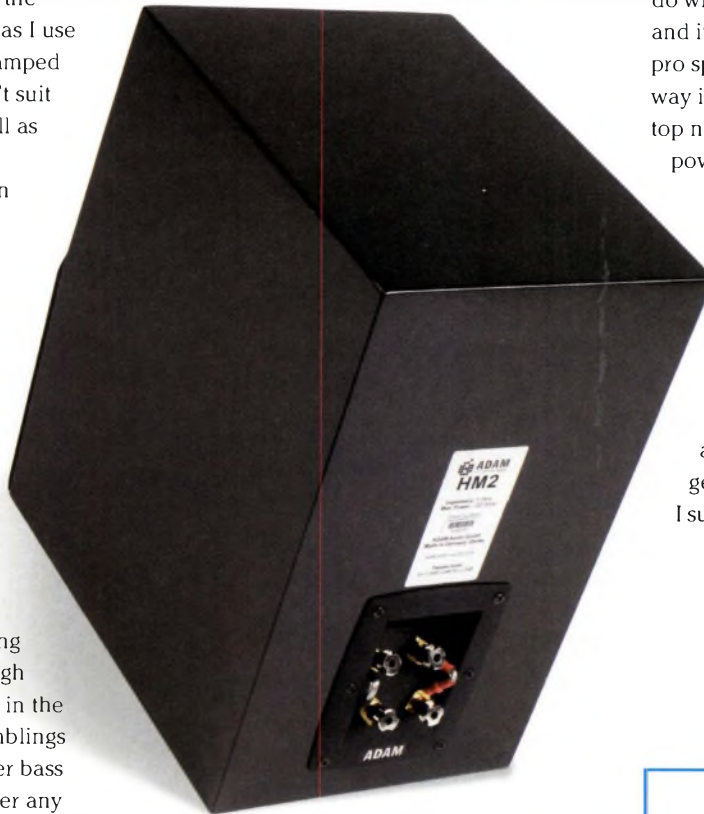
The level of definition for the money is extremely good; more conventional floorstanders such as the Epos M22i seem dull and a little sluggish by comparison. Of course the other side of that coin is that they are easier to live with and deliver greater bass extension. But the life force that the HM2 can pull out of most recordings does make it a more thrilling speaker and one to which you are more likely to pay attention. Another floorstander in this price sector is the PMC GB1i, this offers a fuller bass and a sweeter top end alongside a better sense of timing but is again slightly lacking in the detail department next to the HM2. Of course neither of these speakers costs as much as the HM2 when you ▶

▶ factor in a good quality stand and this is something you need to get decent results. I would recommend something heavy to solidify the bass and calm the treble; the Atacamas I use are not filled or damped and probably don't suit this speaker as well as they could.

Taken on its own merits the HM2 is well suited to luxurious recordings, MeShell Ndege Ocello's *Peace Beyond Passion*, with its chunky bass lines and super smooth production sounds superb, the speaker bringing out the detail of high bells and revelling in the low frequency rumblings emanating from her bass guitar. There's never any shortage of scale either. In fact this is a distinct strongpoint, with all manner of material the sound easily escapes the boxes and expands to fill the space both between and beyond the speakers. Imaging is expansive rather than particularly precise but this would probably be improved if the speakers were pulled away from the wall, albeit at the cost of body in the bass.

I thoroughly enjoyed listening to Zappa's *Punky's Whips* on these, despite the degree of compression that affects it and its slightly raucous, live nature. This speaker lets you hear what his large-scale band is doing and brings a vivacity to the brass and guitar that is particularly convincing. It doesn't, however, let you play it quite as loud as one would like in a comfortable manner, even with a

Classé CA-2200 power amplifier in charge. This with the treble turned down. I tried different degrees of toe in but the room is always



a big part of the picture, presumably because of the good overall dispersion achieved by the speaker.

If you enjoy a slightly bright and upbeat balance they offer a combination of qualities that make them extremely competitive in a market of rather safer sounding alternatives in more domestically fashionable packages. The fact that there isn't a floorstander in the Adam HM range would suggest that the German market has not fallen prey to a trend that reveals how difficult it is to put a decent loudspeaker in the average British living room these days. Stand mounts do seem to have an advantage in many respects, largely because there is less cabinet to flap about and muddy the picture, something which is clearly

not happening here. That stealth shaping not only affects dispersion but enhances the rigidity of the front baffle. The ART tweeter has much to do with the resolution on offer here and its inclusion in the company's pro speakers, which have found their way into Abbey Road among other top notch studios, would suggest that power handling is not an issue.

The HM2 communicates very well and that's what you need from an audio component. Thanks to the amount of detail coming out of the speaker you can hear into recordings to a degree that's quite unusual at the price. If you want to get involved with your music I suggest you seek them out. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way bass reflex
Driver Complement:	177 mm HexaCone bass/mid A.R.T. tweeter
Freq. response (± 3 dB):	40 Hz - 35 kHz
Efficiency:	87 dB/W/m
Impedance:	4 Ohms nominal
Dimensions (WxHxD):	220 x 370 x 320 mm
Weight:	10 kg ea.
Warranty:	10 years
Finish:	Piano black, glossy silver
Price:	£1295

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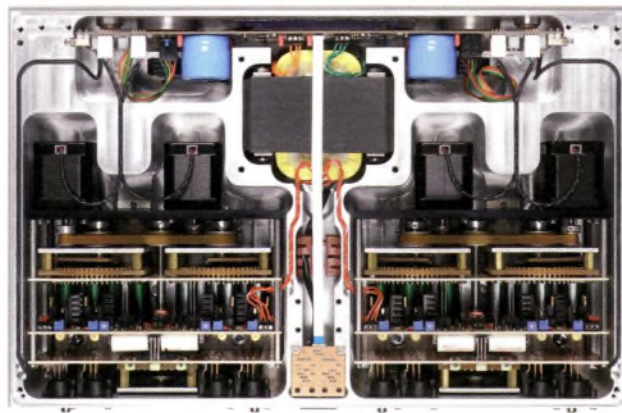
by Chris Thomas

Of all audio electronics there is no breed more rare than the world-class pre-amplifier. It is also the component most often underrated in importance but, as anyone who has made a significant upgrade in this area will tell you, its role is pivotal. In a market containing so many exceptional products there is and always has been a dearth of pre-amps that are really worthy. There are no end of models that make the volume go up and down and switch between inputs and some of them do it with great flair and smoothness, but so often these same units apply a colourful stranglehold on the music, akin to a boot to the throat. They both flavour and constrict the flow to the detriment of everything that comes after them in the system. So it is an age-old truth in the world of audio in general, but the high-end in particular, that most amplifier manufacturers produce much better power amplifiers than they do pre-amplifiers. Just don't expect them to admit as much.

Ayre have, for quite some time, been building one of the great, unsung audio bargains in their K-1xe model, a product that out-performs most pre-amps costing many thousands of pounds more. But it is a large, multi-box affair with basic facilities and a remote control that's extremely limited by the standards of today's market – and an operational clunkiness to the volume, whether you adjust it manually or via the handset,

that makes many a customer cringe. Unfortunately, that volume control, its execution and the heaviness of its feel, is central to the superb performance of the K-1xe, meaning that any attempt to improve on the design would either have to find a better method of controlling level or a better way of executing the existing one.

Well, now Ayre have just such a new, flagship model in the shape of



the KX-R, a solid, single-box design. Take one look inside and it becomes immediately apparent that Charlie Hansen and his design team have pulled out (and have had to pull out) all the stops with this one. Unlike the K-1xe, it's a line-level only unit (a separate phono-stage, the PX-R is in the works) and is naturally styled to match the MX-R mono-blocs. Costing considerably more than the K-1xe it has to go well beyond the already exceptional performance of that unit in order to justify its existence and keep egg off the company's collective face. It's a goal that's been safely achieved.

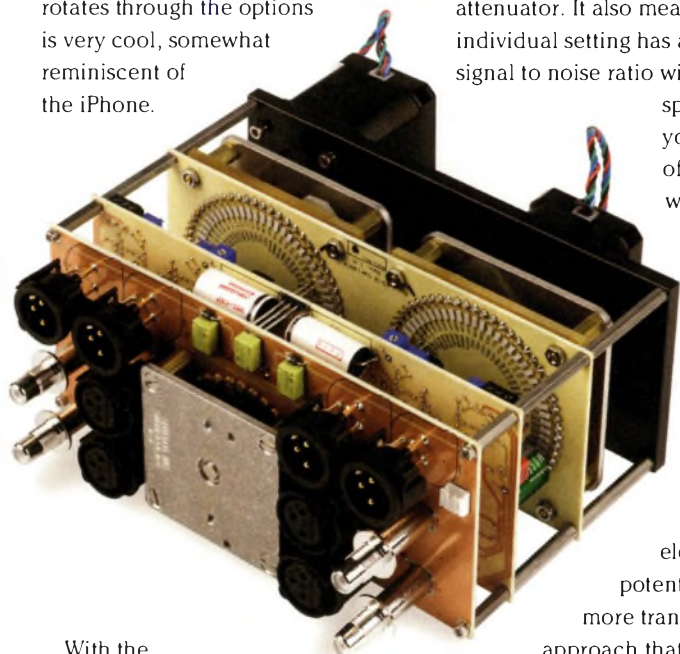
Each KX-R begins life as a 75 lb

block of solid aluminium that is then milled by a CNC machine into a compartmentalised chassis weighing around 211lbs, giving the design a tremendously stable physical platform. Inside are two mono pre-amplifiers, each with their own volume and input selection controls. The only shared components are the transformers and the mains socket. So tight is the fit that each fully complementary

channel is constructed as a block or stack of circuit boards, connectors at the rear, followed by the audio circuit and finally a sandwich containing the volume controls and linkages, a package so dense that it seems almost impenetrable once installed, an impression that belies the conceptual simplicity of the circuit. This is an extremely versatile

pre-amplifier indeed, with eight inputs (four balanced and four single-ended), each of which can be individually named and configured for gain offset and channel balance through a set-up program. All of this information is accessed and viewed through what is unquestionably the best display window I have seen on any audio product. The display itself is a fluorescent type, sourced from Noritake in Japan, a company that supplies many displays to both the audio and medical industries. But this one is unique. It is a non-multiplexing design (meaning that the lit pixels are permanently illuminated, rather ▶

▶ than flickering) which produces no electrical noise. In addition, the microprocessor that controls the display unit as well as all the switching functions within the KX-R shuts down and sleeps until such time as it receives an instruction, which it executes before once again, shutting down, thus eliminating it as a source of audio degradation. There are three levels of illumination that can be selected (from the remote) but the display is so quiet that I cannot detect any obvious sonic difference even when it is completely turned off, so the considerable cost and care that's gone into it is clearly worthwhile. The blue illumination is clear enough that you can easily see which input is selected and at which volume setting from across the room and I must say that the way the display rotates through the options is very cool, somewhat reminiscent of the iPhone.

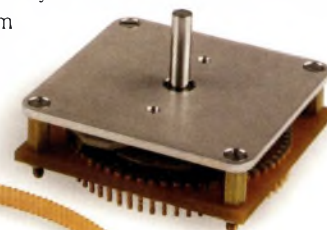


With the base-plate removed it's impossible to miss the array of four, large diameter Shallco switches employed to control level in the four phases of the fully balanced circuit. From which you might deduce that Ayre have simply re-engineered the arrangement used in the K-1xe – but you'd be

wrong. Looking for a significant lift in performance, they couldn't find a better switch than the Shallco, but they could find a better way to use it. This is known as Variable Gain Transimpedance (VGT) and is not new, but is extremely rare and only applicable to zero feedback designs like the KX-R. Where most volume control is achieved by attenuating the incoming signal before sending it to the fixed gain level line-stage, here each gain setting is the consequence of selecting a specific resistor within the gain-stage, employing a set value for each and every position and eliminating the attenuator. It also means that every individual setting has an identical signal to noise ratio with no sweet spots. In effect, you vary the gain of the stage as a whole for each volume level, that single resistor replacing the fixed gain elements and attenuator in a standard design, a far more elegant and potentially much more transparent approach that removes significant componentry from the signal path. If popular wisdom is to be believed, the volume control constitutes around 80% of the sound of a pre-amp – which is one reason why the Shallco based stepped attenuators in the K-1xe helped it sound so good. The KX-R takes that a whole stage further.



Of course, such an exacting approach places heavy demands on the elements employed. The Israeli-built Vishay resistors are of the highest quality and using them like this means



that (with two phases for each channel) each unit needs four identical resistors for each and every one of the 60 volume settings, a nightmare in both cost and component tolerancing that helps explain why nobody else does it this way. However, it also explains why the KX-R is so very exceptional at low levels. The Shallcos themselves are controlled by a neat fly-by wire system where pulses are received by contact-less optical encoders that are then microprocessed and sent to stepping motors that operate both the volume and the input selection via the array of toothed belts you can see in the photos. These are carried on beautifully machined cogs that clamp around the motor and switch shafts, allowing incredibly precise adjustment of synchronisation and belt tension that's impossible with the sort of grub screw fixings more commonly used. Those score the surface of the shaft, meaning that the cog will always return to the same setting when tiny shifts are attempted. Ayre's circumferential clamps (similar to the seat-post clamp on a bicycle) are expensive to produce, but allow much quicker and more precise adjustment of this critical control system. ▶

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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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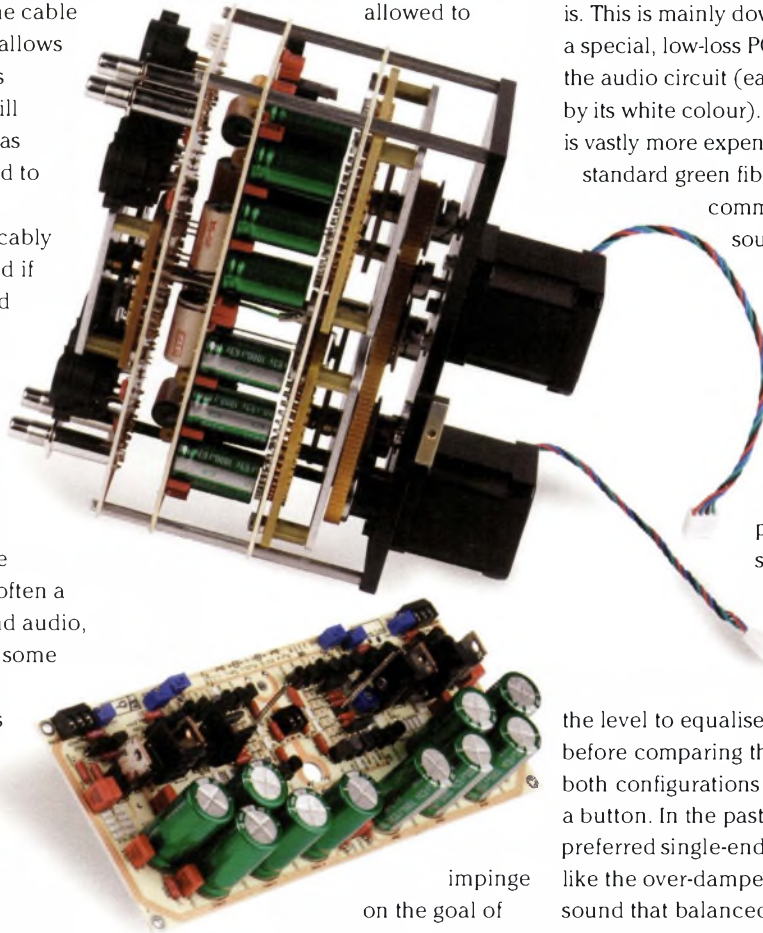
► The result is a dull but rather satisfying thud that accompanies each adjustment. Also included is an Ayrelink system that allows the pre and power amplifiers to be connected with a telephone cable via RJ-11 connectors. This allows you to power up both units with a single button and will become even more useful as new components are added to the R-range.

The whole unit is impeccably assembled and finished and if you admire and value build quality then this is as good as it gets. The two dimpled rotary controls on the front panel are light in touch but just resistive enough to give a real feel of quality to the unit. But I must also mention the system remote control, so often a disappointment on high-end audio, as this one has clearly had some serious thought put into its design. Good sized buttons and a clear layout work superbly through excellent acceptance angles and I especially like the short duration blue illumination button. For

a product as cutely automated as the KX-R it was very important that Ayre got this right as it will be the user's main interface with the pre-amplifier.

There is a kind of hair-shirt purist streak that runs through many users of equipment at this level and I confess that there is a bit of it in me also, that leans towards the non-automated and display-less school of audio. I like convenience but am not prepared to sacrifice performance for it. Ayre have gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure that the KX-R pays no musical price for its features. I've spent considerable time discussing various aspects of this pre-amp's

internals, from the shockingly expensive display components to the complex and costly implementation of the volume controls, simply to demonstrate that nothing has been allowed to



impinge on the goal of optimum performance.

I guess that we are all victims of our prejudice in one way or another. Check out the audio forums if you doubt that. But a couple of months with this pre-amplifier has changed that and left me with a huge admiration for what Ayre have achieved.

I used the KX-R with my own MX-R amplifiers and fed them from both the Burmester CD 001 and the Esoteric P-03/D-03 CD players. Speakers were JM Labs Micro Utopia Bes, the Eben C1 and the Wilson Duette. The electronics were sat on Stillpoints supports while the cabling was either Nordost Valhalla or Odin. Although

it certainly sounds interesting for the first few days, warm up time runs into weeks and it was a month before the system fulfilled its potential and I realised just how good the KX-R really is. This is mainly down to the use of a special, low-loss PCB material for the audio circuit (easily identified by its white colour). Once again, this is vastly more expensive than the standard green fibreglass PCBs more commonly used - but it sounds better too.

Then there is the choice of single-ended or balanced inputs. Ayre would certainly suggest the latter if your CD player or phono-stage supports it. Balanced gives a few dB more gain but I was able to adjust

the level to equalise both inputs before comparing the same cable in both configurations with a press of a button. In the past I have always preferred single-ended as I don't like the over-damped and processed sound that balanced operation often brings, but with the KX-R and the Esoteric CD player in particular, I had a very slight leaning toward the balanced option. It's a choice and judgement you will need to make for yourself within the flavour of your own system, but both are excellent. Output connections to the power amplifier are balanced only, the MX-R being equipped solely with these inputs.

Once fully run-in it doesn't take long to realise that this is a special pre-amplifier, as the music just flows from the speakers with a dynamic freedom that grabs your attention. It is as far from the traditional big, lazy and slow stereotype American amplifier of old as you can get. ►

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► Tonal balance with the MX-R power amplifiers is just about perfect, but what I am looking for in a pre-amplifier is how little it adds to the music. Certainly there will always be some colouring but I hate the constriction of flow and that uneasy feeling that the music has been electronically shaped. There is no real sense of that here. Bandwidth is excellent and wonderfully concise. There is also superb resolution and an almost tactile feeling of scale, width and texture to both instruments and voices and it is impossible to single out any single area of the



bandwidth as being any more notable than another. Musically it is extremely informative and operates on that elevated level where it is possible to isolate any area that may interest you and follow it with ease. It opens a window into the performance and the way it allows individual instruments such dynamic freedom and lucidity without the slightest sense of strain is extremely satisfying as it is so articulate and explicit. But it is fast too and relishes rhythmic challenges. So fast in fact that you don't really notice it and that is exactly the way that it should be. It peels away the layers of electronics between you and the performers and gives a natural and free access to the recording and all of its elements regardless of how complex they may be. There is a

message in so much music that is about personal communication and the way that it touches our soul or nudges at our imagination. For me it is also the dividing line between the good and the great in the world of hi-fi equipment and has become a kind of Holy Grail in my personal quest to find the very best that audio has to offer. The Ayre is up there, close to the very top, because of the way it involves you in the music.

Its potential is limited only by the standard of the signal you feed it with. It really does deserve and need the highest quality and the two-box Esoteric SACD player fulfils that role admirably. The KX-R certainly delivers superbly on simple recordings, but also relishes vast amounts of musical detail, delivered at any speed, due to its enormous resolving qualities. It washes the backgrounds clean of noise that you probably never noticed and allows you to focus on the back of the recording where I guarantee you will hear musical subtleties you were previously completely unaware of.

I really loved the way, with the Wilson Duettes in particular, that the perspectives seemed to continue forever backwards and the

preservation of ultra low-level content within is startling. This was never better illustrated than with David Sylvian's slightly eccentric Blemish remix of *The Only Daughter* in which he creates soundscapes that are almost visual by ingenious electronic manipulation of space in the studio. There is Sylvian's quivering voice, a couple of feet in front of you, but there are also crucial elements of the tracks that hang in free space far in the distance. These ambient details are often no more than suggestions, but one of the wonders of the KX/MX-R is the clarity with which they illuminate and resolve them against such jet-black backgrounds. In comparison, so many amplifiers seem murky and indistinct in this area. On

another Sylvian album, *Dead Bees On A Cake* the amplifier also shows enough compliance to adopt any rhythmic groove the music might demand. 'Krishna Blue' is a song I have heard on many systems, some of them with extraordinary resolution, but the track really only works if it has that exotic, snake-like, swaying tempo. The Ayres were simply great here.



Sinuous and supple, they did nothing to inhibit the flow of that great tabla-driven tempo because without it the whole groove of the track vanishes. You need real agility, speed and rhythmic sensitivity to achieve this level of communication and with the ►

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► Duets the amplifier maintains this intensity and quality of performance at any level. The sound doesn't collapse into the speakers when you are listening late at night although there is so much seamless energy available that being able to set the level so precisely is a great attribute.

So, put all of the KX-R's considerable capabilities into the mix and it's clearly an exceptional product. However, you can't consider it outside the context of partnering amplifiers and systems. As an MX-R owner, those were the amps with which I listened, and there's no doubt or surprise that the KX-R constitutes their near perfect partner. I'll leave the question of how it works with other amps to RG, who will be writing his own follow up to this review, but I have a sneaking suspicion that most KX-Rs will find a home alongside a pair of MX-Rs. Why? Because in the same way that the MX-Rs are an absolute steal, so too is the matching pre-amp, but they dovetail together so beautifully that the musical rewards with the combination are even greater still. And with products this beautifully finished, this neat and this carefully thought through, why wouldn't you use them together? If, at this stage, you are expecting me to say that the KX-R is the world's best pre-amp, then you'll be disappointed. There are simply too

many system and matching variables to make that statement meaningful. But if you find a pre-amp that sounds better in your system than this, you are very lucky indeed.

Criticisms are few. At times the KX-R can sound almost scientifically precise, which is more a comment than a nit-pick. It's high-resolution sound and control is either something you'll want or something you won't. I have heard amplifier

of. What little competition there is comes from products that either lack the Ayre's facilities or its build quality – and all of them are significantly more expensive. Paired with the MX-Rs, you'll be hard pressed to find a better sounding combination, irrespective of price, making the Ayre amps something of a bargain. Despite what is, in high-end terms at least, a relatively modest price tag, the KX-R is a genuine cost no object design in which construction, operation and parts quality is uncompromised and performance is everything. Yet

it is also a truly attractive package that offers great versatility and a superb user interface. This thing is a joy to own and a joy to use. Anyone shopping at this end of the market that ignores or under-estimates the KX-R and its matching amps will be making a serious (and probably costly) mistake.



combinations that have been more intimate and experienced others with a greater tonal palette, but those either cost close to twice the price or fail to match the transparency and sheer musical information delivered by the Ayres. There's also an extremely subtle flavouring to the sound, a dryness or polished smoothness to that slightly hyper reality, but it's a very, very small price to pay and will pass unnoticed in all but the very best systems. Counterbalancing this is the reality that the Ayre can do it all. It can be very taut and drive hard, with real grip and purpose, yet it is expressive enough to deal with the most delicate and sensitive of musical nuance at the same time.

There is no better sounding, fully configurable, balanced line-stage out there – at least not that I'm aware

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Pivoted tonearm
Type:	Single-box line stage pre-amplifier.
Inputs:	4x balanced (XLR) 4x single-ended (RCA).
Outputs:	2 pairs balanced (XLR) 1 pair tape outputs (XLR)
Maximum Output:	Variable
Dimensions (WxHxD):	440x95x300mm
Weight:	19kg
Finishes:	Silver or black
Price:	£11995

UK Distributor:
Symmetry System
Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488
Net. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Manufacturer:
Ayre Accoustics Inc
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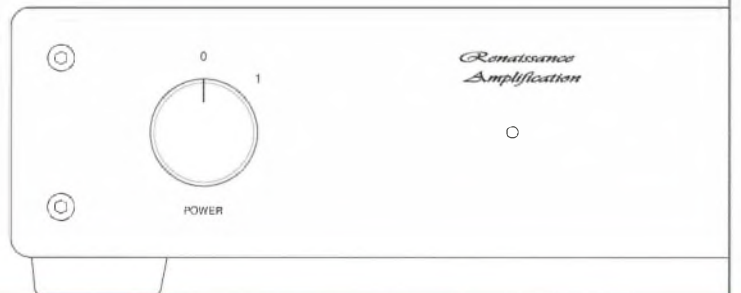
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Past Perfect... conrad-johnson Classic Vacuum Tube Pre-amplifier

by Alan Sircom



Once upon a time, conrad-johnson had a little pre-amplifier – the PV10. It was basic, it had valves, had an optional phono-stage built in (at source) and it didn't even have a remote control. It was, by c-j standards, cheap. It went away, after years of service. Now, conrad-johnson has the new Classic pre-amplifier. It is basic, has valves, has an optional phono-stage built in (at source) and it doesn't even have a remote control. It is, by c-j standards, cheap. Draw your own conclusions.

They'd be wrong. You might expect the Classic to be a re-born PV10. The reality is it's closer to a PV15 (a far more upmarket proposition), only without the fancy logic-driven remotely controllable front end. In some respects, that promises an even better sound, because the logic circuit represent the risk of high-frequency digital gubbins getting in the way of the sound. Of course, this is a gross oversimplification, and c-j has a remarkable ability to insert digital switching circuits in its amplifiers without trashing the sound in the process.

There's something altogether comforting to see a pre-amp with just two knobs and a switch on the front; no remote 'eye' or numerical display, not even an LED to denote which source is playing. No, the Classic is truly, madly, minimally. The leftmost knob is a five-position source selector; next to it is the volume dial and on the other side of the fascia is a power button. Pushing this kicks in a 45 second auto-mute, grounding the outputs via relays to stop warm-up/cool-down transients from reaching the speakers. If you opted for the phono version, under the hood is a four-way DIP switch bank, allowing you to select between 47 kOhm, 9.6 kOhm, 1.9 kOhm, 500 Ohm and 200 Ohm ▶

▶ cartridge impedance loads. And that's the nearest this pre-amp gets to modernity.

This leads to an interesting philosophical aside about how we've changed over the years. The prospect of a pre-amp without a remote control seems an alien thing today, but not so long ago it was the norm. Indeed, there were many who rejected a pre-amp purely on the grounds of it including a remote, because it wasn't ideologically pure. Such is the strength of the about face in the industry, we can't help wondering whether a remoteless pre-amp is a viable option in today's hi-fi community. Who knows, maybe the puritans will reappear in support of this statement of intent?

Like all c-j pre-amps, the Classic uses no global feedback in the circuit, and like all c-j pre-amps the Classic inverts absolute phase. So, you need to invert the loudspeaker terminals (positive in the negative, and vice versa). The line stages of the Classic use just a pair of 8080 miniature triode valves, one used single-ended in the gain stage, direct coupled to the output stage... and this helps deliver 21.8dB of gain. The optional phono-stage is designed to accommodate moving magnet and high-output moving coil cartridges; it delivers 44.5 dB of gain, accomplished by three 12AX7s with passive phono equalization and, once again, no loop feedback.

In the power supply stage, low AC impedance discrete regulators supply the DC plate voltages. This prevents the power supply from imposing its own colorations on the audio signal. A regulated filament supply further isolates the Classic from AC voltage fluctuations.

As with any 'hollow-state' product,

leaving the Classic on constantly is not a good idea; the pre-amp dissipates 30 watts of heat when running idle and that will both warm up your room and your electricity bill. It will also eat into the valve lifespan. You should get 'two to three years' of listening between re-valves (usually more, unless you happen to listen for 5,000 hours per year), but leaving the thing powered up will chew through the tubes in a few months. From start-up, the Classic only takes about a quarter of an hour to come on song anyway and there's no noticeable improvement after that time.

Running in is a different



matter, and you should expect the pre-amp to get better and better in the first couple of hundred hours of bed-in.

The back to basics approach pays dividends in the sound quality of the Classic. But it's very definitely modern c-j sound. Cast aside any ideas of the rosy, soft sound of products like the PV10, this may be called Classic, but the sound is very up-to-date. You always know this is a valve pre-amp – it's got that characteristic mid-range sweetness and deep rather than wide soundstage endemic to the species – and you can readily spot it's a c-j product – the mildly softened bass, making the sound appear smoother and more rounded than most amps,

is a dead giveaway. Nevertheless, that rich, lush and slightly syrupy sound of old is just a memory.

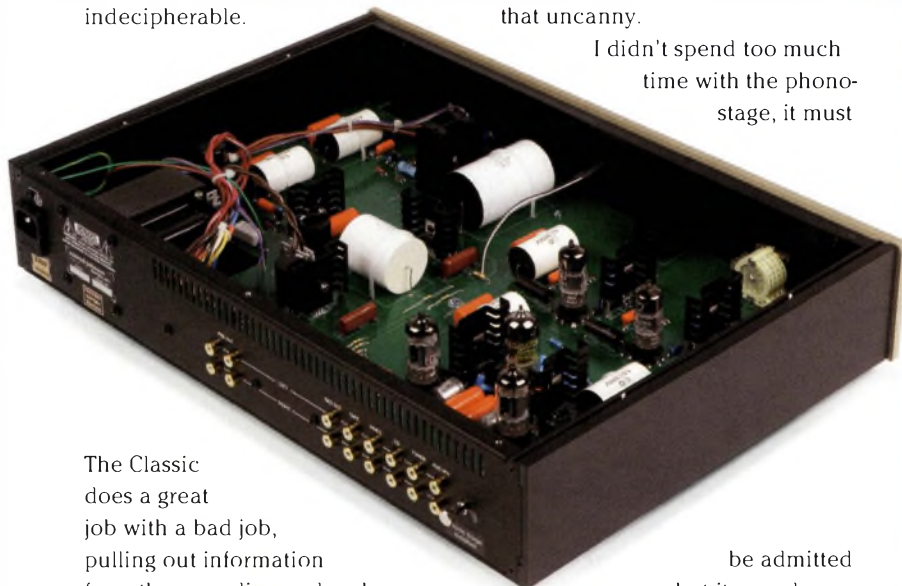
Where this pre-amp excels is in dealing with dynamics, even given the caveat about the bottom-end. The music ebbs and flows with a natural ease that can only come from a product that has all its dynamic ducks in a row. Whether you choose to try big-scale Wagnerian sturm-und-drang dynamics or the subtle shades of loud and soft from a Blue Note classic cut, whether even you feed the preamp purest Pixies loud-soft indie assault, the Classic takes everything in its stride.

It's easy to get a valve amp's dynamic presentation wrong here. Sometimes they gently soften transients, paradoxically making the

sound seem more dynamic than it really is. And sometimes this can be due to the power supply, not doing its job properly. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with this, except that it's not strictly accurate (guitar amps from the 1950s are praised by guitarists for the 'sag' you get when the rectifier is working past its limits). Here though, the dynamic range snaps to the disc; accurate and not making its own rules.

There's another wonderful by-product of this dynamic fidelity; this is a remarkably articulate

► pre-amplifier for the money. It let's you hear into the mix well, even if that mix is not a first-rate, audiophile-chummy recording; Seasick Steve's recordings are hardly state of the art – a one-time hobo turned recording artist, his recordings often accent the crunked-up guitar and leave his singing (well, growling) voice well back in the mix and very indistinct (on some tracks, it sounds as if he's been recorded with a microphone used for close-micing of instruments, like a Shure SM57, but at greater than recommended distances). It's hard – read, almost impossible – to follow what he's on about at the best of times, but tracks like 'Dog House Boogie' are practically indecipherable.



The Classic does a great job with a bad job, pulling out information from the recording and makes you understand the drawl a little better.

That being said, this is not a detail hound pre-amplifier. Sounds are precise, solid and accurate, pinpointed in a 3D space with integrity and that applies at low levels and high. What it doesn't do is leave the music wide open for analysis; detail retrieval is good, but not in the top league – this is where the PV15 comes into its own, and is probably the one place where the price differential between the two

preamps becomes most noticeable from a sonic standing.

We can live with that, because the tonal shading of the pre-amp shows what c-j does best. Find an acoustic instrument you are attuned to – to some, it's the piano, some the violin, guitar, or flute – and play discs of two different artistes playing that instrument. Not only can you hear the delicate shades that separate the different players, but you can almost discern the differences made by the instrument itself. Such subtlety is usually meant for the live experience or very occasionally the best audio; that the Classic can do this is uncanny, although it's a function of the PV15, so perhaps not that uncanny.

I didn't spend too much time with the phono-stage, it must

be admitted but it was clear that it's no afterthought.

Like the rest of the pre, it's a dynamic, accurate and tonally lovely thing, that's almost 'faster' sounding than the line-stages.

What the world needs least at the moment is just another pre-amp. Fortunately, the c-j Classic is anything but. It's basically a stripped-down version of an excellent pre-amp – the PV15 – with very few sonic compromises in the process. Yes, there's a question mark over a pre-amp with

no remote today, but if you can live with the inconvenience of setting your watch back 20 years, you get a bang-up-to-date sound that still keeps the c-j flame alive. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Vacuum tube pre-amplifier

Line Stage

Valve Complement: 2x 8080

Inputs: 5x line-level RCA/phono

Gain: 21.8dB

Outputs: 2 x main out RCA/Phono
1 x type out RCA/Phono

Main Output Impedance: 200 Ohms

Maximum Output: 9.5V

Phase: Inverts phase of all inputs
(including phono)

Optional Phono Stage

Tube Complement: 3x 12AX7

Gain: 44.5dB

Hum and Noise: 80dB below 10mV input

RIAA Equalisation: Within +/- 0.25dB of RIAA
spec

Loading: 47k, 9.6k, 1.9k, 500 and 200
Ohms

Dimensions (WxDxH): 483 x 92 x 346mm

Weight: 6kg

Prices -

Classic (Line only): £1695

Classic (Line + Phono): £2395

UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks

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Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

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Heavy Hitter...

Plinius M8 Pre-amplifier and SA201 Power Amp

by Chris Binns

My acquaintance with Plinius amplification goes back a few years to the early part of the decade, when I spent some time with their flagship power amp, the SA250. Extremely powerful and with a large dose of environmentally unfriendly but room warming class A, it would drive almost any loudspeaker to within an inch of its life and beyond, while positively relishing the challenge of a wicked load at the output terminals. At the time it was one of only a small handful of designs that was not stratospherically expensive and could throw around large amounts of power without sounding earthbound, dull or dynamically compromised, and I remember it being a particularly successful combination with the demanding and uncompromising Revel Salon loudspeaker.

It was also partially responsible for breaking my back, but that, as they say is another story.

The SA 201 might well have some family resemblance to the latest 250, but its heritage seems to be more in line with the development of the company's 'Odeon' AV amplifier, utilizing the same boards and circuit topology to create stereo chassis. Unlike the reference 250 and current 103 there are no external heat sinks, the amplifier running with relatively low bias in AB1 rather than class A, and as a result remains quite cool under most normal operating conditions. I should mention at this stage that Plinius have refined their latest circuitry to the extent that they consider the subjective differences between the two modes of operation to be extremely small.

Essentially dual-mono in construction, two massive but mechanically quiet toroidal transformers feed a generous bank of reservoir caps that supply each channel, the output stage of which consists of eight identical plastic bi-polar devices operating in what I guess to be a quasi complementary configuration, less common these days as tighter manufacturing tolerances for semi-conductors has made the fully complementary NPN – PNP topology a more popular choice for many designers.



(Interestingly, the late Julian Vereker of Naim Audi strongly believed that P and N type transistors never behaved in the same fashion under dynamic conditions and designed his amplifiers using a similar configuration.)

Two sets of good quality, five-way speaker terminals are provided together with the usual RCA and XLR sockets for single-ended and balanced input. The front panel has a small blue LED that gently pulses in standby; push the button beneath it and the unit comes to life. Out of standby it takes about twenty minutes to 'fill out' and reach its full potential and I opted to leave it on most of the time without the worry of loading the electricity bill, something I would not care to do in these troubled times with a couple of hundred watts of class A power in situ.

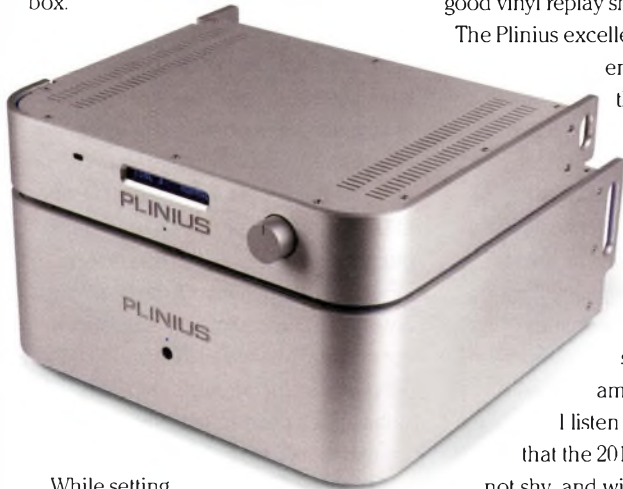
The M8 pre-amplifier is one of two models that form the new Zealand

company's line-up. Where the Tautoro is the all-singing flagship with the option of an internal phono-stage, the more competitively priced 8 is line-level only. To that end, I have had the use of the separate Koru phono-stage for the duration of the review (see the side-bar for a brief description). Of the five inputs, only the CD has the option of balanced connection, two sets of RCA and XLR are provided for output, and there is the added provision of a processor input that serves to bypass all of the pre-amp electronics when selected.

The front panel has but one control for volume, a motorised high quality Alps type augmented by a small blue display to indicate operational status. All further functions are accessed exclusively via the remote control, including power up from standby. I must confess that I was slightly put out by this; I am used to changing inputs while by the hi-fi (which to me makes far more sense) rather than playing hunt the handset amongst the cushions, and of course if the batteries run flat (as they did) it results in much frantic digging around for Allen keys and AAA cells at one in the morning as the system is rendered totally inoperative. But I guess you would get used to it. Opting for the use of discrete components over op-amps, input circuitry is based around Jfet's with high quality relay switching and a highly regulated, low-impedance power supply of substantial proportions.

The internal construction of both units is to a high standard, with decent quality components and substantial circuit boards throughout. There's considerable attention to detail and a neat, spacious layout. Aesthetically the Plinius products are characterised by the distinctive ►

▶ curves on the sides of the two-part chassis construction, the result having a mildly Art Deco air about it, and I guess if Wallace Gilbert had designed amplifiers they might have looked a little like this. Either way, the result is refreshingly different from the run of the mill square box.



While setting the Plinius system up I spent a considerable amount of time comparing results between the balanced and unbalanced connections, and unusually, opted for the former. Often, despite the manufacturers recommendation and an awareness of the theoretical superiority of balanced termination, I have found that the gains in precision and control come at the expense of expression and flow and a less musical performance. This was not the case with the Plinius where the XLR connection played to the strengths of the system with little or no compromise over the SE option.

The last few months have seen me listening to a lot of records, due in no small part to the presence of the Grand Prix turntable, Triplanar tone arm and Lyra Scala cartridge in my system. And inevitably the knowledge that before long it will be returning to the distributor has recently led to an intense exploration of my vinyl collection, to get that different perspective on as many records as possible. So this was the scenario that

the Plinius amplification stepped into, where I have to say it very quickly found its feet and joined the party. With the big Spondor SP100 and revitalised Yamaha NS1000 speakers doing the honours, I immediately felt that this was a system that really captured the spirit of what good vinyl replay should be about.

The Plinius excelled at delivering the energy and excitement that is the essence of a lot of really good analogue recordings (and often missing from average digital ones but hey, lets not go there) and in doing so restored a certain amount of faith in how I listen to music. It helps that the 201 power amplifier is not shy, and will do loud (actually make that very loud) without any sign of losing control or dignity, and on a lot of occasions led me to explore why both of the large loudspeakers are called monitors.



This was the kind of sound that made you want to drag the nearest earphone clad student with their MP3 drone into the listening room and play them a couple of full on tracks at high volume just to show them what full bodied, uncompressed wide bandwidth music should sound like. Actually I did, and

gratifyingly they really did have to pick their jaws up from the ground. Needless to say there quite a few enthusiastic late nights, and one weekend in particular which had been set-aside for playing and recording music with some friends ended up as a mammoth listening session, this was still the topic of conversation for many weeks afterwards.

CD reproduction via the Resolution Opus 21 was similarly blessed with a real sense of purpose, but I had a few problems with the new Densen 440 player where the abnormally high output levels occasionally overloaded the input of the M8, and meant that the volume control was only usable over the first few degrees of rotation where the channel balance was not entirely accurate.

While the 201 power amp instilled a sense of grip and purpose on the large loudspeakers that if I am honest, had been missing with some of the less powerful designs that I have been using, the Plinius combination also had that ability to allow music to communicate in the way that it should, and as a result be engaging on many different levels.

While the system did seem to revel in playing rock music at high levels, it still managed to draw you in when playing more delicate acoustic works at moderate volumes, where the temporal accuracy and rich palette of tonal colour gave a very natural rendition of string quartets and small scale orchestral works. Detail and presentation of instruments and the acoustic space in which they were recorded was well portrayed, and while the soundstage was not as deep or dimensional as I have heard with some high-end systems it rarely diminished my enjoyment of the music. The top end sounded suitably extended but could at times sound a little fabricated with a slightly papery quality, and it lacked the ultimate openness and transparency of some of the

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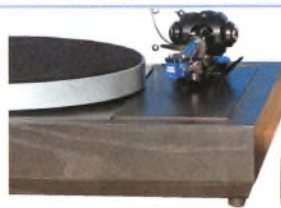
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AUDIO WORKSHOP NORWICH



Esoteric's new P-05 transport (left) and X-05 CD/SACD player.



WORKSHOP NOTES 4a: SACD, Something For Nothing?

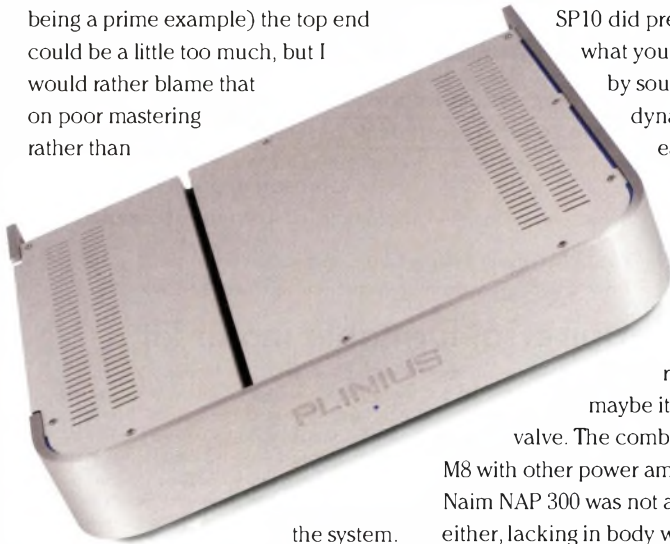
All agree that SACD is sonically a cut above CD, and despite the predictions of a number of audio scribes, SACD survives and even quietly thrives, with more SACD players & discs than ever. The question, then, is how to get it into your system effectively - with no extra cost & no extra box. Historically, a number of SACD players (Marantz SA1 and Sony XA3000ES spring to mind) have done both CD & SACD as well as their peers did just CD... the nearest thing we are going to get to a free lunch. With SACD a no-cost extra, the case for such a machine is difficult to resist and in this tradition comes the **Esoteric X-05**, a £3500 SACD players that plays CDs better than anything under £5000, & plays SACDs really rather well. Add Esoteric's peerless built quality & understated good looks and we have a machine that is already nudging its way to classic status. We have the X-05 on permanent demo at Audio Workshop Norwich so come and get yourself an audio free lunch...

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▶ more rarefied and exotic amplification that I have used recently. Playing some CD's with loudspeakers that tend toward a forward HF response (the NS1000's being a prime example) the top end could be a little too much, but I would rather blame that on poor mastering rather than



the system.

But weighed against this was the sheer dynamic stability and precision that the Plinius is capable of, and this tended to ameliorate any minor shortcomings that it might have had. It was this confident, sure footed delivery that reminded me of the better points of the early



Linn/Naim record playing systems from the mid-seventies, but without the coloured, slightly PA sound that was more often than not part of the package.

While a lot of the essence of what the Plinius amplification achieves is down to the confident way in which the 201 power amp handles the loudspeakers, a little experimentation with the individual units proved interesting. Substituting the M8 for the Tom Evans Vibe pre-amp provided a cleaner, more

finely etched top-end and a greater sense of depth and scale, but tended toward a dry and slightly mechanical result. The Audio Research SP10 did pretty much what you would expect by sounding lively, dynamic and very easy to listen to, but frustrating due to the lack of resolution and rather vague spatial representation; maybe it's time for a re-

valve. The combination of the M8 with other power amps, notably the Naim NAP 300 was not a roaring success either, lacking in body with a rather limp sense of drive and little energy while sounding 'bleached' and generally rather uninteresting. But then having checked the specifications, the Plinius system works around 500 mV for input/output sensitivity, which would not necessarily provide the best match with other equipment, a fact that should be taken into consideration if auditioning the units individually.

The fact that there exists a degree of synergy between the pre and power amp should come as no surprise, and as a pair they deliver a very satisfying and musical performance.

With enough power delivery to wake up difficult and demanding loudspeakers, the Plinius combination might not offer the last word in refinement and absolute detail, but it doesn't seem to matter as what it accomplishes admirably is the ability to convey the life and soul of the music in a way that really makes you want to listen. Best of all, it makes it fun,

The Koru phono-stage

With similar styling to the M8 pre-amp, the £1950 Koru is in fact made up of two separate compartments housed within a single chassis, to provide physical isolation between the power supply and audio circuitry. Accommodating both MM and MC cartridges, the Koru has the added bonus of comprehensive adjustment for loading with sensible values together with four gain settings. Output is via standard RCA or balanced, which was my preference despite having to fight over the single balanced input of the M8. The Koru served the system admirably, and my impression was that of a finely judged balance between the portrayal of detail and preserving the life and dynamics inherent in good vinyl. Expect a full review soon.

and any hi-fi that can do that gets the thumbs up from me – if not necessarily the neighbours. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

M8 Line-stage

Inputs: 1x balanced XLR
4x single-ended RCA/phono
Input sensitivity: 62 mV balanced
125mV single-ended
Input impedance: 50 kOhms
Outputs: 2 prs balanced XLR
2 prs single-ended RCA/phono
Output impedance: 100 Ohms
Output level: 500mV
Dimensions (WxHxD): 450x90x400mm
Weight: 5.5 Kg
Price: £2900

SA201 Power Amp

Inputs: 1pr balanced XLR
1pr single-ended RCA/phono
Power output: 225 watts per channel
Input impedance: 47KOhms
Input gain: 32dB single-ended
38dB balanced
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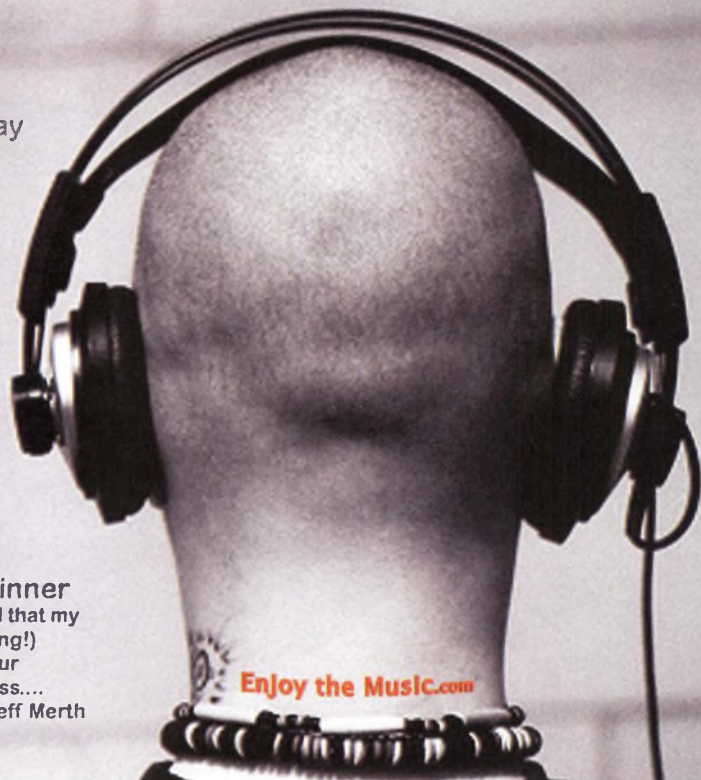
— Craig Mattice

What a great review! — Paul Kittinger

Enjoy the Music.com Contest Winner

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

Thank you again for the awesome prize! — Jeff Merth



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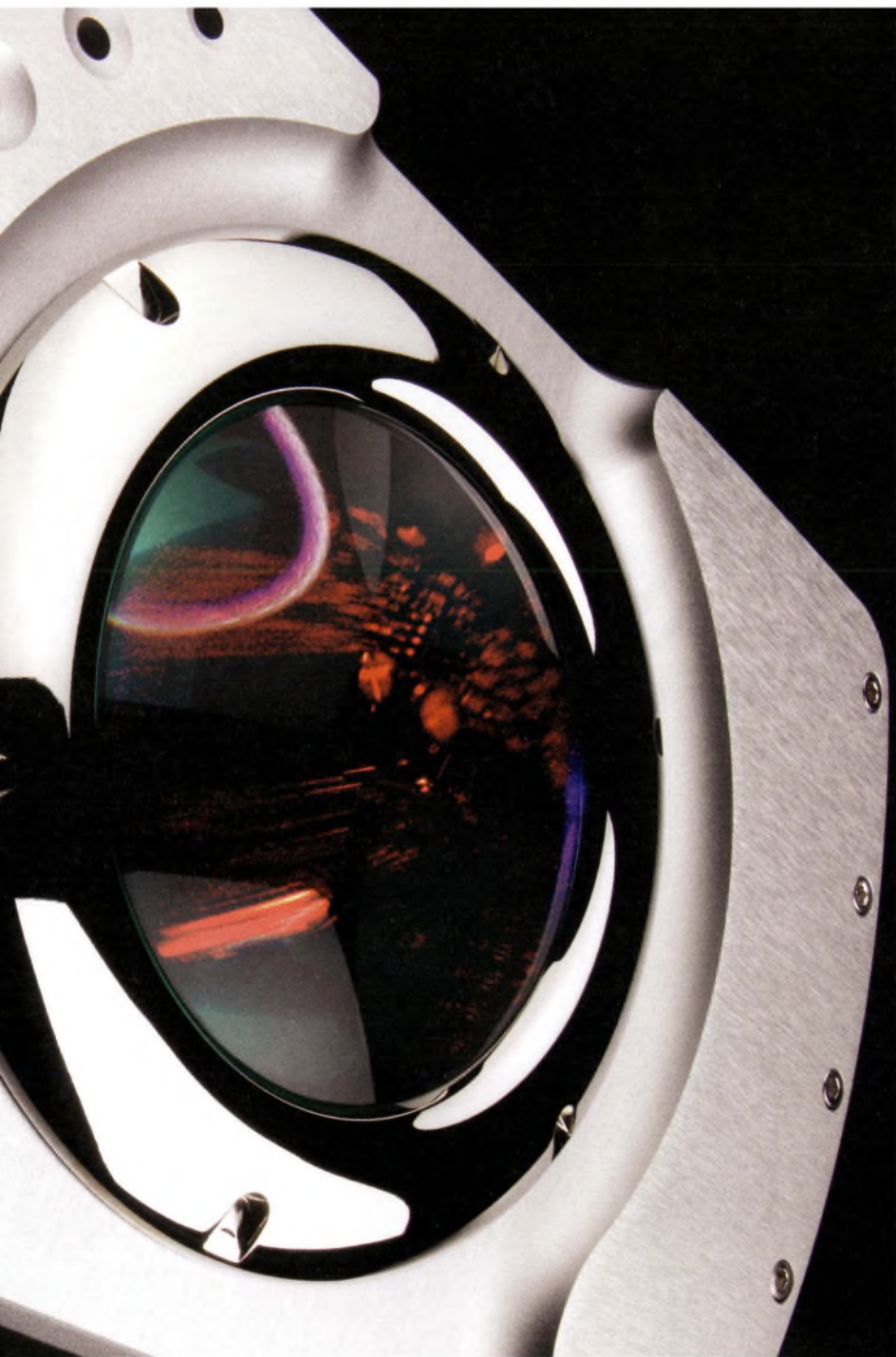


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All Change!

The Chord QBD-76 DAC

by Jimmy Hughes

Readers with long memories may remember my original review of Chord's DAC-64 in these pages – way back in November 2001. I was profoundly impressed. For me, it was a landmark product – the missing link – the component that finally confirmed CD had come of age. I really thought it was that good. Up until the DAC-64's arrival, every time a new CD player or DAC came my way, I always asked – is this the component that will finally make CD sound equal to good analogue? Always, the answer was – no. Then I experienced the DAC-64, and at last felt able to give an affirmative answer.

Since the original DAC-64, there's been a Mk II version with twin digital inputs to enable it to work with Chord's Blu CD transport. I had the pleasure of reviewing that combination, and found it produced fantastic results – delivering the sort of big, dimensional soundstage you rarely encounter with CD. The DAC 64's 'secret' was its exceptional timing accuracy and the elimination of jitter. As timing in the digital domain improves, the music sounds more detailed and articulate, while at the same time becoming subtler and more finely shaded. Deep bass performance improves too.

As we all know, CD (for all its superficial sharpness and immediacy) can often sound rather 'flat' and lacking in presence. There's a lack of dimensionality. CD often produces a uniform range of tone colours that lack subtlety and range. During climaxes, the music gets loud

but doesn't really expand to fill the room. Originally, most of us put this down to the limitations of 16bit and 44.1kHz sampling. But, LPs cut from digital master tapes have a degree of 'dimensionality' and far greater subtlety than CD. So maybe the reason lay elsewhere. Perhaps CD's limitations were not to do with its spec. The DAC-64 showed this to be the case.



It impressed me with the way it made voices and instruments sound real, rather than like cardboard cut-outs. Suddenly, there seemed to be a degree of individuality and separation that had never been apparent before. Even some early CDs that hadn't been mastered properly were transformed.

However, no product goes on forever. And after a decade or so in production, Chord finally decided to 'retire' the DAC-64, bringing out the QBD-76 to replace it, QBD standing for Quarter Back DAC. The new product might be the same size and shape as the DAC-64, employing the same, chunky milled from solid casework as the rest of the Chord series, but it's entirely different inside, offers

a number of new features, and is said to give improved performance. Perhaps the most newsworthy feature is the ability to receive music from A2DP Bluetooth mobile phones via a removable aerial on the back of the unit. Why? Because with increasing digital convergence, the gap between mobile phones (which everybody carries) and iPod type MP3 players (which most people carry) has narrowed so much as to become almost imperceptible.

So the iPhone is a phone, a PDA and a music player – along with an increasing number of the competition. Use a QBD-76 in your system and you (or anyone visiting the house) can route music directly from their portable player/phone through the main hi-fi. Which opens a world of opportunity, not just for continuity between home and portable music listening, but for kids and their friends too, finally engaging that elusive next generation of hi-fi listeners... The changes to the internal technology are just as profound. The original DAC-64 used four gate array chips



▶ to provide 1024 filter taps. Increase in component performance across the intervening years means that the QBD-76 can now offer 4096 taps, with 8th order noise shaping and 2608 times over-sampling. Whereas the rear mounted pulse array in the DAC-64 constituted a single entity, the new design provides each of the four chips with its own power supply and ground plane, separating each phase, left and right to improve intermodulation distortion – literally quartering the back section of the circuit

surprisingly, there's also a USB input to interface with PC or server based sources. Add the changes in layout to the DAC's increased ability to cope with a wider range of sources and that name starts to make sense.

Initially, I hooked the QBD-76 to Arcam's DV135 CD/SACD player. There was an immediate improvement. The sound was bigger and more three-dimensional, sounding slightly louder and more dynamic. The music had greater presence and fine detail, with increased

there was a difference between Max buffer and switching the buffer off, but it wasn't huge. However, when I tried the same comparison using a Bluetooth mobile phone, the improvement was absolutely massive. Indeed, between Low and Max, the sound went from distinctly 'lo-fi', to extremely good. Using the phone with the buffer off, the music sounded a bit diffuse and messy, with no bass. Setting the buffer to Min improved things, but set to Max the sound was transformed. All of a sudden there was a bass line, and a soundstage with depth, space, and dimensionality.

All in all it was a remarkable improvement, making the phone a credible source component

Because of the QBD-76's buffer, it should have a distinct sonic advantage over other DACs offering Bluetooth facilities. No matter

how good the DAC is, if the source is full of jitter you'll hear it as poor sound. Clean up the jitter and the sound will be much closer to its original pristine state. For some reason, music from the mobile phone sounded quieter than CD. I didn't switch all my listening to the portable phone, but those tracks I played sounded very listenable providing you had the buffer set to maximum. It might not sound quite as good as CD at its best, but it wasn't too far off.

The four second buffer on the QBD-76 makes your choice of CD transport and connecting cable less critical, as any jitter issues are largely dealt with. However, a



board. At the same time, the analogue phase locked loop on the DAC64 has been replaced by an all-digital design, further reducing jitter. These changes have required an upgrade in the PCB from a four to a six-layer design, allowing the use of interleaving ground planes, which has had a critical impact on both technical and sonic performance. All of which amounts to a pretty thorough overhaul of the circuit components and topology.

Practically speaking, the optical, BNC and AES/EBU inputs are now doubled up and able to operate individually, or as twin inputs with a transport like the Blu. Not

projection. Just like the DAC-64, there's the option of a two-stage 'buffer' that re-clocks the digital signal to reduce jitter. Set to Max, this results in a delay of about four seconds before you hear the music. Set to Min, this delay reduces to about one second. I found the four second setting gave the cleanest sound.

However, any difference you hear depends on the quality of your CD transport and the cable connecting it to the DAC. If you compared the Max buffer setting with Off, and found little or no difference, that indicates your transport has very low jitter. If the difference is big, it demonstrates that jitter is high. With the Arcam,



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► dedicated transport like Chord's Blu (which actually performs best with the buffer switched off) provides a further improvement. The DAC is able to play a wide range of digital media, being able to sample at 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176, and 192kHz. As noted above, there are two unbalanced coaxial digital inputs using BNC plugs, an optical input, plus a balanced digital input via XLR and the USB, giving plenty of connectivity options. Analogue outputs are unbalanced (3v) and balanced (6v) which are, if anything, a little too healthy for some systems. For the most part I listened via the unbalanced outputs, but if your amplifier has balanced inputs you'll get a significant improvement by using the QBD-76's balanced XLR outputs.

The sound will be bigger and more dynamic, yet subtler too, with greater finesse and delicacy.

The original DAC-64 had a phase-inverted analogue output – something that concerned a few users. The new QBD-76 offers a choice of 'correct' or reversed absolute phase. However, I have to say I preferred the sound with phase reversed. The sound has greater depth and space, and seems more coherent somehow.

Chord claim the new QBD-76 sounds better than the DAC-64. I still have my original Mk I DAC-64, albeit without firmware updates. Comparing the two, I definitely felt the QBD-76 sounded sweeter, cleaner, and more detailed. There was no loss of detail or presence, yet the overall presentation was much nicer. Some listeners found the original DAC-64 a touch cold and 'hard' tonally. While the QBD-76 is recognisably from the same stock, it definitely

sounds sweeter and warmer. There's no loss of clarity or bite, but the music has an extra degree of spaciousness and warmth that wasn't quite so apparent with the DAC-64. The QBD-76 produces a more fluid musical presentation; it sounds effortless and relaxed, despite being more tactile than the DAC-64. Comparing it to the Arcam on a recording of a string quartet, there was a heightened sense of bows

being drawn across strings – a greater feeling of musical tension.

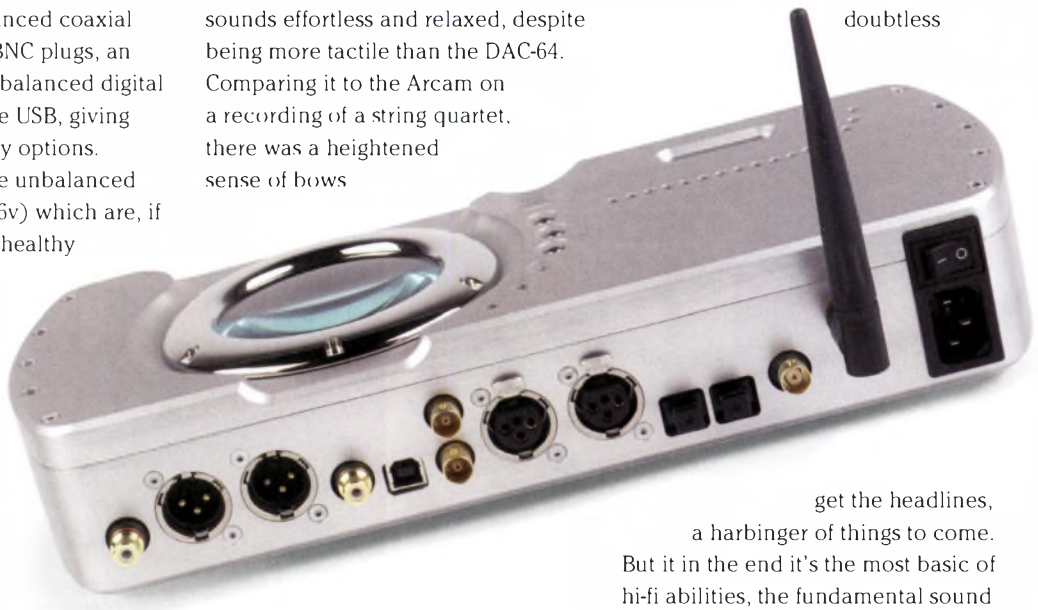
While the Arcam sounded excellent, listening via the QBD-76 you were more in touch with the music. It felt as though subtle changes of tone colour and dynamics were more apparent. Even when the music was quiet with not much happening, the playing had real tension and presence. The Arcam felt slightly bland in comparison.

The QBD-76 offers exceptionally deep powerful bass. You notice this on music, but also on low frequency noise (traffic rumble) which has a very 'real' quality. On several discs, I heard noises that almost sounded as though they were coming from outside the room. I never realised how much LF air my speakers could move!

The QBD-76 left me deeply impressed. Even more so than the original DAC-64, its carefully executed engineering and increased versatility

effectively future proof it as well as making it an upgrade that (almost) can't fail. Your CD player would have to be pretty amazing not to benefit from the QBD-76. The ability to use it with a Bluetooth mobile phone is very useful and will doubtless

get the headlines, a harbinger of things to come. But in the end it's the most basic of hi-fi abilities, the fundamental sound quality that really impressed me. ►+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Standalone DAC
Digital Inputs:	1x BNC 2x optical 2x AES/EBU XLR 1x USB 1x Bluetooth
Sample Rates Accepted:	44.1 – 192kHz
Analogue Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/phono 1pr balanced XLR
Output Levels:	3V (single-ended) 6V (balanced)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	338 x 60 x 145mm
Weight:	7kg
Finishes:	Black or silver, brushed or polished
Price:	From £2990

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PS Audio Digital Link DAC

by Ian Harris



Even during periods of single-box CD Player supremacy, the stand-alone DAC always maintained a niche as a loss-limited upgrade to an existing integrated unit. Take into account the speed of development within digital signal processing and, intuitively, such a step makes a great deal of sense. However, traditionally, any upgrade strategy which depended on the continuing health of an ageing transport also carried a fair degree of risk. Take valves out of the equation, and that transport is likely to be the most vulnerable link in the musical supply chain by far. On balance, I've always tended to lean towards the slightly conservative view that, if its time for a new DAC, it might just be time for a new transport as well.

Of course, digitally speaking, the times are a changing. Even if we are not yet all storing our music on hard discs instead of polycarbonate ones, an audio DAC today is just as likely to be connected to a desktop PC or a hard-drive music streamer as a traditional CD player. In return for the presence of suitably universal connectivity, units such as PS Audio's Digital Link are freed from dependency on potentially fragile transports. Instead, they can be the unifying link between a number of different digital sources. With improvements in digital media being constantly driven forward by both business and leisure developments, nowadays a system's software storage arrangements are likely to change far more rapidly and fundamentally than any downstream component.

In order to take full advantage of this step-change, the Digital Link's inputs include USB, coaxial (RCA) and optical (Toslink), while both balanced and single-ended outputs offer similar high levels of flexibility on the analogue side. Operationally, the unit is a paragon of simplicity – if the unit is connected to a single source, this will automatically

▶ be recognized upon start-up. Alternatively, if connected to multiple sources, these can be manually toggled through via a front panel control. The fascia also features a second control, offering the useful option of hot-switching between the 96 and 192 kHz up-sampling rates.

As the Digital Link's USB compatibility is so central to its functional appeal, I started by connecting the unit to my desktop PC. While the theory of "plug and play" is one thing, successful execution can sometimes be quite another. However, in this instance, the process worked flawlessly, with the new device being immediately and correctly recognized. My normal PC based listening involves a reasonable quality (although somewhat venerable) Creative Labs sound card feeding a Cambridge Audio A5i Amp and KEF Q1 speakers. The resulting sound is fairly coherent, highly detailed and gratifyingly energetic, but the introduction of the Digital Link produced immediate and significant sonic benefits.

The A5i is not an amplifier that is backwards in coming forwards but, fed from the PS Audio DAC, there was a further increase in its grip on the KEFs' fundamentals, allowing the sound to gain a sense of weight and presence that had previously been sorely lacking. The location of this system (with the KEFs being wall mounted) means that soundstage depth is always going to be limited, but the inclusion of the Digital Link produced a solid and well-proportioned lateral image array, which helped to turn the sound from a computer generated facsimile of the real thing to something altogether more palpable and musically convincing. Both the amp and the speakers are very able budget performers, but the extent to which

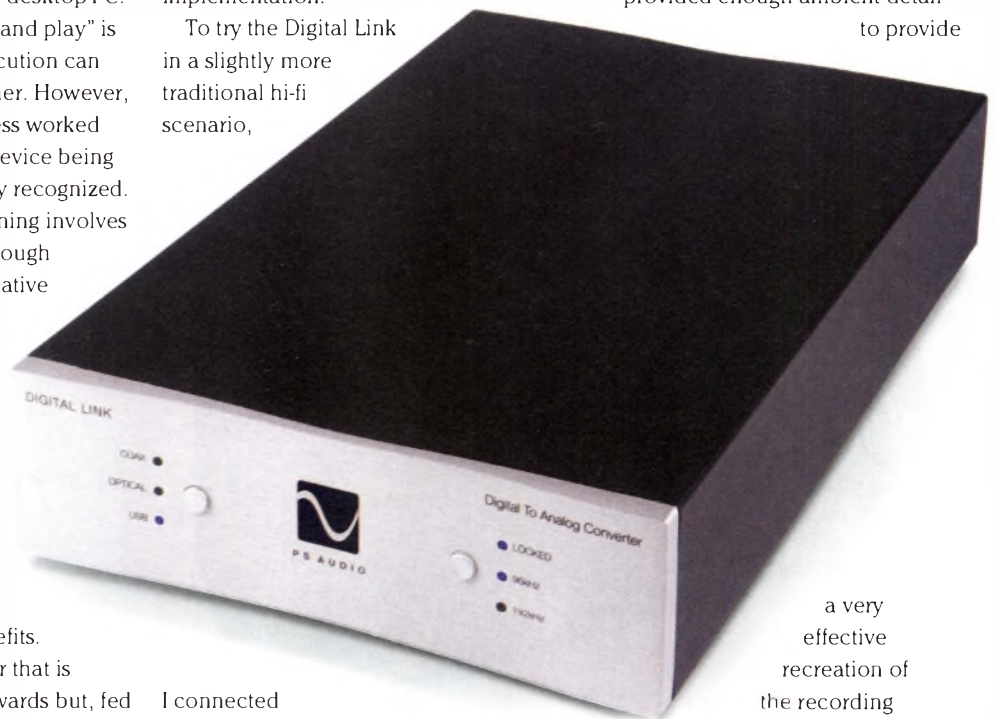
the sound card had been holding the system back was quite surprising. I felt that it was the presence of a powerful and well designed output stage, rather than any unique digital processing, that was galvanizing the system so effectively, but whatever the cause, the net effect was hugely improved sound quality that transcended both the relatively modest componentry and the set-up's "challenging" physical implementation.

To try the Digital Link in a slightly more traditional hi-fi scenario,

I connected it between the digital output of a Cayin CDT-17A CD Player and a Prometheus Audio passive pre-amp which, in turn, fed Ming Da MC8005 mono-blocs and JMLab Micro Utopia Bes. Listening to the Kings of Convenience's *Quiet Is The New Loud*, there was the same combination of detail and presence provided by the computer-based set up. However, this time, the use of carefully placed speakers on solid stands allowed the DAC's spatial performance to come to the fore. Now, the genuinely impressive image array retained a sense of perspective across the whole width of the soundstage, with even images directly behind the speakers

maintaining a convincing sense of depth.

Switching to the title track from the bonus "unplugged" CD included with Jack Savoretti's *Between The Minds*, the vocal was laid impressively bare, with phrasing, inflection and even some unintended glottal activity all present and correct. This recording offers a genuine sense of in-room presence, and the Digital Link provided enough ambient detail to provide



a very effective recreation of the recording venue. Taking this theme even further, the final track on the CD is a live cover of 'Ring of Fire', from Le Grand Rex Theatre, Paris. Here, the sense of acoustic space was quite stunning, with the audience's reaction to the introduction of this classic imaging well outside the walls of my listening room.

Maintaining a vocal theme, Minnie Ripperton's timeless classic 'Lovin' You' (*Perfect Angel/Adventures In Paradise*) was reproduced with an utterly beguiling tonal sweetness. The sense of air around the background birdsong provided a hugely natural sense of space that



► had more than a touch of vinyl about it. Perhaps there was a tiny bit more sweetness and warmth than absolute neutrality would dictate, but if there was a hint of euphony, it was both subtle and achieved with no loss of focus or detail.

Moving things up-tempo, Kenny Aronoff's snare-shots from John Mellencamp's 'Rooty Toot Toot' (*Lonesome Jubilee*) displayed a visceral combination of weight and impact, which provided the track

with an irresistible heartbeat without ever overpowering its sense of balance. Indeed, pushing up the volume suggested an excellent degree of underlying control, with drums, guitars and vocals all maintaining coherent and discrete presences. In the final analysis, perhaps there was just a touch more weight than ultimate transient impact, but I was only really aware of any shortcomings when running A/B comparisons with the vastly more expensive Wadia 27ix.

In terms of the Digital Link's 96 and 192 kHz up-sampling modes, throughout the listening programme, I found the 192 option consistently preferable. Notwithstanding the undoubted musical abilities of the

finest filter-less players, if a unit has an up-sampling topology, my normal preference is for the highest available rate, and the PS Audio unit certainly reinforced this prejudice. While 192 kHz seemed to offer a small increase in detail and focus, I didn't feel that there was any concomitant decrease in musical flow. For me, there was a definite feeling that 192 was more and 96 was less, rather than each option offering its own set of virtues.

Of course, other ears may tell

a different story, and the fact that you can change between modes "on the fly" remains an extremely useful feature.

In summary, the Digital Link is a remarkably versatile little unit. Place it unceremoniously on an office desk, feed it a digital signal from a mundane PC and it demonstrates a seeming ability to extract 110% from both source material and modest downstream components. OK, it shines a fairly unflattering spotlight on particularly low-resolution material, but give it a half-decent supply of bits and its drive, detail, weight and resolution shine through. Up the ante

a little by slipping the unit in between four-figure source, amplification and speakers and you get a better idea of the DACs character. Without a doubt, it has all the detail and focus typical of an up-sampling unit, but it also displays a sweetness and warmth which consistently locks into the heart of a musical performance.

Ultimately, notwithstanding its sonic virtues, it is the versatility, ease of use and plug-and-play PC compatibility that make this unit a winner. For those on the cusp of the brave new digital world, the PS Audio Digital Link's combination of flexibility and performance make it a remarkably future-proof purchase. Nowadays, if your CD Transport gives up the ghost the day after you've bought a new DAC, maybe its not a disaster after all; perhaps its just fate-assisted progress. ➤+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Up-sampling digital to analogue converter
Converter type:	Texas Instruments PCM1798DB Hot-switchable 96 kHz / 192 kHz
Digital inputs:	1 x USB 1 x Co-axial (RCA) 1 x Optical (Toslink)
Analogue outputs:	1 x Balanced (XLR) 1 x Single-ended (RCA)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	210x70x350 mm
Weight:	3.8 kg
Price:	£799

UK Distributor:

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Bridge Over Troubled Waters? The Cambridge Audio azur DacMagic-B

by Alan Sircom

Cambridge Audio is not a name you see often in the pages of *Hi-Fi Plus*, yet when you do it's nearly always accompanied by a kind of "How do they do that for the money?" astonishment. It's a UK designed, Chinese-built range of audio electronics that's designed to fit snugly into the low to medium end of the separates hi-fi market. Nevertheless, looking past the price tags, the company has some exceptionally high-tech and distinctly hi-fi friendly products in its line, of which the £200 DacMagic is merely the latest. Except that it's also one of the most important products to hit the stores this year.

There's a deep-seated sense of no-bullshit about Cambridge Audio products that could be considered an inversion of some aspects of high-end sensibilities. Although well-made, there's no brushed-gold, inch-thick casing, no heat sink carved to spell out the name of the designer's cat or Nuclear Football remote control. These products are functional on the outside, built smart on the in. And the DacMagic is no exception; it's a black or silver paperback (in size and weight), with a separate plug-top power supply. The front panel has buttons to control power, source selection (USB and two sets of Toslink or S/PDIF co-axial inputs) and choice of filter slope, and five LEDs to determine the incoming sampling rate. It up-samples to 24bit, 192kHz precision thanks to Adaptive Time Filtering, developed in partnership with Anagram Technologies in Switzerland. The chipset features a pair of Wolfson's 8740 DACs coupled to a 32bit Texas DSP, and it has balanced XLR and single-ended phono outputs, as well as a Toslink and S/PDIF coaxial out. OK, dedicated DAC twitchers will crow that the Wolfson 8741 is the chip du jour, but re-read this ▶



▶ paragraph again, cross-referencing it with the following words – two hundred pounds – and try not to be impressed.

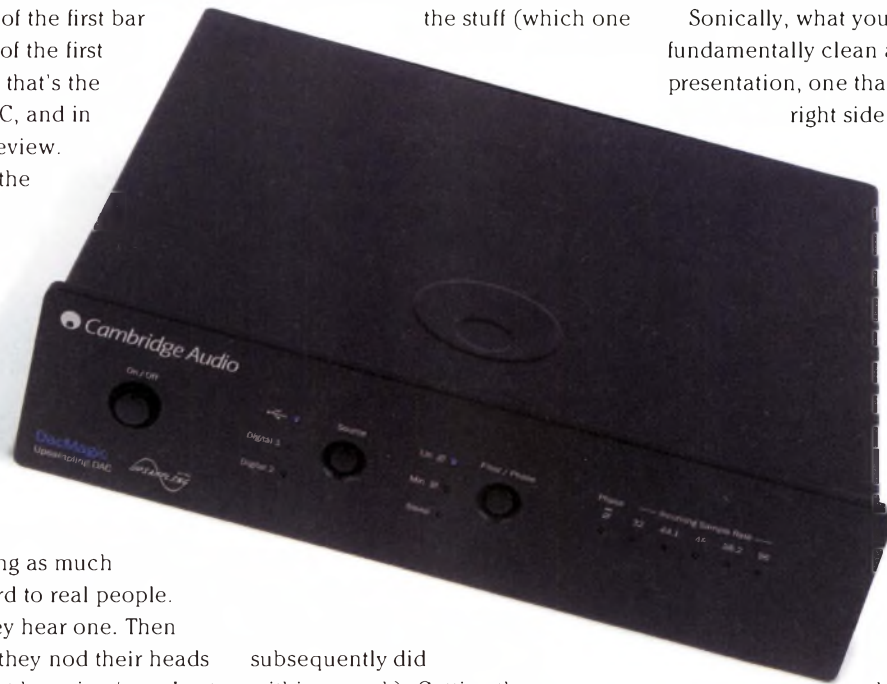
We've seen DACs before. We've even seen cheap DACs before. What makes this one so important? Simply that this isn't just a digital-to-analogue converter; it's a human-to-audiophile converter. You see, insert this little box in between someone's PC (or PS3) and an amp, and the regular muggle turns into a hi-fi buff by the end of the first bar or at the sound of the first gun report. And that's the point of this DAC, and in particular this review.

Viewed from the perspective of *Hi-Fi Plus*, the DacMagic is the kind of money one might spend on a mains lead. On the other hand, the idea of a DAC itself, let alone one costing as much as £200, is absurd to real people. That is, until they hear one. Then they change... they nod their heads and give you that knowing 'now I get it' look.

So, there's two options for you, to spread our particular concept. Buy one and loan it to your friends or buy lots and give them to friends. The result is the same thing – if you loan it out, you won't get it back.

We did just that. We pitched up to what is arguably the least audiophile bunch around – a handful of twenty-something gamers huddled round a Sony PlayStation 3 and a copy of *Guitar Hero*. Turning up with an amp, speakers and a DAC was dangerously 'dad stuff' for them, but less than a minute into the experience, the guy wielding the plastic Gibson

did precisely what we expected... up went the volume, a broad smile emerged and he became more and more animated. A quick rendition of 'Back in Black' and 'Paradise City' (some things never change) and they started asking prices and asking questions about iPods and lap-top outputs. Where not more than 20 minutes earlier, there was a look of outright disgust at all this 'old man' hi-fi gear, now they were asking where they could buy the stuff (which one



subsequently did within a week). Getting the product back to finish off the review was tough; I could out-manoeuvre them easily, but their superior thumb speed was a bit of a problem.

The DacMagic has been dipped in a lot of purple prose in the media. There are those touting it as the best converter on the market, possibly the best that's ever been heard. Let's be sensible; it's a remarkable £200 DAC, but it's still a £200 DAC. It will help make a cheap CD player sound like something between a Cambridge Audio Azur 740C and an 840C (which is still saying a lot... these are a fine pair of CD players, and take the re-sampling up to dizzy

384kHz heights). It won't intrinsically improve a good, current player costing more than about £1,000, or a decade old player that cost £1,500 or more when new. It does, however, have an uncanny habit of latching on to some frankly shonky datastreams, the sort of back-of-the-attic digital relics that are only dragged out to see how good a lock some DACs have. The DacMagic is very, very good at reading less-than-frisky digits from tired old players.

Sonically, what you get is a fundamentally clean and honest presentation, one that stays just the right side of brightness.

It's a paragon of neutrality (that'll be the Swiss connection) making even old acoustic recordings of bluesman Blind Blake come to life.

Stereo is wide, not especially deep or high, but extremely solid. Even when

handling large-scale orchestral works, instruments are locked down in their own distinct spaces within the mix. But the big thing is detail; there's loads of it, precise from top to bottom, and every Hertz an accurate one. No rolled off highs, suppressed mids or flattened bass lines. Far from it; in fact the bass manages to balance perfectly between energy and depth. Bass lines – even those found in dub reggae – are easy to define and full of drama.

Like any good DAC, it makes its presence felt more by the lack of sonic signature than its



▶ intrusiveness. In fairness, this doesn't make for a big step up for most CD players, but the USB option is a very different story. Suddenly, iTunes becomes a legitimate audiophile source option (the DacMagic is easy to hook to PC and Mac alike) and the freedom it imparts to the sound of Apple Lossless files is little short of revelatory.



The filter options are interesting. They represent mild shaping of the sound, instead of fundamental changes from filter to filter. Both 'linear' and 'minimal' phase seemed to work best, with CD mildly better through the clean, deeper bass presentation of 'linear phase' setting and Apple Lossless files more suited to the more cuddly and warm 'minimal phase'. The Steep filter didn't have


a big place in my listening tests, but neither was it out of place compared to the others; it gets lost with orchestral music but was wonderful for making sense of those really early Louis Armstrong Hot Five recordings, through both CD and computer audio sources. It's a mild preference, only determined by lengthy listening sessions; when it's right, the sound just snaps into some kind of temporal focus, making transients more precise.

There are two schools of thought here, depending on your anal-retentive score. Some will fiddle with the filters, find what they like best and leave well alone. Others will determine what filter shape goes best with every single recording on each source and adjust accordingly. Fortunately, the DacMagic isn't bothered either way.

What limits does the £200 price tag impose? Well, the case itself is thin, with a rubber foot designed for vertical standing. The lettering on the case is printed and will probably rub off in time. We would also love to hear what it would sound like with something a bit more potent than the plug-top power supply it comes with.

Oh, and if we are being really picky, ST optical and AES/EBU would be remarkable, but would undoubtedly add to the price. Notice though... none of these price tag limitations affect either the performance or the build of the DacMagic, but are really just idle musings.

Cleverly, Cambridge Audio's DacMagic does everything right. It fights impressively above its weight,

but not to the point where the likes of PS Audio should be worried. More importantly, the combination of keen price and easy connectivity to computer audio and gaming products adds a new dimension, turning gamers and iTunes users into proto-audiophiles, seemingly in a matter of seconds. Say 'hello' to the hi-fi wow factor, 21st Century style. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Standalone DAC
Converters:	2x Wolfson WM8740 24bit
Word Widths:	16-24bit (16 bit for USB)
Digital Input Sampling	
Frequencies:	32kHz, 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, 96kHz
Digital filter:	TI TMS 320VC5501 DSP up-sampling to 24bit 192kHz
Analogue filter:	2-Pole Dual Differential Bessel Double Virtual Earth Balanced
Output Impedance:	<50ohms
Output Level:	2.1V (unbalanced) 4.2V (balanced)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	215 x 52 x 191mm
Weight:	1.2kg
Price:	£200

Manufacturer:
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The Real Slim Shady... The Cain & Cain Abby Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

There's tragedy in the background to this clever loudspeaker, as the undoubtedly creative designer Terry Cain died a couple of years ago. Ironically, he was driving cross-country to a hi-fi show, stopped for a break, removed his shoes and socks to walk in the grass, and was bitten by a tick carrying Lyme disease. Within a couple of years he'd succumbed.

Happily his creations live on, and few loudspeakers look more dramatic or show more originality than the Cain & Cain Abby. This is no mainstream product. It's well out there in the left field in approach, presentation and performance, but does provide the sort of package that will certainly appeal to a particular type of enthusiast, and does so at a reasonably competitive £1,699, all things considered. Indeed, UK importer Angelsound apologises on its website for charging as much as a pound-per-dollar exchange rate for bringing the Abby over from Washington state in the USA, because the speaker's curious and unusual shape requires particularly careful packing and shipping.

It's a single-driver, high efficiency design, based around a Fostex F166E driver with an ultra-lightweight twin-cone (main plus whizzer) paper diaphragm. That alone determines a great deal about how the system behaves, if not perhaps how well it behaves.

For some people the concept of a single full-range driver is simply a contradiction in terms. Certainly any attempt to reproduce all three decades of the audio band with just one drive unit does create problems, especially at the top and bottom ends of the band,

but also in an unavoidable inability to maintain consistent dispersion across that band (with current technology at least). The main task for any designer planning to go the full-range driver route is to try and minimise the effects of these problem areas.

Several techniques may be used to boost the bass output, and the Abby uses

something called a Voigt quarter wave pipe.

Though rather before my time, Paul Voigt remains a legend in audio circles, as possibly the creator of the first genuine hi-fi speaker, in association with Lowther. Back in those early 1940s days, hi-fi was mono and amplifiers had very little power, so high efficiency was vital.

Achieving high efficiency in the mid-band was largely a matter of magnet size, but matching it in the bass is more difficult. The quarter wave pipe is a little like a cross between a tuned column and a horn, both of which can supply good efficiency at the bass end of things.

Although quarter-wave loadings are usually folded, to fit them into the conventional rectilinear enclosure, the Abby makes an aesthetic virtue out of keeping the tapered pipe straight. The result is an unusually tall enclosure looking for all the world like it could have been made using a couple of planks of wood, tapering to a near-edge at the top but about 77 cms deep with a large port near the base – though in this case the planks are bonded sections of solid alder wood, nicely polished and therefore very pretty. A matching wooden plinth enhances the overall stability, but do take care not to lose the supplied spikes, which have a different thread from European types: I had to make do with cones after the original spikes had gone astray.

The drive unit is mounted on a chunky and carefully profiled circular boss about halfway up (or down) the column. While the rather obvious net result makes no attempt to disguise its presence, a backward tilt helps reduce the intrusiveness, and the effect is both stylish and very attractive in its way. In truth I don't know ►



▶ whether Cain & Cain originated this unusual shape; probably not, as I've seen pictures of something called an Albatross that looks similar. However, I've never seen one in the wood, as it were, notice that it has a rather different driver line-up, and therefore suspect the two designs are essentially unrelated.

One thing is certain; amongst systems using 'full range' drivers, the Abby does surprisingly well, especially since it's not unduly expensive. It combines high efficiency with a very easy amplifier load across a respectable enough bandwidth.

The far-field in-room frequency (power) response might not be all that smooth, but in context it is surprisingly well balanced overall. The trend is a little lean in the upper bass (80 – 150Hz) and lower midband (250 – 400Hz), a little prominent through the upper midband (with peaks at 700Hz and 1.3kHz), and rather dull at the top-end (above 6kHz). Smooth it's not, especially through the treble, but as single-driver systems go, it's as good as any I've tried.

Close-to-wall placement helps a stereo pair deliver realistic quantities of bass down to around 45Hz under in-room conditions, which is very creditable since the sensitivity is around 94dB and the impedance stays above 8 ohms throughout. The top end does tend to roll off above 5kHz or thereabouts, under far-field averaged conditions, so the best advice is to try and listen as close to the main forward axes of the drive units as possible, because the driver delivers progressively higher frequencies in a progressively tighter, narrower beam, notwithstanding the 'whizzer' cone. For an extra £200, there's also a Super Abby with an extra rear-mounted

alnico-magnet horn tweeter, which should add some welcome extra air and sparkle.

When the sound of the Abby is compared to other speakers, the first reaction is mild shock at the very obvious mid-band coloration. That is actually quite normal for this kind of loudspeaker, and while it is clearly something that would be better avoided, it's surprising how quickly the ear/brain learns to adjust – just as it adjusts to the way the sound of speech changes as one moves around the various different rooms of a house. The Abby does initially sound rather 'bathroomy', 'hollow' and 'echoey', adding a 'cupped hands' character to voices, but it also has quite startlingly realistic coherence and dynamic expression, so that the familiar vocal characteristics of a well known broadcaster somehow seemed to be enhanced, and his human qualities (or lack of same!) were clearly brought out.

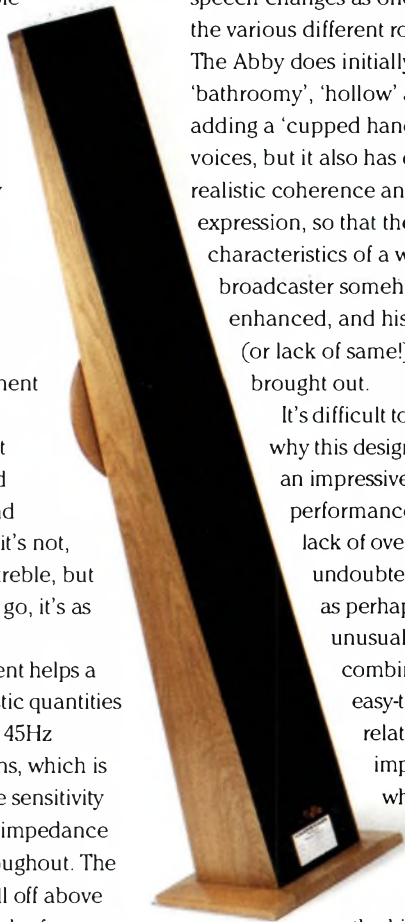
It's difficult to say exactly why this design has such an impressive dynamic performance, though the lack of overall timesmear undoubtedly plays a part, as perhaps does the unusually high sensitivity combined with a very easy-to-drive, relatively high impedance, both of which will make the amplifier's job a whole lot easier. In fact the high efficiency can almost be an embarrassment with regular solid state amplification, as normal listening levels tend to be cramped right down the bottom of the volume control range.

A major plus, of course, is that this speaker is eminently well suited to being driven by low powered single-ended valve amplifiers, and is

quite capable of delivering plenty of loudness from just a handful of watts

Genuinely deep bass is obviously not on the agenda here, so some loss of scale is inevitable, especially on orchestral or techno material. There could be more sparkle and air at the top end of the band too, but again this is more of an observation than a criticism, and in fact the whole Abby experience is thoroughly enjoyable and utterly involving. This speaker goes a lot further than most in breaking down the barriers between recording and listener, simply because of the vividness and subtle coherence of its midrange reproduction.

Image focus is excellent too, though the level of coloration, the lack of extreme top end 'air' and the consequence of close-to-wall positioning do mildly impair depth perception. But these speakers also bring an extraordinary realism and analysis to the most difficult material, such as the massed voices of a choir, or the complex string textures of an orchestra. While there's no denying the obviously coloured and forward upper mid-band, provided this is deemed acceptable, the Abby is unquestionably one of hi-fi's great bargains.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single driver with Voigt quarter wave pipe loading
Driver:	166mm full range (114mm cone)
Bandwidth:	45Hz - 20kHz ±5dB
Sensitivity:	94dB
Nominal Impedance:	8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	235x1740x225mm
Price:	£1,699

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Little But Large... The TLA Shin SET amplifier

by Roy Gregory

It's not often that you need to flex your knees and straighten your back just to pick up a pre-amp power supply – especially when it's mono and there are two of them to feed the stereo control unit. And if it is necessary, then at least you can assume that the control unit itself will be manageable – but you'd be wrong about that too. Don't even get me started on the matching power amp: what, you mean I've got to review it? Oh well, here goes...

On paper there's little to separate TLA's Shin (no, I've no idea either*) from any number of other single-ended 300B amplifiers out there. In the flesh, things quickly take on a rather different perspective. This is a large – actually let's make that extremely large – stereo chassis, massively constructed from aluminium plates with the sort of dimensions that you might more readily associate with pressure vessels than vacuum tubes. Along with the expansive footprint (trust me, it's bigger than it looks in the photos) you get a mass that makes you think the thing has been bolted to the floor. Even carved from solid it wouldn't weigh this much! TLA products demand the sort of physical respect that normally goes with amplifiers delivering around 100 times the Shin's 21 Watt rated output, so what gives?

Founded in 1957, Elmet is a small, family owned, specialist transformer

* Apparently Shin translates from Japanese as "Truth, Honesty and Integrity of Spirit, Body and Soul".

manufacturer, based in Athens (Greece – not Georgia!). Their developing expertise and experience enabled them to refine extremely wide bandwidth designs that led in 1995 to the creation of a subsidiary company, TruLife Audio (or TLA) to apply those transformers to audio applications. And apply them they did, building single-ended amplifier designs



that were both direct heated and valve rectified, as well as transformer coupled throughout. Yep, that's right. The TLA amplifiers use inter-stage transformers to couple each and every active stage, eliminating capacitors from the signal path in the process.

Well, that certainly helps explain why the things are so big and heavy – all that iron in those multiple transformers soon adds up to the sort of weight you might affix to the ankle of the Incredible Hulk – if you wanted to immobilize him, that is. Throw in the sort of casework necessary to stop all that mass going mobile in transit and you can kind of figure it out. But there's more going on here than simple physical necessity. According to TLA, the chassis designs for their

amplifiers are tuned to sink the resonant frequency of the tubes employed, with ball-bearing type feet added to the mix in an attempt to sink that internal energy even more effectively.

The Shin itself is TLA's second smallest amplifier, their other models being a 211 stereo or mono-blocs built into the same chassis. The parallel single-ended output stage uses a pair of 300B tubes for each side to deliver the aforementioned 21 Watts of Class A power, while the stereo topology helps explain the 75kg weight; that and the five transformers (power, two inter-stage, two output) and four chokes. There are also two 6C45 and a trio of 5U4 tubes mounted

on the open chassis, while round the back you'll find single-ended inputs (balanced XLR, presumably transformer coupled, is also an option), four and eight Ohm taps and standby and full power switches. There is no grille to cover the tubes and styling is limited to logos cut in the front and top-plates. I know that aesthetics are down to the eye of the beholder, but for me the TLAs go beyond basic, beyond even the Soviet school of brutalist design. Whilst there's no doubting the quality of the fit and finish, I just can't warm to the heavy-handed construction and equally heavy stylistic flourishes. Nevertheless, they doubtless deliver useful ventilation and potential purchasers don't need me to decide whether they like the looks or not.

Set up is straightforward enough – assuming you've carved out

► sufficient real estate. I sat the Shin on finite-element's largest amp stand, an area it comfortably filled, with the pre-amp and its power supplies on two shelves of a matching HD-03 Master Reference rack. Isn't this a power amp review? Well yes, but experience quickly demonstrated that the TLA delivered considerably better results with the company's own Essence pre-amplifier than with any of the other units I had in house. That might just be bad luck or happenstance, but if the Shin takes your fancy, bear in mind that you might be signing up for a new pre-amp too.

With so much case work and the large number of transformers involved, it should come as no surprise that support is pretty critical, and whilst the Shin's own feet, sitting directly onto the finite-element attempt to deal with this issue, the greater sophistication of Stillpoints Cones or finite's own CeraBase feet both delivered a significantly more coherent performance when placed between the amp and platform. The improved sinking of internal energy that results from close coupling the chassis to the supporting surface, moved the sound from a muddled, sluggish and flattened presentation to a livelier, crisper and far more dynamic delivery that built on (rather than hampered) the superb tonal qualities of the TLA amp. Stood on its own four feet it would be easy to dismiss the Shin as another of those soft, rounded and rather murky amps that give SETs a bad name. Simply dealing with the stored energy in that massive chassis sets the amplifier's virtues free, allowing the natural colours and intonation of voices and music, the body and richness of instruments to blossom – and blossom beautifully too.

Even so, there are still areas of audio performance that remain uncharted territory for the TLA. Transparency,

immediacy and the firmest of musical and rhythmic foundations are not its fortes. But then, if those are your musical priorities I'm not sure a parallel single-ended SET is where you should be looking. If on the other hand, you value the harmonic complexity of instruments, fluidity of musical lines and a large and spatially coherent acoustic, step right up.

21 Watts of not particularly load tolerant power output means that speaker



matching will always be an issue for the Shin, although I got excellent results from models as varied as the Living Voice OBX-R2, Reference 3A Da Capo (both a little over 90dB sensitivity) and the Avantgarde Uno Nano (104dB). What was apparent is that correct impedance matching pays dividends, so whatever speaker you are driving, make sure that you try both the four and eight Ohm output taps on the amp. With the OBX in particular, the benefits were beyond the "none too subtle" and well into "make or break" territory, use of the four Ohm connections delivering not just firmer bass and greater focus, but pulling the performance into a coherent whole and restoring the amp's relaxed but temporally sophisticated grasp of the music's passage. In contrast, the eight Ohm taps left things rhythmically disjointed and apt to meander. Fortunately, checking the

match is hardly a chore – you just need to remember to do it.

Likewise, the amp arrived with a set of mesh-plate 300Bs installed, complete with their attractively retro "balloon whisk" glassware. Past experience with various 300Bs suggests that these are also contributing to the amp's delicate and airy presentation. Switching to alternative tubes such as those from EAT or Western Electric will add their own specific flavour to the sound, bringing (I suspect) greater firmness and authority should you so wish. Such are the joys of owning 300B amps...

But with all the variables of set-up, matching and tube type considered and taken into account, what does the Shin (along with its matching pre-amp) bring to the party? The answer to that question is most easily provided by a simple recording, perhaps just voice and guitar, the more familiar the voice the better. So performers as distinctive as Eleanor McEvoy and Eliza Gilkyson are delivered with their own voice, their accents, mannerisms and specific timbral inflections more than just complete, but completely natural and unmistakable. There are few things more distinctive than Neil Young's nasal tones, the subtle undertones of his Canadian accent. Travel all the way back in time to 1971 and his intimate, personal and intense solo performance at Massey Hall in Toronto, and the TLA projects that voice as a physical presence, right into the room, its Canadian flavour as unmistakable as the adulation of the crowd. But listen too, to just how big and powerful, bold and present his guitar sounds, the scale and complexity of the piano. The instruments have a body and physicality that's rare in recordings, rarer still in the equipment that reproduces them. Now listen to the unforced elegance of the playing, the

► easy ebb and flow of the graceful, solo melodies. Notes are never cropped or jumbled together, never tumble one into another. Even the chopped chords and insistent tempo of 'Dance, Dance, Dance' never overwhelm or smear the guitar's sound.

This ability to allow the notes within a phrase the space to develop without ever losing touch with each other brings a particular calm and beauty to recordings, a quality that makes most other hi-fi sound forced and false in comparison. I first came across it in the Audio Research Ref 3 line-stage, which places the Shin in pretty exalted company. But where these two products diverge is key to the compromises you accept if you include the TLA in your system. After all, that timbral accuracy and natural intonation come at a price, the same as Belgian chocolate comes with a waistline to match. Replaying upright, acoustic bass, the Shin delivers pitch, power and texture to individual notes, but really fast runs of the kind that crop up on *This One's For Blanton* can trip it up. No drama here – it's just that the fingering seems a little clumsy, producing slight hesitations or corners where they shouldn't be. It's a flaw that you'll need to go looking for, but it helps explain a wider effect, a subtle absence of foundation beneath more complex works. Full orchestra is impressive in terms of scale and substance, but there's a greater connection between notes within melodic lines than between the lines as a whole.

Take the Bach keyboard concerti (Murray Perahia and the Academy Of St. Martins) as an example; playing these on the Shin/Avantgarde pairing, there's no missing the almost physical majesty, weight and power the combination brings to

the performance. Or the sense of air, spread and presence it lends the orchestra. But it's a presentation that stands in stark contrast to the typically quick and transparent sound of the specialist, low-powered solid-state alternatives, one extreme of the sonic envelope as opposed to the other. Neither one is necessarily right, but you are definitely going to prefer one to the other!



Which begs the question, just what sort of listener are you? If you want raw, seat of the pants excitement and dynamics that really jump, then parallel single-ended amps are probably not for you. But if you find the vast majority of hi-fi sounds thin, insubstantial and false, that the means and method of reproduction are overwhelming the reproduction itself, then the approach has merit, wringing enough power from a pair of 300B tubes to drive a reasonable range of speakers, without impinging on the linearity and golden tones that are responsible for that valve's appeal in the first place. Let's face it, as soon as you mutter the words "push-pull" the average triode purist's face will blanch and images involving babies and bathwater will flash across their consciousness – probably accompanied by huge, red pop-ups. The danger of

course, is that in seeking to ameliorate the weaknesses of the technology you also dilute its essence, creating an aural equivalent to the jack of all trades that's master of none. The Shin is unmistakably and unashamedly an SET. Rather than veering from that path, it applies the support of inter-stage transformers to balance the weaknesses inherent in that approach, with the result that it does the triode thing really, really well, without the chronic failings that mar so much of the purist SET competition. Yes, it's an amp with a flavour, but if you like that flavour, then nothing I've heard does it better.

The Shin is hardly a triode amp for everyman; it's too big and too expensive for that. But if its musical strengths appeal, then it's well worth seeking out, because sonically at least, it gets considerably closer to that elusive goal than many better known brands, whose products are smaller but whose price tags are much, much larger... ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Parallel single-ended SET
Valve Complement:	2x 6C45 3x 5U4 4x 300B
Inputs:	1pr single-ended RCA (Balanced XLR optional)
Input Sensitivity:	1.2 V
Input Impedance:	100 kOhm
Rated Output:	21 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	600 x 260 x 450mm
Weight:	75kg
Finishes:	Black or silver
Price:	£14999

UK Distributor:

Signature Audio Systems
Tel. (44)(0)20 8480 3333
Net. www.signaturesystems.co.uk

Manufacturer:

TruLife Audio
Net. www.trulifeaudio.com



One Step Beyond...

The Nordost Odin Power Cords

by Roy Gregory

The arrival of Nordost's Odin power cords completes the company's flagship cable line. It also completes my reviewing responsibilities as regards Nordost's cables. It's high time someone else took on that particular task, but this one, last review remains – partly because nobody else can do it. Why? Not hubris I assure you; it's just that I'm the only one with a full Odin loom, as well as the Valhalla cables for comparison. For comparison is what this is about. The arrival of the Odin power cords allows me to investigate whether the power-first cable logic that I've developed over the last few years holds good even at these stratospheric price (and performance) levels.

Just like the interconnects and speaker cables, the Odin power cords incorporate two proprietary Nordost technologies – dual micro-monofilament conductors and TSC shielding. Each cable consists of seven, thick, 15AWG silver-plated copper conductors (three live, three neutral and the last for earth), the snake-like smoothness of their closely wrapped exteriors bundled beneath a clear extruded FEP sleeve. The way they glint and catch the light certainly looks expensive, as well it should, with a 1.25m IEC lead weighing in at a mind-numbing £7250. The opulent impression carries over to the connectors employed, Furatech's top of the range jewellery. With non-magnetic construction and damped carbon-fibre sleeves, they certainly look (and weigh) the part,

although there's currently no UK 13A plug in the range, meaning that leads bought for British mains sockets arrive with a high-quality but far less sexy alternative. But fear not: with US and Schuko plugs readily available, there's never been a better time to swap your distribution unit over to either of these superior systems. The US plugs and sockets deliver the best sound, the Schukos the benefits of easily reversible mains polarity. Either sounds significantly better than the UK standard.

So, along with the Odin power cords, I took delivery of a US type Thor, allowing me to run all US plugs save the single connection to the wall. It also allowed me to run a direct comparison between my UK standard Thor/Valhalla loom, and the new, US equipped Odin set-up. A complete set of US style Valhallas would have been even better, but there are limits... Besides, as you'll see, it wasn't actually necessary.

For the purposes of listening, I assembled a simple but high-quality system, based around the GNSC-modified Wadia 861se, the Lyra Connoisseur 4-2 line-stage and the Vacuum State DPA-300B amplifiers driving the Sonics Amerigo speakers. The system was deployed on a full Stillpoints ESS rack, with component stands beneath the CD player and

Thors, and Stillpoints cones and risers under the rack and amps. A Quantum Qx2 completed the set-up, raising the level to the point I'd consider essential before investing in Valhalla, let alone Odin. Complete Valhalla and Odin signal looms were also on hand.

Rule 1: pay attention to the physical housekeeping before throwing money

at exotic cables, or you won't hear what the wiring loom (or the rest of your system) is capable of.

Time then, to conduct some comparisons. First up was a full system swap, from a complete Valhalla mains loom to the Odin alternative, the rest of the cabling being all Odin.

The gulf in performance was vast – and frankly, not unexpected. As good as the Valhalla power cords are, Odin is in a different league, bringing solidity, presence, a physicality to instruments (especially drums) and the space in which they are recorded, that the Valhalla can only suggest. The background is blacker with Odin, the layering of instruments, their separation and boundaries clearer and more explicit. All of which is nice, but it's the natural sense of energy, weight and direction that really separates the two cables. With Odin, the system never wants



► for weight or power, even with the relatively modest speakers employed, and the low output power of the amps. Instead, the power cords make the most of the amplifier's linearity, colour and control, giving a texture and purpose to bass notes, a clarity to pitch and line that makes music a breathing, vibrant thing. In listening terms, it carried the system across the bridge between you and the performance. With Valhalla the musicians, the music, was still over there; with the Odin power cords in play, there is a reach out and touch it, you are there inclusiveness to the sound that connects

you so directly to the performance that you almost seem present within it. It's not an issue of reality, but one of access. The system doesn't literally fool you into thinking you are there, but it does give you exactly the sort of musical access and connection you'd have got if you had been.

It's heady stuff that finally nails down and delivers up the promise that's been lurking behind the Nordost cables since the Valhalla first appeared, stepping so far into the unknown of cable capability that it rewrote the book of expectation and demanded a new set of rules overnight. That was a shock to the system; Odin is the solution, a hideously expensive exercise in demonstrating the possible that few will be able to afford, but from which we can all profit. Its relevance lies in its revelation of performance potential and the roadmap it provides for getting there. Which

brings us back to those comparisons and the priorities they underline.

The fact that Odin power cords significantly outperform the Valhalla alternatives is hardly a surprise. The good news is that unlike so many such comparisons, they don't leave the Valhallas sounding broken. Instead, it's very much a case of more, much more, of the same. The Valhallas are doing it right – it's just that Odin does it better. Which begs the question, in a mix and match set-up, which combination offers

physical substance, the music of flow and progression. What had been an almost achingly beautiful musical event was now just a very, very good recording. Replacing the Odin in this key position brought so much body and presence to the voices and instruments, provided such a solid grounding for the music, that the track was transformed. From the sonority and complex harmonics of the piano to the character and separation of the two close harmony voices, the delivery and energy spectrum was immediately and dramatically more natural and

credible. But the real difference was the way the song moved; slow and stately, the hymnal structure adds pathos and a deeply moving quality to the performance,

the slowly building momentum of the track has an inevitability that approaches a climax only to be dispelled by the briefest of hesitations in the phrasing, the delicacy of the descending melody, all perfectly projected into the room. Listen to the system? Listen to the recording? I was too busy listening to the song!

If one lead can diminish to such a degree, how far can one lead enhance? Revert to the all Valhalla set-up and repeat the process and you won't hear the same level of change. For a start, the Valhalla loom lacks the body and easy flow of the Odin, almost as if you can hear the system working. Yet add the Odin lead from wall to Thor and the results are still impressive, with gains in weight, dynamic range and the blackness of the background, with better separation, dimensionality and micro-dynamic definition as a result. Instruments are bolder and

the best balance of performance and value?

Starting point in any such assessment has to be the wall socket. Running the all-Odin set-up, I set about comparing the lead connecting the Thor to the wall, Odin versus Valhalla. Using the Eliza Gilkyson track 'Requiem' with its sparse accompaniment and female duet voices, the differences were stark. Switching to the Valhalla lead robbed the piano of weight and the track of stability, the voices of presence and



► project more texture and character, while voices take on more character too, as well as a chest behind them. But in some ways, the least obvious difference is the most important. The Odin brings with it a sense of foundation, of rooted

onto and read a tempo, allow the music to set and shift its own pace. But then a complete set of Odin signal leads fed from a Valhalla loom lack that too, and the added weight and energy they offer can become an



"All Gaul?"

Okay, so the literary allusion might be a little obscure – unknown to those not partial to French animation – but the sentiment holds true. Whilst in one sense the power cords represent a completion of the Odin loom, there are still gaps to be filled. One can only wonder at the possibilities represented by digital interconnects and tonearm leads, especially given the primacy of their positions in the signal chain. In the meantime, we'll just have to slum it with AC, line-level and above, but having got used to the all-Odin experience, the possibilities are nothing if not tantalizing...

stability that underpins those improved dynamics and anchors rhythmic cues, adding a sense of quickness and purpose to prompts while keeping slower tempos moving and measured rather than dragging their feet. It's a bit like adjusting the tire pressures in your system; the handling and economy of effort just lock in and suddenly progress gets easier.

This hint of things to come is critical to your onward strategy, whether you are talking Nordost cables or any other credible brand. Next up, plug Odins into your power amps (even though I was using adaptors) and you extend the firmness and musical values of that foundation. And so it goes as you move on through pre-amp to CD player, each extra lead adding greater substance and stability, a firmer launching pad for dynamics, large or small, a more convincing and palpable sense of space around performers. So, how does an Odin power loom sound with a Valhalla signal net? Grounded and positive, quick, agile and communicative. Okay, so it lacks the natural substance and dynamic ease, the innate ability to latch

embarrassment as the Valhallas struggle to keep everything both moving and in the right place. Sorry, I'm afraid there's no substitute for the whole kit and caboodle, but when it comes to cable upgrades, there's no question where you should start – or what path you should follow. Cable looms that cost more than most people's system; what's that all about then? In a nutshell, it's about energy; the way the system presents and handles it. Think back across the great audio divides: analogue versus digital, tubes versus transistors, panels versus boxes. They're all about the way a performance is captured and then reproduced, the way that musical energy is recreated (or not) in the room. For detail and definition are nothing without the acoustic energy they represent. With the complete Odin wiring loom to hand, for the first time you can appreciate the part that cables play in this process – simply because, for the first time in my experience, a coherent cable loom is handling all the energy present in the signal, right across its bandwidth and without fear or favour. There's no thinness, no fatness and no time-smear or lag. The

result is infectious and compelling, motive and emotive in equal parts – just like the real thing. This cable doesn't recreate reality. It doesn't bring back what's lost. What Odin does is take its foot off the throat of your electronics and ease them on their way. Metaphorically speaking, if the interconnects and speaker cables dust down the weary traveler, the power cords are the car that stops and gives it a lift. Better to travel than to arrive? I don't think so – not after completing this journey! ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Price: If you have to ask...
Oh, alright then:
1.25m IEC – £7250
2.5m IEC – £10500

UK Distributor:
Activ Distribution
Tel. (44)(0)1256 391210
Net. www.activdistribution.com

Manufacturer:
Nordost Corporation
Net. www.nordost.com

"Goin' Back To My Roots"

The Epos M22i Loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy



Those of us who go back aways, and I have reason to suspect that that's most of us, will remember that Epos was the creation of a designer called Robin Marshall. In the early eighties he created a standmount speaker called the Epos ES14 which eschewed complexity in the crossover department and made a good reputation for itself by having excellent timing and an open, musical sound that some feel has rarely been replicated in the affordable sphere since. Robin went to work for Mordaunt-Short in the late eighties and ten years later the Epos name was purchased by Creek. Creek itself was sold to TGI, which owned Mordaunt-Short, so the two brands were quite familiar and it's fitting that they should have come together a second time.

Epos speakers are now manufactured in Creek's Chinese factory, which is how it gets to build heavyweight speakers like the nigh on 19kg M22i for such reasonable money. This floorstander is the top dog in the Epos Mi range; in fact it's the most ambitious speaker in the company's portfolio. It stands 90cm high on a short black plinth, the veneer wrap stained in one of three finishes; we have the red cherry option, which is nicely finished with post formed edges and pair matched veneers. The crossover is tri-wirable but jumpers are (of course) provided. The terminal plate is now aluminium in place of the plastic item found on the previous M model.

In fact, the evolution to Mi status has involved the re-engineering of every part of the design, albeit retaining the same basic driver line-up. The tweeter is now anodised in a more fashionable and restrained silver, but also has a new rubber surround that allows for "better" extension at high frequencies as well as a change in magnet material.

Mike Creek makes the point that the

► Epos tweeter uses ferrite rather than the more fashionable neodymium magnets, his argument being that higher power amplifiers are now more easily available and inexpensive, thus the need for high sensitivity is lower.

The large magnet and metal faceplate are good at dissipating heat, which reduces



thermal compression, improving sound quality considerably. The tweeter crossover is centred on 5 kHz, which is significantly higher than most other three-way speakers, moving the crossover point away from the area where the ear is most sensitive (circa 2 kHz) as well as spreading the load more evenly between drivers than designs that use the tweeter to lower frequencies.

The mid and bass drivers, which are both 165mm units, have been refined by subtle changes to the cones, voice coils, surrounds and chassis. The 'midrange woofer' as Epos refers to it, has a die-cast aluminium chassis and moulded polypropylene cone with a curved profile and graduated thickness. It's driven by a 32mm voice coil and like

the other units is magnetically shielded. It's also designed to roll-off mechanically at high frequencies, so that there's no need for a low-pass crossover filter (between it and the tweeter), while placing it

in a small, separate chamber naturally limits its bass extension to 80 Hz. The bass unit is very similar in construction but replaces the phase plug from the midrange with a weighted dust cap. It is fed by a low pass filter, that restricts output above 100 Hz, and benefits from the rear firing reflex port, flared at both ends to minimise turbulence.

The cabinet is constructed with inch thick, front and back baffles, extensive internal bracing. The aforementioned plinth accepts spikes,

which are supplied with separate metal receptors to protect hard floors. Internal cabling consists of single core connections to mid and treble, with heavy gauge multi-stranded cable for the bass driver.

I started out using the M22i with a Leema Tucana integrated amplifier, which has become a reference point and one which I should put fingers to keyboard about sooner rather than later. It is easily able to drive this speaker and produces well-timed results with all manner of material. Balance wise the Epos is a little on the dry side after my big B&W 802Ds, which are probably not the best speaker to have on before something at this price, but you've got to start somewhere. While the bass is no match either, it is quite substantial with good scale if limited absolute depth. The treble seems the most different to my usual reference, being quite restrained and lacking in sparkle. But given that it's a metal dome this is probably a good thing. Despite their theoretical advantages I don't often come across one that's anything but aggravating with instruments like piano and trumpet, so a tweeter as calm as this is welcome indeed.

Despite its reticence it's certainly contributing to the mix, as the better recordings escape from the box remarkably well given its size and affordability. There is also a generous detail, which helps to produce a convincing sonic picture of events. On Keith Jarrett's Carnegie Hall disc you can feel the gravitas of the instrument even if you miss some of the scale of the venue. Moving over to the totally different (but, at £1,499 nearly as affordable) ATC SCM19 stand-mount, one is rewarded with a similar tonal balance but better dynamics and slightly more bass solidity. This infinite baffle design is rather better at reverb and detail and tells you a bit more about what the ►

► amplifier is sending its way. However, it does not go quite as deep in the bass as the Epos, and the soundstage is a little bigger with the floorstander as well.

Adam's HM2 is, in many respects, from the same mould as the ATC, but uses a ribbon tweeter. The treble is more clear-cut and revealing; so much so that the M22i seems a little dull and airless by comparison. But again, the Epos fleshes out the bottom end rather more effectively, and the laid back top-end is a lot more forgiving of less than clean recordings. In practice it's less alive but easier to live with – at least in the context of the Tucana.

A more likely competitor is PMC's GB1i (£1,295) - there are rather a lot of 'i's around these days, but we needed a change from SEs and MkIIIs. This put in a smoother and cleaner performance, with the sound escaping the box more easily, but doesn't produce more actual image scale. It also seems a little quicker, but that could be because it doesn't seem to have the bass extension of the Epos. With Me'Shell Ndege Ocello's *The Way* the M22i is certainly not short on pace – quite the contrary – but the slightly smaller PMC does just have the edge in this important respect.

Why all the comparisons? Because they underline just how capable the

Epos really is – even when compared to more expensive and arguably more illustrious competitors. But their real trick is still up their sleeve. Wheel in the budget electronics and let the games begin.

In an attempt to keep it real I used the M22i with a Creek Evolution integrated amplifier and a Cambridge Audio 840C CD player, components

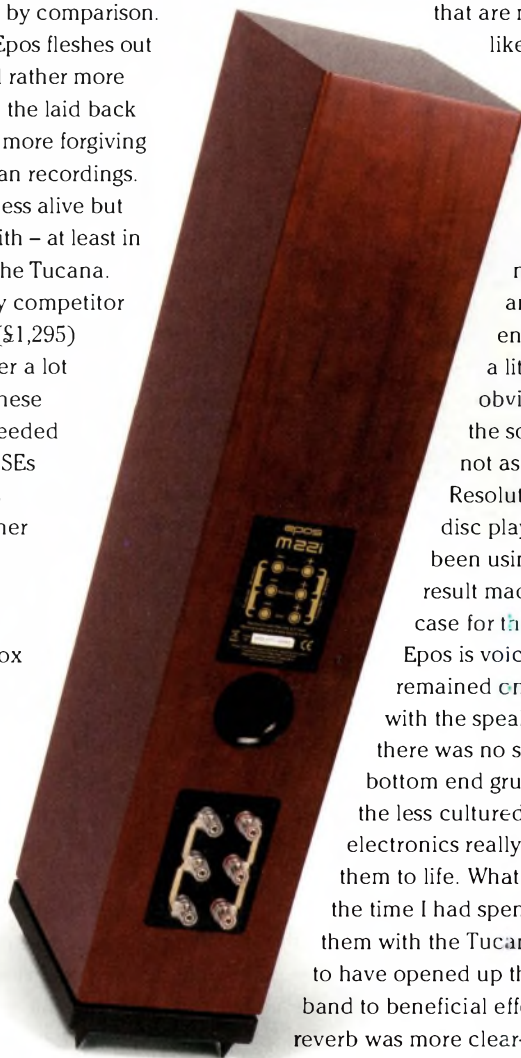
that are much more likely to be paired with a speaker like this.

The drop in power was noticeable and the top end became a little more obvious because the source was not as clean as the Resolution Audio disc player I had been using, but the result made a good case for the way the Epos is voiced. Timing remained on cue and with the speaker bi-wired there was no shortage of bottom end grunt, while the less cultured side of the electronics really brought them to life. What's more, the time I had spent running them with the Tucana seemed to have opened up the mid-band to beneficial effect. Now reverb was more clear-cut and voices projected better. Imaging still isn't first class but most records now managed to escape the boxes and some did so with considerable success – est's *Live in Hamburg* being a point in case.

There is still a degree of dryness through the mid-band which effects female voices like Barb Jungr's, but

it's not so strong that you'd notice it without a comparison. But getting the balance of mid-band and bass right with positioning is quite subtle. The bass doesn't get overblown even at 15cm or so from the wall, but the mid is dulled and the speaker needed about 40cm behind it in my room (where the back wall is not the most solid one could hope for) to balance things out.

It's so long since I heard a pair of ES14s that comparisons would be invidious. Besides, this is a three-way with much wider bandwidth and is thus a more ambitious proposition. But what's clear is that the M22i is just as carefully judged and musically direct as that debut design. With the right ancillaries it delivers an engaging and resolute sound, with a good sense of scale, that times very well and never threatens to fatigue, even at high levels. Which is a right result, given the price. ➤



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two and a half way, reflex loaded
Driver Complement:	25mm aluminium dome HF 165mm polypropylene MF 165mm polypropylene LF
Bandwidth:	38 Hz - 20 kHz \pm 3dB
Sensitivity:	87dB
Impedance:	6 Ohm nominal
Finishes:	Cherry, red cherry, black oak real wood veneer
Dimensions (WxHxD):	185 x 900 x 252mm (without grille).
Weight:	18.9 kg
Price:	£1,100

Manufacturer:

Epos Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1442 260146
Net. www.epos-acoustics.com

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Not Just A Phase...

The Accuphase E-213 Integrated Amplifier

by Steve Dickinson



I think I must be in a coma.

Sometime soon I'll wake, and things will be back to normal. In the meantime, this is definitely the '70s or maybe the early '80s because there's an amplifier on my rack with two big power meters, tone and balance controls, a loudness button for heaven's sake and its solid front plate, chunky rotary knobs and switchery are anodised gold. Yep, early '80s, definitely. Any moment now, Gene Hunt will hurtle past, having recently fired up the Quattro.

Accuphase belongs to that design school, beloved of several high-end American and Japanese brands including McIntosh, Luxman and Audio Research, that holds on strongly to the styling idiom set when they first made their name. This ensures that any new product will fit neatly into an existing setup and makes the products strongly identifiable but at least to British, if not European, eyes, is slightly passé. I think the designers made it look the way it does because they like it that way, and good for them, but they just have to accept that this may turn off a number of prospective customers before they even audition the product. Which is a shame because Accuphase have something important to offer.

There's also more here than meets the eye, the retro styling distracting from what is a truly versatile and thoroughly modern design, offering balanced as well as single-ended inputs, a choice of phono-stages (to better match your black vinyl aspirations) or an internal DAC, and of course, that modern essential, the couch potato joy-stick – I mean remote control. Then there's a tape loop, (defeatable) tone controls, a mono switch, loudness button and switching for two sets of speakers, so it's not just the styling that's early 80's; minimalist it ain't!

The name gives a strong hint of the underlying design philosophy. Accuphase believe that phase is a significant, often overlooked and generally underestimated part of any ▶

► musical signal, and their amplifier designs focus on the accurate preservation of phase throughout the replay process. The E-213 is their entry-level integrated amp, costing almost £2500 and offering a notional 90 Watts output into 8 Ohms, or 115 Watts into 4 Ohms. Outside Class-A or valve designs, 90 Watts for £2.5K is unremarkable and it calls to mind the old Rolls-Royce comment that the



power output of their cars was simply 'adequate'. For this review I used the ELAC FS210 Anniversary and the Focal Electra 1027S loudspeakers which both feature phase-linear crossover designs, the better to appreciate the effect, and the Focals' higher efficiency certainly made more of the power available. So having paid proper attention to the replay chain and run the unit in somewhat (though it sounds very fine straight out of the box, truth be told) I dug out some favourites and set to.

Apparently the ear uses phase to ascertain information about spatial placement, reflected sounds undergo phase shifts when compared to the source for example, so you'd expect imaging and soundstaging improvements for starters. And you'd be right. Outside of some specialised single-driver systems such as those from Eclipse, I've not heard more holographic imaging from any system

to date. But, hugely impressive and immediately satisfying as this is, it is a mere party trick compared to the other, more subtle benefits. These relate to the integrity of the musical signal itself, specifically in relation to timing. I'm not talking about

rhythmic swing, but simply delivery of all parts of the musical signal at the appropriate time. There is very little smearing and blurring of big orchestral tuttis or piano chords, the low bits are in synch with the high bits, there is no vagueness to when the bass starts and stops, transients are crisp with no hesitancy regarding the leading edge of notes. There is just music. Bowed cellos start with that tiny 'cough' as the string is excited, the pitch is established, and the full tonal richness of the note develops and decays simply according to how it is being played. It sounds obvious, but it is surprising to me how few systems do this, this well, and fewer still at this price. It follows that instrumental timbre also benefits from this approach, as does basic pitch accuracy and tunefulness. Of course such micro-analysis of the sound has very little to do with music, I'm just attempting to deconstruct and describe what I think is going on. What you actually hear in a performance is a level of

commitment, emotional engagement and musicianship beyond what you heard before. Paul Tortelier's account of the Fauré *Élégie* (Erato, 2292-45660-2) is captivating. I played it to investigate my point about the cello and simply became lost in the piece, emerging 6 mins 46 seconds later (though it seemed only moments), without a single comment on my notepad. In the past, I've been aware of a certain harshness, a glassiness to the piano, a hardness of texture and tone in the cello in this recording such that I also bought a different version because the Tortelier irritated me. This time round, I was just mesmerised by the subtlety of the bowing,

the connection between soloist and accompanist, the richness of the cello tone. The harshness was still there, albeit reduced, but what really held me in thrall was a powerful and direct connection with the music. Tortelier channelling Fauré, but without all that new-age guff.

Coming back to the grosser, more immediately obvious effect on imaging and soundstaging, this adds



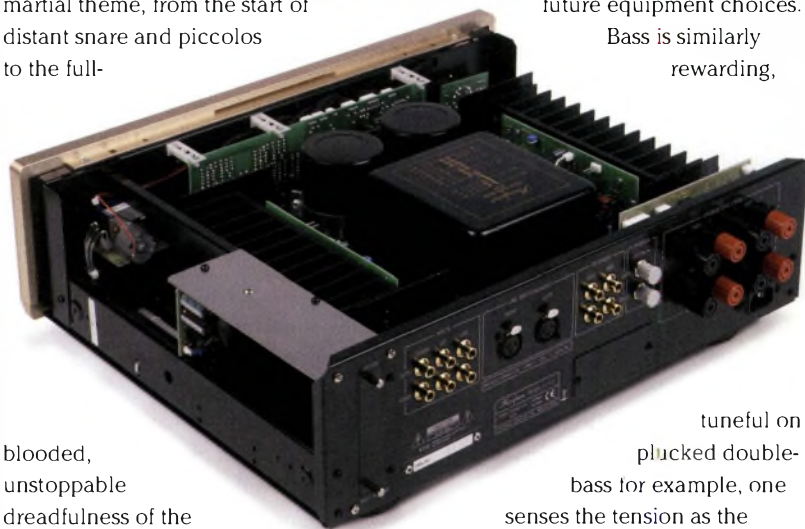
a level of intimacy to, for example early Joni Mitchell, such that she and her guitar occupy an almost tangible space in the room. This is no beautiful, sugar-coated, euphonous hi-fi treatment either, there is still a bright, brashness to tracks such as 'Chelsea Morning' or 'Big Yellow Taxi' which just highlights the life and vivacity so the fact that she has the loudest plectrum in ►

► Christendom just adds to the fun. On to bigger things and the first movement from Shostakovich's *7th Symphony* illustrates how musical material is passed from part to part not only for tonal reasons, but also for spatial effect. Call and response motifs move around the platform, adding quite literally a dimension to the writing which I hadn't fully appreciated. The build-up of the martial theme, from the start of distant snare and piccolos to the full-

the midrange, the better to convey emotional impact. Perhaps the Copland CTA405 has the edge in terms of sheer timbral resolution and a lightness and sense of freedom the grippier Accuphase can't match but that is, to some degree, the trade-off you opt for if you take this route. A route which has, I'd say, significant and far-reaching implications for the rest of your system, indeed possibly for future equipment choices.

Bass is similarly rewarding,

attention to. You need to address the matter of phase-linearity in your choice of loudspeakers to properly benefit, of course, but as a conduit for music, I have yet to hear anything seriously challenge the Accuphase E-213, for anything like its price. I started out not liking how it looks but, having spent some time with it, I just don't mind anymore. If this amp were an actress, it would be less Kiera Knightley, more Dame Judi Dench. One is for looking at, the other is much, much more important than that.



blooded, unstoppable dreadfulness of the whole ensemble at the climax has such a powerful feeling of inevitability and a truly visceral presence. It is at points like that that the 90 Watt output may become slightly limiting, albeit occasionally (and those power-meters can become an object of fascination in themselves) but within those limits the capabilities of this amplifier are genuinely remarkable. Steve Reich's *Six Pianos* has attributes which are hard to appreciate without the enhanced spatial stability of phase-linearity, the music exhibits moods beyond the constantly and subtly shifting parts themselves.

It also needs saying that the amplifier delivers all you could expect in terms of more conventional hi-fi attributes: timing and tunefulness of course, but there is also a sweetness and openness about the treble and an immediacy and forthrightness in

tuneful on plucked double-bass for example, one senses the tension as the string is drawn then released and the decay is long and deep. If bass is a little overblown, for example David Rees-Williams' 'When I am laid in earth' from *Hidden Colours* (BBC LJ30032) where Purcell's powerful, inevitable, ground bass is performed on electric bass and the lowest note might loosen your plasterwork, then one might wish for a little more control, something addressed by Accuphase's more powerful, more expensive offerings but driving rock, for example Tori Amos' *Cornflake Girl* or Pink Floyd's *The Wall* has real power and authority, and an impressive turn of speed.

There is, paradoxically, an air of calm confidence in the way the Accuphase goes about its business, starting with a feeling that the amp is properly centred and focussed. Like a Yoga master it has strengths which it rarely feels any need to draw

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Accuphase E-213	
Type:	Stereo integrated amplifier
Inputs:	3 x line-level 1 x 'option' e.g. phono stage, DAC or extra line-level 1 x balanced 1 x external pre-amp
Input Sensitivity:	213mV
Input impedance:	20kOhm (40kOhm balanced)
Power Output:	90 watts per channel, 8 Ohms, 115 watts per channel, 4 Ohms
Outputs:	2 sets of loudspeakers (switchable), via heavy duty binding posts
Remote control:	Yes
Dimensions (WxHxD):	475x150x422mm
Weight:	18.8 kg
Prices –	
Integrated Amp:	£2450.00
MM/MC phono-stage AD-9:	£390.00
MM/MC phono-stage AD-10:	£650.00
Internal DAC, DAC-10:	£710

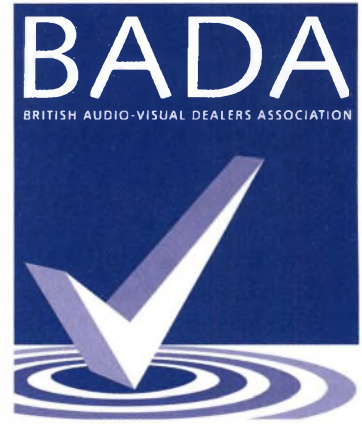
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Little Red Rooster...

Lyra's Erodion gives DDD a wake up call!

by Dennis Davis

Two unusual new boxes have recently found their way into my stereo system. One has no power connection. The other has nothing but power connections. The later, a Quantum Resonant Technology Qx4 is a functional looking silver box and was the subject of an extended review in Issue 59 by CT and SD. The other, Lyra's Erodion step-up transformer, looks like something out of the MOMA gift shop catalogue. Despite the vastly different design and purpose of the two units, they share much in ultimate effect on system performance.

There was a time when high-output moving-magnet cartridges reigned supreme and phono-stages (or the phono sections of pre-amps) were not called upon to provide more than 50 dB of gain. A trickle, then a torrent, of low-output moving-coil cartridges changed all that over the past quarter century, making it almost unthinkable to market a modern phono-stage that does not provide sufficient amplification for moving coil cartridges. Yet to start with there were no high-gain phono-stages to pair with these new cartridges. The sensitivity gap was initially filled by the introduction of step-up transformers, many from the well-established names in high-end electronics. Eventually phono-stage design caught up to the demands for greater amplification, and step-up transformers faded into a niche market. They have never really gone away, however, and have remained popular in Japan, where many audiophiles remain convinced that the combination of a transformer with a low-gain phono section offers better sound than that from a high-gain phono section.

Evidence of the success of this approach can be found in several phono-stage designs that include an integral step-up transformer. The incredible Zanden 1200 phono-stage uses step-up transformers to achieve its special magic, and the Manley Steelhead and Tim de Paravicini's designs for EAR also incorporate step-up transformers.

Step-up transformers bring to the table what is thought of as "free" gain, typically in the



range of 25 to 50 dB. They are passive units that do not achieve gain by amplification, but instead transform the current output of moving coil cartridges into voltage, with which to feed the gain stage of a moving-magnet phono-section.

Needless to say, simple math dictates that step-up transformers are not compatible with all phono-stages, and must be mated with those offering sufficiently low gain settings. With a step-up transformer, a phono-section and a pre-amplifier all adding gain, and moving coil cartridges offering a wide range of output levels, care must be taken to avoid incompatibilities. Phono-stages with gain

values in the 40 dB range are ideal, but these can vary considerably. By way of example, Herron's phono-section has 69, 64, 48 and 43 dB choices. The Audio Research PH7 is fixed at 57.5 dB. The Aesethix I that I use has five choices ranging from 50 to 80 dB.

Lyra made a step-up about ten years ago called the Amphion, and from that experience, as well as listening to transformers from many other companies, concluded that step-ups worked on the cartridge's output in two distinct ways. In addition to the obvious advantage in noise performance, the device also acts as a filter. It was the harsh filtering of early units that resulted in step-up transformers having a bad reputation with many audiophiles. Jonathan Carr, in working on his new design, felt he could reduce the amount of filtering imposed on the signal by other available step-up transformers. To that end, he increased the core volume and selected winding materials, material size and layout to reduce capacitive coupling effects and extend bandwidth.

Lyra's new model, dubbed the Erodion, has its transformer subassemblies sealed into individual, double-shielded mu-metal cans, which are placed within an additional vibration-isolating system and then mounted inside a chassis machined from a solid aluminum billet. The chassis rests on three spikes and is covered in a candy-apple red lacquer. The Erodion was purpose built to work with Lyra cartridges. To that end, it is designed to mate with phono cartridges having an internal impedance of between 2 and 10 ohms, ►

► and provides 26 dB of gain. Lyra specifies that the phono-section must be set for 47 kOhms but this is not unusual. The unit has a single set of RCA inputs and outputs. In addition, a ground terminal and a grounding switch are provided, allowing for either grounding to be tonearm to phono-section, or floating. Anybody who has used transformers in the past will know that grounding is critical to achieving the promised noise performance, but Lyra strongly suggest that you opt for floating the ground if possible. I experienced no grounding hum, so did all listening with the grounding switch to the floating ground position.

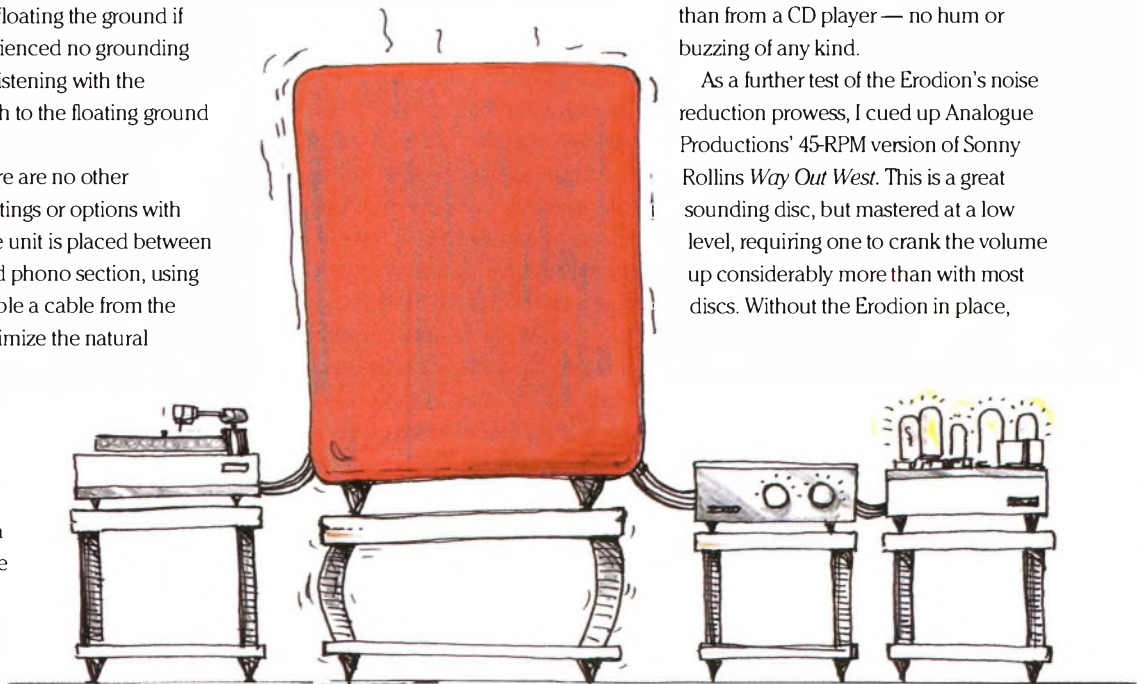
That's it—there are no other connections, settings or options with the Erodion. The unit is placed between the cartridge and phono section, using as short as possible a cable from the turntable to minimize the natural capacitance magnifier effect of transformers. I used a one-meter run of Nordost Valhalla with no evidence of capacitance problems.

Did I mention this component is metallic candy apple red? Before a unit of current was converted to voltage, love was in the air. I always wanted a candy apple red '68 Mustang with a blond in the passenger seat, but given the scarcity of vintage Mustangs, and the excellence of this unit, I'll settle for a candy apple red transformer and the blond. The Erodion immediately stood out as the sexiest looking component in my system. Fully expecting that Lyra had named the transformer after some Greek God of love (perhaps an eroded form of Eros), I was surprised to find that the name came instead from an amphitheater near the Parthenon in Athens.

The Lyra Skala and Titan i each have

an internal impedance of 5.5 ohms and an output voltage of 0.5 mV. Designer Jonathan Carr designed the unit using a Skala, which is near the center of the Erodion's range. I don't believe in coincidences. Common sense, and my listening suggest to me that Jonathan designed this unit to perform ideally at 5.5 ohms, and rated it for use around that sweet spot.

I mated the Erodion to my Aesthetix Io and an Audio Research LS 26 pre-



amplifier, employing the lowest gain settings in each to provide a total phono gain of 86dB (which is identical to the normal, total gain in my system). As I was using two Lyra cartridges, each with identical output and gain settings, the set-up is theoretically ideal.

If nothing else, I was looking forward to a significant reduction in background noise compared to the allTube Io's moving-coil stage. While checking to make sure I had no hum problems to deal with, I pressed my ear to the speaker, cranked up the volume and listened for noise. With any tube phono section unassisted by transformer gain, you can expect to hear at least some light

background noise at normal listening levels within inches of the drivers. If the system gain is turned up to abusive levels, the noise will be more than obvious. The Aesthetix Io, which has dozens of tubes, is not the quietest phono-section on the market, even if it is among the best sounding. With the Erodion supplying its 26 dB of gain, there was a dramatic reduction of noise. I could turn the volume well past any comfortable listening level, and hear no more noise than from a CD player — no hum or buzzing of any kind.

As a further test of the Erodion's noise reduction prowess, I cued up Analogue Productions' 45-RPM version of Sonny Rollins *Way Out West*. This is a great sounding disc, but mastered at a low level, requiring one to crank the volume up considerably more than with most discs. Without the Erodion in place,

I've always heard a faint electronic hash in the background, even from a normal listening position. That annoying artifact completely disappeared with the transformer in place. Within moments I knew that the Erodion succeeded way beyond my expectations in eliminating phono-section noise.

Banishing noise is all well and good, but a minor victory if it comes at the expense of the midrange purity and harmonic rightness that are the main reason for owning a tube-phono section. The Erodion delivered these qualities, with a considerable dash of added magic. Within minutes, I knew this was a different breed of step-up transformer. I had listened to ►

► Speakers Corner's re-issue of Peggy Lee's *Black Coffee* many times, comparing it to the original Decca release, before the Erodion arrived. With the Erodion plugged into the system I perceived a new rightness about the presentation, as though the music had suddenly come into focus. By the second cut of the disc, 'I've Got You Under My Skin', I knew that the intuitive photographic analogy was no mistake. Jimmy Rowles' piano work snapped into focus—especially the right hand. It had a sparkle and fullness that had not been apparent before. The piano remained a bit out of tune as always, but it sounded much more like a real piano. I played this cut over and over, wondering how I had missed until now just how well the piano was recorded on these 1950's sessions. Further listening convinced me I had the analogy slightly wrong — it wasn't so much that the picture snapped into focus with the Erodion. Rather, it was as if the depth of field had been adjusted. Without the Erodion, the focus had been on Peggy's voice, and the backing players were all there to be heard, but a tad out of focus. Adding the Erodion was like adjusting the "f stop" of a camera to gain greater depth of field. Each of the instruments was brought into equally sharp relief, just as they would have been if I had witnessed the recording session.

Listening to larger scale classical recordings, like the Mercury *Firebird*, allowed me to put the Erodion's dynamic range to the test. The Aesthetix has untapped reserves of power, and one of its strong points is its ability to deliver dynamic impact. However, the dynamic capability of the Aesthetix, coupled with the Erodion's lowering of the noise floor is more than the sum of its parts, improving considerably at both low and high levels. On its own, the Aesthetix is a dynamic champion, but substituting the Erodion for the Aesthetix's high-gain stage took the phono amp to another level. With the Erodion, my relatively small Kharna 2.2 speakers seemed capable of handling more power, and I could listen at volume levels way past what had previously

seemed comfortable.

I'd compared the Skala and Titan i in my system last year and repeated the comparison with the Erodion. This time around, the differences between the two cartridges were much easier to identify. On complex musical passages, the detail and delicacy of the Titan, obscured to some degree by the phono noise floor without the Erodion, became obvious with the transformer in place. With Stravinsky conducting *Petrushka*, the Titan illuminated lines of string and percussion work that were barely noticeable with the Skala, as well as presenting a larger soundstage. The intricate detail and extended upper frequencies obvious with the Titan are slightly obscured with the Skala, whose focus was more on forward momentum and excitement. Some have suggested that the Titan is lean in the upper registers. That has never been my experience. While it is not a romantic cartridge in the same way a Koetsu can be lush, the Titan has never sounded threadbare in my experience. With the Erodion in place, the Titan's execution of upper frequencies was as delicate and sweet as I have heard from any cartridge.

This improvement in upper frequencies may be the greatest contribution of the Erodion. The recent addition of a rim drive to the VPI TNT 6 added remarkable pitch stability to LP playback, and the benefits were most evident with recordings featuring violin. The rim drive had me running through all the Suske Beethoven late quartets on Eterna and the beautiful DGG re-issue of Accardo's Paganini *recitals*, released in a two LP set as *Diabolus In Musica* in 1996. With the Erodion driving the Titan i, the additive effect of grainless, perfectly quiet background with the pitch stability of the rim drive, created exquisite string overtones without a trace of harshness or strain.

Without the Erodion, the differences between the Skala and Titan i were certainly obvious, but with the removal of the noise floor made possible by the step-up, the differences were remarkable.

Needless to say, although Jonathan Carr developed the Erodion using the Skala as his reference tool, its magic works equally well with the Titan.

The Erodion's contribution put me in mind of the improvements wrought in removing noise floor scum achieved by paying careful attention to cabling and system supports. I participated in a dozen of RG's demonstrations of the transformation created with three identical systems of electronic components, by switching out only supports, cable and mains filtering. In the case of both the system support changes, and the addition of the Erodion, the noise floor diminished and took with it a film obscuring the delicacy and excitement of musical performances.

Is the Erodion right for you? Certainly if you have a Lyra cartridge (or any cartridge with similar impedance specifications) and a tube phono-section capable of gain less than 60 dB, the Erodion should prove to be an extremely cost effective and dramatic upgrade. If your favorite cartridge lies outside the Erodion's impedance range, by all means explore another transformer more suitable to your cartridge, but remember that transformers with selectable gains and impedance settings cannot serve all masters—they can only work ideally in one range. As for me, I now consider the Erodion an essential component in my system. ►+

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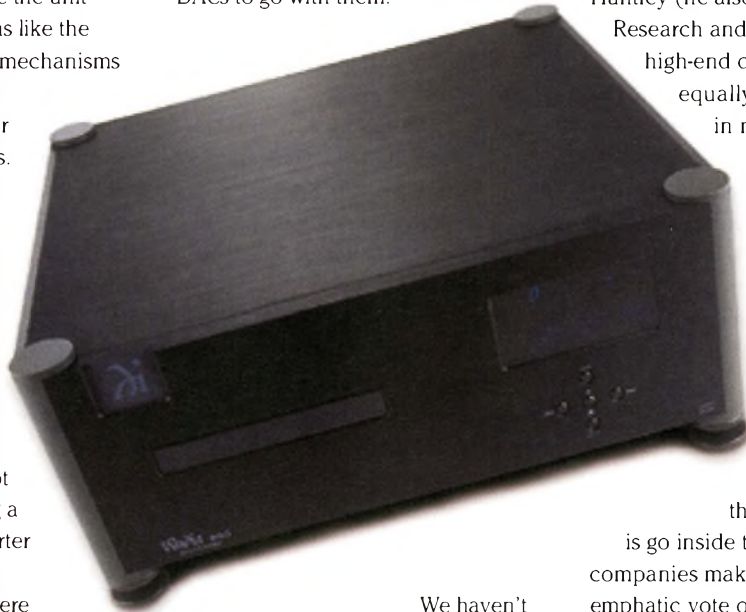
The Great Northern Sound Company modifications to the Wadia 861se

by Roy Gregory

These are difficult days for up-market CD players. The inevitable redundancy of optical media looms large on the audio horizon, even if no one knows just how close it actually stands. Industry support of CD transports is rapidly evaporating while the unit cost of specialist solutions like the TEAC/Esoteric universal mechanisms is quickly becoming stratospheric, too high for serious OEM applications. It's a sorry situation, reflected in the number of expensive players rendered unrepairable by transport failures, in some cases after a shockingly short working life. Any way you cut it, dropping heavy coin on a high-zoot disc spinner is becoming a strategy with an ever-shorter shelf life.

But haven't we been here before? Isn't this what happened with analogue? And just look at the turntable market! This is not the same. The only way to play an LP is on a record player. But digital is just that – digits. All CDs are, is one way to store them. You can keep them safe in many different ways, and transport them from A to B physically, electrically or through the air. And the beauty is that bit-perfect copying means that issues of transport or transmission quality can be overcome by simple repetition. With solid-state storage capacity growing

apace, digital replay devoid of moving parts is a very real and attainable goal, with huge potential sonic advantages. No wonder then, that high-quality server based systems are the hot-ticket, along with the latest generation DACs to go with them.



We haven't reached the point where a good CD player is an irrelevance – but it must be fast approaching. So what do you do if, like me, you are sitting on an eight-year old Wadia 861se? The company has recently launched the rather excellent 581, with the (even better?) 781 waiting in the wings. And along with considerably spruced up CD performance, they've thrown in superb SACD replay too. What's a man to do? Invest in a shiny new machine or stick with the trusty one he's got, hoping it lasts the course? It's a very

real conundrum, believe me – but fortunately, in this instance there's a third way...

Great Northern Sound Company is based in Stillwater, Minnesota. Founded by ex-Wadia engineer Steve Huntley (he also did time with Audio Research and CAL), it's a serious high-end dealership with an equally serious sideline in modifying products – including those they sell. Which in itself should give you pause for thought. After all, why would the likes of Wadia, Aesthetix or Resolution Audio retain these guys as dealers when the first thing they do is go inside the products those companies make. That's a pretty emphatic vote of confidence in the work they do.

When it comes to the 861, as well as the Wadia-sourced se update, GNSC also offer three levels of modification – Standard, Reference and Statement:

The Standard upgrade costs \$950 (plus shipping and VAT) and includes the use of proprietary noise reduction devices in the power supplies, the removal of current limiting on the digital and analogue regulators, changes to the analogue filter section and upgrades to the critical analogue bypass caps. GNSC will need the ▶

▶ player for around two weeks in order to complete the work.

The Reference package adds a completely reworked power supply, with Black Gate filter capacitors throughout, high-speed rectification, additional local reservoir capacitance and the installation of Bybee noise reduction devices. Key signal path components are upgraded and high-quality output transformers are fitted, improving isolation from the amplification and preventing the passage of digital/RF noise into the system. Finally, extensive mechanical damping of the mechanism, boards and chassis is carried out. Total cost of this is \$2000 (again, plus shipping and VAT) and the mods take around three weeks.

The Statement level modifications, as carried out on my machine, cost \$3500 (plus shipping and VAT) and do all of the above, but add considerable additional local reservoir capacitors and significantly improved regulators. Analogue section caps are replaced by larger and higher quality. The Blackgates throughout are paralleled to improve filtering – making for a total of nine new caps in the main digital supply alone. The AC input receives custom filtering and a special Bybee purifier with silver leads is used in the digital signal path. The mechanical damping applied to the unit is far more extensive, taking some 12 hours to complete, and all diodes, regulators and the DAC board, receive a layer of MusiCote. ERS RF absorbent material is also used internally, to quiet components and prevent noise radiation. The Statement mods demand a four-week stay for your machine in Minnesota.

These are not exactly insignificant sums, which bring us straight back to the wisdom of sinking extra cash into an already aging player. Except that, the 861 isn't just a player. It's also equipped with switching for a range of different digital inputs and outputs, and even a digital volume

control coupled to a serious output stage, making it a serious DAC in its own right. In fact, with BNC, AES/EBU, TosLink and AT&T glass optical inputs, the only thing missing from a totally future-proof package is a USB connection – and how long before a high-quality adaptor hits the market? So, even if the transport dies or is rendered redundant by the arrival of a server or hard-disc based system, the Wadia still offers high-quality decoding, defending your existing investment in Wadia's proprietary decoding technology, expensive power supplies and casework. Besides which, a quick look at parts costs and you realize that the lion's share of the up[grade price goes straight into hardware and improving component quality. All of which makes it a bit of a no-brainer really...

With my 861 already enjoying se status, I boxed up the player and sent it off. Six weeks later it arrived back, externally identical except for a nice new pair of (optional) NextGen phonos and a rather nice GNSC badge gracing the rear panel. I plugged it in and left it running for a week to settle down, and then moved it into the main system – at which point even a brief listen to ensure that there was actually sound coming out revealed the extent of the improvements wrought by its short holiday Stateside.

The first and most obvious change was the player's warm up behavior. The 861 would take a full ten days to come on song, sounding horribly stultified, almost constipated until it transformed itself, butterfly like after the allotted period. Disconnect it, even to move it across the room and you were right back to square one. I never did fathom quite why it was so sensitive to constant power, but boy was it frustrating. Well, for whatever reason, the GNSC mods have virtually eliminated the issue. Yes, the player still warms up over time, but it's neither the protracted process nor the

make or break evolution it once was. In fact, the modified player sounds pretty good from cold, really rather fine after a single disc, making living with the beast a whole lot easier.

But, to non-reviewer types, I guess it's the sonic changes you are most interested in – and changes there are. But before I get into the detail, first I need to qualify the nature of the changes, for they are unusual in that they are wholly and entirely positive. Whilst I wasn't able to conduct full ABA comparisons, pre and post mods, I know the sound of the 861se inside out and I've yet to detect a single negative effect from the work that's been done – and an awful lot of positives. So chalk up another homer for the batting side.

The benefits all start at the bottom end, but just like a good sub-woofer, you'll hear and feel their impact right across the range, in the presence, focus, transparency and dynamic impact in the mid, in the air, poise, clarity and lack of glare at high-frequencies. Sonically speaking, this is a total body make-over, not just a butt-tuck. If one thing really set the original 861 apart from the competition it was the linearity and transparency it exhibited at low-frequencies, together with the air around bass instruments and the stable, solid sound-staging that goes with it. It was a quality extended still further by the se update, an evolution that started to put flesh on those bones, but the GNSC Statement mods move it into a whole new league. What they add is texture to bass notes, which might not sound like much, but think it through. That texture comes from the harmonic identity, complexity and weight of the note. With it arrives a sense of impact, bowing or plucking, and even more importantly a sense of each note's shape and the way it's leaning. In other words, bass lines have a weight, shape and colour that has previously eluded all but a handful of the very best CD players, but more importantly, a sense of

► purpose, direction and pace that both underpins and informs the musical performance.

Play the EMI Classics re-master of the legendary Barbirolli *Mahler 5th* and you'll hear it right from the

air of anticipation that results, is just what this music, this performance, is about. The fanfare, the orchestral tutti; it's all there just to create this contrast of quiet space in which the theme can grow and blossom. The GNSC-ed

revealing Robert Smith as one of the most understated and under-rated guitarists out there.

But the effect of those gains in bass weight and transparency on the mid-band and treble is most apparent



opening notes. The trumpet fanfare is perfect placed, high in the orchestra, well behind and outside the right-hand speaker. Those first notes ring out, clearly defining the width of the stage, the position of the rear wall. The opening tutti is still a little strangled (an artifact of the original recording with its splashy, insubstantial cymbals) but the brass and woodwind is rich and full-bodied, and once we pass on to the opening section proper, the pizzicato bass line is beautifully floated, subtle, and perfectly pitched. But it's also mobile, prompting the music forward, giving it a path and purpose, where so many CD players leaving it burbling, disjointed and aimless. The tension, the drama, the

861 now serves the music, allowing it to flow and breathe, quiver when it has to, explode when it should. In comparison, the original player always encompassed the music, never quite able to let go.


You'll hear it too in the stacked, repetitive chords and pulsing shifts in density of early Cure. The denseness of the overlapping and interleaved frequencies can hold the music back, but not on this machine. They aren't just separated and contrasted, there's an urgency to them that drives the tracks forward with an inevitable momentum, instilling life and presence in the vocals, precision and placement in the guitar lines, their off-kilter phrasing suddenly making sense,

when there's no bass at all. Solo voices or acoustic instruments have a presence and natural colour that makes them more natural and much more convincing, both tonally and in terms of nuance and phrasing. The expressive devices used by singers and players are much more apparent and effective, so a vocalist's mannerisms are more obvious, their voice more identifiable and natural as a result. Again, it's a case of the machine allowing the performers (and the performance) to breathe, providing a blacker background behind the music, removing a subtle haze that permeated the sound of the original player. It was this that led to the slight bleaching of musical colours and ►

▶ stripping it away allows those colours to burst out, heightening tonal contrast and musical drama, but also adding subtlety and beauty to quiet passages, the naturalness that, just fleetingly, can make hi-fi almost real.


Just like Wadia's own 581, the GNSC modifications attack exactly those areas that you'd want improved in the original 861. The benefits are far from subtle sonically, but are even more apparent musically, bringing a level of artistic expression, drama, presence and emotional impact to performances that quite escaped the original version of the machine. Gone is the grey-ness and dryness of tone, the sense of rhythmic restraint. Instead, the player gains an almost analogue sensibility – but without the tailored and overly warm balance that goes with an overtly analogue sound. The lower noise floor makes imaging and detail much more explicit. But the really important thing is the increased coherence of the

modified player, its lightness of touch, its surefooted sense of musical flow; it takes that extra focus, detail and clarity and binds it to the new sophistication it displays in the temporal realm to create a far more convincing whole. It's not so much a case of more detail, but more useful detail, with everything in the right place and heading in the right direction. It's only when you hear this level of musical integrity and coherence that you realize just how distracting even tiny deviations are: the cymbal that sits right in the tweeter, the voice that wavers ever so slightly, the instrument that climbs with frequency or jumps forward in the soundstage every time its level increases. These are the things that destroy the illusion; these are the devils that are banished by the exorcists at Great Northern Sound. The result is music with more natural tonality, more natural perspectives and a natural sense of ebb and flow; just more music really...

The GNSC mods don't turn an 861se into a 581. It won't play SACD for starters, and it lacks the ultimate benefits of musical colour and flow that come from the newer machine's discrete output stage. But for existing owners, GNSC will get you remarkably close when it comes to CD replay – and charge you a fraction of the price of a replacement machine. My 861 has worked flawlessly – and musically speaking, magnificently – since its return from Minnesota. Would I recommend the GNSC modifications? Unreservedly. In fact, I've started wondering what they can do for the likes of elderly Audio Research amplification... 

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KRZYSZTOF PENDERECKI

COMPOSER, VIOLINIST, AMBASSADOR OF PEACE

INTERVIEWED BY ANN KATHRIN BRONNER

Krzysztof Penderecki is one of the most popular composers of the 20th and 21st centuries. Works such as the St. Luke Passion, Threnody To The Victims Of Hiroshima, and his two violin concertos have received critical and popular acclaim worldwide. That is a very important parameter in a modern composer's life. Nowadays, it is not a problem to have modern music played. There are a numerous world premieres every year. The problem is: Most of those works then disappear into a drawer. Not so the compositions of Penderecki; a fact that makes him a traitor – at least in the eyes of other avantgarde composers.

Born on November 23, 1933 in Debica, the Pole had to witness not only the cruelty of the Nazi regime in Poland, but also the Russian occupation of his country. These experiences found their way into his music. For him, it has been a coming to terms with the past – for us, it is great music!

Happy 70th birthday, Krzysztof Penderecki!

Ann Kathrin Bronner: Maestro Penderecki, some years ago, I played your 'Cadenza' in the version for solo violin. You are also not only a composer, but studied violin too. Do you play your own works for violin?

Krzysztof Penderecki: Oh no! You must know I stopped practising almost 50 years ago. When I started studying composition, there was just no time. And I thought to myself: "Do I really want to practise five hours every day? I'm not going to be a great violinist, I am already 20 years old..." I was more interested in composing. But before, at the age of 10, I wanted to be a violinist. So, my first compositions were for violin as it was the instrument I knew the best.

AKB: When did you start playing?

KP: In the 40's, during the war. Then there was an interruption in 44/45. My main interest then was composing for violin; my works were like those of Wieniawski, Paganini, or Vieuxtemps. The 19th century repertoire!

AKB: And have these works been performed in public?

KP: No, no. You know, they have been lost. As I didn't know that I would become a composer, I did not keep them safe. But I do remember one of the first compositions – they were often

for special occasions: It was a polonaise for my grandmother's birthday. I wrote it tonally, in a very classical style. This was only natural as there was no modern music in Poland during the war. And after that, everything from the West was prohibited. So, I did not have the opportunity to listen to contemporary classical music. We did not even know Schönberg. I had two professors for composing, and they had no interest in this kind of music. My first contact was in the mid-fifties. It gradually came to Poland when in 1956 the first Warsaw Fall Festival of Modern Music was organised. After that they started to play modern music, but still not on the radio. Not before the late 50's!

AKB: And how were your first atonal compositions received in Poland?

KP: Well, by then I was already a student at the Cracow Conservatory. So, it was normal to play the works there. My first violin sonata I even premiered myself, when I still studied violin. Actually, it was printed and performed by many violinists. But my breakthrough was a competition for young composers in Poland. That was in 1959. I sent in three compositions in different styles. I tried to write very poly-stylistically then.

AKB: Because you were still searching for your own style?

KP: Yes. So, I sent in three works and won all three prizes!

AKB: But didn't they notice? I assume you had handed it in handwritten...

KP: Yes, but you know, I also write with my left hand. So I wrote one with the right, the other with the left. And the third score was copied by a colleague.

AKB: Oh, how tricky!

KP: Yes! Nobody knew that it was one and the same composer! But the reason why I went to such great lengths was that the first prize was a trip to the West! I had tried before to get a passport, which was quite impossible for young men; particularly as I wanted to go to Darmstadt, which was also forbidden. Well, I got this prize, the first one and two second ones, and a passport plus \$120. So I went to Italy – I no longer wanted to go to Darmstadt. ►

► By that time, I had already found my own musical style. On this trip, I started to write *Anaklasis*, that was performed later at Donaueschingen. I wrote it on my Italian trip at cheap hotels. You know, I spent six weeks in Italy! Hard to believe: only \$120, to pay for everything. Today this would be unimaginable.

AKB: Without busking?

KP: No, no. I just ate very little. Only chocolate and spaghetti, which was the cheapest! Well, the first prize also meant a presentation at the Warsaw Fall. Mr Moeck, a publisher from Germany, visited the concert and I signed a contract with him. The first step was that some early compositions were published. The second step: He sent a tape to Dr Strobel. Strobel was the God of Modern Music! He was the director at Donaueschingen and Baden-Baden and did a lot for 20th Century Classical Music, even before the war. He commissioned a work, I finished *Anaklasis* – and from this moment on my music was played! Of course, it was a lot easier at that time as every state and every broadcast station had their own orchestra and festival for Contemporary Music.

AKB: Do you think this development was related to the war – reconstruction and reform? That people were more open-minded?

KP: Yes. It was a very good audience for contemporary music. Yes, I think it had to do with the war. People wanted to start anew. Even in arts, with new arts; and also in architecture. By the way: there was really bad architecture in Germany at that time. What they built after the war is really terrible! In music they did better, I think!

AKB: I totally agree! But who were your role models as a young composer? As you said before, at that time there was very little contemporary music in Poland.

KP: Well, in the first instance it was classical music, virtuoso

music. And of course – Bach! Others I have forgotten, but Bach has always remained! It is like the bible. It is universal music.

AKB: You mean one can find everything in it? All styles of music?

KP: Actually, he has taken a lot of what had been before him, even without asking the composers, for example Vivaldi. There was no copyright. But he was just better than the others!

AKB: He also took his own cantatas and changed them from secular into ecclesiastic and vice versa. Very multifunctional!

KP: The same music with different lyrics, yes. But me, I also often take pieces from my earlier music. If there was a theme I liked, I use it later – but of course in a different form.

AKB: You also revise some works or complete them later. The *Third Symphony*, for example.

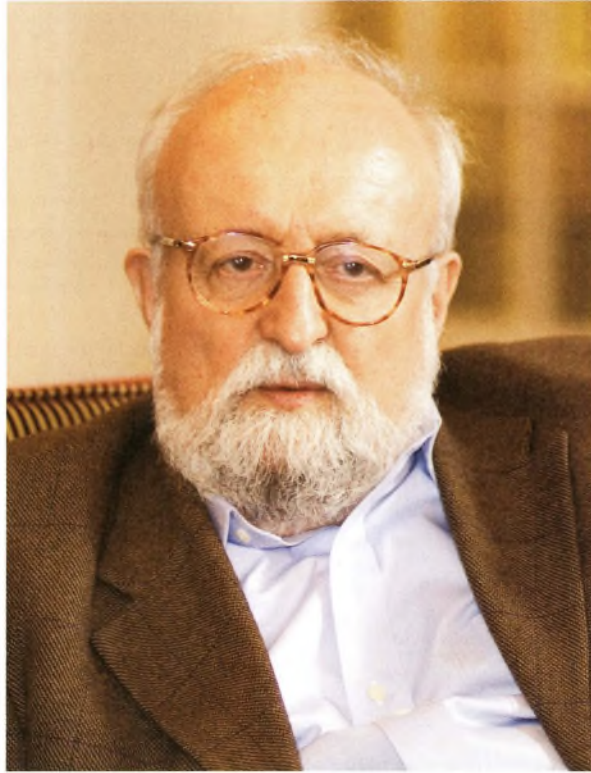
KP: Yes, sometimes. But the *Third Symphony* was

not revised. I had written two movements, but they were not called a symphony. Seven years later, I took them for my *Third Symphony*. Another example is the *Eighth Symphony*: after its first performance I have set three other songs to the music. And I want to go on with that, which means that the work is not finished yet. I will go on, maybe in one year. It needs some distance.

AKB: But why do you do that? I mean you could also take these lyrics and compose a new work!

KP: No! These lyrics belong to this work. When I collected the *Songs of Transience*, I found a lot of lyrics I wanted to set to music. But, of course, it was impossible to use them all. Now there are twelve, and three others will follow. But the form is complete, and the final three songs will remain. You see: I part with my music very reluctantly!

AKB: You have also written for jazz ensemble – for Terje Rypdal and others.



Biography

1933: Krzysztof Penderecki is born on 23 November in Debica, Poland.
 1951: The musician is admitted to the Krakow Conservatory to study violin: at the same time he studies philosophy, art history and literary history at university.
 1954: Begins studying composition at the Krakow State Academy of Music.
 1958: Graduation; he is appointed professor at the Musikhochschule.
 1959: At the 2nd Warsaw Competition for Young Polish Composers the young composer wins the first to third prizes with *Strophes*, *Emanations* and *Psalms Of David*.
 1960: *Anaklasis for 42 string instruments* is premiered at the Donaueschingen Festival – his international breakthrough.
 1961: The Pole is awarded the Unesco Award for *Threnody*.
 1966: Great Arts Award of the Land of North Rhine-Westphalia for *St. Luke Passion*; the composer teaches at the Folkwang Hochschule Essen.
 1967: Prix Italia for *St. Luke Passion*, and the Sibelius Gold Medal.

1968: Prix Italia for his *Dies Irae in memory of the victims of Auschwitz*; he receives a scholarship from the DAAD in Berlin.
 1969: Penderecki's first opera, *The Devils Of Loudon* is premiered at Hamburg.
 1970: Awarded the Prize of the Union of Polish Composers.
 1972-1987: Rector of the Krakow Musikhochschule.
 1973-1978: Professor at Yale University, New Haven.
 1977: Prix Arthur Honegger for *Magnificot*.
 1980: Commissioned by Solidarity to create a work for the unveiling of a statue at the Gdansk shipyards, the *Locrimoso*, which was to become the *Polish Requiem* (rev. 1993).
 1986: The opera *Die Schwarze Maske* (The Black Mask) is premiered at the Salzburg Festival.
 1992-1995: *Violin Concerto No. 2 Metomorphosen*

The catalogue of Krzysztof Penderecki contains about 100 works. His music has been adapted for film soundtracks such as *The Exorcist*, *The Shining*, David Lynch's *Wild At Heart* and *Inland Empire*.

▶ **KP:** Only once!

AKB: Why just once?

KP: Well, you know, jazz means improvisation! And I want to have everything under control. I write a score that nobody should change. And jazz means you write a theme, but each performance is different.

AKB: Everybody makes it his own work, his own style?

KP: Basically, yes.

AKB: And that's something you don't want your work to be exposed to?

KP: No! And I want to control everything, each single note. There was a period, a short period, where I used elements from aleatoric forms, repetition: also in works such as *Threnody for the victims of Hiroshima*, where a theme, or rather a pattern, is repeated in an optional tempo. But that was only a short episode in my music!

AKB: In your career, there have been a lot of commissioned works. It must be difficult, knowing the work must be completed by a certain date. How do you deal with that sort of pressure?

KP: Well, you naturally start some time before, but actually, there is never time enough. You are never able to compose without any hurry. But honestly, under pressure, when you really have to write, with only a short-time before you have to deliver the score – that's when you write best. So, I collect material, make sketches, a lot of sketches, but I don't use them all. I get up in the morning and write; and the next day the

same, and so on, for the next few months... But then, I have to write the score, have to make decisions, create a clean form. And that's something you do best under pressure – which is only human!

AKB: How do you proceed?

KP: I make sketches regarding the form, but also write some special passages. For example: If I am composing a horn concerto, I try to find something interesting for that instrument. You know, I have written for many great artists and interpreters. It started with Siegfried Palm, who was the leading cellist, for modern music back in the sixties. For Heinz Holliger I composed for oboe, for Isaac Stern a violin concerto. For Anne Sophie Mutter. For Rostropovich, of course. For Jean-Pierre Rampal. And for Radovan Vlatkovic. Actually, I am very lucky that I am able to write for such great artists who play my works!

AKB: And do you discuss the work with the artist, or ask them for tips, as Brahms did with Joseph Joachim?

KP: No! I have been composing for so many years now, and after so many works for orchestra, I know all the instruments. But you must always try to write something almost impossible – or even beyond possibility! Because, later on, it will be possible. This has happened several times: I went behind the scale, especially regarding height, but after several attempts, one was able to play it anyway. You know, it is a question of development in technique! Let's take the technique when I was a student – and the technique nowadays. And the high-C in *Le Sacre du Printemps* from Igor Stravinsky: The bassoon player said it would be impossible. And he didn't want to play it at all. And today, they play even one octave higher. Of course, one hundred years have gone by, but... ▶

► **AKB:** Was it always your dream to be a musician?

KP: Yes! First, it was the violin. I actually started composing because there was no opportunity to buy sheet music. I come from a very small town, and already in 1939, our home had been plundered. My teacher wrote *etudes* for me so that I could practise. But I thought: I can do better. And obviously, I could... So I started composing to be able to practise!

AKB: And thus the wish to become a composer arose?

KP: Gradually. I always composed, but then I had my first success. I played some concerts at my hometown Debica, and played some of my own works. And so it developed step by step.

AKB: In your childhood, you were witness to the atrocity of the Nazis when a ghetto was built directly behind your home. How have these terrible experiences influenced you?

KP: It was not only the ghetto, you know. There were a lot of atrocities in my family: first, the Russians killed one uncle; then, another was killed by the Germans in Warsaw, because he was in the underground. A lot of members of my family were killed during the war!

AKB: But you never had any problems with Germans?

KP: My grandfather was actually German. But he was also a Polish patriot as he had spent nearly all his life there. He was from Wrozwaw, but lived in Poland and was married to a Pole. In World War I, all their sons – there were seven – were in Joséf Klemens Pilsudski's legions. But from the moment the Germans arrived, he stopped talking German. Before, I he spoke it with me, taught me a little, especially German literature. Eichendorff, for example, which I have now set to music! You know, they were cruel times, but you have to forget. Otherwise you can't go on living!

AKB: Do you try to recover from that cruelty through your music?

KP: Of course! I have written many works as a direct result; the *Dies Irae*, an oratorio for Auschwitz.

AKB: And for Hiroshima.

KP: Hiroshima, right. And then the *Polish Requiem*; I wrote it for the Solidarity movement. I have composed more than 120 works, but I think it is only four that are – I would never say political – but that are dedicated to, linked with or composed for a special event or reason. All the others are of simply music!



AKB: You do not want to make a political statement?

KP: I have an allergic reaction to that – first the German occupation; then the Russian occupation. The government was sent from Russia! We were even taught an incorrect Polish history. I learned the correct version from my father and grandfather. I guess I got allergic then. I am a free person! Of course I wrote the *Polish Requiem* as that time was a very important period in Polish history, with the changes taking place. And I wanted to support it with sacred music; I was interested as it had been forbidden too. And, as you know forbidden fruit...

AKB: ...is sweetest!

KP: Isn't it? My sacred music hadn't been performed at all. No young composer has written this type of music.

AKB: Due to Stalinism?



► **KP:** Yes! Though the Church had survived, there were always problems and frictions.

AKB: Are you a religious man?

KP: Yes, I am. My mother was very religious, as was my grandfather. It's a family tradition.

AKB: So, your avant-garde compositions were a sort of protest?

KP: Yes! Mainly the sacred music. But avant-garde... Well, you know, in Poland it was not as severe as in other, so called socialistic countries. There was a certain liberty for artists. So, if I say sacred music was forbidden, then I must say forbidden until my *Passion* in 1965. After the success of the work, they actually started playing sacred music again.

AKB: So you were actually able to have a political effect.

KP: Yes. But my *Passion* was a very weighty work. It was written for the millennium of Christianity in Poland. In fact, the government wanted to suppress it. But it was a big success! Two recordings were made within a year, and a lot of performances given, because it was totally new and unexpected, someone coming in from the cold!

AKB: And when did you first conduct in a public concert?

KP: Someone wanted to make some recordings of my work in Poland, so I agreed to conduct. Of course, it wasn't very good, but this was my first time, and my first recordings!

AKB: Is it easier conducting your own works, or those by Boulez, Bruckner, Beethoven or Wagner? When do you place more demands on the musicians?

KP: Well, it is difficult if you are playing your own music. I believe one cannot write down everything, every detail of your imagination. So, the score is never a hundred percent. But if you conduct, you want to evoke everything, even what you couldn't write down. That makes it difficult. I always think my work is better than what I was able to write on paper! In this regard, first rehearsals are always hard, and that's why I prefer somebody else to do the premiere!

AKB: But, we do not have any recordings of Beethoven or Mozart conducting their own music, any record of their intentions. Isn't it important to have you comment on every work you perform, for posterity, so that they can be reproduced really authentically!

KP: Hmm, I am not sure if the composer himself would be the best interpreter. Sometimes you have a conception, but it does

not develop. Of course, you learn to know a work better after some performances. But if you have a good conductor, a good musician, he might be able to play it in another way – and maybe might get beyond your imagination by choosing other tempi or other orchestral colours!

AKB: As he has more emotional distance from the music than you?

KP: That's correct. As a composer, there are too many conflicting emotions when you conduct your own works!

AKB: You once said that, as a conductor you have opened up works by ancient composers you did not have access to before. Did this have any reverse impact on your compositions or on your style? You've been through three or four phases...

KP: Even more. Yes, of course it did influence my work. I've lived a long time now, and the world I live in today is very different. Why shouldn't I change too? Every composer has different phases in his development. Some things remain how they were. But I consider this a weakness. You have to keep up with the times. And sometimes, you have to go against received opinion, remain yourself and remain true to yourself!

AKB: And how do you deal with critics?

KP: Oh, it doesn't interest me at all! I read it in the past, of course, but nowadays; no interest at all. I have created my own world. I have many works being played again and again. And I have always had success with audiences – even in China, or South America! I believe that every audience (a good one of course) understands my music. Even when my music was really complicated and new and different, I earned acclaim. My works have always been successful. And that is actually what I am accused of! (laughs)

AKB: So you are proud of the works you create?

KP: Yes. My music is not only the concertos. I am glad – and this is most important for me – that young musicians are interpreting my chamber music: works for solo cello, the 'Cadenza' for viola, the 'Capriccio' for solo tuba. Every tuba player in the world plays it! Everywhere I go, in every orchestra, the tuba player comes with the sheet music under the arm and asks me some questions. That means that my music is alive! It is not only performed in the ghetto of Contemporary music.

AKB: In many of your works, you start with a single note from which the work develops. Is it kind of a germ, or an act of creation? ►

KP: Well, not always. There are some works like that, but it is not a rule. Yes, I do write music that arises from a germ and I develop it. And you might think that would be very simple, with an unisono, and then... Nobody can start with an atonal chord, in my opinion. Then, no development would be possible, but everybody has his own system. There are some composers who only work at the piano.

AKB: And what about you?

KP: I am a poor pianist. I can write quicker than I can play. Of course, I studied piano, but I was mainly interested in violin. My education was very classical. First I was an interpreter, and I have always written everything by hand. Today, I sometimes see students composing only at the computer. Well, maybe there will be a completely different type of music in the future, but I am convinced that you can't compose an oratorio or a symphony at the computer!

AKB: Is that because a computer has no soul?

KP: Yes, it is a machine. And there are no manuscripts. Contact with that piece of paper is very important for me, it is a constant in my life. I have no interest in computers. They can't do anything I can't do myself. Maybe not so fast, but by myself! But, who knows, maybe the future holds a completely new art in store, due to computers and electronics!

AKB: So, you write by hand. But is the music already in your head, or does it arise as you are writing?

KP: There's no rule. Often, it arises in my dreams. In the morning, when I wake up, my head is already filled with music, and I try to write it down. But, as I mentioned before, I am never able to get it entirely and exactly how I had it in my mind.

AKB: There's probably nobody that can! How can you put it all into a score?

KP: Actually, I have good technique, but I'm still not able to do it...

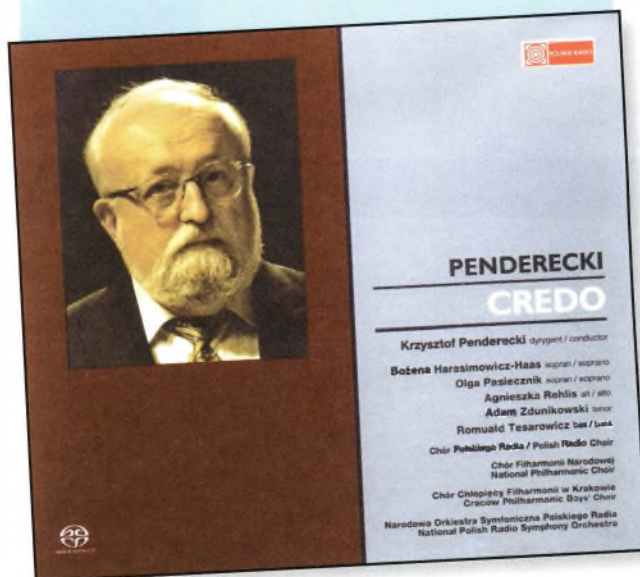
AKB: But don't you think this is the mystery of music; that there are things you can't write down, that only come to life when the music is played?

KP: For me, often the most beautiful music is that which has never been written down. The music you have heard in your dreams or when dozing. That is lost forever!

AKB: What are your plans for the future?

Discography (Selected):

Symphony No. 2 'Christmas' (EMI)
 Die Teufel von Loudon (DVD, Arthaus)
 Orchestral Works (EMI)
 St. Luke Passion (MDG)
 Concerto for Violin and Orchestra 'Metamorphosen' with Anne Sophie Mutter (DGG)
 Symphony No. 7 'Seven Gates of Jerusalem' (Wergo)
 Polish Requiem (Chandos)
 Te Deum (Naxos)
 Piano Concerto 'Resurrection' (Dux)
 String Quartets (Wergo)
 Threnody To The Victims Of Hiroshima (Berlin Classics)
 Canticum Canticorum Salomonis (EMI)



KP: I have just finished a horn concerto, and I have started my third string quartet; it will be premiered in Warsaw on my birthday, by the Shanghai String Quartet. And then... well, I have a lot of plans. I want to finish the cycle of symphonies. I have to write the *Sixth*, which is still unfinished. Not all the sketches are up to date, so when I write it now, I will write it differently.

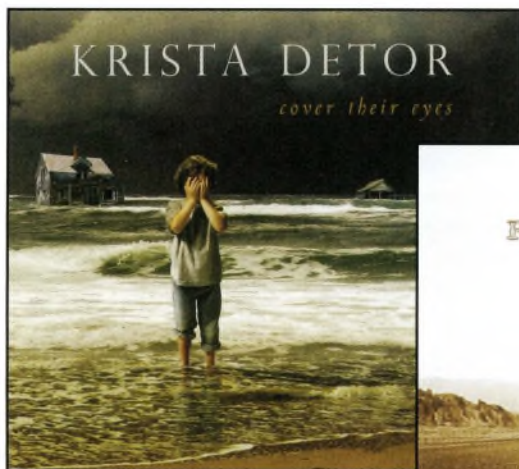
AKB: But why is it number *Six* if there is already a number *Eight*?

KP: I skipped. I had started to write the *Sixth*, but then I was commissioned to write a work for the 3000th anniversary of Jerusalem, which I couldn't turn down. So, I put the *Sixth* aside. Then I composed the *Seventh* and shortly after that, the *Eighth*. So, I will now finish numbers *six* and *nine*, and that's it!

AKB: And you want to leave it at nine? Deeply symbolic...

KP: Yes! That's also a tradition. And not a bad one!





ANDREW HOBBS



Krista Detour – *Cover Their Eyes*
Corazong Records 255102

Ryan Bingham – *Mescalito*
Lost Highway 0602517396746

Beth Hart – *37 Days*
Provogue PRD 7258 2

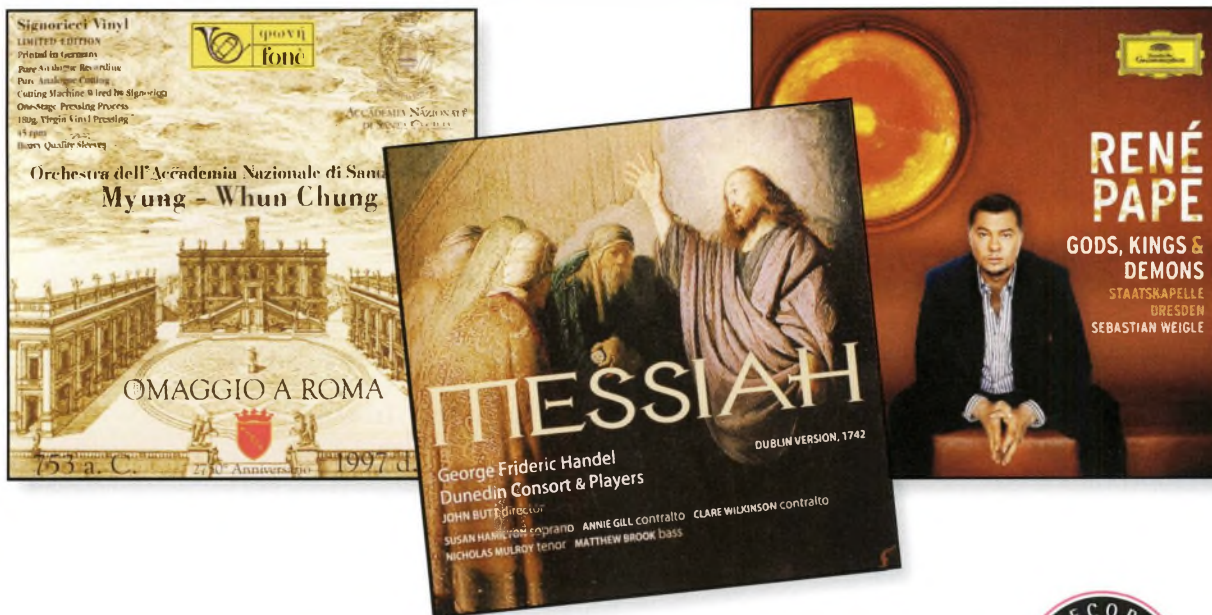
Always a difficult one, this 'Best of the Year' lark. How on earth is anyone supposed to whittle down all the great music of the last 12 months into just three or four titles? Well, orders are orders, so here are the ones that stood out from the pack for me.

Firstly, we have Krista Detour. This woman is an extraordinary talent; blessed with a voice as smooth as chocolate, she doesn't just sing a song – she caresses it. She's also incredibly hard to pigeonhole and covers a lot of bases, and her song-writing – especially her lyrics – is a joy to behold. *Cover Their Eyes* really is a beautiful listening experience and thoroughly deserves its placing here.

Next, we have a new kid on the block, a gritty Texan singer/songwriter called Ryan Bingham. His debut release on Lost Highway, *Mescalito*, is as good a first album as you'll hear anywhere. Tough tales of life on the road and in the urban jungle fizz to life in this man's hands, and he's going to have a long and fruitful career in the music business if he keeps releasing albums as good as this one. He sounds like a grizzled 60 year old who's drunk way too much Bourbon and smoked since the age of seven, so to

find out that he's only 25 makes what comes out of the depths of his soul all the more remarkable.

As good as the above two releases are, there's one album that gets my nod for out and out 'Best of the Year', and that comes from American singer Beth Hart. Read the article in this issue and you'll see that Beth's done it the hard way; booze and drugs threatened to destroy her immense talent before it even got off the ground, but she straightened herself out and now has five amazing albums behind her, including this latest, *37 Days*. Rock music's been sounding a little tired of late and was literally screaming for someone to grab it by the scruff of the neck, which is exactly what this sensational singer has done. Beth is the epitome of passion and power, she sings it like she's lived it and trust me, she's the best damned rock singer on the planet right now. She's also a fine song-writer, and like all good song-writers she pulls on life experiences to get her message across. On the live album, *Live At The Paradiso*, she and her super-tight band romp through a version of Led Zeppelin's 'Whole Lotta Love', and if Zeppelin can't drag Robert Plant out to do a full tour, they have a ready made replacement in Beth Hart. That really is how good she is. *37 Days* was recorded in 37 days but it doesn't sound rushed or forced; it's just one mother of an album by one mother of a singer, and now that Provogue Records have decided to release it in the UK, our record buying public can find out what Europe and America have known for some time – that Beth Hart is the best and the hardest rocking female to come along since the immortal Janice Joplin. People, I kid you not.



ANN KATHRIN BRONNER



Gioachino Rossini – *Overtures: The Italian Girl in Algiers Et The Barber of Seville*
Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Myung-Whun Chung
fonè 016 / 1 LP

Georg Friedrich Handel – *Messiah (Dublin Version, 1742)*
Dunedin Consort; John Butt, Susan Hamilton, Nicholas Mulroy, Matthew Brook a.o.
Linn Records CKH 312 / 3-LP-Box

René Pape – *Gods, Kings And Demons*
Opera Arias from Charles Gounod (Faust), Arrigo Boito (Mefistofele), Hector Berlioz
(La Damnation de Faust), Giuseppe Verdi (Don Carlo), Jacques Offenbach (Les Contes
d'Hoffmann), Richard Wagner (Das Rheingold, Tristan und Isolde), Anton Rubinstein
(Der Dämon), Antonín Dvořák (Rusalka) und Modest Mussorgsky (Boris Godunow).
René Pape, Bass
Staatsoperchor Dresden, Staatskapelle Dresden, Dirigent: Sebastian Weigle
Deutsche Grammophon / Universal 8761649

Same procedure as every year – and the same problems I have to face?!?
Well, not this year. It may be my personal impression, but this year's musical
output has had considerably fewer highlights than the year before,
especially on vinyl. Maybe the majors have focussed too heavily on re-issues
from their back catalogues instead of taking the risk of releasing new material.
Nevertheless, I have played again the role of pearl-diver, and want to present
you with three records that really are worth listening to!
The bronze medal, 2008, goes to René Pape. Bass singers are normally the
underdogs of the operatic circus. So often subjugated to the role of bad
guy, they are on the other hand, the wow factor that can add the spice to
sometimes simple libretti. No one is as persuasive when it comes to being

God, a demon or king, as the German singer René Pape. His voice offers every
nuance from anger through to mellifluous charm, from Godly to demonic, from
velvet to silk, from hate to love. On stage, he manages to completely submerge
himself in his roles. On his first solo recording, he gathers his favourite arias
from Wagner to Verdi, from Mussorgsky to Rubinstein. An amazing voice
– God, king AND demon.

Silver goes to Handel's *Messiah* in the Dublin version, from the Dunedin
Consort on Linn. The luxury three LP box is a fantastic, vivid document of a
successful adaptation of Baroque music to the 21st century! It is a young,
fresh, entertaining *Messiah* from Scotland, and a perfect production: In the
tradition of the original version, the Dunedin Consort uses historic instruments
under the baton of John Butt (who acted as a member of Scotland Yard
in discovering the original transcription) while only 13 vocalists revive the
ambience of Dublin in 1742. The sound is lean instead of bombastic, the
pressing quality is superb, and the voices of the soloists are captivating!
And the winner is... the small audiophile label from Italy, fonè. In its "silver
anniversary year" (25 years of fonè), they deserve gold! This should really
be a lifetime award, although I'm giving it to the Rossini Overtures from
The Italian Girl in Algiers and *The Barber of Seville*; they're my choice for
2008! To those who think Rossini is superficial and offers simple, shallow
content, all I can say is, "Sweets have calories too!" And if you take a closer
look, you will discover the magic and the artistry in Rossini's music: A master
of instrumentation, he pours a cornucopia of beautiful melodies over the
audience. In addition, he adds a proper portion of humor and a dash irony.
The Orchestra of Santa Cecilia and Myung-Whun Chung present a precise and
very "Italian" performance that will sweep you off your feet! The only downer
is the duration: if you can apply "duration" to a 45rpm record that only plays
for 16 minutes? Encore!

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
	Gold CD		150g LP
	HD CD		180g LP
	XR CD		10" LP
	Double Disc		Availability As S/H LP
	DVD		Vinyl Double Album
	SACD		
	Hybrid SACD		Digital Download
	Multi-Channel		



Chris Duarte

Vantage Point

Provogue Records PRDCD7261-2 

The photograph of Duarte on the inner sleeve of *Vantage Point* shows a face etched in what the blues is all about...blood, sweat and tears. Duarte, like so many before him, has had his problems with life's excesses, but he's a survivor who came out with his incredible gifts intact. He's often likened to Stevie Ray Vaughan in the way he plays and sings, but Duarte's no clone happy to ride on the late guitarist's reputation.


Vantage Point is a ferocious mix of high intensity blues-rock and it kicks into life with 'The Best I Can Do', a thumping rocker that races to the finishing line on a breathless groove. The pace changes to a shuffle on 'Satisfy' and then he gets that Strat funking it up with the instrumental, 'Slapstar'. 'More Boogie' motors along on a wicked riff and has more than a touch of Thin Lizzy about it, whilst 'Babylon's' driven by a fantastic vocal and some quite unbelievable playing. 'Woodpecker' shows how versatile this man is; the notes glide off the guitar as the mood changes from jazzy to an almost Allmans-like meander. Mike Varney's production is clean and crisp, and the band allow Duarte room to flex his uncouped musical muscles. He's as good as anyone out there right now...the blood, sweat and tears definitely paid off.

AH



Tracy Bonham

Blink The Brightest

Zoe/Rounder 01143-1065-2 

Oregon-born Tracy Bonham shares a number of striking similarities to the highly acclaimed Eleanor McEvoy. Both were classically trained musicians and this brings a structure and discipline to their song writing. This grip upon the medium, the tautness of the writing coupled with a penetrating vision means that there's nothing flabby or vacuous about these songs. Their music is wide-ranging and inquisitive, introspective and impassioned, but vocally they differ. Tracy possesses one of the best female rock voices around, whereas Eleanor's softer brogue suits a contemporary folk style. That said, thematically in distinctively separate ways their performances memorably dissect the quiriness, desperate longing, disillusion and betrayal inherent in modern relationships. Tracy's take on this condition through songs like 'I Was Born Without You', 'Naked', 'All Thumbs' and 'Take Your Love Out On Me' has a knowing intensity and brooding wisdom about it that is frequently reinforced by the lyricism and engaging hooks. Nor does she have anything to fear from the melancholy or the delicacy of a haunting refrain heard in 'And The World Has The Nerve To Keep Turning'. Nerveless in the relentless pursuit of angst, yearning and doubt, her well-turned phrases display charm, humour and wit.

RP





Rusty Truck

Luck's Changing Lanes

Rykodisc Records RCD10926 

When God was busy dishing out talent, he made sure Rusty Truck front-man Mark Seliger got the main course and a really tasty dessert. Before he decided to get involved with music, Seliger established himself as a world renowned photographer for Conde Nast Publications and Rolling Stone magazine. He befriended many of his subjects and one, Jakob Dylan, helped him hone his song-writing talents.

Luck's Changing Lanes is as professionally crafted as Seliger's photographs and has exquisite attention to detail. The sound is rootsy and generally mid-paced, and Seliger sings in a voice not dissimilar to Dwight Yoakam's. The stunning ballad 'Broken Promises' is definitely going to get covered by a big country star sooner or later, as is the title track. Another standout is 'New York Fallen Angel', a reggae track featuring Burning Spear on backing vocals. It sounds like an unlikely pairing but amazingly sits comfortably with everything else here, and its sunshine lilt illuminates in all the right ways.

Seliger's attracted some high profile guests to help out, including Lenny Kravitz, Sheryl Crow, Willie Nelson and Matchbox Twenty's Rob Thomas, and for those of you who get to the record shops quick enough there's a limited edition version of *Luck's Changing Lanes* which comes as a CD/DVD digipak with 5 music videos and 5.1 surround sound. Cor blimey, sometimes those record companies spoil us rotten.

AH

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Paul Mark

Blood and Treasure

Radiation Records RDTN5907 

Where do these guys hang out? This, believe it or not, is Paul Mark's seventh album in a 15 year career, and I have to confess I'd never heard of him until this dropped on my doormat.

Blood and Treasure was recorded in Memphis with what Mark calls "real live musicians". It has that 'live' feel – not too polished with just the right amount of raunch and roll to get into all the receptive places. So, what does he sound like? Sweaty, honest, a little bit rock, a fair bit old soul, bluesy but in a rootsy way and tough...he sounds tough, like he's had to do it the hard way, playing sweaty clubs for a few hundred dollars a night, which he no doubt has. He has a deep resonant voice perfect for what he does, and he really reminds me of Joe Grushecky, a New Jersey singer cut from the same cloth.

I imagine this lot are absolutely sensational live, belting out tunes at maximum volume whilst all around them the beer and whisky flows and fights break out at one a minute. This is gritty stuff; even the ballads have a certain aggressiveness to them, but therein lies this record's strength and it's charm. It doesn't pretend to be anything but straight ahead, urban rock 'n' roll, and there's nothing wrong in that.

AH

RECORDING 
MUSIC



The Simon Hopper Band

The Less Blessed

Control Shift Music 

Simon Hopper is no apologist. His contemporary folk roots music does so much more than reflect upon life in Britain today. *The Less Blessed* has a conscience. Thematically, he shows a frightening degree of relevance to tackle the most discomforting and challenging of material both barrels. The album opens with 'Lammas Leaves', which muses upon the terrible flooding and loss of life and livelihood during the summer of 2007. This is followed by a shattering song: 'The Ballad Of The Suffolk Five', whose pastoral overtones and traditional form jarringly contrast with a factual tale that traces the horrific murders of five Ipswich prostitutes during the space of just a few winter days last year. There are other more personal moments where Simon changes the mood to give a delicate and quite touching account of the woman in his life on 'New Girl'. Or, in the affection and nostalgia he feels for the chalk downs of 'Seven Sisters'. Interestingly, some of these songs seem to be deliberately paired. So, that for example, the darkly threatening imagery of 'Little Red Riding Hood' comes immediately after 'The Suffolk Five'. Real life and fairytale realms collide. And there are also two contrasting tracks dealing in journeys, new and old, with 'Travelling People' and 'Pilgrimage'. Intelligent interplay of this kind makes this a telling work.

RP


Supplier: Frontier Promotions
www.simonhopper.co.uk

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Marc Ford

And The Neptune Blues Club

Provogue Records PRD72022 

Marc Ford's prowess on guitar has made him a wanted man. He spent a long time with the Black Crowes as lead/second guitarist and has been a recent member of Ben Harper's touring and recording band. In between those stints he found time to record last year's *Weary and Wired*, a tasty, psychedelia-fuelled guitar feast that showed how good a singer and songwriter he is too. It also reunited him with his original band, Burning Tree. This time around he's hired some of Southern California's finest blues musicians, which unsurprisingly gives *The Neptune Blues Club* a deep, bluesy vibe. Never a guitarist to stick to a given formula, Ford mixes the styles around and always keeps it interesting. He can play it heavy and amped to the eyeballs (Main Drain), drop into Chuck Berry territory (Go Too Soon) or just grind out a low-down, filthy Hendrix-inspired groove, as he does so well on 'Can't Get Me Killed'. However, the true highlights are two gorgeous slow numbers; the first being 'Freedom Fighter' which is close in sound to Gary Moore's recent work, and the other is 'Mother's Day', a throwback to Fleetwood Mac's Peter Green era. Occasionally there's a tendency to overstretch a song and self-indulgence creeps in, but overall this is a highly enjoyable set and a real treat for lovers of blues-flavoured rock.

AH



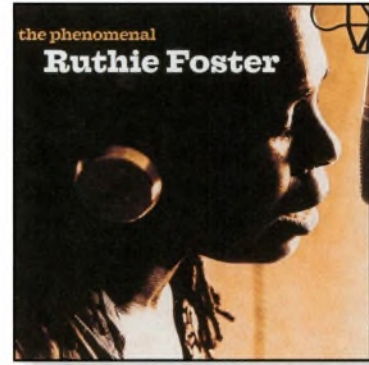
Karen Dalton

It's So Hard To Tell Who's Going To Love You The Best

Megaphone CD MEGA 10 

To describe this album as "great" and Karen Dalton as a quite "brilliant" musician is to thoroughly under appreciate a woman whose unique folk/blues style must be heard to be believed. Her dusky, smouldering yet smoky voice, which has been rightly compared to that of Billie Holiday, slowly simmers as it builds in emotional range. When you hear the delivery of powerful songs like 'It Hurts Me Too', 'I Love You More Than Words Can Say' or 'Ribbon Bow' the affect is nothing less than debilitating. How her reputation never really travelled much beyond the Greenwich Village circuit of the 1960s is totally mystifying. Alongside that bittersweet wistful delivery of a line is her delicate acoustic guitar artistry, so integral to these songs that it drives the stake ever deeper into your heart. Mesmerising moments of such bruising intimacy remain unrivalled. To think that she ended her life destitute and homeless leaves me sick to the stomach. There are other Karen Dalton recordings out there and I would urge everyone to seek them out and then spread the word.

RP



Ruthie Foster

The Phenomenal

Proper Records PRPCD040 

Ruthie Foster is very difficult to categorise; is she folk, soul, r 'n' b, gospel or blues? Actually, she's a pretty ravishing blend of all of them, a singer who effortlessly crosses the boundaries, a performer with a tough and tender voice who really knows how to use it. When she pushes hard on a swinging r 'n' b number like the self-penned 'Heal Yourself' she sounds like Aretha Franklin, yet her take on Lucinda Williams' 'Fruits Of My Labour' brings to mind Dionne Warwick or a female version of Sam Cooke. Her choice of covers is diverse, to say the least. The Son House number, 'People Grinnin' In Your Face' is delivered acapella and shows how easily she slips into gospel mode, whilst Sister Rosetta Tharpe's 'Up Above My Head (I Hear Music In The Air)' is as smooth as silk. Foster can slip into blues just as effortlessly; 'Beaver Creek Blues' has one of her most authentic vocal performances and is delivered almost lazily, but an underlying power can still be unleashed when it suits her. 'I Don't Know What To Do With My Heart', a tender ballad sensitively backed by the Tosca String Quartet brings this beautiful album to a close on a honey-soaked high.

Ruthie Foster makes the art of singing sound so easy; this is a blissful listening experience and phenomenal, indeed.

AH





Erja Lytinen

Grip Of The Blues

RUF Records RUF1141



Finland's not really the kind of place you'd expect to find a blues diva, but here she is. This is Erja's second album for RUF Records, not including the *Pilgrimage* record she made with label mates Aynsley Lister and Ian Parker. She's not an artist firmly entrenched in the blues; she likes to wander around the styles a bit, and as long as you aren't a stuffy purist you'll find plenty to entertain you. Anyway, whatever she does, she always does it with honesty, grace and considerable charm. *Grip Of The Blues* kicks off with 'Broadcast', an instrumental that's heavy on the slide, something she really excels at. She has a stab at Tony Joe White's 'Steamy Windows' which is passable but doesn't come close to Tina Turner's version for all out raunchiness. She's much better when she sticks to her own material and one track that highlights her sensuous voice is 'I Wanna Get Closer', a funky number rich in sexual feeling. She croons about 'getting closer and taking her clothes off' and it really is a saucy little song. The album closes with 'Dissatisfaction', a track that enables her to show off those considerable guitar skills of hers. Overall, *Grip Of The Blues* is a tasty nugget, although maybe a little too diverse for some tastes, but then you can't please all the people...

AH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Murcof

The Versailles Sessions

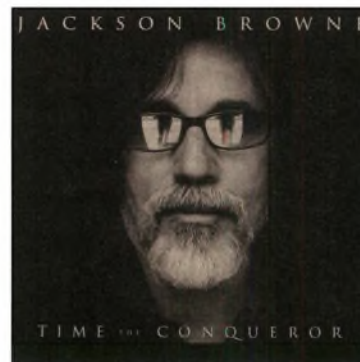
Leaf Label



Mexican musician Fernando Corona works under the sobriquet Murcof, ostensibly in the electronic field. However last year's *Cosmos* featured acoustic organ and the sound sources for his latest project are also of the unplugged variety, so it would seem that he's not content with his niche. For *The Versailles Sessions* Corona worked with recordings of 17th century baroque instruments, including viola de gamba, flute, violin and harpsichord played by Parisian musicians who specialise in baroque music. They recorded pieces by Lully and Couperin among others and Corona mixed them for *Les Grandes Eaux Nocturnes*, a festival of sound, light and water at Versailles. Without the light and the fountains the material still makes for powerful listening with huge dynamic swings and highly physical acoustics. It isn't supposed to be a follow up to *Cosmos* and it rarely sounds that way, but there are occasions when that album is brought to mind. There are others which remind one of Walter Carlos and his *Switched On Bach* synthesizer arrangements, but by and large this is about drama and contrast. Corona places the timbrally rich sounds of early instruments over a wash of ambient background, using low organ notes to create a foundation upon which he lays plucked harpsichord strings or close miked violin. It makes for engaging and exciting soundscapes that will change your perception of the instruments involved.

JK

RECORDING
MUSIC



Jackson Browne

Time The Conqueror

Inside Recordings INR8002-3



This is Jackson Browne's first new studio album in six years. His last, *The Naked Ride Home* was for this writer one of his finest moments, a true master-class in song-writing. Jackson's always been one of rock music's most distinguished sons; he writes about social and political issues as easily as he does a tender love song. He again reflects on the perilous state of our world here, and as one has come to expect, the lyrics hit the spot with unnerving accuracy. The band are the same personnel he used on *The Naked Ride Home*, with the addition of two new girl backing singers. This record's mood appears to mimic his new look, thoughtful but with an underlying weariness at its centre. Jackson's response to President Bush's late intervention on hurricane Katrina comes in the nine-minute epic 'Where Were You', a throbbing monster of a song that pulls no punches. A call for change is documented in 'Far From The Arms Of Hunger', a song for our troubled times and a request for the world to unite as one. Jackson tries to show a more playful side on 'Going Down To Cuba', and whilst not exactly chirpy, it does have a big, memorable chorus about "going down to Cuba where the rhythm never ends." It takes a few plays to register, but this is another fine release from a true legend.

AH

RECORDING
MUSIC





Little Feat

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-299 

Eponymous rock: A compact and country-influenced lump of post-psychedelic candy that at the time was sorely neglected by the critics, the band's own label and the general public alike was built around the talented ex-Mothers Of Invention band members Lowell George (guitar) and Roy Estrada (bass). They were joined by Texas piano player Bill Payne and drummer Richie Haywood to produce a sound that while being out of step with the 1970s California scene has now achieved an enduring cult status through its distinctive, sometimes emulated but never equalled, blend of layered rocking folk-blues-soul and boogie. The George/Payne song-writing axis delivers literate, nicely observed, catchy and on occasions the wildly imaginative material of 'Crazy Captain Gunboat Willie'. Elsewhere, song titles like 'Snakes On Everything', 'Truck Stop Girl', 'Crack In Your Door', 'Hamburger Midnight' and 'Forty Four Blues/How Many More Years' tend to speak for themselves. These vignettes, which are populated by poignantly sad, eminently recognisable and darkly humorous characters, reveal but don't over romanticise blue-collar sensibilities. They still resonate and this is a re-cut whose attention to detail showcases creativity, excellent musicianship and musicality when drawing out every gritty, telling little detail.

RP



Frank Sinatra

Capitol/Mobile Fidelity UDCC 790



Nice 'N' Easy

Sinatra had already lived a lifetime before his Capitol contract, having presaged the Beatles as a teenage heartthrob, then falling just as far into public indifference and obscurity. Between 1954 and 1961, he recorded about a dozen records for Capitol that remain the Mt. Everest of pop recordings, with Frank at the top of his game, incredible arrangements and legendary bandleaders. The 1960 sessions making up this recording were Sinatra's eighth outing with Nelson Riddle, and the twelve cuts are made up of romantic ballads, which Sinatra knew well from his Columbia recording days. This is a great record and will be balanced in tone soon by Mobile Fidelity's release of Sinatra's darker *No One Cares*. Didn't Mobile Fidelity already release Sinatra's Capitol sessions? Well yes, but this is a very different Mobile Fidelity. I sold my old Sinatra Mobile Fidelity box long ago and kept the original mono pressings of Sinatra's Capitol LPs. This new CD is a whole 'nother kettle of fish. It is a sonic wonder. It is so good that I've already moved my original mono LP to the "trade" pile. Mobile Fidelity will also be eventually releasing both the Sinatra titles on vinyl, so one is left to wonder how much better this can sound. Anyone who has not sampled Mobile Fidelity's recent output could find no better place to start than this disc. No one should be without this CD.

DDD



The Allman Brothers

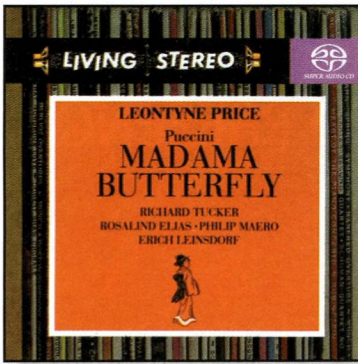
Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-301  

Idlewild South

Idlewild South is a typically early and engaging Allman Brothers fusion, where their Southern blues roots ambitiously jockey with an exciting, energetic and ferociously pumped up rock groove. Enough of the rhythm section – this is in many more ways Duane Allman's album. His remarkable slide and lead guitar work makes a bitingly inventive and driving contribution, with those breathtaking moments of interplay alongside Dickey Betts (lead guitar) giving it real substance and stature. *Idlewild* most definitely enhanced Duane's burgeoning reputation as a slide sidewinder. Characteristically indulgent and sensational improvisational opportunities that certainly characterised their live performances are less frequently realised here. While no single track runs to that mammoth but electrifying 22 minute mark of 'Whipping Post' heard on At Fillmore East, this is still a listing that burns with real emotional fire in 'Hoochie Coochie Man', 'In Memory Of Elizabeth Reed' and 'Don't Keep Me Wonderin'. This is another heavyweight half-speed mastered disc backed by an equally weighty Mobile Fidelity transfer that enhances the presentation of instrumental detail while maintaining the subtlety, balance and delicacy of touch in a manner we've come to expect. It's a place where clean and accurate guitar licks punctuate the acoustic without being overshadowed by this band's musical oomph!

RP





Puccini
Madama Butterfly

Price, Tucker, Leinsdorf
RCA Italiana Opera Orch. & Chorus

RCA Living Stereo 82876 82622 2 (SA)

Butterfly is such a staple Mills & Boon tear jerker that it can easily be taken too lightly. Here though, the principles – an impassioned and exotic foreign beauty in Leontyne Price and that roguish naval officer, Richard Tucker – are deftly and rakishly envisaged. Rosalind Elias's servant girl, Suzuki, is suitably dutiful and also delivers the right breadth of emotional energy as and when required, while the authoritative Leinsdorf remains one of those conductors who both inspires his singers and yet manages to still capture that intensity and oriental mysteriousness present in Puccini's score without recourse to vulgarity or sentimental indiscretion. His handling possesses dramatic bite, expansive tempi and refined textures, helping make this account a nicely balanced and satisfying interpretation. Meanwhile, Price sings sensitively and beautifully, with her characterisation of the abandonment of Butterfly right through to the tragic climax being intelligently and perceptively developed. The recording, which was handled in 1962 by Richard Mohr and Lewis Layton, is praiseworthy because it is operatic. By this, I mean that it captures the scale and orchestral colour, but also has that much sought-for vocal refinement as well. Moreover, this SACD transfer has enough control, transparency and sheer balls to carry it off.

RP



Giuseppe Verdi
La Forza del Destino

Price, Domingo, Milnes – LSO;
Levine (cond)

RCA Red Seal (Opera Treasury) 74321 39502-2 (CD)

The Power Of Destiny is one of the most complex and emotionally intense operas from Verdi's remarkable opus. We're unlikely to come across a more thoroughly prepared and successfully executed recording than this, which took place at Walthamstow Town Hall in 1976. Price, Domingo and Milnes, although still relatively early in their individual careers, surpass themselves both as soloists and as a beautifully balanced team under Levine's baton. While destiny may indeed be powerful, the real power of this opera and this recording in particular, lies in the totally commanding, overwhelming and captivating emotional and musical energy therein. Whenever I start listening to this version of *La Forza*, I cannot give it up until the very end of the final act! Just listen to Leontyne Price in the 2nd scene of the 2nd Act, or – equally so – Sherill Milnes' life story in the 1st scene of that same Act. My favourite Domingo moment comes at the beginning of the 3rd Act where he sings two consecutive arias ("La vita e inferno" and "Oh, tu che in sena agli Angeli") with majestic conviction and expression. This re-issue has been digitally re-mastered with the Apogee UV22 Super CD Encoder and, as a pleasant surprise, sounds remarkably natural with realistic dynamic scale and beautiful 3D soundstage.

DS



Marc Cohn

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-291 (180g)

Marc Cohn's eponymous album earned him a Best New Artist Grammy in 1991 partly, I think, for his consistently good song-writing, partly for that anthem 'Walking In Memphis' and mainly for a dark and deeply soulful voice that has the texture and richness of molasses. It set him apart both from his peers and that plethora of eminently forgettable acts much favoured by the record executives of the day. The transfer to 180g-vinyl as you'd expect, is a notable success, emphasising his robust emotionally charged vocal style, revealing the innate musicality he draws out from these songs. A remarkably mature debut with only the one cover, Willie Dixon's '29 Ways', is purposeful, dramatic and shows a real strength of character as Cohn sensitively observes the seemingly commonplace on his way to making telling and skilfully crafted songs. Whether it's the iconic cars in 'Silver Thunderbird', or the reminiscence of 'Perfect Love' and the urban landscapes of 'Saving The Best For Last' and 'Strangers In A Car' his storytelling here always hits a mark, outlasting even that dazzling if overworked '...Memphis' tune.

RP





PRIMAL SCREAM... THE POWERFUL VOICE AND PRESENCE OF BETH HART

by Andrew Hobbs

There's nothing like nailing your colours to the mast, and if you really want to regret it later, there's nowhere better to do it than in print. But if you're going to do it, you might as well do it properly, so here goes...

There are a fair number of good, female rock singers out there; there are even a few great ones; but this girl Beth Hart is the greatest one of all. Not just the greatest one of all right now, but quite possible the greatest one of all time – and that includes Janis Joplin. Joplin was an incredible singer with amazing charisma; one who could get an audience eating out of the palms of her hands. She had the stage presence, the rock chick look, the voice and the lifestyle; she did the sex and the drugs and had a massive personality to hold it all together, even if inside she was falling apart. Janis wasn't born to live a long life. I think deep down she always knew that, and that's why she partied so hard and sang the torture out of her soul in such a vitriolic way.

I make reference to Joplin because there are so many similarities between her and Beth, and because as far as I'm concerned, they represent the best of the past and the best of the present by some considerable distance. However, as good as Janis was, she didn't have the extra special power this girl possesses. Beth doesn't just sing, she explodes. She has a lovely subtle touch too, but when she's in rip-roaring rock mode there isn't a singer out there – male or female – who can get anywhere near her. She's a volcanic banshee; the walls of an auditorium quake and the audience can feel the tremors hit their inner cores when she's up on that stage, giving her all.

To find out where that primal force comes from, it's necessary to delve into the past of this extraordinary woman. Beth began playing piano at the age of four,



starting with Beethoven and Bach and progressing to songs by Etta James, Otis Redding, James Brown and lo and behold...Led Zeppelin. A pretty tasty repertoire for a 24 year old, never mind a child or 4! Her father was in jail on drugs charges

when she was five, and by 11 Beth herself was taking Cocaine and Speed. Heroin addiction followed at the age of 15, a caring gift from a heartless boyfriend, and as a teenager Beth was well and truly up against the wrecking wall. But this girl's resilient; she attended the *L.A. School Of Performing Arts* as a singing and cello major, and then had her first big break. She entered the *Star Search* TV show in 1993, a talent contest along the lines of Simon Cowell's delightful *Pop Idol*. She won the show 13 weeks in a row, including the final, and came out \$100,000 richer.

Unfortunately, by this time she had succumbed to alcohol addiction and was expelled from the Performing Arts school, but music was coursing through her veins and she wasn't going to be denied. It was whilst performing her songs on a rug subtly lit with candles ▶

▶ on the promenade of 3rd Street, Santa Monica that she was spotted by Cyndi Lauper's manager. So taken was he, that he asked to manage her as well, and this led to Beth signing for Lava/Atlantic. I was in music retail when her debut album, *Immortal*, hit the streets as an import in 1996, and I still remember my jaw hitting the floor when I played it for the first time. I hadn't (still haven't) heard anything like her, and although the production was good and money had clearly been spent polishing the sound, there was still that voice erupting from the speakers. The music was a heady mix of hard, rootsy rock and devilish blues and it made the soul shake. The standout track had to be 'Am I The One', a fierce, slow blues number that finds Beth asking that very question to whoever had a piece of her heart at the time. It's a vocal performance of unearthly magnitude and it pleads and soars in true majestic glory – this is the sound of a woman who understands how to sing a feeling and make it count for everything, whilst taking the listener along for the ride of their lives. Beth toured *Immortal* for nine months solid; the emotional cost to her and the band was enormous and she briefly returned to L.A. before deciding to relocate to Birmingham, Alabama to preserve her sanity.

Screaming For My Supper came along in 1999, a sublime mix of confessional but edgy

pop songs that included the autobiographical 'L.A. Song' which became a top-five hit in her homeland and a big smash in Holland. Scribbled on one of the booklet's pages are these telling lines: "It's not the life I thought it would be, but I'll be alright, I know I will be. So long to circumstance." Beth partied hard on the back of *Screaming For My Supper* and the cracks became all too evident. She made an appearance on the *Tonight* show

weighing in at only 108 pounds, too much to take for her record company who dropped her immediately. It would be another five-years before the world heard from Beth Hart again.

Those wilderness years were hard; she ended up in rehab, did time in jail for falsifying prescriptions and went from 98 to 180 pounds in weight. "I didn't want to live, but I was afraid to die" she remembers, "so I started cutting myself." Beth's made of strong stuff though, and fought her way back from the brink with everything she had. She attended alcoholics anonymous to deal with the drink problem and also met her husband-to-be Scott Guetzkow, the man she clearly sees as her very own earth angel.

When Beth returned to the recording studios in 2004 it was to deliver the soul baring set *Leave A Light On*. She wrote it like she lived it and no song carried more pain or hit harder than the title track. When she sings, "17 and all messed up inside, I cut myself just to feel alive" she's allowing the listener an insight into her own private hell. Lines like "I ain't that bad I'm just messed up, I ain't that sad but I'm sad enough" and "God bless the child with the dirty face, who cuts her luck with a dirty ace" will resonate with anyone who's ever had the misfortune to suffer a troubled upbringing. Beth came out with this telling statement around the time of *Leave A Light On*'s release:

"I wrestle with the sharp edges of life and look at it with a magnifying glass. I know the difficult circumstances of which I sing and I've been through it all."

In May of 2004, Beth played the Paradiso in Amsterdam, a now legendary show fortunately captured forever in sight and sound. On CD it stands as one of the great live albums of modern times, containing some piano only versions of her songs as well as full-on rock ▶





► renditions guaranteed to get the hairs on the back of the neck standing up in appreciation. Her band is as good as any out there and in Jon Nichols she has a guitarist capable of matching the best in the business. She encores with a cover of Led Zeppelin's 'Whole Lotta Love' and trust me, if that band's planned reunion doesn't go ahead because of Percy's lack of interest, all Page has to do is give this girl a call and she'll provide him with not only a ready made replacement, but a better singer. The accompanying DVD is quite simply spellbinding; to watch Beth slide into the audience and lock heads with one of the fans while she sets fire to the microphone on 'Am I The One'... well, it has to be seen to be believed. As does the tattoo on her back, a giant dragonfly (or butterfly) as stunning as her remarkable voice. There's also a bonus track not included on the CD, a thumping romp through Humble Pie's 'I Don't Need No Doctor' and should Beth decide to do a covers album at any time, I have a sneaking suspicion it could well turn out to be the greatest covers album... ever! Another special feature is a 35-minute, behind the scenes rockumentary which gives an insight into this complex

woman's many sides. So many of the extras found on concert DVDs are just there to entice and can be so boring to sit through, but this one's worth watching for the clips of Beth sat at home on the piano; it's a rare chance to glimpse her precious talent at its most personal.

Beth recently signed for Provogue Records, a Dutch label who obviously recognise something special when they see and hear it, and they have released her latest album *37 Days* in this country. It's packed to the rafters with stirring anthems, gorgeous ballads and ballsy tunes like 'Sick', a ferocious rocker Beth dedicated at a recent London showcase gig to "our shitty-assed president."

37 Days is my favourite album of 2008. It's the sound of a woman honing her vast songwriting and singing skills into an almost intoxicating blend of the powerful and other-worldly. Like I said when I reviewed it, Beth's a force ten hurricane, and like a hurricane she's going to make this sad old world of ours stand up and take notice before much longer. Get the album, buy the DVD and go and see her live at all costs... she's everything rock music was invented for in the first place. ▶+

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Examples from the setlist:

Brown-Eyed Girl - Van Morrison
Sweet Home Alabama - Lynyrd Skynyrd
Johnny B. Goode - Chuck Berry
Blue Suede Shoes - Elvis Presley
I'm a Believer - The Monkees
Stuck In The Middle - Stealer's Wheel
LITTLE Green Bag - George Baker Selection
Alright Now - Free
Pretty Woman - Roy Orbison
Should I Stay Or Should I Go - The Clash
You Really Got Me - The Kinks
Back In The U.S.S.R. - The Beatles
Teenage Kicks - The Undertones
Roll over Beethoven - Chuck Berry
Message In A Bottle - The Police
Honky Tonk Women - Rolling Stones
I Saw Her Standing There - The Beatles
Jailhouse Rock - Elvis Presley
Baby Please Don't Go - Van Morrison
Mustang Sally - Wilson Pickett
Pulling Mussels From A Shell - Squeeze
Wonderful Tonight - Eric Clapton

More modern songs from the setlist:

Summer Of 69 - Bryan Adams
Mr Brightside - The Killers
I Predict A Riot - Kaiser Chiefs
Chelsea Dagger - The Fratellis
Angels - Robbie Williams
Don't Look Back In Anger - Oasis
She Moves In Her Own Way - The Kooks
Dakota - Stereophonics
I Bet You Look Good - Arctic Monkeys
Always Where I Need To Be - The Kooks
All The Small Things - Blink 182
Last Nite - The Strokes
Bohemian Like You - Dandy Warhols
Molly's Chambers - The Kings of Leon
New Shoes - Paolo Nutini
Dreaming Of You - The Coral
Basket Case - Greenday
Oh Yeah - The Subways
Parklife - Blur
Ruby - Kaiser Chiefs
Alright - Supergrass
Weather With You - Crowded House

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EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE ONE

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

by Roy Gregory

Athens, Georgia's greatest export, at least as far as music goes, the B-52's did rock-n-roll the hard way, the right way, and if you hail from the old school, the only way. Formed in 1976, they toured, they played as a house band and they financed their own first single release. It was selling all 2000 of those 7" discs that brought them to the attention of Chris Blackwell, and he signed them to Island late in 1978, subsequently re-issuing that first release, the now legendary 'Rock Lobster'. Part punk, part rock-n-roll, part kitsch and all energy, the sub-aquatic psychedelia and bee-hive hair-dos distracted from the inventive chemistry of the music, the quality of the playing and the trademark harmony vocals. The result was up-beat and up-tempo new-wave rock, delivered with verve, skill and considerable style.

From front-man Fred Schneider's whimsically self-deprecating, pencil moustache touting pimp-chic, to the extravagant hair and even more extravagant vocal chords of Kate Pierson and Cindy Wilson, no one could accuse the 52's of taking themselves too seriously, a vibrant antidote to the bleak drabness of the black and grey donkey jackets of the hardcore New Wave. But put that musical intelligence, sense of humour and those voices into Island's Compass Point Studios and the tight band and even tighter bass notes emanating from Nassau, combined to create a wicked chemistry, a deeply funky groove and dynamic tour de force, an unconstrained chain reaction of fizzing life and bounding energy that exploded out of the speakers as soon as you cue up their eponymous first album, released in July '79.

Often incorrectly referred to as *Rock Lobster*, real fans know it as "the yellow one" or simply "the first album". On it were to be found nine original sticks of big audio dynamite – long before Mick came up with the name – with little or no connection to the cold comfort of Thatcher's Britain or the ever Cold-er War. Of course, anybody who'd heard 'Rock Lobster' (it made the charts in the UK back in 78) knew enough to brace themselves or take cover, but the Compass Point magic brought depth and precision, dynamic jump and separation to songs as diverse as opener 'Planet Claire' and the riotously irreverent chant of '52 Girls'. But it's the more measured, considered layers and spectacularly effective vocal arrangements of a track like



'Dance This Mess Around' that first reveal the hidden depths here. That and Kate Pierson's stunning voice – vocal chords that got an outing on another Athens export in the shape 'Shiny Happy People', but the less said about that the better. Then there's the poignance of '6060-842' and the subtle sub-text of 'Hero Worship'. But there's

not a bad track on the album while the powerful bass, easy transparency and crisp, spacious recording is almost a "how-to" of rock records. And the music takes full advantage.

A second album, *Wild Planet* released in 1980, was good but not as great and from there it was all down hill. Ricky Wilson, who played guitar and smoke alarm(!) on the first album, died in October '85 and despite odd twinklings of their old energy and humour, they were never again to scale the dizzy heights of that debut disc. Rock music with purpose, intelligence and humour, a sense of the surreal and bizarre in tow, the yellow album was both a one off and a monument, one that can't fail to lift your mood or put a smile on your face. Every house should, absolutely definitely have one – if only to show the kids how pop music should really be done!



B-52's the B-52's

Planet Claire	Kate Pierson – Vocals, Organ, Keyboard Bass
52 Girls	Fred Schneider – Vocal, Walkie Talkie, Toy Piano, Keyboard Bass
Dance This Mess Around	Keith Strickland – Drums, Percussion, Claire Sounds
Rock Lobster	Cindy Wilson – Vocals, Bongoes, Second Guitar
Lava	Ricky Wilson – Guitar, Smoke Alarm
There's A Moon In The Sky (Called The Moon)	
Hero Worship	
6060-842	
Downtown	

LP first released July '79 – WIP 9580,
re-issued May '86

CD first released Jan '87 – CID 9580,
re-issued Jan and May 94 (following
release of 'Love Shack' and the
soundtrack for *The Flintstones* movie)

Producer – Chris Blackwell
Engineer – Robert Ash
Assistant Engineer – Cass Rigby
Recorded at Compass Point Studios,
Nassau
Hairdos by – La Verne



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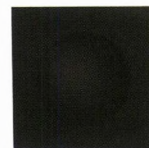


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