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July 2002 / VS55 / Hi Fi News Ken Kessler

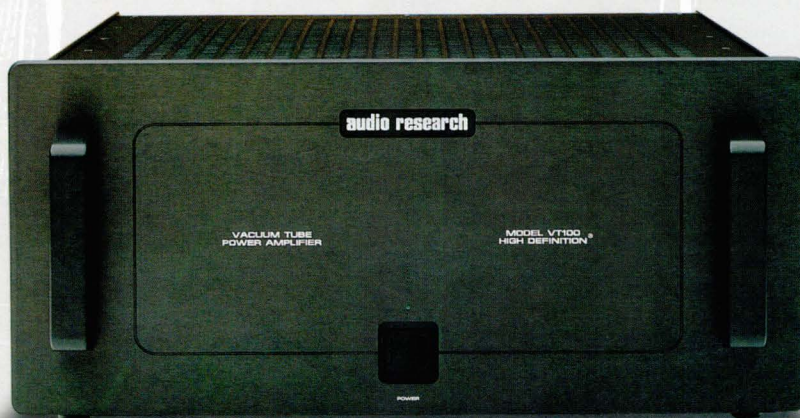
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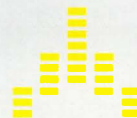


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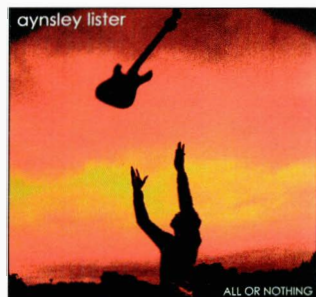
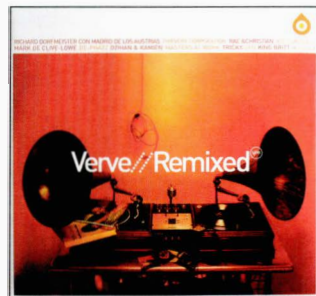
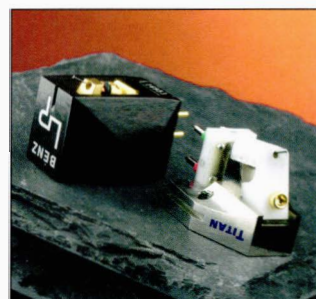
## Music+

### Music Reviews

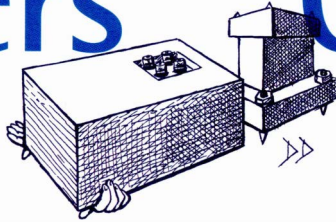
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# Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

The flexibility of a column is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it's lovely to have the freedom to write about whatever takes one's fancy; on the other there isn't the discipline of, say, a specific product review to provide focus and direction. And since a couple of months elapse between each edition of Hi-Fi+, there's rarely a shortage of possible topics – rather I usually find myself facing a surplus.

I might have examined and discussed a particular speaker problem I've encountered recently. Quite a number of models – including some of the most exotic around – show a strong tendency to be rather too shy through the upper bass and lower midband. As a result, cellos sound underdeveloped, and the sound lacks warmth and richness.

I could have mentioned my surprise at the quite dramatic sonic improvement I heard when I hooked up the latest version of Naim's XPS outboard digital power supply to a CDS2 CD player that's several years old. Upgradeability in action, this is further evidence of the vital role power supplies play in sound quality, though Naim remains tight-lipped about the actual changes involved.

I even contemplated making predictions. For example, it's my personal belief that two-channel stereo will carry on, irrespective of what happens with AV and multi-channel music formats. Having tried numerous surround sound systems over more than a decade, I find that for me at least stereo still represents the best compromise, partly for its simplicity, but also because I find I actually prefer to keep my music at arm's length, and really don't relish the whole immersion thing that surround-soundists are always banging on about. I appreciate that many will want to give multi-channel music a try, but suspect ultimately that sufficient numbers will prefer to stick with two-channel stereo to ensure its long term survival. That said, my track record on guessing the future isn't

too hot – and even when I do get it right, I usually get the timescale wrong.

But instead I'm going to look at an important gap that magazines are inclined to overlook. It's in the nature of the media to focus on the new, usually to the exclusion of long established components. Yet when I consider my own experiences, many of the bits that take up residence in my system stay there for a very long time.

Just because a component has been around for several years is certainly no reason to overlook or ignore it – rather the reverse, since relatively few components stay around long enough to qualify for classic status. And those that do can often represent good secondhand opportunities.

That's not to say that hi-fi doesn't continue to improve, or that new models aren't frequently better than their predecessors. My own system has undergone quite a number of upgrades over the past couple of years, not that there was anything wrong with the components I replaced: I sold on my trusty Naim NAC52 pre-amp to help pay for its NAC552 replacement, and expect it'll go on making lovely music for its new owner for many years to come.

Indeed, given the large number of new Naim Classic-series components, there's probably never been a better time to look out for secondhand examples of the previous generation. Perhaps uniquely amongst solid state power amps, Naim's original NAP250 spent nearly thirty years in production, with relatively few changes. The 'flavour' or 'character' of the earlier power amps is quite distinct from the latest generation models. They're more coloured, for sure, but are very involving and entertaining nonetheless, albeit in a rather more upfront and less subtle way than the new generation.

Granted three inputs is a bit constricting in today's environment, but I recently powered up an ancient NAC12 pre-amp that was still hanging around, and



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Paul Messenger, Hi-Fi Choice, December 2002



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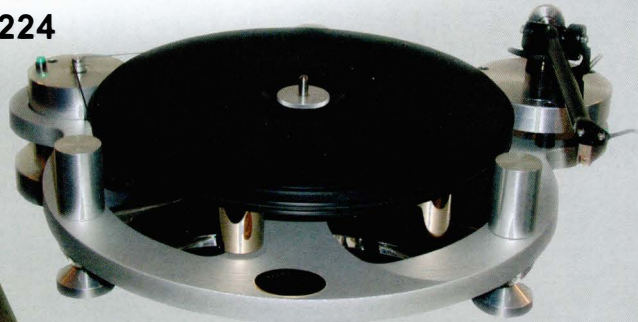
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► was pleasantly surprised at how good it sounded – apart from a need to give the volume control a good clean. Furthermore, one leading British speaker designer continues to use his ‘original spec’ Naim NAC12/NAP250 (complete with ‘screw-together’ casework) out of sheer personal preference, and no one would challenge the excellence of his hearing.

Electronic components like amplifiers and tuners have few moving parts and therefore show little tendency to wear with age (though capacitors do age). I’m particular fond of classic analogue FM tuners, because they simply sound much nicer than the digital synthesis types. A word of warning here, however: an analogue FM tuner needs careful ‘front end’ alignment to give of its best, and older examples might well need realignment – a tricky task which requires a skilled professional.

Another obvious ‘classic’ which has been in production for some thirty odd years is of course the Linn Sondek LP12.

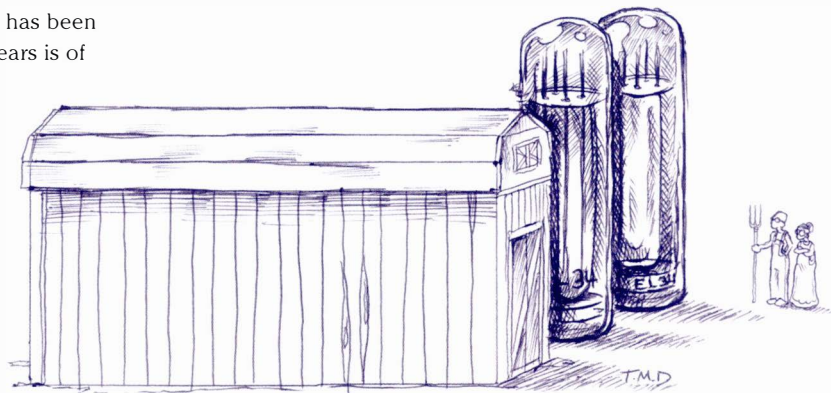
Although the core has remained much the same throughout its life, a whole collection of modifications have been introduced to improve performance, and the overwhelming majority of these are retrofittable. A secondhand Linn is therefore a very realistic prospect with plenty of upgrade options, covered at length in a previous issue.

I honestly can’t remember how many years it is since I first started using Naim’s super-stiff NAC A5 speaker cable – the best part of two decades, I’d guess. I know the Editor doesn’t like the stuff, and reckons it strangulates and confuses the potential of the new generation Naim power amps. But I’ve yet to find an alternative that I actually prefer, despite regularly trying out various respected and far more costly alternatives. While we reviewers can pick or choose amongst the cable-makers’ loan stocks, cost no object, the relatively low cost of Naim’s speaker cable remains a serious real world benefit for the end user.

I’m not saying it’s perfect, and happily acknowledge it lacks the top end sweetness of more costly designs. But this cable’s bass end still seems to make most sense to me, especially with Naim amps but also with others that I try, and it certainly doesn’t seem to block the perception of sonic differences between components to any significant extent. I’m not saying that there aren’t high cost cables that are worth their elevated prices, it may simply be that I’ve

not yet come across them yet. Meanwhile the whole business is made all the more confusing by the fact that cables often take a long (and rather indeterminate) time to ‘burn in’ properly, which makes accurately assessing them rather difficult.

Loudspeaker designs seem to have a relatively short life cycle, though probably has more to do with dictates of fashion and marketing as improving the performance. There are improvements of course – the industry has learnt plenty about the sonic effects of crossover components in recent years, for example. But the actual core design stereotypes change only slowly down the years, and Pro-oriented brands such as ATC, Spendor, Harbeth and PMC do keep models in production for a sufficient period to qualify for classic status.



"I'se tellin' you Jeb, for all your talk of efficiency and throughput with these new EL34's, my bread just tasted sweeter out of those old 300B's."

The tiny LS3/5A is a longstanding cult that somehow manages to keep itself in production, and has spawned a number of near-replicas that claim improvements. Other longstanding classics include the unique Quad ESL 988 and Klipschorn – extremists both, but none the worse for that.

However, when I start getting the idea that speaker design is jumping forward in leaps and bounds, I bring out a pair of 28-year-old Spendor BC1s, and put them on a pair of modern (Kudos S100) 60cm stands. These invariably remind me that a ‘golden oldie’ can provide tough competition for today’s designs (especially one with Alnico magnets). That said, I’m very careful not to drive them too hard. Evolution in voice-coil formers and glues means that modern speakers are capable of handling much more power than their predecessors. Anyone acquiring a pair of original BC1s or early LS3/5As should treat them with care and respect – these are not party animals!



# Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

My last column – about blending home cinema into a hi-fi system without tears – started a veritable flood of responses. Well, an e-mail or six could be considered a ‘flood’ in some quarters. But, it’s clear people want to know more about how to get good movies and music sound without sacrificing one or the other.

First it’s a question of priorities – and in this case, the priority is easy to find. People who read a magazine called Hi-Fi+ have likely nailed their colours to the musical mast, so home cinema is probably an adjunct to an existing hi-fi system. This is an excellent starting place. If you already have, or have your eye on, a specific list of hi-fi components then stick with them, perhaps tweaking the system as you would normally do until you are happy with the two-channel sound. Then – and only then – should you consider adding the home cinema aspect.

This is more important than some give it credit for. There is an assumption that the day one enters the home cinema arena, it becomes fine to use the DVD player as a CD player. Well, perhaps for those who haven’t started down the hi-fi route already, but for those with an existing and decent CD player, this is bad logic. In most cases, keep your CD player for playing CDs and use the DVD player for video replay (one notable exception is the Cyrus kit tested elsewhere in this issue). And that measure of separation between hi-fi and home cinema should follow from one end of the system to the other. In fact, if you have a stereo system you are happy with, change nothing – just add cinema as you would add another tape or line level source. Face it, you didn’t need to change the speakers when you added a tuner, why should you when you add a DVD player, even if it has surround sound added?

If you add surround to an existing hi-fi system, the

only real problem comes with level matching stereo and surround. The best method is to set the volume control of the hi-fi system at an instantly recognisable level – say 12 o’clock on the dial or at a particular place in the LED display – and then make sure the volume dial is at that level whenever the home cinema is playing. If you want to be even more thorough, find the volume level that gives the best balance and mark it on the front panel (use a piece of masking tape and a felt-tip pen if you don’t fancy tattooing your pre-amplifier).

The left channel and right channel cables should be the only interface between hi-fi and home cinema, to maintain integrity. There

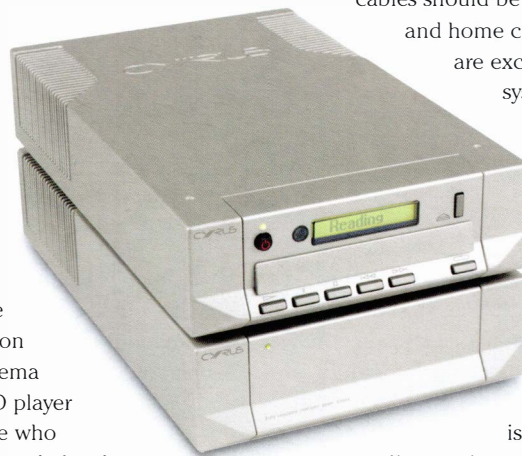
are exceptions, of course, but they are systemic exceptions. The German

manufacturer T+A, for example, has a special communications link between hi-fi and home cinema which means that both work in automated harmony when home cinema is selected and the processor powers down when just stereo is in use. But this

is a rare solution and locks the

listener into a very T+A-centric world as no-one else adopts the same standard.

The rest of us need to keep the two sides of the system separate. And I really mean ‘separate’. One of the best hi-fi meets home cinema systems I’ve heard, effectively sidelined the surround system but made a big thing of the stereo: the centre and side surround speakers were small, identical and wall-mounted just below the coving that separates wall from ceiling. Even the subwoofer was removed to the side wall, so when stereo was used, the influence of the home cinema speakers was practically non-existent. Moving the centre channel up high has an added bonus in that it means you don’t automatically need a shielded centre speaker





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That monitor can cause problems in a hi-fi system, especially if it is a big CRT telly. A big plastic, glass and alloy lump sitting in between your stereo speakers is going to do for your stereo soundstage what clogs do for ballet dancing. So, if you can afford it, a projector or plasma screen hung on the rear wall are better options. Just remember to turn the monitor off when not used – they have fans which are barely noticeable in cinema sound but become immediately obvious when playing something stereo and delicate.

There's still one last way of getting the best from home cinema and hi-fi. It's also, ultimately, the best method and the most simple. Leave your existing hi-fi system entirely untouched and start from scratch, building a home cinema in a completely separate room. That way, the TV monitor cannot interfere with the soundstaging of the stereo speakers, video sources won't drag down the audio signals, and the rest of the family can have a second system you won't be worried about them breaking.

Of course, this may entail moving both systems around; if the hi-fi is in the main living room, be prepared for a shift to the spare room to keep the rest of the family sweet. This

also entails an extra purchase or two for both systems, if they are likely to be used simultaneously; soundproofing and – most importantly – decent mains filtering. As any audio reproduction system is essentially modulating the power to make music, when you have two sound-making electronic bits playing along the same mains, they can effectively trash the sound of both. Decent mains 'sweetening' in the hi-fi system (at least) will help counterbalance this – in fact good mains treatment should be applied to any hi-fi system with a home cinema aspect almost as a matter of course. Similarly, try to put a great deal of distance between one system and the other and if not consider soundproofing treatments; Monteverdi's *Madrigals* were never supposed to be accompanied by Spider-Man whizzing through Manhattan, and *Gosford Park* is not improved by adding a Metallica score. Proper soundproofing – the kind that doesn't involve carpets on walls and egg cartons – is prohibitively expensive, though, so the more you can do to limit the need for soundproofing, the better.

That's just the start. Next time, I'll look at slotting multi-channel music into a stereo hi-fi system – just as soon as I find out how to do it myself! ►+



# Big Boys Toys, or – Loaded For Bear...

by Scot Markwell

I have, of late, had the privilege of listening to several extremely fine MC cartridges, some of the finest available today. A few I have spent an extended period with, and the rest I have listened to on and off for at least several weeks. With no fewer than three systems and a half dozen or so cartridges, it makes for quite a cast of characters, but as cartridges are sensitive to interfacing like no other component, the tedious list is I'm afraid, necessary. The set-ups used are as follows:

**My own home system** – VPI HW19 Mk4, JMW 10.5 turntable, Plinius M-14 or the Hagerman Trumpet phono sections, and a whole host of low-ish powered amps and efficient speakers.

**Harry Pearson's reference system** – Clearaudio Master Reference turntable and Groove phono stage, with the

Alon Exotica Grand Reference speakers driven by ASL Hurricane amps.

**HP's alternative reference** – VPI THT HR/JMW 12.5 turntable, the Manley Steelhead phono stage and speakers and amps to numerous to mention.

Think that's bad, try the list of cartridges on for size! In no particular order I've been listening to:

Van den Hul Colibri - \$6000

47 Lab Miyabi - \$3950

Clearaudio Harmony Wood - \$6000

Benz LP - \$4700

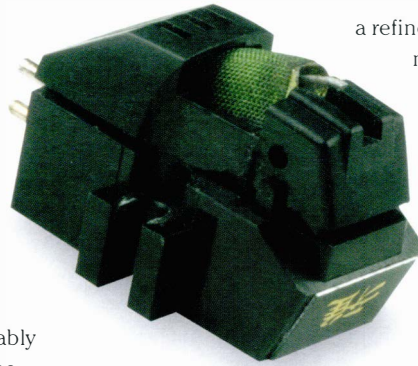
the Koetsu Tiger Eye Onyx Platinum (w/diamond cantilever!) - \$12,500 ►

- ▶ the Scantech/Lyra Titan - \$5000
- Dynavecator DRT XV-1 - \$3500

I auditioned most of the cartridges with two or three different resistive loading schemes, but at the end of the day, in my system, I preferred 47K with each of them. And whilst none of this list could be considered exactly a bargain, rest assured that each model certainly demonstrates its pedigree. When stuff like MC carts get this expensive you either believe in them or you don't (which means you've probably never been lucky enough to hear one doing its stuff). The potential buyer has probably already decided to spend the money, it's more a question of which flavour they prefer, and what compliments their system.

The Colibri, in several ways, is one of the real stunners of the group, in that it tracks like a demon and gives a razor-sharp and incisive view on the musical proceedings, managing this without ever being overly-analytical or strident. In the Van den Hul tradition, bass is slightly on the lean side but with excellent pitch definition and tautness. Bass drum and tympani strikes are articulated well enough to hear the tuning of individual instruments, and organ pedals are rendered with exactness and definition. Reproduction of the middle frequencies is vividly illuminated and exhibits a stunning lack of dynamic compression. The whole package is precise, punchy, and sounds remarkably phase-correct. On the other hand, this is not a particularly warm cartridge, and I would hesitate to recommend it for a system that had even the slightest touch of coolness in the mid-band or is over-lean in the mid-bass. But for those with a compatible system who value precision, excellent trackability, and the some of the most precise bass of the bunch the Colibri is not to be missed.

The Miyabi is a wondrous thing. More a bewitching mixture of Alnico magnets and musical instrument than a neutral transducer, it nonetheless is one of those rare performers that captures the soul of music as well as its sound. With a balance not unlike the Antique Sound Lab (ASL) Hurricane amplifiers, the Miyabi spoils the listener with its rich yet controlled mid and deep bass, smooth, grain free midrange reproduction, and sweet, grainless highs, the top octave slightly lacking in ultimate extension but so well-balanced that one rarely cares or hears it as a deficiency. With its short, rather stiff and hefty aluminum cantilever, the Miyabi appears to ride unsettlingly low in the groove, but in reality it is an optical illusion caused by the shortness and near invisibility of the cantilever - easy to cue this one is not. But the Miyabi makes up for any difficulty in use with a richly-hued, full-bodied tonal palette blessed with a wonderful dynamic freedom and



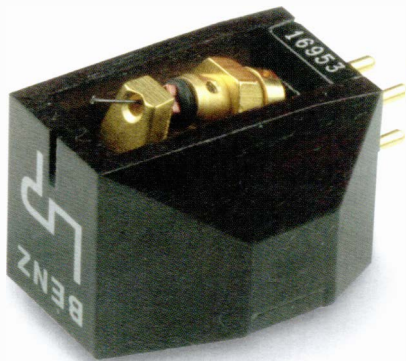
a refined quality of continuous-ness at a level that eludes the others here. Some may be troubled by the Miyabi's slight lack of sparkle at the very top, but the cartridge is so natural-sounding and well-balanced otherwise that this is rather easily forgiven.

Still, if you are an "air" freak, this may not be for you. However, for those seeking to simply play records and get lost in the music, the Miyabi is seductive in the extreme. You do need to be extra-vigilant of any stylus contamination with this cart, though, as it tends to pick up gunk more readily than the others and requires more frequent cleaning, as well.

The Clearaudio Harmony Wood is a different kettle of fish from the two above. With its rather high 0.6mV output and Trygon III stylus configuration, the Clearaudio presents music to the listener with a more forward and intense perspective. I want to stress that this cartridge is never hard-sounding or wiry at all; it is just up-front and super-dynamic, with a brightly-lit midband and extended, smooth, and grainless upper octaves. While not quite as extraordinarily fast in transient response as other top Clearaudios, neither does it have the lead alloyed-bodied models' occasional tendency towards a slight brightness or overly-vivid upper midrange response. What we have in the Harmony Wood, which is basically an Accurate motor in a specially shaped and type-specific wooden body, is a transducer that splits the difference. It is fast and vivid in the Clearaudio tradition, and can sound a bit too much so if not well run-in or when first played after sitting overnight. Once a couple of LP sides are under its wing, though, it sings more sweetly than a "normal" Accurate, but with the requisite musical bite and punch we have come to expect of Clearaudios. Its high output is a blessing for the S/N ratio crowd; you will not get much background noise with this thing.

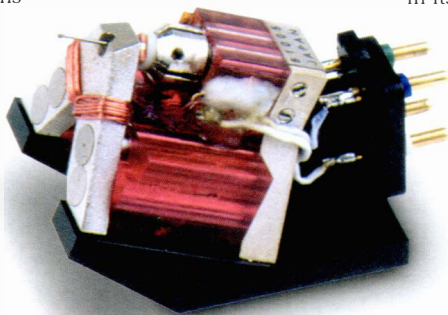
The Benz LP, for the most part a conventional Benz design (although there are a few little tweaks the importer remains secretive about), has a motor assembly that uses a solid boron cantilever and a nude line-contact stylus assembly. The real news on the LP, however, is the vented Ebony wood body used to house the motor. Now, most Benz models are either "naked" or use a more standard wood, but this ebony is said to be hand-picked in Africa from special lots and allowed to cure for a long time, supposedly lending a rich and vibrant sound to the

▶ cart. This all seems a bit mysterious to me, but I can tell you this: The thing sounds unlike any other Benz cartridge I have heard. Yes, there is a family resemblance, but the .28mV output LP has a more robust,



and closer-perspective presentation than the Ruby and other top offerings from the firm. It also exhibits (on paper) a trace, but just barely, of a dip of about half a decibel in frequency response between 1.5kHz and 16kHz, rising from there back to flat response up to 20kHz, then falling off like a stone thereafter. Interestingly, I cannot hear that this dip adds any extra depth or a more distant perspective to the sound, nor does it seem to rob the cartridge of any impact or liveliness in the presence region. This thing plays music in an authoritative and convincing manner. I am particularly enamored of the bass response here. Reference Recording's Beachcomber (RR 62), for instance, sounds at once big, bold, and dynamic, with a bottom octave that shakes the room and yet is as tight as the proverbial crab's you-know-what. And with all of this you get a sweetness and delicacy that seem almost at odds with that forcefulness.

The Dynavector DRT XV-1 and the Scantech/Lyra Titan are almost like sonic second cousins, so similar are they in some critical ways. Both of these cartridges are designed with an ultra-flat, neutral perspective and tonal balance, and both exhibit extremely fast transient response without hardness or smearing of instrumental lines or timbres. The Titan sounds, for the most part, like what it is: the logical conclusion of the Parnassus line, one that always emphasized subtlety, treble extension, solid groove tracing, and a superior sense of delineation of inner detail, all without any tizziness or brittleness to the sound. It is still early running with the Titan, but the thing is squeaky-clean and as grainless in the highs as anything I have ever heard. Like previous Scantech designs, a battering-ram bass response is not one of the cartridges strongest suits, but the lower registers are handled with a firm control and remarkable extension into



the bottom octave, without any boominess or over-emphasis in the mid-bass. This is, in some ways, the very antithesis of the Miyabi: the former emphasizes the orchestral foundation, along with a dynamic authority in the bass and midband that can make records sound grand and perhaps a bit bigger than real life (though undeniably pleasantly so), while the Titan takes a more even-handed approach to the frequency spectrum and shines a bit more light on the top octaves.

The Alnico-magnetized Dynavector, like the Titan, exhibits a wide-open window to the sonic proceedings, with a dazzling clarity that actually reminded me, in the slightly analytical sense, of listening to a CD. Not that the cartridge sounded overly etched or sharp per se; rather, the DRT XV-1 starts and stops so fast, especially in the upper mids and treble, that one gets the sensation of a more direct sonic experience, akin to the directness that high-quality digital can also impart. Ironically, when one reads the press information on the design philosophy of the DRT XV-1, it is interesting to note that the cartridge was specifically intended to "beat digital at its own game". In other words, the Dynavector folks wanted to retain the good qualities of digital (its excellent transient capabilities, along with a big dynamic range and solid bass response) without making the reproduction fatiguing or edgy. Where this cartridge differs substantially from the Titan is that the Dynavector sounds to me slightly more like a mechanical device attempting to recreate the music it is scratching out of the grooves, whereas the Titan seems more finely-wrought and organic in its approach: more delicate and refined but without any lack of ballsiness or authority in its presentation.



The Koetsu Tiger Eye Platinum frankly scares me. This thing is so expensive that I live in fear of something untoward happening while it hangs off the end of my JMW 10.5 pick-up arm. This is the cartridge I am listening to as I sit and write this report, and I have to wonder if I am not influenced somewhat by its exorbitant price and lustrous finish. With a diamond cantilever and the top-of-the-line Koetsu motor

► assembly, as well as that top-of-the-line price tag, all I could think of as I lowered this bauble into the groove for the first time was that it not only better sound really, really good, but that it better have an act. Well, I have to say that it brings home the bacon in both respects. No, it does not serve me ham and eggs for breakfast, but it does manage to flesh out and add body to just about any tunes I care to throw at it. And I do not mean this in a pejorative sense, or in the sense that the Koetsu is unduly colored or romantic-sounding. No, this is more like listening through a transducer that has been to finishing school, one that has all the right mannerisms and moves to be a real player in the King's Court of sound. Dynamic and soft-spoken at once, the Tiger Eye Koetsu builds its power from the ground up, providing a foundation to the orchestra that no other in this group, save the Miyabi, manages to capture. Lush and vibrant without being overtly so, with a sinuous mid-band and silky-smooth and extended upper registers, the Koetsu presents a polished, slightly-rosier-than-life perspective to the proceedings without erring too far into schmaltz. I reread what I wrote here and it perhaps seems to me that I am describing a cartridge that deviates more that it should from neutrality. In fact, while the Tiger Eye is undeniably slightly on the opulent side of the fence, that is in no way a drawback. In fact, I am tempted to say that if music does not sound the way it does through the Koetsu, it should, so lovely and beguiling is the Onyx Platinum's siren song.

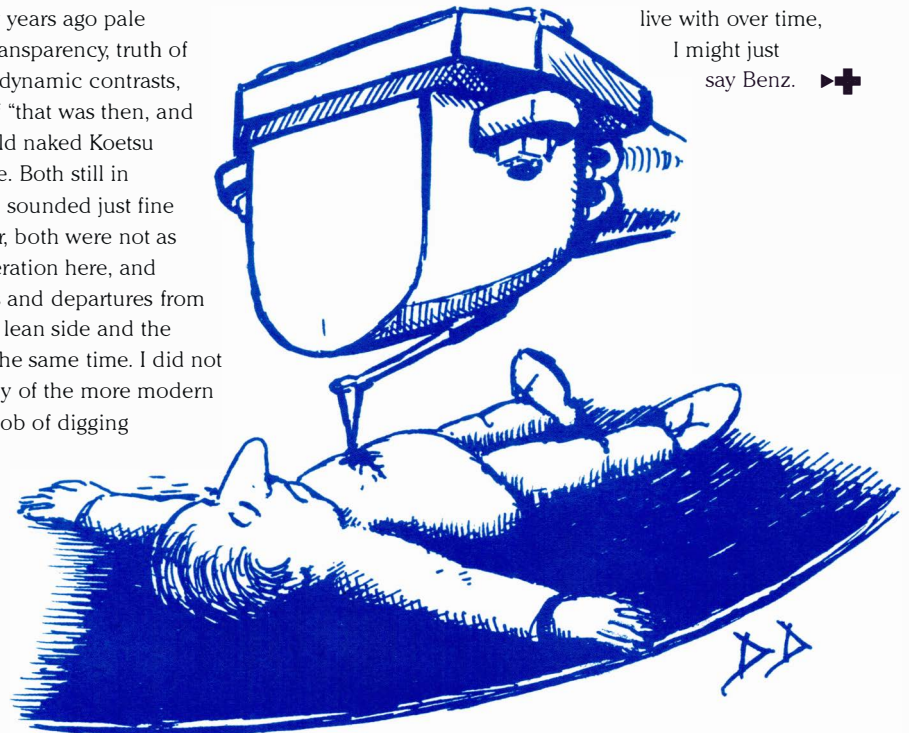
Any of these expensive MC designs are so good that the best cartridges of even a few years ago pale in comparison to these in terms of transparency, truth of instrumental timbre, dimensionality, dynamic contrasts, and tracking ability. To get an idea of "that was then, and this is now", I briefly tried both my old naked Koetsu Black and my Madrigal Carnegie One. Both still in good condition. The older cartridges sounded just fine and as I remembered them. However, both were not as expensive as the ones under consideration here, and each suffered from their own defects and departures from neutrality, the Carnegie being on the lean side and the Koetsu a bit on the full and edgy at the same time. I did not feel that they were wiped out, but any of the more modern offerings did a much more credible job of digging real music from the grooves of my records. This is not to say that these small, expensive transducers are truly "worth it" in a conventional cost/benefit ratio; everything at this level is more about system synergy and listener bias (not to mention depth of pocket) than direct cost. I can

say that I did not feel (in this hyped-up market that we live in today) that any of these gems were completely off the wall fiscally except the Koetsu. But it is so luscious, and so hedonistically satisfying, that I may change my mind about that. Especially since I am getting a free evaluation ride and I do not have to pay for it.

In the end, this is not a shootout with a roster of rankings; rather, I have simply tried to describe in a nutshell how each of a number of sometimes strikingly dissimilar-sounding MC cartridges sounds over time and in different systems. All of the cartridges addressed above played music with vanishingly low distortion, a function of what sounds to me like much better tracking ability than many 'coils of yesteryear. They all sound different, but they all play as cleanly as anything out there. The exception, by the way, is the Clearaudio, which like most of its factory brethren when properly installed, will track with almost Shure V-15-like intensity. So you choose your flavor and biases and then you pays yer money and you takes yer chances.

On the serious side, I experienced no failures at all of any of the review samples with the exception of a problem with the Miyabi that entailed my having to exchange it. It seems I had managed to pick up some kind of bad grime that got stuck on the stylus assembly. Understand that this was no fault of the cartridge. But God, which one to have? If I were pressed with a gun to my head to choose one of these models in a fit of passion, I would not hesitate and immediately choose the big Koetsu. But if I were actually

buying one of these to live with over time, I might just say Benz. ➤





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1. The product I never should have bought, the product I never should have sold.
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Unlike most competitions, this one is open to all comers, without exclusion. The only limitation is on the amount of cable you can win. Four sets of interconnects and one set of bi-wired speaker cable (any one set being up to six meters in length, the others no longer than two meters) should suffice in all but the most unusual cases.

You've got a while to think about your piece as the closing date isn't until the 30th of July. How and where to send it will be published in Issue 24 (on sale 30th of June). Until then you've time to stimulate the creative juices. Good luck.

## NÖRDOST

MAKING THE CONNECTION

### Issue 22 IsoTek Competition Winners

1st Place:	2k Qube	Mr Chris Humphries, Coventry	Runners Up:	IsoPlug	Francisco Corbacho Sevenum, The Netherlands
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3rd Place:	CleanLine	Jorg Stanislawsls, Dortmund, Germany			

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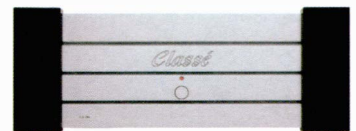
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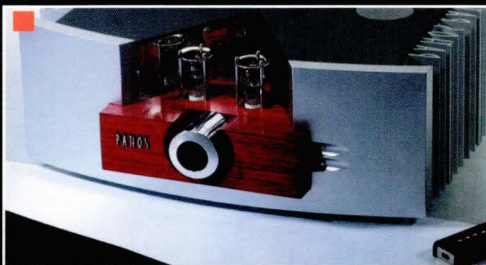
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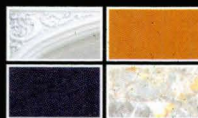


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# What Was New In Bristol

by Roy Gregory

## Lexicon RT-10 multi-standard player

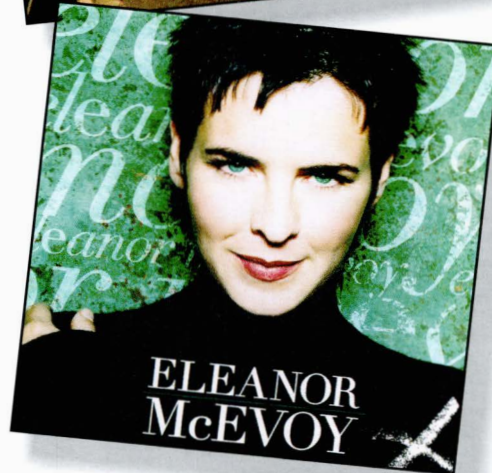
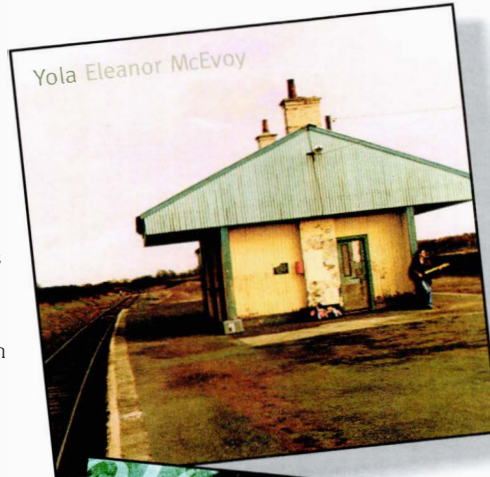
With the announcement of the RT-10, Lexicon are offering the world's first multi-standard disc player with serious audiophile pretensions. Incorporating the latest in video replay technology as well as 24bit/ 192K decoding for its six discrete analogue output channels, Lexicon claim replay compatibility with all 5" optical formats, including SACD and DVD-A, R and RW. Combine that with a half-inch thick aluminium front panel, £2900 price-tag and Lexicon's reputation for serious sound quality and manageable user interfaces (often a sticking point with the new hi-bit formats) and the RT-10 looks like a serious contender for any audiophile waiting for the format wars to end. (CSE – [www.csesolutions.co.uk](http://www.csesolutions.co.uk))

## Comparative Demonstrations

At long last, other companies seem to be getting the message so successfully promulgated by Nordost: comparative demonstration works. Cable competitor True Colours Industries were running their own dog and pony show, although they've a way to go to catch the style and panache of the inimitable (but regrettably absent) Lars. Elsewhere, REL founder Richard Lord was offering sub-woofer set-up demos and it must surely only be a matter of time before other manufacturers finally get the message and follow suit.

## Live Music

Show visitors on Saturday and Sunday



had the opportunity to compare live with recorded sound, Vivante launching their 180g pressing of our album of the year, Eleanor McEvoy's *Yola*, while Nordost sponsored a series of live performances by the singer herself. It was fabulous to have such a superb musician performing in such intimate surroundings, a real bonus for all show goers and hopefully one that will be followed up next year. It took considerable cooperative effort to make it

happen this year, and it was nice to see so many different elements of the industry pulling together for once. It's indicative of the helpful and positive spirit that's made the Bristol show such a year on year success.

## Living Voice and Border Patrol

Once again, the best sound at the show was to be heard in the Living Voice room. ▶



▶ The familiar OBX-R speakers were driven from their revised crossovers (more on those in Audio Smorgasbord) while source was vinyl only, in the shape of VPI's monster TNT HRX carrying its own JMW 12.5 arm and a vdH Colibri cartridge. Step up was Living Voice's own prototype transformers feeding the sadly now no longer available SJS valve phono stage. Electronics were the Border Patrol BP20 push-pull 300B amplifier and their prototype line stage. The resultant sound was detailed yet powerful, with really impressive drive and dynamics, but it was the explicit rhythmic control, bass definition and speed that surprised most listeners. That and the absence of any digital source...  
(Living Voice – (44)(0)1159 733222)

### Michell TechnoDec

Michell Engineering has, in its own inimitable fashion, been quietly undergoing changes, with John taking more of a back seat, handing over the day to day running of the business to his daughter and son-in-law. However, far from taking it easy, that's just left him with more time on his hands, and Bristol saw the first fruits of that, in the shape of the new TechnoDec



turntable. A cheaper and simpler, rigid alternative to the Gyro Spider, the new deck uses the shorter, inverted bearing from the Micro turntable coupled to an acrylic chassis and separate motor assembly. Unmistakably Michell in style the new model is a model of refined, compact elegance, but it's the optional external power supply that's really interesting, using a revolutionary, licensed isolation circuit that promises substantial audible benefits. Michell collaborators Trichord are also using the supply in their latest phono stages, and we'll be listening to one soon, so watch this space as they say.  
(Tel. (44)(0)208 9530771)

### PMC

As well as production versions of the DB1, arguably the smallest transmission line in the world, PMC were also showing the OB1, a new three-way floorstander best described as a big brother for the FB1 two-way that CB enjoyed so much. A larger cabinet but with the same slim proportions contains an 11' line, terminating a 170mm doped paper driver. Midrange is a 75mm fabric dome while high frequencies are handled by a 25mm silk dome. At £2450 a pair, and with claimed bandwidth extending down to 22Hz it will be interesting to see if PMC have managed to retain the winning sound of the smaller FB1 in the bigger package. ([www.pmc-speakers.com](http://www.pmc-speakers.com))

### Shun Mook

Audio Reference were confounding all-comers with demonstrations of the latest gizmo from Shun Mook. Not content with deploying the Quartet, four lightweight wooden racks supporting trios of Mpingo discs that exert a surprising influence over the sound of a system, they added the latest modification from the mythical monks. A horizontal dowel





▶ supporting a wooden plumb-bob on a bit of string, wind it up or down to alter the sound. And it works! Lord knows how or why, but it has a far from subtle impact on music. We've been promised the opportunity to play with a bundle of the Shun Mook products, but whether we can make any sense of them remains to be seen. ([www.audioreference.co.uk](http://www.audioreference.co.uk))

## Revolver

In a blast from the past, the Revolver brand name is back, this time attached to a couple of pairs of speakers. The compact two-way R33 sounded especially lively and engaging on the end of a Sugden CD21/A21 combination. Figures that quote £499, 89dB and 45Hz don't tell the whole story. This system managed to handle *The Planets* with grace, despite the show type volume levels, scaling the dynamic peaks without apparent strain, and whilst the musical qualities of the Sugdens are well known the speakers were doing nothing to inhibit proceedings. These are slated for an early review. ([www.revolveraudio.co.uk](http://www.revolveraudio.co.uk))

## Wilson-Benesch

The new A.C.T. speaker system (replacing both the previous A.C.T. One and Two) is finally with us. Employing an entirely metal and carbon fibre cabinet has increased rigidity and helped reduce overall volume, offering serious performance benefits while the price (from £8400) remains the same as the older Two. Other changes are too complex to cover here and will have to wait for the full review. Appearance is in the familiar Wilson-Benesch house style and the sound majors on focus, clarity and transparency. ([www.wilson-benesch.com](http://www.wilson-benesch.com))

## Trinity Audio

Perhaps the most interesting speaker at the show came from Trinity Audio. I've mentioned their £2000 four-box Trident system before, but it has been joined now by a simpler, two-way, two box version, the Tempest priced at £1295. This was being driven by Tube Technology electronics to great effect and seems to have avoided the classic shortcomings of affordable floorstanders, demonstrating good bass weight and extension that was actually intelligible and in time with the rest of the music, which is no mean feat at this price, believe me. ([www.trinity-audio.com](http://www.trinity-audio.com))

## Emotive Excellence

After the traumas of last year, Emotive Excellence finally had their Honeyman-Scott System One set-up sounding as impressive as it looks.

to sound delicate, dynamic and coherent at the show, which is impressive indeed. Impressive enough to have JK bending my ear about a review. ([www.emotiveexcellence.com](http://www.emotiveexcellence.com))

## Naim Audio

And last but by no means least, Naim Audio were playing the new CDS3. Rounding out the revised Reference Series electronics, the new top of the line CD player is absolutely beautiful. Its centrally mounted, top loading transport is cunningly integrated into the new triptych styling with the best executed lid I've come across yet. Inside you'll find the expected multiple, regulated power supplies as well as the suspended circuit boards first seen (I believe) in the NAC 552. Upgrade hierarchy from the CDX2 remains the same, as does the price at £4750, and it



This imposing and expensive (c.£40000) four-box system incorporates innovative resonance control technology within the cabinets, combined with active drive and digital delay to correctly align the main speakers with the stereo bass towers. It's a complex and costly approach, yet managed

finally comes with both Din and phono outputs, which combined with the looks should encourage its use in serious, non-Naim high-end systems. PM and CT might already be elbowing for position but they're going to have to get past me on this one! ([www.naim-audio.com](http://www.naim-audio.com))

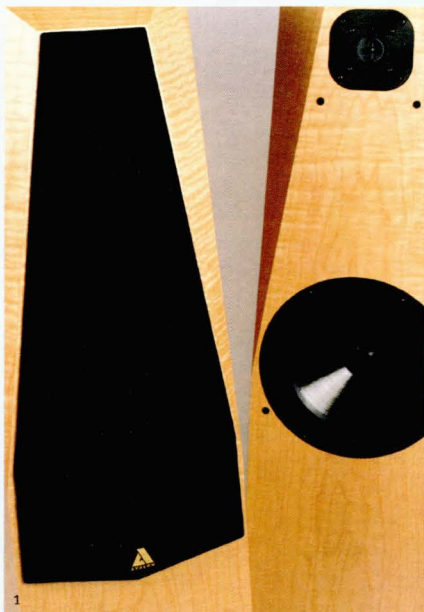


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## 3. Living Voice loudspeakers

The new improved version of the Avatars is now with us with the sonic improvements bringing these popular speakers into an even higher league. Auditorium £1700, Avatar £2700, OBX-R £4000



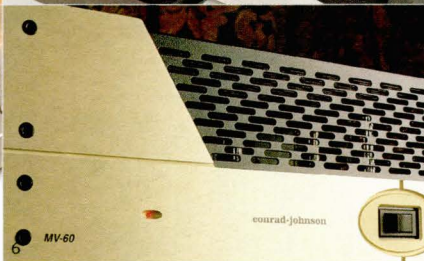
## 4. Shanling CD - T100 player

The amazing, highly flexible CD player with valve output and upsampling. Superb sound and certainly makes a statement with its appearance. £1650



## 5. Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD player

This player now has the improved, quiet drive and the resulting uplift in sound quality has been astonishing. Tremendous value at £2850



## 6. conrad-johnson MV60SE stereo amplifier

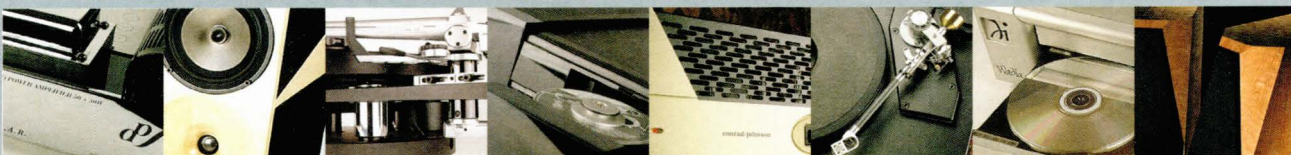
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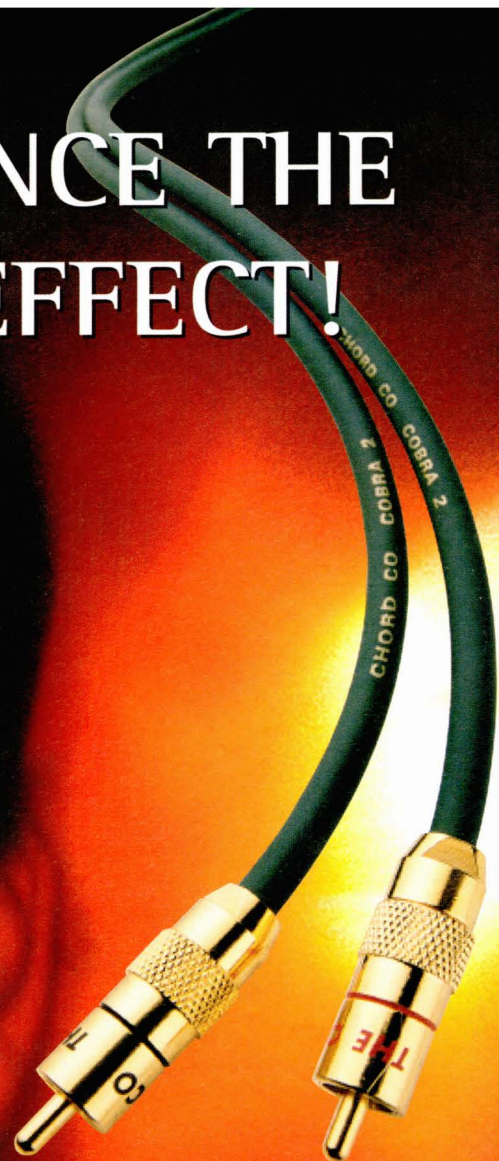
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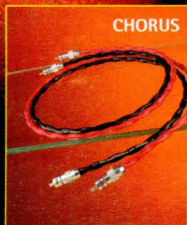


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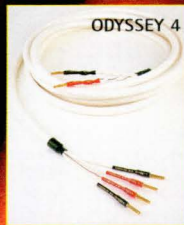
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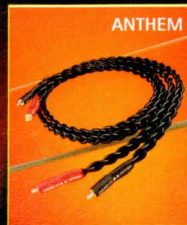
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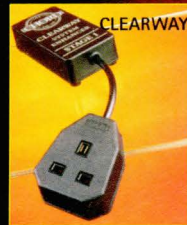
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# Incoming!

Please address letters to the Editor at Hi-Fi+, Unit 12 Albany Business Park, Cabot Lane, Poole, Dorset, BH17 7BX.  
or via the web-site at [www.hifiplus.com](http://www.hifiplus.com)

Dear Sir

Firstly - thanks for what is a great magazine - I think! That probably needs explaining! I really enjoy reading your magazine, almost cover to cover, but I would enjoy it even more if I understood it! I think what I am saying is that I am throwing my full support behind John Wilkinson's request for an 'Audio for beginners' series of articles. I fully appreciate your point about where to pitch the article; as a suggestion could you put the even more basic stuff on your web site as linking articles - space on the web must be of a different value to you.

Secondly, the 'Music Matters' article by Alan Sircom is one of the best I ever read because it discussed a really topical problem for me (probably many people). Well it started to discuss! "Does good two-channel sound automatically render multi-channel performance bankrupt" Go one more please! "...you will achieve mastery of stereo or home-cinema over the lesser" Why? Go on more please. "...demands of each are so distinctive ... never be placed in same room ..... without compromise" Now this is getting frustrating

Alan please another article.

Cheers

**Steve Hipkin**

Via. E-mail

*No sooner said than done – on both counts. In the last issue we published the first of a series of articles from Martin Colloms outlining the underlying principles of audio. That one concentrated on crossovers. The next (in Issue 24) will deal with single driver loudspeakers, with more to follow on a whole host of subjects. Meanwhile, AS has indeed delivered a second slice of wisdom regarding the integration of, and conflict between, audio and AV. Enjoy. Ed.*

Dear Mr Foster,

Many thanks for your excellent piece on the HMV vinyl back catalogue. I (and I'm sure that many other readers) love looking for old vinyl. You're always looking for that great bargain. You must have had replies advising on the best hunting grounds, so here's another. Everyone knows about

charity shops, God bless them; I would like to extol another source. That is the many second hand shops specialising in rock music who keep classical records in the attic. A well known example in the south is Ben's in Guildford. I found a good copy of the Tchaikovsky *Queen of Spades* recently; I didn't even know it had been recorded. Better still is Avid records near the Apollo theatre in Oxford. The Rock and Jazz section is good, but upstairs is a large room filled with classical records and a 100 or more Boxed sets, particularly opera. That's my particular vice, I've got it under control though. My favourite recent find was the complete Berlioz *Les Troyens*, by Colin Davis for £3.30. I couldn't look the salesman in the eye when I took it away. Prices for individual LP's are usually £1.50 and boxed sets £4.50 or 3 for £10.

If you are ever in Oxford I recommend a few hours browsing. In those few hours you'll see a fraction of what they have in stock. More articles in the same vein please

Yours

**David Wise**

Via. E-mail

*Greater love hath no man... Mind you, DD, a Guildford local won't be too happy! Ed.*

Dear Sir,

I have a query regarding LP storage, or rather the lack of it.

Previously I have bought self-assembly cubes from a company called Cubestore who no longer appear to exist. These were ideal for LP storage being approx. 12 to 13 inches high and wide. Despite looking I have not been able to find anything similar. Do you know of a supplier of this type of storage?

Many thanks

**Chris Erban**

Via. E-mail

*Issue 24 is an Analogue Survival edition, and one of the questions we'll be addressing is the vexed one of record storage. No revelations I'm afraid, but a good cross section of the more cost effective options on the market. Ed.*

Dear Sir,

I was pleased to read Paul Messenger's endorsement of BBC Radio 3's *Late Junction* in Hi Fi+ Issue 22. I came across this programme about nine months ago and have listened to it as much as possible since. However, the normal 10:15 p.m. to 12:05 a.m. weekday slot often sees me set up a cassette tape and retire to bed, even though the clean and steady 230 volts available late on make my NAT02 tuner sound wonderful.

At a scheduled 110 minutes *Late Junction* is too long for the standard 90 minute cassette. If I ignore the deck manufacturer's advice and use a flimsy 120 minute tape I lose even more quality, risk jamming the tape mechanism and have even then missed the last few minutes when an earlier concert has overrun. So - I have recently started recording onto VCR tapes and playing them back through a lesser hi fi system. The results are encouraging enough to want to explore buying a VCR for my Sunday-best hi fi.

Would Hi-Fi+ consider this a valid subject for a one-off article? Where does 'good' VCR audio appear in the hi-fi firmament and what are the variables? Does recording 'audio only' improve recording quality?

My questions might only struggle up to mid-fi but still very much involve "Reproducing the Recorded Arts". Any comments, help or advice will be most gratefully received.

Yours sincerely,

**David Harris**

Almeley

Herefordshire

*Using a hi-fi video in order to record long programme material is certainly a viable option, especially if you consider the half-speed facility offered by many machines. That's eight hours of recording time, and given the width of the tape, shouldn't stress the performance parameters too much. It's a while since any of us have actually used a VCR for audio taping so memories are a bit hazy, but generally speaking, results are held to equal but different to audio cassette, making it distinctly preferable to C120 tapes. Beware however, the effects of CX high-frequency compression that can result in audible noise pumping.*

*The other alternative would be to use a hard-disc system such as Sky Plus (if you subscribe to Sky) or the Yamaha CDR-HD1300 standalone unit (80 - 137GB capacity and £600). Audio performance may well benefit from the addition of a basic external DAC, but it's the basic storage facility that you require. Ed.*

Dear Sirs,

"A Cautionary Tale"

On the 15th February 2003 I sold my Martin-Logan Aeries 1 loudspeakers through the Loot newspaper.

I also advertised on hiforsale.com. A man phoned me named Geoffrey, he said "Are the speakers still for sale and would you accept an offer of £1400.00 and is an Alliance and Leicester Bankers Draft acceptable?" I said that would be Okay, always being advised that Bankers Drafts are as good as cash. (This was on 14th Feb 2003) Geoffrey phoned me again on Saturday 15th February saying that he had some bad news and some good news - firstly that his grandmother had had a heart attack and that he had to go down to Brighton with his brother to see her, as this was the third attack she'd had. The good news was that he would send his girlfriend to pick up the speakers and that she would have the Bankers Draft with her. I was naturally very sympathetic and said that this arrangement would be fine and hoped that his grandmother would be okay.

At around 8.30pm on Saturday 15th February, a personable, well-dressed young woman arrived at my home with a Bankers Draft for £1400.00 from the Alliance and Leicester. She said "that the packaging was not required and that she would take the speakers and manuals plus mains lead, in the cab she was in, saying that her boyfriend wouldn't be selling them on again!"

Needless to say I have since found out that the Bankers Draft was forged and that the whole episode was a con! I have followed several different tacks, the first obviously, to see the police and report the crime. Initially, they were not too interested, saying that the matter was a civil one! After phoning and making my presence felt and not going away I have got the police to take up the matter and they have been very good, following up all available leads. To cut a long story short, I would ask you to please find a way to print this "Cautionary Tale", in the magazine, in the hope that: -

a) It will warn all other Hi-fi enthusiasts of this devious pair of criminals and to never accept anything other than cash! (Mind you even this could be forged - couldn't it!)?

b) It may lead to the apprehension of these criminals, who have prayed upon my goodwill, sense of sympathy and trust, (which I must admit has stood me in good stead during my 30 years of being involved in Hi-fi and the Hi-fi community). I have dealt with many fellow enthusiasts, who have been trustworthy, honest and of unimpeachable integrity. (Maybe this is why I fell for this scam!!)

c) The speakers were: -

Martin Logan Aeries 1 in light oak and black, serial numbers were - AELJ620 and AELJ621

As a footnote, it's surprising how good a pair of Mission 700's on sand filled Atacama SE24's can sound!!!

Best wishes but be warned!

**Mick Burrows**

Kent



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<b>Arcam</b>	<b>Chord Co.</b>	<b>Hi-fi for Sale</b>	<b>KEF</b>
<b>Living Voice</b>	<b>Moon</b>	<b>Naim Audio</b>	<b>Pioneer</b>
<b>Primare</b>	<b>ProAc</b>	<b>Sugden</b>	<b>Tannoy</b>
<b>Totem</b>	<b>Velodyne</b>	<b>etc, etc...</b>	

Individual product demonstrations will take place throughout the venue over the two days, with experts on hand from the manufacturers and retailers to help with any queries.

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For all the latest news on the show, stay tuned to Hi-Fi + for the updates as they happen.

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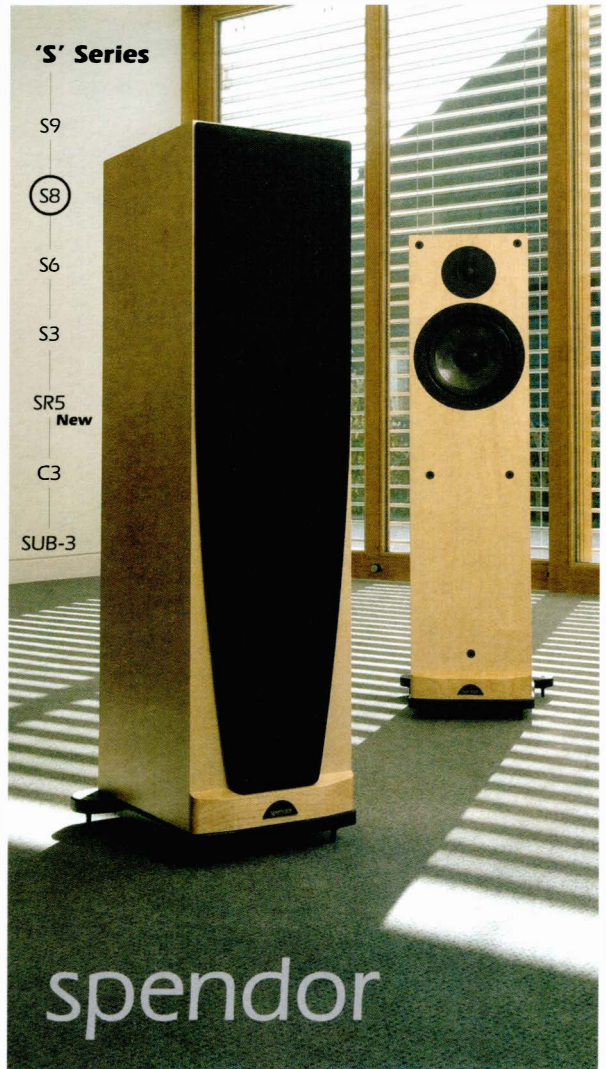
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# Running on Empty

by Phil Ward

We've all experienced it. The new component that sounds raw and ungainly at first but as the hours, days or maybe weeks of use pass by, transforms into the clean, clear, fast, open and musical hi-fi we dreamed of - or at least gets much closer than we ever thought possible. Running-in, burning-in, settling-down, call it what you like, has become a "given" and second nature in the hi-fi business. Without it, press reviews would perhaps be shorter and both manufacturers and retailers might have a harder time selling product; "Yes sir, it does sound a little bright at first but that's to be expected. It'll settle down after a little while", is a pretty useful line. Tell me you've never heard something like it?

But what actually goes on when a product runs-in? Now I'm not remotely qualified to comment on or investigate running-in effects in cables or electronic components - I don't really understand the science. But in the case of loudspeakers, the transformation in sound we so often read about and the mechanisms that are suggested as responsible, should be apparent from the electro-acoustic measurement of a speaker before and after run-in. So in the second half of this piece I'm going to present a set of measurements of a pair of B&W CDM1 NTs - a speaker that B&W in the product Owner's Guide describe thus; "The performance of the speaker will change subtly during the initial listening period. If the speaker has been stored in a cold environment, the damping compounds and suspension materials of the drive units will take some time to recover their correct mechanical properties. The drive unit suspensions will also loosen up during the first hours of use. The time taken for the speaker to achieve its intended performance will vary depending on previous storage conditions and how it is used. As a guide, allow up to a week for the temperature effects to stabilise and 15 hours of average use for the mechanical parts to attain their intended design characteristics."

For the test, both speakers' impedance and frequency response characteristics were measured before run-in, and then one subjected to three weeks of use at high level for around 10 hours a day (the second speaker was stored in a similar environment but far enough away that it wouldn't pick up any acoustic energy). Both were then measured again with the non-run-in speaker providing a control reference. Non-linear characteristics, harmonic distortion for example, were not measured. This was partly due to the difficulty of doing so with the equipment available and partly due to the fact that, by their very nature, the change mechanisms under investigation, if significantly present, would very likely show themselves in

the linear domain.

But now I've gone and done it. I've used the "measure" word in Hi-Fi Plus - the empyrean citadel of music-first subjectivism. I can hear already the muttering about "measuring the wrong thing" or "measurements don't tell the whole story". Well in another context that may be so, but remember these measurements are not aimed at trying to quantify the sound of a speaker. They are aimed simply at revealing change - the measurement system is "transparent". So don't fret. I'm not proposing we put the clock back 25 years, stop listening to any music and simply rely on a box of measuring tricks. I'm simply proposing that, if for example and as I've heard suggested, running-in alters the high frequency resonance of a metal dome tweeter due to its dome material work-hardening, the effect should be visible in a measurement comparison before and after.

"But why would we want to do that?" I hear you ask. "Surely we all know that speaker running-in effects occur so why waste time proving things we already know?" Well my short answer is that I've never been entirely convinced that running-in, at least in speakers, is as clear-cut as it seems. Undoubtedly there can be big changes in the subjective characteristics of a speaker as it warms-up with use. The causes of those changes are pretty easy to predict and pretty easy to measure. But they are reversible. As a speaker stops playing and cools, barring perhaps a little thermal hysteresis, its electro-acoustic characteristics will return to, as near as makes no difference, their room temperature state. However, the proposition that during a running-in period there are irreversible changes in the material structures and mechanisms of a speaker has always seemed to me a little far fetched, and a little too, well, convenient. Especially when there are plausible, although less convenient, psychoacoustic explanations for the run-in phenomenon that we've all experienced.

My doubts arise from three different directions. First, in very many years of working with speakers I've little direct measured evidence for the commonly proposed running-in mechanisms. The only one that I've definitely seen is the reduction in the suspension stiffness of a bass driver - which in turn reduces its fundamental resonance. But even this I doubt is typically of much, if any, significance. The very nature of drivers in boxes, where the enclosed air (in both reflex and closed box) is, 99 times out of a 100, by far the dominating stiffness parameter in defining the low frequency response shape (and transient performance), means that, all other ►

► things being equal, driver suspension stiffness is a relatively unimportant parameter. In other words, the low frequency alignment (by which I mean both steady state and transient behaviour) is fundamentally insensitive to driver suspension stiffness. If this wasn't the case, manufacturers would have a much harder time producing consistent product. Driver suspension stiffness is one of the most difficult parameters to control in manufacture (apart from the fact that it varies with temperature) and a typical driver will have  $\pm 15\%$  tolerance on free-air fundamental resonance - mostly down to suspension stiffness variation. However  $\pm 15\%$  is acceptable because once a driver is mounted in a box the stiffness of the air inside dominates. If you don't believe me, think how stiff a driver in a closed box feels compared to the same driver in free-air.

And the other mechanisms one hears proposed? Well, irreversible changes in the material characteristics of a cone, suspension or surround material, if they are responsible for the significant swings in performance one sees described, would surely produce obvious measurable effects in frequency response or spectral decay? If so, I've never seen them.

Similarly, the previously mentioned "work-hardening" of a metal tweeter dome ought to change its high frequency response shape, especially its fundamental break-up resonance, pretty significantly. Again, show me the resonant frequency shift and/or level change that should occur if the material qualities change? Now it may be that these effects were there all the time, but as I wasn't specifically looking for them, they passed me by. And that, perhaps, is what this exercise is all about.

A second reason for doubt is a suspicious, smoking-gun of inequality in the perception of running-in that I've never been comfortable with. It's this. Why do run-in products always sound better? What possible reason could there be for running-in effects always improving the sound? How many times have you read, or heard; "Well, it was fabulous as soon as I turned it on but coloured, bright and unlistenable after a couple of weeks"? I recall reading something along those lines just once, in this very publication, a few issues ago, but that's once for running in resulting in a worse sound, against countless numbers for the opposite. If the mechanisms behind running-in are not understood and fully taken into account in the design stage, and with respect to the loudspeaker industry, I don't believe they really are, then one would expect the subjective effect of the mechanisms to be sometimes positive and sometimes negative (and sometimes to make no

difference at all).

The only plausible explanation I've heard for one sided result of running-in is that designers tend to work on one development "mule" which, through the development process, becomes run-in. All the development decisions are then made on a run-in product so one would expect subsequent production units to sound best after a significant period of use. There's perhaps some currency in this, but in my experience it also reveals a decidedly romantic, rose-tinted view of modern product development processes and I don't find it convincing. Pressures of time to market now mean that development processes have to be run in parallel, not in series. Gone, or at

least rapidly going, are the days of one engineer endlessly tinkering with a precious prototype until its ready to be presented to an expectant world.

The larger scale loudspeaker companies in particular, will most likely be working with a rolling batch of development prototypes - older ones being left behind and new ones being introduced as, for instance, off-tool samples of new parts become available. The "designer works with run-in product" theory also raises the

question of why, when an engineer starts development with virgin

product, he or she is not sent down the wrong development route in misguided attempts to improve the performance when all that was needed was to leave it playing for a while?

And the third reason that I doubt. Well apart from the multitude of external influences on the performance of a hi-fi system (mains quality, ambient temperature and humidity, background noise level, mood, reversible thermal changes) that make irreversible running-in effects so hard to quantify, there's also the complexity and adaptive nature of our own hearing to stir into the mix. Open any psychoacoustics text book and you'll get some idea of the complexity inherent in our perception of, and response to, sound. There are well documented adaptive phenomena, both long and short term, that could very plausibly be responsible for the perception of running-in. And while I have little evidence for or experience of genuine mechanical running-in effects, I do have experience of listeners adapting their response to a system as they become used to it. A tonal balance that is unacceptable at first can, over time, become acceptable as the ear and brain adapts. If that's not "running-in" I don't know what is. I'm not saying that running-in doesn't exist and isn't a completely valid response to a new product, just that it may well not reside ►



► in the equipment but in the listener.

As any prudent scientist will argue: if you have an unexplained phenomenon, the source of which might reside within either a complex or a simple mechanism, look for it in the complex one before you add unwarranted complexity to the simple one. A speaker is typically a roughly assembled mechanism of wood, metal, plastic and glue. The human brain is the most complex mechanism our planet has to offer (yes, yes, mine naturally excluded). Go figure.

Of course I wrote the first part of this article knowing the results of the experiment. If the set of measurements following revealed any of the evidence we might expect from irreversible changes in the speaker's materials and mechanisms then I would have been writing a very different, and I admit, somewhat surprised piece. But the fact is, there were no changes between before and after run-in that were greater than either the expected experimental error, or perhaps more significantly, greater than the typical pair match or production consistency. So we can't even argue that the fine detail or minor changes are significant. If they were, it would be all but impossible to manufacture consistent product. Each speaker produced would sound as different as is typically reported is the case between virgin and run-in.

Of course I may have got unlucky and chosen, in the CDM1 NT, a speaker that needs no running in (in which case B&W wasted some words in the Owner's Guide). But in the cold light of day, even a relatively advanced product like the CDM1 NT is really not so different in terms of mechanisms and materials from countless other speakers. Or maybe a suggestion I heard while researching this piece; that running-in is only significant for drivers with less than perfectly aligned components (imagine a cone set at slightly the wrong height. Perhaps this would introduce stresses in the suspension that are "massaged" out with use?) is the reason that a blank was drawn? Either, or both, of these reasons might be significant. But even while I appreciate that it's impossible to prove a negative, the absence of evidence for any "mechanical" running-in in this case is pretty strong.

The measurements were carried out over two sessions by loudspeaker measurement consultant Phil Knight and myself. Measuring equipment was a Toshiba PC running MLSSA Version 9.0, with custom made pre and de-emphasis filters and a custom made driving amplifier. For the acoustic measurements a calibrated B&K measuring microphone and custom made power supply were used with the mic at 1m from the speaker aligned with a point between the bass/mid driver and tweeter. The measuring environment was a large, quiet, empty room (a middle of nowhere village hall if you must know) that enables measurement accuracy and confidence down to 200Hz. Curves showing low frequency data were produced by generating a mathematical model of the speaker's low frequency parameters from measurement of its impedance

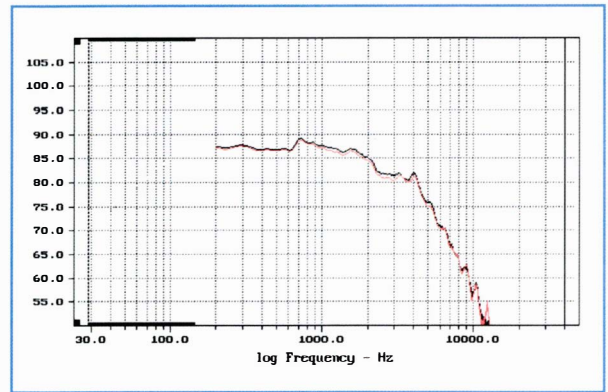


Figure 1.

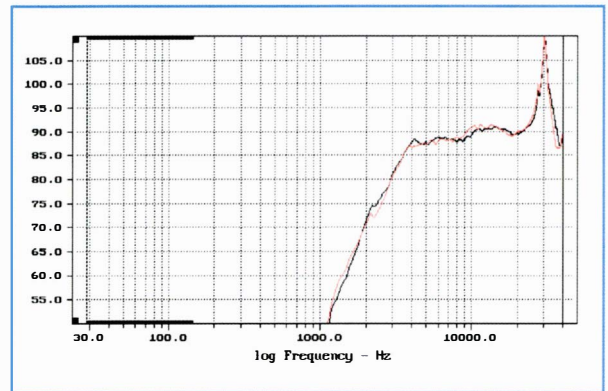


Figure 2.

(this low frequency response modelling technique is explained in the side-bar).

Figures 1 and 2 respectively show the bass/mid driver (200Hz to 12kHz) and tweeter (1kHz to 40kHz) frequency responses through the crossover (the bi-wire terminal panel allowed tweeter and bass units to be measured separately) for each speaker before running in. These curves illustrate the baseline pair match of the speakers. Both tweeter and bass/mid drivers are generally within  $\pm 0.5$ dB through the passband although the tweeter match goes a little haywire in the high-pass roll-on region (this is partly because tweeter suspension stiffness, like bass unit suspension stiffness, is hard to control in manufacture and partly because the steep slope of the curve exaggerates Y-axis difference).  $\pm 0.5$ dB is however a pretty good pair match. You'll see precious few speakers achieve better.

Figures 3 and 4 again show a bass/mid unit and tweeter match but this time it's the same speaker measured twice a month or so apart. These control curves demonstrate the basic confidence inherent in the measuring process. Generally the accuracy is again within  $\pm 0.5$ dB although, again, there's some inconsistency in the tweeter roll-on region - temperature differences between the two measuring sessions and, again, the "slope effect" are most likely to blame. The value of

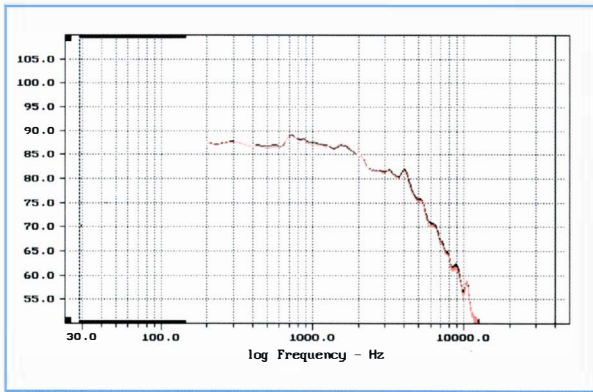


Figure 3.

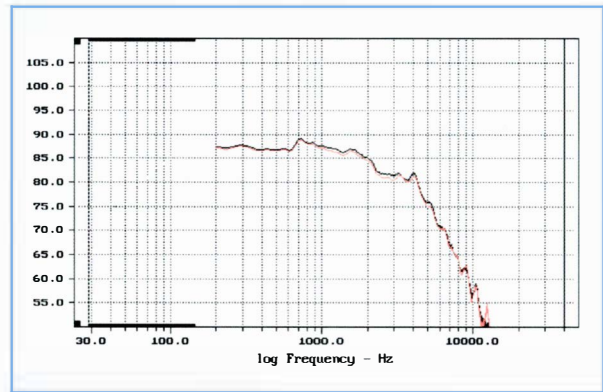


Figure 3b.

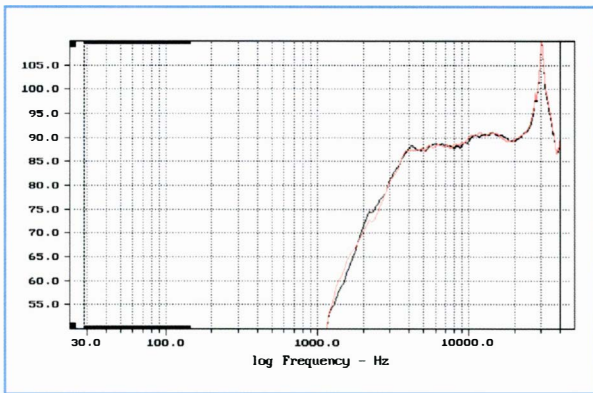


Figure 4.

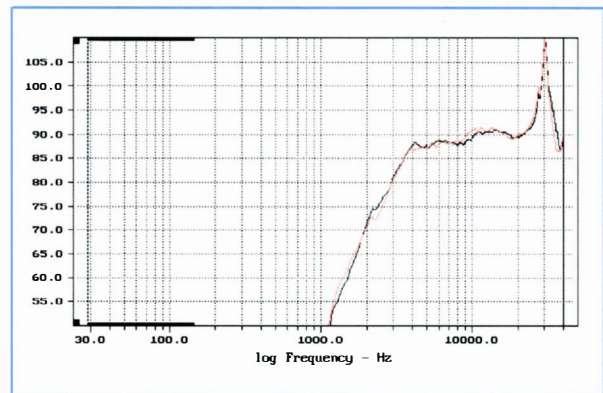


Figure 4b.

▶ these curves is that they provide confidence that when we come to compare the before and after measurement for the run-in speaker, the changes revealed will be real and not measurement artefacts.

Figures 3b and 4b show the same information as Figures 3 and 4 but here the data is presented with one curve referenced to the other. Presenting the data in this form makes it far easier to appreciate changes (the vertical scale

is now 1dB rather than 5dB) and is the method I've used to present the data for before and after run-in - Figures 5 and 6.

Figures 5 and 6 illustrate pretty clearly that there were no changes in frequency response from 200Hz to 40kHz between virgin and run-in that were greater either than the accuracy across the two measurement sessions or greater than the basic pair match of the speakers. Ironically, the changes in the control speaker (Figures 3b and 4b) are ▶

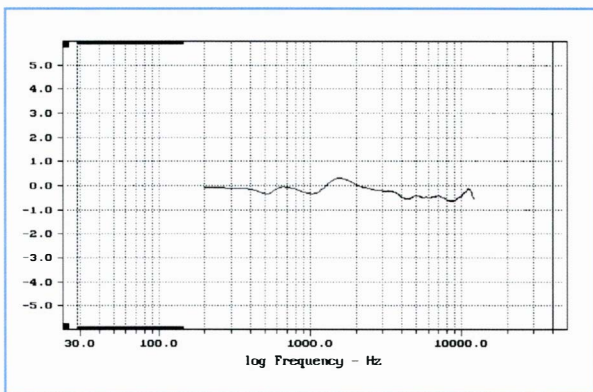


Figure 5.

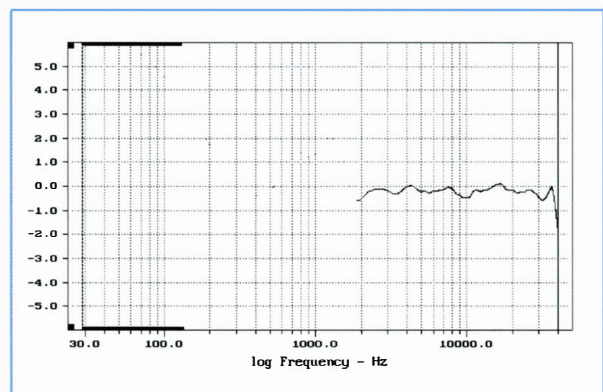


Figure 6.

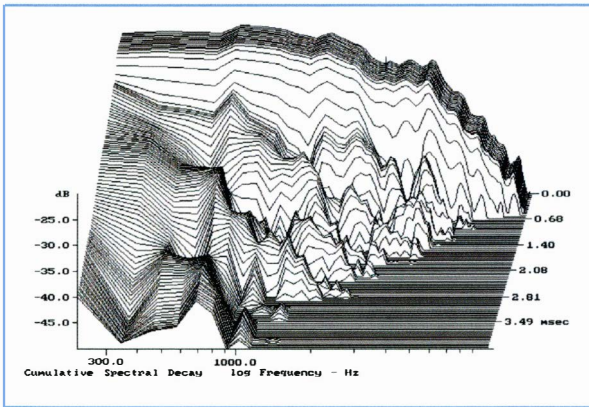


Figure 7.

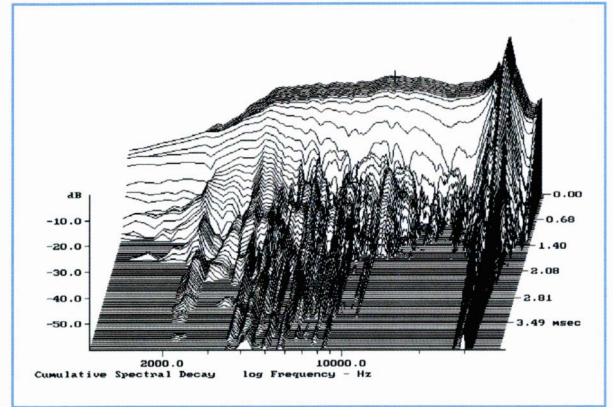


Figure 9.

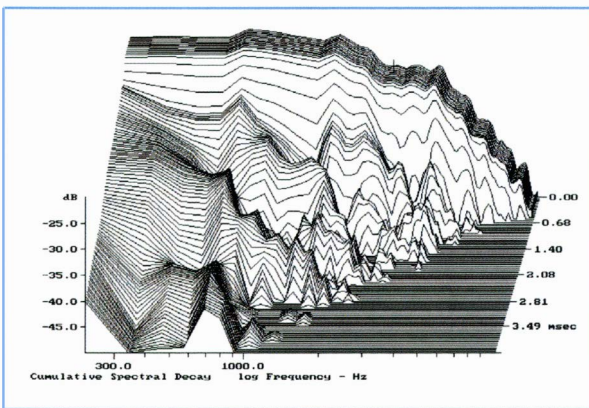


Figure 8.

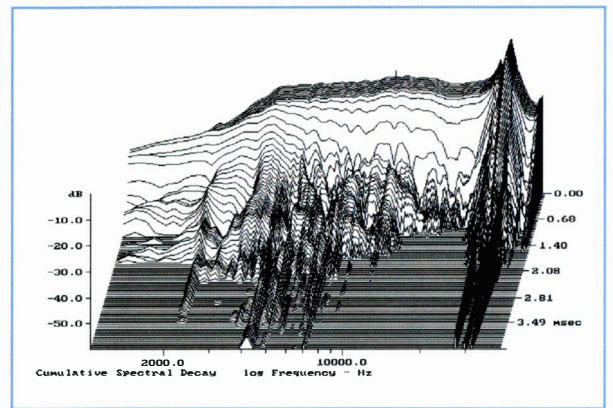


Figure 10.

▶ slightly greater than the changes in the run-in speaker. No, we didn't get the speakers confused. Most likely we were just a little more accurate with speaker and microphone positioning on one speaker than the other.

Of course simple frequency response measurement tells us little about the time domain behaviour of a speaker. Perhaps running-in changes only reveal themselves in the energy decay behaviour (although I'm at a loss to explain why that might be). Figures 7, 8, 9 and 10 show the Cumulative Spectral Decay curves before and after running-in of the bass/mid units and tweeters (Note: The vertical scale on the tweeters is compressed compared to the bass/mid units simply so that the tweeters +20dB resonance peak could be included).

A CSD curve effectively illustrates how well a speaker stops. Imagine that the speaker is reproducing a wide band noise signal that is instantaneously turned off. The rearmost curve is the steady state frequency response, while time is displayed running from back to front. So the curves towards the front illustrate the speaker's energy decay characteristics with frequency. A good illustration of how a CSD curve illustrates energy decay can be ▶

### Low Frequency Response Modelling

Rather than make any attempt to measure directly the low frequency performance of the CDM 1NTs, which for accuracy down to the low Hertz would demand a really vast empty space, the low frequency curves were generated from a mathematical model of the speaker's low frequency parameters. Neville Thiele and Richard Small described in the 1970s how a speaker's low frequency characteristics could be described using analogue electrical filter theory. Their work showed that the mass of the various moving parts, stiffness of the suspension, mechanical and electrical damping, and the acoustic load presented by the enclosure could be seen as analogous to electrical inductance, capacitance and resistance components in an electrical circuit - an electrical circuit with an input and an output. If the analogous circuit is arranged appropriately, its output is the acoustic response of the speaker and enclosure, while its input will have exactly the same impedance as the real speaker. So if you measure the low frequency impedance of a speaker, set up a computer model of its analogous circuit (there are standard circuits for closed box, reflex, coupled-cavity, etc.) and then run a computer optimisation routine to find the unique set of component values that "fit" the measured impedance, you end up with an accurate (to within typically  $\pm 0.25\text{dB}$ ), mathematically generated low frequency response curve.

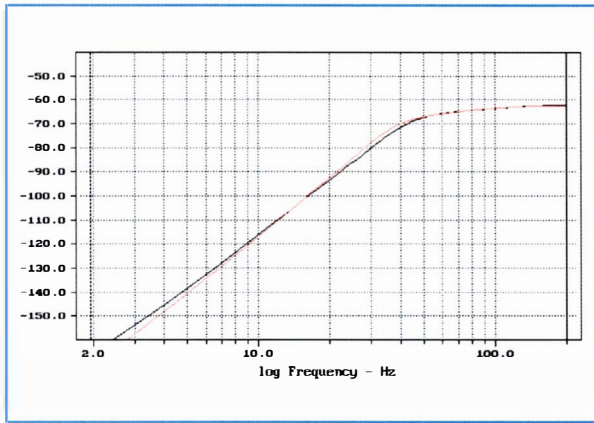


Figure 11.

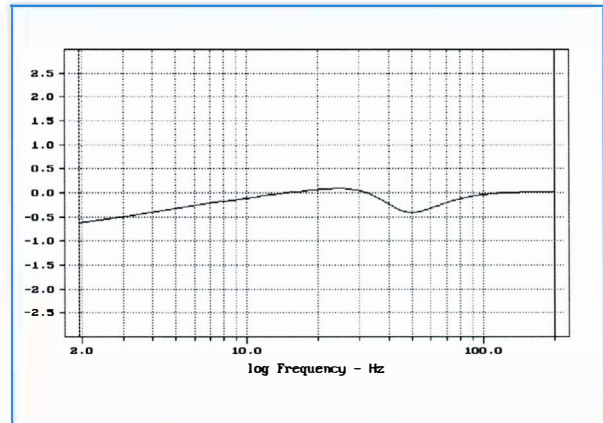


Figure 12.

► seen in the two tweeter curves (Fig 9 & 10). These show very clearly the 30kHz dome resonance decaying down into the noise floor (at around -55dB) over 4 milliseconds or so. There's precious few differences between the before curves (Fig 7 & 9) and the after curves (Fig 8 & 10). If you squint at them for long enough there's perhaps some evidence of less low level hash between 2kHz and 10kHz in the "after" tweeter curve (Fig 10), but this is so far down towards the noise floor that it is more plausibly the artefact of a slightly noisier measurement than evidence of improved tweeter performance. There's certainly no evidence for work-hardening changes in the dome material.

The last three curves, Figures 11, 12 and 13, show the low frequency alignment and pair match of the CDM1 NT, the consistency between measurement sessions, and the before and after run-in change. Again, the difference curves (12 and 13) are presented with one measurement referred to the other.

Figure 11 shows the low frequency response shape and pair match of the speakers. There's a mild 1.5dB discrepancy between 20Hz to 40Hz. This is the port tuning region which suggests that a difference in the speakers port damping is to blame. The most likely cause is differently arranged stuffing in the two enclosures. Although 1.5dB is a less good result than I'd have expected, it probably isn't particularly significant in practice. The real-world compromises of positioning in a domestic listening environment will probably swamp any mild bass pair match errors.

Figures 12 and 13 show the measurement consistency achieved on the control speaker and the change on the run-in speaker respectively. Again, and a little frustratingly, the control speaker shows slightly more change than the

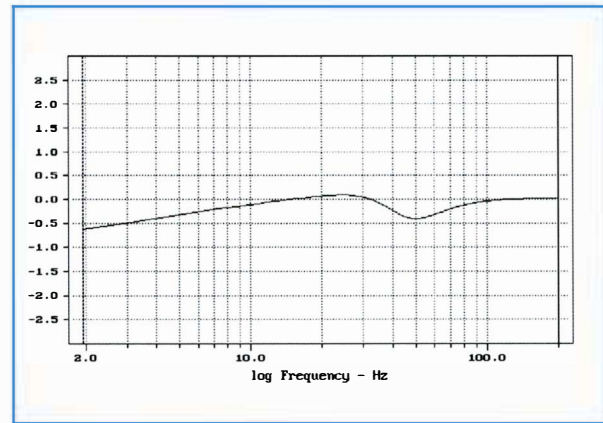


Figure 13.

run-in speaker. Neither however exceeds 0.5dB till we get down to 2Hz. Almost certainly we're in the realm of random experimental error here, a conclusion re-enforced by the fact that while both curves show negative change around the port tuning frequency (ambient temperature change between measurement perhaps?), below 20Hz (where the output would be at -50dB) one shows positive and one negative change.

Finally, I wrote above that there's one mechanical running-in change of which I've had definite experience - a bass/mid driver's free-air fundamental resonance frequency falling. Well you can guess what happened on the run-in speaker can't you? It fell, yes, but by a somewhat paltry 1.98%. At least the control speaker only changed by 0.5%.

Thanks are due to B&W, Chris Binns, Phil Knight and Dr. Francis Rumsey for help and advice in writing this piece.



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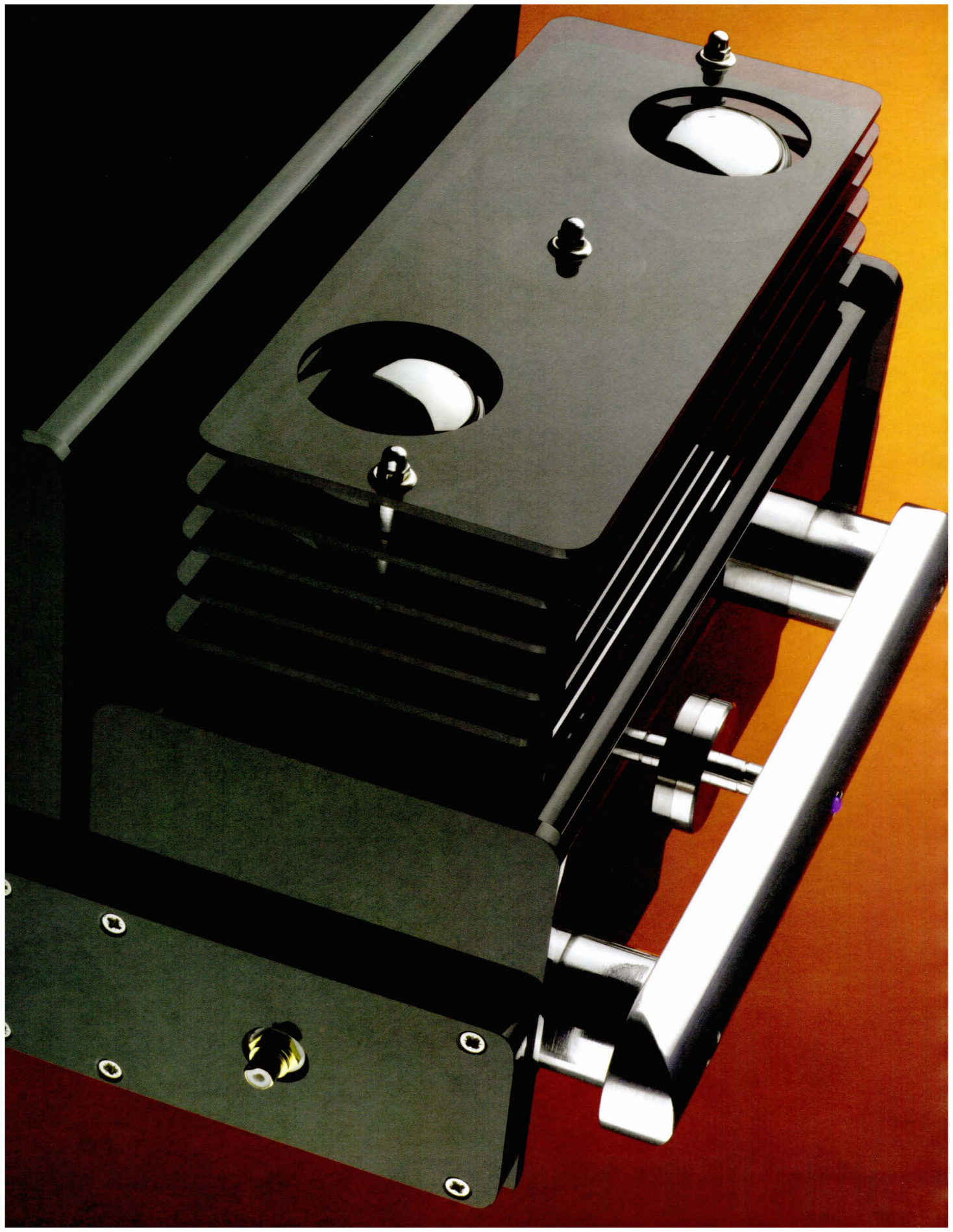
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# Tom Evans Audio Design

## The Soul S15 Power Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

It's no secret that this magazine likes the designs that emanate from the murky yet fertile imagination of Tom Evans. This has nothing to do with whether or not we like the man (like many designers who push the boundaries he can be stubborn, demanding and downright obnoxious when dealing with those still living in what he sees as the past – at least, the ones he thinks should know better). It has everything to do with the performance of his products, real world units that have repeatedly challenged pretenders to the state of the art. It's a history that has culminated with *The Groove* and *The Vibe* (along with its external power supply, of which more later) and now finally, and most impressively, with the Soul Series power amplifiers, a collaborative effort with Anthony Matthews of bespoke manufacturer Tube Distinctions

In order to appreciate just how revolutionary the Soul Series amps really are you need to look both under their skin and back in time. Sure, they look different, and who ever heard of a single-ended hybrid, especially a modular one, but the real story can be read exactly where most valve amps fail so dismally – in the measurements. But before we get to those, you need to know where they come from.

The history of hi-fi starts with single-ended class A valve amps. Low on power and short on bandwidth, the problem was that most of the “cures” were just as bad as the original flaws, just different. The

development of push-pull designs introduced the problem of accurate phase splitting, one never adequately solved by valve designers, while the shift to higher, class AB outputs also introduced switching distortion. Solid-state designs, with their npn-pnp transistor technology avoided the issue of phase splitting but suffer from intrusive distortion artifacts and devoid of output transformers are often critically influenced by the loudspeakers' back EMF. The failure of these various solutions has actually led to a technological backlash and the re-emergence of classic single-ended designs – along with all the problems that caused us to abandon them in the first place! What's actually required is a fundamental reassessment of the causes behind their problems if they are ever to represent a viable proposition. That's exactly what the Soul Series represent.

The potential benefits of a class A valve output stage are well recognised. Valves are extremely linear devices when used within their operating envelope. They also swing more voltage making them better able to track musical dynamics. A well designed output transformer isolates the output stage from the influence of the speakers' back EMF, and when they do clip they do it far more kindly to the ear than transistors. The problem is getting them to deliver their paper potential in practice. In older designs, many of the limitations are a result of the available technology. The output impedance of valves makes them

unsuited to driving other valves, yet this is the standard topology employed in virtually all, current valve amps. Of course, back in the 30s valves were all there was. Additional parasitic effects accumulate in the circuitry itself caused by the wiring, the boards and components. The irrepressible Evans describes the end result as analogous to a “motor-cycle towing a truck”. It's little wonder that you end up with poor response to dynamic power demands and lousy bandwidth. But advances in circuit board technology, greater understanding of dielectric effects and the possibility of greater component accuracy have made it possible to both model and realize actual circuit performance to a far greater degree. That's exactly where Tom's been working for years.

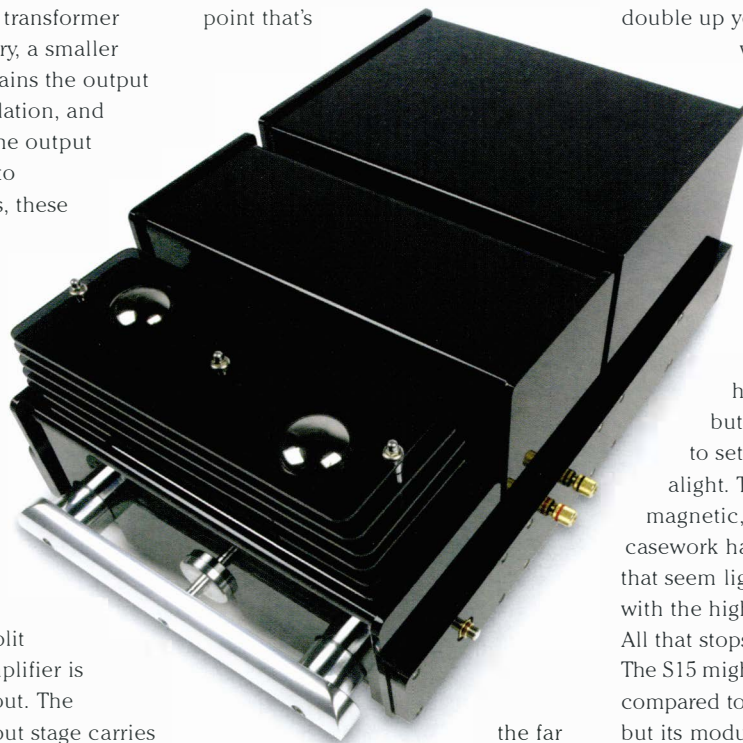
Add in the existence of his super stable and super quiet Lithos discrete regulation circuit and suddenly you are presented with the possibility of creating the perfect operating environment for your output tubes. Compare that with the norm, a valve driven from a poorly matched impedance and drawing power through a resistor/capacitor network which is modulated by the signal and the benefits should be obvious. Unfortunately, valve circuitry is outside Tom's experience and output transformers have never darkened his door, hence the tie-up with Anthony Matthews, extensively experienced in both respects. It's a winning combination, as the results demonstrate.



► The Soul Series amps are constructed around a single, modular output board, carrying a tetrode connected KT88. A high-tech, multi-layer board and surface mount circuitry is employed to cram the 200 discrete components that comprise the seven individual Lithos regulators into a manageable space. That's seven independent regulators per output tube! The chassis is also modular, consisting of a large "dirty" box, containing the mains transformer and all the AC circuitry, a smaller "clean" box that contains the output stage and its DC regulation, and a third box housing the output transformers. Built into aluminium extrusions, these boxes carry perspex covers and are linked by milled from solid aluminium spacers that carry the umbilical wiring. Perspex side cheeks lock everything together and carry the input and output socketry, unusually, split left and right. The amplifier is DC coupled throughout. The underside of the output stage carries a small, silent and Lithos regulated fan, a reflection of the fact that this amp really is class A, its power supply and control circuitry as well as the output stage. It also reflects just how maniacally obsessive these boys are about spurious noise. A discrete class A regulator for the fan? If you want to prevent it feeding grunge back into the power supply then that'll certainly do it.

The S15 reviewed here is the smallest and cheapest amp in the range, delivering 15 Watts a side and costing a not inconsiderable £8000. What sets it apart from other low

powered offerings is its performance, and to truly appreciate the difference, a few numbers are instructive. The better valve amps offer a noise floor of around 50 milli-volts. The S15's noise floor is down in the micro-volt domain. It's also flat from 15Hz to 180kHz, and phase flat to 60kHz. These are seriously exceptional numbers. Most single-ended amps quote bandwidths that struggle to offer a -3dB point that's



the far side of 20k! The

phase coherence so vital to accurate timing and stereo presentation reflects not just the control exerted over the output stage but the superb output transformer too. And whereas most single-ended (and other valve) amps quote power figures at 1k and distortion and bandwidth at 1 Watt output in order to paint the rosier picture possible (if distortion figures measured in whole percentage points could ever be considered rosy) the specs on the S15 are quoted at full rated output.

Still, there's no getting away from the fact that 15 Watts is only 15 Watts. If you need more power then the output boards can be daisy chained to produce a 30 Watt stereo, 30 or 60 Watt monos. In fact, in theory you can simply add more and more modules (until you run out of money or floorspace), and the best news is that you can add them to an existing unit, making future upgrades far more cost effective. Even better, double up your output stage and as

well as doubling the power you halve the noise and distortion levels and further increase the bandwidth and linearity.

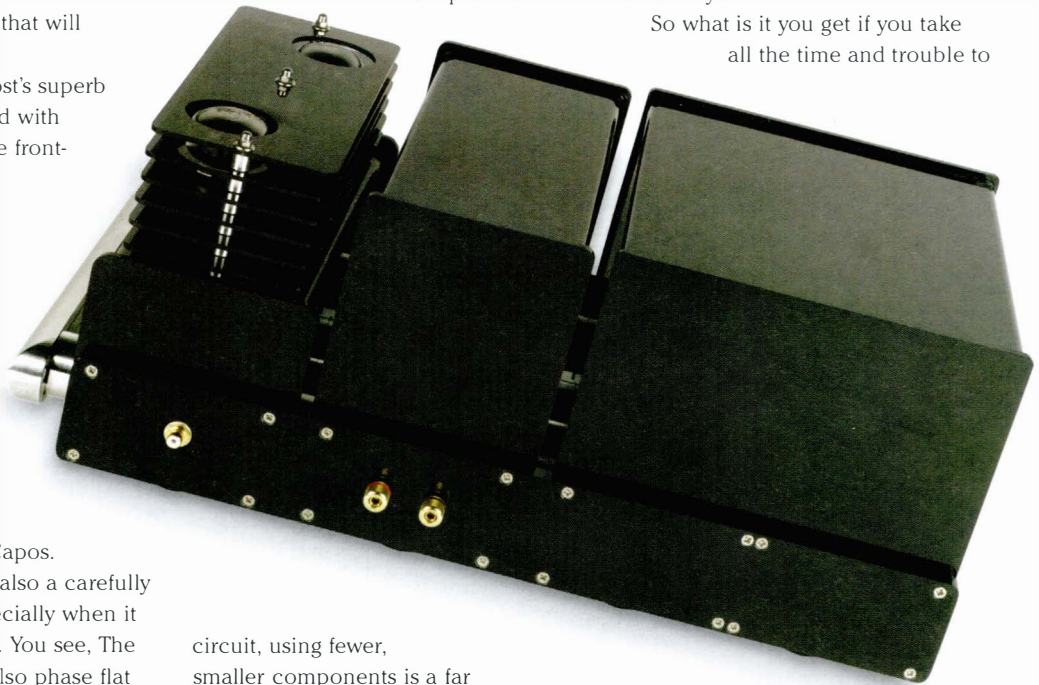
The other big surprise with the S15 is its appearance. Previous Evans efforts have been tidy enough, but they were never going to set the aesthetic world alight. The insistence on non-magnetic, preferably Perspex, casework has produced products that seem lightweight in comparison with the high-end competition. All that stops with the Soul Series. The S15 might not be a heavyweight compared to the likes of the Aquila, but its modular casework is beautifully finished, the overall result reassuringly solid and the package as a whole, sufficiently heavy to give you pause when picking it up. Styling, as always, is a personal thing, and the S15 has enough of it to polarize opinions. Darkly brooding, I rather like it. But one thing's for sure, you can't complain about the fit and finish.

I ran the S15 in a number of different systems, but the bulk of the listening involved The Groove, The Vibe and a prototype of the new external power supply for The Vibe. This latter unit, The Pulse, has

▶ a dramatic effect on the performance of the line stage, increasing transparency, dynamic range and bass extension. The result is a much more stable and solid sonic picture, with greater impact imparted from a far more solid footing. Its importance is in extending the performance envelope of The Vibe to a point where it can keep pace with the power amp. Without it, much of the S15's impact would have remained obscured from view. As to other pre-amps, well, they were less than successful for reasons that will become apparent.

Cabling was Nordost's superb Valhalla, supplemented with the new Valkyrja, while front-ends were mainly the Clearaudio Master Reference, Master TQi and Insider Reference, along with the VPI TNT-HRX, JMW 12.5 and Lyra Titan and Dynavector DV XV1s cartridges. Speakers were the Living Voice OBX-Rs and Reference 3A DaCapos. It's a pretty stellar, but also a carefully chosen selection, especially when it comes to the speakers. You see, The Groove and Vibe are also phase flat designs, making for a phase coherent amplification chain, helped in this respect by the Nordost cabling. And whilst I'd happily offer the phono and line stages as pretty universal products, I'm not sure I can say the same about the power amp. Partly because of its superior performance, partly because of its intimate connection to the speakers, it seems that much more critical of the phase coherence of its partnering equipment, both fore and aft. Complex speaker crossovers that do horrible things to the phase with frequency are ruthlessly

exposed, with lumps, bumps and unsightly aural bulges sticking out all over. It's almost as if the S15's picture is so correct that it draws attention to deviations elsewhere in the system. The difference between the old OBX crossovers and the new isn't subtle. On the S15, familiarity with the new version made the old ones sound broken. I spent ten minutes going through the wiring convinced that I must have hooked something up wrong. The much simpler new



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circuit, using fewer, smaller components is a far better match, offering a sense of evenness, top to bottom and in terms of dynamic energy, that the older units can't approach. Likewise, the benefits of the directly connected bass-mid driver of the Reference 3A become even more apparent.

Moving the other way in the system, substituting the usually excellent Hovland HP100 for The Vibe again produces a clogged and blurred effect. It's not so much that the S15 sounds bad with the Hovland, it's just that it sounds an awful lot better with its own line-stage. And there's a similar effect with end of

side tracing error, making the parallel tracking Clearaudio and 12" JMW arms virtually de rigueur over the various 9" models I have in house. You begin to see the problem. The S15 is an astonishingly capable amplifier, but it's also the most demanding unit I've ever used when it comes to partnering equipment. I'm not saying that you have to use Tom's other electronics when you use the S15, it's just that I haven't found anything else that works half as well – yet.

So what is it you get if you take all the time and trouble to

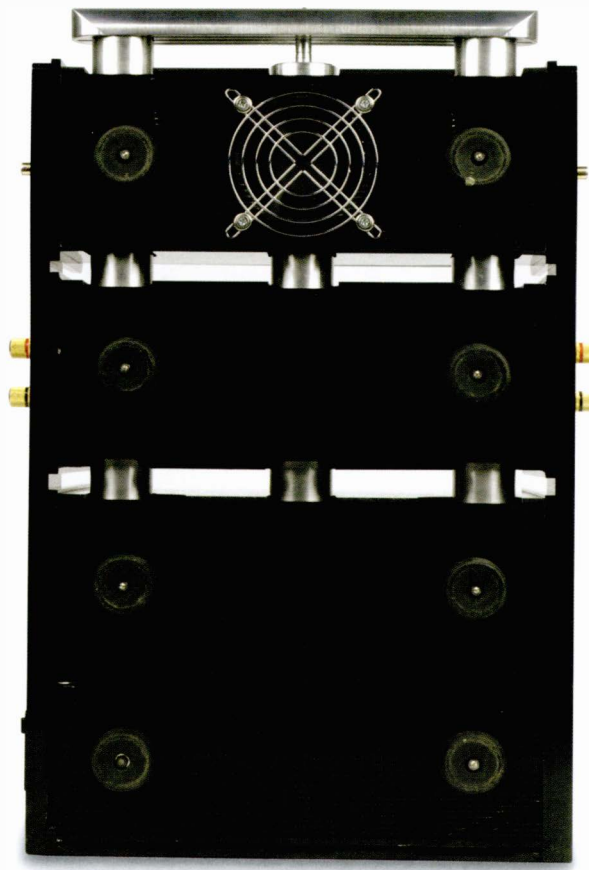
surround the S15 with its preferred partners? The most important thing to recognise, and it's less obvious than you might expect simply because it is so obvious, is how correctly the music's presented. The positioning of the players, the vertical space between instruments and the voices of their players, the space around and behind players, whether in the studio or concert hall, is perfectly proportioned. This was only fully apparent once I'd added the additional power supply to The Vibe, allowing the greater ▶

► transparency to extend the depth perspective, and I'm told that production units are even more impressive in this respect. The relative placement, scaling, but above all the absolute stability of the images is uncanny, and it's not until you revert to other amps that you realise just how imprecisely drawn and unstable their sonic picture is.

In the same way, there's no compression in terms of dynamic space either. Dynamics are perfectly scaled at both ends of the spectrum, steps being equally proportioned whether loud or quiet. This of course depends on the headroom of the system which in turn depends on the speakers, but with either the OBXs or Reference 3As (both around 94dB) there was no discernable compression until the onset of clipping. The only other amp I've ever heard behave like this is the DNM, and like both the PA2 and PA3S, the S15 goes surprisingly loud before it clips.

Now roll those two aspects of performance together and think what they mean for music. 'Revelator' (from Gillian Welch's album *Time (The Revelator)* Proper Music ACONY 0103) is a one take, multi-miked, single acoustic space recording, Welch seated with partner David Rawlings in what can be an uncomfortably stark and almost brittle presentation. The S15 delivers the essential truth in the performance. Welch and Rawlings are facing each other, their positions betrayed by the unmistakable angles of their instruments. The secondary acoustic

of the small recording booth is captured by the closely placed instrumental microphones, Welch's voice is perfectly placed above the body of her instrument. Now, while a voice (or two) and a couple of guitars might not sound like much of a demand, the small forces involved allow this to be a dynamic and uncompressed recording, full of



attack and purpose. That's where the brittleness comes from – well, it does normally. The S15 replays this vivid recording without any of the edge or hardness I'd assumed was on the disc. It does it because it tracks the dynamics without demur, or disturbance to the stability of the picture being played. And that's from CD! (In this case the excellent Gamut integrated player, mounted on the

Kinabalu support system.)

Switch to a really good vinyl front-end and the rightness and stability of proceedings becomes even more apparent, as does its influence in the time domain. Change scale to something larger and the amp simply takes it in its stride. Playing the Argenta/Yepes *Concierto De Aranjuez* (Alhambra SCLL 14000)

it's hard to ignore the immediacy and presence of the solo guitar, its combination of delicacy and dynamic attack. It's slightly over scale (a familiar problem with recordings from the early stereo years – just think of Heifetz) yet the musical coherence, the perfect timing of instrumental interplay binds the piece together into a convincing and captivating whole. The delicacy of Yepes' phrasing, his masterly control of pace and attack during the opening passage of the second movement is exquisite. It's not fast, or liquid, or warm and rounded. It simply is. Which brings us to another conundrum concerning this amp. As critically destructive as it is of partnering equipment, ruthlessly revealing any failings or liberties, it is altogether more forgiving

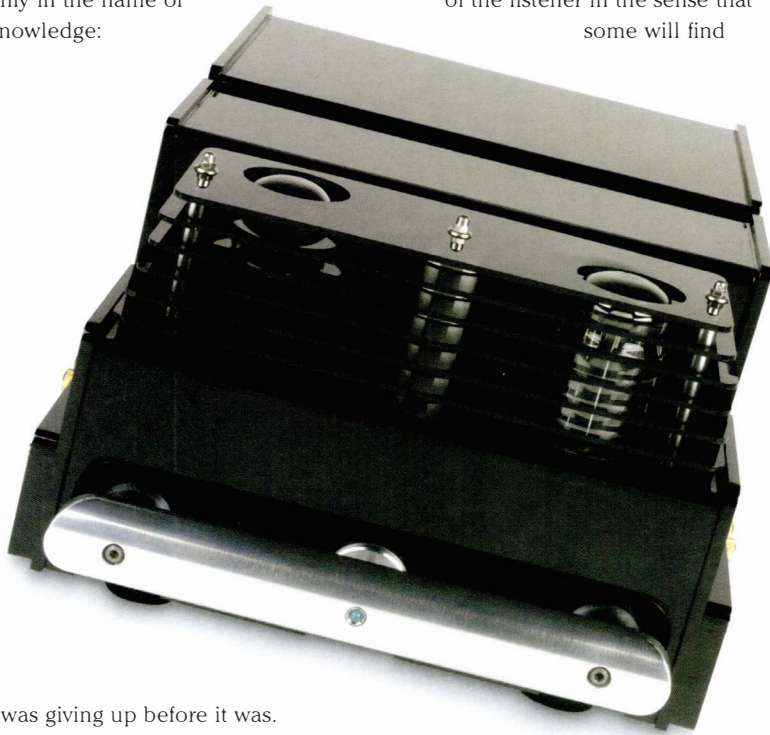
of recording quality. There are few if any perfect recordings out there, and few of those are worth listening to. The S15 makes the most of the signal you feed it. Perhaps it's the easy dynamic speed and pace, perhaps it's the overall sense of organisation that helps, but whatever the reason, this amp breathes life into recordings.

Going for broke, I pulled out ►

▶ the Athena pressing of the Johanos/ Dallas Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* (Athena ALSW-10001). I was concerned that some of the overall pace and clarity in the amp's sound might come from a lightened bass. I needn't have worried. The subterranean detonations that underpin the piece's tremendous opening crescendos where explosively intact and wonderfully unconstrained, even at high levels. Push it hard and the amp would clip, but only in the name of knowledge:

across frequency and level in a way that no other amplifier I have heard can match. There are amps that approach the S15 in one way or another, there are certainly those that offer bigger soundstages and more colourfully pleasing images (the Lamm ML2 for one) and there are those that are more sweetly forgiving. Indeed the S15's gravest shortcoming is that it is so demanding: demanding of partnering equipment and demanding of the listener in the sense that some will find

when I was told that the company had finally settled on a name for its beast – The Soul. I can go with that, 'cos that's exactly what it delivers. Accurate to what? To the only thing that matters. ▶+



I was giving up before it was. But the most impressive aspect of this exercise was the ability of the amp to not just separate out the piano, but to deliver the weight, character and complexity of its left hand, clear and uncluttered by the low frequency maelstrom around it.

I could trot out example after example (this amp also keeps you listening long after you should) but I think you should be getting the picture by now. This amplifier delivers exceptional levels of transparency, dynamic, temporal and musical coherence, and it does it evenly,

its honesty disconcerting and opt for the comfort of some additional padding. I find myself slightly awestruck by its performance and it continues to teach me things on a daily basis. Of one thing I'm sure, there's much more to write on this particular subject, if only because I currently await the arrival of a pair of M30 mono-blocks!

I was contemplating just how completely this system can reveal the inner workings of a performance

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single ended Tetrode hybrid amplifier
Valve Complement:	1 x KT88 per module
Inputs:	Single ended/balanced line (to order)
Input Impedance:	27kOhms
Outputs:	1 pair 4mm binding posts/banana sockets/ch
Rated Output Power:	15 watt RMS per channel/8 Ohms
Bandwidth:	Flat from 15Hz- 180Khz at full power -3dB 7Hz-280kHz
Phase:	Flat from 10Hz-60Khz at full power
Dimensions (WxHxD):	320 x 220 x 540mm
Weight:	38Kg.
Finish:	Any colour so long as it is black
Price:	£8,000

#### Manufacturer:

Tom Evans Audio Design  
Tel. 01443-833570

#### Distributor (R of W):

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# Hot Tubes JD1

## Dual-Mono Power Amplifier

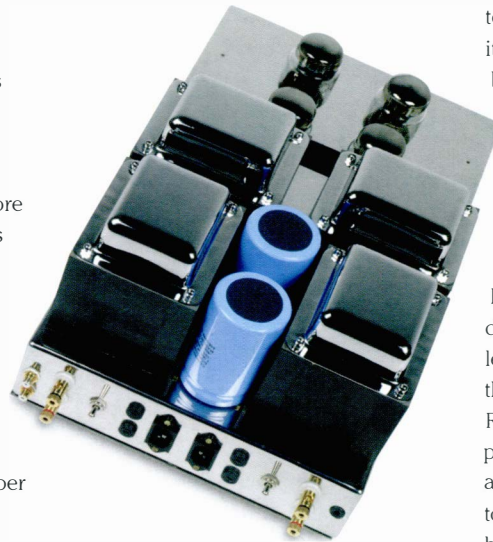
by Roy Gregory

There are only so many ways to skin the valve cat, despite what folk wisdom might tell you. Perm your options from the available selection of output stage topologies and power supply configurations and unless you're doing something really novel then that's pretty much your lot. Once the basic building blocks are in place it's down to component selection and implementation. However, that leaves plenty of room for maneuver, and plenty of scope to get things wrong. Thus, although the world is littered with what are in many cases, little more than modified application circuits, it's remarkable how many bad sounding valve amps see the light of day. It's an object lesson in the facts of hi-fi life: there are no magic ingredients to guarantee sonic success, and the quicker a designer jumps on the tail of the latest passing bandwagon, the sooner he's likely to come a cropper tumbling off the other side.

Valve amps are essentially simple things, especially when compared to their solid state brethren. They have fewer parts, and once they're working rarely sound truly unpleasant: disjointed, confused, murky and musically uncommunicative maybe, but rarely downright nasty. It's a situation that has encouraged more than a few dubious forays into valve amp production, and this particular class of hi-fi manufacturer comes and goes even quicker than the norm for what is a highly volatile industry. No great surprise then that each new manufacturer who crosses our bow, touting the latest breakthrough in

thermionic amplification, is greeted with even greater skepticism than normal.

So what's different about Hot Tubes and their first offering, the JD1 dual-mono power amp? Well, on the surface, not a lot. It's a classic push-pull ultra-linear design, employing a pair of KT88s per channel to



deliver something approaching 100 Watts of Class AB1 power. With an ECC81 front-end and an 83 phase splitter per channel, it's a line-up that's familiar from the likes of Beard and TVA, to name just a couple of historical precedents. Indeed, it could almost be considered the archetypal line-up for a high-powered British valve amp. Which sets it apart for starters. In these days of flea powered single-ended designs: 100 Watts from a single pair of output devices – whatever next? The other thing that underlines its difference becomes apparent when you pick it up.

The JD1 is seriously heavy! Now I'm used to lugging heavy amps around, but this one is taking things way too far. A single, relatively compact chassis that weighs in at nearly nine stone, if you value your health you'll treat it with considerable respect. But that weight is instructive. This amp might break no new topological ground, but it's pursued its chosen path with what can only be described as a vengeance.

For starters, the dual-mono epithet is no marketing gimmick. There's two of everything in here, and that includes mains transformers and mains leads, the latter being of the well-regarded MusicWorks variety. Indeed, the manual underlines the designer's insistence on using these leads, the matching extension lead and the Music Works inspired Quadraspire Reference rack to achieve optimum performance. He goes further than that, and stipulates preferred signal cabling too, although more on that later. A fixed bias design, trim pots to set the bias are located in a convenient chassis top cutout positioned between the valves themselves, easily accessible and simplicity itself to use.

Much of the weight comes from the four substantial transformers grouped at the chassis rear, but the extremely thick, medical grade stainless steel casework also chips in. Heavy, rigid and difficult to work (so much so that it has to be water jet or laser cut) it is extraordinarily rigid and more importantly, non-magnetic. It's also the most apparent evidence of the cost no object approach that's been applied to the JD1, an approach that ►

► extends to every component in the amplifier. Those big blue caps are custom built, the passive components have all been exhaustively auditioned. The output valves themselves are nothing fancy, Sovtek KT88s are supplied as standard, and designer Steve Jackson insists that the choice of output tubes isn't particularly critical. The front-end valves are another matter, and these are Groove Tubes selected items, a decision that's certainly supported by my experience – the need for careful selection that is.



The Groove Tubes wouldn't necessarily be my choice (again based on my own experience) but Mr Jackson insists that in this particular case they're the best he's found – so far.

But there's much more to a product's success than the product itself. There are issues of company structure, commercial reality and longevity. After all, what use is a warranty (or a product) from a defunct or dysfunctional company? Something over fifteen years of involvement in hi-fi retail has made Steve Jackson more than aware of the pitfalls – he's been a witness to most of them. It's a background that offers Hot Tubes a much better than average chance of survival in this most Darwinian of environments. It's also contributed to a refreshingly realistic approach to system building. The instruction manual might specify everything from plug position on the chosen extension lead to preferred

interconnects, but beyond that it quickly becomes clear that the designer has gone to great lengths to create a universal product, one with enough power to be useful in the real world and interfacing requirements that don't rule out most of the pre-amps known to man. So, whilst he's clear as to his product's preferred set-up, he's been at pains to make it useable too.

The JD1 itself carries its heart firmly on its sleeve. If you want the kind of immaculate finishing that you find on products from long production runs then buy one that comes from a much larger company or one that's made out of something easier to work with than the stainless steel and glass used by Hot Tubes. You can see when you look at this amp that somebody has actually made it for you and I think that that is half the appeal. My one real complaint was the bottom plate on the prototype used for the review.

It was a shade oversized, but that's already been corrected in production. Elsewhere, you can pick holes if you really try but that's missing the point. This is to all intents and purposes a bespoke product: it looks like one, the question is, does it deliver like one?

Well, I can tell you for starters what it doesn't deliver. It doesn't have the transparency, focus, leading edge speed or absolute temporal correctness of the Tom Evans Audio Design S15. Nor does it have the easy, unforced grace of the Huxley Scientific Aquila. What it does have however, is honest to God substance - backed up by a real sense of available power. This is very much a traditional valve amp, with what I consider to be the strengths

of a traditional valve amp. Which is where I diverge from those valve aficionados who pursue the historical route to musical fulfillment. Forget warm, sweet and cuddly: Forget walk-in or wrap around soundstaging. What I value from valves is their ability to deliver dynamics with weight and speed. Remember the old one about a valve Watt being worth two solid-state Watts (or more, depending on the evangelical shade of the raconteur)? Well, there you have it in a nutshell. Valve amps may not be the most powerful, but they have a habit of getting there the quickest with the mostest, and if you believe the Army, that's how you win battles\*. They also have a reputation for kindness to surface noise, and the JD1 is no exception. Whilst it sounds neither rounded nor rolled off, the sonic detritus that can intrude on the listening experience was played with a minimum of fuss and then simply brushed aside. Unobtrusive in the best sense of the word.

I remember John Atkinson summing up his review of the Audio Research D250: "Pussy cat? It's a Bengal tiger" ►



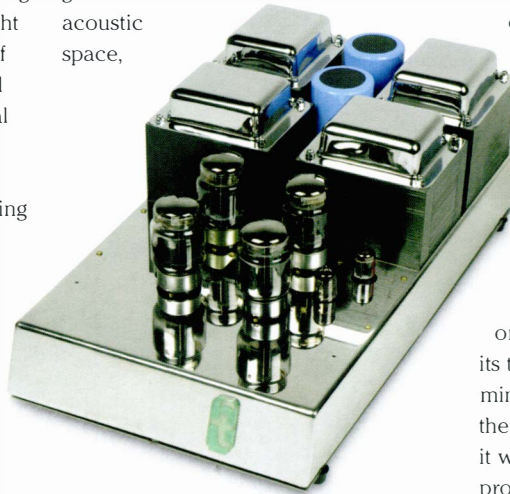
\* It's also exactly what the vast majority of single-ended amps palpably don't do. Which is why the only single-ended amps I've heard that have impressed me have been hung on the end of mega power supplies. As far as I'm concerned, "traditional" when it comes to valve amps, doesn't mean "soft and soggy".



▶ Listen to the JD1 and you'll know exactly what he means. If you're of the persuasion that likes its drums hit, and to stay hit, then you'll love this amp's emphatic style and direct delivery. Any of the new generation of guitar bands that thinks it's hot and heavy should take a listen to The Throwing Muses' pre-grunge album *The Real Ramona* (4AD cad 1002). Those familiar with Kristin Hersh's later, acoustic offerings risk being pummelled into shock by the onslaught of Hersh's and Donnelly's avalanche of guitar chords on 'Honeychain'. Played back via the JD1 it's an almost physical thing. The hard snare smacks that underpin 'Red Shoes' have bite and attack, their propulsive substance driving the track with irresistible momentum. Substitute the Hovland HP100 for The Vibe and you gain weight at the expense of speed. The choice will be system, speaker and source material dependent, but the JD1 clearly defines the difference between these two excellent pre-amps whilst working happily with either. That fact alone underlines its essential purpose. It takes what it's given and applies its considerable power as even handedly as possible. It disturbs the signal in its passing, but it doesn't bend it out of shape, and the power applied is real enough. It encourages you to play your music loud, not because you have to, but because you can.

For the record, with the Living Voice OBX-R loudspeakers on one end of the JD1 I preferred The Vibe on the other. Using the arguably more appropriate, certainly as regards efficiency, Neat Ultimatum MFS stand mounts (just reviewed by JH) I preferred the added weight of the HP100. But it's interesting that even with the very easy load presented by the OBXs the amp avoided sounding stodgy or muscle bound, often a problem with under-driving designs capable of serious power delivery. Back with the Neats, it was equally

unperturbed by their more demanding electrical profile. Even serious head-banging (and it doesn't get any more serious than the Reiner/CSO *Also Sprach Zarathustra* on Living Stereo) failed to drain this amplifier's seemingly bottomless pit of sheer musical energy and enthusiasm. I also used a pair of VPI dB5 Magic Bricks on its mains transformers, which removed a noticeable grain from the acoustic space,



lending a quicker, cleaner quality to proceedings, with better dynamic discrimination and a blacker background. I also tried the recommended Townshend Isolde cables, but ultimately preferred the sonically similar but better balanced Nordosts: More colour and texture with no loss of speed or detail.

This amp is perfectly happy playing loud, but it will do the quieter side of music just as well. It's a function not so much of subtlety (as in the case of the Aquila) or low level resolution (as in the case of Tom Evans' S15) but more one of organisation. The JD1 centres its notes with considerable care, thus keeping the structure of and relationships within the music intact. The power reserves simply keep it that way when things get busy or dynamically demanding. The end result is an amp that puts the core energy and purpose of the music

first. I'm not sure that the JD1 has taught me anything I didn't know about my record collection, but it's certainly allowed me to seriously enjoy it. It stands in stark contrast to the pared away and emotionally parsimonious products that all too often represent today's high-end offerings. That doesn't make it some kind of palliative, it simply makes it honest.

Paired with a pre-amp that offers dynamic discrimination alongside a shared sense of musical structure and organisation, the Hot Tubes amp will deliver musical satisfaction. Having said that, if you lose it in the pre-amp then it's gone for good. The JD1 makes no claims for novelty. It makes no claims for its pre-eminence in the system or scheme of things. It understands its task and is happy to do it with the minimum of fuss or intrusion. It allows the music to speak for itself, supporting it with a substantial foundation and providing it with ample available reserves of power, there when required, invisible when it's not. You can't say fairer than that. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Dual mono power amplifier
Valve Complement:	2x ECC81, 2x ECC83 4x KT88
Inputs:	Single-ended phonos
Input Impedance:	100 KOhms
Power Output:	95 Watts/Channel into 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	
Weight:	53Kg
Price:	£8000

#### Manufacturer:

Hot Tubes  
Tel. (44)(0)161 480 4830  
E-mail. gdowing@mail.can



# Huxley Scientific Aquila Integrated Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

Every so often I receive a request to make our reviews more technical: to employ numbers to describe the equipment under test. Well, true to a spirit that embraces and appreciates contrary views, one that's prepared to accept advice, here are a few numbers that help to describe Huxley Scientific's Aquila integrated amp: 1.3, 13 and 90. Varies they apply to the unit's Class A output power in Watts, its price (in hundreds of pounds) and its weight (also in hundreds of pounds). But the great thing about hi-fi is that which is which could be anybody's guess and it might be fun to finish this review right here...

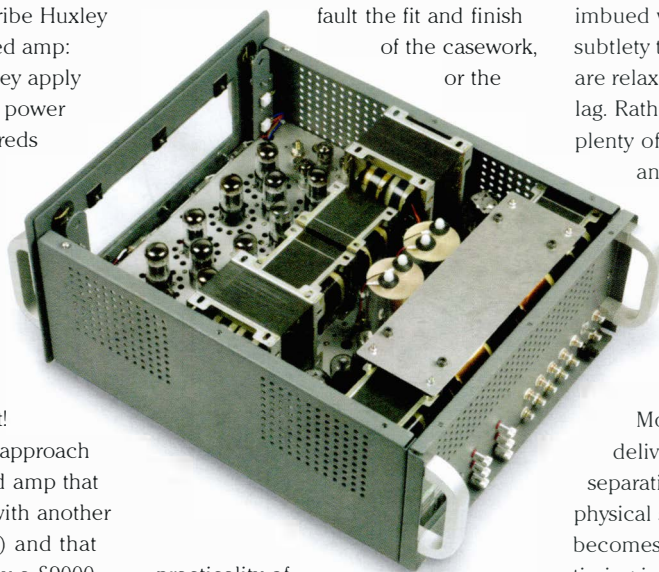
Oh, okay then, if I must!

How exactly does one approach a 13 Watt Class A integrated amp that weighs in at 130 pounds (with another 40 odd on top for its crate) and that arrives further burdened by a \$900 asking price? That's either £700 or ten pounds per stereo Watt depending on how you look at things.\*

Well, the easy answer is to plug it in and give it a listen, but first, a few more numbers just to complete the picture. How about five and zero – the number of line inputs and the number of remote functions respectively. Then

\* It's also just the other side of what I'm really prepared to lift on my own, a fact reinforced by my creaking back. This one arrived, was placed and stayed put until the day it was collected (I was only stupid enough to carry it one way – any manufacturer who creates something this heavy had better be prepared to hump it about).

there's 60 (the unit's depth in cms) and zero again (the number of concessions it makes to domestic aesthetics). It's big, heavy, expensive and frankly, plug ugly in a sort of Ron Arad industrial chic sort of way, although I have to admit that it's hard to fault the fit and finish of the casework, or the



practicality of the enclosed design. The Aquila would be equally at home in either a municipal boiler room or the communications room of a Dreadnought, but then you'd find it difficult to appreciate its musical strengths in either location. Despite appearances the Aquila's natural habitat is indeed the listening room, and once there its performance is as sublime as its looks are clumsy.

Play music on this amp and it all starts to make some sort of sense. It delivers a sound that's rich, fluid and so utterly devoid of grain that it starts to make apparently untainted amps sound positively pixelated in comparison.

The peerless vocal performance on the Speakers Corner re-pressing of Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Cole Porter Song Book (Speakers Corner/Verve MGV 4001-2) is solid, sinuous and creamy smooth. The effortless agility and intuitive phrasing of Ella's singing is imbued with all the easy grace and subtlety that marked her apart. Tempi are relaxed and unforced yet never lag. Rather, they allow the music plenty of time and space to breathe

and evolve, reveling in its inner beauty and complexity. It's a performance that makes the most of the stellar arrangements leaving even the uninitiated in no doubt that this is a very special musical event.

Mono? So what. The Aquila delivers so much space and separation within the music that the physical separation of the performers becomes almost irrelevant whilst the timing integrity that comes with a mono recording locks the rhythms up tight. This is one amp that doesn't set the music's structure in stone, slap in front of you, the notes riveted in place. In deals in softer shapes, draping the musical elements in the colours and shades of the performance yet managing to leave you in no doubt about what's holding it all together.

Driving either the Living Voice Avatar OBX-Rs or the Reference 3A DaCapo speakers, the Aquila succeeded in sounding big, sumptuous and stable. Even the avalanche of sound that opens the Villa-Lobos *Uirapuru* (DCC LPZ-1003) leaves it totally unphased, while the huge

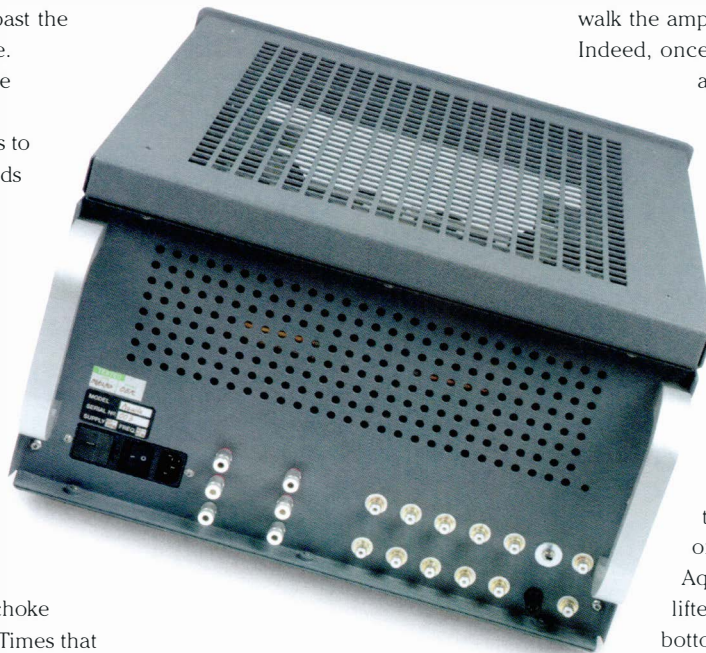


▶ soundstage that wraps this performance is full of presence and tension. The drama and brassy brightness of the Stokowski sound is rich, burnished and powerful, the sudden shifts in scale are carried off with poise and perfect timing against the amplifier's inky black backdrop. Apparently unburstable when used with reasonably efficient speakers, nonetheless it's the amp's smooth finesse that continues to impress once you've got past the "how big, how loud" stage.

Take a look through the heavily perforated lid and you'll garner a few clues as to exactly why this amp sounds as good as it does (and weighs so darned much too). The inside is loaded with valves and a whole variety of other chassis mounted lumps. Count them up and what they tell you is that the Aquila is a true, dual-mono design. That means that each channel gets not just its own mains and output transformers, but its own choke filtered power supply too. Times that little lot by two and wrap it in heavy gauge steel casework and you can start to appreciate why the unit weighs what it does.

The circuitry is hardwired throughout using PTFE insulated wire and ceramic tag strips and valve bases. The main chassis itself is aluminium. The valve complement consists of three 6922s per channel, a phase splitter consisting of dual cascode coupled differential pairs and a constant current sink to provide the drive voltage required. The inverted outputs are directly coupled to 6BX7 twin triode cathode followers that feed two pairs of push pull 6BX7 output tubes. Add in 5U4 and 6X5 rectifiers and that amounts to a grand total of 20 valves, all US built new old stock.

The topology is overall feedback free, while the designer has opted for a fixed bias output stage, providing front panel meters and chassis-top pots in order to facilitate adjustment. Other than the meters, the only other features on the front panel are rotary switches for source select and volume and a pair of handles that have nothing to do with styling and everything to do with essential practicality.



The back panel provides phono sockets for five line inputs, one of which is planned to be switchable to MM input sensitivity once a suitable internal board has been finalised, and a single record out. Vertically arranged trios of binding posts are provided for each channel. These are supplied as standard to match four and eight Ohm loads, but can be specified for one, 16, 25 or 36 Ohms if required. Here too you'll find another pair of handles, rounding off a complete and well-considered package. The Aquila's obsession with practicality extends to its packaging, a beautifully constructed and very necessary fold down crate. Indeed my only real complaints concern the lack of labels on the rear panel and the

profile of the handles which could usefully be rather more rounded given the weight that's going to be hanging from them.

There's one other practical consideration when it comes to the Aquila and that's moving it. Not just the weight, but the bullet shaped rubber feet that provide a degree of isolation. These are so flexible that they make it impossible to slide or walk the amplifier into its final position. Indeed, once the unit is in place,

a gentle horizontal push will set it rocking, almost as if it's on springs.

To this end, the company provide a set of furniture glides (small, hard plastic cups) that, placed between the feet and the supporting surface enable you to slide the amp. They also prevent the soft rubber feet marking the support they're placed on. All this means that the

Aquila has to be pretty much lifted into place, so the bottom shelf of a rack is out, even if it's big enough, unless it's a stacking design. I ended up standing it on an RDC shelf, itself supported on large RDC cones. I wasn't about to go looking for alternatives!

It's always dangerous to oversimplify or make too many assumptions but looking at this list of ingredients, the resulting sound doesn't exactly come as any surprise. The easy, unforced rhythmic integrity, the lack of grain and the black, black background are familiar from previous exposure to choke filtered power supplies such as the Border Patrols. Likewise the fixed bias, push-pull output stage will help maintain power output at the frequency extremes, preventing an attack of the soft and soggy. Meanwhile, the multiple ▶

► output devices will cost you a bit of immediacy, making for a slightly rounded sound, big on comfort and easy long-term listening. So, it's dangerous to make too many predictions, but in this instance the Aquila certainly seems to sound almost exactly as the paper spec would lead you to expect.

That extends to its weaknesses too.

Driven, incisive rock and pop music lacks some bite. The crisp snare that propels the Throwing Muses' track 'Red Shoes' (*The Real Ramona* 4AD cad 1002) is robbed of that satisfying sense of smack and impact, which in turn dilutes its sense of urgency and the power it brings to the music. You'll hear the same effect on Joe Jackson's *Look Sharp* or any number of other well recorded pop albums. It's not a rolling or softness per se, or even an absolute lack of energy. Rather it's a blurring or slight slowing of sudden leading edges. Its effect is to introduce an element of distance, but it's more obvious because it's uneven in its influence, depending on bow, key or stick pressure, and only rearing its head in cases of single, exposed instruments. Once again, it's in line with an output stage that runs eight devices a side: plenty of power, slightly less precision. Then again, the Aquila was unfortunate enough to share the listening room with Tom Evan's S15 amplifier, a product that has just significantly raised the bar as regards dynamic coherence and leading edge integrity.

As soon as the dynamic demands return to the realm of the en masse or merely extreme, the Aquila

immediately settles back into its comfort zone. As I've said, there's no shortage of presence and body (quite the opposite in fact) or substance. Combined with the easy, fluid rhythmic picture that



the amp paints, it makes for an impressive portrayal of the music's sweep, its ebb, flow and changes in density. The romantic Classical repertoire is a particular beneficiary and I can't remember the last time I played so much Rachmaninov, Previn's EMI symphony cycle (SLS5225) being particularly impressive. But if this amp has a natural affinity for one style of music over another then jazz vocal, from Ella to Astrid has to be it. That effortless ability to breathe and follow a phrase illuminates great songs with a powerful inner light. Don't get the idea that the Aquila is a one trick pony: It's a remarkable confident and competent all rounder. But its strengths are in the areas of colour and expression, musical shape and communication. It possesses a gentle touch, but you only need to scratch the surface to discover the steel fist beneath.

This amplifier offers a fascinating (and musically effective) balance of virtues. On the one hand it has the absolute stability and fluid command of rhythm and colour that I associate with amps like the Border Patrol, but manages to combine that with a gentler and arguably more forgiving, almost more traditional valve sound.

It makes for hour on hour of musical pleasure, once the domestic equilibrium has recovered from its arrival. Here's a few more numbers for you – this time marks out of ten: musical qualities – 9; build quality – 9; concessions to aesthetic harmony – 0, zip, a big, round zero! Enjoy.

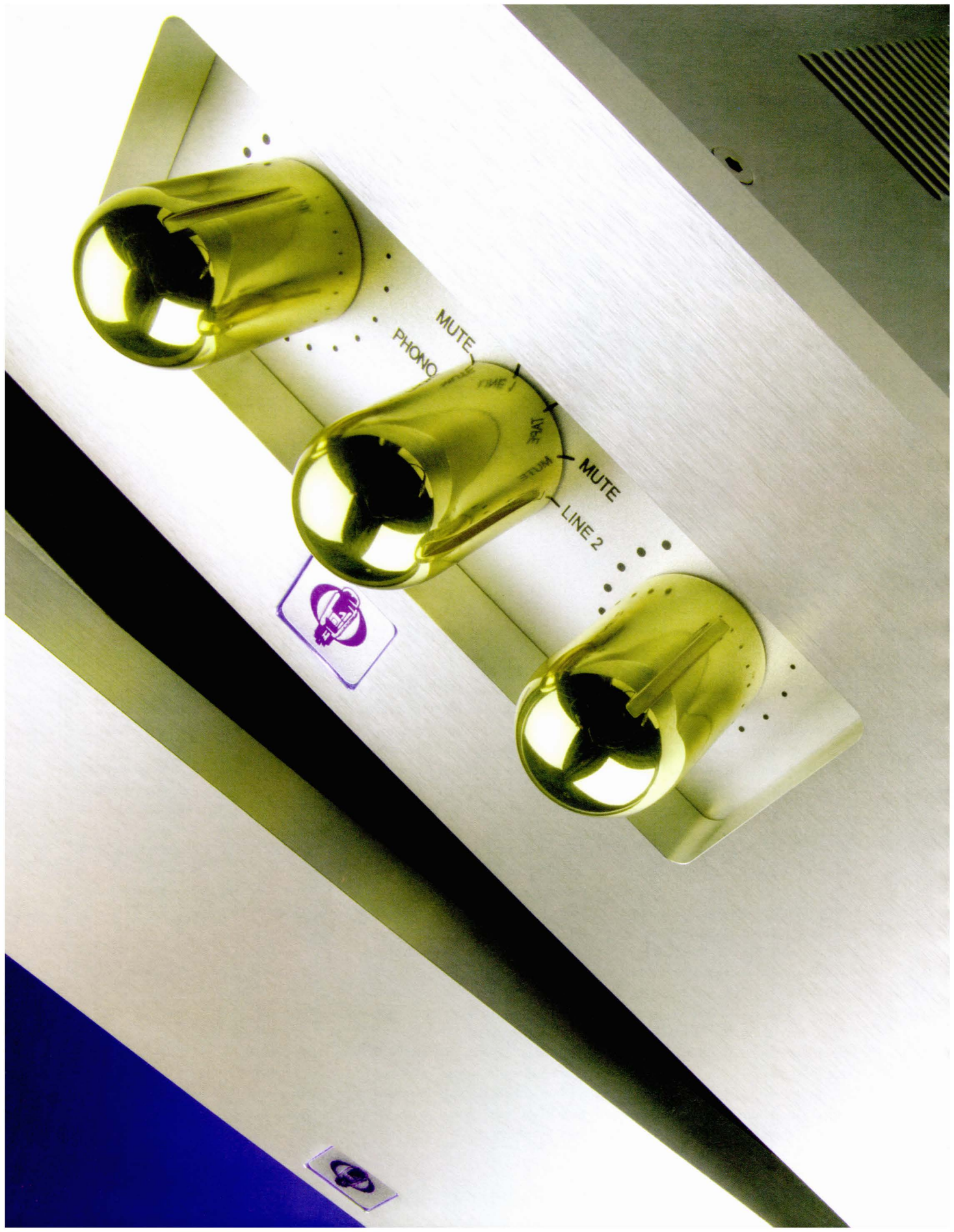


#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Push-pull triode integrated amplifier
Valve Complement:	6x 6922 twin triodes 10x 6BX7 twin triodes 2x 5U4 rectifiers 2x 6X5 rectifiers
Inputs:	5x single-ended line
Outputs:	1x single-ended record 5-way binding posts tapped for 4 and 8 Ohm loads
Output Power:	13 Watts (Class A) 18 Watts (Class AB)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	445 x 285 x 600mm
Weight:	55 Kg
Finish:	Battleship gray
Guarantee:	5 years (90 days on valves)
Price:	£9000

#### Manufacturer:

Huxley Scientific  
Tel. (44)(0)1273 278109  
E-mail. [oliver@huxley-scientific.com](mailto:oliver@huxley-scientific.com)  
Net. [www.huxley-scientific.com](http://www.huxley-scientific.com)



PHONO

MUTE

LINE 1

LINE 1

MUTE

MUTE

LINE 2

LINE 2

MUTE

RETURN

MUTE



# Croft Charisma X Pre-amp and Twin Star 1 Power Amp

by Paul Messenger

Regular readers may well recall a review of something that looks very like this Croft pre/power amp combination back in Hi-Fi+ No18. The Charisma X pre-amp even carries the same name as the one used by the combo I covered ten months ago, although the similarities are essentially superficial, and largely restricted to the chassis and feature set. And the considerable internal changes are reflected in a price which is now £2,900, where its predecessor was £2,050. (Our example was supplied with a moving-coil matching, high gain phono stage; the lower gain MM version saves £100.)

The Twin Star 1 stereo power amp that came along this time also looks much the same as the Red Shift which formed the power part of last year's package. Again the resemblance is largely restricted to the casework, however, and the internals are very different. Furthermore, it comes with a substantial increase in power, alongside a slightly lower price – £2,750 against the Red Shift's £2,950.

The Croft brand has one of the lowest profiles in British hi-fi. Glenn Croft is well into his hi-fi, and enjoys designing and building his amplifiers, but has never warmed to the sales and marketing side of the business. Phone the company and the chances are you'll get an answering machine, though in recent years this will refer you on to Eminent Audio, which has taken on the marketing role and left Glenn to do the things he does best.

Glenn is not only one of the hi-fi business' hermits, he's also a leading heretic. Right through the 1980s he

persisted with then unfashionable valve amps, and to my knowledge has never used a CD player in his home system. Down the years the brand has become regarded as synonymous with valve amplification, and notable for making examples which deliver exceptional sound quality at very realistic prices.

In more recent years his valve designs have been characterised by the elimination of output transformers. This is undoubtedly a laudable aim, but also a very unusual because of the difficulty of delivering adequate power from a relatively high impedance source (the valves) to a relatively low impedance loudspeaker load. This was the approach used in the Red Shift power amp reviewed last year. While it undoubtedly sounds quite delicious, power delivery is very restricted, so high sensitivity and impedance speakers such as horn designs definitely make the best match.

However, despite his fondness for thermionic devices, Glenn is neither blinkered nor doctrinaire. While specific devices and components do have an influence on the sound, the total application is more important than the specific component or even technology being used. The latest Croft designs are therefore adopting a hybrid 'mix'n'match' approach, codenamed 'Transvalve', still retaining valves in key places but using them alongside solid state devices where the latter are best suited to the specific task.

The Charisma X's optional high-gain moving-coil phono stage, therefore, uses type 2SK147 J-FETs, to achieve lower noise figures than is possible with valves. And while the zero-

feedback Twin Star 1 sticks quite close to Croft's output-transformerless CTC design approach, it has a hybrid valve/solid-state output stage, with one valve and two MOSFETs per channel. This provides a better impedance match to the speakers, and significantly more power in consequence. The 30/40W power rating hardly represents muscularity, to be sure, but it's a lot healthier than the 10/5W output of the Red Shift.

This more expensive variation on the Charisma X theme has different circuitry throughout, uses octal triodes in place of ECC83-type valves. It also has a compact but heavy 'black box', codenamed Pathor and housing a 500Va transformer, attached by a long, fixed umbilical, which contains the outboard power supply and keeps it well away from the delicate moving-coil stage. It now has double the power supply regulation capacity, while special filtration networks cleans up any RF pickup just prior to the input stage. 90 per cent of the capacitors are Croft's own film'n'foil 'transcapacitors', in preference to paper-in-oil types.

Interestingly and unusually, the pre-amp runs much warmer than the power amp in this instance. Both components invert phase, so the combination preserves absolute phase.

Unlike earlier generations of Crofts, where style was clearly not a priority, these two components are both good looking affairs, and unusually slim and neat for valve equipment. The thick alloy fascias might have rather sharp corners, but the shiny chrome-finish casework is nicely radiused and looks bang up to date, and some rather ►

▶ cute blue-illuminated badges are a nice touch.

If the presentation is modern, that's more than one can say for the number of inputs. In today's world, I for one find just three line inputs is inadequate.

True, there's no need to allow for



an additional external phono stage here, because the fourth input is vinyl-equalised and supplied as part of the package here (either MM or MC matching must be specified, as they use very different circuitry). But just three line inputs (plus one 'record-out' pair) does seem parsimonious, and might well prove inconvenient for some users.

In this age of widespread remote control, its absence here might or might not be a disincentive. After many years of using full remote control, I find living without it inconvenient and irritating. However, I know that the Editor couldn't give a fig, or indeed a pomegranate, for remote operation. Ultimately it's a lifestyle thing – its usefulness all depends on how you want to use your hi-fi.

It's a Croft tradition – nay curiosity – to use separate volume controls for each channel, rather than a single volume control alongside a separate balance control. This minimises the number of potentiometers needed,

which is an obvious advantage, and also helps keep the channels well separate, but it also makes achieving correct channel balance more than a little tricky – especially since it can't be done from the listening seat without remote control.

Furthermore, every time you actually want to adjust the volume, you have to reset the balance, which I for one find a real nuisance. I daresay this becomes second nature with practice, but it isn't made easier by the small diameter and tricky-to-read calibration of the deeply set knobs.

I also miss the fact that there's no mono switch, because that's the best way to centre

the balance, and is also useful for playing mono LPs.

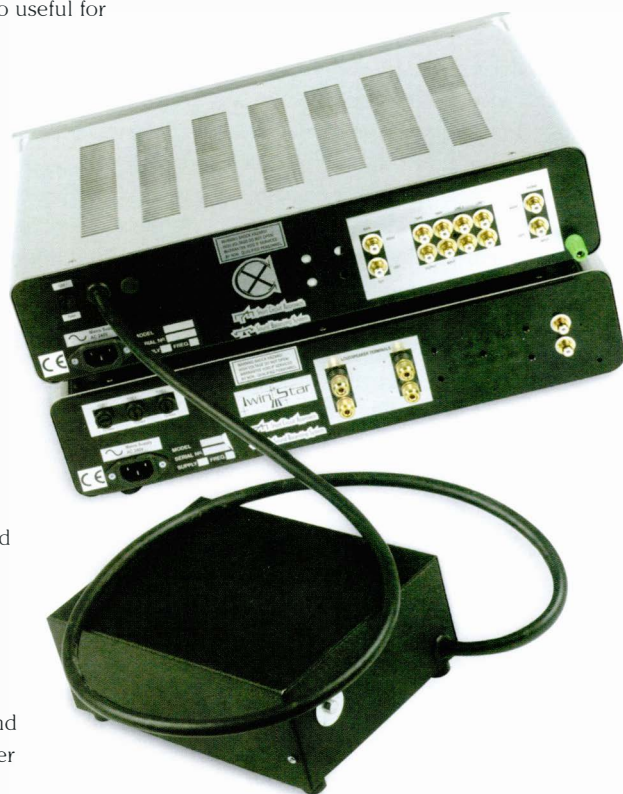
Happily, this separate volume control approach is no longer doctrinaire, and it is now possible to specify a Charisma X with a stereo volume control, which will be welcomed by those that prefer the more conventional approach.

Apart from a front panel on/off switch and illuminated badge, the Twin Star 1 power amp is entirely featureless, with just a single input pair some fuses, a mains input and just two pairs of speaker

terminals. Simplicity is a key element in all of Croft's thinking, both inside and out, and while I'm sure some will find the limited facilities occasionally frustrating, I daresay just as many will welcome its straightforward lack of ambiguities. In these increasingly complex times, it's actually quite refreshing not to have to interact with the artificial (lack of) intelligence of some species of microprocessor.

Plugged in and powered up, I started playing music – and immediately fell in love. Just like the Red Shift combo I tried last year, there was an instant 'shock of the real', arising from this amp's quite extraordinary midband immediacy and delicacy, and its exciting dynamic integrity. Its freedom from timesmear and congestion is quite magical, making it hard to go back to more conventional amplifiers without a genuine tinge of regret.

I was about to write something about this beautifully clean delicate and transparent midband





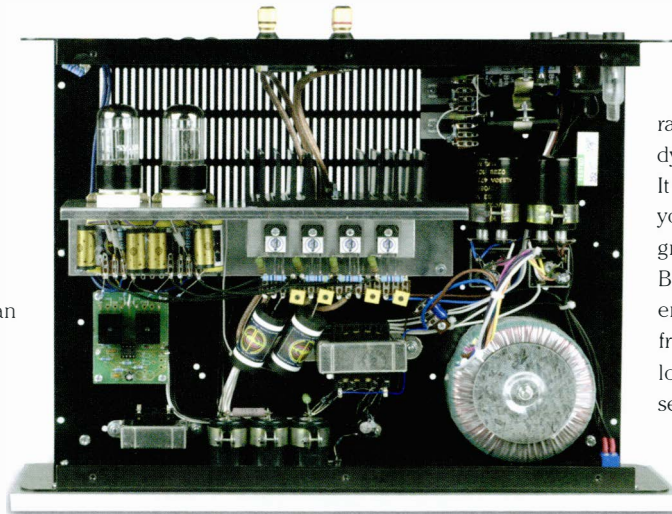
▶ being the classic stereotype characterisation of a valve amplifier, when I suddenly recalled, with a twinge of embarrassment, that the power amp here uses solid state output devices. All I can say is, they don't sound like solid state devices as we know them (Jim!). This sounds very like a valve amplifier, and a very fast and clean one at that. All of which might suggest that the real reason for the stereotype 'valve sound' may well, as Croft (and others) suggest, owe rather more to the innate relative simplicity of the circuitry such amps use than to the actual technology of the devices employed. Or maybe it's the zero-feedback approach.

I spent at least 24 hours dumbstruck by this beautiful mid-range, which seemed to make everything I listened to sound more transparent, clearer, and more natural. Even yucky MPEG digital TV sound seemed livelier, more coherent and interesting.

It was during the second 24 hours that a chink appeared. Four of us were sitting chatting, so I put something 'easy listening' on at a very low level. After a while it seemed a tad intrusive, so I turned it down a notch; a little later another notch, and so on until I gave up. Wonderfully detailed though the midband is, it's also just a tad over-projected, while at the same the very top end seems a little too restrained, even slightly rolled off. At normal listening levels the latter can be quite pleasant, but at very low levels the sound starts losing its fine detail and becomes harder to listen to in consequence.

My previous Croft experiences have tended to suggest that a slightly bright character is a normal part of the mix, but that's not the case with

the Twin Star I, which definitely projects its character rather lower down the band than 'bright'. I also detected a slight fullness, even looseness through the bass region, which is actually quite attractive in tonal balance terms, but does involve a slight softening of



textures and lack of poise.

As far as I could tell, through a bit of mixing'n'matching with other components, the Croft's 'character' owes significantly more to the power amp than the pre-amp. Indeed the Charisma X seems to be an exceptionally neutral and transparent component, and I'm very impressed by its MC phono input too, which certainly matches the transparency of the line stages.

It's a shame I don't have a Red Shift on hand, as I'd be intrigued to hear how the two actually stack up against each other in direct comparison. I really like this amplifier for its magnificent midband, but I'm also conscious that it can become a little too forceful at times and after a time. It's brilliantly informative and really drags you into the proceedings, as it propels the music along with great gusto and enthusiasm. At the same time the whole experience could be a little more laid back and relaxing,

so I'd suggest the amps might be happier partnered with loudspeakers on the laid back side of neutral.

The search for the perfect amplifier remains hi-fi's most fascinating quest, and Croft's Charisma X/Twin Star I certainly shows some powerful

glimpses of the True Path. Its midband is spookily and quite shockingly realistic, with razor sharp timing and true dynamic expressiveness. It just grabs you and keeps you in rapt attention – gripping stuff, no question. But the slight lack of top end fine detail can become frustrating, especially at very low listening levels. The search for perfection continues, but Croft is definitely one of the leading questors. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Charisma X

Sensitivity, phono: 0.6mV/47kOhm/100 pF

Sensitivity, line: 125mV/100kOhm

Output impedance: 40 Ohms

THD: <0.01%

Input overload: >30dB

RIAA accuracy: better than 0.25dB  
20-20kHz

Stereo separation: phono >70dB, line >90dB

Dimensions (WxDxH): 442x355x105mm

Weight: 12kg

##### Twin Star I

Power output: 25/30W (8/4 Ohms)

Input sensitivity: 0.5V

Input impedance: 470kOhms

Power consumption: 40W - 310W

Dimensions (WxDxH): 442x355x 105mm

##### Distributor:

Eminent Audio

Tel 01746 769156

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

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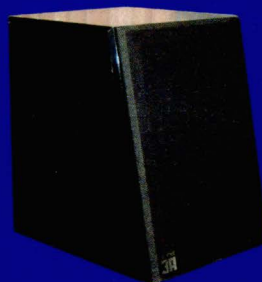


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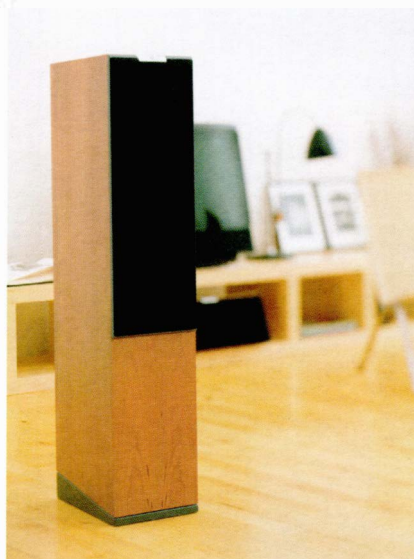
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# ATC Active 50 Loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy

Why doesn't everyone use active loudspeakers? They have so many fundamental theoretical advantages over their passive counterparts that the reasons have to be buried in something other than logic. Perhaps it's because there are so few active speaker makers in the world of domestic audio and therefore we think that they can't be any good otherwise everyone would be making them? Or could it be that you don't get the chance to try different power amp, cable and speaker combinations? There's certainly not so much tweak appeal to a product that ties up two and a half of the four basic variables in a hi-fi system (source, amplifier, cables and speakers). Possibly it's the nature of the active speakers that people have heard or read less than positive reviews of (you do get a serious slice of one designer's vision after all). Price probably has a bearing as well. It's difficult to get your head around the notion that you are buying high quality loudspeakers, multiple mono-block amplifiers, speaker cables and electronic crossovers simultaneously. People look at active speakers and think they're expensive, but if you broke them down and sold each element individually you'd probably double the price.

All of these factors play a part in the genre's domestic scarcity, but in the professional world that's virtually all there is: all those in wall systems and often the desk monitors too, are active designs. They pretty well have to be in order to generate the SPLs all day, and, supposedly, all night as well. There have even been brands like Tannoy that have built active speakers exclusively for the pro world and ironically the same brand is now making active speakers for the install market. Tannoy clearly realises that changing the perceptions of the

domestic market is likely to be a less profitable business.

But the brands that do make actives for the home, like ATC, Meridian, PMC and of course B&O, have been doing so for a long time. And having lived with a few different active designs over the last few years it's not hard to hear why.

The intrinsic advantage of the breed is the ability to design amplifiers to partner specific loudspeaker drive units whilst eliminating the subtractive crossover network in between. The benefit in terms of control is phenomenal. Remember each drive unit has its own amplifier, so a three way loudspeaker like the Active 50 has three power amps in each box. A 200 watter for the 9" (225mm) bass unit, a 100 watter for the 3" (75mm) midrange dome and 50 watts for the 1" (25mm) dome tweeter. That's 350 watts per channel, a lot more than the majority of passive systems, and controlling the drive units directly. Add to that the fact that the active crossover can compensate for low efficiency in a drivers, or its mechanical roll-off, by actually adding level where required, and you have a recipe for wide bandwidth and high energy levels from a compact enclosure.

Which explains why 99% of sub-woofers or sub bass systems are active. We take it for granted that a sub should

be active and we are gradually coming round to the idea that subs are very useful for reproducing a realistic sound-stage. To be frank, you haven't heard bass until you've heard active bass. I guess this is mostly because bass drivers are the heaviest and hardest to control, and you can't really have too much control. I know that low powered amps can sound fantastic with loudspeakers that offer an undemanding load, but this doesn't stop me wishing that someone would build an active speaker around those amplifiers. An all valve powered active speaker could be incredible. I think such a beast was created in Germany not so long ago, but whether it still exists has got to be worth a search on the internet if nothing else. There are of course drawbacks with the genre - nothing in hi-fi is ever perfect! The

one that comes most readily to mind is the back breaking weight of each speaker when they get into the 50 litre domain. I can't lift an Active 50 and it's a struggle carrying one up the stairs when there's two of you.

Then there's the issue of supporting an amplifier within an energised wooden box. To a man whose source and amps usually sit on air suspended Townshend racks the idea of attaching them to the main source of resonance within the system goes against the grain. There must be some mileage to be had from separating amps and speakers whilst retaining the active factor. ▶



► There have been a few active systems with outboard amps and crossovers, including Wharfedale's Option One and B&W's Nautilus, but Naim are by far the best known, with newcomer Emotive Excellence going the same route. But you won't find this with brands that do business in the pro world. This is presumably for practical reasons, but having very short cables between crossover and amp, and amp and drive unit is clearly beneficial and may outweigh the problems associated with poor isolation.

From a system building point of view you also need to get hold of a pre-amplifier that has good cable driving characteristics, and preferably balanced outputs to match the inputs on the speakers. However, I successfully used the ATCs with a single ended output equipped Border Patrol valve pre-amp using phono to XLR converters at one end, so this isn't essential.

The high power found with ATCs is due to the company's pro heritage. Founder and Australian Billy Woodman started off by making bass drivers for PA systems in 1974. From there he moved into building complete pro loudspeakers and inexorably got into active designs with the rest of that industry. He has done so with no little success, developing the dome midrange driver along the way and managing to get his speakers installed in some of the most prestigious studios in the world. Peter Gabriel's Real World, Todd AO (the biggest film scoring stage in the US) and Bob Ludwig's Gateway Mastering. Not to mention supplying many of the biggest names in the business such as Pink Floyd: the eagerly awaited multichannel SACD of *Dark Side of the Moon* was mixed by James Guthrie using an ATC System 3 consisting of SCM 150s at the front and SCM 50s (the professional

version of the Active 50) at the rear with 15" Sub bass system. Talk about wish you were here, or even there, for that matter!

But does all this power and control make sense in the home? Oddly enough it does. Even if you don't aim to recreate



live SPLs in the living room the active approach delivers the goods at real world levels. There is of course always the temptation to wind up the wick because the headroom is limitless by normal standards. But they work at background levels too. This is due to the phenomenal transparency delivered by the system as a whole and the remarkable midrange dome in particular. This driver was developed by Billy Woodman when he started the business and continues to be manufactured at ATC, by hand, using edge wound coils. It makes a powerful

argument for the three-way approach in the way it resolves the signal being fed to it with so little apparent coloration. The other two drive units are certainly in the same league and contribute the width of range, but it is this part of the system that would seem to be the key to the speaker's transparency.

The Active 50s make this explicit when you listen to a range of different material, each recording has its own distinct character to a far greater extent than is usually apparent. You can literally dissect the technical aspects of a track, pick out the vintage, venue and, if you knew what you were listening for, the type of compressors and microphones as well. The multiple layers of Lambchop's subtle but extremely powerful 'Is A Woman' peel away to reveal the instrumentation behind what often sound like background noises, while the phenomenal energy of AC/DC's finest five minutes, in the form of 'Problem Child' on the appropriately named *If You Want Blood*, is delivered to full effect. The recording may have one of the leanest mixes in recorded rock but this, if anything, enhances the power of the performance. And with speakers like these you're guaranteed the last ounce of whatever low frequency information is in that recording, which is always a good thing when you want to play Angus and co in anger. Or Deep Purple or Metallica or even Glenn Gould!

It's not the same sort of transparency you get with a Nautilus Signature 805 for instance, where the tremendous sense of openness and high frequency clarity reveals a lot of what's going on in the midrange. The existence of a serious bass driver and accompanying amplifier underpins the mid and top to give a wider tonal range which rarely results in an 'airy' sound. The traditional ►

▶ cabinet shape and the manufacturer's preference for keeping the grilles on when in use means that the high frequencies are more contained. You can get the impression that the soundstage is rather small and restricted, but this only lasts until you play something that has a genuine sense of expansiveness. Something like the Grateful Dead's live album *Reckoning* (the track 'China Doll' is the one, by the way). The LP has acres of atmosphere and fills the room so well via the ATCs that you wonder what other speakers are playing at. They provoke one into feeling that the expansiveness of alternatives is due to box resonance and other colorations rather than the radiating power of the drive units themselves.

The energy factor is also rather different with ATCs like these. They are never going to sound like horn speakers, for obvious reasons, and you don't get the effortless power of the genre. But you don't get the coloration either. What you can get is level. Jimmy Hughes once wrote that music often sounds better in the record shop than it does at home, and I know what he means. But I think that, in the case of non-classical stores at least, this is because they play at quite high levels and sometimes have enough large loudspeakers to cope. Power handling is what divides the men from the boys with loudspeakers. If you like music that when performed live tends to be delivered at uncomfortable levels there's nothing like great power handling to emulate that effect in the home. Music sounds intrinsically different at different volume levels: boring tracks can become interesting when turned up and lively ones can become tedious. There are no hard and fast rules except that if you like it at normal levels the chances

are you'll like it more loudly. So having a speaker that can deliver it loudly without resorting to obvious distortion is a good thing.

The degree to which the recording is compressed is not disguised with the Active 50s and inevitably some material will disappoint. The majority however deliver big time.



Take Erykah Badu's *Baduizm*, often as not her heavyweight bass playing is lost on

average loudspeakers. They either have a stab at it and end up out of their depth, producing bloated, uncontrolled bass, or simplify matters by high passing the fundamentals and get by on the harmonics. The ATCs give you what seems like the whole picture in deep, tuneful fashion. This comes down to the grip afforded by 200 watts in charge of a high quality, hand built nine-inch drive unit.

I was very sorry to let these speakers go. Not merely because I had to help

carry them down the stairs either. They are remarkably entertaining to use and from a reviewing perspective phenomenally transparent. However, the other reviewing angle is that you can't use them to listen to power amps or speaker cables, which is about the only reason I let them leave the house at all. All in all the Active 50 represents tremendous value for money, I'd challenge anyone to produce a

loudspeaker, amplifier and cable system that came anywhere near this performance level at the price. If what you want from your system is high resolution, high power handling and high entertainment this is one of the finest solutions available. ▶+

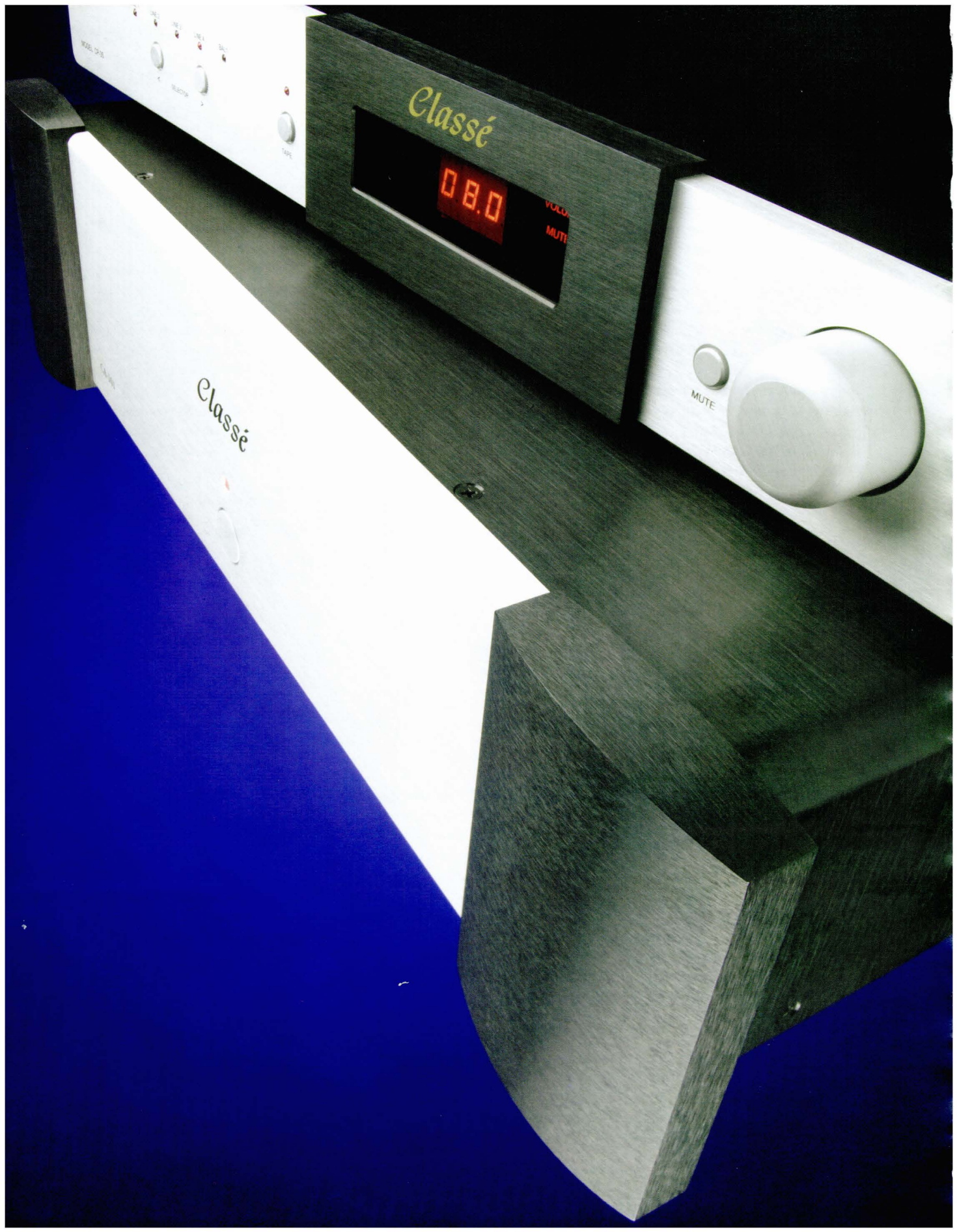
#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way, reflex loaded active speaker
Drivers:	25mm SEAS Excel tweeter, featuring a silver voice coil and double magnet system 75mm ATC fabric dome midrange 225mm ATC bass unit incorporating SCM technology and voice coil spacers
Amplification:	200 watt bass, 100 watt midrange, 50 watt treble
Dimensions (WxHxD):	303x 717x 480mm (inc amplifier)
Weight:	45kg each
Price:	£7,255 (black ash), £7,471 (cherry, walnut), £7,791 (yew, rosewood), inc stands

Owners of SCM 100 and SCM 50 active or passive loudspeakers can upgrade to Active spec for £495.00 per speaker for both models, including return freight UK mainland

#### Manufacturer:

ATC Loudspeaker Technology Ltd,  
Gypsy Lane, Aston Down, Stroud,  
Glos GL6 8HR  
Tel. (44)(0)1285 760561  
Net. [www.atc.gb.net](http://www.atc.gb.net)



*Classé*

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VOLUME  
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# Classé P35/CA101

by Jason Kennedy

Apart from being a brand name that you don't want to have to type too often, Classé components have a quality of build and finish that suggests a far larger and more established company. In fact the brand graduated from its cottage industry beginnings (the DR3 HC was one of the few amps around that drove the legendary 1 Ohm Apogee Scintillas) in 1995 when ex pat Greek Mike Viglas discovered a guy called Dave Rich building amplifiers in Montreal, Canada. Viglas liked the way the amps sounded and decided to invest in the business, building it up to the international brand it is today.

This pre-amp and power amp combo represents the entry level in a medium sized range of electronics. Classé also makes immovable style power amps with pre-amps to match, CD and SACD players and a multichannel processor and power amps to go with it. I recently reviewed the entry level CDP-10 and found it to be very impressive for the money; unusually natural and, as ever, beautifully built.

Rather inconveniently Classé products, or the ones I've heard, tend to sound much as Viglas describes them: relaxed yet on the ball, smooth yet not slow. Where's the contention there I ask you? The best Classé system I've heard so far was the multichannel set up that distributor B&W had at the London Hi-Fi Show last year (and at Bristol this year for that matter). This consisted of a set of B&W CDM9 speakers, Classé amplification and, the key to the result, Tony Faulkner's DSD recorder. We were hearing high-resolution digital recordings of the London Symphony Orchestra from the source, no wonder the sound was so

effortless and convincing. Still the amps didn't seem to be impeding things and it gave me a taste for the brand that, until I get some of the more brutal amps in for review, is not likely to go away. It would also be nice to be able to get some of the LSO Live stuff on anything other than CD. It sounds pretty good as it is so I have high hopes for the SACDs if and when Tony can get the funding. Let's hope he doesn't have to wait until the medium is considered a commercial success - that could be a while yet.

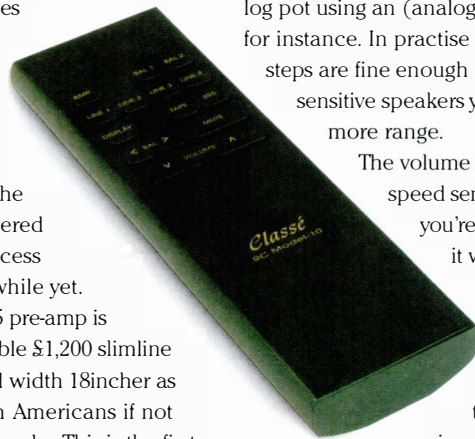
The Classé P35 pre-amp is a relatively affordable £1,200 slimline design, albeit a full width 18incher as preferred by North Americans if not by my Townshend racks. This is the first time I have had to review a pre/power combo one sitting atop the other, hopefully the significant heat dispersed by the CA101's sinking didn't upset the P35 too much. Mind you there are those who feel that the hotter an amp is the better it sounds, so maybe it's an advantage. I stopped short of putting a pillow on top to test the theory further, but it has been done.

The P35 has a restrained set of controls; it lets you change inputs one by one, monitor the tape input and mute the lot. Oh and you can change the output level, that one comes in handy sometimes. That level is shown in numerical form on a display that is happy to run up to 60. With the matching power amp and Living Voice's relatively efficient Avatar OBX-R

loudspeaker I rarely managed to push it into double figures, the level on disc being the most significant factor. Which means that the graduations reflected in both numbers and actual volume steps are a little coarse. It wasn't possible to precisely match the volume level from another pre-amp with a conventional log pot using an (analogue) SPL meter for instance. In practise though the steps are fine enough and with less sensitive speakers you'd get a bit more range.

The volume knob itself is speed sensitive and if you're too gentle with it won't actually advance level at all, but it's not something that's all that confusing in practise. Only those of us trying to level match with other components are likely to notice, and maybe those who read the comprehensive manual for that matter.

In general numerical volume displays are a good thing, you're less likely to encounter alarming levels when dropping needle into groove for instance and from a reviewing/comparison perspective it's a useful reference. I guess it's inevitable that the fancy variety you find on preamps costing twice this much or more offer finer gradations. I recall the one on the Jeff Rowland Integra being extremely gratifying. This one has the tendency to count itself down from 20 on switch on, which presumably indicates some kind of operational checking procedure, ►



▶ it takes rather longer to warm up. However the lack of any form of on/off switch would suggest that you are not encouraged to sit through this countdown very often.

Socketry extends to four single ended pairs plus a tape loop as well as an XLR



balanced pair.

Presumably somebody apart from the Americans is going to start providing balanced outputs on their sources to go with this rise in popularity for the inputs soon. Or am I not getting enough high-end players to review these days? The balanced theme extends to the outputs but is paralleled by the reliable RCA phono for those of us not looking to run acres of interconnect.

The P35 is as one might hope a fully remote control device and comes with a very nice handset in the hewn from solid style.



It's not too breakingly heavy but simply reassuring. It also appears to be a generic Classé stereo handset as there are three ineffectual buttons. Still it allows balance adjustment, which is aided visually by the display, and you can even adjust the brightness of said source of illumination in four stages including off.

Inside the pre-amp you will find that

the toroidal transformer is shielded to minimise stray magnetic fields, and that the power supply consists of multiple regulation stages using numerous small capacitors for filtering purposes. Attention is paid to the reduction of microphonics, which Classé identifies as a major cause of distortion. Its answer is to design out the effects with good

circuit board layout and discrete circuitry. Gain is achieved by combining bi-polar, MOSFET and J-FET transistors with the aim of getting the best from all three.

This unusual approach can also be found in the output stages of the CA-

101 power amplifier, a device specified to deliver 100 watts into eight ohms and twice that into four ohms. As doubling of output into a halving of load impedance is something of a holy grail for power amp designers this is not a claim you'll see in many power amp descriptions, whatever the price.

The £1,600 CA-101 has a few features of its own,

including switchable single

ended and balanced inputs, and switchable stereo or bridged operation. Should you feel the need for more power you can get another one and bridge them to deliver a claimed 600 watts into four ohms (not quite double the 350 watts into eight but

hardly puny). Like the P35

this unit goes through a self checking process on switch on with the front LED flashing until it's ready to play. Apparently in the event of protection circuitry being triggered the light will blink green. Yet when I had the audacity to switch off a valve pre-amp that was connected to it and blew all four rail

fuses the light remained red - I guess I went too far. For all its power this is a sensitive creature at heart!

Under the skin it contains a large and, once again, shielded mains transformer that rests on a plate that's designed to "draw magnetic fields away from the circuitry". Cool! The power supply is much like that in the pre-amp but bigger, it eschews big caps and uses a bunch of small ones distributed around the amp so that they are in close proximity to the circuits they supply.

As I had the mighty ATC Active 50s up and running prior to this review I took the opportunity to give the P35 a spin through them in place of a Bryston BP25 (£1,650). This revealed the (other) Canadian's qualities at high and



upper mid frequencies where the

sense of air and extension is superb. It gives a real sense of openness when that characteristic is on record, and this helps to produce unusually clear and precise imaging. And I'm talking natural high(s) here, smooth and extended with no sense of grain or aggression. The Bryston fought back with slightly better low level resolve and a hint more dynamic energy, but the difference in price is significant at this level and in some respects it was a case of swings and roundabouts - the dearer model wasn't the best in all regards. The P35 delivered an excellent rendition of a Him remix I picked up on vinyl, extracting real body and a tight groove from the, er, groove. Likewise it found the shape and texture in the excellent *Smoke* by Cornelius, which with its ▶

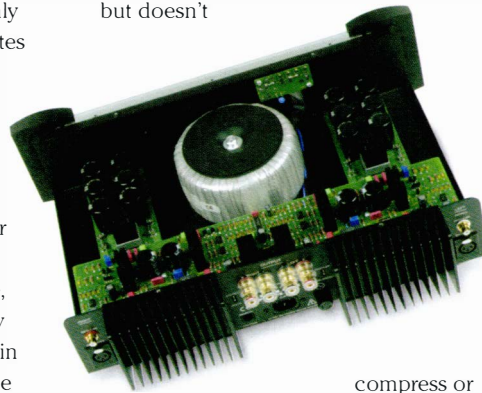
▶ unusual watery backdrop can sometimes, ironically, lose its musical flow, but came through in highly coherent and engaging fashion in the preamp's hands.

The move over to CA-101 and LV Avatars reinforced with Townshend Maximum supertweeters inevitably took some adjustment (I haven't really recovered from the ATCs three weeks later) but from a musical engagement point of view these modest units filled in the gap with aplomb. I kicked off with the usual Townshend Isolda cables, the high capacitance ones with a network to stop them upsetting power amps, and things seemed to be fine. Stereo depth and width was phenomenal and low frequency grip though not apparent in the character of the sound certainly showed through when the low notes came along. There was however a certain slightly hollow character that seemed to be on a lot of discs and which I eventually ascribed to the pairing of power amp and speaker cable. I've encountered amps that don't like this type of cable before, but this is not usually the way they reveal their discomfort. Dropping in some relatively normal cable in the form of Hitachi OFC seemed to settle things down nicely. The imaging wasn't as hot but the character of the sound changed almost entirely from disc to disc which is generally a good sign.

This is a very capable pre/power amplifier that seems to jump through most of the hoops with ease. While it doesn't sound quite as tube like as the best in its class it is nonetheless extremely natural and devoid of any of the negative traits one associates with trannies. Timing is excellent yet not forced, there's no sense of lag or emphasis across the band, a factor which is particularly clear in the bass. The kettle drum on the Omnibus Wind Ensemble's rendition of Zappa's 'Inca Roads' (SACD) was struck with greater depth and transient speed than I've heard for a while. There are times

when the bass seems a little light - this could be a post Active 50 thing - but when it's on the record you know about it. I was quite surprised by the rumble on *Prodigal Son* (Rolling Stones - Beggar's Banquet, SACD) and bathed in the luxury of Goldfrapp's *Brown Paper Bag*. The bass is genuinely juicy, deep and tuneful.

It doesn't seem to be possible to trip up this combo with dense material either, once they're warmed up. Prior to this they have a slightly murky quality, which I guess explains the absence of an off switch on the preamp. Throw something frenzied at it and it comes through in the torrential way desired but doesn't



compress or blur any boundaries.

The CA-101 doesn't have the usual characteristics of a particularly powerful amp, and I had it down as a 70 watter before (eventually) reading the spec. This is both good and bad, I quite like the sense of grip you get from a muscular amplifier, yet I can appreciate the nimbleness on offer from the CA-101. It also goes as loud as you want without any sense of limitation, tougher loudspeakers and rooms might reveal their ceiling, but I can't imagine it turning up too soon in any system.

Low level resolution seems about right for the price, it's good but not stunning, I don't think you can get much better without adding at least 50 per cent to the budget however, so no complaints. Dynamics likewise are about par for the genre, energy levels

are good and you get plenty of variation with source.

Where this Classé pairing stand out from the crowd is in their impressive sense of openness, lack of distortion and speed. Not to mention their remarkably extended and clean high frequencies. The sort of result that makes me want to hear some of the big stuff at home even more. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### P35

Type:	Solid-state remote control line-stage
Inputs:	6x Line
Outputs:	Balanced and Single ended main out, Tape out
Gain:	18.00 dB
Standard finishes:	Soft Shadow Silver with Black fascia
Dimensions (WxDxH):	19 x 10.25 x 2.75"
Weight:	11 lb.
Price:	£1,195

##### CA-101

Type:	Solid-state class AB power amplifier
Rated output power:	
Stereo:	8 Ohm load - 100 W 4 Ohm load - 200 W
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# Nordost Valkyrja – making mono-filament cables more affordable

by Roy Gregory

First there was SPM, an expensive, flat, flagship from a company that had built its reputation on the budget Flatline ribbon speaker cables. The lilac coloured cables offered flat bi-wires and similarly flat interconnects that delivered speed, detail, dynamic coherence and transparency that challenged the very best, despite their comparatively modest price. Compared that is, to the sonic competition, of which there wasn't a whole lot. There were those cables that offered more weight, more flesh on the bones if you like, but none that told you more about the bones themselves.

But unscreened interconnects are problematic, especially over long runs and it wasn't long before SPM was joined by a more expensive, tubular interconnect, the Quattrofil. For the first time it ushered in micro-monofilament technology, a structure in which the cable's conductors are wound with a spiral Teflon thread that spaces them from the Teflon insulation, producing a virtual air-dielectric. The new design was clearly better in some respects than the older SPM ribbons, but used with the SPM speaker cables it cost you some coherence that returned with the all SPM set-up. It was a while before an all mono-filament loom became a possibility.

That day arrived, somewhat spectacularly, in the shape of the Valhalla cabling. Impressive to look at, the Valhallas consisted of tubular interconnects carrying twice the conductors of the Quattrofil, solidcore rather than the former's stranded type, along with broad, flat bi-wired speaker cables. White-silver in colour, they succeeded in looking almost as expensive as they were – and that was the problem. SPM was expensive, and Quattrofil more

again, but with the arrival of Valhalla the stakes doubled to over £2000 for a meter pair of interconnects. However, it was the speaker cable that got really silly, with a two meter set of bi-wires costing a little over £4000! If ever there was an argument for placing your amps close to the speakers, this was it.

But the performance... What a performance. As fast as the SPM with even more detail and low-level information, the Valhallas offered wider dynamics, greater weight and for the first time, real musical authority, eliminating the weaknesses of the SPM in one fell swoop. They established a new level of invisibility for cable systems, albeit at a price that few can afford, and underlined the necessity of treating your cables with as much care and commitment as you do the other, more obviously important elements in the system as a whole.

Since then, Nordost have added both single-ended and balanced digital leads to the Valhalla family, as well as the El Dorado monofilament mains cables, so the good news is that you can wire your whole system with technologically identical cables (there's also a Quattrofil arm cable for analogue addicts). The bad news is the price of doing so. That and the fact that the performance benefits of the Valhalla quickly evaporate as soon as you try to mix and match

them with anything else. It's all or nothing I'm afraid – until now that is.

Nordost's latest assault on the nation's wallets has duly arrived, this time in the shape of the Valkyrja. Roughly three-quarters the size of the Valhallas, and enjoying SPM's lilac shading, it is also roughly three-quarters of the flagship's price. The speaker cables have seven solid core conductors compared to the Valhalla's ten, while the interconnect uses four.

Plugs and terminations remain the same, with both balanced and single-ended options. There are no digital leads in the range, Nordost specifying the use of the Valhalla models, although there will be a Valkyrja arm-lead in the very near future. And it's these last two options that reveal the importance of Valkyrja in the great scheme of things. It doesn't just stand as a cable system in its own right. For the first time it offers a genuine opportunity to mix and match Valhalla with something that won't dilute the benefits. The question of course, is how the two compare and complement each other. Ruling dynasties are used to the idea of competition, indeed, they thrive on it. What doesn't sit so happily is the notion of sibling rivalry. Few flagship products survive the introduction of a bigger (or smaller) brother unscathed, one product normally going on to succeed at the expense of the other. Just look how SPM, once all the rage, has been totally eclipsed by Valhalla. Can Valhalla



▶ and Valkyrja kick the trend and successfully co-exist?

First of course, comes the question of how the new cable relates to the existing models. Comparing Valkyrja to Quattrofil, the differences are clear. Impressive as Quattrofil is, the constructionally similar (stranded and black plays solid-core and lilac) Valkyrja offers a quicker sound with more air and greater bass transparency. Playing 'First Boy in this Town (Lovesick)' (Scritti Politti *Provision* Virgin V2515) the opening finger snaps are quicker, there's a greater sense of space and air around the instruments and voice.



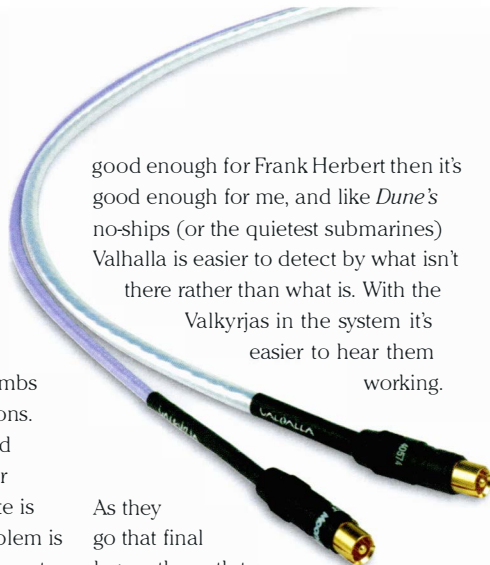
When the great slabs of bass smash down on the listening room floor, the Valkyrja keeps things better placed and separated, and keeps them moving forward while the Quattrofil momentarily loses its footing with the arrival of so much low frequency energy. It also handles the choppy rhythms better, separates out the guitar and backing vocals and effortlessly keeps the whole thing together. No mean feat with a track this complex and over produced.

Bear in mind however that this is after some 250 hours on the cable toaster and another 150 or so of use in the system. If anything the Valkyrja takes even longer to run in than the Valhalla

(and that's a cast iron bitch to start with). From cold, the new cable is bright, hard, bass light and spot-lit, especially in the upper mid and treble. As it burns in, so it mellows and rounds, losing first the brightness at the same time as it stretches its limbs down into the musical nether regions. Then it starts to lose the etched and hyped treble. Listening now, it's far more balanced and its tonal palette is really starting to blossom. The problem is that it's an ongoing process and I'm not sure how much further there is to go. Experience suggests that we're on the last leg, with a little more colour to come, along with a touch of extra warmth, although the extraordinary air and extension show no signs of diminishing. Even as it stands, this is one hell of a cable, combining the speed and dynamic coherence of the SPM with the transparency and detail of the Valhalla. What it misses compared to the more expensive design is a little weight, but more importantly, the substance and authority that go with it. The difference might lie at low frequencies but you hear it in the mid-band. Played on the bigger cable, those finger snaps on 'Lovesick' have an extra dimension, rendered solid by the Valhalla's supreme disposition of energy across the entire frequency range, rooted on the foundation of their bass weight and control.

From which you can conclude that the Valkyrja doesn't succeed in stealing the Valhalla's crown. Having said that, it gets an awful lot closer than anything else, and a lot further than halfway between SPM and the flagship. This is definitely a short step down from the top rather than a long one up from underneath. What do I mean by that? Valkyrja has more of the characteristics of Valhalla than it does the cables below it in the range (including Quattrofil). What it's missing is the ultimate balance that makes Valhalla the original no-cable. Not an original concept but if it was

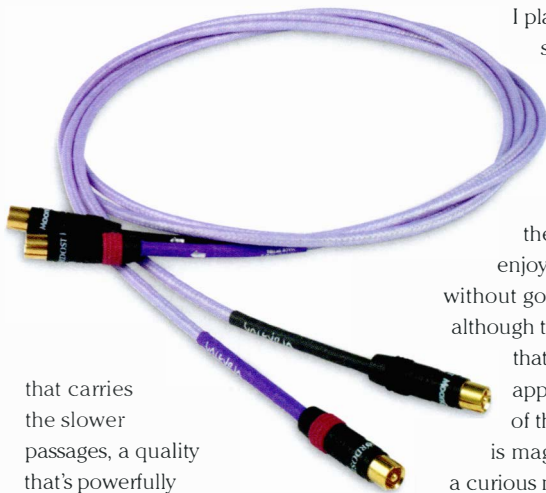
good enough for Frank Herbert then it's good enough for me, and like *Dune's* no-ships (or the quietest submarines) Valhalla is easier to detect by what isn't there rather than what is. With the Valkyrjas in the system it's easier to hear them working.



As they go that final leg on the path to fully burnt I expect them to retreat further into the musical background, become more of the fabric, but they're never going to disappear as completely as the Valhallas do.

Playing Martin Stephenson's 'Wholly Humble Heart' (*Gladsome, Humour and Blue* Kitchenware KWLP 8) the system wired with Valkyrja delivered awesome speed and leading edge impact. Apparent dynamic range is huge, the difference in level between voice, backing and the staccato cannonade of drum beats and emulator notes that punctuate the song is sudden and dramatic. If you want sheer speed and impact above all else (and what system doesn't need more speed and dynamic range to match reality?) then you need look no further. The air and extension that characterises the cables is reflected in the sense of space around and between the instruments. Impressive in a good studio set, acoustic instruments in natural space can be breathtaking. The Corelli *Concerto Grosso op.6 No.7 in D major* (*The Tube* Tacet L74) is surrounded by a palpable three dimensional volume with extraordinary height and light. Light? The rapid glissades of notes shine with a brilliance and vibrance that illuminates the music, the clarity of the acoustic illuminates the space. There's life and energy and vitality in the speed and verve of the playing, welded into a stunning performance by the Stuttgarter Kammerorchester. But, if there's a criticism of these cables it is ▶

▶ that they lean just too much to the leading edge and curtail the notes' decay, a failing that lends speed to a performance at the expense of richness and warmth. It's impressive and it's certainly entertaining and involving, but it can leave thinner recordings sounding exposed and even on the best it has a necessarily editorial effect. Take the Corelli as an example, and although the Valkyrja tracks the changes of pace and density in the orchestration, what it can't do is fully portray the change in mood, the rapid, almost magical shifts that make this music so captivating. There is contrast a plenty, but what's missing is the stately quality



that carries the slower passages, a quality that's powerfully unmistakable with the Valhalla. In contrast, the Valkyrja sounds more obvious and less intimate than its more expensive brother, although the realms of air and extension remain the sole areas in which it challenges and even exceeds it.

Which might sound damning but must be taken in context. Pace, position, dynamic range and speed are critical to the sense in music. Without them, it is just noise. Those are essential. There are cables a plenty that deliver weight and colour, up to and often beyond the mark. In doing so they disturb the structure and destroy the sense in the recordings they are trying to reproduce. The Valkyrja gets its priorities right, establishing the framework before

fleshing it out. In fairness too, it must be pointed out that the loss of harmonic weight and colour is only really revealed in comparison to the Valhalla. Whilst you can hear the cable working it's far harder to pin down what it's actually doing, testimony to how subtle the losses really are.

But there's a coda to this tale, one that returns to where we started. Substitute Valhalla interconnects for the Valkyrjas and that weight and subtlety comes flooding back, along with that mastery of texture, mood and musical contrast. Suddenly the Corelli is exactly where it should be, its musical centre of gravity restored. Likewise everything else

I played. Yes, adding the Valhalla speaker cables takes you even further: another layer of musical texture; more weight, even better placed; more vivid colours; more dramatic contrasts. But for the first time you really can enjoy the benefits of Valhalla without going the whole hog, and although the savings might not seem that significant at least they apply to the most expensive part of the package so that their effect is magnified. And for those of a curious nature, the Valhalla speaker cables are not nearly as effective when used with the Valkyrja interconnects. Better in some regards, they offer hi-fi rather than musical benefits, and as such don't justify the extra outlay.

With Valkyrja, Nordost have achieved their aims with some precision. It complements without undermining Valhalla. It handily and demonstrably exceeds the performance of the competition, both within and without the Nordost range. It offers a logical hierarchy that leads up to their flagship products, making their performance more accessible. How much more accessible? Well, if we assume a two source system consisting of a couple of pairs of one meter interconnects, a pair of two meter interconnects and a pair of

three and a half meter bi-wires then the costs stack up like this. An all Valhalla loom will set you back £13594. Swapping to Valkyrja speaker cables drops that to £11844, while the all Valkyrja option weighs in at £10125. Now none of these could even remotely be described as cheap, but there are plenty of people out there who've spent that sort of money on just their amplification, and I reckon any of the cable options I've just described could easily make a more fundamental difference to your system. Valkyrja might not be cheap, but it's indisputably cheaper than Valhalla.

A product that follows in the footsteps of a flagship that changed perceptions and raised the performance bar can never seem as exciting. However, Valkyrja brings the reality (a word I chose carefully) of mono-filament performance significantly closer to a great many more people, as well as offering a stepping stone to the stars. Perfect it isn't, but it's nearer perfect than anything I've heard save Valhalla, and as such, it might just be the more important product. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Single-Ended Interconnects:

£1649/1m pair  
£289 per additional mono meter

##### Balanced Interconnects: £1679/1m pair

£289 per additional mono meter

##### Speaker Cable: £3250/2m pair (bi-wires)

£450 per additional mono meter

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##### Manufacturer:

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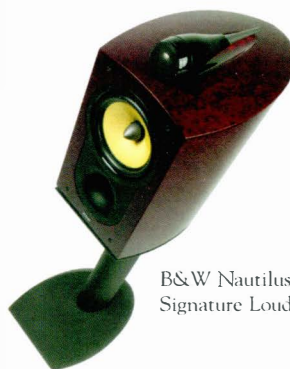
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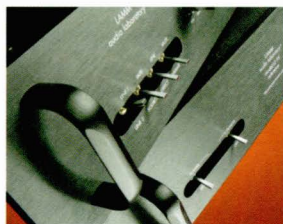
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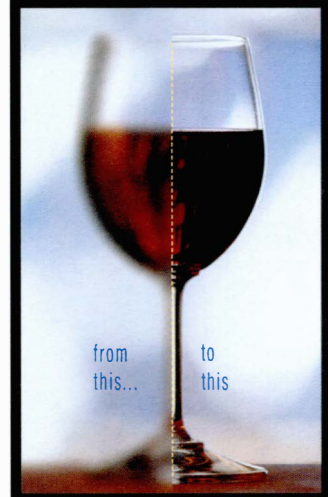
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# Amphion Xenon Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Tall, slim and blond, Amphion's Xenon is the very epitome of Scandinavian elegance. But in a world where the number of narrow, floorstanding loudspeaker designs is in danger of reaching saturation point, this is no "me too" design, and its lateral thinking extends way beyond the use of a sideways firing woofer. Of course, that's not exactly news these days, with the likes of Audio Physic, NHT and Infinity (to name just a few) taking this route. What is interesting in the case of the Amphions is the combination of approaches and thinking applied: the options avoided as much as the ones taken.

The first thing that everyone notices about this speaker is the beautifully executed flare in the baffle that surrounds the tweeter. This offers a subtle degree of horn loading, as well as being individual, stylish and undeniably attractive, but those are not its principal benefits. By coupling the tweeter's output to the room, the baffle contour ensures that the high frequency dispersion matches that of the equally dimensioned midrange unit, thus removing one of the most flagrant indicators of crossover frequency. And this is in a true three-way speaker that has already pushed the tweeter crossover outside the critical 3KHz band that most two-ways resort to. To further enhance dispersion, Amphion have augmented the slim baffle dimensions with a tapered array of holes that perforate the side panels behind the midrange driver. These allow

that driver to bleed carefully prescribed levels of out of phase energy laterally on both sides of the speaker, canceling side and rear emissions and further improving the uniformity of the unit's dispersion. Together, these two measures (called Uniformly Directive Diffusion technology by Amphion) ensure that the directional output of the Xenon is consistent from around 150Hz upwards which should minimise room effects in the midband and treble.

Next comes that bass driver. By mounting it in the side of the speaker, Amphion achieve several potential advantages. The standard approach would see as many as four midrange drivers running down the front baffle, normally in a two and a half way arrangement. The main benefit of this is the go-faster stripes and plastic side skirts effect or all those drivers right in your face. It certainly appeals to the more is better brigade. But, by moving the bass driver to the side-panel, it allows you to use a single driver of much larger diameter.

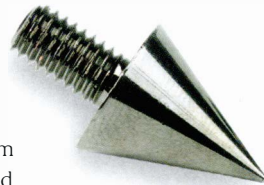
This gives you a single acoustic center to worry about, allowing you to choose how you place it. This is most obviously demonstrated by the NHT 2.9, which positions a 12" driver as close to the rear-wall/floor interface as possible. By extending the baffle forwards, they achieve absolutely maximum bass

reinforcement, and a genuinely full-range system at a very approachable price. That must have seemed like an attractive option to Amphion, until you consider their obsession with dispersion. In fact, by placing the woofer immediately below the mid-range enclosure, they place the

acoustic centers of the three drivers as close together as they possibly can.

What's more, the sideways firing bass-unit offers additional placement options within the room, vital if you are going to translate the extra extension of a three-way design into a benefit rather than an embarrassment. Indeed, Amphion take the whole issue of bass integration and alignment very seriously indeed, offering a simple, user adjustable system to help achieve optimum results. As well as the option to point the woofers into the soundstage or towards the walls, an additional pair of terminals below the speaker connections steps the bass output down by 1.5dB when bridged across. The optional plugs for the rear facing reflex ports have a similar effect, offering the user around 3dB of adjustment as well as two placement options.

The narrow footprint of the Xenon necessitates some sort of plinth arrangement in order to ensure their stability. Amphion supply substantial steel bars that bolt across the bottom of the speaker. These come with screw in cones (hurrah!) dimpled discs to protect floors (hurrah!) and the option of small neoprene-ish pads (hurrah!). Unfortunately, the threads on the



▶ cones are short (boo!) and the blind threads in the underside of the legs are even shorter (hissss!). Amphion are not the first company to grapple with trying to find a visually acceptable solution to the thorny aesthetic conundrum of spiking speaker outriggers. In this instance the results are more pretty than practical, and were greeted with much pursing of lips and sucking of breath. As it happens, I couldn't have been more wrong (hurrah! – everybody likes to see the self appointed expert with egg on his face) and getting the speakers level and stable proved remarkably easy. Subsequently, the issue was rendered irrelevant anyway, by the use of the alternative supports, pads of soft polymer that sit betwixt steel bar and floor surface (in this case carpet) and offer a significant improvement in performance over conventional spikes. It's an approach that works with Audioplans, and leans in the direction of air suspension systems, so its success shouldn't be a surprise, although the conservatives in the industry stick doggedly to their spikes.

Set-up is pretty straight forward, at least in terms of positioning. I found that with the BAS system set at the medium point (jumper in, port plug out) then the speakers sounded at their best exactly where I'd expect them to, with their back corners some 60cms out from the rear walls. Playing with the plugs and jumpers showed that you can trim the bass output to a useful degree, as well as influencing its character. Plugs in/jumpers out offers a little more extension at the expense

of a slightly lighter balance. I opted for the additional weight and wallop of the opposite arrangement, but it's horses for courses (and listening rooms and listening biases). The BAS system is simple and effective: subtle enough to be useful, easy enough to be used. Don't just consider it a gimmick, it's well worth experimenting with and can contribute significantly



to realising the potential of this speaker system. In my well-behaved room, the option of running with zero attention was also a practical proposition, although it made positioning significantly more critical.

Remember the attention paid to dispersion and coherence? Get the toe-in just right (for which read “not too much”) and you'll be rewarded by a really wide soundstage, behind and beyond the cabinets. Get the bass

balance spot-on and that soundstage opens out, gaining focus and transparency. But the really impressive thing about the soundstage is not its scope but its spatial coherence, particularly in the vertical dimension. It sits quite high, replacing the floor of the listening room with the floor of the recording venue. There's no stacking

of images by frequency, just their natural height within the orchestra. The result is bass instruments that float and breathe convincingly, providing the proper musical foundation, in the right place and at the right time.

The Johanos/Dallas Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* offer the perfect example of exactly what the Xenons are capable of. The coherent acoustic is seamless and stable, undisturbed by the building levels of power that combine to deliver the shattering crescendo that closes the opening passage. Indeed, undisturbed or unflappable are the words that spring most readily to mind where these speakers are concerned.

Compared to more efficient and expensive alternatives like the OBX-R and Reference 3A Da Capo, the Amphions lack the range of tonal colour and palpable vibrance and intimacy that comes from well deployed paper cones. But whilst those are the Xenons' weaknesses, there are serious compensations in their strengths. The same coolness that lends strings a glossy sheen and shimmer brings a burnished brilliance to brass that punches through congested passages with ease and real impact. ▶

► That sense of graceful power and substance is what the Xenons are really all about. *Symphonic Dances* is power music, balancing the delicacy of individual instruments against the bludgeoning weight and presence of the full orchestra. All the delicacy in the world won't make it work if the wallop's not there to provide the contrast. Similarly, the driven purpose and attitude of The Evinrudes arrives intact and rude, right in your front room. The sardonic cynicism of Sherry's vocals, her stage presence and acerbic style are essential to the music.

*"Somebody stop me before I tell the truth,  
I'm a little angry, maybe a little too stoned,  
you better cover my mouth,  
you better drive me home."*

So she sings, and via the Xenons you just know that she means it.

This is a macro view of events, full of majestic sweep, master of the overall shape and pace of the music. It's evocative and involving, swaying and foot-tapping all at the same time. But unlike many speakers that can make that claim, you're getting that superb soundstage too. Not the pinpoint, etched and pared away precision that imaging freaks are after, and for which they sacrifice weight, presence and rhythmic integrity, but an organic and convincingly dispersed set of instruments in a believable and unshifting acoustic. It's believable precisely because everything has the right weight and scale and it's all in the right place, preserving the relationships within the original. These are the strengths to which you should play if you want to maximise the musical return from the Amphions. It's no coincidence that Audiocraft also import those robust, no-nonsense Rogue Audio valve amps. The two combined are a powerful tool

when it comes to musical enjoyment. And whilst the substance and impact of the speaker are indicators of a dynamic efficacy, they do enjoy power. Delivering satisfying weight and wallop from as little as the 20 Watt output of the JA30s, there's no escaping the fact that they (and you) will enjoy the extra levels and unburstable headroom that comes with greater power on tap. Realistic levels are simply not a problem, and with the option to play really loud available it almost seems a shame not to. The power and presence of music delivered by the Xenons is just so damned inviting, causing you to reach for more scale, more instruments, bigger productions.

The Amphions will do small and intimate too, but there are other speakers that do it better. If you live on an exclusive diet of string quartets or acoustic folk music then I can think of other speakers you might prefer. But as soon as things start to get bigger or more complex than that, the Xenon's musical and spatial coherence,

their unflappable instrumental organisation, really comes into its own. Feed them a varied diet and they excel. Given their easy drive and capacious appetite for dynamic swings they could easily be the ideal speaker for a combination music/AV set-up (shock, horror, possibly in a straight stereo system rather than 5.1).

The Amphion Xenons are an awful lot of very pretty box for the money, but there's much more to them than that. They are thoughtfully and innovatively designed so that they'll actually deliver their full potential in the vast majority of situations. They carefully balance the often conflicting demands of hi-fi and musical performance. They are anything but a "me-too" product. But above all there's a really satisfying quality to their musical performance, a coherence that's rare at any price. Play to their strengths and they'll reward you handsomely. ➤+



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3 way hypercardioid vented, reflex loaded
Drive Units:	25mm aluminium HF 165mm aluminium MF 200mm aluminium bass
Crossover Points:	150Hz and 1500kHz
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Efficiency:	86 dB
Bandwidth:	28Hz - 20kHz ±3dB
Dimensions (HxWxD):	1070x190x360mm
Finishes:	Birch, Cherry, Black, Silver
Weight:	30kg
Price:	£2500

#### Distributor:

Audiocraft  
Tel. (44)(0)1895 253340  
E-mail. kevinwalker@o2.co.uk

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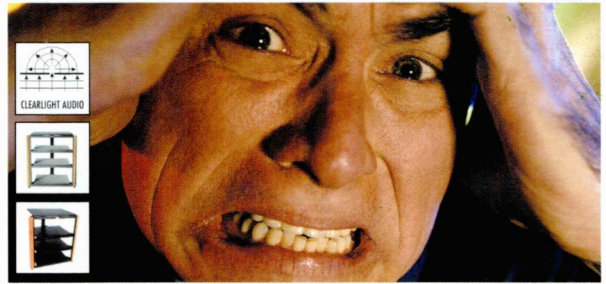
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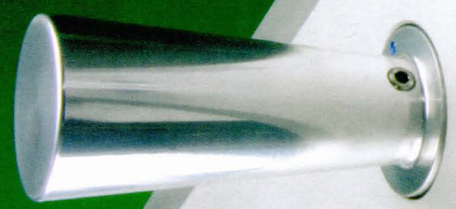
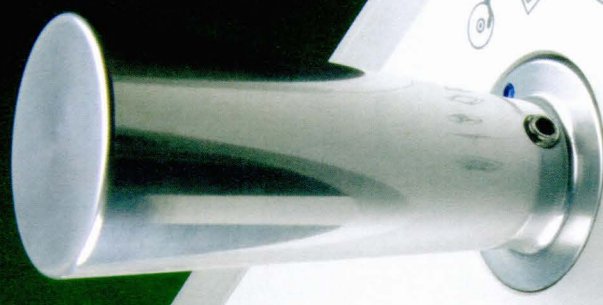
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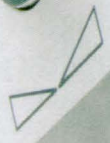


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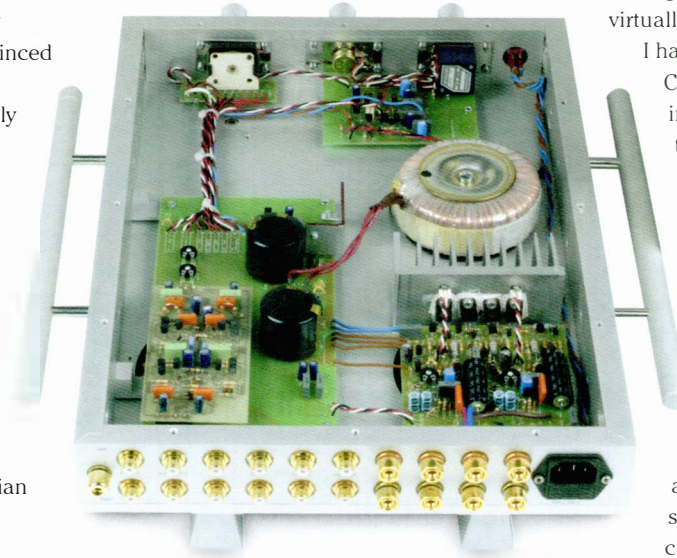
# Mel Audio Casaq 11 Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

For some time I thought that the ideal design team for audio electronics would be an electronic designer and a musician. The idea being that, somewhere between the ear and the graphs, the heart and the head, would lie the ideal product. I haven't taken anything other than a passing interest in measurements for years purely because no one has ever convinced me that they are in any way reliably indicative of a musically capable product. As a design tool they are obviously an essential, but as a guide to what is or isn't good to listen to, I have, as yet, found no correlation between the paper specifications and my own personal musical enjoyment. Strangely, in most cases, when I have heard let's say, an amplifier designed and built by a musician I have not, except on a couple of rare occasions, liked it. Exceptional products it seems (and I am thinking of those I really respect), are designed by people with enormous technical expertise who love music and are mindful of why. The late, but great Julian Vereker (Naim), Dr Keith Johnson (Spectral), Mark Levinson (pre-Madrigal ML and now Red Rose) and Tom Evans, to name but a few, all come under this heading.

Perhaps it is that I am so sensitive to timing issues within audio electronics. Others are much more interested in tonality, imagery and bandwidth. If so, then there are many products that will satisfy them but I maintain that if there is a product cannot play in time, then,

to my ear, there is no music. It might still be attractive to listen to, but it won't be music. I think that one of the most satisfying feelings of all is playing an instrument with other musicians, preferably friends. There is a level of communication that exists, regardless



of technical playing ability, which is impossible to put into words. Egos must be left at the door so when it all clicks and people are playing for, instead of against each other, suddenly you are all sat in the groove and it is truly transcendental. You can stop counting beats and bars because your soul is doing it subliminally and you can play things that you never thought you could simply because you feel comfortable within the rhythm and now have the confidence and ease of mind to try and express yourself. And, if the session is being recorded, when you listen back it is oh so noticeable.

This is the "feel" that musicians constantly refer to and it is inextricably linked to time.

This rather lengthy and personal preamble does have a point, just in case you thought that Chris had finally lost it. All these things have been rushing around my mind for virtually the whole time that I have been listening to the Casaq 11, a solid-state integrated amplifier from the Italian company Mel Audio. I am guessing that the name of Mel Audio is as new to you as it was to me, but further investigations reveal that they produce a whole range of (rather striking) equipment from turntables and tone-arms to CD players and speakers. Being Italian of course they are endlessly stylish and somewhat different

in appearance. The Casaq 11 is certainly a striking piece of kit fabricated from lengths of lacquered aluminium to form a simple yet, to my eyes, attractively different amplifier. It has three sculptured knobs at the front for volume, balance and input selection and a crowded but logical rear panel offering three line inputs plus a phono option and a record loop, all single ended excellent quality gold plated RCA sockets. Two sets of speaker connections are supplied per channel to facilitate bi-wiring.

Since I have spent quite a bit of time listening to support racks ▶

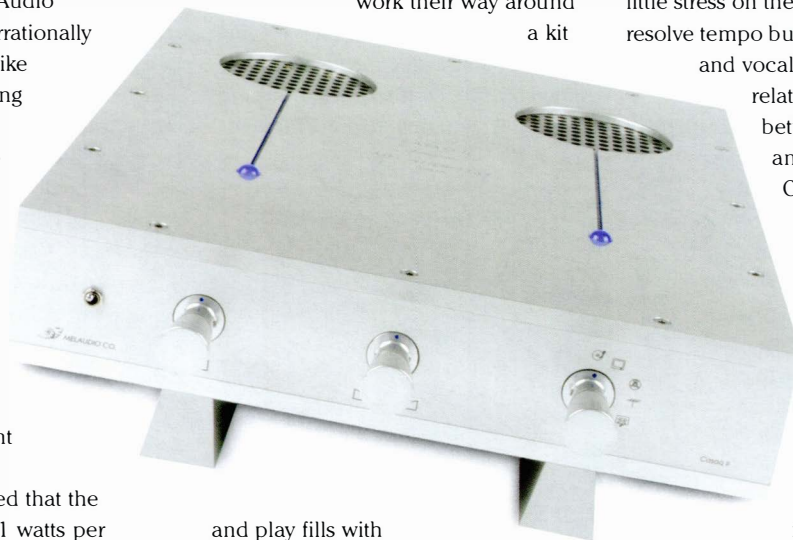
▶ recently I was immediately interested in the feet which are twin triangular aluminium sections that run the length of the amplifier, save for two breaks where the ventilation holes pass through the machine and wondered whether this were a style or a sonic feature. Also, you can't help but wonder about the twin blue domes that sit at the end of the grooves atop the case, though these are a regular identifying feature on other Mel Audio components. Rather irrationally perhaps I grew to dislike these for their annoying obviousness and the fact that they seem to serve no purpose other than to draw attention to the amplifier. Perhaps two smaller ones would have sufficed. If I owned this amplifier I would want them disconnected.

When I discovered that the output was a mere 21 watts per channel I was quite expecting the Casaq 11 to operate in Class A, hence the case and large ventilation areas. But no, Mel Audio specifies low continuous power but claim that the amplifier has ample reserves to meet transient demands. But as we know there are watts and there are watts though 21 of them per channel would seem to mandate high efficiency speakers or small-room, low listening level applications, despite Mel Audio's claims to the contrary.

One of the first things that I found after powering up was that the Casaq 11 was susceptible to the fridge and the central heating switching cycles, illustrating each one with a resounding thump through the speakers. Not a good start and hardly compatible with relaxed musical enjoyment. At the time I had merely substituted the Mel amplifier for my Spectral, driving the Revel Gems, just to see that the amp was working

properly. But listening to it through such a revealing system has enlightening aspects. You might be surprised, for instance, at how well a Naim Nait 5 does in these circumstances.

Any system is only as rhythmically strong as its weakest link just like a band where the drummer controls the overall tempo and integrity of the pace. But drummers are notoriously prone to aberrations in this direction. They can work their way around a kit



and play fills with great panache but, in my experience, and at the risk of offending the drummers union, comparatively few can hold a straight mid-tempo figure for long without speeding up. They often use the bass player as an anchor which is why you will often see the two glaring at each other in the middle of songs at live gigs. But together they form a rhythm section and the best of these are rock solid. But from the very beginning I felt uncomfortable with the rhythmic resolution of the Casaq 11. Music that I knew quite well just did not sit right.

I tried all the speakers that I had around the house and found the best balance was attained with a pair of SonusFaber Minuetto. Although they were still some way off being efficient enough for the amplifier's low paper power output, the easy and slightly soft tonal balance fitted the Mel Audio

integrated far better than the unsuitable ultra-lean clarity and speed of the Gems. Now I could better understand that this is an amplifier that is all about midband performance and over the weeks nothing dissuaded me from this view. Let me illustrate with a couple of examples. Lyle Lovett's *The Road To Ensenada* (MCASC 11409) and the track named 'Promises' is a close-miked guitar/vocal song that places little stress on the systems ability to resolve tempo but a lot on sheer tonal

and vocal quality and the relationship and space between the voice and instrument. The Casaq 11 is absolutely in its element here.

I have heard few amplifiers that are as understandable or atmospheric with vocals.

Lovett's voice was strong and three-dimensional. Full of inflection and feeling it just hung above the

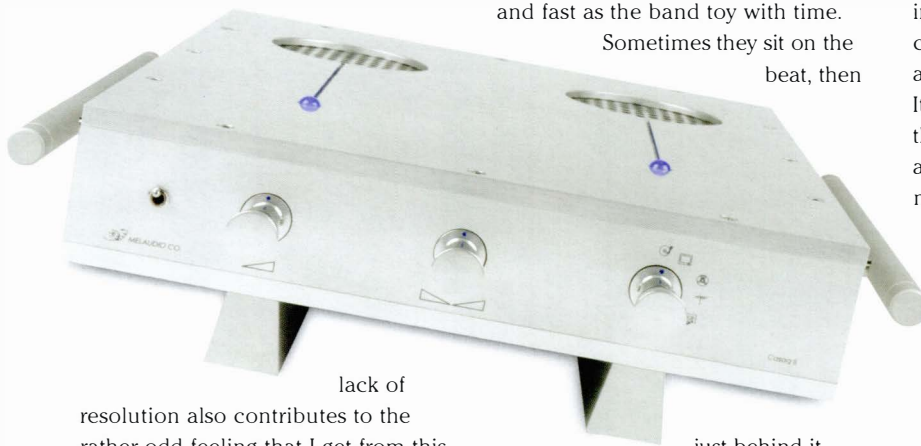
guitar, as though he was speaking straight into my ear, entirely free of the boundary of the speakers. I could hear what he was saying and the emotion involved and the air between him and the superbly played wood and steel of the guitar was thick with the harmonics of both. I found it a really compelling and charged performance.

But move onto 'Her First Mistake' from the same CD, where the amplifier is asked different questions and the answers it gives are not as entirely convincing. This is a medium to up-tempo song with an almost bossa-nova feel and the rhythm section are right on the money and pushing the beat all the time. At both frequency extremes this Mel integrated amplifier is low on energy. The bass lines are just about understandable but the notes don't start and stop quickly enough. Overall it is too soft and lacking any real

► punch or drive and the same goes for the top end, which again has no real bite or impact. When a cymbal is struck near its centre bell, the metallic edge of the note seems to give the amp something to bite on but when it is being ridden near the edge the swell of the sound just loses focus and shape somewhat. And the weakness and lack of power at these extremes shapes the amplifier's tonal balance, shoving the impressive midband forward at the expense of a rather distant bass and top. Perhaps this

recording outfits playing today. Some of the material may stray close to the middle of the road but the level of musicianship is peerless. They are almost greasily slick and make every section of every tune seem so ridiculously easy that the direction changes within the tracks are hardly noticeable. Everything is based around the rhythm section of Harvey Mason's drums and Nathan East's bass that are so tightly bound together that they almost seem to be one instrument. Subtle changes in tempo flow thick and fast as the band toy with time.

Sometimes they sit on the beat, then



lack of resolution also contributes to the rather odd feeling that I get from this amplifier's sense of timing. It just doesn't swing.

Lovett's band appears to be struggling within themselves to find the groove and propel the track along. Where it should be poised on the beat it too often seems to be just wandering along. And where the offbeat should push it never quite ties the tempo together as it should. The vocal and warm tonal quality is still there and it redeems things somewhat I must admit, but the lack of power, and I don't mean volume, leaves it sounding somewhat anaemic. It never manages that edge of the seat anticipation that it shows on the slower tracks or even suggests the numerous polyrhythms that surround the essential tempo. This was never illustrated more clearly than when I played *Heartfelt* by Fourplay (BMG 90266 391622). Fourplay are one of the most technically accomplished

just behind it. When they want to drive the tune they anticipate it and the music almost sits up and begs. They understand the dynamics of recording and have refined it to an art form. But the Casaq 11 can't quite cut it here. It just does not have the ability to resolve the rhythmic subtleties that are the bands trademark. This is a shame as the chord structure, solos and embellishments that come from the guitar and keyboards are as impressive as its shortcomings are disappointing. The soundstage is broad, deep and commendably stable. The instruments are nicely shaped and articulate and there is little sign of compression until the volume control is well advanced. If only I didn't get the impression that guitarist Larry Carlton wasn't looking over his shoulder at Harvey Mason urging him to catch up.

So the Casaq 11 is a bit of a mixed

bag of an amplifier. It won't be powerful enough for most people and I see it being at its most engaging in a small room, probably driving efficient speakers and playing small ensemble pieces or vocal based music. I'd suggest RG takes this amp home and tries it in exactly that context and reports back (Okay, watch this space – RG). If you listen to a lot of rock, bluegrass or complex jazz then I doubt it will register on your horizons and you would be better looking in the direction of Naim, Exposure or LFD. I have heard integrated amplifiers from all of these companies over the last few months and while none of them have this Italian amplifiers midband sweetness, they offer a more complete, focussed and enjoyable view of the world of music. But this is only my opinion and you may well find the Casaq 11 more to your taste than I did. After all, some people actually think that Lenny Henry is funny. ►+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated solid-state amplifier.
Inputs:	3 single ended line with phono option plus tape in.
Outputs:	1 single-ended tape out.
Rated Output:	21 watts per channel into 8 ohms.
Output connections:	4x 5-way binding posts per channel for bi-wiring.
Dimensions (WxHxD):	380x93x470mm
Weight:	10Kg.
Finish:	Lacquered aluminium
Price:	€3480 (c. £2100)

#### Manufacturer:

Mel Audio Co.  
Tel/Fax. (39) 522 433368  
E-mail. melaudio@tin.it  
Net. www.melaudio.com



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# The Cyrus Upgradeable Disc Replay Solution: DVD 6, DVD 8, PSX and Q 7 Dac-Card

by Alan Sircom

Many British hi-fi manufacturers express a desire to allow upgrades in their product ethos. But few actually take it much further than expressing that desire, with very few real upgradeable products in the line-up. Cyrus electronics is the exception, and its DVD player range offers a full upgrade path from base model to flagship in distinct stages. Better still, Cyrus even offers upgrades to previous models to bring them up to the latest top spec condition, and the top Cyrus 8 DVD player is one of the few built with the audiophile in mind just as much as the home cinema enthusiast.

The single, half-sized centre-mounted DVD drive is functionally identical in both DVD 6 and DVD 8 guises. The on-screen displays and exteriors are unchanged (aside from the logo) and, apart from a few extra sockets at the back of the DVD 8 (for component video and the add-on power supply, the layout is more or less the same between the two. In fact, a few more logos, the slightly fatter disc drawer and a different LCD display are about the only things that separate the DVD players from the £1,150 Cyrus CD 7Q CD player. Prices are different, though; the DVD 6 is hardly 'entry level' at \$750, but it is distinctly cheaper than the £1,200 DVD 8.

This is all a part of Cyrus's recent consolidation. There will be three Cyrus ranges and we are cycling through the products at the moment; the entry level 6 Series, the mid to up-market 8 Series and the flagship X (as in the Roman

Numeral 10) Series. So far, there is no DVD product in the frame for the X Series – only a pre-amplifier, mono power amplifiers and a tuner thus far – but expect this to change soon. As it stands, the 6 and 8 Series both start with stereo pre-amplifiers and CD players but have plenty of upgrade

potential. Most of the upgrade path involves jumping from the 6 Series to 8 Series performance, with greater upgrade flexibility in the 8 Series range – as can be seen with the DVD player options.

Both the DVD 6 and DVD 8 feature the same dual-laser isolated loader mechanism, extensive star-earthing and 12 fully regulated power supplies as well as practically the same on-paper specifications throughout. The DVD 8's principle upgrades include PSX-R capability and component video output, but in upgrading these elements the player takes a significant step forward in and of itself. The DVD 8 takes the basic design ethos and transforms it with better specified, high-speed op amps in the audio and video signal chains and the aforementioned component video output for those home cinema types that like playing their films through projectors or plasma screens. It also has improved handling

of 'difficult' discs, so those data-packed SuperBit recordings and the like will play without a care.

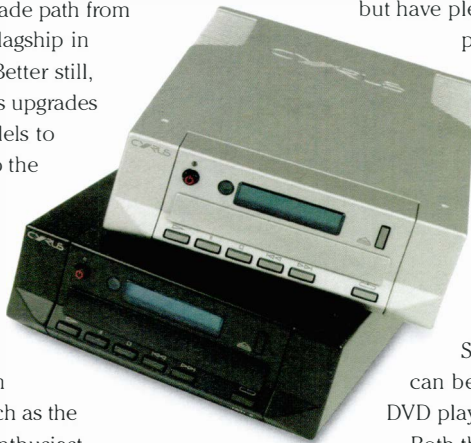
Both base-model DVD 6 and top-flight DVD 8 can be further upgraded with the addition of the plug-in internal Q 7 audiophile-grade digital-analogue converter board, specifically designed for stereo only use, for an additional £350. The Q module is a dual mono 18bit converter with an eight times oversampling filter. In these days of 192kHz, 24bit DACs this may seem uninspiring, but the DAC has sonic strengths of its own. This is not a difficult upgrade for anyone who has upgraded a computer's sound card, for example, but Cyrus strongly recommends letting the dealer do the job, just in case.

Final step on the upgrade path is the addition of an external power supply. Plug in an identically half-sized case containing a £350 Cyrus PSX-R power supply and the DVD 8 takes on a whole new dimension. The DVD 6 has no such provision, sadly, but this is not necessarily a bad thing; the chances are the DVD 6 wouldn't sound good enough to deal with the performance hike the PSX-R bestows.

In all this allows you to go from a mid-price to a high-end player in a series of controlled jumps.

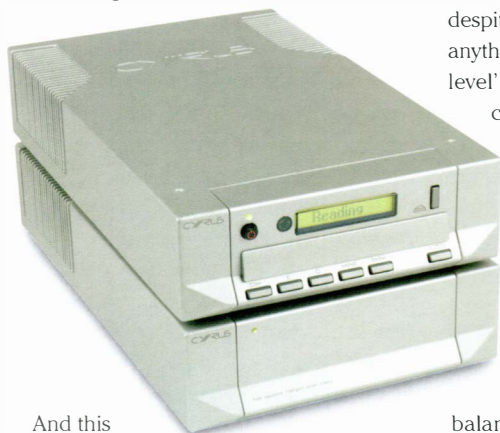
If you have an older DVD 7 or 7+, you can also return it to Cyrus for the DVD 8 upgrade, too. However, if you can't face all this step-by-step upgrading, the whole caboodle costs £1,900 for the DVD 8 with Q 7 and PSX-R.

At the moment, there is no provision for DVD-Audio or Super Audio CD ▶



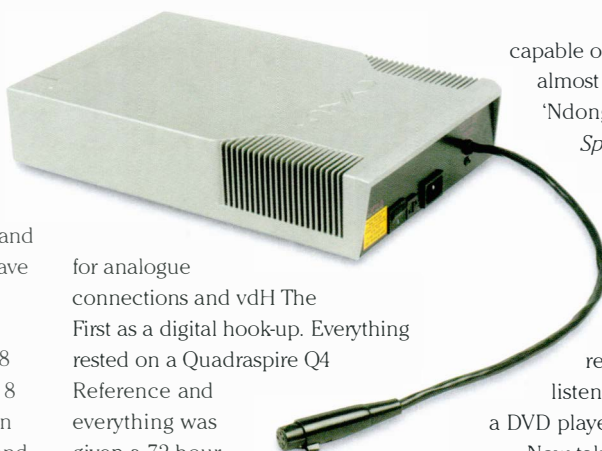
► replay on the DVD 6 or DVD 8, but Cyrus is bullish about providing upgrades for both players and the company's AV 5 and AV 8 decoders.

This now gets extremely difficult; a pair of DVD players with upgrades and audiophile pretensions means you have to write 32 different reviews in one. These include the DVD 6 with and without the DAC upgrade, the DVD 8 with and without the DAC, the DVD 8 with and without the PSX-R and then the DVD 8/PSX-R combination with and without the Q 7 DAC. Then, you have to double the amount of work as you include both CD and DVD-Video recordings.



And this needs to be determined in both a 5.1 and two channel setting. If the Cyrus kit also played DVD-Audio and SACD, the review would be more like a train timetable of musical results than anything intrinsically entertaining or readable.

Given the price of the equipment, both audio and video replay were performed through integrated amplification; the Arcam AVR200 for the home cinema side and the Audio Analogue Puccini for 'vanilla' stereo. The main speakers were the same throughout – a pair of Mission 782s – but these were supplemented by Mission's 78c and 77ds centre and surround speakers and a REL Q100e subwoofer. Speaker cables were Kimber 8TC, interconnects were Cardas Crosslinks



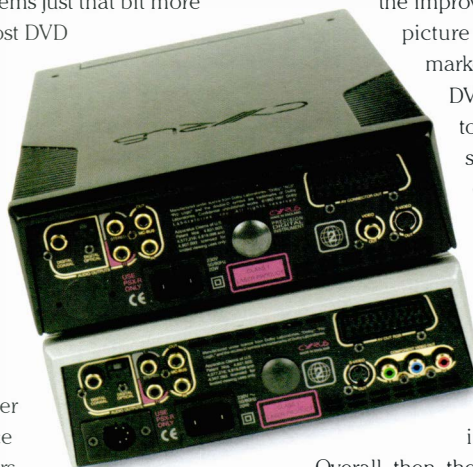
for analogue connections and vdH The First as a digital hook-up. Everything rested on a Quadraspire Q4 Reference and everything was given a 72-hour run-in.

As you might expect, the most basic DVD 6 (without DAC) is the weakest link, almost. It is also the poorest value, despite being at least £350 cheaper than anything else. As it stands, Cyrus 'entry level' produces a good picture on composite video, S-Video and through the RGB Scart socket, but the picture and digital audio output is no sharper or more detailed than the best of Japanese models available for half the price. The saving grace is the two-channel sound on CD, which has good temporal information, an honest tonal balance and seems just that bit more CD like than most DVD players turning their hands to 16-bit technology. It is a notch above standard DVD sound, but the improvement is not so marked to instantly justify its use over similar mid-price big name players.

But replace the internal DAC board and the 16-bit sound takes on a new authority. Suddenly, that good temporal information becomes all the more snapped together, becoming

capable of dealing with the difficult almost Afro-Cuban polyrhythms of 'Ndongoy Daara' from the new *Specialist in all Styles* by Orchestra Baobab (World Circuit 064), keeping the infectious rhythm of the old masters in fine fettle and highly foot tapping. Often, this kind of recording can leave the listener cold when played on a DVD player.

Now take the DAC out and upgrade the DVD player. The change is both for the better and the worse. It is better because it is a more coherent, more detailed and expressive sound; but it's also worse because the timing and natural-sounding benefits of the DAC suddenly get thrown into sharp repose. So the instrument sounds and vocals of Orchestra Baobab become more articulate and more like real instruments, but the precision of the playing drops away in the process. The difference is best highlighted by analogy: the DVD 6+Q 7 is like shoeing a cheap car with expensive tyres; the DVD 8 changes the car to a sporty model, but the tyres are now nothing special. But that's not all,



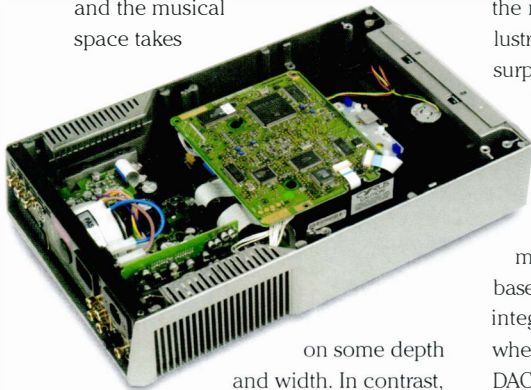
the improvements to the picture quality are marked, and the DVD 8 manages to combine the smooth sheen of expensive-looking players with the crystal clear detail of mid-range Japanese models, a very cinematic improvement.

Overall, then, the change to DVD 8 is a change well worth making.

Now we have two alternatives open, the power supply or the DAC. They cost the same, but do very different things. The addition of the PSX-R delivers ►



▶ a palpable sense of solidity and openness to the soundstage in stereo. Instruments within the sparse soundstage on 'The Saturday Option' from Lambchop's *What Another Man Spills* (City Slang 08711-2) are rooted in their own spaces without wavering (even the pedal-steel guitar, which often wanders around the stereo image in DVD players) and the musical space takes

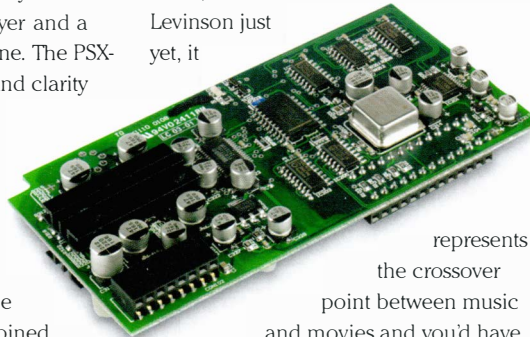


on some depth and width. In contrast, the Q 7 upgrade brings greater smoothness, refinement and, once again, temporal integrity to the party.

Mix them all together and you end up with a very good CD player and a magnificent DVD player in one. The PSX-R bestows a film-like depth and clarity on the picture that makes it considerably more cinematic and refined (anyone can bring out the colour on a DVD player; it takes real skill to bring out the refinement). Sonically, the power supply and DAC combined manage to make a player that combines drive with grace, a player that keeps time very well yet without brightness or a suppressed soundstage. To continue that motoring analogy, we now have the right car with the right tyres on the right road, and the speed limit has been erased. Vroom!

So far, all this audio and video is within its own context, now comes the \$64,000 question... does the Cyrus DVD design, from base model to top-flight twin-box player, really compete with standalone CD players? It is easy to wave the flag for a DVD player as CD player by

only comparing the performance of other DVD players, but it is how it compares with other CD players that's really interesting. The knee-jerk hi-fi stick-in-the-mud answer is to dismiss all DVD players spinning up CDs, but this is as much bias and inertia on the part of the reviewer as it is lack of musical integrity on the player's part. But, not completely: the majority of DVD players do a lacklustre job of playing CDs, with some surprisingly expensive models struggling to reach the musical performance of an inexpensive Marantz CD player. But for Cyrus, the answer is a surprising 'yes'; these DVD player options can play music up to the mark of a decent CD player. Even the base DVD 6 model is as musically integrated as a good £500 CD player. And when you get up to the very top two-box, DAC'd up model, it competes well with almost any sub £1,500 player – a major feat in its own right. If the Cyrus doesn't make you want to throw away your Naim, Wadia or Mark Levinson just yet, it



represents the crossover point between music and movies and you'd have to make a strong case to keep a CD and DVD player in the same system, especially when the Cyrus 8/PSX-R/Q 7 system is on song.

This all shows just how far Cyrus has pushed the DVD envelope. There are only a select handful of DVD players that do a better job of playing CDs than the Cyrus DVD 6, and one of those is the Cyrus DVD 8. The others all cost many times more than the pair of Cyrus players put together. And at each step in the upgrade process, both picture and sound get better. This is good stuff. All of this places the Cyrus DVD player range

in a very select group of DVD players that can also play CDs without ruining the music in the process. Perhaps Cyrus does achieve that audio holy grail of the one-box that does everything, after all. Except that they put it in two... ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Cyrus DVD 6 player

Transport: Integral Isolated Loader Mechanism with dual laser pick-up

Disc Replay Capability: DVD-Video, DVD-R, DVD+RW, Video CD, CD Audio, CD-R, CD-RW

Video Outputs: Composite Video, S-Video, RGB (via Scart)

Audio Outputs: Digital Coaxial, Optical, Stereo Audio

SCART Output: RGB video, Composite Video, Stereo Audio, Function Select

Power Supply: 12 fully regulated power supplies

Display: Text/numeric LCD with green back lighting

Communications: MC-Bus System bus  
Price: £750

##### DVD 8 player

As DVD 6 plus: Component Video (Composite Video through Scart only) outputs  
PSX-R upgradable  
Price: £1200

##### PSX-R

Outputs  
±35.5VDC for stereo power and integrated amplifier

±18-30VDC for monobloc power and other amplifiers

±21VDC for low power applications  
300VA toroidal transformer

Price: £350

##### Physical Specifications (All)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 215x78x360mm

Finishes: Silver or Dark Gray

##### Cyrus Q Module

Audio Output: 2V rms

Price: £350

##### Manufacturer:

Cyrus Electronics

Tel. (44)(0)1480 435577

Net. www.cyrus.co.uk

# WHAT MORE CAN ONE SAY?



## Audio Atmosphere/Wavelength

Good show for us, valuable investment.  
The public needs this type of show, which concentrates on Hi-fi.

## Vertec

Staff at Hotel excellent, so refreshing to have quality time with customers, the show is needed and has prospects.

## Icon

Very nice Hotel - in keeping with show, would like bigger room for 2004 and did some good business on the day.

## Integrated Eng

Thoroughly enjoyed it, impressed with quality, no complaints.  
Will consider our own room next year.

## Reference Audio.

Pretty happy with everything, will do show next year - room worked out well.  
Would also like to see show concentrate on high quality audio.

## Audionote

We really need this type of show, Hotel excellent.

## Dynavector SuperStereo

Very high quality event, all seriously interested people.

## Reality

Impressed with the quality of visitor, great way to get my customers together, would like bigger room for 2004.

## Larc

Definitely worth our while, made sales.

## Beauhorn Loudspeakers.

Liked the 2-day format. Because of the new exhibitor package - we could stretch to a good sized room - a big benefit.  
Liked the Hotel, it's staff and the huge car park is a big plus.

## Music Matters

Absolutely right that this should be a Hi-fi show only, quality was excellent and have picked up many leads.

## 'A' Audio Solutions

Good spread of quality visitors, a lot of enquiries received, would like a bigger room next year.

## Steinhart

The trade must really get behind this event, the unique exhibitor package was a great help, almost certain about next year.

## Metropolis

Lets start planning now for 2004, the show deserves more time now.  
Good venue - new exhibitor package great help.

## Talk

Would like to try for a bigger room, plan now so we attract some more major names, the show must be kept for high end audio.

PS. WITH APOLOGIES TO THE EXHIBITORS WE COULDN'T INCLUDE DUE TO SPACE

Border Patrol, Rob Lambert, Base, Wilson Benesch, Anatek, True Colours, Technique Leisure, Vivante, HiFi Plus, Smarthouse, Lektropacks, Korato. ....ALL OF WHOM VOICED SIMILAR COMPLIMENTS.

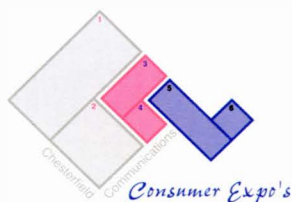
PPS. GET WELL SOON KEN ( Cherished Records ) WE MISSED YOU.

OH WE CAN SAY ONE THING .....SAME VENUE, 3-4 APRIL 2004

For CC



Roy Bird  
Organiser

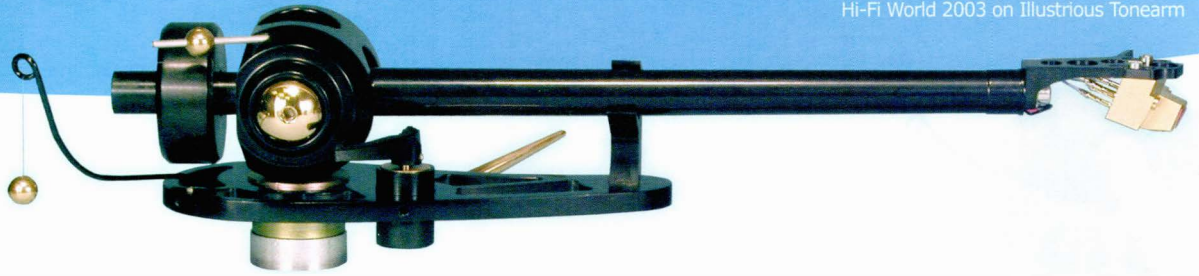


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*Paul Szabady, Stereo Times 2003 on Encounter Tonearm*

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▲ Klyne Model 7 Line and Phono stage

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RECORD

MODE

ENTER

SELECT

LINE

Phono

PHONO/AUX

CD

TUNER

AV

DVD

RCR

TAPE

TONE

SP1

SP2

# Arcam Diva A85

by Paul Messenger

I've known Charlie Brennan for at least twenty-five years, from the days when he moved from Ireland to Scotland to take on a sales and marketing role for Linn Products. Not long ago, however, he moved south to take over the reins as Managing Director at Arcam, and soon after that presided over a major new product launch, which included this A85 integrated amplifier.

Featuring radical new circuitry and a rather higher price than Arcam's previous stereo amps, the A85 was the keynote product at that launch, and when I was chatting to Charlie afterwards he suggested I ought to give it a try, because he felt it was something rather special.

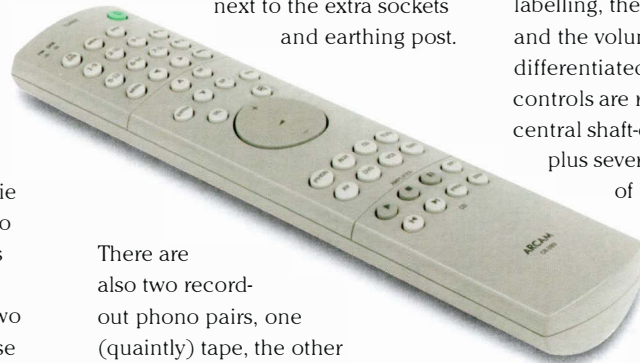
While it's taken more than two years to follow them up (because I do very little amplifier reviewing), I never forgot Charlie's comments, and so, when chatting to the Editor recently I suggested that we should give the A85 a go.

An Arcam integrated amp isn't the normal fodder for a relatively esoteric magazine like *Hi-Fi+*, but perhaps that's one of the better reasons for covering it. After all, Arcam is the market leader in UK hi-fi amplifier sales, so its leading integrated model has got to be a crucial landmark in the marketplace.

Its \$800 pricetag is certainly a couple of rungs up the ladder from Arcam's traditional stock in trade, but perfectly reasonable in view of the spec, which is comprehensive, up to date, and powerful too.

Like many amps today, the standard version just handles 'flat' line-level signals, with seven sets to choose from.

However, a vinyl input module may be specified as an option, at an extra £110, and when this is fitted it takes the place of the aux-labelled line input. The phono stage (which was fitted to our sample) can handle either high (MM) or low output (MC) cartridges, selecting between the two via a simple pushbutton through the back panel, next to the extra sockets and earthing post.



There are also two record-out phono pairs, one (quaintly) tape, the other VCR, and the record-source is independently selectable from the source that is being auditioned.

While the basic construction follows the familiar 'two steel trays' approach, the silver finished fascia is a chunky alloy affair, albeit a little sharp-edged. The whole thing feels very solid, sitting on six rubber feet, and from the front it looks very different from typical UK designs – indeed, decidedly 'international', with a generous fluorescent dot-matrix display, and little LED tell-tales beside each button.

Microprocessor control underpins the complete functionality, which includes a very comprehensive set of 'background' features in addition to the normal basics, and cleverly arranges these in such a way as to avoid cluttering up the prime functions.

Full remote control is included, via one of the neater and better-designed handsets I've encountered in the hi-fi world. It's light and slim enough to be held and operated in one hand, and while one might quibble with the sheer number of buttons here (40 – a familiar problem with 'system' handsets), as well as the size and legibility of the labelling, the intelligent grouping helps, and the volume up/down is very well differentiated. Front panel hands-on controls are restricted to a single large central shaft-encoded volume knob, plus several well-organised groups of buttons.

Both fascia and handset provide easy access to the essentials like input and speaker selection, and also to a useful menu driven system, whose features include the ability to preset both the sensitivity and (bypassable) tone control settings for each individual input. The display shows the volume setting graphically or numerically, and the volume control itself has three modes: normal, fine (for late night listening) and reference.

The amplifier offers full remote switching for two pairs of speakers, and delivers a high quality feed to a head-phone socket too. Pre-amp outputs are available for bi-amping, for which Arcam can provide a matching P85 power amplifier. There's even the provision for an additional internal module which can extend its capability to multi-channel audio applications, again requiring additional power amplification. However, anyone who has purchased an A85 sometime over the last thirty ▶

► odd months might well be wondering what has happened to this promised multi-channel option. The bad news is that there have been some delays in implementation; the good news is that the 7.1-channel module is now scheduled to become available early in the summer of 2003.

Inside the box, the technical bits use plated-through circuit boards with surface-mount components. The whole amplifier is DC-coupled from input to output, with

earlier budget fare. Above all, the A85 has a magnificently wide dynamic range, and superb overall tonal neutrality too.

Self-effacing is the first adjective that springs to mind, as this amplifier rarely makes one aware of its presence, and certainly never ever causes aural offence. I simply put it into my system in place of the much more costly exotics I usually use, and left it there for several weeks. And while I was generally aware that the sound was a little softer around the edges, especially when using the most demanding sources, there

probably because the dynamic range is exceptionally wide here. The recorded wow on my copy of Nirvana *Unplugged* was still very much in evidence, but Kurt Cobain has rarely sounded in better voice, the edgy nervousness of this of this fine live recording coming through very well and adding considerable believability and tension to the proceedings.

Stereo images are precise, well formed and sound very natural, with no tendency to 'force' lead instruments and voices ahead of the accompaniment. Instead the perspectives are just a little laid back, giving a good impression of depth,

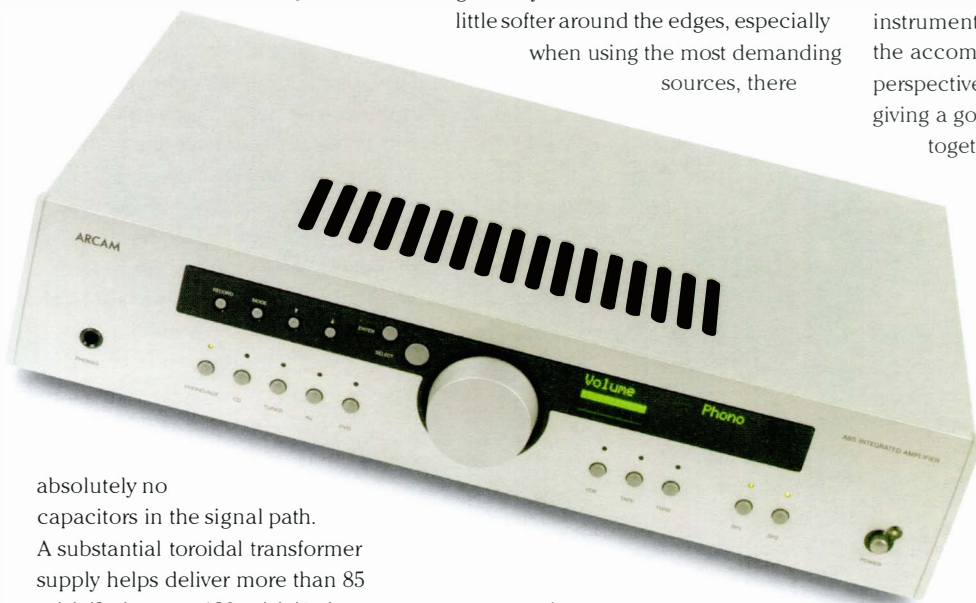
together with some sense of ambience and space around the instruments on appropriate recordings.

I found myself in rapt attention to a piece of unclassifiable modern classical/jazz/rock of some sort, when listening to *Late Junction* one night, at least in part because the imaging was so spectacular.

Timing is basically good, and while this isn't the fastest sounding amp around,

it maintains good consistency across the band, so that the slight timesmear isn't particularly obvious or intrusive.

I tried out the vinyl input on its MC setting (using a Linn Sondek/Ekos/Akiva player), and while performance was perfectly satisfactory, I was again conscious of some lack of 'sparkle'. I would normally expect my vinyl copy of the Grateful Dead's acoustic, live *Reckoning* album to have a clear and obvious advantage over my CD copy of the same, but when I synchronised and compared the two, the similarities seemed much greater than the differences. Yes, the vinyl had a little more inner detail and subtlety about the way the



absolutely no capacitors in the signal path.

A substantial toroidal transformer supply helps deliver more than 85 w/ch/8 ohms, or 130 w/ch/4 ohms. The outputs have fully symmetrical high current stages with novel current feedback loops.

All this adds up to a pretty impressive package, on paper at least. Few amps are as ambitious in their attempts to combine a sound quality with true audiophile pretensions alongside a truly comprehensive feature package. Is it really possible to have this particular cake and eat it too? Up to a point at least, would seem to be the answer to that key question.

It must be acknowledged that the sound here is pretty damn good, and while it may not exactly be the last word in dynamic tension and transparency, it's much quicker and livelier than my recollection of Arcam's

were regular occasions when I quite forgot I was listening to a relatively affordable integrated amplifier.

One could perhaps accuse the A85 of playing things a little too safe – there's a slight impression that the extreme top end is a little too restrained, and the sound might have just a little more 'sparkle'. Instead one finds the attention tending to focus more strongly on the midband, which is really where the amp's main strength lies.

I was spinning some very familiar discs, and quickly became conscious of the considerable clarity through the voice band. Subtle inflexions were particularly easy to hear, and intelligibility is particularly good,

► acoustic guitars were unfolding the musical arguments, but the vinyl did sound just a little less open and delicate than I'd expected.

The mild drop off in resolution at the top end of the band was mirrored by something rather similar in the deep bass. Massive Attack's new *100th Windows* album certainly had plenty of the massive going for it, but seemed a tad lacking in the attack department. There was ample weight, no question, but also a slight lack of precision, authority and drive.

through the presence zone. That in turn means it's somewhat brighter and more forward than the majority of commercial speakers in this region. The A85 does indeed sound just a little thin and forward with the K2s, but that in turn means it will probably sound about right with something more realistic pricewise, and more laid-back soundwise, such as a pair of B&W DM602 S3s. (*You might want to examine CB's review of the 602s in this issue for an interesting slant on different perspectives! Ed*)

control has an adverse impact on the sound quality, though one does suspect there's some element of compromise here.

As the lead model for the most popular and widely distributed specialist brand out there, the bottom line is that the A85 is very well suited to its appointed slot in the marketplace. One might perhaps wish for a little more tension and authority, but the fine midband stands out, the sound is beautifully judged overall and is also pretty well guaranteed not to offend, even when used with modest ancillaries. ►+



This was confirmed by a rather more familiar recording – Mari Boine's excellent 'eallin', which has tremendous bottom-end weight and power. Once again it seemed to lose just a little precision through the bass region, and while it undoubtedly hung on in there, it didn't provide quite the sort of propulsion and momentum that I'd expected. As with other material, the A85 was leading with its midrange and presence, to some extent at the expense of its bass power and authority.

My current favourite loudspeakers are the big JBL K2 S9800s, with a mid/treble horn driver that sounds and measures exceptionally flat and neutral

This amplifier does have a degree of character, and does impose some of this character on the sound, whatever the source in use. While some might consider this overall consistency an advantage, it does tend to blur the distinctions between the various and quite different sources that we regularly use, which is a rather less positive observation.

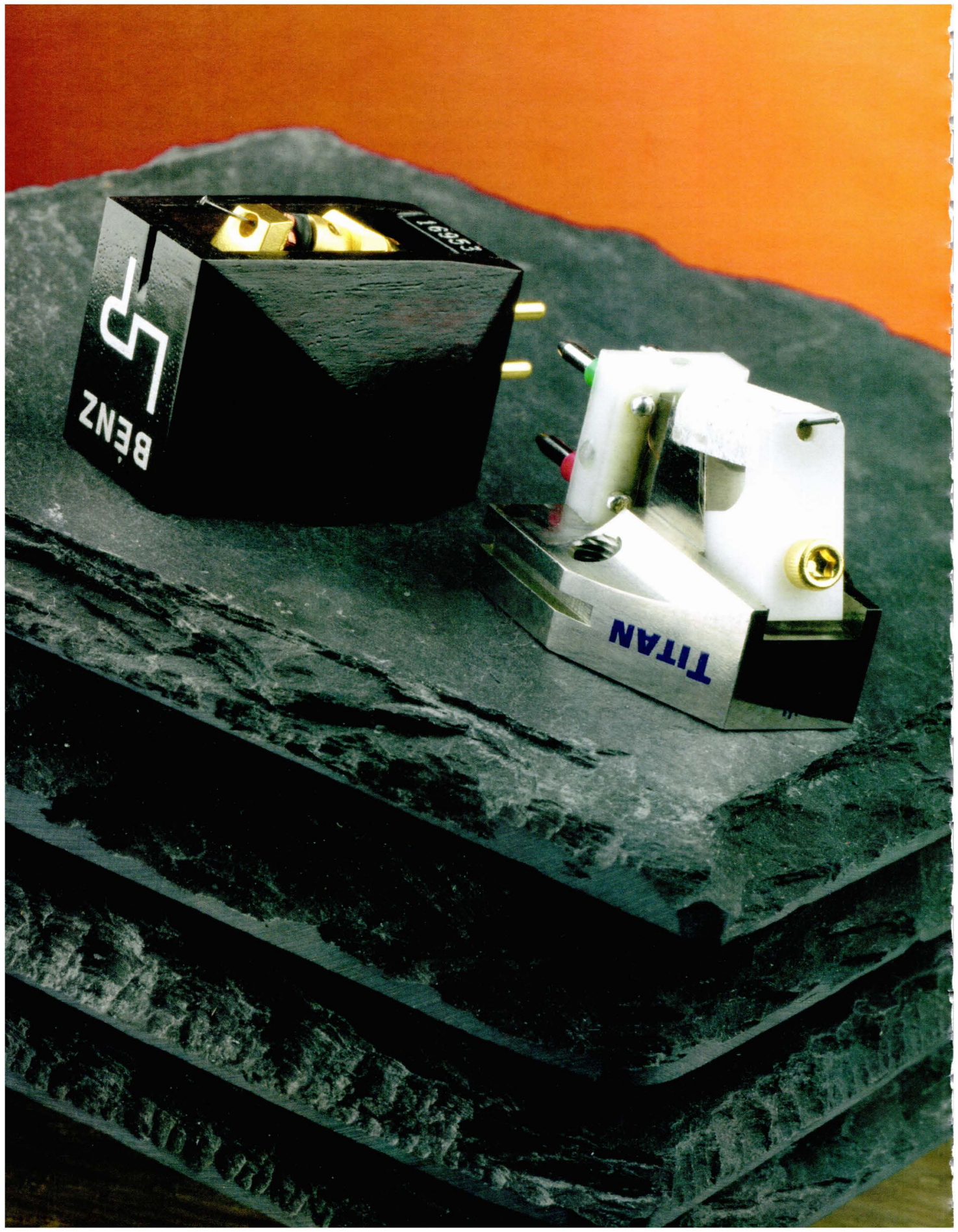
The key difference between this amplifier and most of its competitors lies in its flexibility, both in the comprehensiveness of the feature roster, and its potential for future upgrading. It's hard to say whether the extensive use of microprocessor

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Line inputs:	7 single-ended
Phono Input:	Optional MM/MC
Line outputs:	2x recorders, pre-out
Power outputs:	2 x stereo spkrs, headphones
Power output:	Both channels/8 Ohms, 20Hz-20kHz: 85W Single channel/4 Ohms, 1kHz: 140W
Phono input sensitivity:	2.5mV/250uV
Line input sensitivity:	700mV
Input impedance:	22kOhms
Tone control range:	±12dB
Pre-amplifier output level:	700mV/<3 Ohms
Weight	9kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430x102x330mm
Price:	£800

#### Manufacturer:

Arcam  
Pembroke Avenue  
Waterbeach  
Cambridge  
CB5 9PB  
Tel. (44)(0)1223 203203  
Net. [www.arcam.co.uk](http://www.arcam.co.uk)





# Lyra Titan

by Roy Gregory

At a time when analogue is supposed to be on the wane, it's amazing how many new cartridges come and go. Of course, each one doesn't necessarily represent a new manufacturer and many of these designs are actually the badged work of major manufacturers or OEM producers who remain largely unknown to the buying public. The majors have generally been around for years, with the likes of Ortofon, and Empire enjoying long and illustrious histories, producing cartridges under their own names and others. Then comes a second tier of equally long-lived but arguably more specialist (or should that be characterful?) companies such as Koetsu, Clearaudio and Dynavector. And it is here that we find the latest (and possibly the last) great additions to the field of cartridge manufacture – Lyra and Transfiguration.

Lyra started out as OEM manufacturers, producers of the Spectral MCR and Audioquest AQ 7000 cartridges, amongst others. However, their first own brand product was the Clavis, the first of what might be considered their second-generation products. It was joined by the cheaper Lydian and much more expensive Parnassus, and each in turn evolved into a DC or Beta derivative. The third generation was heralded by the Helikon and it's here that this story really starts.

The Clavis completely rearranged the market when it first appeared, and the Helikon repeated that trick, re-establishing the benchmark for performance at its price point. That wasn't all. It also established the basic blueprint for future Lyra cartridges. Its sculpted, open body and clever incorporation of an all enveloping stylus guard combined with tapped mounting

holes (first seen on the Lydian Beta) achieved a new level of user friendliness without compromising sound quality. By making the cartridge easier (and safer) to handle Lyra are tacitly acknowledging that in the absence of comprehensive dealer support it is no longer good enough to build performance potential into its designs. They need to go a step further and make that potential easier to realise. Add to that the emergence of new magnetic materials and design combined with double layer coils and it was possible to provide significantly more output than their earlier designs, again making the cartridge easier to use.

Purists however demanded a version of the new cartridge with single-layer coils, sacrificing the extra output in search of greater speed, low-level resolution and delicacy, and so was born the Helikon SL. The lower output level also didn't risk overloading phono stages optimised for the 0.2mV levels that had been the previous norm. Next up will be the Dorian, designed to fit between the Lydian and Helikon within the range, but before that we have the arrival of the new flagship model, the Titan, costing a not inconsiderable \$2990.

As the name suggests, and as with the Parnassus DC t which it replaces, the Titan's body is worked from solid titanium alloy, although the alloy itself is actually different to that used in the earlier cartridge (it bears an uncanny resemblance to the incredibly hard 6Al/4V, but that's just speculation on my

part). The body is carefully shaped to resist standing waves, while the internals are electrically eroded to shape, a process that is at once incredibly precise and avoids introducing mechanical stresses into the cartridge structure. The cartridge generator assembly is rigidly attached to this foundation, and consists of two symmetrical discs of a new and extremely powerful neodymium magnetic material. The absence of conventional pole pieces helps eliminate non-linearities within the magnetic field.

The cantilever is a diamond coated boron rod, held by a metal sleeve that is effectively cold-welded directly to the cartridge body. Along with the incredibly short suspension wire this makes for a closely defined vibrational behavior, critical as any spurious resonance will be

reproduced as distortion. The stylus tip is a line contact type specifically developed by Lyra to maximise detail and minimise record wear. The coils themselves are copper (rather than the more fashionable but problematic silver or gold) and wound single layer onto gold plated, chemically purified iron cores. The end result is a pocket battleship of a cartridge (titanium is only light when it's hollow!) that reduces its moving parts to the absolute minimum. The sheer rigidity of the closely coupled structure means that the Titan puts even more energy into the arm than normal, Lyra even stressing the benefits of cleaning the top surface of the cartridge and underside of the

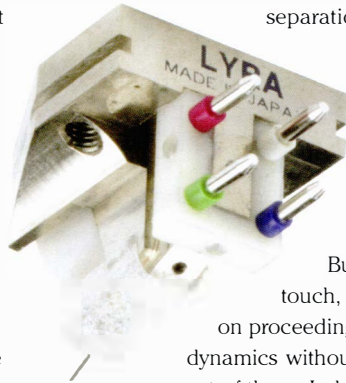


► arm before mounting, in order to ensure proper coupling. Sonically speaking, the result of this is that the Titan is extremely demanding of its partnering tone-arm and turntable. The arm used better have decent bearings and the precise amount of damping used is critical, especially in a uni-pivot such as the JMW 12.5 I used for the review. The Titan weighs in at 12g and puts out 5.0mV, which is the same as the original Helikon. Compliance is 12cu and with a tracking force of 1.65 – 1.75g (I used a shade under 7g) it is ideally suited to most of today's medium mass tone-arms.

In use, the Titan proves simplicity itself to set-up, final alignment aided considerably by the clearly visible cantilever. Precise adjustment is essential, and not for the first time I blessed the adjustable vta facility on the JMW, making it so much easier to get the cartridge really dialed in. The instructions suggest that poor sound can more often than not be traced to faulty set-up, and having been through the process, I can believe it. The cartridge was played on both Clearlight Recovery and VPI TNT-HRX turntables and via the Groove, Vibe, Pulse and Soul amplification combination. Speakers were the OBX-Rs and Reference 3A DaCapos, while the Hovland Sapphire and Neat Ultimatum MFS combination also played a part. Cables were Nordost Valhalla and Valkyrja throughout.

The Helikon has long been a favorite chez Gregory, so I was fascinated to see how it stacked up against the Titan. With both cartridges enjoying identical geometry it was possible to swap between them with no more than a three notch tweak on the JMW's vta dial. And impressive as the Helikon is it is clearly bettered by the newcomer. In terms of tangible differences the Titan offers a wider, better focused and more

transparent soundstage. There's much more low level detail, and the tonal separation of instruments is much more obvious. Taking the Reiner/CSO *Lt. Kije* (RCA Living Stereo LSC-2150) as an example, the opening instruments illuminate the entire width and depth of the soundstage with their echoes, the side-drum and piccolo being both better fixed and separated in space. Percussion and bass notes are handled with a lighter, defter touch than the Helikon, offering much better instrumental separation and texture, while



the cheaper cartridge's attractive dynamic enthusiasm is made to sound crude and heavy-handed by the grip and control exerted by the Titan.

But as I said it's a deft touch, that keeps a firm hold on proceedings, precisely scaling dynamics without crushing the life out of them. Indeed, one of the most impressive things about the Titan's bottom-end is the air with which it surrounds and on which it floats bass notes. It's a subtle, rather than a sledgehammer performance, but none the less beguiling for all that. The end result is that the music's power grows from the orchestration rather than simple low frequency weight. It's a more correct and certainly more believable presentation, even if might frustrate the out and out headbangers who never venture into the realms of mere acoustic bass instruments.

At the other end of the spectrum the Titan offers a spectacular advantage in terms of high-frequency extension and detail, a benefit made all the more obvious by the application of the Valkyrja cables to the Neat Ultimatum speakers. The latter's upward firing super-tweeters made the most of the Valkyrjas' top-end air and energy, revealing the Titan's ability to extract information at the highest frequencies and present it coherently. Everything

from triangles to tubular bells (no, not those ones) rang crisp, true and clear, held stable in space and refusing to step forward or crowd the soundstage no matter how hard they're hit. Dynamic range is wide and sudden jumps in level are traced with real speed that delivers the necessary impact and musical emphasis.

Of course, these tangible differences also effect the intangible and it's here, in the sense, the communicative capabilities of the music that the importance of the Titan's superiority really lies. In comparison, the Helikon (no slouch in this regard itself) is made to sound clumsy and lacking rhythmic subtlety, almost as if its mechanical transduction is intruding on proceedings, not quite capable of keeping up with the demands of tracing the groove. In comparison, the Titan tracks like a bloodhound and the music flows effortlessly as a result. There is a poise and grace, an absolute security to the music that issues forth from the Titan's stylus tip. Shifts in pace and musical density, subtle inflexions of voice or expressive use of bow pressure are revealed and traced without becoming etched or overtly obvious. The trick of the Titan is to take all the hi-fi attributes that audiophiles crave and weld them into a coherent, believable whole. Whereas our analytical tendencies, our efforts to define and describe the performance of equipment has the effect of dividing and segmenting the musical performance itself the Titan reverses this process, almost without you noticing. The performance happens in front of you. Listen into it and you'll find that you can hear deeper than normal, with less effort. The separation and placement of the players, the definition of distinct and separate dynamic levels unravels the intricate layers of the music. Whether it's the superb ensemble playing of the Stuttgarter Kammerorchester or the angst ridden cynicism of early Joe Jackson (the ►

▶ superb *Look Sharp* A&M SHM3154) what you are hearing is unmistakably the product of human intent and purpose. Because it does the hi-fi things so well and in such a linear, balanced way, it makes the music breathe and drive and above all it makes it connect.

The Titan isn't perfect, or even close to it. The Insider Reference offers greater energy and more vivid colours, the Koetsu Red K Signature and Miyabi 47 Labs a more organic sound. But none matches the linearity, the absolute lack of license or exaggeration that characterises the Lyra. There is a leanness to its tonal palette (although I bet it disappears if you listen through the Connoisseur Definitions 4.0) and there's that lightness of touch in the bass, one that puts intelligibility ahead of weight. Indeed intelligibility is the Titan's hallmark. It achieves it through maintaining the scale and proportions within the musical performance. By refusing to embellish or enhance in any way the Lyra allows an unprecedented degree of structural insight. The timing, the placing of notes and the shape of phrases is laid effortlessly bare. If you want to hear what's happening on the record then

the Titan tells you.

Surprisingly, especially given the extension, detail and energy available at high frequencies, the Lyra is extremely forgiving of all but the most extreme surface damage – and even then it continues to track more often than it skips. It's kind to poorer recordings too. It unravels the music – it doesn't rip it apart.

Delivering unprecedented musical access and doing it with a deftness and a kindness to content that serves both the individual performers and the performance as a whole, the Titan is well named. Compared to the competition it even looks like a bargain but don't let the price fool you. A genuine flagship product that towers above run of the mill hi-fi and will rearrange the sense of what's possible in those who've never heard its like, if its strengths accord with your requirements then you'll find it hard to beat its combination of technical virtues and musical honesty. If you want to understand rather than simply being moved (although the Titan does that too) then you need to hear this cartridge. Better still, hear it anyway – you owe yourself a favour, you know you do. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low-output, medium compliance, moving coil
Frequency range:	10Hz – 50kHz
Channel separation:	35dB or better at 1kHz
Cantilever system:	Diamond-coated solid boron rod with line-contact stylus (3 x 70 micrometers profile)
Internal impedance:	5.5ohms
Output voltage:	0.5mV (5.0cm/sec., zero to peak, 45 degrees)
Cartridge weight:	12.0g
Compliance:	12 x 10 <sup>-6</sup> cm/dyne at 100Hz
Recommended tracking force:	1.65 – 1.75g
Recommended load:	Direct into non-inverting RIAA equalizer amplifier or head-amplifier: 10ohms – 47kohms
Step-up transformer:	4 – 10ohms
Stylus Guard:	Yes
Price:	£2995

#### UK Distributor:

Path Premier  
Tel. (44)(0)1844 219000  
Fax. (44)(0)1844 461209

#### Manufacturer:

Scan-Tech Co. Ltd.  
E-mail: [scantech@gol.com](mailto:scantech@gol.com)

# Benz Micro LP

by Jimmy Hughes

It's still a source of amazement that the humble vinyl record manages to keep pace sonically with the best that digital audio can offer. And not just keep pace, but outshine in certain key aspects. Agreed, to hear vinyl at its very best you need deep pockets - the finest pickups, arms, and turn-

tables never come cheap. But, for those with sizeable LP collections, the investment is surely justified by the way a top analogue front end rejuvenates your interest in music. The Benz Micro LP is a case in point; at a cool £2,200 it's hardly pocket money. Can any pickup be worth

that much?

Probably not. After all, Benz themselves make a very fine, relatively low-priced alternative in the Ace that offers excellent performance without spending silly money. However, for those with fastidious tastes and the pockets to match them, Benz offer ▶

► the LP. Cheap it isn't. Near perfection costs dear. But who's to say you don't get what you pay for? No beating about the bush; this pickup is a real thoroughbred - an outstanding performer in every respect.

It's excellent at all the hi-fi things; attack, dynamics, bandwidth, tracking ability, detail. Yet above all what marks it out as special is its incredible naturalness. Despite many fabulous attributes the Benz LP never draws attention to itself. It's like you haven't got a cartridge in the system - the physical difficulties a pickup encounters while playing records seem hardly apparent. There's no sense of struggle; just the music reproduced with effortless grace and superb refinement.

Okay, I'm not saying you can put any old LP on and enjoy clean flawless reproduction. No pickup is that good. But, given LPs in good clean condition, the results match CD in terms of cleanliness and quietness of background, while at the same time exhibiting a vividness and subtly-varied range of tone colours and dynamics CD can rarely approach, let alone equal. Yet for all that vividness, the Benz LP does not exaggerate or artificially 'enhance' the music. Although the sound is lucid and detailed, the overriding impression is one of smooth unexaggerated naturalness.

In my opinion, the foundation of good LP sound is firm stable tracking. Only if the stylus is able to maintain precise contact with the groove wall at all times is high-fidelity possible. The Benz Micro LP is an outstanding tracker. Of course I tried all my most difficult discs, and there were still a few that weren't reproduced cleanly and securely. But, to be honest, since no pickup in my experience has ever

played these discs cleanly, I can't be absolutely certain that totally clean reproduction of said LPs is actually possible - though I live in hope...

Benz suggest a range of tracking pressures between 1.8g and 2.2g. Having settled on a downforce of 2g, I found that increasing it to 2.2g made no apparent difference to tracking performance on the discs giving trouble. And while I'd always suggest you err on the side of too

heavy rather than too light, it would seem there's

little point in going above 2g with this cartridge. Even when the Benz LP seemed to mistrack, it somehow did so in a poised manner. There was no loss of control - just a degree of coarsening and roughness.

Some pickups show excellent tracking ability when tried with test records - high-level mid-band sine waves for example - only to fail with music. Benz claim the LP can track an amplitude of 80um at 315Hz - an excellent figure, but not the whole story. Having listened to the Benz LP on a wide range of musical material, I can say with confidence it's every bit as good in the real world of music as it is on test discs - possibly better!

For example; brightly-recorded '60s pop cut at a high level with wide channel separation - Tamla Motown, early Beatles, etc. Such material can be extremely demanding. Dynamics may be limited by comparison with uncompressed classical recordings, but the combination of a 'forward' peaky tonal balance and high cutting levels can push many cartridges up to and beyond their limits. An indication of distress is the gradual deterioration in sound quality towards end-of-side.

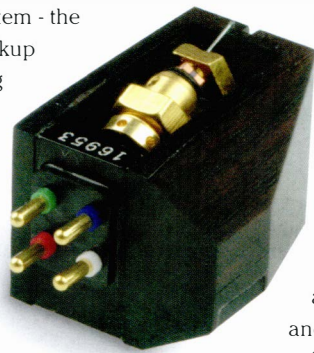
However, using the Benz LP,

there's usually surprisingly little difference in sound quality between the first and last tracks on an album. Where a slight lack of ease towards side-ends does manifest itself, the cause is invariably an LP surface that is not spotlessly clean. Unfortunately, even new LPs (or discs in apparently new/perfect condition) can suffer problems with surface contaminants that leave a microscopically thin sticky film on the surface. It's as though there's something in the vinyl that leeches out over a period of time, coating the surface with a tacky residue.

You can't see it as such. But it can be felt - by brushing the edge of one's palm lightly over the record surface. Wet cleaning seems to get rid of such surface contaminants. But only for a while; after a year or two the problem seems to return... I think that storing LPs in poly-lined inner sleeves probably makes things worse by not allowing the LP surfaces to breathe. Of course I digress. But it's something worth mentioning in passing when discussing a pickup like the Benz LP, as it's surface cleanliness that enables an outstanding cartridge like this one to show its full capability.

Physically, the Benz LP is a fairly big, heavy cartridge. Weighing in at 10.7g, it's heavy enough to require a little extra counterweight mass. I used my review sample in an Avid modified Rega RB-300 on an Avid Volvere turntable, and the counterweight had to be set well back in order to balance the arm. Output voltage is perhaps a shade on the low side at 0.28mV ref 3.54cm/s velocity. But sonically the sound has plenty of weight and richness - there's no shortage of presence or impact - and none of the bland effiteness that can afflict some very low output pickups.

Like previous Benz Micro designs, the LP leaves the area around the ►



► coils open. But, unlike some earlier models, there is a body shell - made from ebony - that offers a degree of protection. Alas, there's no stylus guard. Why? The Volvere has no lid, leaving the stylus very exposed. During the review period I had a neighbour's delightful little three-year old daughter running amok in my living room. Luckily, nothing happened. But I was scared shitless she was going to crash into my turntable, or catch the arm with her sleeve.

The cantilever is long, wickedly thin (just 0.28mm diameter), and fitted with a mirror-polished nude line-contact diamond stylus. Somestiffcantilever cartridges can sound a trifle bright and hard: not this one. True, transient attack is clean and fast, with great immediacy. But overall the tonal balance is smooth and natural. Surface noise is very low and unexaggerated. Of course if an LP has poor surfaces you'll hear some noise. But it won't be exaggerated; somehow the music takes precedence. This holds true for mushy/crunchy surfaces and loud clicks and pops. The stylus invariably seems to ride in the 'quiet' part of the groove.

The magnet employed by Benz in the LP is ferociously powerful. Indeed, when using any steel fixing implement (screwdrivers/allen keys) during installation, you need to be very careful; go too close and the steel object will be pulled from your fingers! This points to why the Benz LP is so good; the generator assembly is exceptionally powerful and efficient, meaning that the slightest undulation in the groove is read by the stylus and translated into voltage.

As previously indicated, the Benz LP's chief glory is its outstandingly natural tonal balance. It raises neutrality to a lofty peak. Only a cartridge with outstanding resolution could risk such sonic honesty. Lesser pickups would disappoint if some of their tonal aberrations were corrected. Allowing a degree of forwardness in the 'presence' region gives the sound an attractive brilliance and immediacy that's exciting and involving. The Benz LP is not strongly flavoured of itself, but because of its outstanding resolution you experience the true individual



flavour of your records.

One LP I hadn't heard in a while was Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life*. The recording is good, but like many pop albums from the '70s it sounds a wee bit contained

and lacking in sparkle and separation. The Benz LP did not artificially enliven the recording by exaggerating presence or detail, but instead seemed to bring out the separation between instruments and voices, creating a vivid almost holographic musical presentation. The layering of Stevie Wonder's multi-tracked voices on the first track was very evident. Yet always the tonal balance remained smooth and unexaggerated.

There's a nice balance struck between sounding delicate and infinitely subtle on the one hand, and strong and forthright on the other. The Benz LP certainly has power and dynamics. But it's very much an iron fist in a velvet glove - being deceptively refined yet actually very potent. Piano shows this well, having good strong lows and excellent transient attack, coupled with a lovely woody

mellowness that brings out the inner voices of the instrument, not just its brilliant overtones. Vocals sound very clean and tonally natural - minus the metallic edge one so often hears.

I could go on, but by now you've hopefully got the message. The Benz LP is a delectable combination of subtle refinement and vivid but unexaggerated clarity, allowing you to experience your records with near perfect rendition of detail, dynamics, and realistic believable tonal values. I can't see anyone being disappointed by what they hear - unless what's required is something more richly-coloured and more obviously exaggerated. Aside from the absence of a stylus guard, I find it impossibly difficult to criticise this outstanding pickup. ►+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low-output, medium compliance, moving coil
Cantilever system:	Solid boron rod with line-contact stylus
Internal impedance:	38 Ohms
Output voltage:	0.3mV (5.0cm/sec., zero to peak, 45 degrees)
Cartridge weight:	10.7g
Compliance:	15 x 10 <sup>-6</sup> cm/dyne at 100Hz
Recommended tracking force:	1.8 - 2.2g
Cartridge Body:	Black Ebony
Stylus Guard:	No
Price:	£2200

#### UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks  
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153  
E-mail. info1@audiofreaks.co.uk  
Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk



# The Real Deal

## The Epos ELS 3 and B&W DM 602 S3 Loudspeakers

by Chris Binns

It didn't seem like a fair exchange.

When Alex, the B&W delivery man wheeled the Signature 800 loudspeakers that I have been using for a while out of the house, he left behind a box with a pair of DM602's in it. In the space of ten minutes I had gone from the flagship of the range to the bottom. Actually, not quite, as B&W do make cheaper loudspeakers, but the Epos ELS 3 that arrived the same day served to illustrate the vast cost chasm between what I had been listening to and what was in front of me now. You could buy eighty pairs of the baby Epos for the price of a pair of the B&W Signatures. However, the law of diminishing returns was hard at work here, and without wishing to question the performance of the 800's, spending the evening listening to budget loudspeakers was not the disappointment that it might have been. I was pleasantly surprised, and realised that I was a little out of touch with what has been going on at the budget end of the loudspeaker market.

Are loudspeakers generally better than they were twenty-five years ago? An interesting point, and one open to some dispute. We can achieve greater power handling, lower distortion...but are they better? It must be significant that designs such as the original Quad electrostatic (now nearing its fiftieth birthday) continue to be highly regarded by many, while we see the resurgence of design practices and materials from decades ago with loudspeakers such as the JBL K2's that Paul Messenger reviewed recently, and was reluctant enough to part with that he paid for them. But at

the budget end of the market I think the quality of loudspeakers has genuinely improved. With Larger companies, the research and development bestowed on flagship models is usefully applied throughout the range, B&W being an obvious example whereby technology developed around the Nautilus 800

series is very



evident in the 602. Developments in computer technology have seen sophisticated measurement and design software become readily available to even the smallest companies; the days of the hit and miss stuffing of drive units into a box are over. It also means that there is little or no excuse for not getting the basics right.

Apart from being two way, reflex loaded designs the Epos and the B&W have little else in common, save perhaps the use of a metal dome tweeter. These have been in and out of fashion several times since they first appeared twenty

years ago, at the moment they are definitely in, particularly in lower cost products.

The ELS 3 is the first in a line of lower cost loudspeakers from Epos, a company that has a turbulent history but is now safely under the auspices of Creek. The diminutive cabinet is bevelled down the side edges, with a single small port at the rear, while a vinyl wrap replaces the wooden veneer of the more expensive models. Based around a 130mm die cast aluminium chassis driver, this utilises an injection moulded polypropylene cone with integral phase plug, and works up to about 3kHz where the aluminium dome tweeter takes over. Unlike other Epos designs, wherein the crossover is accomplished with a single capacitor on the HF unit, the ELS 3 network is a relatively complex 2nd / 3rd order design, mounted on a small board behind the connector panel, where input is via a single pair of binding posts. A degree of magnetic shielding is provided to facilitate use near conventional TV or monitors.

While the Epos is small enough to be classed as a miniature, the B&W is about as large as it gets for a stand mounting design, and physically offers a lot of loudspeaker for the money. Despite its generous proportions, the cabinet is fairly rigid and incorporates an internal brace, while the drive units are mounted onto a plastic cosmetic moulding, which provides contouring for the port and a shallow amount of horn loading for the tweeter. The crossover uses air cored inductors and film type caps, bi-wiring is available via the 4mm binding

posts on the rear. The drive units are beautifully made, the bass unit has a die cast open chassis while the tweeter uses a small tube on the magnet to absorb rear radiation from the dome. It is worth noting that these units are not magnetically shielded.

Having suggested that budget loudspeakers in particular have improved over the last few years, they have as a result



become more demanding in what they are fed with. 'Garbage in, garbage out' was a phrase originally deployed by the computer industry, and borrowed by the audio fraternity where it led to the conclusion that a hi-fi system was only as good as its source components. At the time this meant that it was the turntable that was all important. While the logic of this is sound, at the time it did lead to consumers spending almost their entire budget on the record player, leaving next to nothing for the amplifier and speakers, which was fine if an upgrade was on the cards, if not the results were sometimes a little unbalanced. My recollection of 'budget' loudspeakers of the time is not particularly flattering, and while the systems might have had a degree of musical communication, the lack of refinement often made listening a tiresome experience. Things change, and compact disc has done a lot to redress the balance and allow a more even approach to system building, whereby it is no longer

de rigueur to squander four fifths of the budget on the source component in a cost effective system.

To get things underway, both the Epos and the B&W had the luxury of being used in my main system, which meant that they were in the company of more refined and expensive source and amplification components than one would normally use, but it was interesting none the less. The 602's generous dimensions meant that it had little problem filling the room with sound, and would achieve near enough head banging levels with little problem.

Bass performance was generous, but well balanced, while the mid was open and informative. Top end was forward and at times a little excessive leading to a slightly brash quality: having heard other models in the range this seems to be the way that B&W like to voice their loudspeakers at the moment. There was some mild, box type coloration that was evident with the lower strings of acoustic guitar or cello, but all in all the 602's were happy pretending to be expensive loudspeakers, a deception which they can pull off with ease.

Meanwhile, the Epos did not have the size



to conjure up the sheer physical presence the 602's could achieve in the large room. But what they did have was a sense of poise and delicacy that could make the B&W's sound a bit rude. They tended to work on a different level, impressing with communicative qualities and involvement with music, although again, they could be a little undisciplined at the top end. Hey, maybe I just don't like metal dome tweeters. The bottom end was quite impressive considering the size, although at higher levels could become congested with heavy, bass rich material causing the mid range to cloud over and become a bit muddled. But I was asking a lot of a small speaker in a large room.

Moving the speakers to the office (which is considerably smaller) provided the opportunity to use some more realistic partnering equipment. Source was for the most part an original Rega Planet CD player, while amplification comprised a Denon PMA 355 (representative of a contemporary budget amp) and the Hegel H1 integrated reviewed in the last issue. Just for fun I included a Radford STA 25 valve power amp with a passive volume control. In this smaller, but more lively room the 602's sounded a bit uncontrolled in the bass, for situations such as this B&W provide a dense foam 'bung' to plug the port; this had the effect of drying up the bass which improved things considerably. Results with the Hegel were impressive. Thriving on the tautness and general control that this amplifier possesses, music had a precision to its delivery that was well maintained, even at quite antisocial levels, a task that both speakers and amplifier seemed to revel in.

The ELS 3s seemed to favour this room, where they had to work less hard to achieve realistic levels. Positioning relative to the rear wall is quite critical, as they need a certain amount of proximity to give the bass some weight, but get too close and things start to sound



▶ pretty muddy due to the rear firing port; I found a distance of about a foot to be optimum. It also profoundly affected their ability to image, away from the wall they were capable of conjuring things out of thin air with real precision. While the B&W's were quite happy running with the Denon amplifier, the Epos thickened



up at anything above average listening levels, and I wonder if their 4 Ohm rating might have an influence here. This was not apparent with the Hegel, where once again the precision and control kept things in line.

By far the most interesting, and for my tastes pleasurable combination was with the old Radford STA25. Re-valved and slightly tweaked (new reservoir caps with bi-passing) and rated at a comfortable forty watts, it is no power-house by today's standards, but it offered just the right combination of attributes to demonstrate what both of these loudspeakers were capable of. Used from the 4 Ohm tap, it just 'clicked' with the little Epos, where it provided considerable energy in the bass, and a controlled top end that sounded silky and refined. But it was the mid range that really shone, displaying a naturalness with voices that could give an electrostatic a run for its money, with detail, articulation, and a nice consolidated feel to the rhythm in music. I spent a considerable amount of time trying to work while this system was running, only to be distracted

more often than not. Similarly, the 602's benefited from a slightly more old fashioned sound, and ultimately the treble that could prove a bit wearing with an 'up front' solid state design was far easier on the ear.

I am thankful that this is not a head to head review. Both of these loudspeakers are good, and represent quite an achievement at their respective price points, albeit for different reasons. They both reflect how much the cheaper end of the loudspeaker market has advanced, and in some ways, their performance could be their downfall. In the old days one could throw a budget loudspeaker on the end of a system and get a half reasonable sound; the resolution that both of these models are capable of means that they are more demanding of partnering equipment than one might normally bestow on a budget system.

All things to all men? The B&W 602 is just generally an all round good loudspeaker, and dare I say it, a bit of a steal at \$300. Big enough to provide bass and listening levels to satisfy most musical tastes, the one caveat is the rather forward treble; in the wrong hands it can prove to be acerbic and unpleasant. Its relatively high sensitivity makes it an interesting contender for use with more exotic, lower powered amplification, where it will not embarrass itself, and opens up a whole realm of possibilities – for example I can't help wondering what the combination with say, the Canary CA608 would be like. I reckon you could use it to good effect with ten Watts or so of good Class A power and have a lot of fun.

At a hundred pounds less, the Epos EL5 3 is far more subtle in its strengths; it is a considered and insightful performer. For many, its size will be an attractive

feature, and while I don't think this necessarily limits its performance, it is far more specialist than the B&W. It is quite demanding of amplification, and I suspect that it will not impress when stuck on the end of any old budget amp. Find the right combination however, and it is capable of a highly musical and involving presentation, with an ability to suck you in to a performance that the majority of sub \$500 loudspeakers can only envy. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Epos EL5 3

Recommended amplifier power:

25 – 100 Watts

Impedance: 4 Ohms nominal

Sensitivity: 87 db 1 Watt 1 Metre

Bandwidth: 65 Hz – 20 kHz ±3dB

Drive units: 130mm polymer cone  
bass unit

25mm aluminium dome  
HF unit

Dimensions (HWD): 270 x 174 x 195 mm

Weight: 4.5 Kg each

Finishes: Light cherry, Dark Cherry,  
Black

Price: £200

##### Manufacturer:

Epos Ltd

Tel. (44)(0)1442 260146

E-mail. info@epos-acoustics.com

Net. www.epos-acoustics.com

##### B&W DM 603 S3

Recommended amplifier power:

25 – 120 Watts

Impedance: 8 Ohms nominal

Sensitivity: 90 db 1 Watt 1 Metre

Bandwidth: 49 Hz – 22kHz ±3dB

Drive units: 180mm woven Kevlar  
bass unit

25mm alloy HF unit

Dimensions (HWD): 490 x 236 x 293 mm

Weight: 10.5 Kg each

Finishes: Oak, Black, Dark Cherry

Price: £300

##### Manufacturer:

B&W Loudspeakers

Tel. (44)(0)1903 221500

E-mail. uksales@bwspeakers.com

Net. www.bwspeakers.com



# Shop Talk...

by Alan Sircom

## The Shop:

Grahams Hi-Fi

## The Brief:

A single source system for around £9000, capable of playing all kinds of music.

## The System:

Naim CDX2 CD Player

Naim NAC 202

Naim NA PSC

Naim NAP 200

B&W Nautilus 804 Loudspeakers

Naim NACA5 Speaker Cable

Quadraspire Q4 Rack

Biases and prejudices are hard to eliminate; here are mine. Like many people in the hi-fi industry, I cut my audiophile teeth at Grahams Hi-Fi, both as a customer and then on the other side of the counter to help pay for my habit. Although it's been many years since I demonstrated gear for a living, walking back into Grahams has a peculiar resonance and familiarity that I had to overcome: many of the faces are the same, although with greyer hair; even the listening rooms have the same furnishings and décor since I last worked there.

Beneath the surface, though, things have changed dramatically. Grahams commanding reputation as über-dealer was built during the glory days of Flat Earth, where Linn turntables and loudspeakers together with Naim amplifiers were at the centre of the known universe. Back then, the 'source-first' ethos was taken to the limit; many a full-spec Linn Sondek was sold with

a humble Naim Nait and a pair of small Linn Kans. Recently, though, Grahams has adopted a more pragmatic approach to system building, and subsequently sells more complete systems than individual components these days. This marks a move away from the more extreme tweekers of the late 1980s and very much toward a well-heeled audiophile with a taste for both music and aesthetics.

The company still applies its own rigid listening tests to each product it stocks; nothing is taken on as a range-filler, it stands or falls on its own performance. Every Wednesday, the Grahams staff listen to assess any new bits of kit to see if they are worthy of being included in the line-up. They apply the same listening criteria they suggest to all customers when they turn up for an audition. They break down music into five key areas: tune, melody, dynamics, coherence and intelligibility. Identifying key areas in musical reproduction is unconsciously performed by anyone selecting hi-fi equipment, but by putting criteria into the process (and not just something simplistic like 'the tune') selection becomes more discerning. And, by creating more discerning listeners, Grahams ultimately creates more empowered purchasers in the process. I would prefer to add soundstaging and detail to this list of priorities, but from a purely musical

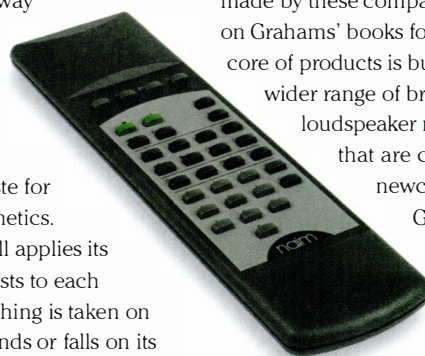
standing, these are very much secondary functions.

There are a range of core brands that Grahams has stuck to firmly; Arcam, Linn, Marantz, Meridian, Naim and Rega are the most obvious ones. Products made by these companies have been on Grahams' books for decades. This core of products is built upon by a wider range of brands, especially loudspeaker names like B&W that are comparative newcomers to the Grahams line-up.

But, whatever the brand, they are selective, picking what they consider the best of each range.

Naturally, the audition is important, but almost more important is the lengthy conversation between the consultant and potential client. The consultant carefully identifies musical tastes, any preconceptions (such as previous kit, auditions at other shops and so on), budget, aesthetic considerations and anything else that can make the system selection process a bit quicker. Normally, the listener brings in his or her own discs, but I wanted to hear what Grahams were playing; when I was demonstrating, Dire Straits and Thomas Dolby were all the rage... surely things have moved on?

The system selected was sophisticated, yet straightforward, comprising Naim Audio electronics (and



► cables) from front to back and B&W Nautilus 800 series floorstanders. This leaves one spot of accessorising – the choice of table, which went to Quadraspire. Well, there was one other concession to accessorising, but more of that later.

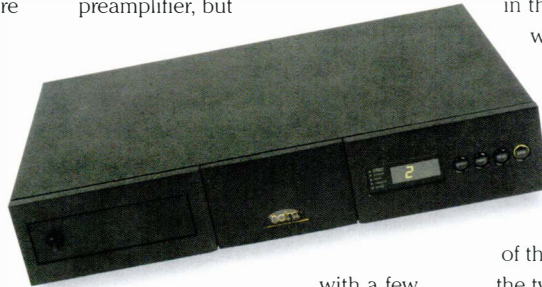
Fronting the system is Naim's second from the top CD player, the £2,650 CDX2. This new player sports Naim's manual swing-arm and metallic puck arrangement as seen in the majority of Naim models. Unlike previous Naim CD players, though, this one is readily upgradeable – just add an XPS2 power supply, itself a healthy £2,300, to raise the audio bar a degree or two. This upgrade (with its giant medical-grade Burmby connection lead) can also be used as a stepping stone to the company's flagship CDS3 player, which also uses the XPS2. There are even concessions



to non-Naim users, such as phono sockets alongside the DIN plug. It also has HDCD decoding, an RC5 socket and an optional RS232 port for those who plan on using the CDX2 in a multi-room setting. Of course, you can't have it all... there's no digital output of course.

There's a wide range of pre-amplifiers in Naim's Reference Series, hardly surprising really, the company started out making amplifiers and it has

always been Naim's centre of excellence. This system features the £1,375 NAC 202, the cheapest of the four pre-amplifiers in the range, featuring the circuit topology of the cheaper 5 Series NAC 112 preamplifier, but



with a few enhancements and the heavily engineered casing filtered down from the NAC 552. Like the CD player, the NAC 202 can be upgraded by improving the power supply. The standard layout is to let the pre-amplifier take its juice from a Naim power amplifier (such as the NAP 150 or 200), but you can improve the sound by adding a separate power supply, like the Flat-Cap 2, Hi-Cap or Super-Cap.

This is where that one tweaky-concession part of the system comes into play. Rather than adding a full-on power supply, Grahams opted to include the smaller £225 NA PSC. Intended primarily to drive Naim's ancillary products like the Headline headphone amp and Stageline phono amp, the NA PSC is used here to feed only the control circuitry and the panel lights. This improves the sound of the amplifier combination significantly, making less demands on the feed from the power amplifier, which in this system is the 70Watt per channel £1,345 NAP 200, again the jumping off point to the Reference Series. Both pre-amplifier and power amplifier also offer a sensible upgrade for owners of Naim 5 Series pre-power systems that have reached their limits.

Otherwise, there ain't much in the way of upgrades to go for. As described before, the table selected at this price was the standard Quadraspire Q4 table,

although the isolationist Quadraspire Q4 Reference is the superior alternative, if the user doesn't mind its wobbly nature. Naim's Fraim stand was also worthy of note, and is said to add detail especially in the treble, but as a four-tier Fraim would cost more than the pre-amplifier, this exceeds the pragmatic Grahams approach.

The interconnect between CD and preamplifier is a single black SNAIC five-pin locking DIN cable supplied in the box of the CDX2 and the same applies with the two-way four-pin locking DIN cable between pre and power and the connections between pre-amp and NA PSC. The speaker leads are also Naim's NAC A5, which costs £6.95 per mono metre. Grahams installs this on site, using QED's cold-welding Airloc 4mm plugs, which adds a further £40 to the cable price for a complete set. Naim is dismissive of bi-wiring, and although



there are bi-wire terminals on the speakers, Grahams also recommends a single-wired approach, ideally with the hot (red or positive) lead plugged into the HF terminal and the cold (black or negative) plug connected to the LF socket. This ever so slightly 'freshens' up the treble without giving it the clangy brightness that bi-wiring can sometime produce.

The last links in the chain are the £2,500 B&W Nautilus 804 floorstanding loudspeakers. This is a tall, slim three-way design, which is more domestically chummy than the average Nautilus design, but is in essence a scaled-down 803, with smaller drivers in a smaller cabinet. It retains the Nautilus trademarks, like decoupled units, the tapered tube driver loading, Kevlar Fixed Suspension Transducer midrange drivers, paper/Kevlar composite bass drivers, Flowport deliberately-turbulent ports, Matrix ►

▶ bracing and the rest. More trademarks than you can shake a stick at.

We stuck on the first recording – ‘Night in Tunisia’, from Ella Fitzgerald’s *Clap hands, here comes Charlie!* (Verve) – and the sound was surprisingly good. Not good in the 3D, detail-packed traditional hi-fi interpretation of ‘good’, but instead in a far more direct, visceral and intensely musically communicative manner. You become less aware of individual instruments in the sound-stage; they are there and just as noticeable, it’s just that the sound of this system stresses the music as music, not as a collection of instruments playing. Ella’s voice was extremely easy to understand, had a perfect sense of space and size to it and the recording itself seemed every bit as fresh as if it were recorded that afternoon. But in the main, the note pad stays bare, the foot taps and you find yourself thinking more associative than directly analytical thoughts about the music playing.

This became especially noticeable when we moved to ‘Big Up/ Armageddon Time’, by Dean Fraser on his *Big Up* CD (Island). The earth-mover bass lines and the powerful live-sounding reggae beat had all the detailing and energy needed to make the recording informative and attractive, but that wasn’t all. You felt like you could smell the fast food and herbal accoutrements of Notting Hill Carnival or Glastonbury as well. This was an odd effect, making the system more like a form of time machine/holodeck mix than a humble stereo system.

‘Love in Vain’ from the new Abkico remaster of the Stones’ classic *Let it Bleed*: This dual layer SACD/CD recording shows exactly how good

dual-format discs really can be (and highlights another string to the Grahams bow... I bought a copy from its extensive and interestingly eclectic in-store CD display). Here, the late 1960s recording sounds better than it has any right to, giving a sound exactly like an early multi-track recording studio filled with wannabes, only with one of the finest bands around at the time giving their best good ol’ boys impressions.

I could sit and eat fried chicken and fire cannons at Fort Sumpter from the back of my pick-up to this recording any time. Hugh Masekela’s ‘Hope (Triloka)’ had the same concert-room atmosphere as the Dean Fraser track, but this time the recording highlighted one of the few system

limitations; a potential toward an above average bass output. It is not bloated or too rich of full, just big. In this case, the heavy kick drum sound seems to be about three metres across.

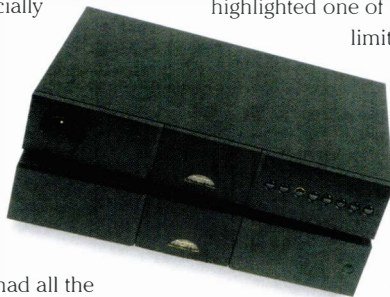
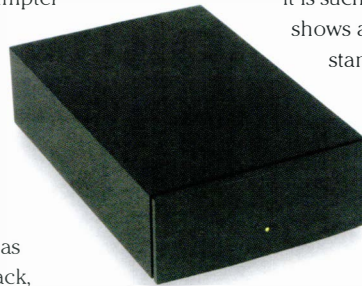
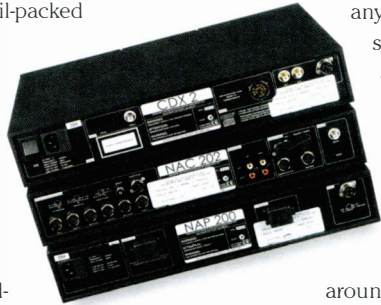
Regardless of the size of that kick drum, it remains hugely entertaining.

The last two tracks – ‘Come Away With Me’ by Norah Jones (Parlophone) and a classic DG version of Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet* – both served to ram home the performance of the system. Grahams big five criteria are perfectly fulfilled, even if the ultimate detail and image depth suffers slightly in the process. But, in terms of what the system is claimed to do, it does the job

exceptionally well.

Ultimately, this isn’t the most neutral sounding system around, but the character is benign and very musical. It has an earthy, visceral presence and weight to the sound that makes the music come alive, even if it hasn’t got the ultimate filigree transparency of some more esoteric systems. It’s a very fair trade though and the un-hi-fi, fuss-free nature of the system will make it good for years of boogie. Finally, although there are a wealth of upgrades available for the CD and pre-amp, at no time do you feel like the system is missing out on anything substantial without those extra power supplies. In short, this is a very complete system with room for growth.

It is such a complete system that it shows a fundamental understanding of what hi-fi can be all about. In this case, it’s about the performance and the music, and less about the finery and soundstaging. But, whatever style of music played on the system, it digs out the musical marrowbone like a hungry Labrador. No wonder Grahams remains one of the very few places that politely but permanently refuses to give discounts. If I stocked systems this good, and provided such service, I wouldn’t give discount either. ➤+



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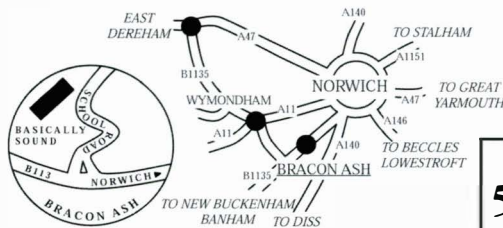


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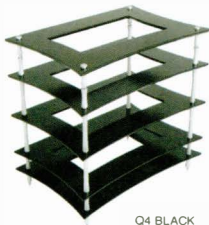


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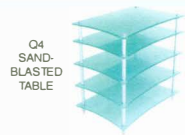
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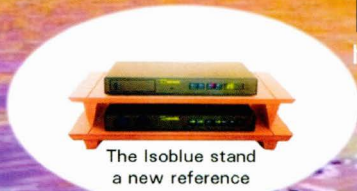
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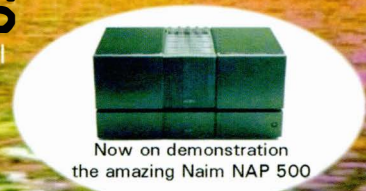
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# Apple's iPod:

## the ultimate temptation to enter a World of sin

by Phil Ward

I can guess what you're thinking, even muttering perhaps with barely concealed annoyance. You're thinking, "What on earth (a flat one, naturally) is Hi-Fi Plus doing with an mp3 player? Don't they know that mp3 is the Devil's very own format and responsible (along with the evil and brain deaf major record companies) for the end of music as we know, or perhaps knew, it?" Well yes, maybe Hi-Fi Plus getting its hands dirty with an mp3 player is a bit like Decanter Magazine knocking back a box Liebfraumilch, or Car Magazine jumping behind the reins of a pony and trap - just plain inappropriate. But think again and maybe its not, because if you look at the Apple iPod a little laterally and strip away some preconceptions, it becomes an intriguing product for the audiophile - even a Hi-Fi product. Don't believe me? Read on.

Wind the clock back to June 1999 - just around the time of the great Napster/mp3 explosion. I was struggling to stay alert through a trade seminar on, "the internet and high-end audio" at the Stereophile exhibition in Chicago. Assorted great and good of the US high-end scene were busy discussing the impact of "the internet" on their business and hi-fi in general. The deeply underwhelming consensus seemed to be that apart from web sites being a "neat way of handling brochures and tech' support", the 'net had little relevance to the actual nuts and bolts of high-end audio. Certainly it had nothing

to do with delivering music. And I can remember musing that while the hi-fi business was busy looking down its collective nose at the web, a whole generation of potential new customers was passing by, getting its music via mp3 files and playing them on perfectly nasty mp3 players and PCs.

Significantly, from hi-fi's point of view, this generation were, and are, unlikely to come within ear-range of a decent system or dealer. I was left hankering after a high-end hi-fi manufacturer grasping the nettle and launching a really gorgeous, good as it gets, mp3 player. I mean ok, so mp3 has its faults (and CD or vinyl doesn't?) and maybe it's not strictly true to the moral high ground aims of hi-fi, but it's out there and millions of potential customers for "real" hi-fi are using it.

So what's the problem? Surely not a lack of confidence in the "real hi-fi" proposition?

Things were different 25 years ago. Back then, when I (and I guess my generation) first became seriously interested in music, the system I had to play with was a pretty dodgy affair and the sounds it made were I suspect beneath the quality of even a seriously squashed mp3 file (no really, the Garrard/Amstrad/No-name system was utter crap). However, there was a direct retail link between that equipment and high-end audio. I bought a cheap cassette deck (remember before you

"dis" mp3 how atrocious cassette could sound) from a Linn/Naim dealer and remember being blown away by the system I by chance got to hear.

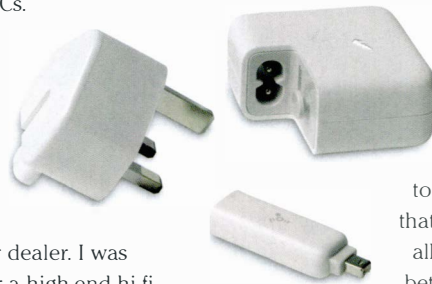
That wouldn't happen now. These enlightened days, the music addicted

kid buying a new mp3 player will get no closer to hearing the true possibilities of hi-fi than the Dixons next door to the PC World - and that's not very close at all. Without a bridge between young music enthusiasts and the hi-fi

business, I really wonder where the customers a decade or so on are going to come from.

Of course the gorgeous mp3 player didn't happen. No manufacturer took the plunge and the high-end hi-fi industry still looks at mp3 the way you might do the soles of your shoes after a walk in the park. However, even though no hi-fi manufacturer took the plunge, Apple did, and disregarding what you think of mp3, the iPod is undoubtedly a gorgeous thing to behold. Its user interface is a joy and its silver-ingot-like feel just makes you want to hold it all the time. It also has a significant surprise up its sleeve.

The iPod is fundamentally "just" a fast yet tiny (size, not capacity) Firewire hard disk drive with a neat user interface and slick integration with some "music library" software - iTunes (or MusicMatch for Windows). The surprise is that while the software, by default encodes

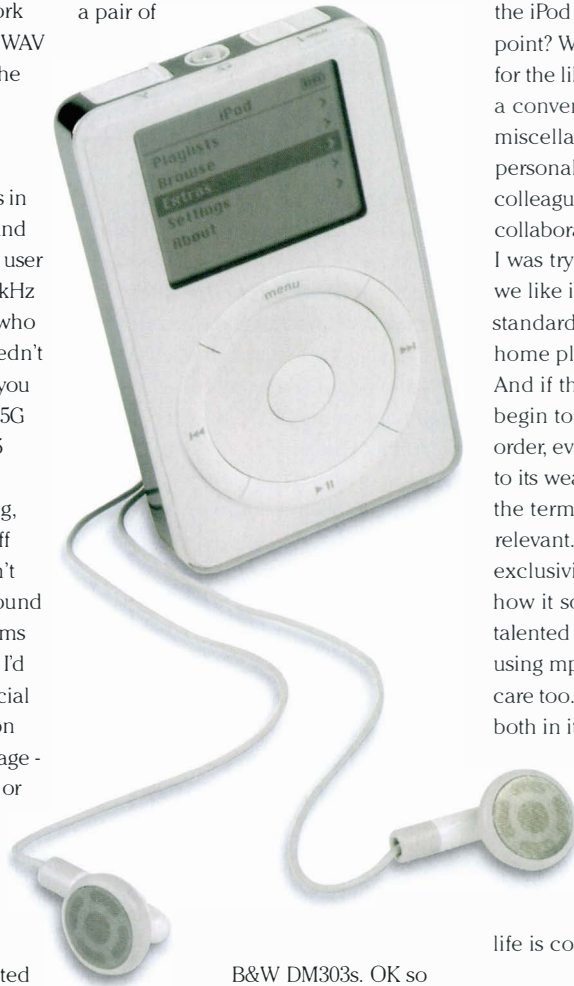


► material for dumping on the iPod as mp3 files (at user definable states of compression from “why bother” to “why listen”), the iPod itself doesn’t really care about the audio format and will work just as well with raw, uncompressed WAV or AIFF files. No surprise then that the iPod is beginning to find a niche as a portable back-up and replay medium in the music production industry. Tweaking a few preferences in iTunes will reconfigure it to import and transfer audio in either format - with user definable encoding (up to 16 bit, 48kHz and who knows what in future). So who says the iPod is an mp3 player? It needn’t be. You want uncompressed audio, you can have it. And a 20G iPod (there’s 5G and 10G versions) will hold over 25 hours of it. Some walkman!

But perhaps now you’re thinking, “Yeah, that’s as maybe, but audio off hard disk, even uncompressed, can’t possibly work can it?” Well there’s bound to be good sounding hard disk systems and not so good ones of course, but I’d wager that not far off every commercial CD release these days has lingered on the surface of a hard disk at some stage - whether for storage, editing, mixing, or mastering. Naim Label releases for instance, despite the majority being recorded direct to stereo analogue tape, are mastered on a hard disk based Sonic Solutions system. And those that aren’t originated on a Nagra, are recorded direct into a Mac running Pro Tools. If hard disk doesn’t work as a carrier of high fidelity music, we’ve been fooling ourselves for a decade at least (and at the same time perhaps abrogating any negative opinions we might hold of mp3).

So I wonder when was the last time the World played host to a system with an Apple front end and Naim amplifier? I’m listening to it now. The iPod, with a selection of tracks “ripped” from CD and encoded on an iBook, some compressed (around 7:1 in terms of files size) some not, is connected to the aux input of a Nait 5. I’d love to write that the

speakers are by Dyson, or Audi perhaps but unfortunately that would be a figment of my deranged imagination. The speakers are in fact a pair of



B&W DM303s. OK so this isn’t the ultimate high resolution, to-die-for hi-fi system, but firstly I’m not arguing the iPod is a high-end CD player and secondly the system is quite good enough to reveal the differences between compressed and uncompressed tracks. The compressed tracks have that characteristic squashed, slapdash, slightly hard and grainy mp3 presentation, the uncompressed tracks though sound pretty much as they should. They’re again a little hard tonally - there’s a similar tonal quality across both compressed and uncompressed versions - but in terms of dynamics, resolution,

noise floor, melody and rhythm, the pieces sound not just like music, but like the music I know well and love.

So where does this get us? So, hey, the iPod can make music? What’s the point? Well apart from it being perfect for the likes of me who could do with a convenient medium for storing miscellaneous chunks of music for personal listening and to play to colleagues and friends and musical collaborators, the point is also the one I was trying to make earlier. Whether we like it or not, the default transfer standard for music down there on the home planet is fast becoming mp3. And if the hi-fi industry don’t at least begin to engage with that reality in order, even, if you like, to draw attention to its weaknesses, hi-fi as we understand the term will become less and less relevant. We audiophiles don’t have exclusivity in caring about music and how it sounds. There’s thousands of talented musicians out there for instance using mp3 as daily currency and they care too. The iPod constitutes a point, both in its musical performance and its high-end audio like feel and construction, where worlds collide and, especially now the man from Apple has been to reclaim the review sample, I’m not sure life is complete without one. ➤

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# Let's Get Personal...

## an adventure in portable listening.

by *Martin Colloms*

Audio systems provide a variety of listening experiences. While your main station, fixed room set-up takes precedence on performance and cost, other solutions also deserve attention. In fact informal dabbling with sub hi-fi systems can prove disturbingly revealing of shortcomings in your main system.

Some portable radios, when receiving clean broadcast feed, still better live concert material, can sound musically more together, more rhythmic and more involving than many costly audio systems. Still more disconcerting is the leap in absolute sound quality that you can achieve when listening with headphones compared with most loudspeakers, and such 'cans' do not need to be that expensive either. How can £50 headphones sound more detailed, smoother, livelier and more revealing than £5,000 worth of box loudspeaker?

Most enthusiasts try not to think too deeply about this. Speakers have their own dominant role in sound reproduction and we wouldn't have it any other way. You have to wear headphones and you can't share your music in the same way with cans. Nonetheless the personal speaker systems represented by headphones can provide a magically immediate and intimate connection between wearer and music. So much so that relatively low-fi sources can sound surprisingly satisfying.

Headphones come in many forms, but the primary operating principles are velocity and pressure and this distinction relates to the way the

headphone transducer is designed and how the sound energy is coupled to the ear. Where isolation from the environment is important, then the coupling to the ear is well sealed and pressure coupling is predominant. This can be achieved with a sealing pad over the outer ear or pinna, under applied pressure from a headband, or in the case of a much smaller in-the-ear phone, by a resilient sealing element which couples directly to the ear canal.

For the velocity principle, pioneered by Sennheiser over 30 years ago, the established strictures of air pressure coupling were abandoned, with the transducer placed adjacent to the ear, spaced away a little, and softly coupled via an acoustically open foam pad. Sony later skilfully applied advanced rare earth magnet technology from Sumitomo to miniaturise their velocity designs and the resulting, pocketable, ultra-light headphone became a key component in the design of the worlds Walkman. Since then hundreds of millions of velocity phones have been made and are widely used for communications, personal audio and Hi-Fi.

Pressure coupled 'phones deliver a low noise floor, excellent detail and bass. However, they can also be sweaty, uncomfortable and leave you feeling disturbingly isolated from your surroundings. Conversely velocity operation allows for relatively normal hearing activity, which is good for safety, for hearing the phone ring or a car approach. They also tend to be more comfortable. Moreover

the basic response of the ear is not affected and more spacious, non-enclosed, speaker-like fidelity is possible, all of which helps explain their near dominance in the domestic market.

Headphones are convenient and useful but there is much more to be considered.

Certainly they can give personal, intimate, room sound and environmental noise excluding experiences. You hear a more direct sound, if somewhat unreal because the front directed image is now largely laid out through ones' head in the virtual space between the ears. Yet many listeners have adapted to headphone perception with experience and have no problem in accepting headphone listening as a musically valid medium.

Some kind of magic takes place with headphone listening. Despite the lack of sound pressure and vibration felt by the rest of the body that occurs naturally with loudspeaker reproduction, headphone reproduction transcends expectation, countering the disadvantages by providing a seemingly effortless, breathtaking degree of dynamics and detail. With good designs the frequency bandwidth can exceed the range of audibility, and all this generally from a single driver. Part of the explanation lies in a virtual absence of distortion since the driver elements barely move. As a reproducer, there are no crossover networks or multiple drivers; the sound is highly coherent, with excellent pulse integrity and timing behaviour. Indeed good headphone reproduction

▶ may approach the fidelity of a recording microphone.

Recently travelling to Geneva via Heathrow I needed to update my CD Walkman phones and by chance bought a pair of Sony 'ear-bud' models, the MDR EX 70 for about £35. When I plugged them in I was totally shocked and the experience led directly to this piece on personal stereo. Certainly I had experienced this quality level before: firstly with many hundreds pounds worth of Stax electrostatic headphone coupled to a hi-fi power amplifier; secondly with the US made, Etymotic Research pressure coupled in-ear phones designed for audio related and other professionals and priced at about \$300.

I could hardly believe the sheer quality which these tiny Sony cans were producing, nor the incredible bass. It is so deep and clean that you almost imagine full range loudspeaker sound. The mid is subtle and spacious, if a bit laid back, and the treble delicate and open sounding. Satisfying listening at really low sound levels is possible.

Good design seems to have largely solved the problems associated with a pressure coupled earphone of this type. Extremely small, just 9mm in diameter, and of almost negligible weight, 4 grams each (excluding the lightweight cord), this phone, like the Etymotic has a soft coupler which pressure seals directly into the first section of the ear canal. Sony has provided for anatomical differences by supplying three sizes of non-allergenic, washable silicone rubber seals that snap on reliably, and may easily be replaced. When you examine them closely it is hard to believe that this powerful, rich, full sound drives through a pinhole so tiny that you need a magnifying glass to see it clearly. That pinhole is a calculated integer in the overall design.

For the techies the MDR EX 70 ear bud can has a high energy neodymium

magnet, a 16 ohm CCAW motor [copper clad aluminium wire, low mass voice coil] a claimed 6Hz to 23kHz frequency response, [no amplitude limits] and a sensitivity of 100dB/mW.

In practice it is a little less sensitive than the usual good quality Walkman phone but is more than loud enough. At normal sound levels it was clearly low in distortion, substantially better than the head band velocity phones tried for comparison and while these rolled off below 30 to 40 Hz, this 'bud' can continued right down to 25Hz, and still lower if the level was turned up a bit. The upper limit was judged better than 18kHz; I could not verify the full spec with my hearing! The upper mid frequency region is a little laid back, if you like there is a sense of a degree of loudness filter contour. However the design did have the noted 3kHz corrective resonator, this identified as the small holes visible on the chrome exterior cover. Occlude these and the upper mid goes to pot, confirming their efficacy. While this design does seal to the ear canal, it remains partly open at the back to allow some environmental sound to come through. I consider this to be a good thing as it avoids that totally sealed off feeling.

There is a technical issue that needs to be addressed with these canal-coupled phones.


For loosely coupled and on the ear models a particular feature of the ear, namely a natural resonance of the ear canal at around 3kHz, is largely undisturbed. However if the canal is sealed and is reasonable matched or that resonance is shut down, and if uncorrected would lead to the perception of sound strongly lacking in upper mid range presence and attack.

Thus, to succeed the designer has to engineer an equivalent upper mid boost to correct the overall perceived frequency response, and only then will a natural tonal balance will be obtained. With such direct coupling

to the ear canal, only microscopic acoustic and electrical powers are required for healthy sound levels, and the very good environmental noise isolation means that quite low levels are satisfyingly detailed musically. With micro power operation there is no thermal compression in the motor part, and linearity can be exceptional.

When you listen you hear effortless clarity, totally unstressed. So great is the quality boost delivered that even a clip on pocket fm radio such as Sony's excellent SRF 50 becomes a highly credible hi fi music source. This combination may be operated for many tens of hours on a single AAA 1.5V power source. While many micro radios are of dubious fidelity this model remarkably survives connection to a hi-fi system and has superior sensitivity and station capture to other personal stereo radios that I have tried.

The performance gain possible with a really good headphone can be so great that with a careful, matching choice of music source, in my case a decent quality stereo micro radio or a selected CD Walkman, a perfectly valid personal Hi-Fi system may be put together.

It is a measure of technological advances that when first launched, a Walkman consumed enough power to flatten several AA cells in a few hours. Early CD devices were still worse. Now a personal FM radio will run 50 hours or more on a single AAA cell and while a CDP needs a bit more these still only use two cells and now provide total running times of up to 100 hours. Add in a really good pair of cans and the sonic advantages are sufficient to lift mid-fi, battery powered music sources right into Hi-Fi territory. In fact a top quality earphone, such as the ear bud model described, may provide sound of such low distortion, extended bass and clarity that your expectation of what is possible from reproduced audio may be in danger of permanent readjustment. 

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# Record Reviews














## How To Read Them

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

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

The reviewers are identified by their initials. They are:- Chris Binns, Pete Christie, Dave Davies, Roy Gregory, Jason Hector, James Michael Hughes, Jon Maple, Reuben Parry, Dave Ayers, Andrew Hobbs, Chris Thomas, Mark Childs, Simon Groome, Michael Mercer.

### Key to Icons

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

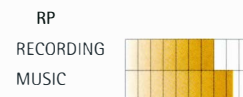


Maria Solheim

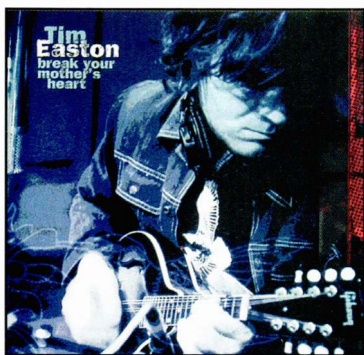
### Behind Closed Doors

KKV FXCD 253 

Compare the artwork for this album with that eye-catching, but unflattering shot of Thea Gilmore seen on the cover of *The Lipstick Conspiracies*. Thea's pose, and her brilliantly abrasive lyrics, suggest a life of hard knocks. Maria, pigtailed, cute and dressed in white lace, presents a quieter and more introverted image. Yet, this outward picture of blissful naivety remains only skin deep. There's a knowing glint in those eyes that hints at the exceptional contemporary pop musician who lies within. Solheim (like Gilmore) demonstrates a considerable degree of maturity beyond her tender years, especially where matters of the heart are concerned. Behind that fortifying curtain wall in 'Hiding Place' lies a palpable sense of uncertainty; insecurity and consuming anguish waiting to be resolved, whilst on an opening, 'Two Minutes and Ten Hours', the lesson is a simple, but sobering one: if your personal happiness is placed into another person's hands, prepare to be broken-hearted. The clever angle taken by Maria on this song is an examination of the woman's feelings two minutes and ten hours before the fateful moment when she learns that the relationship is over. Gilmore and Solheim may be quite different sides to the same ironic song writing coin, but I'm grateful for the intelligence, enthusiasm, wit and conviction that they bring to the table at a time when chart music is sadly lacking in all of these qualities.







## Tim Easton

### Break your Mother's Heart

New West NW6043 

Looking at the front cover of Tim Easton's new album you could be forgiven for thinking that it's Ryan Adams leaning into that mandolin. Easton bears an uncanny resemblance to the ex-Whiskeytown frontman and musically isn't a million miles from Adams and his previous band. Born in New York, Easton lived in Japan for three of his teenage years where he discovered the Beatles who remain his favourite band to this day. In the 90's he spent time working in London and Paris before relocating to Prague where he cut his first album. He busked regularly, which gave him the opportunity to brush up on his finger picking and flat picking guitar skills. *Break Your Mothers Heart* is the follow-up to his highly regarded debut album for New West *The Truth About Us* (NW6823) and features Easton on an array of instruments, brilliantly backed up by some of America's finest musicians. Veteran drummer Jim Keltner, ex Bonnie Raitt bassist Hutch Hutchinson and Jai Winding from Jackson Browne's band help Easton bring the best out of an inspired set of mostly self-penned songs. Easton's musical influences include John Prine, Joni Mitchell, Elvis Costello and Lucinda Williams and there are elements of all those artists in his work. You can also throw Jackson Browne and possibly the Grateful Dead into the mix as well. Quality folk rock for the 21st century.

AH

RECORDING   
MUSIC



## The Byrds

### The Columbia Singles '65-'67

Sundazed LP 5130 

Hugely influential to successive generations of country, folk and rock musicians, The Byrd's dateless song writing (along with those Lennon and McCartney melodies that have also helped to define an era) continues to woo new acolytes and intrigue existing fans through its unmistakable electric twelve-string guitar textures, soaring vocal harmonies and solid bass lines. Here Sundazed have emptied the vaults in this return to the mono single mixes on an inspired 32-track double album which not only revisits anthems like 'Eight Miles High', 'Mr. Tambourine Man' and 'Fifth Dimension', but pulls together B-sides, rarities and withdrawn singles as well. What price do you put on withdrawn singles like 'The Bells of Rhmney' and 'Chimes of Freedom', or 'The Times They Are A-Changing' that was recorded in the presence of George Harrison and Paul McCartney? A beautifully presented gatefold sleeve opens out to reveal a host of anecdotal notes from producer, Terry Melcher and a collage of original artwork. From here it should just be a short step to any one of the first four indispensable albums that have also been lovingly reissued by this label.

RP

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RECORDING   
MUSIC



## Ooberman

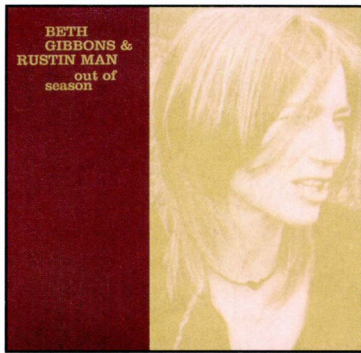
### Hey Petrunko

Rotodisc ROTOCD004 

Albums from Ooberman are few and far between. *Hey Petrunko* is the final release from a series of three, and is their second full length album. Eagerly awaited by fans, it has been four years in the making, documenting the ongoing change in the band's direction. 1999's *Magic Treehouse* album failed to deliver on the band's early promise, although it contained more than its fair share of hidden gems. Ooberman have the ability to write pure pop, of the acoustic guitar and harmony variety. They also have the ability to record songs of outstanding beauty and emotion. However, artificially forced together on a full length release, the two elements tend to jar. *Hey Petrunko* brings the two elements closer together and therefore achieves a much more developed sound. The band seem to be much more comfortable with what they have become and the sound is more confident. The perfect guitar pop of 'Bluebell morning' now complements the Russian violin of 'Snakedance'. And the bands use of cinematic string sections and signature changes have matured so as not to smother the delicate refrains. Still the album feels like a work in progress, a journey and not a destination. Ooberman are following a direction no one else is interested in: cripplingly unfashionable and almost embarrassingly naïve. But this is their strength, the songs are no less vital for this, the album no less excellent.

MC

RECORDING   
MUSIC



Beth Gibbons and Rustin' Man

Out of Season



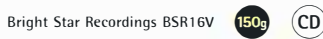
*Out of Season* is the first Solo LP from the Portishead front-woman and has garnered some amazingly rave reviews from other publications, Mojo going as far as to say "it's among the best albums ever made". A quick glance at the bottom of this review will tell you that I don't agree with that conclusion. This album marks a change of direction for Beth in many ways and is an opportunity for her to demonstrate her singing talents in a more varied way. This album only sounds like Portishead on one track, the rest of the time it is far less bleak and more acoustic. Beth does have an excellent voice and she tests its flexibility throughout the album, wielding it like a range of instruments. Each song reveals a different facet to her abilities and in many ways she is like an actor stepping into role. The music behind the voice is also varied. From simple small-scale accompaniment to orchestral big-band backing they further expand the range of the album. I don't think it is a truly great album because the range of emotion seems muted, lacking an up-lifting quality compared to the very best. Sinatra and Drake are cited as influences and are in evidence but it is a female fragility all its own that makes this album a very good buy. Just don't expect miracles.

JH



Jane Weaver

Like An Aspen Leaf



Bright Star Recordings BSR16V

Local Catholic girl, Jane Weaver is one of the better-kept secrets of the Manchester music scene and this, her debut seven-track mini-album, is a gently pitched showcase for those smooth alternative folk songs that she pens. While her early influences include Kate Bush and Echo & The Bunnymen, it's more the shadow-like presence of a Neil Young or, perhaps even the youthful Tracey Thorn, who lurks behind these dreamy and softly textured melodies. The title track, with its analogous idea of an aspen tree whose leaves are noted for their trembling in the breeze, encapsulates (in a fleeting moment) those pensive and intelligent qualities of a wordsmith who can marry the swaying rhythms within her music to a delicate and vulnerable image. The deliberately wobbly instrumentation, and Weaver's stretched vocal, compounds this sense of frailty, a theme that is repeated in later songs such as 'The heart that buckled you', 'Ridiculous' and 'Why don't you smile'. A brightly polished production would have been a mistake here. This recording and the mixes are simple, yet nicely framed presentations of acoustic guitar, cello, piano, drums and Jane's lightweight (but perfectly pitched) voice. To that end they reinforce the tender naivety of a musician I will be keeping an eye for the future.

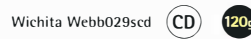
RP

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Yeah yeah yeahs

Master



Wichita Webb029scd

I try to avoid reviewing anything less than a mini album, because very few people tend to credit singles with the respect they deserve. But the Yeah yeah yeahs ep must surely be an exception. There's not much YYY material out there, so the five-track EP represents the largest body of their work generally available. And what an EP. The yeah yeah yeahs are possibly the most important band about at the moment. Not by size or popularity, but certainly by the amount of excitement they generate. And its easy to see why. Broadly speaking they are part of the same New York scene as The Strokes, but they've come much farther than that. Karen O fronts the band with the kind of unstable genius that you might associate with Blondie or The Cure. Howling and snapping lyrics with such self confidence you can almost feel her writhing and jerking. This is art house punk at its very best. Dirty, fuzzed up and distorted to perfection. The yeah yeah yeahs are spearheading a movement, pushing music forward and leaving their old contemporaries behind. Uncompromising and original, spiky unpolished punk, the Yeah yeah yeahs ep could be the foundation of many great things to come.

MC





## Raveonettes

### Whip it on

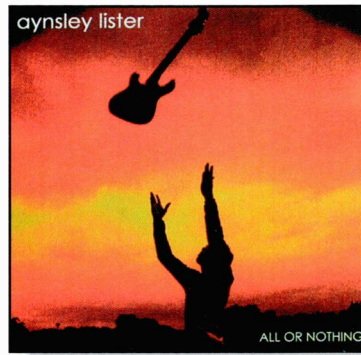
Crunchy Frog Tunes 510753 9 

So New York has it. All the most excellent bands of the moment seem to have some links to the Big Apple. The Raveonettes are no exception; Danish by nationality, but New Yorkers by choice, Sune and Sharin make a seriously distinctive noise. Whip it on is a mini album of eight scorching tracks. The sleeve declares the album is "recorded in glorious Bb minor" and they don't lie. It also declares "explosive stereo (mono compatible)" which is more dubious. But the sense of drama conveyed in the sleeve notes is justified by the gripping musical content.

The Raveonettes have possibly the most recognizable sound ever, with double buzz-saw guitars and double male/female vocals in close harmony. They sit alongside the current New York neo-punk sound, acknowledging it whilst remaining utterly distinct from it. The sound is both their salvation and their curse. On first listening the album is almost depressingly same-y. But, once you have become more acclimatized to their sound, the subtleties become apparent. Like the soundtrack to a fifties black and white thriller *Whip it on* will fill you with tension and keep you on the edge of your seat. For music to achieve this is rare, and superb. Compelling stuff.

MC

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



## Aynsley Lister

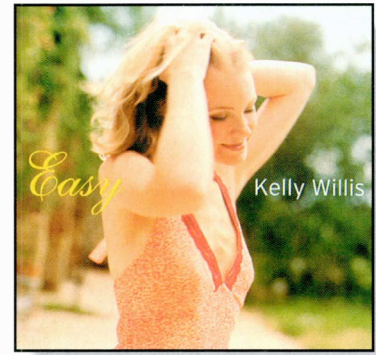
### All or Nothing

RUF Records RUF 1082 

Aynsley's been away from the recording studio for 3 years now. The last full band effort (excluding his solo live acoustic album *Supave n' Pilchards*) was the fabulous *Everything I need* was a mixture of rock, blues shuffles, slow blues and ballads, but the title track did hint at a move towards a heavier sound. *All or Nothing* is that heavier recording – a big, growling beast full of potent rock n' roll. As soon as Alex Thomas' drums come crashing in on opener 'Say Goodbye' and Aynsley cuts in with some wicked slide you know the great man's in no mood to hang about. He keeps his foot firmly to the floor on 'Hero'; grinding out a huge, filthy riff and laying down some quite breath-taking solo's. 'Nothing at all' shows Lister's commercial edge whilst 'What U Got 4 Me' gets deep down and funky. 'Rainy Day' has a really wild slash n' burn groove and clears the way nicely for 'Balls of Steel', an AC/DC style rocker with a full-blooded catchy riff that'll spin round your head for weeks! I haven't got enough room to wax lyrical about the other tracks on *All Or Nothing*, so I'll just wrap up saying Aynsley Lister is the best damn guitar player this country has produced for many, many years. Utter rock n' roll heaven.

AH

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



## Kelly Willis

### Easy

Rykodisc RCD 10622 

Kelly Willis is a sensuous sounding vocalist who has turned heads for a couple of years now. The latest makeover: blonde good looks, a plunging neckline and an album title that manoeuvres us toward an obvious sexual connotation, does in many ways distract from a pretty voice that roams across the usual romantic themes unrequited or otherwise. In a way this brand of cosmetic country is a bit like painting by numbers and it must rankle with the many fine performers who are consistently overlooked. Some credibility is gained through the inclusion of figures like Vince Gill and Alison Krause for supporting vocal roles but Willis needs to urgently develop her own writing talent to encompass more biting subject matter, material that steps beyond those fanciful entanglements of the heart on the six self-penned songs here. Krause, who has herself undergone a similar image transformation, always has enough song writing substance, musicianship and old fashioned nous in reserve so no one would dream of criticising her in this way. The recording that was mixed by Gary Paczosa is warm and detailed. It favours Willis, which is very much as you would expect from such a carefully presented album, one that even finds Doug Sax in the mastering suite.


RP

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



## Thea Gilmore

### Songs From The Gutter

Flying Sparks Records TDBCD 066 

Superlatives, especially from the independent press, have rightly been heaped upon the young shoulders of singer/songwriter Thea Gilmore. In the past eighteen months profile raising appearances on Jools Holland, Radio 4 and at the Glastonbury Festival have brought her inimitable and sometimes caustic brand of social observation to an audience much wider than the few hundred loyal fans who have regularly packed themselves into tiny venues like Manchester's Life Café. Success is no more than she deserves and it seems as though this rare lyrical talent which has been so carefully nurtured by her patient and long suffering manager, Sara Austin, is now on the threshold of something bigger. Even *Uncut* magazine has recognised these attributes and commissioned two cover versions for their Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen tribute CDs.

Moreover, we are indebted to them, indirectly, for this the latest (and Thea's fourth) album release. The story goes something like this. Last year while she was recording 'I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine' for the Dylan CD at Revolution in Cheadle Hulme, Thea made one of those fateful calls to Sara's mobile, saying that she needed to spend a little more time in the studio. She was vague enough to leave an impression that there were some problems with the Dylan track. Ah...as they say, the truth is a beautiful thing...it was just a few days later and another nine tracks, but by then *Songs From The Gutter* (with a little help from Nigel Stonier, Robbie McIntosh and Paul Beavis) was conceived. Between here and mastering at Abbey Road this unplanned pregnancy became twins. Yes, this album's a double and the second CD is a generous eleven-track collection of rare or unreleased material from as far back as 1996. As well as taking music from her almost anonymous single releases, there are songs like 'Hydrogen' (1996) and 'Red Farm' (1997) that I hadn't heard before. These are finely crafted songs, which together with the repressing of *Burning Dorothy* are a welcome addition to the growing number of available Gilmore recordings.

That's enough of the anecdotal tales, what about the latest material?

Firstly, the title itself cannot be ignored. Metaphorically it neatly pulls together those half-forgotten older songs which have been dramatically rescued from the culvert's edge, while at the same time suggesting that her newly penned ones will continue to gnaw at troubled relationships and champion the socially disadvantaged with a real vengeance. There is definitely some compositional gristle thrown into this mix with the darker and more densely textured arrangements for electric guitar and drums dominating tracks like 'Down To Nowhere' and 'When Did You Get So Safe?'. Then there's that savage delivery of 'Lip Reading', a song which scratches away at the surface, working its nails through the skin until we feel all the bitterness and bad blood channelled from a woman on the rebound. These songs have an attritional and coarsely grained quality, which wears away at you, sapping any will to resist their message.

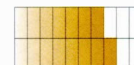
Thematically, well it's classic Thea Gilmore, but I still missed the lovely and softly spoken vocal counterpoint that she often employs when picking at open wounds of this kind. The recording too reinforces these sentiments with an appropriately steely, rough-hewed and sinuous sound.

Elsewhere, when she turns away from these acerbic rock gestures, we are treated to that melodic acoustic folk blues which goes down so well at live gigs. In, 'And We'll Dance' and 'Water To Sky', Thea is persuasive in an almost imperceptible way. One of her greatest gifts is that sculptress' eye for the gently curving lyric, one that rhythmically beguiles you with its' sheer beauty and candour, holding off, but eventually coming back at you with a clear insight into the painful certainties of love, loss, rejection or stigma. Here her softer vocal line expresses immeasurable vulnerability. *Songs From The Gutter* is another bold restatement of all those observations, only here it musically throws down the gauntlet in a much broader challenge than before.

RP

[www.theagilmore.com](http://www.theagilmore.com)

RECORDING  
MUSIC







Joan Baez

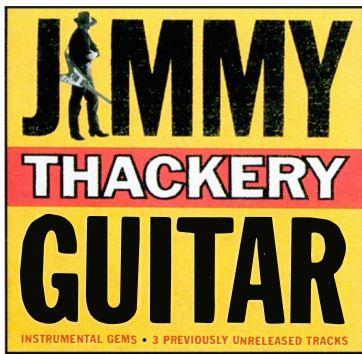
Diamonds & Rust

Universal 393 233-1 **180g** **6**

*Diamonds & Rust* is a mainstream album that has grown in stature since its first release in 1975. Along the way it has become a firm audiophile favourite through the Mobile Fidelity and Nautilus Super Disc half speed mastered reissues. The superiority of those records and that of the latest Universal 180g LP over an original A&M pressing is noticeable from the very moment your cartridge tracks out of the lead in groove and into the opening bars of a title song which is widely regarded to be one of the strongest Joan Baez compositions. But to my mind the sound quality is the least important of the finely tuned assets on display. Ahead of it I would place the fantastic musicianship of Joe Sample, Hampton Hawes, Larry Carlton, David Paich, Wilton Felder, Reinie Press, Jim Gordon and the lovely and quite distinctive sweeping soprano voice and acoustic guitar work of Joan Baez. When this is allied to the exquisitely framed song writing of a Jackson Browne 'Fountain Of Sorrow', Bob Dylan 'Simple Twist Of Fate', Richard Betts 'Blue Sky', John Prine 'Hello In There' and to Janis Ian's 'Jesse' you have an enduring classic on the platter. Indispensable.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603



Jimmy Thackery

Guitar

Blind Pig BPCD5083 **CD**

It's been three albums in a year for Jimmy Thackery. First up was *We got it*, a new studio album on Telarc and a real return to form after the disappointing *Sinner Street*. Next was *Whisky Store* (also on Telarc), another excellent release which saw him link up with the mercurial southern guitarist Tab Benoit. Now he unleashes *Guitar*, his first album dedicated solely to instrumentals and culled from his six Blind Pig recordings. *Guitar* showcases Jimmy's extraordinary skills to the full and covers a wide variety of styles, from the jazzy jive of 'Jump For Jerry' to the smoky night club blues of 'Blues 'fore dawn' and the rockin' shuffle of 'Jimmy's Detroit Boogie'. There's a version of the shadows' 'Apache' (remaining faithful to the original), an eight minute masterpiece called 'Roy's Bluz' (a tribute to the late Roy Buchanan where Thackery manages to sound uncannily like the great man himself) and a wild romp through Stevie Ray's 'Rude Mood', retitled 'Jimmy's rude Mood' and recorded live in front of a wildly enthusiastic crowd in Michigan, USA. 'Jimmy's Rude Mood' is one of 4 tracks recorded especially for this release, so even if you have all of Thackery's back catalogue you still need this one because the bonus songs are equally as good as the rest of *Guitar*. I usually get bored to tears with instrumental albums but this one's a peach and comes highly recommended.

AH



Gillian Welch

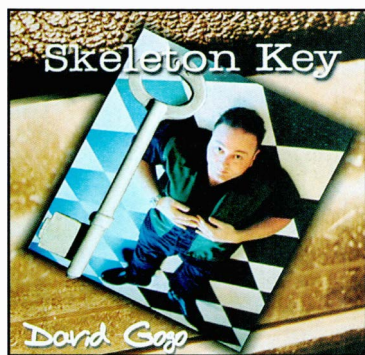
Revival

Acony Records ACNY-0101 **CD**

The title, its monochrome artwork, that photo of Gillian Welch with those rouged lips and sporting a Forties style dress more than suggest this is an album which has the traditional country blues genre in its blood. And, sure enough, ten songs penned by Welch and guitarist David Rawlings are from the outset tapping into subject matter that lies at its core: rural poverty, family and spiritual strength are their targets. An opening 'Orphan Girl', the track 'Annabelle' which quickly follows and later in 'By The Mark' all thematically reinforce these principles with their emphasis on faith and kinship set against a back cloth of share cropping communities in the deep South. The musical debt to the country blues of the past is further repaid by employing open and pared back acoustic arrangements for guitar and voice. Her writing is as exquisitely poetic as ever and lines like, "Oh the night came undone like a party dress and fell at her feet in a beautiful mess" (*Bar-room Girls*) colourfully extracts meaning when set against this honest acoustic instrumentation. We are also reminded that music is an organic living thing as the focus shifts gear to dwell on the pleasures of "...an old V-8 from the year I was born" (*Pass You By*) then the introduction of an upright bass and electric guitars instrumentally keeps pace with this newer theme.

RP





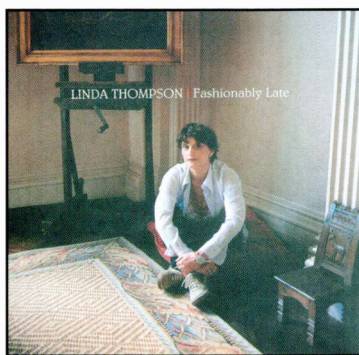
David Gogo

## Skeleton Key

Cordova Bay Records CBR026 



David Gogo might not be a household name in the UK, but that's not the case in his native Canada where he's just won the prestigious Maple Leaf award, the country's equivalent to America's W.C Handy's. Gogo was given his first guitar at the age of five and became totally obsessed with the instrument, practising relentlessly. At high school he shared the same music teacher as Diana Krall and by the age of 16 was well on the way to becoming a pro musician. *Skeleton Key* is his fifth release and shows him flexing his muscles on a diverse set of originals and hand picked cover versions. Opener '(Just Ask) Jesse James' is a powerhouse blues rocker which really sets the mood, and that's hotly followed by the first cover, Albert Collins' 'Backstroke'. Gogo stays pretty close to the original, scarily reproducing Albert's tone and texture. The title track is a lovely mid-paced soul rocker showcasing Gogo's strong, earthy vocals, which are again to the fore on the slow burnin' blues number 'Reap What You Sow'. Gogo gives us a sterling cover of Stevie Wonder's 'Signed, Sealed, Delivered' and then surprisingly covers Depeche Mode's 'Personal Jesus': not what you would expect to find on a blues/rock album but it works well nonetheless. David Gogo isn't afraid to go to the outer extremities of blues/rock. He's a great singer and exceptional guitarist who's well worth checking out.

AH

RECORDING  
MUSIC

Linda Thompson

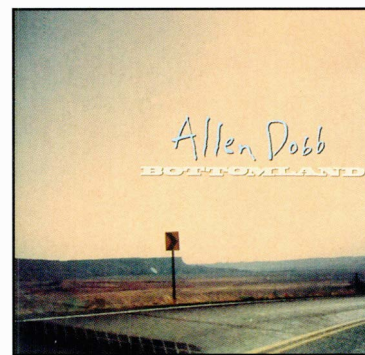
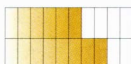
## Fashionably Late

Rounder Records dbk 103  

After nearly twenty years in a recording wilderness Linda Thompson has returned with an exceptional folk rock album of ten sensitive and romantically tinted songs whose simple lilting cadences are graced by outstanding musicianship of a kind that reawakens memories of those halcyon days back in the Seventies. It's wonderfully acoustic, with just a touch of electric guitar (Richard Thompson) for an opening 'Dear Mary' and Mike Rivard's electric bass on 'All I See'. Martin Carthy and Dave Pegg's old acoustic chords are featured as are Kathryn Tickle (pipes), Eliza Carthy (fiddle), Van Dyke Parks (accordion) and the lovely Kate Rusby harmonies. Strength in depth then but who can resist those beautiful, delicately framed and occasionally double-tracked Linda Thompson vocals that caress these mainly self-penned melodies to a finely wrought conclusion. The cradle-rocking tempo, together with the relaxed and intuitive evolution of this music creates a beguiling atmosphere in the typically English (typically understated) way. Linda proves that despite an odd wrinkle or two she has lost none of that poise, timing and control which makes tracks like 'Weary Life', 'Nine Stone Rig' and 'Paint Et Powder Beauty' evocative and enduring.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603

RECORDING  
MUSIC

Allen Dobb

## Bottomland

Skipping Stone Music SSM10072 

The opening track and title song of Allen Dobb's new album begins with a strummed mandolin and you half expect him to break into a cover of Steve Earle's 'Copperhead Road'. He doesn't of course, but that gives you an idea of the kind of territory he presides in. Dobb grew up in rural Alberta, Canada and then moved to South Africa for a few years to study agriculture. When he returned he started honing his songwriting skills, performing not just in Canada but in important roots hotbeds like Austin, Texas and Nashville. Dobb's an expressive songwriter who uses the storytelling style favoured by the likes of Springsteen and Earle. His voice doesn't have the southern drawl of Earle but it does have a charming lived in, dusky quality and it lends itself perfectly to songs such as the gorgeous 'Like an angel', the lyrics telling of a steamy encounter with a beautiful Mexican girl ("its hot down here in the state of Sonora/ I am melting like snowflakes on your tongue"). The playing throughout the 10 songs is first rate. Dobb has assembled a crack band featuring the cream of Canada's musicians and they all deliver the goods, although special mention must go to guitarist and pedal steel player Luke Doucet, whose contribution is exemplary. *Bottomland* heralds the arrival of an important new talent. The future of roots music never looked healthier.

AH

RECORDING  
MUSIC

# Sonic Satori



by Michael Mercer

## Various

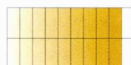
### TWO A.D

#### A Waveform Compilation

I find it best to do my most critical listening late at night (or early morning for that matter). The earth is dead quiet and the suburban noise floor has dropped into nothingness. The night provides the most conducive environment for true listening. I also enjoy the lack of daily distractions during these waning hours. No cell phones, fax machines, or land line ring tones. It is just my playback system, the room, and the media of my choice. This brings me to the magnificent ambient dub compilation TWO A.D., which was released on Waveform sometime in the early 90's. This album is worthy of the term. Too many artists these days are releasing records that, if you're lucky, contain two listenable tracks and the rest are strictly filler, fulfilling their contractual obligation to the record label of course. This album however is brilliantly sequenced, and the story which results is pure sonic science fiction. The Starseeds open up the journey with the dreamy-drum loop infused 'Behind the Sun'. A didgeridoo blares through wispy vocals and wildly panned synth pads. The sexy vocal sets the pace for the evening. Coldcut's 'Autumn Leaves' just leaves you breathless. Ethereal string arrangements and airy chimes fill the soundstage like flowing water. The vocal from this record was sampled on Way out West's 'The Fall', which was a tremendous club hit in the progressive arena. 'Late Night' is appropriately titled. I can't imagine listening to this cut before 2am. Sweeping melodies

and drum hits surround this eerily pleasant static-like breeze. I hope the mastering engineer has had a busy schedule since this release. He or she has a golden ear for certain. I remember listening to this on one of Harry Pearson's super reference systems in Sea Cliff. The presence, air and space in this compact disc is staggering. 44.1k doesn't get much better than this to these ears. The realness of the electronic textures is sublimely articulated. It's almost as if these were true acoustic instruments creating this noise! Seek out this compilation if you're into ambient, space, whatever it is that they are calling it these days. It's a great joyride - and a mental surge suppressor.

SONICS  
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### Asad Rizvi

#### Silverlining Exposures

Ok, yet another house music release being reviewed in the pages of this months Sonic column. So sue me. There is reasoning behind my choice to tackle yet another sublimely mixed and produced house music compilation. There seems to be what some people are calling a musical renaissance happening within this glorious subculture. Some call it "Electronica" (please, they needed a term to appeal to the lowest common denominator - the MTV generation). True appreciators and artisans within the actual dance music community know there is still great music being played,



written, recorded, and produced. The mainstream media only catches a glimpse of what true dance music has to offer to people. Despite the exploitation of the associated drug use, and other political bashing, the community has taken the massive criticism in its stride. Like they say; the music lives on. Anyway, enough of my seemingly endless drivel. Asad Rizvi is well known as a fine collector of music, producer, label head, and even a great live DJ. His latest CD; *Silverlining Exposures* is a complete looking glass into all his mighty talents. The mixing is fluid and progressive. He adds his own musical touch to Cutlab's 'Loudkissing' providing a remix that will rock any dance floor or large scale audio playback system. This album plays out as a late night venture to your favorite underground



nightspot (oh, did I use an overly saturated term there, my apologies). Be warned, this is not the average 50hz bottom end, this is the real thing, 40hz and below! Its clubland brought to your home via compact disc (or you can actually buy the sampler of the CD on Vinyl, which is of equal musical quality). The sonic merit of the CD is surprising. The tonal balance was certainly one of his concerns, and he nailed it according to my reference system. The sound is detailed, but not edgy. The bottom may be heavy, but not mucky or distracting. The synths are beautifully textured and reproduced with such accuracy it's like having a Kurzweil 2500x in your listening room! This album is great for driving, or dancing around the house/apartment with your loved one. Go out and support Asad, buy a bottle of nice red wine, and let all the stress go. This is one for my permanent collection. Bravo. Bravo.

SONICS



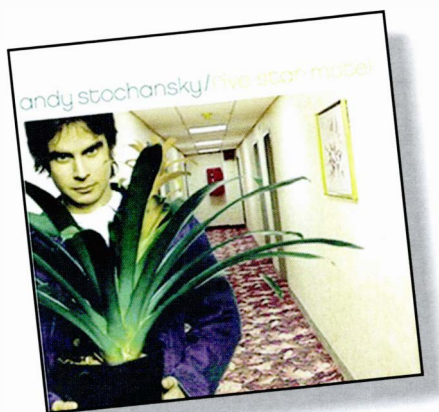
MUSIC

## Andy Stochansky

### Five Star Motel

I must confess my bias towards anybody who has been involved in the evolution of Ani DiFranco's musical career. I believe she is simply brilliant.

A great poet, an extremely magnetic live performer, and a tight musician (yes, and she runs her own label, which, to this reviewer, is a pleasurable middle-finger-in-the-air to money sucking big label land). Now, Ani has stated time and time again that she is only as good as the musicians she surrounds herself with. Enter Andy Stochansky, her former drummer (maybe he still works with her; I plead ignorance to their current working relationship). Stochansky has released his first full-length album, entitled *Five Star Motel*, an appropriate title as this is surely a five star record. The writing exudes vulnerability, and is purely emotional. '22 Steps' is a heartfelt story of a man facing his own fear of facing a woman who has caught his fascination. The man has literally counted the steps from the street to



the woman's door, but has not been able to reach that door and speak to her. Lyrics like "If I were him, I'd know your birthday" reveal with great potency Stochansky's inner conflicts with love, fear, and resentment, the very things we all face every minute. 'Stutter' has the hook, and boy is it a wonderful one. Poppy, but honest and thoughtful, the chorus speaks about obliviousness, how someone (obviously another pined-after woman) simply cannot see how "blissful" it could be if they were to come together. This record is what rock-n-roll, pop, all the endless genres of music, is all about; Pure expression and self-truthfulness. Tracks are not overproduced (or should we say over-Pro Tooled). It's a real pleasure to sit down and bask in a rock record that is sparsely, yet tastefully put together. I mean, how many times can we take the same power cords, followed by the same ol' drum patterns? Radio has become the enemy. Doesn't it all sound the same? The musical nuances in this record are free to roam around the soundstage, and free is what this record seems to be about (his new found freedom as an artist in his own right). Audibly it is sparse in the lower octaves, which tends to drain the intensity a bit, but it's tolerable. As for the guitar production, it's rock/pop without a robot at the console. There are faults, but they work to enhance the music, not subtract from it. Sonic properties aside, this record pleases on all fronts.

SONICS



MUSIC

## Swayzak

### Snowboarding In Argentina

Minimal tech house, sounds like a skeletal description or a blue print for an architect. I call it good music. Continuing to label, dissect, and classify new music only detracts from the actual message of the medium itself. The electronic music community has inundated itself with endless genre specifications and divides. I can only share what I deem to be good music (or bad for that matter). If you want to discover the section in which to find this album you'll have to ask for help at the local music store (and please, support your local retailers). It's Swayzak's *Snowboarding in Argentina*, and that's exactly the virtual journey it provides. This record has this reviewer searching for new adjectives to describe intense fluidity, an endless quality that is liquid in music. It's rare that an artist can maintain their vision throughout an entire album but Swayzak has done so masterfully here. The introduction via 'Speedboat' opens up like a hot air balloon. It's swooshing (a word, no?) synths and slowly escalating drum pattern is infectious. This is followed by the airy clicks and stabs of 'Burma Heights': What a way to begin. Drivv tracks like 'Low-rez Skyline' and 'Fukamachi' continue the transisting, and finally, you're left with 'Bueno', an appropriate title for a closing indeed. This track seals the package with a funky, simple bassline and smoothly escalating synth cords. Again; seamless progression, my definition of what an album should be.

Well, the sonics now: Stupendously transparent and textural. The frequencies at both the high and low end of the spectrum are represented beautifully. The stereo imaging is particularly engaging. The transient attack is sharp and fast. Sparsely produced it seems, and that was right choice. Snowboarding was executed with absolute precision. I've been told by many greats that music is in fact a visual experience. This effort by Swayzak proved that theory to me. This record actually made my short stay in Worcester Massachusetts tolerable (I was there for some Eastern AcousticWorks training). Please, do your mind a favor, find this album, wait til Friday night's early morning hours, and throw this at your home audio gear. It will give you what you've been looking for.

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Various Artists

Verve Remixed

Universal/Verve 589 606-1  

Verve follow the Blue Note lead and open the vaults to the rapine hordes. The results have to rate as one of the most mind bendingly stimulating experiences short of chemicals – and all strictly legal too – copyright and everything! Not so much *When Harry Met Sally*, more *When Willie Bobo Met Richard Dorfmeister*, if you ever wondered what those deliciously seductive Astrud Gilberto vocals would sound like accompanied by a really seriously dirty soundtrack then now's your chance to find out. Featuring the work of mix-meisters as diverse as Thievery Corporation, Tricky and De-Phazz (what the latter does with Ella's 'Wait 'till You See Him' has to be heard to be believed) and the cream of the divas in Verve's back catalogue, the mix of inventiveness and quality raw material proves explosive. With less than an hour of music spread over six 180g sides there's plenty of room for impressive deep bass dynamics, but don't get confused. Modern it may be but this is definitely jazz. Progressive development of melody and theme, those great vocals, all underpinned by throbbing, complex, living bass shapes: buy, play loud, enjoy – and shame your children's lack of adventure along the way! Great music, well served by great sonics makes this a must own record (and I do mean 'record').

RG



Sarah Vaughan

You're Mine You

Classic Records / Roulette SR 52082 

Recorded in 1962, and accompanied by lush orchestral arrangements by Quincy Jones this is perfect Sunday Morning fodder. Vaughan as ever is in lovely voice, full of expression drawing you in and soothing your soul from the very first notes of the eponymous opener. Add in a slinky 'The Best Is Yet To Come', a sultry 'Witchcraft', a sensuous 'Baubles, Bangles And Beads' and you get the idea. Despite the closing 'On Green Dolphin Street' this set 'aint jazz. It is however very superior pop consummately performed and very nicely produced with her voice full-bodied and centre stage and plenty of weighty punch from the brass (on an excellent Quiex SV pressing from Classic), evoking the '60's New York I always associate with favourite Jack Lemmon movies like *The Apartment* and *The Odd Couple*. No bad thing that! Whilst far from her amongst her greatest (that honour, for me, is shared equally between *Sarah Vaughan With Clifford Brown* and *How Long Has This Been Going On* both of which are straight jazz sets, the second of which I've also covered here), this is a nice contrast and is another great showcase for one of the 20th Century's finest voices.



DD

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Sarah Vaughan

How Long Has This Been Going On?

Pablo Deluxe 2310 821  

This album is something of a stranger to the second hand racks (I should know judging by the many hours I spend browsing them), but with good reason. It's one of Vaughan's (and Pablo's) very best recordings and well worth searching out. Supported by a stellar band featuring Oscar Peterson, Joe Pass, Louie Bellson and Ray Brown, she's in particularly fine voice throughout. Closely recorded, Vaughan's every vocal nuance is captured in this relaxed session where she and the band breeze through ten standards. The title track features some outstanding work from Peterson, the band romp through 'I've Got The World On A String' and bring the best from the slower more sensuous numbers like 'You're Blase' and 'Midnight Sun'. All involved are on top form and their enjoyment is palpable. This really is a faultless set. The only drawback is that 'the cover shot does bear an unfortunate resemblance to James Brown in his more 'bouffant' mode, but I won't hold that against her. This is an essential album that any serious jazz collection is incomplete without and is worth getting hold of in any format you can lay your hands on.

DD





## Coleman Hawkins

### Night Hawk

Acoustic Sounds / Prestige 2016 **180g**

Recorded in 1960 this is a good-natured quintet session with Hawkins trading tenor phrases with Eddie 'Lockjaw' Davis. The album title tune was dreamed up on the spot by Hawkins during the recording session, typically forgetting the next day that he'd done so, but it makes a great opener. Trading laid back blues drenched phrases, the immediate thing that grabs you is that Hawk and Davis are not about competing to outdo each other in a battle of the tenors, but are joining in a warm and leisurely conversation with Davis' smoother tone offset beautifully with Hawk's weightier style. A fine piano solo from Flanagan on this track too. The second number 'There Is No Greater Love' is much faster paced, with the two trading some great licks and again the empathy between them brings the best from the number. And so it goes through three more standards, including Ellington's 'In A Mellow Tone' completing the set. It's impossible to pick a favourite from the set, the band are clearly having a great time and it shows. The recording is good and full-bodied and the Acoustic Sounds pressing exemplary. Whilst not ground breaking this is a very fine set indeed and one I suspect I'll be returning to regularly.

Recommended.

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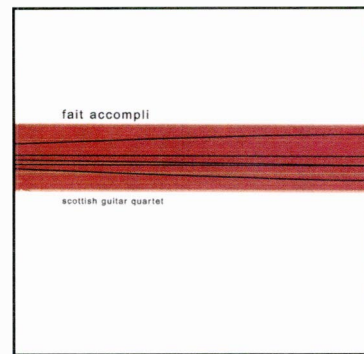
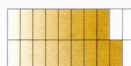
## Coleman Hawkins and his Confreses

Speakers Corner/Verve MG-VS 6110 **180g**

When the "Confreses" in question include the Oscar Peterson Trio, Roy Eldridge and Ben Webster then there's the promise of something special in the offing, and this record doesn't disappoint. Perfectly flat and silent surfaces (a feature of recent Speakers Corner releases after a sticky patch a couple of years back) merely serve to underpin the superb playing on offer. From the deceptively simple opening track with its repeated motif and understated development, things pick up through 'Sunday' and a superb 'Hanid', yet despite the stars on show there's a refreshing lack of competitive strutting, Webster and Hawkins in particular only to happy to work in conjunction, leaving space for others and each other. The rhythm section is just as good as you'd expect, with some particularly fine stick work to savour, while Oscar is happy to drive the groove rather than hogging the limelight. The result is subtle, thoughtful jazz, played with intelligence and dexterity by musicians whose respect for the music and each other runs deep indeed. It's a beautifully balanced set that allows everyone a chance to shine and shine they do. There's an appealing grace and gentleness to the slower numbers, zipp and poise when things move up-tempo. I can see this becoming a firm, firm favourite.

RG

RECORDING  
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## Scottish Guitar Quartet

### Fait Accompli

Circular Records CR 1001 **CD**

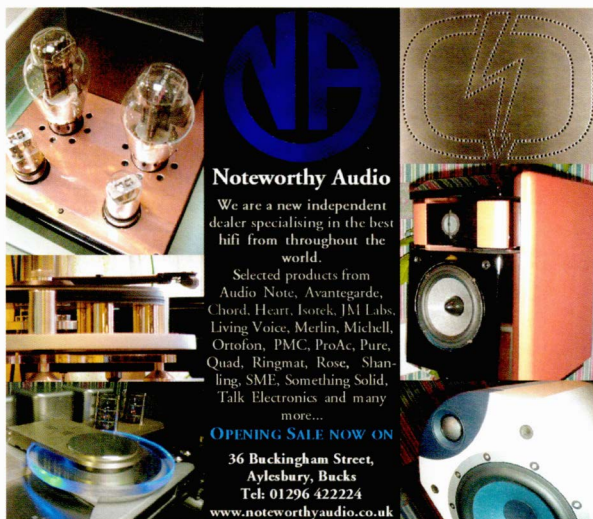
Having enjoyed their 2001 debut recording *Near The Circle* (Caber Music 023), I was pleased to see this their second release which is, to quote the sleeve notes 'the distillation of many miles of composition, rehearsal, travelling and performance'. This tells since this is an even more accomplished and wide-ranging set than their first release. Opening with the title track, composed and led here by Malcolm MacFarlane, it's a gentle, rolling introduction to their style as they trade the tune between the members of the band. 'Dance of the Gypsy King' is a flamenco influenced piece that really highlights the virtuosity of this ensemble which features solos from four of the players, trading licks but not competing for attention, each taking the tune a stage forward. On gentler numbers like 'The Romance Within You' the group achieve an almost orchestral feel as their picking gently both carries and extemporises around the melody. More abstract, offbeat numbers like 'Sidewardly Mobile' are carried off with equal aplomb. All the tracks here are strong, and well programmed for forty minutes of un-flashy, melodic enjoyment. The recording, as in the first release is good with the players set in an arc between the speakers and very much 'in the room'.

DD

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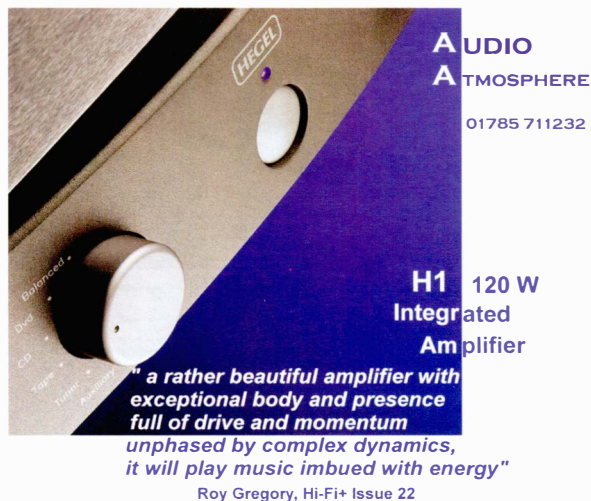
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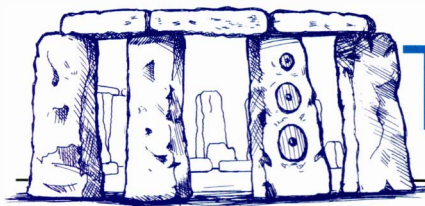
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# The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

**Richard Strauss in High Fidelity**  
**Salomé, Dance of the Seven Veils; Also Sprach**  
**Zarathustra.**  
 Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by Fritz Reiner.  
 RCA LM 1806  
 Recorded March 6th and 8th, 1954. Recording first  
 published, 1954.

What an amazing coincidence that EMI and Decca - in England - and RCA Victor - in America - were all making their first stereophonic recordings at the end of the first quarter of 1954. In one of the first sessions in Chicago's Orchestra Hall, the RCA Victor engineers and Fritz Reiner conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, would produce one of the

finest performances of Richard Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra* ever committed to tape. Collectors and music lovers covet this highly regarded (and justifiably so) stereo recording, LSC 1806. While I consider this early Living Stereo release to be in the highest echelon of well engineered, minimally



miked, natural sounding records ever released, I also consider its cousin to be in the top rank of monophonic recordings. 'High Fidelity' recordings were coming into their own in the early 1950's in America and RCA Victor jumped on this bandwagon with their 'New Orthophonic' technology. Simply put, these recordings were made with equipment that provided a uniform frequency response from approximately 30 to 18000 hertz with unprecedented dynamic range. One of the major reasons for this is these early recordings were recorded at 30ips. There is no doubt the bass impact on this monophonic recording is superior to its stereo counterpart. An additional bonus with this release - not available on the stereo release until years later as Victrola 1424 - is a stunning *Salomé: Dance of the Seven Veils*. This record captures the essence of a superlative orchestra, led by one of the great conductors of the last century, all in their prime. The monophonic issue

commands under \$20 on the collectors market and is a must for all lovers of these works. Highest recommendation.

**Johann Sebastian Bach**  
**Sonatas and Partitas for Unaccompanied Violin,**  
**BWV 1001-1006**  
**Emil Telmányi**  
**Decca LXT 2951/3 [Telefunken Decca AWD 8901-E,**  
**10", contains Partita No. 2] Recording first published**  
**August, 1954.**

Let me first say that I am a died-in-the-wool Johanna Martzy fan. She portrays to me, the essence of Bach's meaning in these works. Having said that, a grand argument can be made for the innovative style and sound of Emil Telmányi. Telmányi, the son-in-law of Danish composer Carl Nielsen, was born in Hungary in 1892. He had an active career as a concert player and settled in Denmark in 1940 where he taught at the Conservatory of Aarhus.

The performances on these records are unique. Telmányi was involved with inventing a bow that combined, in his opinion, the virtues of an earlier bow - used during the time Bach wrote these pieces - and today's modern bow: The Vega Bach Bow.

The bow is curved, as in the baroque style, and allows the soloist, while playing, to adjust the tension of the hairs "so that they can be either fixed at full tension or controlled by thumb pressure, according to the requirements of musical expression." This bowing style offers a lushness to the sound that also allows the artist to create a chord structure unavailable in any other performance of these works. The sound quality, especially in the *chaconne* portion of *Partita No. 2*, is very different. There is a sonority and tonal richness here I have never heard offered by any other soloist. While my favorite performances lie with another soloist, these are very





► well worth seeking for those aficionados looking for something different. Telmanyi is able to bathe the listener in some of the richest sounding Bach ever created. An aural treat.

### Rachmaninov

**Sonata in G minor for Violoncello and Piano, Opus 19.**

Zara Nelsova, violoncello; Artur Balsam, piano.

Decca Records, LXT 5228

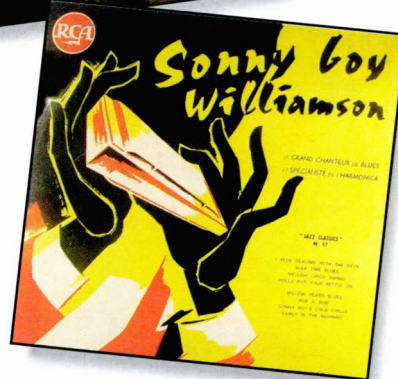
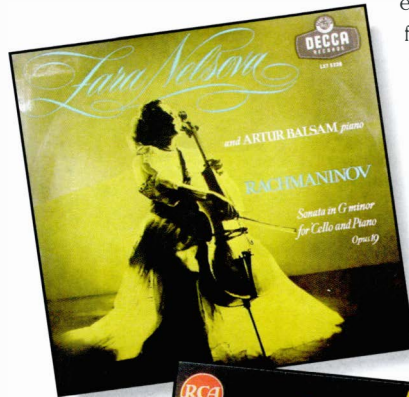
Monophonic only, recording first published

February, 1957.

Zara Nelsova was a Canadian cellist born of Russian parentage. She studied at the London Violoncello School at the beginning of her career. Barbirolli heard her play and introduced her to Pablo Casals who gave her additional lessons. In the early 1930's she appeared as a soloist with Malcolm Sargent and the LSO. Nelsova had been a member of the faculty of The Juilliard School in New York, and recently died after a long bout with cancer.

Artur Balsam, born in Warsaw, in 1906, has over 250 recordings to his discography. Balsam performed with many of the great musicians of the 20th century. In addition to Menuhin and Milstein, he partnered violin virtuosos Szigeti, Kogan, Oistrakh, Fuchs, Francescatti, Shumsky, Goldberg and Stern, and the cellists Rostropovich, Fournier and Parnas. In the 1940s, he was pianist with the NBC Orchestra under Toscanini.

Written in the summer of 1901, the *Sonata for Cello and Piano in G minor* was first performed in Moscow in December of that year with Anatoly Brandukov, the cellist to whom it was dedicated with the composer at the piano. Balsam is the perfect accompanist for this work. He's a fine, strong pianist, essential in a work that shares the burden so equally between the two instruments and across four movements. Extremely beautiful, the heartfelt melody, although not quite as expansive as the *C minor Piano Concerto* of the same period, tends to fall more into eight-bar patterns that impart a trace of Brahms. I'm a huge fan of this work and for me there are not enough performances available (if this recording is impossible to find, look for stereophonic issues by Paul Tortelier and Aldo Ciccolini on EMI stereo ASD 2587, or the mesmerizing performance by Harvey Shapiro and Earl Wild on US Nonesuch H-71155). Nelsova's voice is rich and exact and with Balsam as her partner, this



performance is the one I use to judge others. Try and find this recording, the satisfaction of the performance will justify the difficulty you may encounter in its pursuit. I know this was released in the U.S. on the London label as LL 1480. Dave Canfield of Ars Antiqua (<http://www.arsantiqua.com>) has offered the London copy in "A" condition for \$15. Highest recommendation.

### Sonny Boy Williamson

**Jazz Classics No. 17**

RCA Victor France, 130 238.

This 10" recording was issued sometime in the early 1960's and contains eight songs dating from the early to mid 1940's by the original "Sonny Boy", John Lee Williamson. (Not to be confused with Rice Miller, also known as Sonny Boy Williamson). John Lee left home and became a hobo in the early 20's. He began recording in the 30's and these issues are from a prime period in his all-to-short life. Jim O'Neal of Downbeat magazine felt that "The man who, more than anyone else, shaped the course of Chicago's classic blues of the 40's and 50's and brought the harmonica into prominence as a major blues instrument was John Lee Williamson."

The artists that accompany Sonny Boy on this record are all major stars in the field of blues: Tampa Red, Blind John Davis, Big Maceo, Willie Dixon and Big Bill Broonzy to name but a few. The LP starts off with classic Williamson: 'Dealin' with the devil'. Make no bones about it...this album

contains some of the finest blues you'll ever hear. Listening to just this first cut will tell you why O'Neal offered the accolades he did. One amazing characteristic of this music is that ones hears not only the past (Noah Lewis & Hammie Nixon) but also the future vis-a-vis Little Walter's vocals, the phrasing of Rice Miller and the tones of Big Walter Horton. He was the first of the modern line of singer/harp players to perform his own tunes. Much of his work is available on compact disc and although not my preferred format, it allows the listener to explore and enjoy this truly unique artist. Highly recommended both as a recording and a performer.



## ■ DARK SIDE OF THE MOON...

### **Pink Floyd: *Dark Side Of The Moon***

If there was ever a band that deserved the SACD treatment then it must be Pink Floyd and most especially *Dark Side Of The Moon*. What can be said about such a artistic landmark as *DSOTM*, except to say that in it's SACD presentation (5.1 Surround sound & stereo) it sounds as good as it's going to get. Tracks include *Breathe, Money* and *The Great Gig In The Sky*. All at an amazing price! EMI SACD 582 1362 SACD Multi channel £14.95



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### **Isaac Hayes: *Hot Buttered Soul***

The original 'Love Man' gets down in mighty fashion with an album that virtually defines what funk and soul meant in the late '60's. Features the 18 minute- that's not a misprint, the 18-minute version of *By The Time I Get To Phoenix*, which is worth the price of admission alone. His version of *Walk On By* sizzles. Recommended.

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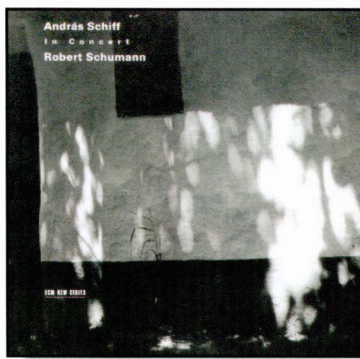
**The Royal Lewters:**  
Music of Henry VIII and  
Elizabeth I's favourite lutenists

Paul O'Dette (Lute)

Harmonia Mundi HMU 907313 

While exceptional royal musicians are now a rare breed, during the reigns of Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth, their courts included musical establishments that attracted some of the premium players from across Europe. Both monarchs were gifted performers in their own right, and fittingly this disc coincides with the 400th anniversary of the Virgin Queen's death. While proceedings commence with the king's own song, 'Pastyme with good Companie', composers such as Anthony de Countie and John Johnson may be less familiar, but as "Royal Lewters" their stylish, cultured or rustic works delighted the Tudor courts, and this release is charming. Many pieces are based on popular ballad tunes or dances, and these contrast with the more intense works. O'Dette's performance is faultless throughout, with crisp, sparkling and stylish playing, all with a sense of improvisation (assisted by his experience in jazz) that conveys many pieces with genuine swing and a precise agility. In fact, you cannot get better, and his fluid virtuosity is enhanced by an excellent recording, that is detailed but with delightful and evocative warmth. All in all this is a beautiful disc, which makes for some intimate and atmospheric listening.

SG



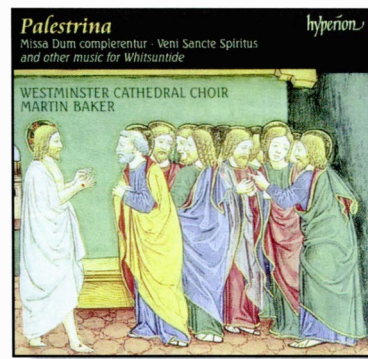
**Schumann**  
Humoreske/Novelletes/Piano  
Sonata in F minor/Nachtstücke

András Schiff

ECM New Series 1806/07 472 119-2 

A live recording of an entire recital of Schumann works that are often regarded as the poor relations of Kreisleriana may not appear too appealing, but each piece has its own glories and Schiff treats them with affection, compassion and respect. In fact, few pianists could have made the entire programme work. The *Humoreske* is notoriously challenging, but Schiff concentrates on the rhapsodic poetry and flair that unite the torrent of opposing ideas, orchestrating the piece with a sense of communicative purpose. His *Novelletten* unfolds with a narrative impression of control and is full of marvellous lyricism, while the *Sonata in F minor*, where Schiff discloses his shrewd and refreshing modifications of timbre, has a positive impulsive fervour merged with an inner soul-searching. Here he opts for Schumann's later four-movement edition, while adhering to his earlier first movement text. ECM's engineering is superb, with the Steinway captured wonderfully in the acoustic of Zürich's Tonehalle, and Schiff's insightful musicianship is augmented by the feeling of occasion, atmosphere and adrenalin that you get with the best recitals. The reflective *Nachtstücke* serves not so much as an encore but as a benediction to this beautifully performed and presented release.

SG



**Palestrina**  
Missa Dum complerentur/  
Veni Sancte Spiritus  
Westminster Cathedral  
Choir/Martin Baker

Hyperion CDA67353 

The *Missa Dum complerentur* is a "parody" Mass and takes its name and musical ideas from an earlier motet. Rather than being an act of mere self-plagiarism, the results are more a strong unification of the compositional techniques employed by the composer, with each Mass movement commencing with a variation of the motet's opening. But Palestrina is subtler elsewhere, and employs a number of motet parts in contrasting areas. Hyperion has been clever to open this CD with the motet, before the complete Mass, for those wanting to hear the source material. The disc is completed by six Whitsuntide motets. The Westminster Cathedral Choir and their new director, Martin Baker, produce a considerate and informative performance, with a clear sense of musical structure. Technically the singing is excellent, with the single-line plainchant of *Sequence: Veni Sancte Spiritus* being just about faultless. There are two eight-part motets that use layered textures projected antiphonally from side to side, and with a clear and atmospheric recording the spaciousness is enhanced, even though it lacks the last ounce of resolution and presence. Despite not exhibiting the last word in engineered sound, this issue of beautifully relaxing music is warmly recommended.

SG





**Beethoven**  
Piano Trios Nos. 1 (Ghost) & 2,  
Op. 70/Allegretto in B flat major

**The Florestan Trio**

Hyperion CDA67327 


While there have been a number of superb recorded performances of these trios, such as two by the Beaux Arts Trio, no current trio conveys such a spontaneous sense of enthusiasm and discovery as the Florestans. In both the contrasting *Op. 70* pieces they respond to the vigour and unpredictability of Beethoven's feelings. Their tempo is a little quicker than usual in the *Ghost* trio, revealing a particular sense of intrigue. The opening movement is appropriately volatile, yet they are always conscious of the score's dolce and pianissimo markings, and the players relish the reactive musical jousting of the presto finale, with pianist Susan Tomes conjuring incredible dexterity and speed. The glorious *E flat* trio is approached with more style, as it should be, yet intermingled are humour and audacity, resulting in a recording of the perfect balance between resolve and sensitivity. While the intermezzo is often performed too slowly, here there is a brisk spring to the music. The performers bounce ideas off one another, stimulating and persuading each to reveal fresh insights and creating a wonderful sense of live music making. With very good engineering this now has to be the first choice among recordings of these works.

SG



**Edward Elgar**  
Overture In The South 'Alassio'  
Introduction and Allegro for Strings\*  
Sospiri, Enigma Variations  
Kuchl quartett\*

John Eliot Gardiner, VPO

Deutsche Grammophon 463 265-2 

The concert overture *In the South* finds Elgar at his most opulent and Straussian, though (as so often with this composer) there's a yearning elegiac quality that gives the music a bitter-sweet feeling of nostalgia and regret. The opening flourish and sweeping tune for strings brings to mind the start of *Ein Heldenleben*, but deep down Elgar lacked Strauss' breezy confidence and worldly charm; the music soon shows its sad melancholy side. The Vienna violins play superbly, and the recording reveals much detail usually obscured. The *Introduction and Allegro* is outstandingly well played too, with an impressive solo quartet. Although idiomatically written for strings, the music is very difficult and demanding. But the Vienna players make light of its technical difficulties, giving a crisp virtuoso account. In the *Enigma Variations*, Gardiner avoids excessive subjective emotionality, keeping the music moving without treating it brusquely. It's not a traditional British performance, but one that reveals the work as a masterpiece of truly international stature – able to stand against any orchestral work of its time. The VPO seem to agree, and play with fabulous commitment and panache. DG's recordings sound clear and open, with good detail and excellent clarity. In the overture especially, you'll hear things most recordings obscure altogether.

JMH



**Fauré**  
Sonates pour violon et piano

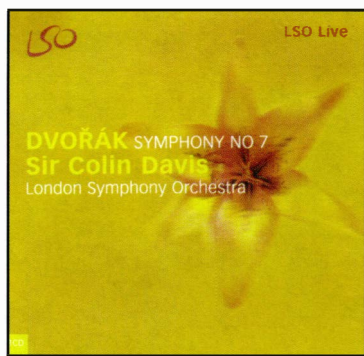
Isabelle Faust/Florent Boffard

Harmonia Mundi HMC 901741 

While Fauré's *Violin Sonata No. 1*, of 1875, is one of the young composer's first masterpieces, the *Violin Sonata No. 2* was not completed for another forty years, meaning that the two came from quite different eras, showing marked stylistic contrasts. The First owes a clear debt to earlier 19th Century works, and receives an exemplary performance from the duo that flows superbly. The *Second Sonata* is a far more complex piece, revealing more in the way of emotion and moving away from conventional tonality. The disc concludes with four minor, yet still inspired pieces. Compared to her performance on their second Bartók disc (see issue 9), Isabelle Faust reveals a growing mastery. Despite the praise heaped upon her early recordings, she has managed to respond and develop further, acquiring a broader, fuller tone along the way. She is less prone to harshness or straining at moments of exertion, and with Boffard contributing a customarily sympathetic performance, there is total ease to the playing, rendering each piece with total clarity, projecting the involved ebb and flow of passion, bringing the music into focus. With outstanding playing and excellent sound, this is an altogether beautiful release.

SG





**Dvorak**  
**Symphony No. 7**

London Symphony Orchestra/  
Sir Colin Davis

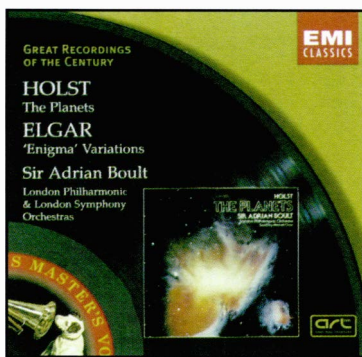
LSO Live LS00014 (CD)

Three years ago, the London Symphony Orchestra launched its own label (LSO Live) with the release of discs of Dvorak's *Eighth* and *Ninth* symphonies. Both soon became the recognized benchmark recordings following rave reviews – including my own of the *Eighth* in issue 8. This new release, recorded in March 2001, is surely destined for comparable status.

In this symphony, Dvorak created his model of the profound "Brahmsian" symphony, with the four movements being a genuine symphonic sweep, and he significantly discarded the melodious quality of his earlier symphonic essays. But, there is still much of the distinctive Bohemian character, and this balancing of integrity and warmth is perfectly caught by Davis, who in places lets the melodies flow, particularly in the glorious *Poco Adagio* where David Pyatt's glorious horn playing emerges from the overall texture. The *Scherzo* is given a genuine rhythmic quality, full of optimism, and the *Finale* is supplied with an acutely dramatic structure.

While the recording was made before the improvements to the Barbican Hall's acoustics, Tony Faulkner has done wonders, supplying sound that is commendably spacious, putting the finishing touches to what is surely yet another success for this great orchestra and its independent label.

SG



**Gustav Holst**  
**The Planets – suite\***  
**Edward Elgar**  
**Enigma Variations**  
**Sir Adrian Boult**

London Philharmonic & London Symphony Orchestras  
EMI CDM-5 67748-2 (CD)

Opinions vary as to which of Boult's five recordings of *The Planets* is best. I still favour his penultimate 1967 version with the New Philharmonia, but many go for the present LPO version released in 1979. And it's not hard to see why. Boult's tempi are sometimes slower than usual, and it's fair to say his performance does not have the virtuoso brilliance of Steinberg's or the sheer sensuality and panache of Karajan's – both DG. But there's no question that Boult's wise and utterly idiomatic interpretation sounds and feels right. He was, after all, the first to conduct the work! This new transfer sounds better than EMI's earlier issue on Studio, and thankfully the hum that afflicted the last four *Planets* seems to have been eliminated. The *Enigma Variations* date from the early '70s – Boult's 'Indian Summer' on EMI when he made so many marvellous recordings. It's a very straight and unaffected performance; clean and outwardly undemonstrative, yet deeply felt from within. Tempi feel measured and unhurried, though timings show that speeds are faster than they seem. Again, Boult's wisdom and maturity shines through every movement, and his performance is again wholly idiomatic. This new transfer improves on EMI's original full-price release – and the subsequent reissue on the British Music series. Wide stereo separation allows you to hear the conductor's preference for divided violins.

JMH



**Bax**  
**Symphony No. 6**  
**Into the Twilight**  
Royal Scottish National Orchestra  
David Lloyd-Jones

Naxos 8.557144 (CD)

Both the *Sixth Symphony* and *Into the Twilight* are full of Bax's Celtic inspired form of Romanticism, drawing on the Scottish west coast and W.B. Yeats respectively. While some dislike this style, the *Sixth* should satisfy his most ardent doubters, being the most concise and easily likeable of his seven symphonies, with its dramatic opening movement, a strikingly beautiful central *Largo* and a *finale* that looks back to Sibelius and forward to Vaughan Williams, with Strauss-like splendour. This is the first new release of this work since Chandos' Brydon Thomson cycle of nearly twenty years ago, and is especially successful. Lloyd-Jones never lets the music linger too long or deviate from its set path, being fully aware of its structure. The *finale* is neatly followed by *Into the Twilight*, one of the composer's earliest tone poems, before the disc is concluded by the hazy beauty of *Summer Music*, with its almost Delian overtones. The maturity of Bax's compositions is especially accommodated by the wonderful sound quality that is good enough to satisfy even the most committed of audiophiles. Overall, this is the most successful of Naxos' already excellent Bax series, and therefore can be wholeheartedly recommended.

SG



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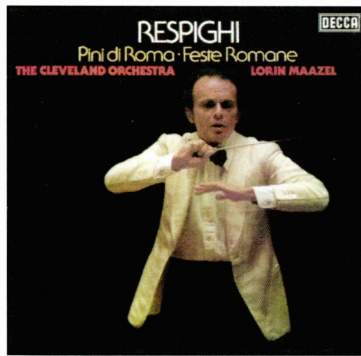


**Ella Fitzgerald**  
**Sings The Rodgers And Hart Songbook**

Speakers Corner/Verve MGVS-6009/10 **180g**

Whilst there are few artists that offer a safer bet to audiophile re-issue labels than Ella Fitzgerald, there's no escaping the fact that Speakers Corner's decision to produce their sumptuous *Gershwin Songbook* box represented a gigantic leap of faith – one that's been repaid handsomely, I might add. Continuing the theme (they've already done the *Cole Porter Songbook*) they return to financially safer ground with a mere double album and a simple gatefold sleeve. But don't be fooled by the lack of the Gershwin's extravagant packaging – the musical and sonic quality here is every bit as good as the previous issues, and that is good indeed. Recorded in 1962, with orchestral arrangements by Buddy Bregman and production by the great Norman Granz, this recording is wonderfully true to the music. Richard Rodgers and Larry Hart were musical architects, carefully sculpting precisely layered structures, a perfect balance of wit and melody, emotion and content. These were songs with poise, so who better to deliver them than Ella with her impeccable phrasing and perfect control. Songs like 'Have You Met Miss Jones' and 'You Took Advantage Of Me' might be high-points, whilst 'The Lady Is A Tramp' and 'My Funny Valentine' might be the classic hits, but there's not a low-point here. Great songs, peerlessly performed and perfectly pressed and presented, this album is a treat indeed. Absolutely essential!

RG



**Respighi**  
**Feste Romain; Pini di Roma**  
**Cleveland orchestra**  
**Lorin Maazel**

Speakers Corner/Decca SXL 6822 **180g**

Just about everyone agrees; Maazel's 1977 Decca Respighi LP was among the high points of his tenure at the helm of the Cleveland orchestra. It was one of those 'must have' LPs in the '70s; definitive performances, sumptuously recorded. Engineer Kenneth Wilkinson achieved a marvellously rich deep powerful sound of great impact and presence. Of course, the engineering flatters to deceive; the sound isn't actually as dynamic as it seems. But who cares when the results sound as convincing as this? *Feste Romain* is especially impressive; Wilkie captures a huge soundstage of immense depth and breadth, the brass blazing out in a sonorous acoustic. Of course it's gaudy vulgar music bereft of taste. But that's the appeal of these brash technicolor orchestral showpieces! The gloriously OTT finale of *Feste Romain* always brings me out in a grin - it's fairground music elevated to art. This new Speakers Corner 180g LP transfer is a shade brighter and drier than the Decca original, lacking the latter's depth and richness. It still packs quite a punch, but the reduced ambience makes Wilkie's multi-miked balances a shade more obvious. Collectors scouring the secondhand market may be interested to know that Mobile Fidelity reissued this LP in the early '80s. The transfer was very bold, sounding as though bass and treble extremes had been boosted to create extra immediacy. Don't say you weren't warned...

JMH



**Dusty Springfield**  
**Dusty in Memphis**

4 Men with Beards 4M 112 **180g** **3**

With a progressive rock juggernaut snapping at her heels this country's finest white soul singer bar none departed these shores for Tennessee to cut a truly stunning LP that was only recognised for its brilliance long after the 1969 release date. By then a thoroughly disillusioned Dusty Springfield had slipped away into relative obscurity which was most definitely our loss. The album's strengths, however, are twofold. Atlantic Records not only ensured that Dusty had an eminent production team around her who placed that naturally soulful voice to the fore, but they also backed this up by countenancing the selection of some classic material written by the likes of Randy Newman, Burt Bacharach, Gerry Goffin and Carole King. These songs, including 'Just A Little Love', 'I Can't Make It Alone' and 'Just One Smile' are not only attractively sung, but they also reveal a soft vulnerability that is totally captivating. Then, of course, there are those unrivalled performances of a timeless 'Son Of A Preacher Man' and 'The Windmills Of Your Mind', backed by the exemplary playing of Reggie Young (guitar), Tommy Cogbill (bass), Bobby Emmons (organ) and Bobby Wood (piano). Quite simply this is a mouth-watering record that should be in every collection and this beautifully presented gatefold reissue, replete with indispensable biographical notes, is the one to own.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603







## Overtures In Hi-Fi

Works by Adam; Auber; Herold;  
Reznicek; Suppe and Nicolai  
Paris Conservatoire  
Albert Wolff

Speakers Corner/Decca SXL-2008

180g

3

Despite a long and eventful record buying career lasting nearly thirty years, I never managed to acquire this mouthwatering 1958 collection of *Overtures in Hi-fi*. I saw it just the once secondhand - but alas another collector already had his mitts on it. Just as well; the price asked made my eyes water! The original (one of Decca's earliest stereo issues) is extremely rare, and (so far as I'm aware) Decca never reissued it, so this Speakers Corner 180g replica is very welcome. Decca seemed to achieve very good sound with the Paris Conservatoire in the late '50s, and *Overtures in Hi-fi* is a typical production; bright, open, lively, detailed, with wide stereo and plenty of brilliance. My guess is that this new transfer sounds tonally brighter and thinner than the Decca original, losing some depth and sheen. But it's still very acceptable, with clean quiet surfaces. And in the absence of an original copy to make comparisons, I soon ceased to worry about what might or might not've been. The choice of works includes old-time favourites like Herold's *Zampa* and Reznicek's delightful *Donna Diana* that (sadly) are played and recorded infrequently nowadays. The orchestral playing is spirited and enthusiastic under Albert Wolff, making up for a certain lack of sophistication and technical security by sheer ebullience. This disc is huge fun. Gorgeous cover art too!

JMH

RECORDING	
MUSIC	



## Ida Haendel & Geoffrey Parsons

### Baroque Transcriptions

Testament SBT 1258

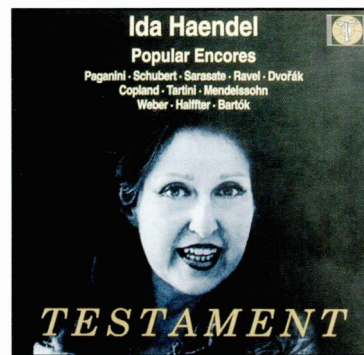


### Popular Encores

Testament SBT 1259



The source of these Testament digital re-masters is of course that remarkable EMI archive which runs to near biblical proportions. The *Transcriptions* and *Encores* were each taped over a three-day period at the Abbey Road Studios in 1976 and 1978 respectively. On vinyl they are some of the toughest titles to track down despite the relatively plentiful supply of 70's EMI recordings second-hand. The original LP references, for those interested, are ASD 3352 and ASD 3785. However, it's worth remembering that Ida Haendel's recorded performances are highly sought after, so don't be surprised if you have to pay a premium for the privilege of spinning them on a turntable. A few minutes spent listening to these recent transfers goes some way to explaining why she has received so many plaudits. There's an intriguing sense of interplay here between that artful Haendel bowing and the accompanying intuitive and dextrous keyboard skills of the Australian born pianist, Geoffrey Parsons. Each of these musicians with their distinctive styles have down the years endeared themselves to English audiences. They certainly excel at this accessible and popular repertoire. Of the two CDs it's the *Baroque Transcriptions* which provides the more musically satisfying programme because there's some real meat to get your teeth into with the longer Corelli *La Folia*, Vivaldi *Chaconne*, Nardini *Sonata* and Tartini *Devil's Trill*. The dozen sugared almonds found on the *Popular Encores* disc are



lovely pieces, but they lack substance. Even the longest, a Giuseppe Tartini *Andante-Presto*, lasts for only a mere seven minutes. So, like a good concert hall encore, it leaves you yearning for more. This is by its very nature an inherently fragmented recital, but it does improve upon Haendel's earlier *Famous Violin Compositions* LP that covered much of the same territory for the old Supraphon label in 1962. All the big tunes are accounted for: *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, *Ave Maria*, Sarasate's *Habanera* and *Zapateado*, as well as an opening Paganini *La Clochette* and Bartok *Rumanian Folk Dances*. There is, however, a terrific sense of rapport established here. Haendel's violin sings throughout these virtuoso and forthright renditions, while Parsons draws upon his famed work as an accompanist to the World's great vocalists in a well-established and rock solid supporting role. Both benefit from a diaphanous and fleet-footed acoustic that comfortably manages to keep pace with every high-octane twist or turn of the great lady's violin. These qualities surface again for a fluid and brilliantly written Vivaldi *Chaconne*. It's a work that has plenty of scope for individual virtuosity and Haendel, who is at her slipperiest, never misses an opportunity to showboat. Elsewhere, on an embellished Nardini *Sonata*, or for the melodic and delightfully expressive *La Folia*, those extended rich and vibrant tonal colours from both instruments are beautifully recreated. An essential purchase for all Ida Haendel devotees.

RP

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

#### Baroque Transcriptions

RECORDING	
MUSIC	

#### Popular Encores

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# Diamonds In The Rough...

## Cherry Picking The Decca Back Catalogue

by Richard S Foster

The Decca Record Company began experiments in stereo reproduction toward the end of 1953. Arthur Haddy, head of Decca engineering and their chief balance engineer for mono records - he gave us Full Frequency Range Recordings or FFRR - hired Roy G. Wallace to lead these experiments. By December, Wallace's success would astound Haddy. In addition to helping create Decca's stereophonic microphone mixer, Wallace created what would become a hallmark playback signature - the Decca tree. Quite simply this was a "T" shaped frame allowing various configurations of different microphones, each of which would create a different sound. There were experiments over the next few years with these microphones in the main venues where Decca recorded: London, Vienna, Paris and Geneva. Decca used Neumann M-49's to start with, then later M-50's and finally KM-56's, adding an omnidirectional KM-53 by the end of 1957. In a recent interview, Wallace said that his first stereophonic acetates were made in December 1953 when he recorded Mantovani and his orchestra, followed by Frank Chacksfield. Nothing remains of those sessions but in the spring of 1954 Haddy and Wallace would find themselves in Geneva at Victoria Hall, home of Ernest Ansermet and his L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. The earliest known example of his experiments appeared on the Decca Eclipse label ECS 543, Rimsky-Korsakoff's *Symphony No. 2 (Antar)*. It should be noted that this record has mono matrices and was sold as "electronically enhanced for stereo reproduction" but the record is in fact, true stereo.

James Locke, Colin Moorfoot, John Dunkerley, Martin Atkinson, Gordon Parry, Jack Law and Stanley Goodall are not exactly household names to music lovers and audiophiles. Yet they were some of the great recording engineers working for Decca in the late 1950's through to the 1980's alongside the legendary Kenneth Wilkinson. The venues where Decca recorded were quite variable and one can certainly hear differences in say, Royce Hall in Los Angeles (the Mehta recordings), Victoria Hall in Geneva (the Ansermet and Stein recordings), Kingsway Hall in London (Bonyng's National Philharmonic or London Symphony Orchestra and Haitink with the London Philharmonic) and the Sofiensaal in Vienna (Boskovsky's VPO issues and others). Likewise, the sound and performances vary, and whilst the Decca catalogue is rich with great performances with a wonderful sound quality, it also contains its share of some that are not so great. It would have

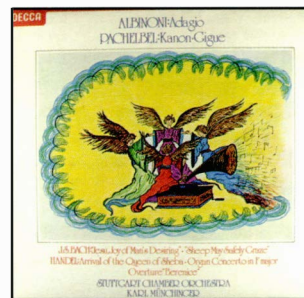
been wonderful to have Ansermet's interpretations played by a first class orchestra rather than one that didn't always play together, not to mention sometimes missing the proper notes. However, when they were on...wow.

Let me advise again, as I did in the EMI piece in issue 22, that I'm a firm believer in trying to conserve my cash outlay for expensive, early issue releases until I am sure the LP is going to offer lasting appeal. Many great Decca recordings - specifically the early wide-band SXL2000 to SXL6448 issues can cost a small fortune today. It's well worth taking a careful look at the Decca reissue series: Ace-of-Diamonds, Eclipse and the late SPA series. Again, if you like the performance on the reissue series, you are guaranteed better sound quality on the original. For many, the reissue series will be just fine. (Please note that some of the Eclipses contain performances that were originally recorded by Decca and released on RCA in the UK in the SB2000 series and for RCA in the US in their LSC series and believe it or not, some of these rival their £200 cousins for sound quality).

Some superb recordings made by Decca can be picked up for almost nothing at charity shops and thrift stores, while the second hand dealer network will normally have plentiful supplies for less than £10 a copy. Here are some of my recommendations:

### Decca SXL 6862

Works by Pachelbel,  
Albinoni, J.S. Bach,  
G.F. Handel.  
Karl Münchinger  
conducting the  
Stuttgart Chamber  
Orchestra with Ulrich  
Bremsteller, organ.



*Recorded in the  
Evangelische Schlosskirche, Ludwigsburg.  
Producer: James Mallinson  
Engineer: John Dunkerley  
Released in 1978.*

This recording contains a smorgasbord of lovely and engaging music from the Baroque period: Pachelbel's ▶

► *Kanon in D major* as well as Albinoni's *Adagio in G minor* for strings and organ, some Bach Cantatas arranged by Münchinger as well as three works by Handel including the *Sinfonia - Arrival of the Queen of Sheba from Solomon*. The sound quality is first rate. Lush but not too reverberant string tone, played by an orchestra that is at the head of the class. Bass notes are deep and tight and the music is highly infectious. We've all heard these works one time or another and this LP can be obtained for next to nothing. May I suggest you keep your eyes out for ALL Münchinger/Stuttgart recordings: First rate playing and top calibre sound are almost always assured.

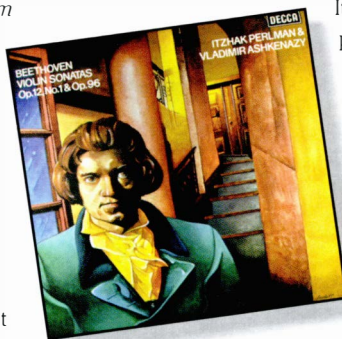
### Decca SXL 6535

Franz Liszt

The Battle of the Huns,  
Orpheus and Mazeppa.  
Zubin Mehta conducting the  
Los Angeles Philharmonic

*Recorded in Royce Hall Auditorium  
I don't know the engineers on this  
but I'll bet it was James Locke.  
Released in 1972.*

This recording is definitely one of my guilty pleasures. Mehta can go a little over the top in his pursuit of drama and this record is definitely dramatic. The three symphonic poems get first class sound and Mehta drives the Los Angeles Philharmonic into a frenzy during *The Battle of the Huns*. The opening of *Orpheus* begins with some delicate harp playing and beautifully captured string tone. Although beautiful in sound, the performance of this particular piece leaves me wanting. Whatever calm and relaxing moments the listener was given during *Orpheus*, you can forget about with the *Mazeppa*, the *Symphonic Poem No. 6* on side 2. This is given the full blown Zubie over-the-top performance and I just love it. While some may prefer the interpretation on Deutsche Grammophon with Karajan and his Berlin Philharmonic on SLPM 138 692, the sound quality Decca provides more than adequately makes up for any performance related short-comings on Mehta's part. Great music, great sound, great fun that is not to be missed.



### Decca SXL6632, 6736, 6789, 6790, 6791

Beethoven  
The Complete Violin Sonatas  
Itzhak Perlman, violin and Vladimir Ashkenazy,  
piano.

*All recorded at Kingsway Hall in London  
between 1973 and 1976.*

*Producers: Christopher Raeburn,  
Michael Woolcock, Richard Beswick.*

*Engineers: Colin Moorfoot, John Dunkerley  
and Kenneth Wilkinson.*

*Released between 1973 and 1976.*

These are very fine readings of Beethoven's sonatas and the sound quality is absolutely first rate. When this cycle was complete, Decca released them together in a box: D 95 D 5, with the critics in the New Penguin Stereo and

Cassette Guide giving them a rosette - their highest recommendation. Please remember that the individual releases will sound better than the box set. (Here's a little tip - when hunting for used records: if you find two copies of the same disk, one with a "Penguin Recommended" sticker and the other with no sticker, you can almost always count on the one without the sticker sounding better. It will, most likely be a much earlier pressing.) These records are a must have for readers beginning to get into chamber music. All are well played

and highly enjoyable. A bargain. One of the most over-looked conductors in the Decca catalogue, in my opinion, is Willi Boskovsky. Boskovsky studied violin at the Vienna Academy, enrolling when he was nine and graduating when

he was seventeen having won the Fritz Kreisler award. He joined the Vienna Philharmonic in 1932 while continuing to make solo appearances until 1939. In the mid 1950's he recorded the Mozart and Beethoven violin sonatas with Lili Kraus for Discophiles Francais. As a conductor, he is probably best known for his Mozart serenades, dances and marches and for his fine Strauss recordings. Some of my favourite Strauss issues are:



### Decca SXL 6692, 6740, 6817

Various New Years concerts  
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra,  
conducted by Willi Boskovsky.

*Recording venues for 6692 and 6817 are the  
Sofiensaal in Vienna, while 6740 was recorded*

► *live on January 1, 1975 in the Musikvereinsaal in Vienna.*  
*Producers: Christopher Raeburn, Michael Woolcock and James Mallinson.*  
*Engineers: Gordon Parry, Colin Moorfoot, Jack Law and James Locke.*  
*Recorded between December 1973 and June 1976.*

These are all outstanding records and can be picked up at giveaway prices. I've seen them on lists for under £5 each. The recording venues for these records are among the finest in the world. The orchestra is certainly one of the top half dozen and the music is out of this world. I never get tired of listening to the music of Johann Strauss (either I or II) and the sound quality given these discs by Decca is first class. Again, I would look for all of Boskovsky's recordings, especially the Mozart *Serenades*. They're going to cost you a little more than £10, but they are worth it. Here is another Boskovsky disk you should not miss:

### Decca SXL 6696

Brahms - Hungarian Dances  
 Dvorak - Slavonic Dances  
 London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Willi Boskovsky.

*Recorded in Kingsway Hall, London*  
*Producer: Christopher Raeburn*  
*Engineer: Kenneth Wilkinson*  
*Record issued in 1975*



The dances on this record by both composers are among their most famous. A wonderful selection to whet the appetite of those exploring in greater detail the works of Brahms and Dvorak. Boskovsky is very spirited in his conducting and this orchestra feels very much at home with these works. Superb sound is provided by Mr. Wilkinson and Kingsway Hall.

### Decca SXL 6966

Rimsky-Korsakov  
 Suite from the Opera "The Golden Cockerel"/"Le Coq d'Or"; Capriccio Espagnol; Russian Easter Festival Overture, Op. 36. Lorin Maazel conducting the Cleveland Orchestra.

*Recorded October 1979 at the Masonic Auditorium, Cleveland.*  
*Producer: James Mallinson.*



*Engineers: Colin Moorfoot and Martin Atkinson.*  
*This particular record, which came out sometime in 1980, was engineered and mastered by Decca, but pressed in Holland.*

My own predilection when given the choice of Holland or England has always favoured the English pressings. Although side 1 contains 30 minutes of music the sound does not appear to be compressed. I wonder how much they really did compress this LP and can only imagine what the master tape must sound like! Having said that, I would strongly suggest, if the repertoire here is to your liking, grab this when it comes along. These performances are all rich, exciting and offer Maazel at his liveliest with very spirited playing by Cleveland.

There is much competition in the catalogues with these works, but I think you will be hard pressed to match this discs combination of sound and performance for what it will cost.

Might I also suggest that you hunt for Maazel's earlier Sibelius symphonic cycle on Decca? The catalogue numbers are: SXL 6084, 6125, 6236, 6364 and 6365. The performances are excellent and the sound is full, rich and not overly reverberant. Several of the wide-bands may cost a little more than our £10 ceiling, but I think they're worth it.

### Decca SXL 6906

Shostakovich  
 Symphony No. 15, Op. 141.  
 Bernard Haitink conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

*Recorded in Kingsway Hall in March of 1978*  
*Producer: Richard Beswick*  
*Engineer: Colin Moorfoot*  
*Released in 1979*



Okay, I'm fibbing here because this LP is going to set you back a little more than £10...but not by much. Very simply put: One of the great performances of this work on record! You get the quirky presence of the quotation from Rossini's *William Tell* overture that keeps recurring in the first movement as well as another quotation (from the ►

► 'Fate' motif from Wagner's *The Ring*) in the finale. This symphony is a fine example of the genius of Dimitri Shostakovich, probably the greatest composer of the 20th century. For those who haven't explored his symphonies I can comfortably assure you that you will enjoy every minute of the 44 it takes for Haitink and the London Philharmonic to weave through this work. There are only two other recordings in this cycle produced in analogue sound: SXL 6838: *Symphony No. 10* and SXL 6927: *Symphony No. 4*. The rest, sadly, are digital. I've never been a big fan of Haitink and his recordings on Philips with the Concertgebouw, finding many of them a little too sedate for my taste. However, let me tell you that Decca pulled out all the stops when producing this record and Mr. Haitink is absolutely on fire. There is no doubt in my mind this is one of the all time great sounding records Decca produced, and it contains a world class performance to boot. Buy it wherever you can, it is so worth it. Highest recommendation.

#### Decca SXL 6812

Meyerbeer - Les Patineurs

Massenet - Le Cid

Richard Bonyngue conducting the National Philharmonic Orchestra.

*Recorded in January of 1975 in Kingsway Hall.*

*Producer: James Woolcock*

*Engineer: Kenneth Wilkinson*

I love ballet music. It's usually very dramatic and leaves the listener a strong visual sense of the story it conveys. That's what we have here and we have it in wonderful atmospheric Kingsway Hall sound. Richard Bonyngue was, like his wife Joan Sutherland, born in Australia. He began conducting in 1962 when he took over an orchestra for a performance where Joan was singing. I have about three dozen of his records and I find them all quite excellent. Bonyngue's repertoire includes works from Adophe Adam through to Peter Tchaikovsky with everything in between. *Les Patineurs* (The Skaters) is a little light for my taste but may suit readers who enjoy light classical music. Massenet's *Le Cid* however, is one of those Spanish influenced works with dances and songs woven in a rhythm of bold dynamic contrasts. Great fun, exceptionally well recorded and available at bargain prices, what more could one ask? Well, I would be remiss if I didn't mention one of the great sonic block-busters of the mid 1970's. It's on EMI in



their TWO series and while I'll save the review for another article, start looking for Louis Fremaux's EMI TWO 350 of *Le Cid*. (Available also in a fine reissue in their Greensleeves editions as ESD 7040 as well as a 180g re-issue from Klavier.)

#### Decca SET 523/4

Homage to Pavlova

Short pieces by Luigini, Saint Saëns, Massenet, Tchaikovsky, Rubinstein, Czibulka, Rosmarin-Kreisler, Drigo, Assafieff, Lincke, Catalani and Krupski. Richard Bonyngue conducting the London Symphony Orchestra.

*No production or engineering credits given.*

*Recording first published in 1972.*

Ballet music, not a cookery programme! Anna Pavlova was the premiere ballerina of the early part of the last century. Her fame made her a household name even to those who never saw her dance, and she's far from the first performer to suffer the "honour" of immortalisation by menu. I mentioned earlier that I love ballet music and this box set is a must have. I've always been amazed that music enthusiasts seem to overlook this release. I often see this set on lists for way under £10. Bonyngue is so at home with this music and the LSO gives us wonderful performances. These discs offer the listener one delicacy after another. The music is highly infectious and the engineers have given us great sound. Another set not to be missed.

#### Decca 6BB121/2

Beethoven

Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 Choral

Georg Solti conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Chorus with Margaret Hills, Chorus Director. Pilar Lorengar, Yvonne Minton, Stuart Burrows, Martti Talvela.

*Recorded May 1972 in the Krannert Centre of the University of Illinois.*

*Producer: David Harvey*

*Engineers: Kenneth Wilkinson and Gordon Parry.*

Recently reissued by Speakers Corner and reviewed on 180g by RG in Issue 22, this was a 'special' release by Decca to celebrate Solti's Silver Jubilee. The album was a wild success and Solti wound up doing a complete Beethoven cycle (11BB 188/96) based upon the popularity of this release. I love the sound quality the engineers captured, the playing of the Chicago Symphony and find the singing first rate. Amazingly this set is widely available for only a few pounds from any dealer in the used market. I'm now living with a smaller system for my listening pleasure but will always remember when I had my "big rig" how well the photograph on the cover - orchestra on the main floor, soloists on stage with the chorus in the balcony behind - was portrayed by these engineers. It was simply astonishing to me how one could recreate this event in their listening room. I mean, you could visually see the chorus above the soloists. I still marvel at this recording. I must admit that although I find the playing and especially the singing first rate, there are also other performances that I consider essential. Firstly there is Wilhelm Furtwängler and the Bayreuth on ALP 1286/7 and then Ferenc Fricsay and the Berlin Philharmonic on Deutsche Grammophon SLPM 138002/3, but these are both quite pricey and somewhat elusive. You may find flaws in Solti's tempi, but I guarantee that you will be quite exhilarated after listening to side 4 of this set.

### Decca Set 534/5

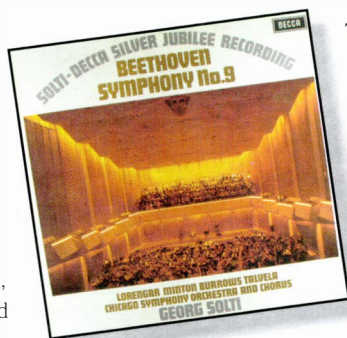
Mahler

Symphony No. 8 in E flat 'Symphony of a thousand' Georg Solti conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Chorus of the Vienna State Opera, Norbert Balatsch, Chorus Master; Singverein Chorus with Helmut Froschauer, Chorus Master; The Vienna Boys Choir. Heather Harper, Lucia Popp, Arleen Auger, Yvonne Minton, Helen Watts, Rene Kollo, John Shirley-Quirk and Martti Talvela.

*Producer: David Harvey*

*Engineers: Kenneth Wilkinson and Gordon Parry.*

*Recording first published in 1972.*



The very same team that gave us the Beethoven 9th is back for Mahler's great 8th symphony. This is Solti at his finest. The performance captivates the listener from the very beginning. The soloists are quite superb and the choruses provide a thrilling experience. The engineers have excelled once again. The interpretation by everyone, in every way, is a musical triumph. This is another of Decca's finest recordings and I have seen this for £10 on recent English lists and was simply astonished at the low price: My favorite performance of this work and its not to be missed.

### Decca SXL 6543

Dvorak

The Water Goblin, Op. 107 [Symphonic poem]; My Home, Op. 62 [Overture]; The Noonday Witch, Op. 108 [Symphonic poem]; The Hussite, Op. 67 [Overture].

Istvan Kertesz conducting the London Symphony Orchestra.

*Recording first published in 1972.*



Fans of Dvorak's works should explore ALL the symphonic performances by Istvan Kertesz and the LSO. Their collaboration produced a wonderful cycle of symphonies in the mid 1960's that can be found at bargain prices. (Available on Decca at as: SXL 6115, 6253, 6257, 6273, 6288, 6289,

6290, 6291). Given the great Dvorak interpreters like Vaclav Talich (most of his finest performances are on 78's), Karel Ancerl, Zdenek Chalabala and Raphael Kubelik to name but a few, Kertesz holds up pretty well. Dvorak is a marvelous story teller and his works are both captivating and appealingly episodic. Who has not been moved and entertained (knowingly or not) by his *Symphony No. 9, From the New World*? There is an accompanying release, SXL 6510 that contains more *Symphonic Poems* and *Overtures* and I suggest you explore this also. All of these works are playful, involving, and dramatic and the engineers give us top quality sound. I've been a fan of these works forever and would certainly recommend that anyone not sure about classical music should give Dvorak's works a listen. They may just get hooked. ➤+



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