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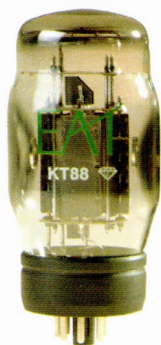
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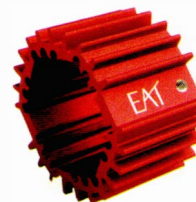
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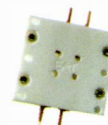
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One of the problems of working with your hobby is keeping a sense of perspective. "It's all about the music" is an oft-repeated platitude, but it's also a disingenuous fabrication. Yes it is about the music, but we're deluding ourselves if we think that the way equipment looks and the way we feel when we look at it is entirely incidental to our enjoyment. Those boxes are fascinating: the way they're built, the way they work, the things we can do to pamper them and keep them at their best. How long before the improvement becomes an end in itself rather than a contributor to the whole? Yes, these things matter, but it's all about maintaining a balance between the music we're listening too and the things we do that allow us to hear it.

The other day we were seated in the second row at Covent Garden, waiting for the interval scrum to disperse so that we could partake of a little inter-act refreshment. Looking about, as you do in such circumstances, my eye settled on a fresh brass plate adorning the back of a seat just to our left – not unusual in itself, many of the seats have them, but this one was especially bright and shiny. Reading it I was astonished to discover a dedication to Alastair Robertson-Aikman, a pillar of the hi-fi community, remembered here with a permanent presence in seat A18 of the Royal Opera House, front-row and just to the right of the conductor. For all the tonearms and turntables that SME have produced, and for all the pleasure they have offered their owners, here is ARA remembered in the place he loved best. Now that's what I call a sense of perspective...



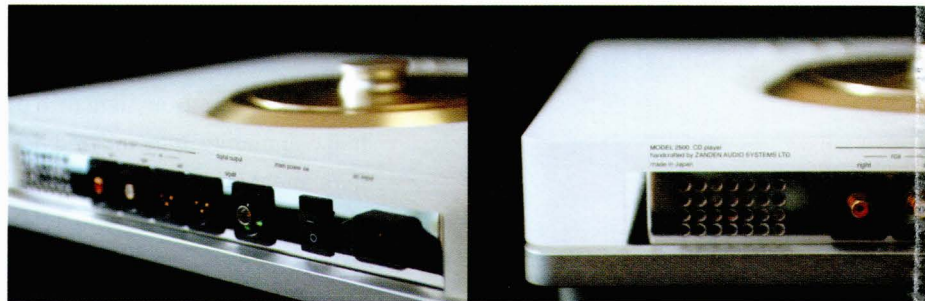
Choice implies qualitative differences not merely quantitative ones, but in today's digital audio marketplace does the consumer really have choices? Nearly every manufacturer of digital components uses the same basic approach to design: ever higher sampling rates and longer word lengths. It is no wonder that the consumer is bewildered by an overwhelming number of products which offer NO substantive difference.

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1- "Until now, I've never used the clichéd phrase about 'rediscovering' my music collection with the insertion in my system of a new piece of digital gear. For the first time, I actually looked forward to playing CDs."--Michael Fremer Stereophile November 2006 Pg.116

"For the first time what I was hearing would have me seriously re-examining the sound of my record players." --Roy Gregory hi-fi + 2005 Issue 38 Pg. 41

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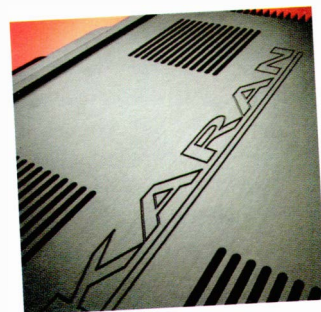
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HOME TRUTHS...

by Jimmy Hughes

'Handel – was he Gay?' screamed a tabloid headline a couple of years ago. Seems that Georg Frideric (unlike his great contemporary J.S. Bach who married twice and sired something like 20 children) never married and was not known to have had any girlfriends. So – putting two and two together – it's obvious innit?

But, whatever Handel's sexual preferences might or might not have been, one thing's certain; there is no hint of sexuality in his music. Leastways, none that I can hear. His music (like that of Bach) contains no sexual element of any description. It probably has just about every other feeling and emotion known to man, but nothing sexual.

The first time I made any connection between sex and music occurred (naturally enough) when I was in my teens. I read an interview with Jimi Hendrix who said something to the effect that sex was the greatest thing ever, and that it was behind a lot of music. I found this very startling; up until then, music was just music. But what is it that makes music sexual? It's a very difficult question to answer. Indeed, I'm not sure it can be defined. After all, if someone insists that Handel's Chandos Anthems or some of his *Concerti Grossi* have a strong sexual dimension, who can prove that it isn't so?

In the field of classical music, it's tricky to say exactly who was the first composer to write music with sexual overtones. I myself would cite Mozart. In operas like *Figaro* and *Cosi*, Mozart created living breathing sexual human beings, rather than cardboard cut-outs. You feel these are real people with real desires and emotions. However, my record collection contains an LP on Florilegium of Madrigals by the seventeenth century composer Monteverdi called *Madrigali Erotici* (DSDL 703). So clearly this sex business in music goes back a bit further! However, I myself hear little that's Erotic in these Monteverdi pieces. Which begs a further question: whether or not 'sexuality' in music is something constant and definable – a thing that spans generations - or is it only discernable to a specific audience? I mean, for all anyone

knows, listeners in Monteverdi's time found his *Love Madrigals* intensely erotic and sexually highly-charged.

This in turn poses the question of whether or not sexuality is something intrinsic to the music itself, or a separate thing that comes from the way the music is performed. The singing on *Madrigali Erotici* strikes me as pretty pure and sexless, but had one heard them sung in Monteverdi's time, perhaps the effect would have been different. Anyone remember '60s singer PJ Proby? Now there was a highly sexual performer! Older readers may recall he was eventually deported from the UK for splitting his trousers on stage. Not once but twice... His first hit song was an absolute belter called 'Hold Me'. At the time I thought it one of the best singles released that year. So I was somewhat surprised when my mum told me that 'Hold Me' was actually an old song from the 1930s or '40s. When I heard the original, I was shocked. Proby made the song sound vibrant and edgy, with a powerful sexual drive. The original was a tame tum-te-tum-te-tum boring little sing-a-long song.

What could be more sexless than the song 'Happy Birthday'? Yet in 1962 when Marilyn Monroe sang it to President Kennedy in a pouting provocative manner, the result was electrifyingly sexual. So, the projection of sexuality in music is greatly dependent on the performer – indeed, crucially-so. I've always thought that sexuality divided the

Beatles from the Rolling Stones.

The Beatles' music is not particularly sexual,

whereas the Stones'

music is. Just listen to

the Beatles'

account of

'I Wanna

Be Your

Man', and

the Stones'

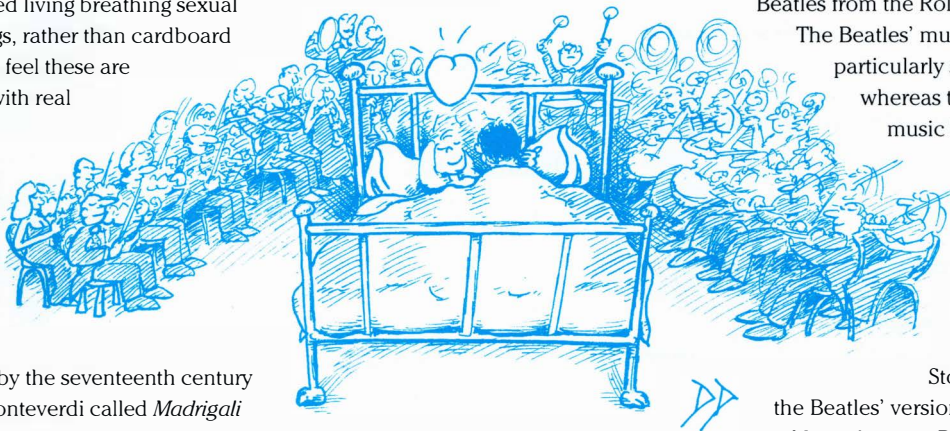
version. The

Stones' knock

the Beatles' version for six –

and I say that as a Beatles fan. ►

I think this probably has something to do with the Stones being influenced by the early Delta Bluesmen and Black R&B singers. When you hear Howlin' Wolf rasping away, you know you're listening to one lusty devil. He could sing about snowflakes or blue skies, and make it sound sexual. ►



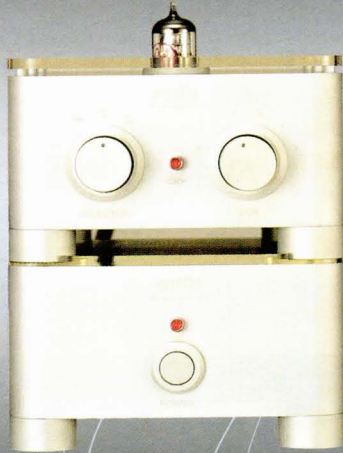
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► Sex is there in his voice. I once heard a Muddy Waters' performance described as 'Pure Sex', and it's true. It's not just the songs, but the up-front 'You want it, or you don't?' way he performed them. It's a very confrontational, Male thing. Rap music is very sexual for much the same reason. Even if the lyrics are about violence and aggression, there's a sexual dimension there too. It's music fuelled by Testosterone. Heavy metal has the same sort of power and drive. There's something very sexual about the sound of a loud dirty-sounding guitar cranking out a powerful riff. Guns 'n' Roses for example.

One of the most powerfully sexual albums I know is from the band Erasure. Their CD *Drama!* has a strong sexual current running through almost every track. It's even there on tracks where the lyrics are clearly not about love, sex or relationships – for example, the title track, 'Drama!'

And more than that, the sexuality of Erasure's music is Gay. Once again, I find it impossible to say how or why it's like this. But you sense it. At least I can. It's not that the music is camp or anything like that (well, perhaps a bit). Agreed, there is a certain larger-than-life theatricality about it. But that hardly explains the effect.

Going back to Handel being Gay (or not), is it possible to tell someone's sexuality from their music? With Handel the answer is an emphatic, "No". But I think you can tell George Michael is Gay from some of his music, whilst I can't say the same about Elton John's.

I think some of Benjamin Britten's music betrays the composer's Gay orientation: the *Serenade for Tenor Horn and Strings* for example. But, again, I don't hear it in all of

his works. And (to name another high-profile homosexual composer) what about the closet gay, Tchaikovsky? I think there are hints here and there – the *scherzo* section of the *First Piano Concerto*'s slow movement for example, and some of the ballet music – but by and large I find any sort of sexual element, gay or otherwise, absent from Tchaikovsky's music.

The sexual dimension is something missing in the music of most great 19th century composers: Haydn, Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Bruckner, Mahler, Dvorak, Sibelius, Schubert, Chopin, to name a few. Even Berlioz – works like the *Symphonie Fantastique* notwithstanding. Their music was about higher things than sex. I daresay 'sex' at that time was reserved for music played in taverns and houses of ill-repute. As a young man, Brahms is said to have played piano in Hamburg Brothels to earn a little money. But sex does not figure in any of his music – at least not to my ears.

The exception of course is opera, where sexual relationships are so often central. The 19th century classical composer who wrote the most sexually-charged music has to be Richard Wagner. *Tristan and Isolde* has the biggest and best orgasm (eargasm?) in all music. The 'Liebestod' recreates in music the power of sexual passion mixed with uncontrollable love/lust in manner quite unequalled. Whether we recognise or understand it as such has to do with the cultural milieu and concerns of the time. If sex was part of the operatic medium, then it (ironically) wasn't at the core of romantic orchestral music. The fact that it is so central to current popular music merely reflects our own concerns. We just need to be careful about superimposing them on the past. ▶+



SPEAKERS CORNER

by Paul Messenger

One of the problems with my hi-fi system is that it tends to get a bit tired and lazy over time. It sits there year in and year out, doing whatever's asked of it without complaint, and all seems to be well and good. But the sound quality is actually slowly but surely deteriorating – so slowly in fact that it's quite undetectable day-to-day. The loss of quality is only noticeable when something jerks the system back to delivering its best potential, through what amounts to a substantial performance upgrade.

This has happened to me twice in the last couple of years. Ironically, each time it has cost me nothing, and each time it's been completely beyond my power to instigate the proceedings, though I was subsequently able to add some

extra tweaks of my own.

The first time followed a power cut, which affected one in three houses along my road. When the lights came on again a couple of hours later, I wandered down the road to find the guy who'd fixed, ask what had happened, and inquire why only one house in three had lost its power. He explained that the sub-station itself was fed by three-phase mains, so three separate single-phase outputs were then fed out to the neighbourhood. Our house just happened to be one of the unlucky ones – or maybe the lucky ones if they happened to be hi-fi nuts like me. He added that he'd replaced a truly ancient fuse feeding one of the phases.

When I returned home and powered up the hi-fi, I was ▶

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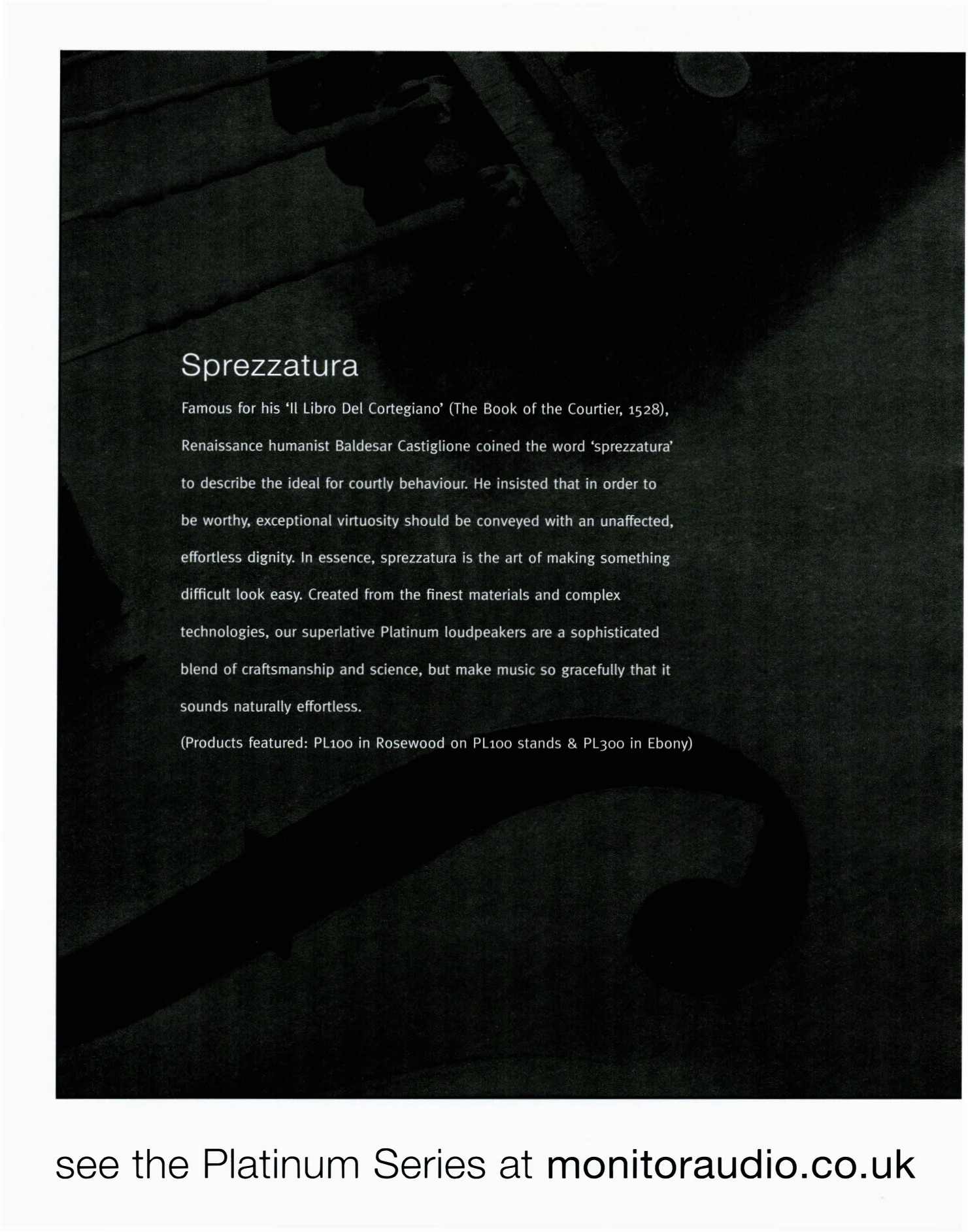
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▶ started to hear a clearly perceptible improvement, with a sharper, faster, cleaner and more 'out of the boxes' sound. I spent some hours the following day cleaning and tightening all my mains connections, enjoying further improvements in consequence. But I don't mind admitting I was shocked and surprised that an improvement in electrical contact (and consequent reduction in mains source impedance) at a substation a hundred yards down the road had been so readily detectable. If I hadn't heard it for myself, I probably wouldn't have believed it, so I fully appreciate reader scepticism.

However, last week saw something of a repeat performance. This time my electricity supplier had decided it was time to change the meter for a new and more advanced model. This relatively simple job only took the fitter about twenty minutes, but crucially involved breaking the seals on the old meter and the main fuse into the house. Even the acts of fitting the tails to the new meter and removing and replacing the fuse holder will have some cleaning effect on a number of the contacts, but I specifically asked the guy to make sure all the screws were nice and tight, on both meter and fuse, and checked that the fuse contacts were clean.

Second time around, I was better prepared for the consequences, and able to anticipate a change. Again there was a clear and obvious improvement in sound quality, along similar lines to that experienced after the power cut, only this time it was rather more obvious. And again I spent a few hours fettling the various hi-fi mains and power supply feeds further downstream from the now re-sealed meter, adding extra icing on the cake. This is most easily accomplished by simply plugging all available plug/socket connections in and out a few times, as the friction is usually sufficient to clean the contact points. (The particularly enthusiastic or obsessive can mess around with DuraGlit, emery paper and suchlike.)

Once again this proved well worthwhile, showing audible improvements right across the board. Stereo images were more convincing and better focused, and the speakers sounded less boxy, with more air and sparkle, and better focus. Dynamic structures and shading seemed more assured and precise, while vinyl surface noise was less obvious and more detached from the music. Diction was also improved, rendering some of Tom Waits' occasionally impenetrable lyrics much easier to make out.

Significantly, the variations in character between the four sources I most commonly use (vinyl, CD, FM radio and TV) had become that much more obvious. Indeed, I've spent the

last couple of months vacillating between two very different vinyl spinners. On the one hand a heavily modified Rega/Linn hybrid with RB1000 tonearm and Apheta cartridge is sweet and wonderfully detailed, especially towards the frequency extremes. On the other hand a Roksan Xerxes.20 with Artemiz tonearm and Shiraz cartridge has marvellous speed and time coherence, and invariably sets my feet tapping. Which is better? I simply can't say. But I can say that the substantial differences between them were altogether clearer and more obvious after the mains had undergone treatment.

I know I've mentioned the importance of the mains supply before, but I make no apology for doing so again, because it's so fundamental to the sound quality of

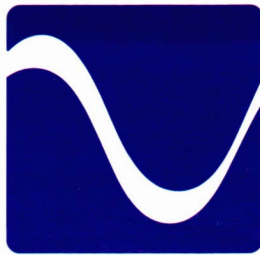


my predominantly Naim-based system. (Whether it applies universally I cannot say for sure, because it's not possible to reverse the procedure or repeat it consistently.)

However, because it's cheap and easy to implement and also very effective, yet equally easily forgotten and ignored, it's worth repeating the reminder that well cleaned mains connections may well represent the best value upgrade for any hi-fi system.

There's rather more to providing your hi-fi system with optimised mains power than simply cleaning up all the contacts. It's vital to run the hi-fi from its own dedicated spur from the distribution block downstream from the meter. For years I fed this spur to a group of unswitched sockets, but obtained a very worthwhile improvement when I used a Powerigel (pronounced power-eagle) multi-way distribution device developed by Naim's German distributor Musicline. This star-earths the whole system and feeds every component from a single plug with all the IEC mains leads the same length and welded together inside an alloy tube that sits on spring legs. Powerigel is very good but not cheap (\$525 for a six-way version the last time I checked). The Hydra (from Grahams Hi-Fi) offers something similar at a much lower cost, though since I haven't tried it, I can't say how it compares

Much more expensive is the mains system from Phonosophie, a German brand with some historic links to Naim Audio and an overall philosophy which shows broad outline similarities (while differing considerably in the detail). This uses a mains extension block along the same lines as those found in the UK, but based on the unfused German Schuko type plugs/sockets. Furthermore, these are available with the various pins in either copper- or silver-plated form, as are the Schuko type ▶



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Christopher Breung, Hi-Fi News
May 2007 (Score: 20 / 20)

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► IEC 'kettle' leads. The bad news is that it's very costly, at £300 for a six-way extension block and £250 each for the silver-plated 1.5m Schuko/IEC leads, though this approach does mean it's quite flexible, allowing other mains leads (eg Vertex AQ ones) to be tried. Note also that the cabling throughout is rather stiff, which can be awkward under cramped conditions.

Whether its strictly necessary to use such costly IEC cables for all the components of the system I cannot yet say, simply because I didn't have any 'ordinary' Schuko-equipped mains leads to hand to make the comparison. (Go into an electrical shop and ask for a Schuko and you'll just get blank looks, and ultimately be offered an adaptor combining a Schuko plug and 13 amp socket, which would rather defeat the purpose of this examination.) Mail order will hopefully come to the rescue here soon.

I suspect that the leads feeding the distribution block and the amplification are the ones that matter most, in terms of minimising mains source impedance and hence in maximising sound quality. One can probably therefore save money by using cheaper mains leads to feed, say, turntable drives.

Certainly the silver-plated Phonosophie mains leads sound very promising. My first reaction was that using them

gave a slightly wider bandwidth than the Powerigel, with marginally greater extension at both ends of the band and a rather more obvious top end. Initially I wasn't sure that they suited the Naim electronics as well as the Powerigel, but a little running in time quickly sweetened up the top end so that it no longer sounded obtrusive. Indeed, my initial impression is that the Phonosophie mains leads sounded a little superior overall, but whether that's enough to justify their quite hefty price premium is perhaps more debatable.

Although there's no way of tinkering with the sealed parts of the incoming mains, ahead of the consumer unit, I had planned to do more comparisons between the Phonosophie and Powerigel, and also take advantage of the Phonosophie's flexibility by experimenting with alternative mains cables (such as Vertex AQ types). However, a minor back problem intervened, preventing me from scrabbling around amongst the mains leads before the untimely arrival of copy dates. I'm also waiting to try out Phonosophie's special mains and component fuses that Uberphon is bringing in from Germany, and hopefully these will be available – and my back will have mended itself – in time for the next edition of Hi-Fi+.



PLAYING THE SYSTEM

by Roy Gregory

Once upon a time, hi-fi was a simple hobby with only two concerns: making a noise and making a better noise. To that end, its adherents laboured long nights with a bench full of components and boxes bent out of metal, sawed up sheets of chipboard and screwed drive units into holes that were about the right shape and even, occasionally in roughly the right place. It was a time of joy, of innocence – of electric shocks. It gave rise to wonder – that any of this stuff ever worked.

But the times they were a changin' and it soon became apparent that the fumbling efforts of amateurs had in turn created an opportunity for the more adept to do the job for others, and thus this naïve (and occasionally dangerous) hobby took its first real steps on the road that would inevitably lead to it becoming a business. Of course, there have been many evolutions and not a few revolutions along the way, but hi-fi has always endured a pendulum swing between the slick, mass produced appeal of big-business brands and the edgy, alternative appeal of fringe manufacturers more interested in performance than

form and functionality. So when the Japanese gobbled up the high-credibility independents like Marantz to add to the shelves stacked with Sony and Sansui separates, they created the vacuum into which the likes of Naim, NAD and A&R Cambridge expanded. Suddenly the cool kit to have wasn't all silver with large meters and enough switches and dials to make Mission Control look simple; we were back in black, with minimal switches and bent metal casework. And so the cycle started over... but this time with a difference. This time it was the companies themselves that turned into proper businesses with proper policies and products. Riding the wave of consumer spending that swelled in the '90s, these manufacturers encompassed the new skills of industrial design and marketing, global sales and corporate branding to grow into real going concerns, many of them successful enough to survive the Japanese financial collapse and a wrong turn into AV. They employ legions of workers, pay dividends to their shareholders and are capable of producing more products, more cost effectively than ever before. They've come a long way



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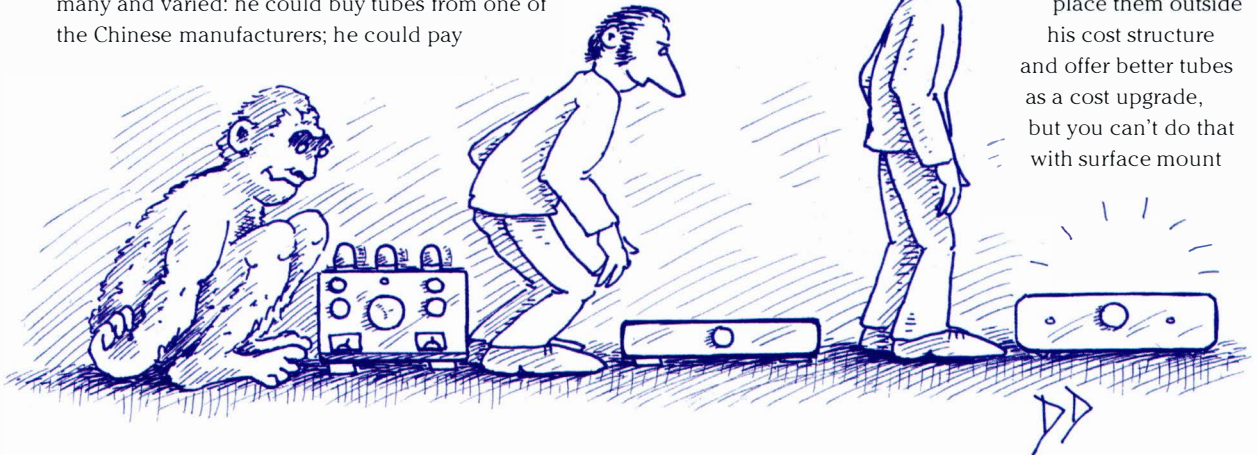
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► from the Kitchen tables and garden sheds in which many of them started. But is the pendulum about to start another swing, and if so, why?

There's an inevitable tension that pervades any hobby that becomes a business. If we think back to where this all started, once you had something that worked, you wanted to make it sound better. Maybe you refined the circuit or construction. More likely you went out and spent a few pounds on better components: The performance increase was well worth the expenditure, you went on tinkering, slowly improving things along the way.

Now, consider the same problem from the point of view of a major manufacturer. Let's say for the sake of argument that he's building a valve amplifier and he chooses to use 6550 output valves. The choices available to him are many and varied: he could buy tubes from one of the Chinese manufacturers; he could pay



more and buy them from the Russians; he could pay even more and use Svetlana tubes; he could really go for broke and fit NOS GEs. The cost difference runs from a tanner each for Chinese valves up to around £18 for a Sovtek and on up to about £25 for Svetlanas. If you were building the amp for yourself and let's assume that it uses two pairs of output tubes, once you'd got it running there's probably no question that you'd end up with the Svetlanas, the only debate being how long it would take you to spring the extra £60 over and above basic Chinese valves. But for a manufacturer there's a completely different cost to calculate. For him, those tubes constitute front-end hardware, which means that they load all the subsequent cost calculations further down the path. By the time he's added labour and fixed costs, packaging, a guarantee, delivery and a profit margin, that front-end cost has magnified considerably. Add a retail margin (including an allowance for export markets) and sales tax and you finally arrive at a target high-street price. The generally accepted ratio of final price to raw parts cost for most products is around ten to one! Now, work back from a target price of £1200 (which is what a lot of such amps cost) and you see

that your selection of Svetlana output tubes would take your product from £1200 to £1800. Add in a few premium driver valves and you'll hit the £2K mark. We won't even talk about NOS Ges at a couple of hundred pounds a piece...

But the story doesn't end there. Your manufacturer has to consider other factors: what kind of quantity discount can he get; how good is the supply; how reliable are the tubes; what currency is he going to have to use to pay for them? All of which explains why you don't get £1200 valve amps arriving with Svetlana 6550s installed. Of course, a

valve is a replaceable item. To some extent the manufacturer might choose to place them outside his cost structure and offer better tubes as a cost upgrade, but you can't do that with surface mount

resistors or different volume pots, and herein lies the rub. The large-scale manufacturer will always have to consider commercial questions that are irrelevant to smaller scale, almost bespoke operations. But if your business has grown from a hobby you are on a seesaw, with outright commercial interest at one end and performance on the other. Where you end up placing yourself along that seesaw is a question of the balance between your hi-fi sensibilities and the commercial pressures bringing themselves to bear.

Many of the smaller, specialist producers are in the happy position of allowing performance to dictate their actions. Their range of options is limited by the scale of their operation: quantity discounts don't apply, overheads are minimal, there's no board of directors constantly poring over the balance sheet. But for larger companies it's a far harder balance to strike, and one that recently they seem increasingly to be getting wrong. Why? Ironically I believe that it's a function of two of their greatest strengths. Make a lot of something and you can get huge quantity discounts on all manner of parts and processes, adding to the cost effectiveness of your production. And nowhere can you make such huge savings as on the case or cabinetwork ►

► that surrounds the bits that actually do stuff. These items are complex, require precise manufacturing and flawless surface finish. Add in the quantity and nature of the materials along with high failure rates (mainly down to the finishing) and you've got the most expensive bit of the whole unit. But it's also the bit the customer sees first. If he likes the way it looks then maybe he'll touch and feel it. If it passes that test then finally, if you are lucky he might even listen to it – but if it looks and feels good enough then he'll probably already have made up his mind (probably buttressed in his choice by a heavy advertising budget and a few intemperately positive reviews).

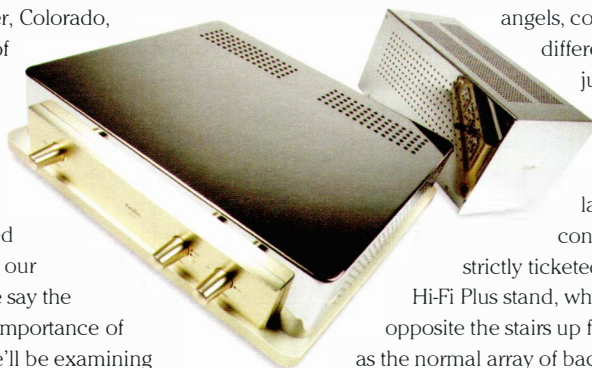
What's more, if you want to sell a lot of these things then you'd better give them broad base appeal. They'll need to be versatile and capable of meeting more than one need. Of course, with the likes of switch mode power supplies, DSP and micro-processor control that's easy, and there are products out there that let you do almost anything to anyone anywhere in the world. It's just that I'm not sure that cruise missile technology is necessarily the most applicable to hi-fi.

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not advocating a return to bent metal and black crackle casework. But the drive to make products physically attractive and endlessly versatile carries its own costs, with ever-larger slices of the budget being devoted to industrial design and software development. The end result, if we are not careful, will be a slide towards beautifully presented mediocrity, a world of fabulous looking products that can do anything except sound good because performance was so far down the list of design priorities. It is no accident that, almost irrespective of price, we are seeing many of the most exciting products emerging from smaller companies or those that seem to be returning to their roots. The quality of commercially available casework means that a tiny operation like Vertex AQ can produce beautifully turned out products, while at higher prices, the likes of Ayre Acoustics are able to present products capable of challenging anything on the market, sonically and in terms of finish. The bottom line is that we can have our cake and eat it. Yes, it's nice to have pretty things, but they're pretty useless if they don't fulfil their primary function. ➤



Hi-Fi Plus at the Manchester Show

As announced in Issue 55, normal service will be resumed in Manchester this January, with another Hi-Fi Plus demonstration to make you ponder the accepted wisdoms of audio reproduction. This time around, and following on from our successful "Road Trip" to Denver, Colorado, we'll be examining the impact of some of the finer points of analogue replay, including a few that most of the industry will loudly tell you are utterly irrelevant. We beg to differ, but unlike them, we are prepared to put our demonstration where our mouth is, and show you why we say the things we do. So, as well as the importance of accurate cartridge alignment we'll be examining the finer points of VTA, revisiting mono cartridges and delving into the arcane world of record replay curves. Differences in the size of the room and available equipment mean that we can't recreate a perfect facsimile of the Denver demo, but the points will be the same.



So, if you don't believe in VTA, use an arm that eliminates overhang adjustment or can't understand why anybody would waste money on a mono record, then come along and hear what you've been missing. If you are already on the side of the angels, come anyway; you'll be expecting differences but you might be surprised just how big they are. Besides, where else are you going to get to hear the Zanden phono-stage. These demonstrations last around 35 minutes and are conducted in Room 220. They are strictly ticketed and you can get yours from the Hi-Fi Plus stand, which should be on the second floor, opposite the stairs up from the main entrance. As well as the normal array of back issues and binders, this will also be pretty much your last chance to renew or top-up your subscription at the current, discounted rate. It goes back up to the old rate on February the first – you have been warned.

So, see you in Manchester on the weekend of the 26th and 27th of January. Come along – it should be fun. ➤



Incoming!

Please address letters to the Editor at Hi-Fi+, 25-27 Whittle Road, Ferndown Industrial Estate, Wimborne, Dorset, BH21 7RP
or via the website at www.hifiplus.com

Dear Sir,

Just wanted to comment on your review of the Marantz SA-7S1. Please be patient as I step you through my thoughts and some background information so that you can understand my perspective. I love reading your reviews. I have a bunch of the same equipment you have in your review system. My ears and your ears seem to have very similar tastes and priorities. For this reason, I was surprised by your review and our different opinions.

Bottom line - I do not necessarily agree with your comments that this machine has a soft top end (I am paraphrasing). Again, my interpretation of your review might be wrong, but you were definitely sending messages that the Marantz was too polite, not fast enough, not detailed enough and possibly lacking air on the top end. Kinda boring if I read it correctly.

I think the boys at Marantz actually got it right. It's the first unit that I have heard that still has the detail and the speed correct without the edgy top end shouting in your face. Listening sessions can go on and on instead of ending after 60 minutes.

The Marantz is more than just listenable. Bass and slam are as powerful, rich and detailed as I have heard on any machine at any price. Mid range is excellent - rich with the proper amount of bloom and warmth. As stated above, the top end is the best that I have heard.

My guess is that you did not give it the 300 hours of burn in that are needed. I have read some reviewers state that this model did not change much over time. I have to strongly disagree. It was more like a wild roller coaster ride for me. At 200 hours it seemed to finally reach a nice steady state and I thought the ride was over. The sound was excellent at this point. At 300 hours, something kicked in and the sound just opened up at both ends. It is now glorious on both Red Book and SACD. Best I have heard.

Bob Youman

Via e-mail

Dear Sir,

I find it necessary to comment on your review of the Marantz SA-7S1 player which to my ears sounds no better

than my 20 year old (modified) Marantz CD94. In my opinion this latest high-end Marantz is overweight and overpriced. I find it hard to understand why the hi-fi press fails to recognise that SACDs sound far better in surround sound than in stereo. The SA-7S1 has a slightly fulsome ponderous bass and lacks the top end clarity and sparkle found in players that utilise 24 bit dacs instead of old technology 16 bit for CD as in the latest Marantz. I agree the build quality and functionality are excellent but the machine is a big disappointment as far as I am concerned.

Yours sincerely
Gerald Bearman

Edgeware, Middlesex

I believe the point of the SA-7S1 review is that this is a very particular player and as such, it's likely to polarize opinion. These two are the tip of the iceberg (currently running 30% pro and 70% anti) so it looks like I got that one right! Ed.

Dear Sir,

Another issue and more fun and more thoughts aroused.

I noted your comments on your Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor M review on 'big, big performance coming from such tiny transducers.' And I am certainly among those who have been awed by such devices. But I suspect that it's more a psychoacoustic phenomenon rather than a technical one. One that is reinforced by the need for such large boxes for that last octave of bass and the comparison in size of these large speakers compared to the small ones such as the Cremona.

I think of two experiences in this regard, one decades old and the other just weeks. The first was my initial LS3/5a experience. I was at a friend's audio store in the mid 70s. And he had positioned each LS3/5a on top of an IMF TLS80 (large 4 way transmission line design) and I truly believed I was listening to the IMFs as I entered the room. Of course, the system had no very low bass nor was it playing loud at the time. But my belief system in those years convinced me it had to be the TLS80s playing.

The second experience was at an annual audio group meeting. Every year about this time this group puts

Take all those preconceptions about amplifiers and kiss them goodbye...



“ Publisher Clement Perry, often speaks of a state of mind he calls “Audio Hell,” where reviewers reside when they become exposed to gear that lifts them to a state of euphoria and then destroys them when they are forced to come to grips with the fact that they can never possess the gear that they love. As I prepare to ship the SS-010 back to Denmark, I know where it is that I will be residing for the next few months ... psychologically anyway. The Vitus Audio SS-010 amplifier is not just highly recommended it embodies the spirit of this webzine’s highest honor, a “Most Wanted Component” award. ”

Dave Thomas, The Stereo Times, June 07

“ The fact that the input options allow you to invest in it by stages, running the 010 as a standalone unit to start with until you can add a pukka line-stage later, just pushes the value quotient from “excellent” into the realms of “truly remarkable”. The price might seem high for the power on offer, but it’s cheap for the quality delivered. The Vitus Audio 010 is a genuine high-end bargain. ”

hifi+

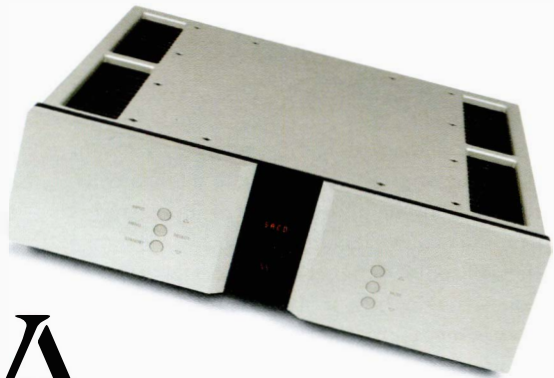
“ The Vitus brings all those things together in such an accessible and focussed way that it somehow seems to enhance the pure beauty of music to a point where the equipment is merely a tool and the music itself is the message. ”

“ For a hand-made amplifier of this quality I assure you that the asking price is not excessive. I think it is a great product - in many ways the most impressive I’ve heard since the Connoisseur, which is praise indeed. ”

Chris Thomas, HiFi+, Issue 49

SS010
AMPLIFIER

VA



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▶ together a small, live concert for its members and friends at a large private residence in northern New Jersey, certainly a good refresher for any audiophile. The concert was held in the entrance/living room of the residence which is a quite large room, about two stories high and open to another normal height room. The concert was given by two tenors and a contralto accompanied by an electric piano performing a combination of show tunes and operatic pieces with no amplification. I found the results astounding (and also a grandly enjoyable concert). The amount of energy even one of the singers put into the rooms was at times almost incomprehensible and two or three was even more astonishing. I can't imagine any audio system doing proper justice to the event. I suppose I shouldn't have been that amazed. After all think of what one great voice can do in a large opera hall. But the physical closeness of the experience amplified the affect on me. The point of it all is the sheer amount of energy that can come out of such a small transducer, the human mouth, even smaller than a small woofer. It causes me to wonder at how weak a transducer a speaker, even a large one is. And yet perhaps we shouldn't be too amazed at how well good, small speakers reproduce our software.

Yours truly,

Allen Edelstein

New Jersey, USA

Dear Sir,

After speaking to various dealers and also friends who read your magazine, it seems a clear pattern is emerging regarding the distributors you are earmarking and the type of products - notably Audiocraft, Audiofreaks and Absolute Sounds. Perhaps we are all dreaming but it does seem extremely strange that despite some truly quality gear hitting our shores now from seemingly reputable and varied distributors, all we are getting are the same old horses being placed in the race, albeit dressed up with new clothes from the same manufacturers.

All very drab, I fear.

Can all the other distributors truly, really all not want their products reviewed and do they all, and I mean all, not fit in with your criteria of being able to supply and service the products they claim to support ?

Or do they all supply products that although hold some level of esteem in the rest of the world, but somehow do not register on the Hi-Fi Plus radar ?

Fair questions, I believe.

If so, there must be buying hordes of disgruntled customers of Gryphon, Boulder, Air Tight, Nagra and so on and the price of second-hand items would reflect this.

Ironically, these unreviewed brands happen to hold the best values...

If you are to truly demonstrate a fair state of affairs within the audiophile community and you are to hold the respect of its loyal, apparently intelligent and patient readership, then you must provide something that makes us desire your magazine each month, not degenerate it after the first few pages.

There are two other magazines that have become laughing stocks and Plus does not seem to be as far away as you may think...

Falling from grace is a horrid thing and right now, it is the best magazine around so please keep it there.

You owe it to us, the people who buy it – go talk to others who trade their wares and bring us their medicine too.

Best regards,

Jai Rooprah

Via e-mail

Of the brands you mention, Gryphon is only available through a single source in this country, yet we have reviewed several of the company's latest products, including the Diablo in this issue. Boulder we have reviewed in the past and the new, more affordable mono-blocs have already been requested. Nagra comes from a distributor who seems unwilling to deal with us and the Air Tight cartridge was reviewed in a recent issue.

We do regularly review products from the established distributors – mainly because they do have a lot of excellent and widely available products. However, we also do more than any other magazine to cover products that are not necessarily even available in the UK. We select those products we cover on the basis of their intrinsic interest and availability for review. There are many products that are not available to us or that we choose not to review. Look a little closer and you'll see that there are whole tracts within the major distributors' catalogues that we leave untouched. The bottom line is that just because something is available to buy in the UK it doesn't mean that it is automatically available for or deserves a review. It is remarkable how many distributors who complain about not having their products reviewed, have actually either never asked us to do so or are unwilling to make a unit available for the requisite three-month period.

The decision whether or not to request or accept a product for review is actually far more complex than it might seem. But we do take the diversity and range of products out there very seriously indeed and fully intend to continue investigating the outer reaches... I should also add that specific suggestions from readers are gratefully received and often acted on. Ed.

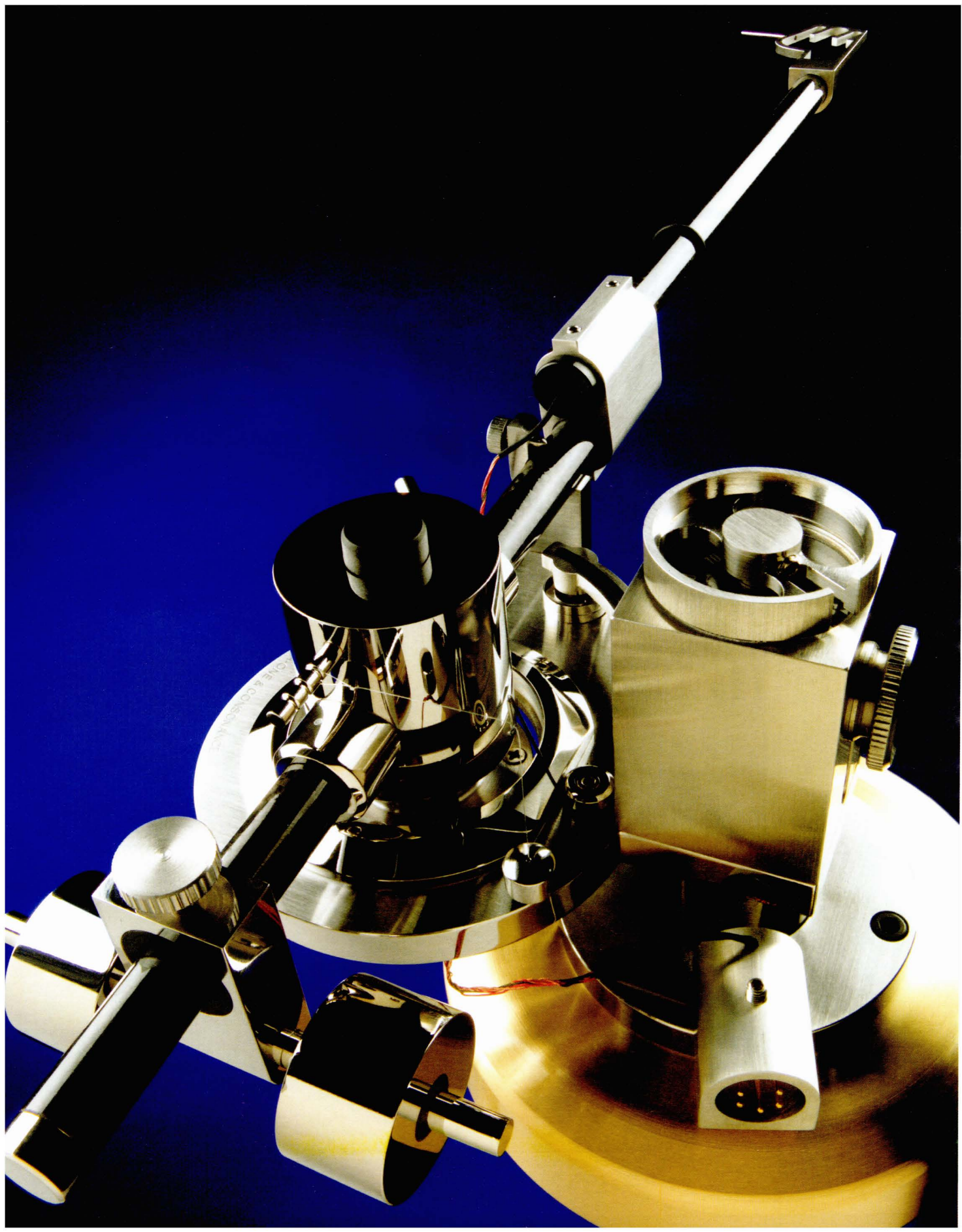




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thousand
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We agree

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Foot-Race...

The ever-longer line of 12" tone-arms

by Roy Gregory

As reported in Issues 50 and 51, it's becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the claims for inherent superiority made for 12" tonearms over their shorter (or should that be "stunted") nine-inch relatives. It's not just the sonic evidence either. Whilst this trail arguably started with the revelatory uplift in performance offered by the SME 20/12, and was significantly reinforced by subsequent experience with the VPI JMW 12.7, Kuzma 313 and Schroeder tonearms, there seems to be no abatement in the flood of new arms reaching the market. Time then to examine these newcomers and discern whether the 12" effective length is of special significance or just a happy accident.

There's no denying the significant reduction in tracing distortion that comes with increased effective length. The questions that go with that observation are whether that increase can be achieved without compromising other areas of tonearm performance (effective mass, structural integrity and resonant behaviour) and perhaps more pertinently, if it's so significant, wouldn't we be better off using a linear tracking design? With these issues in mind, I've assembled a second group of tonearms to assess just how consistent the musical qualities detected in the previous reviews prove to be. Is this a function of arm-length and reduced tracing distortion, or something else entirely?

The arms selected were as follows. The SME 312S, but used in this instance as a standalone product, removed from its intimate association with the 20/12 'table. Whilst I compared the 12" arm with a nine-inch alternative on that deck, this gives us an opportunity to examine

the character and performance of the arm in isolation. Next up was the Brinkmann Tonearm 12.1, a refinement and evolution of that company's 10" design, itself based on the legendary Breur arms. This is much more than simply the 10" arm with another two-inches added to the tube, but has been substantially re-engineered. As with all things Brinkmann, the fit and finish is exquisite. Our final pivoted contestant is the Consonance ST600, originating in China.



This is both the first high-end design I've come across from China and an innovative and unusual beast, offering as it does, variable effective length! Like most modern Chinese products it applies expensive machining and high-tech materials to the problem with apparent abandon, whilst also being far from shy in seeking inspiration in existing designs. The question, as always, is how successful its builders have been in assimilating that knowledge? Finally, and as previously promised, I'll look at a new and (relatively) affordable linear tracking design from The Cartridge Man, the Conductor.

Reviewing this many tonearms, each with its own mounting requirements presents considerable logistical issues. Not only do you need a turntable that can accommodate each arm as well as meeting its requirements when it comes to physical stability and the like (essential where passive linear trackers are involved) you then need to furnish yourself with all the geometrical mounting requirements and

the appropriate armboards to match. Thankfully, Franc Kuzma's generosity in this regard has allowed me to use the Stabi XL4, whose independent arm-towers mean that not only will it accommodate all these arms, two at a time if required, but simple comparisons of effective length are also achievable in the case of the ST600. It also means that Kuzma's own Stogi 313 becomes available as a stable reference and a link back to the previous review, providing context for this new round.

Of course, the danger in relying on a single 'table is that you can't eliminate potential matching or interface issues, but finding two (or more) decks that meet the physical requirements and are also sufficiently familiar to provide a sound basis for judgement is a step way, way to far. Not to mention the impact it would have on what is already a pretty daunting project, making it twice or three times the size. So that is one compromise I'm compelled to accept on grounds of sheer practicality. However, the equipment bracketing the tonearms is another matter. I used Lyra Titan I and Skala cartridges, along with the Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue, a rebuilt EMT and the MySonic Eminent. Phono-stages were the Tom Evans Groove Plus (which will receive a long overdue review in the next issue) and the Connoisseur 4-2 PSE. Tonearm cable used was the Hovland, the latter employed on the SME, Connoisseur and Breur arms with their 5-pin sockets. The Conductor arrived with a captive ▶

► Incognito lead. The rest of the system varied but was mainly composed of the Connoisseur and Ayre K1-xe pre-amps, feeding the Karan KA-M650 or VAS Citation 2 mono-blocks into the Wilson Duettes – with or without the WATCH Dog. Cabling comprised Nordost Valhalla mains and Odin signal leads throughout, including Thor distribution blocks.

The SME 312S

Covered in detail in Issue 50, I'll confine myself to the high-points here. The 312S differs from the original 312 in several important respects. Whereas the original model used an aluminium casting for the armtube, the S version employs a magnesium tube derived from the one used in the Series V, delivering a stiffer structure and one that's a third lighter. The S also borrows its up-rated ABEC 7 bearings from the Series V, along with the damping trough. However, the counterweight assembly is drawn from the 300 series arms, eliminating the sprung downforce of the flagship design. Whilst this represents a step backwards in terms of ease of use, many owners of the V actually prefer to use gravity to set VTF wholly or in part, feeling that the arm sounds better that way.

At first sight, the decision to use a detachable headshell might seem like a poor compromise, but SME's collet connection is about as secure as a detachable design can be, whilst also allowing proper azimuth adjustment, a critical alignment denied by one-piece designs and particularly important given the greater effective mass of a 12" arm. Add the reduction in tracing error to the simplified tracking force arrangements and you have an arm that in many respects represents possibly the best overall sonic compromise in the range. Although originally only available as a package with the 20/12, the 312S is now also available as a separate item, at a price of £1408.37. Naturally you get a full suite of SME's familiar tools, making

accurate set-up a simple and methodical process, with easy and more importantly, repeatable steps. Don't however be fooled by the apparent versatility offered by the detachable shell. Swapping cartridges requires readjustment of VTF, VTA, azimuth and overhang and is really only a practical proposition for those wanting to run mono and stereo versions of the same pick-up. Wiring comes from vdH and as usual, I chose to upgrade the external lead as mentioned above.

To anybody familiar with SME arms past (at least from the 5 onwards) it should come as no surprise that the sound of the 312S is characterized by its stability and smooth, unflustered poise, under even the most demanding musical loads. Nor will it surprise you that that smoothness can, if provoked, tip over into a velvety darkness, making cartridge choice a significant factor. Prior experience with the MySonic Eminent had delivered good results, while Lyra's also work well. Conversely, the Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue took on



a syrupy, closed in quality dramatically at odds with its powerfully energetic performance in the Breur and Consonance arms. So this time round most of my listening fastened on

the Lyra Skala, a cartridge whose combination of speed, transparency and substance seems ideally suited to the SME.

Playing Johanna Martzy's wonderful 'Kreutzer' sonata on Coup d'Archet, the 312S holds the relationship between the

violin and piano perfectly, the speed and quicksilver sprays from the fiddle poised against the sonorous presence of the unmistakably percussive piano. The changing lead, the way in which the emphasis passes from one instrument to the other is beautifully served, the pauses and created tension between them perfectly preserved.

This is all about the music, the composition served by the understated brilliance of Martzy and her astonishing understanding with her accompanist. What you hear is a breathtaking realization, musicians at the height of their expressive powers, music conjured to life, vibrant and dynamic, colourful, energetic and affecting.

It's a performance that rests on the SME's evenness top to bottom and the easy flow it allows the music.

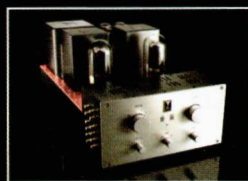
Despite the weight and dynamic wallop it delivers when called for, this is an arm that doesn't carry the burden of a big stick, wielding it when necessary but otherwise unencumbered by impending weight that's waiting in the wings. Whilst the 312S will never match the airy delicacy of the Brinkmann (or for that matter the awesome power and drive of the ST600) overall it offers the most balanced performance of the three pivoted arms reviewed here. Equally at home with the almost balletic demands of a violin sonata, the scale and pomp of *Carmen*, or the pre-grunge, undulating murk of early Cure, it manages to harness the music's forward momentum and energy to illuminate its phrasing, to weave its interlocking strands into their proper shape. Whereas shorter SMEs can sound tight and overtly controlled in their delivery, the 312S allows the players an almost carefree latitude when required, whilst never losing its grasp of the music's tempo and structure, the shape of the bigger picture.

Another noteworthy aspect of the Skala/312S pairing is the absence of grain or mechanical intrusion on proceedings. Again, relative to the other pivoted arms here this is the

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5. Living Voice OBX RW (Santos) £7200 6. KSL Kondo Ongaku Integrated Amplifier £49,000 7. Magnum Dynalab 106T Valve Tuner £3600
8. KSL Kondo Gakuoh 300B Mono Amplifiers £48,500 9. Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD Player £2950 10. KSL Kondo V-z (1m) Interconnect £750

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► least aurally invasive, the one you notice least in operation. Instead it puts the musical performance firmly first, its own contribution notable more by absence than commission. There's still a subtle loss of air and acoustic detail, and it stops just short of the widest dynamic swings. But these are subtle failings indeed, and outside of direct comparison across arms or tables it's unlikely you'll be troubled by them. Besides which, any arm that betters the SME is also considerably more expensive!

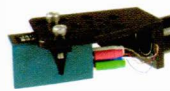
One factor that should be noted is the inclusion of VTA adjustment in the Stabi XL's arm towers, a vital factor in achieving record-to-record consistency with the Lyra cartridges. If that isn't an available option with your deck, and it generally isn't, you'll need to rely either on SME's threaded rod arrangement to optimise arm-height for each disc or select a less critical cartridge. The aforementioned MySonic suits perfectly, whilst the various Clearaudios also work well. Freed of such considerations, the 312S/Skala pairing has sailed through material as varied as Americana and madrigals, the tonal brilliance of Respighi and fragile beauty of Corelli, the grandeur of RVW and the spiky, angular intricacy of *Tepscore*. Never has it stumbled and never once has it disappointed. Being lauded as a great all-rounder is tantamount to damning with faint praise in every field save Lords cricket ground. All-rounder? The 312S is Ian Botham, a larger than life character who grew out of a gentlemanly tradition. And if this arm thankfully lacks Both's propensity to offend, it also makes significantly livelier and more charismatic music than its 9" siblings. Don't be confined by preconceptions or past experience, the 312S re-writes the sonic rulebook, building significantly on the engineering foundation of its predecessors. Here is a 12" arm that offers superb performance that, thanks to its excellent range of set-up and alignment

tools you should have no trouble in realising. It offers the practical benefits of a beautifully executed detachable headshell and service and support that is second to none. A joy to use, a joy to own, most importantly the 312S is a joy to listen to.

The Brinkmann Tonearm 12.1

The Breur tonearm is justifiably legendary, both for its establishment of the high-rigidity, medium-mass, gimbal-bearing model that has dominated the tonearm market ever since – and for its cost and limited production that helped contribute to its scarcity. It was these latter factors that encouraged German turntable manufacturer Brinkmann to create their own version of the basic design, the heavily Breur "inspire" Brinkmann 10.5 tonearm.

Of course, combine the elegance and basic layout of a classic design with Brinkmann's superb standards of engineering and you end up with something quite special; something that has been even further refined into



the longer, 12.1 tonearm reviewed here. Aesthetically the Brinkmann arm is dominated by the contrast between its immensely long arm-tube and the compact delicacy and obvious precision of its bearing assembly and lift-lower arrangements. Starting at the front, the parallel-sided aluminium arm-tube is of thinner diameter than the majority of the competition, while the elongated and tapered headshell, beautifully braced and perforated to save mass, which has replaced the rather blocky affair used on the 10.5 adds to the sense of elegance. The cueing platform and post and collar mounting arrangement are incredibly compact, almost bijou in their diminutive dimensions, but there's no ignoring their beautiful execution. The large barrel of the nicely damped cueing mechanism and the integral armrest are models of

effectiveness and understated visual simplicity, while the almost skeletal gimbal housing contrasts dramatically with the massively overbuilt structures employed elsewhere.

The sense of compact precision is enhanced by the short counterweight stub and the massive diameter of the weight itself which snugs in ideally close to the bearing housing. This is a composite design that allows the use of two different main weights on the sub-carrier, in order to accommodate a wide range of cartridges. The carrier itself locks in place once the tracking force has been adjusted.

Bias is set using a tiny knurled screw that fixes the position of a contactless magnetic coupling, dispensing with the intricacy of falling weights and supplying a consistent force across the entire record: neat and extremely effective. The minimalism is continued



in the simple post, sunk through the cueing platform that allows micro-adjustment of VTA (a system similar to that adopted by SME) and

the lack of a finger lift, although with a cueing system this good you won't miss it anyway. There is no provision for azimuth adjustment, but in every other respect, set-up is as intuitive as any tonearm I've ever used, each and every adjustment falling exactly where you expect to find it, the attention to detail typified by the split collar that clamps the whole circumference of the arm pillar rather than the single allen bolt fixing adopted by most manufacturers. You even get spring washers to fit under the two mounting bolts nearest the slot, allowing the requisite movement. Nice.

In stark contrast to the self-contained completeness of the arm itself, set-up tools provided are minimal, with no

▶ protractor (a card item is available), scales or even arm-lead provided. You get all the fixings necessary and the allen keys to match, but that's pretty much it. This might seem odd at first, but really only reflects the fact that somebody purchasing this arm or a dealer installing it will have superior examples of all these items anyway. One anomaly I was unable to resolve was the stated spindle to pivot distance of 293mm. Using this I was unable to achieve correct alignment with the Feickert. I suspect that this is actually the effective length, and shortening the dimension to 290mm allowed perfect alignment, albeit with the cartridge mounted well forward in the slots. I'm trying to run this aberration to ground but until I do, the performance doesn't seem to suffer, so I'll go with what works.

Pick this arm up: handle it and marvel at the quality of the finish, the almost watch-like delicacy of the engineering. Suddenly a price of £3295 if not exactly a bargain, certainly seems more than reasonable. In a world of heavyweights the Brinkmann is the exception; a rapier amongst broadswords, it has a rapier sound too...

If ever a product sounded the way it looks then it's the Brinkmann 12.1. The sound of this arm is all about quick, precise, delicate resolution. It unravels recordings with a consummate ease, separating instruments and voices, deftly revealing reverb or acoustic details, synthetic or natural, without fear or favour. Listen to a familiar disc and the first thing you'll notice just how quick the system sounds, the speed with which it reacts to musical and dynamic demands. Nothing demonstrates this better than that old audiophile chestnut, Ulla Meinecke's 'Die Tanzerin', with its sparse mix, sudden low frequency eruptions, reverb effects and myriad incidental noises used to punctuate and accent the track. Indeed, it's all those little touches: taps, finger snaps, claps, rubs, knocks and the rest of the battery of human percussion that underlines the effortless precision with which

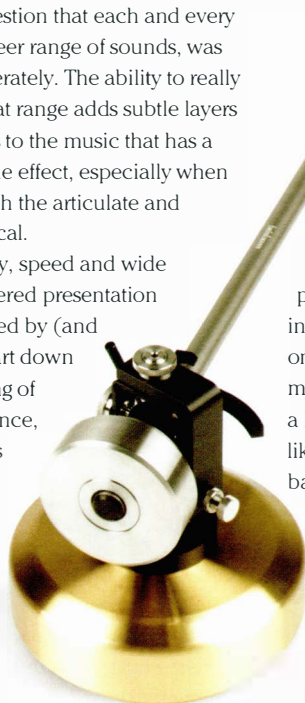
this arm goes about its business. The Brinkmann renders each individual sound so instantly identifiable, it's nature (human or mechanical) and source (even down to the finger in the cheek 'pop') so apparent that the song takes on a new level of fascination, becoming a shop window of percussive interjections and subtle textures, all underpinning the carefully constructed mix. That might sound largely academic but it's not. In a recording this meticulously constructed, there's no question that each and every sound, the sheer range of sounds, was chosen deliberately. The ability to really appreciate that range adds subtle layers and emphasis to the music that has a less than subtle effect, especially when combined with the articulate and expressive vocal.

This clarity, speed and wide open, uncluttered presentation is accompanied by (and in no small part down to) a lightening of the tonal balance, a lean dryness at low frequencies that robs the mid and treble of substance and harmonic body, bringing a coolness to the tonal balance, but it's a relatively subtle effect and one that it is readily compensated for elsewhere in the system (all too often inadvertently – making the 12.1 a welcome addition indeed). Musically, it means pairing the Brinkmann with products that don't want for presence, and it's no surprise that the company's cartridge is based on the EMT generator, with its reputation for muscular dynamics. With that in mind I mounted my own modified EMT and sure enough, both it and the Koetsu delivered the musical goods, the former lending an impressive solidity to dynamics, the latter a welcome touch of warmth and colour.

This lightness of touch gives the 12.1 the ability to tease out the deffest of musical flourishes, the most intricate details of technique. So, taking two examples from a single label, its strengths make more of the absolute pitch precision and control of Zinka Milanov than the lyrical phrasing but perfectly centred notes of the young Leontyne Price. Or coming from the opposite direction, the emphasis in

Martzy's 'Kreutzer' Sonata leans more to her playing and less to the musical whole. Her flawless technique and poise are impressively apparent, albeit at the expense of the intuitive intimacy and balance that she enjoyed with Jean Antonietti.

In many ways the Brinkmann's presentation favours the smaller, more intricate and delicate works that thrive on its clarity, rather than the larger scale musical forces where something a little more visceral suits better. But like everything else it's a question of balance, and if your turntable or system wants increased resolution and separation then this is one product that will provide it with a beguiling grace and musical ease. Only one word really describes the way the Brinkmann is built; the same word that describes how it sounds – exquisite.



The Consonance ST600 Tonearm

The ST600 is the first tonearm I've received that's of Chinese design and manufacture. The significance of that fact lies not in xenophobic questions of quality but in the very different cost equation that imposes on the creative process. Arm's built in the West go out of their way to avoid labour-intensive machining and assembly procedures or literally pay the price for not doing so. That's why the most successful and cost effective arm on the market, the Rega, is based on a one-piece casting that incorporates the bulk of the pivoted ▶

► assembly into a single operation. Contrast that with the ST600...

A pair of carbon-fibre tubes are held together by a complex, double-barrelled fixing collar machined to accept four grub screws. An intricately machined headshell carries a separate finger-lift, while individually machined caps finish the exposed ends. A central bearing housing is constructed from three separate and heavily machined stainless-steel cylinders, held in place by further grub screws. The whole thing is hand-assembled. All of which the Rega achieves in a single manufacturing operation!

Of course, this level of complexity creates both potential problems and opportunities. So, whereas the Rega foregoes both azimuth and VTA adjustment in the name of mechanical simplicity, the cheap labour available to Consonance allows the creation of an arm that, whilst at \$1500 is considerably more expensive (and sets its sights considerably higher than) the Rega, allows the adjustment of every conceivable set-up parameter, including both arm damping and effective length – the latter unique in my experience, although Morch do provide different arm-wands for the DP-6.

The ST600 is possibly best envisaged as an amalgam of the VPI JMW and Triplanar designs. It mounts to a flat plate, secured by three allen bolts. On this is mounted a Vernier type VTA tower with a course vertical scale and a more precise dial on the top, viewed through the intricately machined knob. The arm-height can be locked using a large knurled screw and there's a horizontally disposed 5-pin IEJ connector to the rear. The entire assembly is again machined from stainless steel.

A large stainless plate extends horizontally from the moving sleeve of the VTA tower, providing off-set for the arm-base. The bearing is a uni-pivot design damped by a massive well that hangs below the outrigger, from the centre of which rises the bearing post.

The damping is further increased by an array of six cylindrical paddles that extend below the base of the massive and extremely heavy bearing housing. The stepped arm-tube arrangement obviously allows for the adjustment of effective length, but also drops the pivot height of the bearing much closer to the plane of the record. The low-slung dual counterweight assembly also aids stability as well as providing precise azimuth adjustment. However, the weights themselves could have been heavier as with the arm fully extended they rode close to the end of the (very long) counterweight stub. If the arm expects us to take its variable geometry seriously, then a choice of counterweights will be essential.

The large outrigger also supports the cueing mechanism and an



unnecessarily complex arm-rest that involves a small screw that locks the lower arm tube in place. Fiddly and time-consuming to use, it's probably self-defeating which is also probably a good thing as the rounded metal screw tip had already marked the lacquered surface of the carbon tube in transit. This is something that should be simple to sort out – but it does need attending to. Bias is adjusted via a simple falling weight arrangement, although a wider range of adjustment and values would have been useful.

These minor niggles are only to be expected from a first-time tonearm manufacturer (although the ST600 is top of a range of four designs) and are off-set to some extent by the comprehensive

set-up jig, fixings and the good quality arm-cable supplied. I'd have liked an alignment protractor, but given the beast's inherent variability when it comes to geometry, a universal design like the Feickert is always going to be a better bet. Incidentally, there is also an ST500, non-adjustable 12" arm of otherwise seemingly similar design that could be very interesting indeed. Announced but not yet available, I await its arrival with some interest, if only because cutting

the variables allows greater optimisation of the parts along with the reduction in price.

In the meantime, the ST600 offers a fascinating window on tonearm performance.

I started by listening to the Consonance arm in both 10.5" (266mm) and 12" (300mm) configurations, each carefully optimized and tweaked to achieve maximum performance. There was no doubting the crisp, stable and focussed delivery of the 10.5" set-up,

but it was also noticeably less fluid and engaging than the 12" arrangement. Bass notes were well defined and enviably solid, but there was no disguising their rooted, slightly ploddy feel, an overall sense of rhythmic reluctance pervading the musical proceedings that no amount of fiddling with cartridge set-up or damping could cure. These deficiencies clearly diminished around the null points (generally tracks two and four on a five track LP) but became all too clear as the end of side approached. Acid test was the track 'Hymn' from Janis Ian's *Altertones* album, an end of side torture test. This acoustic track is sparsely arranged so that the listener can receive full benefit from the array of voices (and even a descant) that duet with Ian's soft contralto. With the ST600 in 12" mode the simple melody, picked out on acoustic guitar, ebbs and flows with the soaring phrases of the lyric. Each voice is separate and tonally distinct, changes ►

► in identity laid bare by the pitch and harmonic structure, while the acoustic is broad and open. Playing the same track on the 10.5" arm is almost shockingly different. The voices are focused, but there's no space around them, tonal and locational distinctions severely diminished. The phrasing and simply flow of the track has gone, and so too has its unforced, easy pace. Instead it plods and labours, granular in the highs, edgy on the descant. But it's the elimination of the simple clarity and soaring, uplifting beauty in the voices, the message in the music as well as the words, that's most telling. Ian called this song 'Hymn' for a reason, and chose a structure and performers to suit. With the 12" arm it's not just clear that that's the case, it's downright, unavoidably obvious. Yet with the arm shortened you'd never know and the fragile beauty of this track would escape you forever.

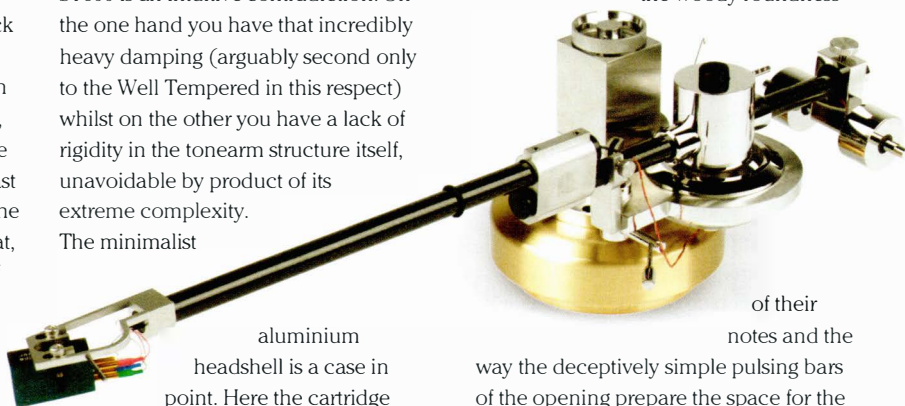
It's a little premature to call time on any arm that's less than a foot. After all, change the effective length and you're changing other parameters too, not least ideal geometry and offset, but even if the ST600 is optimised for its 300mm format, there's no escaping the clear impact of tracing distortion on what we hear, or the simple fact that a well-designed and accurately aligned 12" arm will help mitigate the problem. It should come as no surprise to learn that, with my professional investigative duty discharged, the ST600's arm-tube stayed fully extended for the duration of the review, in which state I have to say, it sounded really quite beguiling.

But first, a word of caution; you can't play fast and loose when it comes to matching cartridges for this arm. Low-compliance – really low compliance – is the order of the day. That awkward junction in the arm-tube does nothing to reduce the effective mass of what is already a very long arm. The manufacturer offers no figure for this critical parameter, but it feels to me not far short of my FR64fx – and that's heavy. Consequently it comes as no surprise to

discover that the Lyra Titan is a marginal choice in the ST600, the Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue and rebuilt EMT proving far happier. Even a slight increase in compliance results in a softening of transients and a loss of clarity, focus and detail, but with the right cartridge this arm can absolutely sing. The other major consideration is deadweight. At over 1300g this arm is extremely heavy, and despite the outrigger moving the mounting point towards the platter, I can't see suspended decks offering a sensible platform. Big, heavy and rigidly coupled is the order of the day, but with no shortage of such decks being offered, finding a home for the ST600 won't present the challenge it might once have done.

In some respects the sound of the ST600 is an intuitive contradiction. On the one hand you have that incredibly heavy damping (arguably second only to the Well Tempered in this respect) whilst on the other you have a lack of rigidity in the tonearm structure itself, unavoidable by product of its extreme complexity.

The minimalist



aluminium headshell is a case in point. Here the cartridge is secured not to slots but the open-ended "prongs" of a rear-facing fork, presumably in an attempt to limit further increases to the effective mass. But even clamped to the top of the cartridge its hard to see those open ends as a desirable feature, especially that close to the energetic mechanical output of a low-compliance cartridge. Combine that with the sleeve joint half way along the arm-tube, and the different materials employed to execute it, and it's hardly surprising that this arm will never win awards for low-level resolution and absolute transparency. Yet, as long as you get the VTA right (thankfully easily adjustable on a record by record basis) and use an appropriate cartridge, the

easy separation of musical strands, the natural grasp of tempo are the ST600's forte. But only if you meet those provisos: allow the cartridge compliance to creep up and the sound softens; leave the VTA at some indeterminate setting and the music will become lazy and indifferent – and so will you. The Consonance arm demands care, but lavish it with the attention it requires and it responds with a musical energy and enthusiasm that's infectious.

I've already talked about the Janis Ian, this arm's ability to pick the different voices and hold the overall structure of the piece. Likewise, play the Adagio from Mozart's *Serenade for Twelve Winds and Double Bass K361* (a 1982 Crystal Records pressing) and the ST600 captures the tonality of the instruments perfectly, the woody roundness

of their notes and the way the deceptively simple pulsing bars of the opening prepare the space for the soaring delicacy of the melody in what is one of the composer's most beautiful and fragile musical moments. Easy to destroy, this music must be allowed to breathe and depends on the perfect control of tempo and the complete separation of line, qualities that the Consonance arm delivers with calm assurance and utter stability. It is this sense of rooted authority and unflappable presence that allows it to translate these abilities away from such delicate moments into perhaps its natural habitat, the dynamic sweep and stacked power of larger scale works. As wonderfully poised as it is with solo voice or small ensemble, what this arm revels in is giving urgency and purpose to piled power-chords, bringing ►

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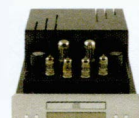
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▶ pathos to the more bombastic orchestral crescendos, drama to the passion of grand opera. So whether it's *Tosca* or *The Real Ramona*, there's a life and easy separation to the densest musical moments, a propulsive urgency to the drumming on 'Red Shoes' and fluid control and lack of constraint to Caballé's vocal *tour de force*, a feeling that her voice could just go on and on. But if you want to really hear what this arm is all about reach no further than the layered slabs and filigreed artifice of pomp rock. Dropping the tip of the Koetsu into the opening groove of 'Supper's Ready' the sprawling vista, pinnacle of the Gabriel Genesis years, simply fills the room, shifting gear effortlessly between the fragile interludes and the huge slabs of guitar and keyboard that construct the edifice of 'Ikhnaton and Itsacon And Their Band Of Merry Men'. It's powerful, dramatic and whilst I feel slightly sheepish admitting as much, downright, indulgently enjoyable.

What the ST600 delivers is a secure and stable platform combined with an easy grasp of music's ebb and flow, both its pace and changes in density. If it glosses over the finest detail it more than makes up for it with its ability to deliver the sense and substance in a performance. In many ways it reminds me of the Dynavector arm and it could also be said that it plays straight to the strengths of the Koetsu cartridge. Why fight the inevitable would be my response. Yes, the Lyra Titan was capable of increasing the overall transparency and levels of information, but at the cost of that absolute security and physical presence, the feeling that nothing was going to disturb or divert the music's flow. With the Koetsu up front the whole was very definitely greater than the sum of the parts, the musical benefits easily outweighing the hi-fi costs. Whether offering protection to the intricate beauty of a small-scale piece or delivering the scale and purpose of the most bombastic work,

this combination kept recordings safe from outside intrusion and the unfortunate intervention of the system's end-stops, with poise and power aplenty. It is this ability to give the music its own, substantial presence that makes the Consonance/Koetsu combination special and which carries you to the end of each and every record. On the face of it, the ST600 breaks all the rules (and given its performance at 10.5" you might ask why) but almost despite that it succeeds handsomely on a musical level. The ST500 beckons enticingly...

The Cartridge Man Conductor passive parallel tracking tonearm

Len Gregory's Conductor tonearm fills the spiritual void left by the passing of the ET11. An affordable passive linear tracker based on air-bearing technology, that's where the similarities stop. This has none of the operational or constructional elegance of the Eminent, bearing as it does more than a passing resemblance to the Meccano meets Bauhaus minimalism of the Forsell arm. This arm adopts the Lotus 7 approach to engineering, performance being its soul *raison d'être*. So, like its four-wheeled counterpart, the Conductor eschews all pretence of luxury when compared to the competition. Of course, it also eschews upwards of 50% (or more) of their price-tags.

Heart of the beast is a single-sided air bearing (it only has outlets along the top edge) on which floats an aluminium sleeve. This arrangement is similar to the one employed by the original Air Tangent and overcomes the tolerances required (and the associated costs that go with them) of an inverted or captive bearing as used by Rockport or Kuzma, but is not without its downsides. The single-sided set up can't match the rigidity of an inverted bearing as well as demanding a long carriage in order to float. This in turn dictates a longer (and less easy to accommodate) beam and allows less control over the lateral mass. Finally, the row of holes in the top of the

bearing beam that are not occluded by the sleeve are busy pumping air out into space, meaning more air needs to be put into the bearing (generally meaning a noisy pump) and act as a source of noise in and of themselves. However, despite these considerations, this is the only serious air-based option at this price.

Atop the sleeve is mounted a carbon fibre arm-tube with a neat circular aluminium head-shell. Between this and the cartridge, the supplier had mounted his cartridge decoupler, an interesting parallel with the Teflon pads advocated by Forsell for use with his arm, along with his latest Music Maker Classic cartridge. I will be examining this in both the Conductor and pivoted arms in an upcoming issue, but for this exercise I stuck with the same range of conventionally mounted cartridges used with the other arms.

The Forsell's cantilever gate VTA arrangement has been replaced by a simple collar and post system, which incorporates a centrally mounted and threaded pole, allowing VTA adjustment via the large, knurled collar. Although this is delineated with small, engraved numbers, a set of much clearer markings would make repeatable adjustment much easier (and less of a strain on the eyes). The base is fixed from below by a single large nut in a similar manner to a Rega, while arm-height is fixed with a simple horizontal grub-screw that engages a slot in the side of the central pole.

The mounting pillar mates to the main beam assembly halfway along its length, again with a single fixing bolt: The plate which mates the two has to be attached to the bottom of the arm cradle, a row of threaded holes allowing some lateral adjustment. A second plate attached to the opposite edge of the cradle supports the lead-out wires or a pair of RCA/phono terminals, offering a choice of in-line sockets or the captive, one-piece Incognito wiring loom fitted to the review unit. A pivoted wire ▶

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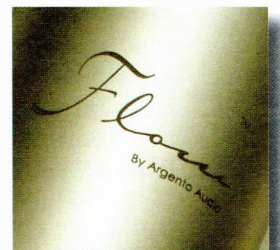
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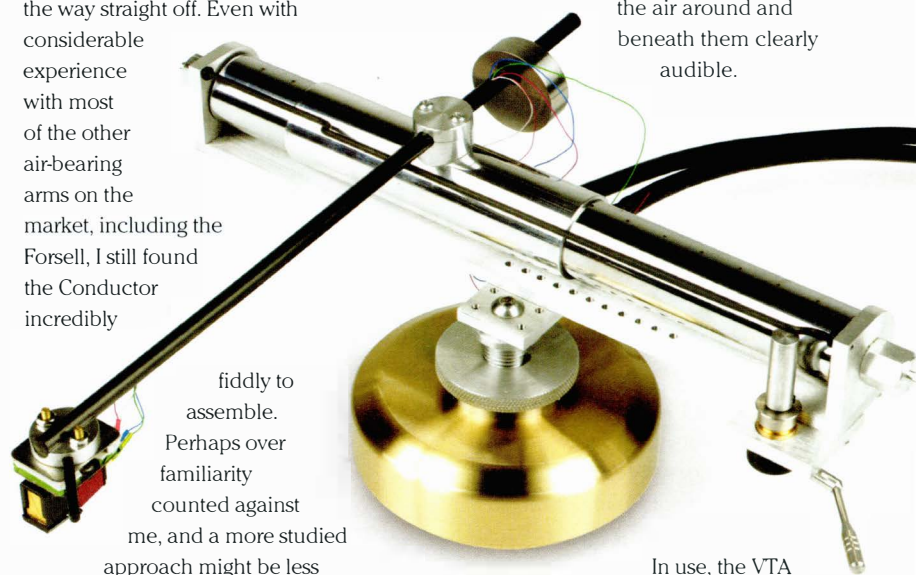
▶ along the front of the bearing beam performs cueing duties, driven by a simple mechanical linkage, although no arm-rest is provided. The end result has a slightly Heath-Robinson feel, with the sharp edges and surface finish of the components rather giving the limited production, assemble it yourself game away. Likewise, there's a slightly trial and error feel to the first time you build the arm, although an excellent and lavishly illustrated instruction manual certainly helps in this regard.

But mock not; if you want to enjoy the benefits of zero tracing distortion offered by an air-bearing arm, this is by far the most affordable game in town, and if the finish is far from flawless, you can't fault the choice and quality of the materials employed. The arm arrives packed in a rather swish wooden case which contrasts markedly with the obligatory aquarium pump, this one having a central rotary control for setting pressure and hence the ride-height of the bearing. There is also an ample supply of rubber hose which connects it to the far end of the arm beam, allowing you to dispose of the noisy pump well away from the listening room (don't be tempted to place it somewhere cold or damp – such as the garage – or you'll likely develop condensation problems and possible corrosion in the tiny capillaries of the bearing). You also get a nicely fabricated air reservoir (basically a Perspex tube with an inlet at one end and an outlet at the other) that helps even out any variations in air pressure. Again, this is a carry-over from the original Forsell design and is necessary because of the nature of the bearing. Any variation or flicker in the voltage feeding the arm would otherwise cause the ride-height to change, resulting in possible "pumping" or "bouncing" and in the worst case, grounding of the carriage. The reservoir is effective in preventing this.

Although vertical effective mass is relatively low, the high horizontal inertia that's inevitable with passive parallel trackers means that really

high-compliance cartridges are still best avoided. I tried all the cartridge options before finally settling on the Skala, its combination of energy, detail and substance suiting the conductor's sound perfectly. The arm, complete with the Incognito cable costs £1700 and will mount most happily on solid plinth or at least high-mass suspended designs. However, the ability to level the arm accurately is mandatory, either through the deck itself or the surface on which it sits, so bear this in mind when considering potential matches.

Right, let's get the grumbles out of the way straight off. Even with considerable experience with most of the other air-bearing arms on the market, including the Forsell, I still found the Conductor incredibly



fiddly to assemble. Perhaps over familiarity counted against me, and a more studied approach might be less

frustrating? The air noise from the bearing itself is considerable and would certainly be intrusive if the deck is positioned adjacent to the listening position. Finally, the lack of constructional elegance does jar. If you are a camera finish kind of guy then the SME or Brinkmann will be much more your cup of tea. Me? I'm prepared to forgive, overlook or tolerate all of the above for one reason and one reason alone. This arm sounds sublime. So much so in fact that if performance and value for money are top of your list of desirable criteria, then you'll not need to look any further.

But what about the specifics? The Conductor delivers a wide-open, transparent soundstage that is utterly

devoid of truncation or grain, making you realise how constrained in this regard 9" arms really are. There's an unforced ease and sense of crisp dynamic life that allows music to breathe and vocals in particular a naturally expressive range of infection. Subtle details and sunken threads are easily unravelled from even the densest mixes, while tempos are rock steady, pauses and hesitations beautifully captured, underlining musical accents. Bass is quick, agile and slightly light in balance, but nicely textured and again, acoustic bass notes float convincingly, the air around and beneath them clearly audible.

In use, the VTA facility is actually much easier to utilise than its mechanical simplicity would suggest, and with this arm over all the others here, the effects are clearly audible. But the real joy of this arm is the overall coherence it brings to music. A place for everything and everything in its place is a phrase that could have been coined to describe the effect of well executed parallel tracking, and tied to the Conductor's vivacious dynamics and fabulous transparency the performance simply unrolls before you, with pace and power when demanded, delicacy and poise as required. It's a combination that makes it considerably easier to ignore the mechanical means of reproduction, the sound of the ▶

► system, and concentrate instead on the musical performance itself.

With such a quick and agile performer, it's tempting to reach for densely scored and dynamically demanding torture tracks to show off its attributes. Yet, ironically, as impressive as the Conductor is on material as varied as Shostakovich symphonies, Cheap Trick playing live and the Basie Big Band, it's when things get intimate that the real delicacy and low-level resolution and integration of this arm really emerge. Whether it's Martzy's exquisite bowing or the coy vocals of Nanci Griffith, the Conductor conjures

them vividly to life. Listening to the sheer range of Ulla Meinecke's singing on 'Lieb Ich Dich Zu Leise' was a salutary experience. Unable to understand a word of German, the song leaves me concentrating on the articulation and expressive qualities in the delivery, qualities that the Conductor writes so clearly across the soundstage, so directly and intimately that this voice you can't even understand has you sitting transfixed.

Communication is the name of this particular game, and whilst the moniker Conductor might conjure images of tail-coats and batons aloft, the prefix 'Lightening' would not be inappropriate, so directly does this arm connect you to the performance encapsulated on the record. The unfettered dynamic range and easy grasp of time and space act to deliver the music right to you, with an immediacy and finesse that is both commanding and captivating. Delving

once again into the Colin Davis *Tosca*, with Caballé singing the title role, the drama and scale of the performance is really impressive, its emotional range driven home by the singers (particularly Ingvar Wixell's demonic Scarpia) and the superb orchestral support. Ultimately, in these largest of works the absolute control exhibited by the Conductor finally starts to crack, but it is only bettered here by the likes of Kuzma's far more



expensive AirLine or some of the better pivoted arms which can't match its grain-free clarity and top-to-bottom coherence.

This is a wonderfully musical device. It is also quirky in both construction (and for those raised on pivoted arms) operation. Fit and finish are more functional than decorative and even Len would be pushed to describe his baby as beautiful. But it can sing, sing with a voice of such purity and immediacy that if performance matters and the practicalities can be embraced, then I can't see anybody being disappointed with the musical results. Above all, the Cartridge Man Conductor underlines one simple fact; tracing distortion is clearly audible and musically destructive – minimising it is good, eliminating it is better. So much better that you should be prepared to go a fair way to achieve that goal.

Conclusion

These arms, along with the 12" VPI JMW, Kuzma 313 and Scroeder, all share a common quality, a sense of uninhibited musical flow, that can only derive from there increased effective length and the subsequent reduction in tracing distortion. Reduce that factor still further and the gains become greater still. For once the verdict is clear; despite the associated compromises when it comes to complexity, rigidity and effective mass, as far as pivoted tonearms are concerned, longer is indeed better. Factoring parallel trackers into the equation simply demonstrates just how important this issue really is, with even significant deviations from the mechanical ideal easily being outweighed by the performance gains overall. For serious record replay 12" arms are fast becoming the de facto standard – and rightly so. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

SME 312S

Price: £1408.37

Manufacturer: SME Ltd

Tel. (44)(0)1903 814321

Net. www.sme.ltd.uk

Brinkmann Tonearm 12.1

Price: £3295

UK Distributor: Symmetry Systems

Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488

Net. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Consonance ST600

Price: £1500

UK Distributor: Alium Audio

Tel. (44)(0)1273 608332

Net. www.aliumaudio.com

Cartridgeman Conductor

Price: £1700

Manufacturer: The Cartridge Man

Tel. (44)(0)20 8688 6565

Net. www.thecartridgeman.com

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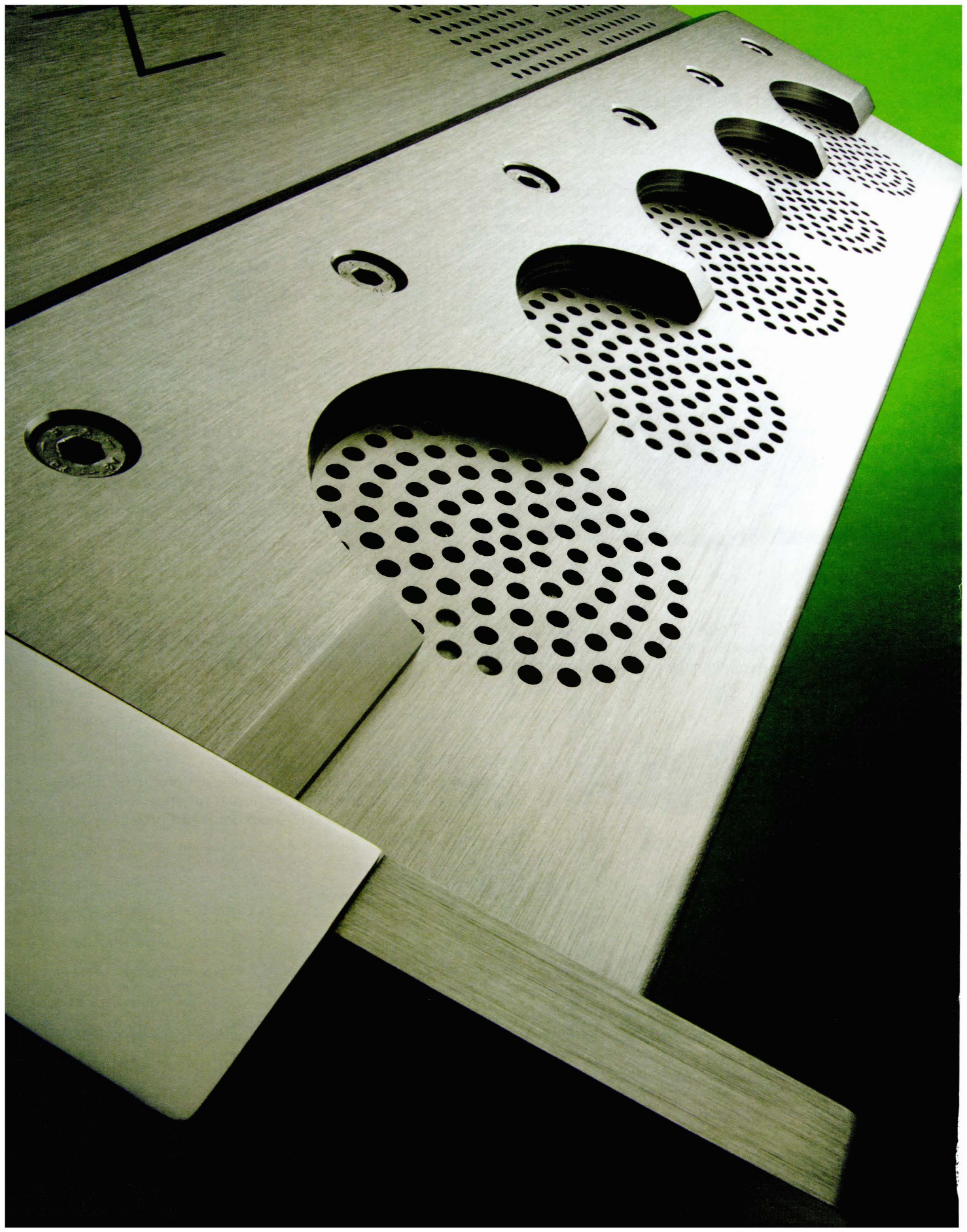
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The Gryphon Diablo Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

When you sit in front of your system for a bit of musical therapy, what are you listening for? It seems logical to assume that each of us listens in a different way and that we listen for and hear different things – or should I say that we hear the same things differently? Are you especially conscious of the sheer detail levels within the music or are you someone who is more sensitive to rhythmic elements and timing issues? Do you look for a system to have a broad tonal palette or is holographic sound-staging high on your list of priorities? Or perhaps you listen for all of these things at different times. I have a friend who loves pure in-your-face presence. He wants the music to leap out of the speakers and confront him head-on. Anything less and the system is of no interest to him and when buying any component he always imposes his notion of what a system should do upon the music. Whether an album has been recorded in that way seems completely irrelevant. Despite my pointing out the obvious pitfalls of such an approach to him, he wants to fashion systems that appeal to his particular tastes rather than appreciate that no two recordings are constructed in the same way.

Surely there can be no right or wrong here as it is his money and he spends it how he wants, but he is a perfect example to me of how a great many people have pre-set views of just how they want their music to be presented. What is vitally important to some is actually a big negative to others. For instance, I believe that

a real-world, three-dimensional soundstage and a realistic portrayal of depth all fall under the general heading of coherence and those systems that have only height and width start at a disadvantage. But I didn't always feel that way. When I had a system that was purely two-dimensional I did not believe it was important. These are aspects of the recording more specifically than the music and fall under the remit of the producer whose job it is to realise the material into something solid and to use all the means at his disposal to achieve this.

All of these questions have been on my mind since I began listening to the Gryphon Diablo integrated amplifier. This is an expensive product, especially by integrated amp standards, a powerhouse of a design that will drive just about any speaker to destruction. It makes a bold statement in appearance and sound, has seemingly limitless reserves of power and is tremendously well specified technically and is as user-friendly as you are likely to find. All good things and yet, even after hours and hours of listening to it, I still find myself having concerns over its ability to completely involve me musically. I have spent much of my time with it asking myself why.

As with the Mikado CD player I reviewed in the last issue, the Diablo is all about high impact. It writes the music bold and large before your ears. You could never call it shy, but that does not mean that it is not subtle too. It grabs hold of a speaker and manhandles it with grip, pace and intensity across an impressively useable bandwidth and with exceptionally taut control.

Physically too it is an imposing object. Basically a large and fairly conventional box, the pen of Gryphon design supremo Flemming Rasmussen, has clad the Diablo been in acrylic and machined aluminium add-ons, giving it a stylish and distinctive appearance, a Ziggurat-like structure. It is very well built and has typical Gryphon attention to detail inside and out. All

of their products are eye-catching designs, but at their heart they are extremely solid and serious components. The Diablo provides inputs for four single-ended and one balanced connection, plus a couple of outputs and has a single set of speaker connections. There are no moving parts on the front panel. All switching and volume control are carried out by light touches to specific areas and the vacuum fluorescent display, itself offering three levels of brightness, keeps you informed of the amplifier's output level and selected input status.

The remote is one of the very best I have tried, a long, slim metal design that enables you to get where you want to be quickly and completely intuitively. It is an object lesson in



▶ uncluttered clarity and it makes the amplifier a joy to control. You need to be a bit sensitive with it though as the power comes on with a hell of a rush and that is one thing that this amplifier has in abundance. It can produce 250 watts into 8 Ohms, 500 into four and a whopping 800 watts into a 2 Ohm load. This makes it just about the most powerful integrated amplifier I have ever used and when you couple this with such a seriously broad bandwidth

about its business with such vigour that the way it employs those Watts is, let's say, central to its character and there is always the temptation to advance the volume that little bit extra and see how it responds. It does become horribly addictive though as the Gryphon is not an amplifier that necessarily caresses the music. It does not suffer

remains extremely nuanced when the occasion calls for it and is well able to take advantage of the open, spatial sound-staging that the Mikado does so well. It has a finely structured and delicate sense of detail right across its considerable bandwidth and that keeps your attention as much as the sheer dynamic potential, both great and small. This is where its fine control of relative instrumental levels keeps the music locked in focus, even at low levels, where it is extremely impressive.

The bass is strong powerful and fast while the high frequencies, though clear and articulate are just a touch hard. I didn't find too much in the way of tonal warmth through the mid-band and the balance remains resolutely on the cool side and especially so with the

Mikado at the front end. For those wanting to bask in the colourful vibrancy of bowed and stringed instruments the Diablo/Mikado duet would probably not be my first recommendation.

Listen to the Alison Krauss collaboration with Robert Plant on *Raising Sand* and you will certainly be impressed with the superb separation of the instruments and their dynamic individuality but I found the amplifier missing out on the sense of intimacy and the warmth and affection between the two singers. Producer T Bone Burnett has done a great job in balancing the two distinctive voices against each other and the mix he has produced is masterfully understated. Sweet and sour, Ying and Yang, call it what you will, but, for me, this relationship is what the album is all about. Like hearing Ella sing ▶



(0.1Hz-250kHz)

you soon realise that you are in control of a heavy duty device capable of terrifying speakers into submission.

Like the Mikado CD player, the well-named Diablo needs a fair bit of time from new to gather all of its strengths and concentrate them on the music-making process. It runs hot, takes a while to run in (though not as long as the Mikado), but be patient and let it cook for a few weeks and it slowly comes on song. After that you can leave it in standby and it will be back up to speed within an hour or so of re-awakening.

I hesitate to say that the Diablo is all about its rampant nature but it goes

from big-amp syndrome, is not slow to react or sluggish in the turns. Instead it holds the speakers in a vice-like grip, hurling them into life, imposing a level of dynamic control that leaves them in no doubt as to just who is boss. It brings fresh meaning to the term "driving the speaker".

Plug in their Mikado CD player that I reviewed in the last issue and you have a potentially explosive mixture of audio detail and dynamics that makes for very impressive Hi-Fi. The heady alchemy involved leaves you in no doubt that you are going to need to consider your speakers and cabling rather carefully. But don't get the idea that the Diablo sacrifices too much finesse for pure muscle. True, it does carry the whiff of a hairy chest but

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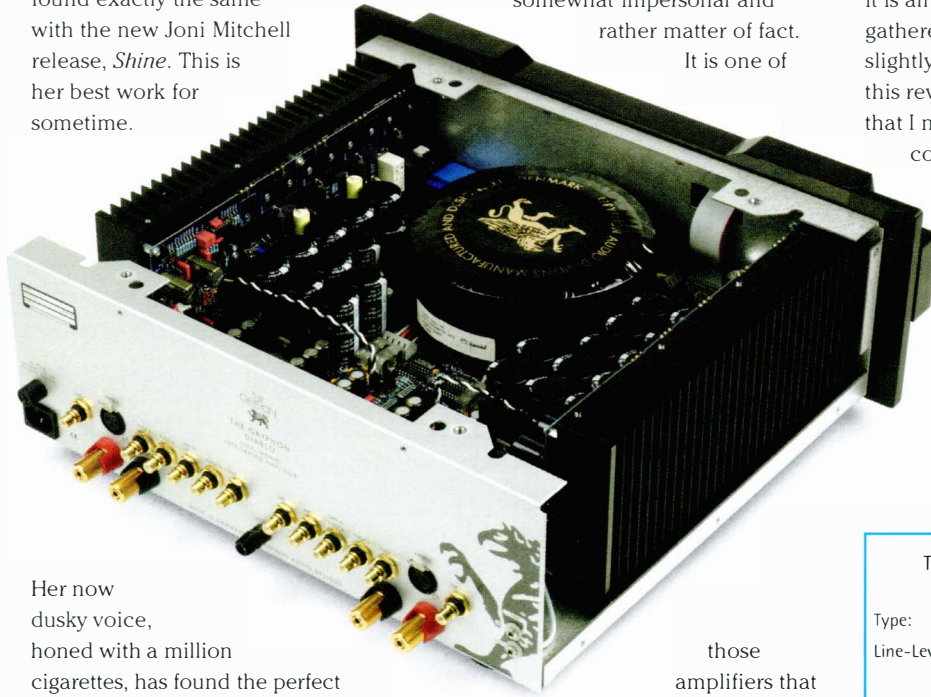
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IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC

▶ against Louis Armstrong, there is something almost spiritual in the contrasting blend. This is where the Gryphon failed to get the juices flowing.

It's elusive and you cannot easily point to it, but sometimes a system just has it and sometimes it doesn't. I found exactly the same with the new Joni Mitchell release, *Shine*. This is her best work for sometime.



Her now dusky voice, honed with a million cigarettes, has found the perfect instrumental environment on this album and the inclusion of the pedal-steel guitar is a masterstroke. Being a musician on a Joni Mitchell gig must be unlike anything else. Each player is given their own voice but she has this uncanny ability to pick their styles and fuse them together around the track. You will seldom hear anything superfluous on a Joni album and this is as lean and mean as they come. Again we are talking about intimacy and the ability of the system to call out to your soul, to go that step further and speak to you on a different and far more personal level. This is, for me, what makes some top-end audio worth paying for. It is not the extra bandwidth or the better control or the superior resolution as you can very soon get used to those things. Music, at its

best, is art and should surely be about spiritual enlightenment, at whatever level you personally operate. Well, it is for me anyway but I definitely know, having read thousands of reviews in my time, that it isn't the same for everyone.

My real concerns are that the Gryphon often leaves music seeming somewhat impersonal and rather matter of fact. It is one of

those amplifiers that you can really hear working as it reconstructs and feeds the information into a torrent of fine dynamic detail. I use the term information deliberately as I found the Gryphon to be too mechanical in the way it portrays music. In other words, it seldom sounds beautiful and the more I listened, the more I became aware of this. Some amplifiers seem like a wide-open window and just let the music flow through them, but the Gryphon imprints its mark firmly and tends to sound very busy and somewhat electronic.

Which brings me back to my first question. What do you listen for when you play your system? Because, technically speaking, the Gryphon Diablo really does tick most of the boxes. It is certainly great Hi-Fi

– of that I have no doubt and I can easily imagine it both impressing and satisfying many people with its dramatic all-round abilities. At this level of performance though, it is other things that make the difference between you connecting with the music or not and surely that is what it is all about. You have probably gathered that the Diablo and I were slightly uneasy housemates during this review and I feel frustrated that I never managed to bind its considerable attributes to the music, to warm to its performance more than I did. I make no value judgements here, just a simple observation that comes from the heart rather than the head. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Stereo integrated amplifier
Line-Level Inputs:	4x single ended RCA/phone 1x balanced XLR
Outputs:	2x single ended RCA/phone 1 set 4mm binding posts
Power output:	2x 250W into 8 Ohms 2x 500W into 4 Ohms 2x 800W into 2 Ohms
Bandwidth:	0.1Hz – 250 kHz ±3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480 x 210 x 460mm
Weight:	30 kg
Price:	£6100
Guarantee:	5 years
No Of UK Dealers:	1

UK Outlet:

Audio Saloon
Tel. 0845 4000 400
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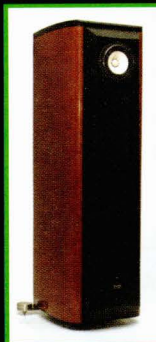


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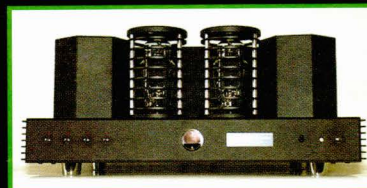
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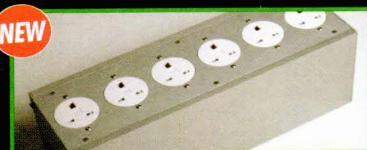


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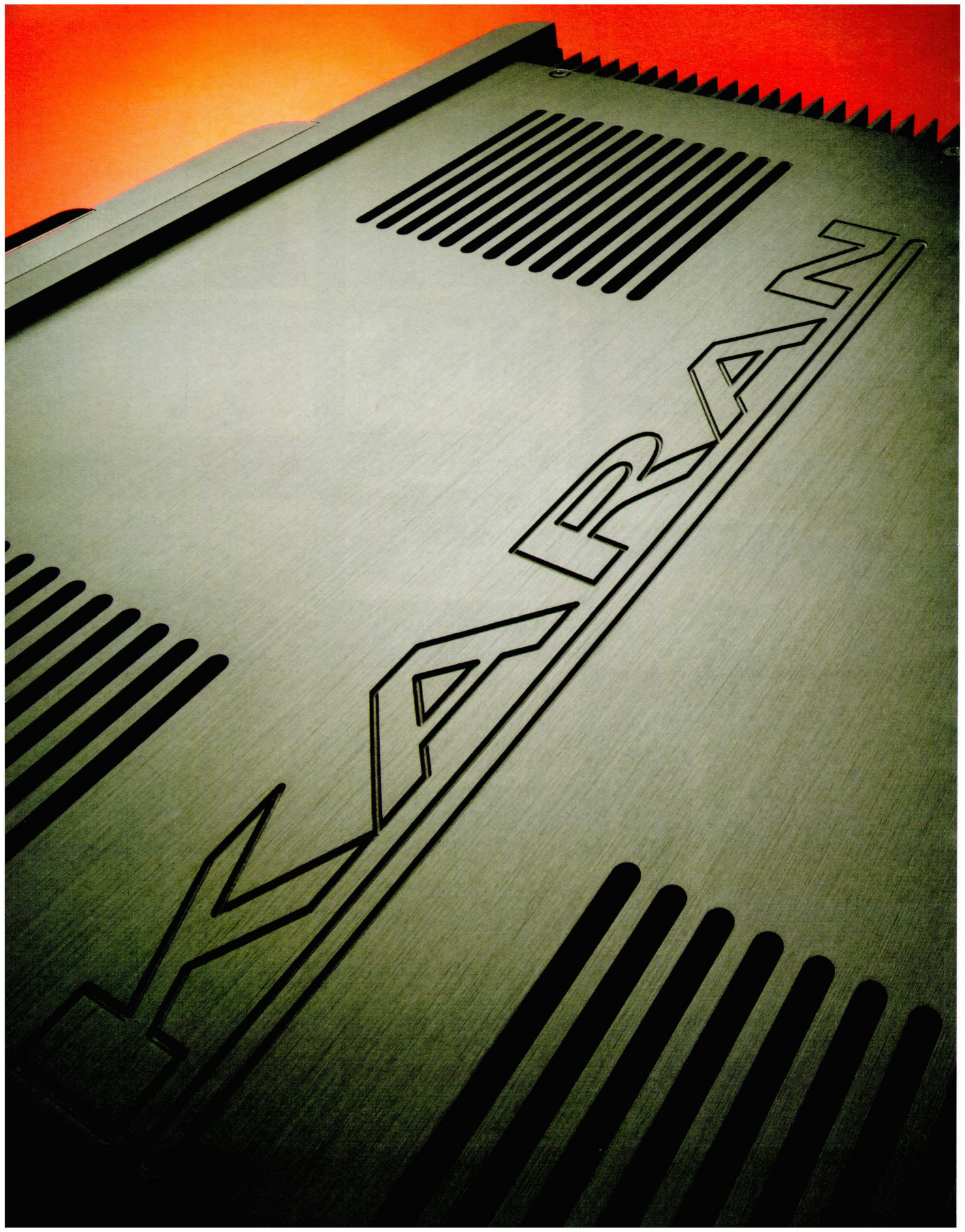


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Little Big Man...

The Karan Acoustics KA M 650 Mono-Blocs

by Roy Gregory

The Karan KA M 1200 mono-blocs have been something of a fixture in the Gregory listening room for some considerable time. A welcome presence with their commanding musical authority and bottomless power delivery, I'll not deny that at times it has felt a little like sharing the house with an autocratic and unbending dictator. Not only are they extremely large, they're also heavy enough to be completely unmovable without two, strong men; both factors that help explain why they stayed for so long. That and the sublime results that rewarded the considerable effort of wrestling them into place. Absolutely intolerant of any careless or incautious act on the part of the user, well over a kW of power into 8 Ohms is easily capable of administering rather more than a slap on the wrist in instances of operator error, one piece of particular stupidity actually vaporising a driver voice coil; there was literally nothing left! But then, if you take a genuine monster home and get careless, you've got to expect to lose a few members of the family...

The thing that makes the 1200 worth all the physical effort and personal discipline that it demands are the musical results it produces. So many big amps grip the music so tight you feel that they never let go. With the Karans they grip the acoustic space, holding it totally stable yet allowing the music a wonderful, unconstrained expressive

freedom within it: no limitations on headroom, no congestion or confusion, phenomenal resolution and separation of musical detail. Yet all of that from a preternaturally stable perspective; it's a remarkable performance and for anybody lucky enough to be able to afford these amps, install them and then simply enjoy them they constitute a fabulous option. But within the constantly changing landscape of a reviewer's system, the practicalities involved weigh



nearly as heavy as the amps themselves, so the feelings of regret when they finally departed were tempered with an almost guilty sense of relief. That and the knowledge that waiting in the wings were Karan's KA M 650s.

Built into the same chassis as the company's KA S 270 stereo amplifier, the 650 still presents a pretty imposing block. The difference is that at around three-fifths of the cost and two-thirds the size of the 1200 it is rather more manageable (in every sense). Indeed, at a "mere" 50kg it is just about man portable – a comment that will have chiropractors everywhere rubbing

their hands in glee. Attempt this and be warned that you are solely responsible for the consequences. Physical parameters aside, the KA M 650s are exactly what you'd expect: the same bluff but beautifully executed casework (including the same hand lacerating heat-sinks), the same fully differential, DC coupled, zero feedback circuitry, the same balanced or single-ended inputs. You of course also get the

same captive isolators built into the feet, three of them ensuring the amps get a firm and mechanically close-coupled footing. Inside the packed casework of each chassis is a pair of 960 VA toroidal transformers and 132000 microF of ultra-fast reservoir capacitance, feeding the sophisticated ring emitter bipolar output devices. Those huge heat-sinks aren't just for show; with the driver stages running in class A and the output stages leaning that way, the amps run warm, even in the depths of winter, where they act as pretty effective supplementary space heaters. One other aspect of the 650s adds to their practicality over the 1200. Each amp requires but a single IEC mains lead as opposed to the excessive demands of the larger model, a factor that certainly makes providing a coherent mains supply

► significantly easier.

The watchword with the 650s has to be “care” – as in “handle with”. Yes, they are physically more manageable than the 1200s but in every other respect they are just as critically revealing. Cable differences (I ran them with Crystal Ultra, and Nordost’s Odin and Valhalla) are shockingly apparent, as are housekeeping issues like the provision of a clean earth and proper support. It’s not that they sound bad without these niceties; the worst you can accuse them of is sounding a little flat if they’re not being fed their preferred diet. But playing with cables, the finite element amp stands, even the connection order and polarity of the mains leads into the distribution block all elevate the performance from the merely excellent to the musically spectacular.

There are two inevitable questions confronting the 650s: how do they stack up against the 1200s, and how successfully do they juggle the big amp

issues of control versus musicality?

Let’s start with the second of those. There’s a real danger with seriously powerful amps that designers and listeners get seduced by the attractions of high-definition, the ever more detailed and clearly defined depiction of each and every element of the recording, be it an instrument, the acoustic, the nature of the floor or a door opening in the auditorium. It’s an understandable tendency simply because these are real, tangible differences in performance: you can hear the space around a player or you can’t, you can identify a music stand scrape or the subway rolling underneath or they’re simply unintelligible noise. But the fact that we can hear these things doesn’t actually mean that an amp is working better, just differently. The danger is that in defining the particular we dismantle or stultify the sense of the whole, yet ultimately it is the whole that is our *raison d’être*. As I’ve already suggested, the 1200s

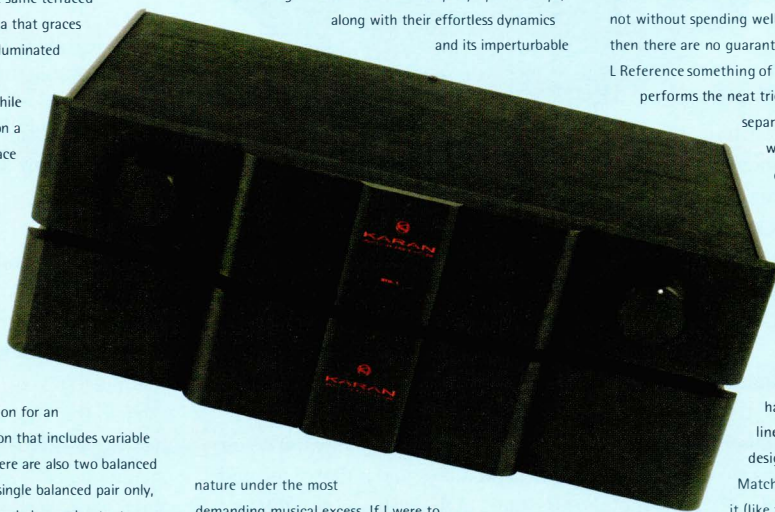
handle these conflicting demands with a self-assurance and deft poise that both provides authoritative stability and allows the music to breathe, the best of both worlds. It’s a sensibility that extends across the range, all the way from the massive flagship monos to the (relatively) baby KA S 180 – and the 650s are no exception. It’s this musical and spatial/temporal balance, very much a balance of virtues, that places the Karan amps at the forefront of solid-state amplifier performance. That and their relative affordability, for in the world of high-end audio, even the £25K asking price of the 1200s looks modest compared to the competition, while the mere £15K ticket attached to a pair of 650s starts to seem almost like a bargain (at least until reality bites).

Connecting these amps to the ultra quick, uncompressed and tactile Eben Ayra CIs demonstrated both the fact that they take a good ten days to run in from new (sounding compressed, grey and ►

Two’s Company...

Along with the KA M 650s, I also received the matching Karan line-stage, the E7450 fully balanced, two-box KA L Reference. Built into two slim but reassuringly heavy and solid cases, the units share the same terraced front panel and central display area that graces the power amps. Along with the illuminated logo, the control unit gives visual indication of the selected input, while the remote volume control relies on a simple red LED recessed into the face of the large, motorised knob. The remote itself is a circular “hockey-puck” style piece that offers two buttons – one for volume up and the other for volume down. The rear of the unit displays a similar austere functionality. There are four single-ended inputs, all fitted with WBT NextGen sockets (including provision for an internal phono-stage, a £500 option that includes variable gain, loading and capacitance). There are also two balanced inputs. Main outputs consist of a single balanced pair only, although there is a pair of single-ended record outputs too. Apart from the XLR socket to accept the power-supply umbilical and an earth socket, that’s your lot. Although I used the KA M 650s with a range of different ancillaries, including the Connoisseur 4-2 LSE and the Ayra K1-xe, the KA L Reference proved a worthy partner, even in

such exalted company. The levels of sheer definition, dynamic range and impact coupled to the absolute stability of the picture it presents put it right at the forefront of classic, solid-state design. The width and rock solid stability of its soundstage it shares with the company’s power amps, along with their effortless dynamics and its imperturbable



nature under the most demanding musical excess. If I were to point to weaknesses they’d revolve around the areas of stage depth, dimensionality and instrumental texture – in other words the realm of absolute low-level resolution and intimacy. But those have never been solid-state strengths and are rare indeed, so it’s a bit like complaining that your

horse walks on four legs. What the KA L Reference did was deliver musical and dynamic authority, poise and purpose that belied its price. Yes you can have more colour, a greater sense of flow and immediacy. What you can’t have is all that and what the Karan delivers as well, not without spending well over the £10K mark and even then there are no guarantees. All of which makes the KA L Reference something of a well-kept secret, one that performs the neat trick of delivering real detail and separation, access to the recording without dismantling the music or the performance. It is not over-endowed with facilities or operational niceties, remote control or user-configurable displays, all of which probably contribute to its excellent sonic performance. If you want scale and the ability to hear both what’s happening and how, this straight-line, fully-differential, two-channel design is a compelling performer. Matching the best of its price peers it (like them) offers its own particular view of events. If you value control and freedom from strain, real dynamic range and a black, black background it’s a view you could travel a long way to better, while the optional phono-stage represents an absolute bargain.

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▶ grainy in the meantime) and that once they find their feet they sound neither like big amps nor small ones. Instead, there's a consistency and substance to their sound, irrespective of musical scale or system volume. Instrumental colours and textures are beautifully captured, musical tension is present without being forced, there's a relaxed alertness to the sound that allows the music unimpeded expression, a natural sense of space and acoustic that is present without being laboured or overly explicit. The soundstage is expansive and three-dimensional without ever becoming etched or overly "carved". Interestingly, this is the direction the KA L Reference leans in, meaning that if you want a shade more definition, more sculpted edges to images, then it presents a readily available solution. But for me, the greater transparency and energy of the Connoisseur, the colour palette and dimensionality of the ACT 2 Series 2 or Audio Research Ref 3 are the natural foils for the big Karan amps, offering as they do a performance that deserves the very best in partnering equipment. So coupled, the life, presence and unrestricted dynamic range on offer is impressive and exhilarating, the poise and delicacy will literally have you holding your breath.

So, just how do the 650s stack up against their bigger brothers. The pragmatic answer is that without some seriously wide bandwidth speakers and prior knowledge of the 1200s you'll probably never know. It wasn't until I reinstalled the massive Nola Pegasus (now in updated Signature guise) that I started to become aware of if not the limits of the 650s performance, then at least the boundaries of their envelope. Compared to the bigger amps, they lose little if anything in terms of spatial definition, scale or stability. They float bowed bass notes with an impressive lightness of touch whilst



reproducing low-frequencies with pitch authority and power when demanded. But there is an undeniable something about the bigger amps, a range of texture, an absolute quality to their reproduction that leaves you never questioning what they deliver,



never looking for more, trusting that what they deliver is what's there. Playing the Gorecki *3rd Symphony* with its repetitive bass phrases and measured tempo, the 650s offer an achingly beautiful performance, but in absolute terms they don't deliver quite the same intimacy of texture or separation of individual instruments. It's not even a question of information, more of feel and given the speakers to do it the 1200s do feel more real – albeit at a price hike of £10K.

But don't be overly concerned. If you can afford a pair of Avalon Isis you can afford (and will want) a pair of 1200s to go with them. For mere mortals with less demanding speakers the 1200s won't be worthwhile over the 650s. I never thought I'd describe a £15K mono-block as the real world choice but in so many ways that's exactly what it represents. Its near perfect balance between the conflicting demands of musical freedom and dynamic control make music convincing through

its stability, natural colours and perspectives, compelling for both its perfect tempi, fragile delicacy and awesome power. The Karan 650s pass effortlessly from micro to macro, without a ripple to the acoustic environment, an Audi RS4 to the 1200s Bugatti Veyron.

They represent almost affordable

excellence if you are prepared to stretch, performance that's useable and seriously rewarding. ➤+

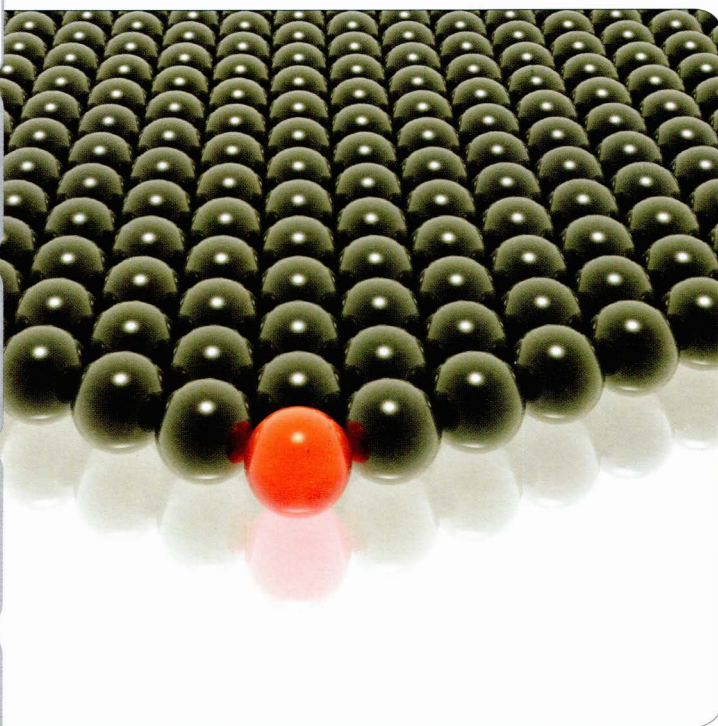
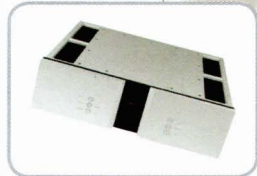
TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state mono-bloc amplifiers
Rated Output:	650 Watts into 8 Ohms 900 Watts into 4 Ohms
Inputs:	1x single-ended RCA/phone 1x balanced XLR
Outputs:	1 pr 5-way binding posts
Bandwidth:	DC-300kHz, -3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	500 x 235 x 450mm
Weight:	50kg ea.
Price:	£15000pr
Guarantee:	3 years
Number Of UK Dealers:	3

International Distributor:

Audiofreaks
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153
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REFERENCE 110
HIGH DEFINITION

POWER

The Audio Research LS17 Line-Stage and Ref 110 Power Amplifier

by Chris Binns

If any company has established a distinctive visual identity over the last thirty years or so it has to be Audio Research. Witness the fact that I still regularly use an SP 10 pre-amplifier dating from around 1986, yet sitting the LS17 next to it I think that the casual observer would be hard pushed to determine which is current and which is the 'vintage' model. That continuity, disturbed only by a few labels and control functions, is as strong on the inside as it is on the surface.

My first experience of Audio Research products dates back to the D115 power amp and SP8 pre-amp somewhere in the early 80s, and they made quite an impression, partly because they were both stunningly good products, but also because they were my first contact with US high-end valve gear, designs that didn't adhere to the established Mullard/GEC model. Somehow, despite reviewing various bits of Audio Research kit in the intervening years, nothing has quite elevated me to the dizzy plane of that first encounter. And initial impressions did little to suggest that the LS17 and Ref 110 were about to change this, but living with this Audio Research combination for a few weeks has caused me to considerably modify that opinion.

While clearly reticent to change the external aesthetics, when it comes to electronics the company have been continuously updating and refining their products with new topologies and components, and it has been interesting to observe this. Different models over the years have swung from the highly complicated, incorporating large numbers of semiconductors, to elegantly simple purist designs with

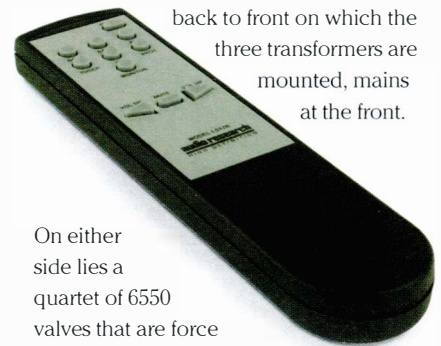
barely a transistor in sight, typified on one hand by the D125 and on the other by one of the 'Classic' or VS series power amplifiers. Both the LS17 and the REF110 tend towards the latter school. Concepts that initially appear within flagship products are often passed down through the range, and this is an intrinsic part of the product development process. Thus we have the LS17 replacing the LS16, incorporating circuitry inherited from the flagship Ref 3 pre-amp, while the Ref 110 looks up to the mighty Ref 610 mono-blocs.

The 17 has a large, solid-state regulated power supply, and active circuitry based around a pair of Russian military 6H30 double triodes and an FET or two, to provide around 17dB of gain. There are five single-ended and two balanced inputs that are switched via discrete relays, two balanced and one SE output, together with both tape and processor loops. On the front panel, two rotary controls provide input selection and volume. Between these are two recessed panels the lower of which has small push button switches for power, mute, tape and processor selection, while the upper displays status and position of the 104 step volume control. The basic but functional remote handset controls volume, mute and input selection.

The REF 110 is, save for the power switch and a small green led on the front panel, a featureless box within which all the electronics are enclosed. Only balanced inputs are provided, which on the face of it might seem a little inflexible, but my understanding is that as this was conceived as a fully balanced design from the ground up, the addition of a single ended input

would not have been a viable option. Loudspeaker outputs for 4, 8 and 16 Ohms are provided (as with previous ARC designs be aware that the 4 Ohm tap is at ground potential) and mains input is via a 20 Amp IEC socket, not the usual kettle type connection. The custom made binding posts are of high quality, but offer no easy way of connecting 4mm plugs (which is a pain from a reviewer's point of view). Spades would be the connection of choice.

Internal layout represents a bit of a departure from previous Audio Research designs. A central channel runs from back to front on which the three transformers are mounted, mains at the front.



On either side lies a quartet of 6550 valves that are force cooled by two fans situated on the back panel (three speeds are internally selectable depending on the ambient temperature). At its lowest speed there is still a small amount of noise, audible if you are sitting close, but bear in mind that cooler running valves will tend to last longer. A small LCD display on one of the circuit boards counts valve use in hours. Bias adjustment is a little more accessible (and slightly less hairy) than with previous ARC designs, with sockets now provided on the board for meter measurement, together with adjustment for each pair of valves via trim pots.

The 6550 power supply valve has been dispensed with in favour of solid-▶

▶ state regulation for the front end (there is no longer a need for a screen supply) where FET's feed a pair of 6H30's for gain and a cathode follower driver. The output stage continues an Audio research tradition by coupling the cathodes to the secondary of the output transformer, providing a degree of negative feedback and a tighter grip of the loudspeaker.

The screens are now tapped in the more common ultra-linear configuration; for many years ARC favoured running the valves in straight pentode mode, a factor that might have contributed to the trade mark 'grunt' at the bottom-end that I associate with many of their earlier amplifiers.

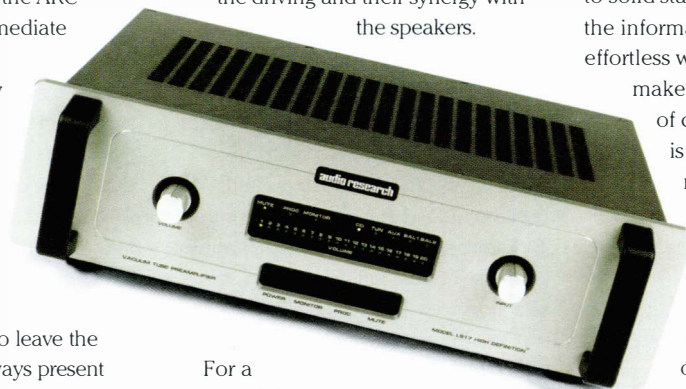
With an Audio Research CD 7 to augment the Resolution Audio Opus 21 for CD playback, the rest of the system comprised a Linn/Ekos/Helikon for vinyl, with Nordost Valhalla cabling. The pre-amp was used with Symposium Rollerblocks, their addition offered a worthwhile improvement in bottom-end transparency and dynamics.

As I mentioned earlier, the ARC combination wasn't an immediate knock out. Don't get me wrong, it sounded perfectly competent, behaved itself impeccably and never put a foot wrong, but I guess I was expecting something a little more flamboyant, more exuberant in character. It felt a bit like the last guest to leave the party, the one who was always present but you never got round to noticing because they weren't loud or colourful and they were just always there. You then bump into them a couple of weeks later, can't remember their name but end up chatting for hours and realise that in fact, they are really fascinating company and you end up becoming firm friends.

Which is exactly what happened with the LS17/Ref 110 combination; after a while I discovered that I had actually spent a lot of time listening to music (and thoroughly enjoying it) without thinking or questioning what the amplifier was doing.



The Spendor SP100's (also reviewed in this issue) loved working with the ARC, and I eventually realised that the incredible sense of flow and communication that I was hearing was down in no small part to the amps doing the driving and their synergy with the speakers.



For a start, the ARC seemed to produce a soundstage that was both large and spacious, possibly more pronounced than any other amplifier I have used. Despite being someone who doesn't put spatial attributes even near the top of the list, I actually found this quite impressive

and instrumental in broadening the range of music I was listening too. But back on more familiar ground, playing the Richard and Linda Thompson song 'The Great Valerio', the instruments and voice hung in the air, surrounded by the acoustic, and I could actually hear the difference between the natural boundary of the room in which she sung and the electronic enhancement beyond that.

The voice, which alternates between strong and hard, almost cold in its delivery and then warm and delicately poignant, had a degree of expression that was spine chilling, and together with her husband's eerie guitar drew minutes of respectful silence from everyone I played it too, even after the track was over.

So the ARC does subtle detail in a way that I don't recall many other valve amps being able to manage, and without the clinical, lifeless portrayal that is often the downside with such attributes when it comes to solid-state designs. It's not just the information they deliver, it's the effortless way you can place it and make musical sense of it. In terms of character, the combination is probably one of ARC's most neutral; it didn't have the 'fruity' kick at the bottom end of early models like the D115, but nor did it have the dry, anaemic quality that afflicted some of the hybrid designs. And the midrange? It had that lovely 'liquid' presence that makes you feel as if you are stepping into the world of the performer, rather than the other way round.

As is often the case, it was when I began to experiment a little with the individual units that I became more ▶

► aware of just what the LS17 and Ref 110 were doing. Putting my old SP10 into the system served to highlight the attributes of the LS17 the aging flagship sounding muddy and ill-defined by comparison, although still very musical. But it was difficult to live with after having been spoiled by what had gone before. Using the 17 with other power amplifiers proved extremely successful, and the combination with a Bryston 14B SST proved spectacular. But then so did most of the other power amps that I tried.

I couldn't resist the temptation to try the ARC combination with the Quad 2805 electrostatics. I had a nagging feeling that I would regret it if I missed the opportunity. If ever there was a match made in heaven, this was it, as the character of the individual units seemed to dovetail perfectly. While the bottom end of the Ref 110 did not have the taughtness of a really powerful solid-state design such as the Bryston, it seemed to 'give' in exactly the right areas to create the impression that the Quads having more low

frequency extension than they actually possess, while the speakers' midrange showed off the Audio Researches' perfect balance between warm and lucid versus detail and articulation. The top end was sweet and open, ameliorating the Quads' slight tendency toward that mild

papery aspect that occasionally afflicts them. This was the best sound that I have heard coming from any of the electrostatics from the '63 onwards.

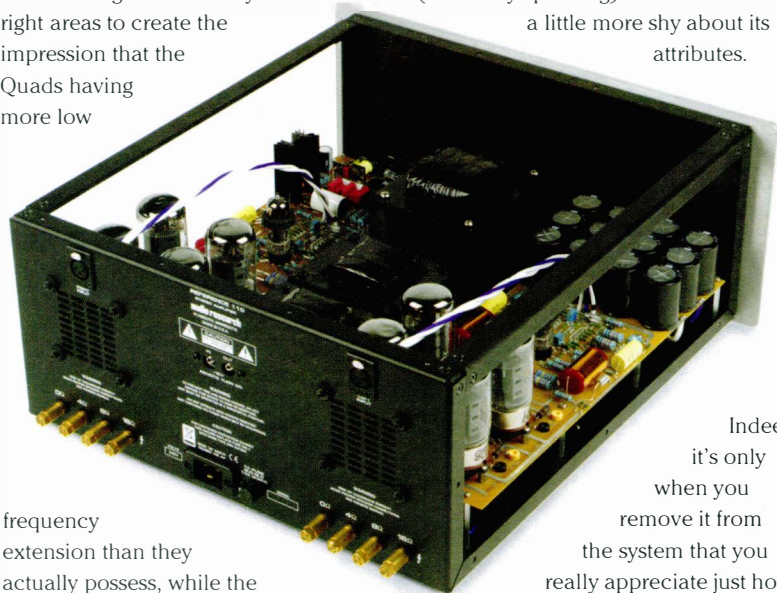
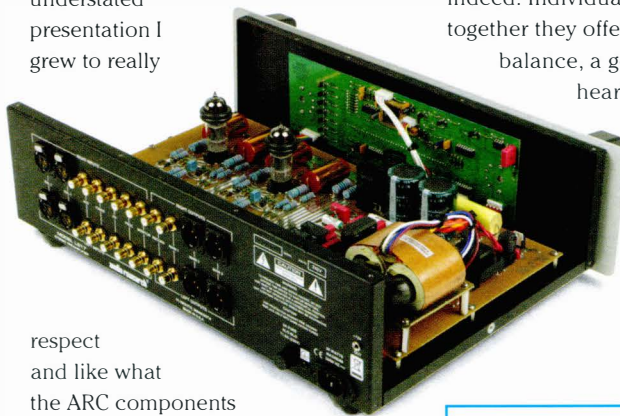
Once I got over their rather understated presentation I grew to really

respect and like what the ARC components were doing. Individually, I think that both the pre and power amp are extremely capable performers. The LS17 is something of a bargain, especially in the context of a system that is a tad dry or mechanical and could use a little help to loosen up (musically speaking). The Ref 110 is a little more shy about its attributes.

Indeed, it's only when you remove it from the system that you really appreciate just how much it's been contributing. It has a magical touch, built on a perfectly judged balance combining precision and control with a warm, fluid and very musical presentation. On paper, the LS17 and Ref 110 might

appear to be a mismatch. But in practice, the Ref 110 is a very special amplifier – and the 17 allows that quality to shine, which given the price differential is impressive indeed. Individually excellent, together they offer a finely honed balance, a genuinely musical, heartfelt performance

that slips in surreptitiously and gets right under your skin. ➤



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

LS17

Type:	Line-stage
Valve complement:	2 x 6H30
Inputs:	5x single-ended 2x balanced XLR 1x processor loop 1x tape loop
Outputs:	1pr single-ended 2pr balanced XLR
Output impedance:	350 Ohms (S-E) 700 Ohms (XLR)
Output voltage:	2 Volts RMS
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480 x 134 x 305mm
Weight:	5.9kg
Price:	£3199

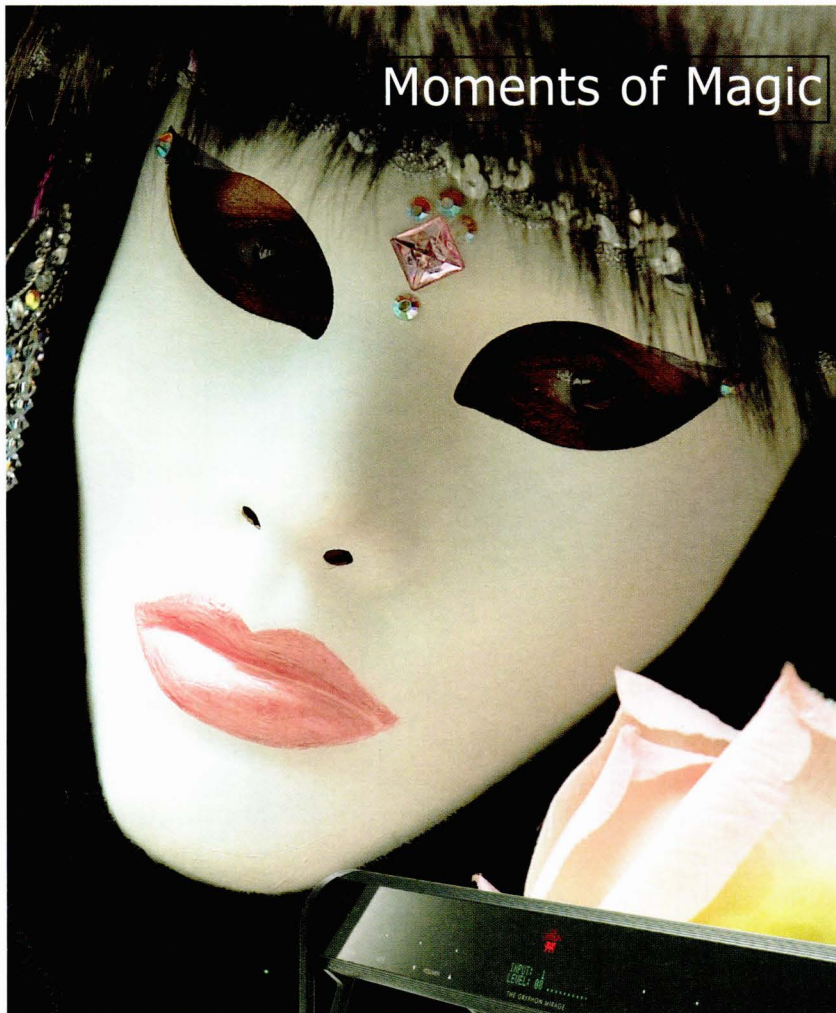
Ref 110 Power Amp

Type:	Stereo power amp
Valve complement:	4x 6H30, 8x 6550
Inputs:	1pr balanced XLRs
Input sensitivity:	1.8 Volts balanced
Input impedance:	300 kOhms
Power output:	110 Watts into 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	483 x 222 x 495mm
Weight:	30.7kg
Price:	£8399

Guarantee: 2 years
Number of UK Dealers: 10

UK Distributor:
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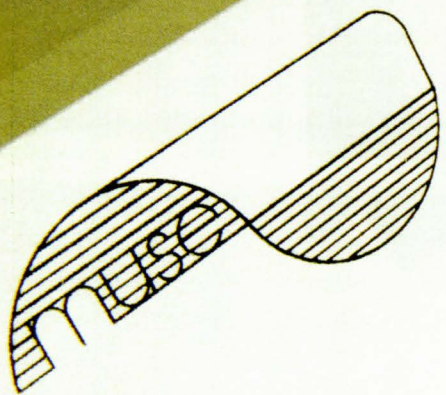
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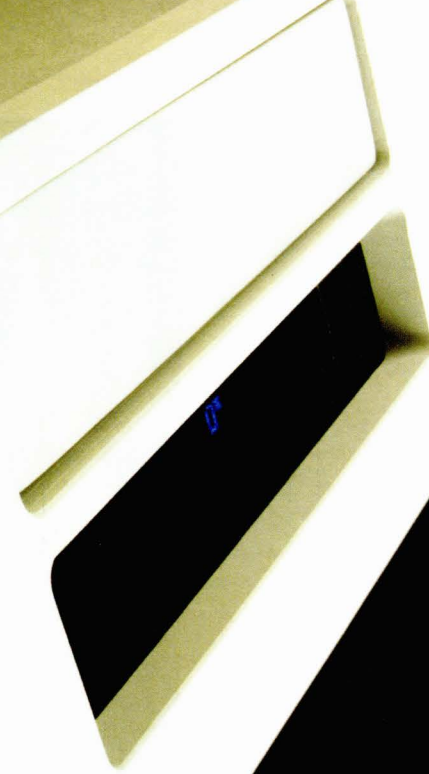
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Sweet Inspiration...

The Muse Erato II Modular Digital Player

by Roy Gregory

Kevin Halverson, the man behind the Muse electronics, represents one of the unsung luminaries of digital development. Starting out nearly twenty years ago with a range of innovative amplification, many of the concepts that debuted in those products underpin his later digital designs. Whilst other companies and personalities have higher profiles (and bigger marketing budgets) the Muse products have consistently set superior standards of performance in both the audio and video fields, a duality that has reached its apogee in the MAP system architecture that characterizes the current range.

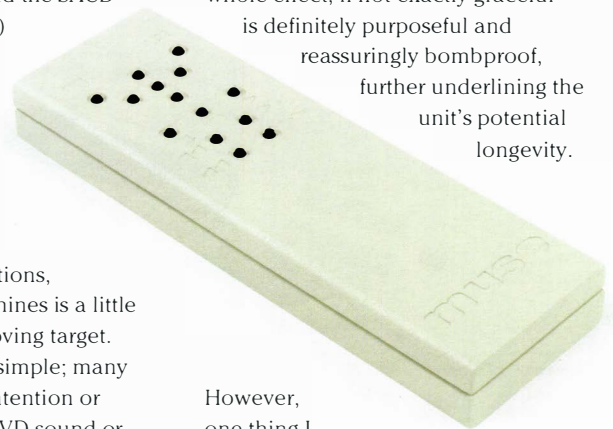
The acronym stands for Modular Audio/Video Platform and when Mr Halverson says “modular”, he means it. So, just as the casework, feet, and front-panel elements employed in the Erato II are identical to those of the Polyhymnia reviewed in Issue 54, the output configurations and options are also user definable. One glance at the back panel will show a series of terminal plates that constitute a card-case arrangement so that purchasers can incorporate the output modules they require – and only those. So, in the case of the Erato II, which is basically a CD and DVD A/V replay platform, the unit can be configured to offer fixed or variable, stereo or multi-channel analogue output on balanced or single-ended connectors. There are also digital video output options, including HDMI 1.2. So, you can include (and just as importantly, exclude) all the facilities that you do or don't want. But even

better, the machine's capabilities can be adapted or extended to accommodate changes in your system (maybe a move from stereo to a multi-channel, decoder based set-up) or its redeployment in a different role or situation. Finally, the output cards can be updated to reflect advances in technology or changes in standards, making the Erato (and the SACD capable Polyhymnia) effectively future proof, requiring minor hardware updates rather than wholesale replacement to stay abreast of the game.

With all those options, reviewing these machines is a little like trying to hit a moving target. But let's keep things simple; many customers have no intention or requirement to put DVD sound or video images through their systems, so let's consider the Erato II as a CD player only – albeit one with the not unattractive ability to extend into the realm of AV and multi-channel replay should you ever choose to walk that way. Configured with a single, stereo output card offering balanced or single-ended socketry (and basic DVD outputs) the Erato will set you back £4350. Adding an attenuated output would add a further £350. Of course, in a single source CD based system, the variable output option allows you to dispense with a conventional pre-amp although inexplicably, the Muse modules don't offer input and switching options, which would

really extend the player's versatility and value, allowing you to employ its superior onboard digital conversion with external sources.

Externally, the MAP casework is finished in a distinctive (and extremely tough) pale grey epoxy coating. The buttons are deeply recessed and thus protected, and the whole effect, if not exactly graceful is definitely purposeful and reassuringly bombproof, further underlining the unit's potential longevity.

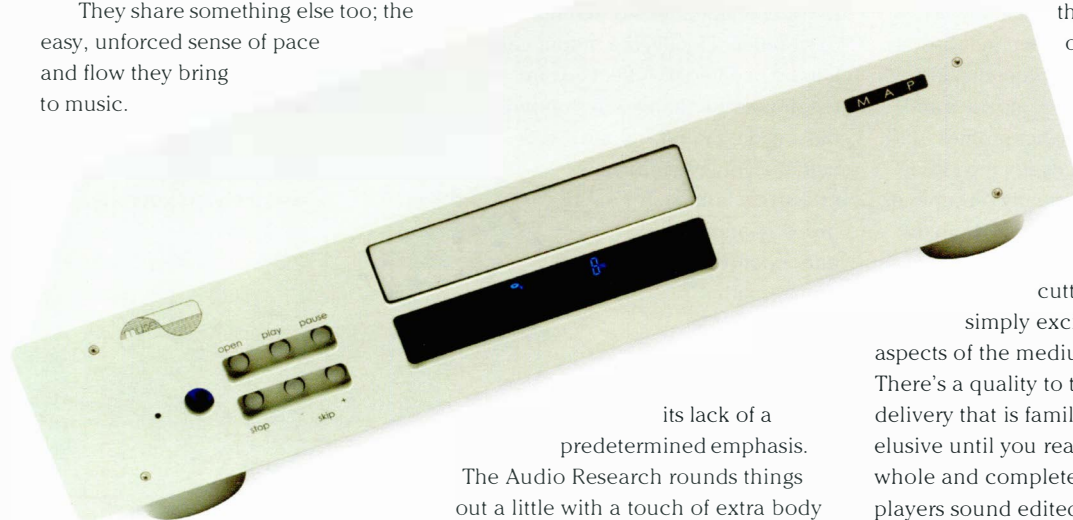


However, one thing I would like to see is clear labeling of the socketry on the output boards. With so many options and configurations possible I really think that this is essential and should be dealt with urgently.

But if the back panel of the Erato II can seem a little opaque, it's sound is anything but. Indeed, the uncluttered clarity and wide bandwidth evenness that it brings to music can actually be slightly disconcerting at first, leading to lower than normal listening levels and a possible assumption that the Muse is one of those machines that puts detail and finesse ahead of music's more physical aspects. Certainly, there's detail and finesse ►

▶ a plenty, bringing space and texture to performances. But match levels carefully against a player like the superb and much more costly Audio Research CD7 and you soon discover that what (if anything) the Erato surrenders in terms of muscularity and physical presence is more than compensated for by its transparency and micro-dynamic definition, the more sculpted shape it brings to notes. It's not so much that the CD7 has greater body or weight, just that the two players deploy it slightly differently.

They share something else too; the easy, unforced sense of pace and flow they bring to music.



Even playing the slow, bass-heavy tempo of the Cure's *Carnage Visors* OST there's no tendency to plod or meander, the Muse maintaining the musical tension and momentum while also effortlessly sorting through the layered bass textures and overdubs. The rounded and slightly woolly acoustic bass that so often bedevils early stereo jazz discs is handled with equal aplomb. That measured riff that opens Art Pepper's 'Las Cuevas De Mario' ruthlessly uncovers any looseness or tendency to lag at low frequencies. The Muse lends the notes a lovely sense of shape, of pluck and release, keeping the line's groove and gentle, dirty smooch intact. But open the throttle and the Erato is just as surefooted as it transits

gracefully into 'A Bit Of Basie', the short jabs of the horns, their rapid runs and inversions anchored to the fast finger work on bass and piano, the sparsely figured drumming. It's this ability to at once unravel complex and overlapping musical strands without destroying the delicate relationships that bind them that sets the really communicative digital players apart. The CD7 does it – and so too does the Muse.

But within the top-flight the thing that really sets the Erato apart is

its lack of a predetermined emphasis. The Audio Research rounds things out a little with a touch of extra body and colour that add to its lovely sense of life and energy. The Muse in contrast, leans neither on the front, the middle nor the tail of the note. It favours no one frequency band at the expense of another; no extra bit of mid-bass weight to give a little explosive impetus, no extra sense of air or focus to crisp up the top-end. Instead there's a wonderful sense of evenhanded balance that allows instruments to coexist regardless of level or frequency, position on the stage or primacy in the musical scheme of things. Whereas players with a more dramatic turn of phrase will push a solo instrument forward, blanketing the careful underpinning of the rhythm section, there's no such tendency with the Muse. The drama in

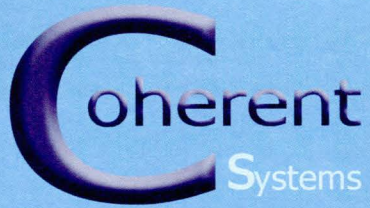
the music comes from the performers, whose notes arrive, unclipped and un-enhanced, just when they should.

It sounds simple I know, but it's the digital equivalent of that old analogue chestnut, "All a record player has to do is revolve at 33RPM and be quiet." Delivering detail has never been a problem for CD; turning that detail into usable, intelligible information, actually making sense of it, is another matter all together.

Muse's meticulous approach to signal processing and protection, their insistence on discrete instrumentation amplifiers to pass the fragile musical data, achieves just that. And it does it without cutting corners or


simply excising unfortunate aspects of the medium's performance. There's a quality to the Erato's delivery that is familiar yet initially elusive until you realise that it sounds whole and complete, where so many players sound edited or lacking – be it in terms of colour, life, energy or timing integrity.

It's this holistic quality that makes the Muse at once so disarming and unforced; it doesn't have to try and cover its tracks, so you don't hear it doing so. What's more, once you stop relying on the volume control to exaggerate body and musical substance you begin to appreciate that the Erato II is equally adept almost irrespective of level. Indeed, dynamics are notably uncompressed, making musical accents lucid and expressive. Combine those qualities and it's no surprise that the Muse Erato II constitutes a performance marker against which other products should be compared, a benchmark in the truest sense of the word. ▶



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► You might not always prefer it but I can guarantee that the comparisons will be instructive.

My complaints with this machine are entirely practical in nature and centre mainly on the paucity of information on the back-panel, the

remote control or from any other source. Sonically it is extremely hard to criticize, especially given the price and versatility. It's sheer musical honesty may not be to your taste (and might not suit your system) which possibly demands something more

dramatic or obvious to satisfy its needs. But as the basis for a well-balanced set-up, capable of playing all types of music, the Erato's self-effacing and surefooted elegance, its ability to caress or cudgel as required, is hard to beat.

"You can pay, but you can never leave..." This Muse definitely leaves its mark

by Chris Thomas

Ideally, as a reviewer, I would like to be able to approach each piece of new equipment with a completely open mind and with no preconceptions of how it SHOULD sound. But, like everyone else, I am inevitably pre-conditioned, a victim of previous experience and because of this the CD players I have been living with over the last year or so have left their mark upon me. So when the Erato II found itself installed in their place I must confess that I was somewhat taken aback by what I heard. At first I thought the output levels were notably lower than I was used to and that the overall sound was somewhat flaccid. Where was the drive? Where was the oomph? There again, where were the controls? First contact with the Muse player and its deeply recessed buttons, scanty information and inscrutable exterior weren't exactly promising. RG has something of a track record for ambushing me with unusual or unexpected products – products that then go on to rearrange my sensibilities. But first thoughts here were that he'd badly missed the mark.

Just a day or so before the Muse arrived I had bought *Long Road Out Of Eden*, the Eagles first new studio album in about 100 years, more out of curiosity than anything. Does, I wondered, the consumption of several millions of dollars worth of cocaine inhibit ones ability to write and play music? While listening to the album though I was lamenting rather more the fact that they had chosen to use quite as much compression, but came to the logical and well-worn conclusion that it had been mixed to sound good on US car radios, thus tempting drivers into the music shops to part with their readies. My conclusions were that there were some good songs, well played but that there were also more filler tracks than made sense. But then this was a double album and their bank accounts were running low. I found it all rather low-key.

So a couple of days later, generally unexcited and a mite lukewarm about the Erato (which had been warming up in the interim) and feeling much the same about the Eagles, I put the good old boys into that rather flimsy

disc-tray and gave them another spin. My, what a surprise. The compression was still there but there was so much less of it that those vocal harmonies had a lot more breadth and depth. No longer did they sound pinched, mean and one-dimensional. Now it was easy to identify each singer's voice individually. That old Eagles sound was back and the songs were as pretty as before. They hadn't lost their ability to write great hooks and some of those tunes and arrangements were to go round and round in my head for days after. What was going on? I trawled through my CDs, playing more and more "difficult" recordings and was generally amazed at how different and fresh the music seemed to me so I rang a friend who lives locally and asked him to drop by and bring some music with him. The same thing happened and he trod the same path as me by being initially perplexed before becoming suitably impressed and all in equal measure. I could not ignore the fact that I was really enjoying the Muse and not just because it was very different either. I was playing more CDs than usual ►

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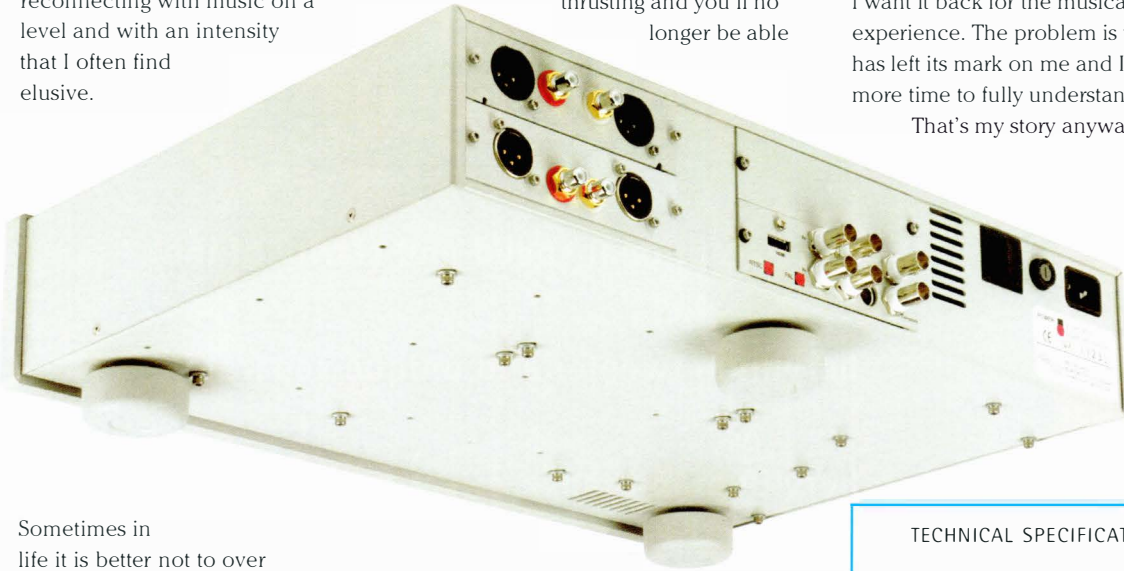
▶ and making new musical discoveries. These moments of enlightenment delighted me and I found I was reconnecting with music on a level and with an intensity that I often find elusive.

all about, I doubt many other players will ever sound the same to you again.

They may well sound crude and thrusting and you'll no longer be able

height. Yes, I want it back because the future of CD might well be to do things the Muse way. But mostly I want it back for the musical experience. The problem is that it has left its mark on me and I'd like more time to fully understand why.

That's my story anyway... ➤+



Sometimes in life it is better not to over analyze and just enjoy. It's easier that way.

I began to think about what was happening here in more detail. But the player had to go back and then a few weeks later I read RG's review. Roy's point about a lack of emphasis seems to crystallize my thoughts exactly. This Muse is completely without it. There is an unforced quality about the way that it streams music that truly does extend in all directions. The lack of it had caused me to question what I had perceived as the low output and I had indeed and as RG states, chased it with the volume control. But the Erato never feels as if it is squeezing the reconstituted music into the pre-amplifier. Resolution of detail just seems to happen naturally and as a consequence of the piece. It is never overt or obvious just as the rhythmic elements of the music are never reliant on the marker beat of the snare or bass drum indicating that each bar has come to an end. The balance is sheer and quite beautifully stated, or should that be understated? Once you have latched on to what the Muse is

to ignore the way that their balance has been shaped. That emphasis or exaggeration becomes a crutch that we've all come to lean on; pull it away and you are left floundering, which is exactly what the Erato II is capable of. It really is that startling, though I am not saying that everyone will see it that way. Indeed, I think your thoughts about it might well be system-dependent – and there are plenty of systems out there that need all the props they can get. But where so many CD players these days offer variations on an all too familiar theme, the Erato II has a quite different story to tell. Take the trouble to listen and you might well learn a few things to your advantage.

Where does that leave me after an all too brief flirtation? I want the Muse back, preferably for a really long-term listen this time. I will put up with its horribly recessed transport buttons, ones that will accept only small fingers offered at the correct angle, irritating remote and a display so sunken into the front panel that you cannot see it unless it happens to be at the right

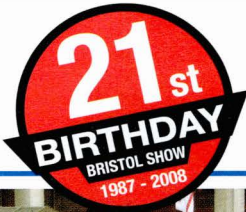
TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Modular CD/DVD player
DAC:	24bit/768kHz
Analogue Stage:	Instrumentation amplifier
Output Options –	
Fixed Level Stereo(2V):	1pr single-ended RCA/phono 1pr balanced XLR
Fixed Multi-channel (2V):	1 set single-ended RCA/phono 1 set balanced XLR
Attenuated (0 - 6V):	1pr single-ended RCA/phono 1pr balanced XLR
Video:	1x composite BNC 1x S-video 1x Component BNC
Digital:	1x HDMI 1.2 1x SPDif BNC
Finish:	Pale grey
Dimensions (WxHxD):	463 x 110 x 330mm
Price:	From £4350
Guarantee:	2 years
Number Of UK Dealers:	3

UK Distributor:
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Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

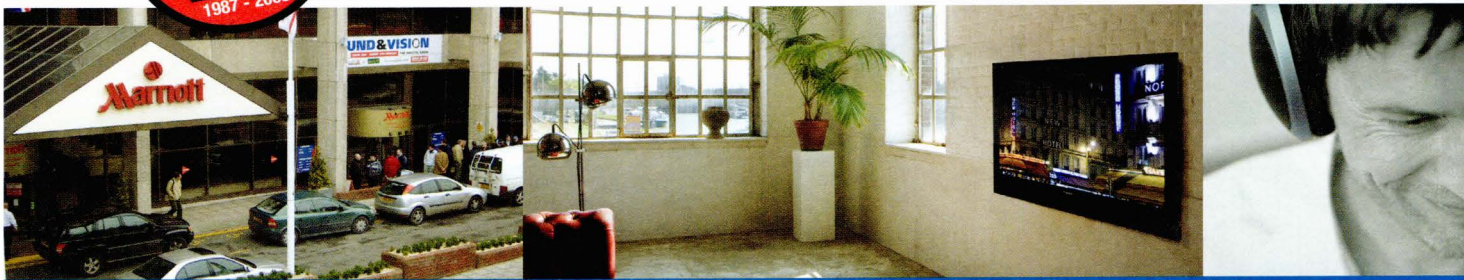
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Abbingdon Music Research CD-77 CD Player

by Roy Gregory

Press releases which announce some new company that's going to set new standards in CD reproduction/amplification/speaker design are not exactly news. In a market where hyperbole is all too often a substitute for considered commentary, terms like "best", "best in show", "best on the planet", even "best in the universe" cease to have much relevance, with everybody claiming to be "best" at something. The result is to discard such claims with perhaps a shade too much jaded cynicism and await events. Often, the product never emerges (at least not in any stable form) and the company simply disappears. There are however, always exceptions to every rule...

When Abbingdon Music Research announced a new range of "Reference Class" products we greeted the news with the usually mix of interest and scepticism, the establishment of a watching brief. And watch we did, as months passed and products appeared in dealers and at shows with remarkable consistency demonstrating if nothing else, that here at least was a going concern; and one whose products demanded to be taken just as seriously as AMR take themselves, at least if the universally accepted "vertical displacement assessment of audio quality" is to be believed. Just try picking up the AMR CD-77 and you'll see what I mean. At 28kg this player weighs more than

many serious power amps, despite being more compact than most of them. Not that you'd exactly describe the CD-77 as small. But once you start to examine this player in detail the one thing that becomes abundantly clear is just how assiduously the designers have ticked every single audiophile box.



AMR's CD player is presented in a substantial single-box chassis that it shares with the company's 180-Watt hybrid integrated amp. The foursquare dimensions and tall front-panel are softened by the gentle backward curve of the fascia with its massive display panel. Thankfully, the display itself is rather more modest in size, although large enough to read from a decent distance. Five beautifully executed touch-sensitive buttons cover the basic commands with everything else you could reasonably require included

on the solidly executed touch screen remote (which illuminates in matching blue to allow operation in the dark).

But the real story becomes apparent once your gaze takes in the top-panel. In front of the enormous, machined logo, a sliding lid covers the top-loading transport. Open it and you see the curved walls of the transport well, compliantly mounted to the massive chassis. The transport itself is a carefully selected mix of Philips and Sony parts, driven by a specially selected motor and assembled by AMR into the underside of their own CNC machined housing, complete with its own integral spirit level. The disc is anchored in place using a large footprint magnetic clamp, and the entire transport section is flooded with blue light from a ring of LEDs set in the underside of the chassis top-plate, light that leaks eerily from the other significant visual feature, the two rows of three windows that flank the transport lid. Actually they're not really windows, slots on either side providing ventilation for the valves employed in the dual-mono analogue output stages (I said they'd ticked all the boxes). The rear panel carries single-ended and (transformer coupled) impedance balanced analogue outputs, but no digital output. This might seem like an oversight at first, but actually is

▶ simply another manifestation of AMR's confidence in the abilities of their product. The heart of the CD-77 is its sophisticated DAC implementation, so why would you want to bypass it? Instead, there's a mini-USB digital input, allowing you to take advantage of the onboard DAC with external sources. Why all the fuss about the converter? Well, that's where the AMR really does break new ground, not so much in terms of hardware, but in the way in which it has been implemented.

Converter is the established Philips TDA1541A, allowing the use of external digital and analogue filtering, in this case the latest complex programmable devices from TI. This digital combination allows the user to select from six different filter arrangements via a single button on the remote control. Crucially, these options include two that eliminate the digital filter altogether (one with analogue filtering, the other without) along with choices of two or four-times over-sampling or up-sampling to 96 or 192kHz – which pretty much covers all the bases, digitally speaking. AMR take great care to optimise the operating parameters of both devices, as well as providing a single, temperature optimised master clock that is different, but crucially in the company's opinion, all the other clocks throughout the entire system are synchronised to, in order to reduce jitter. Power supply is extensive as you might expect, and heavily regulated too, with a separate power line for each functional block within the circuit. However, what makes it special is that each feed is regulated according to purpose,

delivering a supply optimised to the function of the devices in question (low-noise, low-impedance etc). The main supply is itself extremely an sophisticated linear design, providing both filtering of noise and waveform correction, as well as auto-adaptation to any voltage standard connected to it.

Internally, component quality is excellent with each individual item



carefully selected, heavily plated circuit boards and textbook implementations rather than cut corners. Each mono analogue output stage is a zero-feedback, pure tube design, built around a 6CA4 rectifier feeding an ECC81 gain stage and 5687 output buffer, delivering good linearity and low output impedance. All tubes are NOS. Built into the outer portions of the chassis, the internal sections are carefully divided by solid copper plates, while purposely mixed materials and dimensions are used to further minimize structural resonance. Aerospace isolators are incorporated into the feet to reduce the impact of external vibration and AMR supply single-ended interconnects, a superior mains lead, a USB lead and a burn-in disc, all to help ensure that you achieve optimum performance. They even go

the extra mile to make sure it arrives in one piece, packing the whole kit and caboodle in a foam-lined flightcase. But the best news of all is that this single-handed assault on the high-end weighs in at what, given its constructional and component quality, fit, finish and presentation, seems like a bargain price. Line this up alongside the vast majority of £10K audiophile players and it makes them look cheap, in some cases downright shoddy.

Yet the AMR costs "only" £4400.

Not exactly pocket-money I grant you, but definitely material value in today's market place.

So, like I said, it's ticked pretty much every audiophile box, it looks the part and the price is definitely right, but does the sonic whole add up to more than the sum of the parts? In a word – absolutely.

This impressive

players steps straight into the slot next to the Muse Erato II as the new benchmark for serious high-end performance. Of course, in doing so it also offers a stark contrast to that machine, its dedicated CD-only stance and heavyweight build as resolutely traditional as the American player's modular, multi-format approach is current. That fact alone will tend to leave you gravitating in one direction or the other, but the sonic contrast is just as stark, the Muse's unforced evenness and easy separation of instruments quite distinct from the fuller and more dynamically forceful style of the CD-77.

Which brings us to the nub of the question; which CD-77? For in truth this is six players in one. However, I can make things somewhat simpler than that. AMR are firm advocates of their digital filterless outputs, dubbed Digital Master I and II, and I concur. In comparison I find the over and ▶

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► up-sampled outputs (especially the 192kHz filter) more detailed, more focussed and transparent – but also thinner and lacking in the sense of sure-footed tempo and coherent musical sweep that comes from the un-filtered outputs. There’s a presence, body and engaging momentum to the latter that won me over immediately. Of the two settings, DM I sounds sweet but slightly heavy and shut-in. The analogue filtering employed on DM II adds air, light and energy to the top-end, balancing the weight and substance at low-frequencies making the most of the player’s expressive coherence and sense of musical involvement.

But there’s a coda here.

Experience shows me that I value a well-executed filterless DAC just as surely as I tend to shy away from up-sampling, but not everybody agrees. I spent considerable time listening with both the 192kHz and the 4x over-sampling filters, because I really wanted to be sure that my preference for the DM II output was a stable, long-term judgement. Along the way I learnt that despite the subtle synthetic sheen that I detect with up-sampling, along with the temporal disturbance and lack of natural flow in the music I also expect, these artefacts were significantly reduced with the AMR and certainly far less intrusive than I’ve ever experienced before. The bottom line? Don’t assume that just because you are a listener who values the transparency and focus that comes with digital interpolation that the CD-77 isn’t for you. Unlike many machines the different yet exactly engineered choices on offer here are both genuine and legitimate. I prefer DM II: those troubled by brighter systems might find DM I the perfect panacea while the listener looking for the sort of precision that delivers detail without dismantling the music might well reach straight for the 192kHz output. Each choice is individual and

equally valid. The important thing is that the AMR allows you to make that choice rather than simply living with the designer’s preference.

Having said that, let’s get back to my preference and the considerable enjoyment I’ve extracted from the CD-77 in its filterless mode. Comparing the ultra-purist, zero-filtering option of Digital Master I to the analogue only filtered Digital Master II is interesting indeed. Both settings (switchable, along with the other filter options via a single button on the remote) deliver substance, weight and a sense of natural flow to the music. The first thing that strikes you is the extra air and space, the lighter balance of DM II, but the more you listen the more musically fundamental the contrast becomes, the analogue filter offering a lighter, quicker and more agile reproduction, with a natural sense of position and separation between instruments, a greater sense of pace and momentum in the music. In comparison DM I sounds dull and actually rhythmically

restrained, slowing the tempo in the music. Julia Fischer’s recent



Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto* (on Pentagram, and just as good as RSF claims) is the perfect example. Switching from DM I to DM II infuses the music with a lightness of touch and energy that underlines Kreisberg’s control of tempo, the restraint he’s imposing and the tension he creates before the first solo entry, a palpable anticipation

that’s carried forward on a burgeoning orchestral swell that totally escapes DM I. Fischer’s opening phrases are equally telling: slow and measured on DM I, switch settings and they gain a sense of fluidity and grace, a slowly increasing tempo emerges that adds drama to their obvious lyrical qualities. It’s about letting the music speak and DM II simply allows the musicians a greater vocabulary, a greater range of expression and as a result, far more dramatic performances.

Overall, the sound of this player is engagingly lively, pacy and substantial. I suppose comparisons with Audio Research’s top-loading, valve output CD7 are inevitable, especially given its “ever-present” status around here. Indeed, in many respects the players are more alike than different – no bad thing for the AMR. Used directly on a finite element rack the CD-77 sounds at once solid but somewhat homogenous, images and instruments bleeding into each other to create a single, compact block of sound. There’s also a subtle but persistent glossy hollowness to its mid-band tonality. Compared to the ARC, the British built machine lacks the expansive soundstage and sheer range of texture and colour conjured by its American counterpart, but offers better bass definition and transparency whilst sharing the sense of easy, unimpeded musical momentum.

However, we can improve things. Despite AMR’s protestations to the contrary, I find that the CD-77 (just like the ARC) does indeed benefit from attention

to its support. Inserting three Stillpoints cones to bypass the soft feet opened out the soundstage, improved separation and the focus and solidity of individual instruments and voices and banished most of that hollowness from the tonality. Likewise, leaving the player running for extended periods improves its tonal range, overall fluidity and

▶ low-level detail. In this form, the urgency that underpins the Cure's *Seventeen Seconds*, the step-change in tempo between 'A Reflection' and 'Play For Today' is beautifully portrayed, the first deliberate but with a coiled anticipation, the second explosively forceful, forging ahead in a helter-skelter rush. Likewise, the bi-axial juxtaposition that opens 'M' works to perfection, the keyboard whoosh that travels left to right having a studied inevitability, an even progress and eventual impact that most players fail to deliver where vinyl succeeds so handsomely. The solid snare and bass drum doublets that characterize the album have real snap and impact to count against the solid thud and weight lower down, driving the track forward. Indeed, this ability to lean into the music is one of the AMR's real strengths.

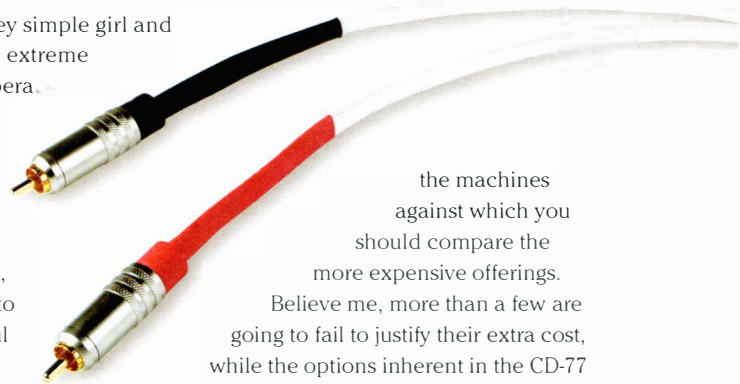
With the added temporal and spatial definition delivered by careful siting and long-term use, the AMR's homogeneity becomes a virtue, offering a combination of evenness and substance top to bottom that is rare indeed. In this important respect it surpasses the Audio Research, whose nicely timed bottom end is nevertheless exposed for its roundness and lack of shape. Nor is this a musical quality that's exclusively applicable to rock and pop music. Classical music and in particular the wider romantic repertoire really responds to the AMR's presentation, with orchestral contrasts of dramatic scale and compass. The sense of body and presence

platters voices, be they simple girl and guitar or the far more extreme demands of grand opera.


Anna Netrebko's Valentina in the Rizzi/Vienna *La Traviata* has a range and power that justifies the hype, the CD-77 managing to convey her wonderful voice in all its glory (and Villazon isn't too bad either!).

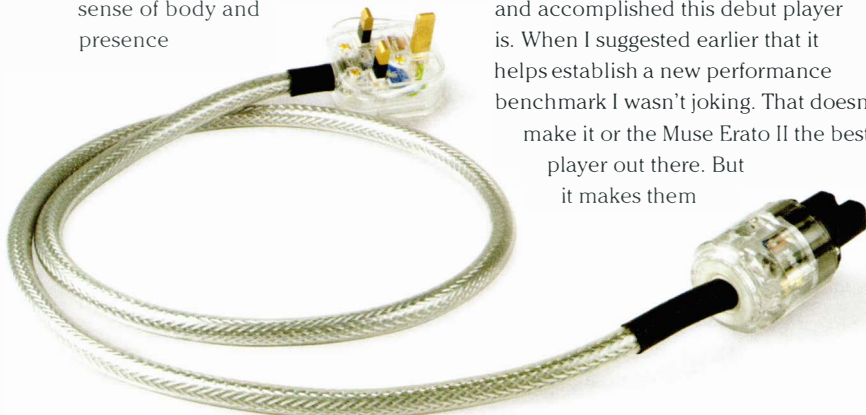
It's this ability to rise to meet the qualities in a performance, to match the scale and drama that makes the AMR so special, elevating it into exclusive company indeed. Whether it's a stretched out, bluesy jazz line, slashing guitar heroics or a beautifully turned orchestral phrase, this player allows the music to deliver, allowing you to relax and enjoy it.

There will be those who demand greater precision, separation and transparency, those who choose a Krell Evo 505 over the Audio Research CD7. Whilst the sound I've enjoyed from the AMR is firmly on the Audio Research side of that see-saw, don't discard the player's up-sampling options if you find yourself leaning the other way. Indeed, with some modern and particularly murky pro-tooled recordings, the added incisiveness of the interpolated signal actually helped deliver a welcome degree of insight amidst the fog. It also helped to underline just how versatile and accomplished this debut player is. When I suggested earlier that it helps establish a new performance benchmark I wasn't joking. That doesn't make it or the Muse Erato II the best player out there. But it makes them



the machines against which you should compare the more expensive offerings.

Believe me, more than a few are going to fail to justify their extra cost, while the options inherent in the CD-77 will broaden its appeal considerably. AMR might not have set out to make a machine that offers all things to all men, but they've got astonishingly close to doing so... 



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single-box CD player
Input:	1x USB
Transport:	Top-loading proprietary
DAC:	Philips TDA1541A
Filters:	User selectable filterless, up and over-sampling
Output Stage:	Dual-mono valve
Tube Complement (NOS):	2x ECC81 2x 5687 2x 6CA4
Outputs:	1pr single-ended phono 1pr balanced XLR
Output Level:	2V
Output Impedance:	<150 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	460 x 160 x 470mm
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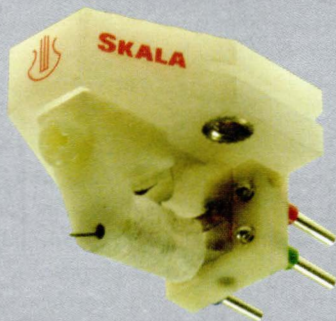
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LYRA
Connoisseur

Mists and mellow fruitfulness? The Cairn Fog3 CD Player

by Steve Dickinson



"You're sending me a *what?*"

"Cairn... Fog3... Yes, really. Follow-up to the Fog2, in case you were wondering."

I was. Evidently, there had been enough takers for Fogs 1 & 2 to perpetuate the line.

"They're French."

"Ah"

Disappointingly, out of a scattering of meteorological product names, Mistral, Bora and so-on, there's currently only the one unit celebrating the murky allure of cold, damp, airborne vapour.

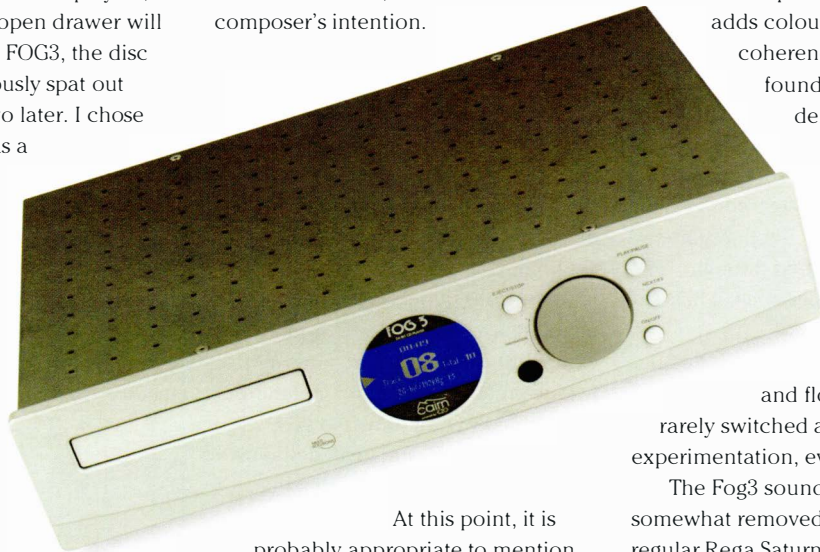
A few days later, having arrived, the nomenclature made no more sense than it had on the phone. This is a substantial unit, its 10Kg weight making many amplifiers feel under-endowed. No mileage in Scotch mist analogies here, alas. The casework is finished attractively in grey Nextel textured paint, with a substantial aluminium front plate bearing a curved chamfer at the bottom which, to my eyes, does nothing to enhance this otherwise attractive unit. A large circular display, adjacent to a large circular control knob (also finished in the suede-like Nextel finish), defines the look, while a scattering of buttons provide the regular control functions. There is a remote control, basic in feel and appearance and, although perfectly effective, not in keeping with the quality of the unit itself (a rather funkier system remote is available as an extra-cost option). The manual is somewhat vague, partly I suspect due to hasty translation. Basic functions are well-enough described, but a large part of this unit's functionality lies in the user-configurable options available via an on-screen menu and selected by use of the control knob, a process barely more than alluded to in the brief manual provided to me. Owners are encouraged to experiment, it would seem. Similarly, if the distributor hadn't mentioned it, I'd have been unaware that the unit is also a digital ▶

► pre-amplifier, although the digital-in connections on the rear panel make it clear that the DAC can be used by an external source, not an option I tried. In fairness, I believe this unit is early-production, so items like the user manual should be sorted out by the time product hits the street.

Citroën owners may recognise the Gallic eccentricity of some of the controls. The manual suggests a long press of the power button to switch on, a short one for off. In truth, two short presses are rewarded by power-on, a long press producing naught but a long wait. Also, on most CD players, a gentle push of the open drawer will load a CD, but in the FOG3, the disc will be unceremoniously spat out again a second or two later. I chose not to interpret this as a comment on my musical tastes. Use the open/close button or live in silence, apparently. The numeric keypad on the remote control is the wrong way up, like a computer keypad rather than a phone, as is more common. Finally, there's a pair of large Vol+ and Vol- buttons, which don't do anything here. To adjust the digital pre-amp output you look elsewhere for a Level+ and Level- pairing. Bless! Mind you, to its credit, the Fog3 loads a disc rather more quickly than many high-end players, and direct-entry of a track number is simply a matter of keying in the digits.

The first impression is of a tight, fast, dynamic sound; Flat-Earthers form a queue here. But happily the baby is still in the bathwater, because the sound is also beautifully nuanced, colourful and with plenty of depth and sense of instrumental placement.

Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (DG 427 806-2) displays a very good sense of musical intent and interpretation, thanks to immaculate timing and pace, and a commendable lack of congestion in the denser sections. The Barber *Adagio for Strings* from the same CD betrays a slight papery sheen to massed strings, and the climactic, soaring crescendos still contain an element of tweeter-melting shrillness at their very height, but in this case the contrast with the immediate stillness that follows is very affecting, and I'd argue that you can't have the one without the other, doubtless the composer's intention.



At this point, it is probably appropriate to mention the filters. The Fog3 comes with four digital filter settings, labelled f0 to f3, accessed either by the control knob, or more quickly via the remote. They can be changed on the fly, but I found it instructive to pause, reset, then replay to best get a feel for what they do. Two characteristics are adjustable, what are described as "group delay" and "frequency" or "time" domains. You can opt for a short group delay, and optimisation of the interpolation in either frequency or time domains, or for a long group delay, again with optimisation for frequency or time, making four settings available to the user. The long group delay is, apparently,

similar to most standard offerings, the short group delay promises benefits in avoiding harshness at the high frequency extreme. Optimisation in the frequency domain may offer a smoother frequency response, but at the expense of transients, while optimisation of the time domain is tighter, but frequency response may be compromised. In practice, the options are fairly subtle, short group delay sounds a little like a very gentle roll-off at the top end, and might be of benefit if you find the Barber *Adagio* just a little too acid for your taste. Frequency optimisation adds colour, but loses some coherence. Personally, I found f1 (long group delay, time domain optimisation) was my own Goldilocks setting, offering a good mix of tonal colour with energetic dynamics

and flow, and I rarely switched after my initial experimentation, even for the Barber.

The Fog3 sound is confident, somewhat removed from that of my regular Rega Saturn. Tonal colour is less expressive, but it more than makes up for that in timing and sheer tunefulness. Having grown fond of the Saturn's fulsome sound over the months in its company, I dropped it back in the system for comparison partway through the review process. It didn't stay there very long. The Rega is transparent but also lush, majoring on instrumental colour, but as a communicator of musical intent it is left far behind by the Cairn. To be fair, the Cairn costs half as much again as the Rega, so context is relevant as always, but I for one wouldn't find it hard to justify the extra cost. A good example: large-scale choral stuff, *Judex Crederis* from the ►

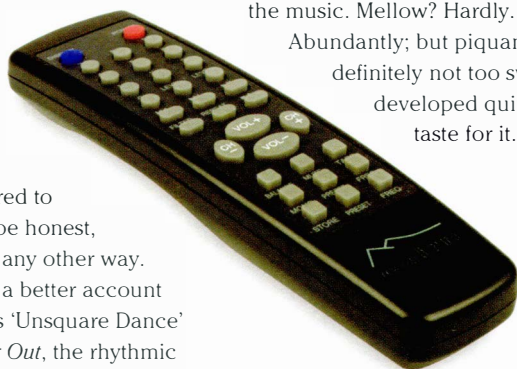
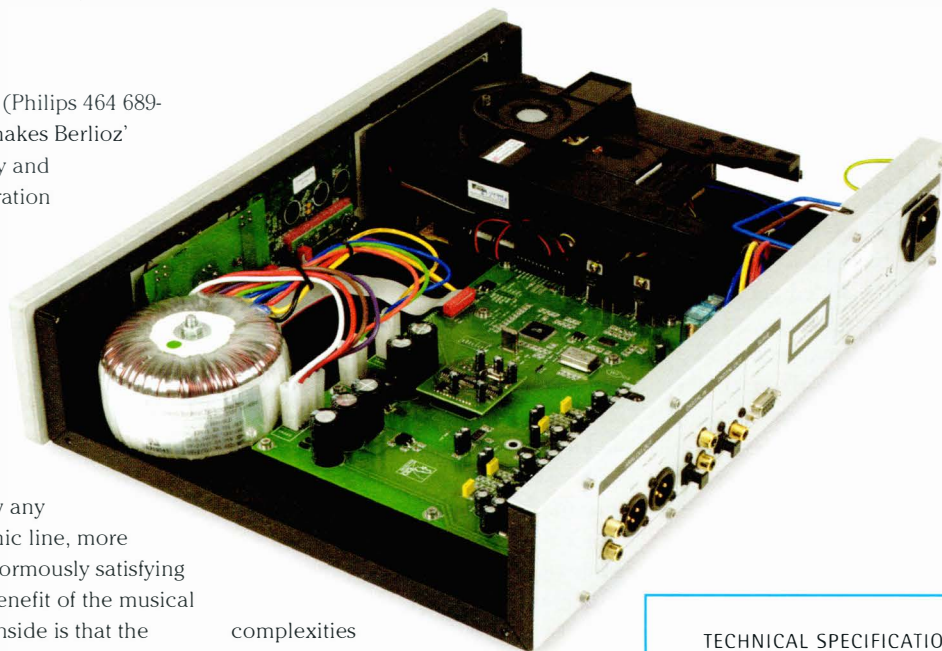
► Berlioz "Te Deum" (Philips 464 689-2), and the Cairn makes Berlioz' intricate polyphony and mastery of orchestration very apparent. The dense, complex layering of large musical forces is very well controlled and presented. Even in the most dramatic passages the ability to follow any melodic or harmonic line, more or less at will, is enormously satisfying and much to the benefit of the musical message. The downside is that the sense of atmosphere and acoustic space is slightly compromised in the pursuit of that separation and insight. John Tavener's *Song for Athene* (HMV 5 74050 2) is, I believe, recorded in Winchester cathedral, but that sense of vastness is diminished through the Cairn. To use wine-speak, it has a shorter finish.

Dusting down Rickie Lee Jones' first album, and playing 'On Saturday Afternoon in 1963', the Fog3 was absolutely on the money. Tunefulness and timing, touchstones for musical communication, were both elegantly portrayed in this delightful vignette; 'Last Chance Texaco' was full of crystalline guitars but not short of richness either. Patricia Barber's 'Mourning Grace' from *Café Blue* (Blue Note 7243 5 21810 2 5) was compelling: the tight, fast ostinato accompaniment had just the right degree of relentlessness and if the tonality was just a shade dry compared to the Rega well, to be honest, I wouldn't have it any other way. I've not yet heard a better account of Dave Brubeck's 'Unsquare Dance' from *Time Further Out*, the rhythmic

complexities leaving the Fog3 quite spectacularly unfazed.

My experience of CD players in this price range suggests that you can either get timing and dynamics, or dimensionality and colour. To get both, you need to significantly increase your budget. The Cairn certainly leans towards the former camp, but as the latter are attributes I value greatly it is significant, I think, that I found myself drawn to this player regardless, and I will definitely miss it when it goes back. Messing with the filters will give more colour, but at too high a cost for me. The Fog3 has helped me discover my inner Flat-Earther. Make no mistake, it does have depth and space in abundance, but what it also has is an unshakeable sense of musical flow, an unbreakable steel thread which pulls you through the music. Mellow? Hardly. Fruitful?

Abundantly; but piquant and definitely not too sweet. I've developed quite a taste for it. ►+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	One-box CD player with digital inputs
DAC:	Four x 24-bit, up-sampling to 192KHz, four user-selectable digital filter options
Inputs:	2x coaxial digital RCA/phono 2x Toslink optical digital
Outputs:	1x coaxial digital RCA/phono 1x Toslink optical digital 1pr single-ended analogue RCA/phono 1pr balanced analogue XLR
Output Level:	2.0V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432 x 102 x 312mm
Weight:	10Kg
Finish:	Silver
Price:	£1995.00
Guarantee:	2 years
Number of UK Dealers:	10
UK Distributor:	
Hi-Fi Brokers	
Net. www.hifibrokers.co.uk	
Manufacturer:	
EZO SARL, France	
Tel. +44 (0)1422 372110	
Net. www.icairn.fr	

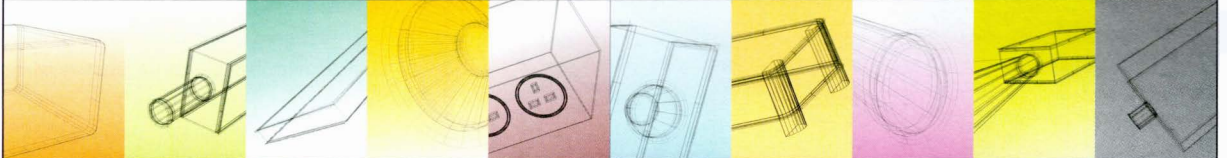
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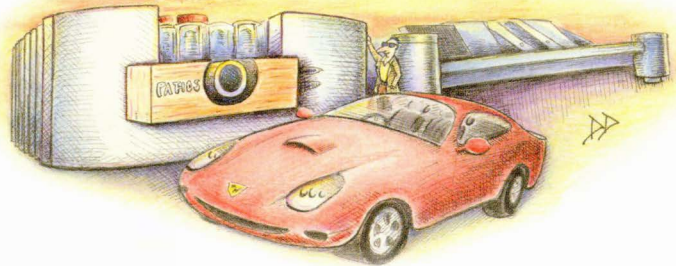
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Denon DCD-1500AE SACD Player

by Jason Kennedy



Unlike many manufacturers Denon still makes at least some of its hardware in Japan, a fact that certainly separates the company from almost all of its competition in the budget audio sector. It's remarkable that it can build such competitive products without relying on cheap labour from the PRC. But the DCD-1500AE is a £500 player with "Made in Japan" written on both box and product – let's hope it's not just a case of 'assembled in' as can be found with some 'Made in England' products. Denon is part of a Japanese conglomerate called D&M Holdings, which also owns Marantz and McIntosh alongside Snell and Boston Acoustics. Being part of something so big must give it opportunities to keep costs down, but given the nature of the organisation profitability is still fundamental. However, despite that reality, this player still cares enough about performance to claim a UK-tuned sound.

Today's DCD-1500AE is an SACD/CD player, but it's a product designation that many readers will remember from the halcyon days as being a benchmark among mid-market CD players, one of the first 16bit 4x o/s machines and the most affordable player to make serious music. Back then if you couldn't afford a Meridian 207 it was the DCD-1500 you aimed for. It even had a variable output option, encouraging early experiments with direct connection to power amps. I have to admit that it's a name that I had forgotten but a quick search revealed its 1985 vintage and the fondness with which it is regarded is reflected in the fact that people are still using and tinkering with them today. Perhaps oddly it is not referred to on the Denon website which mentions 1982's DCD-2000 as 'the world's first consumer use CD player', something that Philips and Sony might have difficulty agreeing with! That

▶ original DCD-1500 also cemented Denon's reputation for build quality with its battleship construction. A MkII version was released in 1987 which featured Lambda processing, a pre-cursor to the Alpha processing still in use today so perhaps the nomenclature isn't as fanciful as it seems.

The new DCD-1500AE is still a fairly chunky machine given its asking price, if not quite as hefty as its namesake. It has a shaped aluminium fascia and the sort of folded steel

chassis that you find on most affordable electronics these days, along with the usual selection of socketry for digital and analogue outputs. Operationally it is very smooth; you'll not hear this drawer mechanism clunking about as you do with many smaller brands at far more elevated prices. This seems to be an area where the Japanese excel, giving their machines a reassuring sense of solid quality that the rest of the world struggles to match unless it purchases Japanese mechanisms. But from what one hears you have to be talking big numbers or big money to do this, so a lot of European brands end up with clunky Philips mechs which leave a lot to be desired in the swishness department.

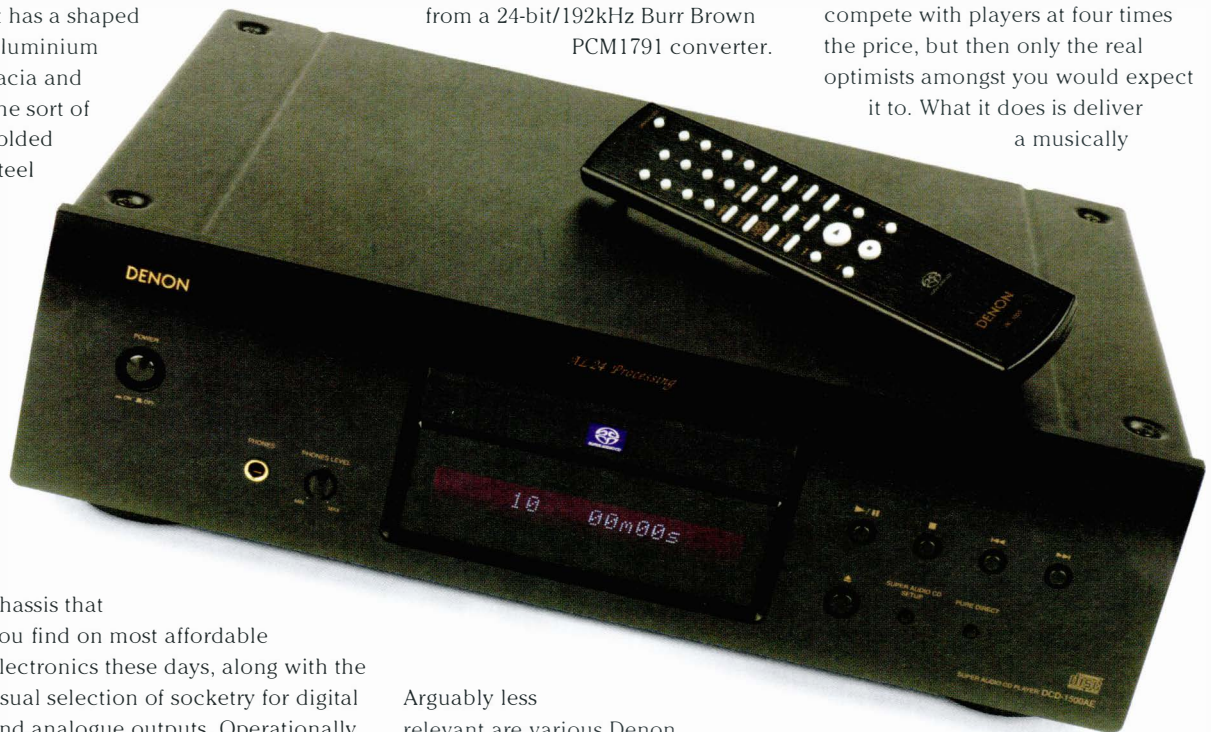
I notice Cyrus has gone over to slot drives now, which is one way of alleviating the problem.

It can't hurt that Denon makes a surprisingly wide range of CD players, considering that it also goes large on home cinema amplification and sources. With six models in the range it must have more than just about any other brand.

The DCD-1500AE sits two down from the top of this group and offers two-channel only SACD playback from a 24-bit/192kHz Burr Brown PCM1791 converter.

include text display for SACD only and a 'Pure Audio' option that leaves the machine looking dormant as all illumination is extinguished. What no flashing lights!

More importantly, and rather like its historical precursor, this Denon represents something of a sonic benchmark and is the best I've heard at its price point; possessing significantly more spirit and vitality than the competition it definitely warrants some attention. It doesn't compete with players at four times the price, but then only the real optimists amongst you would expect it to. What it does is deliver a musically



Arguably less relevant are various Denon specific features that include SVH (or Supress Vibration Hybrid, which despite sounding like something has been lost in translation indicates some means of stopping the chassis from resonating at the wrong frequencies) and AL24 processing, which according to the Denon glossary "supports multi-channel DVD-Audio for all channels" (which doesn't really help as in this case it clearly doesn't but we will assume that it is some form of DSP that's intended to improve resolution; that's usually the plan anyway). Foibles

engaging and revealing result for less than the price of a single speed hardtail (one of the sillier variations on the mountain bike theme, for all you non-cyclists out there). Or to give you an easier analogy, it costs less than a half decent moving-coil cartridge.

It is not, unfortunately, a giant slayer but you will have to spend around twice as much to get a worthwhile upgrade. Press the 'Pure Audio' button, which as well as defeating the display

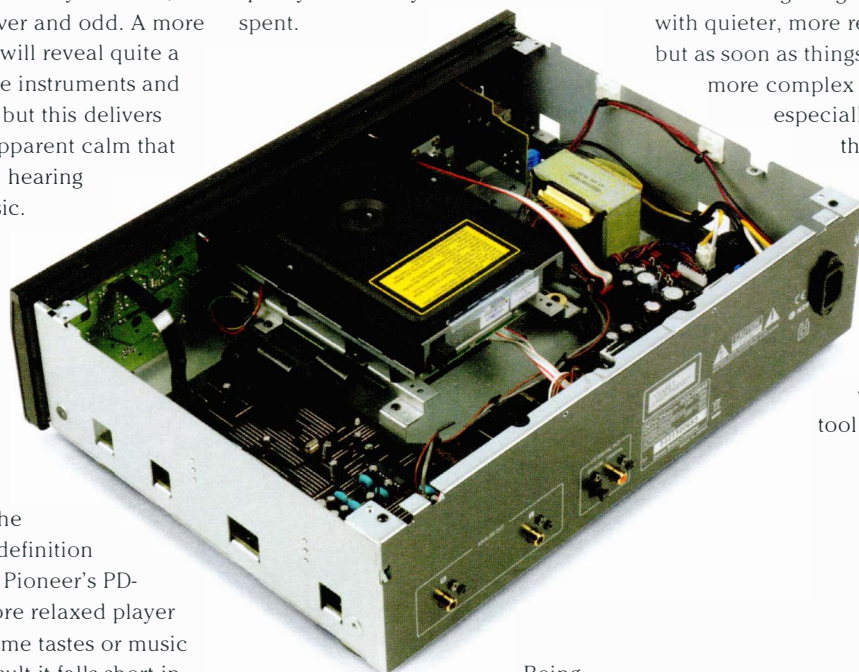


▶ also kills the digital output, and its qualities become apparent. These include impressive finesse thanks to the smooth clean nature of the presentation; so much so that it gives the impression of digging deeper into the detail than is actually the case, which is both clever and odd. A more expensive player will reveal quite a lot more about the instruments and voices in the mix but this delivers them with such apparent calm that you think you are hearing right into the music.

It also does a decent job in the timing department, pulling a groove along in a steady, consistent fashion thanks to a nimbleness in the bass and decent definition of leading edges. Pioneer's PD-D6 (£400) is a more relaxed player which will suit some tastes or music better but as a result it falls short in the temporal department with upbeat music. The Denon also betters it with SACD where its skills in producing good solid imagery come to the fore.

For many listeners, the ability to play SACDs will be a little extra icing on the cake, a nice freebie rather than a major reason to choose the DCD-1500AE over the CD-only competition. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't investigate the possibilities offered by these discs. The Denon might not do so much with the more refined format that you will feel compelled to search out the high definition discs at every opportunity, but it does enough to quietly and clearly reveal their relative strengths compared to CD. And it does so as well as the likes of Pioneer's new PD-D9 at £600. That machine has better build quality and arguably nicer (or at least more "high-end") looks, but it is so close in

character to the Denon that you can't really split them without resorting to minutiae, while the extra £100 you'll still have in your wallet/account/credit limit can make a serious difference to overall system quality if carefully spent.



Being a relatively affordable piece of equipment the DCD-1500AE does inevitably have its shortcomings but these should not be too obvious in an appropriately priced system. Specifically, the high frequencies are not as solid and pure as dearer players and inevitably the dynamics are limited in absolute terms. That said it is a more dynamic machine than its rivals and this was one area in which it clearly distinguished itself, something that is quite likely to be related to the UK tuning factor. Pure Japanese Denons tend to be a little too refined, for my UK tastes at least, but this avoids that particular trap.

This incarnation of the DCD-1500, despite the aforementioned tuning, is also more refined sounding than its UK designed competitors. Cambridge's popular Azur 740C at the

same price point has a considerably more gritty and forward character, which might make it more appealing with less transparent systems so long as they are not too bright. Even in an unsuitably high-end system the Cambridge might have an edge with quieter, more relaxed music, but as soon as things get heavier,

more complex or more lively, especially with material

that you want to play at full bore, then the Denon's smooth, relaxed character and musical versatility is the tool for the job. ▶+

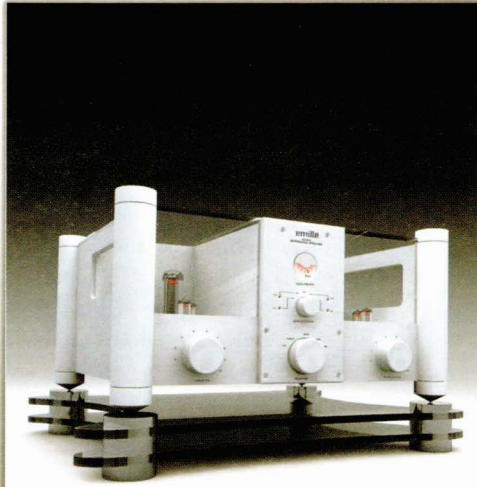
TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	One-box stereo CD/SACD player
DAC:	24bit, 192Hz Burr Brown
Outputs:	1pr single-ended analogue RCA/phone 1x coaxial digital RCA/phone 1x TosLink optical digital 1x headphone socket
Output Level:	2V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	434 x 135 x 331mm
Weight:	7.6kg
Finishes:	Black, silver
Price:	£500
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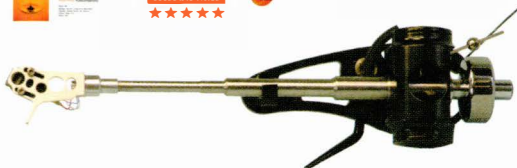
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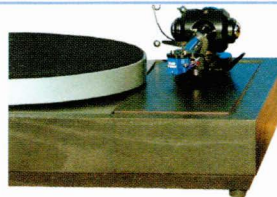
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Bryston BCD-1 CD player

by Alan Sircom



Unlike many electronics companies in the hi-fi business, the Canadian Bryston company was a digital hold-out. Yes, it has included DACs in its integrated amp and pre-amp for some time, but to make a whole CD player... that was someone else's job. Technically, Bryston claims it held back on producing the BCD-1 until such time as digital audio was mature enough to achieve the same performance as the company gets from its amplification, but we suspect there's a hint of 21st Century hi-finomics at play, too; very, very few people buy just an amp today, and people seem to think systemically, even if the products are reviewed solo. So, the BCD-1 is necessary for those who wouldn't consider buying an amplifier without having at least a CD player from the same brand in tow.

On the face of it, there's not much to differentiate the BCD-1 from other CD players currently on the market. It's a Red Book standard spinner, capable of supporting CD and CD-R. It features a 24bit, 192kHz over-sampling DAC (a hand-selected Crystal CS4398, if we are being specific) and discrete Class A amplifiers specially made for that chip in the output stage. Yes, it has both balanced and single-ended analogue outputs, fully isolated digital Toslink, AES/EBU and S/PDIF connections, an easy-read, two-deck LCD readout and has an RS232 port for firmware updates, but even this hardly separates the BCD-1 from the middle-range CD players. So, what's so special?

Paradoxically, it's the distinct lack of 'special' that makes it so, er, special. There are no fancy tube output stages, no filterless, zero times oversampling converters, no special fairy dust sprinkled over feet made of spun gold or the rarest hardwood in existence. No CD draw painted with special inks and no remote control penned by a sports car designer in a spare moment. It's a bullshit-free product in a bullshit world, and that it is ▶

► super-glued to the Red Book standard only serves to highlight just how many liberties are taken with that notional standard for disc play.

Okay, so there is a little more than just commonplace Red Book build. Like the jitter-busting concept of using the same master clock to drive both transport and DAC stage and a well-constructed analogue power stage with a goodly sized toroidal transformer. Essentially though, the BCD-1 is a good CD player built with a full-on belt-and-braces approach to making digital audio.

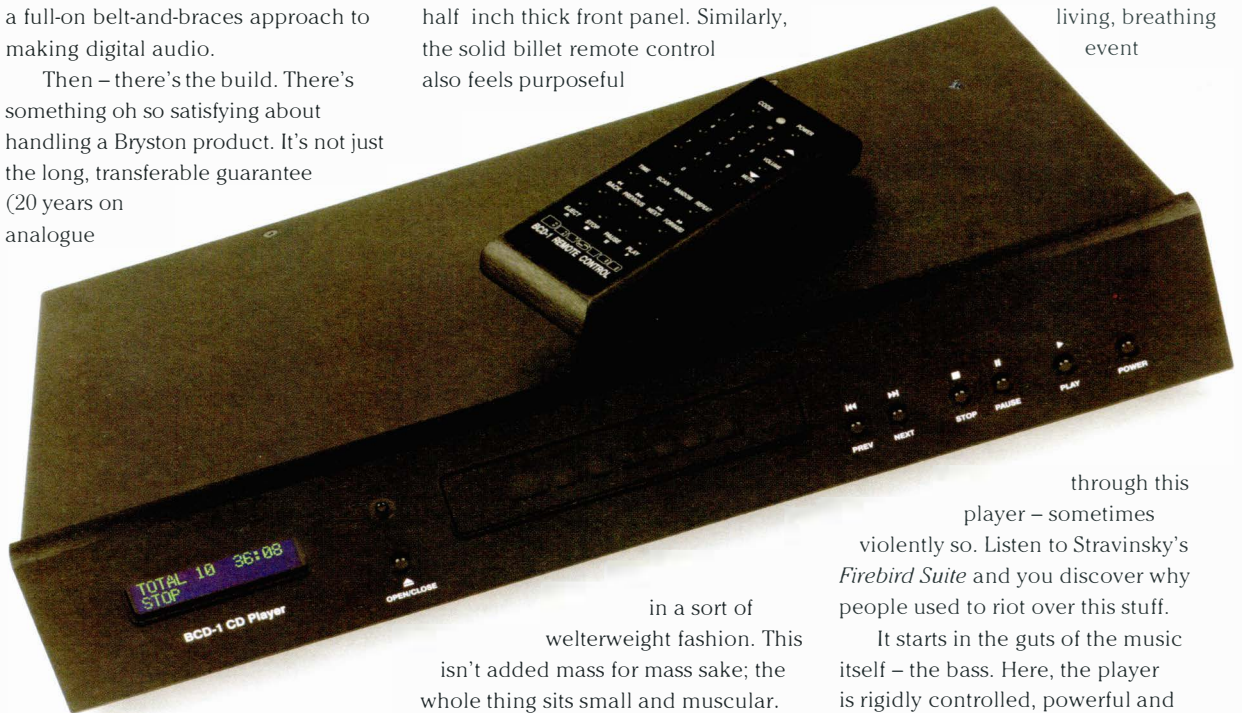
Then – there’s the build. There’s something oh so satisfying about handling a Bryston product. It’s not just the long, transferable guarantee (20 years on analogue

computer and weigh as much as the desk itself. There isn’t the same necessity to over-engineer a CD player (it’s a temptation that should be resisted if at all possible, as over-engineered players usually suffer in the sound quality stakes). So the BCD-1 is a slimmer device than most Bryston products, standing just 2.8” high and just over 11” deep (irrespective of whether you chose the 17” or 19” sized version). It’s still a heavy player, due to the solid aluminium case and close to half inch thick front panel. Similarly, the solid billet remote control also feels purposeful

players, they seem set on digging out the beauty inherent in any piece of music. Sounds are polished, refined and mannered, as if everything has been played through a Mendelssohn filter. We bask in a sumptuously deep soundstage and listen to the instrumental microdynamics. Trouble is, sometimes this audiophile majesty can lead to a bloodless performance.

The last thing you could ever say of the BCD-1 is that it is ‘bloodless’.

Music is a visceral,
living, breathing
event



circuits, five on digital ones) or the thick, slightly cheesy Bryston name laser cut into the cover for the transport. Or even the fact that the company’s products have a big following in the studio world. It’s that all things Bryston are just so ‘built’. It’s nice to own a CD player that could survive a HALO drop. It’s reassuring that – in the event of nuclear Armageddon – the small enclave of cockroach survivors will have something to play their discs on.

Of course, Bryston built its reputation on über-butcher power amplifiers that are the size of a desktop

in a sort of welterweight fashion. This isn’t added mass for mass sake; the whole thing sits small and muscular.

We’ve become so used to products that demand a hundred hours of running in that we forget what a joy no-nonsense players like the BCD-1 are. Yes, you can leave it running in if you like. You can use it with crazy cable costing more than the player itself if you choose. It doesn’t seem to bother the player one iota. It sounds good, whether you treat it with kid gloves or utter contempt.

Of course, there’s good sound and good sound, and once again we’re presented with something wholly different from most high-end players. When we listen to many

through this player – sometimes violently so. Listen to Stravinsky’s *Firebird Suite* and you discover why people used to riot over this stuff.

It starts in the guts of the music itself – the bass. Here, the player is rigidly controlled, powerful and tactile, yet possessed of a very rhythmic drive to the sound. No matter how intricate the bass line – and we are talking Chapman Stick virtuosity or Kraftwerk-grade precision polyrhythms – the BCD-1 takes control of the bottom end like it was born with Mole grips in its transport mechanism.

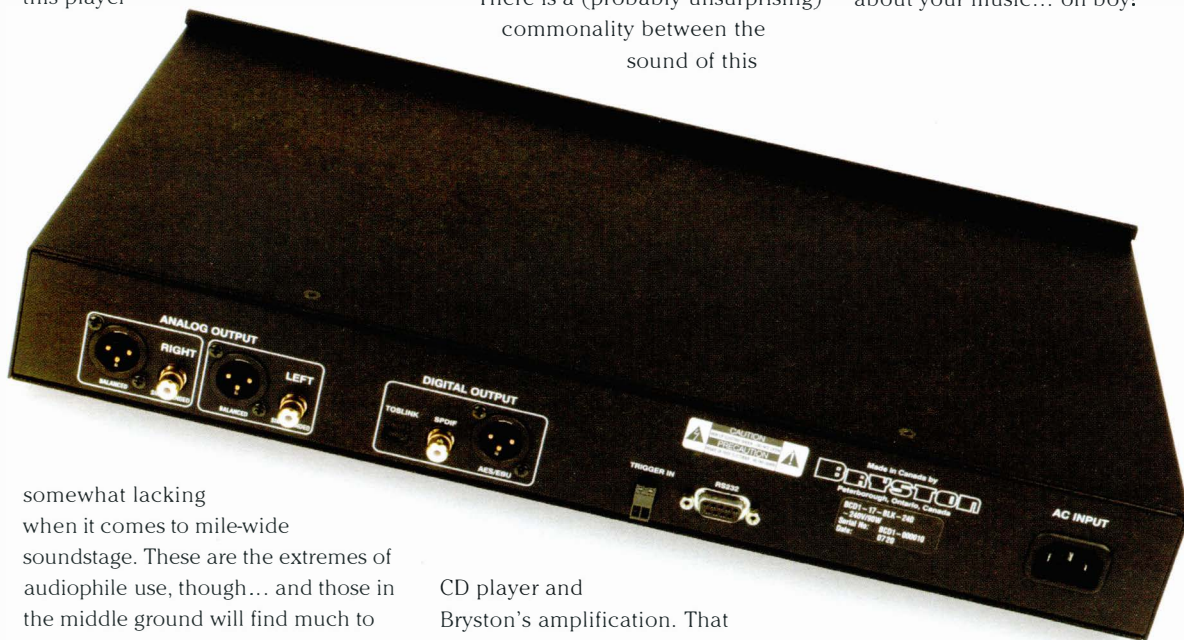
Don’t imagine the sound is as big as it is powerful; this is a tightly controlled, dry and taut performer. Some will find the dryness of the sound too arid and light – those who live for rhythm often use amplifiers and speakers that can

▶ sound lean, and the addition of this player could pitch that over the edge. Also, those who have engineered their sound for a mellifluous, sumptuous performance might find this player

soundstage. And neither did the mid-band let the side down. It might not have the transparency of top-notch players, but neither is it veiled or sat upon in the midrange.

There is a (probably unsurprising) commonality between the sound of this

appeal to those who like their music slightly softened and beautifully presented, but if you love music for the experience and use the words 'soul', 'feel' or 'passion' when talking about your music... oh boy! ➤+



somewhat lacking when it comes to mile-wide soundstage. These are the extremes of audiophile use, though... and those in the middle ground will find much to like in the BCD-1.

If you selected your system on the grounds of absolute accuracy then you will love the precision of the Bryston player, but for once this precision is allied to a sense of musical enjoyment and insight both into the music and the performance that's very alluring. It's an earthy precision; you get the feeling of peering round the door of the recording studio control room, but you also get the feeling of musical entertainment rather than musical analysis.

The acid test of any CD player with the Bryston's character is the brass section of an orchestra. Too stark and the player turns French Horns into powerful oboes; too brash and the brass dominates the orchestral sound entire. Here it trod carefully between the two, giving a sense of insight into the music, even if this is not the sort of CD player that readily lets you listen into the

CD player and Bryston's amplification. That powerful, highly rhythmic and slightly toppy sound found on Bryston amps appears here. Strangely though, I don't think this will undermine the overall Bryston sound. It will not sound more toppy or bright when CD and amp are partnered together... instead it will just sound bright and bold and energetic. It's also little wonder that Bryston and PMC have a close connection; judging by the BCD-1, the sound is very studio-like in its directness and accuracy. It's a player that ticks all the right boxes, which is more than many rivals do. Much of what you are enjoying on other, similarly priced players is deviation from the Red Book standard. Personally, I prefer this more precise approach, even if it's perhaps not the most immediately gratifying.

Ultimately, if this player doesn't stir the blood, you should get checked over for anaemia. The Bryston BCD-1 is never going to

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated CD player
DAC:	Crystal 192k/24bit DAC, 128x o/s
Analogue Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA 1pr balanced XLR
Output Levels:	2.3V single-ended 4.6V balanced
Digital Outputs:	1x co-axial S/Pdif 1x balanced AES/EBU 1x optical TosLink
Finishes:	black and silver
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432 or 483 x 79 x 286mm
Weight:	8.2 kg
Price:	£2050
Guarantee:	5 years (digital parts) 20 years (analogue parts)
Number Of UK Dealers:	12

UK Distributor:
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33

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Coming Around Again... Thorens TD160HD Turntable

by Roy Gregory

"I know nothing stays the same..." at least, so sang Carly. But in hi-fi, as in life, there are touchstones, ever-presents, whose constancy both reassures and marks our passage: they may develop or evolve, fade from our affections only to re-emerge later, often reminding us along the way of a reality we'd perhaps chosen to forget. And let's be honest, wanton disregard for the facts is pretty much a prerequisite for audiophilia nervosa. Which tends to make products that are just downright sensible, that deliver simple, honest performance, sadly unglamorous. But how often do we come back to them, rediscovering the solid qualities that somehow escaped our notice (or didn't seem quite so important) when we were busy selecting our last flight of sonic fancy?

Thorens supplied my first ever, suspended sub-chassis turntable (at a time when suspended sub-chassis construction was *de rigueur* if you didn't want the staff in your local audio store sniggering at you behind your back). That TD160S, complete with an SME 3009 served me well, whilst encouraging a (probably unhealthy) interest in the history of the deck's development. As a result I also acquired a TD160BC, various TD150s and a couple of AR XAs, all for peanuts on the secondhand market. It was an interesting voyage of discovery, along the path of which I learnt that appearances can be deceptive and newer doesn't necessarily mean better. But it also taught me considerable respect for Thorens' engineering and

their place in the hi-fi firmament, importers to Europe from its roots in the US, of the structural approach that was to sweep to prominence in the audio equivalent of jihad.

Ironic then, that just as the suspended deck seems finally to have had its day, the latest TD160 incarnation should arrive. But just as Thorens themselves have been through a major transformation, changing ownership and revisiting the electronics market with some really rather impressive

power amplifiers,



the TD160 you see before you today, whilst sharing a basic concept with its various ancestors, employs materials, engineering and execution that have changed out of all recognition. Look a little closer and you find a deck that whilst superficially similar is technologically far more impressive. But the best bit of all: it's simpler, even more sensible, but the performance now needs no apologies. Add that to all the techy stuff you can wax lyrical about and the dear old TD160 has become downright sexy.

So what have we got? Outwardly the TD160HD employs similar, compact

plinth dimensions and the same moulded lid as the original. That's where the material similarities cease. The lid no longer even comes with hinges – removing the lid whilst playing being one of the standard tweaks in ages past. The sub-chassis is now constructed from RDC material, and suspended on sophisticated polymer grommets that provide exceptional isolation coupled to good mechanical stability, meaning speed stability is also improved. Drive is from a slow-speed synchronous motor, fitted with a large diameter, crowned profile nylon pulley

and fed from an external, plug-top supply. This uses the standard Thorens flat belt to drive a one-piece acrylic platter, possibly the biggest single change from the original design with its two-part aluminium platter. You even get a nifty

little device that enables you to position the belt correctly. The platter sits directly on the new, larger-diameter bearing shaft, supported by a large cir-clip. The top of the platter surface is recessed to accept a two-piece, cork mat, similar in design to the Loricraft ones, the large cut-out in the top layer forming the label recess. A large switch on the front corner of the plinth allows electronic selection of 33 and 45 (although personally I'd have loved to see the old, almond-shaped knob retained, perhaps in acrylic to match the platter).

The deck comes supplied with a Thorens-badged Rega RB250 mounted on its now circular armboard. This is ►

► moulded from RDC and incorporates a locking collar to allow arm-height adjustment. The armcable is terminated in a pair of phono sockets mounted in the rear of the plinth, although no earth terminal is provided. One final change that's definitely for the better; the deck stands on three RDC cone feet, which sound better than the old rubber ones as well as allowing precise levelling. The factory-set suspension and clear instructions make set-up as simple as any solid-plinth design and the biggest dilemma will be choice of cartridge and mounting surface. Although the Thorens is less affected by its support than some suspended designs, it will still benefit from some care in this regard and I got excellent results from Cambre Core and finite-element racks as well as the (completely overkill but I just had to try it) Grand Prix Audio wall shelf. The Rega arm will be at home with anything from budget moving-magnets up to sub-£1K coils from Lyra, Ortofon or Dynavector. Again, I got great results using a DV-20X but the player really deserves (and rewards the use of) a better cartridge, and I employed the Lyra Argo for much of my listening – although I've a sneaky suspicion that the DV-17D3 could work really well too.

The complete package (without a cartridge but including a basic interconnect for the tonearm, a small spirit level and a really excellent instruction manual) will set you back £1395, which I have to judge a

considerable bargain. Incidentally, you can also buy the TD160HD as a BC (or basic chassis) model, fitted with a Rega, SME M2, SME oval or blank armboard at a price of £1250. Other factory fitted combinations include the RB300 at £1470, the SME M2/9 at £2500 or the SME 309 at £2800.

In serious analogue terms the price of the TD160HD with the RB250 represents one step up from entry level, the bottom rung on the high-end ladder. However, that doesn't mean that you can take its performance for granted. Care and attention to meticulous set-up pays dividends, and whilst this is mainly a case of doing it properly and checking that you have (rather than any arcane black arts), time spent getting the deck perfectly



level, aligning the cartridge – ideally more accurately than the provided Rega single-point protractor allows – and getting cabling and a nice clean mains feed is readily audible in the musical end result. In particular, pay attention to tracking force. Set it initially (preferably using an electronic balance) but then

take the trouble to listen to the effect of tiny adjustments up and down. Do it by ear, simply turning the weight a mil or so each time. You'll soon hit a sweet spot that combines pace and a solid sense of purpose to the music. Over do it and things will start to slow and get stodgy. It makes all the difference between a performance that's nice, and one that really grabs and holds your attention – and it's free. Which in many respects sums up the Thorens as far as set up goes. Plug and play it straight from the box and you'll get a performance that's perfectly respectable, especially at the price. Do the job properly and you'll elevate that performance significantly, adding transparency, dynamic range, solidity and a natural sense of musical flow to proceedings.

Running the TD160HD with the Argo mounted and a Crystal arm cable (chosen to match the rest of the cabling in the system rather than the deck specifically) the performance delivered was frankly astonishing for the money.

Like its principal competitor, VPI's Scout, the TD160 completely redefines

your expectations as to just how much music you can get from a basic analogue set-up. Compared to the more affordable offerings from Rega and ProJect this is definitely the real deal. The dynamic envelope, bandwidth, transparency and range of expression available puts many a high-end CD player to shame – and quite a few wannabe turntables too. There's an attractive pace and momentum to music that demands it, a more relaxed ease and expansive fluidity to more introspective material. So KT Tunstall's 'Black Horse And The Cherry Tree' has an infectious bounce and drive that picks up effortlessly from the more ►

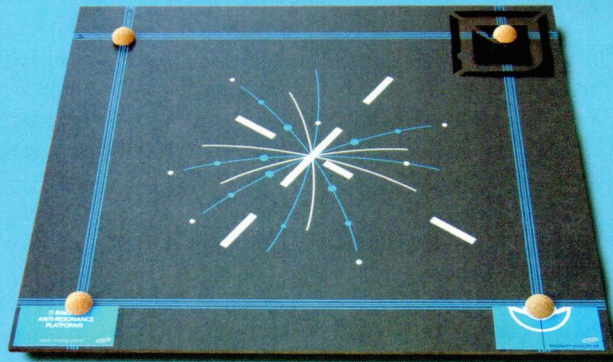
What on earth is RDC?

For all of you who've been asleep at the back, RDC is a resin-based material developed by a German company Clearlight Audio, containing grains of different sizes and materials that bonded together create a chaotic and thus non-resonant structure. Readily moulded into different, complex shapes and also easily machined, the nature of the substance's mechanical behaviour can be further tuned according to the precise mix of materials incorporated. It has enjoyed considerable success in the accessories markets as well as delivering impressive results in Clearlight's own products. The Thorens TD160HD was developed with considerable input from Clearlight's Kurt Olbert, and is the first mass-market product to really exploit the material.

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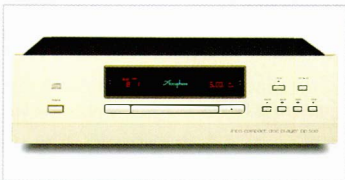
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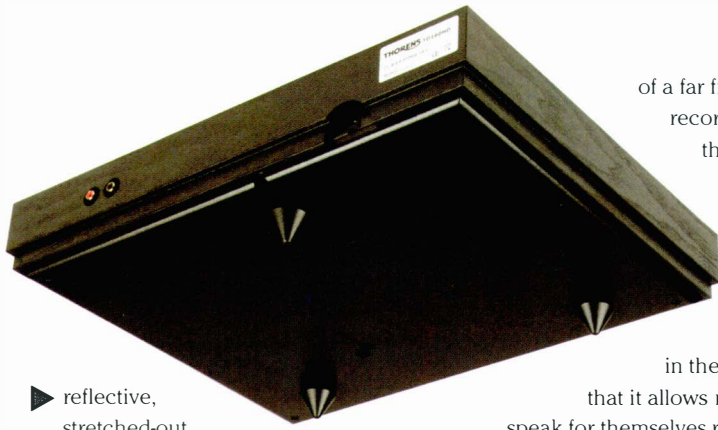
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▶ reflective, stretched-out tempo of 'Under The Weather'. Rock solid drums propel the track, easily bridging the hesitations and breaks that keep things interesting across the length of this perfectly shaped mini-pop statement. Yet the music slips just as effortlessly into the tactile, almost reggae bass line of 'Miniature Disasters' with its deep, deep thuddy bass drum. Too many decks roll the rhythms of these successive tracks together, making them sound same-y when in reality they're far from it. It's this chameleon quality that underpins the stellar musical contribution of the Thorens, that allows it to put the music so firmly first. It has an innate, almost preternatural grasp of music's rhythm and tempo, and an ability to match its pace – and shifts in pace – that allows it to live and breathe. This should come as no surprise to anybody who has heard the Clearlight turntables – but here, combined with the cost benefits of (relatively) large-scale production we discover the benefits at a previously undreamt of price-point. And there's more: couple the deck's plug-top power supply into something more sophisticated like a mains regenerator feeding the rest of the system, and its temporal grasp becomes absolutely front-rank, matching any 'table I've heard in this important respect – making for a compellingly enjoyable listening experience.

You'll also notice that thus far, the only record I've referred to is a bog-standard commercial pressing

of a far from great recording. The best thing about the TD160's inherent honesty, its reluctance to step forward in the process, is that it allows records to speak for themselves rather than standing over them, pointing out their shortcomings. Likewise, as wonderful as the Argo sounded, the DV-20X, at almost a quarter of the price, was allowed to strut its stuff, sounding well-balanced, grainless and sweetly solid. With the Dynavector installed the 'table took on a smaller, slightly politer and more constrained quality. It didn't sound sat-on or shut-in, it sounded complete and satisfying. Reverting to the Argo, the benefits were hard to miss, it's just that they made much more sense, were far more apparent going up the scale than down – which is another way of saying that the Thorens will generally deliver as much as it can. So the catchy energy of 'Suddenly I See' has a propulsive integrity with the DV-20X that pushes things along, a coherent flow. With the Argo the carefully woven strands and



textures, the overdubs and changes in density are teased out, more apparent, adding interest and subtlety to the song. But this isn't just about the cartridges; it's about the deck allowing them to do their job.

This evenhandedness is a mark

of the deck's inherent, almost studied neutrality. It imposes so little of itself on the process that its partnering equipment and the recorded content dominate proceedings. Again it's a case of the RDC hallmark, with a naturally effortless separation of instruments and overall clarity that sets out a convincing soundscape without paring away the instruments to etched outlines of their solid selves. That is in turn down to the tonal and textural distinction the deck brings to individual instruments and notes, its harmonic patterns underpinned by micro-dynamic integrity and the even nature of its energy spectrum. There are no bands of unwanted colour to clog proceedings, no excess weight wobbling embarrassingly free where it's least expected. Instead, the picture presented is clean and unadulterated, what sins there are being subtractive in nature. These are apparent in a subtle greying of the tonal palette, although not one that diminishes instrumental separation or identity. Instead it serves to mute the more vivid aspects of their tonal character. This and the limits on absolute low-frequency resolution and transparency (a lack of acoustic boundaries and the air below bass instruments, only apparent when compared to far more costly 'tables) and some congestion or lack of poise on the most complex and energetic material are I suspect, more a product of the tonearm than the deck. Of

course, a better arm alters the cost and value balance, but the inherent dynamic, bandwidth and tonal limitations of

the Rega beg the question as to just how good a platform the TD160HD provides? Hopefully, it's a question we can investigate further via the BC model, but for now, it's the Thorens/Rega pairing that concerns us, and at the asking price the failings are frankly trivial. ▶



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▶ Playing better recordings simply plays to the deck's strengths. The *Carmen Fantasie* on Decca? Space, air, focus, a calm assurance and mid-band transparency combine with the delicate precision of Ricci's playing to captivate the listener. Dynamic contrasts may fall short of the TNT 6 carrying the Titan i, but only by dint of extreme familiarity or direct comparison, while the subtle shifts in tempo and beautiful phrasing of soloist and strings are given full rein. The confident swagger in Ricci's bowing never runs away, transforming itself into hauteur or vivid drama at the demand of conductor and score. This ability to embrace the emotional compass of a performance is exactly why you should invest in analogue in the first place. The Thorens delivers a more immediate return on your investment than any other deck I've tried near the price.

Nor does it favour one genre at

power, there's a sense of contained energy waiting to respond or explode as required. Think of the poise and effortless acceleration of Seb Coe in his prime, all that potential performance contained in such a slight frame, yet combined with the vivacious life and graceful bounce of a ballet dancer. That's the surefooted musical response you get from the Thorens; and some of Coe's World Records still stand today!

Just how good is the TD160HD's motor unit? I've yet to discover, but I've also yet to push it beyond its limits. Even a combination of Connoisseur phono and line stages driving the VAS amps and Wilson's Duette/WATCH Dog combination failed to disturb its balanced enthusiasm or calm restraint, simply extracting more and more performance from the player. Likewise, the way it responds to external upgrades, be they a cartridge, a power supply or a support, further suggests the mechanical integrity of the essentially simple but beautifully executed design. And all at a price that is distinctly Real World. I'm pondering where to go in

terms of a matching arm: the Naim ARO is an obvious contender, as is the Kuzma

Stogi Reference, whilst VPI's JMW

9.0 also appeals. Then there's the Brinkmann 10" if that would fit. Choices, choices...

But let's try and put the Thorens into some sort of context. As appealing as it should be to anybody looking for a high value record player, just consider the special fascination it will hold for all those who owned, once aspired to own, or still own a Linn. Just think; you could buy a Keel sub-chassis upgrade for an LP12 or, for around half the price, a whole new deck to mount an existing or new arm on – leaving you around a £1000 to spend on peripherals, and we

know how this deck responds to those! Am I really suggesting that the 160 is a viable alternative to a fully loaded Linn? I don't know, not having heard the latest LP12, but I'm confident that the Thorens will give any of the previous Linn incarnations a run for their money. Yes, the TD160HD really is that good. In fact, this Thorens has to represent one of the biggest analogue bargains of all time. Given the dedicated following that still clings to the Linn and the stratospheric price rises on that product, let alone all the analogue newbies and born-again, the TD160HD could (and should) be the most significant analogue product launched in the UK this year. Suddenly, being sensible seems almost... sensible!



the expense of others.

Listening to the likes of KT Tunstall or The Cure you could be forgiven for concluding that its pace and drive make it a rock or pop orientated product. But nothing could be further from the truth. The restrained tempo of Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen*, the elongation of the phrases, is never hurried or clipped. Music, all music is allowed to breathe; yet that that should be breathless is breathless indeed. It's a little like watching a great middle-distance runner going through his paces. A perfect blend of balance, grace and honed, athletic

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Record player with suspended sub-chassis and integral Rega tonearm (other arms available – see text)
Motor:	AC synchronous
Drive:	Belt
Speeds:	33 and 45
Platter:	One-piece acrylic
Platter Weight:	2kg
Tonearm:	Rega RB250
Effective Length:	223mm
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 175 x 340mm
Weight:	8kg
Finish:	Black/Grey
Guarantee:	2 years
Number Of UK Dealers:	30
Price:	£1395 (including RB250 tonearm)

UK Distributor:

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Piega TC 10X Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

There is something irrationally attractive about small, expensive objects. Cameras, exotic moving-coil cartridges, luxury fountain pens and watches with interesting mechanical complications all hold some kind of fascination for me. Now I can add to the Piega TC 10X speakers to that list. They are small, beautifully formed and frivolously expensive. Their diminutive size means that they will have limited applications but, for those with the right sized listening room and the finances to indulge their requirements when it comes to partnering equipment, they present an intriguing range of musical possibilities.

Piega speakers have been made in Switzerland since 1986 and they currently produce several different ranges. Both the all-aluminium cabinet and the inclusion of the rather fabulous C2 co-axial ribbon midrange/tweeter assembly define the smart little TC 10X, but these speakers are much more than a pretty face.

The cabinet is extruded into a gentle oval boat back, completed with an aluminium baffle and to the rap of a knuckle constitutes an extremely dead enclosure. The inner face is lined with directly attached damping material, along with extra wadding which, together with the size and shape of the cabinet ensures that the potential for interior standing-waves is killed at source. Although they come with detachable grilles I could find no reason for leaving them in situ as they shut down the mid/treble noticeably.

Single or bi-wired cabling can be accepted via the four 4mm binding posts/sockets at the rear.

Like all exceptional small designs it soon becomes clear that these speakers are going to require some serious attention to detail if you are going to realise their considerable potential. For a start, let's talk stands. Piega do manufacture models specifically for the little TC 10x but they were not supplied with the speaker. Having seen photographs of them and heard of other reviewer's experiences, I can see why. They bring the speakers to the right height but have a slender, single pillar that, stability-wise, look distinctly marginal when it comes to giving the cabinets a firm foundation. These little things are surprisingly heavy and really require a specialist pair of supports. Once again I am left wondering why manufacturers of such interesting speakers do not spend more time over their stands because, as we all know, you can kill a speaker's potential by using the wrong type. I do sometimes get the impression that they see themselves as speaker and not stand makers so don't really "get" it, considering the stand only as an afterthought. Surely a speaker, especially one of this class, should be considered as a total package. During my time with them I used the Piegas with a heavy single-filled column type from Kudos and my current favourite, the super lightweight Quadraspire acrylic as originally designed for the

smaller JM Labs speakers. Both did a good job, but once again, I found that the acrylic stands sounded as transparent as they look although I would want to try the smaller version, as the top would probably have been an even better fit with the speaker's cabinet.

Low frequency extension is better than you might expect from such a diminutive cabinet. It is handled by a 6-inch driver which is reflex-port loaded via a small baffle-mounted slot. Piega fit their own Magnetic Optimised Motor system to this unit and have intelligently not sought to extend the response below sensible levels by overdoing the size of the porting. For those wanting or needing more bass, there is also a sub-woofer available.

While the inclusion of a sub-woofer would increase its suitability for larger rooms, the TC 10X, used as a stand-alone, is only really suitable for more confined spaces. But this is no budget product and it will reward partnering equipment of the very highest quality, although it is not as ultra demanding in this respect as I was anticipating. I pushed the boat out and used it with several CD players including the Naim CD 555, the Gryphon Mikado and the Muse Erato II, while the amplification centred on the Lyra Connoisseur 4.2L SE preamplifier driving a pair of the superb Ayre MXR mono power amplifiers. The whole system was connected with a full Nordost Valhalla cable loom. This is quite a potent, ►

► high-resolution system but the Piega's seemed to revel in the challenge and certainly surprised me with their ability to accept high power settings with no sign of strain.

Although, due to their size and front porting, they could be sited closer to a wall than most small speakers, gaining some bass weight in the process, this is not a trade-off I generally favour. I soon found that giving that mid/top unit enough space to breathe was far more important so I ended up with them pulled well into the room. This allowed the speaker ample air to really expand its musical view and did no harm to the tonal balance at all.

Piega fit their own Magnetic Optimised Motor system to the other-wise conventional 6" drive unit. But the co-axial midrange/tweeter ribbon assembly is certainly a far more interesting unit. As you can see, the tweeter resides in the middle of the larger midrange membrane giving them both the same acoustic centre, which is one of the reasons why the TC 10X sound so wonderfully coherent in this frequency range. The foil of the mid-band unit itself is just 0.02mm thick and is driven across its entire surface by neodymium magnets. It is not really a ribbon but is closer to a planar-magnetic driver in concept. The entire assembly covers a generous frequency range from just over 400 Hz to an impressive 50 kHz and I have to say that this unit is a tour de force and makes the hours of painstaking work that goes into its construction well worth the effort.

In this age of much-improved high-frequency units the Piega's central driver provides enough resolution, transient ability and tonal range to compare with the best I have heard, but it is the way it is integrated with the midrange unit that really distinguishes it in this speaker.

One of the drawbacks of ribbon tweeter designs can be their tendency



to beam as the frequency rises, making the listening-window unhelpfully narrow, but the Piegas do not suffer from this at all. Instead you get the most gloriously open and detailed view of the recording as the balance seems slightly tilted toward the mid rather than the treble. Although the low frequency extension is better than you might expect from such a diminutive cabinet, I sometimes felt that the bass was slightly detached

and not quite "of" the whole, which is a trait I have heard in other hybrid designs. This is nothing to do with its dynamic qualities, just that it can seem slightly monotonous and lacks a wide enough range of bass tonality to match the mids. Given that the integration and resolution elsewhere is so good it is perhaps not surprising that the bass range suffers a bit in comparison. Although I never stopped noticing the lack, I never felt that it did any real damage to my overall enjoyment of the speaker. Put it this way, you are never going to buy these speakers purely for their low-end performance, but I very much doubt it would stop you from wanting them either. It is certainly very fast, with the lack of any real extension and the small, tight cabinet helping to give the speaker a very positive, but light rhythmic touch which is more than matched by the ultra-clean transient delivery through the mid and top. Unravelling tempo and timing conundrums is never an issue with these speakers.

Vocals and other predominantly mid-band instruments do assume a prominence and a certain amount of forwardness in comparison to my usual speaker, the JMLabs Micro Utopia Be and it takes a while to get used to the fact that the relaxed yet high-energy projection of the Piega makes it appear that, even albums you know very well seem as if they have been given an extra degree of midrange presence. The TC 10X has a sense of purity and clarity that never strays into the realm of being over analytical. In fact I found that there is a certain dry sweetness to their balance that is only emphasised ►

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► by the stunning openness and lack of compression, even when confronted with complex material. Not warmth, that would be the wrong word, but a feeling of harmonic richness and tonal vibrancy that always seems entirely on the side of the music.

Presentation-wise there is little to criticise. If you like an uncompressed, broad and open soundstage, with good depth and brimming with resolution (and who doesn't?) then these Piegas will delight you. It is true that certain components lead you to music that plays to their strengths and I did listen to a lot of vocal albums through these speakers. The more complex and involved the arrangements were, the better, as the TC 10X has that rare ability to unravel even the most dense of recordings in an unstressed way and when the system is so at ease with this material, you are too. It is no one-trick pony either. There is absolutely no denying the purity of this speaker when it can illuminate the tonality of pianos, strings, voice and guitars so beautifully. There is effortless control of these instruments right down to note level where, when dealing with leading edges, you find precision, followed by colourful sustain and decay that shows you the shape and character of each instrument's voice. It can provide layer upon layer of different, or clashing tonal colours and spread them before you in a fixed picture of an acoustic space and is among the very best when it comes to what I call superimposition, where two instruments, close in frequency, are played alongside each other. Acoustic instruments like piano and guitar can be uncomfortable

recorded bedfellows and I have often felt disappointed with the way that even expensive systems deal with this particular combination. Where the note shapes and tonal characteristics of each instrument, generally dominated by the piano, get congealed together into some amorphous swirl, you can end up hearing a guitano, the non-existent harmonic offspring of the

pair. The Piega has the precision to resolve them both with absolute ease and makes



understanding each instrument's progress easy to follow. The result is that not only the instruments but also the musicianship itself is easier to follow and appreciate.

So, given this level of insight, it is no surprise that it is also so articulate when it comes to resolving the micro-dynamics of classical music where those small changes in playing pressures and especially the shimmering fog of the massed vibrato in string sections often causes systems so many problems.

This is a smaller speaker than

you might think by looking at the photographs, but I can see it appealing to many people. Obviously, due to its general sophistication and lack of real bass it is not going to find favour with head-bangers (rock or classical). But it is an attractive proposition for anyone with a small listening room who enjoys an intimate relationship with their music or those who have previously found small-speaker compromises hard to live with. But, like all designs, the TC 10X is not a speaker without some flaws, however minor. If Piega could just improve both the low-frequency unit's tonal qualities and its integration, then, for its size, this would be near perfect. This is an expensive design but, if you can meet its requirements, it can be quite brilliant. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way reflex loaded stand-mount
Drivers:	1 x 6 inch bass driver 1 x planar magnetic mid 1 x co-axially mounted ribbon tweeter
Sensitivity:	90 dB
Nominal Impedance:	4 ohms
Bandwidth:	38Hz - 50 kHz ±3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	190 x 406 x 210mm
Weight:	24 lbs
Price:	£5750.00
Guarantee:	6 years
Number Of UK Dealers:	18

UK Distributor:

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Spendor SP100R Loudspeakers

by Chris Binns

When it comes to loudspeaker technology I am a keen advocate of cutting edge design, so bring it on; lets have the new diaphragm materials, beryllium, diamond and ceramics; I'm up for it all. But on the odd occasion when I get the chance to listen to 'classic' designs from thirty years ago, I am always surprised at just how damn good they often sound particularly given the benefit of modern amplification and all the assets that we never considered at the time; spikes, speaker cables and other such ancillaries, and lets not forget positioning. While certain aspects of loudspeaker performance – such as distortion and power handling have considerably improved over the years, and the consistency of the average budget loudspeaker has become dramatically better with the availability of design and measurement software such as MLSSA, I often wonder if we have really moved forward that much. For all of the perceived improvements with say, greater resolution and lower (or maybe just different) colouration, have we in fact moved a couple of steps to the side of the track and off in a different direction? Is it possible that the same factors that have averaged out loudspeaker performance across the board to a predictable 'good' have in fact removed the spark and individuality or worse still, true innovation? When I am confronted with (and often bored potless) by yet another formulaic approach to the domestically acceptable slim floorstander I sometimes feel that the answer is, "Yes, maybe we have lost our way."

The SP100 is definitely not of the slim variety and it's not a floorstander, although its dimensions are possibly ameliorated to an extent by the prefix 'monitor' so I guess domestic

acceptability was not top on the list of design criteria, and do bear in mind that Spendor make other ranges more in tune with those requirements that contribute toward domestic harmony. Speaking for myself, I was kind of excited about the idea of getting a 'proper' loudspeaker into my listening room rather than something with lots of little drivers that would look more at home in a church. And best of all its got a twelve inch bass unit. I think that the Spendors have a basic, functional elegance particularly with the black finish, comments from others have been a little less kind, although one particular female visitor having been converted by an evenings listening (and a decent bottle of wine) declared them 'impressively ugly'. The word monitor might also ring a few alarm bells; these days I try to keep a very distinct line between equipment used in the studio for work and at home for pleasure, as more than ever I find the two mutually incompatible, although there have been one or two exceptions...

The company was founded in the late sixties by ex-BBC engineer Spencer Hughes and his wife Doreen (Spen/Dor for anyone who didn't know) to produce professional monitors based upon Spencer's research at the BBC, where one of the main criteria was for tonal neutrality. The BC1 proved to be one of the most influential loudspeakers

ever to emanate from this country, and became something of a standard presence in a large number of radio and television studios throughout Europe. A two-way design pairing the then radical bextrene cone with a Celestion HF1300 tweeter (later augmented with the Coles HF4001) it possessed a midrange performance that was astonishingly uncoloured, even if the dynamic range was a bit limited and the bass a little under-damped. It was not surprising that it became a successful hi-fi loudspeaker

for those whose musical tastes did not demand massive power handling and seismic bottom end, and it also kicked off the whole concept of stands, but that's another story.

A couple of years later came the BC3, a three way full range design which incorporated a 13" woofer with a similar mid and top unit, which aimed to offer a more extended bandwidth and greater power handling, although not enough to make it a hit in the rock and pop world where apart from anything else it sounded too 'nice' when compared to the JBL's and Westlake's that were in common use at the time. This is the lineage from which the SP100 has evolved. The 80s saw the introduction of the SA3 where the mid range unit was dispensed with and the 12" bass was engineered to work up to 1200Hz before crossing over to the large Audax HD13D34H soft dome tweeter. This was followed by the



▶ S100 designed by Spencer's son Derek (also an ex-BBC engineer) saw a return to a three way design which subsequently developed into the SP100 a few years later. Having been in production for well over a decade, problems sourcing core materials for its manufacture have recently led to a revision of the design under the auspices of Philip Swift (previously responsible for Audiolab) who in 2001 acquired both the company and the challenge of revitalising Spendor for the 21st century, and while new and contemporary ranges have been very successfully introduced, much of the tradition has been retained. For example, Spendor is one of the few remaining British companies that still manufacture their own drive units; the 12" bass unit for example takes nearly three days to produce, with multiple layers of viscoelastic damping that has to be applied by hand.

As part of the 'classic' range, a lot of the 1970's Spendor heritage has been preserved; witness the aforementioned 300mm bextrene woofer coupled to a 160mm polypropylene midrange and a version of the well established Scanspeak 2010 HF unit that's been around for nigh on 25 years and its almost as if CD's, metal domes and MDF never happened. The cabinet is still of the traditional thin wall construction; since the original BC1 this has been a bit of a Spendor thing, where a relatively light ply was 'damped' to avoid the energy storage associated with more conventional thick wood assembly that often led to a smeared quality in the midrange. The original layers of bitumous felt have been substituted for a more stable long-term rubber compound that is also more effective. The midrange driver has seen considerable refinement with the

addition of a second magnet to tidy up response in and around the crossover regions, while the crossover itself has been redesigned with audiophile grade components, gold plated tracks and heavy gauge OFC wiring. Two deep, relatively small ports load the bass unit, situated either side of the HF unit and foam lined to reduce turbulence.



For the review Spendor kindly supplied a pair of stands sourced from their German distributor, these

elevate the not insubstantial SP100's to a height where the listening axis is situated between the top-positioned mid unit and the tweeter. They also made placement a painless task, as I was able to push the speakers around on the carpet before attaching the spikes; a process I was expecting to be quite involved with a large, reflex loaded cabinet. In fact the Spondors were

remarkably room tolerant with only minor shifts in the evenness of the bass output suggesting a well-tuned low-end alignment. Source equipment consisted of the Resolution Opus 21 and Audio Research Ref 7 CD players, with my Linn LP12/Ekos/Helikon for records. Amplification was Audio Research SP10 or LS17 pre-amps paired with a Naim Audio NAP300, Audio Research Ref 110, Almaro A50125 or Bryston 14B SST. Cabling was Nordost Valhalla throughout.

From the word go I was extremely comfortable listening to the SP100's. OK, you're probably thinking that this was a nice nostalgia trip back to the days when everything seemed less complicated and loudspeakers sounded warm, a bit flabby and rather vague. And I won't deny that there was a little bit of nostalgia, and there was a very, very mild hint of character that did evoke the days before Dire Straits were invented. But as for the other negative traits that one used to associate with the generation, forget it. To begin with the Spondors possessed a snappy, tight and extremely rhythmic bottom end, with an attack and punch that could be quite ungentlemanly when required. Sluggish? Definitely not, and with the ability to go loud and deliver decent in-room extension to about 30 Hz, orchestral music had that great sense of authority and scale that makes it so believable, while well-recorded rock music with real drums was just awesome. So the midrange then, a bit syrupy and thick? No. Fresh from having been hit between the eyes by a snare drum and sawn off at the neck by Robert Fripp's astringent guitar on the 12" single of David Bowie's 'Fashion' I can report that things were very much up to speed in the midrange department, and I can't honestly say that I was missing the top end extension of some rare and expensive tweeter diaphragm, as it sounded suitably sweet and open to me. ▶



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▶ What became apparent over a length of time is how the Spondors blended these attributes together into a performance that rarely had you thinking about it, regardless of the type of material you were playing. Listen to something as offensive as PJ Harvey at her worst and you will be blushing as if you have just been caught fondling a top shelf magazine at the vicarage - I jest not, the Spondors are just as

happy rocking out effortlessly at very high levels as they are playing very quietly, losing nothing in the process. So the S100s are even handed in many ways, but particularly when it comes to amplification. With an easy eight Ohm load, they worked particularly well with both the Almarro power amplifier and the Audio Research Ref 110 where I was expecting the sound to become a bit sickly, sweet and too much of a good thing. But no, the Spondors just reflected the liquid capabilities of these amplifiers particularly well. The NAP300 also worked well, as indeed did the Bryston, where the sheer precision and control commanded the bottom end, rendering good detail with both musical textures and those vital almost sub-bass clues about the acoustic of certain recordings that go to make a more complete picture. Detail and resolution seemed perfectly placed within the music rather than a distraction. In other words, it was all too easy to get lost in the flow of whatever music you were playing.

The more I have been listening, the more I come back to this element of a

“fine blend”, one that has me struggling slightly to fasten upon particular aspects of the Spondor’s sound, and as is often the case, the more one is enjoying the performance the more difficult it is to analyse. Despite struggling against unfashionable dimensions, the music came away from the box with ease to portray a big soundstage that was certainly wide and with good depth, though not as generous when it came to height, and the image within this was



strong enough if the subject was central but lacking a little in focus to either side. This is one of those factors that some people are not concerned about, while for others it is one of the most important criteria of loudspeaker performance; my own preferences tend toward the former, and despite having just spent a couple of weeks with the Quad electrostatics (which can do this sort of thing in their sleep) I cannot say that I was over bothered.

There was a sense of seamless bandwidth from the Spondors, and such was the integration between them that I never had the impression of listening to the individual drive units. This was particularly apparent when listening to massed vocals, where occasionally the ‘s’s and ‘t’s seem to come from a different place to the body of the sound, but not so with the SP100s.

There are loudspeakers that probably offer more leading edge when it comes to the rendition of detail, often at the expense of any sense of musical integrity. There are those that undeniably push the boundaries when

it comes to what can be achieved in purely hi-fi terms. There are also those that demand very specific amplification. But my experience with the SP100 suggests that it is not overly fussy, which opens up a lot of very interesting potential possibilities; for instance, I would love to hear them with the DartZeel pre and power combination. I am sometimes guilty of being seduced by a particular aspect of a loudspeaker’s performance only to find that in the long term it is coldly academic. By comparison the Spondors are capable of a deeply satisfying, musical and above all heartfelt performance that I find personally very satisfying. Their technology might be rooted in the 70s, but hey, what goes around comes around, and listening to the SP100’s you could almost pretend that digital audio never happened. But the last word goes to the friend who described them as “impressively ugly.” She followed that up by added, “But I can always close my eyes.” ➤

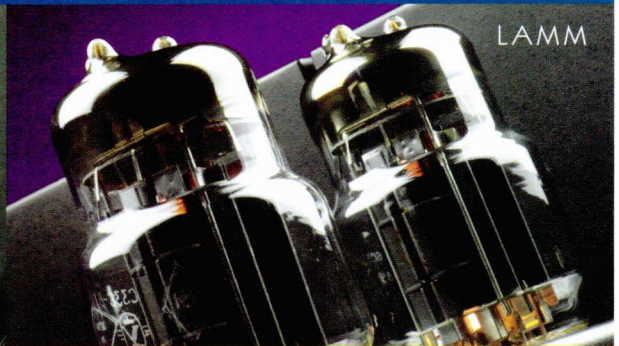
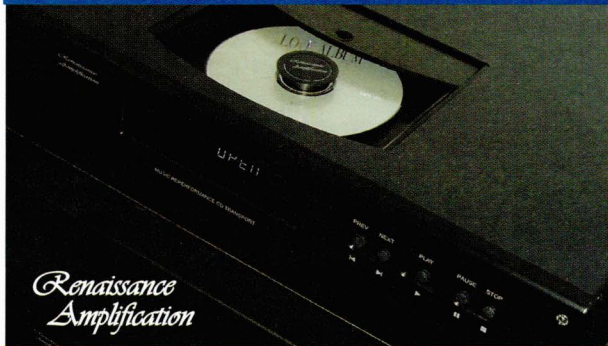
TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way, reflex loaded stand mount
Drive Unit Complement:	1x 300mm Bextrene bass cone 1x 160mm polypropylene midrange 1x 19mm soft-dome tweeter
Sensitivity:	89db 1 watt/1metre
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Power handling:	15 - 200 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	370 x 700 x 430mm
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Price:	£5000
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The Eastern Electric Minimax and Fatman i-tube 252 Integrated Amplifiers

by Chris Binns



Audio power has never been cheaper than it is at the moment. Advances in both semiconductor design and digital electronics have resulted in a situation where a couple of hundred watts of conventional solid-state power can be yours for less than a pound per Watt, and if you care to step into the world of class D amplification and ICE modules, almost limitless output is available for very little money. This might well prove an effective solution where the prime requirement is for plenty of power, for example with PA systems and it is suggested, sub bass units (although on that score I remain unconvinced). But for me, it is the quality of those Watts and how they are delivered that is of far greater importance than the quantity when it comes to listening to music. Certainly, my experiences with digital amplification that should offer tremendous performance, at least on paper, have proved to be highly disappointing in practice. So, two oft quoted sayings come to mind when I am looking at more modestly powered amplifiers: "It's the first couple of Watts that count..." followed by the popular theory that there is often an inverse and conflicting relationship between power output and quality. The first stems from the fact that while listening to music the average power level transferred between amplifier and loudspeaker is quite small, and it is only during peaks or transients that this rises above a Watt or two, even at quite high listening levels. As for the second, there are a number of bona fide reasons why it is often easier to design an amplifier that is not required to deliver prodigious quantities of Volts or Amps, such as the benefits of simple, straightforward circuitry and the compromises that are inherent with multiple output devices.

While the two amplifiers here share common ground, both being integrated designs built in China

(where else?) and are not dissimilar in price, the concept behind them comes from two very different directions. The Minimax has a strong air of 'budget audiophile' about it, but with only eight Watts per channel will need careful matching with suitable loudspeakers. Thankfully, due to the resurgence of interest in low-powered triode amplification this is not as much of a problem as it might have been a few years ago. The Fatman, by contrast is a little more real world with 25 Watts a side, modest by many standards but enough to broaden the selection of partnering equipment considerably, and thus increase its appeal as a more universal device, which in part at least is exactly what the manufacturers are aiming for; a valve amp for the i-pod generation.

Casting round for suitable candidates in the loudspeaker department could have become a bit of a dilemma, certainly as far as the Minimax was concerned, but the Coincident Triumph Signature model that I reviewed in the last issue proved to be a welcome partner for both amplifiers, and although a peak sensitivity of 94dB might not seem ideal, they have been designed very much with low powered amplification in mind. Also available were a pair of Tannoy 15" Monitor Golds in Lockwood cabinets and their sensitivity made for some interesting listening with both amps. There was also another slightly unusual venture with the Minimax

that I shall discuss a little later.

Based in Hong Kong, Eastern Electric produce a small range of specialist equipment that includes a CD player and various amplifiers with an emphasis on traditional valve engineering and simple but effective circuit configurations. Neat, almost miniature in appearance, the Minimax presents a clean and uncluttered face to the world; it also feels remarkably

I believe they are still manufactured by some of the Russian and Chinese factories so replacements should not be a problem.

The relatively modest valve count is explained by the fact that each device incorporates both a power output pentode (akin to a smaller EL84) and a triode section along the lines of half an ECC82 in the same glass envelope. It enabled more economic construction of domestic audio such as record players and radiograms in an era where transistors had yet to rear their ugly heads. This configuration was adopted for hi-fi use by a number of manufacturers,



solid for such a small item due in no small part to the dense central block in which three transformers are I think, potted. On the substantial aluminium front panel there is the input selector and power switch, together with a motorised ALPS volume control that can be operated from the supplied basic but functional remote. On the rear, three line inputs are provided together with five-way binding posts for both four and eight Ohm loads and a standard IEC mains connector. Valve complement consists of two ECL82's per channel, common enough in lower powered amplification from the 60s but rarely seen in hi-fi these days.

most notably Rogers, who used the similar ECL86 in a number of their designs that have an enthusiastic following to this day. The Minimax uses a conventional ultra-linear configuration for the output stage with cathode bias, and the power supply is choke-coupled with the associated benefits of better ripple under load and superior drive capability. Internally, the Minimax is neatly constructed with housekeeping electronics (such as the remote circuitry) built on printed circuit boards while the simple signal electronics are hard wired to the valve bases.

I was expecting a bit of a struggle to get any kind of realistic levels out of the Minimax with the Coincident loudspeakers, but that wasn't the case. I'm not suggesting that this is ►

► a match made in heaven, but the 8 Watts available were put to good use, establishing a surprisingly firm foundation in the bass, that was tight and controlled with a sense of purpose which made it quite satisfying without having to advance the volume excessively. Not quite what I had anticipated.

precision and timing that would embarrass most other amplifiers of a similar power output (meaning most of the SE triode designs that I've heard) along with a euphonic and dimensional mid and top and a real sense of 3-D dimensionality, a major achievement considering the nature of the speakers. If low-powered amplification is on your agenda, don't be fooled by the

generation that haven't the faintest idea of what a half decent hi-fi system can do, so it can't all be bad.

Fatman is an offshoot of TL Audio, a company who have been around the pro industry for quite some time. Initially renovating and customising old Neve EQ modules for recording studios, as these became increasingly rare and expensive they progressed to manufacturing their own units with a particular slant on valves as a tonic for the hardness of the modern digital age. The Fatman follows a fairly traditional formula when it comes to aesthetics, with a chrome chassis flanked by black lacquered wood. The transformer



Add to this a midrange that has the wonderful liquid quality that is so appealing in amplifiers such as the Leak Stereo Twenty, combined with a gentle, smooth treble and you begin to get the picture.

An interesting opportunity presented itself in the form of a pair of Vitavox Thunderbolts, ridiculous (from a domestic point of view) cinema /PA loudspeakers from the sixties, but with enough hi-fi cred for Living Voice to base the Air partner design on them. They are also frighteningly efficient at something like 108 dB for 1 Watt; the standing joke when I actually owned them was that you could literally blow the windows out with a Sony Walkman, and this is one of the reasons they ended up in the converted church in which a friend of mine resides, rather than my living room. The Minimax proved to be tailor made for the job, showing a degree of

Minimax's diminutive dimensions. It's a genuinely potent and highly musical package in the right environment.

I guess the 'i' prefix gives it away, but you won't be surprised to learn that the Fatman 252 comes with a universal dock for your i-pod, should you possess one. While this might conceivably rob the Fatman of a bit of hi-fi credibility (although probably not as much as a mention in the Sunday Mail) it might also serve to introduce the concept of specialist amplification to a headphone clad

housing at the rear is similarly clad; in front of this a black cage protects the nine valves and small fingers, but I guess most users would want to remove this to show the full glory of their thermionic amplification in action.

The circuit is based around an ultra-linear output stage utilising a pair of 5881 pentodes driven by a 6SN7 octal double triode, while the input stage consists of a 12AX7. Cathode (or self) bias is employed, while an interesting addition is what used to be called a 'magic eye' ►



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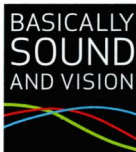
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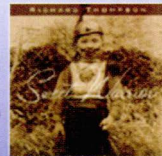


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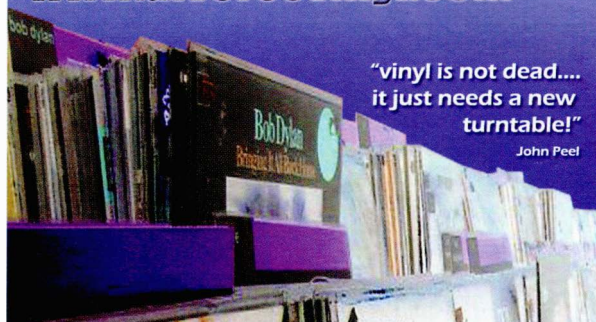
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▶ valve indicator of the type commonly found on cheaper tape recorders (and better radio tuners) in the 60s. This gives a fluorescent green indication of signal, and I confess that when I first used the 252 this briefly gave me a bit of a fright – any light coming from within a tube amp that isn't a reassuring orange glow usually portends some kind of expensive firework display and impending disaster. Internally the Fatman is very neatly assembled with the bulk of the electronics on two circuit boards. The power supply uses a substantial, toroidal mains transformer and choke coupling with plenty of fuses in the rails for protection. Three line inputs are provided along with good quality binding posts for the usual four and eight Ohm loudspeaker outputs.

The supplied i-pod dock is finished to match the 252 amplifier (making a change from the more usual anaemic white plastic of most i-pod accessories) and is powered from a small plugtop supply and signal goes via basic phono leads into one of the line inputs. The remote offers more than just the usual basic functions of the i-pod, and once you get your head around it, it will allow you to navigate through the menu to albums and play-lists. There is also adjustment of bass and treble as well as volume that I guess is carried out through analogue circuitry within the dock itself. However, note that the Fatman amplifier on its own has no remote facility.

Driving the Coincident loudspeakers the 252 proved competent and well behaved without drawing attention to itself. Able to generate levels a little beyond what I would have expected from a mere 25 Watts, it was able to cope with a wide range of material and was just as happy pumping Massive Attack into the slightly bass shy Triumphs as it was with a *Brandenburg concerto*.

Dare I describe the character as classic valve sound? Let me justify that by suggesting it sounds the way that the uninitiated think tube amps should sound. The midrange had that warm, tangible quality that was immediately inviting, while further down the audio spectrum upper bass had a mildly rich, slightly 'plummy' quality that seemed to suit small speakers well. It was with the Tannoy's that shortcomings at the frequency extremes were evident; yes the treble was a little bit untidy and now that the bottom end was really evident, it lacked precision and a certain grip, more evident as the volume went up - but hey, this is not an Audio Research. I'm sure it would have been possible to refine the presentation of the 252 in these respects, but I have a feeling that it would have killed the performance in an area in which the Fatman is really quite good; the ability to endow music with a sense of life and purpose, with a realistic portrayal of the dynamics that matter.

To put the Fatman in perspective, there are an awful lot of sub \$1000 amplifiers appearing from the Far East at the moment, and one only has to spend a little more to reach the territory of models such as the Prima Luna and the Pure Sound A30, which offer more power and up the ante considerably in terms of performance. But that slightly misses the point; the 252 is a very neat, elegant product that delivers a musical and enjoyable performance way beyond most of the solid-state lifestyle or i-pod associated equipment, and that is where it will really score, as with the included dock it is undeniably good value for money.

The more specialist appeal of the Minimax lies in its ability to match a beautiful liquid midrange to a degree of authority in the bass and an open and extended top end

that very few valve amplifiers of this breed can match. With a number of interesting loudspeakers offering suitable efficiency there is the opportunity to maximise the potential of this little amplifier, enjoying what it does well, without too much compromise in other areas. If single ended triodes are your sort of thing, you should listen to the Minimax as it offers a very interesting and in many ways a better balanced alternative. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Eastern Electric Minimax

Valve compliment:	4 x ECL82
Power output:	8 Watts per channel
Dimensions (WxHxD):	255 x 125 x 195mm
Price:	£899.00 inc vat
Guarantee:	2 years
Number Of UK Dealers:	1

Distributor:

audiography
Tel. (44)(0)20 8133 7006
E-mail. design@audiography.co.uk

Fatman i-tube 252

Valve compliment:	2x 12AX7, 1x 6E2 2x 6N8P, 4x 5881
Power output:	25 Watts into 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	392 x 157 x 290mm
Price:	£799.00
Guarantee:	1 year
Number Of UK Dealers:	100+

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SALVATORE ACCARDO

THE LEGENDARY VIOLINIST, CONDUCTOR AND TEACHER

by Anke Kathrin Bronner

When it comes to instrumental traditions, Italy can justifiably lay claim to the violin, both in terms of creation and creativity. When it comes to technical skills and artistry Vivaldi, Tartini, Viotti and, of course, Paganini are the names everybody associates with this most popular of instruments, whilst it's hard to imagine any one of today's great players without a Stradivari or Guarneri!

So it should come as no surprise that one of the most renowned violinists of the 20th and 21st centuries is also an Italian: Salvatore Accardo. He stepped into Paganini's footsteps at the incredibly age of only three years old. Since then, for more than half a century, he has dedicated his life to his passion, the violin. He grew to create his own personal sound, distinct amongst the other great violinists, strong and dynamic, yet with a lyrical undertone, a dolce timbre tempered with an occasionally harsh attack. He has always been controversial, but accepted by critics and acclaimed by audiences everywhere. They love the warm-hearted interpretations of this Neapolitan, as well as his intellectual approach. Technically perfect, with a vibrato that could melt an iceberg, he seems to be the veritable successor to Paganini.

However, Salvatore Accardo is not only passionate about performing, but also embraces conducting and teaching. He wants to pass on his experiences, from his teacher and from playing chamber music with the likes of Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli and Pablo Casals. But the most important lesson for him is humility – in the face of music, the great works and life.

Anke Kathrin Bronner: Maestro Accardo, how did you start learning the violin?

Salvatore Accardo: I think that it was the violin that chose me (laughs). It was during the war, in 1944, and my father was in Germany. He was an amateur violinist, and he was playing Neapolitan songs and opera arias on the violin. I asked him before he left to give me a violin, because he liked to listen to the violins on the radio. The first song I played was Lily Marlene (laughs). I was three and some months. I saw the violin on the bed, took it from the case and started to play. I knew exactly how to do it! And I was amazed – I was amazed – that everybody was amazed that I was playing, you know!

AKB: So, it just came naturally?



SA: It was the easiest and most natural thing for me!

AKB: And today, could you face a day without the violin?

SA: Without the violin? Well, I also do some other things. I like watching movies, reading and, of course, watching football (laughs). Football is my passion!

AKB: Well, you're Italian! But you still practice every day?

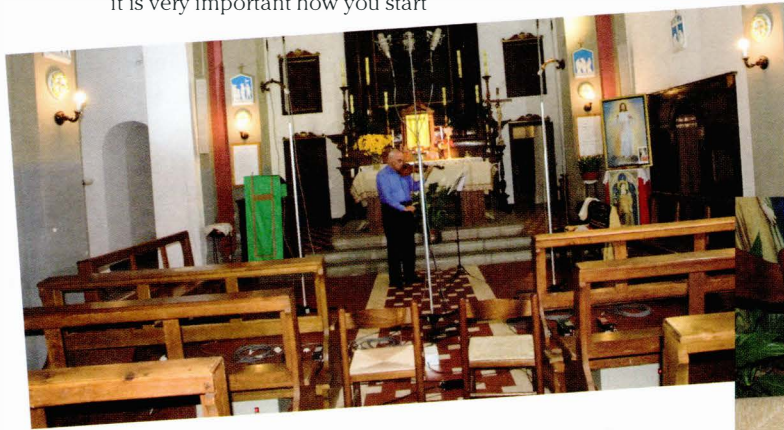
SA: I do, I do, always. Of course, I don't practice six, seven hours a day, but I do need to play, and I really want to. My body needs it, my fingers and arms.

AKB: It's like sports, right? If you don't play for some days, you will lose form.

SA: My teacher used to say: "You leave your violin one day, it leaves you a week. You leave your violin a month, it leaves you for two!" Which is true! (laughs) ▶

► **AKB:** Well, it is mainly technique that you lose. But what does technique actually mean for you?

SA: To develop a good technique, a base technique, is important, fundamental. Otherwise it's like building a house without foundations. You can create fantastic buildings, but after a while, they will collapse. The same when you are on tour and have to play every day: You cannot always give one hundred percent. If you have a good technique, a base technique, although you are not at 100%, you will still play a good concert. But if you don't have it, maybe you play well one day, but the next day nothing really works! Nothing... So it is very important how you start



your practice. Because if you start and the teacher is not good enough to teach you the basics of the bow (which is eighty percent of playing, because the left hand is only intonation and vibrato) that's it. Finished. The bow is all: The phrasing and emotion. And, of course, the bow stroke, the staccato and spiccato and ricochet and so on, is very important... This is eighty percent of violin technique! I was able to watch my colleagues when I was studying with my teacher. He was able to teach staccato to somebody who was not naturally able to do it or particularly gifted. This is the mark of a great teacher. I mean, Itzhak Perlman, he could play with any teacher. It was not a teacher who made Itzhak Perlman. Or Anne Sophie Mutter...

AKB: It is not talented pupils who make a good teacher.

SA: Right! And the great teacher is also somebody who doesn't ruin a great talent! This is something that some parents don't understand. Sometimes the parents come and they want them (their children) to play concerts. So, I always say what my teacher once said to my father: "Do you want your son to play until he is 75-80, or do you want your son to play until he is 25, 30?" Of course, my father said: "Until 75 or 80!" And my teacher replied: "Then, it's not the right time." The first competition I did I was thirteen. I was not really an "enfant prodige", because I studied like everybody. But – I

practiced in the right way! And I must say I was very lucky, because in my career I saw many great talents ruined by terrible teachers. A lot! So, it is really a question of luck, that you meet the right person at the right time.

AKB: And how would you describe your relation with your violin? Is it friendship? Or is it more? Is it love?

SA: It is love, really. And I am not the type of violinist who sometimes hates his instrument. If you hate your instrument (as sometimes happens with my colleagues), you want to change this, you want to change that, you don't like the bridge and you want to change... This is not good for a violin. Zino Francescatti, who played my Stradivari for 45 years, he never changed the bridge – in 45 years! He never changed the sound post, he never changed the bass bar. Never! And now this violin is with me, and I am the same! I don't change anything.



Anything! I have had this violin since 1985, that's a long time! I haven't changed anything!

AKB: It's like a marriage! If you begin to change your husband or your wife... Better not, I think!

SA: (laughs) And it's not good for the violin, you know. Because every time you open it, it stresses the wood and then it needs time again to recover. It's like an operation for a human being. So, I'm sure the violin is very happy that I don't interfere with it, because it is always in good shape!

AKB: But, to be honest: Aren't there some days when you are not motivated, or some days when you don't want to play?

SA: No! The miracle of music is that if you are not in the right mood when you start playing, you soon will be. You'll soon become completely involved.

AKB: And if you are in a bad mood, what kind of music do you play? Do you play Bach, or do you play Paganini? ►

► Or something more melancholy?

SA: No, no, whether you play Bach or Mozart or Schubert, you are just so lucky that you can play this music. And there is something that people who don't play can't understand: The sheer emotion you have when you are in the music with these great composers. That gives you a lot of energy.

AKB: Do you think you meet the composer when you are playing his works?

SA: (takes a deep breath)
Well, you meet what he once wrote, so it's his energy that is in the score. You know, it is very interesting that the score is the same for everybody, right? You buy the score, and the music is in there. Of course, the composer could not write everything into the score, but he instilled it with his emotion and energy. As an artist, you have to be very honest and to really do what he wrote. And after that, after doing everything that he wrote, then you put yourself into the score. But if it is written forte, you have to play forte. No discussion! But some artists, if it says crescendo, they do a diminuendo. But if it is a crescendo, you have to do a crescendo. There are thousands of different crescendos you can do, thousands of different fortes, thousands of different ways of accelerando. But you have to do an accelerando. You can't do anything else. But – it is how you do the accelerando which is different. And this is another miracle of music: Take one score and a hundred musicians; they all play the same score – but it will be different every time. That's really a miracle!

AKB: It is interpretation. Do you think there are some interpretations from other violinists that are wrong?

SA: I think it is difficult to say "wrong". I mean, it's wrong if you don't do the right things.

AKB: Wrong notes?

SA: Well, wrong notes... Today it is quite impossible to play wrong notes. But it is wrong if you play a crescendo where there should be a diminuendo. But if you do the right thing, it is not wrong. If their idea or interpretation is different, you cannot say it is "wrong". Only Bach can say wrong! (laughs) Not you, not me! Nobody else... You can like an interpretation, and you can like another one better, of course. But nobody can say "wrong".



AKB: Bach cannot say anything any more, but what if you are playing contemporary work, from Krzysztof Penderecki for example. How does the communication between you and the composer work?

SA: Many composers have written works for me: Salvatore Sciarrino, Iannis Xenakis, Luciano Berio and so on. It is very nice to work together with the composer. It would have been amazing to live in the past, like Joachim with Brahms, because they did something incredible.

AKB: And do they give you the complete score, or do you help them a little bit, giving them some advice concerning specific difficulties or technical things?

SA: Of course. If a composer is not a violinist, he has to be helped by the violinist, just like Brahms with Joachim. This is normal. Sometimes a composer is amazed when he hears his music for the first time.

Sometimes it's like: "Oh my God! I didn't realise it was like this!"

AKB: And also: "I didn't want it like this. I have to change it!"

SA: No, that never happened with me. They were always very, very happy about it. (laughs)

AKB: You are also famous for your Piazzolla interpretation. How and when did you meet Astor Piazzolla?

SA: Well, I met Piazzolla in Buenos Aires. The first time I went to play in Argentina was in 1963/64. I went to listen to his concerts and was amazed by the music he was making. Later, I went to Argentina quite often; and finally, in 1969, I went to see him at a concert with the violinist Antonio Agri. He was an autodidact, but he really had the most beautiful sound. A great violinist! I said to Antonio Agri: "Listen, you have the most beautiful violin sound I ever heard in my life." And then they came to my concert, after which we went to Piazzolla's house to see the Americans landing on the moon. The same night, he wrote a Milonga for me. He came to the Colon theatre in the morning, to my rehearsal with my pianist, showed me the sheet music and said: "I wrote this for you!" So, I started playing. And he gave me some advice on the interpretation of this music, because you don't play it the same way as you'd play Mozart, where you want do everything right and play every single note. He said: "No, this is a melodic line, and then you can improvise." ►

► To cut a long story short: I loved this piece so much that I played it the same night as an encore.

AKB: And he was in the audience?

SA: And he was at the concert, yes! Of course, he didn't know that I was going to play the Milonga. But I did it, and he... He cried. He came to the dressing room and was crying. It was a great moment! And since then, we've become really good friends. I even gave my violin – at that time I had the Strad The President – I gave my violin to his violinist to make a record. He was so proud, and on the album is written: Antonio Agri is playing a Stradivari from 1720 that Maestro Accardo gave him. And in return, Antonio taught me how to play his music and the music of Piazzolla...



AKB: Contemporary classical works are often not accepted by the typical audience at classical concerts. How do you react if you feel that the audience is not soooo... attentive?

SA: I think if the audience is not soooo... attentive, it is my fault. It means I'm not giving enough. I have had some interesting experiences with young people. Often, they have no experience of listening to music. Two years ago, we were doing a chamber music festival, with an open rehearsal for an audience of 12 or 13 year olds. And we were rehearsing *Verklärte Nacht* for string sextet by Arnold Schoenberg which is a difficult piece. Before we started I said, "Well, they are either going to leave or sleep or be noisy." But, you know, it was amazing! For an hour and a half, not one of them moved! They were captivated. Some of them were even crying. Give young people something important enough through music and they're only too ready to accept it.

AKB: But isn't that the problem nowadays, that people aren't going to concerts any more. If they never experience a live concert and the atmosphere there, then I think it's hard to interest young people in classical music.

SA: For me, it is just a question of education. If the schools do not do anything, how can we expect to have young people at concerts? At school, they have to teach both how to listen to music and the music itself. If school does not give you the opportunity to learn something, you'll never learn anything. Not only music, but every kind of education. Young people, they are like sponges. You know, what you give to them, they absorb. If

you give them terrible things, they will absorb terrible things. If you give them great music, they will absorb great music!

AKB: If they only know McDonalds, they think this is food, but really it is trash?

SA: Yeah, that's right. We are responsible for that. It's the same for musicians; if the school does not do anything, we have to do it. And we do it! I mean, with my colleagues, we do a lot of things. We go to play in schools, we bring young people to rehearsals.

AKB: You are often called the "second Paganini". Is that an honour for you?

SA: The only thing I can say is that I have played everything and I recorded everything that he wrote. Of course, it is an honour (laughs), of course, yes. Paganini has been very important for violinists, because he was able to do things that

before nobody even imagined were possible. I am very happy because I really played what I liked. And I am very happy that I have the opportunity, the technical opportunity, to interpret such great music.

AKB: Have you always been so self-confident? Even as a young student, or is it something that came with maturity?

SA: No, it's the way I have always been. I was very lucky to meet so many incredible musicians. The time you spend with great musicians is very important. I learnt a lot, not only from violinists, but also from conductors and pianists like Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli. I had the opportunity to speak with him, to make music with him, to play for him. And he gave me so much amazing musical advice. So, you can learn from a pianist, you can learn from a conductor, you can learn from a cellist. With Pablo Casals, I also had fantastic musical moments. I was so lucky to know so many great musicians – and to play chamber music with all of them! With Isaac Stern, with Rostropovich. And I played with great conductors: with Sergiu Celibidache, with Claudio Abbado, with Riccardo Muti and so on. The fact that you play with so many other musicians means that you absorb a lot of ideas and energy and interpretation. You know, your teacher is important for your technique. But you become a musician by meeting other musicians!

AKB: It sounds like you should be a good team player? ►

► **SA:** In life, in chamber music, of course I am. I play a lot of chamber music, because I think that it is very important. Playing chamber music, you learn to play and listen at the same moment – which sometimes soloists don't! They always think like the star: You play the Beethoven concerto and the orchestra is accompanying YOU. But that's not true! You are part of the score, together with the orchestra. So, you are just one part. When you play with an orchestra, you sometimes have to play in another tempo because the oboe or the clarinet cannot play in yours. It is always a collaboration, you are a part of the orchestra. In chamber music, you must play while listening to the others. And your freedom stops where another player's freedom starts. It's just the same as life. I adore rehearsals with the other musicians. You learn so much playing with the others and discussing the score and the phrasing. Music is not created by a Mussolini who says, "This has to be like this and that like that!" No! It's a great democracy. It is nice to have ideas and also to have ideas from other people and to put them together. It's also a question of combining energy to build the performance of a great masterpiece. What could be more incredible than a rehearsal for Schubert's string quintet? You have the experience of rehearsing with great musicians and playing the Schubert string quintet – at the same time!

AKB: And when did you start conducting?

SA: I started many years ago. The very first time I conducted was in 1969, with a chamber orchestra in Turin. I also did a lot of concerts with I Musici. So, I was playing and conducting without a conductor. It's a natural way of making music, leader inter pares, so to say (laughs).

AKB: Did you never doubt this path you've taken?

SA: There was one moment... Well, it was not really a doubt, but I was very good at soccer. When I was very young, at the age of eleven or twelve, I was a great goalkeeper. And the Napoli soccer team, they came to my home to speak with my father, because they wanted to offer me a contract. But my father said: "Are you crazy?" And this was the only moment that I thought: "What am I going to do? Musician or football player?" But it was only for 10 seconds (laughs). After this, I didn't play goalkeeper any more, because I realised it was dangerous for my hands. But I didn't stop playing soccer – I played forward, but I was not good, because I didn't like to run too much. I am a very lazy man. You know, as a goalkeeper you stand at one place... (laughter)

AKB: How do you prepare for a concert? Do you meditate like some conductors do?

SA: For a conductor it is different. Because he has no

instrument – in his case the orchestra – to work with immediately before a concert. Fortunately, I have the violin. So, before going out, I practice, I play. Thus, it's a concentration ON the instrument that sharpens my focus.

AKB: And what message do you want to give to the audience when you are playing?

SA: The message... David Oistrakh used to say: "When we go out to play, we don't have to tell the audience, "Listen, how good we are. No! We have to say: Listen how lucky we are to play this music. And listen to how beautiful this music we are playing really is." This is the message, and I think it is very important!

AKB: But being famous, isn't it sometimes hard to be so well grounded?

SA: No, if you are a great musician, you are a great musician because you have humility before the music. Otherwise, you might be famous, you might be a great talent, but you are not a great musician. This is my opinion. I think Oistrakh was right!

AKB: What was your relationship?

SA: He was my ideal violinist.

AKB: Your idol?

SA: Yes. Well, there were also others, Heifetz, for instance. For any violinist, Jascha Heifetz was simply unbelievable. But with Oistrakh, his humanity was present in his playing. The way he spoke about music, the way he played in public and the emotion he gave to the music, for me that was great. The actual way he played the violin was great, his presence on stage, how he was standing there, his legs... It was fantastic. Before I heard him play live the first time, I already had hundreds of his records. He was in Naples when he came to play a cycle. And when I went to see him and he wanted to listen to me, it was a proud moment. One of the most emotional moments of my life! I went to all his concerts in Italy with him, so I played for him many times and it was a great experience to listen to his remarks about music, the way of playing and all these things. I learnt so much about playing from him! And when I went to play in Moscow for the first time, in 1970, he was at the airport waiting for me with his son, with Igor, another great moment. The day he died, for me it was like losing my father.

AKB: So, did you learn from his playing or from your discussions about music?

SA: From David Oistrakh (laughs). It was him as a human being. Our discussions were very important, but he was – for me he ►

► was the music. He was the violin, he was the music. It was really a single being. And his smile! His smile was so sweet and so beautiful that I'll never forget it!

AKB: Do you think a person with an ugly soul can be a good musician?

SA: I don't think so. Impossible. There are some great technicians, but the music, the emotion of music, never unfolds. But emotion is the core. If you don't get emotional while you play, you don't give anything to the people who listen to you. And if you don't give anything to them, they don't give anything back to you, and that destroys the fundamental relationship between the music and its performance.

AKB: What was the most captivating concert, or the most captivating moment in your career?

SA: Well, some of them have been very important and very emotional. Especially when I knew there were great musicians in the audience. When you go to play and you know that there are musicians you like and admire in the concert hall, you play with a lot more emotion. When Oistrakh was there, I think I played better than ever. When Francescatti was there, I played fantastically... Isaac Stern or Henryk Szeryng... One time in Paris, I played the Bach solo sonatas and partitas with all the Paganini caprices in three concerts – two Bach, eight caprices; two Bach, eight caprices; two Bach, eight caprices. And in each concert Szeryng was there. Daniel Barenboim was at one too. So, when I knew that they were there, I really played like never before. And I still remember all these concerts being very special...

Another really emotional moment was the very first time I played Paganini's violin. It was after the Paganini competition in 1958. I was seventeen, a seventeen year old boy having the opportunity to play Paganini's violin. It has to be one of the great emotions of your life! And then, I played the 24 caprices, again with his violin in Genoa, in his hometown, for the 200th birthday celebration in 1982. All the great Italian violinists, great friends and violinists, were there. And this was a great moment, too.


AKB: So when you play, whom are you playing for? Yourself or the audience?

SA: The moment I start playing, I play for the music. Of course, the audience is there and you play for them. But more than for them you play for the composer, for the music you are recreating. I sometimes think about my mother and my father, who are no longer here. But I never play for myself. No!

AKB: And which is your most important recording?

SA: Recordings are important; they are nice things to do. But the moment I have recorded something, then for me it is finished. By the next day if not everything then at least something is different. You can play the same thing hundreds of times, and it will be different a hundred times. A record is just a moment...

AKB: A snapshot?

SA: Yes, because everything is different. So, a record is fine, but it reflects just one singular moment, one snapshot of a life full of music. 


Salvatore Accardo on disc...

by Jimmy Hughes

Salvatore Accardo's International career as a recording artist began in the early 1970s with the premiere recording of a 'lost' Paganini violin concerto for Deutsche Grammophon – 2530 467. Accardo was partnered by Charles Dutoit, who conducted the London Philharmonic.

It was an auspicious debut; a new violinist in a previously unknown and never before recorded violin concerto by Paganini. The LP had a fabulous cover – a colourful painting of Paganini by Petrus Wandry. Wandry did some great sleeves for DG – Steinberg's Boston *Planets* and Martinon's *Lalo Namouna* for example

Not long after, DG recorded Accardo playing the other five Paganini concertos, again with Dutoit conducting the LPO. This was the first integral cycle of the Paganini concertos ever recorded, and the virtuoso playing of the soloist set standards that in many ways have yet to be bettered.

Better still, for all their incredible technical brilliance, the playing was actually very musical. Of course all six works were and are great showpieces. Yet those fortunate to have heard Paganini himself play – including a certain Franz Schubert – were stunned by the Italian's expressive singing vocalises tone. Schubert likened it to hearing an Angel sing... 

▶ A further Paganini LP of shorter pieces and a double LP of the 24 Caprices (with all repeats observed!) followed, establishing Accardo as something of a Paganini specialist. Incredibly, Accardo first performed the Caprices in public at the tender age of 13. He re-recorded them again in 1999.

These early recordings certainly demonstrate Accardo's tremendous technical prowess, and sweet singing tone. Technically, DG's sound is gorgeous. The Paganini concerto recordings have a bright, open, yet deliciously sweet and natural quality that stand among the best DGs of what was a very good period for the Yellow label.

In particular I like the *third concerto* – lovely work, gorgeous sweet string tone and that deliciously droll tuba reinforcing the bass line! – but actually it's hard to select highlights when every movement has something to offer. The 'Campanella' finale of the *second concerto*, for example – wonderful! After releasing the *sixth concerto* on its own, DG released all six concertos in a boxed set just to annoy those who'd stupidly bought the first LP. They then released each concerto over the next few years on a separate LP, often with fillers that were not previously released, each with a cover painting of Paganini by Gerhard Noak. In 2007, clearaudio re-released a cross-section of Accardo's Paganini recordings for Deutsche Grammophon made in the years 1975 to 1978 on 180g vinyl: *Diabolus In Musica* (clearaudio LP 002894776492)

Although the Paganini discs seemed to be successful – both musically and commercially - Accardo left DG and went to Philips. In the mid '70s he'd already made a recording for Philips of Bach's *Triple concerto* with I Musici, and sets of Vivaldi *concertos Op 11* and *12* followed. Which naturally brings us to that violinists' favourite *The Four Seasons*. Accardo's Philips recording was released in 1988, and it was a truly sumptuous affair. Dubbed *Omaggio a Stradivari*, it was intended as a tribute to the greatest of all Italian violin makers

The recording was made live in Stradivari's home town of Cremona, cradle of Italian violin making, during the fifth Cremona festival in 1987, with the orchestra playing entirely on Stradivari-made instruments. Accardo actually plays a different violin for each *Season*. I'd like to have seen the insurance premiums... In this recording you can hear the two Stradivari violin's actually owned by Accardo, including the instrument that used to belong to Zino Francescatti. The disc ends with a Vivaldi concerto for three violins in which Accardo once again plays the ex-Francescatti fiddle. The original LP (422 065-1) was

a truly lavish production – a gate-folder with colour photos of the beautiful instrument (Il Cremonese) played by Accardo in the *Spring concerto*. A CD was issued at the same time, but with a skimpy booklet and no colour photos of the instruments. In comparison it was a sad and sorry affair.

For Philips Accardo went on to record all the great Romantic concertos – Beethoven and Brahms (Kurt Masur/Leipzig Gewandhaus), Mendelssohn (Dutoit/LPO) and Tchaikovsky (Colin Davis/BBC SO). He also did a handsome

double LP set of Bach concertos, including several reconstructions from the harpsichord concertos. 1980 saw the release of a four LP boxed set on Philips devoted to the complete works for violin and orchestra of Max Bruch. Philips also released a three LP set of the complete solo violin Sonatas and Partitas by Bach. Other recordings included the Dvorak and Sibelius concertos – both with Colin Davis conducting.

A couple of Paganini LPs devoted to rarely-heard works for violin and orchestra were released on EMI in the early '80s, featuring the Chamber Orchestra of Europe. Accardo also partnered Anne Sophie Mutter in Bach's *Double concerto* – again for EMI – with him conducting the English Chamber orchestra.

Quite a few of Accardo's key early recordings were made right at the end of the analogue era. Perhaps for this reason his performances were sometimes passed over for CD release in favour of newer ones that had been digitally recorded. The demise of the LP saw many fine Accardo performances slip from the catalogue. One of his best Chamber releases was of the *Six Rossini String sonatas*, played with one player per part. The two LP boxed set (6769 024) was released in 1979, but did not last long in the catalogue. Perhaps the tide had begun to turn against this tuneful elegant music.

Other notable recordings from Accardo as a chamber musician came in the form of Vivaldi's *sonatas for violin and harpsichord Op 1 and Op 2*, plus the *six sonatas Op 5*. There was even a boxed set of the Haydn *concertos*, but (strangely) no Mozart. Indeed, Mozart is the one major composer missing from Accardo's early discography.

True, there was a CBS disc of the *Flute sonatas* with Classical Supergroup Jean-Pierre Rampal, Isaac Stern, and Mislav Rostropovitch, on which Accardo played Viola.



The Recent Years... Accardo's and the fonè label

by Anke Katharin Bronner

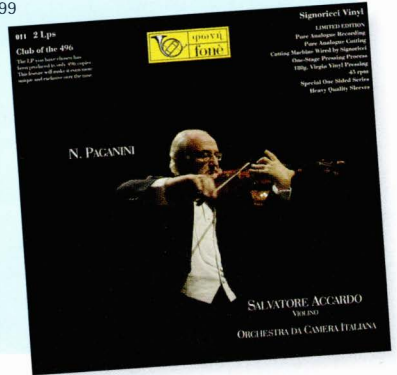
Accardo's recordings for fonè are characterised and determined by two strong relationships: his close friendship with Astor Piazzolla and his cooperation with Giulio Cesare Ricci, founder and president of fonè.

Amongst nearly 15 releases one can spot two main series: Three recordings of works by Piazzolla and the rest releases featuring historical instruments. The music of Astor Piazzolla means love and loneliness, joy of life and doubt about its sense, welcome and farewell – all at once, oscillating between heaven and hell. Piazzolla's music transports this ambivalence perfectly. Tango; tango is life and it is passion! Piazzolla's music brings some colour to the everyday grey. Accardo seems the right man to wrap the pain into sound! The effects of the strings suit the Latin rhythms and music perfectly. I have seldom heard Accardo playing with so much soul and expressing Piazzolla's – and his – humanity so strikingly. Whether Amati or Guarneri, Stradivari or Guarneri del Gesù, fonè has released a series of samplers

presenting these historical treasures, not only diverting but also training your ears. Having listened you will agree: Yes, it's true, a violin is indeed a creature with a soul! And you will discover that each of these immortal instruments – immortal as long as they are played – has its own, "personal" sound. And if you've been lucky enough to witness Giulio Cesare Ricci producing these recordings you'll understand the skill and passion he brings to the process, allowing us to enjoy this highest artistry combined with fabulous sound quality.

I Violini Di Cremona – Omaggio a Fritz Kreisler 1
Et 2
LP 003 / SACD 003 / 030
Stradivari – Il Cremonese: Omaggio a Fritz Kreisler
CD 2045
Stradivari – Il Vesuvio
SACF 040
Astor Piazzolla – Oblivion
LP 002 / SACD 019
Astor Piazzolla – Adios Nonino
LP 013J / SACD 020
Astor Piazzolla – Le Grand Tango
SACD 021
Johannes Brahms – Sonata per Violino op. 78, op.

100, op. 108 Scherzo from "F.A.E. Sonata"
SACD 008
PAGANINI – 24 Capricci for violin solo op. 1
SACD 032
Salvatore Accardo – The Master
Laura Manzini piano
CD 037
Schumann Schubert Mozart
CD 2006
N. Paganini
LP 011
Homage to Heifetz
CD 099



► Sad to think that all but Accardo are now dead. But the concertos had to wait till the 1990 release of Mozart's complete works for violin and orchestra on Nuovo Era.

Recently, the Italian audiophile label Fone re-mastered his recordings of Mozart's complete works for violin (concertos, sonatas, etc) on 13 CDs using tube technology. Incidentally, Accardo's Mozart violin sonatas are included in Brilliant's *Complete Mozart Edition* – 170 CDs available for \$99 or less – an amazing bargain...

Although Accardo mostly tended to record music from the late Baroque period up to the early 20th century, he does play modern music. There's a recording of Penderecki's *violin concerto* with the composer conducting on Nuovo Era for example. Composers like Sciarrino, Donatoni, Piston, Piazzolla and Xenakis have all written works for him.

1992 saw Accardo form a string quartet – the Accardo Quartet – in order to indulge his love of chamber music in general, and the quartet repertoire in particular. Italy's highest honour, the Cavaliere di Gran Croce, was bestowed upon him by the President of Italy in 1982. In 1996 the Peking Conservatoire named him 'most honourable Professor'.

In 1999 he was granted the order of 'Commandeur dans l'ordre du mérite culturel', the highest honour of the principality of

Monaco and in 2001 he received the prestigious 'Una Vita per la Musica' Award.

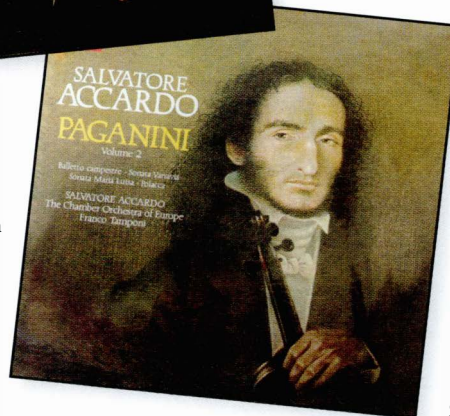
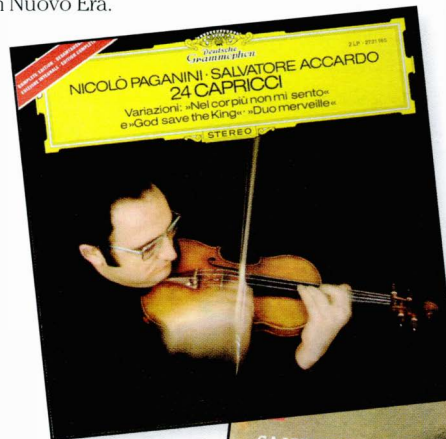
In 1996 Accardo re-founded the Orchestra da Camera Italiana (OCI), whose members are drawn from the best pupils of Cremona's 'Walter Stauffer' Academy. In 1997, he recorded two CDs with them - *The Virtuoso Violin in Italy* and *Masterpieces for Violin and Strings* for Warner Classics' Fonit Cetra label, marking the recording debut of the Orchestra da Camera Italiana.

1999 saw Accardo return to his

Paganini roots with a new recording of the complete Concertos for violin and orchestra with the OCI for EMI Classics – recording engineer Giulio Cesare Ricci. He also recorded the complete works for violin by Astor Piazzolla on three SACDs for the Fonè label.

Accardo is the proud owner of not one but two Stradivarius violins: the Hart ex Francescatti of

1727 and the Firebird ex Saint-Exupéry of 1718.



Record Reviews

How To Read Them
















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

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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

They are:- Dave Ayers, Tim Britt, Anke K. Bronner, Mark Childs, Richard Clews, Dave Davies, Dennis D. Davis, Peter Downard, Richard S. Foster, Roy Gregory, Simon Groome, Jason Hector, Andrew Hobbs, James Michael Hughes, Reuben Parry, David Stirling.

Key to Icons

	CD		120g LP
	Gold CD		150g LP
	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		10" LP
	Double Disc		Availability As S/H LP
	DVD		Vinyl Double Album
	SACD		
	Hybrid SACD		
	Multi-Channel		



GoodBooks

Control

Columbia LIBRARY009 


Control is GoodBooks' debut album and it's a record that provides tight, thoughtful music in spades. Reminiscent of bands like Bloc Party: intelligent and considered, with a distinct focus on production whilst steering away from Neanderthal dad-rock they use a light touch to build a more complex sound than most bands, with percussion and guitar effects used to open it up, rather than hammer it home. However, *Control* isn't about being experimental or progressive and this is certainly no concept album. Instead it is refreshingly light and tuneful, with breezy harmonies and dancehall keyboards. Not many bands can, or would choose to, write a song about the Great War, and far fewer still would set it to a disco backing. But this is what GoodBooks do - using metaphors, telling stories, fables and parables. They keep the overall tone light, but look underneath and their music, both lyrically and musically, is surprisingly deep. Throughout the album you get the distinct impression that there is something else here, some sort of message, snatched glimpses of something more. This record is subtle and heavily textured, brilliantly recorded, offering more each and every time you listen. It's been a long time since I listened to an album that is as thoughtful and intelligent as *Control*, and longer still since that album was actually any good. This leap out of your hi-fi like a burst of fresh air.

MC



Debbie Davies

Blues Blast

Telarc Records CD83669 

It hasn't been easy for women guitarists/vocalists to gain a foothold in the blues, an area of music heavily dominated by the male fraternity. Things are beginning to change though, and there are some amazingly talented ladies out there currently giving the guys a real run for their money. Thanks to the likes of Susan Tedeschi, Ana Popovic, Sue Foley and more recently Roxanne Potvin, the girls are beginning to make blues fans stand up and take notice. As a former pupil of the late, great Albert Collins, Debbie Davies has been plying her trade on the blues circuits for a number of years. For three of those years she backed the great man, and his intensified playing style can be heard in Davies' marvelous and consistently inventive take on lead guitar. She wheels in some heavyweight guests to help out on this latest release. Coco Montoya, Tab Benoit and legendary harpist Charlie Musselwhite are on hand to make proceedings go with a right royal swing. Whatever floats your boat, be it blistering in-your-face instrumentals, foot-tapping Texas shuffles or heartfelt slow blues, you'll find it all here in these grooves. Best of a great bunch is the instrumental 'Sonora Sunset', ten priceless minutes of scintillating slow blues where Davies, Benoit and Montoya take it in turns to let rip in their own inimitable styles. Yep, it's definitely a real blast of the blues.

AH





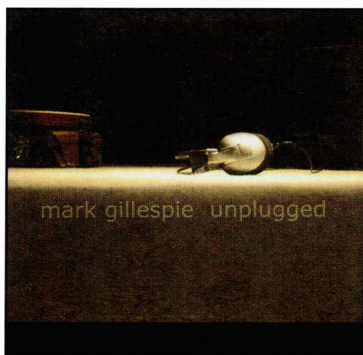
Kelly Willis

Translated From Love

Rykodisc RCD10886

Kelly Willis is blessed with one of those heartbreaker voices; when she sings a real tearjerker she can bring the toughest of the tough to their knees. In the 90's she was a product of the Nashville treadmill, but even in such a sterile environment she still managed to produce albums head and shoulders above her contemporaries. Once free from the confines of the corporate music industry she set up home at Rykodisc to create a more alternative country sound. Her take on Nick Drake's 'Time Has Told Me' still stands as the best version I've ever heard. *Translated From Love* finds Willis collaborating with ex-Green On Red guitarist Chuck Prophet, and together they have crafted the most fully realized album of her career. The twelve songs take in six co-writes and some pretty unusual covers, none more so than Iggy Pop's 'Success'. With call and response vocals, a huge dollop of vintage vox organ and sparkling guitar work from Prophet and Leisz, Willis hands it a new lease of life, albeit a million miles from the original. However, a Kelly Willis album isn't complete without a tearjerker and there are three beauties here, 'Losing You', 'Stone's Throw Away' and the stunning title track. Motherly duties have slowed her output but when Willis does get in the studio she never disappoints. This is just as good as what's gone before.

AH



Mark Gillespie

Unplugged

New West Records NW6128

This is the disc that Mark Gillespie has for years threatened to release. It's also his best. *Unplugged* is a studio album dedicated to his busking "street audience" and is based around his favourite covers and four of Gillespie's own songs written during the recording sessions at the Chocolate Factory studio in Giessen, Germany. The originals: 'Take To The Skies', 'Angels In The Rain', 'So Beautiful' and 'Chasing The Moon' sit comfortably alongside 'Don't Mess Around' (Richard H Jones); 'Ain't No Sunshine' (Bill Withers); 'Chasing Cars' (Snow Patrol); 'Probably Me' (Sting); 'Crazy' (Seal) and 'Waiting In Vain' (Bob Marley) emphasising Mark's strength as both a writer and performer. The production is built upon Gillespie's airy and compelling whiskey soaked voice that eases across the width and breadth of popular music, and of course the minimalist simplicity of his Lakewood acoustic guitar playing. He makes these covers his own not through imitation but through intelligent and confident reinterpretation, subtle inflection, thoughtful carefully revised tempos and many a crafted nuance. He also possesses in Peter Herrmann (bass) and Oliver Jager (piano) a pair of exceptionally talented sidemen who constantly remain on his wavelength. Mark Gillespie, a fantastic busker and a decent bloke with whom to share a beer.

Supplier: www.gillespie.de

RP



Hans Theessink

Slow Train

Blue Groove Records CD1620

Theessink's last album, *Bridges* was recorded in an old church to give it a warm, open and very natural sound. So taken was he with the results, that he set about looking for similar surroundings for *Slow Train*. This time his friend Pinky Watts opened his house in the vineyards of Southern Styria and the whole band parked themselves there for ten days, along with lots of vintage equipment from Vienna and sound engineer Thomas Löffler, who built a makeshift studio from scratch. The results are absolutely stunning. Rarely have I heard a CD recording sound so analogue, it really is a joy to behold. *Bridges* was a peach of an album, full of African influences and beautifully married to Theessink's deep love of the blues, but he's gone one better with this one. The song writing is so strong and his band is nothing short of incredible. Those African influences continue to play a major part too; think a bluesier *Graceland* and you'd be getting close to what this man does. Theessink's voice is the perfect foil for the music; deep and creamy but with a lovely easygoing quality to it. My favourite song is the title track; I loved it on first hearing and it just gets better with every play. In fact, that's true of the whole album, a really uplifting experience. Pure gold dust.

AH



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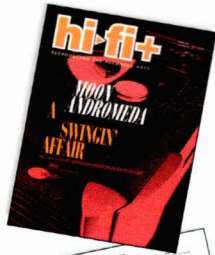
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Last Train Home

Last Good Kiss

Corazon Records 255100 

The leader of Last Train Home is Eric Brace, a former music journalist for respected newspaper The Washington Post who just happens to be an excellent singer and songwriter in his own right. This is Last Train Home's fifth album, and although Brace is the principal songwriter, all the band members (which include ex-Jayhawk Jen Gunderman on keyboards) contributed ideas and arrangements. Last Good Kiss was mainly recorded live in the studio, and shows a band comfortable in their surroundings and capable of bringing the best out of one another. They fit the Americana bracket, or alt-country if you prefer, but really they're just a damned fine rock 'n' roll band with a great grasp on melody and song structure. Not surprisingly, considering they have an ex-Jayhawk in their midst, there's a strong 'Hawks' flavour to their music, especially on mid-paced numbers like 'Can't Come Undone', which features delightful accordion playing courtesy of Ms. Gunderman. They have their own identity though, and in Brace they have a vocalist with a flexible and hugely entertaining voice, and a songwriter every bit the equal of messrs. Louris and Olson. Thrown in for good measure is a cover of Dylan's 'Wheels Of Fire', and it's a compliment to Brace when I tell you his songs stand shoulder to shoulder with one of rock music's legendary compositions.

AH



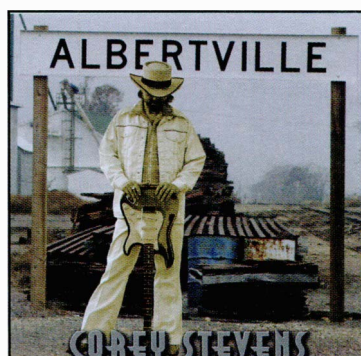
The Long Blondes

Someone To Drive You Home

Rough Trade RTRADCD364 

The Long Blondes have been building in my consciousness now since this album was released last year. It's taken that long for them to have risen from also-ran to top of the class, but rise they have. They use the long-standing formula of a handful of guys at the back pumping out jangling guitar licks with a woman at the mic providing a hint of retro-chic sophistication. The Long Blondes twist is to keep things that little bit gritty. So whereas The Pipettes and The Chalets are buffed until squeaky clean, The Long Blondes still have a little bit of dirt under their fingernails. This allows their music a little more freedom, loosening the format and letting things get a bit darker; there's absolutely nothing subtle about the performance on this album. The guitars stumble about like a drunkard on a Friday night, wheeling off in unexpected directions and exploding down each creative pathway and it's this boisterous exuberance that gives the record its energy. But what really sets the band apart are some of the finest lyrics I have ever heard. On they read like prose, on record they spin the melody off into unexpected detours as sentences run their course. This is a record that drips with bitterness, regret and jealousy seen from the eyes of the jilted lover or the forgotten woman. And it's this dark, innovative song-writing that makes this album unforgettable.

MC



Corey Stevens

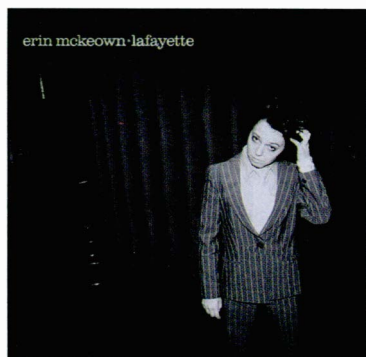
Albertville

Ruf Records RUF1125 

Corey Stevens is one of the blues world's best kept secrets. This Texas native has released some stunning albums over the years, none more thrilling than Blue Drops Of Rain, a record Stevie Ray would have been proud to call his own. Like Vaughan, Stevens is an exhilarating guitarist comfortable in any style, and blessed with an excellent voice. Here he pays homage to a colossus of the blues, the immortal Albert King. Rather than take King's best loved songs, Stevens has chosen to cover a batch of the lesser known ones - and my word, what a great job he's done too! Wicked solos tumble forth, augmented by a crack horn section and the tastiest rhythm combination this side of Chris Layton and Tommy Shannon. This is most definitely the blues, but it's shot through with a generous helping of funk, which makes standing still an impossible task when listening to it. There are too many highlights to list but to these ears 'Little Brother (Make A Way)' deserves special mention for its lazy, soulful groove. The bass-line is positively hypnotic, and Stevens' solo hit's the spot. The only downer is a pedestrian take on 'Blue Suede Shoes', a rock 'n' roll song that doesn't translate too well to the blues. But hey, I'm being picky; the rest is a sublime listen and a must for all music fans.

AH





Erin McKeown

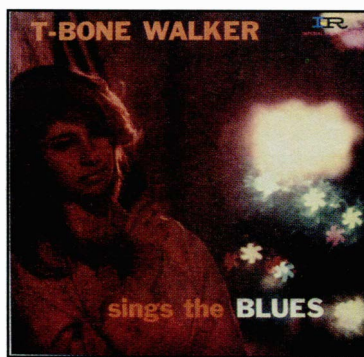
Lafayette



Live albums...you either love 'em or hate 'em. Personally, I'm a fan of the former, as long as they're capable of making you wish you'd been there to watch it all going down. Erin McKeown's early albums had a tendency to drift in an indie-pop direction. Nothing wrong with that as she's more than capable of writing a decent tune or two, but in a live setting it's a very different story, as one might expect given that she calls her back up band 'The Little Big Band'. Recorded at the Lafayette club in NYC, this album crackles with energy, and the performances of all the musicians are right out of the top drawer. Special mention has to go to drummer Alison Miller though, for providing constantly inventive fills and a rock-solid backbeat. Her timing is positively metronomic as she blends superbly with bassist Tom Sickafoose (what a name!) on the slow-building 'James', and she whips the intimate crowd into a frenzy with a great display of precision and power on 'We Are More'. McKeown shows her leadership qualities on '...More' too, as she gets the audience involved in a sing-a-long that makes the hairs on the back of the neck bristle with emotion.

Lafayette is a terrific live album with great songs, a knockout band and really excellent recording quality. It's one gig I'd have loved to attend.

AH



T-Bone Walker
Sings The Blues

Imperial LP 9098

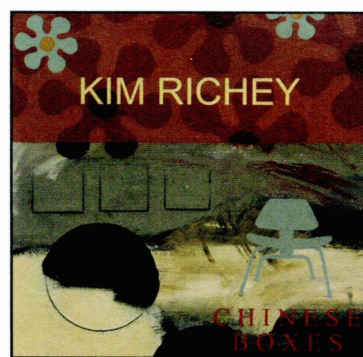
Pure Pleasure Records 180g

A hugely influential innovator, blues guitarist

T-Bone Walker cut these grooves over four sessions in Los Angeles between April 1950 and January 1952. The technical brilliance of his cool West Coast licks are supported by an array of truly excellent players including bassist Billy Hadnott, tenor Maxwell Davis, pianist Willard McDaniels and drummer Oscar Lee Bradley, with Walker's guitar determining the tempo. Real synergy is generated throughout. The songs are tight and pithy little gems that range across a host of typical blues themes, obvious from titles like 'Blues Is A Woman', 'Cold Cold Feeling', 'You Don't Love Me' and 'Strollin' With Bones'. None are longer than a touch over three minutes in length and this adds to the sense of momentum, musical flow and immediacy. Vocally, T-Bone Walker bears his soul and generates that classic tortured blues man persona as he wrings the last drop of emotion from this material, the smouldering 'You Don't Understand' being a fine example. Ironic threads and rays of deprecating humour generously illuminate these songs in the traditional way of the blues. Shadow and sunshine struggling for ascendancy, and whilst Pure Pleasure's release offers no sonic challenge to original pressings, it does offer the chance to own a crucial musical document.

Supplier: www.purepleasurerecords.com

RP



Kim Richey

Chinese Boxes

Vanguard Records 79823-2

As a Nashville songwriter Kim Richey has few peers; luminaries such as Trisha Yearwood and Mary Chapin Carpenter are amongst the many to have covered her songs. As a solo artist there's been a steady shift; the earlier albums were very much country rock, but her last album *Rise* showed a different side to her, loaded as it was with beautiful, ethereal pop songs. *Chinese Boxes* carries on where *Rise* left off, only this time she's enlisted the help of Sir George Martin's son Giles as producer, and together they've crafted a record that's sure to figure in a lot of 2007's 'album of the year' lists. *Chinese Boxes* was recorded in London and that, coupled with Martin's bright and spacious production, gives it a very 'English' sound. Unsurprisingly the Beatles spring to mind, especially with the arrangements and melodies displayed on 'Jack And Jill' and the bouncy 'Not A Love Like This'. However, ballads are Richey's tour-de-force. She's got heartbreak by the gallon in that voice of hers, and it spills over righteously on the pleading 'The Absence Of Your Company' and downright gorgeous closer 'Pretty Picture'. These days, given CD's ability to allow an artist to over-indulge, it's refreshing to see Richey eschewing the temptation in favour of just 33 minutes of music, but what a lovely listening experience those 33 minutes are. She is such a treasure.

AH



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Paradise Lost... And Found

The Return of the Blade Runner Soundtrack

by Richard Clews

Blade Runner Trilogy: 25th Anniversary Universal Music TV 5305147 (CD)

RECORDING
MUSIC



Vangelis' *Blade Runner* soundtrack is the stuff of legend, an electronic Smile that remained buried for years while a cult formed around it. Regularly voted one of the most influential and important film scores of all time, it has driven many fans to hunt down bootlegs, spin conspiracy theories and elevate its modest creator to demigod status.

With the approaching 'final cut' of director Ridley Scott's masterpiece, speculation had been building that the soundtrack might be re-issued. News leaked of a possible *Blade Runner 2.0*, while an interview made passing reference to the soundtrack being re-issued with a bonus disc. Despite the rumours, the sudden announcement of the *Blade Runner Trilogy* caught fans off-guard: a lavish three-disc set, it comprises the original 1994 soundtrack album, an extra disc of previously unreleased music, and an album of new Vangelis compositions.

In the summer of 1982, when *Blade Runner* hit cinema screens, it was assumed that a soundtrack album would soon follow. The end credits and publicity material stated that it was available on the Polydor label. Yet it was not to be. Polydor designer Alwyn Clayden had researched computer imagery for the sleeve, but the project went no further. Warner Brothers stepped forward and issued an album of semi-orchestral arrangements of music from the film, but this was scant compensation for people waiting for Vangelis' score.

Polydor issued a press release in which, referring to the decision not to release an album, the company said of Vangelis: "The composer/producer/performer, whose soundtrack LP for *Chariots of Fire* has been certified double platinum in Canada for sales of over 200,000 units, has, from the start of his professional career, consistently diversified the nature of his work, undertaking numerous projects which have not automatically become record releases. In fact, actual discs represent only a small portion of his entire work; for example, just prior to accepting the *Blade Runner* work, Vangelis composed the music for the highly acclaimed film *Missing* - but did not release it as an album either."

The success of *Chariots* played a part in Vangelis' decision not to go ahead with an album at the time. On March 29, 1982, his 39th birthday, *Chariots of Fire* earned him the Academy Award for Best Original Score. Offers of soundtrack work flooded in, and album sales rocketed. But this presented an obstacle for a composer keen to avoid the fate of John Barry and Maurice Jarre, whose work away from the silver screen had been unfairly ignored. Vangelis' work encompassed solo recordings, collaborations with choirs and orchestras, experiments with African and Chinese music, avant-garde electro-acoustic music, the 'Jon and Vangelis' partnership with Jon Anderson, as well as music for adverts and documentaries. To suddenly have public attention focus solely on his film score work, with its unwanted ties to the dreaded box office, was a potential setback.

Another problem for Vangelis was, with so many projects happening simultaneously, which should he commit to vinyl? As Vangelis explained: "I realise it is natural for those who work in the record business to assume that there should be an LP of the *Blade Runner* soundtrack as a follow-up to the success of *Chariots of Fire*. Ideally, however, I believe that the onus of deciding whether a composition translates to record must lie with the composer himself."

While the possibility of a *Blade Runner* soundtrack album seemed remote, demand for the music started to build. Its parent film, which performed poorly on initial release (due partly to a rampaging E.T.), became a cult hit on home video. Repeated viewings allowed people to appreciate the layers of detail that Ridley Scott had painstakingly coordinated, accompanied by a soundtrack that seemed chemically bonded to the stunning images. Vangelis' music was heard in nearly every scene of the film, either as leitmotifs for particular characters or a near-constant swirl of wind chimes, bells and electronic textures. The sheer amount of music – far beyond that recorded for *Chariots of Fire* – made it all the more surprising, and disappointing, that none of it had been released.

Vangelis went on to score *The Bounty* and the harrowing Japanese epic *Antarctica*, but again chose not to allow film work to overshadow his other projects. Except for two themes, the score for *The Bounty* lies in the vaults, while *Antarctica* remained an import for several years. However, in 1987 Polydor started planning a compilation ►

► that would include some of the music fans had been clamouring for. Eventually released in 1989, *Themes* carried three pieces from *Blade Runner*, one of which, 'Memories of Green', came from *See You Later*. This 1980 album saw Vangelis touch on some of the ideas that resounded in *Blade Runner* itself, especially the fear of the planet being overwhelmed by pollution. The following year, *The Friends of Mr Cairo* revelled in the gangster imagery of 1940s Hollywood noir, again a major influence on Ridley Scott's film. All of this recorded in London, a city boasting



punks, New Romantics and inhabitants from all over the globe. It is not surprising then that Vangelis was able to find exactly the right mix of paranoia, nostalgia and cosmopolitan spirit to give *Blade Runner* its emotional core.

In 1993, interest in the film was rekindled when a 'Director's Cut' received international release. This version came closer to Scott's original intentions and, this time round, enjoyed commercial success. At this point, the dubious 'wonders' of bootlegging enabled a rogue double CD of the soundtrack to enjoy fifteen minutes of fame. Though suffering from heavy distortion, tape hiss and foley effects, the bootleg nonetheless changed hands for ridiculous prices. But then something unexpected happened – an official soundtrack album appeared in

June 1994. Including many themes from the film, supplemented by new pieces, the soundtrack allowed the music to be heard in crystalline clarity.

That seemed to be the end of the *Blade Runner* story, but when news emerged of a comprehensive DVD set to mark its 25th anniversary, containing a polished cut of the film, speculation grew that the rest of the score might also see the light of day. While the new CD set does not contain

every cue missing from the 1994 release (the opening title music is sadly missing), a substantial amount of music has been added – some of it recorded for the film but ultimately replaced by other music. The second disc functions as an album in its own right, loaded with Vangelis' signature atmospherics and ominous electronic rumblings. The flip-side to the airy 'Love Theme' and 'Rachael's Song' from the first album, this is the hard stuff, and listening to it now in remastered sound is awe-inspiring. Vangelis exploited the full dynamic range of his 24-track studio, wrestling with fearsome bass frequencies from the Yamaha CS80 and orchestral percussion at one end, and 'dog whistle' pitched noise at the other.

The new music on disc three fits the often melancholy mood of the score, with some evocative sax

solos from ace session musician/arranger Dimitris Tsakas. Spoken word snippets, exotic instruments and 'street' rhythms are used to bring the speculative fantasy of the film closer to home. 'BR Downtown' and 'No Expectation Boulevard' evoke the heat and despair of South Central L.A., while 'Piano In An Empty Room' is a simple and graceful meditation that eases the listener before 'Keep Asking' poses a series of questions to which there are no answer ("How did we get here, and where did God come from?").

Vangelis has definitely thought about how inexorably we seem to be moving towards the fictional 2019, and created music to convey the feeling that *Blade Runner's* world is here. That this music can stand comfortably alongside one of his milestones is quite an achievement, and a fitting conclusion to the entertaining, frustrating and ultimately rewarding saga of the *Blade Runner* soundtrack. ✚



Maria Rita

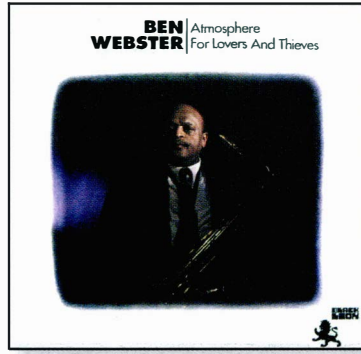
Samba Meu

Warner 2564698109

The daughter of two icons of Brazilian music, Elis Regina and Cezar Camargo Mariano, Maria Rita has already carved a name for herself with her eponymous first album going platinum, and her second album *Segundo* gaining two Latin Music Grammys. This third album pays tribute to some of her country's most characteristic music, the samba. It includes numbers by many of the best known songwriters including Arlindo Cruz, Franco Picole, and Elson do Pagode, but doesn't exclude new composers such as Edu Krieger and Rodrigo Bittencourt.

With excellent arrangements by Jota Moraes and a strong crew of musicians in support, particularly (and as is only right for this music) on percussion, one track listing 'cymbal, knife and frying pan' amongst the arsenal, it's Maria Rita's voice that properly leads and sets the feel throughout. It's a joyously seamless experience, guaranteed to put a little sunshine in your soul, but a few favourites quickly established themselves for me, including the sensual opening title track, the light as air 'Num Corpo So', the children's voices joining in on 'Cria', the meltingly tender 'Trajetoria' and so it goes. It's a strong album throughout, superbly sung, beautifully played and joyous.

DD



Ben Webster

Atmosphere For Lovers and Thieves

Black Lion/Pure Pleasure 30105

One of several Black Lion releases from studio sessions recorded in Copenhagen in 1965 when Webster moved permanently to Europe, *Atmosphere* is among the best of his later recordings. This is a collection of titles from three different recording sessions, about half of which include as sidemen Kenny Drew, Niels-Henning Orsted Pederson and Alex Riel, while the others feature a larger group of less well known musicians. What results is consistently fine playing and superior sound. The tunes are mostly standards such as 'Stardust', 'Autumn Leaves' and 'Days of Wine and Roses', and Webster's trademark romantic sound is stamped all over each tune.

These Black Lion sessions are fairly common in second-hand bins, but I was never especially impressed with the sound of these records until I heard this re-mastering by Sean Magee at Abbey Road Studios. The quavering, throaty sounds emanating from the bell of Webster's horn are captured perfectly and the sound of the band is well reproduced. The only caveat is that the original recording engineer for these sessions recorded a very hard left/right stereo image. That result has not changed, and there is no mono alternative. But the sound is so good, and the performances so worthwhile, that this caveat should not serve as an impediment to acquiring this set. For me, there is never enough good Ben Webster.

DDD



Charles Mingus and His Jazz Groups

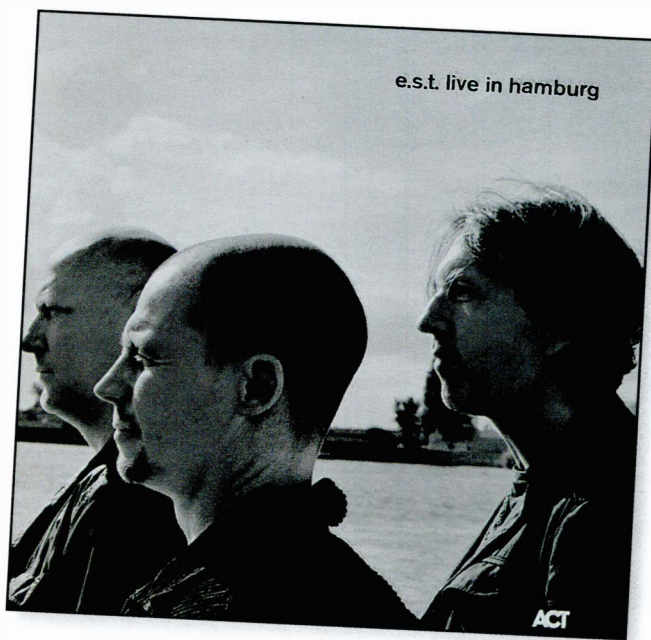
Mingus Dynasty

Columbia/Pure Pleasure PPAN CS8236

Like its better known predecessor *Mingus Ah Um*, this album was recorded in 1959 and is presented here in a newly re-mixed, expanded and re-mastered edition. Leading some of New York's best and most creative improvisers, Mingus effectively challenged two ensembles, a tenet and a nonet including two cellos, as never before. And boy, did they come up with the goods. It feels from the opening 'Slop' like a particularly energetic live set throughout. There's no 'filler' despite the inclusion of unedited versions, simply great music making. It's difficult with material of this calibre to extract favourites, but the storm whipped up in 'Gunslinging Bird' stays with me, as do the tributes to Mingus' idol Duke Ellington in 'Things Ain't What They Used To Be' and 'Mood Indigo'. But really the set is a blast from start to finish and so far I've found it impossible to play a single track without enjoying the full set. And whilst it'll never be the classic that its predecessor has become, this remains a great example of the genius of Mingus – and in this superb issue a lasting joy.

DD





e.s.t.
Live in Hamburg ACT 6002-2 (CD)

EST or the Esbjorn Svensson Trio has only produced one other live album in its 14-year history, and that was back in 1995 so it came as a surprise to see this double disc set from the Tuesday Wonderland tour. It consists of ten pieces, seven of them from the Tuesday Wonderland album but few if any are straight versions of the originals, e.s.t. being one of those bands that prefers to experiment with its music on stage, taking the opportunity to explore its possibilities and to indulge in the occasional solo. There are various explanations in the liner notes for why this particular night was selected for release. The tour manager has it that the band were inspired by the sight on the previous night of the James Last touring 'machine', with its eight eighteen-wheeler trucks and huge double-decker sleeper vans, but this probably impressed the tour manager more than anyone. Another factor was that the PA system arrived late and the band were unable to fit in a proper sound check before going on stage which must keep you on your toes to begin with at least. I suspect that the most important factor was the sound captured by the NDR which is front row in its intensity yet captures the atmosphere of the event. Whatever the reason it was a great gig and one for fans and newcomers alike to savour.

JK

RECORDING	
MUSIC	

...and also...

I've thoroughly enjoyed e.s.t.'s previous studio bound albums but I have long been aware that they have a particularly strong reputation as live performers. This release goes a long way to explaining why whilst giving me a metaphorical kick up the butt for never having taken the trouble to catch them in the flesh. Pianist Esbjorn Svensson, bassist Dan Berglund and drummer Magnus Ostrum present a set based largely around their 'Tuesday Wonderland' album and grab every opportunity to stretch out in live performance. The extended opening take on 'Tuesday Wonderland' sums up their strengths as well as anything. Svensson's virtuosity is immediately apparent, the subtlety and delicacy of his playing at the opening followed by his unrestrained and powerful improvisation later in the number would carve him out as the dominant star in any less well balanced trio, but in this case the other two are certainly his equal. The fluidity and range of Berglund's bass as he soars into abstractions and the power and inventiveness of Ostrum's percussion make it so. Couple this with their superb interplay and it's a winning combination. This evening in November 2006 must have been a great experience. ACT, via this very well recorded release has enabled us to get pretty close to being there.

DD

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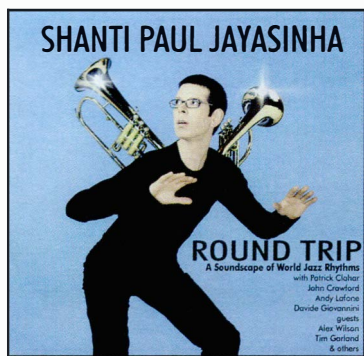
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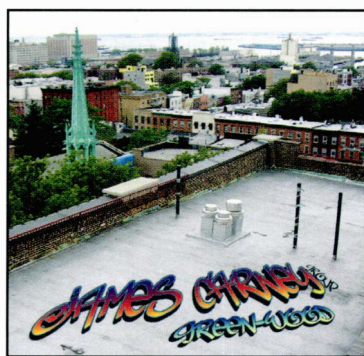
Shanti Paul Jayasinha

Round Trip

Candid CCD79848

First let me get the horror of the CD sleeve design out of the way: What were they thinking of, the poor guy in a LePetomanesque pose with trumpets for wings..aargh! Right, that's better. Thankfully the music once you're past the sleeve is well worth the pain. Jayasinha's first album as a leader, he has previously worked with many jazz luminaries including Kenny Wheeler, Tim Garland (who plays on one track here), Courtney Pine and Jason Rebello, and has toured the World taking in many musical influences along the way. The album reflects his travels with different soundscapes and images conjured from track to track. Standouts include the powerful and atmospheric 'Sufi', the lighter tones of 'Racatu', lifted by Clare Foster's vocals, the chunky percussion driving 'Jamuba', and the bass lines and horns in 'Yambu'. All in, it makes for a really enjoyable musical trip. There's some excellent soloing here too, as you'd expect from the man himself, his fluid trumpet leading most tracks, but notably too from Patrick Clahar's sax. This is a great start for Shanti Paul Jayasinha and I'm certain that next time he'll be able to afford a better sleeve design.

DD



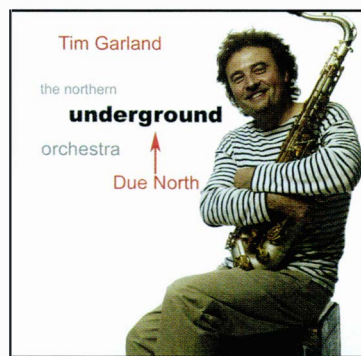
James Carney Group

Green-Wood

Songlines

James Carney is a New York based keyboard player who cites Rush, Reich and Nancarrow among a wide range of influences. He is accompanied here by a four strong brass line-up, bass and drums. The result is varied and often intense but manages to stay on the right side of the interesting/ challenging divide. Carney's use of synthesizer is particularly effective on the opening track which has a claustrophobic energy that gives the music remarkable torque. This electric buzz pops up on the fourth tune as well, which has a sorcery to it that is reminiscent of the mighty Mahavishnu Orchestra. Elsewhere a piano, drum and bass piece clicks into a distinctively east coast groove, something that pervades the disc as a whole and brings back the feel of John Lurie's Lounge Lizards. Tenor and soprano sax from Tony Malaby and Peter Epstein offer a lively contrast to the keyboard but you are never left to wonder who is calling the shots on these eight tracks. The recording (originally 24/88.2 pcm) while clearly highly resolute and rich is a little shut-in and dense at times. The 5.1 version really opens it out though and certainly helps the listener's enjoyment of this music.

JK



Tim Garland and the Northern Underground Orchestra

Due North

Jazz Action JA11

Saxophonist, arranger and composer Tim Garland, joined here by his regular collaborators Asaf Sirkis (drums) and Gwilym Silcock (keyboards), has assembled a highly talented bunch of Northern based players and with Arts Council help, commissioned several new pieces from musicians with strong ties to the North. Whatever the geography, this is a very fine set. Opening with a bracing Garland number 'We Got a Future Together' the terrific soulful voice of singer Hannah Jones makes an immediate impact and she also turns in great performances on 'Just for Now' and in a superb version of the Holiday/ Herzog Jr classic 'God Bless the Child'. The latter includes some great solos, notably from Silcock, and is strong enough to justify the price of admission alone. The quality of musicianship throughout the set is remarkably high and there's a real sense of the enjoyment they are clearly experiencing in making this music that draws you in and holds your attention throughout. Other standouts include Adam Dennis' 'Voyage of Discovery' with its South African influenced rhythms and a telling tenor solo from Lewis Walton, Garland's 'Tynemouth Spray' with great ensemble work and a strong solo from Stuart McCallum (guitar), and Simcock's languid and lovely 'Prelude'. With its refreshing absence of jazz-noodling, strong tunes, great playing and overall joie-de-vivre you can't go wrong with this album.

DD



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MODERN SAX GOD

by Dennis Davis

James Carter has developed into one of the most exciting stage performers in jazz today. I was reminded of this recently watching Carter's explosive soprano saxophone solos during several sets at Yoshi's jazz club in Oakland, California. After recording eleven CDs, he has developed an engaging stage presence rivaling that of anyone else performing live today. He has recorded with some of the top musicians on the scene and appeared (as Ben Webster) in Robert Altman's film Kansas City. His extremely well recorded second CD, Jurassic Classics, recorded by Jim Anderson, caught the attention of audiophiles for its spectacular sound and performance, and he has released a string of well-recorded CDs. His 2003 tribute to Billie Holiday, Gardenias for Lady Day, recorded to analog tape and later authored for SACD, is a standout. He is adept on every type of saxophone, and can be heard playing bass, tenor, f mezzo and soprano saxophones on Chasin' The Gypsy, his 2000 tribute to Django Reinhardt. He recently played a four-day run at Yoshi's and took time out from his busy schedule for this interview. Like an audiophile, Carter has a love of beautiful mechanical devices, but his interests are in collecting and designing saxophones, rather than pre-amplifiers. And rather than searching out record stores near his tour venues, he is drawn to pawnshops in search of vintage mouthpieces for his saxophones. Carter tours with a variety of groups, including a traditional quartet, an electric group and an organ trio, including an annual European tour. He also substitutes frequently with the World Saxophone Quartet.

DD: How did you get into music?

JC: I was the youngest of five in my family all of which

are musically inclined, two brothers, two sisters. My mom used to play violin and piano in her formative years. My dad played a mean radio – B.B. King, T. Bone Walker, folks of that like. So it was part of the environment... my brothers actually had an R & B cover band back in the day and some of the members would go on to be members of Parliament Funkadelic later on, namely my brother, he

was in during the Mothership Connection phase like '76, '77, then he went on to join the Floaters, Five Special and their various musical pursuits during that time. Who else was in there – Shirley Haden, Janette Washington – they would go on to become members of Parliament Funkadelic and then like Parlette, Brides of Funkenstein. My sister was a vocalist, played piano and the flute and she still does it in her spare time. Now she's an account exec at Sony in Culver City.

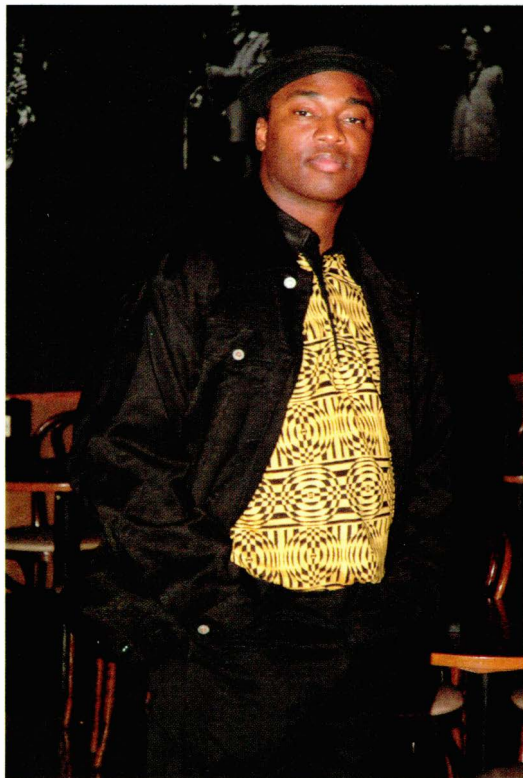
DD: You started out with Sony and DIW and have been through some of the great recording labels like Atlantic and Warners.

JC: I really miss Atlantic, man, and the nine years there was seriously family. It wasn't just a job to them; everybody took

their music and their artist's home with them.

DD: What happened with that situation?

JC: I think it was a downsizing thing for acquisition sake and they just had to cut off something that wasn't producing up to par and this meant the jazz division, pretty much. The writing was kind of on the wall with *Conversin' With The Elders*.



► **DD:** How is that?

JC: I started seeing certain marked indifferences. When we did *The Real Quietstorm* they would send us reports, displays from various places across the US. On *Conversin' With the Elders* it was less of the same thing, and all of a sudden with *Layin in the Cut* and *Chasin the Gypsy* it was a good push but it was in another direction. Then not too long after *Conversin' With The Elders* had wrapped in the studio, director Michelle Taylor found out she was fired. That was about '96 and she had been looking into getting into managing and she took on my cousin Regina as one of her first clients. But she did it a year earlier (than she wanted) – the axe came first and that's what went down so she had to switch gears.

DD: You had a later album with Ahmet Ertegan producing, so you kept that connection.

JC: Yeah, it was good to finally hook up with Ahmet on a more intimate basis and I wish it had reached its fullest potential as far as being able to have Aretha's participation on it. The tracks were only good for that immediate consumption. We looked at each other after we wrapped that set up and said we gotta go back in that studio, we gotta do this again. And the date over the next 16 months never came, that's why the release date was so late for *Live at Baker's* – we were trying to get her in there to do the supplemental tracks. She would call a date and all of a sudden "Ms. Franklin regrets"

DD: So what projects do you have on the horizon other than your new contract with Universal?

JC: I'm really getting that one situated. I'm also still dealing with the Saxophone Concerto by Roberto Sierra. Back in November of 2001 I was doing a gig with Kathleen Battle in DC or Baltimore and after the gig was over (my manager) Cynthia (Herbst) introduces us to each other and Roberto says "I want to write a Concerto for you". So the following month we meet at the rehearsal studio and he shows me some sketches of the potential movements. The piece wound up being four

movements for tenor and alto saxophone and orchestra, approximately 22 to 24 minutes in length and continues to be challenging. So we were going through various sketches. He'd play certain things for me and I'd play what he had written down and so I said OK so maybe this might be a bit challenging but I'll come to grips with it. The next thing I know in the middle of January I get this big manila envelope in the mail and it's the first movement. I open it up and the first thing I notice is all these sixteenth notes and later on these groups of five, six, eight notes in one beat. I call him up – "what the heck is going on?" – he says look at the tempo marking. It was like one twenty [chuckles and sounds a phrase at that tempo]. So finally the world premier with the DSO, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra

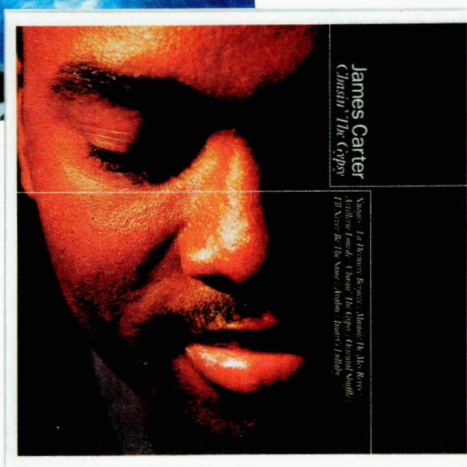
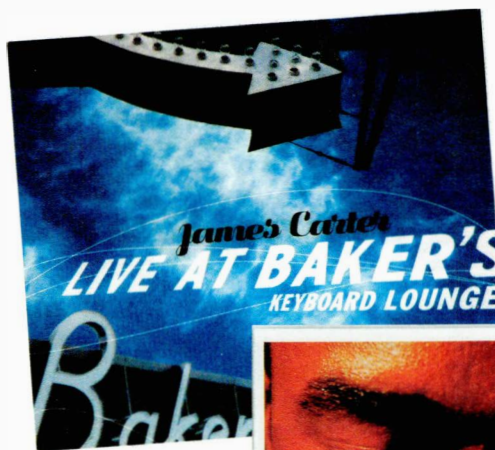
in October of '02 and the thing that was on my mind most was don't miss, keep the time thing happening because you know particularly with the mix of complex music in the improv, really I was worried about how the improv was going to make the transition with the orchestra. So we work that out... so it worked itself out. So mathematically it was cool and later on I would get into assigning soprano, tenor roles, giving it more of a human quality. The piece is still challenging. There's so much information

in there musically that I have yet to apply to other situations wholeheartedly. I've taken snippets, like with Bird using certain things from various arias, etudes. The same thing can be applied in this situation where I've used (voices a musical phrase) and I just look forward to more performances of it. I supposedly have a five year lease on it before it becomes public. There have

been over a half dozen performances and we're looking at '09 going to Europe with it.

DD: Tell me something about your involvement in the choice of recording engineers.

JC: As I got to know em yeah. I remember Jim Anderson from *JC On The Set* days and remembering that I had a good sound with him. Joe Ferla – I had a nice live sound with him. I started thinking about certain recordings where I felt the sound was ►



► compressed and tried to stay away from that sound because it sounds like you have a muzzle on when you're playing

DD: Not Anderson's recordings?

JC: No. No.

DD: Speaking of the old masters, tell me some of the albums you couldn't live without – your desert island albums.

JC: Well, I'd have to go back to what initially got me into listening and being a part of the genre. Duke Ellington's *70th Birthday Concert*. Billie Holiday *Story Vol. 3*. Basie's early years – the *One O'clock Jump*, *Swingin At The Daisy Chain Time*, *Blue and Sentimental*, *Super Chief*. Is it just five? No? Then Louis Armstrong's *Hot Five and Hot Sevens*.

DD: Do you still listen to vinyl?

JC: Yeah. Every now and then, but I need a turntable. In fact I'm in the process of – I noticed on the in-flight magazines they have this machine that lets you move vinyl to CD. At least it would be digitized and if I were able to clean it up by putting it through its processes. I'm ashamed to even say this; I'm still listening to CDs, but I have these two iPods that I've yet to program, but I'm going to get around to it. I think the main thing that's really holding me up is a good laptop where I can download the stuff into it, then lift it from there and put it in. The laptop I have now has like a Pentium 0.5 processor. There's a Pterodactyl in there chiseling out the next page. It's not that bad, but in comparison to the Pentium 4s its like... slow.

DD: So you don't want a Mac to go with your iPods?

JC: I'm looking into that, you know. One of the good things about the Electric Group with Jamaladeen is he showed me how he carries two machines. Its like a PowerBook that deals with just his music where he has Protocols already installed in it. Then he has a book that just deals with looking at DVDs, email and all that. He doesn't let the PowerBook with his Protocols get touched by the other one, no junk mail, nothing like that.

DD: Is there an Ornette connection in your background?

JC: (Because of my work with) Jamaladeen and G. Calvin

Weston? Um, well I've known Jamaladeen for a couple years prior to this happening anyway. G. Calvin at the time *Layin' In The Cut* went down I had pretty much had an idea about but never really played with him in isolated situations. So that was a first chance meeting. Same with Marc Ribot in that instance. Jef Lee Johnson I later used for the road shows. We played with Shannon Jackson together, so I guess there's a smidgen of connection there.

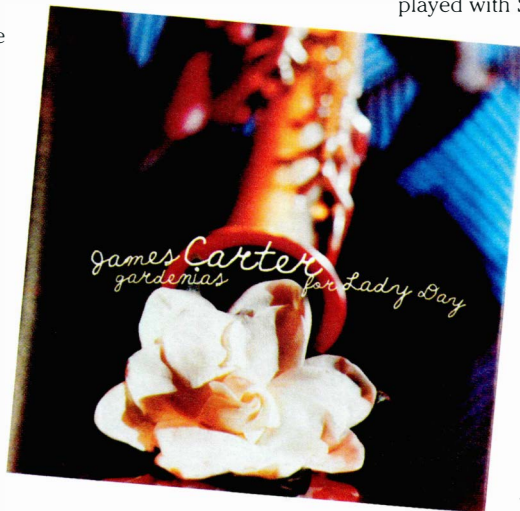
DD: Of the greats that are still with us is there anybody out there you'd like to play with?

JC: I have a penchant for vocalists – I would love to play, vocalist wise I can say with - (chuckles) – Lena Horne, Eartha Kitt and Nancy Wilson, yeah. I'd really like to do something with them. I was very privileged in the later part of last year do a weekend with

Freda Payne at the Iridium. This was during the time that she was doing her tribute to Ella phase. In fact I'm contemplating on going to Frisco to hear her in this play *Blues In The Night*. Later on we got to rekindle that relationship with a friend of mine's show back in Detroit called *Blues Rhythm*, a musical revue... Freda was one guest, she did *You've Changed* which pretty much was her arrangement from the tribute to Ella. I look forward, someday, I'd like to put it on stage one day. It's an evening with me and various vocalists I've admired over the years. People with national or international status or whatever. There are a couple of other vocalists from back in the Mid-West, one's named Erica Johnson that I've taken on the road. There are very few of these individuals, in terms of scating big beautiful looking ladies who use that to their advantage in being able to tell and sell the story, whether its Hokum or whether its actually matters of serious issue, they know how to use their – not only their voices, but they use their whole persona to sell the song and convey that over to the listener. But it goes back to that entertainment thing. There's actually some meat to it. Another person is Denise Johnson who's in the Detroit area. So I think there are quite a few people.

DD: What's your first recording project with your new Universal contract?

JC: We're in the process of pulling material. Some of its going to pretty much represent a small microcosm of ►



▶ what goes on in my head, what I feel a kindred spirit with in terms of pieces – various originals. There's one entitled *Brother Dolphy* that I recorded for *Live At Baker's* but because of fidelity sake I think it got lost, it's a bass clarinet feature. I think I did it, the first time in Manetta Lane Theatre with D. D. (Jackson). It was in three parts that represent Dolphy's instrumentation – bass clarinet, and then there's an out part that goes in flute and at the end the alto. Maybe this (a studio recording) will be the better way to do it in a controlled situation where certain things like the instrumentation doesn't get lost.

DD: If you had a time machine and you could go back and pick a few spots to land in history, would the Five Spot with Dolphy be on the list?

JC: Any place that doesn't exist now would certainly be on the list. Also there's... people wise I'd like to hear somebody like Chu Berry, cause for me he really represents the beginning of mainstream tenor players, somebody that's not necessarily adhering to Lester or Coleman, where right off the bat you know that's him. You still hear certain elements in styles, but they go on to something else and because of outside interests, I mean outside the saxophone as far as being influenced, like with Don Byas you hear the harp thing but at the same time his harmonic concept is hinting a lot on Tatum and its predating the complexities of modern jazz, the bop if you will. The same with Lucky Thompson, he has that harp tone, something that's like it but at the same time he has some subtleties that really kind of call of Pres and the fluidity of Tatum. Wow, just how you put these various concoctions together and it comes up to be a composite of this person and all.

DD: Speaking of the instruments, your horns are some of the most beautiful instruments I've seen.

JC: I'm glad we're getting into that. I've been dealing with P. Mauriat, that's the name of the company. They're based in Taiwan and there's a national distribution point here in Denver or Greeley Colorado. They're starting to get out there in terms of their notoriety because they're great axes and they really listen to the players and try and implement a whole lot of player's suggestions

DD: So how long have you been using their horns?

JC: Since '05.

DD: They've made some changes based on your feedback?

JC: I just recently went there in June. I met the President and checked out the office and the various factories. The factories are actually located in Taichung which is about an hour and a half outside Taipei and they do soprano saxophones and tenors in one shop that looks like an

airplane hanger and then the baritones are assembled in a triplex condominium across town. Everybody wants to say that there's not good craftsmanship over there and I beg to differ. It's not automated at all. There's human contact every step of the way in dealing with these instruments. I've also done some tweaking of my own that brings it into focus, with something that I find a bit more conducive for my needs. I tell them these things. It will show up on a subsequent model. I'm doing two soprano models with them right now.



DD: I notice one of your releases is on SACD.

JC: That's *Gardenias*.

DD: How did that come about and what did you think of it?

JC: It came about as a result of the layers we were using on *Gardenias* with some of the arrangements like with *Strange Fruit* for example it came across with six cellos and a wind machine. When I hear it on a nice system particularly for the end of it where the angst come into fruition and then all of a sudden the angst is encapsulated in this for close to a minute and then all of a sudden it gets sucked out vacuum like. It's a very crisp and engaging surround thing. I was also using my bass and contrabass clarinets in there so you got your region and your sub-region covered in there so I was really digging that too.

DD: Will you do SACD again?

JC: Any time the complexity of the instrumentation call for it so that all of those parts are well defined.





Sibelius
The Seven Symphonies
Violin Concerto
Kennedy (vln), CBSO, Rattle

Fifth Symphony, Night Ride And Sunrise
Philharmonia, Rattle

EMI 5 00753-2 (CD)

This boxed set brings together all the Sibelius recordings made by Simon Rattle during the early 1980s. It includes the Seven Symphonies with the CBSO, plus the earlier (1981) recording of the fifth symphony (and *Night Ride and Sunrise*) with the Philharmonia. I bought the individual CDs when they were first released (Rattle's was one of the first Sibelius cycles on CD), but at the time harboured reservations about the tonal thinness/brightness of the early digital recordings – in particular, *Symphonies 1* and *2*. The set has not been re-mastered, and comparing these new transfers of the CBSO recordings to the originals there's not much difference – a slight increase in cleanliness, and marginally greater instrumental richness and tonal warmth. There's more improvement with the Philharmonia recordings – the new transfers producing a bigger weightier sound than my original German Polygram CD. Incidentally, I still prefer the broader more

expansively played Philharmonia *5th* to the leaner, faster CBSO version. Certainly, these recordings now sound much better today than they did 20 or so years ago, and at times the sound is impressively brilliant and detailed. Rattle's accounts are quite fiery, with keen orchestral playing and plenty of ardour. I still find the conclusion to the *First Symphony's* Scherzo hasty and rushed, but this is an isolated misdemeanour.

Not having heard it for many years, I was thrilled to reencounter Nigel Kennedy's searing performance of this most difficult of *Violin Concertos* once again. He plays it with real passion, and is equal to all its many and varied technical demands. It serves as a perhaps timely reminder of a genuine talent that seems in danger of submerging beneath the image and hype that surround it. The boy could certainly play.

Another highlight is the taut yet atmospherically playing that characterises the Philharmonia's account of *Night Ride and Sunrise* – surely one of Sibelius' most original orchestral pieces. At its special price (you can expect to pay well under £20 when discounted) this set is a real bargain and not to be missed, if more for the performances than the sound quality per se.

JMH

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Rossini
La Cenerentola

Bartoli, Dara, Matteuzzi, Corbelli, Pertusi – Chailly/Teatro Comunale Bologna

Decca 436 902-2 (CD)

If you are interested in Rossini's operatic work, this is the opera to start with. If you are interested in enjoying the most complete recording of this opera, this is the release to have. As simple as that. Back in June 1992, Riccardo Chailly, arguably the most incurable perfectionist among modern conductors, assembled a stellar cast for this production, using the often underrated, but nevertheless excellent orchestra and chorus from the Teatro Comunale in Bologna. Cecilia Bartoli is by far the best Angelina (Cenerentola) of modern times, while Enzo Dara (Don Magnifico) is sublime and inspired, William Matteuzzi (Don Ramiro) a pure virtuoso, joined by the equally brilliant Alessandro Corbelli (Dandini) and Michele Pertusi (Alidoro). What, however, makes this recording so special goes well beyond the individual abilities of each soloist. It is the unique and unsurpassed emotional and vocal cohesion as well as the musical joy radiating from every single aria throughout both acts! Christopher Raeburn, Bartoli's loyal Decca producer brought us an extremely realistic, three-dimensional and perfectly balanced recording which will, while putting audio systems to the test (a test they may well fail) only make you listen to this *La Cenerentola* again and again.

DS

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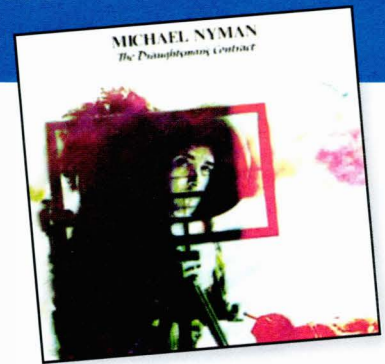
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by Reuben Parry



Few original soundtracks have that capacity in purely musical terms to stand on their own two feet without the visual screen imagery in attendance. The music crafted for the 1982 film, *The Draughtsman's Contract* is one of those rare exceptions to the rule. Before this, the first of eleven collaborations with director Peter Greenaway, Michael Nyman was something of an anonymous and disaffected composer who because of the constrictive nature of modernism had on a number of occasions abandoned composition entirely. The turning point for Nyman was almost certainly the 1976 Harrison Birtwistle commission to provide the arrangements of Eighteenth century Venetian songs in a production of Carlo Goldoni's *Il Campiello*. It led to the formation of the The Michael Nyman Band, a group of musicians who were to become renown for playing a combination of period instruments, their modern equivalents and the use of amplification. This sounding board encouraged Nyman to experiment and formulate a compositional style that, while grounded in the classical traditions of strong melodies and ensemble playing, was nevertheless quite fearless in its use of assertive rhythms, repetitive bass lines and in the deconstruction of familiar pieces of music that were then reconstituted into forms not unlike the Passacaglia or Chaconne of past centuries. It's hard to believe today, some twenty-five years on and so many scores later how daring, challenging and downright exciting Michael Nyman's music seemed at that time. Recently, returning to the *Draughtsman's Contract* reaffirmed my conviction that the strong musical structures, compositional imagination, energy and sense of musicianship found here has an enduring quality that engrosses the listener on its own terms.

Of course this recording was primarily music composed to accompany and complement Greenaway's enigmatic and artfully constructed murder mystery of the same name, set against the genteel surface of a Seventeenth century country estate. Contrastingly, there is the theatricality and elegance of this historical context; the metaphysical conceit of the "contract" itself (an arrogant young draughtsman, Neville is engaged by the lady of the house to make twelve drawings of the estate as a gift to her estranged husband, but he will be paid in kind for this work with her sexual favours) and the deeply troubled household full of secrets and populated with characters driven on by lust, ambition and greed that are overshadowed by a central philosophical question framed in Neville's drawings - that of the profound difference between

seeing and knowing. All of this provides the kind of challenging script which demands a stunning and memorable musical solution to reinforce or reveal these concerns. Nyman delivers in spades.

Conceptually, the tracks for *The Draughtsman's Contract* are based upon the work of Henry Purcell. His motifs are broken down and then reconstructed by Nyman into seven vignettes of varying length that offer a deliciously ironic commentary to the on screen events. They are the touchstone from which the arrangements for violin, bass guitar, double bass, clarinet, trombone, piano, harpsichord and sax (tenor, alto and soprano) are wittily presented. This is instrumentation that injects an appropriate feeling of exuberance, equivocation and intrigue into proceedings, yet maintains a convincing sense and spirit of this Restoration drama. These and Nyman's trademark phrasing and harmonic repetitions convey the exotic curiosity, mystery and dizzying array of allusion, innuendo and bawdiness of the subject matter. Individually tracks like 'The Disposition of the Linen' and 'A Watery Death' episodically propel the narrative forwards as they build towards the finale - the closing twelve-minute long 'Bravura in the Face of Grief' which in time honoured fashion encapsulates all that has gone before. However, the standout moments for me are and have always been the pithily wry and dry humour drenched 'Chasing Sheep is Best Left to Shepherds'. The jaunty quirkiness and exaggeration here recreates the inherent absurdity of our human condition in its brief two and half minutes of music. This is followed by the rhythmically contrasting lumpiness of 'An Eye for Optical Theory' that seems to in some ways define the age of reason. Truly illuminating. ▶+

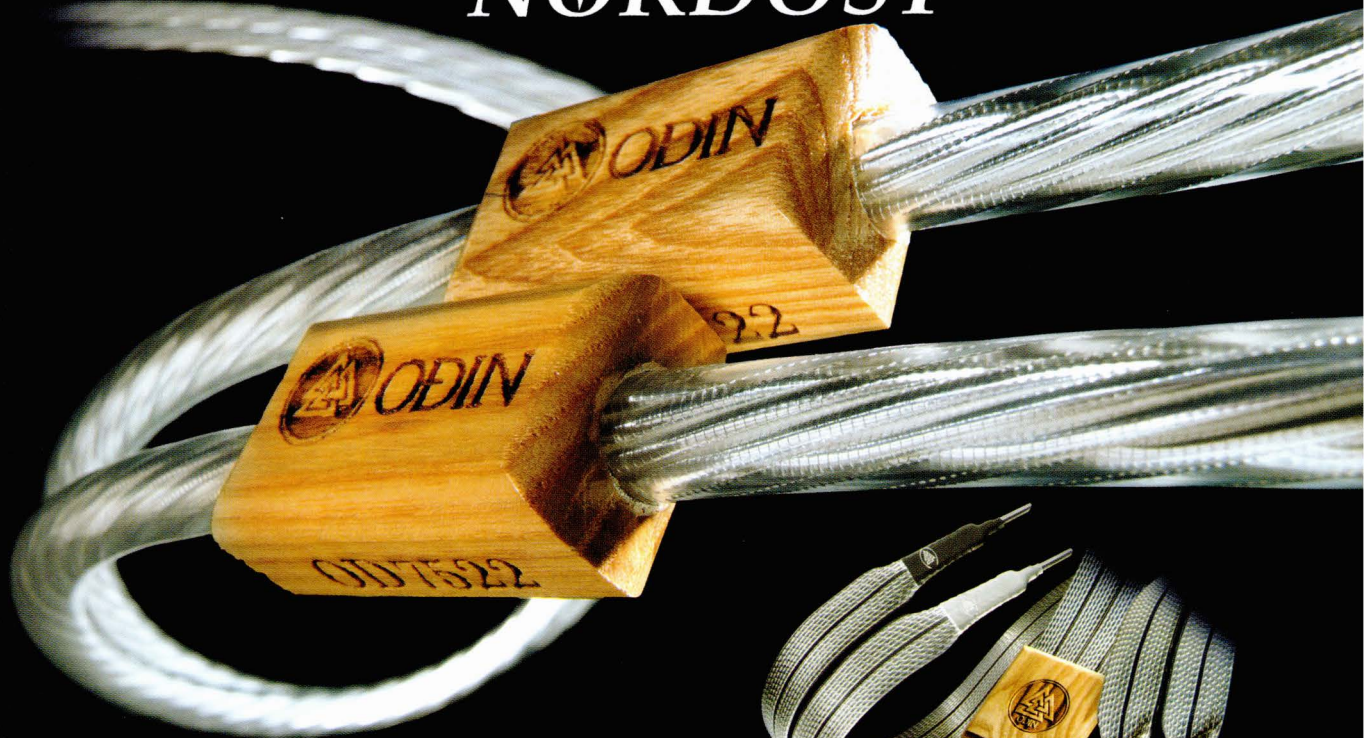
Michael Nyman & The Michael Nyman Band

The Draughtsman's Contract

Originally released on LP in 1982 (Charisma CAS 1158).

Engineered by J. Martin Rex at Studio 80, post production by Tony Cousins at Townhouse Tape Copying

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