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ISSN 1465-5950



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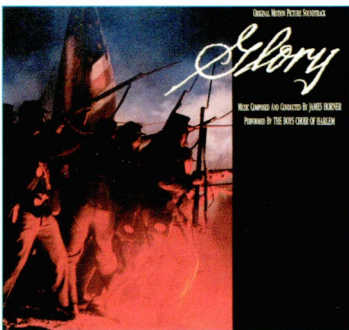
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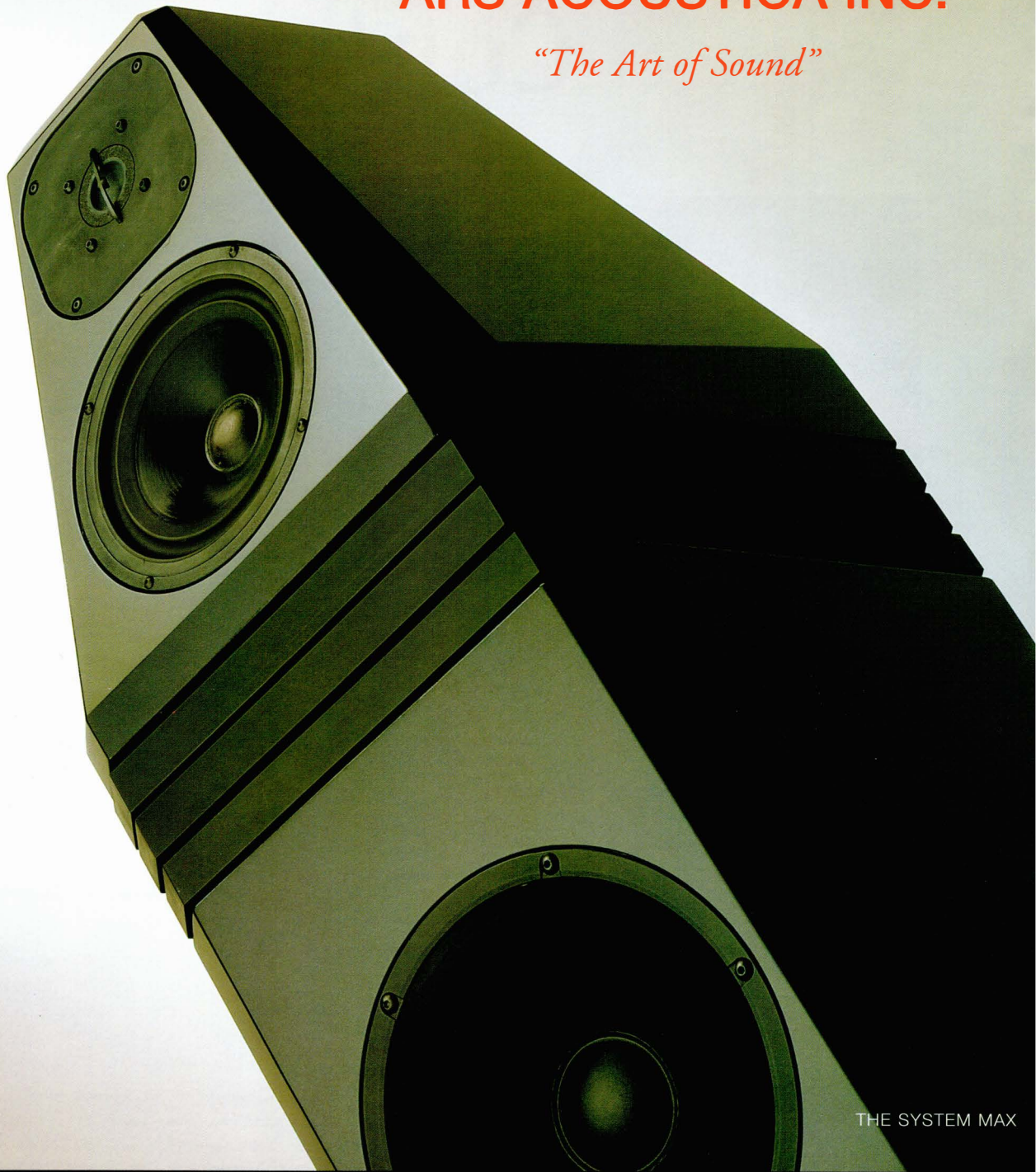
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Roy Gregory AQ Feb 98

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Beginnings are such fragile times and we must be careful not to attempt too much. It is more important to set the basic elements in place and see them firmly rooted, than to worry about the finer points and window dressing. That's exactly what I've attempted with this, the first issue of Hi-Fi+.

This is far from a finished product. Many of its limitations are imposed by practical pressures of space and time. Of course, I have clearly defined notions of where we are heading, and how the magazine will develop. But that development has an internal dynamic all of its own. Sure, I have plans and intentions, but you know what they say about that.

Our approach is fundamentally different to other magazines. We present an open forum, one in which manufacturers and dealers can engage and share their points of view. But it's open to you, the reader, as well. I start this magazine with the firm intention that above all, it should inform. But it is up to you to respond in kind, and we can only know how effective we are being if you tell us. So write, fax or when I sort it out, e-mail us with your views; about music; the industry, hi-fi, or most importantly of all, how you want Hi-Fi+ to grow. You have your chance to shape what we do. If you don't take it, you have only yourself to blame.

I look forward to a long  
(and probably torrid) future.



Roy Gregory



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You see, the technology that tells the Eurofighter's pilot whether that's a friend or a foe lurking over the horizon, is precisely the same technology that enables the Alpha 9 listener to tell whether that's a Steinway or a Bechstein lurking behind the conductor.

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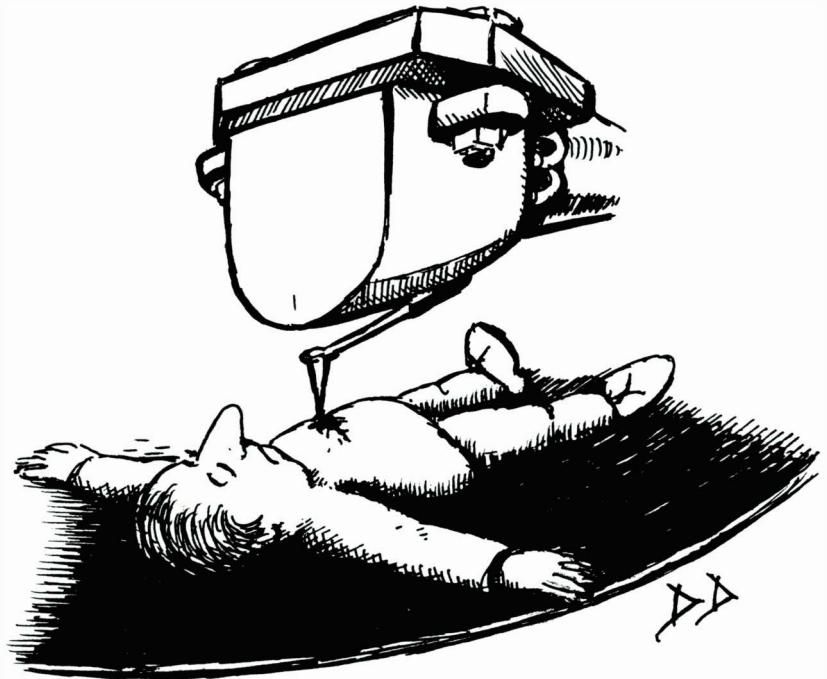
# Playing The System

by Roy Gregory

*This article first appeared in Issue 2 of Audio Quarterly, but it is so central to what this industry (and this magazine) is all about, that I make no apologies for reprinting it here. RG*

One of the hi-fi industry's favourite aphorisms is the law of diminishing returns. The poor thing gets blamed for the shortcomings in a whole host of under performing exotica; and is used to justify the expenditure of even greater sums of your hard earned cash for smaller and smaller improvements in your system. No wonder it's embraced by all and sundry; for dealers and manufacturers it's an absolute godsend. For you, the customer, it's the perfect prop to keep that nagging sense of disappointment from crashing round your ears. The same sense of disappointment which keeps you hunting for that final 'fix', that final upgrade which will really make a difference. Insidious huh!

Which goes a long way to explaining why everyone throws up their hands in horror when I suggest that the infamous law doesn't, or at least shouldn't, apply to hi-fi at all. The fact that it so clearly does indicates that there's something seriously awry. To understand what, and more importantly, how to avoid it, we need to look at changes that have occurred in the way we buy hi-fi, and also the care with which we use it.



## At the heart of hi-fi lies the system

The search for a system that works is synonymous with the pursuit of audio nirvana. And that system will be greater than the sum of its parts. That's what lifts it above the mire of mediocrity. What it won't be is a haphazard collection of 'Best Buys' and bargains. Unfortunately, in this day and age, this is more than likely exactly what a great many people own.

Whatever the reasons, and they are many and various, we have moved from a situation in which purchasing

decisions were dealer (and audition) led, to one in which they are review led. Magazines no longer print discursive pieces on the finer points of system set up. Page space has to justify itself in the face of the great God, marketing. That's what happens when a hobby becomes an industry. The differing requirements of the two camps results in a dislocation of understanding. The magazine is still about hi-fi, but its perspective and agenda are not the same as the altruistic/intellectual attitudes of the hobbyist. People who simply love music get caught in the gap, ill equipped to place the welter of

► information provided by magazines into a wider context they know little or nothing about.

The review dominated press has produced an over emphasis on the selection of individual items, a fascination with their individual traits. The ranking of products in group tests produces 'winners', and everyone loves a winner! The problem is that 'winner' becomes 'best', becomes 'best for you'. Everyone wins except the customer.

Combine this with the current obsession with getting the best deal, and you've got a recipe for disaster. The dealer is reduced to the status of a 'shop assistant' and treated as an adversary. The buyer is much happier to believe the magazine than a salesman, who he thinks just wants to extract as much money as possible from each and every customer. Given the mindset it's hardly surprising that a whole range of dealers have appeared who are only too happy to shift the boxes, take the money and run, thus perpetuating the myth. Each October the great British public rush out to buy What Hi-Fi's award winners, despite the fact that they don't remotely resemble a matched system, and individually are unlikely to match existing systems either! Good components in the right context they may be, but how often does that context apply? Change the rest of the system and a completely different product can easily out perform the supposedly undisputed champ.

The bottom line here is that an essential part of any hi-fi system that delivers the goods is a decent dealer to buy it from.

Give yourself a budget and select a system. Take it home, set it up and listen. Give the same budget to a good dealer and he'll produce a better sounding system than you. Even if you use the same components his choice of cabling and experience when it comes to system set up will still leave his system sounding better than yours. A lot better!

Most of the better dealers I know can walk into a new customer's house and improve the sound of the system, often substantially, without spending a red cent. Give them a budget to play with, allowing them to look at cabling, supports and other set up details, and you'd be surprised what they can achieve. But turning a sow's ear into a silk purse will be beyond them! If the system comprises poorly matched components then there's only so much that can be done. The fundamental building blocks have to be right, which is why you should start with a good dealer in the first place.



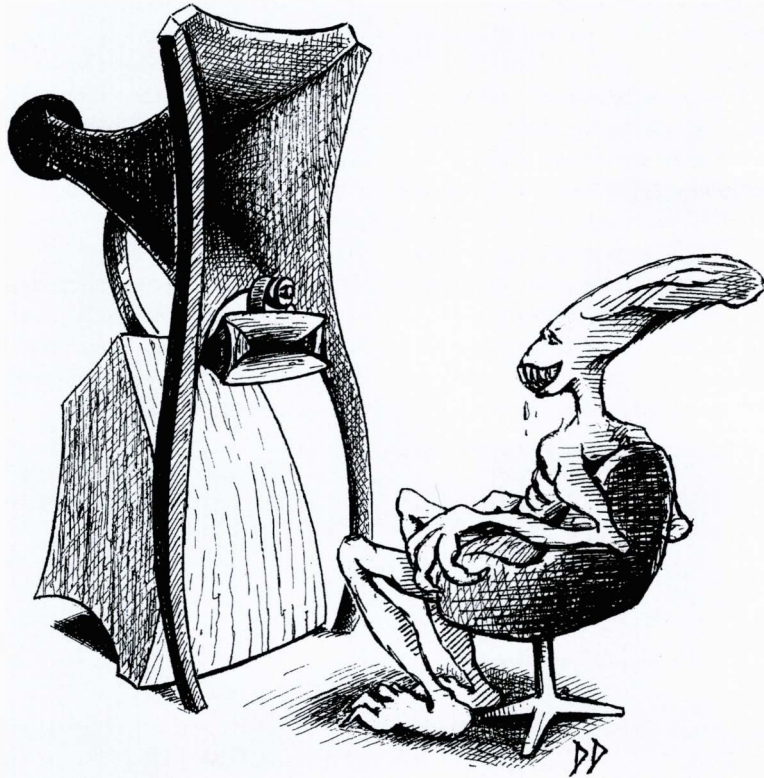
On the face of it that might not seem too attractive. After all, specialist dealers tend to charge full price for everything, while John's Hot Hi-Fi

always offer discounts and a load of free accessories. But remember, what you're buying is sound quality. You might get more for your money on paper from a discount store, but you'll get more music from the specialist. A properly matched and set up system will give you more lasting pleasure than knowing that you saved £400 on the RRP and got a lot of questionable accessories you probably don't need.

What you're aiming for here is to develop a long term relationship with your dealer. Work out which of your local dealers suits you best by discussing your needs with them, and seeing how they respond. A good dealer will listen to you, asking you questions to establish what it is you are after. That's before he lets you anywhere near a dem room. Be honest about your budget and timescale, he can only work with what you give him. Above all, and like most professionals, the dealer's job is to protect you... from yourself! In other words, put your effort into choosing a dealer, then let him demonstrate the equipment he reckons will meet your needs. He not only knows the equipment better than you, but as long as you've been honest with him, he's probably got a clearer idea of what will deliver your particular requirements. The real test of a good dealer is whether he can demonstrate the truth of what he says. If he says the Symphonic Bombast X3 loudspeakers don't work with the Sludge Pump CBR500 amplifier, let him prove it. And let him show you what does work.

But what if he doesn't stock the right equipment for me, I hear you protest. It does happen. You find a brilliant dealer but he just can't hit the right sound for you. Bite the bullet and move on. However, this scenario is surprisingly rare. Most shops keep a range of products enabling them to meet a whole variety of needs. Until you reach the realms of real ►





► esoterica, there are almost certainly a range of possible solutions to your particular sonic blueprint. Remember, equipment matching and set up have a disproportionate influence over the final sound. It's the combination rather than the specific ingredients that produce the whole.

And it doesn't stop when you've bought your system. The longer you deal with the same person, the better he gets to know your needs. Because a shop tends to stock complementary equipment ranges, they'll have the kit you need to hear when upgrade time rolls round. And they're much more likely to offer a decent trade in on equipment they sold you, and from a range they still stock and service. Once they know you, and know you are serious, they'll be happier to let you try equipment at home. The whole experience is an education. With time, you learn more about your


hi-fi and what you want from it, and so do they. The end result is value received for money spent, and no expensive mistakes!

And what about discounts? Look at the time a dealer spends on you. Initial discussions, a demonstration, home install as a bare minimum. Now consider the fact that all this is free (under normal circumstances). The average margin on hi-fi is around 35%. But out of that a dealer has to meet overheads; staff, premises, utilities, advertising, transport. He also has to finance his stock. Buy the time the bills are paid, most shops run at between 5 and 10% profit on turnover. Any discount you receive comes straight out of that profit. If you get 10% the shop is probably only just covering its costs. Think what you earn in a month before tax. Multiply that by ten and that's how much hi-fi you'd have to sell just to pay your own wages.

Now consider demonstrating and installing it all. Frightening. Especially when you consider that small sales often take as long as big ones.

Hi-fi dealers earn their living, make no mistake. Let them do their job and you will maximise your investment. Of course, you can go for big discounts, but you pay for the saving in terms of limited service and poor sound quality. In other words, no real saving at all. Or you could get a demonstration at a specialist dealer and buy the equipment from a discount shop down the road. But you'll only do it once. The shop will recognise you as a time waster, and if you and all your mates do the same, it'll have closed down next time you need some advice anyway. That particular mode of behaviour is largely to blame for the current lack of decent dealers in the first place. And the piece of kit you bought probably won't perform up to scratch anyway, for all the reasons we've already discussed. A serious case of shooting yourself in the foot.

Nowadays, because of the financial pressures, many dealers operate from home, and a lot of the more esoteric equipment is only available directly from importers. This isn't necessarily a problem. Good advice is where you find it, and the basic rules still apply; can the dealer demonstrate his ability or not?

Which brings us back to the law of diminishing returns. Impulse buy an upgrade on the basis of some reviewer's opinion and it will apply with a vengeance. But the right upgrade, carefully matched into your system by somebody who knows what they're doing, will be worth every penny, whether it's a \$35 interconnect or a \$2000 moving coil cartridge. Believe me, hi-fi is still far enough from reality to leave plenty of scope for improvement! 

# Home Truths

— by James Michael Hughes —

It's one of life's strange ironies that those with large record collections often have fairly modest hi-fi systems. While those with elaborate expensive hi-fi systems sometimes have miniscule record collections. Of course hi-fi is simply a means to an end - the end being the enjoyment of music superbly recreated in the home. But hi-fi can be an end in itself. And some people undoubtedly get a buzz out of owning and playing with exotic equipment.

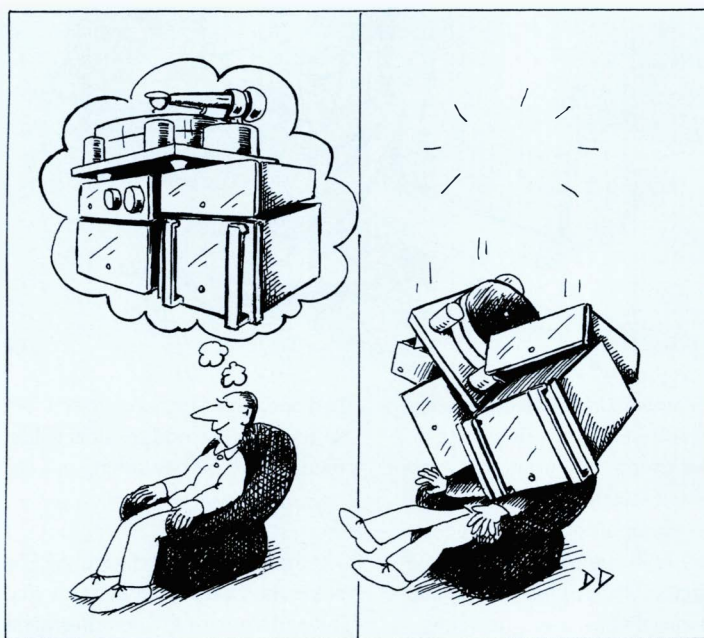
Of course it's sad when someone spends a small fortune on hi-fi gear and never listens to more than a few test tracks in order to assess how well the system images and how deep the bass goes. But is there a wider point behind all this? A really good system, in my book, is one that fully engages your interest in the music, while leaving you unaware of the mechanics of sound reproduction. Such a system expands your taste by making all kinds of music more accessible.

Unfortunately, it's very difficult to quantify such qualities. A hi-fi system can produce awesome bass, and holographic imaging, yet fail to engage you in the music. Indeed, it's my experience that the better a system becomes in hi-fi terms (that's to say, the deeper the bass, the bigger the sound, the more 3D the imaging, etc), the less easy it is to 'forget' the mechanics of

sound reproduction and simply be aware of the music and its performance.

A good system doesn't showcase itself; it showcases the music. A good system tricks you into accepting a reproduced performance as though it were real. But how Hi the Fi? Obviously, if the system is significantly limited in terms of frequency response and dynamic range, it won't sound real. Nor will it recreate the subtleties of tonal colouring, dynamics, and pitch that give expression to the

But isn't this putting the cart before the horse? In my experience, a really good system allows you to enjoy a wide range of recordings of varying vintage. It's easy to condemn a particular disc simply because it sounds poor on your system. But, played on another system, it might actually sound good! I find, as my own system improves, its ability to successfully reproduce a wide range of recordings gets better - it actually copes with a wider range of material without coming unstuck.



performance. The great difficulty is achieving both high resolution and high listenability.

High resolution can mean a sound so clinically analytical, every tiny flaw and blemish in the recording is exposed. Systems like this narrow your taste in music, and severely limit the range of recordings that can be enjoyed. Of course there's bound to be one record in your collection that sounds great. So you could be forgiven for thinking - if only all records were that well engineered, I'd have no problems.

Rather than thinking it's the system showing up faults in the recording, I prefer to turn this on its head and say it's the recording showing up what's wrong with the system. And, ironically, that's the common ground where modest systems and really good systems meet. Both have the ability to reproduce a wide range of music styles and quality-levels of recording without getting into trouble.

So perhaps the modest system/big music collection, mega system/mini music collection syndrome isn't so strange after all.



# Speaker's Corner

by Paul Messenger

What are the important factors when it comes to choosing loudspeakers? Price, size and appearance are obvious enough. The sound is the difficult one to pin down. I've reviewed something like five hundred speakers over the past ten years, and if it sometimes feels that the more I do the less I know, I have picked up a few useful perspectives along the way.

The trouble is, it's a multi-dimensional problem, and several of the desiderata are mutually exclusive. Which means that even if size, price and appearance aren't issues, you still can't have it all. There are always some compromises to be made.

A lot of these are pretty well understood - the pluses and minuses of single driver versus multi-way systems and that sort of thing. But one that particularly intrigues me, yet has received little if any attention, has to do with loudness levels. Some speakers like being played loudly, others are happier working at low levels, and it's not too easy to find a happy medium.

Indeed, the sort of listening levels you yourself like ought to be one of the key factors to consider when choosing a pair of speakers. This 'loudness factor' sounds rather nebulous and hasn't been properly defined or quantified, but it is a largely predictable and indeed measurable phenomenon.

Every loudspeaker has its own unique balance (or frequency

response) 'fingerprint'. The trouble comes in trying to measure it in a way that has any useful meaning to the listening experience, because a speaker's response varies dramatically according to where you put the speaker and the microphone.

The method I use is decidedly simple and crude, but has also proved surprisingly effective, probably because it's designed to replicate the actual listening experience. It consists of positioning the speakers, and then placing the measuring microphone in several different positions across the listening zone. The different traces merge together to form a surprisingly well defined average.

This averaged trace actually gives a very good clue to the real world balance of the speakers, as well as their interaction with the listening room. It gives useful guidance on how close to place the speakers to the wall, for example, but most usefully helps me avoid getting fooled by balance anomalies. Knowing the characteristic balance of a speaker is the prerequisite to listening 'past' its particular foibles in order to pin down the underlying qualities.

To get back to the point (at last), this measurement also provides useful information on the 'loudness factor' of the speaker. The clues are in the critical 'presence' region, the couple of octaves which link the midrange to the tweeter (say 1-4kHz), which just happens to be the section of the audio range where

the human ear is most sensitive. It's also usually the mid-to-treble crossover zone, where a cone main driver starts to 'beam' its output on a forward direction only, just as it's handing over to a point-source omni-directional tweeter. In short, it's a load of trouble for the designer, and the zone where my far field measurements show the greatest variation between models.

A truly flat response is fairly unusual, and isn't necessarily what's wanted either (though it's no bad thing). Nearly all the speakers I've measured show a downward trend from bass to treble. Sometimes it's smooth and progressive, but more usually the trace stays reasonably flat up to 1-1.5kHz, then tilts downwards, either progressively or abruptly, before the tweeter level is established at some 3-5dB below the midband.

Quite often there's an actual notch or dip between the mid and treble, and these are the loudspeakers that encourage you to play them loud. B&W's new Nautilus 801's are a notable recent example. Developed for high level professional monitoring, they sound great when played loud (even close to the level of pain!), but are just a bit shut-in when played as whisper-quiet levels. My own Rehdeko RK175s are the opposite: the room response actually peaks up somewhat in the presence region, and they sound great when played really quiet, yet tend to get too over-the-top aggressive when the volume's turned up high.

Few, if any, loudspeakers are truly neutral, and most tend to favour playing loud rather than soft (or, more rarely, vice versa). It's nice to be able to play things loud, but it's not always practical - neighbours, children, telephones, etc. Bear in mind, next time you visit a dealer for a speaker dem, listen at your preferred level, not his.



# Meet The Reviewers

Hi-Fi magazines have always tried to perpetuate the fiction of independent or unbiased reviewers. But in reality, it's simply not possible (or desirable) to separate reviewers from the manufacturers. The hi-fi industry is far too small, and peopled by poachers turned game-keepers. Everybody knows everybody else, and this alone guarantees that nobody is totally independent.

Add to this the fact that there are more ways to build a hi-fi system than there are ways to skin a cat, and suddenly the spectre of personal preference raises its ugly head. Nobody is totally free of personal prejudice; we all have our favourite pieces of equipment, and we all listen in a particular and personal way.

Of course, all this only matters if you are trying to make absolute judgements about individual components, a difficult if not impossible task which no one in the UK is equipped to carry out! Despite what they might think. We are happy to aim a little lower. Our reviewers are tasked to discover the strengths and weaknesses of a product, to ascribe it a character, within the specific context of their listening experience and system. An essential part of this process is liaison with the manufacturer, to ensure that we understand how to use the product and what it is intended to do. That's why I try to give products to reviewers who will be sympathetic to them.

There's no point giving a 5watt triode amp to somebody who insists on using 84 dB speakers with an impedance curve like a section through the Himalayas.

That's why it's vital to understand where our reviewers are coming from, and what they base their judgements on. So I've assembled a series of thumbnail sketches by way of an introduction. You'll see that it covers a pretty broad church. And whilst there's plenty of experience here, what I'm really after is enthusiasm. Yes, for hi-fi, but mainly for music. I won't use anyone whose equipment is worth more than their record collection. Even Simon (the photographer) qualifies.

And remember, what these guys write is informed opinion, not the gospel truth. Their perspective may be different to yours, and you might consider different aspects of performance important. That's why we'll be following this with some more in-depth profiles written by the writers themselves. The reviews we print are intended to give you some idea of whether you'll like a product or not. Use them as an aid to listening, rather than as a substitute for it. We do our best to present products as fully as we can. We try to detail how to get the best out of them, and what you should expect, but we can't choose them for you, and you'd be mad to let us! In the meantime, here we are...



**Chris Binns**

Lecturer in Music, Acoustics and Sound Recording

**Hi-Fi Experience:**

Where to start? There's not a lot that the Binns hasn't done, including: session guitarist; recording engineer (currently at Room With A View near Bath); hi-fi retail and manufacturing (the original Cadence valve amplifiers, as well as studio monitoring systems); hi-fi and record reviewing. Quite a CV!

**System:**

Linn LP12 with Binns-Mod power supply, Mission Mechanic  
 Monster Alpha-Genesis 2000  
 Sound Organisation Table with Aerolam top plate  
 Meridian 508 24bit CD Player  
 Michell Iso HR phono stage, Primary valve line stage  
 Primary valve mono-blocks (150 w/ch push-pull Ultra Linear 6550s)  
 Primary Monitors  
 Quad ELS 57  
 Teflon coated silver interconnects  
 Chord Co. speaker cables

**Desert Island Discs:**

John Martyn Grace and Danger Island ILPS 9560,  
 Talking Heads Remain In Light Sire SRK 6095  
 Robert Palmer Some People Can Do What They Like Island ILPS 9420,  
 Finzi Loves Labours Lost Suite/Clarinet Concerto Nimbus NI 5101  
 Genesis The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway Charisma CGS101  
 Bartok String Quartets Novak Quartet Philips 442 284-2  
 Echo And The Bunnymen Heaven Up Here Korova Kow 58320

**Book:**

Ian McEwan - First Love , Last Rights

**Film:**

My Life As A Dog

**Luxury:**

Radio One to be banned, and the entire staff to have a near-fatal accident on the M25 whilst re-tuning their radios for better reception of a Michael Bolton single.

**Indulgence:**

Cheltenham Ladies College, or failing that, a Steinway Concert Grand and a copy of How To Play Rachmaninov In Five Easy Lessons

**Dave Davies**

Marketing & Design Consultant

**Hi-Fi Experience:**

I got bitten by the hi-fi bug as a student, starting with a Thorens, Trio, AR system and working my way through countless increasingly expensive permutations.

This was followed, after returning from a couple of years in France, and moving from London to Hampshire, by establishing the basis of my current system. Most of my spare (and not so spare) money continues to be spent on records, CD's and live music. Alongside this I've had regular stints as cartoonist for a number of dealers and for the long defunct HiFi Answers, alongside other freelance work.

**System:**

Record deck: Michell Gyrodek with Orbe upgrade kit  
 Mission Mechanic arm  
 ClearAudio Signature cartridge  
 Meridian 506 Mk2 CD Player  
 Meridian 501 pre-amp with Michell Iso/ Hera Phono Stage  
 2 x Michell Stereo Alecto's.  
 Ruark Paladin speakers.  
 Audioplan Musicable cables  
 Quadraspire racks  
 Brightstar and Seismic Sink supports.

**Desert Island Discs:** (this month)

John Coltrane 'The Heavyweight Champion' 12 record set  
 Rhino/Atlantic RI 71984  
 Charles Mingus 'Mingus Ah Um' Columbia Legacy 065145  
 English String Music LPO/Barbirolli HMV ASD 521 CDC7 47537 2  
 Richard Thompson 'Wait Until Dark' Hannibal HNCD 5303  
 Ella Fitzgerald 'The Cole Porter Songbook' Vols 1&2 Verve 821 989-2/ 990-2  
 Nina Simone 'Feeling Good' Verve/ Polygram 522 669-2  
 Sonny Rollins 'Saxophone Colossus' Prestige OJCCD-291-2 DCC LPZ-2008

**Book:**

Diary of a Nobody - George & Weedon Grossmith

**Film:**

Some Like It Hot

**Luxury:**

A container load of selected 1990 red bordeaux'

**Indulgence:**

Janina toothpaste

## Pete Christie:

Hi-Fi Salesman

## Hi-Fi Experience:

I've been working in hi-fi retail for fifteen years. I also play guitar and sing in a two-piece band Drums and Wires (the other guy plays congas and percussion) which plays twice a week on the local circuit.

## System:

Helios 2 and Trichord Genesis CD Players  
Shearpe Phase 2 Amplifier  
Rogers LS3/5a Speakers (15ohm Model)  
Purpose built Purbeck Stone supports  
Nordost and van den Hul cables

## Desert Island Discs:

The Beach Boys Surf's Up Epic 467835-2  
The Who Who's Better, Who's Best Definite Article 835389-2  
Paul Simon Hearts Et Bones Warner Bros. 923942-2  
Mahler 2nd Symphony Denon C37-7603-4  
Frank Sinatra Songs for Swingin' Lovers Capitol CDP 7 465702  
Vaughan Williams Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis Phillips 442 427-2  
The Beatles The Complete Boxed Set EMI

## Book:

Birds of the Western Palearctic and a pair of Leica 10 x 42 binoculars.

## Film:

It's a wonderful life!

## Luxury:

A kebab house just around the point.

## Indulgence:

My Lowden guitar and a lifetime supply of strings.

## Roy Gregory

Magazine Editor

## Hi-fi Experience:

Since 1986, I have worked in the hi-fi industry, holding positions in retail, with distributors and manufacturers, and as a free-lance journalist.

## System:

VPI TNT Mk 3 Turntable, with Flywheel  
VPI JMW 12" Tonearm  
Eminent Technology ET11 Tonearm, WISA air-pump.  
ClearAudio Insider Cartridge  
XLO Signature 3.1 Tonearm Cable  
Pass Labs Aleph-Ono Phono Stage  
Helios Model 1 CD player  
Pass Labs Aleph-P Line Stage  
Michell Argo HR Line Stage  
Jadis JA30 Monoblocks (EL34)  
Michell Alecto Monoblocks  
Ars Acoustica System Max Loudspeakers  
Nordost SPM and Quattro-Fil Cables  
Audioplan Mains Filters and Cables  
RoomTunes JustaRack Deluxe  
RoomTunes Acoustic Treatments

## Desert Island Discs:

Bizet Carmen RCA LDS6164 Price, Corelli, Merrill, Freni, Karajan, VPO.  
Elgar Cello Concerto EMI ASD655 Du Pre, Barbirolli, LSO  
Vaughan Williams The Nine Symphonies EMI SLS822 Boult, New  
Philharmonia Orchestra  
Barber Violin Concerto Reference Recordings RR45 Ricci, Clark, Pacific  
Symphony Orchestra  
The Cure Seventeen Seconds Fiction Fix 004  
Basie Farmers Market Barbeque Analogue Productions LPJ023  
Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Cole Porter Song Book Verve MG-V-4001-2

## Book:

Paul Hirst - On Law and Ideology

## Film:

Some Like It Hot

## Luxury:

Albert Roux (+ kitchen)

## Indulgence:

My Mountain Bike

**Jason Hector**

Opto-Electronics Engineer

**Hi-Fi Experience:**

Weekend Hi-Fi Salesman and discoverer of great 'indie' music.

**System:**

Linn LP12 Armageddon

Naim Aro Tone-Arm

Dynavecator DV 10 X4

Musical Fidelity CD-T on spiked slate slab.

Naim NAC 102

Naim Hi-Cap

Naim NAP 250

Shahinian Arc Loudspeakers

Naim Interconnects and NAC A5

Quadraspire Racks

**Desert Island Discs:**

The Beatles Revolver

Joni Mitchell Hejira

Rickie Lee Jones Eponymous

Bob Dylan John Wesley Harding

Gomez Bring It On

Throwing Muses Hunk Papa

Holly Golightly Laugh It Up

**Book:**

Dan Simmons Hyperion Cantos

**Film:**

Reservoir Dogs

**Luxury:**

Fine food

**Indulgence:**

The wine to go with it!

**Reuben Parry**

Quantity Surveyor

**Hi-Fi Experience:**

Pathological secondhand record collector and reviewer (It's a good thing Roob's a quantity surveyor. You need to be to calculate how many records he owns! Ed.)

**System:**

I don't have to do this bit, because my system is dissected in this months Audio Smorgasbord. You can get the dirt in all its horrible glory on page 95.

**Desert Island Discs:**

Lloyd Cole and the Commotions Rattlesnakes Polydor LCLP1 823683-1

Dvorak Cello Concerto Starker, Dorati, LSO Mercury SR90303

Canteloube Songs Of The Auvergne Netania Davrath,

cond. Pierre de la Roche Vanguard VSD 713/714

Copland Appalacian Spring Keith Clark Pacific Symphony Orchestra

Reference Recordings RR22

Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Cole Porter Songbook

DCC Compact Classics GZS(2) 1079

Ataulfo Argenta Box Set Alto AA006

Sibelius Violin Concerto Heifetz, Hendl, CSO RCA Living Stereo SB2101

**Book:**

John Donne - The Complete English Poetry

**Film:**

Bringing Up Baby Cary Grant/Katherine Hepburn

**Luxury:**

A Sony World Receiver. That way I get sport, music, drama and news.

**Indulgence:**

I'll take my Heckler (No, it's not a disgruntled reader! It's actually a monstrously expensive mountain bike with 4" travel suspension front and back, and hydraulic disc brakes! Ed.) And I want Ms. Pezzo to undertake all my maintenance needs. Given the light weight, all spares can be dropped by air.

## James Michael Hughes

Camera Service Technician

### Hi-Fi Experience:

16 years in retail; reviewer for 20 years

### System:

Kuzma Stabi and Roksan Xerxes turntables with Ringmat and Kuzma Stogi and Roksan Artemis arms. Cartridges include Transfiguration Spirit and MS Brier Shun Mook Record Clamp  
Trichord modified Pioneer PD-75 CD transport with Statmat  
Meridian 518 digital processor  
Cambridge Audio DAC Magic 1 used via its balanced outputs into the Luxman transformer  
Trichord and Theta jitter reducing boxes  
Marantz and Luxman line matching transformers  
Musical Fidelity X10-D and ASE valve line stages, plus Musical Fidelity X-Tone, used with slight treble and bass cut  
EAR 859 integrated valve amplifier, used on its low impedance output setting.  
Impulse H-1 horn loaded speakers with two REL Q-Bass subs  
Cables include Kimber, Chord, and DNM inter-connects  
Speaker cables - Goertz  
Support stands from MANA (Phase Four), plus some oldish Origin Live stands, Shun-Mook platform. Power Wedge Mains Conditioner with Kimber Mains Distribution Block and Cables

### Desert Island Discs:

Mahler; Kindertotenlieder Christa Ludwig; Herbert von Karajan/BPO DG 453 040-2 (2CDs)  
Vaughan Williams Pastoral symphony Sir Adrian Boult/NPO EMI CDM 7 64018-2  
Handel 12 Concerti Grossi Op 6 Iona Brown/Academy of St Martins Philips 410 048-2 (3CDs)  
Schubert Drei Klavierstucke D946 Claudio Arrau (piano) Philips 434 101-2  
Brahms Symphony No 3 Eschenbach/HSO Virgin 5 613060-2 (4CDs)  
Total Eclipse of the Heart Bonnie Tyler CBS CDCBS 25304  
Strawberry Fields Forever The Beatles version 3 from Anthology 2 Apple 8 34448-2

### Book:

The Lord of the Rings - JRR Tolkien

### Film:

The Full Monty

### Luxury:

Canon EOS-3 camera, lots of film, and a processing lab.

### Indulgence:

A Piano

## Chris Thomas

Vintage Guitar broker

### Hi-Fi Experience:

Twenty years involvement in hi-fi retailing and reviewing.

### System:

Well Tempered Turntable  
Lyra Clavis Cartridge  
  
Naim CDS CD player  
  
Naim NAC 52 pre-amplifier  
Mark Levinson No 380 pre-amplifier

2 x Naim NAP 250 power amps  
Mark Levinson No 331 power amp

Naim SBL speakers (active)  
Platinum Duo speakers on target HJ stands

Cables from Naim, Descadel, Tice and Siltech.  
Home built composite equipment supports

### Desert Island Discs:

The Beatles Abbey Road EMI 7088  
The Beatles Rubber Soul EMI 3075  
Jimi Hendrix Electric Ladyland Polydor 2310269  
John McLaughlin Et Mahavishnu Orchestra Apocalypse CBS 69076  
Stevie Wonder Songs in The Key Of Life EMI 6002  
Miles Davis Nefertiti Columbia9594  
Tchaikovsky and Sibelius Violin Concertos Oistrakh/Philadelphia CBS 60312

### Book:

The Complete Lennon and McCartney Songbook

### Film:

The Shawshank Redemption

### Luxury:

1930 Martin OM45 Acoustic Guitar

### Indulgence:

Cases each of 1947 Chateau Cheval Blanc and 1921 Chateau D'Yquem



# Events Diary

The Events Diary is a free notice board for anybody organising audio related events, either in Britain or abroad. That includes shows, open days, musical evenings or anything else you can come up with. Whilst most of the current listings are for major shows or seminars, the Events Diary is also intended to help publicise dealer evenings, hi-fi clubs and the like. A bit like public service broadcasting really!

To include your event, we will need time, date and location as well as brief details and a contact phone number so that readers can confirm that the details haven't changed since press date. Publication date of the next issue is the 31st of May, so if you have any plans for events after that date, please let us know.

## **24th and 25th April**

The Northern Ireland Hi-Fi Show 1999  
The Stormont Hotel  
Upper Newtownards Rd, **Belfast**  
Open - 10-7 Sat, 10.30-5.30 Sun.  
Organiser's Contact.  
Tel. (44)1868-753606  
Fax. (44)1868-753006  
e-mail. david@kronoshi-fi.demon.co.uk

## **11th - 16th May**

Hi-Fi '99  
sponsored by Stereophile  
Palmer House Hilton Hotel

## **Chicago**

11th - 13th Trade Only  
Tel. (1)-505-9926604  
14th - 16th Public Days  
Tel. (1)-505-9822366

## **13th - 16th May**

High-End '99, **Frankfurt am Main**  
Hotel Gravenbruch Kempinski  
and Holiday Inn  
(13th Trade Only, by pre-registration)  
Open - 13th 10-8, 14th to 16th 10-6.  
Organisers Contact.  
Tel. (49)202-702022  
Fax. (49)202-703700  
Net. www.hiendsociety.de

## **19th - 22nd May**

Cedia Expo  
(Home Cinema and  
Multi-Room Installation)  
Novotel Hotel, **West London**  
Trade Only Tel. (44)1462-627377

## **23rd - 26th September**

The Hi-Fi Show '99  
sponsored by HFN/RR  
Novotel Hotel, **West London**  
23rd and 24th Trade Only  
Tel. (44)181-7740847

# NORDOST flatline cable™

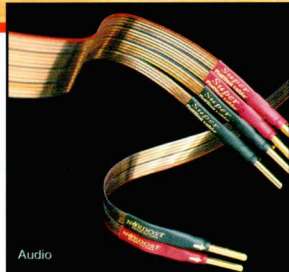
*'Making the connection....'*



*'...between technology & music'*



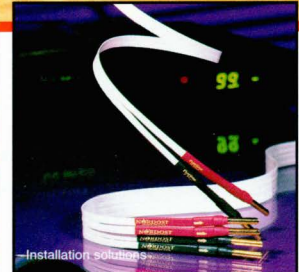
Power cords



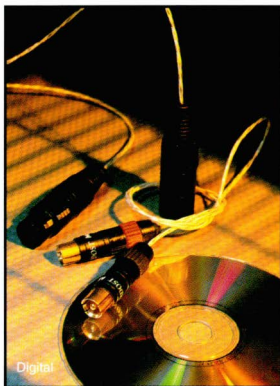
Audio



Visual



Installation solutions



Digital



Maintenance

# NORDOST flatline cable™

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# Secrets And Lies?

When it comes to snake oil, the hi-fi industry is in a league of its own. Products abound that fly in the face of accepted wisdom, and whilst they're far from the worst offenders, audio cables are certainly the most visible. With an ever increasing range of competing brands, and the rising stakes of marketing hyperbole matched only by the rising prices, it's hardly surprising that "specialist" audio cables have gained an unenviable reputation as over-priced under-achievers. But is the result of a bunch of bandwagon jumping charlatans out for a quick buck, or misapplication of honest products? Like many things, the answer is a bit of both.

If we retreat to the balmy days when specialist dealers were just emerging, cables weren't even an issue. Just about everyone used Naim NAC A4 (or a very close relative of it), and consequently, that's what got used for product development. Specialist interconnects didn't exist, so a universal standard existed by default. Then, in the early eighties, this cosy situation exploded. CD, valves and foreign imports appeared to create a disorderly market place in which specialist cables were but a single element in a bewildering plethora of new products. Suddenly, dealers had to assimilate a huge number of new items into their experience. And an even greater number of possible combinations. Not surprisingly, the in depth knowledge of a previously small product range was impossible to maintain, and all too soon we were into the realm of mix and match. Or should that be trial and error?

## Just how big a difference do cables really make?

Given the uncertainties of the situation, it's hardly surprising that cables found themselves cast in the role of cure-all, glossing over or attempting to make up for the inadequacies of less than perfect equipment combinations. So entrenched has this use of cables as tone controls become, that cabling systems has descended to the level of tweekery and mumbo jumbo. Normally well adjusted listeners, who wouldn't dream of allowing a tone control anywhere near their precious signal path, are quite happy to attempt the alchemical transformation of base metal into sonic gold, via the endless search for that perfect combination of dissimilar materials and mismatched technologies that make up the average hi-fi system's cable loom.

In fact, the solution is far simpler. We should combine our equipment far more carefully in the first place, and apply cables in such a way as to preserve the virtues of the system intact. The best cables in the world won't make a bad system into a good one, but see how quickly poor cabling ruins even the best equipment.

Because of their arrival in a chaotic market, no-one bothered to work out the basic rules of applying specialist cables. They were simply treated as an optional upgrade, rather than an essential element in the system architecture. But apply the following guidelines and you shouldn't go far wrong.

- 1 Consider your cable loom as a system in itself. Always use interconnects and speaker cables from the same manufacturer. You will enjoy a huge increase in musical coherence.
- 2 The exception to the above rule; special applications. These include tonearm cables for record players, and data cables in digital applications. Always use a purpose designed cable in these roles, even if your main cable supplier doesn't produce one.
- 3 Don't assume that connectors that look like large items of male jewellery sound better than smaller, simpler ones. The benefits of simplicity apply to cables just as much as other hi-fi.
- 4 Don't assume your speakers will sound better bi-wired. Always compare the performance with a second run of cables, to the effect of a single run that costs twice as much. You may be surprised. If you do bi-wire, then use identical cables top and bottom

Having established some ground rules, let's look at how much difference cables really make. The Nordost SPM is a serious claimant to the state of the art, and offers an insight into just what we might be missing. At the other end of the scale, we've assembled a range of basic cables, to see how cable choice effects more basic systems.



# Nordost SPM



interconnects and speaker cable into your system, and you'll hear exactly what the equipment is doing – and how much good and bad your old cables were covering up. The detail and transparency of these cables is quite breathtaking, especially the first time you hear it.

Once in place, the SPMs give you direct and immediate access to the music. There's no sense of filtering, and no loss of energy. They're not forward, there's just less grain and general grunge in the sound stage.

Less between you and the instruments. But what makes them really special, is that they manage to be equally adept across the entire frequency band and dynamic range. SPMs make you realise how muddled and indistinct the bass end of most cables is; how much treble energy they lose, how they squash dynamics, and how out of step the different frequency ranges often are. Like I said, think stained glass window. SPM stands for speed, phase and music. All the things that Nordost claims it gets right. On this showing I'm not going to disagree.

Let's look at a musical example. Running SPM between the Pass Aleph-Ono, Aleph-P, Jadis JA30's and Ars Acoustica System Max, I played 'The Look Of Love' from *Casino Royale*. Dusty's voice was stunning. Clear and solid, right in front of me, each tiny modulation, each inflexion adding to the naturalness of the singing. But what really floored me was sax! The reed, the valves, the column of air and the bell mouth – you could place each element of the instrument. Now, I've been able to do that before, but never with the ease and precision, and downright spooky ▶

Despite being relative newcomers to the world of audio cables, the aggressively marketed Nordost Flatline range have achieved considerable critical and sales success. One thing this company doesn't lack is confidence in its product! SPM is their flagship cable, (a status the unscreened interconnect shares with the even more costly, shielded Quattro Fil), and one of the things that makes it so interesting is that the product is almost indistinguishable from its cheaper brethren. Once you get above the base models, they all use silver coated copper conductors, formed into a flat ribbon by extruded Teflon insulation. In fact, the most remarkable thing about the SPM is its rather fetching lilac hue. That and its sound.

It may look like the other cables in the range, and employ near identical materials and geometry, but the sound is in quite another league. Just as well, given its exorbitant price.

First exposure to SPM can be a fairly shocking experience. It makes you realise just how obstructive and tonally influential the vast majority of cables really are. You feel like you've been looking at the musical landscape through stained glass windows. Someone throws them open, and the effect is dazzling as well as revelatory. It can take a while to adjust.

The hallmark characteristics of SPM are its clarity, speed and overall coherence. Put a set of (run in!) SPM



► presence of the SPMs. The instrument's acoustic shape was there, stood in the sound stage. But we're not done yet. The really impressive bit was the notes. Not just their immediacy and natural sense of tone and dynamic life, but the way they were propagated into the sound stage. Each note was projected with the precise dispersion and angle of the instrument's bell mouth. And I've only ever heard that live.

Holographic is a cruelly abused and over used term in hi-fi journalism, but it's the only appropriate word for the SPMs. This degree of spatial precision speaks volumes about the cable's phase coherence. And for all those who ignore or pooh-pooh stereo imaging, stop and think about the time domain. This cable doesn't just transmit the details, it keeps everything in the right place as well!

So SPM is perfect? We all save up and then never buy another cable?

Not exactly. SPMs strengths are also, to some extent, its weaknesses. As I said earlier, it's a far from flattering performer, giving you the music, and your system, warts and all. Where equipment has been developed within the context of a 'matching' cable (Naim, Wilson or Spectral spring to mind), you may not like what the SPMs tell you. It's dynamic range, especially at the frequency extremes, can lead systems into previously uncharted territory, with unpredictable results. In short, it's not a sonic band aid. It's almost the complete opposite!

Tonally it is neutral, with no added weight or bloom to fill things out. But combined with the touch of hollowness that often characterises Teflon cables, it can sound a little cool and lean, (especially in comparison to the cellulite loaded wobble-bots that pass for most high end cables!). I'd also guess that it's a 'double dipper', with a very shallow scoop in the mid bass and another in the lower treble, which accentuate its already remarkable focus and transparency. If you want lush, look elsewhere. SPM is brutally frank. It also takes an age to run in. In its raw form it can be searingly bright and hard, which makes auditioning a chancy proposition. I can't imagine most dem sets are even approaching sonic maturity.

The Nordost SPM has become an essential part of my system, both as a reviewer, and for simple musical pleasure. There's no cable like no cable, and this is the closest I've got yet. The cost is ruinous. £825 for a meter pair of interconnects, \$2795 for a set of three meter bi-wires. That's around four and a half grand for a basic single source system! The problem is, it's worth it. In the context of a high-end system costing around five grand a box, it would be easy to justify. And despite the price, it would be a bargain – musically and monetarily. You can pay a lot more than this for cables!

For me, SPM is the confirmation of something I have long suspected. The cable loom is a vital structural element of the system. It is just as critical as any other component, and price should be calculated accordingly. ►+

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WEB. <http://www.nordost.com>

# Blind Listening To Budget Cables

Having looked at the seriously expensive end of the market, it's time to examine the influence of more mundane cables in slightly more real world systems. What I wanted to know, was the effect of different budget cables: could you hear a difference, and if so, how important is it?

Given the number of people who still claim that all cables sound the same, and assuming we'd be dealing with subtle differences, I thought it might be interesting to try some blind listening, and settle the issue once and for all (he says, optimistically). So, with that in mind, I assembled the usual suspects, and organised a line-up.

## Police Procedure

First order of business was to establish a methodology. Clearly, this had to take account of our basic rules laid out in the introduction. Which means that you listen to complete cable looms from single manufacturers rather than simply swapping speaker cables. Mind you, if you're talking about a system consisting of a CD player, integrated amp and speakers, that's no great hardship. By adding a second, totally different system, we can look at compatibility issues as well. And at the same time, each set of cables gets a second bite at the cherry, minimising the chances of a total mismatch.

With this in mind, I approached two local shops, Phonography in

Ringwood and Movement Audio in Bournemouth, in order to get their recommendations for mid-range systems. Despite the fact that we would be listening to budget cables, I wanted to be sure that the systems wouldn't be the limiting factor. And as the two shops have rather different approaches, it guaranteed that I'd be getting totally different equipment.

Phil March at Phonography opted for a Rega Planet CD player (£450), a Densen Beat (£650) and a pair of Royd Doublets (from £485). This is a little system that we both know well, and it really sings. The high output impedance of the Planet makes it critical of cable choice, and ideal for our purposes. The system was set up in Phil's smaller dem room, and left overnight. At the same time, we set up Movement's offering in the larger dem room. This consisted of a Helios 2 CD player (£1000), a Shearne Phase 2 Reference amplifier (£800), and a pair of B&W CDM1se speakers (£600). Again, this is a tried and trusted combination, but couldn't be more different from Phil's set-up if it tried. Both systems were left running overnight, and we re-assembled in the morning.

## Identikit

The listening panel that rolled, somewhat raddled, from its beds that Sunday morning, consisted of Phil, Chris Binns and Dave Davis. And once again, they represent widely

## The Music We Used

### First System

Duke Ellington and Ray Brown  
*This One's For Blanton*  
Analogue Productions CAPJ 015  
Track 1 'Do Nothing 'til You Hear From Me'

Nanci Griffiths  
*Storms*  
MCADMCG 6066  
Track 2 'Drive In Movies And Dashboard Lights'

*Barbirolli conducts English String Music*  
EMI CDC 7 47537 2  
Track 7 Vaughan Williams 'Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis'

### Second System

Jackson Brown  
*I'm Alive*  
Elektra/Warners 7559 61524 2  
Track 1 'I'm Alive'

Michael Hedges  
*Oracle*  
Windham Hill/BMG 01934 11196-2  
Track 1 'The 2nd Law'

And the Barbirolli *Tallis* again for the third piece.

We changed the selection on the second system out of self-pity. How many times can you listen to the same track? The only exception was the Tallis, which everybody loved, and which proved to be extremely revealing.

contrasting views as to how a hi-fi system works, and what it should be doing. Phil is a long-time Naim dealer with a strong regard for Shahinian speakers. He's been listening to Naim cables for around 20 years, and is extremely sceptical when it comes to the claims made for exotic wiring. Chris has extensive experience of both the domestic and professional audio fields, and is a respected designer of valve amplification and

▶ loudspeakers. He uses Chord cables at home. Dave is our Jazz reviewer, and as an enthusiast has owned more hi-fi over the years than he cares to admit. He's in a period of stability at present, using a Michell system with Ruark speakers. His cables are the expensive Audioplans, which bear no relation to anything in this test!

The systems were arranged so that the cables could be swapped without the listeners' seeing them, and only one set of cables was in the room at a time. We started with a control and then played the cables under test, repeating the control at the end. I didn't repeat one of the test cables, as the whole process was already becoming pretty unwieldy. But I did change the running order between the two systems. I played three musical extracts on each cable, repeating the first before changing over, so that the last thing the panel heard on one cable was the first they heard on the next.

So, which cables did I select for review? Well, the market leaders pretty much chose themselves. The starter cable market has been dominated for the last few years by Cable Talk 3.1, in its various guises. A multiple What Hi-Fi? Award winner, for a while it seemed like the only game in town. But recently, it has been challenged, nay, usurped by the likes of QED and Ixos, themselves recipients of the coveted What Hi-Fi? Five star review. With all this in mind, I selected the following cable combinations:

Cable Talk; Monitor 2.1 Interconnect (£50) and 3.1 speaker cable (£2.25/m).

Ixos; Gamma Series 1002 Interconnect (£40) and Gamma Series 6003 speaker cable (£3/m).

The interconnects are all metre pairs, and the speaker cables five metre sets of single wires. And yes,



*Reference Cable Company CA1-010 master conduit asymmetrical interconnect and CS2.3 master conduit 2 conductor speaker cable.*

I know that I'm using the cheapest speaker cables with middle range interconnects, but that's what I'd recommend anyway.

Of the newcomers, I chose Reference Cables, a new outfit applying the technology once marketed by Furakawa, and the first budget speaker cable from the well established Chord Company. The actual cables chosen were:

Reference Cables; CA1-010 Master Conduit Asymmetrical (£65) and CS 2.3 Master Conduit 2 Conductor Speaker Cable (£3.75/m)

Chord Company; Cobra Interconnect (£55) and Carnival Speaker cable (£3/m).

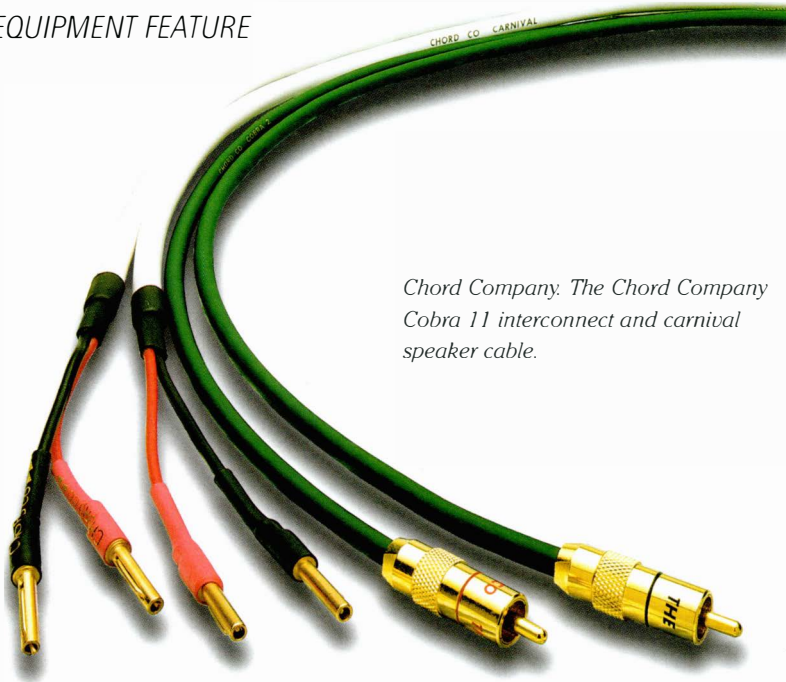
Price wise, that puts everything in the same ball park, although the Reference interconnect is slightly on the costly side. That's because it's the cheapest model they make, believing that you can't do the job properly for

any less. Either way, the package prices work out at between £70 and £102.50 (plus termination on the speaker cable), and that's close enough.

The control cables were the Chord Siren (£65) and Naim NAC A5 (£5.50/m) that Phil normally sells with the Rega based system. Whilst they might appear to break our single company rule, the two share a common heritage. Chord's original Chameleon bears a more than passing resemblance to pre-SNAIC Naim interconnects, and contemporary to the NAC A4, so there is a definite continuity of philosophy here. Given the price differential and its known affinity for the test system, this combination should handily out perform the other cables here. How it gets on in system 2 should be interesting.

### Testing Positive

Each member of the panel was asked to mark each cable on each piece of music. Scores were out of ten, and rating was for musical involvement ▶



*Chord Company. The Chord Company Cobra 11 interconnect and carnival speaker cable.*

▶ and pleasure. They also awarded an overall mark. These were totalled and laid out in the table below, by listener and system. I also totalled each cable's scores as a whole, and scored them in order of preference, four points for first choice, three for second and so on.

The first, and most important thing to point out, is that these scores are not some form of absolute judgement. They represent individual viewpoints in the context of very particular systems. Trying to draw conclusions about the relative qualities of the cables reviewed is a waste of time. A quick glance at the scores will show you that it's all a matter of opinion. And that's exactly the point.

The results make interesting (and unexpected) reading, and lead to some surprising conclusions. Let's take them in turn.

First and foremost, experienced listeners were clearly able to identify their preferred cable under blind testing. The entire panel consistently marked their personal favourite cable far higher than the competition. And that repeatability extends across the other cables, none of them moving up or down more than a single place in

each listener's order of preference. Where they do move, it tends to be cables that have been marked almost equally. So, not only are the differences between these cables often far from subtle, they can be reliably and repeatably identified. The least experienced listener (Dave) was just as accurate in his rankings as the other two, although his marking showed a narrower spread.

Secondly, none of the cables tested approached the performance of the more expensive control set-up. Having said that, the test cables scored higher in the second system, indicating not that this system sounded better, but that they got closer to the control,

and hence that the control was less successful in the context of that equipment. Not surprising given that it was selected specifically for system one. Clearly, cables can be optimised for a given set-up.

Thirdly, and for me, most surprisingly, listener's preferences tended to over-ride the effects of system compatibility. The only real exception seems to be the Ixos cables which tended to perform better in the second system than the first. What this means is that if a listener prefers a particular approach or technology when it comes to cables, then he or she will tend to gravitate towards it whatever the system. It is noticeable that both Phil and Chris chose the nearest equivalent to the cabling they live with, whilst identifying the shortcomings in the comments section. Poor old Dave was left a bit high and dry, as Audioplan cables are not only distinctly different, they don't make anything that even approaches this sort of price! In fact, Phil's preference for the Cable Talk was so marked that it brought it within an ace of top-score, despite the Chord combination's greater overall popularity, as reflected by its ranking points.

Finally, and least surprising of all, even at this price level, cables make a significant difference to the performance of a system. And ▶

Listener	System	Cable Talk	Chord	IXOS	Reference C Co
Chris Binns	Rega-Densen-Royd	15 (3)	24 (1)	13 (4)	18 (2)
	Helios-Shearne-B&W	16 (4)	30 (1)	20 (3)	26 (2)
Dave Davis	Rega-Densen-Royd	16 (3)	20 (1)	16 (3)	17 (2)
	Helios-Shearne-B&W	19 (2)	23 (1)	17 (3)	17 (3)
Phil March	Rega-Densen-Royd	30 (1)	15 (3)	4 (4)	16 (2)
	Helios-Shearne-B&W	29 (1)	14 (2)	10 (4)	12 (3)
<b>Total Points Awarded</b>		<b>125</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>Ranking Points</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>16</b>



*Cable Talk Monitor 2.1 interconnect and Talk 3.1 speaker cable.*



*IXOS Gamma series 1002 interconnect and 6003 speaker cable.*



► remember, we're not comparing bell wire to audio cable, we're examining the difference between specialist cables of roughly equal price. If we look at the Rega-Densen-Royd system and Phil's scores, then you have to conclude that if he bought it cabled with Cable Talk (30 points) he'd be pretty happy with the results, but if he was sold Ixos (4 points), then the whole lot would become an expensive waste of money. And whilst this is the most extreme example, some of the other point spreads are also alarmingly wide. Different cables, same conclusion.

## Verdict and Sentencing

The implications of all this are far from comfortable. For the most part, and as I suspected, people have been underestimating the importance of their cable loom. You can no longer treat cables as the icing on the cake, an upgrade or afterthought. They are an essential structural element in the architecture of your system (a bit like the steel rods that run through reinforced concrete!). Whilst I haven't presented specific evidence to support the proposition, experience shows that mixing and matching cables simply creates muddled phase relationships within the signal, and hence the music. Try to stick to a single manufacturer, or at least a single, coherent technological

approach. In short, treat your cables in exactly the same way, and select them with the same care that you lavish on the rest of the boxes in your system. They may not weigh as much, but they should probably cost about the same!

If you are in the fortunate position of having a system with a matching cable loom, Naim being the obvious example, that should always be your starting point. And it should take some pretty convincing evidence before you shift from it.

But what really worries me, is the strength of the panel's preferences. As I pointed out, this makes cables a very real make or break issue when it comes to system performance. And remember, the panel were marking for musical enjoyment and involvement. If a first time buyer has been sent home with an inappropriate cable ("This is what you want mate, five star review, can't go wrong!"), he'll get bored with his system pretty damned quick, and turn on his telly or surf the net instead, because it really is more interesting. Because the life and interest are missing from his hi-fi, lost in the wrong cables. And we wonder why hi-fi is a shrinking market.

Anybody who bought their cables because they won an award or got

a good review, and didn't listen to the alternatives, should do so immediately. The cables you have could be fine, but if they are, it's probably more by luck than judgement. You wouldn't let a total stranger choose your speakers for you, don't let them choose your cables. Listen to your dealer if he has a specific recommendation, but above all listen. Get the right cables for you and your system, and your investment in hi-fi will start to pay off. ►+

## Suppliers:

### Cable Talk:

Freephone (44)(0)808-1006868

Fax (44)(0)1276-686353

### Chord Company:

Tel (44)(0)1722-331674

Fax (44)(0)1722-411388

### Ixos (Path Group):

Tel (44)(0)1494-441736

Fax (44)(0)1494-440360

[www.ixos.co.uk](http://www.ixos.co.uk)

### Reference Cable Co.:

Tel/Fax (44)(0)1563-524320

Special thanks to the listening panel, Phonography (01425-461230) for the use of their fantastic facilities, and Movement Audio (01202-730865) for the loan of their dem stock.

# Conclusions

I have to admit to being extremely surprised by this whole experience. Sure, I know that cables make a difference, and have spent a fair amount of my own money investigating their effects. But I was staggered by both the cost and quality of the Nordost SPM cables. This didn't just confirm my suspicions (prejudices?), it drove them home and then fixed them in place with six inch nails. I don't know whether to be chuffed (because I always thought that cables were doing untold damage to my listening pleasure), or chastened (by the extent of the damage that I've been living with).

Less of a shock, but more of a surprise, was the outcome of the blind listening to budget cables. I've always been suspicious of blind tests, on the grounds that they move the brain's goalposts. I don't have a problem with sighted listening.

In both cases it's all down to methodology. You can make a right pig's ear out of either approach. In this case, I reckoned blind testing was worth a go, if only because of the weight it might lend to the results. And what results! Their consistency is startling. I could have used a bigger sample, and I could have gone double-blind by repeating cables, but the time and complexity ruled it out. But, warts and all, let's look at the conclusions.

What these listening tests and the SPM review demonstrate, is that the cable loom is a critical element in the performance of your system. You'd better take care of it, as its position at the junctions between equipment makes its influence all pervasive. More so than we realise. And at all price levels.

There is a saying, 'good cables can't make a bad system into

a good one, but bad cables will ruin even the best systems'. On this evidence, you'd better believe it!

But there is a silver lining. The primacy of personal preference demonstrated by the blind listening, suggests that a more structured approach to optimising your cables is possible. Start by comparing the products from a variety of companies. And try to include various technologies; silver, copper, solid core, variegated stranding etc. Once you've found a company whose products you like, refine your choice within their range. This might sound difficult, but it's actually pretty straight forward, as most of the better cable companies have a recognisable sonic signature. And it sure beats the hell out of some mad-cap mix and match approach, where you never know whether you've reached the end of the tunnel ('cos the light keeps changing!).

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mark  
levinson  
MADRIGAL AUDIO LABORATORIES  
Nº 39  
CD PROCESSOR

# MARK LEVINSON No 39 CD PROCESSOR

by Chris Thomas

I was fascinated with music a long, long time before I ever heard a Hi-Fi system, as I am sure most of you were. In my mind the two are inextricably linked. I see audio equipment as a way of bringing music into the home, and that's about it. If it doesn't make music, and so much of it doesn't, then I am just not interested in it, no matter who makes it or where, how well it is built, what lifestyle statement it makes, how it measures when connected to a machine as opposed to an ear, what it costs or what reviewer wets himself over it. Past encounters with American products in particular, had not been particularly musically rewarding and, up until a couple of years ago, my attitude could generally have been summed up as overpriced, over-hyped and over here.

But then things began to change. I began hearing some striking music coming from equipment like Wilson speakers, Jeff Rowland amplification, Mark Levinson Compact Disc players, and a few others, all of which made me sit up and take notice. Perhaps the Yanks were getting it together at last. They were, and as living proof of this let me introduce you to the Mark Levinson No 39 CD Processor. If you have any doubts as to the value, musically or financially, of American high-end equipment this machine will change your mind. I guarantee it.

Shortly after Madrigal Audio Laboratories took over the company

several years ago, Mark Levinson himself left to design and produce Cello products, leaving only his name and a reputation for expensive but superbly built high end amplification. Madrigal, being a subsidiary of Harman International, and thus having enormous financial resources to draw upon, went on to design a whole range of audio electronics, that despite an initially confusing nomenclature, can truly be described as high-end in terms of performance, build quality and most certainly price. There are currently two preamplifiers, five amplification systems and three CD players of which the No 39 is the cheapest at £4995, while the most expensive is an extraordinary three box design, the 31.5 transport and 30.5 processor/power supply, which offers no change from £25,000.

The No39, to my eyes looks fabulous and has a build quality to match. The design and solid construction described by Madrigal themselves as industrial, is as good as any component I have ever used, and a lot better than most of them. The thick aluminium faceplate, logically laid out with bead blasted push buttons, and the 1/8 th inch thick solid aluminium disc drawer do make the No 39 a joy to use, but give little indication of the stunning versatility of the machine.

CD player, CD transport, digital processor and pre-amplifier are all roles that the No39 can fill at the touch

of a button. Operating as a straight integrated CD player it will output an analogue signal, balanced or single ended, straight into a preamplifier. As a transport it can be used with a separate processor via its digital output stages (XLR or RCA), or it can act as a separate processor itself, accepting two external digital inputs through optical or RCA connectors. It can switch between both these inputs by becoming a preamplifier capable of driving single ended or balanced leads straight into a suitable power amplifier.

Switching for these operational states is made through the suitably robust (industrial) remote control, via the mode switch, which along with many other features allows the No 39 to be switched from fixed to variable output. Nothing new in this you might think, except that just about every other player I have used in this way has sounded really rather horrible. Thin and hard are two words which spring to mind. But this is no ordinary volume pot, stuck on as an after-thought, but rather the same analogue device as fitted to the 380 and 380S preamplifiers. This means that it sounds great and offers controlled volume settings in 0.1dB increments. I have never used a volume control with such fine resolution and quite frankly it makes all others seem somewhat crude and coarse. The balance control too offers the same fine level of adjustment. To be able to set the volume exactly right for any situation, especially late night listening, is something that I didn't realise how much I had missed until now.


The useable versatility of the No 39 is remarkable, and so are some of its features. It does of course offer basic programming of discs, with unwanted tracks simply being deleted. But it also offers custom playlists for thousands ►

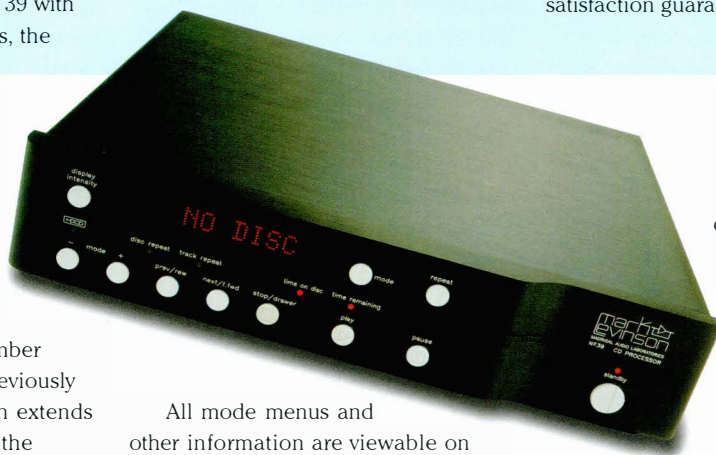
# What's Inside And What I Hooked It Up With.

The No 39 retrieves data from the disc via a 2X industrial CD-ROM mechanism and uses two D to A converters per channel in opposing polarity. The digital filter is the Pacific Microsonics PMD-100 (also used by Naim in the CDS11). This 8X digital filter allows 24-bit throughput though the digital information is dithered down to 20 bit, prior to conversion to match the resolution of the converters. The filter also allows for the use of HDCD discs.

A word or two about systems might be a good idea. I used the No 39 with other Mark Levinson products, the

No 380 preamplifier and the No 331 power amplifier, and the Platinum Duos were sited on Target HJ stands. A degree of synergy between the electronics might be expected here, and this was the case, as the system functioned quite beautifully as a whole. Comparisons between the No 39 being used with the 380 preamplifier and as a stand-alone machine were interesting. If you only use Compact Disc as a source you should seriously consider hooking a No 39 into a power amp.

This two box system has its attractions, though bear in mind that you will be unable to use any external sources unless they have digital outputs, such as a separate CD transport, a laser disc or, for the future, a digital radio receiver. If you can manage this you will save yourself the several thousand pounds that a suitable preamplifier would cost. Used in this configuration the No 39 works extremely well, but it ultimately lacks the full-blooded drive and power that you get with the addition of a high quality preamplifier like the No 380 (\$3995), or better still the superior and very tasty No 380S (\$6500). Nevertheless it should not be discounted, and is an excellent stepping stone into what is a superb range of electronics. Musical satisfaction guaranteed. 




▶ of discs which enables you to program a CD and store the list so the next time that disc is placed in the drawer, the No 39 reads the serial number and defaults straight to the previously programmed tracks. This even extends as far as being able to invert the polarity of the whole disc or individual tracks. Polarity inversion is an interesting feature, and one that MLAS see as important enough to include on all their electronics. Their argument that the likelihood of normal polarity being maintained throughout the recording process is unlikely for every disc is one that I agree with, and there is no doubt that some discs do sonically benefit from inverting the polarity. Others show no improvement, and in certain cases it is hard to hear a difference at all. I could personally live without it, but it is somehow in keeping with the Mark Levinson way of doing things.

All mode menus and other information are viewable on the excellent red display which itself can be scrolled through three levels of brightness or left off altogether. It shows times, both elapsed and remaining, by track or disc, although when using the No 39 in variable output mode it shows volume levels as soon as these buttons are touched on the remote control.

There was a time when a machine boasting as many features as this would inevitably fall down when it came to the most important performance parameter of all. Back in the days when analogue was king, simplicity was the way to go. Excessive switching,

displays and even remote controls were all seen to be no-no's capable of corrupting the precious musical signal in a single bound. But no more.

The Mark Levinson No39 shows that you can indeed have it all, as its sound quality is absolutely superb. But let's start at the beginning.

Burn in is totally critical. Madrigal claim that 300 hours is the requisite time. I would say it will carry on improving for a month, at least, and quite probably longer. Listen to it straight from its box and it will disappoint by sounding constricted and rhythmically inert. All this changes though, as the tonal balance evens out and the machine begins to stretch its legs. A fully run-in No39 is a very 

▶ sweet sounding device indeed, with an ear opening sense of musical perspectives. Dynamically it is excellent, without ever sounding forced or over compressed. It has tremendous separation of instruments and shows levels of instrumental detail that had been missing from CD replay up until relatively recently. All aspects of its performance are polished and to the point, but where it really scores is in its overall presentation, the way that it can gather up many musical threads and pull them together to make a performance. Its ability to produce the goods in this way is in some sense related to the presentation of these elements. Within the right system the No 39 creates a stereo image to die for. Even if, like me, you have never considered this to be of great importance there is something totally seductive about the way this CD player stretches a huge and wonderfully tangible soundstage across the room, beyond the width of the speakers and far behind them. It is stunningly stable too, effortlessly detailed, three dimensional and totally addictive.



Despite being a big Joni Mitchell fan, I must confess to initially having a problem with her most recent album *Taming The Tiger* (Reprise 9362-46451-2). Its instrumental framework at first seemed to me very monochromatic and dynamically restrained. The No 39 tells me that everything is relative, and shows the whole album to be a musical painting, the chorused guitar, played by Joni with its strange tunings coupled with her unique right hand technique, is exposed as a backdrop of textures, an ebb and flow of slowly moving colour over which she weaves her vocal spell. The languid tempos too, some unguided by percussion, were really

excellently unfolded, and this is what I mean by a musical performance. The music itself has a 'feel' and a message, but its beauty is to be found in the small variations of shade rather than dynamic splurges of sound.

Al Di Meola's latest offering *The Infinite Desire* (Telarc 83433) shows what the No 39 can do when confronted with music of almost unrivalled multitracked complexity. Al, a stringer of formidable technical ability, and a producer and composer unwilling to use one guitar track when he could use ten, has produced what is, to me, his most interesting piece of work for a while. The sheer scale and ambitious proportion of musical interplay in some of the songs will leave your head spinning, and though some of it seems to be musicianship just for the sake of it, there is a degree of musical technique and playing ability from all involved that is mind blowing. On most CD players it would, I suspect, be difficult to make it through more than a couple of tracks and

you could quite easily write it off as just some American guitar freak playing his brains out. If you listened on a Mark Levinson No39 you would change your mind. Opening up the structure of music like this is within the capabilities of few pieces of audio equipment. You need detail, the more the better. You need transient ability; you need a realistic approach to tonality (overbright or thin sounding machines should avoid this disc); and you need space for it to all happen. This is the Levinson's forte, as it sorts out the action, locating instruments and all their associated studio paraphernalia in a totally accessible way, without ever becoming over clinical.



As you have probably gathered I think the Mark Levinson No39 is a hell of a machine. It is fabulously built, operates like a dream, is extraordinarily versatile and best of all is totally 'simpatico' with the music. If you want a player of this class I would say that at £4995 it is almost a bargain.



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Product Type

CD Player and digital processor with input switching and variable output

Inputs 2 X Digital (One optical, one RCA phono)  
Outputs. 2 X Digital (One RCA phono, one AES/EBU balanced)  
2 X Analogue (One pair RCA phonos, one pair balanced XLR)

Dimensions (w,d,h) 400mm x 363mm x 97.5mm

Shipping Weight 22.75kg (50lbs)

Price £4995.00

### Distributor

Path Premiere  
Tel. (44)(0)1494-441736  
Fax. (44)(0)1494-461209

### Manufacturer

Mark Levinson Audio Systems  
Net. [www.madrigal.com/madrigal/marklev](http://www.madrigal.com/madrigal/marklev)



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# Crimson Products

## 600 Series

# Amplification

— by Pete Christie —

The 'modular' hi-fi system is not an unusual concept. Most decent hi-fi shops will boast examples such as Cyrus, Naim, Meridian, QUAD and the like. In fact, 'designer hi-fi' is a term that springs readily to mind - high quality hi-fi presented in a format which offers the customer a genuine alternative to the traditional 17" wide black box. Unfortunately, interesting designs can quite easily cost interesting amounts of money! Enter the Crimson Products 600 range, an unusual and interesting pre/power design consisting of three basic units offering a far more wallet-friendly alternative. In fact, systems start at £775.00.

These amps are re-engineered versions of the original Crimson Elektrik kits, dating from the mid-eighties. The original 510 battery powered pre-amp and 520 power amp were well regarded in their day.

The review units were brand new, but I managed to clock up 35 hours of running in before I reached for my favourite CDs.

The first listening test I performed was with the CS610C pre-amp and the CS620C stereo power amp. At an all-in cost of under £800.00, I decided to use my Trichord Genesis CD player as a source, and hitched the lot up to my old favourites, the dependable Rogers

LS3/5a's mounted on purpose-built stone stands. With the amps warmed-up and ready to go, my first choice of music was 'She's Already Made Up Her Mind' from the Lyle Lovett album *Joshua Judges Ruth* (MCAD 10475), a simple acoustic guitar and vocal track which tests separation and bass response to the limit. No problem there! Everything was where it was supposed to be, with real clarity and detail.

On to something slightly more difficult. 'Heavenly', from the Hary Connick album *We Are In Love*, (CBS 466736 2). A totally instrument-free zone, with lead vocal and finger snaps centre stage, and harmonies appearing in all directions. It was quickly becoming obvious that the speed and clarity of these amps was really bringing out the dynamics in the music, almost as if the system had more energy.


Trying to confuse them with something awkward, I dug out my ancient recording of the Beach Boys classic, *Surf's Up* (Epic 467835 2) and played the title track. Taking account of the then experimental stereo recording techniques, I was, once again, suitably impressed with the delivery. Crisp, controlled, and involving.

On to something more modern.

The superbly produced. Hearts and Bones from the Paul Simon Album of the same name (Warner Bros, 923 942-2). An easy-rolling song sympathetically produced to allow the laid-back delivery of the lyrics to dominate, whilst still showing the rhythm-sections' skill and dexterity (not easily done!). Again, the combination of clarity and body continued to impress.

I decided to give the superb Jacqueline du Pre/Barbirolli performance of the Elgar *Cello Concerto* (EMI CDC 7 47329 2) an airing. This has to be one of the finest performances of this piece, full of passion and life, and I never felt short changed by the Crimsons. It was exciting and dynamic, and though the amps provided plenty of sparkle, the sound never once became 'glassy'.

It was now that I replaced the stereo CS620C with the two CS630C monoblocs. Same CD player, speakers, and disc, but the difference was an almighty kick up the backside! The soundstage grew in all directions. The overall characteristics were largely unchanged, but now there was more of it; an awful lot more! The deepest notes emanating from the cello were now giving a growl that literally tugged at the hairs on the back of my neck. Let me warn you, laid-back they ain't! Rather than waiting for the signal to be delivered from the CD Player, the Crimsons appeared to be so keen to play the music, they were sucking it in! Rather than let the output signal drift down the cables, the Crimsons seemed to be propelling it to the speakers! And all the while, they were making sonic sense. Whilst they were obviously immediate, I would not describe them as at all 'edgy', and while they were delivering a lot of bass information, they were certainly not booming.

One of my favourite piano pieces is the Adagio from the Beethoven 

# The Crimson Perspective

(In conversation with Martin Moorcroft of Virtual Reality)

So, what do we have then? A pre-amplifier called a CS610C, a stereo power amp called a CS620C, and a couple of mono power amps each called CS630C. The numbers may sound boring and commonplace, but the corresponding boxes are certainly far from mundane. The first thing you notice is the size. Small and neat! In fact, if you stand a standard video tape upright on its longest edge, you have roughly the equivalent front elevation of the CS610C pre-amp and the CS620C stereo power amp! Now that's what I call neat! Even the pre-amp and both monoblocs take up less room than a single "full-size" amplifier. OK, at 360mm (just over 14"), they are fairly deep, but most normal hi-fi furniture can comfortably cope with that. Are they black? No, they're very black! And if you pick one up you cannot fail to be impressed with the superb quality of fit and finish. The outer casing on each model is deep-black anodised, and the front face of the pre-amp is high-gloss black, simply adorned with a vertical array of three small black knobs (power/source/tape, balance, and input select). A larger black volume knob, a small green LED, and a discrete Crimson logo complete the picture. The front face of the amps feature vertical heat-sink fins, a small power knob and a green LED in the top left-hand corner. As far as I am concerned, I would describe the overall visual impact as stunningly simple, and simply stunning.

The rear panel of the pre-amp offers a vertical array of RCA phono sockets, and a 5-Pin DIN socket and grounding terminal for the phono input (which is switchable between MM and MC). That leaves a curious 3-Pin DIN socket. Yes, the days of the PP9 battery are over! The pre-amp is now powered by a 20-Volt mains adaptor! This, as you would expect, is supplied by Crimson,

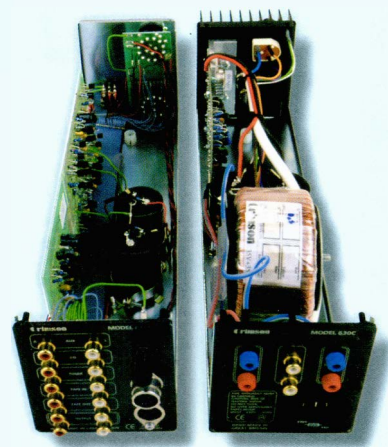
along with high quality single stranded mains leads, and the recommended 45cm long DNM Reson interconnects! I was also supplied with 5m bi-wired lengths of DNM Reson speaker cable.

The rear panels of both power amplifiers are equipped with an IEC mains inlet, phono inputs and speaker connectors. The review amps were fitted with 2mm sockets ( ideal for solid core cables), but you can specify 4mm if you must.

When asked to comment on the overall design brief of the Crimson range, MM's reply was fairly straightforward; 'There are only a certain number of ways to build an amplifier. There are only a certain number of amplifier circuits that work with any degree of stability. We just took a basic, very simple amplifier circuit, put some high quality parts into it and set it up properly. That is the essence of a Crimson. There's no Voodoo magic involved!'

So, they're not sitting on a revolutionary design using space-age technology after all! - Shame!

The physical shape of the beast, it turns out, is not down to a design quirk, it is designed that way to give the shortest possible signal path, which makes a big difference. Output devices are bi-polar type, and Crimson use the fastest (and most expensive) that money can buy. The whole lot is run close to the limit in terms of biasing set-up, and this helps to give the lucid sound quality without compromising reliability. In fact, the Crimsons are so well-designed that MM assures me that you can drive the amps into a full short-circuit without causing them any damage. Just unplug from the mains, leave for 10 minutes, re-connect and they're ready to go again! That's one of the reasons they give a three-year warranty. So as the CS630C is designed



to be able to run extremely hard, it becomes an obvious choice for an AV power amp. Imagine the 'grunt' and excitement of a surround-sound system using a CS630C monobloc amplifier for each channel! Frightening!

Turning to the pre-amp, the outboard power supply replaces the batteries of the earlier version. This is far more practical and still prevents the problem of 'hum' leaking into places it isn't wanted. There is the possibility of a higher quality power supply using the same casework as the rest of the range becoming available, but the present 'plug-top' power supply certainly seems to do a perfectly adequate job.

So why are DNM Reson cables/interconnects preferred? Again, the deliberate design philosophy is fairly simple. Solid-core wire is used throughout. As MM explained: 'Houses are wired using solid core, transformers are wired using solid core. - When was the last time you saw a resistor with stranded wire legs?' OK, you've got me there! Even the internal wiring of the Crimsons uses DNM cable, so the integrity is certainly maintained. Does it make a difference? If you are sceptical, try removing the mains power lead supplied and replace it with a bog-standard "kettle lead" alternative, and listen to the resultant loss in clarity!



▶ *Piano Concerto No.5* (Philips 416 215-1, Sir Colin Davis/Claudio Arrau with the Dresden State Orchestra), and I was again impressed with the tonal representation of the instrument. The slow, lilting quality of this melodic section was given pin-sharp focus, yet the sound contained no harshness, and the accompanying bass was allowed to punctuate rather than take over. And all the time, the impression was that the amps were capable of giving even more. This was proved when I played the final movement of Mahlers *2nd Symphony*, Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra and Chorus conducted by Eliahu Inbal (Denon C37 7603 4). It takes a lot of amplifier to control the explosion of passion and sheer volume of information from the combined orchestra and chorus. At no stage did I feel that the Crimson were struggling. In fact, they gave an impression of total ease, whilst relaying a superbly controlled yet rich and dynamic rendition of the music.

By this stage I decided that I should audition some contemporary speakers, and also try a superior source. I opted for the Helios 2 CD player, and connected the popular B&W CDM1se loudspeakers mounted on a variety of speaker stands.

The effect was fairly predictable, though I was not as pleased with the overall sound.

Certainly, though the power and control was evident, with effortless handling of good recordings, I did feel that poorer recordings suffered in becoming slightly disjointed in the midrange.

Interestingly, I found that replacing the CDM1's with their smaller brothers the CDM2se's was a better combination.



This, however, would be a retrograde step as changing up to the floor-standing Castle Harlech was to prove. At last, the amps had a load they could really get their teeth into. Repeating the earlier auditions I was treated to the same results, though now, I was more aware of the added dimension created by the power available from the 100 watts/channel monoblocs.

So what's the verdict? I think that the Crimson range offers an extremely stylish, affordable alternative to more traditional pre/power combinations. For small boxes, they deliver a surprisingly big sound that is detailed without appearing cold or analytical, rich without being 'plummy'. Most of all, they are dynamic with an involving sound stage. Their slimline design makes them a definite choice where multi-amping is required, such as home cinema set-ups, or where a lot of power is necessary (try daisy-chaining the monoblocs!). Speaker selection was a fairly painless process, and the supplied cables and interconnects proved to be well-matched with the amps, enabling an overall sonic stability. Reliability is not considered a problem, and the amps are happily given a 3-year manufacturers warranty adding a nice touch of consumer confidence.

Do they Rock and Roll?  
Not half they do! 'Out In The Cold' from Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers album *Into The Great Wide Open* (MCA MCD10317)

proved conclusively that a great solo can still make a clapped out old git like me want to reach for a cut-out guitar and leap around the room!

If you are in the market for some new amplification loaded with life and vitality, put them on your audition list - preferably near the top! ▶+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### CS610C Pre-Amplifier

Inputs . . . . . 4 Line + Phono (MM/MC)  
Nominal Output Level . . . . . 775mV  
Output Resistance. . . . . 700 ?  
Maximum Output Level. . . . . >3.5V r.m.s.  
Sensitivity (All Line Inputs) . . . . . 250 mV  
Sensitivity (MM). . . . . 5.5 mV @ 1KHz into 50 K?  
Sensitivity (MC). . . . . 0.25 mV @ 1KHz into 330R  
Dimensions (WxHxD). 95mm x 112mm x 360mm  
Weight . . . . . 7Kg

### CS620C Stereo Amplifier

Details Not Supplied  
CS630C Power Amplifier  
Power Output. . . . . 2 x 100W into 8 ohms  
. . . . . 2 x 175W into 4 ohms  
Peak Output Current. . . . . 17A/Channel  
Input Sensitivity . . . . . 775mV  
Frequency Response. . . . . 10Hz to 40KHz at -1dB  
Output Resistance. . . . . Inductor + Wiring @ 0.1R  
Dimensions (wxhxd). 95mm x 112mm x 360mm

## CRIMSON AMPLIFIERS

CS610C Pre-Amplifier	E450.00
CS620C Stereo Power Amplifier	E450.00
CS630C Monoblocs	E800.00 /Pair

### Pack Prices

CS610C and CS620C	E775.00
Price includes DNM Reson 45cm interconnect and DNM mains lead.	
CS610 and CS630C x 2	E1075.00
Price includes DNM Reson 45cm interconnect and 2 x DNM mains leads	

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# Arcam Alpha 9 CD Player

by Roy Gregory

On the face of it, the Alpha 9 CD player was on a hiding to nothing. Whilst it's top of Arcam's range of upgradeable players, at £800 it's the cheapest machine I've lived with for quite a while, and reality checks are rarely fun! It also lacks the emphatic character of the Helios and Naim players that have been recent fixtures in my system. The new Arcam was certainly up against it, a factor that makes its ultimate success all the more interesting.

Not that it stormed to instant triumph. Getting the best out of the Alpha 9 takes a while. First consideration was running in. Having had it on continuous repeat for two weeks, I felt fairly safe starting some serious listening. Wrong! At the end of week three, it gained an overnight dynamic shove that upset my calculations. This is important, as dynamic wallop and presence are exactly the area where the 9 suffers in comparison with the likes of the more expensive Naim and Helios machines. In fact, the set-up saga was a constant search to combine the player's considerable strengths with a bit more power and drive.

First discovery was the extraordinary effect of various supports on the 9's performance. Best basic option proved to be a set of AudioQuest "Little Feet", which gave the player a much needed

injection of bass energy and midrange presence (must be something to do with the name). The improvement was so obvious that, as distributor, Arcam should include a voucher with the 9 encouraging owners to buy a set. More expensive, but even more effective was a combination of a Torlyte slab (£99) atop a Bright Star sand box. The Bright Star on its own, and a whole host of other options, simply failed to deliver, with either non-existent or flubby bass. If you audition the 9, cast an eye over its support before you jump to any conclusions. And while you're about it make sure it's as been on as long as the competition.

Decent interconnect and mains cables should be top of the accessories list (Arcam recommend AudioQuest Quartz interconnects as a sensible minimum), and if you've got other digital kit, like an AV processor, then try experimenting with an isolation transformer like Acoustic Precision's Black Box. Finally, switching off the display offers a worthwhile improvement in presence and transparency.

What makes the 9 worth all the trouble (and investment!) are the many things it does well. Most obvious is its way with the human voice. Singers

sound uncannily natural, individual voices in duets are quite distinct. Subtle inflexion and shifts in level are beautifully preserved, which really brings out a singer's character. Shawn Colvin's vocal gymnastics on 'Every Little Thing (He) Does Is Magic', (*Cover Girl*, Columbia 477240-10), are full of agility and expression as she bends and stretches the melody out of shape. The time and tune tight-rope she treads lifts the familiar song to a whole new level. Unlike a lot

of players, the 9 never loses the plot.

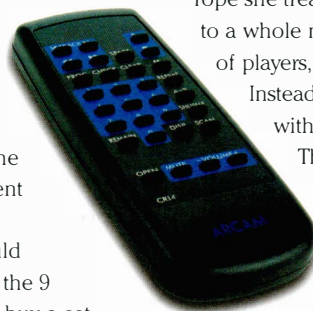
Instead, it takes you all the way, with an inexorable fascination.

The DCC re-issue of *Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Cole Porter Song Book*, and the XRCD2 of Sarah Vaughn, *Crazy and Mixed Up* simply reinforce

the point. No matter how complex, the Arcam draws you into vocals, unerringly laying out the melodic line. It makes songs really talk to you.

It turns the same trick with solo instruments. The Fone disc *Homage To Kreisler* (94 F04CD) features recordings of five separate violins from the Cremona collection, all played by Salvatore Accardo. On the 9, the character of each instrument is immediately and obviously apparent. The solo playing, with occasional piano accompaniment, is spellbinding. The precision and delicacy is there to hear, but it's the beauty of the melodies that draws you in. And yes, I am talking solo violin on CD!

By now you'll have gathered that the Alpha 9 has detail to burn. And it takes that detail and weaves it into a seductively convincing musical picture. This player reproduces the harmonic envelope of acoustic instruments more naturally than anything even close to its price. The minutiae and texture of a great performance are there to be enjoyed. ►



# Running The Ring-Dac

The Arcam Alpha 9 is the first CD player to make use of the dCS Ring-Dac technology that first reached the world of hi-fi in that company's Elgar digital to analogue converter, an £8500 product which went on to become Stereophile's 1997 product of the year. Arcam uses a new, monolithic version of the device, which they co-developed with dCS, and which will also replace the discrete components in dCS products. Developing such an expensive piece of technology is a major decision for any company, and I asked Arcam MD John Dawson the reasons behind it.

"We selected the dCS Ring-Dac for a number of reasons. It combines a near textbook measured performance with an in-built element of future proofing, because so much of its functionality is governed by software. It also gives us an important exclusivity in the market place. This makes it extremely attractive, from both an engineering and a marketing perspective. Not only does the Ring-Dac work well within the CD format, but with new software can function just as effectively with 24bit /96kHz, or even the top DVD-Audio sampling rate of 24bit/192kHz. So, whilst making an Alpha 9 play DVDs would require an impossible series of hardware changes, we are already working with this state of the art digital technology, for use in future products. In the long run, whether the public settle for 96/24, 192/24 or even DSD, we can evolve our existing dac technology and apply

specific experience. It's a decision that was made with one eye firmly on the present and one fixed on the future."

The Alpha 9 shares its chassis and transport with the £330 Alpha 7 CD player. Doesn't this represent a disproportionate expenditure on the DAC?

"The Alpha 9 represents the top step on an upgrade ladder which starts with the Alpha 7. The 7, 8 and 8se can all be upgraded to full 9 specification for £500. (If you have an 8 or an 8se, your dealer may give you an allowance for the board he's taking out, which could be sold on to a 7 owner. But bear in mind that this is discretionary.) By retaining the mechanics we take them as far as we can, as well as adding value to our existing customers' machines. However we are aware that structural factors may be limiting the performance of the 9, as indicated by its critical response to different supports. In the short term, the AudioQuest SorboGel Little Feet do a good job of isolating the player and damping its base plate. But I'd prefer to spend time finding and treating structural nodes within the player's chassis, than totally re-engineering it. It's a more cost effective approach, and the knowledge can be applied to the less expensive machines as well."

When you upgrade to Alpha 9 spec. what changes apart from the DAC?

"The DAC boards carry considerable extra regulation, which plays a big part in the final performance. The rest of the system architecture was always designed to be upgraded and takes the final requirements into account. A lot of it is over specified for the Alpha 7."

The Alpha 9 is not a particularly demonstrative or immediately impressive sounding player. Are you worried that it might suffer in comparative demonstrations?



"In a word, yes. There are more immediately impressive sounding machines on the market, but when we design a product we want it to give long term pleasure. The Alpha 9's combination of a natural tonal balance and extremely open and stable sound stage, make it enjoyable and unatiring to listen to. It's incredible how wearing hardness or wandering images can be, even if you don't pick up on it immediately. The end result is that you turn the music off and do something else. Arcam have always aimed for long term listening pleasure, as I think our track record shows. Just look how many people out there are still using A60s. Anyone spending £800 on a CD player should take their time. We're confident that the 9's merits will become apparent, once it's properly warmed up, and gets a fair demonstration."

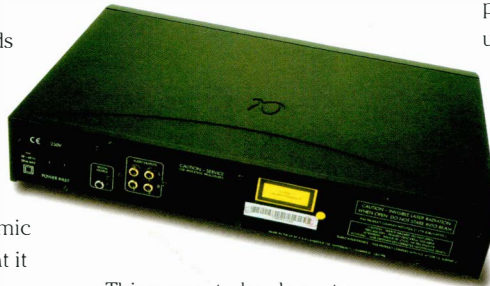


▶ Soundstages are broad, but a shade shallow. Individual instruments are well separated and held stable. And they reappear in the same place twice! All of which moves us a step nearer to reality, reducing the workload when it comes to suspending disbelief.

That sense of correctness extends to the time domain. The 9 may lack the insistent, choppy quality that appeals to the toe-tapping fraternity, but it also lacks the rhythmic rigidity that goes with it. The 9 may not fire notes with the metronomic regularity of a machine gun, but what it does is far more important. It lets music breathe. And if you don't believe me, see what it does with the world class rhythm section on 'Way Out Basie' (*Farmers Market Barbecue* Analogue Productions APJ 023). Piano, drums, bass and guitar really swing, laying down a rock steady foundation for the brass tuttis and solos. Anything that combines a full on brass section with strummed acoustic guitar can quickly become a real mess, with the softer instruments alternately audible and swamped by the louder ones. The Alpha 9 succeeds in holding everything separate, each instrument in its own space. But it's the sense it makes of the Count's subtle prods and prompts that's really impressive. What he leaves out is just as important as what he puts in. The 9 opens those spaces, filling them with musical contrasts.

If this sounds too good to be true, rest assured that the Arcam player has its weaknesses too. If it excels at the smaller end of the dynamic scale, larger forces can reveal failings. In short, the Alpha 9 lacks what the audio world calls authority, particularly around the nether regions. The first track of the 'Testament Of Freedom' (*Testament* Reference Recordings RR-49CD) closes with a massive finale, underpinned by a colossal bass drum.

Now, I've heard it go off like a depth charge. On the Arcam it's more of a deep rumble, lacking the sense of mallet on skin. The truth lies somewhere between the two, but I've still to extract a bottom octave from this player which can match its midrange.



This seems to be down to two things. One is a lack of heft, at least in the leading edge of bass notes (the note's weight is centered correctly, hence the Arcam's rhythmic integrity). The other is the player's mid hall balance. It's slightly more distant perspective robs it of a certain natural immediacy which exacerbates the problem. This also partly explains the apparent contraction in dynamic range, but balance aside, the Alpha 9 still fails to go the last yard on the really big orchestral crescendos.

How big a deal is this? That depends; on the music you play and how much care you put into set-up. Bear in mind that this is an absolute judgement, regardless of price, and that I was using the Alpha 9 in the context of some pretty heavy duty equipment, including the Audiovector 6 speakers and Nordost SPM cables, products with exceptional bass extension and definition. Simply plonk it down on a standard hi-fi rack, and what bass there is will be sluggish and indistinct. But, lavish a little attention on the finer points and play something other than serious power-pop or Stravinsky, and short of direct comparison with much more expensive machines, you'll probably never notice. Which brings us to another point. Compare the Alpha 9 with machines nearer its own price

point, and you might dismiss it as nice but soft. That would be a major mistake, high-lighting the dangers of snap decisions. For "soft" read devoid of the edge and glare that infests most of the competition; for "nice" read natural. And that really cuts to the heart of this product. The Alpha 9 is all about unforced and unexaggerated music.

Whilst the box and buttons are shared with the £330 Alpha 7 CD player, don't mistake the Alpha 9 for a close relation. Musically it's more of a distant cousin, several times removed. Its combination of resolution and integration sets new standards at the price, bringing an embarrassed blush to the face of some highly regarded (and cruelly exposed) competitors. It's biggest weakness is the effort required to realize the potential, but the Arcam repays the debt with interest. If you don't like the Alpha 9 then you are listening to too much hi-fi, and not enough music. ▶+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Arcam Alpha 9 CD Player

Dimensions (hwxwd)	425mm,275mm, 85mm
Dac Technology	dCS RingDac
Remote Control	Full Function
Price	£799.90
To Upgrade Alpha 7	
Alpha 8	£500 (but see text)
Alpha 8se	

### Manufacturer:

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### Recommended Accessories

AudioQuest "Little Feet" .....	£29.90
Torlyte Platform PL2 .....	£99.00
(From Russ Andrews 0800-373467)	



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display

previous

next

pause

stop

play

# NAIM CDS11

by Chris Thomas

Naim Audio ceased production of the old CDS several months ago as the supply of transports from Philips began to dry up. It was a great machine in its day and in fact was responsible for me getting involved in CD in the first place. Prior to the CDS I had a real problem with digital sound in general and the silver disc in particular. Basically I was still hooked into the whole analogue thing. But to my ears the CDS got the fundamentals right for the first time, especially rhythmically where it still excels. But, after seven years of production it was getting a bit long in the tooth and more modern machines were coming along showing sonic improvements in certain areas, particularly fine detail resolution. What Naim needed to do in their own unique way, was to incorporate the latest technologies and hardware into a new machine, which was technically superior to what had gone before, without detracting in any way from the overall musical performance of the original. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the CDS 11.

It was always going to be a two box design. Naim's belief and expertise in the meticulous design of external power supplies has been absolutely established for well over 20 years now. The power supply is the XPS which can also be used to upgrade the cheaper CDX player. Other design features that were carried over are the suspension systems for both the transport and

the main board. The rest of the innards are absolutely new.

Externally the CDS11 shows very little cosmetically to distinguish it from its predecessor. The same extruded aluminium cases, transport function buttons and metal feet. The display window is, I believe, slightly smaller and that's about it. There is however a new, better quality, multicore interconnect lead between player and power supply, via the twin



Burndy connectors. Signal output from the CDS11 is available only through a lockable 5pin din socket, and Naim have also started supplying improved quality signal leads which are compatible with their own preamplifiers. The problem is that they are not compatible with any other preamplifiers and if you want to use any Naim CD player with amplification other than Naim, your options are limited. Adapters are undesirable and there are a limited amount of interconnects available with a 5pin din socket on one end. More exotic cabling also tends to be difficult to

use, due to the cramped confines inside the average din plug, which makes it difficult to solder more robust cable designs. If Naim want to sell this machine to non-Naim amplification users, they are just going to have to bite the bullet and provide an additional output connection of two high quality RCA phono sockets.

In use the CDS11 functions generally as per its predecessor. The small operational differences

are that programming is now more quickly and easily achieved by using a delete function and that the display, always rudimentary, can now be switched off altogether, giving a small but worthwhile increase in sound quality. This is a no frills machine, its entire raison d'être being to play music, and it makes no concession to anything other than that.

As with the Mark Levinson No 39 a lengthy burn-in period from new is absolutely mandatory. When I first installed the machine it sounded wild from cold. It was pretty obvious that there was lot more going on than with the old CDS but it was a bit like riding a musical big-dipper. Amazing control and projection alright, but a relentless and in-your-face presentation that left me scratching my head quizzically. ▶

► Over the next few days it began to sort itself out and gradually like a giant jigsaw puzzle, piece by piece it began to form the whole picture. It continues to improve though by much smaller amounts even now, a full three weeks after the initial installation. I used it with two contrasting systems. The first an all Naim system comprising a 52 pre-amplifier and a pair of SBL speakers driven actively by two NAP 250 power amplifiers, and the second, an American set-up using a Mark Levinson No 380 pre-amplifier driving their baby power amplifier, the No 331 (100 watts per channel). Speakers were the interesting Platinum Duos. Interconnects for this system were a pair of Descadel silver leads miraculously soldered into a 5pin din plug, though I had to leave the plug case off to achieve a connection.

From the off, a fully run-in Naim CDS11 is musically right on the button, building enormously on all the good things that the CDS managed. Its sense of rhythm is awesome, and almost touchable, and it quite simply never loses its sense of grip in this area. I'm not talking merely about its control of instrumentation, but its sense of movement and the way in which it lays bare the feeling of a piece of music moving through time and space. This you can think of as the canvas on which the music is painted, and it is an area in which Naim have always excelled. The CDS11 just takes it to new heights.

Tonal balance is just about as good as it gets, bringing an air of relaxation particularly at the top end where it shows superb transient abilities without growing hard, even at higher volume levels. This more insightful

performance at high frequencies is one of the major areas of improvement shown also by the cheaper CDX, particularly when used with the XPS power supply. Bass is leaner, tighter and harder and at first seems slightly lighter but this, I soon realised, is just a by-product of the vastly increased control. If anything the CDS11 goes even lower. The real difference though is the way bass notes just appear with no subliminal sense of acceleration preceding them.

Another striking aspect of the new player is the way that it opens the music tonally. Every instrument seems to have a greater life and bandwidth, even acoustic double basses have a high frequency presence and sparkle that comes from the



realisation of fingers plucking and stopping strings. Acoustic guitars have that shimmering harmonic aura that really does surround a quality instrument; pianos ring with vibrancy and a realistic sense of scale; saxophones are more vibrant and colourful with far less screech. An example of this is certainly Jan Garbarek's *Visible World* (ECM 1585) where Jan blows his plaintive, and some would say haunting, lines through soprano and tenor saxophones. Too often, when using the old CDS I would avoid playing this disc as the shrill thinness of tone, especially from the soprano instrument, would grate on my ears and make me feel uncomfortable. Garbarek's particular tone is going this way anyway, and that "edge" that he ►

## Technical Description

Although Naim Audio have their own approach to electronic design they obviously need to source their components externally and it's interesting to note some of the hardware similarities to Madrigal's Mark Levinson No 39 CD Processor. The design approaches though, are very different.

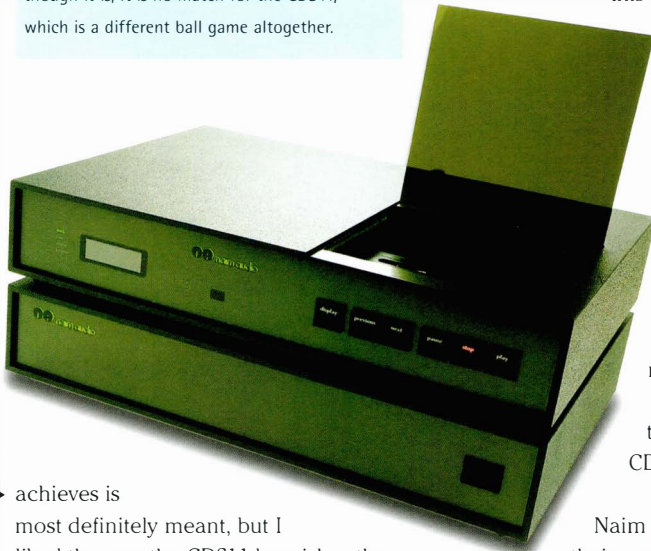
The CDS11 uses a Philips VAM 1205 transport, which is a high quality variant of the CDM12 range. Naim mount this on their own three-point suspension system. The main circuit boards are also independently suspended using damped springs. These systems are unlocked before use. The digital filter is the Pacific Microsonics PMD 100 which has the added benefit of offering HDCD decoding (the display will inform you when an HDCD disc is being used). Digital to analogue conversion is handled by two Burr-Brown PCM 1702K 20-Bit converters.

In true Naim style the power supply features receive special attention. The CDS11 has 25 low-noise regulators on the main circuit board, 4 on each of the two analogue output boards and 3 on the servo board, while the XPS has 6 separately regulated very low noise outputs leaving all critical circuitry triple regulated. Roy George, the designer of the CDS11 has always maintained that while it is desirable to house the power supply in a separate box, this is certainly not the case with the converters, which should be located as close to the transport as possible. And judging by the amount of high end single box players appearing, it would seem that others are beginning to agree.

The unusual disc clamping system stays, though the clamp itself has evolved. Its function remains the same though, and I haven't experienced a single problem with accessing tracks as I have with my old CDS, which required regular cleaning of the disc support, which at times is a bit of a pain.

## The Upgrade Trail

If you aspire to own a CDS11 you might want to consider doing it in stages. The CDX is a stand-alone player which can be not so much improved, as totally transformed by the addition of the XPS power supply. This combination is a pretty formidable one in its own right, being in lots of ways better than the original CDS, largely because it is a more sophisticated and refined machine. The CDX could then be traded in against a CDS11 at a later date. Having used a CDX/XPS combination I can tell you that good though it is, it is no match for the CDS11, which is a different ball game altogether.



► achieves is most definitely meant, but I liked the way the CDS11 burnishes the note leaving it still sour but not painful, just far easier to listen to.

The increase in levels of detail is superb. Not only does it make listening a more involving experience but, coupled with the undoubted musicality of this player, it can lay bare the fabric of the music, opening your ears to elements of performance that may well have gone unnoticed. The relaxed sense of total control led me to lots of extremely interesting discoveries. Instruments that are similar in frequency, or multiples of the same instruments playing together often seem to suffer from a kind of superimposition effect, whereby the instrument that is playing either the loudest or the more dominant note will be the one that the ear picks

up on. You can hear the other instrument, but its signature is hidden. The CDS11, on many occasions, and on music that I thought I knew backwards, showed me that where I thought there was unison playing, there was in fact a harmony line being played behind the dominant instrument. We all take different things from music I know, but when a piece of equipment can actually change your mind about something you are very familiar with I start to get excited, and the CDS11 did

this on numerous occasions. It pulls you into the piece, opening your mind to possibilities and variations of mood and tonal colour by painting the picture with much finer brush strokes than the original CDS ever could.

Naim of course have their own label and some of my favourite releases are those featuring Antonio Forcione, particularly *Meet Me In London* with Sabina Sciubba (Naim 021). Antonio is an extremely sensitive player who understands the use of volume as well as any guitarist I have ever heard. He is also smart and tasteful enough to know that studio effects should be used exceedingly sparingly where acoustic instruments and beautiful vocals are concerned and the lovely thing about this album is its lack of adornment. He is a great player, who can conjure moments of tranquillity or excitement with a great choice of notes and a superb understanding of his instrument. The CDS11 was breathtakingly impressive on this CD, and showed with its jet-back

backgrounds another area where it significantly betters the old model; its sense of imagery and uncanny focus. Absolutely rock solid and fixed in space, the extra detail laying behind every note or vocal inflection gives a much greater feeling of depth and realism in itself, and even on much more instrumentally complex discs, the CDS11 is unflappable in its sense of control and its location of instruments within the mix.

Straight comparisons with the old CDS would really last no more than a couple of minutes as the CDS11 is, quite simply, several classes ahead. There is not a single area of musical performance that the new player doesn't take what the old one did and improve upon it by a huge margin. It is a very special machine and I have found no downside to its performance at all. It costs £5700 which ain't peanuts, but it should be considered by anyone wanting a really top class CD player, whether they already own a Naim system or not. It really is that good.



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Product Type

Two-box CD player consisting of head unit and separate (but essential) XPS power supply.

Outputs. 1 x Analogue (5pin Din)

Dimensions (w,d,h). 430mm x 300mm x 76mm  
(Allow 75mm behind units for PSU connections.)

Shipping Weight. 21.2kg

Price.	CDS II head unit	£3700.00
	XPS power supply	£1925.00

Please note that the CDS II cannot be used without the XPS.

### Manufacturer

Naim Audio Ltd

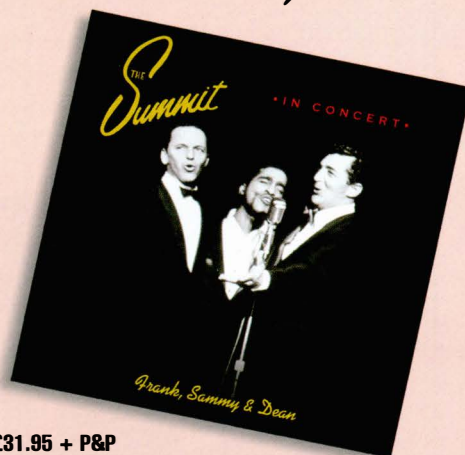
Tel. (44)(0)1722-332266

Fax.(44)(0)1722-412034

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In what must be one of the musical coups of the decade, LA-based audiophile specialists DCC have just announced an historic agreement with Artanis (the company started by the Sinatra family to handle the late crooner's musical catalogue) to issue previously unreleased archive material. The world-wide deal has given DCC access to over 60 hours of tapes which will result in a series of 180g vinyl and 24 carat gold CD releases, all to be remastered by engineering maestro Steve Hoffman using DCC's renowned vintage vacuum playback system, resulting in what we all hope will be the best-sounding Sinatra releases ever. The first title is *The Summit*, a 1962 "Rat Pack" recording featuring Ol' Blue Eyes and accomplices Sammy Davis Jr and Dean Martin, this will be followed by a solo Sinatra live recording, *'57 Concert*, and many more releases will follow.

## Tracks Include:

1. Fanfare & Introduction

### DEAN MARTIN

2. When You're Smiling (When Your Drinking)
3. (I Left My Heart In) San Francisco
4. I Am Gonna Sit Right Down And Write Myself A Letter
5. **Medley:** Volare (Nel Blu Dipinto Di Blu)  
An Evening In Roma

### FRANK SINATRA

6. Goody Goody
7. Chicago



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8. When Your Lover Has Gone
9. Monologue
10. You're Nobody 'Til Somebody Loves You  
**SAMMY DAVIS JR**
11. (You're Right) Out Of This World
12. What Kind Of Fool Am I

### FRANK, DEAN AND SAMMY

13. **Medley:** She's Funny That Way/Hey There
14. Impressions Of Singers
15. "A Toast"/Movie Routine
16. **Medley including:** I Can't Give You Anything But Love  
Too Marvelous, For Words, Pennies From Heaven,  
A Foggy Day, Embraceable You,  
The Lady Is A Tramp, Where Or When
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18. The Birth Of The Blues Encore
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20. **Dean and Sammy:** Sam's Song  
**Reprise:** The Birth Of The Blues

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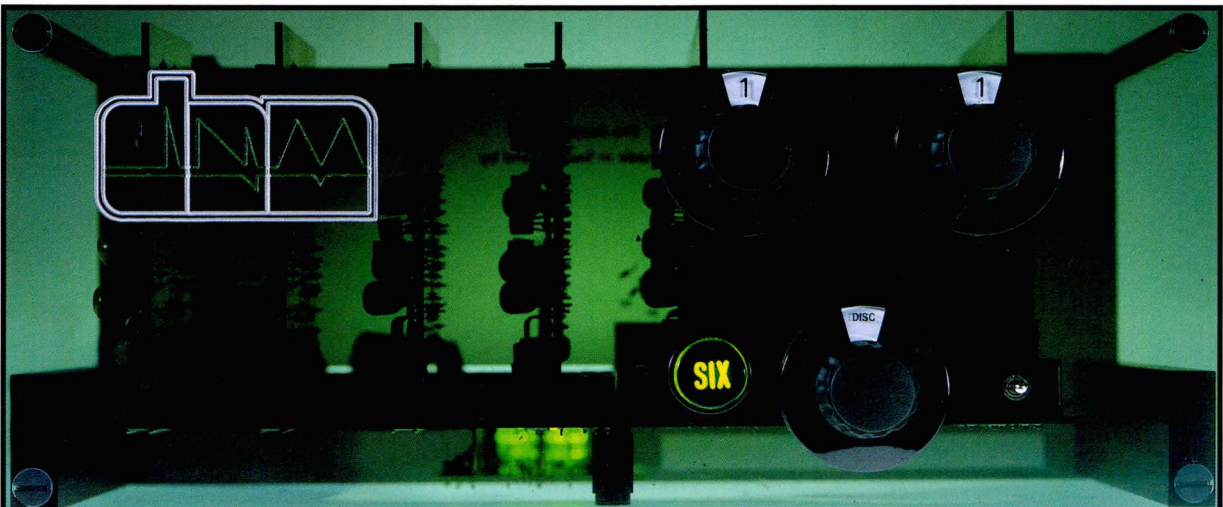
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# Infinity Overture 1

## Hybrid Active Speaker

— by Roy Gregory —

I was trying to convince our resident jazz reviewer of the musical merits of Madonna's Ray of Light album. As I teed up the CD player, Dave settled onto the sofa, coffee in hand, Bizet (the cat) getting well comfortable in his lap. The little Infinities are the smallest speakers I've used at home for quite a while, and as the title track's gentle opening washed over him, you could see my unsuspecting victim visibly relax. Then that bass line hit, and three things happened simultaneously. The (deaf!) cat hit the ground running, Dave nearly hit the ceiling, and his nether regions narrowly missed an unscheduled bath. Mmmm, Nescafe!

The Overture 1s are certainly a surprising little package. When the inspectors from the Noise Pollution Police beat down your door, you could simply point to them and say 'What, me guv?'. You'd probably get away with it too. But once you get over the shock value, (It takes a while. Each new visitor is just too good a target to miss.) the real question remains. Is the Overture 1 a serious hi-fi speaker, or just an A/V party piece?

These speakers are really small, and surprisingly heavy. They come with matching stands (included in the £1000 asking price), and these were the stands I used. They lift the tweeters between 27" and 34", and


tilt the cabinets back. I ended up with the tweeters pointed at listening ear height, and crossing some 18" in front of me. On axis, they sounded rather fierce, and the extreme toe-in certainly helped focus and the sense of scale.

Infinity make no secret of the target audience for these speakers. They are positioned squarely in the multi-use and A/V market place. And, with their combination of bandwidth and sensitivity they are ideally suited to that application. However, those same characteristics make the Overtures a very attractive option for the under powered audiophile who wants some real wallop. I used a variety of amps to drive the Overture 1s, but even the 20 odd watts from a Unison Research Simply Four were capable of raising neighbour annoying levels from the little Infinities. All of which is irrelevant if the bass is beyond control or tolerance, so let's deal with that first.

Now you already know that there's enough bass to plaster poor Dave to the wall. It goes deep, and there's plenty of power. In fact, there's so much bass available that it's embarrassing. Each speaker has a rotary bass level control, with a central détente. Only a hardened raver could enjoy the sheer quantity of bass that's produced with the control in its parked position. Quickly winding it back, I settled on levels just off

minimum, depending on the amp doing the driving. And that's with the speakers 21" from the nearest wall! Matching the bass level to the system is crucial to getting decent results. Tiny adjustments make a huge difference to bass integration and definition, so it's worth taking some time and getting it right.

Once you've got it right, the Overtures will reward you with seriously deep bass notes, and really energy when it's called for. But we'll get to that. My acid test for bass linearity and integration is rather more subtle - Duke Ellington and Ray Brown's *This One's For Blanton* (Analogue Productions CAPJ 015). Brown runs up and down the entire range of his double bass, making this an invaluable set-up disc, as well as great music. With the Simply Four doing the driving there was a discernible step as the notes descended the cellar steps. They gained a bloom and weight, which whilst it didn't blur or muddle them, did separate them from the lower midrange. I don't want to over emphasise this, because it is a worst case example. Using the Michell Alectos rendered it virtually inaudible, and that on a disc which is the aural equivalent of a microscope. The bottom line is that with care when it comes to siting and the choice of matching amp, it's unlikely to bother you. But the discontinuity is there to be exaggerated if you get it wrong.

Now let's look at the benefits, and they're not easy to miss. Music has a sense of weight and substance that you just don't get from the average mini-monitor. Sound stages have real volume, even if their boundaries are indistinct. The street sounds at the beginning of Private Universe (Crowded House *Recurring Dream*) fill the room, and the scale and drama of the Dvorak *Cello Concerto* 

# The Active Option

Active operation is the term used to describe a system topology in which the power amps are directly coupled to the speaker drive units. Clearly, in a multi-way speaker this requires as many amps as there are drivers, and a means of filtering each input to the correct bandwidth. This is done by an electronic, or 'active', crossover, placed between the pre-amp and the power amps.

So, what's the big deal? A normal speaker uses a passive crossover, placed between the amplifier and the drive units. This splits the frequency range into slices, and pads the level to each driver, so that their outputs match. Unfortunately, this is a subtractive process, which leaves the power amp wasting output, and having to contend with the awkward reactive load presented by the crossover components themselves. It's no coincidence that many of the best passive speakers have had minimal crossovers.

The active crossover avoids these problems by coupling the amplifier directly to the driver, allowing improved control and full use of the available power. As a separate filter/gain-stage (rather like a dedicated pre-amp) for each driver, the active crossover can match levels by increasing the signal sent to a power amp. Which brings us to the most important benefit of all. Passive speakers face an inevitable compromise between size, efficiency and bass extension. If you want deep bass and an efficient speaker, it needs to be huge! But the active crossover gives us a way out of the trap. Because it can add to the signal fed to a driver, and it's already filtering the bandwidth,

we can use it to 'correct' the bass response. If the mechanical roll-off of a given driver in a particular box is  $-3\text{dB/octave}$  below  $50\text{Hz}$ , we can simply increase the output of the bass amplifier by  $+3\text{dB/octave}$  below  $50\text{Hz}$  in order to compensate (as long as the amplifier has sufficient power and headroom to keep up with the rest of the system!). Hey presto, deep bass from a small box.

Active systems are not without their problems, cost being the most obvious. But this hasn't stopped companies such as Linn and Naim persevering with upgradeable, building block systems, whilst Meridian have adopted an even more purist approach with their inter-active designs, building crossover, amps and drivers into a single cabinet. But we'll leave fully active designs now, to look at the 'hybrid' approach adopted by Infinity for the Overture 1s.

What infinity have done, is try to combine the bandwidth/size benefits of active bass, with a high efficiency, passively driven mid-range and treble. By driving the bass amp at speaker rather than line level, they keep the cost down and ensure maximum compatibility with existing systems. You just plug them into your existing amp.

The Overture 1's use a clamshell cabinet, made out of moulded polymer material. The front baffle features a pair of  $75\text{mm}$  midrange drivers in a D'Appolito arrangement, flanking

a horn loaded  $25\text{mm}$  soft dome tweeter. That's the passive section. The rear of the cabinet houses the bass amplifier, which drives an  $8"$ , sideways firing woofer. The end result is a tiny cabinet (the baffle measures just  $5"$  by  $12"$ ), with an overall efficiency of  $92\text{db}$ , and a  $-3\text{dB}$  point of around  $35\text{Hz}$ . Impressive? You'd better believe it. And whilst I haven't measured them, I don't think those figures are in the slightest bit fanciful.



Driving the active section at speaker level does involve compromise; the bass signal passes through two complete amplifiers. However, this approach has been applied to subwoofers, and is both familiar to the public, and keeps cabling to a minimum. The Overture 1s require just a single run of speaker cable (and connection to the mains). The secret with any hybrid is to integrate the two sections, and at least with this approach the possible losses are offset by the bass signal being overlaid with the character of the main amp. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and it's up to the designer to realise the potential benefits of his chosen approach. History tells us that both active and hybrid designs are super critical. The Overture 1 is a big mouthful, and Infinity have done a pretty good job of chewing it.



▶ (Mercury 432 001-2) is really impressive. Starker's Cello is a solid presence, and the bass arpeggios in the opening have tremendous texture and growl. In fact, bass lines in general have a sense of power that either anchors music or drives it as appropriate. Nanci Griffiths' *Storms* (the Alto 180g re-issue) makes subtle use of bass instruments to build stature behind the fragile vocals, adding power without swamping them. 'Drive-In Movies And Dashboard Lights' works beautifully, the double kick drum accents providing propulsion for the poignant lyrics. Definition is good rather than outstanding, but as nothing else this size goes this deep, it doesn't have a lot of competition. It easily beats any of the sub £500 sub-woofers on the market.

Moving up the range, the Overtures lack the positional precision and tonal subtlety of the mini-monitor competition. They're never going to match the focused soundstage of the B&W CDM1s, or the natural voice of an LS3/5a. What it does have, is a sense of life and vitality. And that brings us to the second requirement in a matching amplifier. I had high hopes of the Simply Four. This I thought, could be a marriage made in heaven. But it lacked the necessary bass control. It also lacked the snap and immediacy to make the most of the Overture's mid and treble. Instead, the speed of the speaker simply drew attention to the softness of the amp. Which just goes to show the danger of pre-conceptions. What is needed is something clean and clear. The Alectos were great but overkill. The £1500 Lavardin IS integrated proved to be the perfect choice. Imaging was respectable, bass integrated and the midrange presence and immediacy stunning. This combination brought the best out of the Overtures. Okay, so they're never going to win any prizes for their manners, but boy are they fun to be with.

The aforementioned Madonna disc becomes a musical tour de force, its complex rhythms and kitchen sink production given the full treatment. But it's not just about scale and power. Music from Michelle Shocked to Shostakovich had a wonderfully communicative quality. The Barbirolli Sibelius 2 (Chesky CD3) is a case in point. Never the quietest or most detailed disc, the Overtures gave it the combination of grandeur and restraint the music demands. And whilst they'll always be happier with modern studio recordings, even Ella and Sarah Vaughan felt quite at home.

What we're talking about here is a speaker that gives you the experience of a performance rather than its minutiae. If you want to count the second violin's nasal hairs, look at any of the many mini-monitors out there, and take your pick. The Infinities can be bettered for tonal sophistication and positional sophistry, but even moderately sized floorstanders are going to struggle to match their bandwidth and life. This may be a 'lifestyle' product, but let me assure you, the lifestyle in question is more Loaded than Little Women. Limited space or power? Want to enjoy music rather than study it? Leaning toward rock and pop, but want an all-rounder? Get some life. Get some Overture 1s.

The little Infinities are going to sell. Nothing this cute and this much fun is going to be ignored. The Overture 1s prove the concept, but leave me wondering just what would happen if Infinity refined it further. The existing trade-offs are well worthwhile, but minimise them and you could really be onto something.



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Infinity Overture 1 Hybrid Active Speaker

Type	Three-way with active bass
Drivers	25mm soft dome, horn loaded tweeter 2 x 75mm midrange units 200mm long-throw bass unit
Efficiency	92 dB/watt
Dimensions (h,w,d)	318mm, 146mm, 318mm
Recommended Power	10 to 100 watts.
Price	£1000 (including stands)

#### Distributor

Gamepath Ltd  
Tel. (44)-1908-317707  
Fax. (44)-1908-322704

#### Manufacturer

Infinity  
[www.infinitysystems.com](http://www.infinitysystems.com)



**BEAT**

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BEAT B-100

Volume



# The Densen Beat

by Pete Christie

According to Densen: Life is too short for boring Hi-Fi.

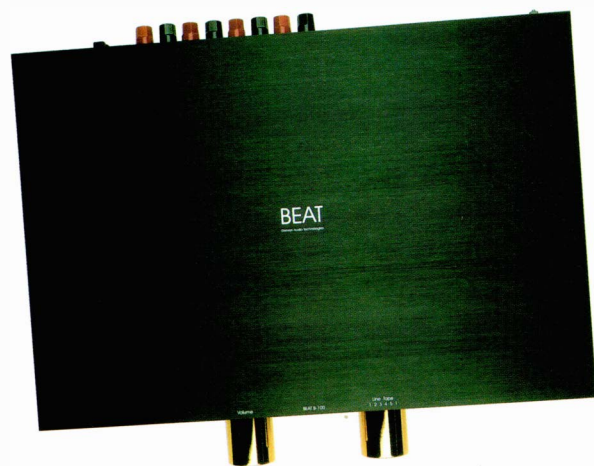
So they came up with the Densen Beat B-100 integrated amplifier, designed and built in Denmark. The moment it is removed from the box it exudes class and distinction, and certainly doesn't look boring. Weighing in at 12Kg, it didn't feel boring either! Whereas most amps are just black, the Beat is a seamless, geometric slab of textured satin black, with faultlessly sharp and clean edges reminiscent of the monolith in Kubrick's *2001 – A Space Odyssey*. Add to this the two enormous gold control knobs (one for volume, and one for input select), and the centrally placed red power LED and you have an amplifier that positively oozes class and style. Take it from me, this amplifier is far too sexy to be hidden away in a cabinet or buried amongst a pile of inferior black boxes. It should be displayed as a genuine statement of minimalist design, regardless of whether it is actually plugged in to anything or not! To emphasise this point, the top panel has all the writing on it. The control settings are discretely displayed in small, clean white printing above the control knobs, and the 'BEAT' logo is slap-bang in the centre. The front panel is unadorned black – apart from those knobs. I can't remember ever seeing knobs as big, or as gold (40mm diameter and 40mm long!).

In today's market-place, \$650.00, though a not a trifling sum, is not an

unduly high price for a quality amplifier, so Densen could quite easily be forgiven for taking a few "short-cuts" in unseen places, e.g. the rear panel. This, however, is certainly not the case, and the layout is simple, yet stylish. A bank of 8 pairs of RCA phono inputs, giving 5 line inputs, tape record/play, and a pre-amp out. The line inputs are numbered rather than pre-identified as CD, Tuner, Aux, etc. There are 2 pairs of high quality 4mm speaker outlets to enable easy bi-wiring of a single pair of loudspeakers if a heavy gauge speaker cable is used. The rear panel is completed by a fused IEC mains inlet, and a high quality power switch.

First listening tests proved interesting. I had been warned that the Beat works best when left permanently powered-up, and my immediate impression seemed to bear this out. Having switched on and given it barely enough time to warm through, it quickly became apparent that the full potential wasn't being realised. It had little problem driving a pair of Epos ES 12 loudspeakers, using the Helios 1 CD player as a source, but the overall sound was pleasing without being totally involving. I was a little disappointed, as I had been led to expect a lot more than I was hearing. So I took it home,

plugged it in and left it switched on for a couple of days before getting properly 'stuck-in'. I substituted the Epos speakers with my faithful old LS3/5a's, and the Helios 1 CD gave way to the more familiar Helios 2. The literature supplied with the Beat boasts the largest power supply in the world (perhaps) for an amplifier in this price class, making it possible to drive difficult loads with ease. A pair of ageing 15 Ohm 82dB (in)-efficient speakers would give it a fairly stiff test! Using Van den Hul CS122 speaker cable and a Nordost Solar Wind interconnect, I selected my first recording.



Leaving it powered up certainly made a difference. I was absolutely staggered at the improvement in sonic quality.

The final recording I had listened to in the first audition was the Theme From 'Missing' (from the Album *Themes* by Vangelis, Polydor 83951 8-2). A piece of electronic ambience that encompasses the complete sound spectrum from wind chimes to deep, earthy bass notes. The improvement in separation and detail was enormous. I could pick each sound precisely, though at no time did I feel that the sound was cold or overtly analytical.

# Zero-Feedback Technology - what's that all about then?


The booklet that is supplied with the amplifier goes into great detail about the effort that Densen have made to produce audio equipment that will convey the emotion in the music. And that no matter how good the technical specification of a product, the most important aspect for them is capturing and conveying the soul of that music. As you might expect, the quality of components used is consistently high, and the capacitors and toroidal transformer are custom built. Signal paths are kept to a minimum, and the overriding philosophy is to keep the design as simple as possible.

Densen quote Zero-Feedback Technology as the most important

aspect of their entire product range. As a non-technical bod I always treat claims made in the name of technology with profound suspicion. But it's hard to argue with the Densen's sonic attributes so I guess I'd better take them seriously. Apparently, a Finnish professor by the name of Matti Otala discovered the importance of low feedback in the seventies. Something to do with all those long winter evenings I suppose? The problems with feedback technology are that the signal takes time to pass through the feedback loop and therefore the comparison of the input and output signals which is supposed to increase accuracy, ends up comparing slightly different things. This means that

feedback alters the signal, and results in nasty things like compressed dynamics (nasty!), smeared details and altered soundstage. Got all that? Good! – I'll be asking questions later.

Anyway, the Densen doesn't have any of these problems as they use zero-feedback. Simple really – I think.

What all this means to ordinary blokes like me is that, in theory, here we have an amp which should deliver extreme dynamics, improved detail, excellent soundstage, high transfer speed and a wide open sound. The Beat is certainly a convincing advocate for the approach. 

► On to a collection of pieces by Ravel, Satie, and Faure entitled *Pavane* by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra DG449 186-2. The delicacy of the performance was immediately apparent. I have always been an admirer of Ravel's more magical pieces, and I can honestly say that the Beat provided a near-perfect image in 'Pavane pour une infante defunte'. Each note seemed to be surrounded by a cushion of air, and floated into the room. Marvellous!


The accompanying booklet goes to great length in explaining the general philosophy of the Densen design, and one of the (many) points made is that a good amplifier will 'show-up' poor recordings and possibly render them 'un-listenable'.

They (Densen) feel that they have achieved a design that focuses on the music, thus avoiding this problem. OK, I can see that. So I selected some of the worst recordings I love!

'Need Your Love So Bad' by Fleetwood Mac (*Fleetwood Mac Greatest Hits* CBS 460704); recorded in 1968 with all the technology you expect from a blues band. I found that, just as the nice people at Densen said, I listened to the music, not the recording.

On to 'I Got A Line On You' by Spirit, from *The Collection* Castle CCSCD319. An original 1968-ish recording which has never fared well under the digital process. Yet again, I found it to be totally enjoyable.

How about something a little older than me: 'Au Fond Du Temple Saint' from Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*, featuring Jussi Bjoerling, recorded in 1950 and available on RCA Victor GD 87799. I have always loved this particular duet (with Robert Merrill), but always found it a tad edgy. The Danish amp certainly assisted the Swedish tenor, and, once again, the performance was easily able to dispel any mere technical interruption.

I continued working my way through my CD collection until, at last, I found something that gave the system a problem. 'Won't Get Fooled Again' by The Who, available on *Who's Better, Who's Best* Definite Article 835 389-2. A 1971 recording of the finest rock band the world has 

► ever known, and one of my own personal favourite songs. Whilst the soundstage was impeccably reproduced, and the separation and harmonics seemed fine, I couldn't help but notice a slight lack of excitement. Mind you, I am being extremely fussy at this point. I've found that the only way to re-create the full 'wallop' of a Who gig, is to go to another one and subject your ears to at least 120dB of high-energy PA. System.

With its combination of clarity and dynamics I expected the amp to sparkle with percussion. I selected an interestingly recorded song, 'Can't Run But...' from the Paul Simon album *The Rhythm of the Saints*, Warner Bros. 7599 26098-2. Layers of percussion instruments build up after each successive bar, with a vocal track centre-stage. The resulting rendition was absolutely enthralling! I can't remember ever being able to distinguish as much, as clearly.

The finest moment of all came when I played 'When Angels Cry' from the Janis Ian album *Revenge* Grapevine GRACD 301. A haunting and intimate song performed with solo acoustic guitar. Every sound that came out of the speakers was as personal and poignant as I always felt it was meant to be. I couldn't help myself – I must have played it half a dozen times, and each playing sounded as good as the first.

Densen have come up with an absolute gem of an amplifier. All the music I used in my listening was allowed to flow smoothly and effortlessly into my room. Never once did I feel that I was listening to a collection of electronic components 'producing' sound waves. The speakers all but disappeared from the equation, establishing a direct line to the

performers. The best adjective I can use to describe this amplifier is 'articulate'. Each sound is allowed to form naturally, and is presented to the ear as if it were hanging in the air rather than being propelled through it. It looks superb, it sounds superb, and it is affordable. Why is it that similarly priced British made amplifiers either sound great but look best OK, or look great but only sound OK? Here is an amplifier that combines all the good bits, none of the bad bits, and is imported from a country where you need a mortgage for a cup of coffee, but it will only set you back \$650.00!

The best advice I can give you is to audition the Beat for yourselves, and soon. It does so much right that even really expensive amps get wrong, that it might even start you thinking! But make absolutely sure that you visit a Hi-Fi shop that has got one permanently switched on! It makes that much difference.



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### The Densen Beat B-100 Integrated Amplifier

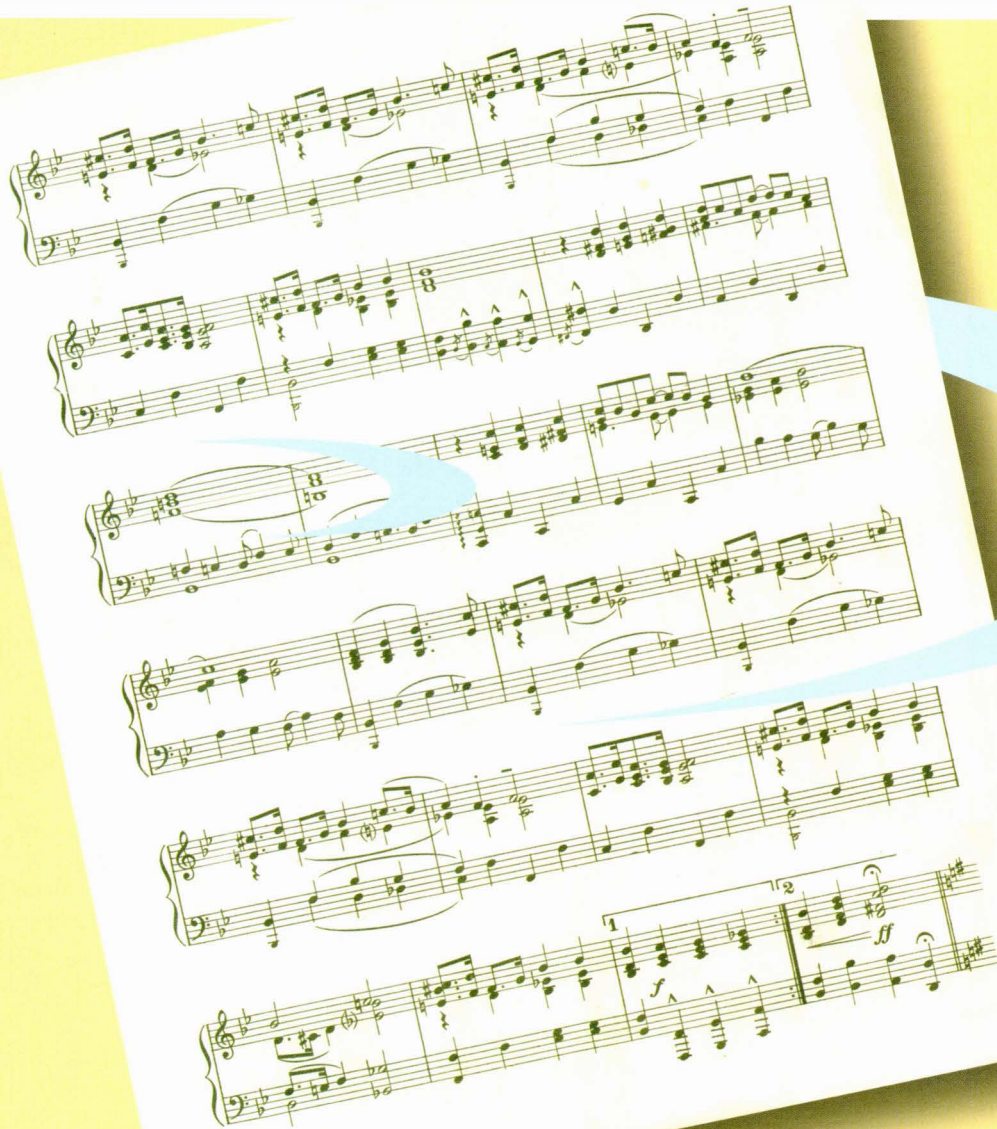
Input Sensitivity (all inputs)	280mV
Input Impedance	22Kohm
Frequency Response	2 - 20KHz
THD + Noise @ Rated Output	Less than 0.01%
Signal to Noise Ratio	More than 92dB
Power Consumption	
Minimum (Idle)	10W
Maximum	160W
Power Output per Channel	
Into 8 Ohms	60W
Into 4 Ohms	120W
Power Transformer Size	360VA
Storage Capacity	40,000uf
Dimensions (w,d,h)	444mm x 375mm x 75mm
Weight	12Kg

#### Distributor;

Densen UK  
Tel. (44(0)1582-561227Fax.  
(44)(0)1582-477355

#### Manufacturer;

Densen Audio Technologies  
Net. [www.densen.dk](http://www.densen.dk)



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# Hales

## Transcendence Three

by Chris Binns

A month or so ago I had a phone call from a friend of mine who was going to buy a CD player for his dad. He wanted a few suggestions for good budget machines, so I gave him some ideas and the phone number of our local Hi-Fi dealer. As it happened, I ended up dropping the machine off at his parents house, where his somewhat bemused father wired it up to his 35 year old, home made amplifier and loudspeakers. It sounded fine. As we discussed the system he said he was particularly happy with the remote control - "This is technological improvement!... but I can't see that loudspeakers have moved on at all. They're still just bits of paper flapping around in wooden boxes."

As I was driving home, I considered what he had said. Here we are, approaching the millennium, with state of the art single ended triode amplification (designed circa 1930) and... well, bits of paper flapping around in wooden boxes. Sure, we may use different materials such as carbon fibre, plastics or whatever, but, rather like the internal combustion engine, it has been refinement rather than radical re-design that has taken place in the last few decades.

These thoughts were still in the back of my mind as I unpacked the Hales Transcendence Three's (although somewhat clouded by the

fog of pain from my back that was reminding me to consider a fork lift truck instead of a hatchback the next time a new vehicle was on the agenda). The packaging itself (and the weight of the cabinets) was typical of what I discovered later, to be an inherent feature of the manufacture of the product itself - functional, with incredible attention to detail.

Once unpacked, the first thing to strike you about the appearance of the Transcendence Three is that the cabinet is a parallelogram, as you look from the side both the front and rear panels slope backwards. Reactions from those who saw them ranged from 'very elegant' through to 'awkward' and included opinions on how much beer would have to be consumed before they appeared normal or straight. The grille really is a masterpiece of construction - a welded steel frame with a distinctive raised diagonal across the front - I mean, how much can you do with a loudspeaker grille to make it look interesting? - this one does.

At this stage I would like to put on record that the attention to detail, and constructional quality of this product is second to none. There is absolutely nothing tacky or second rate about these loudspeakers, right down to the instruction manual. Normally these are consigned to the garage along with the

cartons but this one could probably achieve epic status as a publication in its own right. Apart from well written advice on ancillaries, cables and the like, there are pages of tables enabling you to calculate room resonances and standing waves. There is also what amounts to a plea not to judge these speakers until they have been run in for 100 hours. I was warned...



Removing the grilles (which is achieved by sliding them upwards) reveals a beautifully contoured, four inch thick front baffle, with three vertically aligned units. The tweeter, which is a metal domed unit with what looks like strong Vifa origins, and a mid range unit are mounted on a sub-baffle. The mid range is a 5" unit from Seas, with a magnesium cone and copper phase plug. The sub-baffle is in turn bolted to the main baffle which is in two sections, the lower one carrying the bass unit, which is mounted from the rear.

I must admit to being mildly disappointed by the sight of the 8" bass unit. There's nothing wrong with it - far from it. It looks to be a well made unit with very long excursion capability but... OK, I suppose my occasional tendency to megalomania wanted something a little more butch in a speaker of this size and weight. All right, no I didn't. No. I have grown out of that. Really. Oh, and by the way, it's proprietary to Hales - so I've probably just upset Paul Hales and he'll never forgive me!

Moving swiftly on ...The rear panel reveals two sets of binding posts, one for the bass, the other for mid and top. Linking for single cable use is by means of nice copper bussbars. Connections more or less have to be made by spade as bare wires are impossible with the links in place and there is no provision for 4mm plugs. ▶

▶ The crossover networks are described as fourth order Linkwitz-Riley transfer function (read: complicated) with selected components. Internal cabling is Cardas. I have no reason to believe that they are any less well constructed internally than they are on the outside.

Before using the Transcendence Three's in my main listening room they were run in (out of phase) for 3 days and nights, with music and white noise at an average level that couldn't be heard at the other end of the house. It wasn't enough. Throwing a loud-speaker into an optimised system is one move that any reviewer should be wary of. Occasionally a product will shine straight away but more often than not the system will have to be altered to allow the review product to show its true colours. In this case there was no doubt that changes were necessary.

Used with my normal system (see my profile on page 10) it seemed that there was a lot of work to be done. To begin with, the optimum positioning was worked out using the calculations in the manual. To my surprise this placed them fairly close to what long experience has shown to be the best position for most speakers in my room. I adjusted them inch by inch before installing the beautifully machined cones provided, whereupon the cabinets became extremely stable.

My first impressions were of a wide bandwidth loud-speaker with incredible amounts of detail and a slight metallic ring at the top end. Fortunately this diminished with further use, but never entirely

disappeared. Sometimes the odd vocal line would excite it but by and large, as they continued running in, it became less obtrusive. Likewise the mid range performance opened up and the sound became more balanced, but the one area that I was passionately hoping would improve, that of musical coherence, showed little or no difference.

Time for some changes. Bi-wiring seemed to be the first alteration in line. Using another length of Chord Co. 'Odyssey' the tonal balance changed a little but overall I felt it to be a retrograde step in terms of musical communication - I stuck with single cable.

Up until now, the Primary valve power amps had been driving the Hales. Two things were painfully obvious. First was that the speakers could happily soak up all of the 250 watts plus

per channel that they could provide, and secondly that the bass units were wildly out of control at higher levels.

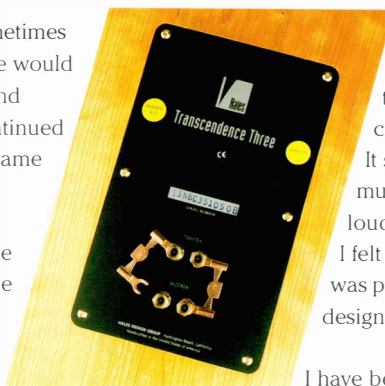
Enter the Mark Levinson No20's - a pair of which just happened to be passing through my house at the time. These well respected monsters were in many ways just what was needed and altered the sound quite considerably. Gone was the

uncontrolled, fat bass; the mid range shone through and things were considerably happier. It still frightened me how much power these loudspeakers demanded but I felt that the resulting sound was probably nearer to the designer's intentions.

I have been buying loads of inexpensive Naxos CD's recently, including smaller orchestral works such as *Bliss Music for Strings* (Naxos 8.553383) and *Elgar String Quartets* (Naxos 8.553737). Listening to music like this, the Transcendence Three's excelled. The sound was seductive, focused and well presented, with good imaging and depth. Time and time again I would sit down to do some paperwork and the system refused to let me concentrate - it demanded my attention. Apart from the occasional metallic edge, the integration of the sound coupled with the amazing detail was awesome, and I genuinely heard things in familiar recordings that I had never heard before.

Listening to more modern music in the Drum & Bass / Trip Hop vein, it was clear that the Levinson amps were exerting a vice like grip on the bass units, and that higher levels were possible without distress; but it was almost as if the very refinement that made listening to romantic strings such a pleasure was holding back more energetic music. The temptation was to turn the volume up to generate some excitement, but it plainly made no difference. In fact, a major point in their favour was that, despite the voracious requirement for powerful amplification, these speakers delivered most of what they had to give at remarkably low levels.

Music such as John Martyn was reproduced with tantalising detail ▶



▶ but it was as if the separate strands of the performance didn't gel together. Thus the speakers behaved almost like a sound engineer's tool; dissecting the music so that you could hear each individual instrument in front of you, but somehow failing to integrate them back into the song. In Hi-Fi terms, the Hales are a marvel, but musically I felt unmoved. I'd end up spending hours listening to a guitar player's technique, but never listened to the song itself.

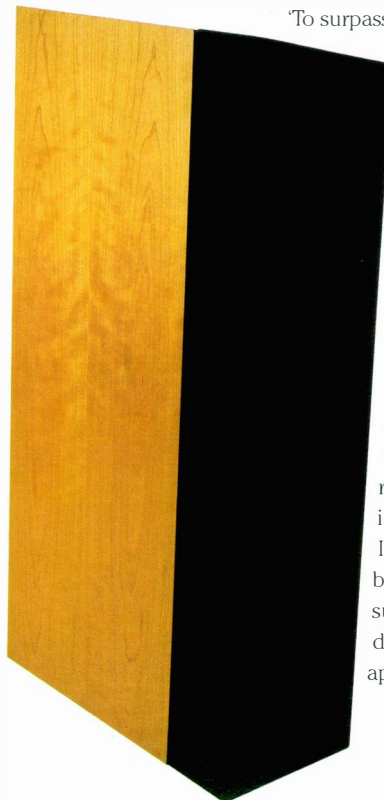
Sadly the Levinson's had to go. They had proved a far happier coupling with the Hales than the Primary's had, and I was considering my next move when the editor came round for a listen, and suggested an alternative. A silly alternative. The Gryphon Antileon - 100 watts per channel of class 'A' power amplifier with matching balanced preamplifier. Silly, because the power amp probably weighs more than I do - but at least it has handles on it, which I don't. Yet. Interestingly, I also had no need to light a fire in my house despite the chilly November evenings.

The Gryphon combination was wonderful - it provided the grunt and control necessary to satisfy the Hales at the bottom end, with a delicate and open mid range reminiscent of the Primary valve amps. It also gave me an opportunity to try some different cables, such as an Audioquest combination, although I ultimately preferred the quick and clean results of my usual PTFE / Silver wires. But I was still not happy. My listening area was cluttered with very

expensive Hi-Fi equipment which was singularly failing to give me the enjoyment I know I can get from music. It all became so frustrating that I had to change the one item that had so far remained constant... the room!

Against mine and my osteopath's better judgement, I moved the Transcendence Three's into a different environment, hoping that a changed acoustic might bring them to life. Even this made no difference. The same fundamental problem remained. I could not get a sense of musical enjoyment from them. They remained technically impressive but emotionally uninspiring. They also present something of a dichotomy. The choice of amplifier is very limited because the demand is for a heavy-weight beast to drive them, conversely they need a small, fast and detailed unit to make the most of their incredible definition in the mid range. In my experience these rarely come together in the same package.

The dictionary definitions of transcendence include 'To rise above', 'To surpass' or to 'lie beyond the limit of'. The trouble is that I'm not sure what the Transcendence Three is surpassing. True, in hi-fi terms it is one of the best loudspeaker systems I have lived with, and one which has reproduced recorded information that I have never heard before. If you subscribe to the detail *uber alles* approach, and want



a system that is capable of ruthlessly exposing the differences between vinyl and CD, whilst effortlessly dissecting recordings into their component parts, then look no further than these extraordinary speakers. Unfortunately, to me, it rarely feels as if the music is essentially reassembled. If I was wearing my sound engineer's hat then I'd probably be ecstatic, but as a domestic speaker I found the Hales tantalising, and ultimately, frustrating.

When the time came for the Hales Transcendence Three's to be packed away, I was still in awe of their technological refinement, but I just couldn't help feeling that there are older and simpler units, of flapping paper and wooden box construction, which are musically more satisfying.



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

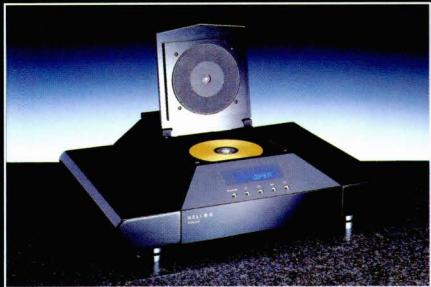
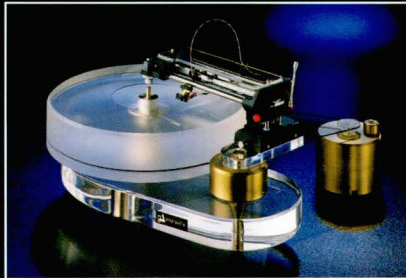
Type	Three-way, sealed box loudspeaker
Drivers;	1" Aluminium Dome Tweeter 5" Magnesium Cone Midrange 8" Polypropylene Woofer
Sensitivity;	87dB/watt
Impedance;	Nominal 4ohm
Load;	Awkward
Frequency Response;	35Hz - 26kHz ± 1dB
In Room Bandwidth;	25Hz - 28kHz
Recommended Amplifier	
Power;	100watts+
Dimensions (h,w,d);	924mm x 254mm x 297mm
Weight;	86.5lbs each.
Finishes;	Sapele, Light Oak, Black, Natural Cherry, Stained Cherry, Pau Ferro.
Price;	£4050 - £4685 depending on finish.

### Distributor

Zentek Ltd.  
Tel. (44)(0)1892-616383  
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### Manufacturer

Hales Design Group  
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# Analogue Extravaganza

Record players become more anachronistic with each passing day. Like an elderly relative they harp back to an earlier, golden era, replete with ritual and “doing things properly”. And as they pass, the last vestige of hands-on hi-fi will pass with them. Which makes it all the more ironic that the analogue enthusiast has an unprecedented range of exotic tools and accessories, waiting to help him make those microscopic but all important adjustments, each a small step on the path to enlightenment. A shrinking market translates to bespoke pricing, but high quality turntables were never cheap, to buy or run. We’ve assembled a collection of the best analogue aids there are, some cheap but mostly expensive. And one

thing is certain. If you want to extract the most from your records, you are either going to end up buying some or all of these. Either that, or you’ll meet a man who has.

## Basic Tools

Before you spend money on the more exotic items listed, there’s a few basics to buy. They will form the basis of your hi-fi tool kit, a sacred chattel, never to be besmirched by changing the plug on the toaster. Buy new, good quality tools and look after them, which basically means don’t let anyone else near them! You will need:

Metric Allen Keys  
Imperial Allen keys

(Buy sets that clip into a plastic block. It’s much harder to lose individual keys.)

Tweezers

Needle Nose Pliers

Small Adjustable Spanner

Large and small spirit levels

Selection of Screw Drivers (New, not the ones you open paint tins with!)


Cartridge Mounting Hardware

Digital Multi-Meter

Small Soldering Iron

and Silver Solder

Craft Knife

This is your basic kit, but you’ll end up adding things like ball-drivers and nut spinners to suit your specific needs. Put the whole lot in a decent toolbox and cherish it. 

## Gryphon Black Exorcist Cartridge De-magnetiser

The benefits of eliminating spurious magnetic build ups throughout your hi-fi system are well documented. The Black Exorcist is a dedicated cartridge de-magnetiser, and should reward you with an increase in clarity, focus and dynamics. It doesn’t do the rest of the system (the matching Exorcist does), and at £85 it

isn’t cheap. But it is the best.

### Supplier

HFN/RR Accessories Club (see p62)



## Test Records

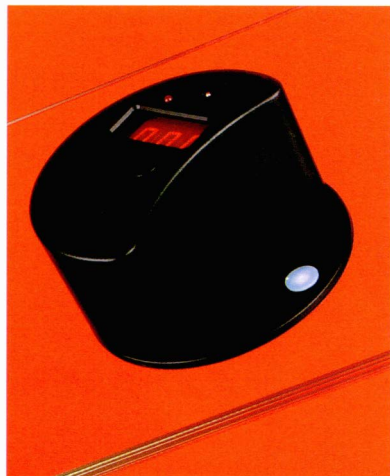
A well sorted test record is invaluable when it comes to optimising record replay, and there are two on the market; the Hi-Fi News Test Record, and the Analogue Audio Association Test Record, or Klangtest as it is called in its native Germany! By sheer chance these two discs actually complement each other, the HFN/RR one majoring on tracking performance, the AAA version helping with azimuth and imaging, as well as a few musical excerpts. At around £14.50 each, anyone who sets up turntables for their own or other peoples use should have both.

### Suppliers

HFN/RR Accessories Club (see p62)

Vinyl Demand (see p67)

# Electronic Stylus Balances



It also has a dimple on the weighing platform, and it's vital (and fiddly) to get the stylus tip in exactly the right spot.

The Winds suffers neither of these problems, although it drifts a little from zero for fifteen minutes or so after switch on. The stylus can be placed at any point on the large platform, and this makes using it an absolute doddle. It's also a much nicer unit to handle, with a camera like quality to its feel and finish.

The only way to set the tracking force for your cartridge is by ear, but you have to have a starting point. And once you've fixed the optimum value, it's nice to be able to return to it at will. That means a set of scales, and these are the most accurate around. In fact, in repeated testing over time, I've found little to choose between them, accuracy wise. Both do an excellent job.

However, there are differences, not least the price. The Cartridge Man's balance may seem expensive at £199, but it pales into insignificance against the Winds, at £475 or £795 depending on whether it weighs to tenths or hundredths of a gram. Operationally there are differences too. The Cartridge Man model runs from an internal rechargeable battery, which is great unless it runs out half way through your set up. Either keep it plugged in until you want to use it, or charge it the night before. Not exactly spontaneous.

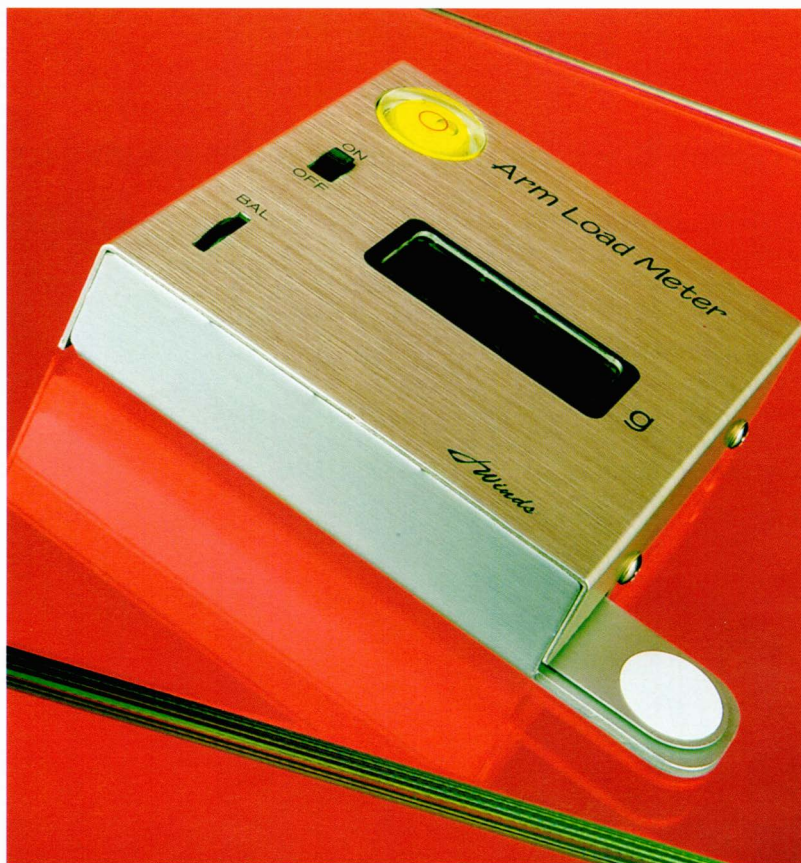
I love the Winds, but what price its simplicity and cool looks? Me, I'll settle for the Cartridge Man balance. It does exactly the same job, it just places a little more onus on the user. ▶+

Winds Arm Load Meter  
£475 or £795 depending on version.

**Supplier**  
Absolute Analogue  
(see p64)

The Cartridge Man Digital  
Stylus Force Gauge  
£199

**Supplier**  
HFN/RR Accessories Club  
Tel. (44)(0)1234-741152  
Fax. (44)(0)1234-742028  
[www.hi-fi-accessories-club.mcm.com](http://www.hi-fi-accessories-club.mcm.com)





# ClearAudio Alignment Gauge



Correct geometrical alignment of phono cartridges is absolutely critical to maximising their performance, a consideration that isn't helped by the variety of tonearm geometries currently in use. Pivoted arms vary in length from nine to as much as fourteen inches, and even arms of nominally the same dimension are often optimised for different values of overhang and effective length. The ideal solution is a purpose drawn tracking arc for each tonearm (and such a thing actually exists, the Wallytractor, bespoke protractors from the USA), but this is apt to be expensive, as well as potentially confusing. All those bits

of mirrored plastic...

For anyone with more than one tonearm, or who wants to future proof their toolkit, or any dealer with an ongoing interest in vinyl replay, what is needed is a good quality, accurate, universal alignment tool. Which is a pretty good description of the ClearAudio device that's sat in front of me.

Derived from the Denneson gauge of yesteryear, the ClearAudio is a far more refined piece of engineering. It consists of two pieces of perspex which can be locked together using Allen bolts. Look at the picture and

you'll get the, err... picture. The flat base has a stylus dimple and alignment grid as per most protractors. The clever bit is the long arm set at right angles to the base. This has a pointed rod through the extended end, which should be placed over the tonearm's pivot point. (You can adjust it's height to ensure accuracy with different arms.) Because the protractor's arm is offset behind the turntable spindle, setting the spindle to pivot distance automatically rotates the alignment grid to the correct position. Dead simple, and checks against cartridges set up with dedicated protractors show it to be extremely accurate.

In an ideal world, I still prefer to have the complete tracking arc when setting up cartridges, but this is the next best thing. I'd also prefer a slightly smaller dimple, to further improve accuracy, and a line through the dimple to make cantilever alignment easier, but I understand that both these changes are under consideration. In the meantime, ClearAudio's alignment gauge is the one I carry with me. This is about as future proof as analogue gets.

Incidentally, as a major supplier of all things analogue, ClearAudio also offer a number of other useful and hard to get bits and pieces, including a carbon-fibre record brush, styluscleaning fluid, and unbreakable, self adjusting cartridge tags. Expect to pay around a tenner a pop.

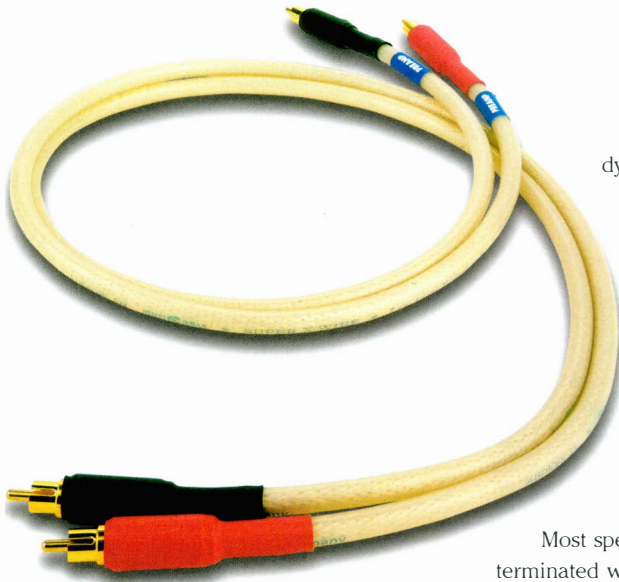


ClearAudio Cartridge Protector  
£49-95

**Distributor**  
Absolute Analogue  
(see p64)

**Manufacturer**  
ClearAudio Electronic GmbH  
e-mail. clearaudio@t-online.de

# Tonearm Leads



dynamics. Suddenly, it's like the signal locks on and the music starts to make sense. Not really surprising when you consider that most people are throwing the signal from several thousand pounds worth of record player down a £25 lead.

**Audioplan Super X-Wire 1m**  
SME or phono-phono £225

**Distributor**  
Absolute Analogue  
Tel. (44)(0)1425-654488  
Fax. (44)(0)1425-654400

**Manufacturer**  
Audioplan  
www.audioplan@t-online.de  
e-mail. audioplan@t-online.de

On the whole, the arm leads supplied with your expensive tonearm have been of pretty lamentable quality (SME and Linn are particular offenders). Recently, the manufacturers of most of the priciest offerings have side stepped the issue completely, by failing to supply any leads at all. Either way, if you are running a thousand pound tonearm, the chances are that it needs some decent wires.

Most specialist arm leads can be terminated with a variety of plugs, but if you own a really floppy turntable (LP12, Pink, Gyrodek), then it's worth considering a tonearm termination box, which runs a flexible link to a pair of phono sockets. Transparent make a good one, and Pink Triangle offer their own. If you are into heavyweight record players, then keep the connections to a minimum with a one piece lead.

**XLO Signature 3.1 1m**  
phono-phono £750, 1m SME-phono £800

**Distributor**  
Wollaton Audio  
Tel. (44)(0)1159-284147  
Fax. (44)(0)1159-280625

**Manufacturer**  
XLO Electric Company  
e-mail: xlousa@aol.com

Which isn't as straight forward as it seems. Firstly, the signals being carried are absolutely miniscule, which means you need serious shielding. Secondly, the cable forms part of the electrical damping for the cartridge generator, so its electrical characteristics have to take that into consideration. The majority of shielded interconnects are simply too capacitive to allow the cartridge to perform properly.

However, specially designed leads do exist. Use one, and you will be astonished by the increase in low level information, transparency and

My favourite arm leads are the Audioplan Super X-Wire, which at £225 for a meter pair should be considered a minimum standard, and the XLO Signature 3.1. Ruinously expensive at £750 for a meter pair of phono to phono leads, I've not heard it bettered by anything you can actually buy. It has remained an essential part of my turntable since I bought it three years ago. ➤+



# Lyra Lydian Beta

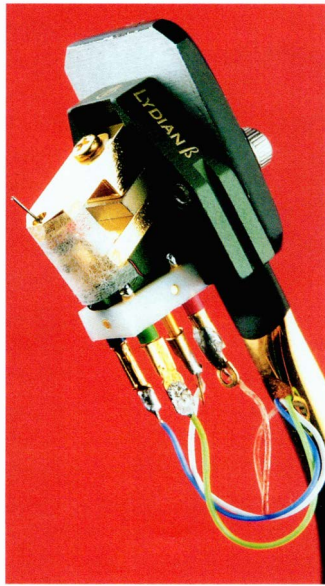
by Roy Gregory

Since its introduction, the Lyra Lydian has pretty much ruled the roost as far as aspiring vinylphiles are concerned. At \$650, it was so much better than cheaper cartridges, and so close to anything for less than a thousand pounds, that it really was the only logical choice. It stood in splendid isolation, defining the entry point to the world of serious record replay. But recently, its crown had started to slip, undermined by the rejuvenated Dynavector Dv 17D2 (\$450), and ClearAudio's new 'entry level' moving coil, the Sigma (\$550).

Which brings us to the Lydian Beta, a timely riposte if ever there was one. The original Lydian was not without its foibles. It sounded so much better without its body, that only a fool would have left its modesty intact. Unfortunately, removing the offending object was not a job for the faint hearted or heavy of hand. It also rendered the stylus guard unusable and left you with a cartridge that was so tiny as to be difficult to handle. Along with the minute dimensions came feather light weight which could lead to problems

balancing the medium mass tonearms its compliance demanded. And its lowish output didn't exactly endear it to listeners whose upgrades had still to reach their amplification.

The Beta deals with all these points in a comprehensive redesign. The body is gone for good, and the mass made up with a thicker and larger top plate. This makes handling much easier, not least because of the all enveloping new stylus guard. This is front loading, sliding into slots in the edges of the top plate, and is



by far the best I've come across. Setting up is now a joy, with the supplied Allen bolts screwing directly into the top of the cartridge making overhang adjustments a piece of cake. And the exposed cantilever makes alignment a doddle. Good news, as all Lyras really repay precise adjustment. One word of warning, the cartridge is supplied on a mirrored alignment protractor. The geometry of this

device is not specified, but seems to accord to Linn mount nine inch arms. Don't use it with anything else, especially Regas, or you'll drive yourself batty attempting the impossible. If in doubt, stick to something you're sure of.

Playing with loading, I settled on 200 ohms, but it may vary in your system. Output is healthy to say the least, and would probably drive the medium sensitivity phono stages found in the likes of conrad-johnson and early Audio Research pre-amps with ease. It's well up around the level of early Koetsus!

How does it sound? In a word, lively. The increased output has robbed it of

none of the original Lydian's resolution and transparency, but has added meat to the dynamics and a welcome sense of presence. This is a much more engaging performer, it's midrange pushing close to the Clavis DC. Whether its Shawn Colvin's soaring vocal in 'Shotgun Down The Avalanche', or the breathy intimacy of Lou Reed on 'Perfect Day', the Beta transports you straight to the heart of the song. The top end is quick and clean, without a trace of fizz. What separates it from its more expensive brother, is the bottom end. The Beta can't match the depth and definition of the DC's bass. Having said that, it still moves pretty merrily along, and I could see some listeners preferring the Beta's bounce to the cool, calm and collected Clavis.

This new version of the Lydian is a huge improvement over what was already a seriously good cartridge. The renewed competition means it may not have it all its own way, but it sets the standard to beat. And if you own some piece of exotica, this is a hell of a stand-bye to hold against that dark day that looms in all our futures. Oh, and I almost forgot. It's fifty quid cheaper than it used to be. Recommended? What do you think? 

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type	Low Output Moving Coil
Cartridge Mass	8g
Compliance	12cu
Output	0.7mV (at 5 cm/s)
Recommended Load	100 ohms - 47 kohms
Price	£599.00

### Distributor

Path Premier

Tel. (44)(0)1494-441736

Fax. (44)(0)1494-461209

### Manufacturer

Scan-Tech Co. Ltd

e-mail. Scantech@gol.com

## VPI HW - 16.5 Record Cleaning Machine

by Reuben Parry

Harry Weisfeld's HW - 16.5 cleaning machine (and its big brother the HW - 17) are more than just a statement about personal hygiene. They should be considered an essential component for any serious vinyl play-back system.

Records deserve to be treated like a non-renewable resource because those cherished, secondhand purchases are often simply too difficult to replace, while the expense of unnecessarily duplicating audiophile discs is so prohibitive that a little preventative maintenance makes good sense.

An initial outlay of £399.00 may appear extravagant at the time, but not to do so is false economy. Ultimately, an HW - 16.5 will pay for itself by extending the life of your LPs; protecting the cartridge from damage inflicted when playing dirty records, and through a marked improvement in sound quality.

This machine is extremely user friendly and takes all the awkwardness out of wet cleaning. The procedures are straightforward: read the comprehensive owners manual; unbox your HW - 16.5 with its accompanying brush and VPI cleaning fluid (Disc Doctor or other fluids can also be used) and find some grubby LPs.

I used the VPI's arrival as an excuse to spend another lunchtime at Gibbs in Manchester. They were having one of their regular vinyl sales so I splashed out a \$1.00 each on three early L'OISEAU-LYRE Bach recitals. Superficially, their surfaces looked pretty good, but a quick spin on the deck at home revealed the usual clicks, pops and detritus in those tired old grooves. I could have as easily

used a brand new pressing, say, from Classic or Speakers Corner because although visually perfect, they are coated with mould release agents (MRAs) that should, in an ideal world, be removed before playing, though I admit to being far too lazy to do this all the time. I soon remember once that cherished new disc starts to play!

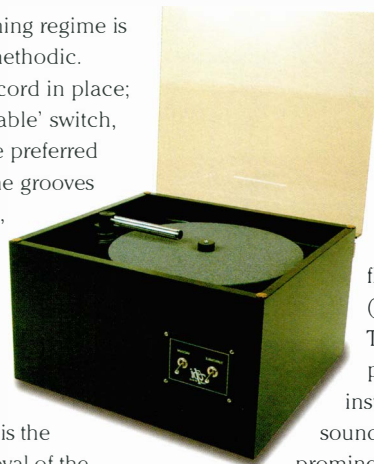
The cleaning regime is simple and methodic.

Clamp the record in place; flip the 'turntable' switch, and apply the preferred liquid onto the grooves as they rotate, spreading the solution across its surface with the brush provided.

The next step is the effective removal of the contaminants suspended in fluid. For this the pickup tube should swing counter clockwise above the record until it roughly points at the spindle, then hit the 'vacuum' switch and cover your ears! This is the noisy part. The velvet coated nozzle automatically lowers and locks into position. After two revolutions the suction should be sufficient to have removed the fluid, then the vacuum switch is turned off. The entire operation is then carried out again, on the record's flip side. With a little practise an LP can be dispatched in just a couple of minutes. It should then be zapped with a Milty Zero-Stat and given a plush new Nagaoka anti-static inner sleeve. The waste liquid stored within the machine's stainless steel reservoir should be drained after half a dozen records have been cleaned.

That's the basic procedure, but you can jazz it up with an extra mat to keep your just-cleaned record side from contacting a contaminated surface; a two part fluid like the Disc Doctor

(extra brushes and a rinse in distilled water as well as an extra vacuum turret); or anything else you might dream up. Whilst I've heard the benefits of the demon Doctor's alcohol free fluid, I'm happy to keep things simple. That way the machine is so quick that I can clean each record before playing it.



Visually, these Bach discs now appear to be pristine, with the surface noise reduced to a negligible level. However, the biggest gains are to be found in terms of tangible sonic improvements. Densely textured recordings like *Concerto in A minor* for flute, violin and harpsichord (BWV 1044) are transformed. The tonal qualities, and position of the soloist's instruments within the soundstage, was given greater prominence. And the presence of supporting orchestral players was also enhanced, as subtle background details, especially in complicated passages of music, became far easier to hear. Images were far more precise and transparent, the playing more cohesive, creating a far more credible illusion of realism.

A four hundred pounds expenditure along the conventional upgrade path would struggle to replicate these advances, so Harry and the VPI team are to be congratulated. A good wet cleaning machine opens up the latent power lurking in secondhand record shops, as well as spring cleaning your existing collection. Any vinyl lover should consider one an essential purchase. ▶+

#### Distributor

Vinyl Demand (see p67)

#### Manufacturer

VPI Industries Ltd.

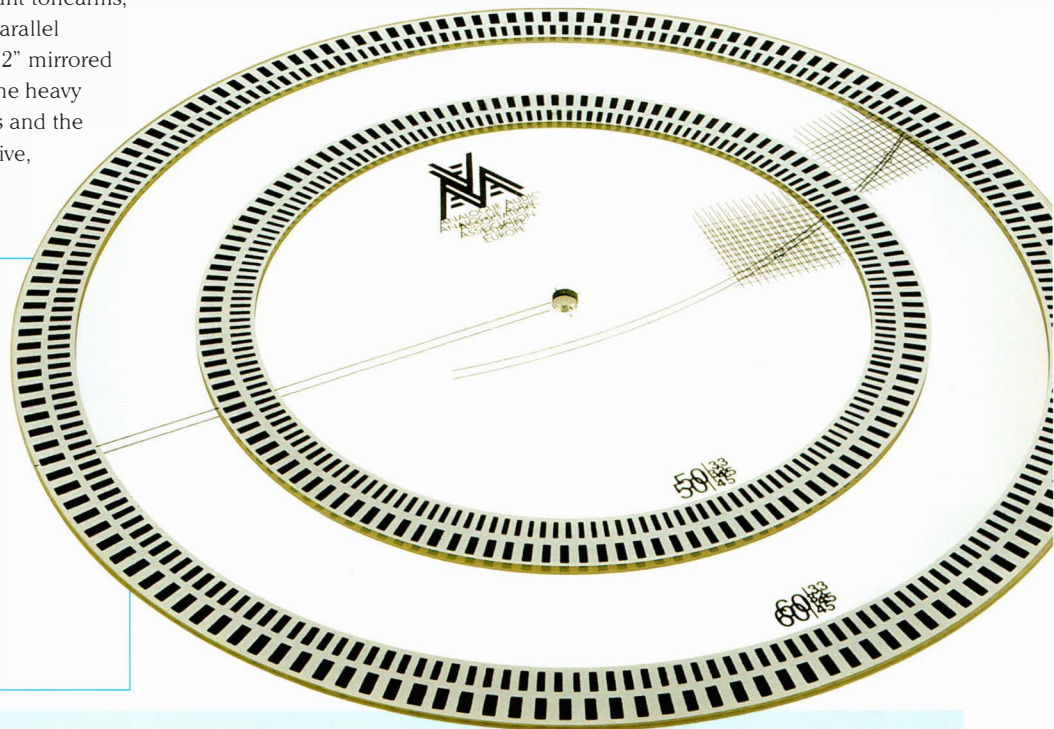
Tel. (001)908-946-8606

# AAA Strobe Disc

If you have a variable speed turntable, then you need a strobe disc to set it up. The best I've come across is the Analogue Audio Association disc from Germany. This gives you 50 and 60 Hz bands, as well as a tracking arc compatible with Linn mount tonearms, and a tangential line for parallel trackers, all printed on a 12" mirrored surface. It's definitely on the heavy side, so not ideal for Pinks and the like, and at £65 it's expensive, but it's the last strobe disc you'll ever buy.

Bear in mind that any strobe disc is only as good as the light doing the illuminating. Ideally, this should be independent of the mains, and the nicest I've come across is made by Loricraft, at a price of £40.

Battery powered and incredibly accurate, it is a model of functional simplicity. And if you ask them really nicely, they might even dig you out a 60 Hz version, which will make it even more precise. ➤+



## Suppliers

### AAA Strobe Disc

#### Vinyl Demand

Tel. (44)(0)1579-363603

Fax. (44)(0)1579-363604

### Strobe Lamp

#### Loricraft

Tel. (44)(0)1672-511401

## VPI Perspex Cleaning Kit

Every piece of hi-fi that I own seems to be big, black and shiny. More and more manufacturers are turning to Perspex as a material, and piano lacquer as a finish. Which looks great, until it gets dirty. And believe me, it shows every finger mark, every speck of dust, and every cat print in enough detail to positively identify the culprit. As a company that could win awards for the conspicuous consumption of

Perspex, VPI offer their customers a cleaning kit consisting of a fine rubbing compound to remove scratches, and a polish to keep everything shiny. The kit costs £20. The creams are basic industrial products, and probably have UK equivalents. I've just never found them. And the VPI kit is so good I've never felt the urge to look. For anybody with high gloss hi-fi, this is an essential purchase.

And a quick tip for those that find that polished Perspex attracts dust quicker than a ticket tout attracts United fans; once you've polished your pride and joy, give it a wipe over with Nordost Eco 3 static dispersant. This will keep baby clean, and help it to sound better too!

### Distributor

Absolute Analogue (see p64)

# The Graham Tonearm



precision balancing act

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exclusive  
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Amplifiers, Graham  
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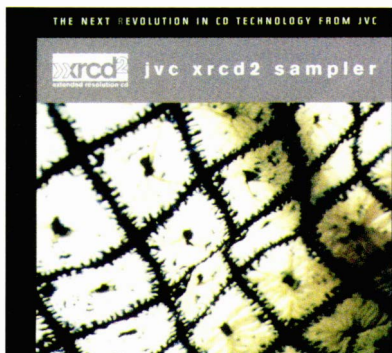
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This outstanding release, produced by Akira Tagachi, co-creator of the **xrcd** process, features tracks by five of JVC's critically acclaimed artists and includes the Bill Hollman Band's 1998 Grammy-award winning tracks "Straight, No Chaser"



## JOHN COLTRANE SETTIN' THE PACE

JVCXR - 0201-2

★★★★ 1/2 - DOWN BEAT

Recorded in 1958, this classic session features Coltrane backed by the stellar trio of Red Garland, Paul Chambers and Art Taylor. Among the tracks is a full force workout of Jackie McClean's intriguing "Little Melonae."



## THE MODERN JAZZ QUARTET CONCORDE

JVCXR - 0201-2

★★★★★ Warmth, imagination compositional freshness and musical integrity" - DOWN BEAT This album, the first featuring all four members of the "classic" quartet, is notable for its fugue-like title track, a relaxed "Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise" and Miltckson's "Ralph's New Blues."

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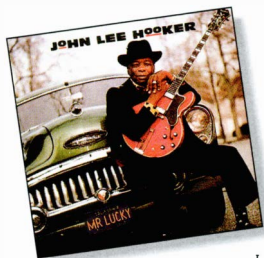
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# 24/96

## – Computer Cast-Off or Audiophile Salvation?

by Roy Gregory



Almost a year ago, a small group of manufacturers dropped a bombshell in the middle of the Las Vegas CES. Digital

Audio Disc, or DAD for short, arrived with a bang, and the echoes have been rumbling around the industry ever since. And depending on your point of view, it's either the salvation of high end audio, or the biggest gust of hot air ever, and that in an industry that could run on thermal energy! Why the interest? And why the controversy?

When Mike Hobson of Classic Records stood up and announced the release of four titles on DAD, it was a pre-emptive strike in the on going battle to establish an "enhanced CD" format. And if it wasn't exactly Pearl Harbour, it certainly focussed the attention of the hi-fi industry. Suddenly the magazines were rife with rumour of the imminent demise of CD, and that of course was the intention. But to understand the real implications of the Las Vegas earthquake, we need to step back and take a wider view.

### What is DAD, and where does it come from?

Digital Audio Disc has been proposed as a high resolution replacement for CD by a small group of audiophile record companies, supported by an equally tight group of high-end audio manufacturers (to produce the replay hardware). The most vocal advocates amongst an incredibly vociferous group, are Hobson and Kevin Halverson of Muse. The name is slightly misleading, in that DAD is actually a variant of the established DVD-video technology, a disc whose specification always allowed it to be configured in a two-channel 24bit/96kHz format. This relationship is vital, as it represents DAD's biggest strength, and potentially its biggest weakness.

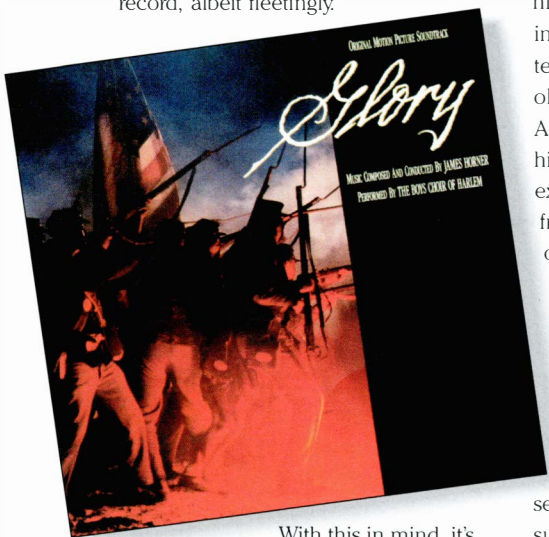
The notion of an improved digital format has long been a cherished audiophile dream. The limitations of theory when confronted by reality have rarely been as cruelly exposed as by the performance of CD. And whilst its 16bit resolution and 44.1kHz sampling rate should provide adequate dynamic range and bandwidth, as our

understanding of things digital has improved (along with our digital processing capabilities, driven by the computer industry), its shortcomings, and the reasons behind them have become all too apparent. The format's performance parameters were set by financial necessity rather than considerations of sound quality. It took Sony and Phillips so long, and so much money to develop CD technology, that they urgently needed to recover their investment. The format was fixed just as soon as it was theoretically acceptable, so that they could get on and produce some product and make some sales. Remember, the original Phillips players were 14bit!

Despite its limitations, CD was a massive commercial success. Supported by blitzkrieg marketing it quickly stormed the public's imagination. Who could fail to be impressed by Tomorrow's World and its tale of indestructible discs covered with marmalade, or the slogan 'Pure Perfect Sound For Ever'? And this at a time when LP quality had reached an all time low. The time was right and the buying public wanted to believe. And nobody that mattered in the electronics industry was going to try and convince them otherwise. The high-pitched bleatings of the specialist audio manufacturers were drowned in the thunder of general enthusiasm and ringing tills, as the slumbering home audio market sprang back to life. With so much money to be made by so many people, CD's acceptance was guaranteed. What opposition there was, was so disorganised and disparate that it was simply trampled beneath the feet of the behemoth. It wasn't long before even the staunchest digiphobes bit the bullet and joined the gravy train with players of their own. And the public's enthusiasm for the format shows no sign of waning. The marketing was so effective that 'digital' has become synonymous with perfection. ▶



▶ But within the high-end, the debate over digital has rumbled on, and vinyl has undergone a small but significant resurgence in popularity. And not just amongst disgruntled digital converts, returning to their old collections. An increasing number of the digital generation are re-discovering the delights of their parents music through the treasure houses of secondhand record shops. Dance music has kept vinyl cool, and a surprising number of current pop albums are released on record, albeit fleetingly.



With this in mind, it's not surprising that the first moves to establish a superior digital format have come from the audiophile record manufacturers. After all, much of their business comes from re-releasing archive material in an updated (180g) format. Most of them produce gold CDs as well, and the notion of an existing format capable of supporting superior two channel digital sound, combined with their access to forty years worth of back catalogue, is just too good to ignore.

### Does DAD deliver the sonic goods?

To listen to its supporters, anyone would think that they'd travelled the road to Damascus. There have been some pretty intemperate claims for DAD's performance. To quote Hobson, 'There are no trade offs. With vinyl there were

major trade offs in convenience, and some in fidelity, while in CD there were serious compromises in fidelity. This is the closest thing in a commercial format to the master tape, and for once, comparisons with vinyl reveal far more sonic drawbacks than strengths in the older format.' And Halverson chips in with 'You'll get decisively better sound from these recordings on the cheapest DVD player capable of playing them than you'll obtain from the CD version on any available playback system. Every high-end recording label has expressed interest: Note Hobson's use of the past tense when referring to CD. Yes it's an older format, but it's far from dead yet! And when Kevin Halverson says that high-end recording companies have expressed an interest, it's a long way from their unqualified support of, or investment in the technology. Frankly, I'd be amazed if they weren't interested in any half-sensible proposal that might effect their business.

But given statements like these, and the mainstream magazines' love of a sensational story line, it's hardly surprising that the magazine buying public are caught in two minds whether to buy that expensive CD player or not. How well do the claims stand up to closer inspection? And how important are they anyway?

Firstly, let's get something absolutely clear. DAD discs do sound significantly better than CD equivalents when played back on 24/96 capable DVD players. Which pretty much means the Pioneer and Toshiba models (not all DVD machines contain the appropriate dacs). However, I wouldn't go as far as Hobson and Halverson. I feel that the constructional limitations of what are fairly basic machines are audibly apparent, and I am far from convinced that the DAD discs I've listened to are better than vinyl. Now, there are all kinds of issues here, not least the

## The DAD camp

### Software Manufacturers;

Chesky Records  
 Classic Music  
 Cardas Audio  
 Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab  
 Pioneer Electronics

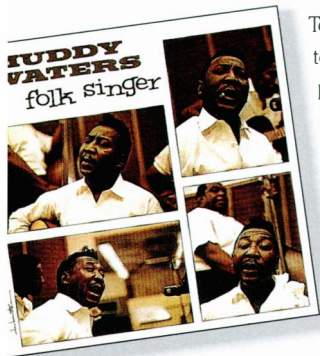
### Hardware Manufacturers;

Ayre Acoustics  
 Bel Canto Design  
 conrad-johnson Design  
 Kuzma  
 Muse Electronics  
 Resolution Audio  
 Theta Digital

comfort factor of familiarity (vividly demonstrated in our blind cable listening), but I'm simply not prepared to offer the kind of blanket endorsement of DAD that its proponents seek. When we do get a replacement for CD I'd like to think that it would be at least equal to, and preferably clearly superior to the best existing system.

Much is made of DADs resolution and sampling rate. Halverson states that 'a 16bit sample can contain 65,536 possible levels.... In the case of 24bit samples these can contain 16,777,216 possible levels.' Impressive figures which suggest massive improvements in resolution and dynamic range. Likewise, the 96kHz sampling rate pushes the upper frequency limit to something around 48kHz, which is a vast improvement on the 19kHz or so that CD routinely delivers. But just like the older format, the numbers don't tell the whole story. In fact, true 24bit dacs don't currently exist, due to limitations in the noise performance of basic electrical components such as resistors. The best we can currently achieve is around 20bit, which is a bit of a knock back from the claimed numbers. It also winds the dynamic range back from the claimed 144dB, which is way beyond ▶

► the performance capabilities of current analogue circuitry, and hence our ability to reproduce, to around 120dB. The numbers are still way better than CD manages, with its maximum dynamic range of 96dB, but let's not ignore this gilding of the DAD lily.



To date, I have yet to hear the spatial precision and layering of images from DAD that I obtain from LPs. Nor can I make as much sense of the small and

incidental noises that accompany music making. But nor am I hearing those CD artefacts that have come to represent 'digital' sound. DAD seems to suffer none of the shut-in or dead qualities that I hear with CD, especially at the top end. But bear in mind that many of the recordings available on the new format are from historical/analogue

sources. The acid test is the replay of original recordings encoded specifically for the format. These exist, from the likes of Chesky, but tend to be small scale

jazz or similar music which hardly stretches the systems' performance envelope. Of course, we're listening to some pretty basic hardware, and once the high-end equipment manufacturers get their hands on the technology, we are going to see some fairly dramatic improvements in player performance. But given the available evidence, it's impossible to make a definitive judgement of the format's potential. Especially when you consider what else

is happening in the world of high rate digital recording.

## Factions, Formats And In-Fighting

While the hi-fi industry has been getting its knickers in a twist over DAD, the major electronics manufacturers have had bigger fish to fry. DVD-video has established itself as the new home theatre format of choice, but its sister audio format, DVD-audio, is still under discussion (or up for grabs, depending on your point of view). The interested parties comprise DVD-Working Group 4, and can be divided into two factions. On the one hand are Toshiba and Warners, whilst in the opposite corner are Sony and Philips.

At this point it's important to remember that the CD format enshrined in the Red Book (no coincidence I'm sure) is owned by Sony and Philips. Which means that every piece of hardware or software produced has to pay a royalty, on top of an initial licence fee. This runs out at around 7 cents a disc, money that goes straight out of a manufacturer's pocket and into the Sony/Philips coffers. Do you reckon that rankles? You'd better believe it. If we replace CD with a new format, the financial implications for the major players are enormous, and the fight over the pie is correspondingly vicious.

Toshiba are championing a 24bit/192kHz standard, which would itself be multi-configurable for channels and sampling rates. Sony and Philips are promoting their DSD system, a bitstream development offering a 200kHz rate, which they asked the other members of DVD-WG4 to ratify as the sole high resolution audio standard within the new format. There was predictable reluctance from the opposition camp, although it seems that DSD will become one of the available options. In a move that smells suspiciously of spoiling tactics, Sony/Philips have announced

their own independent (of DVD-WG4) high resolution audio format, Super Audio Compact Disc. There is a good deal of suspicion concerning the technical viability of the system, but can the electronics manufacturers even risk an open format war, with potentially crippling results for the loser?

Which raises the whole issue of format acceptance. It's all very well the electronics giants creating a new format, but the rest of us have to buy in for it to survive. Remember DCD? And this creates a whole new problem. Sony has the Beta-max saga etched on its corporate memory, and vowed that it would never place itself at the mercy of the software providers again. It's purchase of CBS places an extremely strong card in its hand (which makes Philips recent sale of its software division even more incomprehensible). The position of the recording industry is going to be critical to the final outcome of the debate. No software makes any new format a non starter. The electronics manufacturers see it as an opportunity to stimulate the market with another generational change similar to the CD bonanza, but the circumstances are very different. When CD raised its ugly head, many of the studios were already using digital technology. But to realise the benefits of any enhanced digital format, they would have to replace their recording hardware wholesale, and not even Kevin Halverson makes any claims for interest in DAD from the major recording labels. This is why the format debate has been centred on the recording industry, with Sony demonstrating DSD to all and sundry. It's also why the proposal of a peripheral format to the specialist audio industry can attract so much attention. The competition are busy elsewhere!

The other major difference between the situation facing CD and any new audio format, is public perception. CD was a united front which spoke to a ►

► receptive audience. But it was so successful that the public are perfectly happy with it. Any new global format will have to convince people that it improves on perfection! A disorganised or divided proposal could easily be catastrophic to the new format's survival. CD has also penetrated the computer market, which means that any new high density digital storage medium is no longer a simple music carrier. Instead it is a multi-media commodity which must satisfy the often conflicting demands of different user groups if it is to serve them all. And who do you reckon has the louder voice, Bill Gates or high-end audio? One of the major influences between the multi-channel music lobby (who are also part and parcel of the whole debate), is the desire to provide a single, unified

## The Consumer View

Where does that leave us, the poor punters? Anybody who claims to be able to predict the outcome of the format war, is full of something, and it ain't wisdom. With so much money at stake, this one will go right down to the wire. It's a bit like playing chicken with fully loaded super-tankers. There is undoubted support within all elements of the audio industry for an enhanced digital audio standard. But what it might be is another matter altogether.

One of the big issues is backward compatibility with existing CDs. Any enhanced digital audio format should ideally include this, allowing you to play your existing CDs on your new player, and the new discs (at CD resolution) on an existing player if you haven't got around to buying a new one yet. This is certainly the case with SACD, but the DVD-audio camp are strangely silent on the issue. It is absolutely not the case with the DAD format. A DAD compatible player will play CDs, but no CD player can replay DAD, even with an external

converter. Which raises the spectre of double inventory, both for electronics and software.

And there are other formats available as well. 88.2kHz HDCD is coming up fast on the rails, especially given the acceptance of 44.1 HDCD within the audio community. And each and every system has a seemingly equal number of manufacturers ready to endorse or rubbish it with equal vehemence. But one thing that everyone agrees on is the desirability of a single replay standard. The apparent benefits of a multi-standard replay system are undermined by the sonic compromises inherent to such an approach.

The real strength of DAD lies in the fact that it can be piggy-backed onto an

existing technology (DVD-video), which is supported by a growth market. Whatever happens to the DVD-a/DSD (SACD) debate, the DAD route will always be open to the audiophile community. It may not be perfect, but it is a lot better than CD. But before we embrace it with open arms, we should at least establish whether the potential benefits of the alternative formats are realised in practise. In the meantime, you can rest assured that CD will be around for a long time to come, and that whatever new format emerges, the back catalogue will take an awfully long time to catch up.

Should you buy a DVD player? Yes, if you want to play movies and the odd music disc. Will it replace a high quality CD player. No way. ►+

## The DAD Catalogue

### Classic Records

Art Davis	A Time remembered
Various Artists	Pulse
Red Rodney	Live 1957
Rachmaninoff	Symphonic Dances (Dallas, Johanos)
Jimmy Rushing	Gee Baby, Ain't I Good To You
Zoot Sims and Al Cohn	Either Way
John Lee Hooker	Mr Lucky
Soundtrack	Glory
Sam Phillips	The Indescribable Wow
Chris Whitley	Dirt Floor
John Lee Hooker	Boom Boom
Earl Hines and Jimmy Rushing	Blues and Things
Sam Phillips	Cruel Invention
Terry Evans	Blues For Thought
Lorna Hunt	All in One Day
Hank Mobley	Roll Call
Dr John	The Brightest smile In Town
Gershwin Collection	Slatkin and the St Louis Symphony (dbl)

Freddie Hubbard	Open sesame
Muddy Waters	Folk Singer
Prokofiev/Rimsky Korsakov	Alexander Nevsky/ Scheherazade, Slatkin
Cannonball Adderley	Something Else
Dr John	Plays Mac Rebennack
Kenny Drew	Undercurrent
Ravel	Complete Orchestral Works (dbl)

### Chesky Records












Various Artists	Super Audio Collection and Test Disc
Dave's True Story	Sex Without Bodies
Rebecca Pidgeon	Four Marys
Jon Faddis	Remembrances
Sara K	Hobo
John Basile Quartet	Desmond Project
Livingstone Taylor	Ink
Babatunde Olatunji	Love Drum Talk
David Chesky	Three Psalms For String Orchestra

This list includes discs planned up to the end of 1998, but the world being the way it is, contact the importer, Vivante London (Tel. (44)(0)181-9776600 Fax. (44)(0)181-9774445) to confirm availability.

How To Read The Record Reviews

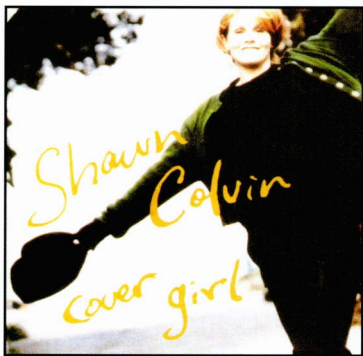
The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

Key to Icons

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

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

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



Shawn Colvin

Cover Girl

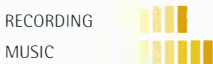
Columbia 477240 2 

What is it about cover versions? Why are there so many that are better than the originals? Devo might have got canned off the stage at Knebworth for daring to cover 'Satisfaction', but if anyone had stopped to listen, they would have realised that, far from sacrilege, the off-beat Americans' version knocks the Stones' for six.

Which is kind of how I feel about Ms Colvin's cover of 'Every Little Thing (He) Does Is Magic'. This is a whole new song. And absolutely brilliant it is too. In fact the album's worth it just for this. Even better news, there are some other corkers as well. Steve Earle's 'Someday' gets the treatment, and so does The Questionnaires' 'Window On The World'. Even Talking Heads respond to her country/rock enthusiasm.


Recording quality varies from good to clumsy (overdubs added to live tracks!), but the album still makes great listening. Colvin's voice has character, a million miles from the sterile purity of Mary Chapin Carpenter, who duets on 'One Cool Remove', and her history as a New York busker is plain in her direct and emotive performance. Great album! Oh, and don't forget her debut outing 'Steady On' - much more minimalist, and really well recorded.

RG



The Congos

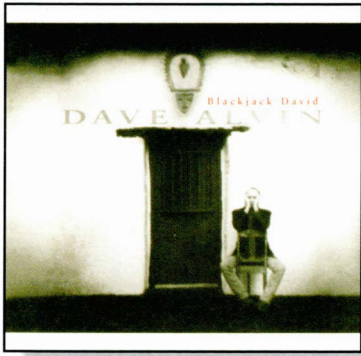
Heart of The Congos

Blood & Fire BAFCD009 

'Send us another Moses to lead Jah nation/The hungry must be fed so there'll be no more sufferation..' they implore during Children Crying. Its righteous reggae at its most spiritual. As pious as Hildegard of Bingen but with a lot more swing, the ganja-addled apocalyptic theology of Rastafarianism is voiced in a series of classic roots reggae songs and chants. Produced by Lee 'Scratch' Perry at Black Ark Studio and originally released in 1977 this is a recording of great depth. The Congos were a vocal duo of Cedric Myton (falsetto) and Royden Johnson (tenor) long since fallen into obscurity. At this time Perry's house band The Upsetters featured some of Jamaica's finest, including drummers Sly and Mikey Boo, bassist Boris Gardiner, organist Winston Wright and guitarist Ernest Ranglin. Perry's recording and production on 4 track Teac with Echoplex reverb and Mutron phaser mixed and mutated through a Soundcraft board is exemplary. Scratch is the only man in the world who could place bovine farmyard effects in the mix and get away with it. Like dread say - 'Hail natty, have you any herb my brotherman?/Yes my brother yes, ten crocus bags..'

JM





Dave Alvin

Blackjack David

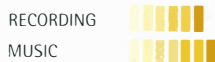
Hightone Records HCD 8091

Until this disc appeared, I'd never heard of Dave Alvin. Now I'm scrambling to discover what else he's done. You'd be right to conclude that I'm impressed.

Now, I know that country music tends to send certain people running for cover, but hear me out. The country/pop fusion initiated by the likes of Nancy Griffiths, has snowballed into a genre all by itself. And that's squarely where I'd place Mr Alvin. If you liked *Storms* I reckon you'll like this.

His singing voice has that 'lived in' quality that suits the material, and the playing is first class. Production is understated, favouring natural perspectives over the sonically spectacular, with the sweet and slightly soft top end that I associate with a lot of HCDs. All but one of the songs are self penned, and deal with the normal run of American working class life. No surprises there. But the quality of the writing and performance make this a recording which bears repeated listening. And I have been!

RG



George Martin

In My Life

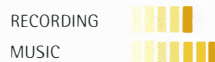
Echo LP20

On the face of it, an album of Beatles covers featuring the musical talents of Goldie Hawn, Jim Carey and Robin Williams, might best be avoided. Not exactly a confidence inspiring line-up, even with George Martin at the controls. To be honest, when I first saw it, my initial reaction was to take the piss out of the proud new owner. How wrong you can be!

'A Hard Day's Night' Las-Vegas style, is a pretty weird concept, but it really works. Jim Carey makes a fabulous Walrus, and Robin Williams and Bobby McFerrin certainly 'Come Together'. Okay, so there's the odd low point. Jeff Beck's air guitar interpretation of 'A Day In The Life' would be more at home on an album of great musical cliches. But the majority of these tracks demonstrate just how much Martin's production and arrangements brought to the Beatles.

If you've got any sort of love for the Beatles' music, and you want to hear what a more creative mind than Noel Gallagher can do with the legacy, then give this a whirl. I can guarantee that you'll be surprised.

RG



Gomez

Bring it on

HUTDLP49 (Virgin)

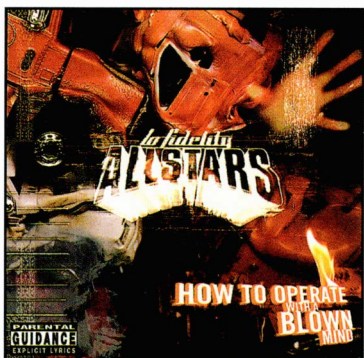
Gomez might be the latest 'big thing', but for once the plaudits are well deserved. Bring It On recently won a Mercury Prize, and the fresh faced five piece are surfing the crest of a wave.

The album is full of contrast and subtlety. Complex edgy rock, the band aren't afraid to incorporate some unusual influences, Tijuana to name but one. Further interest is provided by the two singers, who alternate the lead across the album, one all cigarettes and too much whisky, the other softer but no less expressive. The songs are immediately attention grabbing, and the band really work together. A feat which escapes most modern groups, this is one of the main strengths of Gomez.

The recording quality is excellent and production is refreshingly unobtrusive, allowing the music and performance through your system and into the room. The vinyl issue is well pressed, flat with low surface noise and very good dynamic range. The CD quality is also excellent so don't worry if you don't have a turntable. This is a very fine album (great sleeve too)! If you are in the market for thoughtful contemporary pop, don't miss out

JH





Lo-Fidelity Allstars

How To Operate With A Blown Mind

Skint BRASSIC8CD (CD) (120g)

Big beat was not so much a new dance genre as a rebranding of the old dance-rock crossover long championed by Meat Beat Manifesto, Renegade Soundwave, Revolting Cocks et al. Whatever you want to call it - and big beat is way too simplistic - we have here some hard driving breakbeat rock-n-roll. The sheer motive force occasioned by the beats is supplemented by some powerful but intricate bass-playing from a chap glorying in the monicker A One Man Crowd Called Gentile. Overlaid is a catholic selection of treated samples and creative deck work from The Albino Priest, while vocalist The Wrecked Train takes us into the darker recesses of his poetic imagination. Here is a man who realises the English - of whatever ethnic origin - are congenitally unable to rap convincingly and instead gives us a kind of Cockney visionary schtick like Johnny Rotten declaiming William Burroughs (as translated out of the American by William Blake.) Thus - 'Filled with viscous demented fluid...He dreams of being the scorpion who never sweats, and quite frankly I am appalled to find this individual in my head space... Stick em up motherf\*\*\*er!'. Could be the Big Beat benchmark.

JM



Madonna

Ray Of Light

WEA 9362-46847-2 (CD) (120g)

Life clearly begins at 40, at least as far as Madge is concerned. This is her best, and most consistent album by a mile, down in no small way to the inspired choice of William Orbit to produce. In fact, the only weak track on the album is the only one he had nothing to do with.

Take Madonna's unerring grasp of the great hook, and her feel for a groove, and combine them with Orbit's multi-layered complex power pop mixes, and the results are almost overwhelmingly intense. He simply piles on the mix, drawing from acoustic instruments, synths, samples, the kitchen sink if it comes to hand. But it's done with a sure hand, and the strands weave a textured, undulating and constantly shifting vault of sound, around and behind the fragile vocals.

Is this a dance album? You'd better believe it. If this doesn't get you moving then you're overdue a health check. You're dying from the feet up! Play loud and enjoy. Yes, it's a dance album, but it's so much more as well.

RG



September Songs, The Music of Kurt Weill

Various Artists

Sony SK63046 (CD)

In which New York producer Hal Wilner gets to grips with the peculiar, impressively sordid, world of Brecht and Weill. This is his second, improved attempt at the Weill canon, the first 'Cry Beloved Country' of 1985 (A&M vinyl) is doubtless now deleted. Lou Reed is back in action on 'September Songs' and his slow-burning take on the title track remains as incisive. Joining him on the diverse collection are such as Nick Cave who, as you might expect, wrests 'Mack The Knife' from the Las Vegas crooners and wrings every last drop of sadistic glee from the quivering remains. Elsewhere PJ Harvey offers a beautifully sensitive reading of 'The Soldiers Wife', while Elvis Costello gives vent to a broken-voiced 'Lost In The Stars'. An ancient, crackling recording of the bizarre tones of Lotte Lenyas 'Pirate Jenny' is reproduced to great atmospheric effect, as is a bonkers rendition of 'Mack The Knife' by Brecht himself (he doesnt sing in key or in time - but hey, its his song). Yet the most demented performance here would be a toss-up between David Johansens' 'Alabama Song' and William Burroughs' 'What Keeps Man Alive?' while The Persuasions close-harmony 'Oh, Heavenly Salvation' is ...well, heavenly. A dramatic, juicy perverse album.

JM





## The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion

ACME

ACME Mute ACDSTUMM154 (CD) (120g)

Aptly titled, this would indeed seem to be the acme of Spencers mission - which began with the seminal NYC band Pussy Galore in the mid 80s. His rock-n-roll and blues deconstructions have sometimes seemed just too haphazard for comfort. He previously brought a kind of anarchy to bear on the traditional forms which seemed to be a commentary on the state of rock music itself (i.e dead and decaying fast) But Acme is a visionary statement of future rock-n-roll . The album was recorded on analogue by Steve Albini in Chicago, then farmed out to a wide range of producers and treatment-artists including T Ray (Cypress Hill), Dan Nakamura (Dr Octagon), Alec Empire (Atari Teenage Riot), Nick Sansano (Sonic Youth/Public Enemy), Chris Shaw (Butthole Surfers/Weezer) and the venerable Jim Dickinson (Big Star/The Cramps /Panther Burns etc. etc.) Acme is infused with country, gospel, blues, rock-n-roll and hip hop broken down and reassembled with added sleaze and perversion, tectonic sub bass and crystalline guitar. Guests like Luscious Jacksons' Jill Cuniff and Dub Narcotics' Calvin Johnson give a wide range of vocal stylings from growling swamp blues to effervescent gospel. Possibly the funkier white blues album since 'Exile On Main Street'.

JM

RECORDING   
MUSIC 





## RZA Presents Wu-Tang Killa Bees

The Swarm Volume 1

Wu-Tang Records/Play It (CD) (120g)  
Again Sam WT001CD

A more succinct offering than the sprawling, slightly gruelling epic double album Wu-Tang Forever and all the more accessible for that. It is the hardcore shit, however, with old-skoool (ie raw) production values and the emblematic minimalist strings sampled and inexorably looped. RZAs instinctive (and in the traditional sense, unmusical) grooves and beats imbue the backing with some heavyweight atmosphere. Often melancholic, frequently unsettling, and very seldom relaxing, the ambience sets the mood for the various Clan members to deliver a series of raps which vary in theme but are never less than righteous. This is serious stuff. Perhaps the most extraordinary cut is Never Again, a deeply sympathetic and angry lyric from Remedy concerning the - hardly typical rap subject - of the Holocaust. Hanging with the Wu (as I believe the terminology has it), is an experience very far removed from the vacuous commercial rap that spends its time regurgitating old songs on Top of The Pops. It is from the heart and furthermore, it gives you something to think about while youre jumping up and down like an idiot. Arguably the best hip hop album of 98.

JM

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



## Grosse Pointe Blank

London Records U.S.A.

828 867-2 (CD)

Thriller? Black Comedy? Love Story? George Armitage's cult movie criss-crosses the genres through its bizarre and eccentric characters. Not least among them are John Cusack's 'nearly' reformed hit-man, Martin Blank, and Minnie Driver's 'jilted small-town DJ'. Their tenth anniversary High School reunion provides a focal point for the action, in which potentially explosive twists and turns of plot and scheme are nailed by a soundtrack that has real 80s attitude.

The CD opens with 'Blister in the Sun', a sparse song, pared back to the essentials of guitar, drums and voice. It shows the Violent Femmes at their intense and angst-ridden best. Coupled to some great tracks from The Clash, The Beat, The Jam and The Specials they create a distinctive cipher for the lone figure of Martin Blank. Nor have the lighter romantic moments been neglected. 'Let My Love Open The Door' is one of Pete Townshend's better solo efforts.

But the soundtrack (like the film) also exhibits a perverse sense of humour. Never more so than in Guns N' Roses' memorably outrageous cover version of 'Live Et Let Die'. The Band's incongruous backing harmonies crack me up every time.

RP

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



Belle and Sebastien

The Boy With The Arab Strap

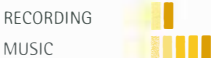
Jeepster Records JPRLP 003  

If you are already a Belle and Sebastien fan then you know what to expect from this. If you're into Lo-Fi as a genre, then you'll feel right at home. And if you want to dip a toe into the Lo-Fi pool, then this is a nice accessible place to start. Me? I think this is a cracking album.

Despite the eight members, the band's sound has an organic, small-scale feel, mixing acoustic guitar and Moog style synthesisers. Twin vocalists deliver the thoughtful but often rather depressing lyrics, and the songs are generally built around a story, but not necessarily one you feel comfortable hearing. The voices are soft, and the male vocalist in particular, employs extremely limited dynamic range. This blends well with the relaxed feel of the whole album.

Some may find this a bit pretentious, in a distinctly French/60s throwback vein. Here's a band who fancy themselves as new intellectual poets. But it's a carefully put together album, and an ideal introduction to both the band and Lo-Fi as a style.

JH



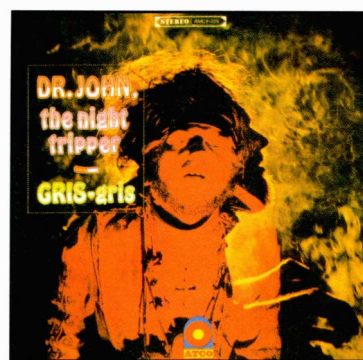
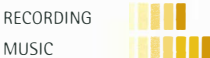
Diamanda Galas

Malediction and Prayer

Mute CDSSTUMM163  

In which the Bride of Satan sits at a grand piano and sings. And does she ever sing. If Janis Joplin had been put through Conservatoire training she might have sounded like this. Beautifully recorded live by Blaise Dupuy on the world tour of 96/97, La Galas here embarks on a series of powerful old blues songs interspersed with more exotic fare. The credits span both Son House (Death Letter) and Charles Baudelaire (Abel et Cain) taking in Phil Ochs (The Iron Lady) and Pier Paolo Pasolini (Supplica a mia Madre) along the way. If the songs are powerful then her performance renders them just about invincible. Her reading of Willie Dixon's Insane Asylum for example is a majestic bout of frenzied scat singing taking us from the depths of her four-octave range to its scarifying summit (and when this woman screams you know about it - indeed, they know about it in the next county). In Abel et Cain the phrasing brings to mind Piaf, while the Spanish (Si la Muerte) and Greek songs utilise Moorish ullulation. Here are songs of love, death and madness imbued with lurid Orthodox religiosity and deep blues passion by the Diva of Disease.

JM



Dr. John, The Night Tripper

Gris-gris

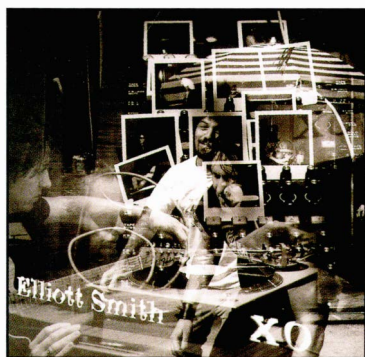
Atco 7567-80473-2 

1968 was when the flowery hippy bubble burst and things began to get dark. The Stones were at their Satanic peak and the bad drugs were taking hold. A New Orleans session man called Mac Rebennack conceived of Dr. John, and released Gris-gris in all its narcotic voodoo glory and it had the sound of evil running through its veins. Somehow, all these years later - after post Modern readings of his grooves found commercial favour through Trip-Hop - it still does. This is bad trip psychedelia imbued with ritual chants and voodoo sorcery and its atmosphere is so spiced with the midnight boneyard you can smell it. Musically a coupling between trad Creole and swamp blues the album culminates in the 7-minutes of sinister wonderment which is the oft-covered 'Walk On Gilded Splinters' (most recently by Paul Weller). When the good Doctor tells you that his band - flute, bottleneck, tambourine, congas, 'funky-knuckle skins' bass, sax and mandolin - 'were dredged up fresh from the Rigolets by the Zombie of the Second Line, under the Eight Visions of Professor Longhair' - you can believe it.

JM







## Elliott Smith

### XO

Bong Load Records BL35 (US Import)

Why do singer songwriters find it so hard to make it, when certain other performers are laughing all the way to the Swiss bank? Is it because they crave credibility? I doubt any of them would turn away success. Is it because the songs are challenging and the dumbed down audience are incapable of understanding? Possible. But whatever the reasons, Elliott Smith is doing his best to overcome them. And you never know, he might just drag a few lost listeners with him. *XO* is his fourth LP, and will be by far his most successful. It rides on his popularity following the film *'Good Will Hunting'*, for which he received an Oscar nomination (he lost to Celine Dion, so you can see what I'm getting at!). A quiet performer, his whispered vocals often rely on simple acoustic guitar for accompaniment. Occasionally he stretches out to embrace other, mainly acoustic instruments. The songs are built on melody, with some vocal harmonies, and the lyrics are topical, and tend to the angst ridden. Elliott is clearly struggling to make sense of the world (you would too, if you'd had to follow Celine Dion home). His music might best be described as melancholy Beatles, and that's no bad thing. This is a very good album and I highly recommend it. It might even lead you into Mr Smith's back catalogue.

JH

RECORDING   
 MUSIC



## Olu Dara

### In The World

Atlantic 83077-2 HDCD

From the first notes of 'Okra' with its chiming guitars, street cries and infectious South African beat you immediately feel part of a warm, musical experience. Drawing on a rich mix of African, jazz, and blues influences, Olu Dara, whether he's on vocals, guitar, trumpet or cornet holds it all together remarkably well, bringing a real cohesion to the band, whatever they're playing. In some respects reminiscent of Taj Mahal, in others recalling Ellington's 60's band, and sometimes sounding like pure delta blues, there's still something unique about the album. Maybe because of the sheer variety of influences presented with a common warmth, feeling and sheer sense of enjoyment.

In addition to 'Okra' standout numbers include the straight ahead blues of 'Rain Shower', the laid back jazzy 'Harlem Country Girl' and a track pretty much guaranteed to bring a smile to even the most cynical listener 'Your Lips'. Sound quality is good rather than outstanding at least on my non-HDCD player. (It takes a definite step up the scale on an HDCD capable machine. Ed.)

After 20 years in music, this is Dara's first release. More please.

DD

RECORDING   
 MUSIC



## Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Cole Porter Song Book

DCC GZS(2) 1079

When Ella first strayed from the straight and narrow of 'trad jazz', aficionados held up their hands in horror. But to the rest of us, the Songbooks represent one of her finest hours, and the Cole Porter is my favourite.

Recorded in 1956, the sound is just what you'd expect, warm and immediate. The DCC gold discs don't have the presence and dimensional quality of my original Verve records, but they don't have the surface and tape noise either. Given the scarcity and price of decent second-hand copies, this is a welcome re-issue.

All the greats are here. The track listing reads like a potted history of Broadway show stoppers: 'Anything Goes', 'I Get A Kick Out Of You', 'Let's Do It', 'You Do Something To Me', the list goes on. These are timeless songs that offer the perfect showcase for Ella's vocal talents. If you've never heard her sing and you're wondering what all the fuss is about, you could do a lot worse than starting here. Broadway may not seem like your cup of tea, but great music will break down your pre-conceptions. And this is some of the best.

RG

RECORDING   
 MUSIC

# JACQUES BREL

## Hidden Voice

by Jon Maple

Next time you're down the pub having an argument about the Single European Currency and some wag says 'name one famous Belgian then, go on', you'll be able to say, 'Jacques Brel, mate'. When they say, 'Nah, get off, who?' you can reply, 'Jacques Brel: 1929-78, singer and songwriter. He was the Jarvis Cocker of his time y'know! Which is not altogether true – Jarvis is Brel with Alan Bennet's vowel sounds, more like – but say it with conviction and you'll get away with it.

Pulp songs like 'Mis-Shapes', 'Pencil Skirt', 'I-Spy' – most of the *Different Class* album in fact, is thoroughly moistened by the spirit of Brel. The swirling, building, climactic arrangements of songs like 'Common People' are deeply redolent of Brel's 'chansons' of the 50s and 60s. Taken with the lyrical themes of seedy sex and other juicy human frailties evident in both writers' work, – 'Live Bed Show' is basically Brel toned down for the 90s – the link could hardly be denied.

Jacques Brel was the son of a wealthy Belgian cardboard box manufacturer. Having both taught himself the guitar and been expelled from school, he spent four years working in the family factory while writing and stockpiling songs. After military service he went to Paris with

the intention of "going pro". His first professional gig was in a cafe in La Pigalle in 1953. By the late 50s the distinctive debauched grandiosity of his songs and the intensity of his stage presence had made him a star of French show business. He drew his audiences into his picaresque world peopled with a colourful selection of low-life characters. A writer of over 400 songs, the 'chansonnier' appeared in a number of films directed by such names as Claude Lelouche and Marcel Carne; he also directed himself.

Brel's influence has long had a marked effect on the more poetic end of English-language popular songwriting and singing. This first became generally apparent in the early 70s when there was a rash of cover versions. Notable among them was The Sensational Alex Harvey Band's near-psychopathic waltz-time rendition of 'Next' and David Bowie's wracked reading of 'Amsterdam' to well-thrashed 12-string guitar. Bowie's version of 'My Death' played an integral part in the Ziggy Stardust legend/fantasy.

Alex Harvey's half-demented Glaswegian snarl delivering lines like, 'I still recall the brothel trucks, the flying flags/The queer lieutenant slapped our arses thinking we were fags' is not easily forgotten. The song basically tells the story of, '...how my innocence was lost/In a mobile army whorehouse/ A gift of the army free of cost.' It's replete with archetypal images of shame and degradation – later the singer laments, '...the wet head of my first case of gonorrhoea'.



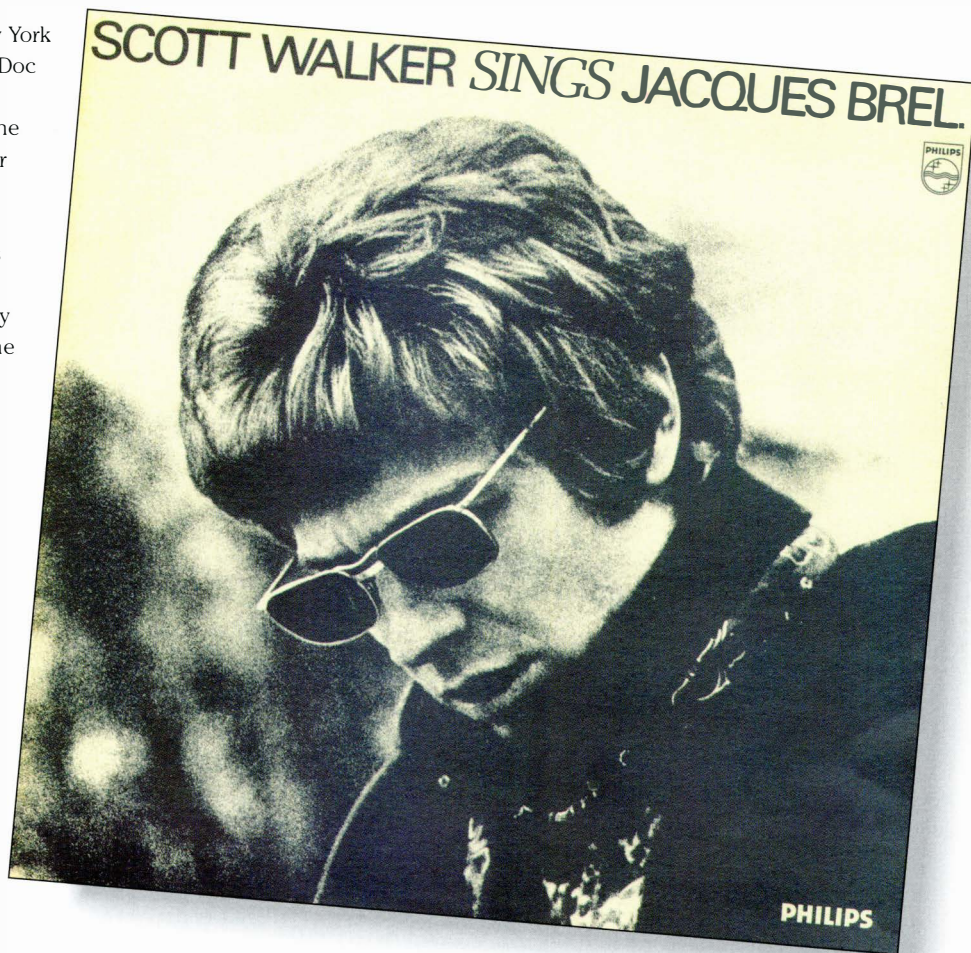
The experience clearly leaves its mark in other ways, for 'since then each woman I have taken into bed/ They seem to lie in my arms and whisper in my head-Next!'

Bowie's 'Amsterdam' is a very powerful, not to say overwrought, piece of work. The tale of an old sailor drinking by the harbour side teems with seamy life: '...and they drink and they dance and they laugh and they lust / 'Til the rancid sound of the accordion bursts / Then out on the night with their pride and their pants / And the sluts that they tow underneath the street lamps...' Bowie declaims the words with a gleeful sort of savagery. ►

► The translations from Brel's original French were by the New York songwriter Mort Schuman. With Doc Pomus, Schuman had many hits during the 1950s with acts like The Drifters (Save The Last Dance For Me), Dion & The Belmonts (A Teenager In Love) and Elvis Presley (Viva Las Vegas). Now its a long way from this sort of stuff to the existential angst of, say, 'My Death' but as Schuman said at the time, '(Brel) was a man who combined raw force with the most meaningful lyrics I had heard in songs – a deep understanding of the human condition...This was what I wanted to bring back to America. No more 'yummy yummy yummy I've got love in my tummy' '

That quote is taken from the sleeve notes to 'Scott Walker Sings Jacques Brel', the essential album of Brel covers from the 70s. Walker's accounts of songs like Mathilde, Funeral Tango, and Jackie were lushly orchestrated and electrifying. As The NME's Phil McNeill declared in 1977, 'when Scott discovered Jacques Brel the effect was devastating... Nobody in pop music has ever made more nihilistic, grandiose, debauched, schizophrenic, souls-in-torment, night-riding, heart-rending music...'

That didn't stop likely contender Marc Almond – a performer so absolutely right for Brel's nocturnal emissions – from weighing in with a suitably camp – and damp – rendition of 'Jackie'. Less obviously Brellian singers like Judy Collins, Tom Jones, Ray Charles, Petula Clark and even Frank Sinatra also covered his songs. The prize for the most unsuitable Brel interpreter, however, must go to Terry Jacks whose heavily



bowdlerised version of 'Le Moribond' – the saccharine 'Seasons In The Sun' – became a million-seller in 1974.

Cancer caused Brel to retire from touring in 1967, poor health reducing his output to just one LP after 1974, the bleak and unforgiving *Brel* of 1977. The final years of Brel's life were spent reclusively in Polynesia but he returned to Paris to die in October 1978.

Brel's principal translator Mort Schuman with fellow American poet Eric Blau later created and appeared in 'Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris'. The show included twenty-five of Brel's best known songs and ran off-Broadway for four years. ►+

### Selected Discography

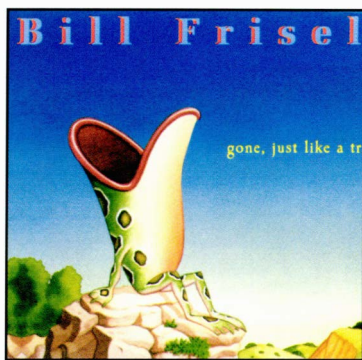
Jacques Brel Greatest Hits  
Duchesse CD 352111

Jacques Brel Brel  
Barclay/Polygram CD 810537-2

Jacques Brel Ne Me Quitte Pas  
ECM CD 8130092


Various Artists The Jacques Brel Album  
ITM CD ITM 1455

Scott Walker Sings Jacques Brel  
Fontana CD 8382122



Bill Frisell

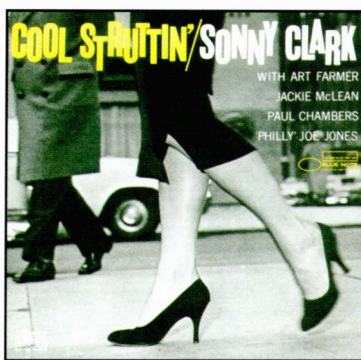
Gone, Just Like A Train

Nonesuch 7559-79479-2 

First the artwork. It's great. At least it's great if you're into dreamlike surrealist cartoon imagery. Created by Jim Woodring, Frisell believes it evokes the spirit of the music and he's right. The session, recorded with bassist Victor Krauss, and (a first for Frisell) with drummer Jim Keltner, has a spacey, dreamlike quality throughout. It often has something of a soundtrack feel to it (Twin Peaks/ Paris Texas ?), and there's a gently rolling quality underpinned by Krauss' bass lines, and offset by crisp fills from Keltner. This is not to say that the music doesn't cook. The opener, 'Blues for Los Angeles' builds beautifully, with Frisell's guitar soaring over a solid foundation. Frisell swaps between electric and acoustic instruments throughout the album, and the combination of his strong melodic sense, coupled with outstanding playing from all three, holds everything solidly together. Whether it's cod reggae, 'Egg Radio' or a gentle, vaguely French sounding acoustic number, 'Ballroom', there's an almost unique consistency to the whole album.



The sound quality is outstandingly good for CD. Warm, spacious and very natural. Frisell says that for him this was 'a dream project come true'. He's right.

DD



Sonny Clarke

Cool Struttin'

Blue Note re-issue LP 1588   

After Bud Powell, Sonny Clarke is regarded as one of the very best hard bop pianists, and Cool Struttin' is his masterpiece. Together with an outstanding band comprising Jackie McClean, Paul Chambers and Philly Joe Jones, everyone is on peak form. Clark is brilliant throughout, but since the band is so tight and together, no single player dominates.

Standout numbers include the title track inspired by Clark's wife, which includes the first of several bowed bass solos from Chambers, and particularly the Davis tune 'Sippin' at Bells' , a 12 bar blues with numerous changes, which is packed with great solos. Of the four tracks (on the LP), the only relatively weak number is 'Deep Night' which sounds just a little pedestrian (apologies for the pun) against the other tracks.

My old(ish) CD (Blue Note 0777 7 465 1325) sounds relatively thin and one dimensional when compared to the Blue Note 180g re-issue album, but does contain an extra two numbers from the original sessions. Great black and white cover shot too, which looks even better on the LP.

Supplier: Vivante

DD



Yamamoto, Tsuyoshi Trio

Midnight Sugar

XRCD TBM-XR-0023  

From the opening notes of the title track, you're immediately struck by the stunning recording quality. From the solid snap and fingerwork of Fukui's bass, through to the solidity and attack of the piano, this is the sound of a real band occupying a tangible acoustic space. Originally released on LP in 1974, Three Blind Mice and JVC have done a great job in transferring this recording to XRCD. It's also something of a major endorsement for the XRCD process, in that this sounds very close indeed to a great vinyl recording, and brings the very best from the CD format.

So, it sounds great, but what about the music? The album couples two numbers by Yamamoto with three standards. For me the strongest track is the Yamamoto penned 'Midnight Sugar', which has a blues quality, and comes across with more feeling and depth than the standards. These are very well played, but offer just a hint of supper club jazz. The other Yamamoto track 'Sweet Georgia Blues', being improvisations around another standard, falls into the same trap. The playing is of a very high standard, but with the exception of the title track, it's all a bit cool and clinical.

Supplier: Vivante

DD





Sonny Rollins

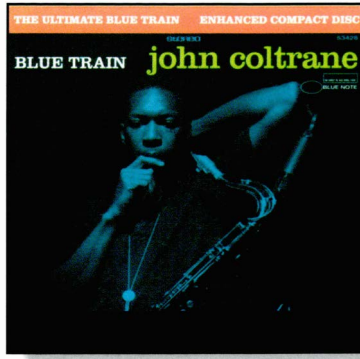
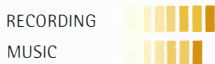
Rollins Plays For Bird

JVC XRCD XR-055-2 **XR** **3**

Recorded in '56, the same astonishingly productive year as the Rollins classics *Tenor Madness* and *Saxophone Colossus*, *Plays for Bird* is not up there with either of those masterworks. But it is, none the less, a thoroughly entertaining album. Recorded with the then current Max Roach Quintet, the album opens with a medley of familiar Parker tunes. Both Roach and Kenny Dorham had played with Bird, and whilst Rollins is hardly evocative of Parker, that's not the point. Firstly, Rollins is unmistakably Rollins, and secondly, this is really an affectionate tribute to Parker. As such it works very well. The opening medley of Parker tunes starts well with 'I Remember You' and builds beautifully, taking in a fine honking solo from Rollins in 'They Can't Take That Away From Me'.

All in all it's a good, but not great, Rollins album. Of course that still places it pretty high, so it's recommended if you've already got the above mentioned classics, along with his best later work, and want to hear more. My only quibble is the slightly miserly playing time of under 43 minutes. A couple of alternate takes wouldn't have gone amiss JVC. The sound is glorious, in the room mono, and all the better for it.

Supplier: Vivante  
DD



John Coltrane

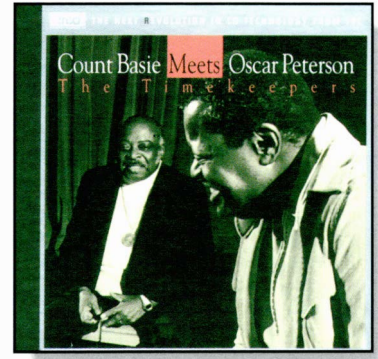
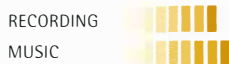
The Ultimate Blue Train

Blue Note 7243 8 53428 0 6 **XR** **4**

This enhanced CD version of Coltrane's classic '57 recording is the one to have. Leading a superb band featuring Lee Morgan, trumpet, Curtis Fuller, trombone, and a dream rhythm section comprising Kenny Drew, Paul Chambers and Philly Jo Jones, they can do no wrong. The playing throughout is stunning. Four of the five compositions on the album are Coltrane's and aside from the title track, include numbers soon to be classics such as 'Lazy Bird' and 'Locomotion'. There are also alternate takes of two numbers. The CD is very nicely presented in a card slip case and the 20 bit Super Bit Mapping has clearly been worthwhile. But what really sets this version apart, and makes the small price premium so worthwhile, is the interactive content.

Assuming you have a fairly standard spec. PC the interactive section is a treat. Titled 'At Least Listen' you can watch Coltrane execute a beautiful solo as part of Miles Davis' band in '59, whilst the rest of the band look on. You can sample an interview with Rudy Van Gelder. You can listen to excerpts from other band members recordings along with looking at the album sleeves, and much more. It's very easy to navigate, but most importantly, it is absolutely in keeping with Blue Note's house style. As you'd expect, it's full of great photography. Highly recommended.

Supplier: Vivante  
DD



Count Basie Meets Oscar Peterson

The Timekeepers

JVC XRCD2 JVCXR-0206-2 **XR** **3**

Recorded in '78, this is one of three albums that paired these two masters of jazz piano that year. Accompanied by Louis Bellson, drums and John Heard, bass, Basie and Peterson are stylistically different enough to make this an interesting prospect. The key question on sessions like this is do the two result in something equal to or better than either individually?

The answer in this case has to be no. The dominant player throughout is Peterson who carries most of the numbers, underpinned by Basie's inimitable phrasing, sounding distinctly laid back set against Peterson's rapid frills and arpeggios. The whole thing is held together by great playing from Bellson and particularly Heard. The faster numbers like 'After You've Gone' come over most successfully, but overall the album doesn't stand serious comparison with either pianist's individual small group recordings from (roughly) the same period. For example, *At Montreaux*, or *Nigerian Marketplace* from Peterson, and *Kansas City 3*, *For The Second Time* from Basie. The way to consider the album is probably just as it was intended, as a fun session. Sound quality on this XRCD2 recording is good, and like earlier JVC efforts, has probably done as much as possible with this tape and the CD format.

Supplier: Vivante  
DD





**Gustav Mahler Symphony No 10**  
(realisation by Clinton A Carpenter)

**The Philharmonia Hungarica**  
**Harold Farberman**

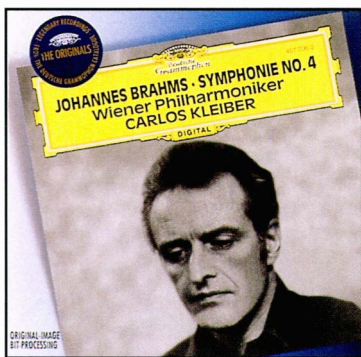
Golden String GSCD-024 DDD

Recordings of the completed Mahler 10 are no longer rare, but nearly all conductors choose one of the two Deryck Cooke versions, so it's good to hear another realisation of Mahler's original draft. For this recording, Harold Faberman has chosen Clinton A Carpenter's completion. He began work on the score in 1946, finishing it in 1966. Compared to Cooke, Carpenter's is a far more radical realisation. He feels that even the parts Mahler fully orchestrated have an incomplete feel to them. Therefore, he's fleshed-out the music. This is especially noticeable in the two scherzo movements, which are (in Cooke's version) easily the least convincing parts of the work. Here the textures are denser, the music busier and more contrapuntal. I must say, it sounds more like a finished work, more like Mahler, even if one or two details jar; speaking personally, I don't care for the percussion enhancement of the first movement's climax, for example. But for the most part, Carpenter's ideas work. Fabermann adopts fastish tempi in the belief that Mahler's own tempi were quicker than we typically hear today. The orchestra play superbly, and the performance is excellent; sensitive and subtly phrased, yet full-blooded too. Pressed on gold CD, the sound is clear and detailed, if a shade glossy; it's rich and clean, but slightly 'peaky' at the top-end.

Supplier: Vivante

JMH

RECORDING   
MUSIC



**Johannes Brahms Symphony No 4**

**Vienna Philharmonic Carlos Kleiber**

DG 457 706-2 DDD

Originally released on vinyl in 1981, Carlos Kleiber's exciting incandescent Brahms 4 was one of DG's earliest digital recordings - and sounded it. The LP was cut at a very high level, but the tonal balance was viciously bright and harsh; at least, that's how it seemed at the time. I still have my original LP, and CD, but today on modern equipment the recording sounds much better. True, balances remain close, and you need a refined system able to cope with this. But the sound has a thrusting tactile quality that suits Kleiber's high energy performance. Now newly remastered for DG's Originals series, the sound has been cleaned up and improved in terms of clarity and focus. There's slightly greater richness and sheen to the strings and brass, though you could never say the sound (or the performance) was mellow or warm. Remarkably, this was Kleiber's last studio recording of an orchestral work; since then (aside from the DG Tristan) all his recordings have been made live. Many critics take this to be the finest performance of Brahms 4 in the catalogue. It's certainly the most exciting and brilliant, though for me it misses the autumnal sadness and bitter-sweet melancholy of the music. However, it's unquestionably a performance of stature, and definitely worth buying at mid-price - even if the total playing time is short.

JMH

RECORDING   
MUSIC



**Prokofiev Piano Concertos 1 and 3**  
**Bartok Piano Concerto No. 3**

**Martha Argerich (pno)**  
**OSM Charles Dutoit**

EMI 5 56654-2 DDD

Prokofiev's third piano concerto is very much a work one associates with Martha Argerich. She made a famous recording of it for DG back in 1967 with Claudio Abbado, and has performed the piece many times in concert. So a new recording is very welcome, especially when generously coupled with Prokofiev's first piano concerto and Bartok's third - works new to the Argerich discography. Checking movement timings shows her new Prok 3 is slightly slower in all three movements, compared to the DG account. The playing is as supple and articulate as ever, but the new interpretation sounds deeper and more mature. There's no loss of focus or dexterity, yet the playing is definitely less showy. Prokofiev's spiky first piano concerto is given a suitably brilliant mercurial performance; less brash than some, but always clearly articulated and immediate. Bartok's third receives a thoughtful atmospheric performance, with steady tempi but no lack of drama or tension. In this work, the piano initially seems too distant, as though the soloist were part of the orchestra. But this is quickly corrected, and the bravura passage for soloist at 1m 04s sounds correctly balanced. The sound in all three works (studio recordings, not live by the way), is smooth, clean, and dynamic. But there's a slight lack of brightness and transparency, I feel, and this impairs clarity at times.

JMH

RECORDING   
MUSIC





**Gustav Mahler Symphony No. 9  
Richard Strauss Metamorphosen  
for 23 solo strings  
VPO Simon Rattle**

EMI 5 56580-2 DDD 

Rattle recorded his volatile and incident packed reading of the Mahler back in '93, and it has presumably been waiting for a suitable coupling. The opening is exceptionally spacious, giving the impression that the first movement will be extremely broad. But things soon tighten-up, as conductor and orchestra strike sparks off one-another. Listening, one gets the feeling at times that Rattle and the VPO were out to show each-other what they could do; the interpretation has a slightly self-conscious quality, and is perhaps a little studied rather than natural and spontaneous. Important details are underlined, and the music is shaped rather than allowed to unfold inevitably. Yet the performance is always interesting, and there's no denying the sincerity and commitment of the playing.

Metamorphosen (recorded 1997) receives a vibrant, trenchant performance that's naturally phrased and spontaneous, yet deeply committed and very powerful. It sounds as if conductor and orchestra are more used to one-another, and the music-making has greater naturalness and flow. The recording of the symphony has a very wide dynamic range, and will tax all but the best systems. Metamorphosen sounds rich and warm, yet detailed and well-separated. Both performances were taped live.

JMH

RECORDING   
MUSIC 





**Leonard Bernstein. Prelude,  
Fugue, and Riffs; Facsimile;  
West Side Story - Symphonic Dances;  
Divertimento for Orchestra**

**CBSO Paavo Jarvi**  
Virgin Classics 5 45295-2 68m 23s DDD 


As a composer, Leonard Bernstein's music is too multi-faceted to be showcased on a single CD. But this one gives a good idea of his brash jazzy side. The exception is the ballet score Facsimile, which Bernstein wrote for Jerome Robbins. The work, premiered in 1946, deals with the de-humanising of contemporary life and is the most 'serious' piece on the disc. The most fun is undoubtedly Prelude, Fugue and Riffs, which finds Bernstein at his most extrovert and outrageous - so far-out at times, it's almost a parody of itself; only Bernstein could write music like this! Paavo Jarvi's performance is not as wild and exaggerated as some, but he treats the music with great respect, and obtains crisp rhythmically-tight playing from the CBSO culminating in a racy exciting conclusion. Jarvi takes the Symphonic Dances more slowly than usual, and the quieter sections have great atmosphere. Overall, his performance is exceptionally cohesive, emphasising the Symphonic nature of the music. Divertimento, written for the Boston symphony orchestra's centenary, is a highly eclectic 8 movement mixture of styles, including a smoky sexy Blues - wonderful stuff! The recording sounds crisp and clean, with good clarity and definition yet no obvious spotlighting of instruments.

JMH

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



**Friedrich Kuhlau  
(Eight Overtures)**

**Danish National Radio SO  
Michael Schonwandt**  
Chandos CHAN 9648 DDD 68m 55s 

The music of Friedrich Kuhlau (1786-1832) is largely forgotten today, though his works for flute and piano retains a certain popularity with amateur flautists. So it's something of a shock to find that the overtures included here are of such high quality. The music sometimes reminds one of Beethoven and Weber, without being quite like either. For Kuhlau has his own voice and isn't derivative, even if influences can be detected. His music sounds fresh and lively, with clean outlines and transparent textures. It is beautifully crafted and atmospheric, yet strongly outlined and rhythmically buoyant. Perhaps the only thing that's lacking is that extra spark of genius one finds in the music of Beethoven Mendelssohn, and Weber. But there's much to enjoy, especially given performances as polished and committed as these. It's difficult to imagine the music being better played. Michael Schonwandt and the DNRSO attack these works with great enthusiasm, as though it were the greatest music ever written. The playing is scintillating, making the most of Kuhlau's effective orchestration. The Danish radio recordings, made between 1993 and 1998, sound pretty consistent - bright, lively, nicely detailed and immediate - and less reverberant than typical Chandos productions. An absolute winner from every standpoint.

JMH

RECORDING   
MUSIC 

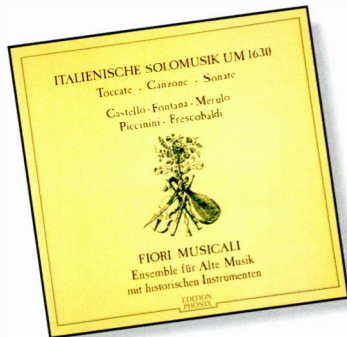
# VINYLL HOLD-OUT

by Reuben Parry

## THE ANALOGUE AUDIO ASSOCIATION

Perhaps it's creeping paranoia, but when I hear of German enthusiasts rallying in pursuit of an ideal, I picture stylishly cut uniforms and an agenda including world domination. Of course if the Analogue Audio Association was a British concern then I'm almost certain it would have been formed more along the lines of that male suburban refuge, The Scale Modeller's Club. To place the future of LPs in the hands of this fellowship, where an anorak is haute couture and a pronounced overbite the norm, would be a frightening proposition. But what of these latest German intentions? Thankfully the Association rank and file have not taken to wearing brown shirts, and their leadership's ambitions only extend to a production of high calibre vinyl rather than munitions.

The Analogue Audio Association was founded back in 1990 at a time when it seemed likely that records would disappear altogether. Its prime objective - to resurrect vinyl in Germany



- is a cause celebre championed by amplifier manufacture, and Association President, Dusan Klimo. At his shoulder, the optimistic Head of

Engineering Wilfried Zahn, describes those dark days as an opportunity to '...give them [LPs] a chance for a new life'.

Zahn's recording, mastering and cutting skills have helped to rejuvenate the market with the Edition Pheonix replica discs and Klimo Edition Open Window original releases. A burgeoning catalogue now has an attractive classical repertoire encompassing choral, chamber and orchestral works. Among them is the complete Beethoven Symphonic cycle conducted by Rene Leibowitz. These tapes come from the RCA New York archives via the German branch of Reader's Digest. Recut on to seven 180gr LPs, this Pallas pressed box set is available through the Association's U.K. distributor, Vinyl Demand, at a realistic £95.00.

Closer to home source material taken from the DGG and ETERNA

vaults has been supplemented by the recordings of smaller independent German producers. The Radio Bremen tape of *Fiori Musicali* (EPH-07) performing works by Castello, Fontana, Merulo, Piccinini and Frescobaldi is a wonderful example of early music played on historic instruments.

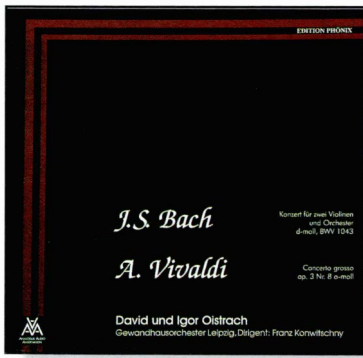
Occasionally the discography turns up unusual or even puzzling releases. The cluster of Carl Orff compositions is one of those surprises, and I asked Wilfried why this music was so well-served. It transpired that these LPs were directed at the German public and, with *Die Kluge*, they also had a 'High End Hit. A very good recording... especially the voices'.

Placing equal emphasis upon popularism, sound quality and musical performance is one of the Association's notable successes. Record sales continue to finance future projects and planned releases include a Duke Ellington disc; one of South American music and an LP version of *Man, Woman and a Double Bass* - Zahn mastered the CD for the Dutch Etcetera label and then obtained the vinyl licence because he 'loved the joyous humour in the music'.

This infectious passion for music has shaped the catalogue. Which leads me to a challenging and remarkably nostalgic LP that perhaps only Zahn would have thought to remaster. ➤+









**Bach: Double Violin Concerto  
BWV 1043**  
**Vivaldi: Concerto Grosso in A minor**  
**Franz Konwitschny conducting  
Gewandhaus Orchestra Leipzig.**  
**David and Igor Oistrakh, violins.**  
EDITION PHEONIX EPH-17

Intriguingly, these enduring and often recorded works are recut from the Oistrakh's earlier, less well-known, 1957 rendition with Europe's eldest orchestra. Zahn's initial enthusiasm for those old mono DGG master tapes stems from the fact that he learnt record craft alongside the original session engineer.

Ignoring the obvious – that these are truly great performances by orchestra and soloists, alike – I was attracted to the provocative gesture sent out by this re-issue. The frequently ridiculed DGG source (Deutsch Grammophon's own LPs are sometimes justly called 'Dodgy Grungephons' because of their poor quality vinyl) is given a new lease of life with this faultless 180g pressing. The mastertapes, like that provided for Speakers Corner's replica disc of Boieldieu's *Harp Concerto* (SLPM 138118), once again confirms the technical expertise that existed. While this monaural

recording should hold no fears. It creates a wonderful sense of warmth and security (both Concertos have the same ambient appeal of a fleece on a frosty Winter's morning) accompanied by a focused and nicely balanced sound which does not unduly spotlight the solo violins. Here the empathic, dextrous and silky-toned playing of the Oistrakhs is magnificent.

It is also, dare I say it, refreshing to hear a performance that is neither taken from the earliest available manuscript nor played on original instruments. Perhaps 'authentic' readings by groups like the Academy of Ancient Music are no longer the Baroque storm troops they once were.

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



**Stravinsky: Pulcinella Suite.  
Circus Polka.  
Capriccio for piano and  
orchestra.**

**Herbert Kegel conducting the  
Dresden Philharmonic**  
**Peter Rosel, piano**  
EDITION PHEONIX EPH-13

*Pulcinella's* indebtedness to Baroque conventions is audible in its rhythmic patterns. The composition is both elegant and derivative. At one time or another the Suite was described as, 'monkeying around with Pergolesi', although whether these fragments were actually written by the Italian is doubtful. Strikingly, *Pulcinella* lacks the obvious bite, wit and acerbity of Stravinsky's other neo-classical works. He does transform the rather tame ideas that lie behind the Suite; putting a rich, balletic spring in its step that glosses over those shortcomings. Even so, I personally prefer Ernest Bloch's treatment of similar historical influences with his *Concerto Grosso Nos. 1 & 2*. The rhythms are sharper and more aggressive. An audiophile pressing of this work is currently not available. If only Classic reissue had the excellent Howard Hanson/Eastman-Rochester album.

The sound of the Suite puts me in something of a quandary. I desperately wanted to like it more than I actually did. The music is attractive and the instrumental detail is reasonably good. Picking out flutes, oboes, cellos and violins was straightforward enough and, with most of the activity taking place in the midrange, subtle dynamic shifts are capably addressed. Yet, because the track is cut at a relatively low level, you will find yourself reaching for the volume controls. This, in turn, also raises the

noise floor of the recording, increasing any extraneous groove intrusiveness.

The Capriccio and Circus Polka are an entirely different matter. They are taken from an earlier, 1978 tape, which might partly explain the disparity between them and the *Pulcinella*. Horst Kunze was the engineer involved on each occasion so it's clear that these neo-classical compositions have been remastered from three inconsistent ETERNA masters. The brands of tape used in the German Democratic Republic varied widely and their storage was clearly not ideal. There are some print throughs on this LP but pre-echo is barely noticeable and the technical skills on display have even successfully handled the high output tapes with no noise reduction.

Crisply cut at a very generous level, Peter Rosel's strident piano entry in the Capriccio dramatically demands, deserves and gains the listener's attention. Raspingly deep thrusts from the supporting lower strings and full-bodied, tightly focused, piano notes are gloriously captured. This and the Polka are real gems that would rate a higher recommendation if they were not coupled to the Suite.

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



Simon and Garfunkel

Bookends

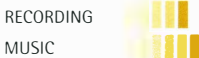
Mobile Fidelity MFSL UDCD 732

Decisions, decisions. You want to re-release a Simon and Garfunkel album, but what do you go for? *Bridge Over Troubled Water* is the obvious choice, but it's a well dodgy recording. MoFi opted for *Bookends*; not such monumental music, but at least it's a reasonable tape.

I think they called it about right. Refreshed via the Gain system, the songs come up all sparkly and new. You get 'Hazy Shade of Winter', 'Mrs Robinson' and my favourite S and G track, 'America'. And the sound is far more natural and open than my rather bright and brittle vinyl version (the boys were never that well served by their recordings). The album also contains ample evidence that, even in 1968, Paul Simon took himself altogether too seriously. 'Voices of Old People' is the kind of pretentious art school drivel that is best destroyed in order to avoid future embarrassment.

If you've got to have an audiophile S and G album, then this is it. Sonically it's perfectly presentable, and the songs are timeless classics. My only real complaint is the short running time – a little over 28 minutes!

Supplier: Vivante  
RG



Count Basie Big Band

Farmers Market Barbecue

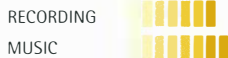
Analogue Productions APJ 023

If, like me, you could never really get to grips with big band jazz, you should try this record. I don't think you'll regret it. You get eight arrangements which spot light the talents of Basie's band – and they are considerable. The Count can choose from the best, and it shows in this outing.

What should you expect? Well forget Glenn Miller. Recorded in 1982, these tracks are all about layered rhythms underpinning showcase solos. The trade mark brass tuttis are used sparingly, for impact and contrast. The solo playing is fabulous, and the subtle prompts and accents of Basie's piano are a wonder of studied restraint, as important for the spaces he leaves as the notes he plays. The insistent opening of 'Way Out Basie' and the meandering solos of 'St. Louis Blues' have survived the indignities of 'test track' status, and continue to weave their musical spell. This recording fascinates with the beauty of the playing rather than sonic spectacle. If only more audiophile releases followed suit.

*Farmers Market Barbecue* is testimony to the quality of the Basie Big Band, and is a stunning reminder of the power of great musicians on a good day.

Supplier: Vinyl Demand  
RG



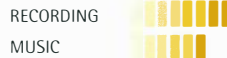
Mussorgsky "The Power of the Orchestra" A Night on Bald Mountain. Pictures at an Exhibition. RPO, Leibowitz.

CHESKY RECORDS RC30

This recording could be likened to a vigorously shaken fizzy drink. Pop the tab back and *The Power of the Orchestra* erupts with coherent musical images cascading throughout the expanse of Walthamstow Town Hall. Dynamic? You bet, and then some!

'The Witch's Sabbath' is accompanied by kettle drum detonations that could wake the dead, while, at the opposite frequency extreme, instruments are wonderfully etched. An excellent midrange has outstanding tonal qualities which fuel and sustain both ends of the register, making this particular 'Night on Bald Mountain' a sonically spectacular one. The Gerhardt/Wilkinson collaboration on 'Pictures' is equally impressive. It is awash with colour and every dynamic nuance imaginable. Tim de Paravicini's all-tube cut from the RCA mastertapes is superb. He has virtually eliminated tape hiss, so turn up the volume and revel in concert hall levels. Rene Leibowitz gives a dignified and easily recommended reading, but Reiner and the Chicago Symphony's definitive performance of 'Pictures' (LSC-2201) outclasses the RPO, while their impassioned interpretation of those frenzied unearthly night-time activities found on *Festival* (LSC-2423) is a shade more exciting. However, neither can match the Chesky's sonic muscle.

Supplier: Vivante  
RP





**Holst The Planets – Suite O.P. 32**

**Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra**

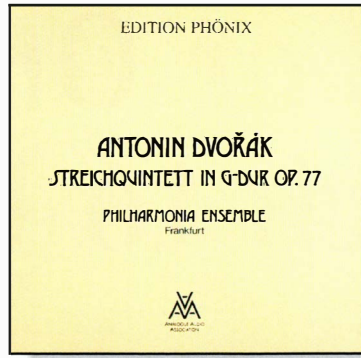
Zubin Mehta, DECCA SXL 6529 **180g**

The Speakers Corner reissue of Holst's highly original and most 'English' of celestial works, comes straight from The Absolute Sound's top seven. Its technical credentials are almost peerless and, to be fair, it's a score that demands and is given some of the finest orchestral sound around.

This is a performance which combines awesome power with the development of a delicate, sensual and translucent string tone, which is faithfully captured by a recording that reveals even the slightest shift in size, scale, tempo and texture.

Reservations? Well, there are two. The original wide band Decca pressing is so vividly natural that it would secure perfect technical marks. This pressing is not in the same class. And Zubin Mehta's honest endeavours (though praiseworthy) do lack the sparkle of Boult's literal reading (EMI ASD 2301); nor have they the refreshing creativity that Previn elicits from his traditional performance with the LSO (EMI ASD 3002). These LPs merit consideration because their sound is impressive and both are readily available, secondhand, at a fraction of the price for this 180gr replica disc. What price the TAS list?

Supplier: Vivante  
 RP  
 RECORDING   
 MUSIC



**Dvorak: String Quintet in G Major OP.77**

**Philharmonia Ensemble, Frankfurt**

EDITION PHEONIX EPH-02 **180g**

Do not miss the opportunity to own this LP. Its unadorned, flesh-coloured sleeve barely hints at the pleasures to be found within. The recording of the Philharmonia Ensemble, Frankfurt, is exceptional. An independent Hanover based label, Thorofon, taped this chamber work in November 1982 and Wilfried Zahn was the original session engineer.

However, for those that are unfamiliar with this early lyrical music, the *Quintet* is a sensitive and atmospheric dialogue where instruments express many differing moods. Spirit, passion, indecision, effusiveness and melancholy are all aspects of the human condition teased out by the Philharmonia players - culminating in the joyous uninhibited dancing of the Allegro assai.

This emotional rollercoaster, its dynamic shifts between crescendo and diminuendo, is wonderfully reproduced. The location of each instrumentalist within the soundstage was never in doubt. Scale, imaging and balance are naturally lifelike - violin timbres spinningly so - in this sympathetic and idiomatic rendition that even outstrips the Decca account by Members of the Vienna Octet. I can't think of any more superlatives to heap upon this record. The *Quintet* is a revelation.

Supplier: Vinyl Demand  
 RP  
 RECORDING   
 MUSIC



**Italian Violin Music 1600 - 1750**

**Chiara Banchini, Gerhart Darmstadt, Alfred Gross**

Edition Open Window OW 002 **120g**

Choosing a single LP to represent the 'Open Window' series has not been easy, but I felt this stylishly played and beautifully recorded selection of Baroque vignettes to be a persuasive candidate.

This may be one of the earliest Klimo/Zahn collaborations (1986) but its values are fundamentally correct. Modelling the production as closely as possible to an old DECCA session: Zahn used three vintage Neumann omnidirectional mics to harvest a rich, intoxicating and sun-ripened fruit. Whereas the Dvorak *Quintet* has a "bite your tongue" immediacy; this resonant, intimate church acoustic allows the violin's timbres to caress a Leoni or Uccellini *Sonata*. Banchini's seductive tone then teases, and explores like a deliberately drawn out kiss.

The Teldec cut (as with those DECCA antecedents) has been released on 'standard' weight vinyl. In company with many other engineers, Zahn privately admits that a pressing tipping the scales around the 140-150gr mark is the optimum for a record. On this showing it's hard to disagree with this slim and sexy approach to music.

Supplier: Vinyl Demand  
 RP  
 RECORDING   
 MUSIC

# Reissue or Original? Which to buy!

by Jimmy Hughes

They're known as Label Snobs. Collectors who select secondhand LPs more on the basis of their antique status than for performance or sound quality. You see them in specialist shops, looking for Shaded Dogs or Deccas with big black labels, as though this were all that mattered. Don't get me wrong. Like any keen collector, I'd much sooner buy an original copy of a disc than a reissue. But only because I like old sleeves and dated artwork. It's not because I automatically think the original issue will always offer the very best sound quality.

If you select an old LP then compare copies of different vintage, very often the original doesn't offer the best sound or cleanest pressing quality - though it would probably command the highest price in a specialist secondhand shop. Take either the cheap Fontana or Contour reissues of Dorati's complete performance of Stravinsky's Firebird ballet with the LSO, for example; these sound audibly better than the Mercury original! Yet they're worth nothing, while the original is much sought-after.

So don't ignore reissues because they're less collectable. Some reissues sound vastly superior to the originals, being better cut, and pressed on quieter vinyl. Those of you who've

had your fingers burnt buying rare expensive early EMI, RCA, Mercury, or Decca LPs that haven't lived up to the hype will know what I mean! If you're buying an LP for its antique value, that's one thing; if you're buying for sound and/or performance, that's something else.

The trouble is, it's difficult to know how a record will sound before you play it. With experience you can tell much by looking at the grooves. But it takes time, and even then you can be fooled. For example, some early Decca LPs look as though cutting levels are low because the grooves don't seem to be especially deep or heavily modulated. Yet this is deceptive; often these LPs are cut at generous levels. It's just that the grooves don't look as squiggly as some later copies.

Also, in my experience, one's opinion about what is and isn't a good disc depends very much on your hi-fi system - tonal balance especially. It's interesting to read contemporary reviews of LPs that are today highly prized for their sound quality - Mercury, for instance. The old EMG Monthly Letter was often very critical of Mercury, which means that either their playback system didn't cope with the bright, forward, Mercury balance, or the sound simply wasn't to the reviewer's taste.

Speaking personally, I've found my own opinions varying over the years as my system has changed. In some cases, LPs I once thought sounded great are no longer top of my favourites list. While others that initially seemed disappointing now impress greatly. Take, for example, Lorin Maazel's 1964 Decca recording of Tchaikovsky's fifth symphony with the Vienna Philharmonic - SXL 6085. I bought a new copy in the mid '70s and was very impressed with the vintage Decca sound - bright, open, clear, and very tactile.

Then, in the early '80s, I found a good secondhand '60s copy which sounded even sharper and more immediate. With the Linn Asak cartridge I had at the time, this early copy sounded fabulous; much more open and alive than my '70s copy, let alone the less vibrant late '70s Decca Jubilee reissue. But the Asak was a dull lazy-sounding cartridge (at least it was after a few months use), and it definitely performed best with very immediate-sounding LPs cut at a high level.

Towards the end of the '80s, using better cartridges that got more detail off records, my once-prized '60s copy of Maazel's Tchaik 5 now sounded raw and over-bright, while the later, less bright, '70s pressing



## Matrix Numbers Explained

The matrix number of a disc is stamped in the vinyl near the centre label. In some cases the number will be the same as the record's catalogue number. Deutsche Grammophon and Philips adopt this arrangement. With Decca and EMI, the number will be completely different to the catalogue number. With Lorin Maazel's Tchaikovsky fifth symphony (SXL 6085), the matrix numbers are ZAL-6127 for side one, and ZAL-6128 for side two. At the end of this number is a dash symbol followed by a number and letter - eg, ZAL-6127-5F. This indicates 'cut' 5, mastered by engineer F. ZAL indicates a stereo recording, with mono LPs coded ARL. With the LP centre label the right way up to read, the ZAL matrix number is usually found at the six O'clock position. At three O'clock is a letter that designates the stamper. Known as the Buckingham code, the letters B.U.C.K.I.N.G.H.A.M. indicate the stamper used. At nine O'clock is a number (1, 2, 3, etc) which indicates the mother from which the stamper was taken. So, if you found a copy of Maazel's Tchaikovsky 5 with a 1F matrix number, a B letter at three O'clock, and a 1 at nine O'clock,

you'd have the earliest pressing produced. Unlike the matrix number, which is fairly easy to read, the Buckingham code and associated number are often difficult to see. My early '60s copy of Maazel's Tchaik 5 has a G Buckingham letter, with a 1 number for both sides.

LPs pressed in Decca's New Malden factory always have the matrix number written in a straight line - as though the number was applied by a punch. Some early '50s mono LPs have a curved matrix number. However, when Polygram took over Decca in 1980, they scrapped the New Malden plant and switched LP pressing to Holland or Polygram's UK factory in Essex. Many Dutch pressed Decca LPs have 'straight' stamped matrix numbers, but some have a 'curved' number very close to the centre label that's often hard to decipher. You may find LPs with a straight matrix on one side, and curved on the other. In such cases the two sides often look quite different, and sound dissimilar - sometimes markedly so. Some Decca LPs of the early '80s have hand-written matrix numbers, and while generalisations are dangerous I'd say the sound of these LPs is usually less good than a typical Decca - the grooves look shallow, and cutting levels are low.



► was better balanced and preferable! Which is the more faithful to the original master tape is perhaps a moot point. It's known that some early disc cutting heads had a rather peaky frequency response, giving a bright forward sound. But many enthusiasts actually like this, even though it isn't completely natural.



For perfect results your LP playback system needs to be absolutely compatible with the record being reproduced. But can one turntable/arm/cartridge combination be all things to all men? You probably know that LPs are periodically recut. Titles that spend a long time in the catalogue might be recut thirty or forty times, and each time the sound will change. Quite apart from the use of different tape playback machines and disc cutters, the rake angle at which LPs were cut changed from 15° to 20° at some point in the late '60s. So, for perfect results, you should alter cartridge vta for each disc!

But we're stirring up a hornet's nest now. Records are recut for any number of reasons, and that's how it is.

For example, the matrix number of my mid 1970s copy of Maazel's Tchaikovsky 5th is 13 on side one and 7 on side two. Because side one is over 28 minutes long, the cutting engineers possibly had trouble getting a good transfer, and may therefore have recut the side several times before they were happy. My '60s copy is 7 on side one and 5 on side 2.

It's possible there are lower numbers than these (a '1' on both sides would

obviously indicate the first cut), but in this case there may be no matrix 1. Quite possibly, Decca needed seven attempts before they cut side one to a standard that satisfied the producer.

So matrix 7 is actually the 'first' in terms of being released to the public, all earlier ones having been scrapped. It does seem that longish LP sides caused problems in those days, and most of the Decca sides that were constantly recut are around the thirty minute mark. I believe long-side disc stampers wore out more quickly, hence the need to recut.

Of course it's also true that some LPs stayed in the catalogue for years and were never recut. But much would depend on how well the disc sold. Clearly, if you pressed-up 10,000 copies and only sold 2,000 there'd be no need to recut with 8,000 still in the warehouse! However, most runs of classical LPs seemed to be fairly short. Therefore there wouldn't be massive stocks of unsold discs lying about somewhere.

As a general rule, with a Decca LP issued in the early '60s and subsequently recut over the years, the sound grows smoother and mellower with later transfers. Early copies almost always have the sharpest leanest sound, but are sometimes rather brash and bass light. This brashness may be groove damage caused by stylus wear. Many early Decca LPs would not have taken kindly to being played on the primitive groove mashers of the time; indeed, many tax the tracking ability of even the best modern pickups.

In the early '60s, a Magnetic cartridge (almost any magnetic cartridge) was aspirational; many enthusiasts were only able to afford a Ceramic pickup like the Decca Deram. These cartridges were not gentle with records; if a disc cut at a high level was played twenty or thirty times, significant groove damage could easily occur.

Also, it wasn't unusual for cartridges to have a sapphire stylus with a playing life of 50 to 100 hours; If used beyond this time, the stylus would become blunt and cause lasting damage, even if the LP was only played once. When buying old LPs secondhand, there's always a chance the disc will be shot, despite looking immaculate.

Groove damage can be very difficult to detect, and sometimes it's impossible to see anything wrong. Ironically, the condition of the outer sleeve is sometimes a more reliable guide to the condition of the LP inside. If the sleeve is torn and dog-eared, the record hasn't been loved and cared for by a fastidious collector. However, if the outer sleeve looks new, despite being 30+ years old, chances are the disc inside will be in immaculate condition too, and perhaps hardly played



# Competition

Win **£1000** worth  
of audiophile LPs  
or CDs of your  
choice from



Everybody runs competitions. They're good for the magazine, and good for the company that provides the prizes. And in theory, they're good for the readers who get to win them. But how often does the winner actually want the pair of speakers or amplifier on offer? More often than not, the prizes turn up for sale in the secondhand columns a month later, as the "lucky winner" tries to convert them into something he really wants.

So we made a decision. Any prizes we give away will be things that people really want, which means introducing an element of choice. And to make sure they go to a deserving winner who will really appreciate them, there'll be no patsy questions either.

Which brings us to our first competition. It's Issue 1 and we wanted to offer something really special, so we convinced those nice people at Vinyl Demand to donate a £1000 record voucher. Unfortunately (for you) they've also insisted that the winner work a bit before he collects it. But then, that much music on audiophile records or CDs has got to be worth some effort.

You'll find three sets of questions on pop, classical and jazz music. You only answer one set (whichever you know the most about). And you've got two months to research the questions, because the entry form and tie-break appear in Issue 2. Happy hunting. And remember, one set of questions and don't send anything yet.

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## Classical Questions

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- 1) Which English composer's second symphony carried Shelley's lines - 'Rarely, Rarely Comest Thou Spirit of Delight'?
- 2) How many numbered Beethoven piano sonatas are there?
- 3) Name Mozart's last opera
- 4) Which American composer said 'Prizes are for boys; I'm all grown up now!' when his third symphony won a Pulitzer?
- 5) Who wrote *Curlew River*?
- 6) For which city did Haydn write his last twelve symphonies?
- 7) Which minimalist composer wrote the opera *Einstein on the Beach*?
- 8) Which spider provided a living for 16th C. musicians of a medical bent?
- 9) How many complete cycles of the Beethoven symphonies did Herbert von Karajan record?
- 10) Which Hungarian composer invented the symphonic poem?
- 11) Who succeeded Eugene Ormandy as Chief conductor of the Philadelphia orchestra?
- 12) What do Berlioz, Schumann, Liszt, Wagner, and Busoni have in common?
- 13) Who wrote a libretto about "the greatest logger in history"?
- 14) Which Austrian composer could rightly be regarded as the father of the string quartet and the symphony?
- 15) What does the term Col Legano direct a string player to do?
- 16) In 1983 which pressing house forced EMI to admit that they'd done a better job than EMI themselves?
- 17) Richard Wagner married a famous composer's daughter - which one?
- 18) Which record label was the first to licence the reissue of RCA's Living Stereo back catalogue on audiophile pressings?
- 19) Which English composer was killed in action in Libya in 1942?
- 20) How many Preludes and Fugues make up J S Bach's Well tempered Clavier books 1 and 2?

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## Jazz Questions

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- 1) Who was responsible for Billie Holiday's nickname 'Lady Day'?
- 2) Who was the 'kid from red bank'?
- 3) Which year was the jazz samba boom?
- 4) Which 1969 album successfully merged jazz with rock textures, paving the way for fusion?
- 5) Which label was founded by Alfred Lion and Francis Wolf?
- 6) Buckshot LeFonque; which member of a talented musical family heads this band?
- 7) Who took an escalator in '71?
- 8) Which brother of a famous guitarist was the first jazz musician to record with an electric bass?
- 9) Steely Dan's *Rikki Don't Lose that Number* borrowed from which great jazz track?
- 10) This pianist's use of long pauses once inspired a reviewer to wonder whether he'd left the studio. Which pianist?
- 11) The world's best-selling solo jazz piano album?
- 12) One of this great saxophonist's best albums is named after a Rodgers and Hammerstein tune. Who and what?
- 13) Bill Evans 'Peace Piece' is based on the modes which became which famous Miles Davis number?
- 14) Who took 'The Road To Saint Ives' in 1990?
- 15) Which Baltimore born guitarist fuses jazz, rock, pop, country, film music and any other influences he can lay his hands on?
- 16) In 1980, Art Pepper recorded a live album in the guise of which quartet?
- 17) Sample, Felder, Hooper and Henderson. But which two band names?
- 18) Which was the first black New Orleans band to be recorded?

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## Pop/Rock Questions

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- 1) Who are the Glimmer Twins?
- 2) Who wrote under the names of Nanker and Phelge?
- 3) What is Elvis Presley's real name?
- 4) Which famous Country/Rock guitarist toured with Elvis, Emmylou and Rick?
- 5) Who played bass on Booker T's 'Green Onions'?
- 6) Who is Roberta Flack singing about on 'Killing Me softly'?
- 7) His short lived stint playing piano for Bobby Vee gave no hint of stardom to come.
- 8) Who wrote the Status Quo anthem 'Rocking All Over The World'?
- 9) Which two members of the East Enders cast (past and present) have had U.K. No1 hits?
- 10) On *Abbey Road*, which three guitarists feature on the instrumental break between 'Carry That Weight' and 'The End'?
- 11) Who is McKinley Morganfield?
- 12) Name Jim Morrison's alter ego.
- 13) Who is Richard Penniman?
- 14) What group connects Dusty and Liza?
- 15) What musician features in Francis Ford Coppolla's films 'Dracula' and 'One from the Heart'?
- 16) 'Silence of the Lambs' and 'Wild at Heart': two movies, one musician?
- 17) Which canine hit was produced by Apollo C Vermouth, and who was he?
- 18) Where did the name Procol Harum come from?
- 19) Who received a platinum disc for his record 'The Rosary'?
- 20) What was the first video shown on U.S. MTV?

## And remember...

...only answer one set of questions. You won't get brownie points for doing the lot. Nobody likes a smart ass! The competition is open to anybody except employees of Hi-Fi+ or Vinyl Demand, and we will only accept entries on the proper form. Oh, and good luck.



# Audio Smorgasbord

by Roy Gregory

Normally, this section of the magazine will concentrate on capsule reviews of accessories. But being as this is our first outing, I thought that putting a variety of bits and pieces into a realistic context might be a good starting place. Then, Reuben moved house, which was far too good a chance to miss. So here they are, those....

## New Room Blues

Moving house is always going to be stressful, but it pales into insignificance compared to the terrors of a new listening room. Judging from the doom laden tales I was hearing from Roob, his previous occupant must have used Wes Craven as an architect. Despite extensive telephonic counselling ("Audio Samaritans are go!") it was clear that a long range cure was out of the question. Unfortunately, solving this hi-fi nightmare was going to involve a lengthy laying on of hands, doubtless accompanied by appropriate chanting (well, lots of swearing anyway), and the obligatory sacrifice or two. I say unfortunately because this particular cleansing would involve a 500 mile round trip. Never mind, Roob lives in the Peak District so I'll console myself with a bit of serious biking.

Suitably flushed after a quick stint on two wheels, all that remained was

to ensure that this was an auspicious occasion. This in turn depended on events at The Rec. Well, the boys done good, and that alongside the sheep's entrails I'd inadvertently examined earlier in the day, convinced me that the time was right to proceed.

## What Was Done

Now, regardless of what anybody might tell you, setting up a hi-fi system is down to the systematic application of experience. There is no black magic involved - just things that work and things that don't. We might not be able to explain why they work, but if they're audibly beneficial, do 'em anyway.

Roob's system is fundamentally well balanced, and not inexpensive. Having heard it before, I was shocked by the lifeless, smeared and uninteresting mess it was now producing. We agreed what it was he was after, and I fetched my boxes of kit from the car. The brief, obviously, was to sort the sound, but to do so without replacing any of the main components. However, I had a bit of latitude in that the last round of upgrades was a while ago, so peripherals were fair game.

The starting point is always a clean sheet, so my first action having listened to the system was to reduce it to

a stack of components. The list of equipment runs like this :

Michell Gyro + GyroPower PSU  
Zeta Tonearm + Cardus Arm Lead  
Kiseki Agate Ruby ( standing in for a vDH EMT 1b, away being rebuilt )  
Target Wall Shelf

Pioneer PDS901 + Trichord Clock mod.

Michell Iso / Hera phono stage

Michell Argo / Hera line stage

Counterpoint SA12 hybrid power amp


Audioplan Kontrast 11 Loudspeakers

Chord Solid, Cobra and  
Rumour cables

That's about £9000 in round numbers, and I've heard a Rotel starter system giving more enjoyable results. One of the really worrying things was that the CD player sounded better than the record player !

The good news was that Roob's listening room is a) dedicated to hi-fi, and b) sparsely furnished. As a rule it's a lot easier to tame a lively room than to try and inject a bit of life into a dull one. From here on, whilst the actions taken are specific to this particular room and equipment, the general approach is perfectly applicable to any system, regardless of price. I'm not going to bore you with minutely observed descriptions of each step's sonic impact. Rather, read it as a total approach to system set-up or spring cleaning. Here we go....

## Where To Start

Get rid of everything you can. Empty the room of non-essential items. Having done that I started with the equipment racks. The target wall shelf was positioned at the  $\frac{3}{4}$  point on 

the right hand side of the room. Ideally I'd prefer it at the 2/7ths point, but moving it was out of the question due to problems of fixing it to the wall. Apparently not an experience Roob wanted to repeat. I satisfied myself with replacing the upward facing spikes with nice new sharp ones, getting the Torlyte shelf absolutely level, and cranking down on the lock nuts. Likewise, the Target rack and amp stand had their spikes checked and replaced where necessary. Everything was set-up absolutely level, and with the lock nuts nice and tight. The CD player sits on a Bright Star sand box, whilst the Argo has another Torlyte board, so these were placed on the appropriate shelves.

With the racks nice and solid it was time to attack the turntable. I totally dismantled the Gyro and immediately discovered one source of its poor performance. The inverted main bearing screws into the underside of the sub-chassis, and during the move, this had worked loose! I tightened it right up, adding a smear of Loctite Blue for good measure. This is definitely something that all Gyro owners should keep an eye on. Before I rebuilt the deck I persuaded Roob to try the Orbe upgrades. He was more than happy with this idea, part of which involves cladding the webbed underside of the sub-chassis with a mastic damping compound. Use rubber gloves. You'll never get this stuff off your fingers! The spring bolts were screwed tightly home and the adjustable feet tightened onto them. Although the feet can be used to level the deck, it sounds much better if they're locked in place (hence the time spent getting the wall shelf absolutely spot on). The motor pulley was cleaned with a match head soaked in iso-propanol, and the housing torqued down.

With all the potential rattles taken care of, the bearing was charged with oil and the sub-chassis lowered over the springs. A new record spindle (to accept the Orbe's screw down clamp) was inserted into the bearing sleeve, and this and the new Orbe platter put in place and fixed down. The arm mounting bolts were checked for tightness and then the arm board bolted in place. The Gyro suspension is best left to someone familiar with it, but is really just a case of trial and error. With a record clamped in place and neither the belt or arm cable attached, level the sub-chassis. Then, by twisting the springs on their mounts, adjust until you have clearance around the motor housing and a nice even bounce with the whole sub-chassis going up and down as a unit. That's the time consuming bit. A new belt, re-dressed arm cable and re-tensioned lid and the turntable was ready to rock. I didn't attack the arm due to the imminent return of the EMT 1b, but I did check the cartridge set up, which was spot on.

With the turntable set-up complete, it was time to power up the rest of the system. I dispensed with the GyroPower, replacing it with the upgraded QC PSU. The rest of the equipment was positioned in the rack and hooked up. In a recent review



Roob was mightily impressed with the Chord Chorus interconnect, so we substituted it right through the system. The new room also allowed us to lose a meter of speaker cable, so out went the Rumour to be replaced by a set of the new Chord Odyssey bi-wires. All socketry was cleaned. I used a little Audio Technica set consisting of fluid and excellent fibrous tools, but it's sadly no longer available. Never mind, there are plenty of alternatives. Having finally got a nice coherent cable loom in place, it was time to connect everything to the mains. But first I removed the bottom shelf from the Target rack so that the large Hera power supplies could sit on the floor, thus preventing any vibration from their transformers reaching the other equipment.

## The Mains

When you listen to a hi-fi system it is really the mains that you're hearing. Yet most systems are simply connected to any old wall socket that happens to be available. A separate spur is considered the height of sophistication. Fortunately, some companies are aware of the damage the average mains supply can do. Having witnessed the effect of Audioplan's mains cabling and filters at the Ramada show, so was Roob. Luckily for him Audioplan's Thomas Kuhn is a confirmed vinyl junkie. As Reuben owns multiple copies of rare records that other collectors would happily sell their children into slavery just to borrow, there was obviously room for a bit of barter. The outcome was a set of basic mains accessories for the Parry music centre. I won't upset the knowledgeable by revealing just exactly what went the other way. ▶

▶ The Audioplan mains set consists of the following :

The Fine Filter 11- a sophisticated choke and RF filter designed to smooth and clean the mains to all but the biggest systems. Individual versions of unlimited capacity, built into a mains lead are available for Krell owners !

The PowerStar - a seven way, star earthed mains distribution block.

PowerCords - a special mains cable designed specifically for audio applications.



produces dramatic results, and this time was no exception.



The various elements of the mains system were installed, ensuring that mains leads ran separate to signal cables. Where they had to cross it was at right angles and well spaced to minimise interference. The SA12, QC, and PDS901 all had captive mains leads, so these were chopped off short and fitted with in-line IEC sockets. Once everything was connected, the system was left running for 24 hours to settle it down and burn in the cables. I used the Purist Audio Design system conditioning disc for this, although there are other (cheaper but less effective) alternatives.

Standing between the speakers with my back to the wall, I slowly advanced into the room repeating "one, one, one..." After about two feet the sound of my voice changed quite noticeably. We marked this point and I continued to advance until the tone of my voice changed back, about another three feet. This gives you the front and back limits for the speaker baffles. Start with the speakers central between the two points and pointing straight ahead. (Obviously this doesn't apply to speakers which are designed to sit with their backs to the wall !). Get out the tape measure and make sure that they are both the same distance from the back wall, and evenly spaced from the side walls. The gap between the speakers should be about 90% of the distance to the listener's ears. That's your starting point, and it's worth marking it so that you can return to it later if need be.

### Speaker Positioning

Before doing anything with the speakers I removed the spikes, making them easier to slide around in small steps. Then I took an Allen key to the drive units, really tightening them home. This simple step often



Now you simply move the speakers forward or back an inch at a time until they give you the most even bass response. I find plucked acoustic bass backed up with frequency sweeps to be the easiest way to hear what's going on. I usually

rely on the Analogue Productions gold CD of This One's For Blanton, but everyone will have their own favourite. By the end you'll be shifting a centimetre at a time, and you'll be grateful you took the spikes off !

Once you've got the bass right, adjust for toe in and lateral spacing. You need a good acoustic recording for this, with a nice coherent soundstage. Alternatively , you can cheat by using the LEDR tests (available, along with frequency sweeps, on the Hi-Fi News Test CD 111). These computer generated bleeps allow you to map the sound stage with accuracy and repeatability. I wouldn't be with out them.

### Acoustic Treatment

As I said, Roob's listening room is quite live, with virtually no furnishings above waist height. Time for RoomTunes. These small "cushions" are designed to make the speakers see a larger room by dispersing pressure nodes in the room corners. Despite their small size they are remarkably effective - so much so that you have to be careful not to over do it. Adding one or two pads at a time and listening carefully, we arrived at an arrangement of four Tuning Strips in the corners, a pair of Echo Tunes front and side, and a pair of Comer Tunes at the top front. A final check with the LEDR tests allowed us to spread the speakers by a couple of inches. The improvement in soundstage proportion, size and focus, along with a more natural and integrated treble, made a huge difference to the system. ▶



► Final Touches - the free, freaky and hard to explain

Finally I showed Roob a few tricks and techniques that I've picked up over the years. Most of these are free, and the effects vary with the situation. Try them if you like, it costs nothing (except your dignity!).

I started by putting an Audioplan Powerplant 100 on the CD player - which really improved the sound of records!

The driver valves in the SA12 were treated to Sicomin valve dampers, and the amp was placed on three RoomTunes Tone Cones. A VPI brick was placed immediately above the mains transformer.

I also treated the system with Nordost's Eco 3 Static Dispersant, a spray which can be used on every thing from cables and equipment to CD's and Record labels (make sure you read the instructions!). Highly recommended.

A large fern was moved from the back corner of the room and placed behind and

between the speakers, giving the music an increased sense of air and life.

The existing lampshade was binned, if only on grounds of taste, and replaced with a large paper globe, which helped tame a residual slap echo and a trace of fizz and



smearing on cymbals.

I demagnetised the system using the XLO Test and Demag CD, and a Gryphon Black Exorcist on the cartridge, resulting in a noticeable gain in clarity and focus.

Finally, I placed two large speaker spikes on top of the speakers, with another improvement in focus and dynamic clout. Before you scoff, Sam Tellig writing in Stereophile proposes a similar tweak using coins, and one American speaker manufacturer actually produces accessory cones for the tops of his speakers. I could tell you that it works better on shiny speakers, but that would really upset people.



Now do it yourself - Well Sort Of

Much of what I've described is free and the kind of thing that any hi-fi enthusiast should be perfectly capable of doing themselves. The new cables and mains set-up meant that I was saved the task of cleaning all those additional connections, but they will need doing too if you're keeping your existing ones. Once it comes to playing with turntables and the like, talk to your dealer (it's times like this when having a decent relationship with your local retailer really comes into its own!). Likewise, you may well be able to borrow things like de-mag discs, the PAD system conditioning disc and other set up tools which you can't justify owning.

Listen to your dealer. I have used products which are available to me and I know will work with Reuben's equipment. Your dealer will do the same. Assuming of course that he sold you your system, he should know the equipment inside out, and what works with it. As an example, whilst I used the Audioplan mains

leads, alternatives exist. The Audio Council in Cheadle (0161-428-7887) have a set of distribution blocks and leads which work an absolute treat on Naim systems. The bottom line is, don't be surprised if your dealer suggests products or ideas that I haven't mentioned.

In this case I spent a fair amount of money one way or another, but it was all on items that I would consider essential in a system of this price and quality. Was it worth it? I'll let Reuben tell you that, but if this was a makeover on day time TV, then it would be akin to transforming Dot Cotton into Gwyneth Paltrow!

Where The Money Went

Michell QC power supply for Gyrodeck **£399-00**

Orbe upgrade kit (Platter, Spindle, Clamp, Mastic) **£285-00**

Audioplan PowerStar 7-way Star earthed Mains Block **£250-00**

Audioplan Finefilter 11 **£300-00**

Audioplan Mainsleads 1.5m **£65-00 each**

Audioplan Powerplant 100 **£250-00**

\*Remember, Roob did a deal for the Audioplan pieces.

Chord Chorus Interconnect (per 1m pair) **£185-00**

Chord Odyssey Speaker Cable **£17-00**

(per mono meter, plus £30 single wire termination, £40 bi-wire termination)

RoomTunes Tune Pack (10 Pieces) **£200-00**

(Both Audioplan and RoomTunes equipment are supplied by Absolute Analogue.)

From this you can subtract trade-in prices for the Chord Solid, Cobra and Rumour cables, and the GyroPower PSU.



# Audio Smorgasbord – Part 2

## The Long And Winding Road....

— by Reuben Parry —

Roy's approach offers a fascinating blend of the scientific with that subtle dash of the "Madame Arcati" about it. His thorough and occasionally time consuming procedures, unceremoniously cast out the many snarling demons that have tormented music reproduction since moving house. Whatever your own Hi-Fi horror stories, be prepared to put in the hours; work through the problems, and exercise a modicum of patience because the improvements are quite sublime.

Impatience is your worst enemy. Tweaking any system can be a pain in the backside. We all have our personal dislikes, but on this occasion my bete-noir was chopping mains leads and then fitting awkward, uncooperative IEC male/female connectors. I uttered incantations which were far from mantra-like! When you get that irritated it's simply time to stop. Consequently, we spent some eight or nine hours (spread over three evenings) before the system and the room performed to its potential. There is no dictum for exactly how long the "tuning" process will take - you will be the sole arbiter and judge of when things begin to sound inherently correct.

However, at every stage of this process it's important to maintain

a musical perspective. We returned to a number of familiar recordings as each new item of kit; cable run; accessory or acoustic treatment was introduced. Having established clear objectives at the outset, these excerpts were selected to ensure that a quick and effective evaluation of the sound could be made. When minor adjustments were needed, or just thought to be worth trying, re-evaluation was then straight forward. The tracks we used are indicative and I'm sure you'll have your own preferences but these, remember, were tools chosen with a specific purpose in mind.

*The Thunder and Lightning Polka* (Strauss Waltzes, RCA LSC-2500) provided ample opportunities to review bass extension, dynamics and soundstage development.

*True Love Ways* (Legend, MCA Records MCMD 7003) is one of the few great digitally remastered LPs, and Steve Hoffmann's technical wizardry on this track should reveal a focused, naturally unforced, vocal quality in this intimate Buddy Holly studio recording.

*Take The "A" Train* (Still Harry After All These Years, SHEFFIELD LAB 11) to test out the top end with Harry James' spiky big band cymbal splashes, trumpets and trombones.

*Birth of Kije* (Prokofiev, Lieutenant Kije CHESKY RC 10) for accurately establishing the position, size, timbre, integration and tonal characteristics of instruments.

*Radio Fragile* and *Drive-In Movies And Dashboard Lights* (Storms, ALTO AA004) disclose the expressive nature of Nanci Griffith's voice; its sense of rhythm and timing.



*Airhead* (Aliens Ate My Buick, EMI Records MTL 1020) was played for fun!

The upgrades and co-ordinated tuning techniques operated in conjunction with one another and their cumulative effects significantly enhance almost every aspect of music making. Overall, a song like 'Radio Fragile' is now far more immediate. Its translucent, detailed and highly focused images flow naturally throughout an expansive soundstage. Bass lines are considerably tighter and extend much further down into the recording, providing a bedrock that lends a greater rhythmic

► coherence to proceedings. While Nanci's distinctive lead vocals, the supporting harmonies and all the individual instruments of the Blue Moon Orchestra (be they piano, drums, synth, acoustic or electric guitars) share a richer tonal palette.

Conventional expenditure on the Orbe modifications and a new QC power supply for the Gyro Dec should be considered an essential step up by all existing Michell owners. The rewards in this area were apparent right from the start with greatly improved dynamics, bass extension and rhythmic sense. On my Chesky LP the tonal balance was exact and the retrieval of low-level information far better than previously heard. Crisp creeping drum beats from Kije's Birth had wonderful poise and timing, and an injection of life into the bottom end of the recording strengthened the lower strings – giving them real presence and bite. The Chord Company's articulate and expressive Chorus and Odyssey cabling retained an iron grip on all these images. None of this information is allowed to slip through its fingers and a coherent and convincing musical performance is delivered as a consequence.

Audioplan's Powerstar, Powerplant, Finefilter and Mainsleads take records and CDs into another dimension. Its only when these devices are introduced to the listening room that you realise how deficient domestic electrical supplies are. The Mains (dirtier than your average English beach) had combined with all that digital mush thrown out by the PDS 901 player to clog up the soundstage. This molasses-like state made music seem

sluggish, dull and uninvolved. A trend that was to be dramatically reversed by these main accessories. Replaying 'True Love Ways' highlighted the differences. There's a much lower noise floor - extraneous background noise simply disappeared and (without touching the Argo) speaker volume level increased! Dynamics also took a huge step forward - Buddy Holly's emphasis on a particular word, or phrase, was clearly delineated in a recording which now had phenomenal transparency.



A perceptible sense of "blackness" surrounded his voice and separated all the accompanying instruments, while advances in terms of rhythmic conviction were heard in the intonation, timing and natural delivery of this ballad.

The last major influence were those amazing Room Tunes. They perform a marvellous conjuring trick to totally suspend belief.

I know exactly where my room's back and side walls are located – I can see them, and I can touch them. But when Tuning Strips, Echo and Corner Tunes were applied your awareness of these boundaries alters. Spin a record. Close your eyes (because visual stimulation tends to dominate and mask the other senses, in this case, hearing) and listen. After a few bars of the 'Thunder and Lightning Polka' it was clear to me that the effect of room boundaries on music presentation need no longer be of relevance. The soundstage was cavernous. I literally had no idea where the real rear wall was. At least, I thought I knew, until a thunderous bass drum detonated far, far, far back in Orchestra hall where its

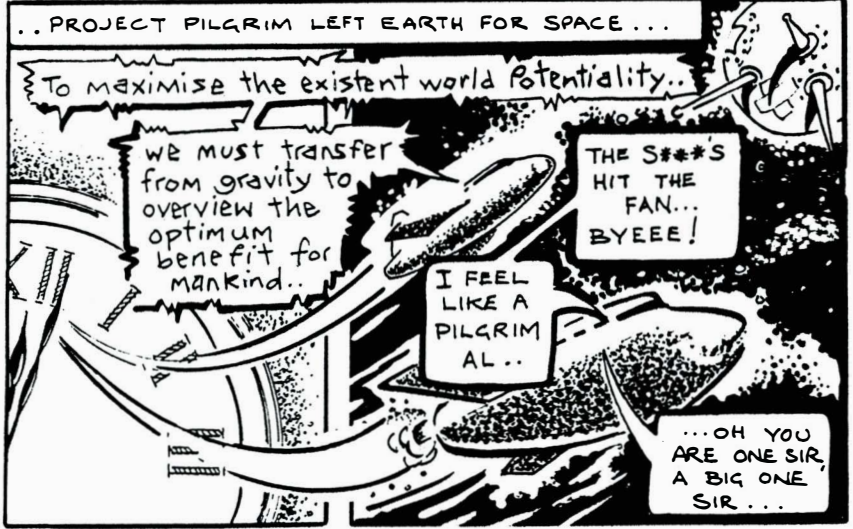
shock waves and through-the-floor dynamics threw me into confusion. The boundaries of the recorded acoustic had over-taken the familiar limits of my listening room. Soundstage spread is equally impressive. Brass and wind instruments, kettle and snare drums, begin way beyond the speaker cabinets – their sharply defined and natural timbres rolling across the platform. Having already established an improvement in the focus, weight, depth and precision of instruments at the bottom end with earlier modifications to the system, this opening out of the recording gave orchestral music an appropriate scale and impact. Room Tunes are a superior and flexible treatment that is neither environment or equipment dependant, and I wouldn't be without them.

Finally, do not neglect the role of "the free, freaky and hard to explain"..... These miscellaneous upgrades (especially the inexpensive ones) can enhance even the most modest set-up. I particularly like the experiment with house plants and putting spikes on top of speakers. They work. Oh! And don't forget the lampshade. A recent trip to Habitat's lighting department had me speculating on the acoustic properties of a 90cm lantern. It's a good job I've got high ceilings because that evening there I was, Atlas-like, hanging this massive paper globe. My £9.95 was well-spent. Returning to Harry James & Co in *Take The "A" Train* confirmed that it's a case of "the bigger, the better" in my house. The new lampshade tamed a touch of unruly splash on cymbals. But the most important outcome of these many tweaks and changes is a renewed enthusiasm for recorded music in general. Expect to revisit all those records and CDs which have for years remained dormant in your collection. ►+

# THE VIRTUAL COWBOYS



THE BUG  
BIT 00.01  
2000AD  
..JUST AS..  
UH..HUH



.. PROJECT PILGRIM LEFT EARTH FOR SPACE ...

To maximise the existent world Potentiality..

we must transfer  
from gravity to  
overview the  
optimum  
benefit for  
mankind..

THE S\*\*\*  
HIT THE  
FAN...  
BYEEEE!

I FEEL  
LIKE A  
PILGRIM  
AL..

...OH YOU  
ARE ONE SIR,  
A BIG ONE  
SIR...

COMMUNICATION WAS  
ONLY A WORD BY NOON..



AIRCRAFT FELL FROM THE SKY.  
HOSPITALS HAEMMORRHAGED



YOU'RE A  
DEVIL IN  
D'SKIES

INDUSTRY SEIZED AND THE  
BANKS BROKE..



CIVIL UNEASE  
LED TO ANARCHY..



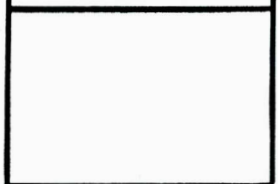
..WHICH GAVE WAY  
TO WAR ...



... RANDOM NUCLEAR  
EXPLOSIONS STOPPED ..



... EVERYTHING



78 YEARS LATER



YOU'RE  
RIGHT..

SOME THINGS ARE DIFFERENT... SOME...



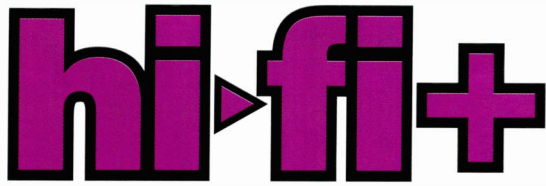
I'M  
LEFT..

.. ARE NOT



AN' SHE'S  
GONE!

...AH, ELVIS  
COMET! LIGHT  
ME & SIT YOUR  
CUTE BUNS..  
I WANT YOU TO  
DO SOMETHING.



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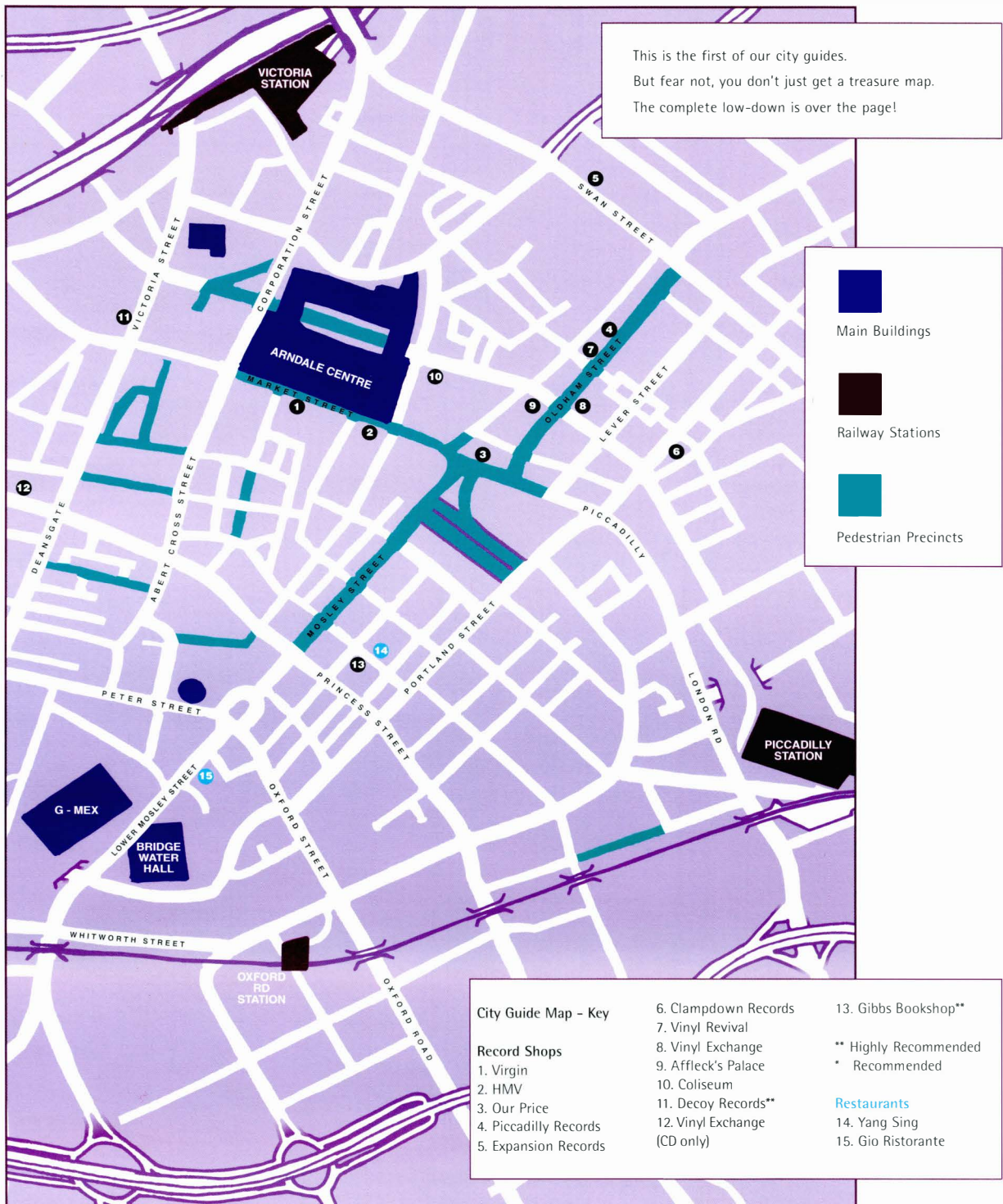
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# City Guide - Manchester



# City Guide – Manchester

## Record Shops (New)

### HMV

90-100 Market St  
(Includes Box Office Service)

### Virgin

52-56 Market St  
(Includes Box Office Service)

### Our Price

7-9 Piccadilly

### Piccadilly Records

Smithfield Building, 51 Oldham St  
Tel. 0161-839-8008  
Open – Mon–Wed 10–6, Thurs 10–7,  
Fri 9.30–6, Sat 9–6 !!  
LPs & CDs; Teckno, Pop,  
Indie, Jazz, World.

## Record Shops (New & Secondhand)

### Clampdown Records

10 Newton St  
Tel. 0161-236-7636  
Open – Mon–Sat 10–5  
S/H LPs & CDs; Rock,  
Pop, Indie – £4+.

### Decoy Records\*\*

30 Deansgate  
Tel. 0161-832-0183  
Open – Mon–Sat 10–5.30  
S/H & New LPs & CDs; Jazz, Blues,  
World, Folk – £3 > £12.

### Gibbs Bookshop\*\*

Charlotte House, 10 Charlotte St  
Tel. 0161-236-7179  
Open – Mon–Sat 9.30–5  
S/H LPs; New & S/H CDs; Classical –  
LPs £2 > £7.50, CDs £4 > £15.

### Vinyl Exchange

18 Oldham St  
Tel. 0161-228-1122  
Open – Mon–Sat 10–6, Sun 12–5  
S/H LPs, CDs & Videos  
of every type – £2 > £10.

### Vinyl Exchange

67 Bridge St  
Tel. 0161-819-5440  
Open – Mon–Sat 10–6  
S/H CDs of all types.

### Vinyl Revival

5 Hilton St  
Tel. 0161-661-6393  
Open – Mon–Sat 10–5.30  
S/H LPs; Rock, Pop, Indie – £3 > £10.

### Expansion Records

Swan St  
Tel. 0161-832-1364  
Open – Mon–Sat 9.30–5 Closed Tues  
S/H LPs & CDs; Jazz, Funk,  
Gospel, Blues – £4+.

## Indoor Markets

### Affleck's Palace

Church St  
Arts, Crafts, Fashion, S/H Records & CDs

### Coliseum

Church St  
Arts, Crafts, Fashion, S/H Records & CDs

## Shops In The Suburbs

### 78 Record Exchange\*\*

9 Lower Hillgate, Stockport, SK1-1JQ  
Tel. No phone, but they publish an  
extensive stock list.  
Open – Mon–Sat 9–5.45  
S/H LPs & 78s; Mainly Classical, but  
some Pop, Jazz, OSTs – £3 > £20.

### Sifters Records\*

(Noel & Liam's fave shop)  
177 Fog Lane, Burnage, Didsbury,  
M26-6FJ  
Tel. 0161-445-8697  
Open – Mon–Sat 10–6 Half-day Wed  
New & S/H LPs & CDs; All Types, All  
Prices.

### Soundsearch Records

14 George St, Ashton-under-Lyme  
Tel. 0161-330-4559  
Open – Mon–Sat 9–5  
S/H LPs & CDs; All Types  
– LPs 50p > £4, CDs £3+.

### Kingbee Records

519 Wilbraham Rd, Chorlton,  
M21 0UF  
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S/H LPs; Everything except  
Classical – £3 > £10.

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### Bridgewater Hall

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Box Office. 0161-907-9000  
Quality Classical Venue

### Manchester Apollo

Ardwick Green  
Box Office. 0161-242-2560  
Rock & Pop Concerts

### The Boardwalk

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### B&T on the Wall

25 Swan St  
Tel. 0161-833-0682  
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### Star & Garter Public House

Fairfield St  
Tel. 0161-755-3430  
Live B&Ts

Three Shires Public House  
Great Underbank, Stockport.  
Tel. 0161-477-3907  
Live Jazz

## Eats with Music

### Blue Note Café

Beech Rd, Chorlton.  
Tel. 0161-881-7715  
Live Jazz & Blues

### Elvis's Palace (Chinese)

116 London Rd, Hazel grove,  
Stockport.  
Tel. 0161-419-9831  
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## Places To Eat

### Yang Sing (Chinese)

3 Charlotte St  
Tel. 0161-236-2200

### Gio Ristorante (Italian)

Lower Mosley St  
Tel. 0161-228-2030

## In The Suburbs

### The Italian

26 Compstall Rd, Romiley, Stockport  
Tel. 0161-406-6261

### The Heaton T&toori

Shaw Rd, Heaton Moor, Stockport  
Tel. 0161-442-9766

## Watering Holes

### City Arms

Kennedy St, off Cooper St

### Vine Inn

Kennedy St, off Cooper St

### Bulls Head

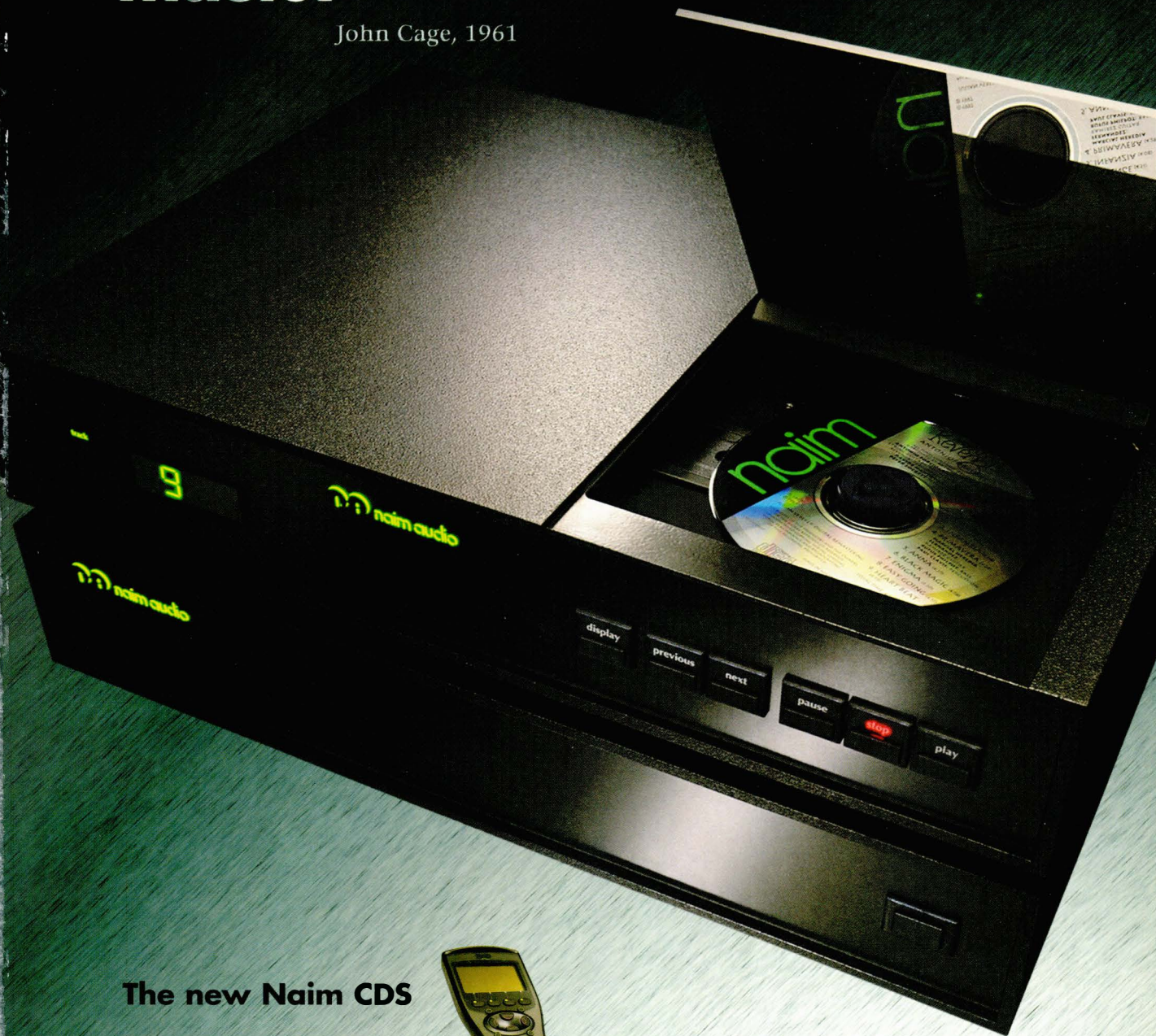
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