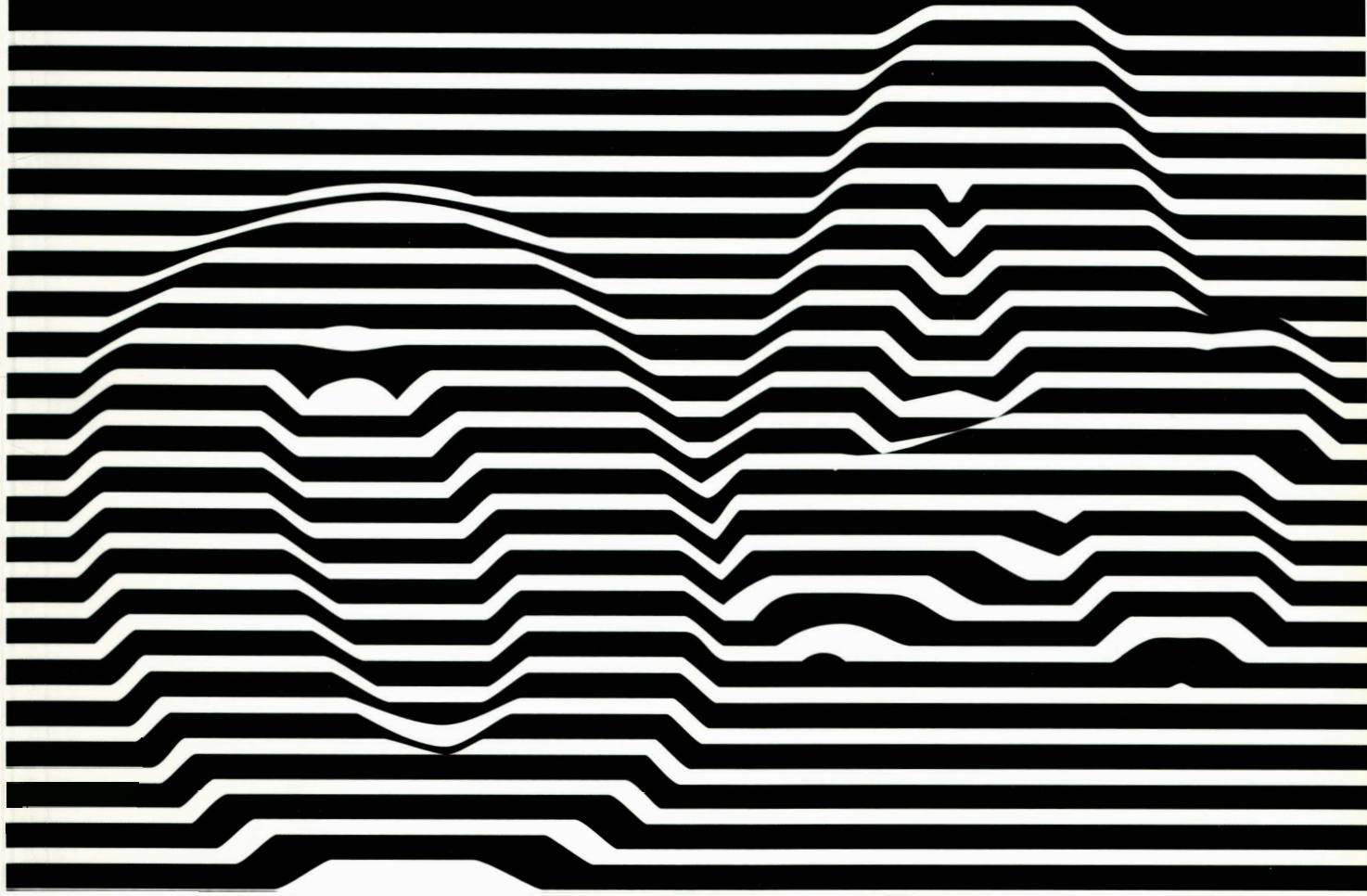


REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS

hi-fi+

Issue 36
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REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS



ANNUAL



Issue 36

In an age of constant hype, with too many manufacturers enshrining their specifications (and the misinformed sowing seeds of confusion) only a few stand out as being capable of producing components that are truly high fidelity.

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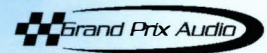
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After nearly six years and 36 Issues, the time has come when the price of hi-fi+ has to rise. In that time paper prices have increased considerably, to the point where they now force us to either increase our cover price or decrease something else. Given that most readers wouldn't want to sacrifice the content, the number of pages or the weight and quality of the paper itself, the conclusion is unavoidable. We have held our original price for as long as humanly possible, at a time when the competition have all, without exception, increased theirs' several times. We have also held to our original format and quality – as we will do in the future.

For this issue, our 2004 end of year annual, we have not only announced our award winners, but the reviewers have written reappraisals of each and every one, explaining exactly what makes them so special. We've also asked them to provide a personal overview of the year, as well as updating their individual profiles, originally published in Issue 1. Of course, the staff has swollen somewhat since then, but comparisons with the original contributions make for interesting reading, while the current listings offer vital background information and perspective on the writer's reviews. From now on it's a formula we'll be repeating at the end of each year, one that we believe will help keep hi-fi+ as the most interesting and informative hi-fi journal out there. As of Issue 37, the cover price will rise to £4.50 in the UK, ensuring that it's also reassuringly expensive!

Happy listening (and reading) in the New Year.



"This amplifier can blow your house over but loses nothing from the music"

Your Guide to Hi-Fi and Home Cinema, January 2004, Stan Curtis



"Combining clarity with control is virtually a three word encapsulation of the KAV400xi"

Hi Fi Choice, November 2003, Alvin Gold



KAV400xi

"The new player not just delights with the still quite rare SACDs, it also knows how to please with CDs"

Audio, Germany, September 2003

"If I had to choose one SACD player, (regardless of price), I'd go for the Krell."

Stereophile, December 2003, Michael Fremer

"A unit capable of delivering performance at the very top in the reproduction of CD and SACD"

Audio Review, Italy, November 2003, Franco Guida

"The 'Standard' is a player with...guts"

Diario de Noticias, Portugal, September 2003, JVH



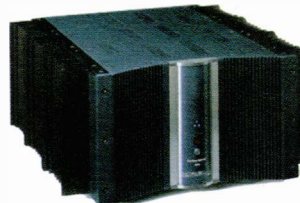
SACD

KRELL'S ANGELS THE NEXT CHAPTER

From its arrival with a single power amplifier in 1980, Krell's exclusive product range has evolved into a total system concept. Because it is now recognised as the premier high-end audio and home theatre brand, Krell has been compelled to create the ultimate in audio-only and audio-video systems from front to back. Its range of amplification devices have been augmented over the years by CD transports, digital converters and audio/video processors. In 2004, the concept reaches fruition with the ascendancy of both definitive source components – the SACD Standard and the DVD Standard – and a range of loudspeakers suitable for pure music or multi-channel cinematic pleasure.

Krell has also expanded its catalogue vertically, with the KAV and Showcase ranges for entry-level and mid-level systems, and the rare and exotic Reference Series for systems without limit. Regardless of the model, however, a component must attain the highest standards of sonic performance, ergonomic excellence, superior build quality and long-term dependability before its front panel is graced with the Krell badge.

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Krell FPB 700cx

"There's a timeless quality to all-round excellence, and the FPB 700cx has just that"

Hi Fi News, June 2003, Martin Colloms



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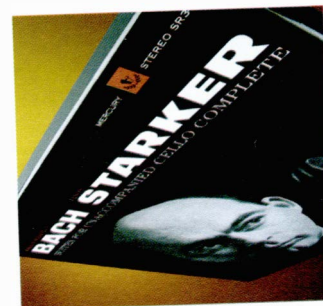
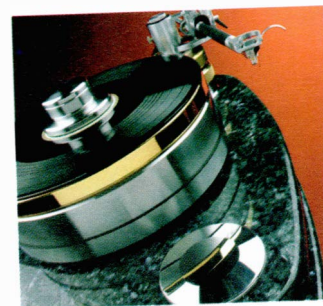
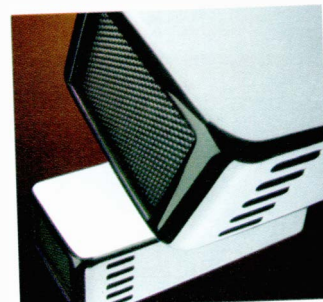
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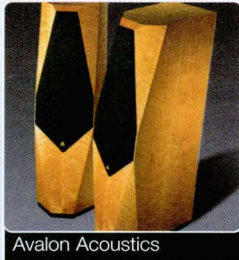
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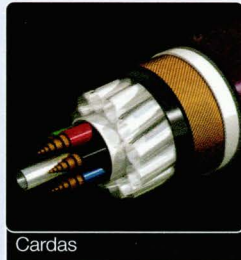
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for the love of music...



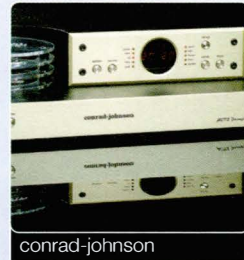
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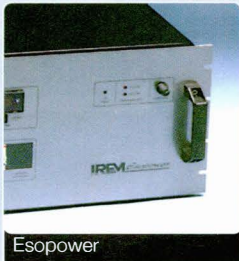
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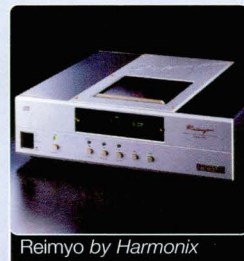
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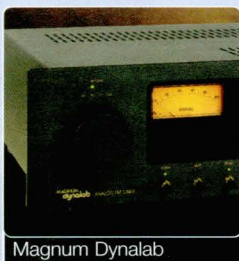
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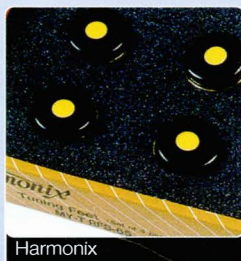
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Reimyo by Harmonix



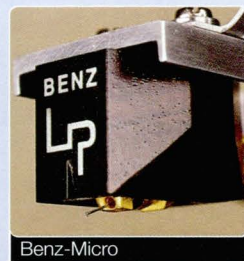
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Acustica Applicata (DAAD)



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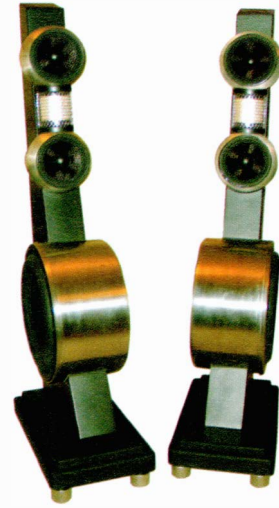
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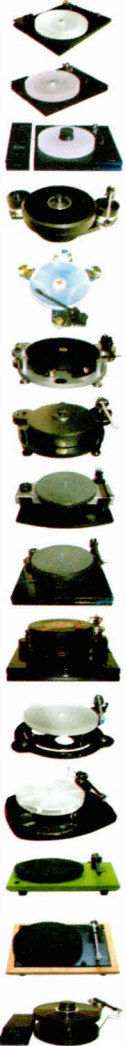
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This ad features a few new products we're excited about, as well as a couple of old favourites (which we're still excited by even after all this time!) From top right, going anticlockwise, first off are the Anthony Gallo Reference 3 loudspeakers (£2400/pr). You can't tell from the picture, but these are actually very compact (about 3 feet tall) but have the most amazing bass extension and a very open sound. Next, the brand new Musical Fidelity A5 series amplifier (250W/ch) and CD player, at £1499 each, are superb value. They are designed to be better, and cost less, than the popular 308 series, and don't even feel embarrassed in the company of the famous Nuvista and Trivista series. The CD even features a valve output stage, just like the late lamented Trivista DAC! The Duevel Bella Lunas (£3160 to £4160/pr dependent on finish) need no introduction. This superb Omni design, featured at the recent Heathrow Show, should be on everyone's shortlist. Origin Live's new Sovereign turntable (£3850 plus arm) sets new, even higher standards for this already envied manufacturer whose decks already receive huge acclaim from the press. Next up is something we thought we'd never see - a valve / transistor hybrid power amp from Tom Evans, famous for their Groove phono stage and Vibe preamp. The Linear A (£3999) is a truly innovative design which draws on the strengths of both technologies to give transistor speed and control with valve naturalness and texture, another milestone for Tom! Many people will still remember the success we had with the Magneplanar MG 1.6 speakers at the show. These flat non-electrostatic panels with ribbon tweeters produce the most amazingly believable soundstage, all for the direct import no-middleman price of £1500/pr. The new Duevel Shuttle-Disk rechargeable battery CD player (also £1500) is on permanent demo - bring your own CDs and be pleasantly surprised! Lastly, we had to squeeze it in, what we regard as probably the finest all round (pardon the pun) turntable in the world, the Brinkmann LaGrange with the Brinkmann 10.5 tonearm (£8395 in total), a truly staggering combination.



air tangent amazon amphon amplifon anthony gallo apollo furniture argento audible illusions audio physic audiovalve breuer dynamic brinkmann cartridge man cawsey chord electronics clearaudio consonance decca london dnm duevel dynavector ear yoshino final lab graham sree hadcock heart incognito infinity isolda jadis jbl k2 klimo koetsu korato lavardin lyra magneplanar michell engineering morch musical fidelity nordost nottingham analogue opus 3 origin live ortofon papworth pro-ject rega revolver ringmat roksan shun mook shanling shelter slinkylinks sme something solid sonnetter spendor stax sugden sumiko tannoy tci cables tom evans townshend audio transfiguration trichord trigon van den hul voodoo wireworld xlo

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Incoming!

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or via the web-site at www.hifiplus.com

Dear Sir,

In issue 34 of Hi-Fi+ you take on an important but delicate matter - blind testing audio cables.

You say it yourself in the Intro; "The problem of course is in devising an appropriate test or set of tests". You can say that again!

I am sorry to say, however, that I think you fail utterly.

Did you ever consider consulting a professional, like a statistician or some experienced scientist? The pitfalls are many, deep and not so easy to foresee.

There is an expression in the field of statistics that goes: "GIGO - Garbage In, Garbage Out", and as much a fan of the magazine I generally am, this time I come to think of this GIGO.

Some comments, then:

- I do not think you mention if the identities of the six cables are revealed to the listeners or if it in fact is a "double-blind" study, which in these circumstances would have been vastly superior.

- You use one of the cables on test as a "reference" after which the panel is introduced to all the objects on test, including the former "reference". Instead you should have utilized an external reference cable, well known to all, preferentially of neutral character. I am fairly certain that doubling as both a test object and a "reference" influence the results in a non-predictable manner.

- Then, of course, you should have devised some "internal validity tests", e.g. including the same cable four times in a session of six cables in total, just to see how much variation you have.

Or, displaying the exact same series twice in a row - did the scores sum up?

- Adding two more listeners would have had a great impact on the possibility to draw conclusions from the material, though I realise the "logistic" problems.

- Also, some possibility to "zap" back and forward between the test objects would be nice, but I guess that would necessitate for separate rooms?

- Regarding "Conclusions"; you claim that it is possible to handle the raw data in a number of different ways, but I am not so sure about that - the material is not extensive enough.

Finally, some comments in general.

You express a deep satisfaction concerning the fact that

no one in the panel was familiar with the Valhalla. But one member is in fact an employee of the Chord company, so why the fuzz about Valhalla? Have you received so much ill fated mail addressing the fact that a set-up of your "in-house favourite cable" costs like a second hand car, or what?

Very smart of you to utilize two different-sounding systems in the set-up. What a pity that you then try to disregard your own results concerning Siltech and its "incompatibility" with one of the systems. Obviously, Siltech and Hovland are not meant for each other - tough, but you can't win them all! Furthermore, in the second group, Siltech is down there in par with AU24 and Stereovox, the three finishing approximately abreast, second from bottom.

Provided you disregard NF:s scores, that is.

Next analysis of yours goes to the Stereovox, which scores rather poorly, especially when considering its prize tag. Here, in one sentence, you invalidate your own test panel and test protocol; "Yet, having listened to these cables in isolation I'd consider them worthy of far higher remarks.". Everyone is entitled to an opinion of ones own, you AND the members of the test panel. Why not just point out the differences without trying a "cover-up". Who knows, you might produce a similar protocol as your test members regarding the Stereovox during those particular circumstances.

So, instead of regarding variations in a test protocol as embarrassing, you could acknowledge the importance of matching the entire "ensemble", and those facts about in what types of systems a particular cable fits especially well in (or bad, for that matter) might be just as important as which one is the best in a Hi-Fi+ system.

Finally, probably to much of your surprise I am a very keen reader of Hi-Fi+ and have (almost) absolute faith in the judgments of yours, emanating from the type of reviewing you do mostly, i.e. thorough, long-term auditions in familiar environments, not necessarily comparing (competing) different items.

Yours sincerely

Jan Kährström

Via E-mail.

Much of this was dealt with in the last issue, but just a response to a few of the specifics:

▶ *The number of reasons advanced to explain our affection for Nordost's Valhalla cables continues to swell, however, they can generally be bracketed somewhere between bribery and the theory that Nordost own the magazine! Oddly enough, the myriad conspiracy theorists out there seem to have ignored the possibility that we might actually like the stuff – along with all the other writers, on just about every magazine in the world, who also review it positively. But then I guess I forgot the golden rule when it comes to conspiracies – the best ones are always worldwide. That was one of the main motivations for setting up the blind test in the first place; and why the vindication was so sweet.*

Nigel Finn works for The Chord Co. He is an experienced blind listener, and having been responsible for the development of the Chord Signature cables, I was interested to see whether he would reliably identify/prefer his own product.

There were two objectives in this test: To test the premise and to test the test. That's why I spent time on the failings inherent in the results, most notably with the Stereovox cables. Bear in mind that as the test operator, I was familiar with all the test subjects having spent some time with each, running them all in. Even then I didn't predict the Hovland/Siltech meltdown. In the same way that we set up the NF/Chord scenario and the Valhalla one, the Stereovox was included (in part at least) because it's not an immediately impressive performer. Given time however, all that clean-sheet thinking and careful choice of materials delivers an exceptionally natural and unforced presentation which you don't tend to notice until you replace the cables with something else. Then you notice, believe me!

Finally, many of the methodological suggestions you offer are undeniably positive in terms of accuracy – assuming that you have unlimited time, facilities, respondents and budget. We did the best we could while imposing on other people's time and generosity. However, our tests were at least representative of – and in some respects far more sophisticated than – tests on which the blind-listening brigade place their faith.

The whole point is that the tests are flawed! Ed.

Dear Sir,

I just started reading issue 34. Congratulations on your handling of the blind testing of cables, a gutty move that ended up well. Testing cables and especially testing them blind has to be the most 'cannot win' adventure in audio, making the reviewing of loudspeakers look like the proverbial walk in the park. How do you know if what you are hearing is inherent to the cable or is it

just a singular interaction with the amp/speaker combo you are using. I think you succeeded as well as possible.

I can recall my first real involvement with speaker cables in the mid 70's. I was acting as a gofer for Gordon Holt in the days when Stereophile was a one man operation, stuffing envelopes, helping move speakers, and such. Bob Fulton showed up with lots of new 'stuff'. But the most fascinating stuff that day was the Fulton Gold speaker cables, the fatest(4 gauge?) cables I had ever seen in the days when 14 gauge lamp cord was a step up. I was and still am essentially a sceptic so I asked Bob if I could borrow a set of Fulton Golds to try at home. Not only did he agree but he went to the back of his truck, found a 32 foot(not exactly 32 feet as Bob had a theory on lengths to reduce resonance in cables) set, and just told me to keep them. They cost about \$250 , which in those days of lamp cord was as shocking for cables as \$10,000 would be today. I'm still using them now with some changes such as which branch takes plus and minus, how the branches lie next to each other, with some mechanical damping, etc. And they're still doing a fine job.

And one of the reasons I'm still using the Fulton Golds is a fascinating letter from the esteemed Ralph West in the March 1985 issue of HFN. He recounted an experiment he did with speaker cables and included measurements, meaningful objective measurements I feel. Ralph measured the frequency response of his amp, a Quad 405-2 I believe, at the speaker terminals of his Spondor BC1 speakers, a speaker with a fairly reactive impedance curve. He used two sets of cables, one with a 1.5 ohm resistance, the second with 0.1 ohm resistance. With the higher resistance the frequency response looked like a squashed version of the BC1 impedance curve with variations of about 0.8 db except above 10 khz where the response dropped about 2 db in the top octave. Since these were broad band dips and rises there should be a small, but noticeable variation in octave to octave balance. With the lower resistance cable there was about a 1.0 db increase in sensitivity and more importantly the frequency was almost flat with much less top octave fall off. The impedance related dips and rises were so small as to be only recognizable because one knew to look for them. I am certainly not convinced that low resistance is the only significant factor in cable design (witness the tweaks mentioned in the previous paragraph) but with objective evidence such as this I am convinced of the positive affects of low resistance (which would be even more evident with the higher output impedance of most tube amps). Thus my continued use of Fulton cables. ▶

Dawning of a new era...



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"...the most natural voice-band presence I've ever encountered..."

- Paul Messenger, HiFi Choice magazine January 2005

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We'll leave the last words to our customers, reviewers and show goers:

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"I felt power, dynamics and control this system felt alive. It's just great! - Mr A Johnson, customer

"Almost speechless, a rich and exciting listening experience. The sound will stay with me for the rest of the day."

Karida, London HiFi show visitor

"...thoroughly beguiling. "They show marvellous mid-to-treble delicacy, focus and coherence, and possibly the most natural voice-band presence I've ever encountered, with quite exceptional fingers-up-the-spine realism"

- Paul Messenger, HiFi Choice January 2005

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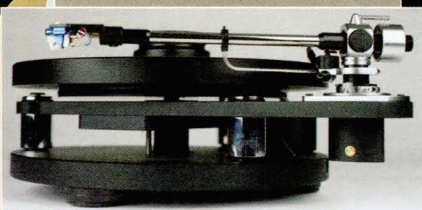
Final Electrostatic loudspeakers.

All the transparency and imaging that only comes with this type of speaker design. Model shown is the F500 panels with S200 300wpc active sub. All inclusive price of £3495. Also demonstrating the 400i package at £2000.



Amphion Xenon loudspeakers.

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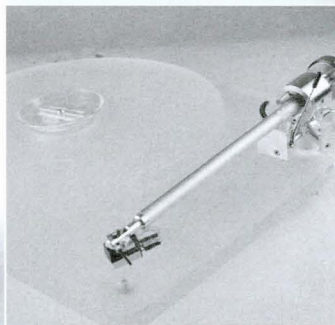
SME Series M2 tonearm.

Wonderful engineering for this price. A much better sound than we expected at £613. Cartridge shown is the excellent new Lyra Argo at £849.



Sugden Masterclass phono amplifier.

Very lucid, sonically on a par with some valve phono stages but with noise free high gain £1299.



Clearaudio Emotion turntable.

Beautiful looking, non-suspended design with the Satisfy unipivot tonearm. Incredible value, including cartridge at £655. Also demonstrating the Champion Level 1 turntable.



Rogue Audio 90 power amplifier.

The new 90 wpc stereo valve amplifier offering remarkable sound and value at £1995.



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▶ On another note, as I was just listening to LPs of these two singers as I read your magazine, let me put in a plug for two wonderful, but unfortunately obscure female singers from the 70's but still around, who have just had re-issues published on CD. Mary McCaslin has a folksy, slightly country like small but mesmerizing voice. She writes her own material that is so intensely personal that often when I try to sing along I can't because I begin to emotionally choke up and yet it is easy to associate to. And she also does other writers work so well that she can make it sound like she wrote it herself, even the Beatles music. Bonnie Koloc is a Chicago folk singer with a voice and intelligence that she can range from the seeming simplicity of folk songs to the pop music of Broadway. She has the kind of voice control and phrasing, that dare I say, makes me think of Sinatra. Her songs also consist of her own beautifully written material and well-chosen works of other writers. Both of these performers are among the group of relatively unknowns that are so good that they make you wonder what the hell the mass public sees in the latest platinum recording pop phenomenon.

Keep up the good work. You produce a beautiful and fun publication in the days when there are fewer and fewer of them, especially in the true audio arena.

Allen Edelstein

Via E-mail.

Dear Sir,

I was drawn to Issue 34 by virtue of your very brave and credible effort at blind testing of high-end cables. The results were indeed interesting. However as a sceptic of high-end cables, I remain only more convinced that beauty remains in the realm of the beholder. It appears that the listening panel were trying very hard to identify the expensive cable, and to avoid the embarrassment of daring to prefer the less expensive samples. You continued to excuse the poor scores on some dubious reasoning. You followed this article with one where you were a little scathing on some unknown cable manufacturer. What confused me was that you were unimpressed by the 'ProFi Gold Plugs'. Are you referring to the ones manufactured by Neutrik, or Clearaudio, or another that may be less well known. I am keen for you to exonerate the Neutrix Profis, as they are the same beasts that terminate the winner of the blind test, the Nordost Valhallas!

Yours faithfully,

Edson Cheah

Via E-mail.

Dear Sir,

In your review of the PM Components "Tube Technology" cables, you said "the cheaper interconnect appears to be a basic co-axial design and is terminated with rather nasty ProFi Gold plugs which are pretty enough but have no place on a cable of this price."

I'm trying to reconcile that comment about the ProFi plugs with the fact that the Nordost Valhalla interconnects, which in the blind listening article you said "...acts as the cable of choice for CT, CB and myself..." also use ProFi gold plugs.

Thank you.

Steve Eddy

Via E-mail.

An understandable confusion between the company ProFi, a Far-Eastern manufacturer of generic connectors who supply the plugs for many of the budget cables on the market, and the Neutrik ProFi plugs as used by Nordost amongst others. The two are completely different and separate, one a company name, the other a brand-name associated with a single product. However, you are right to raise the issue of plug quality, a vital and oft overlooked element in cable sound. Manufacturers are forced to assess their connectors on more than just sound-quality. Reliability, strain-relief, availability and repeatability are all important factors to be considered. This helps explain why most people accept the sonic benefits of the Bullet Plug, yet few are prepared to fit it as standard; Ham-fisted users can destroy them all too easily. However, as you'll discover in Issue 37, the WBT NextGen plugs are about to raise the bar... Ed.

Dear Sir,

ONLY FOOLS AND AMPLIFIERS...

I refer to Roy Gregory's Editorial in issue No 35, in which he wrote: "Once upon a time people claimed that all amplifiers sounded the same."

Only a fool would make such a claim, surely? The late, great Peter Walker was no fool and he was often misquoted as saying that all amplifiers sounded alike. What he actually said was this: "Competently designed amplifiers should sound alike."

Only a fool would disagree with that, surely?

Phil Postings

Via. E.mail

It wasn't Peter Walker I was referring to, however in response to your question, the validity of the statement depends entirely on your definition of "Competent". Clearly, according to the terms of the statement, once

▶ you have an amplifier that you consider competent, any device that sounds different, be it better or worse, will be incompetent. Thus the statement becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for its adherents.

However, back in the real world, there are many fine amplifiers, using many different technologies, all of which are capable of excellent musical results – given the right circumstances. But, alter the choice of partnering speaker – its efficiency and the nature of its load – and an amplifier that sounds perfectly fine in one context can be reduced to a muddled and disjointed mess in another. So, what are the rules? Does a “competent” amplifier have to be equally capable under all circumstances? More to the point, how do we define its performance or if it sounds the same as another? Once you start trying to actually define such things in the real world you quickly realise just how meaningless any universal notion of competence actually is. Limit the definition to a single context and it becomes more meaningless still! My problem with the statement is that, whilst it’s a philosophical truism, in reality it’s actively misleading. Ed.

Dear Sir,

I am a subscriber to your magazine which I enjoy greatly. Your reviews of products are on the whole very interesting and informative, with not too much of the “Dark tonal colours in the mid-band” type of flowery language so often used to bamboozle us ordinary English speaking folk! The choice of products in your pages is more often than not way out of my wallet’s capability, but it’s good to dream!

However, I would like to take umbrage with what seems to me to be Hi-Fi snobbery creeping in to your text. I refer to Jimmy Hughes’ column in the current magazine, Issue 35. He is discussing Beethoven (my favourite classical composer) and his Eroica symphony. The article is a most interesting and revealing one, I shall attempt to obtain some of the recordings mentioned as I am intrigued to listen to the different variations. Towards the end of the article however, he writes, “...the trumpet part at the climax of the first movement is seen for what it is - ludicrous and impertinent. The re-written version sounds coarse and vulgar - like brass band music...” Well, I am afraid I couldn’t believe my eyes.

My father was a professional musician, playing with brass bands in his youth, the Coldstream Guards and the D’Oyly Carte Opera Company in his working career and finishing his working days teaching and conducting youth brass bands. As a result, I was brought up in a household full of brass band music and even played a little myself. My Hi-Fi system does not compare with most of the kit in your magazine but it is decent quality equipment,

some of it self-made and produces a sound I am very happy with. I thoroughly enjoy listening to good recordings of brass band music, there is a lot of it out there, and am disappointed that a comment such as the above was allowed to go to print.

Some of the “classics” have been arranged for brass band and there are some composers who only compose/ed for brass bands. How this can be considered any less of an art-form is beyond me.

Surely it matters not what we listen to on our Hi-Fi’s, if it brings pleasure to the listener then the equipment has done its job. I am not a fan of Bananarama but would not think any less of someone who is and I would not call that type of music “coarse and vulgar”. There isn’t much I do not listen to, my collection ranges from Beethoven to The Black Dyke Mills Brass Band, via Bjork, Big Country and Bob Dylan (I also like music made by people whose names don’t begin with B!!). Maybe Jimmy Hughes should broaden his musical taste and try listening to some brass band music, you never know he might enjoy it!!

Yours,

James “coarse and vulgar” Crompton

Via E-mail.

Dear James

Sorry to give offence!

In saying what I said I did not mean to denigrate brass bands.

I was trying to say - the re-writing of the trumpet part makes the Eroica sound like the worst sort of brass band music. However, I would accept that what I actually wrote could be taken as a criticism of brass bands period, and I certainly did not mean to say that; quite the contrary. Actually, you might be surprised by the number of brass band records in my collection - I used to buy all the Chandos brass band competition discs recorded at the Royal Albert Hall, and particularly enjoy music played by a military band, where wind and brass combine. Pieces like Grainger’s A Lincolnshire Posy, or Vaughan Williams’ English Folk Song suite and the two Holst suites for Military band are great personal favourites.

Incidentally, Beecham used to dismiss Elgar’s music (all of it, no doubt!) as ‘Brass Band Music’ - a wicked, yet not entirely inaccurate jibe. And I say that as someone who loves Elgar. I hope you liked my piece (in parts at least) on the Eroica - and hope you find Beethoven’s pristine original vastly better than the usual version played - the more I hear that foreign trumpet part, the more surprising I find it that anyone would have the temerity to re-write Beethoven.

Best wishes

Jimmy Hughes



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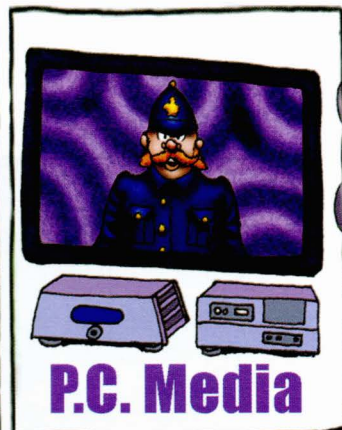
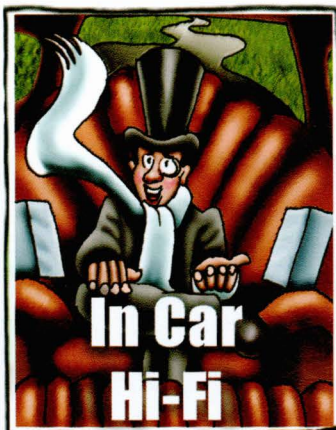
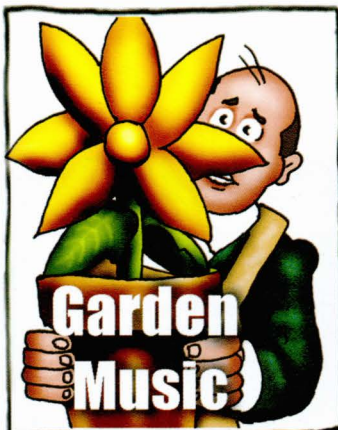
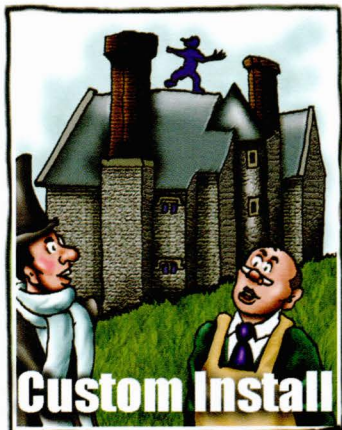
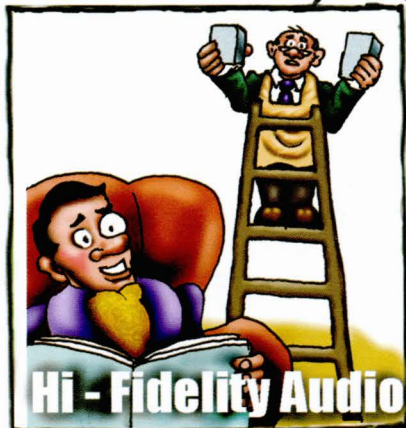
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Product Of The Year Awards Introduction

by Roy Gregory

There are lots of magazines, and between them they hand out a lot of awards. Ours are a little different...

For starters, we don't have meaningless categories: There again we don't have rules either. All we do is select, in a completely arbitrary manner, those products that have really impressed and entertained us this year. We like them – we think there's a good chance you will too!

Unfortunately, even something this simple can't escape without a degree of explanation. You'll soon realise that there are two distinct categories within the awards themselves: Product Of The Year awards and Discovery awards. Oh, and then there are the Record Of The Year awards, but those at least should be self-explanatory.

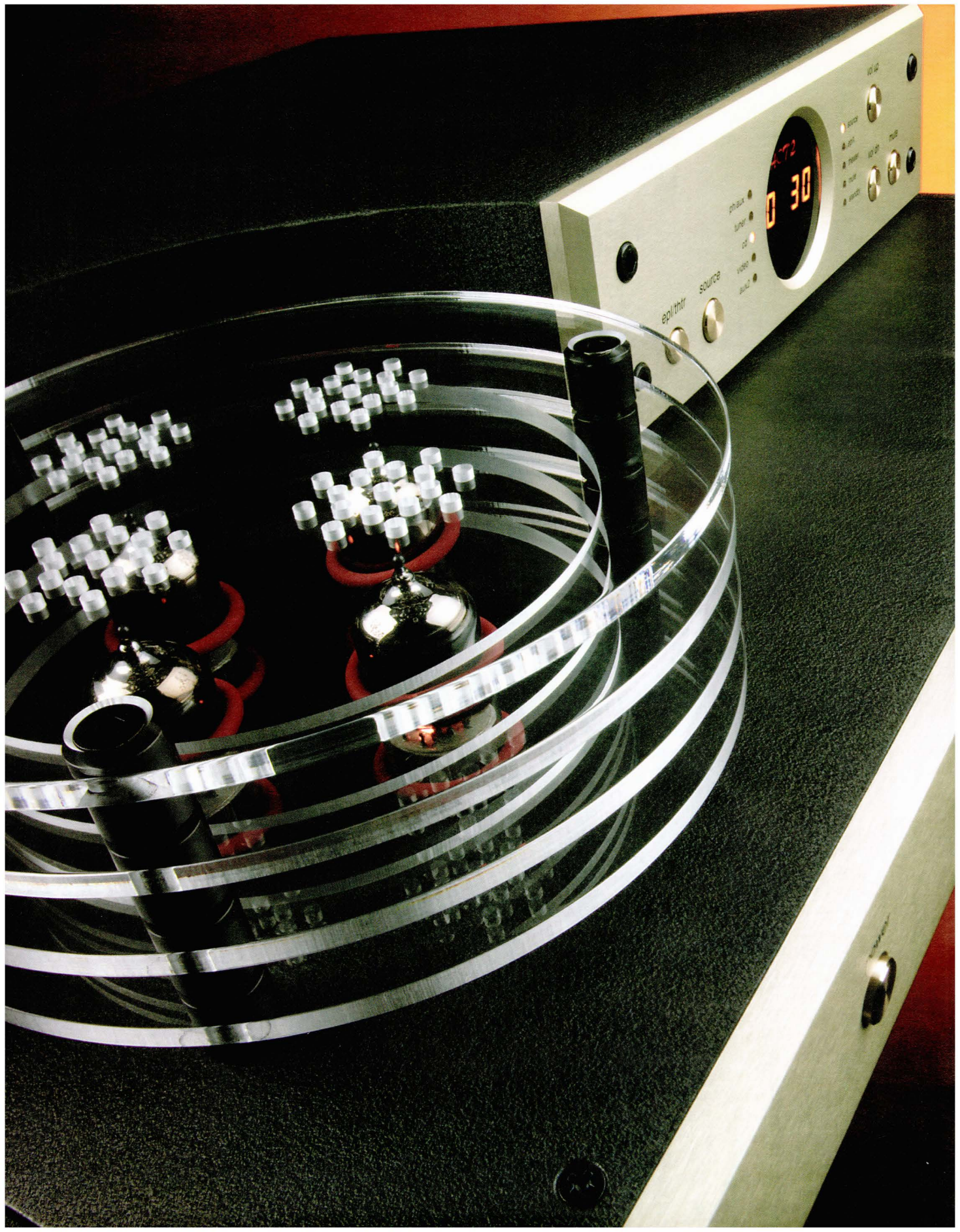
So, why the distinction? Well, it is intended to reflect a difference not so much in the products themselves but in the companies behind them. The most striking example is the contrast between the Avalon Eidolon Diamond and the Marten Design Coltrane. It would be easy to treat the two speakers as virtual clones, so much does a quick glance suggest that they share. However, look a little deeper and actually take a listen and you'll soon realise just how different these products are. What is more, those differences are inextricably lodged in the technologies employed and the very different philosophies that have selected them. Where the Eidolon Diamond is a logical extension of Avalon's evolutionary approach to loudspeaker design, a lineage that stretches back across many years, the Coltrane is a debut product that selected the latest available materials and technology in a clean-sheet design exercise. And that's the point: you couldn't have got to the Eidolon Diamond in any other way; the Coltrane pretty much has to come from a new company.

But the implications run far deeper than that. Dealing with a new company offers potential benefits but risks too. Buy a product from an established company and you should have a good idea of what to expect sonically speaking as well as reasonable security when it comes to servicing and back-up. Many new companies, especially the more interesting ones, bring new technology or new approaches into the industry. These can deliver previously undreamt of results, as well as totally unforeseen problems. Longevity is certainly possible (all those established companies started out somewhere!) but it isn't guaranteed. That's why we have introduced the Discovery awards – a category that reflects as much the novelty of thinking behind a product as the newness of the company that produces it. They generally indicate products that are from companies new to us (as opposed to necessarily new to the world of hi-fi). They are not lesser products or lesser awards, simply different. Indeed, in some cases (such as the Blue Pearl turntable) they rewrite the rules as regards what's possible.

Next year, I might well introduce a third category to reflect companies that have been in continuous production for ten years or more, but hey – one step at a time, a thought prompted by the reappearance of some familiar faces. But then that's no surprise either. The guys who've been doing it right for a while quite often continue to do so: Take a bow Conrad-Johnson, Koetsu, ProAc, Nordost, Rotel, Focal JMLabs and a few others...

Meanwhile, congratulations to all our award winners and thanks from everyone at Hi-Fi+ for lighting the way. You can't have a great magazine without great products. These are all great products.







conrad-johnson

ACT 2 Line-Stage and Premier 350 Power Amp

by Roy Gregory

Something of a fixture in the US high-end, conrad-johnson have won that status by remaining unfailingly loyal to the pursuit of musical as opposed to hi-fi performance. Their products have always put the whole before the particular, the natural before the spectacular, a policy that has produced a whole string of designs that have lived long in both the memory and the systems of audiophiles. Where long-term musical satisfaction counts over novelty or the ability to impress one's mates, c-j products have found loyal customers. And not just the flagship, Premier range either. The company ethos extends across and can be appreciated in every product they make,

In truth, we could have given this award to any of a host of different designs, the Premier 140 having a particularly strong claim. However, we eventually settled on the combination of the ACT 2 line-stage and Premier 350 amplifier, products that encompass many different aspects of the company's approach.

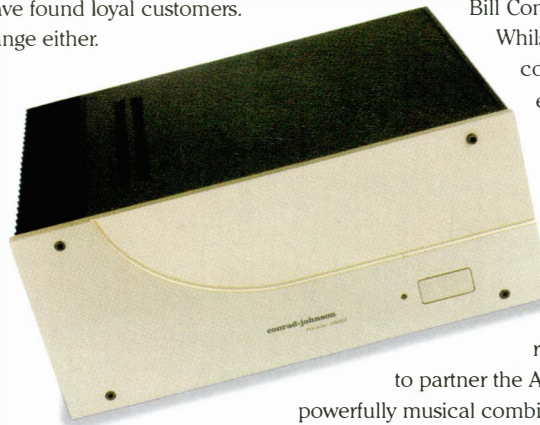
Representative of the latest generation of c-j products, it looks like being a vintage year. What they share in common is the application of new, proprietary Teflon capacitors in place of the previous polystyrenes. Other than that they're about as different as can be. The ACT 2 sits squarely in the company's traditional field of excellence, being a vacuum tube design. What's impressive is the way that new components, especially in the power-supplies, combined with different tubes, has enabled the development and evolution of the circuit that

first set new standards in the legendary ART. The result is simpler, more compact and cheaper, while the dynamic and timbral resolution of the new Teflon capacitors opens a whole new level of inner detail in familiar recordings, ensuring c-js' continued presence at the audio top-table.

The Premier 350 represents a stark contrast. The first solid-state design to bear the Premier designation, it represents the final realization, some 25 years on, of Bill Conrad's first ever solid-state design.

Whilst this further underlines the company's incremental and evolutionary approach to product development, the circuit itself emphasises simplicity and the willingness to adopt unusual or innovative solutions. With only two gain stages, the 350 manages to be at once powerful and transparent, offering the resolution and fundamental stability

to partner the ACT 2. Together they represent a powerfully musical combination that further extends the reputation of this illustrious marque.



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Vivid Audio B1 Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

This gorgeous looking speaker was conceived and is built in South Africa, albeit with considerable technical input from leading UK designer Laurence Dickie.

Dickie worked at B&W for many years, during which time he was responsible for the original 'snail-shaped' Nautilus design, and the influence of this design classic can be clearly seen in Vivid's much more affordable but no less elegant creation.

This is a serious high end speaker that not only looks wonderful, but is also both original and logical. In a world where stand-mounts have performance advantages, yet floorstanders are aesthetically preferred, Vivid's £6,590 per pair B1 is a stand-mount-with-integral-stand design that cleverly combines the best of both worlds.

It's a four-driver design, operating as a three-and-a-half-way. There are two 6-inch alloy cone main drivers, one facing forwards, the other backwards and rolling off above 100Hz. The front 6-inch continues to 900Hz before handing over to a 2-inch alloy dome midrange, which in turn transfers to a 1-inch tweeter around 4kHz. The extra midrange driver ensures all drive units operate under exclusively piston conditions, and also helps maintain consistent sound distribution.

A very solid and hefty speaker, the elegantly curved enclosure is moulded from a polyester resin, filled with carbon fibres and other mass-loading minerals. Like an egg, the curved shape confers immense mechanical strength and stiffness, but also has acoustic benefits inside and out.

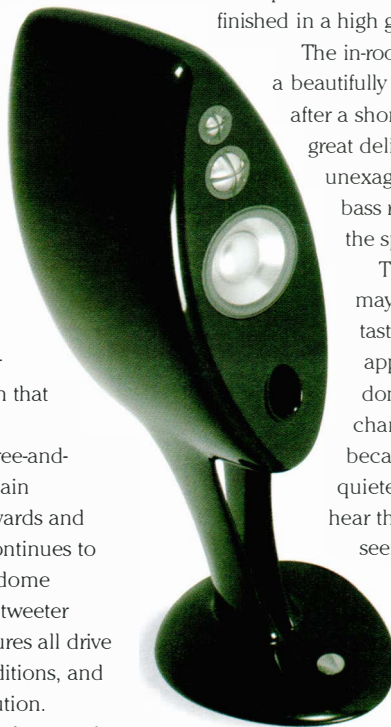
The two identical back-to-back cone drivers are mechanically coupled together, yet decoupled from the enclosure by lossy mounting. Reflex loading is applied via twin opposing ports front and rear. The two dome drivers are

both loaded behind by individual tapered tube transmission lines hidden inside the enclosure, and are also mechanically decoupled. The whole thing - enclosure, legs and base - is finished in a high gloss metallic automotive paint.

The in-room, far-field averaged measurements show a beautifully smooth and even frequency balance, and after a short run-in, the B1 proved to be a speaker of great delicacy and subtlety, and quite exceptional unexaggerated neutrality, though in my room the bass region did sound a shade heavy, even with the speaker well clear of walls.

The sound is laid back, for sure, and some may find it a little too restrained for personal taste. But this is a speaker for those who appreciate genuine refinement, and who don't want something that imposes its own character on the proceedings. That's partly because the B1 must have just about the quietest and least 'boxy' enclosures around. You hear the drive units, of course, but the enclosure seems to make no contribution of its own.

It doesn't glamorise or hype the sound, but doesn't hide anything either, and while it looks utterly sensational, it's sonically remarkably discreet and unintrusive, merely allowing the system to get on and make sweet music.



Price: **£6590**

Manufacturer: Vivid Audio (PTY) Ltd.,
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—Jimmy Hughes, *Hi-Fi+*,
Issue 34, pages 88 to 91



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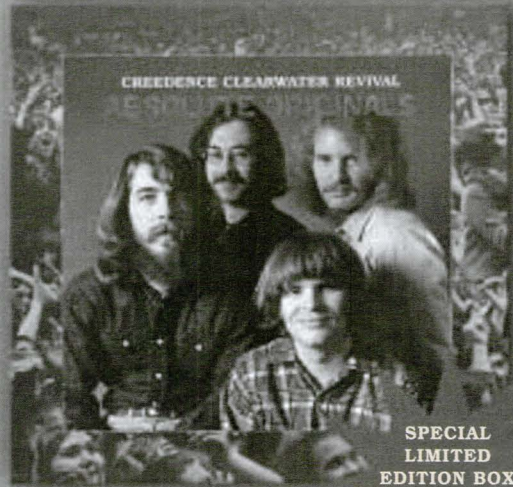
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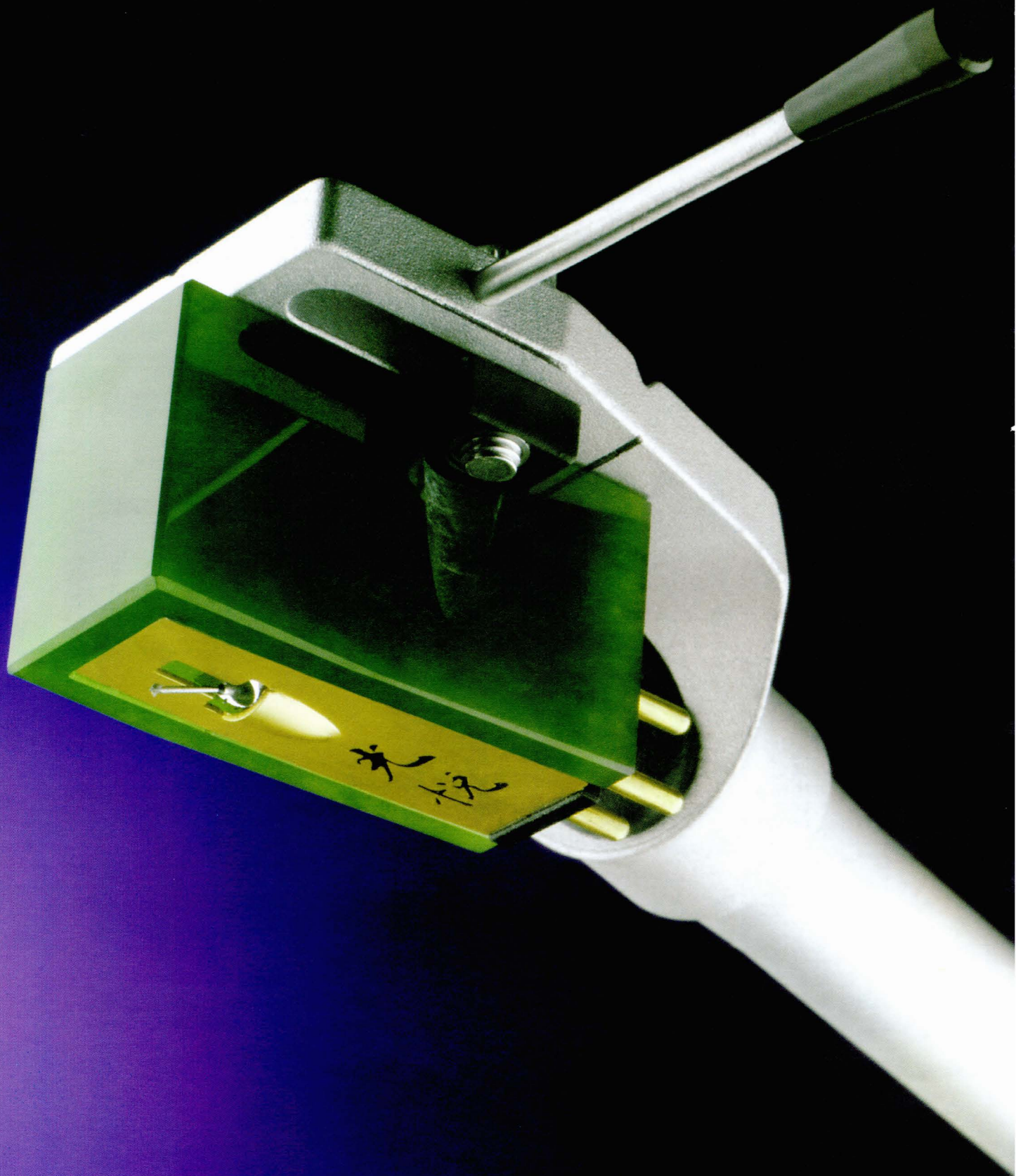
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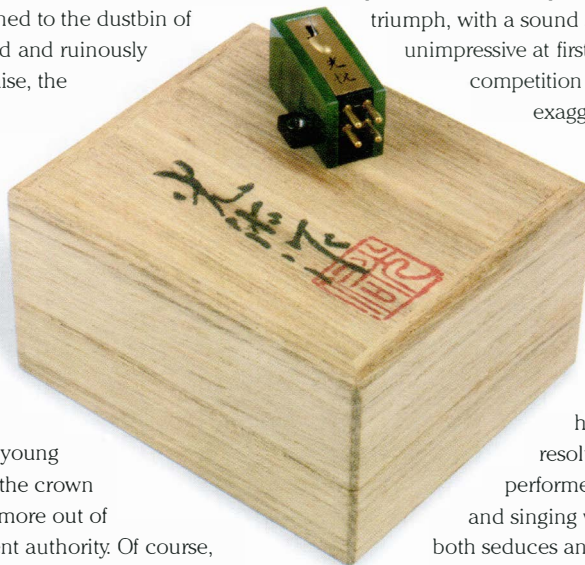
by Roy Gregory

There is no single product that sums up the identity and ethos, the very essence of high-end audio, as succinctly as the Koetsu cartridges. They were there when it all began and they're still here now. But back in the day, when the Asak was king and valves had been long since consigned to the dustbin of history, these tiny, exquisitely crafted and ruinously priced gems offered a hint of promise, the glimmer of another, better world.

But if Koetsu represented the first foot in the door, a role that guaranteed them legendary status in the annals of the English speaking audio press, they're also living proof that you can't survive on reputation alone. The world of high-end cartridges moved on, and whilst Koetsu still represented the doyenne to all the young upstarts, there came a point when the crown started to slip and the respect was more out of affection for past glories than current authority. Of course, fashion also had something to do with it, as well as the fickle promise of better performance at lower prices. But through it all, the Koetsus maintained their integrity and their own special sound, their distinctive packaging and total lack of technical specifications. There was no high-tech marketing hype and no full page adverts showing blown up micro-ridge stylus profiles.

Well, not much has changed; still no specs, ads or high-tech hype. But, the latest Koetsus are re-establishing the brand's reputation for stellar musical performance. They may look

almost exactly the same as models from 20 years ago, but their performance represents a huge step forward whilst still managing to retain the power and presence that built that reputation in the first place. The Jade Platinum is a triumph, with a sound so natural that it seems unimpressive at first. But comparisons with the competition leave them sounding forced, exaggerated and hyped. The Jade just breathes music, its sure-footed tracking and natural energy allowing performances to swell and bloom without edge or grain to intrude and destroy the illusion. Dynamics are beautifully scaled and realistic in range, but it's the instrumental colours, micro harmonics and low-level resolution that really bring performers to life, instilling their playing and singing with a passion and vitality that both seduces and convinces all at once. Six-thousand pounds is a huge amount of money for a cartridge. Hear the Jade Platinum and it starts to seem like a bargain. Suddenly, justifying the purchase isn't the problem; it's affording that focuses the mind!



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Rotel RA 1062 Integrated Amplifier

by Jason Hector

What do we look for when buying a component? Good sound at the price is a given but what about features, build quality, reliability and a reputable brand? They all count for something but it is very rare to find one product that encapsulates them all. The Rotel RA1062 is that rare beast, being pretty much all things to all people. It is a powerful but subtle, full featured but audio tweaked integrated amplifier from a brand renowned for its reliably musical, budget sector products.

Look at the feature list and it is hard to think of anything that has been missed off. The RA1062, like the 1060 before it, features separate listen and record selectors, two tape loops, remote control of all major functions, a contour (read tone) control that can be turned off, a balance control and a headphone output. The 1062 has even gained a moving magnet phono-stage and some lovely blue LED's.

Good points from the audiophile perspective are that circuit layouts are symmetric and feature metal film resistors and polystyrene or polypropylene capacitors in the signal path. The amplifier also sports a large and heavy in-house designed toroidal transformer followed by a T-network capacitor. This combination forms a low impedance, highly regulated power supply to help the amplifier's dynamic capabilities.

The fit and finish is excellent and again would put many more expensive products to shame. All of the controls feel solid and weighty and the product is a joy to use.

Sound wise the Rotel, far from announcing itself, simply got on with the job of driving the speakers and propelling

music into my listening room. Totally rhythmically committed, the sound was emotionally charged in just the way the flatterer in me likes. Yet this amplifier also has a surprisingly effective presentation of spatial cues and instrument timbre.

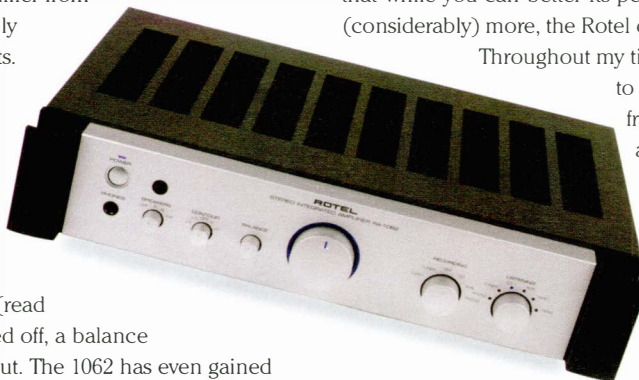
In my review of the 1062, I spent a lot of time on its failings. Don't let that mislead you. What is important is that while you can better its performance by spending (considerably) more, the Rotel does get most things right.

Throughout my time with it, it never failed

to make entertaining music. A friend has one at home driving a pair of old Acoustic Energy AE1's and it makes a great sound. The speakers and CD player will be changed before the amplifier. It's great to see that Rotel have managed to take an already good product in the 1060 and improve it

considerably, both in sound and features, while keeping the price static. I think you would have to spend well in excess of £1000 to significantly better the RA1062.

This product deserves this award because it is something the industry sadly lacks and needs more of – a high quality, good value product you can live with. Just make sure you treat it to a decent source and speakers and sit back and enjoy.



Price: **£595.00**

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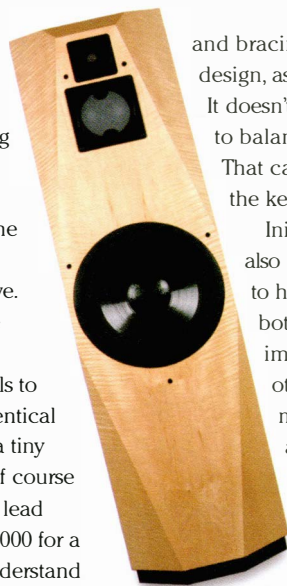
Avalon Acoustics Eidolon Diamond Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Avalon Acoustics seem to have been around forever, quietly ploughing their own furrow, proof against the excesses and indiscretions of fashion and fame. Instead they've concentrated on producing discrete speakers that are beautifully crafted and as near sonically invisible as they can make them.

For what represents (for all practical purposes) the company's flagship speaker, the Diamond is neither particularly large nor, at £33000, particularly expensive. Bear in mind that the world of speakers is one where bigger is so often perceived as better that biggest is assumed to be best. It's clearly not a logic that appeals to Avalon. The Eidolon Diamond is visually, virtually identical to the two-thirds the price, standard Eidolon; there's a tiny faux "diamond" embedded in the badge – oh, and of course THAT tweeter. It's a presentational conceit that might lead people to assume that they're being asked to pay £10000 for a pair of diamond diaphragm tweeters. That's to misunderstand the speaker, both in content and in concept.

Whilst there's a natural tendency to fasten one's interest on the tweeter, do so and you'll be disappointed. No high frequency fireworks here. Instead, the clean, low-distortion extension can sound almost dull – until you appreciate the uncannily natural detail and air that the system's delivering. Instead, the really impressive thing about the Eidolon Diamond is the seamless way in which Avalon have integrated all its elements into a single, coherent whole that cleaves to the core of the music. Examine this speaker in detail and you soon realise that it shares virtually nothing in common with its near namesake. Apart from the ceramic midrange driver and the single set of input terminals it's all-change, with the tweeter, bass driver, crossover, cabinet construction



and bracing all being different. This is an entirely new design, as reflected in the measured performance.

It doesn't just go higher it goes lower too, in order to balance the extraordinary treble extension.

That carefully weighted bass is, in many ways, the key to this speaker.

Initially unimpressive the Eidolon Diamond is also the most unobtrusive speaker you're ever likely to have heard. So even is its performance from bottom to top and in every respect that it imposes less of itself on the signal than any other speaker I've used, as well as delivering more of that signal. The Avalon has that golden ability to make the most of recordings rather than pulling them apart. It isn't perfect, and its insatiable appetite for high-quality power makes it expensive to use as well as buy, but to achieve full-range performance of such quality from a cabinet this compact and beautifully finished represents a new benchmark for high-end speaker performance. As so often in hi-fi, less is actually more. In this instance it applies to price too. The diamond is easily capable of musically embarrassing many a six-figure behemoth, making them sound like the dinosaurs they are.

Price: **£33000**

UK Distributor: Audiofreaks
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153

Manufacturer: Avalon Acoustics
Net. www.avalonacoustics.com





L'ARCHET D'OR



L'Archet D'Or, Series 2

by Richard S. Foster

For the past two years Glenn Armstrong has continued to deliver something unique to this industry: music of unparalleled calibre combined with a standard of packaging that has not been seen since the golden age of LP manufacturing. RCA's deluxe *Soria* series springs to mind, but this presentation is more like the hand screened art sleeves produced by Nixa in the early fifties via sixties pop art. We have here a truly limited edition masterpiece for a ridiculously low sum of money. Remember, this is a four record set strictly limited to 250 copies, individually signed and numbered for only £300.

The music contained in this set was described extensively in Issue 27 but bears reviewing here. Marcelle Meyer's Mozart; 20th Century works performed by Jeanne Gautier, Nadine Desouches and Lelia Gousseau; Brahms and Beethoven with Maurice Maréchal and Cécile Ousset; Ravel and Debussy with Agnelle Bundervoët.

These records are a revelation. None of these artists are well known outside the high-end connoisseur marketplace. None of these performances have been heard for almost half a century and only then to a limited audience via radio. These alone are reasons enough for this well deserved award. While we can appreciate that these artists are relatively unknown, their reputations are held aloft by the cognoscenti and nothing can prepare us for the astonishing performances and the glorious rich monophonic sound of these records. While many readers may think the price too high to spend on a set of LPs, I can assure them that I am aware of sales of records by these artists (we're talking about one record of one performance) that can bring more than

ten times the cost of the L'Archet D'Or set, they are so phenomenally rare. Now collectable records might not hold the same appeal to you as they do those who pay big money for them, but it serves to underline the astonishing musical value of the gift Armstrong has given us.

I keep returning to these marvelous records and they continue to satisfy on so many levels. There is nothing in this collection, or AO Series 1 for that matter, that will not

stand the test of time. This is an important factor in my thinking. The music, the performances, the sound quality, all bring an almost visceral pleasure that could be sinful.

The presentation is equally striking and vital, the gorgeous covers designed by Armstrong and Flavia Olivares.

The work involved in unearthing the recordings for these issues (they are NOT re-issues, but first time releases, never before seen on vinyl or compact disc) is extremely complex. Sadly, many times, after all the effort, potentially exciting material may not be up to the standards demanded by Armstrong. We are truly fortunate to have this treasure available to us and I urge anyone with the slightest hunger for beautifully produced, honestly presented accounts of thrilling music to run to <http://www.coupdarchet.com> and grab yourself a handful of manna from the Gods. I continue to look forward to more from this courageous company. Congratulations and many thanks Glenn.

Price: £300

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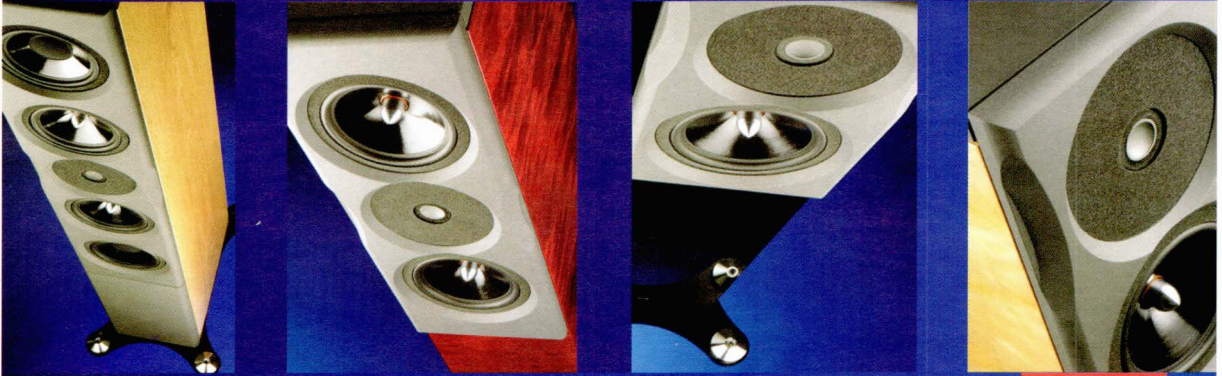
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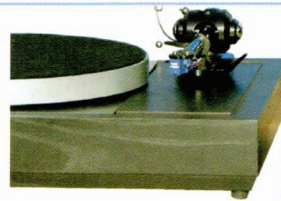
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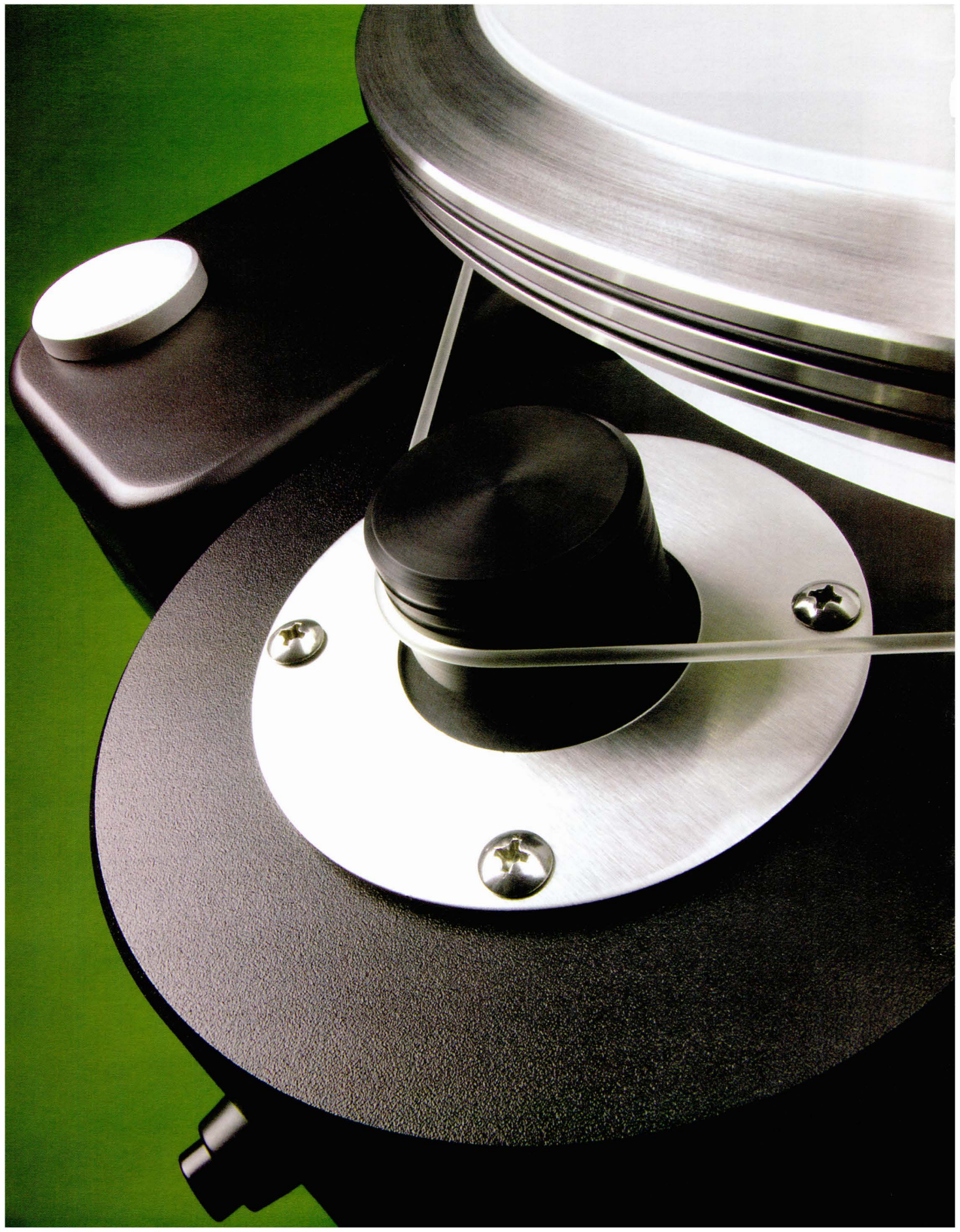
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VPI Scout-Master Turntable and JMW 9.0 Tonearm

by Roy Gregory

Another year, another Awards Issue and another award for VPI; in fact, the company has received an award in each of the last three sets, for the TNT Hot-Rod, the Aries Scout and most recently, the HRX. Cynics and conspiracy theorists can make of this what they will, but I respond with a single question; how can we not give these products awards?

The world of record players (and record playing) is notoriously tweaky and arcane. What started out as mystique and an argument in support of specialist expertise has since become an embarrassing legacy and a stark contrast to the simplicity and usability of the CD. Many customers asks themselves why they should bother with the complexity and palaver of playing records when CDs are sooo straightforward... Well, I'd like to think that we all know the answer to that one, but Harry Weisfeld of VPI has gone a whole step further, delivering his response in physical rather than verbal terms. Even his biggest turntable (and I do mean BIG) is a model of simplicity when it comes to set-up, and whilst it offers adjustability to rival even the SPJ, those adjustments are easy and user-friendly enough to disarm even the sternest critic. But perhaps his crowning achievement lies not with the justifiably revered TNT and its derivatives, but with a simpler, smaller and even more practical device.

Product development has always been an evolutionary quest for Harry. It's a trait that drives his customers wild with frustration. Forever tinkering, he constantly improves his designs – which is another way of saying that you've no sooner bought it than there's an upgrade available. Of course, the

benefit of such changes is generally incremental and they can (human nature aside) be sensibly ignored. The sound you bought is, after all, the sound you bought. However, the upside of all this fettleing is that it nothing is off-limits and Harry will try anything; once in a while this exploratory attitude delivers pay dirt.

Take the simple MDF plinth of the Aries Scout and double it up to create a constrained layer. Combine it with the platter and peripheral clamp from the HRX, riding on a lengthened version of the Scout's innovative bearing and the motor from the TNT Hot-Rod and what have you got. The answer is a deck that combines compact dimensions with plug and play simplicity and a stepped upgrade path. Add the nine-inch version of the JMW tonearm along with the SDS external power supply and you've a turntable that gets shockingly close to the performance of the true heavyweights.

The fully loaded Scout Master, for such is it called, may sacrifice the elegance and proportions of its bigger brothers, but if performance is your sole concern, then there are few decks to touch it, and none at its price.

Price: **£2095 - £3495**

UK Distributor: Cherished Record Co.
Tel. (44)(0)1579 363603

Manufacturer: VPI Industries Inc.
Net. www.vpiindustries.com





Focal J.Mlab



Focal-JMLabs Chorus 707 Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

Few of us have unlimited money available to indulge in our hi-fi hobby, so deciding the optimum way to apportion a given budget for best effect remains crucial. It might be a slightly old-fashioned view, but there's still a strong case for building a system 'from the front', spending as much as possible on the front end and amplification, and economising at the speaker end of things.

There's therefore good reason to pay close attention to a top quality budget-price loudspeaker, such as this £349/pair Chorus 707 from French maker Focal-JMLabs. It's neither a fancy nor a fashionable package, but rather follows a format that has survived the test of decades, and still makes just as much sense today. Finished in a mix of vinyl and veneer, and a choice of three options, it's a large stand-mount that deserves to be placed on high quality 600mm stands. Fashion today favours slim floorstanders, often with small multiple drivers, but there are good sonic reasons for sticking with the simple two-driver line-up, and in separating the roles of loading/enclosing the main driver, and supporting the whole thing well off the ground.

The 20-litre port-loaded enclosure is driven by a 175mm cast-frame main driver, a combination that's quite capable of delivering decent bass weight and extension under normal in-room conditions, without too much box surface area to add coloration. The main driver has a 130mm diameter 'polyglass'-damped cone, while the tweeter uses a 25mm aluminium/magnesium alloy dome, inverted in the Focal tradition and

driven from a 19mm coil and neodymium magnets. Crossing over at 2.4kHz, the network is fed from twin terminal pairs, allowing bi-wire or bi-amp options.

Musically this is a thoroughly capable and highly enjoyable speaker by any standards. It has a smooth evenhandedness, a fine freedom of expression, and hides its modest pretensions very well indeed, especially when fed from a high quality system. However, it does have its own quite distinctive character. Measurement shows a slightly restrained bass with the speakers clear of walls, some excess through the lower mid-band, and a smooth, flat response thereafter, though the treble is a little stronger than average.

There's some 'boxy' coloration here, and a touch of nasality with voices too, but the 'open' presence sounds very natural, and avoids the 'shut in' character commonly encountered. Voices are impressively intelligible, even at very low levels, but the sound can become a little aggressive when the volume is turned up high. This 'bright' top end is perhaps the 707's most distinctive feature, and will probably suit some listeners and systems, but not all. Detail is certainly enhanced, but it's important that the signal feeding these speakers is of good basic quality and free from treble distortions.



Price: **£349 per pair**

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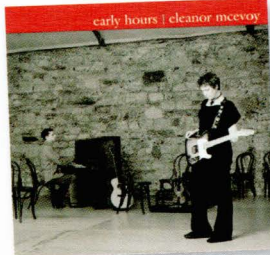
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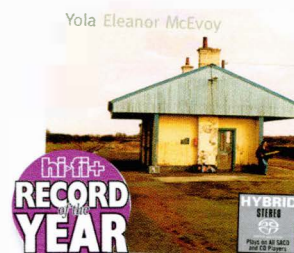


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Pathos Classic One Integrated Amplifier

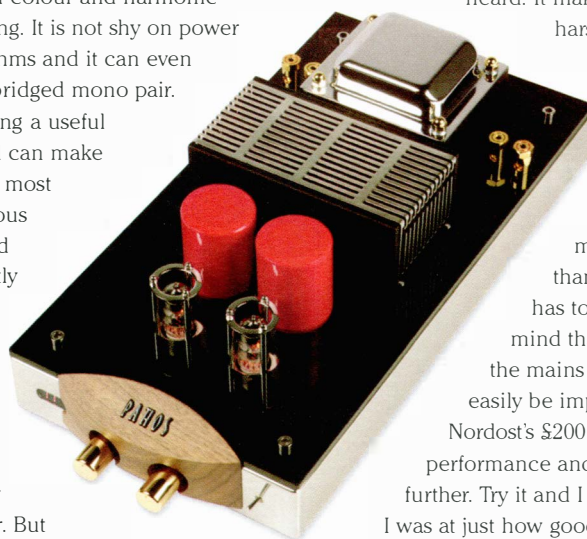
by Chris Thomas

One of the surprises of the year and one of the better kept audio secrets, the entry level Pathos is so much more than a striking little piece of audio architecture. It looks like a valve amplifier but in fact only the input section is valve driven. However, this is enough to bestow the rest of the solid-state circuitry with an injection of colour and harmonic richness that can be beguiling. It is not shy on power either with 70 watts into 8 ohms and it can even summon up 135 watts as a bridged mono pair. It has five line-inputs including a useful balanced section (XLR) and can make a respectable stab at driving most speaker loads although serious auditioning is recommended here as the Pathos is distinctly more at home with some designs than others. It made great music with the Eben X-Centric but was surprisingly unable to repeat the feat to quite the same extent with the X-Baby from the same manufacturer. But get it right and you will be rewarded with a slightly relaxed but very informative insight into your favourite music. The Classic One's greatest trick is that it allows the musicians and not the electronics to create the tension and still brings great focus and attention to detail to the proceedings.

It is an unforced sounding amplifier but it never loses its strong sense of the rhythmic as it has excellent grip across its bandwidth and a feeling that it will never grow flustered and this is maintained up to surprisingly high levels. If you

are an out and out head banging rock 'n roll merchant then the Moon i-3 will undoubtedly appeal more, but it cannot match the seductive powers of the Pathos nor its truly amazing mid-band abilities and pure charm when dealing with vocals which are, at times, almost as good as I have heard. It makes so many other amplifiers sound harsh, electronic and over-processed.

And add to this the stunning sense of sound-staging, depth and pure presence and you are looking at an amplifier for someone who likes to get up close and personal with their music. Sure the bass is a little softer than you might wish but at £1350 it just has to be a bargain. You need to bear in mind that it is quite system dependent and the mains lead that comes as standard can easily be improved upon with the addition of Nordost's £200 Shiva, which lifts the overall performance and refinement of the amplifier even further. Try it and I think you will be as surprised as I was at just how good it is; different, but interesting and always on the side of the music.

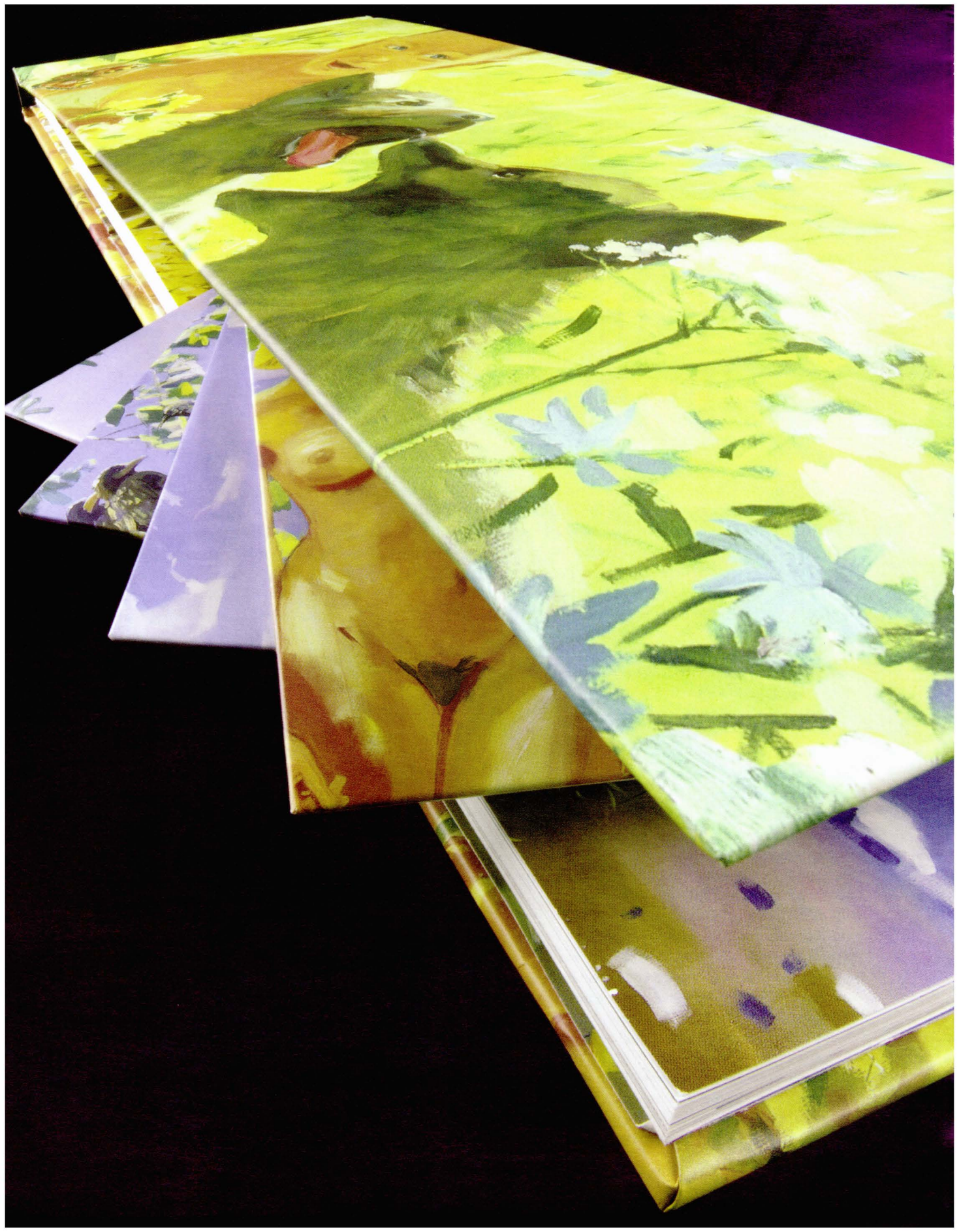


Price: **£1350**

UK Distributor: UKD Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1753 652669
Net. www.ukd.co.uk

Manufacturer: Pathos Acoustics SRL
Net. www.pathosacoustics.com







Talking Heads Once In A Lifetime

by Roy Gregory

Normally, when a hi-fi magazine gives an award for a recording, it goes to some small, specialist label for some minimalist recording of an artist few people have ever heard of. Either that, or it goes to a re-issue house for some slab of 180g (or heavier) vinyl, pressed and sold in quantities that rarely get beyond three figures. Well, it's nice to break that habit. Labels don't come much bigger than EMI and bands don't come much bigger than Talking Heads (at least not ones that've got any musical credibility left).

What makes EMI's revisiting of the band so impressive is the balance they've brought to this most complex of projects. Byrne, as the central hub is complicated enough, but tracing the musical and personal threads that bind him to the other members of the band elevates the problem to another level of complexity altogether. The secret is to capture the essence of Byrne's quirky individualism, but also the creative cradle that allowed it to flourish, provided by the other band members. Then you've got to trace the band through its many evolutions without getting lost in the myriad albums and individual tracks, soundtracks and other projects, let alone the solo work.

EMI have got the track selection spot-on, with just the right mix of the rare and the familiar, the live, the studio and the alternate takes. Then there's the additional DVD footage too, and that's before we even get onto what they've done with the sound. Early Talking Heads CD transfers were far from what the medium is capable of

delivering these days, with glassy, opaque sound that turned the raw recordings into something really quite nasty. These re-mastered versions are a world away from those horrors, with presence and energy to match the early LPs, together with a detailed refinement and focus that does much



to counter the brasher tendencies in the earliest material. In fact, sonically they serve as an object lesson in what can be done with older material when it meets the latest technology.

Add in commentary from the major players and well-chosen illustrations, all presented in a sumptuous booklet and the only possible complaint is the bizarre format that defies all known storage systems. But then, even that is something of a tradition with Talking Heads, a band whose sleeves always pushed the envelope.



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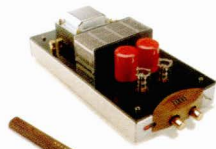
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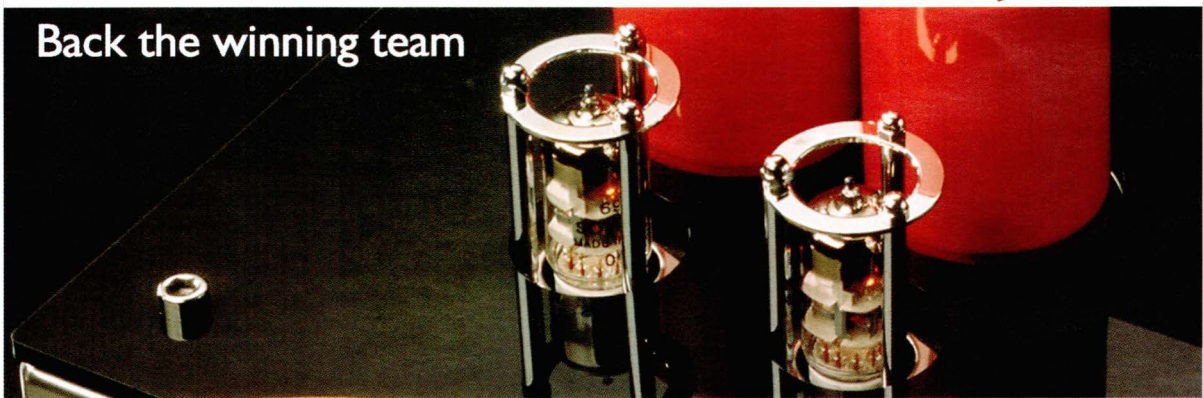


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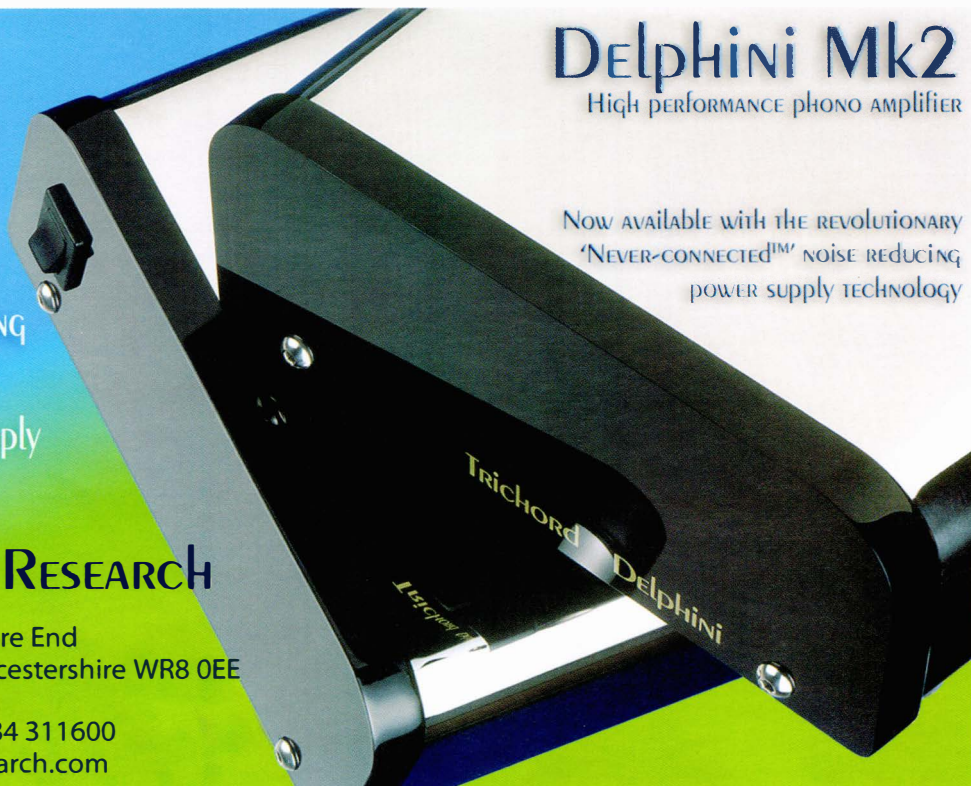
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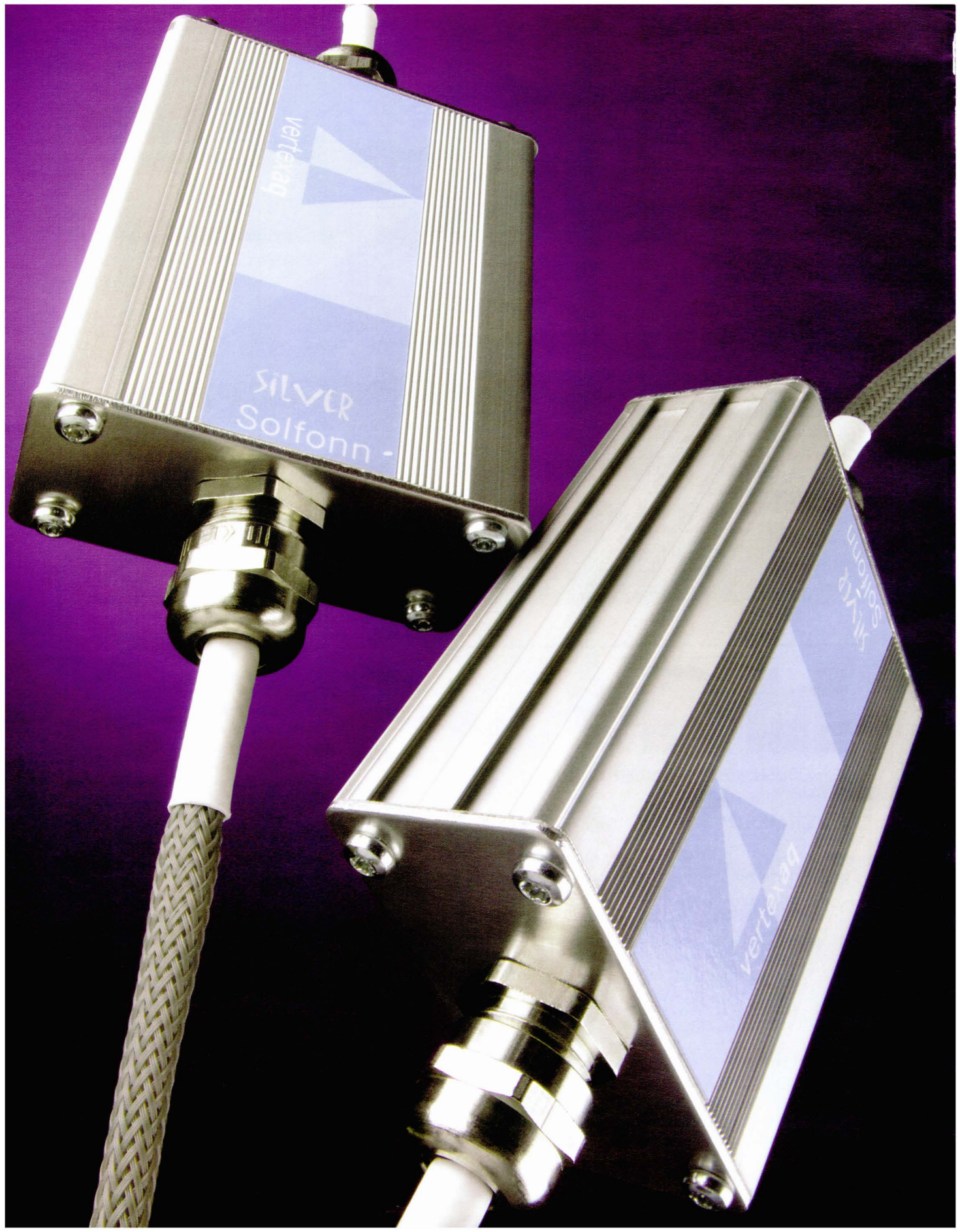
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Vertex AQ Cables and Isolation Products

by Paul Messenger

The name Vertex AQ gives little clue to the who, what or why of this newcomer. One could describe it as a maker of accessories, but that would be to sell this creative new company decidedly short. Yes, it does make the sort of bits and pieces normally classed as accessories, but it does so within a unified and coherent context that is entirely original and remarkably effective.

A roster of curiously named and quite costly products include the Kinabalu support platform, the Jaya mains treatment, Roirama mains leads, Solfohn interconnects, and Moncayo speaker cables. All have been specifically designed to remove the wideband mechanical vibrations that our systems receive, generate and pass around, and which, Vertex AQ suggests, adversely interfere with both digital and analogue low level electrical signals, compromising the real-world noise floor and system dynamic range. To do this most effectively, the various absorbers need to be distributed throughout the system.

The \$295 Jaya mains filter unit is a small but quite hefty alloy box on the end of a short length of mains cable. It's plugged into a spare socket, and operates in 'shunt' mode to absorb spikes, RFI and mechanical vibration. The effect of plugging in first one and then a second Jaya was a sweetening and 'tidying up' of the top end, and reduced 'graininess', though the musical communication remained unimpaired. A newer, more costly Silver Jaya is even more effective.

The Roirama mains leads (\$329 each) have 2m of fairly stiff cable, decent plugs at each end, and in the middle an alloy box that looks the same as the Jaya's, but purely acts as a vibration absorber here. The improvement was qualitatively similar by somewhat greater than that achieved by Jaya alone.



I tend not to get excited by upmarket speaker cables, but have made an exception for the Moncayo (\$1,295 per mono-wire 3m pair). This has two much larger vibration absorption boxes along its length, and classy locking WBT 4mm connectors. Once again it was noticeable how these cables 'quietened' the system's background, yet allowed full dynamic expression. Coloration and 'boxiness' were reduced, and stereo depth and spaciousness improved. And similar improvements were found with the Kinabala platform (from \$327.50), and the Solfohn interconnect (\$595 for a 1.5m phono-terminated pair), all of which helps confirm the effectiveness of this systematic approach.

Although costly and tweaky, the various Vertex AQ treatments can deliver remarkable improvements in sound quality, especially from digital sources. This stuff really works, and that's by no means always the case in the wacky world of hi-fi accessories.

Manufacturer: Vertex AQ
Tel. (44)(0)1454 326496
Net. www.vertexaq.com







Moon i-3 Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

Simaudio, the Canadian manufacturer of Moon products are on something of a roll and are one the “happening” audio companies of the moment. The i-3 is perhaps the bargain of the range though you would never know it if you listen to it from the box or unwarmed. Customers and dealers beware because this is an amplifier that requires at least six weeks of warm-up time before it begins to show what it is capable of. Ignorant of this fact I was initially distinctly underwhelmed by it.

It has power to burn at 100 watts per channel even though it does grow a little flustered at high gain settings. But from cold, whilst it is ultra fast and full of impact it is also tonally bright, rather black and white and distinctly edgy. It sounds like a bare-bones amplifier. But then, as the days and weeks pass, it begins to add more and more flesh to those bones and the rough edges are gradually burnished away leaving a sound that is very solid-state yet immensely satisfying, especially to those who feel that too many modern designs are somewhat safe and conservative in their balance.

Its speed is one of its main attractions and it remains one of the only amplifiers I have heard this year that is comfortable when dealing with pure rock music, but to categorise it purely as such would be to do it a severe injustice. It has real driving power and the ability to get a grip on speakers normally considered out of its league. I was amazed at the job it did with the Micro Utopia Be and the way in which it responded when I introduced it to a full Nordost Valhalla loom, including the mains cable, as this

can often magnify the shortcomings of cheaper amplifiers by highlighting their lack of tonal refinement and resolution to say nothing of their rhythmic aspirations. But the i-3 rose to the occasion and actually did a better job than some pre-power designs costing twice its price. You

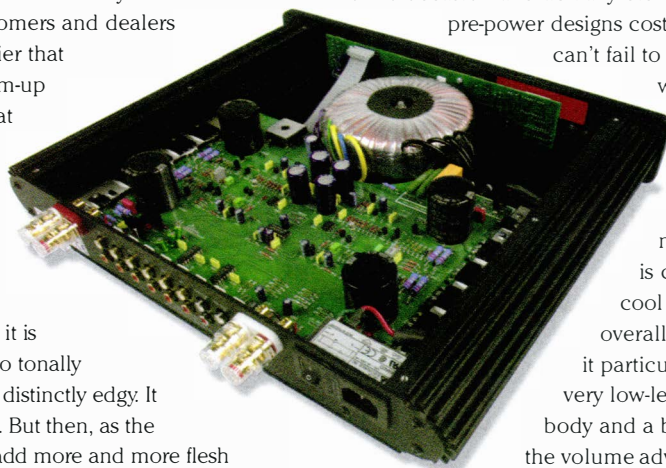
can't fail to be impressed by the way it draws you into

the music with its no nonsense grip, clarity and sheer note control. It may

not major on depth and is certainly a bit on the cool side when it comes to overall tonal balance. Nor is

it particularly impressive at very low-level where it lacks body and a bit of weight, but as the volume advances it snaps into a resolute step and locks onto the

music displaying superb energy right across its bandwidth. At its £1595 price it is a real benchmark product, which just needs a little understanding and quite a bit of patience.



Price: **£1595**

UK Distributor: Redline Ltd
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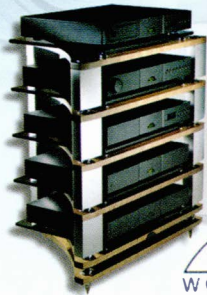


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Border Patrol S20 SE Amplifier

by Jason Kennedy

Border Patrol's S20 SE is a parallel single ended design with twin outboard power supplies which offers the benefits of SET operation combined with the extra power that another pair of tubes contributes. This makes for an amplifier that is hugely capable in the dynamics department, offers triode levels of transparency yet manages to deliver a more even response than usual. Right to the point where genuine bass weight is on the agenda. Detractors of valve technology point out that most transformers produce a triangular frequency response and therefore that valve amps can't hope to be anything other than tonally coloured. However, if you design your transformers well the worst of this effect can be overcome. The result is a less obviously valve sound and one which allows the high and low notes to take their proper place in the natural order of things.

The S20 SE has a valve rectified, choke input filter, high voltage supply for each channel, making it dual mono all the way back to the mains sockets. So not only will you need an extra shelf or two for the power supplies you'll also need another mains socket and decent quality lead. The power amp itself is conservatively finished in a wooden surround with screen printed top plate featuring speaker outputs of four and eight ohm varieties and a standard pair of RCA phono input sockets. A pair of umbilical cords are hard wired into the chassis with multipin connectors to hook up the power supplies.

What makes this an award-winning amplifier is

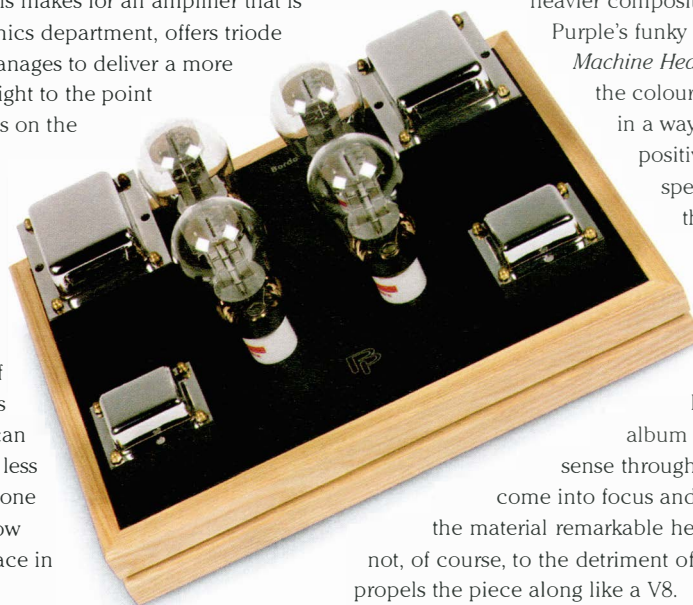
ultimately its sound. It has a speed and fluency that few can emulate the speed and agility with which John Renbourn and Bert Jansch play on their *Bert and John* album. With heavier compositions such as Deep Purple's funky 'Never Before' (from *Machine Head*) you can appreciate the colour and shape of the notes in a way that is rare, this track positively oozes out of the speakers and when you push the volume that bit too far, the S20 SE clips in such delicious style that you can understand why guitar players still love valves.

Bugge Wesseltot's latest album *Filming* makes more sense through it, the small sounds come into focus and the spatial details give the material remarkable height and realism. But not, of course, to the detriment of the musical meat that propels the piece along like a V8.

This latest Border Patrol has all the qualities that one desires of a fine SET amplifier without the shortcomings of most of the competition. The bass isn't soggy; it will play loud and it has a tonal richness that renders a living, breathing musical event in your listening room. If that doesn't make it award winning material I don't know what does.

Price: £6,600

Manufacturer: Border Patrol
Tel/Fax. (44)(0)1242 717171
Net. www.borderpatrol.net







Hovland HP200 Vacuum Tube Pre-amplifier

by Roy Gregory

What they started with the RADIA, Hovland now finish with the HP200 – and I'm not talking just about the cool, good looks of the aluminium and acrylic casework. As attractive and stylish as the Hovland products are, it's their sonic performance that's really impressive, a virtue that grows out of the impeccable attention to detail lavished on every aspect of the design. What might appear to be no more than an HP100 with remote control and revised aesthetics is in fact a far more refined beast altogether. The development of an all-new volume control circuit along with shorter and simpler signal paths, as well as the adoption of a new valve complement has created a significant improvement in performance whilst retaining all the considerable musical strengths of the original.

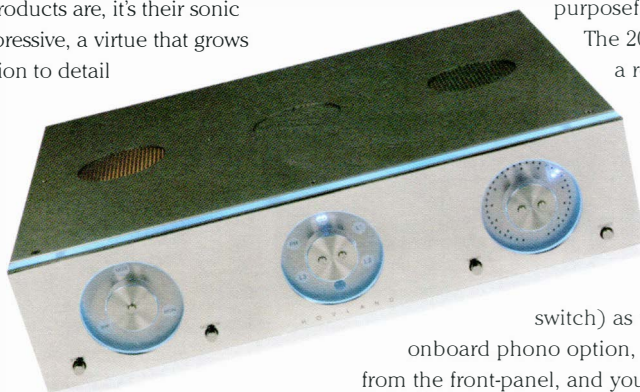
Hovland products have always succeeded in standing aside from the sense and structure of the music, rather than placing themselves in its path. The emphasis is on getting the right amount of energy in the right place and at the right time, placing notes and the spaces between them. It gives music an incredibly natural sense of flow and progression, a gestalt that denies the old assumptions regarding valve (or solid-state) sound. The sound of Hovland is indeed the sound of music.

What the HP200 brings to the mix is greater focus and transparency, immediacy, intimacy and detail, elevating the performance of the pre-amp back into line with that of the

RADIA power amp. The end result is both greater air and space and greater musical authority. Where the HP100 has a seductive quality, the 200 grants music a far more purposeful and commanding presence.

The 200 might be less forgiving as a result, but the inner aspects of a performance, the technique and expressive input of the players, are far more apparent and effective. Combine that performance with a full quota of control functions (including a mono

switch) as well as the provision of an onboard phono option, all of which can be driven from the front-panel, and you have that rarest of creatures, the full-facilities pre-amp. Fit and finish are superb, while form definitely follows function. It gives the HP200 the same visual integrity that it delivers in sonic terms. With improved versatility and remote control as well as superior sound, it is a worthy partner to both the HP100 (which continues) and the Hovland power amps. Music rarely looks so good.



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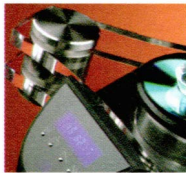
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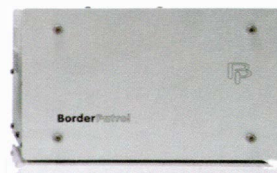
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Roy Gregory Hi-Fi+ issue 8.



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Janos Starker

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Speakers Corner/Mercury SR3-9016

by Richard S. Foster

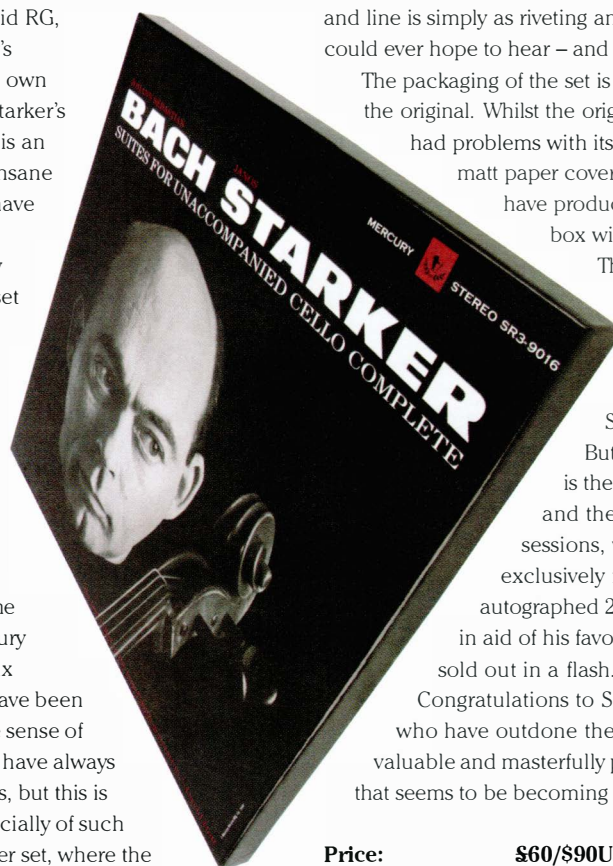
Although Speakers Corner has already won a Product of the Year award for their Mercury Living Presence project, I felt, and after some persuading so did RG, that the release of Janos Starker's highly regarded set deserved its own recognition. Timed to honour Starker's eightieth birthday last year, this is an extremely special reissue. The insane prices that the original US LPs have commanded make this a particularly welcome release by SCR. Even the Golden Imports set has cost more than this!

This is one of those records that seems to hold a magic mirror to sound – in this case the sound of a man playing a violoncello in space, in time, captured forever. This is a near physical manifestation of a performance out of thin air. Every nuance, every gesture of the performances captured by Mercury engineer, Robert Eberenz from six sessions between 1962 and '65 have been revealed by SCR's mastering. The sense of ambient space is extraordinary. I have always been a fan of the original records, but this is one of those rare instances, especially of such a highly regarded and sought after set, where the re-issue offers far greater pleasure and insight than the original release. I find myself groping in my bag of superlatives for one I haven't tried yet.

The merits of the performances were covered in depth in Issue 33. Starker's technique, his touch, his grasp of instrument and line is simply as riveting and utterly convincing as one could ever hope to hear – and hear it you do.

The packaging of the set is also a distinct improvement on the original. Whilst the original box has its charms, it also had problems with its construction and that its thin matt paper covering was hopelessly fragile. SCR have produced an attractive, substantial box with a quality high gloss finish.

The original insert has been enhanced and enlarged by the inclusion the original Mercury press release and a brief commentary about Starker by Hagen Zimmermann. But for me, the icing on the cake is the memoir concerning Mercury and these particular recording sessions, written by Starker himself, exclusively for this release. He even autographed 200 copies, a limited edition in aid of his favoured musical charity and sold out in a flash. An exclusive indeed! Congratulations to Speakers Corner Records who have outdone themselves with this most valuable and masterfully produced set, a sentiment that seems to be becoming a habit.



Price: £60/\$90US

Manufacturer: Speakers Corner Records
Net. www.speakerscorner.de







Reimyo CDP-777 CD Player

by Alan Sircom

The Reimyo CDP-777 is a £9,500 CD player. That's it. That's all it does. No DVD-Audio or SACD replay, no built-in pre-amps, digital inputs – not even a valve output stage. You get a top-loader and a magnetic puck, but all that separates this player from the average Rega is the JVC K2 processing and balanced outputs: At least on paper.

In reality, on paper means nothing. The Reimyo CDP-777 may be 'just' a CD player, but it's one of the best CD players money can buy. First, there's the build quality. We liken the best products to military-grade construction, but this goes considerably further. This is Bentley build, from the days when Bentleys were handed down from generation to generation. It might be a big, bluff box, but it is so well made, you'll find it attracts engineers like a moth to a big alloy flame. This build doesn't mean fancy controls or useless gizmos that can break or fall apart. The puck fits squarely, you close the cover manually and play disc upon disc.

The heart of this 15kg player is a 24bit, four times over-sampling processor. Allied to the 176.4kHz interpolated and extended frequency range of the JVC K2 processor, this means it delivers signal up to 705.6kHz, at least in theory. In reality, this means any form of CD brightness nasty is pushed well past our hearing.

Whether listened to through its balanced or single-ended outputs, the CDP-777 turns in one of the most natural and

listenable sounds you can hear from CD. All the concerns listeners have had surrounding the format fall away through the CDP-777. CD isn't bright, it's the players – no matter how good – that introduce that brightness.

But, if you think the CDP-777 works by dulling the top end of discs, guess again. This player delves into the detail on any disc, but plays the sound of the disc, not the player's interpretation of the sound of the disc: We were impressed by the imaging, the tonal separation and the solidity of image, too.

But none of this really

mattered. What really makes you want to max out the credit card is the way everything holds together naturally. This is the sort of coherence that is commonplace with vinyl, but hard to find with CD. This doesn't mean that it sounds like vinyl, but makes the same easy on the ear performance you get with analogue technology.

With such revelatory performance on CD, it's little wonder we put this in the frame for a Product of the Year Award. This must rank as one of the top two or three CD players around today, and is thus one of the best players ever.



Price: £9,500

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Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153
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Euro Audio Team KT88 Diamond Valves

by Roy Gregory

People have been arguing about the quality of valves for many years, but with production heading East, that debate has tended to shift from the preferred choice amongst premium brands to the most acceptable option from what's available. Sovtek's baseless 5881 and original ECC83 demonstrate that modern factories can produce superb valves, but the onus has definitely shifted from quality onto quantity.

Perhaps the first "audiophile" valve, certainly the first to attract widespread attention was Western Electric's 300B. Built precisely to the original specification, as used by the company in days of yore, its performance stands so obviously head and shoulders above the run-of-the-mill Eastern European and Chinese offerings that owners of the appropriate amplification have been shelling out the several hundred pounds a tube asking price without demur. It seems a lot of money, especially when the things wear out, until you hear the results. Besides, generally speaking, 300B amps only use one or two output tubes per channel.

The importance of the WE 300B lies not in the numbers sold (there really aren't that many 300B amps out there) but in the precedent they created. Even the Chinese have responded, producing their own, premium grade Mesh Plate 300B. However, what we have here is altogether more interesting. Sourced from the original Tesla factory in Prague, Euro Audio Team are offering a KT88 that claims parity with the legendary MO Valve Company original (they also offer a couple of different 300B designs, but that's a story



for another day). Internally, the

construction of the EAT KT88 appears identical to the MO version, while each tube is reassuringly solid when handled.

They come in matched pairs as standard, with quartets or larger groupings for a very small extra cost. They also carry an almost unheard of six-month warranty.

Sonically the results are absolutely superb, trouncing generally available examples and bettering even NOS MO samples (which will cost you rather more than EATs). Romantic they aren't, but if you want power, transparency, grip, focus, detail and definition – all woven into a singularly convincing whole, then look no further.

What's more, with KT88s (and the 6550 equivalents) generally being used in multiple arrays, quality and matching becomes even more important to an amplifier's overall performance. Consistency and longevity appear good, with no failures so far (and we've tried!) which combined with the fantastic musical and sonic performance makes these valves a must own upgrade for everyone with an appropriate amplifier. Once again, they seem expensive until you hear the results, at which point purchase becomes a no-brainer.

Prices: **£120 ea.**

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909

Manufacturer: Euro Audio Team
Net. www.euroaudioteam







Townshend Maximum Super-Tweeters

by Jimmy Hughes

Although I can try to describe the effect produced by the Townshend Maximum Super-Tweeters, it's only by hearing a set that you'll fully appreciate the difference they make. Part of the reason for this is down to the fact that the sonic effect produced seems to go way beyond what the devices are actually doing. This is definitely one of those products where the total effect is greater than the sum of the parts.

By bolstering the high frequencies you'd expect the sound to be sharper and more immediate. And superficially that's exactly what happens. But there's more. Not only is the sound sharper, it's also more solidly focussed and three dimensional, with a greater sense of space and depth. Not only that (and this is where it gets really scary) the bass sounds noticeably deeper and firmer...

It's like finding the missing link – the key ingredient that liberates the sound. There's added space around voices and instruments, plus enhanced clarity and separation. The music sounds more dimensional – by which I mean it seems to be liberated from the physical confines of the speakers. It's almost as though your speakers have expanded, or you've got more of them.

Take the super-tweeters away, and the sound collapses back into the boxes; it doesn't seem quite as loud, yet at the same time there isn't the cleanness and separation apparent before. Try making with and without comparisons using a fairly busy congested recording – one that doesn't open out too well – and notice the difference in clarity and sheer listenability.

But perhaps the strangest thing of all is switching off your

main speakers and listening to the super-tweeters on their own. First, the contribution seems miniscule; second, what they seem to be doing (heard solo) is hard to relate to the overall effect produced when the main speakers are working. Another curious thing; the improvement in spatial clarity is enhanced by keeping the super-tweeters turned well down in level.

Townshend provide variable output, allowing you to tailor the super-tweeters to your system – and personal taste. Now you might think that having the output set fairly high would enhance the effect produced. But actually the opposite happens; the

most striking improvements come with the tweeter volume set at minimum. At first this is very hard to accept; it's completely counter-intuitive. But try it and see.

One last point; the subjective effect produced by the super-tweeters is audible on most kinds of recordings and music – whether recent or old, analogue or digital, LP or CD, stereo or mono. Although the rationale for super-tweeters is the extension of the high frequency bandwidth to supersonic regions, you don't need recordings with ultra-wide bandwidth to hear a difference. It's there on most material.

Townshend Maximum Super Tweeters: \$800/pr

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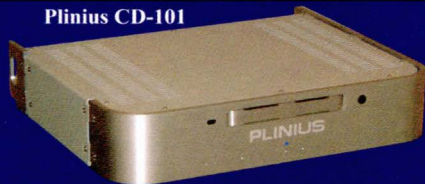
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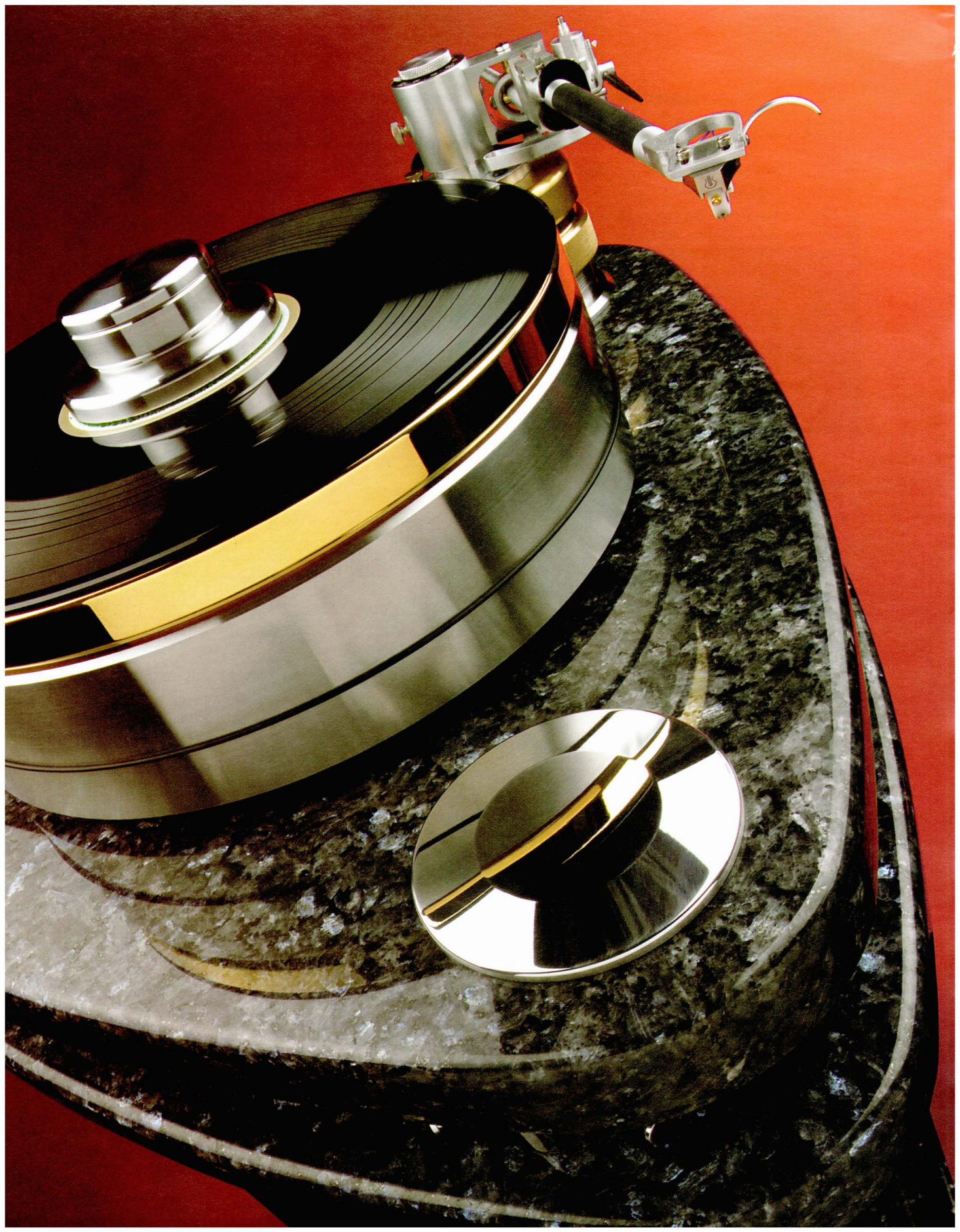
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Blue Pearl Audio JEM Turntable

by Roy Gregory

It's a chastening thought that in these days of SACD and DVD-A, analogue developments attract more attention than either of the newer formats. Rarely a month goes by without some new piece of extravagant exotica turning up on these shores, and they don't get much more extravagant or exotic than the Blue Pearl. What makes this \$48000 turntable even more remarkable is that it's the company's first product!

I will readily admit to some trepidation when first confronted by this beast. It's not the price; I've played with expensive turntables before. Rather, it's the evangelical zeal that tends to go hand in hand with producing something as massive, impractical and downright un-saleable as this. After all, logic dictates that if Rockport (with a proven track-record, more immediately impressive technology and no dealer margin) struggled to sell the Sirius III, what chance does a start-up company in the UK have? Imagine then my surprise (and relief) when the JEM turned in not just an impressive performance but one that handily exceeds any turntable in my experience, including the various Rockports.

But dig below the rather garish surface (I never was much of a one for gold) and the laid-back explanations of manufacturer Martin Easton, and a more complex picture emerges. The JEM grew out of the old Stratosphere design, itself no mean performer. What Easton did was re-engineer the product to precision machining standards

rather than hi-fi industry ones. Along the way, every aspect of the design transmogrified until it arrived in its current, substantial shape.

Heart of the Blue Pearl is its incredibly powerful, opposed magnet main bearing, encapsulated in cartridge form, the matching 100lb platter and the motor and power supply that drive it. The massive stand that dominates the appearance is simply there to support and isolate it in what is a genuinely high-mass approach. The end result is a turntable that imbues music with a poise, stability and spatial definition that is close to matching the Sirius III, but combines that with a dynamic delicacy and immediacy that breathes life into a performance. Add seemingly limitless levels of sheer energy and presence and a natural sense of pace and momentum and you have a 'table that commands and rewards attention with equal authority. With a simplified (and far cheaper) model that retains the core elements already in the works, Blue Pearl are setting new standards in analogue reproduction.



Price: **\$48000**

Manufacturer: Blue Pearl Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1243 514284
Net. www.bluepearludio.co.uk





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KT88

12AU7

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12AX7



PrimaLuna Prologue Two

by Jimmy Hughes

To tell the truth, I didn't know what the PrimaLuna Prologue Two cost when I first got it out of the box; I simply connected it up and listened. Certainly, there was nothing about the finish, build quality, or sound that indicated a low price; indeed, quite the opposite – it looked and sounded expensive, and seemed solid and well built.

Literally, from the first few notes, I was hooked. The improvement was obvious. Even my wife commented on the sound – and that's interesting because I hadn't told her I'd changed amps, nor had I asked for comments; it was a spontaneous reaction. The sound was rich, full and weighty. The bass seemed unusually deep and powerful, while the treble sounded silky smooth yet at the same time very crisp and 'present'.

The other quality apparent was power - lots of it. Now, some valve amplifiers have limits in terms of their absolute loudness. Certainly, valve amps tend to have a lower wattage. But output power as measured, and output volume judged subjectively aren't necessarily the same thing. We've all heard massively endowed Mega-Watt amps that haven't actually sounded powerful unless played loudly.

With a number of valve amplifiers, high output is sacrificed for higher quality. By choosing certain valves, or adopting particular circuit configurations, a designer may choose sound quality over output. And in many ways it's a very acceptable trade off; I'd always prefer an amplifier than offered outstanding sound quality and reasonable output over

one that sounded inferior but could play louder.

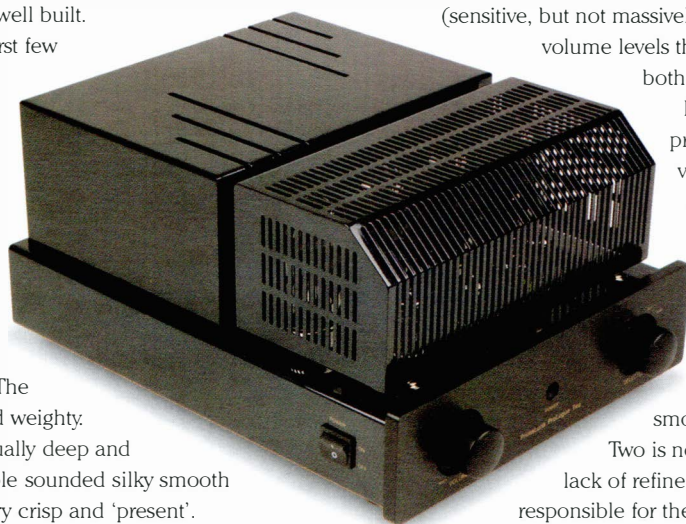
The point about the Prologue Two is – you don't need to compromise. This is an amp that sounds gutsy and powerful at medium and low volume levels, but is capable of playing quite loudly should the music demand it. Using Impulse H1s

(sensitive, but not massively efficient) I could generate volume levels that bordered on uncomfortable – both for me and my poor neighbours!

However, the fact that the amp produces a big sound at medium volume levels, means you don't have to play music at anti-social levels to create a proper sense of presence and excitement. Subjectively, the Prologue Two sounds loud when it isn't. This is interesting; because the basic sound is actually very smooth and refined, the Prologue

Two is not creating a big sound through lack of refinement. It's genuine quality that's responsible for the difference.

When I realised how reasonably priced the amplifier was, I was shocked and pleased in equal measure. And while I'm not saying it's likely to see off all its more expensive competitors, for many the difference in price will not be easy to justify. It would be better to put the money saved buying the Prologue Two towards a superior CD player or speakers. Either that, or spend the cash saved on music.



Price: **£999**

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
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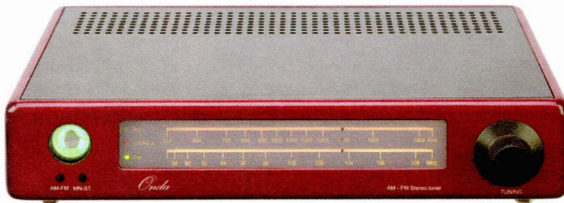
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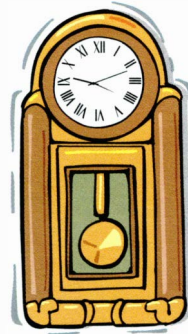


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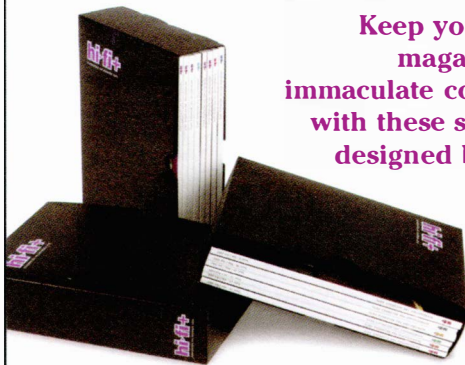
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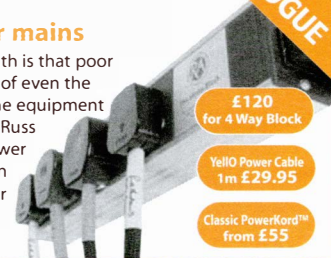
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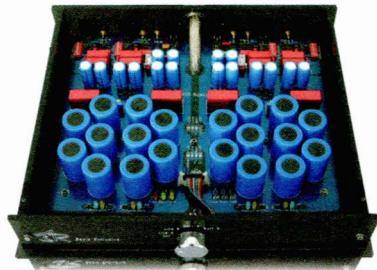
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Hi-Fi News March '03.

But, whatever the explanation, truth is you don't need bat-like hearing or ultra-wide bandwidth recordings to enjoy the subjective benefits of super tweeters. The effect is there for all to hear on the vast majority of recordings, be they new or old, digital or analogue, mono or stereo. Hi-Fi + April '04.

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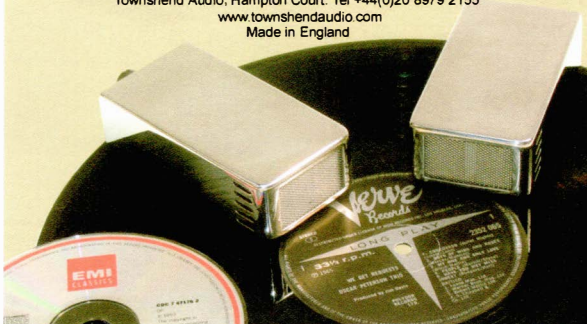
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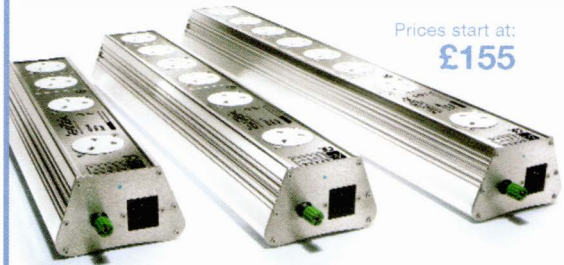
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Vitus Audio Statement Series Line and Phono-Stages

by Roy Gregory

It's a brave company that debuts with an £18500 phono and line-stage combination. It takes bravery on quite another level to put your faith in running them from batteries. Yet Vitus Audio seem to have passed both tests with no apparent trouble; the presentation of the products is as good as anything out there, while the battery supplies are simple, effective and failsafe. But, most importantly of all, the sonic performance fully justifies the extravagant pricing.

Given the chequered history of battery power in the world of hi-fi, it's even more surprising when someone actually gets it right. Theoretically speaking, the benefits should be clear enough, but all too often the sonic results are marred by a lack of dynamic range and authority, further undermined by tortuous and unreliable operating procedures. Well, maybe it's one of the few things that we actually have to thank mobile phones for, but batteries are considerably more compact, powerful and easier to use than ever before. Combine that with enough brute power and suddenly they take on a new viability. Which, no surprise, is exactly what's happening here.

Listen to the Vitus pre-amp and you hear a wonderfully natural, unforced and beautifully paced performance. The fluidity of musical phrasing is combined with a real sense of grip and authority, whilst the music is entirely devoid of edge or grain. It makes for a seductive listening experience, one

that combines the tonal appeal and dimensionality of vacuum tubes with the transparency and detail of the best solid-state designs. Operationally too, these units are up with the best in terms of their facilities and the user interface that controls their considerable adjustability. The two, independently and externally adjustable inputs to the phono-stage are just one case in point that demonstrates the clarity of thinking that's gone into these products. There's much here than many a more

established manufacturer would do well to emulate.

When superb standards of fit, finish and operation combine with sound as musically enticing and convincing as this, the products responsible demand attention. That they come from a new and until now unknown company is as impressive as it is encouraging. Those who haven't lost sight of the purpose and goal of hi-fi should look

forward to great things from designer Hans-Ole Vitus.

Prices:

Statement Phono-Stage £8600

Statement Line-Stage £9800

Manufacturer:

Vitus Audio

Tel. (45) 9626 8046

Net. www.vitusaudio.com







Marten Design Coltrane Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

In the course of a year we see many new products and many new companies, more loudspeakers and people producing loudspeakers than anything else. The desire to stick readily available drivers into easily manufactured boxes seems too tempting to resist. Unfortunately the results seldom match the designer's ambitions, leaving reviewers and magazine editors with a healthy dose of cynicism and highly developed defence mechanisms. However, seldom have I come across a debut product as thoroughly engineered and thought through as Marten Design's Coltrane.

It's not just a question of the price; there are plenty of far more expensive competitors out there. Nor the fancy drive units or cabinet materials. Loudspeaker sound is a brutally Darwinian world which proves categorically that it's not what you use but how you use it that counts. But what impresses about the Coltrane is how completely the design integrates the various elements together.

There's a rationale behind this speaker, not simply a selection of fashionable technologies and marketing bullet points. Each and every aspect has been considered and reconsidered before finalisation of the design, from the complex cabinet shape to the bespoke crossover components. Form follows function and in this case the quality is much more than simply skin deep. From the sumptuous high-gloss finish that covers the thick, critically damped cabinetwork, to the massive baffle, this speaker does a good job of appearing more compact and discrete than the list of ingredients suggests. Not that it's hiding its light under much of a bushel. You only have to take one look at the outrigger feet and exposed drivers to see that this is no shrinking violet, a character that extends to its sound.



The Coltrane is as quick, agile and bold as its exterior is clean and uncluttered. The speed, coherence and clarity available are genuinely state-of-the-art, delivering phenomenal levels of detail, all integrated into an intelligible whole. It is a compelling and authoritative performance that is equally demanding of both the listener and the partnering electronics. If you want a speaker that is forgiving or relaxing, that will cover the all too obvious deficiencies in recordings and too many highly regarded amplifiers and front-ends, then look elsewhere. The Coltranes are all about the process that transports the music. Along the way they are also about the character and individuality of performers and performances, the precision and technique of the playing, the relationship and chemistry that binds them together. Unfettered resolution and dynamics bring the intimacy and power of music vividly to life in a manner that connects directly to the listener. Meet their demands for power, agility and finesse from the partnering equipment and they'll deliver in kind. It's a remarkably assured and capable performance from one so young. I look forward to hearing Marten's more recent (and more affordable) designs. They've got a hard act to follow.

Price: £32000

UK Distributor: Audiocraft
Tel. (44)(0)1895 253340
E-mail. kevin.walker@audio-craft.co.uk

Manufacturer: Marten Design
Net. www.martendesign.com







Reference 3A Dulcet Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

Do you remember the Rogers LS/35A and all of its BBC monitor clones? Well this is just the opposite. A speaker not overburdened with the need to be particularly accurate or overly analytical. The Dulcet is, for me, what hi-fi should be all about and that's the pure enjoyment of and involvement in music at home. It is small, perhaps too small for many to consider viable. But, judging by the response of all those big speaker owners who heard it, it certainly makes you and them wonder why. I've heard full bandwidth designs costing many thousands of pounds that I haven't enjoyed listening to as much.

The lack of a multi-component sound-shaping crossover places a heavy responsibility on the driving amplifier but you needn't spend a fortune to get it right. Look no further than the Moon i-3, feed them with a good source, don't skimp on the stands, use quality cables, and sit back. You'll be amazed at the sheer scale and space that comes from such a small cabinet. You'll be pleased that the designer has produced such a brilliant mid/bass driver, one capable of such stunning subtlety. And you'll be relieved that he's had the confidence to pair it with a seriously good textile-domed tweeter which exhibits marvellous extension, air and texture.

However, as long as you choose the amplifier with care the Dulcet will faithfully assume its overall characteristics, adding just a slight but noticeable forwardness through the mid-band. But what really lingers in the mind is the emotional contact with the music that it brings. It's a bit of



an over-used term in hi-fi journalism I know, but entirely appropriate when talking about this speaker. Vocals, harmonies and complex instrumental passages just pull you in and bring a smile, as the speaker is endlessly revealing and open to musical nuance. It also maintains controlled and a sure-footed attitude where rhythm is concerned, but don't expect it to maintain composure when the volume is advanced too far as it can grow flustered and a bit compressed in the bass if you ask too much of it.

It also responds with vigour and subtlety when you up the ante and increase the quality of electronics and cables, as it has surprisingly high levels of resolution across the whole bandwidth.

But it is a small speaker and is never going to produce any really deep bass or move that much air although it does have a wonderful sense of scale and is quite pitch coherent at lower frequencies. The Dulcet is a design that takes full advantage of all the potentially good things that a small speaker with a highly rigid cabinet can offer and does so without falling into any of the pitfalls. Highly recommended and excellent value too.

Price: **£1695**

UK Distributors: Absolute Analogue
Tel. (44)(0)20 8459 8113

Manufacturer: Divergent Technologies
Net. www.reference3a.com



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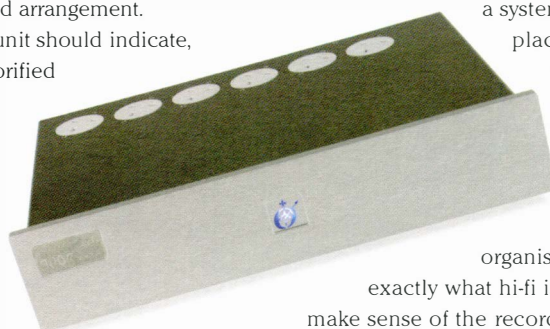
by Roy Gregory

We've long been saying that your mains supply is the foundation on which your system's performance is built. With the arrival of the Thor mains distribution unit, Nordost have finally completed a wiring loom that started with the Valhalla interconnects and speaker cables, meaning that we can finally hear the benefits of a coherent, micro mono-filament set up that employs the technology throughout the system in the optimum, stearthed arrangement.

However, as the price of the unit should indicate, Thor is much more than just a glorified six-way block. In an unusual show of common sense (at least as far as the hi-fi industry is concerned) Nordost have taken their proprietary technology, including some rather fancy circuitry that as far as I can hear, effectively "re-clocks" the mains without actually being in line (that's my description, not theirs') and combined it with Isotek, acknowledged experts in the field of mains distribution. The end result is a very pretty box that makes a bold statement as far as the priority you should give your mains goes. By building a full-width, full depth chassis, what they're saying is that you need to treat and support this unit with exactly the same care and attention you lavish on your amplifier. Nor is it just an empty box, puffed with self-importance. Wired internally with Valhalla mains cable, there's also considerable parallel filtering inside, designed to deal with RF pollution without interrupting the line itself. Add that alongside Nordost's own particular tricks and

there's not a lot of space left. Internally, each and every leg is starred, further adding to both the conceptual simplicity and the constructional nightmare. Open the stainless steel casework if you like, but when it comes to reassembly you're on your own.

All that effort hasn't been wasted. Thor makes such a fundamental difference to the sound of a system that it demands primacy of place in the mains hierarchy. Thor with standard leads will sound better than Vishnu with a conventional extension block or straight out of the wall. The sense of expressive ease, purity and above all, organisation that it brings to music is exactly what hi-fi is all about. What Thor does is make sense of the recording, turning information into a performance. Add the mains leads and finally they've got a firm footing to work from, revealing their true capabilities for the first time. Thor can't turn a bad system into a good one, but start from the security of this foundation and you'll be astonished by the potential that exists in even quite modest components. It really should be the first name you put on the team sheet.



Price: £1600

Manufacturer: Nordost Corporation
Tel. (44)(0)1352 730251 (UK)
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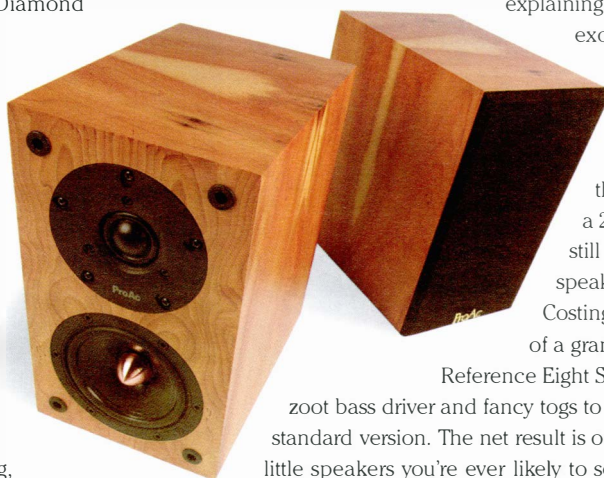
ProAc Tablette Reference Eight Signature

by Roy Gregory

2004 has been something of a bumper year as far as speakers are concerned. At the higher price points, models like the Marten Coltrane and Avalon Eidolon Diamond have established a new benchmark for performance that undercuts and undermines many of the behemoths that litter the audio landscape, making them look like the expensive dinosaurs they really are. At the other extreme, high quality stand-mounts, or mini-monitors as they are often called, have made a rather unexpected comeback: surprising simply because the compact floor-stander is so firmly entrenched in the market.

Well, people have started to realise that you can't get something for nothing, no matter how much you might want to. The extra bass and sensitivity that comes with a floor-standing cabinet has costs too – and they're nearly always paid in musical and quality terms. Whilst a compact, stand-mounted cabinet imposes inevitable compromises it also delivers a number of inherent strengths, not the least being its rigidity and the reduced cost of materials and packaging, leaving rather more for drivers and a crossover. The success of such an approach depends on the skill with which the designer selects his compromises. In other words, what he keeps and what he allows to slip away: Of course, that's true of any loudspeaker, regardless of type, but the choices are starker and flaws in the balancing act become that much more obvious the smaller the cabinet gets.

No surprise then that experience counts for a lot when it comes to building a small speaker. Which goes some way to explaining how, amidst a welter of exotic tweeters and retro crossovers, the model that has bubbled to the top of my personal mini-monitor rankings is the current incarnation of a 20 year-old design, and still recognisably the same speaker after all this time. Costing a hundred notes shy of a grand, ProAc's Tablette



Reference Eight Signature adds a high-zoot bass driver and fancy togs to the (slightly cheaper) standard version. The net result is one of the most attractive little speakers you're ever likely to see, but there's far more to the Ref Eights than just a pretty face. Carefully set-up and allowed the space to breathe, they reward the listener with a remarkably coherent and beautifully proportioned view of the musical performance. Eschewing cheap theatrics and gaudy detail, the little ProAc's trade in musical integrity and drama, placing communication ahead of sheer information. The result is extraordinarily satisfying, the more so for the diminutive dimensions of the speakers producing it.

Price: **£899**

Manufacturer: Celef Audio
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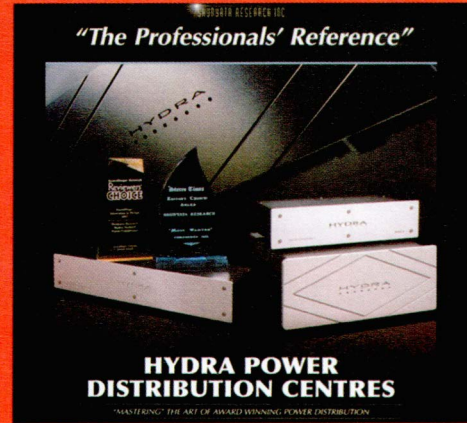
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Out front...

Mike Large, Director of Operations, Real World Studios

Interviewed by Roy Gregory

RG. Could you explain your background and your current role at Real World?

ML. I used to work for SSL (Solid State Logic, the mixing console manufacturer) and installed their products all over the place. Back in the mists of time, well – 1984, I installed one for Peter (Gabriel) and subsequently he persuaded me to come and work for him here, setting up the studios at Real World. I've been here ever since, originally in a technical capacity and more recently in a managerial one. So now I'm part of the team responsible for managing his group of businesses: the record label, studios, publishing company and World Music Festival organisation, all of which have their own managers that I work with. I'm also part of the management group for Peter himself, which consists of Peter, myself and another colleague Michael Thomas. The three of us try and cover everything from Artist Management through to the invention of and planning of projects and things that we should be trying to do. So, new products, new ways of selling products, interesting new ways of touring...

RG. New technology?

ML. Yes, new technology: looking at its impact and what we can do with it, whether it's DVD, the internet, MP3, online sales...

RG. You've left out your dirty little secret; the fact that you're one of the few people in the pro-industry who actually has a decent hi-fi system at home.

ML. Yes, I do. It's interesting that both – I can't call him my partner in crime because he's a lawyer – but Michael Thomas and I are both horribly addicted to the evil that is hi-fi. Therefore, we're both virtually bankrupt but we do both have

reasonably decent hi-fi systems and reasonably decent music collections, ranging from vinyl through to SACD. In fact, Michael's collection is bigger than mine, but such is life... So, all three of us, Peter, Michael and I, take listening to music very seriously. Peter, for better or worse, does most of his listening in the studio; Michael and I do most of ours at home, and I guess that none of us would be doing what we're doing if it wasn't for that passion.

Michael Thomas and I are both horribly addicted to the evil that is hi-fi. Therefore, we're both virtually bankrupt...

RG. Recently you embarked on a huge project, which was the re-mastering of the entire Gabriel back-catalogue, re-assessing the available

technology and deciding what formats to re-release it on. In short, what you could do with it. As a result of that process, what conclusions did you reach regarding the various technology options and how they relate to the master-tapes?

ML. (After a very long pause!) I guess the first conclusion that you reach – that really glares at you – is that when the back catalogue was originally re-released on CD, for a number of reasons, it wasn't a good job. Originally, when a tape is mastered for vinyl, somebody runs off a production master which should have all the settings that were used in the cutting room so that anywhere else, people should be able to get the same results. In some instances it looks like those masters, intended for vinyl, were used to make the CDs, which is obviously questionable.

RG. In the sense that those tapes compensate for the aberrations of lathes and vinyl itself?

ML. Yes, absolutely – well aberrations or qualities depending on your point of view. And to make matters worse, they also play to some of CD's weaknesses rather than its strengths, which is a bit of a tragedy. But even where the original (studio) masters were used people made huge assumptions. Very often the process of converting to CD masters was driven by

► record companies rather than the artist and so not subject to the usual approvals. The nature of the new technology, the pitch with which it was sold left some people believing that they could simply set everything flat, go for a cup of coffee and everything would be alright. In the ensuing 18 or so years we've actually all learnt about the problems associated with CD and how to play to the strengths of simple 16bit, 44.1K digital, so if you start again with the original tapes we can produce a much, much better CD than we used to. So it's interesting that you ask about new technology yet the first conclusion is that the technology we've all been using can be made to work a lot better than we all thought. The first satisfying thing is that we can make the CDs sound better.

We also took the opportunity to re-master for vinyl, which was a bit of a labour of love because our feeling is, very much, that this will only happen this time, it'll never happen again. We also took the opportunity to reassess a number of things that were done in the past, the most obvious being the running order of *So*. Peter always wanted it to finish on the track 'In Your Eyes' but the cutting levels required meant that it wasn't sensible to position it at the end of side. This time we took the view that we were making vinyl for people that had decent record players. In the old days, when vinyl was the mass medium you had to work to the lowest common denominator, whereas we didn't have to do that this time, so we could make a deluxe, audiophile package based on the assumption that customers would have a pick-up capable of tracking the cut. We did that with Mike Hobson at Classic Records, who also supplied the packaging to match the best vinyl we could produce.

The vinyl of course demanded a different master to the CDs. There are really two stages to mastering; the first is getting the music to sound the way you want it to, the second is to ensure that whatever technology you're going to store it on will replay it to the best of its ability. So Peter went into the mastering suite with Tony Cousins to get a digital master that sounded the way he wanted it to – in itself an interesting process as he re-evaluated all that work rather than just trying to get it the way it was the first time around. This was then supplied along with the original master tape so that the engineer cutting the lacquer knew what he was aiming for. In other words "Here's a 24bit digital reference – now make that come off the record!" I don't think people have done that before and I have to say that, on the whole, we're very happy with the results.

The next stage was to start comparing new technologies – 24/96 and DSD. In fact, we re-mastered to both of those, but whilst we haven't done anything with the 24/96 we have released the catalogue on SACD. You always have to be very careful comparing formats because there are so many variables in trying to assess the raw technology, 24/96 vs DSD, that you can't really do it – for instance you're always using ►



▶ different converters. It may be that what you hear is the converter rather than the technology. But having said that, in our listening, the closest to the original master is the DSD. If you put up the 1/4" or 1/2" master-tape, 16bit PCM, 24/96 and DSD, you quickly realise that 16bit PCM obviously isn't as good as the original master, the other two are close and then you're into degrees of winning. They're not huge differences but certainly, around here the vote would come down on the side of DSD as being the closest. BUT... it might be that some super new set of converters appears and we all change our minds. However, you can be absolutely confident that no 16bit PCM will ever come closer to the master-tape than DSD – that's a real gulf in quality – and I might, one day be proved wrong but it will take a miracle to cross that gap.

RG. When talking about reference to the master, is the master-tape the sacred cow that the hi-fi industry believes it is?

ML. The master-tape that leaves the studio is probably the most accurate reference yes – but is it the best rendition of the work... well there's a word for that belief that starts with a B and has a few Ls in the middle. A lot of people will tell you, indeed Dan Lanois who has just re-mixed a lot of Peter's back catalogue into 5.1 has told me, that very often the record sounds better than the master tape, and we would agree with that.

RG. Do you mean specifically the vinyl record, or just the finished article, be it CD, SACD or whatever?

ML. Well, both, but with the vinyl the difference can be more striking. Making a record, cutting a lacquer, is an art. Indeed, all mastering is an art, but you very often do more when you're cutting a record. In fact I know people who master in the studio and cut vinyl before recording that back to digital to make CDs. Making the vinyl is part of the creative process; it changes the sound. The mastering process will always affect the sound, be it vinyl or anything else. The master-tape is an interesting and accurate reference. You mix it in the studio and when it leaves you should know that everything that the artist and producer want you to hear should be audible in there. It then goes to the mastering room, and in a way the job of the mastering engineer is to make sure that your home hi-fi delivers that content to you. But, in the process, certainly with

people like Peter or Dan Lanois, it's more than just tweaking that master to get the maximum out of your home system. It's part of the creative process as a whole.

RG. Do you think that applies across all genres?

ML. I think it applies across all genres. Whether it applies across all artists and producers I don't know. I think that it's all part of the process. Eventually, what you're trying to do is give



people an emotional experience at home, whether it's one that makes them get up and dance, or one that moves them on some deep level, or just takes them away to somewhere else in their minds. It's all to do with moving people and I think that the whole mastering process is another tool of that trade. So, no, I don't think the master-tape is sacred. There are a lot of people who think that the record sounds better or should I say works better than the tape that came out of the studio.

The thing about that master-tape and that mastering process, as somebody explained to me in my first installation for SSL, he said "These consoles are fantastic, but they can't turn shit into gold". If the master-tape that comes out of the studio from the mixing session is crap then no amount

of mastering is going to produce anything other than crap at the end. That tape has to be as good as it possibly can be, it has to preserve all of the information and do it in a way that achieves the artist's aims. Then the mastering can make it better. It can also make it worse, but it can definitely make it better. And then a well-mastered, well-cut record can make it better still. And interestingly enough, a good hi-fi system can make it better again. Around here we'd all accept that if you play our vinyl on your system at home, it may well sound better than it ever did in the studio. The one thing that the system in a studio should be is quite analytical – it should be the best system for letting you hear what's actually on the tape. That doesn't mean it's the best system for moving, emotionally connecting with the listener, which is definitely the ultimate aim of what we're trying to do.

RG. What you're saying is that there's a difference between the fact of the performance and its internal chemistry.

ML. Absolutely, well there's a difference between the analytical content and the emotional delivery of a performance. ▶

► The aim of the music is to connect with you on an emotional; level and I'd be prepared to bet that the system you have at home does that better than any of the systems we make records on.

RG. Taking that a step further, you've now just released *Play* which is re-mastered for 5.1, so you've got a lot of material there that was originally done in two-channel now being re-mixed into surround. Is surround sound an artistic opportunity or a problem?

ML. (Looking perplexed) You can never have one without the other. It's a huge artistic opportunity, but more so for some genres than others. For music like Peter's which is very complex, then often the songs will have 120 or 160 tracks of audio that are pulled apart and eventually boiled down to stereo. Having five speakers to distribute all that information around is a great opportunity, allowing you to highlight things in the mix that you couldn't in stereo. But it is a very different thing and one would never dismiss the stereo mix. Everyone is still learning the rules of 5.1 (if there are any) and that is very interesting. By way of an example, we were asked to listen to some 5:1 mixes of something else that Peter had been involved in and give an opinion. My response was "If I disconnect the rear channels on this it still sounds fine!" So, why bother? On *Play* if you disconnect the rear channels you'll wonder where half the band's gone.

From a psycho-acoustic point of view, it presents more of a challenge, because we like to have the focus of our attention in front of us, so you have to be a bit careful with it. It's horses for courses, so at home I have one room for stereo and one room for 5.1. Depending on my mood and what I want my system to do for me I choose which room and system I want to play with.

RG. Obviously, you have access to most of the PG back catalogue on both two and multi-channel formats. Does it affect choice of format too, so do you find yourself asking whether you want to listen to So in two-channel today, or five-channel? Or is this where you get into trouble by admitting that you never listen to Peter's work at home?

ML. I have to listen to the entire catalogue before I come to work each day – it's in my contract! – but seriously. That's exactly the choice you have to make. It's ironic that out of Peter's music my favourite album is *Passion*, which we haven't mixed to 5.1 yet, but it's absolutely crying out for it. But it's not worth doing if you don't do it seriously. A lot of that stuff was on loads and loads of multi-tracks.

There was a huge amount of work in simply assembling all the elements to produce a stereo mix. It's not like each bit is on 24 or 48 track tape that you can just run up and pan about a bit. It's a hugely complex project.

RG. That's interesting because what you're talking about is reconstituting something that was originally composed and conceived as a

stereo presentation. Yet some current composers are now writing for surround. Some even take it further to the point of having no "front" per se, writing music that should function equally well whatever your listening perspective.

ML. That's a fascinating prospect, although I'm not sure that it quite works, simply because we're designed to face forwards, and it'll take significant re-education before we stop trying to find a point of focus. One of the powers of music is to take you out of yourself and transport you to another place, but once location itself becomes an issue there's a danger that the technology starts to fight against itself.

When surround is done well it can produce a truly immersive experience. All too often, the temptation is to use the rear channels to simply provide a bit of ambience or interesting effects rather than for substantial, structural elements within the music. So if we take the track 'Father, Son' you'll notice that Dan and Richard mixed most of the brass was to the rear channels, an

arrangement that works both tonally and atmospherically. However, if the lead vocal came from the rear, your natural tendency would be to turn towards it. So how you use surround should be defined by the nature of the music itself. You can do much more with some tracks than others – which is where composing for surround really gets interesting.

I think the worst thing you can do is simply fake 5.1 out of stereo with various processors that you can buy. ►

**A lot of people will tell you...
that very often the record
sounds better than the
master tape, and we would
agree with that.**

**The aim of the music is to connect with you
on an emotional; level and I'd be prepared
to bet that the system you have at home
does that better than any of the systems
we make records on.**

► That to me is just a wasted opportunity: We also have to consider that if we don't get it right this time whether it will ever be done again or will that then become forever, the 5.1 version of say, 'Sledgehammer'. Likewise, SACDs that simply resample a 16bit original; what's the point? You should really interview Dan (Lanois). He's an extraordinary character: He was talking about a record he'd made which someone else then mixed into 5.1. They sent him the mixes for approval. He then phoned them up and said "Don't do this – I know where you live!"

His point is that when you mix something you work on it for a long time. You are completely immersed in it, it has a life and energy of its own; it's a big thing and it matters. It's important and you can't just mess with it. Which is exactly why we got Dan back in to do these mixes. We didn't just want something that sounded like stereo with a bit going on behind you. In fact, he and Peter ended up re-playing on some of it (so on 'Mercy Street' there's a vocal that was never there before) because once they started creating it in five speakers the tracks started to go off in new directions.

RG. They became a new realisation of the original concept?

ML. That's exactly right; they're different. It's not the same creature – now it's got six legs instead of two. So some of the mixes became quite different from the original stereo ones. We had to decide which mix of the tracks on Play we should use for the stereo output. We chose the original ones we'd re-mastered for CD. They sound quite different to the 5.1 versions on the disc. We tried folding the 5.1 mixes down into stereo and that was a waste of time. It just underlined that if you're going to mix in stereo then mix in stereo; if you're going to mix in 5.1 then mix in 5.1.

RG. That has huge implications for DVD-A, where the machine itself folds down a stereo output of the 5.1 mix for those without surround sound.

ML. Don't do it. Not worth it. Go and buy a CD player. I think that's sacrilege. Why not put a graphic equaliser in? That's the point at which you cease to care.

RG. Which seems like a good point to introduce the subject of copy protection. I know that you've done extensive listening to some of the available systems; what conclusions did you reach as a result?

The copy protection systems that we listened to... we could hear. It was detrimental, and more to the point, the copy protection didn't work.

ML. The copy protection systems that we listened to, including the one recommended by our label EMI, we could hear.

Now, having spoken to the people who offer these systems it's not clear whether the flaw lies with the systems themselves or in the plant that produces the discs. Their feeling was that the pressing process had not been set up properly when the copy protected discs were produced. Precise set-up is critical to correct operation of the system, which might also explain

some of the anomalous results. At that point it becomes hard to get to the truth, but, absolutely clearly, we could all hear the difference. It was detrimental, and more to the point, the copy protection didn't work. I took considerable glee in sending MP3s of the protected and unprotected discs back to the record company so that they could hear the difference! I think that copy protection is a dead duck. However the point that was made to me (and makes sense) is that copy protection is about making honest people realise that they shouldn't

be making copies. Even if you do something slightly odd, like having to use a different piece of software to lift the track off, most people will realise that this is something they shouldn't be doing.

RG. When you say it's a dead duck, do you mean in technological terms or as an issue?

ML. Well, in America I don't know that anything is now copy-protected, because of the outcry. CDs don't seem



► to be copy-protected in the UK now. Nothing that we're doing is copy protected. If you're worried about copy protection (as an artist) then the trick is to make your CDs 78 minutes long, and then they can't copy protect them.

It's just one of those things that you feel is inherently frightening because it messes with the audio. The companies that produce the systems say that they will be releasing ways that copy protect without touching the audio. That would be worth another look, but anything that actually affects the audio... we've always found that our ears are better than any of the test gear, not just here at the studio but everyone's ears. They'll always try and tell you that they're not, that they can do things that you can't hear, but they're absolutely wrong.

RG. You're in a slightly unusual position in that you wear so many hats: you work with artists, you produce records and you're a consumer. How does the whole issue of copyright, which sparked copy protection in the first place, and now downloadable music affect the future of a record label like Real World?

ML. It's a double-edged sword. I think the advent of downloadable music presents an opportunity. Analysis shows that regardless of format or supplier, whether you're talking about music downloads or DVD subscription services, the money that these people make is not on the 100 hits but on the 2000 other items in the catalogue. This online marketplace has created a situation in which if you can sell 20 copies of a song you can still make money. The overhead of getting into the store is effectively zero. I know from my own experience with OD2 (the Real World online distribution company) that what people want is infinite catalogue. What frustrates them is if they want that early Van Der Graff track and it's not there. You make far more money from having a million tracks available that only get downloaded three times each, than having a

thousand tracks available that each get downloaded a thousand times.

For a niche label this is all good news, because we live in a world where we expect to sell between 10000 and 50000 albums rather than 500000. The disadvantage is that as people start to get their music elsewhere, the record

stores are shrinking the space they devote to it, and the first things to go are the titles that sell less. Our racks, the world music racks, are out in the street and the DVD racks come in.

So, a double-edged sword. Is copying or file sharing a problem? I personally think that, with a few exceptions it's debatable whether file sharing detracts from or adds to record sales. It might well become the 21st Century equivalent of radio.

RG. Given that the sonic deficiencies of MP3 are pretty well accepted, do you think it undermines the need for a quality replay chain?

ML. No, not at all: there are a couple of points to consider. Firstly, if we think of MP3/file sharing as similar to radio then you have to question the pricing structure. Given that they're not as good as CD they should cost a lot less. Then you get a lot more out there and how many will convert into CD sales? Secondly, even if you start with MP3, the better the system you hang on the end of it, the better it sounds. In turn, the better the master, the better the MP3 sounds, so that actually creates more pressure to make both the input and the output good. I have my entire CD collection at home stored on an Apple-Mac so that it can provide background music for family parties and the like. Yet despite the general resistance at home to hi-fi and the hardware that goes with it, everyone in the family can immediately tell the difference between a track played from record or CD and one that comes off the computer. Which do they want to hear? The higher quality version, which pretty much says it all.



A lot of people will tell you... that very often the record sounds better than the master tape, and we would agree with that.



Family Values...

David A. Wilson of Wilson Audio

Interviewed by Roy Gregory

RG. I'd like to start by establishing just how long you've been doing this. Having started out as a record label, when did Wilson Audio complete the transformation into a speaker manufacturer?

DAW. Well it really all started in 1959 when I read my first book on loudspeakers, written by Gilbert A. Briggs. He was a fine writer with a real knack for explaining complex technologies, usually with these little hand-drawn line drawings. It was an inspiration to me. I built my first loudspeaker in 1959 and the hobby developed over the years, but when I went to University I knew I couldn't make a living designing loudspeakers so I studied Zoology, Chemistry and Biophysics – which I loved – and

I worked for a period of time for Abbot Laboratories doing medical research into middle-ear infections. From there I moved to Cutter Laboratories, designing medical equipment, but all the while developing my loudspeakers.

Then, in 1976 I started doing some fairly serious recording, driven by the poor sound available from records then. The labels we'd taken for granted in the late '50s and early '60s just weren't sounding as good. So I started out using AKG 414 microphones and a Revox tape machine. You know, the way so many labels started. I released several LPs over time, still as a hobby, but by 1979 I'd started developing a more ambitious loudspeaker based on time delay phenomena such as group delay and so forth, which ultimately became the WAMM, patented in 1984.

RG. So was the WAMM developed as a hobby project?

DAW. It was developed as a home project so that I could

recreate the sound that I'd heard at and remembered so vividly from my recording sessions. The speakers I'd had before simply couldn't approach a realistic facsimile of that experience. But there's a real advantage of developing technology and designs as a hobby is that the gestation period doesn't have to be artificially accelerated, the way you do if you form a business

plan, get investors, borrow a lot of money and need to pay a large return on that investment in a short period of time. I had a constant income from my day job, my Clark Kent job at night – which absorbed all my energy and money – and I was blessed with a truly understanding wife, who also turned out to be a business genius. She was very supportive and finally, in April 1982 I left Cutter Labs and took the

...you can get them built in China, put the same brand name on them, and pay someone \$4 a day to assemble them for you. That week they'll be building your product. Next week they'll be building someone else's, and the week after that, who knows? These are not people who have a passion for what they do!

entrepreneurial leap of faith, sped down the run-way of private business ownership, lifted up the landing gear and wobbled very shakily into the air, where we just about managed to stay for the first few years. Along the way we lost a house, the economy in the US was not good in 1983! Inflation was terrible and business conditions weren't good. We were in the unenviable position of selling LPs and WAMMs.

RG. How much was the WAMM at that time?

DAW. About \$50000 a pair, a little more than the Infinity IRS! But you also need to remember that '83/'84 was the time that CD was introduced, so LP sales collapsed. So in a plan based on selling WAMMs and LPs, scratch the LPs. So around the time we lost the house my wife said, "You know Dave, you really need to design a small loudspeaker that we can actually sell."

► **RG.** You mean that people can actually afford?

DAW. That people can actually afford. Quite honestly, I had no interest in doing that but I had a disastrous recording session and it was disastrous because the near-field monitors I was using simply didn't reflect reality. That was when I decided that I needed to design my own near-fields. So that took about six-months with the first units appearing in January '76 at CES where we were promoting a record we'd done with Micky Hart from The Grateful Dead. It had this thunderous bass and the demonstration featured these little home-brew speakers that later became the WATTs (later to become the WATTs) along with a WAMM sub-woofer in the corner of the room. When that 16Hz went rolling down the aisles, mobs of people crowded into the room. We sold a lot of LPs, but we also got a lot of people intrigued by those little speakers. It wasn't the bass, it was the incredible sound-staging that had them impressed.

RG. Were you surprised by the success of the WATT?

DAW. I was. I remember thinking at the time that nobody would buy them if we did make them commercially because they'd be three times the price of the nearest competitor, which at that time was the Celestion SL600 which was \$1500 in the US. I remember thinking, "Well, the WATT doesn't have any bass" but what the WATT did was have extraordinary resolution of detail, phenomenal sound-staging and excellent dynamic gradation...

RG. So that it could track dynamic levels?

DAW. Exactly. It did those three things, the central design criteria for a location monitor as far as I was concerned, arguably as well as any speaker at the time.

RG. The WATT started out as a location monitor, but it's transmogrified into a high-quality domestic system. That's a near 20-year development path. How has that change in role affected the design criteria?

DAW. Well, a speaker like the current System 7 has a tremendous advantage in the shape of its best friend, the Puppy (sub-woofer). That makes life so much easier for me, and for the end-user. By having a full-range system to work with you no longer need to demand so much from the WATT at the lower-end of its range, so you polish the frequencies it does handle to a far higher degree than ever before. But my general goals and design criteria haven't changed that much.

I'm still working for an accurate presentation of a recorded reality. I simply have more tools with which to do that than I started out with. I have a team of engineers that work with ►



► me now which reduces my burden significantly. I do all the voicing and conceptual design of all our products, but the engineering load is spread much wider. Then we have manufacturing capabilities that I couldn't have dreamed of when we started.

RG. For me, there was almost a generational change between System 5 and System 6, with 6 sounding quite different. Would you agree with that?

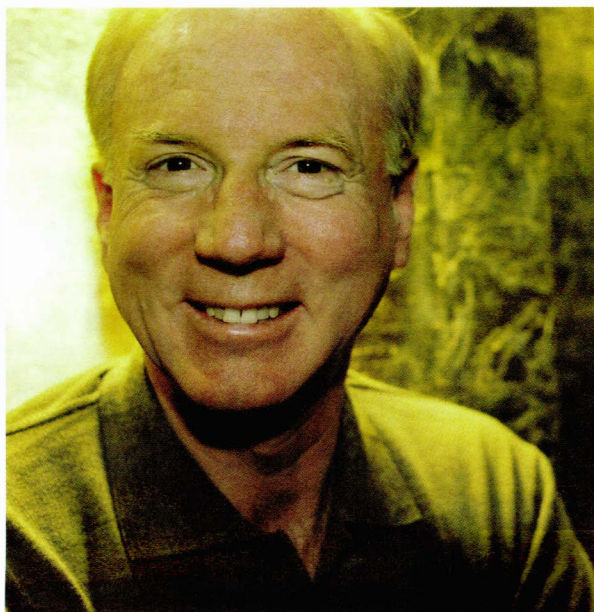
DAW. Yes, yes I would. In terms of voicing System 6 didn't lose any resolution but is gained enormously when it came to ease of listening. It was the first WATT system that incorporated adjustability of the group delay, so the sound could be more correctly focussed with less time smear for a wider range of listening environments. The enclosure for the Puppy was enlarged, which did two things: obviously it extended the bandwidth closer to 20Hz. My original goal with the Puppy was only 40Hz although it would go down to 30 or even a little below that in-room. System 6 and 7 will comfortably reach the low 20s. But, more importantly, especially for the European market, the upper bass became far more linear. European rooms tend to differ architecturally from North American or Japanese rooms in that they tend to be

more solidly built, with less window area and less evacuation of the bass, which tends to build up in the room. The System 5 had real problems with that. Having said that, System 5 was a significant breakthrough compared to earlier WATT/Puppy systems in that it was designed to allow wider dynamics in the bass. The size of the earlier Puppy was frankly too small to allow full dynamics across the entire range, a deliberate decision to avoid low-frequency problems emanating from turntables. So the early Puppies automatically compressed as you went lower in frequency. The 5, with its bigger port, didn't do that. On the other hand it did sometimes overload rooms whereas the 6 actually had a better balance when it came to

those problems.

RG. Where the speakers voiced separately for Europe, the Far East and the US?

DAW. We have for many years now, produced two distinct products. The E version, which is the one we export to Europe, is indeed voiced differently, and can't be bought by dealers in the US.



...a real advantage of developing technology and designs as a hobby is that the gestation period doesn't have to be artificially accelerated...

RG. So you would argue that, despite being easier to listen to, the System 7 is no less accurate than say a 3 or a 5...

DAW. It's actually more accurate, because it's measurably more linear, it settles faster and more thoroughly; it has a wider dynamic range, so it's superior in a number of ways.

RG. Does it still function as a near-field monitor?

DAW. It does. The WATT specifically has been so successful, with over 12000 shipped, because it's such a problem solver. It will fit in so many difficult and challenging environments and still give very good results. The Sophia also is very good in that regard but it lacks the absolute ability of a WATT and Puppy. A lot of studios are using our products. Sony has equipped

many of its studios around the world with Wilson Audio speakers. They actually had a programme to develop a speaker in the price range of the System 7, and they certainly have the technological resources and financial muscle to do so. But in the world of loudspeakers perhaps more than any other realm of playback, there's a blend of art and science that's involved. There are more compromises, loudspeakers are less perfect as a category, and I would say that along with the recording and the room acoustics, the loudspeaker is the most critical element in the chain. At one time it was an honour shared with the turntable, another electro-mechanical transducer where set-up and tolerances were just as critical. ►

► **RG.** First the WATT, along with the Puppy, and then the X1, both established completely new price points for loudspeakers. The WATT was three times the price of its nearest competitor, the X1 was launched in the UK at £70000, completely redefining most people's understanding of the flagship concept and price, yet both products have enjoyed unprecedented success...

DAW. When we stopped production of the X1 about a year ago it was around serial number 650. When I originally designed that product it was more for the Asian market, which had bought a lot of WAMMs – all of which needed calibration. Given that in many cases the rooms weren't really large enough for a four-tower system, my target was to design a less critical and more compact speaker that delivered 90% of the WAMM at 60% of the price. But when we introduced it we had to explain to people that we weren't using the approach that most companies do where they create a flagship product – which they don't really expect anybody to buy – so that they can offer “similar” technology in their itty-bitty models 55 price-points below. Our line was “We don't build Grand Slams (X1s) to sell WATTS. They each have their own, independent place in the scheme of things. Each is a commercial product in its own right”. So in the first three days we took orders for 14 pairs of X1s!

I think that is a testament to several things. Number one is the commitment of our dealers and distributors. There are 14 dealers with X1s on demonstration in the US, distributors showing them all over the world. That's in stark contrast to the normal approach with a statement product which might look for a couple of dealers in the States, one in Singapore, one in Hong Kong and maybe a couple in Europe. Suddenly a lot more people got to hear these speakers and when they did they realised that they were genuine, an authentic product. This wasn't something that was just slapped together with a high price-tag hung on it. This was authentic excellence. That's what established the X1 as a true benchmark product, creating that price-point in the process. Some other manufacturers, I think rather cynically, took a look at the price and thought “Lets get some money from our investors, get some stuff built

in China and then stick that price on it”.

RG. I think there are two sides to that coin. The thing that struck me about the appearance of the X1 was that within a year, just about everybody seemed to be trying to produce a speaker at that price, whether they'd ever done so before or not. I think it was a credibility issue; they genuinely felt that the X1 had created such a stir in both the market and the press that unless you did something to compete you weren't taken

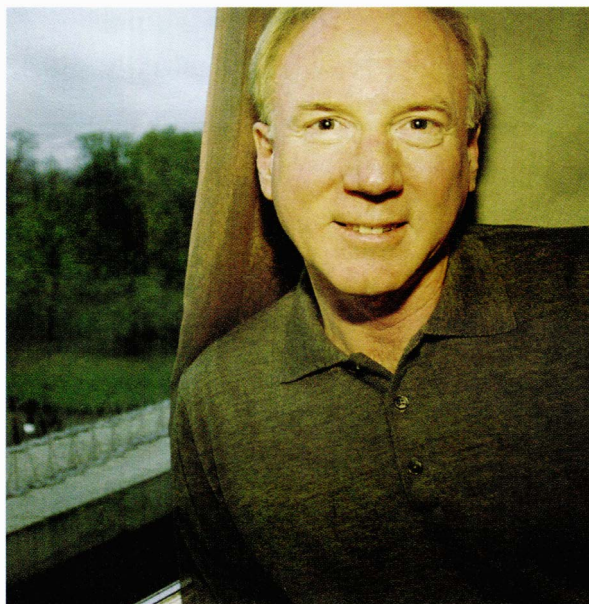
seriously. Although, as you say, many of the results were quite cynical and of dubious merit, it's still remarkable that a single product can have such a profound influence on the market. But for a single company to achieve that twice is really unusual.

DAW. Well, on the Alexandria which costs substantially more than the X1, we have taken orders for 150 of them in 14 months. The first 55 were ordered without anyone ever having heard it! Again, I think that says a lot about the quality of representation we have but also about people's experience with our products. Basically, Wilson Audio has a set of core

values that we are very true to. You may accept those values or you may disagree with them, but you know what you're going to get. Our approach and values are so strong that there's a real element of trust. You know going in what we're about and I think that that is one of the elements that is starting to be lost in our industry and it's a grave concern. I see so many people in our industry who have built their reputation on the basis of building fine products and charging top-dollar for them. But now they've learnt the dirty little secret that you can get them built in China, put the same brand name on them, and pay someone \$4 a day to assemble them for you. That week they'll be building your product. Next week they'll be building someone else's, and the week after that, who knows? These are not people who have a passion for what they do!

RG. Am I right in saying that Wilson are the only survivors from amongst the original high-end speaker manufacturers who've been in continuous production? What is it that's kept Wilson at the top for over 20 years?

DAW. I read in one of the business magazines a humorous ►



▶ story about a president of a corporation – it was a creative agency I think. As a youngster, fresh out of Art School this guy was the young Turk with all these radical ideas. He and his partner became market leaders, they grew and they grew and they became profoundly good at what they did. They hired all these associates, young talent and years went by and the day came when his concept lost out to one of his employees. He said, “I felt empty, I had to ask myself what am I doing here?” It’s a question that the president of every company should ask themselves. If you’ve done your job well then you should have a laser sharp vision of what your core values are. Then you surround yourself with people who are better than you are. Why hire someone to do something that you can do better? That doesn’t make any sense and doesn’t really free-up your time either. You need people who when they go out there, it’s job done and done right. So what this president realised is that he had succeeded almost unknowingly. By surrounding himself with brilliant people he was able to concentrate on creating the company culture and keeping that company on track. That’s exactly what I have tried to do. My values are pretty much what they were 25 years ago. I got my original concepts in audio from one of the pre-eminent British designers. So along with that comes the appreciation of natural timbre, the appreciation of value itself – a very British trait.

When I was designing implantable medical hardware, if you got it wrong or used the wrong materials then people died or got cancer ten years down the road. I became very good at designing test protocols to ask the right questions. In contrast, I think this industry has been guilty of producing brilliant answers to irrelevant questions. So I’m always looking at what is the relevant question. Now, in talking about loudspeaker design, according

to my wife, I have two gifts: number one is that I know exactly, in my mind, what a given circuit or loudspeaker architecture will sound like. And you know, she’s right. The second is that I’m at my best when I’m building toys. I’m a guy and guys like toys. I’m just lucky that there are a lot of other guys out there who like the same toys as me. There’s a lot of truth, a simple purity in what she says.

So when I’m visualising the sound of something I do it in terms of the sound of a group of live musicians. Now, next

week I’ll be spending my time stood in front of the 370 voices of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, along with an 80-piece orchestra and one of the biggest pipe organs ever built. That’s a lot of sound. When you hear sound like that it’s not like hearing speakers at a hi-fi show. When they hit a fortissimo it

is an awesome thing. It’s powerful. So when I hear speakers with a nice, refined, smooth frequency response I’ll accept that it’s a nice sounding speaker, but it doesn’t begin to intimate reality, just like a TV screen can’t intimate the scale of the Grand Canyon. So dynamic

range is absolutely vital, and a lot of reviewers have recognised that. So our speakers will work with low-level detail or at fff. I think that that is key to their success. I know exactly what it is that I want. I don’t release it until it’s ready. It is essential to know your destination before you begin.

That’s one of my main concerns with companies that have discovered the China connection. These guys are making profits like never before, but how long can you take these products and brand them with your label before the reliability and repeatability catch up with you. It’s a betrayal of your customers.

If on the other hand you have a second, separate range which you clearly state, although it’s designed by your design team, is built in China, which allows us to reduce the cost and

pass those savings along, then to me that’s honesty in marketing. That’s forthright and above board. It’s when they don’t tell you, especially when the prices stay at the same high levels, that it becomes a problem, because ultimately it risks devaluing our whole industry.

I’m hoping that this is something that the magazines will start to do – to inform their readers. They need to recognise when a product is from a company like ours that has remained authentic and not present

off-shore product as equivalent, because it isn’t the same thing. One thing that they could do is inform their readers whether the manufacturer’s accounts are available from Dunn and Bradstreet. D&B tell you all sorts of things about a company including its margins and how they compare to other companies in the same industry. I always say to people that whilst our speakers are regrettably expensive, given their cost of manufacture, they are not over-priced.

I think they (magazines) should also list component ▶

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► source: of the drivers, of the crossover, of the cabinet. There's a little trick that is used by loudspeaker manufacturers. If you have a driver where each element of the assembly, the basket, the cone, the surround, the motor, is made and put together in China, and you send that un-magnetized driver to the US, put it on your magnetizing machine and push the button for one and a half seconds, you can now say that that driver is made in the US, because it has changed function since coming in.

(One well-known cable manufacturer) had a federal action brought against them because they were bringing in cables from China and removing the 'Made In China' labelling. You see, it's everybody's dirty little secret, and if it is not exposed then consumers out there will buy this stuff and they won't get value for money.

RG. What I find interesting is the products that come out of China, marketed by Chinese companies. Currently, many of those products are a triumph of presentation over performance. They haven't quite got the "art" element of hi-fi design right yet. So, you might have a \$1000 CD player that looks like a \$5000 CD player but actually still sounds like a \$500 CD player...

DAW. And at \$500 it would still be overpriced in manufacturing terms. I know what it costs to build stuff. That's how we price our products: the full manufacturing cost plus a margin. If that is based on a US labour rate of \$20 an hour – which includes full health benefits, dental benefits, everything for our employees, disability insurance and all that, paid vacation time – and then to have that compared with \$4 a day with zero benefits or security! We hand build and hand finish all our products. In China the benefits they get are meals and a place to stay. But the place to stay is a room smaller than a bathroom, with six bunks and a bucket in the corner. That might be an improvement in conditions, the wages might be an improvement, compared to what they had before. But if we compare \$160 a day plus benefits to \$4 a day with no benefits in manufacturing terms, that's more than 40 times the cost, and labour cost is one of the major cost factors in any end product. And it extends to materials. We don't use MDF but the materials used in China are made in China. What are the wages for the workers in lumber mills? Factor those things in and you end up with a full manufacturing cost for a product

in China being around a twentieth of what it would be in the US. So if they are selling it to you at one third of the price, you are not getting a bargain. People simply can't understand how cheap labour is over there – and how exploited. The only reason China is growing so fast is because they have an exploited labour force. And you know, part of the problem is US companies that want more and more profit, so they put more and more pressure on the labour costs.

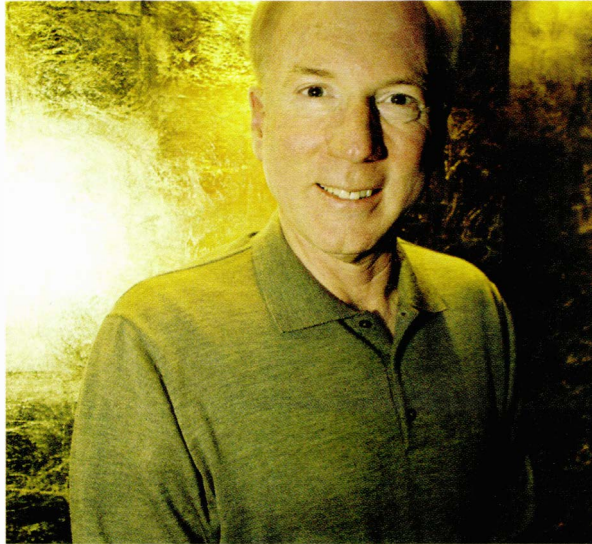
RG. Sooner or later, the Chinese will get the "art" aspect right, at which point, the people who have been relying on the Chinese to build product for them will find that the Chinese are building those products, or ones very like them, on their own account. Because the performance and expectation of products in general has been eroded by the manufacturing process, the indigenous Chinese designs can first compete with and then overtake the original products.

DAW. We saw it in the '60s with Japanese receivers. What happened to Sherwood and

Pilot and Fisher will happen all over again. How many people collect old Onkyos? Now I understand that there isn't a massive market for my products, but then I don't build them for millions of people. Basically I build them for me. I remain completely unconcerned by the price. The only thing that concerns me is the performance and I think that is one of the main reasons why Wilson Audio is where it is today.

RG. Where do you see the high-end in ten years time?

DAW. Well, we've been fortunate as a company to enjoy growth every year since 1998, and that during a time when the market has endured a lot of stresses. People think that the high-end is going to die because people are getting into computer games. But as long as people love music and it continues to speak to them, then products that genuinely deliver more of that music will continue to come to the fore. It's true that young people don't listen to the same music as adults, but they'll tend to mature in their musical tastes. Not all of them, but some will and from those, there will be some, a small percentage, for whom music touches them like nothing else can. Music extends a siren call to those who hear it and for them, nothing else will do.



The long and winding road...

Branko Bozic, of high-end distributor Audiofreaks

Interviewed by Roy Gregory

RG. Perhaps we could start with your early life and the unusual route that eventually led you to hi-fi?

BB. I was born in Croatia – then part of Yugoslavia – and from my very early days got initiated into the world of classical music. Piano lessons started at the age of six and who was to know they would continue into my early/mid 20s and that music was to become my vocation as well as the biggest passion of my life? While studying piano and collecting all the available degrees and qualifications, I was also frequently performing both as a soloist and with orchestras; all part and parcel of one's education towards the impossible task of becoming a "class" concert pianist.

It was after graduation at the Academy of Music in Zagreb and while studying for my Masters degree that I also got my very first – and only – employment as a piano teacher, in one of the primary music schools where I attempted to give a basic knowledge of music and piano to children at primary school age.

It took me only 10 years to realise that my sense of total and absolute perfection in music and life in general was incompatible with ever becoming a good teacher, and so that episode came to an end in 1987 and, strangely enough, led me to this country and another, totally different career that stretches to this date.

RG. Is this when your involvement with hi-fi really started?

BB. I would like to make it very clear that my entry into the world of audio happened as a total and pure consequence of my involvement in music! Even as a child in my parents' home,

I was privileged to listen to music on audio systems that, at the time (60s and 70s) seemed to have been pretty good overall. My father was an avid collector of LPs, but even more so very much liked to use open reel tape in order to record radio programmes, concerts, etc. So, in addition to a basic Dual turntable, we also had an Uher open reel tape deck which was quite good in those days. When I got to an age where we all want something of our own, I assembled my first audio system (with a receiver, turntable and speakers) and that was the beginning of that particular journey.

A couple of events back in 1984 became the turning points in my "audio life". Firstly, I was invited to contribute to one of the magazines covering the field of audio – which later led to a presence in almost

every publication in my country that had pages or columns dedicated to hi-fi – and, secondly, thanks to one of those regular columns, I met Franc Kuzma and his very first product – the wonderful Stabi turntable. He came to Zagreb to visit me, brought the turntable for a review and I actually wrote the very first review of any of his products. Leaving aside the fact that this encounter led to a long-standing and close friendship that endures to this day, it also had a huge impact on everything I was to be doing in the years to come.

Shortly after our first meeting, Franc and I embarked on another silly adventure with an even more excited product. We established a society of music aficionados called Audiofil (audiophile) which gave us the legal possibility – otherwise non-existent within the system we lived in – to have our own audio magazine also called Audiofil. Franc was the publisher, I was the editor and a couple of other experienced audiophiles and music lovers contributed with their copy on audio, ►

There is a common belief that pets and their owners start looking very much alike... ...I sincerely hope none of us will ever look like our favourite loudspeaker.

► music, records, etc. In the purest “Harry Pearson” fashion, we chose not to have either advertising or distribution which, if nothing else, ensured, that the honeymoon did not last longer than 8 issues. But, I am very proud of this achievement to this day, and even now when I read what I wrote about, for example, the essence of High-End Audio, I do not feel that much has changed, at least as regards the fundamental principles and postulates I formulated then.

Now, being a “recognised” audio reviewer and journalist on home turf, I regularly visited the UK and met more and more people from the British audio industry – whether at the Penta show which I attended regularly from its inception, or by visiting manufacturers for interviews, etc. I am immensely proud and privileged to have met one particular personality from the UK audio industry back in 1984 – Alastair Robertson-Aikman of SME Ltd – and was actually the author of the very first, or maybe second, detailed review of his Series V tonearm in the world. Even now, 20 years down the road, we still remain in close contact and, mutual love for operatic music aside, I could not have had a better mentor and point of reference in terms of the general approach and standards one should maintain in his professional activities.

Eventually I was invited to join one of the then leading high-end distribution companies (Automation Sciences) and this led to me and my wife’s move to the UK and the locality of Richmond, Surrey where we have stayed to this very day. Sadly, my first port of professional call in the UK had been in enough trouble already and did not long survive my arrival, so Audiofreaks was born in November 1987.

RG. You’ve already mentioned the term “high-end” and the philosophy that should accompany it. Unfortunately, it’s a description that has been shamelessly devalued in the name of product promotion. What does it mean for you?

BB. As far as I am concerned, there is only one way to define the term “high-end” and it applies equally to every single aspect of our lives. Sadly, too many of us consider high-end to be nothing but a reflection of high price and, hopefully, overall quality of the commodity. For me, “real high-end audio” can only exist if individuals pursuing it have a “high-end way of life”. What does that mean? It means living a life of extremely high standards and criteria imposed primarily on yourself, and only then on other people and things. Unless we live a life of very few compromises where it matters, how can we recognise, judge or define what is “the best of the best”? I can, of course, only speak for myself, but my unhealthy perfectionist approach to life is my biggest enemy! Probably as a consequence ►



► of my lifelong involvement with music which, just as any other art, does not recognise relative, but only absolute. And, after all, we can never be perfect, so all we can do is try our very damn best.

Assuming one can adopt a life philosophy along these lines, it should be fairly simple to assess and choose anything that surrounds us, and that includes audio components or systems. Reality may suggest otherwise, but without perseverance and a strict approach there is never any progress.

RG. As a distributor, how do you select products for your portfolio?

BB. There is a common belief that pets and their owners start looking very much alike if the relationship between them lasts long enough. While I shall not dispute that some of us do indeed look on our audio components as pets, I sincerely hope none of us will ever look like our favourite loudspeaker. Joking aside, I think there is no question that the very best audio components vividly reflect the personalities and characters of their creators. Further, I could never work just with products – I also need good people supporting them. Unless I can have a genuine, deep relationship with the people behind the product, there is no chance I could ever feel comfortable with the product itself. Sounds complicated, but is, in fact, very simple and happens naturally all the time. Finally, people I deem to be “bad” never have products I would classify as “good sounding”. Why exactly this happens I could not say, but it would not surprise me at all if it had something to do with the high-end approach to life in general I mentioned a moment ago.

I divide the very best of high-end audio into two main groups: products that strive to play music as closely as possible to what can be heard in concert halls, opera houses and

similar and products that want to reflect “perfect hi-fi”.

Personally, and as a distributor, the only products that make sense to me belong to the former group, and I have no interest in the latter. Sadly, there are many more products belonging to the latter and, for end users (mis)guided by the vast majority of retailers, the latter are much easier to sell. Certainly, this also defines what to avoid when choosing products. Such a statement is not an imaginary one as we have almost daily communication from the general public who have succumbed

to “perfect hi-fi” and would like to hear some music coming from their systems. All this, of course, does not necessarily mean that my products are the “best” or even “musically perfect”, but I refuse to subscribe to the excessive use of the oldest bail-out clause in hi-fi, that subjective preferences are the only relevant criterion in existence. Why? Simply because one has to have objective experience and aural knowledge of acoustic music and artificially reproduced sound, at least to a minimal extent, before you can assign personal taste to the task of choosing.

A real high-end audio product is a composite of its craftsmanship, execution and, above all, the years and years of r&d and experience of the designer, all of which result in the most beautiful rendition of music for the listener. If that, or even a proportion of that, can be achieved, I would like to believe the aim and purpose of such a creation has been met.

Bearing this in mind, it goes without saying that, if there is one thing I would always avoid, it is products that come and go like a song entering and exiting the Top 20 chart. There are more and more products that seem to offer a hell of

a lot for very little, although we all know there is no such thing in this life as a free lunch – even if it may look that way. I shall never cease to be amazed how some importers and retailers love to race after a quick buck. Inevitably, ►



It took me only 10 years to realise that my sense of total and absolute perfection in music (and life in general) was incompatible with ever becoming a good teacher.

▶ after a short period of time the product falls into oblivion, there is no after sales support and all too often the product turns out to be quite badly executed and thus unreliable. We choose our products carefully and stay with our suppliers for a long time to enjoy and share the stability this brings.

RG. How do you view your role as a distributor?

BB. The main role of a distributor, in my opinion, is to be a proper, professional and, above all, respectable extension of the manufacturer in a given country. In short, the distributor “is” the manufacturer in another country or market. Some years ago, our function was much more simple and

straightforward. However, since the introduction of the EEC and, even more so, Internet, e-Bay,

Audiogon and other virtual marketplaces, I do ask myself sometimes why am I still doing this and what I should be doing in this “new commercial order”. While I would very much like to believe that the quality driven approach to the promotion, marketing and sales of the very best in audio has not completely vanished, I

have to say that the modern obsession and tactic of buying on price or discount rather than the product’s performance and its qualities will, inevitably, bring the world of high-end audio to a premature death. Customers assume that performance comes with the retail price of a product and that you’ll always realise that performance regardless of what you pay. However, as I’ve already said, price is absolutely no indicator of performance in itself, and any customer must ask how much of the performance available from a product they can expect to receive – and for how long!

RG. Do you think that the current emphasis on price and discounting puts suppliers under undue pressure and that that ultimately undermines the performance of both the company and its products?

BB. It would not surprise me at all if the day came when not only retailers and distributors, but also less stable manufacturers will have no other choice but to sell their products at 5 or 10% above cost. That ensures the end-user two things: the cheapest possible price and a complete

absence of support or service. Any business that doesn’t cover its overheads – let alone make a profit – cannot survive and 10% doesn’t even come close. As long as that happens when I am no longer involved, fine, but I would like to stick around a bit longer than this may take to happen.

Perhaps it sounds a bit old fashioned, but I firmly believe that manufacturers should manufacture, distributors and importers do their part and retailers should do exactly what they have been doing for ages and sell to and service the general public. My main reason for that is the unavoidable difference in mentalities of the parties involved. I will not elaborate in detail, but the qualities that make a good distributor certainly do not make a good retailer and vice

versa. Assuming that each link in the chain can keep its respective level of greed under control (a problem that gets greater the further down the chain you get) I see no reason for the established system of marketing and sales to change; at least not if maximising performance rather than ownership is the object of the exercise.

Where products have emanated from within the EEC, it’s theoretically possible for a manufacturer to dispense with a distributor in each country for legal, administrative and similar purposes. Even in this instance

however, I would argue that this is not sensible, and is an approach confined to smaller, emergent companies rather than established manufacturers. Clearly, if you only make two products then this route may be possible, but once you have a whole range, the logistics and knowledge base required to provide proper local service and support preclude it.

RG. How do you assess a new product? What are the qualities that you seek?

BB. The answer to this question should lie within what I said about the way in which I choose our products for distribution. Bearing in mind that I could never market a product that did not fulfil my personal expectation to a sufficient extent, the set of criteria are pretty well defined and I expect to see them met no matter how expensive or complex, affordable or simple the product under evaluation would be.

When I evaluate products I only apply non-electrified music as I like to call it, and that means classical and jazz, sometimes delicate country or folk. And, if I may add, in this particular order of genre. Unless a particular sonic ▶

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▶ signature is rationally required and asked for, whatever can reproduce, for example classical music, in a satisfactory manner will rarely if ever sound less good on electrified pop or rock. Further, every single component has to be able to demonstrate its musical qualities in a wide variety of applications or systems. While it will, of course, sound different to some extent, a true, genuine first-class component will always be recognised for its main positive sonic attributes, irrespective of the application. Even the worst sounding system cannot destroy or obscure the real qualities of a superior individual component. Lastly, in order for a component to satisfy my expectations it has to have the highest possible degree of real, low level detail resolution and, especially when evaluating loudspeakers, the lowest possible distortion. In other words, most of the musical content has to be audible at pretty low listening levels. Far too often we try to use decibels in order to make a component do what it, sadly, is not be able to do. Playing loud means only playing loud and increasing the distortion and fatigue; it will never make a component sound better or more complete.

Strangely enough, if all these elements of the reproduced sound happen to exist, everything else will, more or less, fall into place on its own. There will be no need for concern about the dimensionality of the soundstage, transparency, focus, stability of the image or parts of an image, etc., etc. As with everything else in life, if the basics are healthy and correct, the rest happens anyway. No rocket science, mystique or philosophy in that. Thankfully, or sadly, not many components can do all this and that is what should and does make a distinction between music coming from the ugly box called amplifier or the big lumps called loudspeakers and a lot of unarticulated noise filling up the room instead.

RG. In stark contrast to most exhibitors, you always seem to produce great sound at shows. How do you achieve that?

BB. First of all, it is very pleasing and motivating to know that this seems to be what people think about my systems at the shows. Leaving that aside, I have never really thought about how and why it ends up sounding as it does, no matter which components we use. Products have to be good enough, of course, and all I do is apply and implement the same approach and rules I have already mentioned in choosing individual components. It would not surprise me

at all if I, subconsciously, simply try to replicate the sound of the system I enjoy at home. Also, we have to survive in that room at the show for three or four days, so it is essential that our team, let alone the visiting public, are left with something more than a headache or feeling of mental and physical exhaustion.

The sound of a show system reflects the ethos behind it and the balanced attributes of the products that go together to create it. If those things are correct then the sound of the show system should also be correct. Assuming all our products do indeed possess all the positive musical characteristics I am talking about all the time, it should not be a miracle to be able to achieve a solid, acceptable final result. People always say how bad the rooms in hotels happen to be for what we need to do at shows. I disagree. Assuming they are large enough, they are often no better or worse than an average bad living room in a flat or a house.

People always say how bad the rooms in hotels happen to be for what we need to do at shows. I disagree. Assuming they are large enough, they are often no better or worse than an average bad living room in a flat or a house.

One has to be able to deal with all possible conditions and get the most out of it without sacrificing any of the important elements of the sound to be generated. As long as I can give the show visitors a taste of what the real depth, height or width of the stage is and show them what real musical dynamics and life combined with refined transparency is about, I shall be very happy. You would be sadly surprised to know how many show visitors have never really heard those essential qualities that even the most basic audio system should provide without question.

RG. The UK press seems to have an importance out of all proportion with the size of the market here. Do you feel that that creates an unusual pressure on UK distributors to achieve positive reviews for the products they represent?

BB. I accept that the English language happens to be the language of communication in the global audio community. It may be true that, in the constantly eroding world of real high-end audio, the UK audio press might be of particular relevance to manufacturers as a commonly and widely read platform for promotion and acclamation of the better products from around the world. At times when the business is slow, perhaps there is not much else any of us distributors to do but organise reviews, but I would not like to think of it or look at it in that way.

I have always tried to maintain a good and

► uninterrupted rapport with the UK audio press, regardless of the importance of the language, market or anything else. That means developing and a mutual understanding with the writers as to the way products should be treated and understood. As one would expect, the end result varies as much as the individuals concerned, but we have been able to develop some excellent long-term relationships that I'd like to believe have benefited all parties: us, the writer and the reader. I'd like to feel that none of our suppliers have stayed with Audiofreaks simply for the press coverage we can arrange. After all, sales are still more important than press and I have never ever based my marketing strategy on the weight of reviews. One has to install the product into the market first and then support it with reviews that, if good, help the general cause.

When it comes to the review itself, experience over the years means that I have a fairly good idea of what an individual writer's tastes and preferences may be, but as the supplier of a product to be reviewed, it is important that I can work with the reviewer in order to adapt the product to the individual system, listening room, small subjective preferences within the objective requirements and so on. A good product simply cannot be judged badly no matter how different the people and systems involved may be.

It is also very good and encouraging to see that the core audio journalists in the UK continue to support and endorse two-channel sound, while at the same time recognising the potential advantages and existing pitfalls of multi-channel music and home theatre solutions. In the world of MP3 players, the Apple iPod, hard disk data

storage and whatever else may come to de-humanise what we and generations before us have cultivated for so long, it is nice to see that even something like a good, old LP can find continued endorsement amongst audio writers. Especially when you consider how tempting it is to succumb to the easy stories that surround the latest technology.

RG. On that note, how do you see the future for Audiofreaks and of course, yourself?



BB. If and when I manage to retire, I would like to look back at my Audiofreaks career as a period of time which gave the audio and music community a bit more than just hundreds or thousands of products in exchange for money. If it was not for the support of my wife and children as well as that of a very few special friends and suppliers, I would have closed the company down more often than I care to remember. I entered the world of commercial audio in a most idealistic and naive manner and with no previous experience – and learned the hard way on many occasions. I've also been fortunate, privileged to develop a family of loyal and extremely

competent retailers without whom Audiofreaks couldn't possibly be where it is today.

I am still hopeful that my work and commitments might allow me to re-enter the world that perhaps I should never have left: the piano and creative music making. Whether it will happen or not remains to be seen, but, for the time being, I am more than happy to be where I am and to be doing what I am doing.



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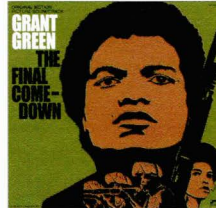
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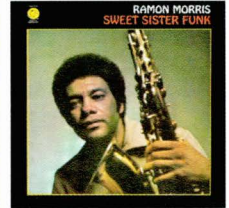
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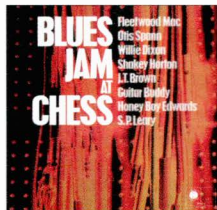


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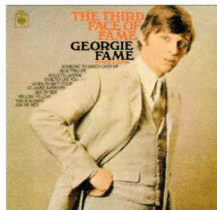
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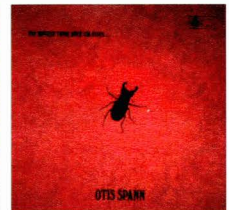
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Writer Profiles and Retrospectives

by Roy Gregory

Ever since we published a profile of each of the contributors in Issue 1, readers have been asking for updated versions. There just never seems to have been the time or, more importantly, the space to do it. Which is why we decided to make the last issue of each year an Annual – specifically to allow us to update our readership and take stock: Which in turn dovetails rather nicely with the awards.

But why the interest in these profiles? Don't worry, it's not a case of over inflated self-importance. Indeed, it's quite the opposite. I've said before (and getting paid by the word, I'll doubtless say again) that the reader's only protection is the name of the author appended to the review. That's why we put the name of the writer right underneath the title. That way you know upfront just whose ears and eyes you're looking through. The myth of the omnipotent and unbiased writer is exactly that: a myth. We all have our preferences, the sound we like, strengths and attributes we look for in a product. As Editor, the hardest part of my job is matching a product to the reviewer whose going to appreciate it – or maybe be challenged by it. I can give a Naim product to PM safe in the knowledge that he'll understand its ethos and application without even breaking stride. His conclusions will make perfect sense to the legions of devoted Naim fans. But Naim are shifting ground and so is their sound. That's why I need to give their products to writers like CB or CT as well, those who have strayed from the fold, for an external view. That way we see the shift

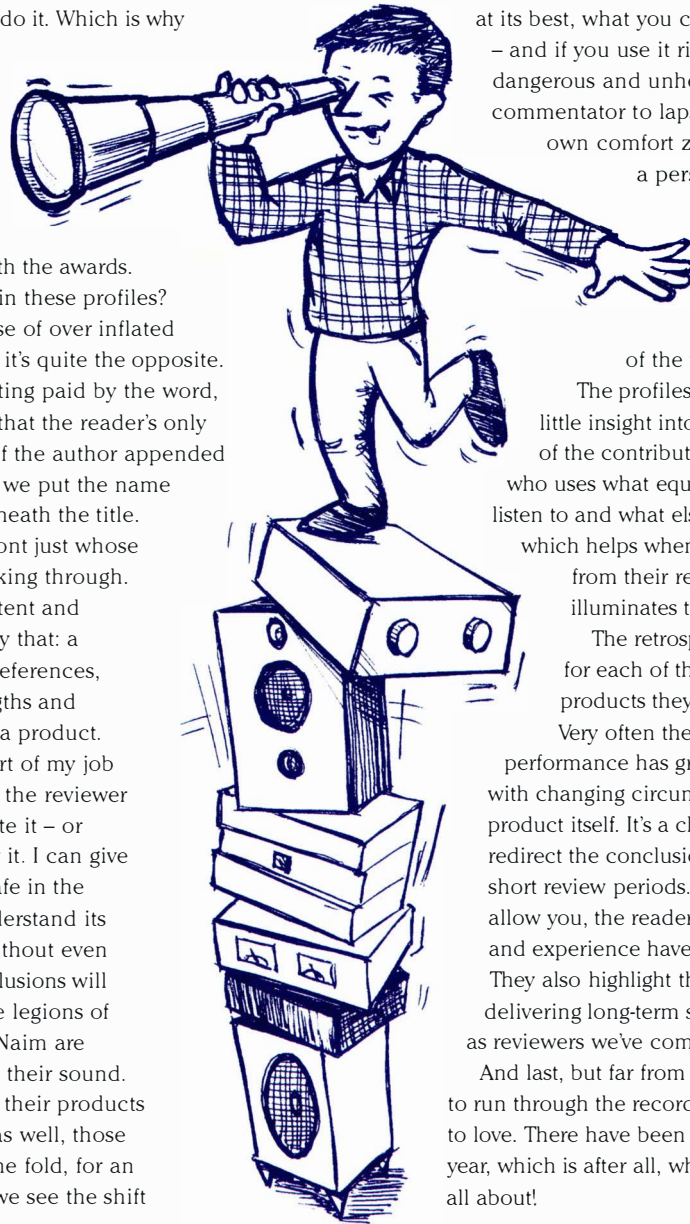
from both ends.

It's a tricky balance to get right. On the one hand, the final copy needs to reflect the product working at its best, what you can get out of it if you try – and if you use it right. On the other, it's dangerous and unhelpful to allow any commentator to lapse too deeply into his own comfort zone. Any review offers a perspective. It's a view from a particular direction. The trick is to try and avoid tunnel vision. Fine, give a perspective but place it in the context of the whole too.

The profiles should allow you at least a little insight into the background and tastes of the contributors. They should tell you who uses what equipment, what music they listen to and what else interests them. All of which helps when it comes to getting the most from their reviews, precisely because it illuminates the writer's viewpoint.

The retrospective offers an opportunity for each of the reviewers to revisit products they enjoyed during the year. Very often they're products whose performance has grown on the listener slowly, with changing circumstances or changes in the product itself. It's a chance to underline or redirect the conclusions reached after necessarily short review periods. Further than that, they allow you, the reader, to see how a writer's views and experience have been shaped by the year. They also highlight the products capable of delivering long-term satisfaction and those that as reviewers we've come to depend on.

And last, but far from least, they offer a chance to run through the recordings that we've grown to love. There have been some fantastic discs this year, which is after all, what it's supposed to be all about!



"Not waving, but drowning..."

by Chris Binns

2004; the year in which America chose to re-elect president Bush, shortly after which my appendix exploded. While I'm pretty sure there is no connection, both left me feeling distinctly uncomfortable. And hi-fi? There has been nothing that has really knocked me off my feet, offered a life changing experience or given me cause to re-evaluate the way I listen to music. I continue to be frustrated by both the professional and consumer industries attitude to digital audio; on the one hand there seems to have been little advancement regarding high resolution formats, except possibly with the amount of confusion surrounding them, while simultaneously there is a revolution taking place for the average consumer. I say average; for a lot of non-audiophiles, downloading compressed music from the internet has become highly popular, and if asked the question "Would they be interested in a higher quality CD?" the answer is invariably, "Why?" But enough grumbling, and on to some of the products that are worthy of mention from the last year.

The little Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD player. Emerging from what appears to have been an incredibly frustrating development, I re-evaluated this machine at the beginning of the year and concluded that it sounded pretty good. Further on down the same line I feel that it is a remarkable player, particularly for the money, as it has plenty of dynamics, is free from any hard edges and possesses a warm and inviting character. Thus rock music rolls along with speed and energy while other music is portrayed with a full palette of colour, plenty of texture and detail. Not a machine that particularly impresses you on first listen, its more the type that seduces you gently until you realise that you are playing a lot more CD's than you otherwise would. It also managed to play a disc that was hitherto unplayable on any other machine, due to a large hole in the coating through which you could see daylight. So excuse the cliché, but it's

almost as satisfying as a good turntable: There are not many CD players that I would say that about.

The big Bryston 7B's. An awesome amplifier, and despite its outrageous power output, capable of an incredibly delicate and musical performance. I had a lot of fun with these, and it wasn't all about keeping the neighbourhood awake. The publisher of the magazine is contemplating a pair of these to partner his Revel Salon loudspeakers, and I am green with envy.

The average sized Ayre phono pre-amp.

Although I didn't review it (RG had that pleasure) I used it for some time with a view to writing a second opinion. Once warmed up, it seemed to me to capture all that was good about listening to vinyl by sounding 'wholesome' and thoroughly satisfying. It might lack the ultimate definition of say, the Groove, but it avoids making music sound rather academic, and dare I say it, uninteresting. Expensive, maybe, but it offered me one of the best and most enjoyable analogue sounds that I have had at home.

While the Naim NAP300 does not, strictly speaking, fall into this year's category, it continues to surprise me with its capabilities and provide much joy. Finely etched detail, expansive presentation, and proper portrayal of musical dynamics with an ability to remain composed while driving bastard speaker loads; this adds up to almost everything I want from a power amplifier at the moment. And it pulls me into music in a way that I thought only a valve amp could.

Which leads me on to mention the EAT KT88 valves. While representing possibly the most expensive KT88 ever, there are two important aspects of their performance that make them a worthwhile investment. They sound brilliant, and will make you think that your amplifier costs three times as much, while they also appear to be stable over a long (and counting) period of time, which potentially



► means they could prove to be more cost effective than many other valves.

Unfinished business? One product in particular that could have done with further evaluation was the Roksan TMS 2. Although it sounded great with the fitted Artimesz arm, I would have liked to have tried it with something better (and more in keeping with the price tag) to further explore its considerable potential.

The Talking Heads collection – *Once In A Lifetime*. This is the first time I have encountered a CD re-master that has actually managed to really capture the essence and life of the original vinyl. In particular, disc one of this unwieldy set (specifically designed to not fit on any shelf known to man) is amazingly good, insomuch as it has all the life and dynamics of the late seventies records, possibly more. This is a lesson in how it should be done, and listening to these early tracks was as exciting as I remember it being first time round; a rare event indeed. Can we have more re-masters like this please?



And finally, an honourable mention for a pair of KEF 104ab loudspeakers. Having seen me through college years (and remarkably, survived) I sold these to a friend of mine who still has (and uses) them. He brought them round for a quick check up that involved nothing more than tightening up the drivers. I spent an afternoon listening to them, somewhat surprised at just how good they sounded, and of course wondering if speakers really are any better than they were twenty-five years ago. Nostalgic? Yes, to a degree, but it set me wondering; the fact is that like many people I recall being more downright enthusiastic about listening to music at the tender age of eighteen than I am now, and I have continually wondered whether this is just about getting older, or inconceivable as it might seem, that hi-fi has taken a wrong turn somewhere along the line. I know that this might be a bit of a sad git type of thing to do, but it's my intention in the near future to replicate the system that I was using around those 104's, and find out.

Happy New Year.



Chris Binns

Recording and mastering engineer

Hi - fi experience:

Where to start? There's not a lot that the Binns hasn't done, including: session guitarist; recording engineer; hi-fi retail and manufacturing (the original Cadence valve amplifiers as well as studio monitoring systems); teaching of music and sound recording and of course, hi-fi and record reviewing. I currently spend most of my time working in studios (again) as a mixing and mastering engineer, where everything is now done with computers with which I struggle to communicate. Grumbles persistently about this, and argues that if you had to drive a car using a mouse we'd all be in trouble...

System details:

Linn LP12 with Armageddon PSU, Linn Ekos and Lyra Helikon SL
 Cheap, wobbly Ikea rack
 Resolution Audio Opus 21 and Densen 400XS CD players
 Tom Evans Microgroove phono-stage
 Primary valve line-stage
 Naim NAP300 power amplifier
 Primary monitors or Quad ESL 57's
 Nordost Valkyrja/Valhalla cabling
 Russ Andrews Mains Leads and Distribution Block

Desert island discs:

Talking Heads – *Once In A Lifetime* – CD set
 George Dyson – *Violin Concerto* Chandos chan 9369
 Keith Jarrett – *The Paris Concert* ECM 1401
 The Cure – *Faith Fiction* record fix 6
 Cesar Franck – *Choral no. 3 in A minor* Chalfont SDGX 307
 Gerald Finzi – *Loves Labours Lost/Clarinet Concerto* Nimbus NI 5101

Book:

Alan Carr – *The easy way to give up smoking*

Film:

Breaking of Waves

Luxury:

Sleep – or a guardian angel, or failing that, Valium.

Indulgence:

A very, very powerful telescope

Out Of The Blue...

by Mark Childs

When you come to look back over the past year, it's best to look a just a little further, to see how things have changed since the year before. And this year, whilst the music itself may be similar, there's been a distinct change in how it has been received. At the end of 2003 there was a real sense of a music scene in good health, with a mass of bands doing well, making great music, just underneath

failing to get the exposure they might have reasonably expected. Instead offbeat offerings from bands like the Zutons and the Scissor Sisters did particularly well, catching a new interest in colourful cabaret and picture book drama. The Scissor Sisters especially deserve note here. Considering the difficulty that previous retro/ electro-clash groups have had in the past (remember Fischerspooner?), their move into the spotlight seemed to come out of the blue.

But, for me, the year must really be defined by the albums that remain firmly shackled to my Hi-Fi. The pure abundance of good records this year has meant pretty brisk rotation on the CD shelf, so to pick out a few of



the mainstream.

So if 2003 was good, then 2004 was great, because this year, more than anything else, was the year when these bands moved into the mainstream. Great bands, who would previously have remained staring firmly at their own shoes in dark pubs in the midlands, took to their feet and made an assault on the charts. All year I have struggled to discover some hidden gem, a spark of undiscovered talent, only to find Radio 1 taking up their cause, and championing them to a number one slot in the album charts.

There have been a few genuine surprises along the way though. Some good solid releases from bands that had been looking like hot property seemed to fall by the wayside, with records from Hundred Reasons, Biffy Clyro, The Prodigy, The Hives, The Datsuns and The Libertines

the best is doubly hard, but a few favourites have definitely appeared.

Franz Ferdinand did a pretty good job of redefining the charts early this year, bringing good music to everyone's attention. Their eponymous debut album is a stroke of perfection, every note considered and played with authority. Perhaps the most revealing thing about Franz Ferdinand is that the track listing reads like a greatest hits record, which isn't a bad trick for a band who

▶ only burst onto the scene 12 months ago.

The Futureheads also excelled themselves this year. After exhaustive touring they unleashed their music on the world with their self-titled album. If you yearned for something to make you smile, to inject some energy back into your life, then this album was for you. Quite frankly, just listening to it makes me feel out of breath.

But three albums in particular define this year for me, three albums that were released within weeks of each other at the start of the year, three albums which have shaped the musical scene. The first two, Snow Patrol's *Final Straw* and The Killer's *Hot Fuss*, were two of the finest albums this year. Both albums are expertly produced and mixed, creating something friendly to the general public, whilst preserving a core of musical integrity. In the end this proved to be vital, as both albums moved from indie also-rans to true pop success. These albums contain deep emotions, challenging lyrical constructions, innovative musical arrangements and sublime melodies, but most importantly, manage to contain this within an instantly appealing three-minute pop song. These albums mark the point at which a band stops staring down at their own navels, and get up to try and conquer the world.

Which leaves the third and, for me the best album this year by a country mile. It was a small band from the south coast that really stole the charts this year, with an album built around luxurious piano scores, and lacking any form of guitars whatsoever. Keane's *Hopes and Fears* seemed to come from nowhere, propelled by soaring vocals and truly gold-plated melodies. But the depth of the album takes quite some time to appreciate. This is an album which starts off great, and then grows to be even better. Keane have managed to skip the debut album altogether and write a mature modern classic from scratch, the equivalent of skipping *Parachutes* and moving straight to *...Rush of Blood*. What Keane have, that Franz Ferdinand, the Killer and Snow Patrol lack, that elusive spark, is emotional integrity. That sense, even more remarkable for such a young band, that they really mean what they are singing, lifts this album clear of the competition.

Of course now, at the end of the year, there are some bands appearing that seem worth keeping an eye on. Will next year bring more of the same? Will it bring a musical revolution? Or could it bring a move back to manufactured sugared pop? Personally, I intend to survive Christmas and enter the New Year on a diet of backward, counter-culture hippy protest songs. As the nights draw long, and the shops go silly, Willy Mason's *Where the Humans Eat* seems the perfect antidote to keep my feet planted firmly on the ground. A latecomer to the list of this year's best albums, but a welcome one. ▶+

Mark Childs

Analogue circuit designer

Hi-Fi Experience:

I have been seriously interested in music, both live and recorded, since my school days, and try to get out to see new bands as often as possible. When Jason Hector realised I was passionate about good music he introduced me to Hi-Fi as a means to getting more out of my music collection. After re-discovering my favourite albums and hearing them in a new light I was, quite simply, convinced. I now love hearing how different systems can bring out different aspects of a recording, bringing the music to life.

System Details (including cables, supports etc)

Speakers: Epos M12

CD: Creek CD 53

AMP: Creek 5350 SE

Tuner: Myriad Cameo

Cables: DNM Reson

Desert Island Discs:

U2 *Achtung Baby* Island Records CIDU28

Biffy Clyro *Blackened Sky* Beggars Banquet Records BBQCD226

Tiger *We Are Puppets Trade 2 /* Island Records TRDCD 1002 524 316-2

Idlewild *100 Broken Windows* Food 7243 5 25439 2 2

Six By Seven *The Closer You Get* Mantra Recordings MNTCD1017

Kings of Convenience *Quiet is the new loud* Source SOURCD019

Boo Radleys *Kingsize* Creation Records CRECD228

Book:

Iain M Banks *Excession*

Film:

Magnolia

Luxury/Indulgence:

My guitar

Sonic Frontiers...

by Dave Davies

The products that have impressed me the most over the past year are both sitting proudly on my racks: My Brinkmann LaGrange turntable, and Krell SACD standard. Both products have opened the door and my ears to exploring my collection anew and of course to discovering new music. The Brinkmann replaced a long treasured Orbe modified Michell Gyrodek, Mission Mechanic and Clearaudio Signature cartridge that though dearly loved was beginning to look a little long in the tooth and outpaced by changes elsewhere in my system. The Brinkmann combination, eye wateringly expensive as it is, had impressed me before I even heard a note of music, its elegance of design and outstanding constructional quality immediately setting it apart.

pleasure from the likes of my Thelonious Monk Riverside original pressings. Calmly wringing the best from every disk I throw at it the Brinkmann is consistent across every recording and type of music I play. Whether it's my mono original of Georgie Fame and The Blue Flames *Rhythm and Blues at The Flamingo* which provides a challenge to any system being a far from perfect recording, or a brand new 200g audiophile pressing I can be absolutely confident that the Brinkmann won't let me down and will deliver a convincing musical performance time and time again.



It was just as impressive in

action and entirely consistent across the wide range of music I sampled on demo. And now that I've lived with it for a long while it continues to provide a rock-solid source of unadulterated listening pleasure. As an avid collector of second-hand vinyl, it's often the case that even after careful cleaning many treasured recordings dating back to the late '50's and early '60's have less than perfect surfaces. The Brinkmann takes all that in its stride and without losing an iota of musical value seems to play down extraneous surface noise to a significant degree. This may simply be that it unlocks so much musical enjoyment that anything else is unimportant; all I know is that extraneous issues like surface noise just don't matter anymore and I can gain even more listening

The fact that it does all this whilst looking like a piece of sleek black and silver sculpture is merely

the cherry in my musical life's martini.

Complementing the Brinkmann is my more recently acquired Krell SACD Standard. This has broadened my musical horizons by opening the door (I have resisted for a good long while) to SACD reproduction, and in upping the ante in the quality of standard red-book CD's. And whilst the SACD Standard can't match the performance of the Brinkmann, it does a similar job in getting the best from CD's albeit on a slightly smaller and less convincing stage than the mighty German. Hearing the best SACD's has been something of a revelation, the Paavo Jarvi Stravinsky pieces on Pentatone (5186 046), Alison Krauss' *Forget About It*



- (Rounder SACD 11661-0465-6), Coltrane's *Soultrane* (MFSL UDSACD 2020), and the *O Brother, Where Art Thou* soundtrack (Lost Highway 088170358-2) are just a few of the SACD's that have been in frequent rotation all of them bringing the digital medium so much closer to the best vinyl in warmth, and sheer naturalness without losing the better aspects of CD – the dead silent backgrounds, and deep, well defined bass. The Krell shows its quality spurs too in the reproduction of standard red-book CD's and has helped here too to let me experience many CD's afresh. In particular I have become a late convert to Gillian Welch her *Time (The Revelator)* (WEA 5050466-6875-24) had sat on my racks awhile but hadn't particularly grabbed me via my previous player. What was I missing?!



The Krell has made it clear that I was ignoring one of the most heartfelt and musically satisfying recordings in my collection. That it has the potential to do the same revelatory job for many of the other 3,000 or so CD's on my shelves is a promise of great joy throughout 2005.

So in summary, the Ed asked me for what impressed me in '04, what I learnt and if I picked up on any significant trends. I was enormously impressed by my Brinkmann and Krell, I may finally have learnt to take great care in the purchase and matching of equipment (if so it's only taken me 30 years), and the (fingers crossed) greater availability of superb SACD re-issues and new recordings is a trend I sincerely hope will continue.



Dave Davies

Marketing Brand Manager

Hi-Fi Experience:

I got bitten by the hi-fi bug as a student, starting with a Thorens, Trio, AR system and working my way through countless increasingly expensive permutations. Many, many mistakes (as the Ed will gladly concur) have been made along the way with some truly awful and far too hastily made purchases, although I now think I've finally reached a sort of nirvana with a well-balanced system that whilst it's not perfect (what is?), I am truly happy with. My connections with the industry date way back to the '70's when as a freelance illustrator I became the resident cartoonist for Hi-Fi Answers. This naturally led to attending shows and from there many other contacts were made. Nowadays, since my mortgage has to be paid, I have a demanding job in IT Marketing and my cartooning is limited primarily to my work for Hi-Fi Plus. Much of my spare (and not so spare) money continues to be spent on live music, records and CD's, although an increasingly serious art collection is also taking its toll.

System:

Record deck: Brinkmann LaGrange

Tonearm: Brinkmann 10.5

Cartridge: Brinkmann EMT

Trichord Delphini 2 phono stage with 'Never-Connected' upgrade.

Michell Orca pre-amp with 'Never-Connected' upgrade to power supply.

Power amps: 2x Michell Stereo Alecto's

SACD Player: Krell SACD Standard

Speakers: Audioplan Kontrast 111i speakers

Speaker cables/interconnects: Audioplan LS16 and Super A-F cables + Caswey from record deck to phono

Racks: Hutter Racktime

Mains: Russ Andrews

Record Cleaner: VPI 16.5

Desert Island Discs (this time):

Shelly Manne & His Men *At The Blackhawk Vol 4* Contemporary S7580 (LP)

Roland Kirk *We Free Kings* Mercury 6336 384 (LP)

John Coltrane *A Love Supreme* Impulse AS-77 (Classic Records re-issue) (LP)

Pixies *Doolittle* AAD CAD 905 (LP)

Richard Thompson *Wait Until Dark* Rykodisc/ Hannibal HNCD 5303 (CD)

English String Music Barbirolli/ Sinfonia of London/ Allegri Quartet HMV

ASD521 / Nimbus Supercut (LP)

Soft Machine *Vol 1* Probe CPLP 4500 (LP)

Book: John Richardson *A Life of Picasso vols 1&2* Jonathan Cape

Film: *A Matter of Life and Death* (Powell & Pressburger) Carlton VFB15775.37115 00033 (DVD)

Luxury: An art collection that imminently threatens to overspill the house

Indulgence: My Leica Digilux2 camera

The Next, Best Thing...

by Dennis Davis

This last year saw the replacement of my Linn LP 12 with Harry Weisfeld's amazing VPI TNT Mk.6. I had owned the Linn for about 15 years and had done everything I could think of to wring as much performance out of it as possible. The Lingo power supply of course, an Ekos arm and then later a Graham armboard and arm were all incorporated. The Mana Acoustics wall mount stand kept the table isolated from floor vibration, while at the same time leaving the appropriate amount of Linn bounce. I then found myself toying with the idea of installing the Origin Live DC motor kit, but before making that further commitment to the table, I decided to scrap the incremental approach and start from scratch with a whole new design. I considered the SME tables, but found the price of a full-blown model too dear. I had been lusting over the VPI HR-X, but its footprint was simply too large to accommodate without overhauling my room layout. Then I heard the new VPI TNT VI. Harry Weisfeld's new centre weight and periphery clamp, in addition to the smaller footprint of the TNT sealed the deal for me (I think there might be some creative self-delusion going on here! Ed). I had never been satisfied with the way that the Linn had reproduced the soundstage and dynamics of large-scale orchestral music. The new VPI kit immediately quenched

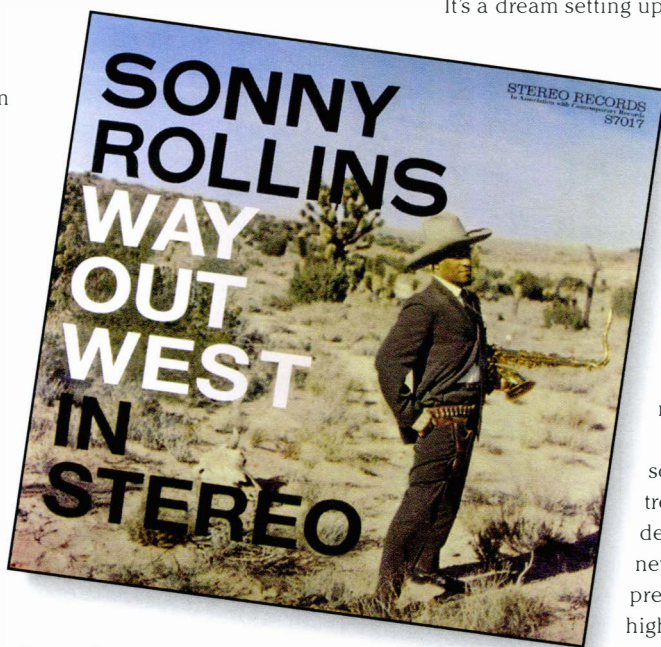
that long-standing need. The TNT delivers the dynamics, detail and soundstage I dreamed of. On smaller scale music like jazz, I can finally hear low-level detail. Cymbals and drum brush strokes finally sound like the real deal.

It's a dream setting up and leveling the TNT compared to the Linn.

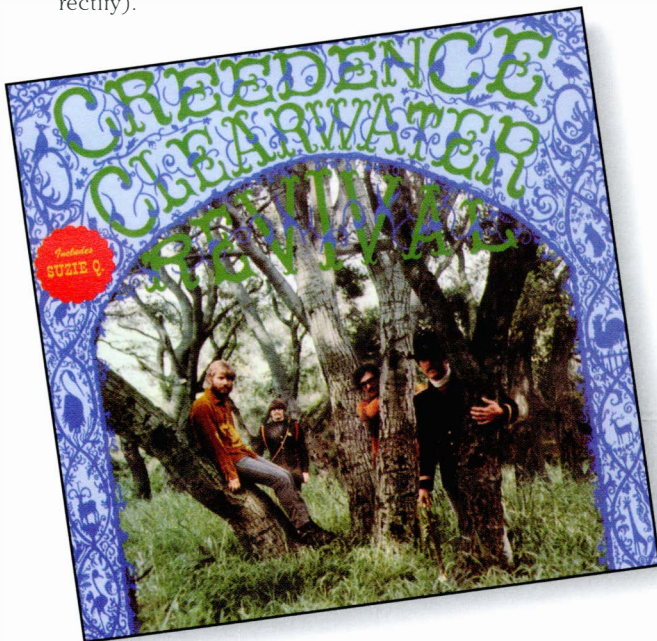
This is the single most impressive change in kit I have ever made. I thought that last year before when I added my Kharma speakers, and a few years ago when I switched to the Aesthetix phono-stage. But this time I really mean it!

I am a bit of a dinosaur, so my idea of an emergent trend or significant development tends towards new vinyl formulations and pressing techniques. New high end formats seem to be withering in the face of the demand for music

that can be stored on a computer hard disc and then compressed further to carry around - ten thousand songs at a time, on a key chain fob. The most promising technology I saw this year were the record pressing machines at Record Technology Incorporated (RTI) in Camarillo, California. Kevin Gray's stunning mastering chain, Steve Hoffman's hands moving the sliders on the mastering console, and RTI's record presses stacking up piles of new 45 RPM Fantasy jazz titles. Now that is the future I see!



► This year has seen the release of as many great vinyl re-issues as any, bar none. I will mention only those recent issues that I have not already written about. The AcousTech team has released 45 RPM re-issues of Miles Davis' *Steamin'* and The New Miles Davis Quintet (both classic Prestige sessions); Kenny Burrell and John Coltrane; Sonny Rollins +Four (a highly sought after collector's item which should sell out fast); Everybody Digs Bill Evans; Gene Ammons' *Blue Gene*; Thelonious Monk's *Monk's Music*; and Lightnin' Hopkins' *Goin' Away*. These are all monster titles reproduced to perfection. The only thing issued recently by AcousTech that seemed a misstep in terms of musical choice was The Montgomery Brothers' *Groove Yard*. Acoustic Sounds has also issued a box set, as well as individual platters, of the best of the Creedence Clearwater Revival songs cut at 45 RPM. These will knock you on your rear end, especially if your system can reproduce unlimited deep bass (a failing of my system I plan to rectify).



Pure Audiophile's newest release, Karrin Allyson's *In Blue* is a double album cut at 45 RPM and released on blue vinyl. I'm a sucker for tinted vinyl and love the way it lights up the VPI platter. This album sounds as good as it looks. Speakers Corner, in addition to its contribution to the Mercury catalog, has released fine replications of the occasional jazz title. *Recital By Billie Holiday and Wynton Kelly* and *Wes Montgomery's classic Verve set Smokin' At The Half Note* are both fine reproductions of hard to find jazz treasures. Both are highly recommended. ➤

Dennis Davis

Attorney

HiFi Experience:

Aldous Huxley's descriptions of rapture listening to the late Beethoven string quartets on a 78-RPM player under the starlight ignited a lifelong affair with music, which set me on a course of building HeathKits and Dynacos in the 1960s. I started amassing a record collection to meet the listening requirements of my college music appreciation class in 1968, and have never needed an excuse since then.

System Details:

VPI TNT Mk. 6 turntable
 Graham Series 2.2 arm
 Hovland phono cable
 Lyra Helikon mono and stereo cartridges
 Aesthetix Io phonostage
 Audio Research LS5MkIII line-stage
 Audio Research VT130 Amplifier
 Kharma Reference 3.2 speakers with wiring upgrade
 Wadia 8 and 15i (upgraded) and Alesis Masterlink digital front end
 Harmonic Technology interconnect cable
 Wireworld Eclipse Silver speaker cable
 XLO Ultra X-10 power cables
 Black Diamond Racing cones
 Billy Bags and Mana Acoustics support tables
 Grado RS-1 headphones and Melos headphone amplifier.

Desert Island Discs: (all vinyl LPs)

Ornette Coleman *Change of the Century* Atlantic 1327
 Louis Armstrong *Plays W. C. Handy* Columbia CL 591
 Charlie Parker *Vol. 2-4* Savoy 9001, 9010 & 9011 [3 10" LPs for the price of 1]
 Miles Davis *Cookin'* Prestige 7094 [I'll leave my original at home and take the AcousTech 45 rpm]
 Coltrane *Crescent* Impulse A-66
 Eric Dolphy *At The Five Spot* New Jazz 8260
 Bach *Overtures 1-4* Telefunken SAWT 9509/10-A.

Book:

This year's best book was Neal Stephenson's *System of the World*; I have no idea what I would take to my desert island if limited to one book.

Film:

This year's best were *Hero* and *Eternal Sunshine Of the Spotless Mind*.

Luxury:

See System Details above.

Indulgence:

La Maison Du Chocolat.

Riding The Rising Tide...

by Richard S. Foster

The year 2004 was a fabulous year for both music and equipment.

I was most impressed by the series of Jazz/Blues 45RPM issues from Chad Kassem and Analogue Productions. These have been and will continue to be documented in these pages. Of course these wouldn't be possible if it wasn't for the work of Kevin Gray, Steve Hoffman, RTI's Don MacInnis (and you too, Chad) as well as the people at Fantasy. They have all contributed to make this series a must own. The quality is outstanding both in terms of sound, pressing quality and packaging and not to be missed under any circumstances.

For those who have yet to hear them, Kassem has issued both in single issues and also in a box set, many of the greatest hits by Credence Clearwater Revival on 45RPM. I received a sampling of these last year and brought them with me to the 2003 Phonogram convention in South Florida. They were instant hits and everyone has been waiting for them to be released. Well they're here and you just wouldn't believe what's in the grooves of these black gold records. Leave it to the collaborative efforts of Kassem/Gray/Hoffman/RTI to offer up something very special. A tip of the vinyl-loving hat gentlemen.

There have been some phenomenal releases from Cisco Music this year as they mine the Vanguard folk catalogue. I'm glad to have the Joan Baez treasures as well as those two fabulous Doc Watson and Weavers albums. My thanks to Robert Pincus of Cisco, Kevin Gray of AcousTech (why do I keep seeing his name?) and of course the folks at RTI for producing one heck of an outstanding product.

Continuing a fine tradition are Steve Hoffman and Sam Passamano of S&P offering some fabulous Peggy Lee, Nat King Cole and of course the stunning *All-Time Greatest Hits of Roy Orbison*. I'm looking forward to much more from this company in 2005 because I think they're just getting started.

Dennis Cassidy's Pure Audiophile label has given us

several knock out re-issues from the Concord Jazz catalogue, mastered by Stan Ricker and pressed at RTI. I'm looking forward with great anticipation to the surprises Dennis has up his sleeve for 2005.

Glenn Armstrong's L'Archet D'Or offers special recordings of performances previously unheard for almost half a century - and then only if you were in certain countries in Europe and your radio was on and tuned to the right station on the right day. As far as I'm concerned, these are all original performances seeing daylight for the first time. All are glorious and it only takes one listen to understand how wonderful they really

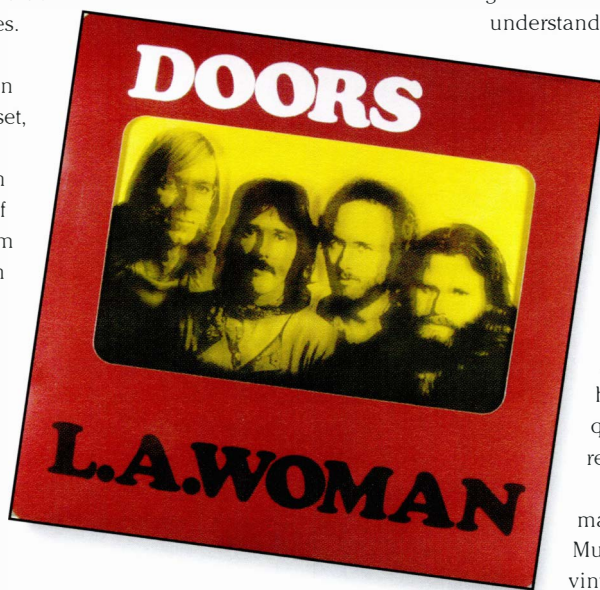
are - no matter what you do or do not know about classical music. These productions are first-rate and unique.

Diverse Records had their share of fine issues this past year and I for one am glad to have a copy R. L. Jones', *The Evening of My Best Day*. John Richards and company have continued to deliver the quality of their Dolly Varden releases.

Who would have thought a major company like Universal Music would deliver quality vinyl versions of both new and re-issued/re-mastered material? I know it was 2003 for Lucinda

Williams' *World Without Tears*, but it was definitely 2004 for those great re-issues of two classic Doors albums: *LA Woman* and *Morrison Hotel*. Both albums sound better than ever and if you've talked with your favourite vinyl vendor, you've discovered there are at least a half dozen more in this series. All I can say to Universal is, "More please."

Mobile Fidelity came back to the world of vinyl in 2004 with several nice offerings including Aimiee Mann's *Lost in Space* and the ever-so-spectacular Alison Krauss & Union Station, *So Long So Wrong* two LP set. There were other releases of course, but for me these were the standout issues by MO-FI on vinyl. I've got some of their SACD issues in house and will be commenting on them in the near



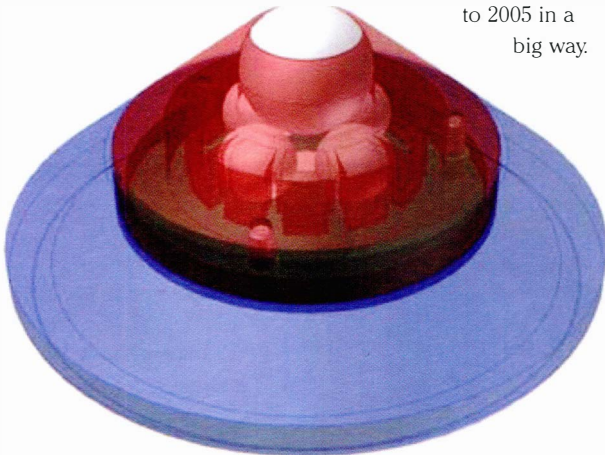
▶ future but I can absolutely tell you not to miss R. L. Burnside: *First Recordings*, UDSACD 2026 – thanks Roy. This is a great blues SACD hybrid and I've enjoyed it to the max.

I know there are more companies than I've mentioned releasing outstanding material, but in vinyl, these have been the stand outs for me... with one small exception: Speakers Corner Records.

They've really out done themselves in several categories. They are issuing not just jazz or classical, but also superb blues and easy listening repertoire. I've been over the moon with their Mercury project and it hasn't stopped there. You've read my comments on Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon, Joe Williams, Sarah Vaughan, Howlin' Wolf and others. Kai Seemann gets a really special thanks from this music lover for all the fine quality products he's re-issuing.

I gather there are many others in the marketplace who have similar thoughts as I hear nothing but positives about this company's products.

I'm looking forward to 2005 in a big way.



I would be remiss if I didn't mention two products from two US companies that have helped to totally transform my system. One is the Stillpoints system: Stillpoints, Risers and Inverse Risers. These are a simply incredible set of isolation/decoupling/resonant dissipating devices that will remove unwanted nasties from any system. I consider them just as critical as any component in the audio chain.

The other product which continues to dumbfound me are those power cords from Nordost; absolutely stunning. They have opened up new sonic horizons for my system. Everyone who's experienced them cannot believe what they're hearing.

And now for the part I hate the most: My personal record of the year. Well, there isn't one. There are two: Joan Baez: *Farewell Angelina*, Cisco Music's re-issue of Vanguard VSD 79200. The other is *Sarah Vaughan*, Speakers Corner Re-issue of EmArcy Records: MG36004.

2004, it was a very great year.



Richard S. Foster

Having just retired the main things keeping me busy are writing for this magazine and finding and selling 'collectible records'.

Hi-Fi Experience:

I've been fascinated with audio equipment since the late 1950's. One of my earliest recollections is walking into a store in the U.S. where I once lived and remember distinctly the store had all this beautiful McIntosh gear which had this gorgeous 'green glow'. Listening to some Mac amplifier and pre-amp being fed by an Empire Troubadour turntable releasing it's sound through a pair of Bozak Concert Grand speakers was about as close to dying and going to heaven as I could ever imagine. I never forgot that experience and would go to this store as often as the owner was prepared to put up with this kid. That was the hook.

System:

VPI TNT6/HR-X turntable; JMW 12.6 tonearm with additional arm wands. Lyra Titan stereo and Titan mono cartridges.
Herron VTPH1 moving coil (tube hybrid) phono section
Thorens 124 turntable (totally rebuilt) Ikeda 407t tonearm and Pierre Clement NOS moving magnet cartridge
Herron VTPH1 moving magnet (all tube)phono section
Yamaha CDR-1000R recorder
Herron VTPS2 remote control, tube line stage
Manley Neo Classic 300B SE/PP mono-blocks
E.A.T. 300B power tubes
Burmester 948 line conditioner
JMLabs Micro Utopia Be loudspeakers
Audio Physic Luna 2 sub-woofer
Nordost Valhalla interconnect and speaker cables, Valhalla and Vishnu power cords
Stillpoint ESS component rack, riser-inverse risers and Black Component Stands

Desert Island Discs:

Mozart *Piano Sonatas*, Lili Kraus Les Discophiles Français DF91-97
Bach *Sonatas and Partitas*, Johanna Martzy, EMI Columbia 33CX 1286/8
Bach *Sonatas and Partitas*, Henryk Szeryng, French Odeon: ODX 122/4
Bach *Suites for Unaccompanied 'Cello*, Speakers Corner/Mercury SR3-9016
Beethoven *Sonatas for Violin and Piano*, Christian Ferras and Pierre Barbizet, French EMI only FALP 584/7
Mozart *Requiem K626*, Rudolf Kempe, BPO with Grümmer, Frick et al, German Electrola WALP 1514
L'Archet D'Or *Volumes 1-8*
Milstein Favorites, RCA LM77
Lightnin' Hopkins, *Lightnin' and the Blues* Herald Records LP 1012.
(I can't chose seven and you've left me no room for Magda or Yvonne or Agnelle and too many others ... I am NEVER moving to a desert island).

Book:

Blues with a feeling (The Little Walter Story) by Tony Glover, Scott Dirks and Ward Gaines.

Film:

This year my favorite was *Hero*.

Luxury:

My new Sony 60" LCD rear projector.

Indulgence:

My penchant for films from Japan, China, France and Eastern Europe ...must have something to do with subtitles ...

Small can be beautiful, and cheaper too...

by Roy Gregory

Looking back over the year, there are several things that stand out, but by far the most important is good news indeed. 2004 was the year when the serious high-end got seriously cheaper. Not cheap mind you, but value seems to have once again entered the equation. As a rule of thumb, things seem to be around half the size and about two-thirds of the price, but sounding better nonetheless. Where is the evidence for this unlikely claim? Pick a category. In the realm of power amps, c-j's Premier 140 and 350 models are single chassis designs that better the performance (and price) of the old Premier 8 monos; likewise the ACT 2 and its predecessor the ART. The same is true of speakers, with models like the Avalon Acoustics Eidolon Diamond and Marten Designs Coltrane establishing new benchmarks for price and performance. Going down in size we find the JMLabs Micro Utopia Be and the Eben X-Baby, each in its own way establishing new expectations as to what is possible from a compact enclosure.

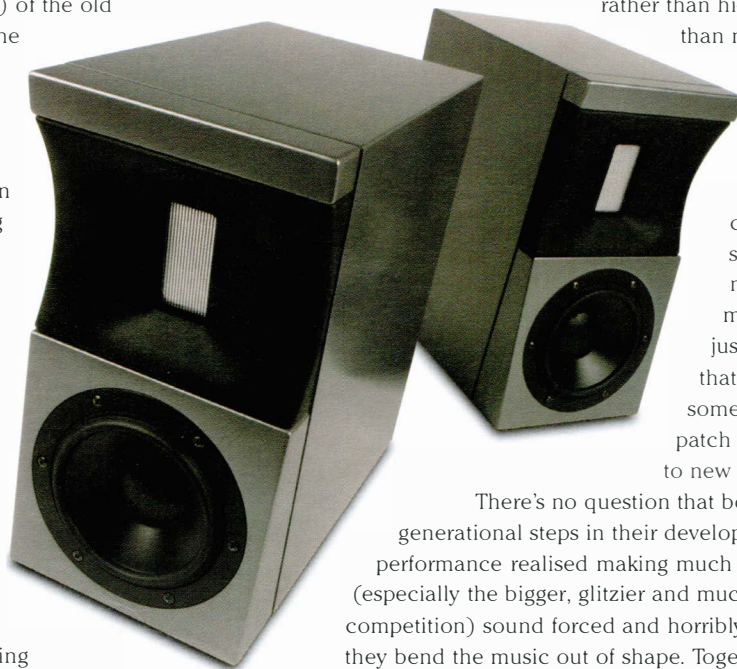
But the really interesting thing about this emerging trend is the way those results are being achieved. We've had the various efficiency/detail/ bandwidth brigades, each beating their own drum. We've had less is more taken to the lunatic extreme in two-and-a-half Watt triode amps. We've had conspicuous consumption rammed down our throats in the shape of everything from speaker cabinets laminated from solid planks to carbon fibre enclosures for cable filter networks. And we've had the prices to match. Well, sanity seems to be recovering as tenuous a grip as it ever held on the high-end. The thing that sets these products apart is the sense of balance they bring

to the musical performance. No longer are the internal relationships and structure sacrificed on the altar of extending one, single, overriding performance parameter. Instead, we're being offered an altogether more wholesome and holistic musical experience. That completeness and sense of proportion unlocks in turn, the inner detail and relationships within the music, subtle, intimate details previously lost in the wake of thunderous dynamics or rigid control, that breathe convincing life into the musical proceedings. Suddenly, it's about people rather than hi-fi, music rather than mechanics.

Of course, companies like c-j and Avalon have been pursuing a course far less spectacular but far more natural for many years. Is it just coincidence that both are enjoying something of a purple patch when it comes to new products?

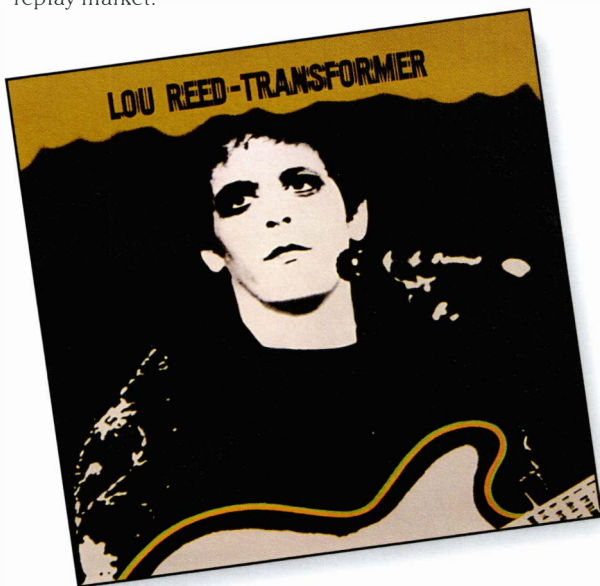
There's no question that both have made generational steps in their development paths, the performance realised making much of the competition (especially the bigger, glitzier and much more expensive competition) sound forced and horribly exaggerated as they bend the music out of shape. Together with the other companies that have adopted a similar course, they are dragging the high-end, kicking and screaming, back into the realms of reality.

Meanwhile the SACD debate continues, and whilst DVD-A also has its advocates, it's the DSD based system that seems to be scoring with audiophiles and quality concerned record producers. It was a pleasure to see Mobile Fidelity leading the way with a range of superb sounding and imaginatively chosen hybrid discs, while the appearance of the first titles from both the RCA Living Stereo and Mercury Living Presence catalogues



► confirms the strategy to win audiophile hearts and minds. Of course, once bitten is twice shy and so it's no surprise to see the first generation of "audiophile" universal disc players appearing, with models from McCormack and Townshend in the van. Nice surprise then to discover that these too follow the rather more affordable route to high-end nirvana.

All of which makes it especially ironic that vinyl re-issues are enjoying such a period of rude health. Speakers Corner are going from strength to strength, their latest Mercury offerings pushing the performance of rare and expensive originals. But that trend extends well beyond the collectible classical repertoire: After Starker, how about a bit of Lou Reed? The 180g pressing of *Transformer* that turned up recently is absolutely stunning, while S&P, Cisco and a host of other manufacturers are following suit. And let's not forget the Diverse Vinyl pressing of the latest Rickie Lee Jones album! Records like these are deserving of the enthusiasm they're attracting as well as stimulating the whole vinyl replay market.



Which brings me to my final point. It might have been AV that got the sub-woofer back onto the hi-fi map, while the new hi-bit formats generated renewed interest in the whole subject of super-tweeters, but you don't really enjoy the benefits of either until you use them together. Do that and the great leap forward is as apparent on a mono LP as it is on the latest DSD derived SACD. Bandwidth is well and truly back on the agenda, which brings us back to where we came in. It's extension at both ends that delivers the magic. What better example of balance is there than that? ➤

Roy Gregory

Magazine Editor

Hi-Fi Experience:

I've been involved in the industry as a retailer, with manufacturers or as a journalist for 20 years; I've been editing Hi-Fi+ for the last six of them.

System:

Kuzma Stabi Reference, Triplanar, Lyra Titan
 Clearaudio Master Reference, Master TQI, Insider Reference
 VPI TNT 6, JMW 12.5, Koetsu Jade Platinum, Lyra Helikon Mono
 Tom Evans Audio Design Groove Plus phono-stage
 Wadia 861SE CD player
 Tom Evans Audio Design Vibe and Pulse line-stage
 Hovland HP100 pre-amp
 Jadis JA30 mono-blocks
 Hovland RADIA power-amp
 Living Voice OBX-R2 loudspeakers
 Reference 3A Da Capo loudspeakers
 Townshend Maximum super-tweeters
 Velodyne DD18 sub-woofer
 Nordost Valhalla signal, speaker and mains cables
 Nordost Thor Mains Distribution Units
 Chord Co. Signature signal and speaker cables
 finite elemente Pagode Master Reference racks
 RoomTunes acoustic treatments

Desert Island Discs:

Bizet *Carmen* RCA LDS6164 Price, Corelli, Merrill, Freni, Karajan, VPO
 Elgar *cello Concerto* EMI ASD655 Du Pre, Barbirolli, LSO
 Beethoven *Kreutzer Sonata* Coup D'Archet Coup 003 Martzy/Antonietti
 Bach *Cello Suites* Mercury/Speakers Corner SR3-9016 Starker
 The Cure *Seventeen Seconds* Fiction FIX004
 Eliza Gilkyson *Land Of Milk And Honey* Red House Records
 Basie *Farmers Market Barbeque* Pablo/Analogue Productions LPJ023
 Ella Fitzgerald *sings the George and Ira Gershwin songbook*
 Verve/Speakers Corner MG VS-6082-S

Book:

Paul Hirst – *On Law And Ideology*

Film:

Some Like It Hot

Luxury:

Albert Roux (+ kitchen)

Indulgence:

My Mountain Bike

A certain lack of presence...

by Simon Groom

As a reviewer of mainly newly recorded music, the past twelve months has been a good year, but not a vintage one; especially where orchestral music is concerned. SACD releases may have increased, and there have been a number of excellent new issues on CD, but 2004 has lacked some of the exceptional musical highlights of other years.

While independent labels such as Harmonia Mundi and Hyperion have continued issuing excellent offerings, on the whole very few contemporary recordings have challenged those of the “Golden Age” of recording.

To put this into perspective; the musical high point came at London’s Heathrow show when RG, Franz Kuzma and myself compared various pressings of the esteemed Mercury Living Presence LPs (see issue 35). While a fan of the performances, in many ways I just could not see what all the “sonic” fuss was about. That was using the British originals as a yardstick. As restating RG’s words on the subject will probably only make my collecting such discs even more difficult, I am loathe to have to say that the US Pressings were in another league; although the latest re-issues from Speakers Corner came a fairly close second. Add to this the fact that the most entertaining SACDs have been the first batch of re-issued RCA “Living Stereo” discs, and you see my point.

As for new recordings: I was happy to see Naxos issuing SACDs after previously backing DVD-Audio. This should certainly lead to more economically priced releases, and may be a good indicator as to the way the format wars are heading.

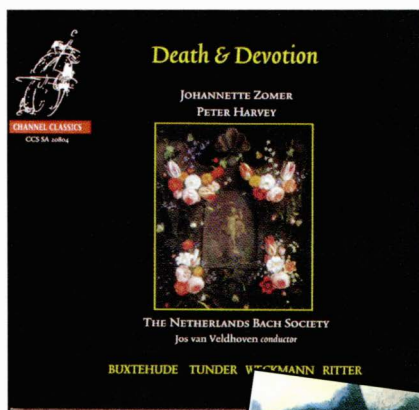
BIS on the other hand have been behind SACD from early on, and continue to release a number of high-quality recordings, such as the Kempf Trio’s agile performance of Beethoven’s “Archduke” *Trio* (BIS-SACD-1172)(Issue 35).

Even more satisfying was the label’s release of Martin Fröst’s rendition of the Mozart *Clarinet Concerto* (BIS-SACD-1263) (Issue 30); revealing his wonderful command and control. For me though, the Swedish label’s best SACD was the disc of Grieg’s captivating yet underrated *Symphonic Dances*, coupled with the *Norwegian Dances* and *Lytic Suite*, which I reviewed in issue 32 (BIS-SACD-1291); enchantingly performed by Kristian Ruud and the Bergen Philharmonic.

Two further releases on SACD stand out. Firstly, Channel Classics continue to issue superb recordings on the format, highlighted by their disc *Death and Devotion* (CCS SA 20804) (Issue 32), while another release of vocal music leads the way for SACD this year. Deutsche Harmonia Mundi’s recording of Mozart’s wonderful *Requiem Mass* (82876 58705-2) (Issue 35) is simply the most astonishing release of the composer’s choral music currently

available; and while the sonics just miss out on true excellence, the performances are simply outstanding. There were a number of top quality releases on CD, with a dozen prominent. As I love Czech chamber music, Naxos’ wonderful issue of Martinu *String Quartets* (Naxos 8.553784) (Issue 34) was most appealing, while the same month saw a superb recording of

Shostakovich *Trios* (Harmonia Mundi HMC 901825) by the Trio Wanderer. In Issue 31, the same label had a simply beautiful disc of Rossini’s *Sonata a Quattro* (HMC 901776), while an issue earlier saw Mendelssohn’s *Quartets 3 & 4*, revitalized by the Eroica Quartet (HMU 907287). In fact it was a fine year for chamber music, and Hyperion joined the party in Issue 29, with an outstanding second volume of Boccherini’s *Cello Quintets* by the Vanbrugh Quartet and Richard Lester (CDA67383): while they also continued to issue their excellent series of Beethoven’s *Complete Music for*



► *Piano Trios* with the Florestans. Hyperion also managed to out do all other labels for solo piano; with stunning releases by Angela Hewitt, Stephen Hough and Stephen Osbourne: although Pierre-Laurant Aimard's performances of Debussy's *Images and Études* (Warner Classics 8573 83940-2) deserves special mention for nearly knocking Uchida's outstanding Philips issue of the *Études* from top perch in Issue 29. But the most enjoyable disc of piano music came in issue 34 from Marc-André Hamelin, who performed Nicolai Kapustin's jazz-like music with wonderful charisma (Hyperion CDA67433).

For vocal music, look no further than Harmonia Mundi's Iberian division, which released two outstanding offerings. In Issue 28 came *Bestiario de Cristo*, performed with sensitivity by Alia Musica and Miguel Sánchez

(HMI 987033), and in Issue 33 we saw Tomás Luis de Victoria's *Et Jesum* (HMI 987042).

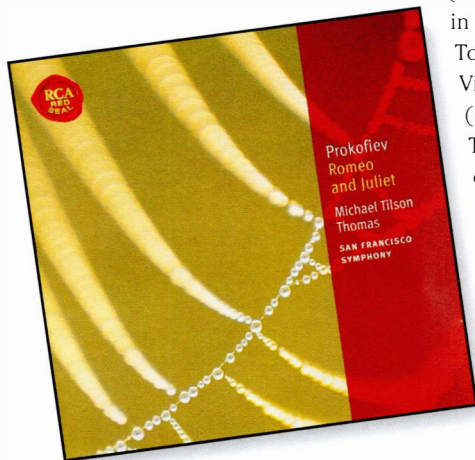
This is a most enthralling disc of music for voice and lute or vihuela, which I considered very hard for my Record of the Year.

RCA led

the way for orchestral music, with

a number of re-issues from their Classic Library series: two by Michael Tilson Thomas being of the highest calibre. His interpretation of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra (82876 59424 2) (Issue 33) is possibly the benchmark for this work currently available, while two issues later saw the same orchestra performing a most Gaelic flavoured *Symphonie Fantastique* (82876 60859 2). Among the new recordings, the most outstanding appeared in issue 29, with Rachel Podger and Arte Dei Suonatori performing Vivaldi's "La Stravaganza" Concertos (Channel Classics CCS 19598) with energetic fluency.

But, for my Record of the Year I return to Harmonia Mundi, who's wonderfully entertaining disc *Le Violon Vagabond* (HMC 901785) (Issue 34), performed by Graf Mourja and Natalia Gous, was simply a delight; with playing of the utmost virtuosity. While I am hunting out those original American LPs, I am happy to have such an extraordinary CD in my collection. ➤



Simon Groome

Buyer for a London NHS Trust and Freelance Writer

Hi-Fi Experience:

Purchased a "real" hi-fi nearly twenty years ago, and suddenly began to appreciate what was actually in the grooves of an LP. Soon became hooked on collecting vinyl, especially early stereo classical. Now owns approximately 4500 LPs and around 1500 CDs. Known by dealers, has been "roped into" pricing and valuing of rare discs. Regularly attends concerts in central London, and is a Friend of Wigmore Hall.

System Details:

Modified Voyd Valdi, with modified Wilson Benesch ACT 2 tonearm

Cartridgeman Music Maker cartridge

Tom Evans Audio Design Micro-Groove "Plus" Phono Stage

Modified Marantz CD-63SE CD player

Sony DVP-NS900V "QS" SACD/DVD player

Audio Innovations Series 500 amplifier, fitted with 5881 valves, and Border Patrol power supply

Leak Troughline tuner, with Tim de Paravincini Stereo Tube FM decoder

Modified Snell J-II speakers on 4-legged Pirate stands

Nordost Red Dawn Interconnects and bi-wired speaker cable

Pentacore HGC Silver-plated Interconnects and Grade 2 bi-wired speaker cable

Supports by Target and Sound Organisation, with various cones and Final

Daruma-3II Ball Bearing Isolators

Loricraft PRC-2 Professional Record Cleaning Machine

Desert Island Discs:

Dvorák *String Quartets in F major, Op. 96, E D minor, Op. 34* – Janacek Quartet Decca SXL 6103, "Wide Band" Original LP

Liszt *A Faust Symphony/Orpheus* RPO, Sir Thomas Beecham HMV ASD 317/8, "White Et Gold" Original LP

Mahler *Symphony No. 1* – VPO, Paul Kletzki HMV ASD 483, "White and Gold" Original LP

Mahler: *Symphony No. 5/Five Rückert Lieder* – Janet Baker, New Phil.

Orchestra, Sir John Barbirolli HMV ASD 2518/9, "Coloured Dog" Original LP

Smetana *String Quartets Nos. 1 Et 2* Smetana Quartet Supraphon 4 11 2130, Original LP

Pentangle *The Pentangle* Transatlantic TRA 162, Original LP

Fairport Convention *Unhalfbricking* Island ILPS 9102, Pink Label Original LP

Book:

The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien

Film:

Blade Runner: The Director's Cut

Luxury:

Fine Italian Food

Indulgence:

My son Marcus

Looking After The Pennies...

by Jason Hector

This last year has been interesting; I have gained a baby daughter, which has somewhat cramped my style, so my retrospective might not be as involved as the others.

Somewhat bizarrely the component that impressed me most this last year was heard at the Heathrow Hi-Fi show; bizarre when considering my usual moaning and groaning about the sound at shows. The Wilson Max speakers were the product in question and they sounded simply awesome in their scale, accuracy and lack of distortion. I am more than happy to admit my exposure to equipment at this level is severely limited but the sheer transparency of this system left a lasting impression on me. It was heartening to hear that although the rooms at a show are a limiting factor sheer quality and care and attention to setup can win out, so if you are in the market for a \$40000 pair of speakers I'd recommend a listen.

At the other end of the scale is the Rotel RA1062 ... award winner, and a bargain integrated amplifier that has forced re-evaluation of what is possible if cost is much more of an issue. More will be said about this product elsewhere but suffice to say that this amplifier is a star.

Earlier in the year a very good friend purchased a pair of Neat MF9's partly after hearing the MFS during the period I was reviewing them. I regularly have a good listen to them (the rest of the system is similar to my own) and over time they are impressing me more and more. The space the speakers have to fill is large for a UK room (30 x 26 x 12 feet) and they do so admirably to serious levels. Like the RA1062 they aren't an obvious sounding product. Interestingly the system and room the MF9's sit in proves that, contrary to

popular opinion, source first is not always the best option. With that large a space to fill, cheaper speakers and amplifiers just could not cope. You need Watts and lots of them or you need extravagantly efficient speakers. Neither of which is cheap. The room has also been more and more heavily treated over the last year, with mainly RPG acoustics devices. The differences wrought are very large.

Adding wide band absorption to reduce wall reflections and tuned absorbers to damp problem modes has turned a big extremely difficult room into a big difficult room.

There is still more to come here and I am trying to persuade my friend that a proper before and after would make an interesting article.

The system containing the MF9's also features another cost effective product; in this case the Dynavector P75 phono-stage. This little unit is a product that offers significantly more than the price suggests.

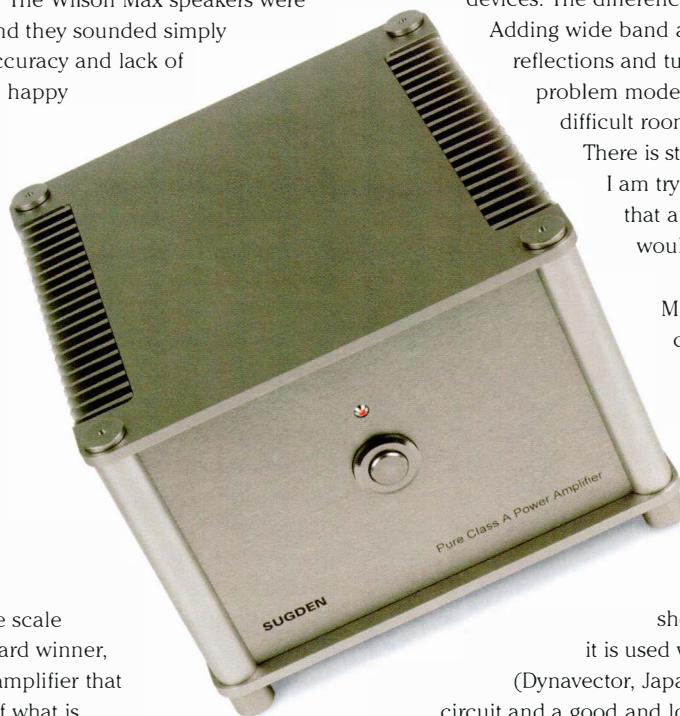
It is very flexible with a variety of gain and loading options and

shows its true class when

it is used with the Dr. Tominari

(Dynavector, Japan) inspired phono-enhancer circuit and a good and low output impedance moving coil cartridge. The stage is quiet and very dynamic but also capable of great subtlety and that means realism. It joins the ever-growing number of good quality, sensibly price products for replaying our precious vinyl. This sector of the market seems to be the most active with new phono-stages, cartridges and turntables appearing on the scene all the time.

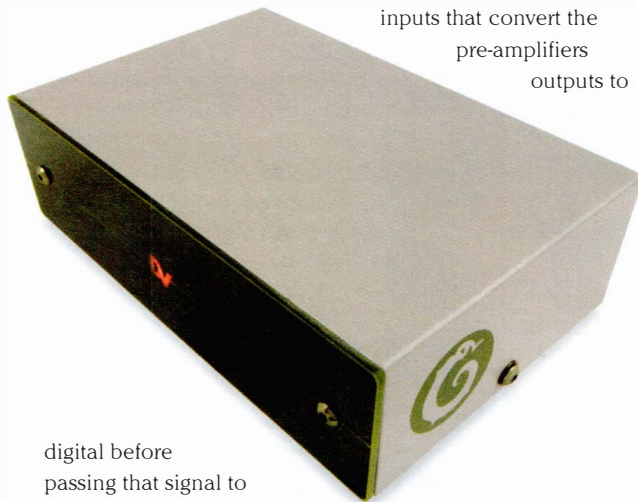
Another very enjoyable product I reviewed in 2004 was the Sugden Music Master, a Class A stereo power amplifier designed to be an aesthetic as well as acoustic match to the Sugden Bijou system. This amplifier was beautifully melodious when kept within its power



▶ envelope and I felt it was really too good to be limited to consideration with the rest of the Bijou range. At a retail price of approximately £1300 it could be a very cost effective solution in the right system.

At the other end of the technology spectrum one trend that seems set to transform the amplifier landscape is the digital or switching amplifier. This technology is becoming ubiquitous. It is very likely that all mass-market consumer electronics will feature digital amplification soon. Some (many?) will take advantage of some form of room correction functionality. What then for the high-end and why are digital amps becoming so popular?

The popularity can be traced to the fact that digital amplifiers are significantly more electrically efficient than their analogue counterparts and that can allow cost reduction through smaller enclosures and heat sinking. This aspect also makes them very useful for cramming many channels into a single enclosure. Most of the products currently available have analogue inputs that convert the pre-amplifiers outputs to



digital before passing that signal to the switched output stages. An evil that is traded off, it is said, by the performance possibilities of the digital output stages themselves.

This is of course the first step. All digital (right up to the amplifier outputs!) systems promise good quality with many of the usual sources of signal loss (volume control, switching etc.) happening in the theoretically loss-less digital domain. This, along with faster and cheaper DSPs, allows serious amounts of room correction to be employed. I think most people concede that the average listening room is far from ideal for playing a decent Hi-Fi. Digital correction promises to overcome this limitation by cancelling out the room's effects. Unfortunately the techniques still seem to require work before they become flawless and the result less "processed", and the few demonstrations of this technique I have had have been disappointing. ▶+

Jason Hector

Research Scientist (LCD) for a major electronics company

Hi-Fi Experience:

The thing that started it all was a love of music – well Duh, no surprise there then! ... After pestering my friendly dealer long enough, he let me help out as a "Saturday boy" so I have some experience trying to sell the stuff as well as installing it into a range of environments (and I do mean a range). The reviewing has happened more by accident than design as our esteemed editor lives close to the shop where I still, occasionally help out. He was looking for some well-meaning amateurs to broaden the reviewing staff and the rest, as they say, is history...

System Details:

Well Tempered Reference record player and arm
 Dynavector Te-Kaitora cartridge
 Dynavector L300 pre-amplifier and onboard P300 phono-stage
 Dynavector HX1.2 power amplifier
 Shahinian Obelisk loudspeakers
 Micromega Duo Pro transport and DAC
 Hutter Racktime tables
 Homebrew Bullet plugged interconnects
 Chord Company Prodac digital cable
 Kimber 4TC speaker cable

Desert Island Discs:

So difficult, it used to be 10 and that was hard enough but here goes ... and it will be different next week ...

Joan Baez *Farewell Angelina*

Ben Folds *Ben Folds Live*

The Beatles *Revolver*

Bob Dylan *John Wesley Harding*

Lloyd Cole and the Commotions *Mainstream*

Doors *LA Woman*

Richard and Linda Thompson *Shoot out the Lights*

Book:

Almost as hard as choosing just 7 discs.

Hyperion Cantos by Dan Simmons or the *Dune Series* by Frank Herbert or anything by Iain M Banks or ...

Film:

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly ... aeeei aeeei aaaa wou wou wou

Luxury:

Fine red wine, Amarone specifically – and some decent food for it to wash down.

Indulgence:

A Stressless Reclining Chair.

Radio Ga-Ga...

by Andrew Hobbs

When the editor told me I had to write an overview of my musical year I thought perhaps I should just write down all the albums I've bought and enjoyed and the reasons why. Then I thought, 'hang on a minute, here's a chance for me to go into rant mode! So dear reader, bear with me while I get a few things off my chest.

I frequently get asked where I find all my music from. Well, one thing for sure – I don't get it from listening to the radio! With a few exceptions, UK radio is

a bloody disgrace. If you're into the blues (as regular readers of this mag will know I am) all you get on BBC Radio is one hour with Paul Jones on a Thursday night. Oh please! There are literally hundreds of blues and blues related albums released every month and what coverage does it get? One lousy hour on a Thursday night! I'm not saying we need 4 hours everyday, but how about slipping a few tracks into the play list during the daytime programmes? I'm not talking about obvious artists either. Everyone knows about John Lee Hooker, Muddy Walters and Buddy Guy, so give them some of the lesser-known artists, like Texan bluesman Bugs Henderson for example. If radio gave his latest album the exposure they have afforded the new U2 album, I'm sure Bugs would shift units in their thousands. He would then come over and tour, giving people the opportunity to see and hear one of the blues world's best kept secrets.

Which brings me nicely onto major record companies. In the early days as an independent record store manager I used to get a rep coming in and they would have a presenter with all the new releases in it. Naturally, they

would start with the month's big releases, so a company like Warners would trolley out the latest Madonna album and tell you how much money they were spending on it (you would be horrified) and then proceed to tell you how many copies they wanted you to take. Further on in the presenter, almost as an afterthought, would be the latest by Marc Cohn (or whoever) and there would be precious little promotion, no live gigs and no big promotional spend. So poor Mr Cohn is left to his own devices, not promoted but tied to a five album deal by a company who couldn't give a toss because they don't see him as a wonderful marketing tool. Said album disappears, the artist is dropped and unable to record for anyone else and bingo – end of a promising career.

Now that the independent sector is fast disappearing, record company reps spend most of their time at radio stations, dictating what they want played and

how many times a day they want it featured. Radio is happy to pander to them and remain relatively mainstream (apart from the odd specialist show) and the customer gets subjected to all this poppy boy/girl chart crap.

At this point I have to give you an example of a DJ being brave. Last week Johnny Walker played a track by Jimmy Lafave, a wonderful Texan singer/songwriter who hardly ever gets an airing on daytime radio. Within minutes of the track finishing Johnny received numerous e-mails and texts asking him what the song was and how much they'd enjoyed hearing it. You see, someone shows a little initiative and Joe public pick up on it in a very positive way. Hardly rocket science is it?

But, back to where we came in. Where does one



► go to find all the great, unknown singers and bands out there? The obvious starting point is the magazines, of which the best UK ones for rock, country, blues, jazz, and folk etc are Mojo, Uncut and Record Collector. These magazines give excellent coverage on a general scale, but if you want to delve into the more specialist areas may I suggest you take a look at Maverick Magazine, No Depression and Blues Revue. Maverick covers most aspects of country music; mainstream, alternative and roots are given plenty of quality exposure, and there is an abundance of expertly written and well-researched record reviews to muse over. It's not available everywhere but you will find it at Borders or on the net. No Depression is a U.S. alternative country/roots publication which is even more in depth, and that will keep you in touch with what's going on in America and Canada, both with the major record labels and the smaller independent ones.



Blues Revue is America's finest mag for all things blues and blues related; it's a national treasure and the best way of expanding your knowledge in this field. Start here first – it's an essential read.

Word of mouth is the next best thing. If you hear something really good please don't keep it to yourself; play it to your friends and they in turn can play it to their friends. We all have a role to play in promoting great music and the domino effect really does work wonders.

Finally – buy this magazine! May I wish you all a Happy Xmas and the most musical of New Years.



Andrew Hobbs

Sales consultant for Phonography, an independent Hi-Fi dealer in Ringwood, Hampshire, UK

Hi-Fi Experience:

I've been with Phonography for about four years. I have a good tutor in Phil March but I'm still learning! Previous to Phonography I was the manager of Pinpoint Music, a specialist independent CD retailer. Music is, and always will be, my great passion.

System:

Arcam Decta 170 CD transport
Black Box 50,
Densen Beat 100 amp
Royd RR1 speakers
Chord Anthem interconnects and Chord Odyssey speaker cable
Naim Headline headphone amp and NAPSC power supply
Beyerdynamic DT931 headphones.

Desert Island Discs:

Anything by the following artists:
Steve Earl, John Mellencamp, Peter Himmelman, Chris Isaak,
Paul Thorn, Bugs Henderson and Emmylou Harris.

Book:

The Tibetan Book Of Living And Dying by Sogyhal Rinpoche

Film:

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest

Luxury:

Music – and a win for Southampton Football Club

Indulgence:

More new music

Good Things Come...

by Jimmy Hughes

Perhaps the most impressive thing that's happened to hi-fi this year are the strides taken by CD as it continues to improve, 20+ years after its birth. Chord's Blu transport coupled with the latest version of the DAC-64 demonstrated that CD is far from finished. Remembering the dynamically flat boring sound of the early '80s, who would have believed back then that CD could deliver such outstanding results? The Chord combo showed CD to be capable of exceptional fine detail and dimensionality, plus impressive naturalness and brilliance, while delivering a big, wide soundstage, with imposing dynamics and a smooth but vibrant tonality. Separation – tonal and stereophonic – is outstanding. This ensures excellent clarity so that even busy complex passages sound open and clearly defined. The music sounds vivid and engaging – very involving.

The Weiss Medea DAC from Switzerland also confirmed that CD still has much life left in it. This advanced unit produced outstandingly natural yet vivid results that combined sharp focus and brilliant immediacy with incredible smoothness and openness. Agreed, such perfection does not come cheap, but you can use the Medea with a fairly basic CD transport and still obtain top-class results. This is because the Medea totally re-clocks the digital signal, cleaning up jitter and any other nasties. Although it seems largely insensitive to changes in cables between DAC and Transport, it will show definite sonic improvements when used with an up-sampling transport able to work at either 88.2kHz or (best of all) dual output 176.4kHz. Doing this relaxes the need for a steep anti-aliasing filter close to the upper audio bandwidth.

The result? A delicious smoothness/openness that I for one never thought possible from CD. A tight closed-in 'hard' quality almost seemed to be CD's signature, and few players and discs seemed entirely free of it. However, products like

the Chord Blu/DAC-64 and Weiss Medea demonstrate that CD can still produce outstandingly good results for those who remain committed to two-channel stereo. Speaking as someone with a heavy investment in CD, I'm pleased that all my discs – even some of the oldest – have been given a new lease of life by the clever use of advanced technology. It's great to play a disc you've had for ten, fifteen, maybe even twenty years – a disc you've tried on all manner of hi-fi

systems, but never heard sound any good – and find it's suddenly been transformed. At last you can listen to the music and performance, and not be annoyed or distracted by sonic limitations or irritations. For me that's the main justification for buying better equipment.

Analogue hasn't stood still either.

I was very impressed by the Rega RB-1000 and Origin Live Encounter tonearms.

There's an effortless open natural quality with the best LP reproduction that (good as it is) even the best CD still doesn't quite aspire to. Since the early '80s,

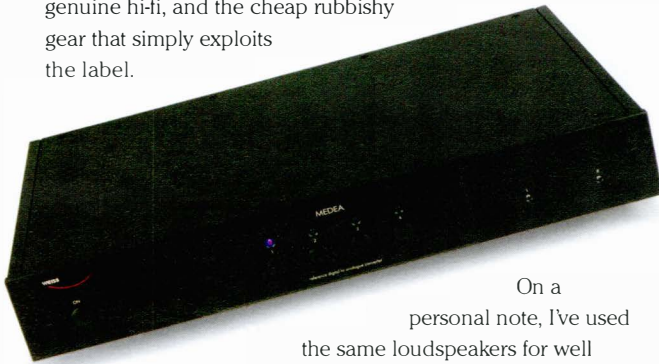
LP and CD have each moved closer to the other's sonic domain as equipment has improved; LP has achieved comparable focus and precision to CD, while CD has far more of LP's naturalness and three-dimensional spatial depth.

Precision tonearms like the two mentioned help ensure that the pickup is able to follow the groove with greater accuracy. Quality pickup cartridges tend to be very expensive; always have been and perhaps always will be. However, the Aria from Transfiguration (while not exactly cheap) is certainly much less expensive than its siblings, and offers clean, noise-free, focused sound - outstanding LP reproduction in every respect.



► Quite a few excellent phono-stages came my way last year – several of which I'd have been more than happy to live with. But the one that really stood out was the Sutherland PhD with its battery power supply. It gave a very distinct sound; incredibly open and free from tonal hardness – a difficult to describe freshness and naturalness that perhaps only LP (at its best) can give.

It's also been a very good year for reasonably-priced valve amps – some from Eastern Europe, others from China. I had several that gave great pleasure, but for sheer performance and value the winner has to be PrimaLuna's Prologue 2. Okay, it doesn't totally erase memories of the Jadis DA50 Signature valve amp I enjoyed a brief but passionate affair with a couple of years back, but it's not that far behind. Because the PrimaLuna costs something like two thirds less, the sonic differences between it and something like the Jadis seems less significant. It can only be good for the hi-fi industry that such high performance components are becoming available at what are (by high-end standards) very reasonable prices. It serves to put clear water between genuine hi-fi, and the cheap rubbishy gear that simply exploits the label.



On a personal note, I've used the same loudspeakers for well over fifteen years – Impulse H-1s – and still find them very satisfying. They seem to get better and better! I can honestly say I've heard nothing I prefer overall. They combine excellent clarity and dynamic contrast with natural tonal qualities and good bandwidth. However, I need to acknowledge the part played by another key component: Adding Townshend Maximum super-tweeters to the Impulses has made an incredible difference. The sound is bigger and more dimensional, with greater clarity and a more holographic three-dimensional soundstage. Given that I was already using a set of home-made super tweeters, the difference made was little short of sensational.

Incidentally, I still use my speakers back-to-front, firing against the wall, and have done for well over a decade. The musical benefits this brings in terms of spatial/tonal integration and a general sense of cohesion, are hard to exaggerate. People who hear my set up often remark on how easy it is to listen to – and how you don't have to spend time getting used to how it sounds. There's no 'learning process' involved – it immediately sounds natural and right! ►+

Jimmy Hughes

Freelancer/Free-loader

Hi-Fi Experience:

Did 20 years hard labour in retail, with time off for bad behaviour

System:

Impulse H-1 speakers with Townshend Maximum super tweeters; 2x Rel subs.

Chord Pre with Mezzo power amps;

Chord Blu CD transport with DAC-64.

Musical Fidelity MF-1 turntable with SME arm and Transfiguration Aria cartridge. Roksan ArtaXerxes phono stage.

Cables; Chord Co digital interconnects; Kimber analogue interconnects; Townshend Isolde impedance matched speaker cables. Kimber mains with Russ Andrews mains distribution blocks + Purifier and Silencer.

Supports; Mana Phase Four table, plus Origin Live stands and a Sound Organisation table. Speakers and subs sat on Townshend Siesmic Sinks.

Desert Island Discs:

Mahler *9th symphony* – Guilini Chicago symphony orchestra
DG 463 609-2 2CDs

Brahms *3rd symphony* – Guilini Vienna Philharmonic orchestra
DG 431 681-2

Brahms *2nd piano concerto* – Gilels/Jochum Berlin Philharmonic
DG 447 446-2 2CDs

Schumann *Dichterliebe* – Hampson/Parsons EMI CDC5 55147-2

Mahler *Kindertotenlieder* – Ludwig/Karajan Berlin Philharmonic
DG 457 716-2 2CDs

Vaughan Williams *A Pastoral Symphony* – Haitink London Philh'
EMI CDC 5 56564-2

Derek and Clive *Come Again* – Virgin CDOVD 110

Book:

The Lord of the Rings

Film:

JFK (Director's Cut) I've seen it three or four times and still can't make head or tail of it..

Luxury:

Chocolate (lots and lots of it)

Indulgence:

A Piano

Size Matters...

by Jason Kennedy

The past year has been one of the best years for digital sources since the advent of Tom Evans' Eikos CD player. Perhaps it should not be surprising that the turn up for the books this time around is also a heavy revamping of a Pioneer chassis as was the case with the Eikos. Back then, Tom took a CD player base unit and turned it into giant slayer. This time another hi-fi maestro, Max Townshend has done the same with a Pioneer universal player. The TA 565 as he has dubbed it, first turned up in the hottest days of the summer and proved its worth by slaying Linn's prime contender in the universal stakes and giving last year's finest CD player, the Resolution Audio Opus 21, a hard run for its money. By November the TA 565 had transmuted into its Evo II incarnation, a transition that has pushed it from being a seriously good CD player into a truly great one that's worthy of taking on the world.

For instance I wouldn't be surprised if it gave the Wadia 861SE a run for its money (I would! Ed.) A player that proved very impressive, and not only because of its silver finish and £10k price tag, it is the finest Wadia yet. As muscular as its forebears, it delivers even greater levels of fine detail, producing rich, three-dimensional sound and an uncanny level of insight into the music. I suspect however that there is a hint more of the player's character than you get with the new Townshend.

In my software reviewing role I have noticed a genuine increase in the quality of hi-res discs, which is gratifying for those of us that care. It seems like the rest of the world at large thinks that the iPod's AAC compression system is the best thing going. A couple of discs stand out, Yo Miles' *Sky Garden* is a direct to DSD double album of modern interpretations of Miles Davis' jazz-rock period work. Stuff like Bitches Brew and *Live Evil*. Yo Miles do a pretty good job of this often dense, abrasive stuff and the recording makes for the most realistic digital disc I've encountered. Another interesting album is Lilium's *Short Stories* DVD-A, a collaborative album

put together by alt.country 16 Horsepower's rhythm section that works well musically, if you like a your country downbeat, but produces some quite astonishingly real instruments in your living room.

Much of this realism has been aided in no small part by my loudspeaker find of the year – possibly decade to be honest. The ATC SCM150 ASL is a humongous and frankly not terribly beautiful speaker but its aesthetic is one of

purpose, this active speaker keeps it real in no uncertain terms. You can't beat physics when it comes to moving air and the combination of a 150litre cabinet, 15inch bass driver, dome mid and treble plus a sum total of 350 watts of power in three

separate chunks means

a quite staggering potential for effortless, wide bandwidth, high resolution sonic entertainment. Someone, who has heard nearly all the great speakers, recently commented that he'd not heard a speaker that was both open and had genuine bass thump in the way that the 150 has. Linn, Naim and several others offer active routes for their speakers which might bring them the qualities available from the 150, but then again not many brands make boxes of this scale – and scale is what you need if realistic results are the aim.

It hasn't been a bad year for turntables either. Rega introduced two new decks the more expensive of which, the P7, is a real stunner thanks to a ceramic platter and a highly refined variant on Rega's classic tonearm. Not perhaps as pretty as the P25 with its wooden surround this deck nonetheless is remarkably resolute for a solid plinth design. The other turn up for the books was Townshend's Anniversary Rock turntable with original John Bugge designed tonearm and the smartest set of clothes this deck has so far been seen in. This turntable is a challenge to the vinyl lover's senses because its damping trough removes the warmth that we have not only not been aware of but which is so part and parcel of the vinyl sound that it's



► a shock when you take it away. Instead you get genuine transparency combined with digital style bass, a combination which reproduces all the layers in a multi-track recording but in a fluid, realistic fashion.

As for the meat of the matter, or music for short, the past 12 months have not been obviously remarkable – but there have been some highlights. Most notably EST's late 2003 album *Seven Days of Falling*, which despite the occasionally distorted nature of the sound (deliberately it seems) is this trio's finest work to date. I discovered Keiren Hebden who calls himself Fourtet and makes what some describe as electronic folk, though this is stretching the latter



term to its limits. Still his *Rounds* album makes for diverting listening. As does Justin Spooner's *Everyday the Same, Everyday Different* which is closer to folk and features some of the finest acoustic guitar I've heard for ages, hopefully he will find a label to back him soon. One time Hebden cohort Adem made a touching disc this year called *Homesongs*, a bit like Turin Brakes with integrity, this is quality stuff. I also (inadvertently) bought a pop album earlier in the year, Outkast's *The Love Below/Spearkerboxxx*, a double album that sees the influences of Funkadelic, Prince and hip hop combine to stunning effect. Finally a word for RJD2's *Since We Last Spoke* which builds on his earlier work and stands comparison with DJ Shadow's classic *Endtroducing*. It's that good. ▶+

Jason Kennedy

Journalist/photographer

Hi-Fi Experience:

I got into hi-fi as a result of my Dad's enthusiasm for the subject, initially by sitting between his Leak Sandwich speakers playing Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple, then discovering that most dangerous of things – the difference between audio components. I think the problem really started when I first heard a Garrard 301 with a Decca (London) MK3 cartridge. These components, though hardly sophisticated, had a thrill power that I have rarely encountered since. Any hope of recovery was nullified when Xavier Wilcox (now proprietor of Brighton's Power Plant) introduced Paul Messenger who recruited me for the A4 re-launch of *Hi-Fi Choice* in the late eighties. It's been downhill from there on but an entertaining descent and a diversion from which to scrape a living of sorts nonetheless.

System Details:

SME Model 20A/Series 5/van den Hul Colibri Et Grasshopper III GLA

Resolution Audio Opus 21, Townshend Audio TA 565 Evo II

Tom Evans Groove phono stage, Trichord Delphini II phono stage

Border Patrol Control Unit, Bryston BP25,

Gamut D200 Mk1

Living Voice Avatar OBX-R, ATC SCM150 ASL

Townshend Seismic Stand (original and current), Townshend Seismic Sink speaker bases, ATC 150 stands

Living Voice Potato interconnect, Townshend DCT Isolda speaker cable, Living Voice and Russ Andrews mains cables Et distributors

Desert Island Discs:

Frank Zappa *One Size Fits All* Discreet Records K59207

John Fahey *Let Go* Varrick Records 008

Keith Jarrett *Eyes of the Heart* ECM 1150

Led Zeppelin 4 Atlantic K50 008

Bugge Wesseltoft *Moving* Jazzland Records 013 534-2

Bill Cobham *Spectrum* Atlantic 40 506

Steely Dan *Katy Lied* ABC Records ABCL 5094

Bicycle:

Santa Cruz Superlight

Book:

The Acme Novelty Library Book of Jokes – Chris Ware

Film:

Drowning by Numbers

Luxury:

Cake

Indulgence:

More cake

Moving On Up...

by Paul Messenger

A year's hard (and soft!) listening has involved reviewing more than a hundred items – nearer 200 if you count each loudspeaker pair as two, which I do when unpacking, installing and re-packing. Although some of the more interesting experiences occurred elsewhere in my hi-fi chain, most of my time and effort goes into loudspeakers, and some very decent examples linger in the memory. Not surprisingly, the most interesting were also the most costly, partly because manufacturers invariably introduce their latest technologies in their top models. So what sort of changes and trends are going on in loudspeakerland?

Quite a number, I'd suggest. First, there seems to be a definite trend upmarket. I wouldn't say that the prices of equivalent models is rising – indeed, the impact of competitive Chinese manufacturing has probably tended to bring down like-for-like prices a little, especially in the budget and AV sectors of the market. But there do seem to be a whole lot more upmarket speakers around than was the case a few years back. I suspect the considerable commercial success of ranges like Focal-JMLabs' 1995 Utopiae and B&W's 1997 Nautilus 800s has added significant credibility to the upmarket sector, and inspired other brands to join in.

On the engineering side, tweeters seem to be receiving the most attention, triggered by the arrival of super-tweeters, by JMLab's Beryllium dome, and a proliferation of ribbon tweeters. Hitherto Diamond diaphragm tweeters have been restricted to the Very High End, so the imminent arrival of such technology at much lower prices in B&W's new 800s could shake things up again.

Plenty of effort has been going into refining enclosures, and I'm increasingly impressed by the way 'boxy' midrange colorations are being steadily reduced in the more serious loudspeakers. I can cite numerous recent examples from personal experience, including the AE1 MkIII and AE3 MkII,

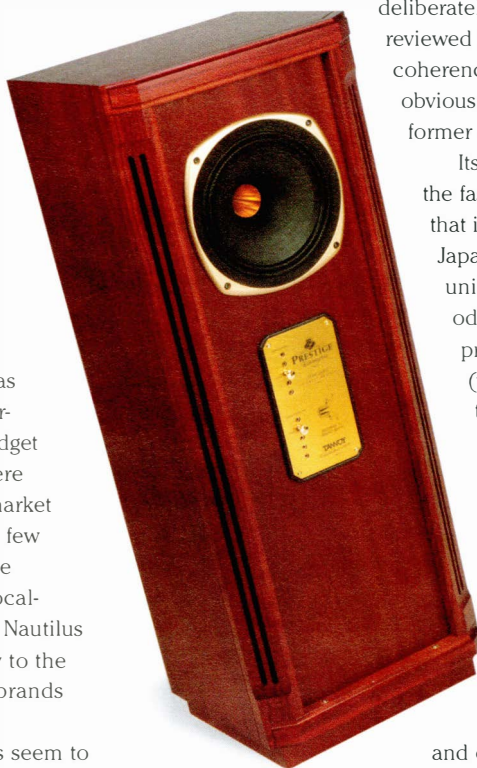
the Wilson-Benesch A.C.T., Sonus Faber's Stradivari, the Vivid Audio B1, Triangle's Magellan, and B&W's 700-series. All the above are recent arrivals that show a degree of enclosure refinement that would have been very rare a few years ago.

However, one of my personal favourites amongst last year's loudspeakers not only looks decidedly oldfashioned but also sounds somewhat 'boxy'. That said, the deliberately retro Tannoy Kensington that I reviewed in Issue 33 has a mid-band realism, coherence and delicacy to die for, despite its obvious colorations, and in my view the former comfortably outweigh the latter.

Its 1950s styling won't appeal to the fashion conscious – here in Britain that is – but I gather it goes down well in Japan and the Far East. Its 1950s drive unit technology also looks decidedly oddball in today's company, but is probably the secret of its sonic success (with considerable assistance from the very latest and best in crossover components). This 10-inch Dual Concentric drive unit is a real throwback. It not only makes it quite impossible to design a sleek modern slim-line enclosure, it also uses an exorbitantly expensive AlNiCo (aluminium/nickel/cobalt alloy) magnet system and a stiff 'double-S' fabric surround outside its generous paper cone and concentric horn tweeter.

To these ears at least the use of AlNiCo in particular, and to a lesser extent the low-hysteresis surround, as an alternative to the ubiquitous ferrite-and-rubber equivalents, brings a mid-band quality that has a surprising similarity to the sonic advantages that valves have over transistors. It remains a source of some disappointment and frustration that more brands aren't pursuing this strategy. And I'd dearly like to see Tannoy put its Kensington driver into something that might closely resemble a TD10 enclosure, and which would therefore be much more acceptable to European tastes.

If speakers have been my prime preoccupation this



► year, some of the most interesting changes have occurred in what are best lumped together as ‘accessories’, all of which are concerned with ‘cleaning up’ the signal long before it gets to the speakers. A number of the Vertex AQ bits and pieces are described in some detail in our Award Winners section, but I recently came across some newer bits and pieces which are also worth mentioning.

The essential points about the Vertex AQ kit are that it’s distributed around the system, and that it considers wide-band mechanical vibration is as important as electrical noise. It therefore not only helps remove all the nasty pollution that afflicts our mains these days, it also prevents the components in the system from interfering with each. One of the company’s new (as yet unnamed) developments provides the best justification I’ve yet encountered for fitting twin (bi-wire) speaker terminal pairs. Using single-wire Vertex AQ speaker cable to the tweeter terminals of a pair of Dali Helicon 400s, I removed Dali’s own high quality links and replaced them with the new Vertex AQ links with their little damping boxes. The idea is to stop vibrations generated by the woofers from interfering with the signal feeding the tweeters, and the results were very impressive, convincingly widening the dynamic range. This is a costly product at £585/pair, but well worth checking out in a high-end system context.

Tackling mains pollution is Isotek’s *raison d’être*, and the latest products from its all-new range represent an alternative way to lower the background ‘grunge’ of a system, widening its dynamic range and generally ‘sharpening up’ the musical flow and information. The £500 ‘entry level’ MiniSub (scheduled for review next issue) certainly lowers the noise floor, but because it uses some in-line filtering it’s better suited to budget applications, and may compromise genuine ‘high end’ capabilities. However, I’ve also had a sneak preview of two more costly Isoteks, the £1,425 Titan and £1,350 Nova, which use a different principle of operation, and these, singly but particularly in tandem, brought substantial improvements to a top-of-the-line Naim system. Whichever route one takes, it looks as though products such as these are really starting to come of age.



Paul Messenger

Hi-fi writer/reviewer

Hi-Fi Experience:

Got into music at the beginning of the 1960s, and into hi-fi by the end of that decade, buying Quad 33/303 and Spendor BC1s. Joined Spendor in mid-1970s and made speakers for a couple of years before landing a job with Hi-Fi News. Moved on to edit Hi-Fi Choice for four years, but ultimately went freelance in 1984. Currently writing for six magazines on a regular basis.

System Details:

Naim CDS 3 and Burmester 001 CD players

Modified Linn Sondek LP12 turntable with Rega RB1000 tonearm and Linn Akiva cartridge

Magnum Dynalab MD 102 tuner

Naim NAC552 pre-amp

Naim NAP500 power amp

Cables from Vertex AQ, Chord Company and Naim.

Supports from Mana, Townshend, Vertex AQ and Naim

Desert Island Discs:

Grateful Dead *Reckoning*

Little Feat *Waiting for Columbus*

Tom Waits *Rain Dogs*

Bob Dylan *John Wesley Harding*

Rolling Stones *Let it Bleed*

Chemical Brothers *Exit Planet Dust*

The KLF *The White Room*

Laurie Anderson *Strange Angels*

Book:

Slaughterhouse 5

Film:

Oh What a Lovely War!

Luxury:

A down/feather pillow and duvet, and a horse hair mattress

Indulgence:

A small grove of mature coffee plants, and the paraphernalia required to turn the beans into a decent cup of coffee

Alive And Kicking...

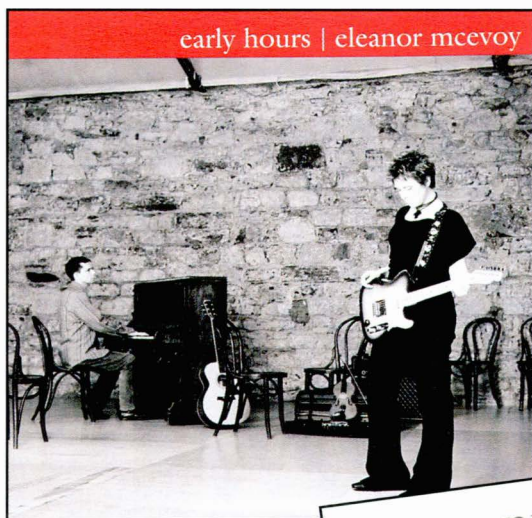
by Reuben Parry

Well, it is as they say that “cock on the block” time once again as I get a chance to reflect upon the eye-catching recordings of the past twelve months. Personally I think it’s has been another strong year overall but perhaps not a vintage one.

I’ll begin with my biggest disappointment. Ignoring some great re-releases of audiophile LPs, this time cut at 45rpm, I’d say that there has been a relative paucity of new blues and jazz LPs and CDs. The exceptions are Mobile Fidelity’s return to the record vaults where they unearthed a classic blues disc with the marvellously atmospheric R.L. Burnside *First Recordings* album (UDSACD 2026) and some musically significant Sonny Rollins (*Plus 4* UDSACD 2006) and John Coltrane (*Soultrane* UDSACD 2020) releases. However, during the year I have been placated by lots of nice second-hand finds. These include Basie, Oscar Peterson and Joe Pass LPs on Pablo and Wes Montgomery’s *Goin’ Out Of My Head* and *Dark Velvet* on the Verve and Riverside labels. But in this category the R. L. Burnside shades it for me.

Conversely I think it’s been a bumper year for classical music, especially from the re-issue outfits. Speaker’s Corner have taken a lead here with their Mercury Living Presence LP reissues. My favourites include the Respighi *Birds and Brazilian Impressions* SR-90153 and a startlingly good Byron Janis performance of the Rachmaninov *Piano Concerto No.3* SR-90283. Both of these records featuring maestro Antal Dorati conducting a London Symphony Orchestra that was at the peak of its powers. There are not enough superlatives for their supportive work alongside the amazing Janos Starker in the Dvorak *Cello Concerto* SR-90303. Starker’s beguiling and irreplaceable playing of the Bach *Suites for Unaccompanied Cello* SR3-9016 was yet another high point for the Speaker’s Corner catalogue. However from out of nowhere came the pick of the solo piano music on offer. This was a John Lill

double album recital on Tony Faulkner’s Green Room Productions label. His new recording of the Robert Schumann *Fantasy in C major Op17; Faschingsschwank aus Wien Op26* and *Kinderszenen Op15* on GREENPRO 4001/02 finds Lill in a captivating and intuitive mood when dealing with scores that possess such savage emotional intensity. Controversially it just gets the nod ahead of the others for reasons that I’ll go into later. Again though I must mention Mobile Fidelity’s contribution. Their Multi Channel Super Audio CDs employing Vox Productions master tapes as source material have given us a stunning series



of discs. The best sounding and most profoundly inspiring of them all must be the Leonard Slatkin *Ivan The Terrible* UDSACD 4003. Prokofiev’s visionary music scored for a vast orchestra (The St. Louis Symphony) and choir is superbly well engineered.

Ploughing a contemporary groove are more of those outstanding Mo-Fi analogue and digital solutions. ▶

► A beautifully crafted Alison Krauss LP *So Long So Wrong* MFSL 2-276 is given tremendous sonic breathing space with its blue grass songs spread across four sides, while on their premier digital format, a sympathetic remaster of the 1999 Aimee Mann disc *Bachelor No.2* UDSACD 2025 impressed me greatly too. In fact it has been a very good year all round for women singer songwriters. K.D Lang's cover versions of Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen and Neil Young numbers together with her own song 'Simple' for the album *Hymns Of The 49TH Parallel* is a revelation and a quite wonderful celebration of Canadian artistry. But closer to home Ireland's Eleanor McEvoy has shown them all a clean pair of heels with *Early Hours*. The SACD MSM51SACD128 was an excellent release but later in the year came a heavyweight vinyl cut (MOSV101) that deservedly takes the plaudits up to the next level. Cracking original songs and that terrific slow burning performance of 'Memphis Tennessee' with McEvoy's exceptionally natural sounding voice and an improved instrumental resolution together with the sublime sense of ensemble created here makes this my favourite amongst a strong contemporary scene this year.

Choosing only one of these to be my top recording of 2004 has been tough. It boiled down to a shoot out between the diva and the pianist as Burnside's *First Recordings* was edged into third place because of an irrelevant modern dance mix tacked on to the end of an otherwise compelling blues line-up. So who comes out on top and why?

Soloist John Lill edges it. His virtuoso playing of a wonderful sounding 1964 Steinway is beautifully consistent and has tonal warmth and rhythmic solidity. He perfectly judges Schumann's capricious moods to give appropriately weighted readings. *The Fantasy and Faschingsschwank aus Wein* from the crown prince of piano composition is compelling and Lill is flamboyant and intense, precise and pensive, lyrical and dramatic all as required. He has the muscle and dexterity of a great concert pianist (which he of course is) and also possesses the studied subtleties one can bring to the studio - where he is given a finely judged and spacious acoustic to fill with exquisitely rich images. Great balance, a natural sound that's very quick to respond to the dynamic shifts in the score and that exploits the transparent and revealing qualities of this venue. Take a bow Tony Faulkner engineering and production genius. Take another bow as well for bravely tackling the audiophile marketplace with a new recording when re-issues are all the rage. It has freshened up the scene and I now look forward with real anticipation to Green Room's next offering. Congratulations as well to John, Tony, Stan Ricker who transferred the two-channel masters to disc and to RTI for such a lovely pressing.



Reuben Parry

Senior Quantity Surveyor

Hi-Fi Experience:

Record Collector for the last 20 years, a reviewer for Hi Fi+ since issue 1 and before that a hack on the short-lived AQ magazine. Also a regular contributor to music newsletters and occasional writer of CD/LP liner notes. I have also been known to sell the odd record or two at UK Hi-Fi Shows and my own LPs and CDs both privately and at on-line auctions as well. Especially so now that I've become less precious about rare and desirable music that I don't play any longer or have duplicate copies of.

System Details:

VPI HRX turntable with JMW Memorial 12.5 arm and vdH EMT MC1b cartridge.

Tube Technology CD 64; Helios 2 and Philips SACD 1000 CD Players.

Tom Evans Groove phono stage.

Michell Argo/Hera pre-amplifier.

Four 250w Trichord Alecto mono block power amplifiers.

Eminent Technology LFT 8a hybrid panel loudspeakers.

Audioplan mains cable, power supplies, distribution blocks and conditioners.

Audioplan interconnect and speaker cables.

Support systems by Quadraspire, Target, Brightstar, RATA and Clearlight Audio RDC

Room Tunes acoustic room treatments.

VPI 16.5 record cleaning machine.

Desert Island Discs:

Eleanor McEvoy *Yola*. Market Square Records MSMSACD113. SACD.

Ella Fitzgerald *George Et Ira Gershwin Songbooks*. Verve/Speakers Corner VS-6077-81. 180g LPs.

Thelonious Monk *The Riverside Tenor Sessions*. Analogue Productions APJ 037. 80g LPs.

Lloyd Cole and the Commotions *Rattlesnakes*. Polydor LCLP1 823683-1. LP.

Dvorak *Cello Concerto*. Janos Starker, Cello with Antal Dorati conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. Mercury Living Presence SR 90303. LP.

Heifetz Brahms, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, Sibelius, Mendelssohn,

Bruch, Glazounov Et Rozsa *Violin Concertos*. LSC-1903, 1992, 2129, 2314, 2435, 2603, 2652, 2734 Et 2767. Classic Records 200g Vinyl Box Set. A greedy choice!

Jimmie Lee Robinson *Remember Me*. Analogue Productions APO 2006. 180g LP.

Book:

James Lee Burke. *White Doves At Morning*.

Film:

No change here as it's *Bringing Up Baby*, the Cary Grant/Katherine Hepburn screwball comedy.

Luxury:

Sky Sports for Rugby and Cricket.

Indulgence:

No real change here either. A Santa Cruz Blur mountain bike and I'll take my old mate, Alan to go biking with.

Quality counts...

by Alan Sircom

This year has been a real retrospective for me. It's been one of those periodic spring-cleaning years, where the old detritus of home cinema and hi-fi are brushed aside and we start anew, from first principles. Not everyone has followed the same path, though; this is a purely personal thing.

This was the year I went back to basics, starting with the cheapest CD, amp and speakers (the record deck remained almost unchanged... for now) and began to see what aspects of the high-end survive at the low-end. Occasional gem aside, it's been a mostly distressing process and I've found myself listening to less and less recordings.

This is a good thing, it's like a palette refreshing exercise. Now, I return to the high-end with my cynicism gland firmly controlled by strong drugs (any excuse) and a heightened sense of how much musical communication is lost listening to almost anything the wrong side of about £2,500.

In this journey of cheap discovery, there were (occasionally) products that proved highly exciting. There are still a handful of products we can recommend to those starting the journey, that do not cost a fortune or demand the listener to be locked

into shouty home cinema sub-sat systems. Mordaunt-Short has provided a constant seam of low-cost, high-quality products; its Avant bookshelf speakers are a rare find,

especially as they cost less than the sort of mains leads most high-enders use.

They may not be the most extended, most dynamic or even most transparent of speakers, but they get the music

across in a way so few of the mainstream entry-level speakers do.

However, most of the equipment that has impressed has been more expensive. I've even found a brand that seems to do everything right, in that I've yet to hear a product from that company that failed to perform both as expected and supremely well. That product range

is Magnum Dynalab. Yes,

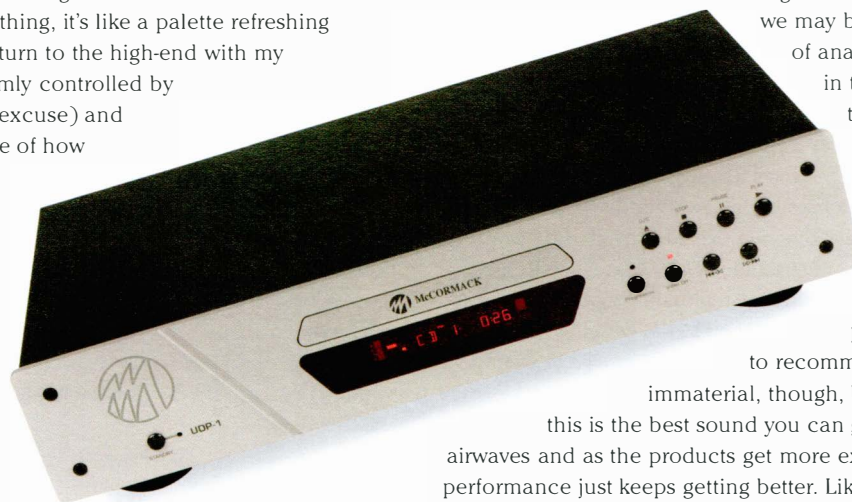
we may be in the twilight of analogue radio and in two or three years time, the cost of the tuner against the life

expectancy of analogue broadcasts will make the products difficult

to recommend. All this is immaterial, though, because today

this is the best sound you can get from the airwaves and as the products get more expensive, the performance just keeps getting better. Like most people exposed to Magnum Dynalab tuners, I've rediscovered the appeal of radio, in a way that the diversity of digital radio channels simply doesn't offer.

The past few years has seen a major jump in performance from CD, both discs and players. This is



► ironic, as the mainstream listener is trying to replace their CD players with DVD models, most of which effectively ruin CD sound. This CD improvement is not subtle, and can be easily demonstrated by experiment. Take a decent 10-year old CD player from a specific brand and compare it with today's equivalent from the same brand. Now do the same thing with amps and speakers. You should find that the CD player has improved immeasurably, where the amp and speakers have improved less substantially (if at all). Of course, freed from the shackles of price CD becomes truly stunning, as the latest models from Wadia, Naim and Reimyo demonstrate.

There are several trends in hi-fi today, although some are interrelated. We are starting to see a rebirth in proper hi-fi, not from the mainstream, but from the small guys, who may be the next generation Linn, Naim or Audio Research. I seriously welcome this new wave of high-end as it means hi-fi performance wasn't set in stone in the last quarter of the 20th Century after all. This is accompanied by a move away from multi-channel music carriers; although more popular in America and Asia, DVD-Audio and multi-channel SACD remain, at best, unheard of and un-listened to in most of Europe. We seem to want our sounds in stereo, and right now that means on CD.

This time last year, universal players were becoming commonplace; this year, they've lost momentum, especially at the lower end of the market. Of course, those universal players that survive are better than ever, and the likes of the Denon DVD-3910, the McCormack UDP-1, the Theta Compli and the Townshend TA-565 all demonstrate how SACD, DVD-Audio and CD can sit comfortably together. The question is, will anyone care?

Our biggest threat is the future, though. The MP3 generation are leaving college now and getting jobs... but not buying hi-fi. Why should they? They have no discs to play. Windows Media Centres and iPods may actually drive people further from collecting CDs and DVDs, and without those discs to play, who's going to spend big money on high-end audio, when all it does is highlight the compression used to send a music file down the line?

We have been troubled by similar woes before. Cassette threatened to destroy vinyl, early CD was not all it was cracked up to be and those in their 70s and 80s now may remember how stereo threatened to undermine the true quality of mono. So, perhaps the threat iPods pose to hi-fi is not so great as I imagine. But, with the might of Microsoft and the marketing and branding genius of Apple behind the next generation of music carrier, this is the first time we are relying for delivery on people for whom music is just another part of the great multimedia experience.



Alan Sircom

Freelance Meeja Hoor

Hi-Fi Experience:

I've been interested in music since childhood (both parents are musicians) but wasn't really bothered about audio until the school show-off was given a Linn Sondek for his 18th birthday. I was jealous and hooked, and when I assisted an audiophile photographer, the bug took hold... big time. I soon began working at Grahams hi-fi, to pay off those huge debts for Linn/Naim gear, and began writing in the early 1990s, since when I've performed just about every role a publisher can legally demand.

System Details:

The system is always a work in progress, and a trade off between hi-fi and home cinema. For regular, non-critical listening, my gradual re-introduction to the high end has so far reached this level:

Meridian G98 CD/DVD-Audio player

Linn Silver interconnects

Audio Analogue Puccini SE integrated amplifier

Quadraspire reference table

Kimber 8TC speaker cables

ProAc Tablette 8 Signature loudspeakers, blu-tacked on Kudos S50 stands filled with a mixture of silver sand and 'lead' shot.

The turntable has remained almost unchanged: SME Model 10 played through a Densen DP-02 'light-powered' phono stage, all resting on a RATA Torlyte turntable stand. The 'almost' bit is a move to a cheapo Audio Technica AT-OC9 MC cartridge, following a bizarre sleeve-related stylus accident.

Desert Island Discs:

JS Bach *Six Cello Suites* Pablo Casals, 3LP set Archiv, COLH 16-18

Gilbert & Sullivan *Pirates of Penzance*, D'Oyly Carte Opera, 2LP set, Decca SKL 4925/6

The Eagles, *Hotel California*, DVD-Audio, Elektra 60509

Rolling Stones, *Let it Bleed*, hybrid SACD/CD, Abkco 719004

Damien Rice, *O*, CD, East-West, 5046647885

Ray Barretto, *Acid*, CD, Sony International 5031142

Cymande, *Cymande*, CD, Sequel NEXCD202

Eric Dolphy, *Out to Lunch*, CD, Blue Note 4987932

Book:

The Great Gatsby, *Three Men in a Boat*

Film:

A Matter of Life and Death, *Withnail & I*

Luxury:

A life-size replica of Everest, made of diamonds

Indulgence:

Guard Daleks, to protect my diamond mountain. Or maybe a swimming pool, filled with lightly-oiled porn queens (they are bouncier than supermodels).

Shrink to fit...

by Chris Thomas

For me this was definitely the year when the stand-mounted speaker came into its own. It started with the JMLabs Micro Utopia Be and ended with the Dulcet from the Canadian Reference 3A company who already produce one of our favourite speakers in the Da Capo. The Micro became my personal speaker of choice, superseding the Revel Gem because of its relatively low demands where the driving amplifier is concerned. Potentially brilliant though the Gem is, it would have laughed at me had I asked questions of it with a £1600 integrated amplifier like the Moon i-3, where the Micro actually performs extremely well under the same circumstances. Add to this the fact that the JMLabs speaker has that stunning beryllium tweeter which gives it an enormous edge over just about everything which doesn't and costs about half as much as the Gem and you'll see that it wasn't a difficult decision. Two other JMLabs designs also came my way last year. The 907 Be was a sub £2K model of a limited edition range of speakers which featured a scaled down version of that tweeter and the Chorus 706S which at £250 per pair were probably the bargain basement speaker of the year. Both designs offered extraordinarily good value for money, which has become a trademark of the company, but the Chorus in particular impressed me. It's a bit rough and ready and it is easy to find fault with until you remember that it only costs £250, at which point all criticisms

seem to melt away. The fact is it plays music with a sense of freedom and swing. The bass is a bit boxy but it is notably good in the treble where its aluminium/magnesium alloy inverted dome tweeter maintains JMLab's reputation for manufacturing superb high frequency drivers at all price points.

Both the X-Centric and the X-Baby from Eben present a rather different view of the world and are altogether more challenging propositions in that you tend to listen to them from the edge of your armchair rather than slumped back into it. At their best they ask as many questions of the listener as any speaker I have heard and to some extent they challenge our perception of what a hi-fi system should actually do. I had a bit of a love/hate affair with both of them for several weeks before finally growing used to the peculiarities of that horn

augmented planar tweeter. Once my ear had grown used to it and the unusual balance that it creates it became much easier to appreciate and admire its ultra fine sense of even the smallest dynamic shifts within the music.

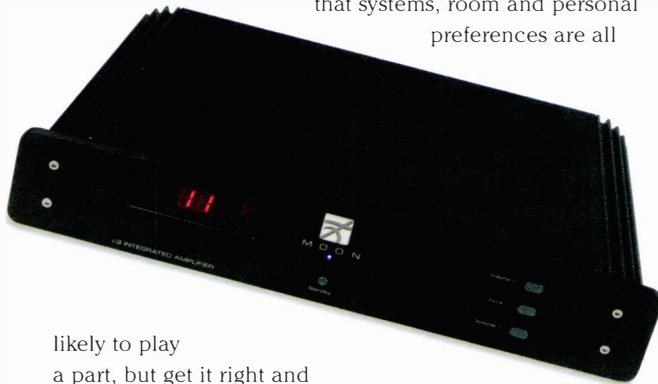
It makes most other speakers sound crude and heavy handed in this respect but after a few days of listening to more conventional speakers, especially the Micro Be's, returning to the Ebens meant that I had to reacclimatise myself all over again.

My exposure to the above and several other speakers also lead me to a growing interest in that little bit of space between the stand and the floor where the spikes usually go. I'm talking largely about hard floor mounting here where I discovered that the kind of air decoupling offered by the Voodoo platforms bought about changes in the musical presentation that seemed hardly



► credible. With the speakers and stands floating around on a bed of air, so did the music which took on an almost ethereal feel. Less grounded perhaps but completely detached from the confines of the cabinets. I also ran through the gamut of solid fixings and found that spikes and protectors were the least preferred option and settled on Nordost titanium Pulsar points as the best and most musically convincing method. But I recently received a pair of the intriguing open-frame speaker stands from Something Solid that were followed by a set of feet, each of which could be viewed as a mini trampoline designed to offer vertical compliance beneath each stand leg. These are proving extremely interesting and give some weight to the notion that there is almost as much difference in stands as there is in speakers. What is undeniably true is that you can kill a speaker's potential by using the wrong stand and you can make serious improvements to both with the correct footings.

I doubt there is a universal answer and that systems, room and personal preferences are all



likely to play a part, but get it right and the rewards, when considered against the costs, are absolutely enormous.

As far as electronics goes I would have to say that the Moon range stands out. The i-3 is a bargain, the i-5 has been warming at the heart of my system for six weeks or so and the imminent arrival of the Nova CD player means that a system review early in the new year is on the cards, although, bearing in mind Moons notoriously lengthy running-in period, that might have to wait a bit. All the truly expensive amplifiers I heard this year had a post Connoisseur tinge of disappointment about them. So the highlight was most definitely the rise of the stand mount speaker because so far has their quality advanced over the past few years that I personally feel no need to aspire to anything larger, preferring to spend any available extra cash on the front end or some more music. Most times these days when friends ask for hi-fi upgrade advice I find myself discouraging huge outlays and encouraging radical rethinks.



Chris Thomas

I've always loved music and maintained a healthy scepticism about hi-fi. I got into writing in the very late '70's and then, in the 80's I was sentenced to several years in retail. I have continued ever since, buying and selling vintage guitars and doing audio consultancy work.

System Details:

It's very difficult to keep a personal system running when so much review gear needs warming up and listening to. But my permanent components are:

Naim CDS 3
Tom Evans Audio Design The Vibe Line-Stage
JMLabs Micro Utopia Be speakers and stands
Nordost Valhalla interconnects, speaker cables and power cords
Naim Frain.

Desert Island Discs:

The Beatles *Abbey Road* EMI 7088
The Beatles *Rubber Soul* EMI 3075
Jimi Hendrix *Electric Ladyland* Polydor 2310269
Beach Boys *Classics* Capitol 72435
Stevie Wonder *Songs In The Key Of Life* EMI6002
Tchaikovsky & Sibelius *Violin Concertos*
Oistrakh/Philadelphia CBS 60312
Shakti *The Believer* Verve 549 207-2

Book:

Sexus – Henry Miller

Film :

This changes all the time but how about *The League Of Gentlemen* – a homo-erotic fable of ex-servicemen who rob a bank. Very British.

Luxury:

1950's Fender Strat finished in Lake Placid Blue with a rosewood neck and an old Fender Twin Reverb. Could I sneak in a Cry Baby pedal?

Indulgence:

Case of 1988 Romanee Conti with suitable glasses.

Iconoclastic to the last...

by Roy Gregory

If this issue demonstrates anything it is the range of opinion, the breadth of experience embraced by this magazine. We don't have, have never had and frankly, are not interested in a party line. Instead, I welcome a range of voices and contradictory views, because debate is healthy and productive. Whatever you hear, whatever you like to hear, I'm happy to hear about it, whether you are a writer or a reader.

However, there is one thing I'm not interested in. I'm fed up with people who try to use mathematics, or physics or approaches loosely labelled as "scientific", to prove that we can't hear the differences we report. You want to analyse something? Analyse why we can hear what we do. The "I can't explain it therefore you must be imagining it: You must be imagining it because I can't explain it" arguments get more and more tired with each passing day. The simple case is that our ears have always been able to detect things that we couldn't explain. When CD was launched our ears told us it was far from perfect when the numbers "proved" the opposite. Time passes and people start to re-examine the numbers until, hey, surprise, the theories aren't quite as complete and all embracing as the scientists thought they were. Now we know just a few of the reasons why CD sounds the way it does. We also know it's far from perfect, despite its clean numerical bill of health.

Why the sudden rush to the barricades? The blind listening test we did on cables provoked a massive response, both for and against, but what really struck me about the nay-sayers was a common theme that cropped up over and over again. Basically, the same people who suggest that if you can't hear the difference blind then it doesn't exist (psychology, left-brain/right-brain function, and task related stress clearly don't register on their scientific radars) now claim that when we do hear the differences blind, that doesn't count because the tests either aren't blind enough or are not scientific enough. In fact, the test won't satisfy them until we can't hear a difference because if we can hear the difference there must be something wrong because the difference doesn't exist because they can't measure it!


Get a life!

Hey guys, did it ever occur to you that I really don't care whether I can prove, scientifically, that these differences exist or not. I don't need to. I can hear them – and oddly

enough so can lots of other people. What's more, I can demonstrate them too. Now, there might well be people who don't hear them and that's fine too. But all the time I can hear them I'm going to report what I hear, and what the other writers hear, because there are those people out there who want to make use of the information and make up their own minds. You see – I'm quite happy for people to disagree with me. It's not a question of absolute knowledge. There is no right or wrong, just what's important to you.

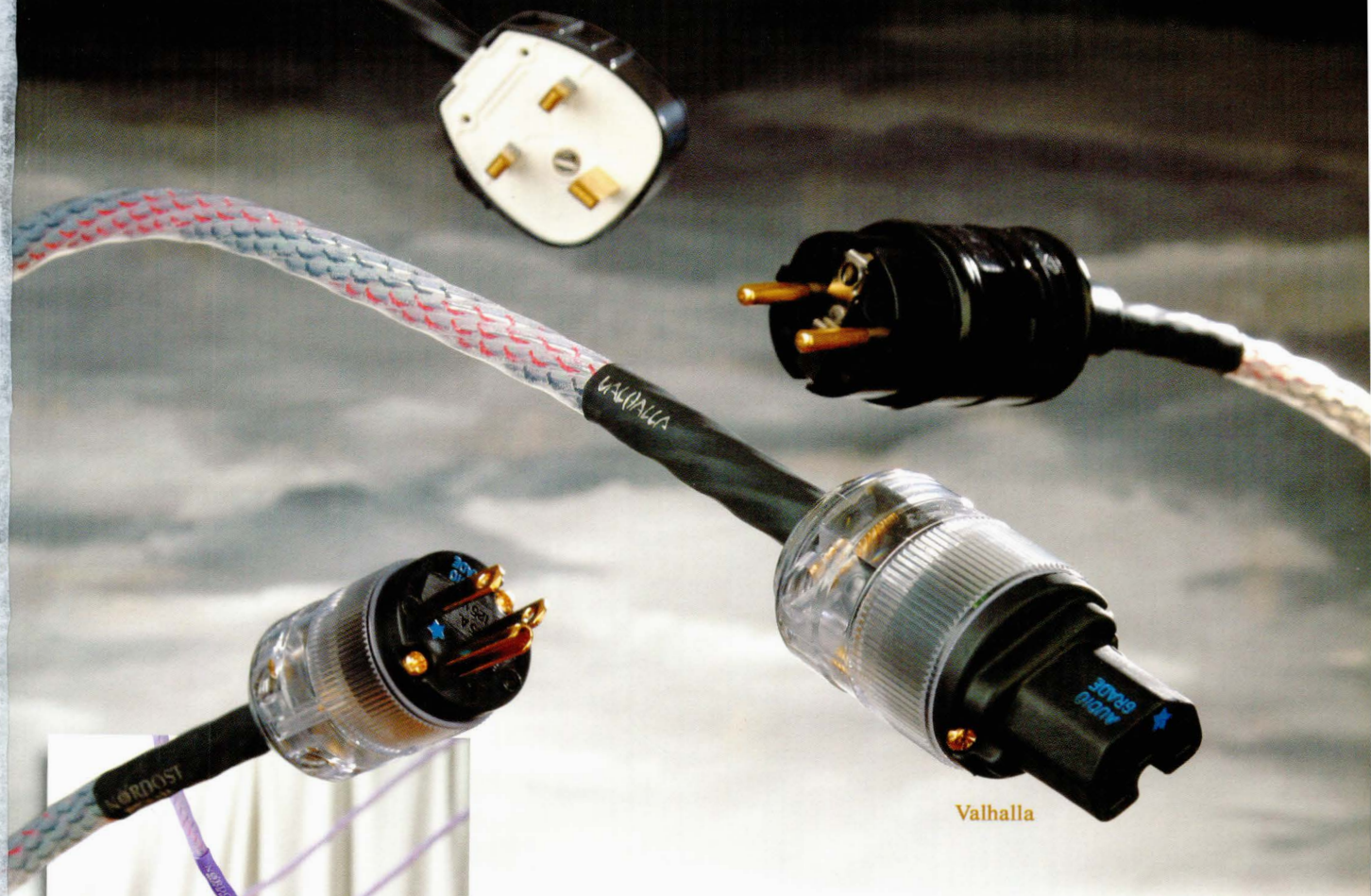
So, the guy who can't hear the differences between cables, or can but doesn't think they are (for the most part) worth the money, is welcome to his opinion. That's why PM gets to write for the magazine. But there's a big step from there to the "I can't hear it or measure it so I'm going to prove that it doesn't exist" dogmatism that cannons around dressed in the clothing of "science". Who cares? Why do these people want so badly to be right? Who do they think they're saving/helping? Presumably it's the general public, poor lambs, who are clearly incapable of hearing for themselves, separating fact from fiction and are all susceptible to hoodwinking by unscrupulous (and of course unscientific) manufacturers, and their lackies in the hi-fi press.

Oddly enough, I've always found that by and large, the public vote with their feet and wallets. If something gets past the "new craze" stage then there's generally some value in it, whether we know why that is or not. Cable sound has been with us for well over 20 years now – but of course, we've all been deluding ourselves for all that time.

When we listened blind to cables it was out of interest. It was to discover whether the test, as conducted, could tell us anything. Nothing more. Nothing less. Whether it was statistically or scientifically valid is of no earthly concern to me. We did it; we presented the results; we drew our own conclusions; everyone else is free to draw theirs. You see, science is and always has been a limited form of knowledge, lagging well behind experience and intuition. If you want to use it as a tool to help advance the state of the art then great; if you think it's an end in itself, a theoretical ball and chain to hold us back until it grudgingly grants approval, then you're wasting my time. We shouldn't be afraid of things we can't explain and we shouldn't be afraid to enjoy them. After all, who can explain the magic in music? 

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