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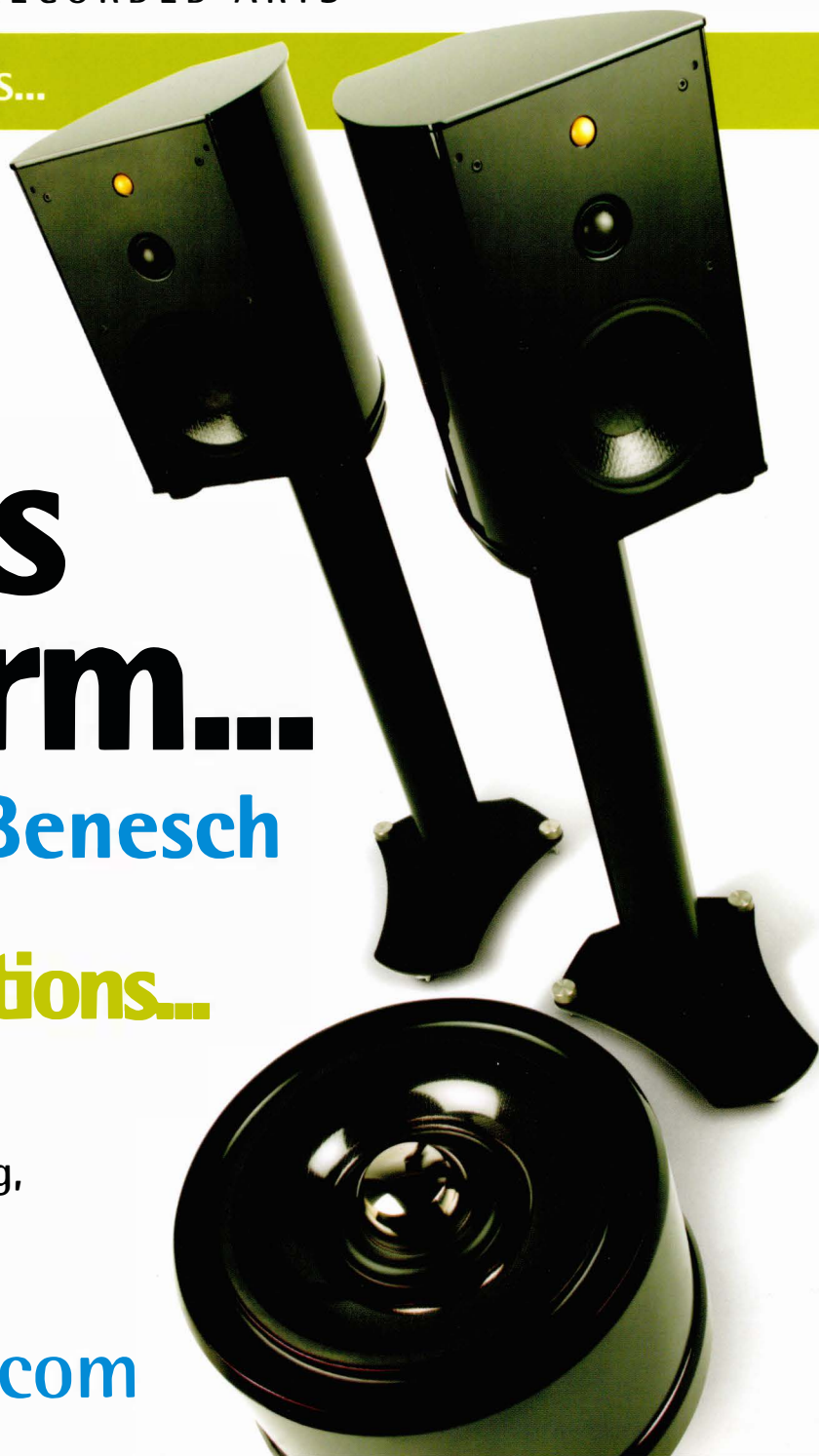


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HI FI NEWS / JULY 06 / KEN KESSLER / DUETTE

“THEIR PERFORMANCE IS REMARKABLE, OPTIMIZED AND IDEALLY SITED IT REALLY IS SPECTACULAR”

HI FI PLUS / ISSUE 47 / ROY GREGORY / DUETTE

PROVONANCE

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



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Important Notice London Show Demonstrations

This year at the September Show (19th to 21st), *Hi-Fi Plus* will be running ticketed demonstrations located in the Renaissance Hotel, just across the road from the Park Inn. The tickets themselves will ONLY be available from our stand in the main show, however, a limited number will be available for subscribers to pre-book; just ring Jackie on 01425 461155, between 11.00am and 4.00pm and she'll add your name to the list. Reserved tickets will be limited to two per caller and must also be collected from our stand at the show, before 11am each day.

We've introduced this measure because recently our demonstrations have become so heavily attended that disappointed subscribers have been unable to get tickets. Hopefully this will ease the problem, as well as ensuring that the demonstrations fulfill one of their primary objectives; giving readers the chance to hear for themselves the differences and performance benefits we describe in the pages of the magazine. This serves the dual purpose of allowing you to "calibrate" our descriptions and keeping us honest! After all, who wants to stand in front of a room full of people trying to demonstrate a miraculous upgrade that no one can hear?

The demonstrations will be designed to show the importance of set up and ancillaries to overall system performance – including several of the products reviewed in this issue – lessons that apply to all systems irrespective of price.

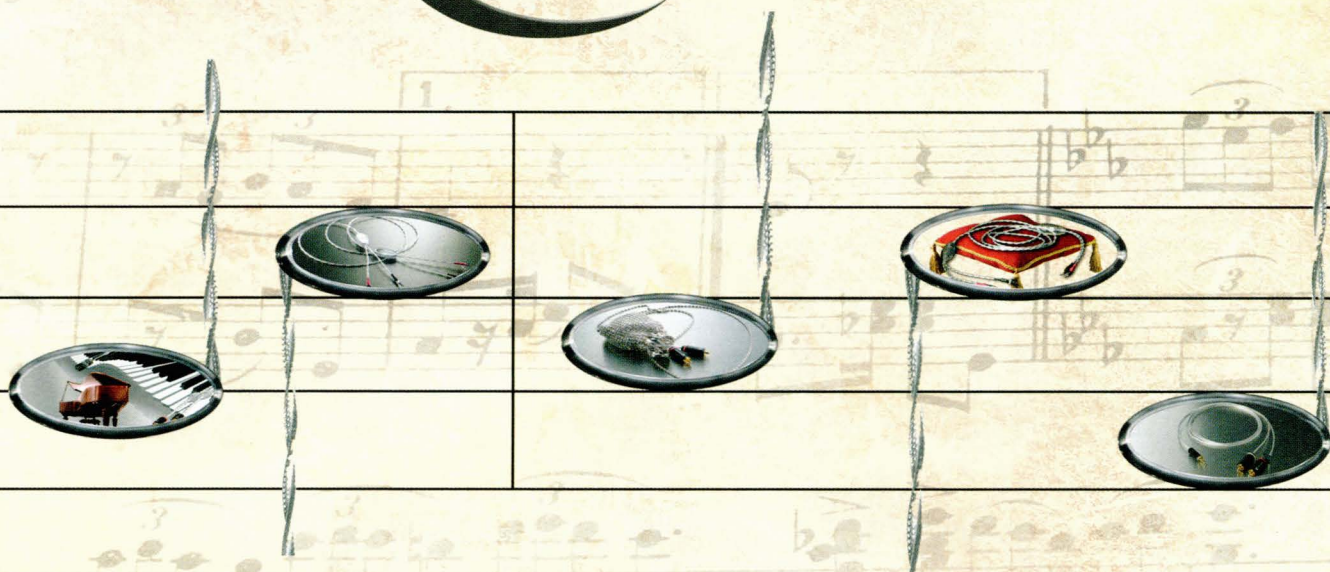
Each demo will last approximately 40 minutes, starting at 3.00pm on Friday, 12 noon on Saturday and 11.30am on Sunday. We won't be alone at the Renaissance either, with Audiofreaks running their *Unplugged 2008* event (more details on page 8) and *Hi-Fi News* also in attendance, making the trip across the road well worthwhile.

We look forward to seeing you there.



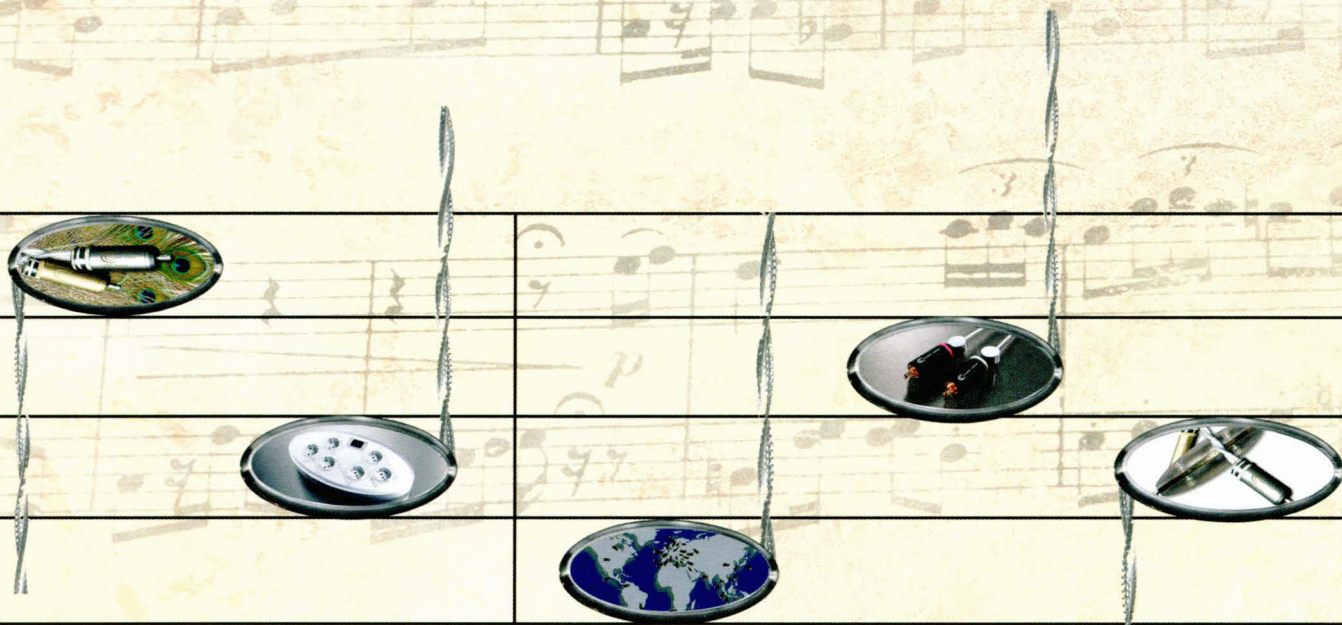


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Roy Gregory, HiFi+ Magazine



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MUSIC MATTERS...

by Alan Sircom

It sounds alarmist, but there really is a spectre threatening the whole of the hi-fi industry. Malign forces are moving against the audiophile, threatening to undermine and devalue our little community to the point where the purchase of any hi-fi system – not simply high-end electronics – becomes essentially pointless. And no, it's not the people at Apple, it's not ProTools or even those on-line 'experts' who claim all hi-fi is a waste of money.

The problem is the discs themselves. Or downloads; it makes no difference. A significant number of commercially available pop and rock recordings are combatants in the loudness wars, but it's the listener who ends up being the casualty.

So, what's the 'loudness war'? For the longest time, A&R folk in the music business have known that if a recording plays louder than its peers, it sells better (let's ignore musical content for the moment... just like the execs do). With millions of records competing against one another, it wasn't long before execs started pushing recordings to the absolute limits of the replay system.

This causes a significant problem, one that anyone who has ever tried to record anything other than white noise will quickly recognise. You can't record everything at the same level, because some elements of music (or speech) will be loud and some quiet. If the recording is pushed to the point where even quiet sounds are close to the limits of the system itself, what happens when you hit a dynamic peak?

Faced with this problem, there are only two avenues open to the engineer; send the recording out with the peaks 'clipping' into digital distortion, or apply some kind of compression to the signal (some use a combination of the two, letting the top end of the most dynamic transient peaks clip, while applying compression to keep everything else in check). The problem here is that both options leave the music effectively dynamically hobbled... but 'louder is better' still wins.

This has led to the situation where albums are released with music hitting '0 dBFS' (or 'digital full scale'). Music is pushed to the point where the quietest sounds in the track are approaching peak output for 16bit PCM and this ends up with absurd situations where the supposedly quieter break in a record (where the vocalist might talk over a backbeat) is as loud as the band at full throttle. If this sounds like exaggeration, go have a listen to Californication by The Red Hot Chili Peppers.

Dynamic compression is nothing new. In fact, it's as old as rock 'n' roll; rockabilly guitarists found that the valve rectifiers in their amplifiers sagged when pushed to the limits, and they loved the compressed sound that made. The compressor is also one of the great triumvirate dictated by the Radio Edit (alongside cutting out all the swearwords and keeping the track under three minutes long). The difference now is that where led-footed compression might be used on the single but applied with more caution (if at all) on the album cut, since the mid-1990s it's become a feature of every track on the album. Worse, if a classic album is re-mastered, chances are the new version will sound louder, but ultimately less dynamic than its predecessor. So, if you were wondering why that re-mastered Greatest Hits was initially impressive, but ultimately sounds shouty and harsh, it's not your ears or your age... it was re-cut that way.

The rot set in after Oasis released (*What's the Story*) *Morning Glory?* in 1995. The album was one big radio edit, with every track pushed into the peaks and compressed accordingly. And it sold like mad. It could be argued that this album arrived at a point when Oasis was at the top of their game and would have sold like mad irrespective of being pushed into the peaks, but with declining sales and the rise of the download, A&R types turned to anything successful that could get them more market share... and making 'everything louder than everything else' was the 'obvious' answer.

In fairness, if most of your music listening is limited to in-ear headphones or micro-system speakers, the worst excesses of dynamic compression might not seem so vexatious. It just sounds like you've turned your system up a notch. Play the same thing through a halfway decent system and a very different result occurs; it still sounds like you've turned the music up, but in the process, it sounds like you've filled the ports with concrete and thoroughly lost the dynamic range of the music. No matter what you try, no matter how expensive a system you play this recording through, that dynamic range will not come back.

Those people who are running out buying Coldplay and Snow Patrol albums today are the high-end buyers of tomorrow. And, they will want to play their heritage, just like today's fortysomething and fiftysomething audiophiles occasionally let (what's left of) their hair down to U2 and Pink Floyd albums. Except that, when they play these early 21st Century recordings, they will sound dynamically flat and uninteresting. If most pop and rock recordings and

Flow

by ARGENTO AUDIO



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the Power of Perfection....

"What I dream is an art of balance, of purity and serenity" (H. Matisse)



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19-21 SEPTEMBER

Welcome to the 2008 Audiofreaks unPlugged show weekend
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from our exquisite portfolio of stereo and
home theatre high-end components

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Friday 19 September 3pm-6pm (press, trade and guests)
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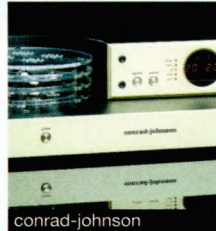
Also exhibiting: Blade Audio, The Audio Works and Hifi News with their selection
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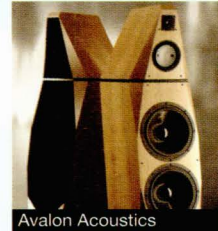
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► re-masters made over the next 20 years also sound dynamically compromised, who is going to buy a high-end system to highlight that limitation?

There are a few voices shouting about the loudness war, but many of them are of an age where they are not considered important enough anymore. Bob Dylan and Neil Young might clamour for recordings made with real-world dynamic range, but they are not exactly reaching an audience young enough to sway musical trends anymore. Perhaps it's up to us to educate and inform the next generation... show them what real

dynamic range can sound like and hope for the best. Perhaps it's up to us to use the forums and word or mouth to actively seek out dynamically un-buggered albums and equally actively walk away from those who take the other path.

Or perhaps we can hope more studios follow the apocryphal tale of the big red 'loudness' button on the mixing desk. According to studio legend, the big red button is there so that the A&R dork can do their duty and make the recording louder. Of course, everyone else knows the big red button does precisely nothing at all... 



PLAYING THE SYSTEM

by Roy Gregory

One of the things I love about the Munich Show is the opportunity it offers to gauge the health of the analogue industry. I'm not talking about whether new 'tables or "hand-polished by Buddhist monks" cartridges appear; that you can guarantee. It's more a case of how many... This year didn't disappoint, with highlights being the (finally) finalized versions of the Spiral Groove, a new flagship AirTight cartridge and for sheer, over the top chutzpah, the new range of up-market 'tables from Montegiro, the sumptuous but almost sane Vivo and Legno models in sharp contrast to the Art deco extravagance of the conical and candy-striped flagship, the all too appropriately named Lusso.

But for once, the big stories were away from the show. 2008 sees Thorens celebrate its 125th anniversary, an event celebrated in some style at a special gathering in Dresden, where the least surprising "surprise" was the unveiling of a new Jubilee flagship record player. 58kg of Swiss engineering, the standards of construction and finish are exactly what you'd expect. However, for anybody who remembers the previous Jubilee – launched 25 years ago and now most often seen in the vdH room at hi-fi shows – the design and appearance will definitely come as a surprise. Created with significant input from Kurt Olbert (of RDC/Clearlight fame and the man responsible for the astonishingly engaging and enjoyable TD160HD) it shows a number of interesting and novel touches. A set of stacked, isolated and damped slabs independently supports the motor and platter/main bearing assembly. These are in turn supported on beautifully engineered, precisely adjustable feet located in each corner, each one also benefiting from internal RDC damping.

But the novel aspects, certainly as far as Thorens goes, are the use of a twin-belt drive system running through a

separate idler/flywheel, and freestanding armboards for the two arms that can be accommodated. An internal electronic supply provides 33, 45 and 78 RPM, from the massive, multi-material platter. But it's the free standing (independently adjustable for level) armboards that are really interesting, especially in this day and age with so few arms offering really precise azimuth adjustment – of which more later. There's also a new, matching tonearm, the TP125, available in 10" or 12" models so that prospective owners can field one of each! Two arms not enough? Just lift one off and replace with a complete, separate assembly. It's an incredibly simple, solution that retains the precise geometry essential for optimum vinyl replay. The price of all this engineering? At around €35000 it's in the "if you need to ask" category. Just as well then that there will already be an orderly queue forming outside the premises of Thorens far eastern distributors. Mind you, with release slated for "late summer" it could be a long wait.

All of which makes the Company's other announcement all the more interesting. At around one hundredth the price of the Jubilee, the Mini is a fully manual deck mounted in a conventional plinth and lid. It is as small and neat as it's possible to be, but still embodies Thorens' traditional engineering virtues and plinth-top speed change. Priced at €300 it neatly embodies the diverging vinyl replay market, split between the affluent or increasingly dedicated enthusiast/collector and the reemerging interest in LPs at the budget price level, whether amongst the iPod generation or older listeners rediscovering their record collections. As impressive as the Jubilee undoubtedly is, it's the Mini – Thorens' cheapest ever turntable – that is actually the more significant product. (www.thorens.com)

► If more evidence of vinyl's rude health in the very sector of the market where money is tightest is needed, look no further than Project's latest release. The Gengis Khan of the budget vinyl sector has come from nowhere to dominate cheap turntable production, to the extent that Linn have even specified a Project arm on their latest "back to basics" LP12. Now comes the Genie 2, a diminutive, skeletal deck somewhat reminiscent of the minimalist, cylindrical Systemdek designs of yesteryear, except that being based on the Company's RPM series decks, the Genie 2 uses a standalone motor pod. A stepped pulley provides two speeds from the synchronous motor, which drives an MDF platter fitted with a felt mat. An S-shaped tonearm carrying an Ortofon OM3e cartridge completes the rather elegant and attractive package, whose appearance belies the almost unbelievable \$140 price-tag. Couple that with a Project phono-stage and a pair of the new \$399 AktiMate speakers from Red Box AV, proper little two-ways based on Epos/Creek engineering and electronics, with a built in iPod dock and line-level inputs, and you've suddenly got an awful lot of music for not much money. There's no doubt that vinyl lovers on a budget have never had it so good – which is great news for those concerned that we're losing sight of musical quality in a "feel the bandwidth" rush to download oblivion.

Munich also threw up a few examples of the Unexpected Law Of Consequences, with the Acoustic Solid

stand placed opposite Ortofon. No problem with that you might well think, except that Ortofon were proudly showing a new badge-engineered tonearm OEMd from Jelco, manufacturer of many a classic budget arm – while Acoustic Solid showed an essentially identical product. Initially, both arms were accompanied by pricing information, although the ticket for the Ortofon model was quickly "misaid". Mind you, I notice that there's a new London Reference parallel tracking tonearm on the market which, apart from a few black bits, bears an uncanny resemblance to the Cartridgeman Conductor we recently reviewed; separated at birth doesn't begin to cover it. Oh, there is one big difference – nearly a thousand pounds on the price!

And for those who thought there was little or nothing new under the analogue sun – you reckoned without Audiodesk System who finally have their stunningly simple double-sided record cleaning machine entering production (www.audiodesksysteme.de), and the indefatigable Dr Chris Feickert. Yes, he of Feickert protractor fame has produced a test-disc and associated software which, when plugged into a PC soundcard gives a graphical readout of cartridge crosstalk, allowing you to set azimuth with previously unheard (and unheard of) precision. Interestingly, the read out also casts light on the changing phase relationships with azimuth and SRA, which finally starts to explain just why VTA is so audible when the adjustments are so small.

I do love it when science finally catches up with reality! ►+



UNPLUGGED 2008

Alongside the established Park Inn show on September 19th to 21st, Audiofreaks will be holding their second *Unplugged* event, across the road in the Renaissance. They will be presenting two systems with the emphasis placed firmly on the quality of their audio performance, and are joined by The Audio Works and Blade Audio, each offering their own take on two-channel excellence. Alongside these four rooms, you'll have the chance to meet and chat with the *Hi-Fi News* editorial staff and writers, and enjoy our closed-door demonstrations (tickets only available from the *Hi-Fi Plus* stand in the Park Inn – but see the announcement on the editorial page).

Don't miss this rare opportunity to hear the likes of

Avalon's mighty Isis, the new Zanden one-box CD player and Kuzma's eagerly awaited 4POINT tonearm, all in an oasis of calm. Also meet and chat with two of the UK's leading dealers, people who are out there, delivering results from serious systems every day of the week. The Audio Works will be demonstrating their highly regarded mains leads and equipment supports, while Blade Audio will be showing their customary care and attention to the set-up details that really matter. So if you fancy a vision of the future – tinged with a sense of déjà vu – cross the road to the Renaissance and spend a little time with systems where sound-quality really counts. You'll want to look, but we've all done this so that you can listen! ►+

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A larger and more massive version of our well known Model 20/2. It will accept nine, ten and twelve-inch arms but is especially directed at the exciting Model 312S. This offers a performance some 27% better than a nine-inch arm in respect of angular error distortion. The wand and headshell are pressure die-cast in magnesium and are 27g lighter than they would be in aluminium. Probably the stiffest and lightest twelve-inch arm ever made these dual problems are at last addressed and on listening, the benefits of minimal tracking error and harmonic distortion are clearly revealed.

'This arm/turntable combo is the most graceful-sounding analogue front-end I've heard'.

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

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Energy

Power Plant Regenerator

Supporting Cast...

Towards a new understanding of the concept of a level playing field

by Roy Gregory

Building a firm foundation on which to base your system is a drum we've been banging for a while now. The contribution of cables, supports and the mains supply are realms with which hi-fi aficionados have dabbled to various depths at different times, and all but the most Luddite of scientific reductionists agree that these things matter. Where Plus as a magazine departs from this accepted wisdom is the extent to which they matter. Firstly, we feel that they must be considered en masse as a system in themselves: secondly, once you do that, it becomes clear that a coherent approach to the problems of environmental and mechanical isolation that embraces signal transfer and internal microphony becomes a critical aspect of realizing the performance potential of your electronics and loudspeakers. Suddenly, these "ancillaries" become fundamental parts of the system itself, rather than accessories or mere after-thoughts.

Of course, the easiest way to achieve a coherent solution that stresses similar philosophical and technological/material solutions is to source all the elements from a single designer or manufacturer, but such is the collective blindspot to these issues we've developed as an industry, that such single-source solutions are few and far between. Vertex AQ makes the only example I'm aware of, the range of products

from Russ Andrews and Ringmat coming a close second. After all, sexy boxes that light up when you switch them on, the things that actually make the noise, are so much easier to get excited about – and thus so much easier to sell. Out of sight is truly out of mind when it



comes to hi-fi, and just like architecture, it's the walls and roof we react to – despite the fact that without

those deeply rooted but totally hidden foundations they stand on, the whole edifice would be of dubious stability, if not actually impossible to construct. A hi-fi system really is no different; lasting quality depends on the internal integrity of the construction – and that depends on the quality of the power reaching the boxes, the integrity of

the signal transmission between them and the extent they're protected from internal and external mechanical interference.

So, getting the best sound from those expensive electronics you've invested in requires you to feed, succor and protect them in equal measure, requiring in turn a suite of tools to do the job. But with so

many different approaches and conflicting claims, how do you select a sensible set of solutions? And that's just at home.

If you are a reviewer, expected to assess and understand the relative strengths and weaknesses of equipment, how do you ensure that the solutions selected are the best and most appropriate. The only answer is trial and error, but in turn that leads to the establishment of basic rules and understanding. Here we'll be looking at various approaches to the problems of system optimization, varying in their cost and sophistication, their methodology and philosophy. In so doing we'll attempt to start the process of establishing ground rules and fitting disparate pieces together. In practice, any serious attention paid to these issues will generate gratifying improvements in musical performance – more a reflection on the woeful neglect currently common than the quality or universal applicability of the solutions. But get a set of carefully ►

► constructed, sympathetic responses and the results can be spectacular – indeed, worryingly so. This odyssey really got started with the Wilson Duette system reviewed back in Issue 48 by the arch accessorial cynic AS,

a man who has seen and heard it all (or more frequently not) over the years. To say that he was perplexed, even discomforted by the results, the fundamental nature and scope of the benefits, is an understatement. Read

that review again as a precursor to this. In the meantime, I'll start at the beginning – and with hi-fi systems, that means the mains and the thorny issue of distributing it to all those sexy boxes...

The Vertex AQ Elbrus Balanced Power Supply

by Roy Gregory

Regular readers will be familiar with the Vertex signal and power cables, unique in that they seek to prevent the transmission of mechanical energy between electrical components, down the conductors of the cable itself. To this end, each of their wires has at least one and in some cases two substantial aluminium cases built into its length, each containing an acoustic drain to impede the passage of mechanical energy.

It's a shockingly effective approach – the more so because everybody else has ignored what is clearly a critical issue.

Taken individually there's an undeniable elegance to each, beautifully finished wire. But by the time you've got a system's worth of cables hanging out of the wall and the back of your equipment, all those boxes can become something of a problem, a problem exacerbated by the fact that the internal logic of the product range means that the more boxes you have and the bigger they are, the greater tends to be the effect. In an attempt to both further improve performance and create a tidier, more manageable solution, Vertex have created a single chassis hybrid distribution device, dubbed the Elbrus and costing \$2950. For that sort

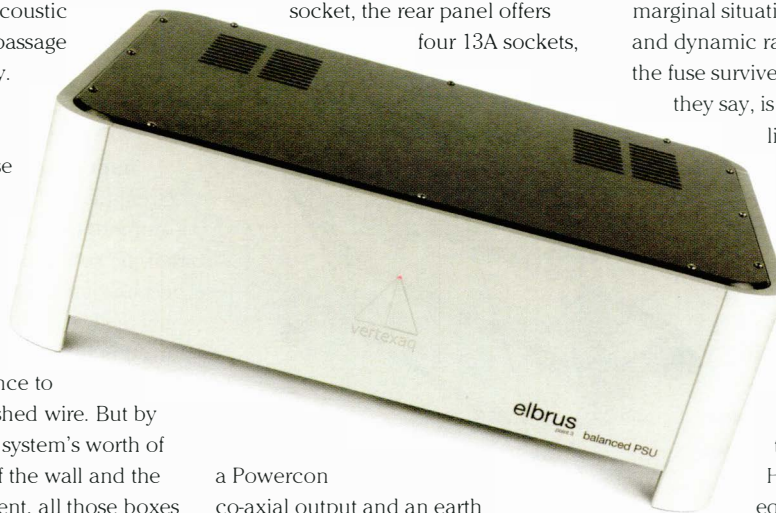
of money it needs to be pretty special: don't worry – it is.

A large and surprisingly elegant unit, constructed within a plate and post chassis rather reminiscent of the Wadia CD players, this is a multi-function device, intended to meet the needs of all but the most elaborate systems. Fed from the wall by a standard IEC socket, the rear panel offers four 13A sockets,

source components and pre-amps, although some valve designs might exceed this, so do check. Overload the outputs and you simply blow one of the comprehensive protective fuses, one on the input to the balanced circuit, one on each of its output phases as well as two more for the Silver Jaya RF filter modules. More problematic are marginal situations where headroom and dynamic range might suffer whilst the fuse survives intact. The proof as they say, is in the listening. Why the limited output capacity?

It's a question of striking the right balance between cost, quality and capability. The greater the capacity the larger and more the costly the transformers required, adding considerably to the price of the unit. However, there's another equally important factor at work. Larger components

– especially transformers – are significantly more self-microphonic, generating greater levels of internal vibration, mechanical energy that needs to be dealt with if it's not to erode sound quality. The greater the energy level fed through the unit, the greater the problem, so with the Elbrus working with AC mains, this becomes an even more serious consideration. With ►



a Powercon co-axial output and an earth post. There's also an on/off switch and a small toggle switch that defeats the front-panel LED. Look a little closer and you'll see that sockets 1 and 2 are described as "unswitched direct outputs" while the remaining two plus the Powercon are fed from the internal, balanced supply: let's start with the latter.

The balanced element of the Elbrus offers a combined output capability of 300VA, capable of powering most



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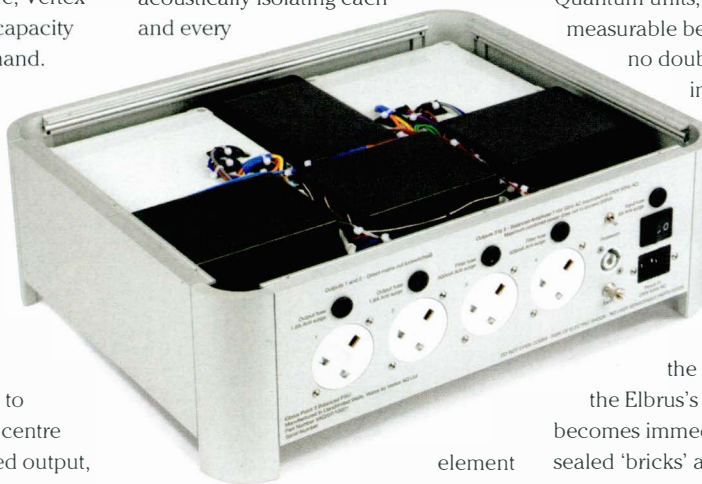
▶ source and control components particularly prone to mains-borne interference and drawing relatively low levels of power (as well as digital front-ends being a major source of electronic pollution), the balancing act required enough capacity to feed these, whilst avoiding the cost, capacity and related mechanical issues that would have been demanded by power amplifiers. To this end 300VA seems a sensible choice, covering the vast majority of situations, with manageable components in a manageable package and a manageable price. But never fear, for all you dedicated audio nuts out there, Vertex have plans to create a larger capacity device should there be a demand.

The balanced power supply itself consists of an input transformer that steps the mains voltage down to 60V, allowing far more effective shunt filtering with smaller (and more cost effective) components. A second transformer then steps the voltage back up, but this time to the plus and minus 115V and centre earth required for the balanced output, taking advantage of the common-mode rejection inherent in this topology. Each of the toroidal transformers is mounted in its own anti-vibration isolation chassis, while the input also benefits from the application of the company's established Silver Jaya filter module. A second Silver Jaya module is applied to the output of the balanced circuit, further preventing interference between connected components.

Alongside the balanced outputs, the unswitched sockets provided for the connection of integrated or power amps offer similar levels of filtering to those found in the Vertex Taga six-way block (reviewed in Issue 54). By incorporating them into the Elbrus, Vertex have sought to reduce the number of multiple, daisy-chained connections in the critical power cabling, as well

as unifying the earthing and acoustic absorption arrangements for the system. In addition, the Powercon can be used with a special Roraima mains lead (standard or silver wired), terminated with a pair of IEC flying leads to further augment the balanced outputs, again without having to employ multiple distribution blocks and leads.

Of course, the other critical aspect of the Vertex approach is the provision of acoustic absorption between system elements, as mentioned above. The Elbrus takes this to new levels, not simply blocking energy at the input, but acoustically isolating each and every



element and output stage within the unit. Adding Vertex leads on the in and outputs then adds a further layer of mechanical isolation between the various electronics used in the system. At first sight, providing a mechanical drain on a power lead might seem odd, but consider instead the proven benefits of the Vertex Kinabalu platforms beneath equipment. These drain internal energy to pretty dramatic effect. The Elbrus does the same for the mains loom, helping reduce the level of mechanical energy reaching sensitive electronic components in the first place, a fact underlined by the additional benefits to be garnered by placing a Kinabalu under the Elbrus itself.

So, the Elbrus seeks to provide a mechanically isolated and RF filtered

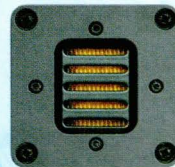
feed to each of its output sockets. But there's one more trick up its sleeve. As well as providing a direct, star grounded earthing arrangement centered on the rear panel output post, Vertex use a proprietary technique they refer to as "destructive interference" to further cleanse the earth provided for each component, also minimizing the effects of pollution dumped back into the line by the components themselves. It might sound like snake-oil but, as far as I understand it (and Vertex are prepared to reveal) this actually seems not dissimilar to the technology used in the Quantum units, along with their readily measurable benefits. Either way, there's no doubting the clear sonic improvement that derives from connecting the Elbrus to a clean earth post, underlining the effectiveness of its internal arrangements.

Lift the lid and the modular nature of the Elbrus's internal construction becomes immediately apparent. Neat, sealed 'bricks' are stacked inside, underlining the degree of physical and mechanical isolation applied. Tot those elements up (the balanced supply with its in-built filter module, two Silver Jayas and the best part of a Taga and it soon becomes clear why the Elbrus costs what it does. More importantly, it also underlines that these modules actually represent a simple amalgamation of distinct units into a functionally convenient whole. The Vertex AQ approach is both layered and complete. The isolation from mechanical and radiated interference depends on a multi-level approach that embraces all aspects of mains and signal transmission and equipment support. To that end, the Elbrus will only ever be a part of the solution, not the whole enchilada. Furthermore, and unlike the PS Audio PPP, it probably isn't even the first

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part you buy. The Vertex approach is rather more strategic; what the Elbrus represents is a part of the overall picture, but it still needs the rest to make sense. So, don't think that having the Elbrus means that you can ignore the Roraima power cords, not to mention signal and speaker leads, all of which should be incorporated into a layered approach. Don't believe me? Try placing the Elbrus on a Kinibalu support platform and see what it does for the performance. With Vertex, the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. Just which parts and in which order you apply them depends on the system and your dealer's advice. The Elbrus might be big and it's certainly kind of sexy, but that doesn't necessarily make it the place to start. Consider it more as a super sophisticated alternative to a Taga and you'll be pretty much in the ballpark.

So, I used the Elbrus with a full set of Roraima leads, with and without the matching signal and speaker leads, with and without Kinibalu supports under the equipment – an enlightening experience. For me, it only really started to make sense in the test system once the power cords were in place – and really came into its own once I had it sitting on a Kinibalu. At that point, applying the signal and speaker leads just made things better and better, each additional layer of Vertex simply adding to the picture. Just make sure that if you like the sound of what it does (and believe me, what's not to like?) you factor in all of the ancillary costs to give the Elbrus the necessary supporting framework. Take the trouble (and drop the required coin) and this is what you'll hear...

Anybody familiar with the existing Vertex products will know what to expect: the increase in separation, clarity, transparency, dynamic range

The Listening System...

Sanity, practicality and the sheer weight of work means that any far reaching project like this requires keeping things as simple as possible – especially when it comes to any sort of comparative listening. Otherwise all the variables simply overwhelm you. So, as previously, we established a simple "four-box" system to serve as a reliable (and repeatable) workhorse. This consisted of the Electrocompaniet ECC 1 CD player and ECI 5 integrated amp (reviewed by CT in the last issue) driving the really rather surprising Gershman Sonogram speakers. Signal cabling was Chord Co. balanced Indigo and Signature speaker leads, with the whole system stood on the Cambre CORE rack, complete with recent Lode Stone Isolator upgrade. Mains cabling in the basic system comprised simple, good quality 13 Amp IEC leads originally supplied with Naim equipment. This set-up allowed us to ring the changes on the cable looms, mains supplies and support platforms whilst also easily reverting to the control system, which in itself offered a sufficiently good level of equipment support and cable quality to give the various contenders a challenge.

In addition the results have been back checked against listening conducted in other systems and circumstances,

with other equipment and in the case of the SRA platforms the specific units they've been built to match. Many of these products have been assessed over a considerable period and in many different situations – which explains why their names dot other reviews over the last three or four issues. Reassuringly, their results have been remarkably consistent.

I also stuck to the tried and trusted when it came to direct musical comparisons, so whilst a vast number of records, CDs and SACDs were used in association with the various products on test, when it came to direct comparisons I relied on the following:

Townes Van Zandt: 'Waitin' Round To Die'
– *Heartworn Highways*,
Loose Music WJCD167

Art Pepper Quintet: 'Las Cuevas De Mario'
– *Smack Up* Analogue Productions CAPJ 012 Gold CD

Rachmaninoff: *Symphonic Dances*
– Johanos/Dallas S.O. Analogue Productions APCD 006

Eleanor McEvoy: *Love Must Be Tough*
Mosco Disc MOSACD304 SACD

and the dramatic improvement in dynamic tracking – the ability to follow micro-dynamic shifts, the tiny graduations in level that reveal a singer's inflexion, an instrumentalist's work and technique. But the Elbrus brings more.



At first, and in isolation, it's hard to put your finger on just why it makes such a huge difference, but thankfully, help is at hand in the shape of the Elbrus itself. How so? Avail yourself of a simple two box electronic set up, just amp and CD, and connect them both to the straight-through, unbalanced outputs. Take a listen, familiarize yourself with the sound, get a good feel for its

qualities. After all, with the equivalent of a Silver Jaya, Taga, a Kinibalu platform and the Roraima mains leads it should sound pretty good – and it does.

Now, connect the CD player to one of the balanced outputs and listen again... It's one of those "Ohhhmyyyygaawwwd" moments.

It's one of those "I'm listening to a different system" moments.

With the balanced supply comes a shape to notes and melodic lines, a purpose, a weight, an intent.

The background is blacker, the dynamics richer, there's more weight and more colour. But add these things together and they add up to a sense of flow and natural progression that makes the music much more intimate and far more expressive. So playing Eliza Gilkyson's 'Hard Times In Babylon', the hesitant, almost stilted tempo of the straight through socket is replaced

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– Noel Keywood, *Hi-Fi World*

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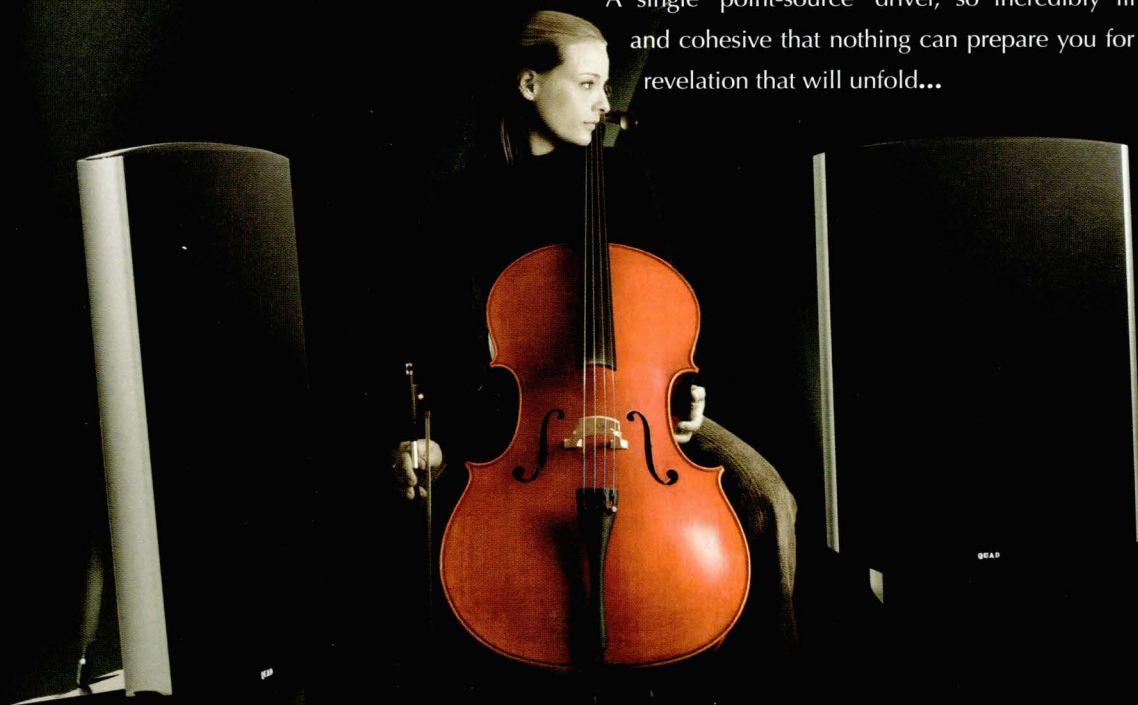
– Sam Tellig, *Stereophile magazine*

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► by a beautifully paced, natural, evocative, measured progress. Suddenly the tempo makes sense, conjuring as it does the sense of a harsh lesson learnt, a good friend lost. It's about musical communication at the most basic level. The added weight and colour heighten the effect but it's the control of pace and flow that binds the whole together.

At its best the Elbrus is an astonishingly effective performer; or rather, it allows your system to become one, finally realizing its potential. But, as I said before, it's not a one-box solution and its performance depends on layered ancillaries used in Tandem. Remove the Kinibalu platform from beneath it and you rob the sound of weight, colour and purpose. Indeed, remove its supporting layers and you diminish its value by stages – not small ones, either. But the Roraima, Elbrus, Kinibalu combination represents a sweet spot in the Vertex system, delivering a whole that's way, way greater than the sum of the parts. So much so that in approaching a system context I'd be putting the first Kinibalu under the Elbrus rather than any other component, buying a Kinibalu along with the Elbrus if I didn't have one

available. Play the Symphonic Dances through the PS Audio PPP and the Elbrus standing straight on a standard shelf and it's a question of swings and roundabouts, sumptuous, unstoppable power plays detail and separation. As soon as you put the Kinibalu under the Elbrus, the combination delivers the best of both worlds: weight, discrimination, separation, structure and momentum.

In creating the Elbrus, Vertex have judged its capabilities nicely. With sufficient capacity to handle most single source systems – as well as the ability to expand the outlets – the unit is as big as it needs to be but no bigger, minimizing the internal mechanical issues while keeping the cost as low as possible. It is far from cheap but is also seriously effective and elegant in execution and appearance. The ability to self-check its impact by comparing the performance of the balanced and direct outputs is wonderfully reassuring, as well as underlining the dramatic impact the balanced supply has on system performance. By isolating the critical source components from outside interference as well as protecting the gain stages from the pollution so many digital

circuits or switch mode supplies dump back into the mains, it cuts both ways simultaneously – and tools don't get much more efficient or elegant than that.

Ultimately contexts vary and so do systems, but a well-constructed Vertex foundation will help any system sing. The precise order of priorities might vary but of one thing I'm confident – properly matched the Elbrus more than pays its way. As a basis for a complete Vertex cable loom and support system it extends the envelope significantly. As an individual step towards that goal, taken at the right time it's more of a mighty stride than just another pace. 

Price:
 Elbrus Balanced Power Supply – £2950
 Roraima power cord – £362
 Powercon Roraima extension lead (1.5m) – £490

Manufacturer:
 Vertex AQ
 Tel. (44)(0)1597 825993
 Net. www.vertexaq.com

The PS Audio Power Plant Premier Regenerator


by Roy Gregory

On the face of it, regeneration is a simple concept; take the AC power from the wall and instead of feeding it directly into your equipment, use it instead to run a signal generator and a power amp, set to output a clean 50Hz AC waveform. The first units I saw arrived around a decade ago, initially from Accuphase and then shortly after Burmester, although that's reflects my awareness rather than any strict chronology. But these units were large and expensive and they were soon followed by a

slew of more affordable alternatives and imitators, not least from PS Audio who swiftly launched a whole range of different designs, varying in capacity, weight and size.

The problem was that regeneration, like many a simple concept, proved to be far more complex and demanding when it came to actual execution, and many of these designs disappeared as rapidly as they'd emerged. But PS Audio have always understood the prime importance of power supply quality and

stuck with the problem. We reviewed the smallest (300VA) of their original supplies and found its performance promising, especially at the relatively modest asking price. But it was large and ran extremely hot but the sonic benefits were undeniable. Unfortunately the size and temperature issues were exacerbated in the larger versions, culminating in a massive 1.2KVA behemoth that was a serious two-man lift.

Now, six years on, we have the latest generation regenerator (!) from PS 

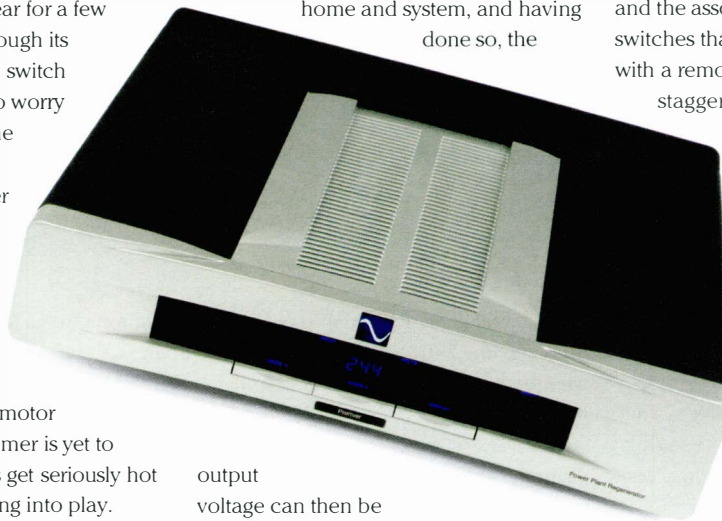
▶ Audio, the Power Plant Premier, or PPP as it's more commonly known. The product of lessons learnt with the earlier designs, this is a far more accomplished and sophisticated beast. It's slim-line and beautifully executed chassis is weighty but readily manageable, cool running yet capable of delivering a substantial 1.5KVA, more than enough to run most systems. Despite this dramatic increase in efficiency over previous models, the PPP still contains a cooling fan that you might just about hear for a few seconds as it cycles through its self-check sequence on switch on. Quiet enough not to worry you unless you place the unit right next to your chair, in practice I never managed to activate it in use, even with the PPP driving a pair of serious mono-blocks on the end of a valve pre-amp and CD player as well as a four motor turntable! Okay, so summer is yet to arrive, but unless things get seriously hot I can't see the fan coming into play.

At £1800 this compact PS Audio actually looks expensive in material terms, but once you examine its minimal domestic impact and extraordinary capability that perception soon changes. With five main, independently isolated and filtered outputs and a host of associated signal socketry (to allow protection of modems, Sky boxes and the like) the PPP is clearly versatile, but it's not until you investigate the front-panel display that you start to realize that it delivers both genuine insight into the state of your mains supply and the ability to extract the best from it.

The display toggles through a six-position menu, showing you the input voltage to the unit, the output voltage from its sockets and the differential between the two. Then it shows you the %THD of the input signal, output signal and once again the differential between the two. All very interesting you might

well think, but so what? Well, the PPP allows you to either decrease or increase its output voltage by ± 10 Volts. On the review unit that was achieved by turning a small set-screw in the bottom plate – a somewhat fiddly exercise, which helps explain why current production units now have a thumbwheel to facilitate the process.

The significance of this adjustability is two-fold: using a tester the dealer can calibrate the display in the customers home and system, and having done so, the



output voltage can then be optimized by examining its impact on the THD. Don't just assume that 230 Volts will deliver the best results; you may well be surprised.

But even more than the basic functionality, it's the additional thought that's gone into the PPP that really impresses. Input is via PS Audio's anti-spike/anti-surge cartridge, a replaceable element that provides genuine protection to the equipment connected after it (a fact demonstrated to spectacular effect by PS Audio head honcho Paul McGowan in a video clip on the company's web-site that's well worth a look). If you are unfortunate enough to suffer a sufficiently large spike that the re-set button won't restore operation, the damaged cartridge will be replaced free of charge by PS. Internally, the electrical paths are kept as short as possible to preserve dynamics and musical impact, each output socket provided with its

own common mode filter. But the PPP sees the introduction of a new choke technology developed by Hitachi and dubbed Finemet. This material has the highest magnetic permeability available, allowing components to be considerably smaller and, as a result shortening the electrical path by an order of magnitude over previous PS designs. Sound fanciful? Hitachi supply copious documentation to support the material's performance. Then there's the data bus connections and the associated bank of small switches that allow the unit to interface with a remotely operated set-up as well as stagger the switch-on of the various

units to avoid embarrassing thumps, or worse, actual damage.

In use the PPP requires a little respect when it comes to connection, switch-on and optimization – largely consisting of making sure that everything's off before connecting to the wall and then allowing the unit to stabilize before switching it back on and

then the electronics connected to it. Tweaking the settings will normally be done by your dealer, but is a straight forward enough process to carry out yourself with a little guidance should it become necessary.

Where a unit like the Vertex AQ Elbrus is very much one cog in a wider conceptual picture, the PS Audio is a standalone add-on to just about any system. As such it's plug and play – and yes, you'll certainly hear its impact used in this way. But like all other aspects of the system foundation, it is also part of the whole, and combining it with a coherent set of high-quality mains leads is pretty much *de rigeur* if you want to really hear what the PPP is capable of. On its own it's impressive enough, as is a decent set of power cords. But combine the two and as with all the other components that contribute to

The PS Audio family tree...

The PPP resides at the top of a whole suite of power products, all of which employ PS Audio's anti-surge input cartridge. Next down the tree is the Quintessence (£999) which, whilst outwardly identical to the flagship unit, dispenses with the sophisticated regeneration facility, confining itself to significant levels of the more commonly seen shunt filtering to deal with RF pollution of the mains. Then comes the Quintet (£395), which builds the rear-panel versatility and functionality of the PPP into a substantial horizontal extrusion, containing a lower level of RF protection. Finally, the Duette (£249) is a simple two-way extension and anti-surge unit that can be used in isolation or to increase the number of sockets available from the larger units. All these are built to the same standard as the PPP, making the budget designs especially impressive. All are available with US, UK



or European Schuko socketry, and serious students of AC power may well opt for the superior sound of the US connections, or the reversible phase advantages of Schuko over our own 13 Amp standard.

There are also four power leads available. These start with the Prelude, a

basic three-conductor design that costs £149 for a meter length. £249 will buy you the Plus, a heavier

cable that employs twin conductors for live and neutral, while the Statement (supplied with the review unit) increases the total conductor count to seven at a cost of £399. Finally, the £699 Premier uses the same configuration as the Statement but employs silver conductors. But once again there's slightly more here than meets the eye: the IEC connectors make a really solid contact with sockets – so much so that you can easily lift the substantial mass of the Quintet by its power cord, while the input end is always terminated with a US plug, supplied with a high quality adaptor (£15) where required. The earth pin of the US connector can be unscrewed, making

lifting the earth to chase down loops and noise problems simplicity itself, without compromising the integrity of the earth connection. Thus even the humble power cord becomes a model of versatile practicality at the hands of Paul McGowan.



▶ establishing your system's foundation, the whole is far greater than the sum of the parts. With three Statement leads to hand, I was able to run the whole system from wall socket onwards on the same cable – by far the best solution. And yes, even with a regenerator like the PPP, the cable that

an immediate increase in the sense of musical flow. Where the basic set-up was nice enough on the TVZ track, it tended to smooth over the hesitations and edges that make this recording so stunningly immediate and natural. The

PS Audio rendered both the vocal and guitar lines far more

impromptu backing vocals (human and canine) were far clearer and more audible. On the Art Pepper track, the bass and piano took on a more motive stance, starting to drive the track forwards by adding a little slink to what had been a ploddy, heavy rhythm line. Where it had sounded laid back, even turgid, now it showed a hint of life, the first stirrings of some underlying purpose or urgency.

But adding the Statement power cords between first the wall and the PPP and then the regenerator and the CD player and amp transformed the performance. Collectively, the upgraded leads delivered body, colour, space and presence, building on the already impressive sense of musical flow and overall coherence instilled by the PPP. Now the plucked bass notes on the Pepper had real shape and texture, their juxtaposition with the piano line at last falling into the dirty, smoochy groove that characterizes this track (and makes it so hard to get right). Townes Van Zandt's voice and guitar were more present and immediate, yet paradoxically, stepped back behind the plane of the speakers and into a much more coherent and ▶



connects it to the wall is still the most important single wire in the system. Why? Because the less work you give the filters and regenerator to do, the better they're going to sound.

I started by adding just the PPP into the basic system, which resulted in

convincingly, while a dramatic drop in noise floor gave a blacker

background, a greater sense of focus and separation, more body to images and a more coherent perspective. The rather awkward separation of voice and guitar witnesses on the original system was collapsed, and if not perfect it was now far more credible. Likewise the



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► accurate acoustic space. And whilst the enunciation and phrasing, the hesitations in the voice and odd clumsy fingering on the fretboard all added to the sense of expression and natural delivery, it was the overall temporal stability imposed by the regenerator, the feeling of things happening in their own time, that made the track so convincing, the rawness part of the experience. The awkwardness is in the performance now, rather than the system struggling to reproduce it.

But if one track really highlighted both the considerable strengths of the PPP and how it differs to a unit like the Elbrus, then it has to be the Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances*. From the opening notes the added sense of acoustic space, the clearly delineated rear wall and the dramatic tension that characterizes this performance were immediately obvious. Where the original system had sounded congested, flat and strained on the crescendos, the presence, colour, dynamic range and musical coherence that were injected by the PPP and Statement cables brought the orchestra and music to vivid, bold and purposeful life. No shortage of forward momentum now, no sparing the horses, and if the calm, relaxed stability of the PPP stopped

things becoming a headlong rush, now they had an inevitable and unstoppable momentum propelling them forward. The music simply powered through the ascending steps to the mighty climax that closes the opening section, carrying all before it in a display of majestic power and physical presence, devoid of the strain or edge that can make less capable systems seem superficially louder (but ultimately more wearing). Impressive indeed – in both hi-fi and musical terms.

That sweeping sense of grandeur makes for compelling listening, but does come at some cost. The same presence and body that picks out those impromptu backing lines on the TVZ and fleshes them out into a real person, singing along, the sheer body and towering presence that makes the Rachmaninoff such a powerful musical statement – those things rob the music too, of some inner detail and micro-dynamic agility. It's the age-old conundrum; are you more interested in what's being played or how the player's playing it? The PPP stands squarely in the former camp, its innate sense of overarching musical coherence and flow making for an emotionally involving listening experience. It's unforced and unhurried, bringing natural perspectives and a

natural sense of pace to proceedings. It delivers a holistic picture and one that's both impressive and satisfying without having to resort to being too obvious. As a result, long term listening is a joyfully strain-free experience.

If you want to get up close and personal with the performers, then a unit like the Vertex will get you within touching distance. The PS Audio is about something different: the musical whole, the shape of the piece rather than the strands that make it. This is about music as experience rather than about performance as an intellectual exercise. This is about the message in the music and if that's what you're after then the PS Audio PPP delivers it loud if necessary and never less than clear. ➤

<p>Price: PS Audio PPP</p> <p>UK Distributor: Signature Audio Systems Tel. (44)(0)208 480 3333 Net. www.signatureaudiosystems.co.uk</p> <p>Manufacturer: PS Audio Net. www.psaudio.com</p>
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The Quantum Resonant Technology QX-4 Mains Purifier

by Chris Thomas

I must confess that this is a first for me as I find myself in the strange position of reviewing a product when I am not totally clear exactly what it is.

Let me explain. Quantum Resonant Technology (QRT) was founded in Santa Monica, California in 1997 and have been manufacturing AC Mains conditioners and purifiers since then. You will find one of their QRT modules inside Nordost's Thor distribution box and now that same technology has been

incorporated into two devices which, they claim, will improve the quality of any audio system or TV. What is clear is that we are certainly living in a very different electronic environment compared to just a few years ago and as such, uncontaminated mains have become even more difficult if not impossible to achieve. Just have a count up of all the various things that are plugged into the wall in your home. Mobile and cordless phone chargers,

wireless networks, Plasma TVs, games consoles, the list goes on and on – and by pumping rubbish back into the mains, every one of them has its own detrimental effect on its quality. Conventional power conditioners, according to Quantum, compress musical dynamics so their answer to all this general mains grunge is QRT – Quantum Resonant Technology, although it's an answer they're reluctant to explain. Fortunately, the effects of ►

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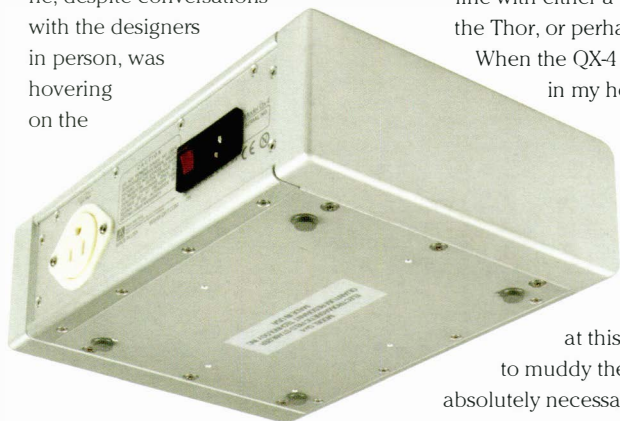
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TIME DOMAIN AUDIO SYSTEM

TD510

▶ the circuit are readily measured and even more easily perceived.

I did ask RG for a summary and even he, despite conversations with the designers in person, was hovering on the

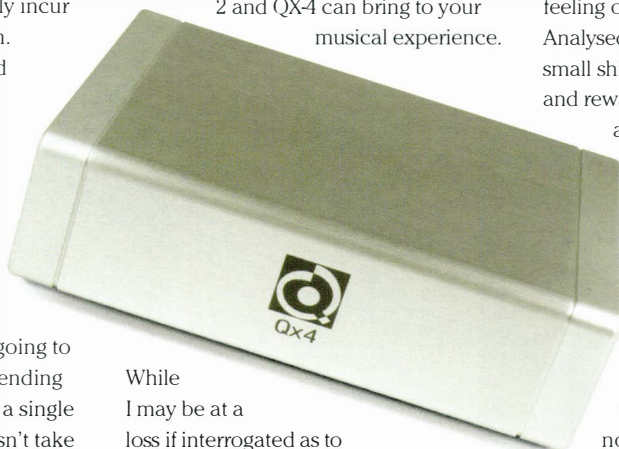


precipice of understanding as to exactly what goes on inside the box and there are also Patent issues that inevitably incur extra manufacturer's discretion. The QX modules that are found inside both the QX-4 and the QX-2 bring coherence, noise reduction and order to any associated electronic circuit. The term that Quantum use to describe the action is Electro Magnetic Field Stabilisation (EMFS) which is probably as close as we are going to get at the moment to comprehending it. Inside the Thor you will find a single Quantum unit (QX-1) so it doesn't take a great leap of imagination to deduce that QX-2 and QX-4 are twice and four times as powerful and the claim, totally confirmed by my experience, is that the more Quantum devices you add to your system, the greater the benefits. Whether this has a limit though I have yet to discover, as the maximum I have used is two QX-4s plus the one inside the Thor.

So, at last we move from the world of mystery and supposition to the mains socket in your listening room and this is where things become a lot clearer. The QX units are small but built for mechanical stability, very substantially constructed from aluminium with chunky solid-billet caps at each end of

the case. On the back are a pair of mains sockets so you can plug one end into the wall and the other can be used in line with either a distribution box like the Thor, or perhaps your amplifier.

When the QX-4 was being installed in my home I was also shown the benefits of mains leads of different lengths and that demonstration was as mind boggling as the introduction of QRT itself. But, at this stage, I don't want to muddy the waters more than absolutely necessary so I'll leave that particular discussion for another day, pausing only to add that its relevance is inextricably linked with what the QX-2 and QX-4 can bring to your musical experience.



While I may be at a loss if interrogated as to how the QRT works, I can certainly tell you what it does sonically because that is not subtle at all. Having said that though, I should add that the nature of the benefits and energies that flow in a more coherent fashion from its outlets will not necessarily be appreciated by those who estimate system improvement by how much extra bass "slam" is produced or solely whether it does or doesn't have something mysteriously but

appropriately called PRAT. It is true that many upgrades or improvements are characterised somewhere along the line by a reduction in the noise floor and this is one of the first things that you notice with the QX-4 in place. Backgrounds are blacker and stiller and they get more so as you add more QRT. The stark contrast of the instruments or voices against this brings an enhanced luminescence to the musical picture for sure. But the best way to describe its overall influence is probably with the word order – the sense of what is happening and when. It might seem like a somewhat impersonal and mechanical way to refer to an art form like music, but the Quantum brings a clarity to musical structure and patterns, a finer and more natural sense of flow in the way the music moves, a greater feeling of precision in the playing. Analysed in itself it might seem like a small shift, but often the most important and rewarding system improvements

amount to just a tilt in one direction, a qualitative rather than quantitative shift akin to the last millimetre of turn on a fine lens that brings everything, including the depth of field, into sharp focus. Musical phrases are more succinct and also more understandable due to the noticeably enhanced contrast and shading of micro-dynamics. I have also noticed a slight change in balance and perspectives that has been more evident when sitting off-axis. A slight edging forward of the ▶

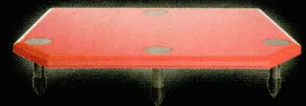
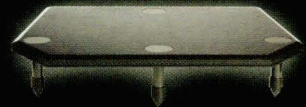
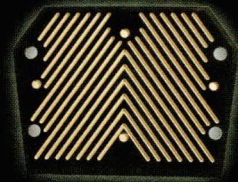
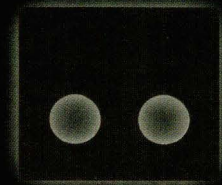
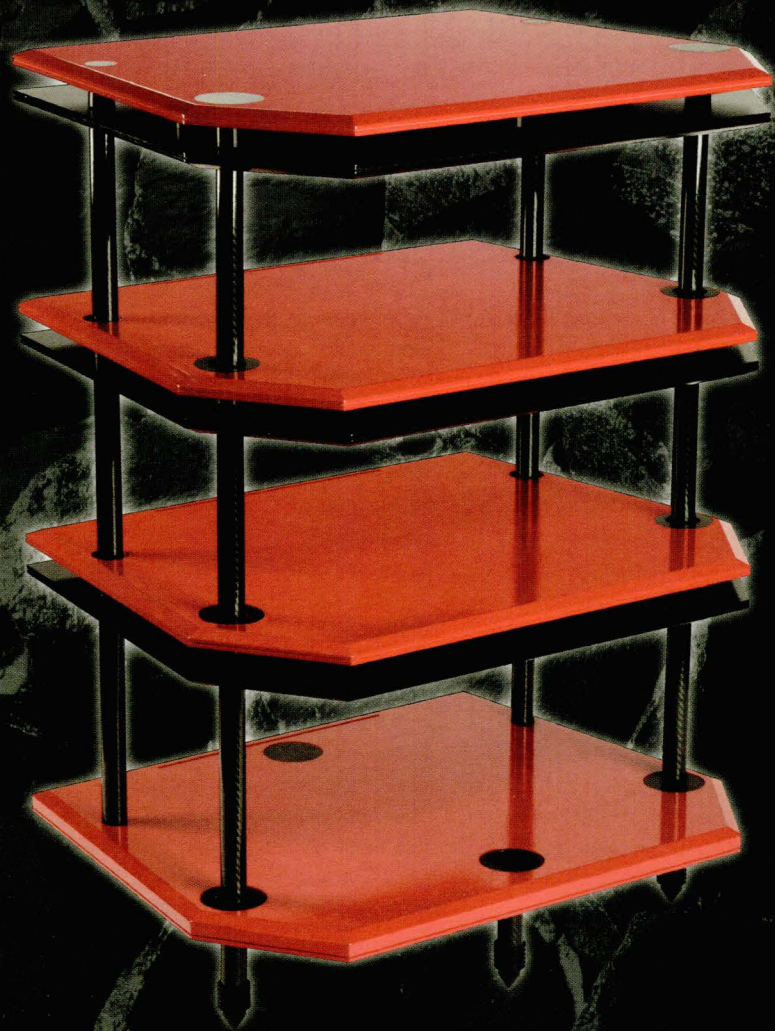


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► mid-band perhaps that lends a touch more presence, but then it may just be the subjective result of the reduced noise floor and will almost certainly be system dependent. But there is no sign of any compressive limiting at all. Far from it in fact, as resolving power and freedom when it comes to those small dynamic variations is noticeably improved.

As the QX-4 is so easily portable and installed I have also tried in a few friend's homes with systems of varying

levels of quality to get a broader view of its effectiveness, and I have yet to hear a single situation where the system and the music failed to benefit from its inclusion. It is true that many have struggled to describe its effect in words but, once removed, everyone I have played it to wants it back in place. It is, perhaps not surprisingly, affected by where it sits. Don't leave it on the floor but allocate it a dedicated shelf and you will enhance its effectiveness even more. I can see no real downside to it

at all and in many ways the benefits it brings to a music system are not unlike those of the Stillpoints products I have reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

Both can be viewed as fundamental and critical building blocks when it comes to getting the best from your equipment – and both work superbly in tandem. What Stillpoints achieve in mechanical terms the QX-4 seems to do to your mains, and that's the point. More Quantum, more music; it really is that simple. 

The solace of Quantum... The QX2 mains purifier

by Steve Dickinson


If you fancy a giggle at our forebears' expense, google the word 'Phlogiston'. This was the term coined to describe an unknown, in this case the mechanism by which things burn, to help explain the known, i.e. the fact that things burn. Following the discovery of oxygen, the phlogiston theory was discredited, but one could be forgiven for suspecting the marketing departments of cosmetics companies, for example, of keeping the tradition of such risible scientific nomenclature alive. The term 'flat-earther' is commonly used in hi-fi circles to describe adherents to the '80s Linn-Naim philosophy that all a good system had to deliver was tunefulness and dynamics – even at the expense of everything else. Many still espouse this view, though many more do not. Here at Plus Towers we've been banging on about the fundamental importance of mains cabling, supports, interconnects and so-on for longer than just about anybody else, attracting a fair amount of criticism in the process from what may be, perhaps, the new flat-earthers. Their view, based on some fairly basic physics (albeit provoked by some of the more outlandish claims from some cable manufacturers) is that cables can't have

the effect we describe, because these effects can't be explained or described in terms of simple cable parameters such as resistance, inductance and capacitance. But if all scientists reacted that way, saying "That can't be right" rather than "That's interesting" we might still be talking about phlogiston today.

I mention all this because I've been approaching this review with a degree of mild disquiet. My misgivings, such as they are, centre on the lack of a technical frame of reference for the Quantum products. The developers of the technology remain tight-lipped about the scientific goings-on under the hood. They have not furnished me with any kind of technical description, and the back-of-a-fag-packet explanations I have heard didn't make a great deal of sense to me. Which is just as likely to be an indictment of my own level of technical competence – as I'm sure you, dear reader, were just about to point out. Logically, of course, this is not that different to a cable review where the physics is not generally well-understood, and even less well explained. But this is a box, with an on/off switch, a light and stuff, and boxes are supposed to do things we recognise, not lead us off into metaphysics. That's what

cables are for...

Apparently, Quantum technology does something with electromagnetic fields – a something which might be hard to explain but is actually easy to both measure and demonstrate. Be in no doubt, there is something extraordinary going on here.

My QX2 represents the entry-level unit, while CT has been playing with the QX4, rated at twice the effectiveness. Both share the same casework, the only visible difference being the change of designation in the logo. The rear is also simple, a regular IEC mains input, and a mains output (currently US or Schuko only) together with an illuminated on/off switch. This last makes A/B comparisons a doddle as the unit is essentially passive when switched off, the power merely passing through unmolested. The use of a Schuko output does necessitate the use of a Schuko to IEC mains lead for onward connection and I was supplied with a Nordost Brahma, identical to my normal mains leads, for that purpose. I also obtained a pair of Nordost Valhalla power cords for comparison. Nordost reckon that a 4m length is optimal for their power cables, so with each section into 

▶ and out of the Quantum unit measuring 2m, this effectively created the optimum length. Likewise, nearly all audiophile mains leads are available in both Schuko and US versions, so the output socket is less of an issue than it might appear.

The actual effect of the Quantum units creeps up on you, but once you 'get' it, which doesn't take long, it is striking. Dynamics are enhanced, though not in any way forced: this is not like turning up the volume, it's more like turning down the rest of the world. A level of, previously unsuspected, oppressiveness is lifted away, not unlike moving from a smallish room with low ceilings to one with expansive, elegant and lofty proportions. The effect on the performance is simply that musicians play with more conviction, a deeper level of commitment. Imagine a concert performed by players who have just endured a tedious, overdue, overcrowded and overheated train journey to the venue. Then imagine the same concert if the performers have parachuted in, James Bond style, tearing off their jumpsuits to reveal immaculate tuxedos as they bound onto the platform to rapturous applause. It is that energising, refreshing effect that the Quantum brings with it. It makes the timing and placement, the texture and shape of notes far more obvious and effective. It's almost as if you've taken the shackles off your system. There is no hint of artifice, no contrived niceness, simply a more direct engagement with the emotional impact of the music. You also miss it like hell when it is switched off.

The Valhalla leads also allowed me to compare the impact of the QX2 to that of a better power cord. Moving from a Brahma'd-up Quantum to un-Quantumed Valhallas and finally to Valhalla'd Quantum was most illuminating and, suffice to say, anybody who tries to get the Valhallas and the Quantum off

me might get hurt in the attempt. But the middle stage was perhaps the most intriguing. Using the Valhallas without the Quantum brought clear benefits, but you also lost a lot of what the Quantum had added to the Brahmas. For example, a quick listen to Dave Brubeck's *Unsquare*



Dance via Quantum and Brahmas showed how well defined the clapping is at the start of the piece; with the Quantum out of the circuit, the claps are more amorphous, less spatially and temporally articulated. The Valhallas, sans Quantum, restored much of the texture and the timing, but it is not until the Quantum is re-introduced that the full ambient information, and sense of interplay between the various clappers, their enthusiasm, is restored. Similarly, pieces with plucked acoustic bass lack ambience and tension without the Quantum, regardless of the quality of mains cable employed. In some cases, it might almost be an electric bass in play, however the Quantum unit shows quite clearly the body, space and volume of the instrument so there is no room for doubt.

This, I think, is why I am happy to enthusiastically espouse the Quantum units. Valhalla mains cables represent fairly close to state of the art performance, but there are things the Quantum brings to the party that the Valhallas only hint at. The effect of the Quantum boxes is also cumulative. There's no reason why multiple units can't be daisy-chained, and this seems to work. When my unit was delivered, another QX2 plus CT's QX4 were also to hand and, just for fun, we connected all three units up, making in effect a QX8. Having played around a bit, we switched them off. The only word that adequately describes my feelings at that point is 'bereft' – and I'm not overstating or exaggerating the effect. Quantum technology allows your system to work better, allows it to deliver much more music – and does so in a way that seems unique. In this respect the QX2 is good, but the QX4 is better. One demonstration should convince and I suspect that anybody

who hears these units will have no trouble justifying the extra expense of the QX4; indeed they might just start saving for another. ▶+

Price:
Quantum QX-2: \$950.00
Quantum QX-4: £1375.

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A Whole New Ball Game... The Stillpoints Support System

by Chris Thomas

It has long seemed to me that the business of system upgrading is a task fraught with peril and hidden dangers, both financial and emotional. We all do it as and when finance and inclination permit but, if we are buying outside a prescriptive path, certain precautions must be observed. Experience suggests that, excluding money, you need three things to stand any chance of getting to where you want to be:

Firstly, you must have an open mind. This means that you need to leave all your preconceptions about what does or doesn't work or what role specific hardware has, behind you.

Secondly, you must be honest with yourself, brutally so. The decision to purchase and the subsequent responsibility of ownership distorts our objectivity, honesty and colours our ability to admit when we have bought the wrong thing. We invest more than just money when we upgrade. Most of us have bought rubbish in the past and then tried to convince ourselves that it is good and that we really like it. The audio forums are littered with strange people trying to persuade others to make the same mistakes as they have. It's an unfortunate side of human nature.

Thirdly, as audio equipment is constantly evolving, you need a quality dealer with a progressive outlook and not someone who is content to sell what he has always sold just because it requires so little effort. Find the right man and form a good relationship with him, as a really enlightened dealer can save you a lot of money and heartache, because when you do buy the right product you get a new record/CD collection every time and later, when

you are immersed in the music, it will always seem cheap at the price.

Very occasionally RG sends equipment over to me, knowing full well that he is about to tilt my world on its axis. He sneaks these nuggets into my life and waits for me to ring him as one of the newly converted. It's a game with no rules but because of it I was introduced to, among others, the Lyra Connoisseur line-stage that has been the beating heart of my system for the past few years, as well as a number of other paradigm shifting products. Just recently he arranged for the visit to my home of Paul Wakeen and his associate Chris Hess from Stillpoints over in Wisconsin, USA to install their ESS rack. At the time I didn't know the impact this was to have, but not long after they'd left, I realised that he had gone and done it to me again.

I needed no convincing that the choice of supports was crucial and too often underestimated, although I soon realised that my own experience as to their true worth had been more limited than I would have liked. What I was certainly not ready for was the scale of the improvements that the Stillpoints were going to bring and which have left me with the feeling that this was the most profound and important change that my home system has undergone since I bit the not inconsiderable bullet and purchased the Connoisseur a few years ago. I am perhaps rather audio-cynical through experience, but over the years I have heard more claims about Hi-Fi equipment than I can remember. Perhaps it is too easy to adopt cynicism as a default position but I have certainly seen the Emperor naked on too many occasions. For many people, supports,

cabling and mains treatments are no more than snake oil and we are the industry's salesmen. But, the source-first theory is still totally relevant, only these days the source begins with the mains and associated cables and continues with the supports, as these are the bedrocks and absolutely critical to the performance of any system. Stillpoints products, and the ESS rack in particular, go to the heart of the music and are successful simply because most systems are operating at only a fraction of their potential, but the impact is so fundamental and far reaching that to ignore its significance could condemn you to a future of tail-chasing. System building is what we are talking about here and Stillpoints are a group of products that underlines how our concept of what that means really should be changing. It is however still something to be approached with your ears, and mind, very wide open.

Stillpoints Technology systems are about resonance control and low mass, as mass means energy storage and that is anathema to them. These are recurring themes when discussing audio designs these days but with the recent improvements to the ESS rack Paul Wakeen has taken these concepts to a completely new level. You may already be familiar with their extremely versatile conical shock absorber design that we on *Hi-Fi+* have been big fans of for quite a while now. Inside is a circle of ceramic balls supporting a protruding ball, also ceramic, which contacts directly with the component. The lower internal level is restrained within a slightly flexible petal-like outer case, known as the Calyx, made from Delrin. As the vibration travels down ►



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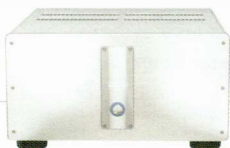
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► it is transferred through the smaller balls, changing direction at the point of contact, denying resonances a vertical outlet. The weight of the component causes the lower tier to expand the Calyx, the vibration is damped and the resonance is absorbed. These are the quickest and cheapest way to get into Stillpoints systems and three of them sat beneath your CD player will give you a taste of what to expect before you consider moving onto more complex resonance control products. They can be used in a number of situations. As stand-alone individual component absorbers, or attached to threaded risers for levelling. Or you could employ them with other Stillpoints products like the impressive skeletal Component Stand, built around a lockable central hub and usually configured as a three or four-legged equipment support. Together they impressed RG so much that he gave them an award in 2005. Highly versatile, this can be physically coupled with other Component Stands to provide extended support for much larger pieces of equipment or even employed beneath loudspeakers. It represents the next level of isolation and comes equipped with the Delrin Mini Inverse Risers (MIR) as standard feet, but can be upgraded with the addition of the preferable aluminium Hard Coat (HC) MIRs. Slip a three-legged Component Stand under your CD player and you will be in for a shock. You will certainly hear a more vibrant and dynamic view of the music with sharper timing, better resolution across the bandwidth and a broader soundstage with greater depth and much better articulation and expression. Within the base of both these (and also the ESS rack) there is another kind of resonance control system that, though different in external shape and size, functions in the same way as the Stillpoint cone. This

also uses a system of smaller balls in a restraining conical housing to absorb resonant energy. These embedded units are threaded and will accept the Delrin and the HC MIRs, or even Stillpoint cones themselves, as feet. The more you use the individual pieces, the more configuration possibilities appear. There is no redundancy with these products and any that you already use can be incorporated into a custom ESS rack installation with no problem, and this enhances the possibilities greatly as the layering of resonance control systems brings undeniable musical benefits.



The ESS itself is available in three heights (26, 32 and 40 inches) and in three widths (20, 26 and 36 inches). RG reviewed a similar system back in issue 46 but since then the whole unit and in particular the shelving options have undergone some radical design improvements. Each rack comprises two Masts (uprights) for the height and a pair of crossbars, each internally tensioned with a threaded rod, to form the width. Both Masts are constructed from a 63mm steel tube that is damped inside and powder coated externally with a clear coat for additional damping. A pair of 19mm milled aluminium horizontal arms, top and bottom, are fitted to these and held

in place by stainless steel end caps. They are then equipped with a pair of steel cables, attached by aluminium collars and to which the shelves are subsequently attached. Pre-tensioned to inhibit resonance, each has minimum break strength of 2000 lbs and that means that the ESS will bear just about any load you ask of it, even American behemoth amplifiers. Imagine each cable as a long, thin, leaf spring having inherent frictional damping that is not only an additional part of the resonance control system, but also avoids cross-contamination of vibration between shelves. Constrained layer damping is employed throughout the whole rack and achieved by using different materials wherever there is an interface. All parts are also treated in an in-house cryogenic unit presumably to help stabilise their crystalline structure.

There are now four different levels of shelving available and these may be mixed. The first three comprise a pair of support bars that clamp to the cables with ball-ended grub screws (to avoid cable kinking) concealed behind smart polished stainless steel end caps and firmly attached to an acrylic shelf. Set up using a spirit level, each shelf can be precisely spaced as convenient. The first level of performance has half-inch aluminium bars supporting a half-inch thick acrylic shelf and these are available in only 20 and 26-inch widths. Bar/shelf decoupling is by hard plastic dimples. The second level increases the aluminium bar size to three-quarter inch and this means that Stillpoint devices can be directly embedded in three places along each bar to support the three-quarter inch acrylic shelf. This is available in the same widths. At the third level the bars are now three-quarter inch solid stainless steel, again with three resonance control devices in each, while the acrylic remains at three-quarters of an inch. The rack I use is the 40-inch tall version equipped with ►

DEFINITIVE AUDIO



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.



1. KSL Kondo M7 Line Preamplifier
2. Living Voice OBX-RW Loudspeaker in Ebony
3. New Audio Frontiers 845 SE Integrated Amplifier
4. KSL Kondo Neiro Integrated Amplifier

5. SME 2012A Turntable with KSL Kondo IOJ Cartridge
6. New Audio Frontiers KT66 Legend Integrated Amplifier
7. Kore-Eda LLA-1 Control Amplifier
PLA-1 Power Amplifier



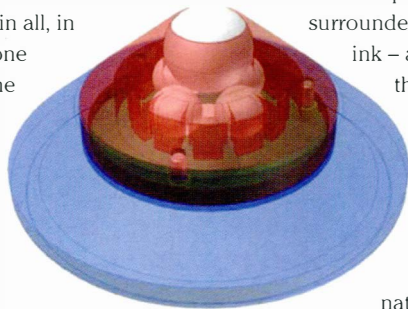
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▶ five of these third level shelves. There is also an optional one-inch acrylic shelf available to match the steel bars for particularly heavy components. The top echelon of performance dispenses with the acrylic shelf altogether and has a four-legged Component Stand mounted directly into four of the resonance control devices in the stainless steel bars, making eight in all, in two layers for this one level alone. Here the equipment is sat straight onto the Component Stand and if you really wanted to go over the top (as I did) you could fit four Stillpoint cones atop the stand as well, making 12 resonance control devices for this single component. Due to the extra height I can only see this being realistically practical on the top shelf in most installations though, unless you only use a couple of shelves and have the free space required.

Although such views are always personal I must say that this is by far the best looking piece of audio furniture I have seen and is also exquisitely made. The combination of the thin cables and acrylic take the visual bulk out of the design as well as being totally functional, while the satin-polished finish is extremely smart.

The ESS rack is where all the mechanics and levels of Stillpoints technology can be bought together and as these operate by removing the equipment resonances, its sonic character is actually one of reduction and the results are a classic case of less being more, a lot more. This is no “tone control” that lifts certain parts of the frequency response to give an artificial boost to the system’s tonal balance. Nor is it a damping device that sucks the speed and musical energy from the music by sitting the equipment on a high mass, heavy structure. Once you have heard just what three Stillpoints can do



when sitting under your CD player and then see and understand how the ESS rack builds so comprehensively on that, perhaps you won’t be surprised that the results are so eye opening. Imagine writing, with a fountain pen that delivered too much ink to the nib on poor, ultra absorbent paper where each stroke of the pen produced a line surrounded by a halo of blotchy ink – and then compare that with using a high quality pen with quality paper where each stroke is clearly delineated and you will have a rough idea of the nature of the benefits the ESS rack brings.

As I mentioned earlier, the Stillpoints components go to the heart of the music and strip away what I can only assume is the rubbish that is a result of resonance and microphony, leaving it in a far more pristine state, yet without eroding the signal, without the tonal balance ever becoming too lean or bleached. So, musical articulation is enormously



enhanced as pure resolution is taken to completely new levels and the repercussions of this alone are absolutely enormous, especially where tempo and timing issues are concerned. There is more “air” in the sound and certainly much greater separation and space between instruments too, but the tranquillity of that space between them is also blacker as the system’s noise floor seems greatly reduced. Not only is it much easier to hear the shape and character of each and every instrument

in isolation, but also the duration of the intervals between the notes are incredibly vivid. A high potential system becomes hyper-sensitive to the smallest dynamic shifts and this brings new understanding to playing techniques like phrasing which lay at the heart of every musician’s expression. And as you also get a fascinatingly clear look at the tonal characteristics and colours of their instrument, meaning that your listening experiences are much more intense and involving. When you hear the striking increase in speed, musical dynamism and the resultant rhythmic power that seems to flow like a river through the system, it is initially very hard to credit that this has been bought about by a change of supports.

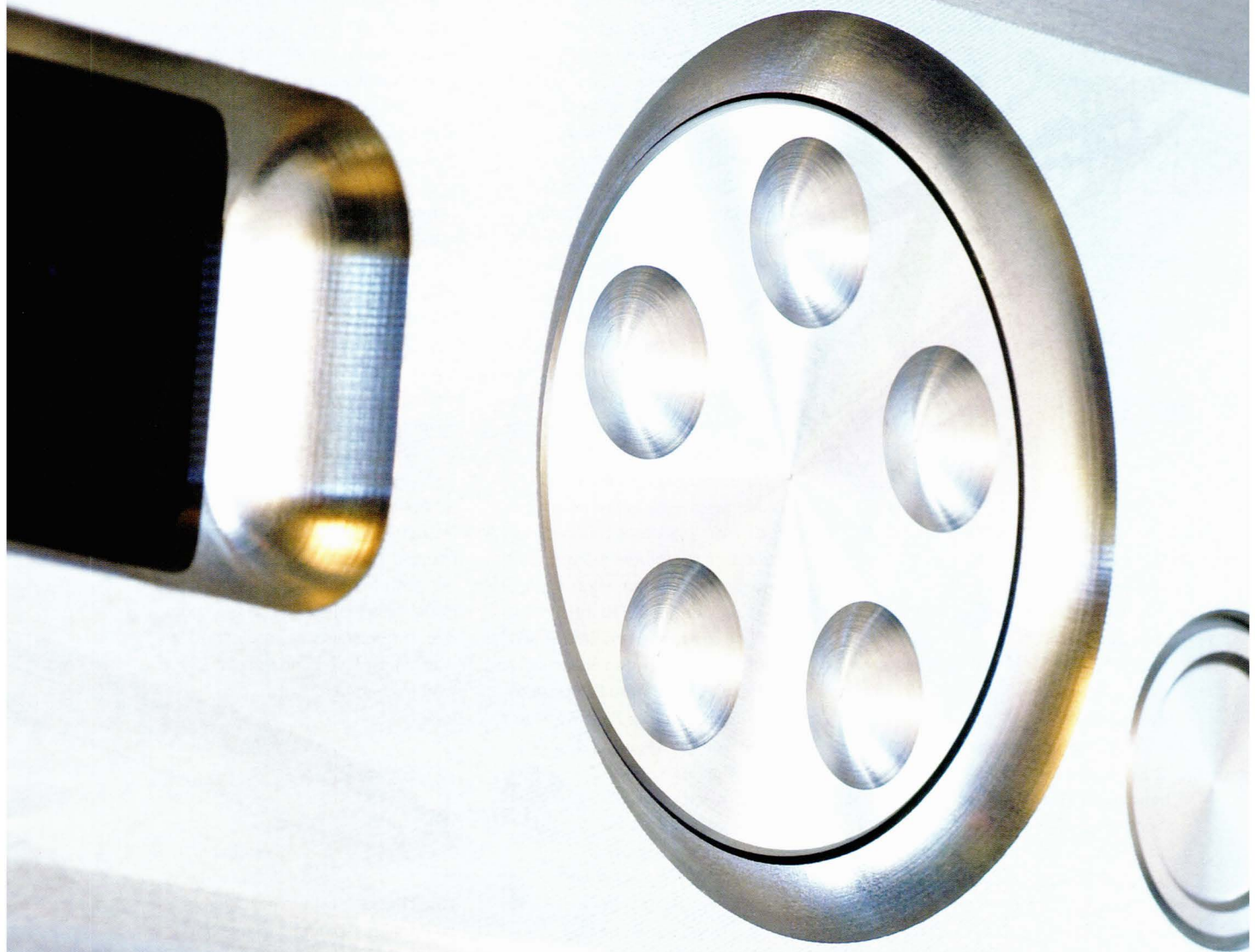
The word energy and the way the system packages it so efficiently become more and more evident as you are acclimatising yourself to the radical changes the ESS brings. I was sent a level one shelf so I could hear and understand for myself what improvements each upgrade delivered and the difference between this and the level three design, with its stainless steel bars and six embedded resonance control devices, is simply huge.

But the level one shelf is still comfortably good enough to see off the competition I have heard. It certainly left me very impressed, and don’t forget that it is a lot cheaper too. Upgrade to the level three shelf and the unmistakable increase in momentum, musical transparency and resolution of micro-dynamics might easily be enough in themselves, but there are also equal improvements in bandwidth, instrumental weight and a sure-footed rendition of pitch that make the case for the extra outlay so compelling. I think I may be especially sensitive to it, but the whole question of pitch and audio systems has interested me for years and piano remains the most glaring culprit I think. The beating influence of the harmonic halo against the fundamental during sustain has ▶

A y r e

pre-eminent...

the new KX-R preamplifier



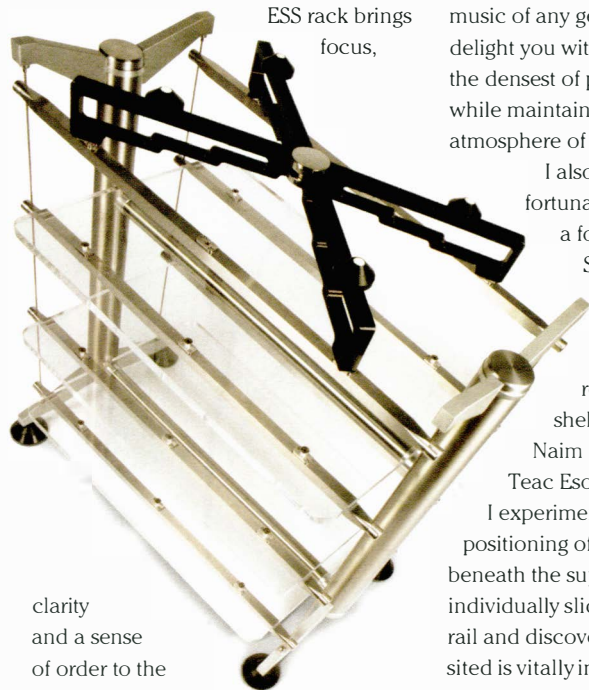
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► so often left me with the uncomfortable impression that the instrument is wandering in and out of tune. Also, when the playing becomes fast and florid, notes can often seem as if they are tripping over each other and if there is any sign of compression at the leading edge, even a magnificent 12 foot Steinway Grand can take on slight honky-tonk characteristics. But the rock-solid foundation provided by the



ESS rack brings focus,

clarity and a sense of order to the associated jumble so that even rapid semi-tone shifts are easy to understand. The higher quality shelves add to this a greater sense of scale and an unwavering stability. This is applicable across the whole bandwidth too as the tonal balance that the Stillpoints bring is exceptional, with no emphasis or hollowness anywhere that I could detect. At this level the ESS allows great electronics complete command of the music, from the heaviest orchestral salvo right down to note level where the attack, colour, sustain and decay is just so informative and understandable. High frequencies are explicit and extremely concise without ever becoming over analytical, too cool or detached. Cymbals have

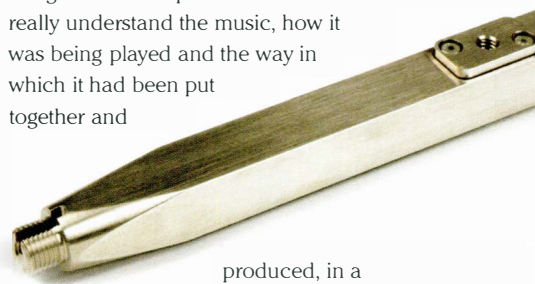
tremendously fast, realistic attack and ring with superb freedom and clarity throughout their envelope and they never saturate or become blurred. Bass too is better controlled and shaped than I have ever heard at home before with dynamic independence and a depth of grip that seems to extend forever downwards with no loosening or softening of texture or blurring of pitch. If you are interested in highly complex music of any genre then the ESS will delight you with its abilities to unravel the densest of playing and arrangements while maintaining an unswerving atmosphere of musical intensity.

I also found myself in the fortunate position of having a four-legged Component Stand (complete with cones) that I fitted straight onto the stainless steel bars after removing the acrylic top shelf. On this I sat either the Naim CD 555 head unit or the Teac Esoteric X-01 D2 CD player.

I experimented with the exact positioning of each Stillpoint cone beneath the supported equipment by individually sliding them along the leg rail and discovered that where these are sited is vitally important to the results you will hear. Around this time I had also slotted three inverted Stillpoints and Risers between the Micro Be speakers and their stands and as Paul Wakeen had promised me, the results moved to yet another level. Like inserting the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle, with these in place the sound became completely detached from the speakers and I heard a fully energised and animated soundstage unlike any I have ever achieved at home. With yet another incremental leap in speed, instrumental clarity and sheer power, the musical picture was totally transparent with an almost surreal sense of separation, depth and vocal and instrumental

independence. There was something so organic, natural and yes, real, about the music now that I was glued to the system for hours on end, delighting by rediscovering musical pieces that I thought I knew so well, wondering how I'd previously missed pearls of musicianship or simply marvelling at the way that events were just happening in front of me in such an unreconstructed way. I haven't heard many systems with such broad capabilities and able to do so many different things at the same time, yet with such a core of stability at its heart. Incorporating Stillpoints throughout the system is a very smart and cost-effective thing to do as the cost of introducing resonance control at the speakers is comparatively small and the results in a system already equipped with an ESS rack are exponential.

The acid test for any component is how its presence draws you into the music and I am still having many intense listening sessions with the fully Stillpointed system. Whenever I get hold of a new piece of equipment that really impresses me it inspires me to look ever more deeply into the music. The longer I experienced the ESS rack, the more I realized that the way it operates and all the very clever thinking behind it had bought me to the point where I could really understand the music, how it was being played and the way in which it had been put together and



produced, in a more enlightened way. I tried the rack with many different components spanning a large price range and found that it benefits them all equally. It remains hugely enjoyable, emotional and endlessly interesting, which for me is really what hi-fi should be all about, but so seldom is.

I have always been fascinated with tremolo and vibrato techniques and ►

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▶ they have been a constant source of both interest and irritation to me for years. I admire the expression offered by variability of speed and depth both instrumentally and vocally but cannot begin to understand that kind of switch on and off one-speed, rapid, tremulous quivering loved by so many highly rated



classical violin players (and Michael Jackson). But, good or bad, I have never heard the technique better illustrated than with an ESS supported system, simply because the life and sustain of each note is so beautifully preserved.

It has also led me to think more deeply about the relationship between chord progressions and melody and enabled me to separate and examine harmony more intimately. It taught me details about tunes I had been trying to understand for years, got me listening to vocal intonation, phrasing and breathing and ultimately left me feeling a greater attachment to the music I listen to. These are personal things to

me that may or may not be important to you, but then the enjoyment of music is a personal thing isn't it?

There may be a better support system out there somewhere, but I certainly haven't heard it. The ESS takes the equipment that it supports to places it hasn't been before and I now think of all the Stillpoints products as truly effective

musical system tools that, together, should really be considered as an audio component rather than as add-on accessories. That is how I have written about them and I now can't imagine

not having them as an integral part of my home listening. As for the ESS rack, its limitations lie within the electronics that sit on it and its function is one of liberation rather than invention. It is certainly not cheap, particularly in its higher spec levels, but when you consider its cost as a percentage of what a top audio system will set you back and compare that with its level of impact, it makes an extremely persuasive case as to its true value. If I had spent the same amount on a new pre-amplifier or CD player and got these improvements I would be absolutely delighted. It opens up new and exciting system building options and those in the market for a serious system upgrade should perhaps

consider Stillpoints before they look at some new electronic box, because what the ESS rack and in fact all of the Stillpoints products are really about are the musicians that make it all happen – and I have never heard them given such an eloquent voice. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

With so many variations available it would be foolish to try and list them all. As for the ESS rack, you can customise one for your particular installation by choosing from three heights and three widths (see text for sizes) and select from three shelf options plus the ability to utilise the Component Stand. I have included some guide prices but for a more detailed breakdown I would suggest that you contact the importer directly for specific details and pricings.

Stillpoints Cones:	£225 (set of 3)
Risers:	£75 (set of 3)
Component Stand	
– three legs:	£575
ESS with four shelves	
(level 1):	£4495
ESS with five shelves	
(level 3) - as tested:	£6595

UK Importer:
Blade Audio
Tel. (44)(0) 01252 737374
Net. www.blade-audio.com

Manufacturer:
Stillpoints Inc.
Net. www.stillpoints.us

Supplementary Benefits...

Support platforms to raise the game of existing racks

by Roy Gregory

CT's experience with the complete suite of Stillpoints products heavily underlines the benefits of a coherent approach that encompasses the system as a whole. Unfortunately, that's not always a practical or affordable proposition. Maybe you have existing racks that match your décor; maybe your system is concealed, maybe

having invested in expensive racks already you don't want to embark on wholesale replacement. When it comes to optimizing an existing set-up, the most practical and effective solution often takes the form of supplementary platforms. Not surprisingly, there are a host of options on offer, with an equally wide range of prices. I've

selected two from the upper reaches of what's available, products which compare in price and aspiration to the likes of the established designs from Vertex AQ and Stillpoints, products that actually offer a no-compromise solution to equipment isolation rather than simply acting as an after-thought or band-aid. ▶

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The Sonority Design Isolation Platforms

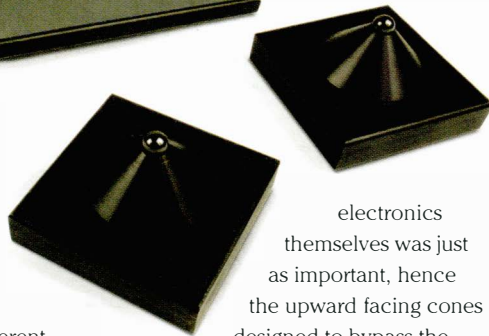
Sonority Design is a young company based in the West Midlands that's quietly causing quite a stir with its range of isolation platforms. Intended originally to improve on the performance of simple MDF or glass shelves, the company now also produce speaker supports intended for use with stands or under floorstanders. Allowing you to elevate an entire system.



Essentially a pair of boards separated by ball bearings captured by shallow cups, don't be fooled by the apparent simplicity of the Sonority platforms. The company was exhaustive (obsessive) in its testing of different materials, dimensions and constructions before finally arriving at the combination you see before you. The boards are actually sheets of phenolic resin matrix, constructed around layers of thin, fibrous material to create a sheet that is rigid and easily machined but also possesses excellent self-damping. Similar to the material employed by Wilson Audio in their high-end speaker cabinets it is an expensive but mechanically impressive option. The base-board is supported on three flat aluminium discs, widely spaced, one to the front, two to the rear. These are mirror imaged by three shallow aluminium cups that match corresponding cups in the top-plate and between which sit three large diameter ceramic ball bearings; both the balls and the surface of the cups meet exacting tolerances to ensure minimum

friction and free rolling action between the two layers of the platform. The top surface is graced by three cones that sit directly over the feet, each tipped by a smaller ceramic ball. So far so good, but what does it all mean?

Whilst Sonority were experimenting with all the various materials and configurations, it rapidly became apparent that the problem of isolating the equipment from the outside world was only part of the story. Drawing internal resonance out of the



electronics themselves was just as important, hence the upward facing cones designed to bypass the supported unit's feet and couple the chassis directly to the dispersive layers of the platform. The upward facing cones are available in two heights as standard (the taller ones add around £15 to the price of a platform) but any height can be ordered. Sonority were keen to keep the



cones as low as possible to minimize the "stack-height" of the platforms, allowing them to fit beneath equipment placed in existing racks and thus keeping them

as versatile as possible. The standard cones are perfectly sufficient to bypass the small feet found on the likes of Naim equipment, and Sonority actually manufacture a dedicated platform specifically to replace the glass shelves (and their mounting hardware) in the Naim Frain. The bigger feet favoured by many American manufacturers necessitate either taller cones – or you can simply remove the feet from the equipment.

Likewise, although the platforms we received for review employ a standard layout, the upward facing cones can be arranged in any pattern the customer requires. This is important as experience with both Vertex and Stillpoints platforms shows that getting the support points in the right places (generally beneath the mains transformer and then under particularly vulnerable circuitry) makes a huge difference to performance. Using the separate tall cones, each on a square of phenolic resin board, placing them between the equipment and the supporting platform quickly demonstrated the benefits. The other major option is what's termed the Ultra support, which employs the same construction and layout as the standard platform, but with phenolic boards 20mm rather than 12mm thick, raising the overall stack-height from 52mm to 68mm.

Sonority are also more than happy to work with customers when it comes to the precise arrangements required for speaker supports and floor interfaces. I received two options, the first being pairs of small plates, separated by the standard cup and ball arrangement, but this time employing the smaller ceramic bearings. The upper and lower faces of each pair are covered in a rough layer to prevent inadvertent slippage – just as well as they are intended

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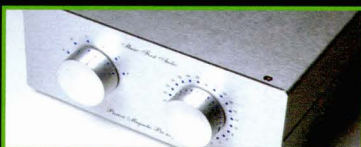
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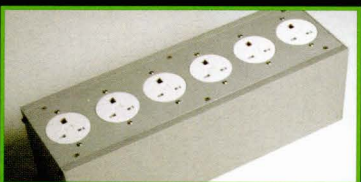
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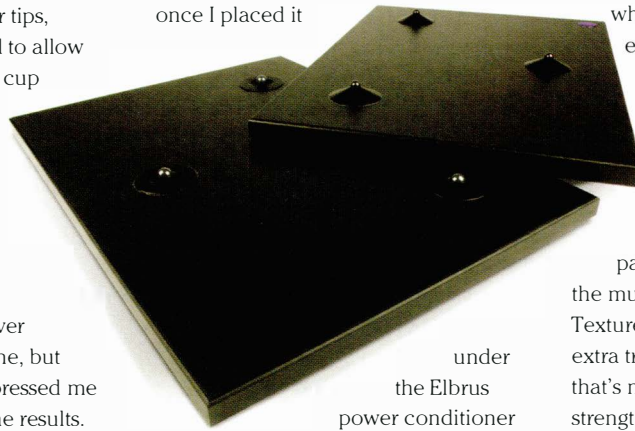
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▶ for use between small speakers and their supporting stands. The second configuration is intended for use under floorstanding speakers and employs a pair of the Ultra level boards. The base-board is supported on three aluminum cones tipped with the small diameter ceramic balls. On these sit steel posts with machined cups in their tips, threaded through the board to allow leveling. Three of the larger cup and ball spacers isolate the top-plate and once again, a rough surface finish is supplied to prevent equipment slippage.

I've used the Sonority platforms under a huge variety of equipment and over a considerable period of time, but the thing that has really impressed me is the utter consistency of the results. Almost irrespective of the equipment in question, you know almost exactly what to expect: a blacker background leading to better separation, crisper dynamics, a more natural sense of pace and flow. Bass is tighter and deeper, although not weightier, leading to a quicker sound with an increased sense of momentum. Employing the Ultra platform does add weight and stability and this is where some will demur. PRATs will point at a perceived loss of drive and speed, but for me the effect is actually completely the opposite. The Ultra platform doesn't add padding; it subtly shifts the centre of each note's gravity, producing greater top to bottom linearity, a more natural sense of tonality and harmonic development. As a result, pace and phrasing is far more natural, taking on an unforced poise and a greater impression of the precise gaps between notes, the care with which musicians place them. Just listen to solo piano and you'll see what I mean. The Ultra platform delivers a larger and more complex instrument, more shape to musical phrases and lines, better definition when it comes to each note's weight and spacing.

But with only one Ultra platform on hand, where to place it? The answer is under the amplifier, or better still, under the power supply if you are using one. The impact under the ECI-5 was far more significant than under the ECC-1 CD player, but even that paled into insignificance once I placed it



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the Elbrus
power conditioner
feeding the two

Electrocompaniet units. In fact, the reason for this is entirely logical. If a large part of what the Sonority platforms are doing is down to absorbing the internal vibration generated within the equipment itself, start by putting your most effective platform under the thing with the biggest transformer in it. I hesitate to guarantee success, but the exceptions will be few and far between.



But the Sonority platforms really come into their own once you put the speaker supports into the system. With speakers suitably elevated the sound steps away from the cabinets, in the process, stepping away from the system as a whole. The music has a far more holistic quality, the intrusion of the system, those effects that let you hear it working, is dramatically reduced. As a

result the music speaks with a clearer, a more immediate and more intimate voice, the performance floating in its own space rather than anchored to the floor between the speakers. It's an effect you'll hear quite vividly on live recordings like the TVZ or Nanci Griffith's *One Fair Summer Evening*, where the recording brings its own environment with it.

A lot of this has to do with the way the Sonority platforms clean up the bass. They put edges on the notes and space them much more clearly, setting out the rhythm and pattern of the music as played by the musicians (rather than the system). Texture is improved as a result of the extra transparency and definition, but that's not really the Sonorities' greatest strength. They'll never match the likes of the High Res Kinibalu or SRA platforms when it comes to harmonic identity and development. Instead they're much more concerned with the structure of the piece and dynamic discrimination. It's a character that in part betrays their origins and association with Naim electronics, but they are far more capable than such a narrow application suggests. Whilst their low stack height and low cones make them well-suited to that application, simply add the taller cones and they'll deliver excellent results under all manner of

equipment, including the likes of the Audio Research CD7, where the Ultra platform succeeded in significantly tightening the bass, instilling a welcome sense of urgency where appropriate. The speaker platforms are particularly effective when used in conjunction with fully floated electronics, making Sonority one of the few ranges that offer a coherent solution to total system support (the other being Stillpoints with the use of component stands under speakers). Many will consider the speaker

▶ platforms something of a luxury. That's a big mistake. After all, you don't see the whole picture until the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle is in place, a maxim that applies with a vengeance whether you are talking about Sonority, Vertex AQ or Stillpoints. It's almost as if the last piece is what finally unlocks the full potential of all the rest. Sonority platforms might look simple but the materials are of excellent quality, exhaustively selected and the elements are meticulously

manufactured. The designs are more carefully considered than they might appear and the company is more than willing to work with customers to extend the performance benefits still further. In common with the other products mentioned above they tackle both sides of the mechanical interference problem, and do so extremely effectively, placing them in a select group capable of really delivering your system's potential.

Prices –

Standard Platform: \$650
Ultra Platform: £995
Pair of Speaker Platforms: \$1125

Manufacturer:
Sonority Design Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1384 79965
Net. www.sonoritydesign.co.uk

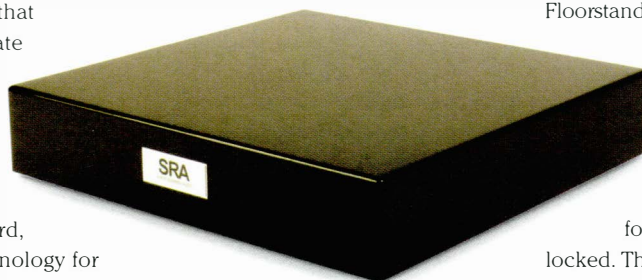
The SRA Ohio XL Plus IsoBase

There's many an audio company that claims a high-technology background behind or "mil-spec" components within its products. Some of these claims withstand scrutiny better than others. Few have a more direct claim than SRA – or Silent Running Audio.

Many of America's brightest and best find their way into the US military/ industrial field. Kevin Tellekamp is an excellent example of just that phenomenon. With a doctorate in Theoretical and Computational Quantum Physics by the age of 21 (not to mention the parallel MSc in Chemistry) he soon found himself at the Navy Yard, working on the quieting technology for the Ohio class SSBNs – yes, you know, the big nuclear missile submarines like the one in *Crimson Tide* – one of America's most sensitive and highest technology programmes. Whilst there he met compatriots who shared his interest in audio – one a specialist in atomic scale materials design, the other in FEA – and SRA was born, applying the materials and theoretical knowledge they'd gained from their work on submarines to isolating and optimizing audio equipment. The result is a range of audio equipment platforms and a rack unique in approach and technology.

Two things make SRA platforms

distinctive: the first is the sophisticated materials and construction; the second the belief that isolation works better if the design and characteristics are matched to the unit being supported. Thus, each and every SRA Ohio platform is hand-built to match the mass, weight distribution, constructional materials and siting specifics (on a rack or the floor, if so



what sort of floor) of the unit it will support. This is a truly bespoke service and like all such tailoring you can take it pretty much as far as you want to, with the Ohio platform itself being available in XL and XL+ and XL+2 versions, differing in the sophistication and materials of their internal construction – with a matching spread of prices!

The Ohio platform itself is constructed from a rigid, lightweight skin, into which is built an internal flexible "raft" that supports customized damping modules configured to match the mass and weight distribution, as well as the resonant character of the

chassis materials and construction of the product to be supported. The end result is a slab anything up to 100mm thick that matches the footprint of the unit it is built to isolate. Surface finish is a flawless lacquer, available in a range of colours (including a bright, bright ASR yellow for Wilson owners) although the review samples arrived in a discrete black, offset by handsome front panel badges. Floorstanding platforms are supplied with tall, steel cones, while those intended for rack mounting (as requested for review) come on inset spiked steel studs. Both arrangements are adjustable for leveling and can be securely locked. They also arrived with a set of steel spike cups designed to protect the supporting surface, although I elected not to use these.

Turn the platforms over and examine the spiking arrangement and you'll see that they are actually flexibly mounted, presumably directly into the "raft", thus creating a suspension system. But there's more here than just that; the damping modules employed apply a compound that actually adapts its durometer and thus its energy dissipation according to temperature. So, when vibrational energy reaches the modules it causes friction at a molecular level, raising the internal temperature and simultaneously ▶

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▶ adapting the compound to deal with the energy present – a really neat trick if you can do it and exactly the kind of thing that comes with the research budgets associated with protecting nuclear deterrents rather than audio signals. Don't you just love it when we develop a genuinely useful spin-off from all the tax dollars and pounds that go into weapons research? But the real question is, given their incredibly impressive pedigree and CV, do the SRA platforms actually deliver their paper potential in practice?

The simple answer to that is "Yes". Used as designed between the ARC CD7, the Gryphon Diablo and the Cambre rack, these are the best sounding platforms here, including not just the ones under test but the Stillpoints component stands used as a control and a host of other feet, spikes and cones I had around for comparison. Which, frankly, given their bespoke nature should really come as no surprise.

More interestingly, let's look specifically at what sets their performance apart. Using the Art Pepper track illustrates their strengths perfectly. The opening bars from the plucked bass are beautifully placed outside the right hand speaker, each note woody and full of texture, the shape of the attack and release wonderfully natural and naturally detailed. But it's when the piano enters that you really realise that there's something special going on. Not only is the instrument big, rich and complex but it's behind and just inside the left hand speaker, defining the opposite side of the acoustic space that embraces both instruments and stands totally independent of the speakers. This is no clipped or curtailed upright, there's no leaning on the percussive leading edge clatter of notes making the piano smaller than it really is. Its notes are

More than just Ohio...

As well as the various Ohio platforms, SRA offer a basic unit, the Tremor Less, and the VR3 series, a more affordable take on the Ohio's bespoke approach. There are also various feet and coupling options as well as a complete rack.

With so many different configurations available, where things get unbelievably complex is when it comes to price.

Outlines we can give, but for precise pricing details you'll need to speak to SRA or their local distributor, define exactly what is required and they'll quote accordingly. But expect an Ohio platform to cost you around £900, an XL will start at about £1050 and the XL Plus, £1150. If those prices are a little rich, the VR3 series starts around £450 while the basic Tremor Less is available from £200.

carefully placed and weighted, locking together perfectly with the deceptive simplicity of the bass line, perfectly positioned in space, perfectly timed, establishing the rhythmic pattern that will hold the whole piece together. Then come the drums, and for once the snare and cymbals are in the same plane and the right place, just as their beat starts to play off the piano/bass

range, micro and macro, passes almost unnoticed simply because its essentially right. You might not fasten on the snare per se, but pick it out and you'll suddenly recognize just how crisp and sudden it sounds. Likewise familiar voices; having spent considerable time with Eleanor McEvoy the night before, both chatting and listening to her live set, putting on Love Must Be Tough was a pretty spooky experience.

Her distinctive voice and accent, even more her particular humour and the almost musical phrasing with which she speaks, were immediately, unmistakably in the room. It's this naturalness, the absence of false emphasis or

exaggeration that really sets the SRA platforms apart from the crowd; the way they allow the musical performance to step away from the speakers and electronics reproducing it.

It's all a question of perspective; the recorded perspective in this instance. By preserving the natural sense of scale and distance, the physical and temporal relationships that are captured in the original recording, the musical relationships are rendered much more accurately and convincingly, more evenly and without undue emphasis. It's this lack of slant or exaggeration that allows the music to flow in such an unforced and relaxed way; dynamic contrasts and musical drama become the province of the musicians rather ▶



fundamental before stretching out to explore the available space they've created. The horns haven't even started and already the track has sucked you in, wrapped itself around you and fastened your attention. From there on in things just get better.

This ability to reproduce the subtle and infectious chemistry that drives a performance is down to the spatial and temporal coherence of the picture painted, the ability the Ohio platforms give the electronics to place notes with the right shape and energy in the right place and at the right time, with no smearing and no hesitation. Dynamic

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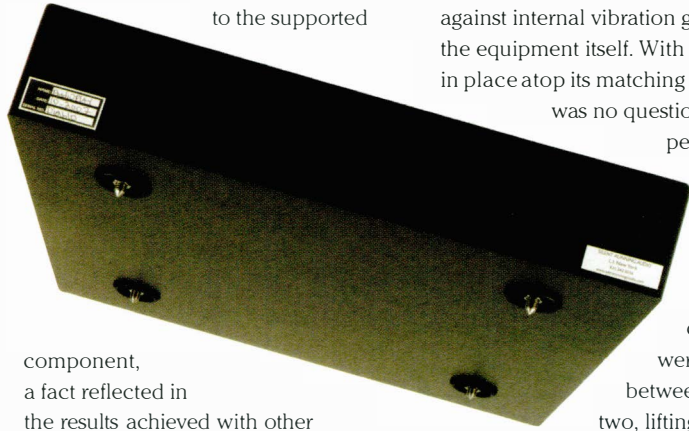
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▶ than the system reproducing them. So the spatial relationship we hear on the Art Pepper track, the way the acoustic is in a completely separate plane to the speakers, dovetails with the independence of instrumental placement, the superb rhythmic integrity. They're all equal parts in a coherent, natural whole.

So in pure performance terms the SRA has few if any challengers – but that's not to say it's perfect. Practically speaking, the considerable depth of the platforms can lead to space and height problems when it comes to their use with existing racks. It's possible to condense them to a total height of 50mm, but even that represents a considerable increase in the bulk of a component. Also, their product specific nature and cost mean that they are much more appropriate in the context of a settled system than in one which is constantly changing and evolving. A substantial part of their performance derives from the physical match to the supported



component, a fact reflected in the results achieved with other equipment used on these platforms. So, used under the CD7 it was built for, the SRA delivers a superb performance, easily outperforming the Stillpoints component stand. But change to the Electrocompaniet ECC 1, a player that's physically and technologically the opposite of the CD7 (it's solid-state and around a third of the weight) and whilst the SRA sounds better than resting the player straight on the rack, both the Stillpoints Component Stand and

Vertex AQ Kinibalu easily outperform it. Repeat the exercise with the Wadia 581 (which is at least closer to the CD7 in weight) and the gap narrows, but it's still there. This isn't really a criticism of the SRA, more a cautionary note to underline the importance of using it as intended – and the limits that places on its versatility. Use it as directed and you'll be blown away; ignore the product specific nature of the beast and you'll simply be wasting your money. Off-setting this to some extent is SRA's willingness to modify an existing platform to accept a different (although not too different!) load. The first such modification comes free, although you'll have to pay the shipping costs to and from SRA; good thing each platform comes in its own wooden crate.

Practicalities aside, my only other criticism is on a conceptual level. By failing to bypass the feet of the supported equipment, coupling its chassis more directly to the platform, SRA limit the Ohio's effectiveness against internal vibration generated by the equipment itself. With the CD7 back in place atop its matching slab, there was no question that the performance was further improved when a Vertex tripod and decouplers were placed between the two, lifting the player off its own rubber feet. A thickness in the upper bass was eradicated, bringing even more natural colour, transparency and better-delineated image height – all without bending the spatial and musical relationships out of shape. Interestingly, experiments with less sophisticated couplers were far less successful, the exaggeration or hype introduced standing out like a moustache on the Mona Lisa. So yes, you might possibly

experiment with the Vertex cones but that's not really the point. What I'd love to see is a dedicated solution from SRA, a step that would make a superb product even better.

The Ohio XL Plus isn't perfect and it isn't for everyone. But if you want to hear what your existing system can really do and you don't want to completely re-house it, then the SRA platforms aren't just the best game in town, they're probably the most effective too. Now look at the prices listed in the sidebar; that's how good these platforms are!

Prices: See Sidebar

UK Distributor:
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Where Next?

That scratches the surface of the physical support and power supply side of systems infrastructure. The products we've looked at are not the only answers, but the guiding principles on which they're based, the strategies that inform their use are universal. These products also seek to extend the limits of the performance envelope, often using complex manufacturing or expensive materials and technology to do so. Applying simpler iterations of the basic concept can reap surprising benefits. In the second installment of this series, I'll look at cable looms from a range of manufacturers, as well as some almost DIY options that also deliver surprising results. That will be in the next issue, closing the loop on system foundations – opening the door for an examination of complete, single source solutions to the problem. ▶+

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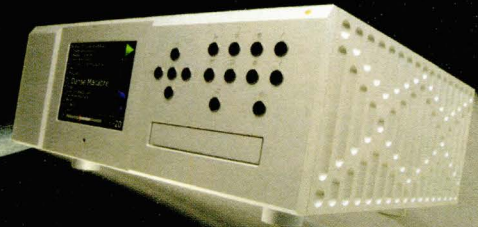
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Hole Shaped World...

Craig Milnes of Wilson Benesch talks Torus with Roy Gregory

The Wilson Benesch Torus marked something of a departure for both the company and sub-woofer design in general. It's striking, drum-shaped structure and full diameter cone make for a dramatic appearance that only hints at just how different this product really is. Rather than trying to explain the thinking and technology behind the innovative unit, why not let the designer deliver that information direct from the horse's mouth, so to speak?

RG. How would you describe the Torus and its operation to somebody who has never seen it before?

CM. Imagine it as a kick drum with a motor either side of the skin. Only the skin isn't flat; it's shaped into a cone to deal with the compressive forces that result from the sealed enclosure. So essentially, think of it as a conventional driver, but with two motors, one either side of the diaphragm. Secondly, the energy generated in those motors travels straight to ground, not through the outer enclosure – a key element of the design and what makes it so different.

RG. So it's almost like an inversion or internalization of the force cancelling rods that people use between pairs of opposed drivers?

CM. It both internalizes it and divorces it from the enclosure.

If you take a conventional driver, it is supported by – it depends on – the external enclosure for its structural system. So, if that structure is intrinsically incapable of dealing with the huge energies that are pumped into it – and the low-frequency information produced by sub-woofers passes through concrete walls with ease – if you have an MDF cabinet trying to deal with that it simply becomes a vibrant part of the whole system. Rather than a solution it simply becomes an extension of the diaphragm itself. It's simply impossible for those materials to deal with that kind of energy.

RG. What is the actual structure of the Torus cabinet?

CM. It's laminated MDF with an internal steel structure to reinforce it.

RG. So, even though you are evacuating most of the mechanical energy directly from the driver, the cabinet itself is still extremely rigid?

CM. That's because it has to constrain the considerable air-pressure behind the diaphragm. It has no other function, but being a cylinder it can handle those stresses relatively easily – although it is still a significant structure in and of itself.

RG. What was the thinking behind, the process that led to the unique structure of the Torus and its use of a

separate controller and amp module?

CM. Well, the concept for the drive unit goes all the way back to the first driver we ever developed, the Tactic, because that was based around the idea of creating an isobaric arrangement. When we tried to extend the bottom end of the ACT One by using a 10" driver, everything that was good about the speaker was immediately destroyed. It wasn't until we employed isobaric loading that the bass had the same speed as the midrange and we got back the things that were good about the system again. So that realization set the company on a course that was different to what everybody else seemed to be doing. We were saying that you couldn't generate low-frequencies that were dynamically matched to the mid-band by using a large diaphragm, because the mechanical and dynamic behaviour of a big diaphragm is simply so different. Of course, as soon as you take that position you define an avenue that as far as a sub-woofer is concerned, is really hard to resolve. You could use a lot of isobaric elements, and I suppose that might be a solution, but it wouldn't be simple and it would be very expensive. With a minimum of eight drivers and the cost, reliability and matching problems that go with that, it's a complete non-starter.

So the solution started with the isobaric configuration, with its two ►

▶ motors, but trying to accelerate and decelerate one diaphragm rather than two was the thinking behind it. At first it appeared totally impossible. If you think about drive units, the biggest problem is the tolerances and consistency of the coil and the very narrow gap in which it operates. So how can you get two coils and two motors in perfect alignment? That was the apparent stumbling block. But in reality, when you machine the parts accurately, alignment becomes axiomatic. It happens by virtue of the way the thing is built...

RG. Around a single axis...

CM. Yes. But it wasn't possible to look into this without significant funding, so we got our second SMART Funding research grant, which allowed around £115,000 worth of funding to develop it.



We had to match that investment, so you're talking about a considerable cost in R&D.

It took three years to really get to grips with the concept of what we were trying to achieve. Once you get started and you consider the accuracy required, that defines other things; so it became obvious for instance that the amplifier should be

external, amongst other things in the design that are also quite different.

RG. Once you are working around a single axis, pretty soon you run out of places to put an amplifier.

CM. Well, there's nowhere to put it if you are working on a circular cabinet. But it was obvious to us anyway that you just do not put an amplifier or electronics in such an aggressive environment.

RG. Do you think that the fact that so many people do exactly that reflects a feeling that because it's "only" bass, quality and subtlety just don't matter?

CM. I think that's probably true in the

case of cinema systems, where people are less inclined to be so obsessed with timbre or quality of reproduction. They're looking for something more visceral. But in actual fact, the dynamics of the Torus are faster and more controlled, so you don't have the same need to blast or reinforce the edge that you're looking

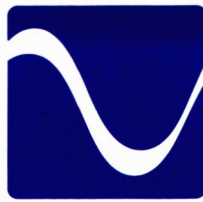
for. It's easier to hear.

RG. So, you are getting quality of another kind, because of the speed of the driver? It's offering texture and micro-dynamic detail that simply escapes more conventional systems...

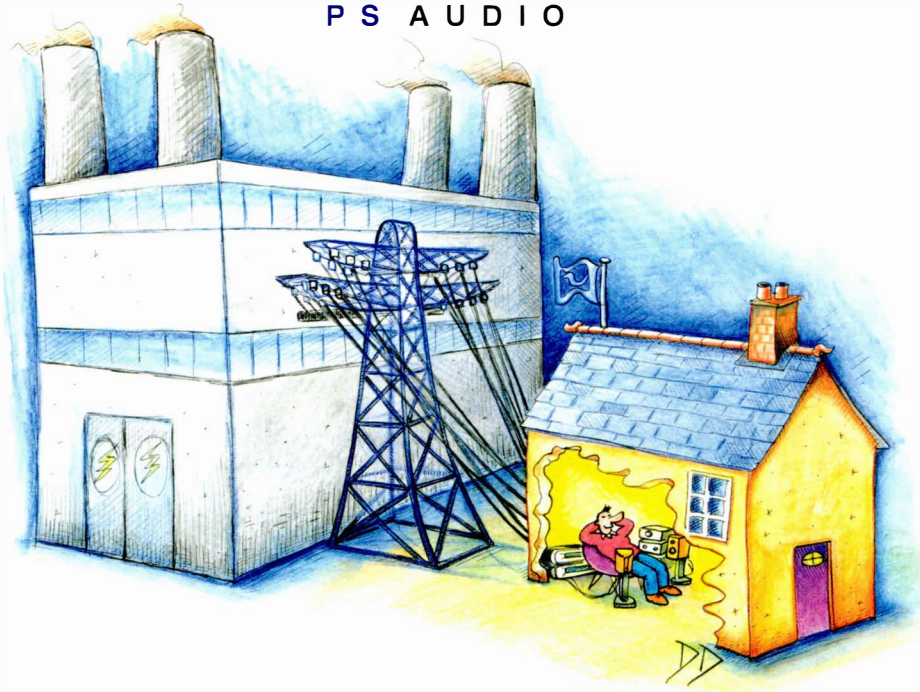
CM. That's been the biggest learning curve; the things that have happened with this product after its development. We've found a whole range of new people interested in its performance possibilities; people with electrostatics for instance – or horns – I would say are a major part of the customer base that's invested in this product, because of their need for speed, their desire to have something extremely fast and three dimensional to match their loudspeakers. Conventional subwoofers actually undermine and destroy the quality that attracted them to their loudspeakers in the first place. That's the kind of customer that we really didn't anticipate.

RG. What has the Torus taught you as a speaker designer?

CM. Well it gave birth to the Trinity, a speaker with extension way out beyond 20kHz – to around 100kHz in fact. It defined the idea that the way forward for our company wasn't to just design bigger and more expensive loudspeakers, but to produce products that could add to existing systems, ours or other peoples', and make quite a considerable difference. The Torus is not an inexpensive product, but in a realm where loudspeaker prices reach hundreds of thousands of pounds and you are offering something that's never been



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► achieved before, it's also far from expensive.

With the Torus, it's not the frequencies it produces but the way it affects the main loudspeakers that is the most enchanting thing about the design. You hear the chest and body of the singer, rather than just the voice. It's the way it creates a far more physical and three-dimensional soundstage.

RG. The way it fleshes out the midrange?

CM. Everything is just so much more natural; exactly what high-end audio should be about – the illusion of recreating the sound from the original event.

RG. When you move to a much wider bandwidth system, as long as it's working then one of the things that always strikes me is how much more musically coherent it is in terms of the point and pace at which discrete events occur.

CM. Yes, the Trinity is all about point-source information. When we sell speakers to people we tell them that all our models sound the same – except for the bass. It's the bass that takes the most effort and is most difficult to extend and improve. We love the (simple, two-way) Arc, and in a design like that you get a lot of music for your money. But

for a company that's about creating sound-scapes and enhancing the sense of "being there", adding the Torus can create exceptional, spatial reproduction and some of the most realistic sound you'll ever hear – without making you change your speakers or power amp.

RG. Is there a line-level output from the Torus controller, allowing you to

below that, allowing you to drive the two modes that most rooms exhibit. It makes them more versatile in difficult situations.

RG. Is there a high-pass output from the controller?

CM. No. You always run the main speakers full-range and roll the Torus up underneath them. I think it's

now generally accepted that that gives the best results. If you look at the Trinity, there's no crossover on its main driver and so no phase shift, making it much easier to achieve the top-to-bottom coherence we were talking about earlier, making the results that much more dramatic. Likewise, the Sphere (super-tweeter). The Trinity is a design that demonstrates our views on wide-bandwidth, the way it improves dynamics and speed.



use a different amp for instance?

CM. No. No there isn't. There are line and high-level inputs but no line-output. In terms of actual control, it allows you to set the Torus's upper roll-off between 20Hz and 120Hz, and its lower roll-off below 35Hz in 5Hz increments. This actually allows you to use a pair of Torus either as a two stereo units, or to stack their outputs, running one from say, 45Hz down to 29Hz, and then the other

RG. How critical is the Torus of precise positioning?

CM. It is quite remarkable how sensitive it is to position – but that doesn't mean that it's hard to place. The best position is always centrally between the speakers and the same distance as they are from the listener. Move it back even a couple of feet and the effect on coherence is immediately obvious. ➤

The Wilson Benesch Trinity/Torus Loudspeaker System

by Roy Gregory

A few issues ago I looked at (and was seriously impressed by) the Wilson Duette/Watchdog combination, a “double the price – more than double the performance” outgrowth from the original two-way stand-mounted design. Now comes the Wilson Benesch Trinity/Torus system, a three-box solution which, quite literally, extends the concept even further.

But before getting into the specifics, let’s just pause for a second and clarify what it is we’re dealing with here.

Traditionally, sub/sat systems that combine a pair of small satellite speakers with a separate sub-woofer to augment their limited low-frequency output, have been sold on the basis of their lower domestic or visual impact when compared to conventional floorstanders of equivalent bandwidth. It’s a marketing strategy that’s been taken to ever-greater extremes by the A/V crowd, with the satellites decreasing in size as they increase in numbers, and “site anywhere” subs getting smaller too. Of course, any sub/sat set up

enjoys the benefits of reduced size, but that’s not what drives systems like the Trinity/Torus combination. This is a pure performance based approach that seeks to outperform more conventional designs at similar (and

or balance into account. The same is true of the low-frequencies, where separating them means that approaches that would be difficult or impossible to implement in a conventional floorstanding design become possible – certainly true in the case of the Torus. Then there’s the ability to optimize placement of the sub(s) as well as build the complete system in a series of bite-sized chunks rather than as a one-time capital purchase. This combination of practicality with the ability to functionally specialize each element is what gives these systems their potential performance edge – as long as the designer gets it right.

Time then to look at the specifics. I’ve dealt with the unique design of the Torus in the preceding interview with its designer Craig Milnes, so let’s concentrate on the Trinity. Essentially a small two-way design incorporating a hemispherical gold-plated ceramic super-tweeter it could easily be mistaken for the company’s similarly sized (but far more affordable) Arc. But the Trinity is a far more ambitious design, developed specifically in response to the performance gains offered by the Torus. As we have frequently observed (and demonstrated) whilst adding a sub-woofer to almost any system will offer sonic advantages, to really exploit the benefits you need to extend the bandwidth at the opposite extreme as well, adding high and low-frequencies in balance. The sheer sonic quality of the Torus makes this even more apparent; hence the search for a ►



in some cases much higher) prices, by exploiting the benefits that come with the separation of their cabinets. So, a speaker like the

Trinity can be optimized for its specific frequency range, exploiting the stiffness of its small cabinet and the choice of materials that opens up. It can also be placed to best advantage, without having to take bass nodes

▶ satellite which could match the new sub-woofer for clarity and transparency as well as extension. So, whilst the Trinity is superficially similar to the Arc, it represents a far more sophisticated realization of that basic design concept.

Let's start with the cabinet. This is a complex, composite structure created from a range of different materials. Mechanically speaking, the key elements are the side cheeks that flank the baffle. Profiled aluminium extrusions, their smooth exterior curve helps minimize diffractive effects, but internally they are shaped to lock the various cabinet elements together. They are joined at the front by a 4mm steel plate that engages firmly with their extruded grooves. This is joined with a visco-elastic peripheral gasket to a precision milled 10mm aluminium plate that forms the front of the baffle and allows the three drivers to be positioned as close together as possible. The side and rear walls are constructed as a single unit from Wilson-Benesch A.C.T (Advanced Composite Technology), a carbon/glass sandwich with a high compression core. The curved walls and concave rear create an incredibly stiff but well damped structure, while the top and base plates are constructed from Perspex bonded to steel sheets. Extrusions aside, all machining and the extremely sophisticated composite construction is carried out in-house, ensuring consistent tolerances and performance.

Having taken all that trouble to create a carefully controlled, non-resonant structure for the cabinet,

it's not surprising that the care and attention to detail extends to the fixing of the drivers. Rather than simply bolting them into place, which creates pressure points and thus resonant nodes within their structure, Wilson-Benesch employ steel/aluminium plates to clamp the drivers in place, helping to spread the fixing load more evenly. A composite coupler and U.D. carbon-fibre tube

brace the rear of the bass/mid driver to the back of the cabinet, terminated by the large steel boss that carries the serial number and model designation. The dedicated stand bolts directly to the steel bass plate of the speaker,

allowing the use of twin, downward firing reflex ports – something of a W-B trademark.

The two-part aluminium column is inherently self-damping and also houses the crossover, removing it from the mechanically hostile environment within the cabinet itself. The W-B designed bi-wiring terminals are located at the base of the pillar, and will accept 4mm plugs, spades or bare-wire.

The stand is supported on three sharp steel spikes, the rear two being adjustable from above and lockable using

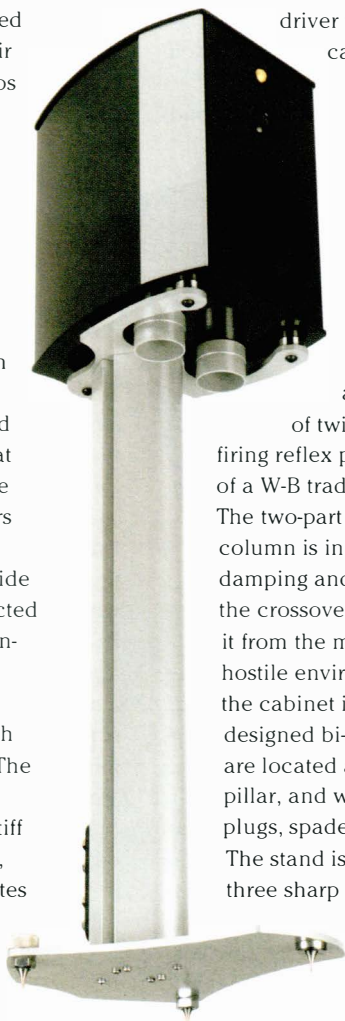
substantial nuts below the thick steel base-plate. You even get a spanner to fit both these and the terminals.

Nor are the drivers familiar, off-the-shelf units drawn from the usual suspects. Key Wilson-Benesch design

goals are wide-bandwidth and consistent phase response, which has led them to adopt directly connected midrange drivers, running full-range. The smooth mechanical roll-offs such an approach demands pretty much necessitate the creation of dedicated drivers and the Trinity's bass-mid unit is a prime example. Dubbed the W.B.One (Wide Bandwidth One) this uses a woven polymer cone (based on Isotactic Polypropylene) and a vented motor assembly, all built in-house. The tweeter is the same modified Scanspeak unit used in all the other W-B speakers, retained because Craig Milnes feels that its performance advantages (especially when it comes to interfacing with the bass/mid driver with a simple, first-order crossover) outweigh those delivered by more recent, wider bandwidth designs. Instead, he employs the increasingly common Murata super tweeter, dubbed The Sphere in W-B parlance.

Put all this together and you have a conceptually simple speaker – electrically speaking it's about as simple as it can be – but executed with extraordinary precision and the application of considerable materials technology. But what I find really interesting is the parallels that exist between the Trinity/Torus system, the Wilson set-up and another speaker that's impressed me recently – the Reference 3A Grand Veena.

The Duetto/Trinity comparison is fairly obvious: both are high-quality standmounts with dedicated supports and the option to add a sub-woofer (extending both their bandwidth and ambition). But despite clear differences in the design of those sub-woofers, both are used in conjunction with main speakers run full-range, their respective controllers simply rolling the low-frequencies in underneath. Likewise, both encompass (even encourage) the use of a second sub-woofer for ▶



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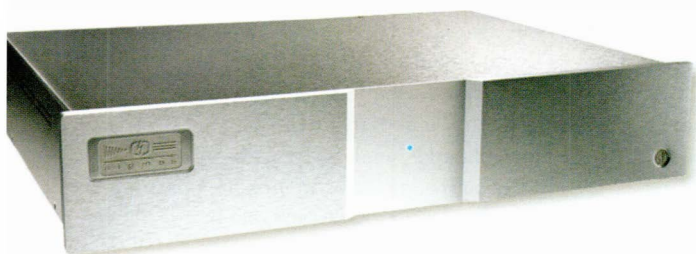
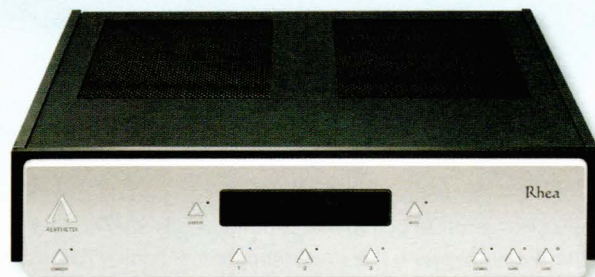
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▶ ultimate performance. But where the WatchDog is a passive design demanding the user to provide amplification (which does allow complete electronic continuity across the full bandwidth), the Torus controller has inbuilt amplification that can be run from high or low-level inputs. Both units benefit from placing their electronic elements external to the

balance considerably. Excellent with basic electronics, they flourish and grow with better source and amplification components, turning traditional notions of system priorities on their head.

Do I see a theme developing here? Certainly there's an emerging



sub-woofer cabinet proper, and given the clear audible benefits of running the WatchDog with the same amp that drives the main speakers it would be nice if the Torus could offer the same facility – especially as the controller already incorporates a (currently unfiltered) low-level output.

Similarities between the Trinity/Torus system and the Grand Veena might be less obvious but if anything are even closer: Both systems employ a direct connected, in-house midrange driver; Each use a specifically modified version of the same Scan tweeter with a first-order crossover; Both employ a Murata super-tweeter and both add extra bass to the mix to extend the system bandwidth around the clarity of that filterless mid-band.

What's more, all these speakers are astonishingly comfortable with even quite modest amplification, a factor that changes the budget

appreciation of the importance of extended bandwidth coupled to good phase and dynamic coherence. Having said that, each of these speakers is also quite distinctive, and the Trinity/Torus system is no exception. Run both as a 2.0 and a 2.1 set-up, they were used with a variety of electronics, including VAS and Emille valve amps, the Belles MB200 mono-blocs, Hovland RADIA and also an Audionet Amp V, a five-channel unit supplied (and distributed) by



Wilson-Benesch, allowing me to bi-amp the Trinities to great effect. Although the intrinsic adjustability of the Torus means that it has the same go-anywhere versatility that has made the Landrover a worldwide success, in practice it performs best placed between the speakers and with its "hub" the same distance from the listening position, significantly easing integration. In my dedicated listening space (dedicated in the sense that hi-fi sensibilities trump all others) that presented no problem. In less forgiving environments a less obtrusive placement is possible, while using paired subs would certainly open the possibility of less symmetrical arrangements configured to exploit the room modes. With the sub between the speakers, set-up is extremely simple; the further it (or they) strays from that position, the harder you are going to have to work. In that respect the Torus can't rewrite the laws of sub-physics – performance will be defined by the quality of the set up and integration.

Faced with any sub-woofer it's awfully tempting to reach for the biggest, baddest discs you possess. But in fact, if you really want to understand what it is that subs bring to the musical party then what you really need is small-scale works, just a voice and a few acoustic instruments. Conversely, for a small speaker to work effectively it has to possess sufficient weight and scale to satisfy with larger works, and if the Trinity is to serve as an effective stepping-stone to a full three or four box speaker system, then that's where we need to start.

Playing everything from Elgar to Rimsky-Korsakov, the Trinities faired surprisingly well on even the most bombastic works. Even the explosive pyrotechnics of the shipwreck from the Reiner *Scheherezade* ▶

► were delivered with an enthusiasm that belies the size of the tiny cabinets, clarity, speed and positional precision off-setting the lack of real low-frequency power, the sheer speed of the dynamic response making up for a lack of genuine heft. Of course, the results depend on the matching amplifier, as with any small speaker, and here the benefits of bi-amping the Trinities with the modestly priced

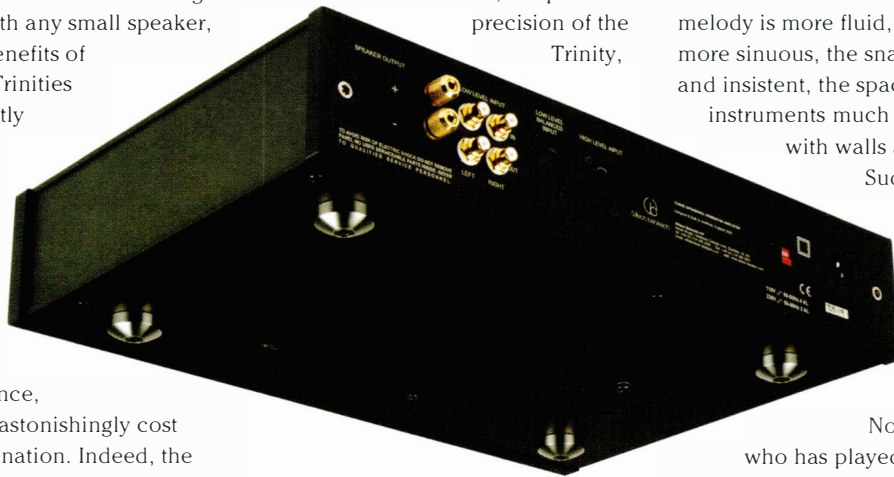
Audionet really came into their own, maximizing the crisp dynamics and surprising sense of substance,

making this an astonishingly cost effective combination. Indeed, the extending, grumbling bass passage that opens the Gorecki *3rd Symphony* showed a measured sense of swelling power, of even ebb and flow that escapes many a larger speaker, while the immediacy of a small-scale track like Bill Maloney's 'Solar System' has a tactile intimacy and lucid clarity that talks straight to the listener.

Nonetheless, moving up to the RADIA or Belles mono-blocs produced a greater sense of foundation and richer tonal balance, a deeper, more woody tone from the bowed basses in the Gorecki, more chest from Bill, a more emphatic thwack from the snare – at a not inconsiderable increase in price, it has to be said.

Even so, the volume and dimensionality that these amps bring to images, the warmth and easy pace they deliver, really brings a track like 'Solar System' right into the room. Maloney's guitar becomes a living, vibrant thing, its harmonic signature comprised of so much more than just the strings, while the

space around and behind him goes a long way to conjuring a believable sense of presence (and not a little personality). As stepping stones go, the Audionet provides a pretty firm footing, but with a speaker that possesses the lucid clarity and resolution, the poise and precision of the Trinity,



the added scale and more sophisticated tonality delivered by bigger amps is readily apparent, actually making the satellites an even more credible standalone option. So, perhaps you don't need a Torus at all? Spend the money on a bigger, better amp and you'll be laughing? Errr... not exactly; in fact, not even close...

Even in their richer, warmer, more expansive mode with the bigger amps, adding the Torus to the mix



produces a far from subtle increase in quality and performance. For the first minute of the Bill Maloney track there are no bass fundamentals to speak of, just acoustic guitar, voice and snare. Yet, adding the Torus transforms the timing and integration of the instruments. The picked melody is more fluid, quicker and more sinuous, the snare more snappy and insistent, the space around the instruments much more apparent, with walls and a floor.

Suddenly the music takes on a feeling of underlying urgency that dovetails perfectly with the lyrics.

Now, anybody who has played with subs before should be far from surprised by this – at least if they got a sub to work properly. Time and again people expect a sub to add more whereas what it actually does is deliver more, a nice but crucial difference. So, if we look at the Bill Maloney track, what we're hearing from the increased bandwidth is a greater sense of spatial and temporal accuracy; things are happening when and where they should. Actually, to some extent they always were, it's just that now you can hear that much more clearly.

So yes, when you play that long, meandering opening passage from the Gorecki you'll hear more weight and texture from the basses, the floor and walls of the auditorium, but it's the added sense of shape, direction and purpose that's more important, the dark, brooding tension that hangs behind the music. Without it the opening bars quickly drag, the attention wanders, the music meanders... Add the sub and you'll be riveted to your seat, the brooding menace of the

► performance commanding your attention, gripping you deep inside. Yes, you get more bass – but it's what the system does with it (or what it allows the system to do) that's more important than the simply presence of quantity.

Which brings us naturally to the question of quality.

The Torus goes very, very deep – especially for a unit that's so compact (I'm not sure any sub can really claim the label "elegant" but the Wilson Benesch gets way closer than most) but what's really impressive is the transparency, harmonic detail and texture of the notes it produces.

The familiar, deep, pellucid drops of the bass riff that opens the Cure's magnum opus *Faith*, have a shape and attack that I've heard only rarely indeed, and then from

speaker systems at many times the price of the Trinity and Torus. And I include the Trinity advisedly; when so much of the melody is both carried and driven by the bass guitar,

pitch and placement of the notes becomes super critical, a quality that comes from the top-end extension provided by the sphere, as well as the phase coherence of the system as a whole. Faith can be sluggish, even turgid on way too many systems, yet there's no ignoring the driving urgency and frenetic insistence of a track like 'Primary' – just

so long as you get the bass right. Here, those rapid, chopped chords, played low on the neck have a tangible solidity and purpose, propelling the track to its inevitable, off-beat, off-key, off-kilter finale. At no point across the album do proceeds lag. The space that envelops 'Other Voices', the multi-textured layers of 'Faith' itself, the craft that's gone into Mike Hedges' production, all are effortlessly unraveled, to the benefit of these tight and carefully woven songs. Just listen to the spatial array created by the drum pattern that opens 'All Cats Are Grey' and you'll hear exactly what I mean.

I've always been aware of it, always loved its ability to catch the attention. What I've never been aware of before is the way it evolves throughout this haunting track – a bit like hearing McCoy Tyner's piano artistry emerging from 'My Favorite Things' for the first time, something the Trinity and Torus also unravel with consummate ease (and thanks DDD, the mono pressing is fantastic!).

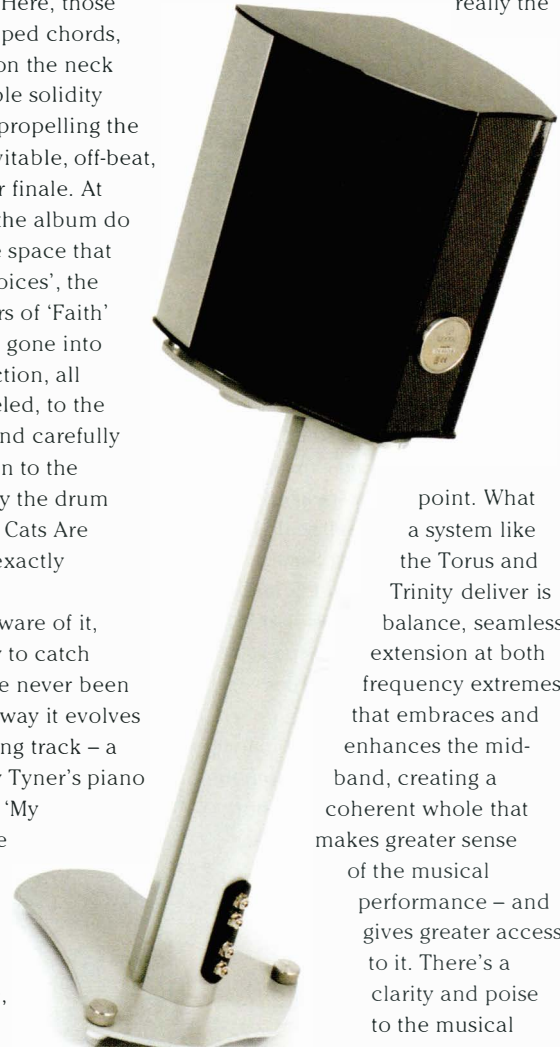
Moving to the other end of the scale and that storm sequence from *Scheherazade*, the Torus adds scale, foundation but most importantly of all, a feeling of majestic inevitability to proceedings.

There's that same ease, but this time hitched to a feeling of unbridled power; you can almost picture the sea smashing against the huge rock, creating a dramatic picture and an equally dramatic contrast with the delicacy and tranquility of the closing violin part.

It's hard to review a sub-woofer based system without discussing even focusing on the bass, but that's not really the

point. What a system like the Torus and Trinity deliver is balance, seamless extension at both frequency extremes that embraces and enhances the mid-band, creating a coherent whole that makes greater sense of the musical performance – and gives greater access to it. There's a clarity and poise to the musical proceedings that makes the structure

– the notes, the phrases, the parts – easier to hear, easier to slot together. It's easier to hear the contribution of each player, easier to separate each voice and instrument. All of which ►



► is nice to have, I'm sure you'll agree – especially when you consider the jumbled and confused tumble of sound that most hi-fi systems generate when compared to live music. But the easiest thing of all with the Trinity and Torus, is understanding the intent behind the music and why whoever wrote it bothered in the first place. The vivid, almost pictorial impressions created by *Scheherazade* are no accident. Nor are the stark drama and contrast created by the alchemy of Beethoven and Heifetz as the latter blazes



through the *Kreutzer sonata*, his pauses and stately grace in the slower passages bringing a subterranean tension as he coils himself for the next blindingly fast flight, his trajectory marked by the spray of notes scattered in his wake. The solid, funky, dirty groove of 'Las Cuevas De Mario' leave you in no doubt that eggs is definitely eggs, while the monochromatic angst of Robert Smith's vocal transports you back to the depressed and decaying terrain of early 80's Britain and the Thatcher years; 'Tramp The Earth Down' indeed.

Music works on many levels: the emotional, the spiritual, the

intellectual, the facile. It matters not why we listen, the Tourists enjoying exactly the same status as Telemann or Tchaikovsky. What matters is that we receive the message we seek, the reward within. We might want Marco Pierre White, we might want classic Roux brothers cuisine – or we might want candy-floss; sometimes all we want is a bit of fluff. And my point is? A wide bandwidth, phase coherent, high-resolution and dynamically coherent system should be able to deliver without fear or favour. The Trinity/Torus set-up does exactly that. It's a select group of speakers that provide such access, such musical credibility and do so with so little residual character. Like the Duette and WatchDog the Wilson-Benesch combination gives up ultimate transparency and textural resolution to the biggest and best. But at the price being asked that's a trifling concern which need only bother those with a burning need to drop another 20 or 30 grand – and that's just on the speakers. Because in some ways the best thing about the Trinity and Torus isn't how good they sound with the best possible ancillaries (and they are well worthy of the best); no, the best thing about them is just how well they work in isolation, how willingly they work with amps that shouldn't really be allowed anywhere near speakers of this quality. This is one sub/sat system that really does deliver on the promise, both in terms of superb sonic results and bite-sized financial practicality. Full-range, effortlessly engaging, addictively entertaining, musically sophisticated, unflappably capable but still prepared to let its hair down, at around £13K plus an amp the Wilson-Benesch Trinity and Torus have set the bar awfully high

for speaker systems confined to just a pair of boxes. Forget domestic acceptability, these are speakers you buy for their performance – everything else is just icing on the cake!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Trinity Loudspeaker

Type:	Twin reflex loaded loudspeaker with integral super-tweeter and stand
Driver Complement:	1x 170mm W.B. One MF 1x 25mm coated silk HF 1 x sphere gold plated ceramic UHF
Bandwidth:	46Hz – 80 kHz ± 2db
Sensitivity:	89dB
Impedance:	6 Ohms nominal 4 Ohms minimum
Crossover Frequency:	5 kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	235 x 1080 x 300mm
Weight:	16 kg ea.
Finishes:	Too many options to list, with bespoke finishes also available
Price:	from £4,700

Torus Bass Generator

Type:	Sub-bass speaker with separate amp and controller
Driver Complement:	18" Integral Unit
Bandwidth:	20 – 120 kHz ± 6db
Amplifier:	200 Watts
Dimensions:	450mm diam. 350 mm high
Weight:	15 kg
Finishes:	Black
Prices –	
Torus Speaker:	£3,000
Control Amp:	£2,240

Manufacturer:

Wilson Benesch Ltd
Tel. 01142 852656
Net. www.wilson-benesch.com

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The conrad-johnson ET2 Pre-amplifier and LP66S Power Amp

by Alan Sircom

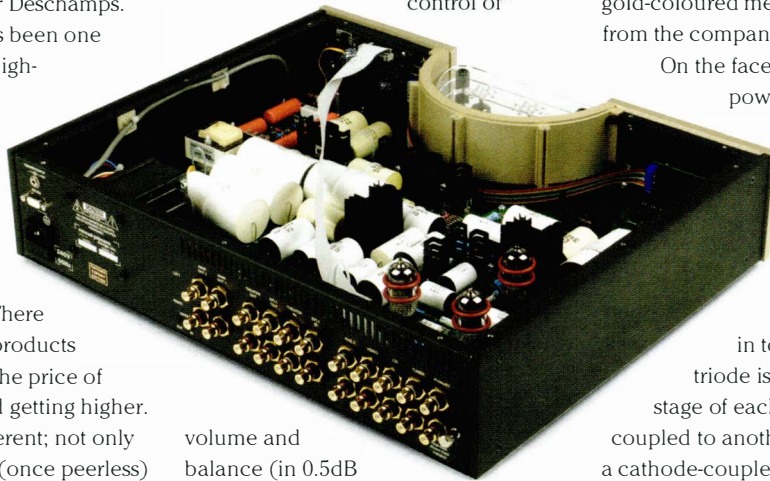
At one point I wondered whether this should be a pre-amp review, relegating the power amp to a supporting role. That reflects the sheer quality of the ET2, a classic, full facilities pre-amp of the kind that c-j built so much of their reputation on. The fact that in the end we gave the LP66S equal billing reflects the fact that, in practice, these two are very much a team; every Zidane needs his Didier Deschamps.

Conrad-johnson has been one of the front-runners in high-end amplification for decades, but of late it has lost some ground, especially when its closest rival – Audio Research – has been really delivering the goods in recent years. There were always excellent products in the c-j portfolio, but the price of admission was high and getting higher. The ET2 pre-amp is different; not only does it re-establish c-j's (once peerless) reputation as the benchmark for high-end entry when it comes to valve pre-amps, it has all the elements that first made c-j so attractive to audiophiles (that sensuous, sonorous, rich and detailed sound), but married to more modern sensibilities (cleaner, clearer, a remote control and a performance that fits more snugly into 21st Century audiophilia).

Common to most c-j pre-amps (whether line or phono, valve or solid-state) it's a zero-feedback design. Its line-stage uses a high current 8080 valve per channel with a direct-

coupled buffer stage to deliver low output impedance, and that's pretty much it. This simplicity means that it leaves little musical imprint on the sound, but it also means – again like most c-j pre-amps – that it inverts absolute phase.

The control part of the ET2 is more high-tech than the amplifier stages, if only to allow for the precise remote control of

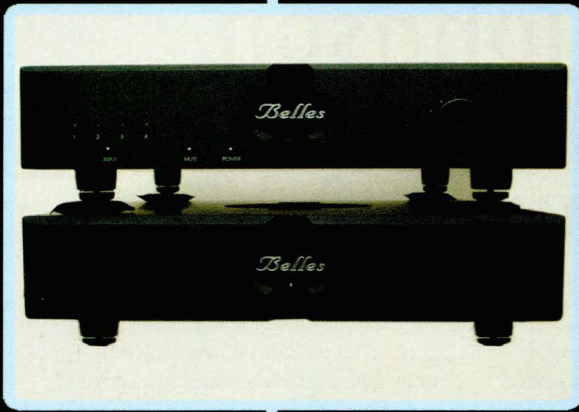


volume and balance (in 0.5dB steps) as well as the switching functions. There are seven line-inputs and an optional phono-stage. Actually, there are two optional phono-stages – one for high and one for low gain – but Audiofreaks most commonly fits the high-gain (>1mV input sensitivity) version. This can be factory fitted or added later at a cost of £950. Like the line-level amplifier, the optional modules are zero-feedback designs with triode amplifier stages for voltage gain, but add passive RIAA equalisation. Aside from the line and phono-stages, there's also a Theater

Loop, which locks the pre-amp into unity gain and allows your hi-fi system to act as the front channels in a home cinema system. In keeping with other c-j designs, the valves are nestled in a central alcove and protected by Perspex slats. The remote control, is a thin, bluff plastic handset, which is more ergonomically valid, but nowhere near as impressive as the half-brick of gold-coloured metal I'm used to getting from the company.

On the face of things, the LP66S power amp is a natural partner for the ET2, if only because both cost £3,500. It's a simple 60 Watt per channel device, with just seven valves in total. A 6922 double triode is used in the input stage of each channel, direct coupled to another 6922 acting as a cathode-coupled phase inverter. The output stage comprises a pair of push-pull 6550s per channel. Sensibly, limited negative feedback is used to reduce distortion and boost the damping factor. Biasing uses c-j's standard, simple LED system, while plate fuses protect the circuitry against tube failure. Both products tick all the audiophile boxes when it comes to internal components, with audio circuits and their related power supplies sporting precision metal film resistors and polypropylene capacitors, with carefully selected internal wiring and connectors. Famously, ▶

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► Queen's early album covers proudly proclaimed "No Synthesisers were used on this Album" – and until the band capitulated in the early 1980s, the No Synthesisers... stance was almost a mantra. C-J has a similar mantra – "No electrolytic capacitors were used in the audio circuits or in the related power supplies." OK, it's not as pithy as Queen's proclamation, but it has the same air of zero tolerance about it. Proprietary wide-bandwidth output transformers seal the deal.

As I've already stated, this combo makes a powerful statement. And it's a two-fold one. First it shows what c-j can do, especially in the pre-amplifier stage. The ET2 sounds not far off the performance of a CT5; like four-fifths of the performance for about half the money – and the CT5 is one of the jewels in the c-j crown. The LP66S is similarly excellent, but there's still a jump in transparency and dynamic range between this and the LP70S. The deal is, you'd expect there to be a jump in performance between the two; what's surprising is how small the jump is between the ET2 and CT5.

Perhaps more importantly though, this duo shows just how good American iron can be. Plus isn't xenophobic and where a product springs from is immaterial, but recently the valvophile market has been swamped by cheap products – and some, it must be said, have been very good, acting as a wake-up call for manufacturers the world over. Some were – are – awful, but were praised (elsewhere) simply because they had valves and were

cheap. This pairing shows that c-j has not been slumbering; these products have both risen above their price peers and are (just about) affordable enough to show what you'll be missing if you buy the cheap stuff.

So what exactly will you be missing?



First impressions of the c-j pair are of a sumptuous dynamic range, something that teases out the inner detail of any good recording in a nanosecond, and can even work some kind of magic on lesser fare. No, they cannot save dynamically strangled music, but if the recording has even the slightest dynamic range on it, the ET2 and LP66S will bring it to the fore. There's something else that hits you almost instantly; lyrical beauty. This articulate

and enjoyable sound gets behind the lyrics and forces you in there. Play something breathy and ethereal (like Feist for example) and those seductive tones flow over you with a touch of magic. The same happens – to a lesser extent – with any instrument, but it's the well-recorded almost unaccompanied voice that has some near atavistic force behind it.

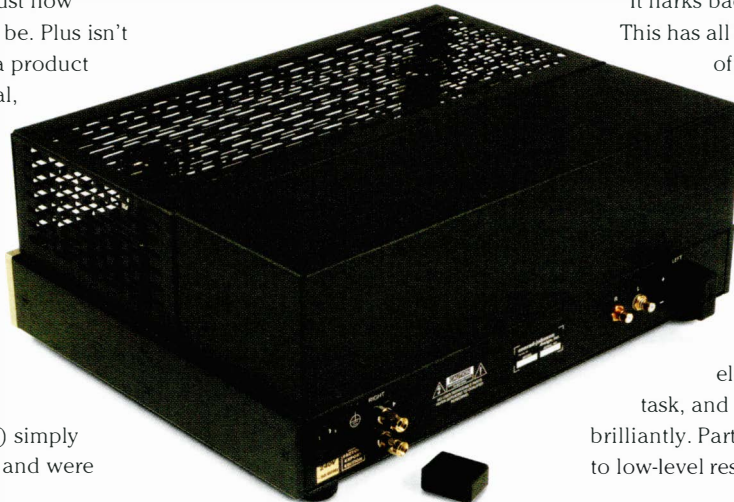
Tonally, the sound is chocolaty rich, but difficult to pin down. It's certainly not thick in the mid-band or rolled off at the top. There's no obvious bloom and it's never, ever sickly sweet; just rich – like really expensive, dark chocolate. All of this might suggest it's 'rich and a bit...' something negative, but the downside seems never to appear. It isn't particularly slow or flat sounding. In fairness, this is not the first choice for speed metal fans... but if you want to wig out to most other musical styles, this amp certainly doesn't get in the way. There's just something – something rich – about the sound that is both enjoyable and satisfying. It's as if someone invented cholesterol-reducing eggs benedict; all of the pleasure, none of the downsides.

It harks back to Golden Age c-j.

This has all the seductive charms of their great pre/power

combos of yore, but none of the rose-tinted viewpoint. Which makes it ideal for 21st Century audiophiles. We want great accuracy, great insight and all the smoothness and elegance. This is a hard

task, and this duo has cracked it brilliantly. Part of that comes down to low-level resolution; you find



▶ yourself listening deeper into the mix and pulling out details that would be lost on lesser amps. Like for example where Buddy Whittington uses a Carman Ghia amp or where he plays through a MAZ 38 on his eponymous album; the two valve amps sound very similar (both are from the same company), but one (the Ghia) sounds more 'creamy' while the other sounds more 'gutsy'.

This is very, very hard to spot – probably something only those with a penchant for the genre, the instrument and the player might hear. But here it's as clear as day, and yet this clarity does not rob the music of its entertainment value; it's still good blues with dreadful lyrics.

We haven't even touched on imagery yet, in part because the conrad-johnson products do such a sublime job with everything else and it's hard to stretch the superlatives to yet another aspect of performance. But the c-j duo does not disappoint here, either. The stage is neatly presented, slightly forward and wide of the speakers, but what is exceptionally fine at the price is the sense of height; you feel as if you are on a level with the second row of the orchestra, with the first strings slightly below you and the percussion slightly above; all of which seems absolutely correct and uncannily like sitting in an auditorium. Instruments and voices have a good sense of solidity and presence to them, but this is the one aspect where the limits of the LP66S begin to appear. There's a thin line between too much and too little image solidity; too much and even ballet music sounds bolted down, too little and Shostakovich sounds like the music from *Seven Brides*

for *Seven Brothers*. Here, while the sound is 'solid', it's not 'rooted', but then you won't find 'rooted' for less money.

So, should CT5 owners start feeling sorry for themselves? Not really, and this is the reason why



this is not simply a pre-amplifier review. The ET2 and LP66S work brilliantly together and make you think you are listening to nigh on twelve grand's worth of audiophile equipment, when in fact you are hearing what £7,000 can do. And yes, a lot of that comes down to the pre-amp. But partner the ET2 with an LP70S or beyond and you'll miss the inner details and crystal-like clarity that only a CT5 or better can reproduce. That tired boxing analogy of 'fighting above its weight' fits perfectly here; a middleweight boxer might be so powerful against his peers that he should fight as a light-heavyweight, but in reality, put him in that light-heavyweight ring and he'll get hurt. No-one's getting hurt here, but the ET2 should be considered among the best in its class, not the class above. And, in that context, it is perfectly partnered by the LP66S, which is also among the best in its class; it just doesn't have ideas above its station.

What we have here is an example of c-j's innate understanding and

experience in balancing the virtues of their products, getting the quality where it matters. These are fantastic products that work beautifully together, providing a rich, natural sound that should satisfy for decades. There's a real touch of magic about this c-j pairing; it draws you in and keeps you there, smiling. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ET2 pre-amp	
Type:	Vacuum-tube pre-amp
Valve Complement:	3x 8080
Inputs:	7x line-level 1x phono (optional)
Gain:	28.5dB
Phono Gain:	54dB (high gain)
Outputs:	Main, tape and theatre
Maximum Output:	5.5 V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	482 x 84 x 350mm
Weight:	6.8kg
Prices –	
ET2:	£3500
ET 2 inc. phono-stage:	£4250

LP66S power amp	
Type:	Push-pull vacuum-tube power amp
Tube Complement:	3x 6992 4x 6550
Inputs:	1pr RCA phono
Input Sensitivity:	0.5 V to rated power
Input Impedance:	100 kOhms
Rated Output:	60 Watts/ch
Dimensions (WxHxD):	482 x 162 x 406mm
Weight:	21kg
Price:	£3500

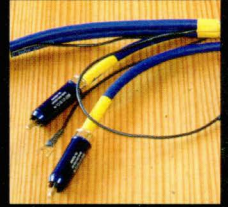
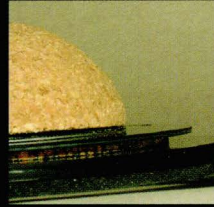
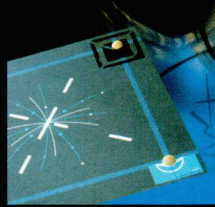
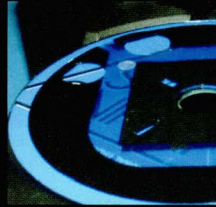
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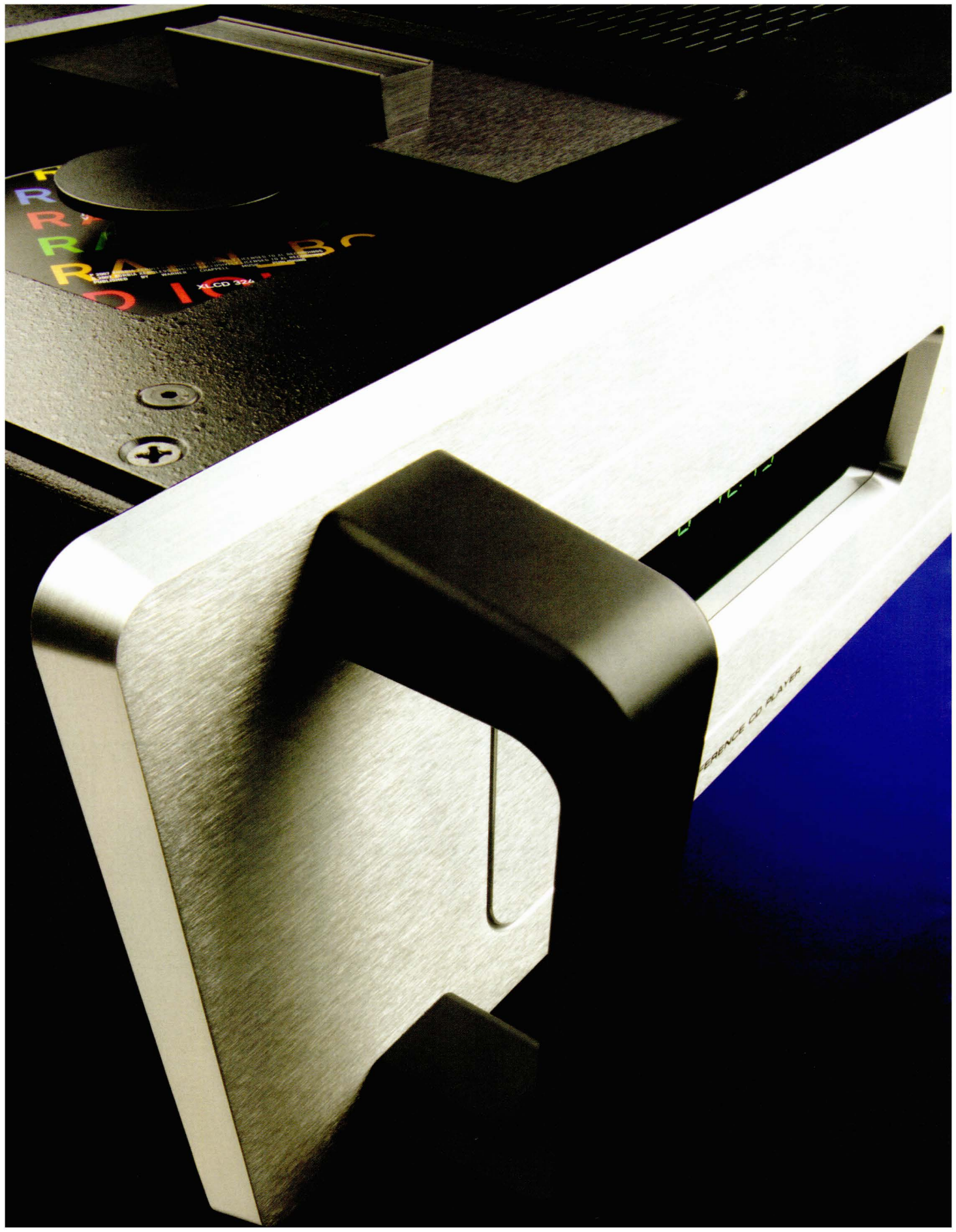


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The Audio Research Reference CD7 CD player

by Chris Binns

It's getting increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that CD technology has been undergoing a bit of a bashing from various quarters recently. With the increasing popularity of downloaded music affecting sales, digital storage getting cheaper by the minute and an increasing number of manufacturers claiming superior results with hard-disk drives, there are those that predict that the days of the silver disc are numbered. Déjà vu, anyone? Or possibly poetic justice – its really not that long ago that compact disc was the perpetrator and LP the victim. Only time has shown that the prophets of doom were wrong; as a quick glance at any issue of Hi-Fi+ will testify. But lets look at the facts. Technology does indeed move at a rapid pace, but at the present time downloading is about convenience rather than quality, and moving even CD resolution type files is problematic for most of us, not so much because of the hardware but the limitations of an ancient and overstressed network. As a result (with one or two possible exceptions) most music is offered at best as a FLAC or lossless file. So while the marvels of being able to store a dozen albums on a piece of plastic the size of you fingernail is very much with us, getting them there is more of a problem, and while they are being held on a flash memory, do we yet know how stable that situation is? Then there is the fact that for a lot of us, owning the hardware complete with all the details and artwork is still an important part of the process of

listening to and enjoying music. But the real irony is that the major record companies who were so scared of losing revenue through downloading are now so enthusiastic, having eventually realised that they will no longer have to fork out for pressing costs, printing, casework, distribution and retailer mark up.

So yes, I guess that I am sticking up for the compact disc, a situation that surprises me as I have never really warmed to the format, but it scares the hell out of me to think that the quality of mainstream music could drop any lower. That and the fact that for the last few months I have been living with the Audio Research Reference 7 CD player, a machine that has very gently and seductively worked its way under my skin. No startling revelations, just a player that has considerably widened the channels between my CD collection and the desire to listen to the music within it.

The CD7 needs little or no introduction. Despite never receiving a formal review it has become something of a benchmark product, the recipient of an Product Of The Year award last year and part of a system review in issue number 54. RG is a keen advocate and seems reluctant to let it stray too far from his listening room. It looks much like any other Audio research product, brushed aluminium front panel (double thickness as it is part of the reference range) with large handles, black casework and an air of functionality rather than designed aesthetics, an identity that has served

the company well for over thirty years. The CD transport is accessed via a sliding panel on the top and utilises a magnetic puck to secure the disc in place. The old-fashioned looking display and basic functions occupy two recesses in the front panel. Like the current pre-amps, I find the plastic switch panel a bit cheap and unrefined by comparison to the rest of the machine; it would be nice to have something a bit more tactile and elegant, but I guess I am being picky as nobody else seems to agree with me.

With an existing CD player in the shape of the CD3 Mk. II, it was the development of the Ref 3 pre-amplifier that was to be the major influence in the conception of the CD7, in particular the output stage and associated power supply. By incorporating much of the improved circuitry developed for the flagship line-stage into their existing player, ARC felt that not only was the performance elevated to such an extent that the improvement warranted a new model, but that it was worthy of joining the ranks of their reference range, a privilege indeed. So the '7 retains the Philips Pro 2 disc transport, a heavy unit built on a cast chassis that goes against the current trend for lightweight, plastic CD-ROM mechanisms that rattle around at high speed. A lot of care has gone into controlling and dissipating the unwanted vibration from the mechanism and this accounts in no small part for the sheer mass of the machine; it feels ►

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▶ more like a power amp than a CD player when you pick it up. Conversion is carried out by a Crystal 24 bit DAC which feeds the gain stage lifted from the Ref 3. Designed around the now familiar Russian 6H30 double triode, the discovery of this valve has had a major influence on the circuit topology of many recent Audio Research products and no less than seven are incorporated into the Ref 7, two per channel form the active electronics while the remaining three go to make up the tightly regulated HT supply. ARC are also making a big deal about the capacitors used in this stage. A swift glance inside the machine reveals the presence of a lot of high grade components and, as you would expect, build quality is to a suitably high standard. Both analogue and digital outputs are provided, and you have the option of balanced and single ended via RCA's, XLR's and a 75Ohm BNC.

I've lived (occasionally reluctantly!) with quite a few CD players over the last 20 years, of which a surprising number have featured valves in part or all of their analogue stages. Often they've been accompanied by a suggestion that, by sounding soft and rounded their incorporation helps to balance out or ameliorate some of the sins committed by digital processing. It's not a view to which I subscribe; instead they seem to mask or undermine the one or two things that CD does well. Good audio circuitry should be just that, regardless of the devices used, and while ARC have always been a champion of thermionic technology, they are not afraid to use FET's or transistors where appropriate to achieve a better result. So the inclusion of valves in the Ref 7 is not just an after thought or gimmick,

and a quick listen to the CD3 that is essentially the same machine but without the analogue refinement serves to highlight the difference.

The Issue 54 system in which I first reviewed the CD7 was designed to balance the performance of CD and vinyl, and included the impressive Kuzma Stabi Reference with a Triplanar VII and Lyra Skala cartridge. One of my comments at the time was that the difference

unprecedented resolution of the colour and texture of instruments. But it is the sound (or more properly, the lack of it) in between the playing, the structural aspects to music, that suggests a more complete and coherent picture of what is going on, one that's more akin to the way good vinyl replay does things.

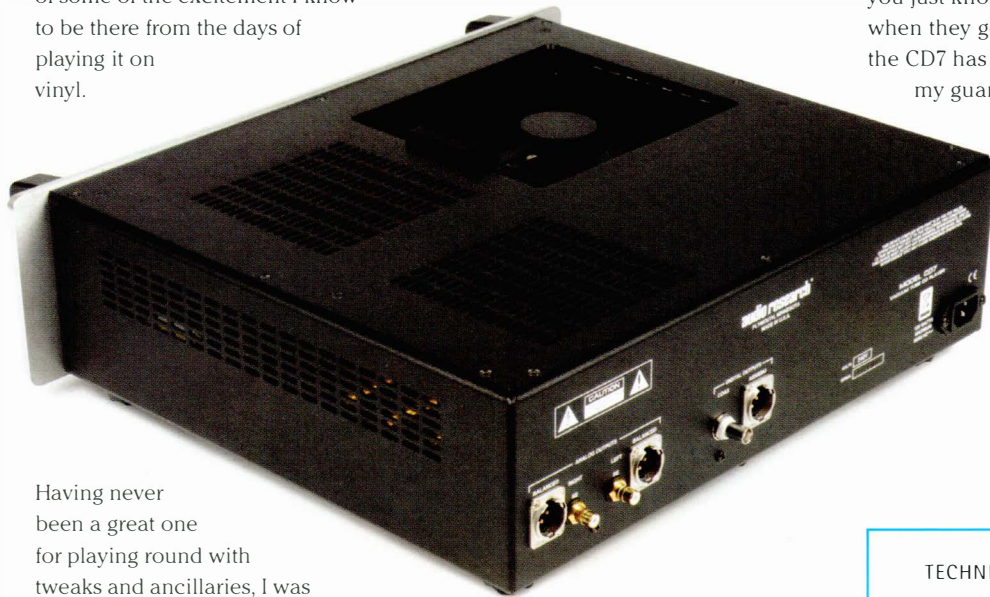


between analogue and digital replay was not as great as I'd expected it to be, which considering the capabilities of the LP front-end says a lot about what the Audio Research does well. Several months and a lot of discs down the line I am still of the same opinion, and it's as good a place as any to start when describing the sound of the CD7. This player manages to reproduce more of the air and space in a good recording than the majority of players that I have heard, with the result that music sounds less processed and thus more accessible. But it is not about laying an analogue sheen over the music, rounding off corners or taking the edge away - far from it. The ARC seems to offer

I have had the pleasure of using the CD7 with a considerable range of gear, but probably the longest standing set up involved the Revel Salon II's driven by the Goldmund Telos 200 power amps and the Ayre K1Xe pre. After some deliberation, I ended up (unusually) using the balanced outputs from the ARC, which in this particular combination sounded just a little more focused, at the risk of trading a touch of flow and expressiveness.

In terms of character, the CD7 is essentially neutral, but its range of tonal colour and harmonic development mean that it tends toward the rich and full bodied rather than lean and emaciated, while the top end is beautifully sweet and capable of real articulation where required. While it is easy to be beguiled by delicate sounds being reproduced with great clarity and ▶

► expressiveness, dynamically the ARC is capable of moving pretty fast when the material demands it, from the subtle picking of acoustic instruments through to the raw energy of say *The Who – live at Leeds*. My only caveat is that with recordings such as this I occasionally felt that the extreme bottom end lacked a bit of impact compared to the rest of the spectrum, robbing the performance of some of the excitement I know to be there from the days of playing it on vinyl.



Having never been a great one for playing round with tweaks and ancillaries, I was a little dubious when RG suggested that I try the platform specifically designed for the CD7 by SRA. Maybe it's the combination of valves (which are inherently susceptible to vibration) and the mechanics of the transport in the same box, but the support produced a considerable benefit, more than I had anticipated. It sounded, as if the microphone in the bass drum had suddenly been (re-)positioned correctly, as opposed to half way down the hall, and the timing at the bottom end clicked into focus with everything else. The big surprise however, was the vast improvement in imaging and the way in which the music projected away from the loudspeakers; something that I'd thought CD players didn't do particularly well. So, one more assumption banished.

Another vital area in which the Audio Research excels is its even-handedness when it comes to recording quality.

It always seems to unearth the musical strengths of any disc – even truly crap sounding commercial releases, including a lot of so-called re-masters which actually challenge the use of the "M"-word and make me question my chosen career path.

By now you'll have figured out that this player exposes and dismisses preconceptions and prejudice with equal ease. As someone who grew up with analogue replay, I sometimes wonder whether it's fair or even sensible to always be comparing compact disc with records? I still believe that good analogue recording and replay is better at capturing the essence of a performance, what music is really about. That superiority depends on the specific strengths and capabilities of the format; the way it is able to present the information. Yet the ARC CD7 closes the gap significantly, precisely by doing fundamental things as well as a good record player, while still retaining the strengths of digital replay. Can it just be the addition of

that sophisticated valve output stage? Whatever the reason it's delivered considerably greater pleasure from my CD collection than anything else I've used. In fact, the CD7 sounds a lot like music, which means that it doesn't sound like either a CD player or a record deck, the mark of a really outstanding product. As a reviewer there are some products (fewer than you might think) that you just know you're going to miss when they go. In the last few months the CD7 has snuck so far under my guard that parting with it is going to be quite a wrench..



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD player with valve output stage
Analogue Outputs:	1pr balanced XLR (5.4V) 1pr single-ended RCA (2.7V)
Output impedance:	660 Ohms (balanced) 330 Ohms (single-ended)
Digital outputs:	1x 110 Ohms AES/EBU XLR 1x 75 Ohms SPDIF BNC
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480 x 134 x 390mm
Weight:	14.8 Kg
Price:	£7498

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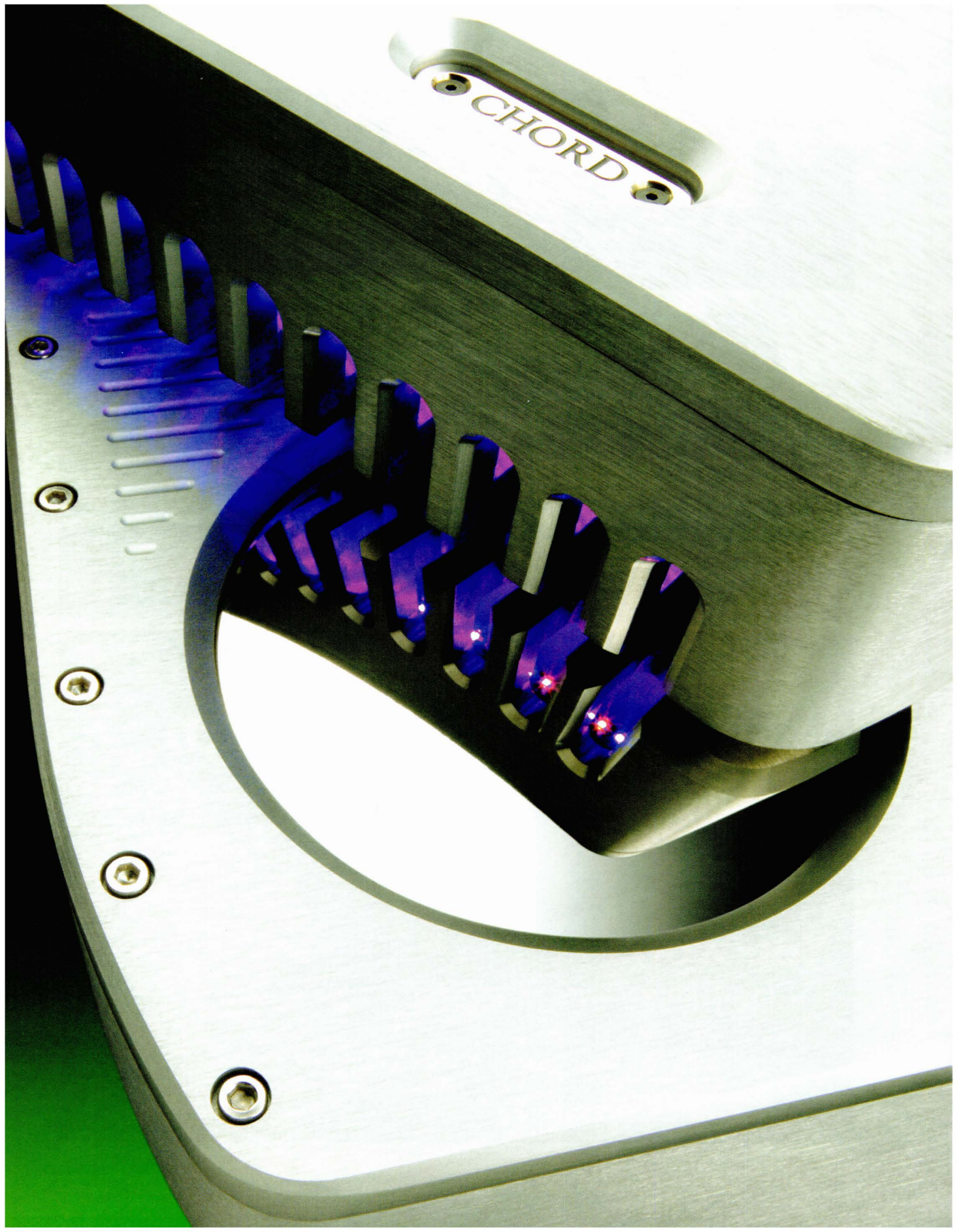
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CHORD



Two's Company... The Chord Mezzo 140 Power Amplifier

by Ian Harris

Anyone with experience of Chord Electronics' DAC 64 will know that, despite their compact dimensions, the company's Aspire series are extremely serious products. Even so, it's hard not to find the "L" word clouding your perceptions. Yes, that's the one – "Lifestyle": small, stylish components where, if form doesn't actually outweigh function, it definitely pushes to the front of the queue. Add a rather fetching lightshow and, in an industry where utilitarian looks are almost a sonic badge of honour, one can understand a degree of skepticism.

While compact size and unique styling are clearly high on the list of design priorities, the governing rationale goes a little further. The Aspire components are intended to answer the needs of audiophiles living in reduced circumstances – in spatial terms at least. High-end haven Hong Kong is just one example of a prosperous city where even the most luxurious accommodation tends toward the compact. So, the original Mezzo 50 amp was a stylish solution to driving speakers of moderate efficiency in small spaces. The bridging facility for increased output adds extra versatility, along with a loss-less upgrade path and the ability to grow into medium sized rooms. But what if your room is larger still or, more likely, your speakers don't

present that cuddly a load?

Enter the Mezzo 140. Sharing the same frontal dimensions as its smaller siblings, but with twice their depth, the 140 is unmistakably a member of the Aspire family, a fact underlined by that familiar violet glow emanating from the crenulated window in the unit's leading edge. It too is bridgeable and it was to a pair of mono-blocs



that I spent most time listening. On the top panel, twin circular indents reveal chromed inserts which, by accident or design, are suggestive of toroidal transformers. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth: not only does the 140 feature switch-mode power supplies, but there are four of them in each chassis. Seasoned Chord watchers will know that power supply topology defines the brand even more than their arresting visuals. Persistently controversial, there's no ignoring the fact that switch-mode units should deliver energy much more quickly than the 50

Hz recharge cycle of a conventional PSU. To maximize this advantage, as per standard Chord methodology, the 140's four units also fire out of phase.

If the Mezzo 140 has the potential to bridge the gap between Chord's Aspire and SPM ranges, particularly with regard to mastering tricky speaker loads, then the obvious review scenario was... a tricky speaker load, here in the form of the Martin Logan Prodigy.

While Martin Logan's own amplifier recommendations go as low as 50 watts per channel, in reality these large hybrid electrostatics have a seemingly insatiable hunger for current. The key issue is not the sub-10ohm impedance of the panel at high frequencies but rather, the challenge

of gripping the moving coil bass driver sufficiently firmly to subjectively match the speed of the panel in the cross-over zone. Failure in this respect manifests itself as an overtly "hybrid" sound, while success provides a wonderfully seamless blend of electrostatic transparency and moving coil heft.

The main review system consisted of a Great Northern Sound Company "Statement" modified Wadia 270se and 27ix pairing, directly driving a pair of bridged Mezzo 140 via the DAC's digital volume control. Initial listening indicated that the Chord amps were a touch happier mounted on Seismic Sinks than when placed on either glass ►

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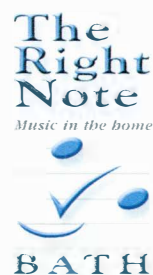
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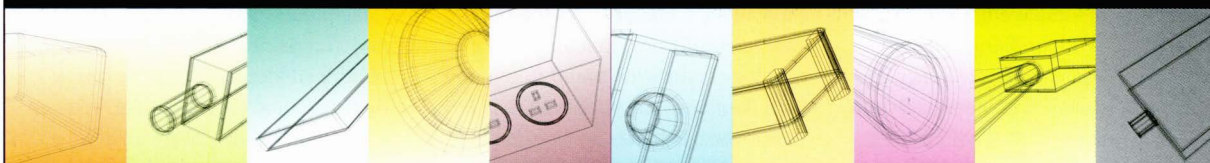


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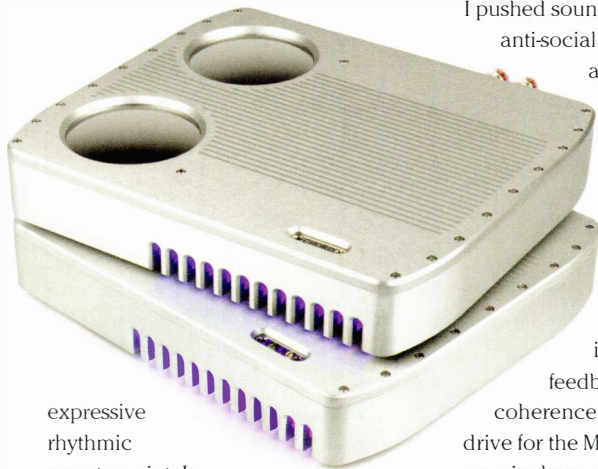
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shelves or directly on a solid wooden floor. There also seemed to be a slight increase in overall coherence when the source was powered from my dedicated Kimber spur, while the Mezzo 140s were connected to the house ring-main – as is generally the case. However, improvements were subtle enough to suggest that the Mezzo 140 is not overly sensitive to its environment – a potentially important quality in a component that may be required to blend into its surroundings, rather than dominate them from the expensive perch of an all singing, all dancing equipment stand.

As percussion and bass are both areas that can expose the Martin Logans compared to full-sized moving coil speakers, that's where I started. I'm not sure exactly where Mick Fleetwood stands in the pantheon of great drummers, but for me, his performance on 'Go Your Own Way' is a percussion master class. It might be the anguished melody of Lyndsey Buckingham's vocal that first raises the track beyond mere hook-laden FM fodder but, listen a little deeper and the drumming creates an



expressive rhythmic counterpoint. In turn, what the Mezzo 140 provide is an incredibly detailed timbral map of each drum skin, with the exact force and each strike's point of impact clearly portrayed. During the final bridge, the sense of barely controlled angst and fury was utterly mesmerizing. If you think

The Aspire Series

The full Aspire line-up consists of the DAC 64, the Blu transport, the One CD player, the Symphonic phono-stage, the Prima line-stage and both versions of the Mezzo amp. While a whole system wasn't supplied, a pre-amp was provided and, even more than the Mezzo 140, the regular Aspire-sized Prima brought home the stunning build quality of these components. Each chassis is machined from a solid billet of aluminium, providing a level of structural integrity more typical of a bathyscaphe than an electronic component. One XLR and four RCA inputs (each individually adjustable for gain between 0.25 and 1.5) provide adequate connectivity for most systems, although the single XLR output suggests that a "family"

implementation is the Prima's principal *raison d'être*. Dynamic and transparent, it offers a clear sonic as well as visual continuity with its partnering amps, which bodes well for the performance of complete Aspire systems.



Rumours is a little, well, "middle of the road", a listen via these Chord's could be an illuminating experience.

Remaining squarely in the 70s, the introductory bass-line to Roxy Music's take on 'The In Crowd' displayed leading edges of an almost percussive intensity, followed by note bodies of a wonderfully taut elasticity. Growth and decay were equally well-defined and, as I pushed sound pressure levels deep into anti-social territory, there was almost a sense of air being sucked back into the speaker cones as each note ended. As guitar and vocals joined keyboard and bass, the distinctive rhythm remained perfectly weighted while, even as the track ended in a veritable festival of feedback, a sense of total coherence remained. It takes a lot of drive for the Martin Logans to sound like genuinely credible rock speakers and, in this respect, the bridged Mezzos were highly successful, punching well above their 220 Watt weight.

Moving on to some rather more relaxed material, the immaculate production on Eric Bibb's *Spirit & The Blues* provided clear evidence of the

sometimes surprising dynamic range of acoustic instruments and the human voice. Some of Eric's guitar picking on 'I Want Jesus To Walk With Me' was almost explosive in its intensity, while the warmth of his impassioned baritone filled the room. The wonderfully laid-back ensemble piece 'Braggin'" displayed excellent stage width, well-focused images and finely graduated depth, with Bjorn Gideonsson's drums clearly set some distance behind the lead vocal. That said, while there was a huge amount of ambient detail, the acoustic remained constrained by the limits of my listening room, rather than expanding to properly represent a palpably larger recorded space. So, whilst the Mezzo 140s are certainly Premier League spatial performers, they're not in there fighting for the championship. Of course, not much material stands such microscopic spatial scrutiny. Truly explicit components can make some recordings feel a little anti-climactic. The Mezzo 140s present a near perfect compromise, with the ability to reward audiophile production levels whilst never needing them to give of their best.

▶ Removing one unit and reconfiguring the other into stereo mode, I repeated the listening programme with interesting results. Make no mistake, the single Mezzo 140 still drove the Prodigy successfully, but it was a little like a power boat cruising on a glass-smooth lake - there was a sense of serene control, but also of untapped potential. Return to bridged mono, and it was a little like the power boat's transition to planing – potential instantly converted to a step-change in performance, hybrid speaker technology switched from a slightly fragile marriage to a truly glorious synergy. It was not so much a surprise that two amps worked better than one with the Prodigy, rather that there was an unavoidable sense that, when bridged, the dual 140 became more than the sum of their stereo parts.

As a complete contrast, I played the Chords to a pair of Focal Micro Utopia Bes, a benign load that I normally drive with 40 single-ended Watts. First up was Nickel Creek's eponymous first album, which tests a system's ability to track a musical signal. Listening to 'Ode To A Butterfly', the incredible speed of Chris Thile's Mandolin playing was vividly demonstrated. A genuinely musically agile component will uncover myriad micro-rhythms of a speed and complexity which almost defy belief. Not only did the Mezzo 140 succeed admirably, it also uncovered a whole new level to the man's genius – the amplifier's insight into the finest nuances of musical energy revealed that the subtlest changes in the power of individual notes were not unavoidable side-effects of the light-speed tempo. Rather, they were a conscious part of his technique, which

remained utterly consistent during each repeat of a given refrain. The slightly gentler appeal of 'Out Of The Woods' proved that, while the Chord displayed excellent tonal neutrality, it was far from dry or astringent, with Sara Watkin's violin displaying sublime richness of tone.

Unsurprisingly, toggling between stereo and mono configuration provided less of a quantum leap in performance via the Micro Utopia. There was certainly a worthwhile improvement in spatial definition, with a slightly larger soundstage, more vivid images and more closely defined width and depth. There was also a very definite increase in overall authority, the reach of the speakers seeming



to grow a little, in line with the extra drive at their disposal.

The Mezzo 140 successfully extends the Aspire range's horizons. Whether you are starting from scratch or have already bought into the series, this new amplifier opens up the possibility of both current hungry speakers and large rooms, while maintaining the components' stylish but physically unobtrusive presence. The bridging option is the icing on the cake, with even benign loads benefiting from the increase in drive. In terms of character, the Mezzo 140 provides an impressive blend of resolution, dynamics and neutrality. While the unit itself appears to have no inbuilt warmth, if there is any richness to either a recording or the partnering source, the 140 will

faithfully reproduce it. Combined with the subtlest subordination of spatial performance in favour of dynamic expression, this transparency makes the Chord a hugely satisfying listen over a wide range of musical styles and production values.

However, the 140's exhilarating way with drive and energy is always presented as just one of a finely balanced set of musical virtues. In this respect, this amplifier is a genuinely gifted all-rounder.

Ultimately though, for all its adaptability, the outstanding impression remains just how much impact, power and control is available from this small but perfectly formed amplifier. Particularly in bridged mode, the 140 actually sounds considerably more powerful than its rated output would suggest. Push the sound pressure level as high as you dare and prepare to be stunned. Listening to a pair of Mezzo 140 at full-tilt is the musical equivalent of being laid out by Kylie Minogue. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Switch-mode solid state stereo power amp, switchable to bridged mono mode
Inputs:	1x balanced XLR 1x single-ended phono
Outputs:	2 pairs of WBT binding posts
Output Power:	120 Watts into 8 Ohms (stereo) 220 Watts into 8 Ohms (bridged mono)
Gain:	30 dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	340 x 60 x 340
Finishes:	Black or Silver
Weight:	11 kg ea.
Price:	£3,800 ea.

Manufacturer:

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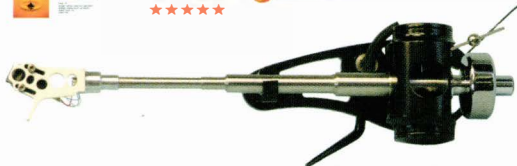
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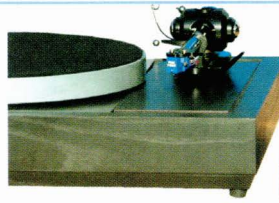
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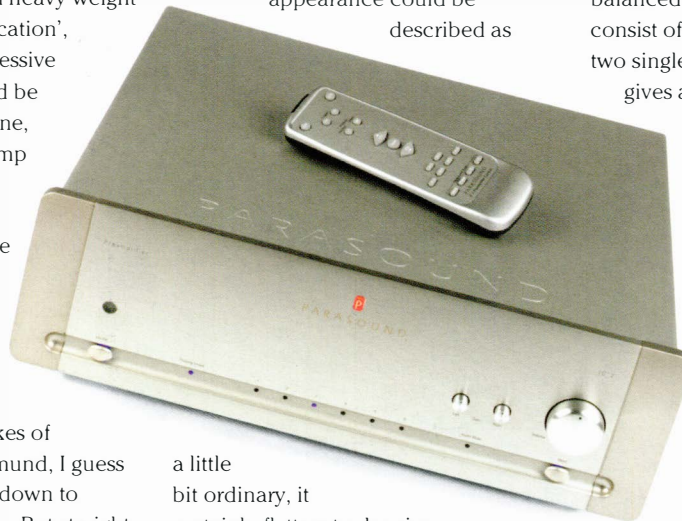
The Parasound Halo JC2 pre and JC1 power amplifiers

by Chris Binns

No reflection on Parasound, but they're one of those US companies that I've been aware of for years without really knowing anything about them. Founded in the 80's, their amps have a reputation for providing plenty of bang for your buck, combining solid engineering with realistic pricing. Bearing that in mind, my expectations of the JC1/JC2 combination were along the lines of 'typical heavy weight American power amplification', where theoretically impressive output capabilities would be design criteria number one, accompanied by a pre-amp that would (as so often seems to be the case) constrict the performance of the system. A little bit cynical I know, but having recently lived with exceptional and hideously expensive amplification from the likes of Dartzel, Ayre and Goldmund, I guess I was preparing to come down to earth with a bit of a bump. But straight out of the box, the Parasound amps showed just how wide of the mark my preconceptions were. Indeed, with the passing of a few weeks in which they settled down and burnt in, I found myself increasingly impressed. Feeding the fussy and highly revealing Marten Byrd loudspeakers, the JC amplification had no trouble filling the void left by its illustrious predecessors.

I might be forgiven for my less than flattering assumptions by the fact that the Parasound looks far more mainstream than something from the tweaky, high-end sector, and it comes as no surprise to learn that the

Californian based company has its products assembled in Taiwan. The curved front panel and silver finish provide a degree of visual identity and help to disguise the fact that the power amps in particular are actually very large boxes, while the wrap around casework of the pre amp feels a bit tinny. But elsewhere the construction is reassuringly solid. If the external appearance could be described as



a little bit ordinary, it certainly flatters to deceive. Internally the Parasound units are a completely different story.

Let's start at the beginning; the circuitry for these amps was developed by John Curl, one of the most respected designers in high-end audio, with products like the almost legendary Vendetta pre-amp and the original Mark Levinson JC1 pre-amp to his name. Modest about his achievements, he attributes a lot of the success of Parasound's flagship Halo range to his partnership with Carl Thompson and Bob Crump, responsible for layout and component selection respectively, while the long-term association with

the company since 1989 has obviously been a fruitful one. The result is a design that has no capacitors or inductors in the signal path, carefully selected components and a layout that has been optimized to ensure minimal interaction between the crucial elements.

The JC2 offers six line-level inputs, two of which can be switched for balanced operation, while outputs consist of tape, balanced XLR and two single-ended RCA, one of which gives an inverted signal, offering an

elegant and useful method of bridging stereo power amps. Front panel controls are minimal; a large volume knob is augmented by individual trim for channel level rather than a balance control, while push buttons select input source and standby.

There is no power switch; plugging the unit into the mains initiates a 45 second mute (indicated by a flashing LED on the front panel) to allow the circuitry to stabilise and subsequent operation of the standby switch brings the unit to life after a period of a few seconds. Internal layout is extremely neat; separate boards carry audio circuitry for the left and right channels and are mounted close to the rear panel to allow a very short signal path. These are shielded from the rest of the amplifier by substantial slabs of 3/8" aluminium, and all switching is carried out via high quality relays. Another two boards deal with remote control functions and the volume control(s), which are of the blue

▶ Alps type. The complicated power supply is fed from two transformers: a conventional device supplies current to the 'housekeeping' circuitry while a high quality R core design, selected for its superiority over the more common toroidal type in terms of blocking mains born noise and interference is used to supply the audio circuitry. The remote offers all of the pre-amp functions plus a polarity invert button, and while not from the "hewn from solid" school, works effectively enough over a decent range.

The JC1 power amplifier has been Parasound's flagship since 2003, and is a bit of a monster. With a rated output of 800 into 4 Ohms, rising to 1.2 kilowatts into two, available peak current capability is a scary 135 Amps, provided by no less than eighteen high power Sanken output devices selected for their speed and ruggedness. Input and driver stages are based around J-FET's and MOSFET's respectively. John Curl feels that this topology offers the best of both worlds and allows the earlier stages greater immunity from the loudspeaker load. They are fed from individual power supplies based around the massive potted (and extremely quiet) toroidal mains transformer. Similar in looks to the JC2 pre-amp, the construction is reassuringly solid, the two sides being taken up by substantial heat sinking, necessary because the Parasound produces the first 25 Watts of its output in class A. Even under quiescent conditions the unit runs quite hot, enough to raise the ambient temperature in my listening room by a few degrees – not entirely unwelcome during what promises to be a very average British summer. But if it proves too much or there is insufficient space for good ventilation, a switch on the rear provides the option of reducing the bias to a nominal 10 Watts of

class A to allow cooler running. The amplifiers are protected against misuse and potential faults by both fuses and a non-intrusive relay that disconnects the speakers in the event of a fault. Two sets of four-way binding posts together with balanced and single-ended inputs are provided, while both the JC1 and 2 have all the prerequisite 12 Volt trigger arrangements for remote turn on and use with AV systems. Also worth mentioning is the 'music sense' facility on the power amp which has adjustable sensitivity, a useful feature for the lazier amongst us – and with



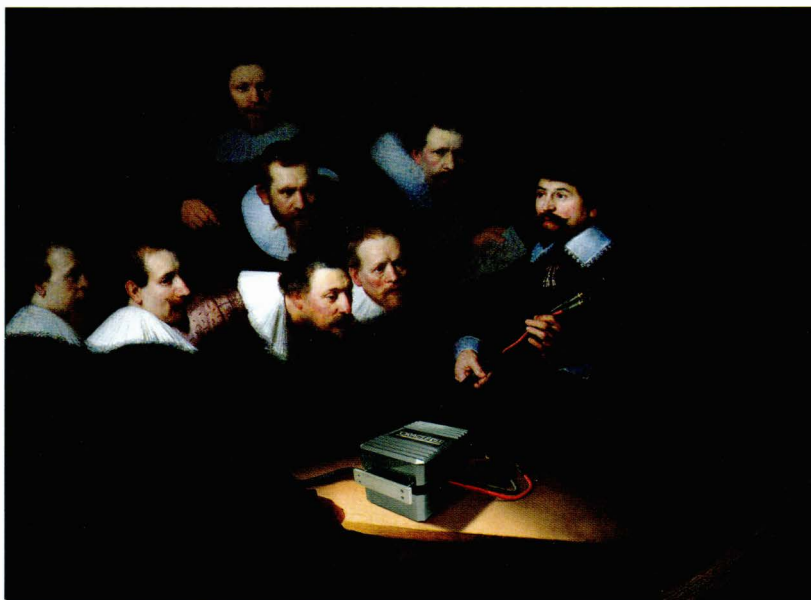
all that class A dissipation, a much healthier option for the electricity bill. The power amps seemed to come on song relatively quickly, stabilising their performance after twenty minutes or so, while the JC2 was left running continuously.

From an already auspicious start things just got better and better. Over a period of a few weeks the Parasound combination underwent some subtle, and some not so subtle changes and I'm not entirely sure, two-months down the line, that it has finished burning in. While it became looser in terms of opening up and allowing the music to flow with greater freedom, simultaneously I was aware of a

'tightening up' of snap and timing, while bass cones seemed to be held in an increasingly visceral grip - there's nothing quite like a few kilowatts of solid-state power to put your bottom end in order. With both the Spendor SP100R and the Marten Byrd, ported designs with good bass extension, the authority, slam and resolution at lower frequencies was quite spectacular, reminiscent of the bigger Bryston amps that I hold in such high regard in this respect. All that effortless precision was able to un-muddle the most complex of bass lines, and endow well-recorded drums with real impact and energy.

There is often a tendency for large power amps to sound ponderous and earthbound, but this is not the case with the JC1s, where there is an impressive speed that contributes to the tactile quality, and little smearing of the impressive amount of detail that was on offer. Voices and instruments had a good sense of body with a fine balance between weight and agility. The higher frequencies showed a slight loss in definition, with a hint of softness leading to a definite ceiling, rather than giving the illusion of limitless air in the way that the Goldmund amplification seemed to manage so well. Never unpleasant, there was just the odd occasion where the extreme top-end had a slightly 'velvety' quality to it, noticeable in particular with the sometimes ruthless but highly revealing diamond tweeter used in the Marten loudspeakers.

As for sound staging, I'm not entirely sure what the connection is between the low-end performance of a system and the ability to produce three-dimensional images, but the presence of well-defined LF information helps delineate the boundaries of acoustic spaces and what is contained within them, and the Parasound certainly proved the



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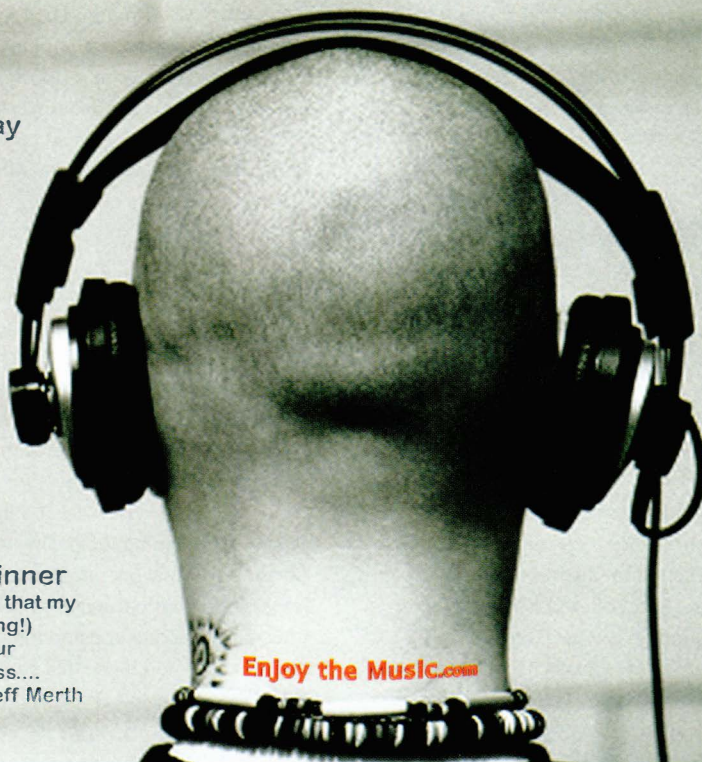
I have never replied to online audio reviews but wanted you to know that I have enjoyed several articles.

— Craig Mattice

What a great review! — Paul Kittingerk

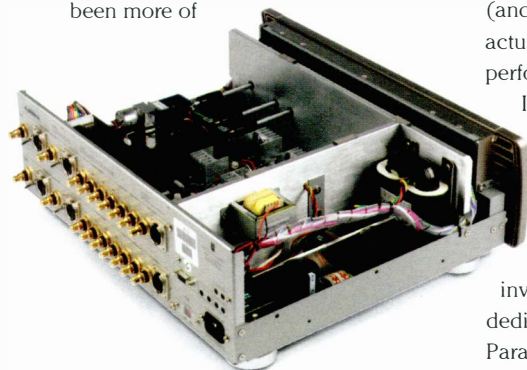
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In fact, the Axiom Audio EP500 works so well that my wife and I both stood mouths open (not kidding!) as it shook the rafters and window glass in our house. Amazing! Love that palpable, tight bass... Thank you again for the awesome prize! — Jeff Merth



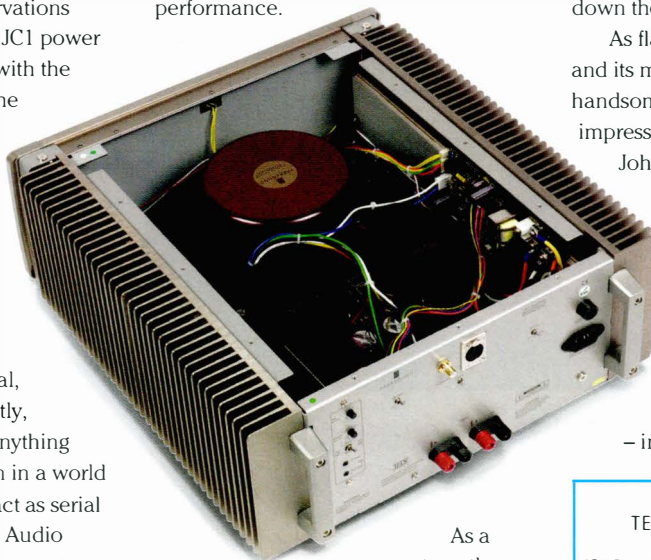
► point. Live recordings had a palpable sense of contained space, with individual performers projected well away from the speakers with a reassuringly solid presence that had good dimensionality and solidity to them.

A lot of the above observations would seem to relate to the JC1 power amps and their interaction with the loudspeakers, which begs the question as to just what the pre-amp was contributing to the whole? The pat answer is, "not very much at all" – but that seriously underestimates its quality. The JC2 left no noticeable imprint on the musical signal, but perhaps more importantly, didn't seem to be holding anything back, a welcome realization in a world where so many line-stages act as serial stranglers. Compared to the Audio research SP10 that I sometimes use the JC2 had better resolution, a wider bandwidth and sounded more neutral, emphasising the slightly rich 'spongy' character of the aging valve design. The Goldmund Mimesis 28.3 could not have been more of



a contrast, providing an exceptionally clean, etched and occasionally academic presentation against which the Parasound offered a slightly richer character, but gave little away in terms of resolution. But it was while I was using The Naim NAP300 power amplifier that I began to realise just how effective the JC2's balance of

virtues really is. Inherently quiet, it is capable of presenting detail with both texture and precision while simultaneously sounding open and airy, the combination of which offers a highly lucid and musically enthusiastic performance.



As a system, the JC1/2 pre-power combination works extremely well, and goes way beyond simply providing lots of amp for the money. Standing direct comparison with some seriously capable (and expensive) competition. What it actually provides is genuine high-end performance at a very reasonable price.

If you need lots of drive, the JC1's have it in spades, whilst avoiding most of the compromises that usually accompany really powerful amplifiers. As an alternative to spending more, invest the extra money on having a dedicated mains spur installed, and the Parasounds will reward you with even better performance.

Which brings us to the JC2 line-stage. It's becoming increasingly obvious how few pre-amps succeed in passing a musical signal without imposing crippling constriction in the process – and those that can are invariably expensive. Well, you can add the JC2 to that (very short) list of the great and the good.

At the asking price, that makes it a genuinely astonishing bargain – especially if you don't need the awesome power delivery of the JC-1s and team it with something more manageable and affordable from further down the Parasound range.

As flagship products, this pre-amp and its matching mono-blocs succeed handsomely. They represent a really impressive accomplishment that

John Curl and Parasound can be justifiably proud of – just as proud as those lucky enough to own a set. In an industry where the term "value" seems to have taken on an almost comical elasticity, the JC1 and JC2 are definitely the real deal – in every sense. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

JC1 Power Amplifier

Type:	Solid-state mono-bloc
Input sensitivity:	1 volt for 28.28 output
Input impedance:	100K Ohms
Power Output:	400 Watts into 8 Ohms 800 watts into 40hms
Damping Factor:	1200 at 20 Hz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	451 x 178 x 508mm
Weight:	27.3 kg ea.
Price:	£2500 ea.

JC2 Pre-amplifier

Type:	Solid-state line-stage
Inputs:	6x line-level (2 balanced)
Input Sensitivity:	200mv for 1Volt output
Input Impedance:	30K Ohms
Outputs:	1pr balanced XLR 2pr RCA (one inverted) 1x tape
Output impedance:	60 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	437 x 150 x 406mm
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Reviews are important in the great game of audio and rightly so as a good reviewer will bring independence, insight and experience to his trade. But many people find that far too many reviews have only a passing acquaintance with reality. Why so?

A list of what goes wrong includes reviewers with cloth ears (they do exist, it seems), or just having a bad hear day (sorry..), non standard kit sent for review, editors changing copy (very common), poor system matching etc... And that's before we factor in prejudice & dirty tricks (audio is a business). Common sense tells us that good reviews in several magazines earmark a product for **further investigation**. I put it to the jury that buying kit unheard, based on a single frothy review is daft. I mean, who is going to be living with it? You or the reviewer? **You** are the only reviewer that really matters. Read first, then listen, then decide.

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Hidden Virtues...

The Gershman Sonogram Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

The one thing you can safely say about Gershman speakers is that they're decidedly, obviously, gloriously distinctive. They don't look like other speakers, they don't adopt the same approach or technology as other speakers and that's why they so often appeal to people who find those other speakers wanting. Whether it's the tapered elegance and unusual driver disposition of the Gap 828 or the nested cabinet design of the Black Swan, one look at a Gershman and you know it's not a "me too" product. Which made the Sonogram, the company's new and more affordable model, something of a shock when I first saw it at the *Rocky Mountain Audio Fest*. A slightly squat, resolutely rectangular floorstander, it could only be described as – well – normal! But fear not, looks can be deceptive.

The first clue comes when you remove the grille, underneath which lurks a full three-way driver line-up, including a custom 205mm bass-unit sporting Gershman's trademark yellow cone. So that's why the cabinet is wider than the fashionably slim frontal profile found on the competition. Next, you pick it up – or try to. The Sonogram weighs more than you expect it to – a lot more. Now, I know that Eli Gershman likes to put a lot of material into his speaker cabinets, but there's definitely something different going

on here, which isn't obvious to the naked eye.

Sure enough, the internal construction is anything but conventional. It's also impressively simple in concept, in a "Why didn't I think of that?" sort of way. Take one look at the Gershman product range and you don't have to be a genius to spot the theme; tapered cabinets designed for rigidity, low resonance and to reduce internal standing waves. The problem is that such complex cabinets are difficult and expensive to produce, a big no-no if you are designing a more affordable model. There again, so is losing all the qualities that make your established designs so popular...

The solution to this dichotomy was surprisingly simple and elegant. The front, sides and top of the Sonogram are of standard, chamfered edge MDF construction. The rear baffle is the clever bit. Viewed from above, this has a triangular section, the flat rear keeping the box conventional in appearance, the sharply angled inner faces breaking up standing waves and adding substantial bracing to the cabinet (see the accompanying diagram). The front, side and rear panels are in turn braced by conventional horizontal members, creating a rigid and heavily triangulated structure. If you are feeling confused, the internal construction is shown on the

Gershman web-site; one glance and everything will become clear. The end result is a cabinet that is utterly conventional in appearance, making it cost effective to finish and pack, yet its internal arrangements offer similar sonic advantages to the more extravagantly shaped cabinets used on the more expensive models. The hidden nature of this solution also helps to explain the name...

The bass driver is reflex loaded by a large slot port positioned at the bottom of the rear baffle, an arrangement that delivers substantial bass, another Gershman trademark and one that extends to 28Hz in this case: midrange is handled by a Morel 55mm doped fabric dome operating between 350 and 2000Hz, with a 25mm soft dome filling out the upper register. The cabinet stands on a small plinth and large, adjustable cones are provided for leveling. A single pair of binding posts is all that's provided, following the recent trend away from bi-wiring. Efficiency is quoted at a realistic 89dB, with a reasonably flat 60hm impedance curve making for a manageable paper load, although in practice, speakers with this much bandwidth demand an amplifier capable of getting a grip on their nether regions and, like other Gershman designs, the Sonogram really responds to quality power. I employed various amps throughout the listening period, but large and ►

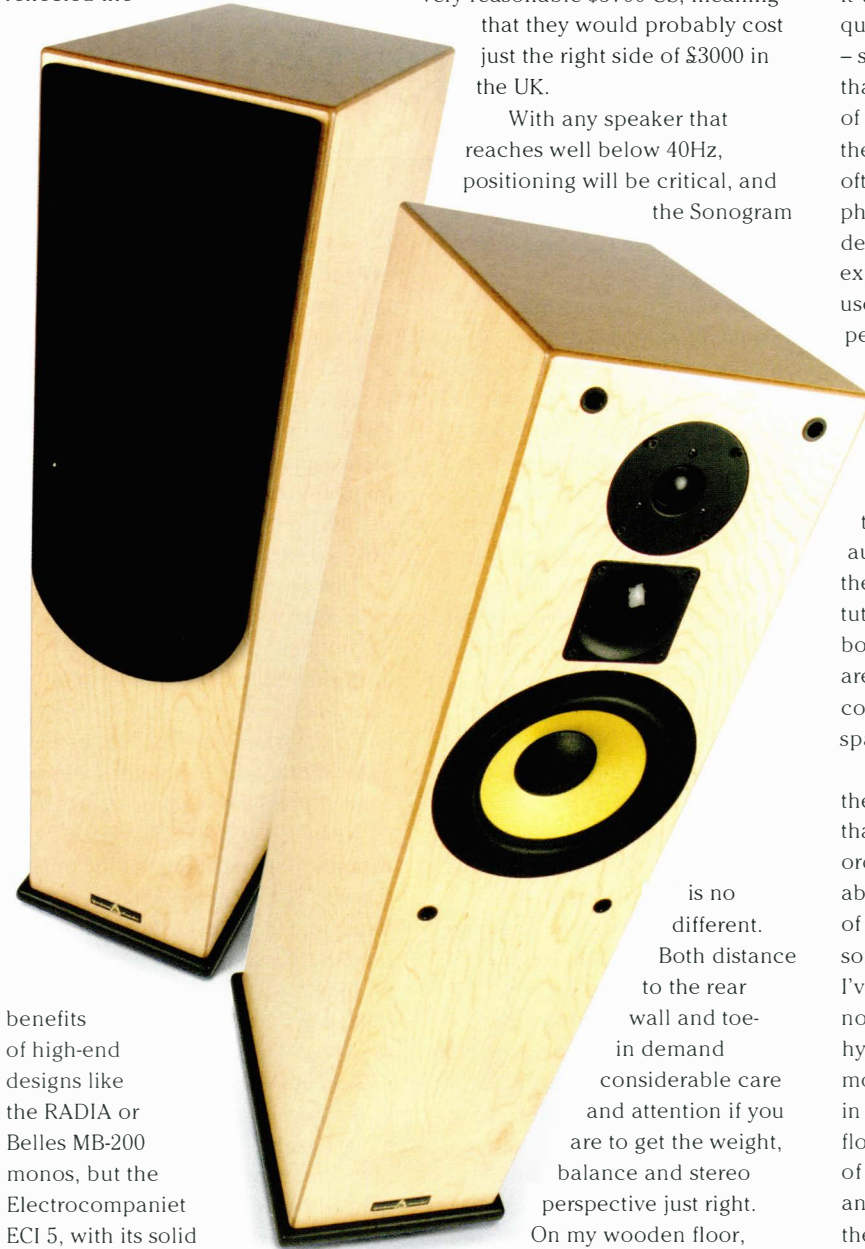
► solid-state always seemed to tick the right boxes, as well as offering the headroom required for realistic levels; if the Sonogram has an Achilles' heel it's the way it shuts down at low listening level. The speaker readily reflected the

review pair arriving in an attractive pale wood veneer, a red stained option being the other alternative. You can have various piano finishes too, but they cost a fair bit more. The standard finishes are priced at a very reasonable \$3700 US, meaning that they would probably cost just the right side of £3000 in the UK.

With any speaker that reaches well below 40Hz, positioning will be critical, and the Sonogram

repeating the experience with carpet. Once placed, you'll also need to level them. With that done you'll start to hear what these speakers are all about. First up is that bass. Deep and weighty, get the positioning right and it will also be beautifully integrated, quick, agile and surprisingly powerful – surprising in the musical sense that is. I've never been over fond of the Reiner/Chicago recording of the Beethoven *5th*, finding it all too often turgid of tempo, inflexible of phrasing. Playing it on the Sonograms demonstrates that the problems experienced lie with the systems used rather than the recording or performance. Get the bass wrong (too tight, not enough energy) and the music loses its sense of drive and expectancy. The Sonograms get it right and the result is bold and involving, with that delicious contrast between authority and delicacy that makes the work so special. Orchestral tuttis have real substance and body, Reiner's dynamic shadings are beautifully judged, the internal contrasts enhanced by the sense of space and placement...

Ahhh, did I omit to mention the soundstaging? The other thing that comes with deep, properly ordered low frequencies is the ability to reproduce a palpable sense of acoustic space, something the sonogram does better than anything I've heard at this sort of price. I'm not talking about the spot-lit, etched hyper-reality of the average mini-monitor. I'm talking about the space in which a recording was made, the floor, side and rear walls, the volume of excited air, the space around and, most importantly, between the instruments. These Gershmans create a wonderfully coherent acoustic environment (where appropriate) as well as effortlessly separating and delineating the multi-tracks of studio mixes. ►



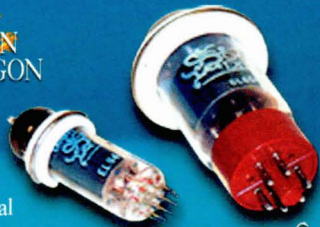
benefits of high-end designs like the RADIA or Belles MB-200 monos, but the Electrocompaniet ECI 5, with its solid 120 Watt output proved to be the perfect price/performance partner. The Sonogram looks and sounds better with the grilles removed, the

is no different. Both distance to the rear wall and toe-in demand considerable care and attention if you are to get the weight, balance and stereo perspective just right.

On my wooden floor, with the cones stood on finite element footers this was simplicity itself (these speakers definitely let you hear the result of each shift) but I'm not sure I'd fancy

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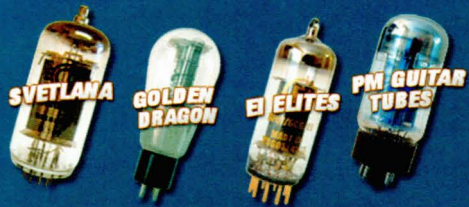
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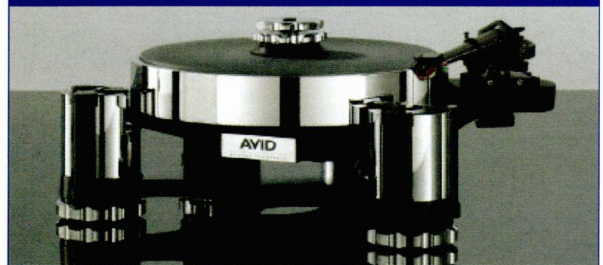
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► In turn this reflects the even, well controlled behavior of the cabinet. All that bass is only a benefit if it's properly integrated and doesn't mess up the rest of the range. This is where the massively braced construction of the Sonogram's woodwork comes into its own, handling the mechanical energy generated by those low



frequencies rather than simply shaking, rattling and rolling along with them. You hear it in the coherence of the acoustic space, you hear it in the excellent range of tonal colours on show. But most of all you hear it in the quickness

of the dynamic response, the lack of hesitation and sure-footed step when it comes to rhythmic shifts and patterns. It's this capability that stops the Sonogram being one of those worthy, polite, classical only transducers.

Feed the Gershman with the convoluted, sinuous rhythms, dense bass patterns and sudden hesitations of Mina Agossi's 'Ain't Misbehavin'' (is she the only modern singer who can scat convincingly?) and they lap it up, filling the undulating flow with substance and urgency, encouraging you to get out of your seat and advance the volume control. The rhythmic switches on Nanci Griffith's *Storms*, and especially the hitch-kick that gets 'Listen To The Radio' well and truly into its stride, are encompassed with ease. The harmony vocals are beautifully distinct, the lyrics noticeably easier to decipher than normal. Nanci's voice is instantly recognizable, and despite an overall warmth and noticeable lack of nasty edge, there's no shortage of clarity here, reflecting the benefits of that dedicated midrange driver.

Essentially neutral, musically and spatially coherent, the Sonogram clearly carries a heavy dose of family DNA. Drive it properly and it produces a vivid and dramatic performance, full of substance and contrast. Under-drive it and the colours collapse, the dynamics compress, the rhythmic corners get

straightened out and smoothed over, leaving you underwhelmed. And there's the rub. This speaker demands the sort of care and attention to set up and amplifier matching normally associated with products at twice the price. The good news is that, take that time and trouble and they sound like they should cost twice the price too. I've always liked the natural, unforced dynamics, scale and rich, natural tonal balance of the bigger Gershman speakers. Now you can get it in a more manageable and affordable package. The Sonogram might not be Eli Gershman's best sounding speaker, but it's definitely his most impressive achievement. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way reflex loaded
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm fabric dome tweeter 1x 55mm doped fabric dome mid 1x 205mm woven fiberglass bass
Sensitivity:	89dB
Bandwidth:	28Hz - 20kHz ±3dB
Impedance:	6 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	260 x 1080 x 360mm
Weight:	29Kg ea.
Price:	\$3700 US c. £3000

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Yes, we have no beryllium... The Focal Electra 1027S loudspeaker

by Steve Dickinson



Focal are famous for their tweeters. As an OEM driver manufacturer, their justly famous titanium inverted domes have graced many loudspeakers from high-end manufacturers, notably Wilson Audio. More recently, Focal's own loudspeakers have come from nowhere, making significant inroads into the market with a range of mind-boggling breadth and depth, starting at under £300 and extending to beyond £50k. The conventional hi-fi ranges include the Chorus 700 and 800 series, an overlapping (in cost and performance) range of smaller standmount and floorstanding loudspeakers at domestically realistic prices; the Profiles, a good-looking part-AV, part-lifestyle range pitched above the Chorus; the high-end Electras and the super high-end Utopias. The Electras benefit greatly from trickle-down technology from the no-holds-barred Utopias, including the application of the extraordinary beryllium tweeter, designated by "Be" in the nomenclature. Clearly, though, somebody at Focal woke up in a sweat late one night, having discovered a market niche they didn't cover comprehensively enough, hence the introduction of the Electra S models, similar to the Electra Bes but without the beryllium tweeter and offered at a significant saving. To be fair, the price gap between the top of the Chorus 800 series and the lower reaches of the Electra Be's represented quite a stretch, a gap neatly narrowed by these newcomers.

At present, the Electra S range consists of a single standmount, the Electra 1007S, and a largish floorstander, the 1027S reviewed here (plus the obligatory AV add-ons) each considerably less expensive than the corresponding Be models. Interestingly, there is still a trickle-down effect at work, ▶

► In that the technology developed to manufacture the beryllium tweeter has also permitted a new generation of aluminium-magnesium alloy tweeters to be formed using the same process, offering a level of performance beyond that of the previous generation of Al/Mg tweeters, still in use in the Chorus and Profile ranges. The remainder of the driver complement here is the same as the equivalent Be model, a 6.5 inch “W” sandwich polymer midrange, and paired 6.5” “W” sandwich polymer bass units but there are other changes, too: the cabinet of the 1027S loses the downward-firing bass-reflex port of the 1027Be (and the pontoon-like feet which serve to vent the port) in favour of a conventional rear-firing flared port; the crossovers are changed and the cabinets are finished in a smart, satin lacquer with a plain top, rather than the high-gloss, slightly sparkly finish and glass top-plate of the 1027Be. Personal taste plays a part here, of course, but I found the understated sheen of the 1027S more appealing. The review samples are finished with side-cheeks in Macassar ebony, a boldly-grained wood which I also liked greatly. My wife however assures me that in this, I am sorely mistaken. To be fair, it probably suits more contemporary décor rather better.

Here’s a tip: don’t audition these if they are factory fresh. The Electra S models seem to require a fair few hours of running-in, more than the –Be variants. If they sound hard, aggressive and shouty, they still have a way to go. Once that is achieved, however, they blossom into something rather fine. It is odd, isn’t it, how expectations can be coloured by specifications?

The Be variants quote an upper frequency roll-off (-3dB) of 40kHz. The S versions go to a ‘mere’ 30kHz, so immediately you start listening for top-end harshness or fizz, forgetting that until quite recently, even the sweetest tweeters rarely extended much above 20kHz and, using a CD source, I’m unlikely to seriously challenge the top octave anyway. So let’s forget the psycho-acoustic



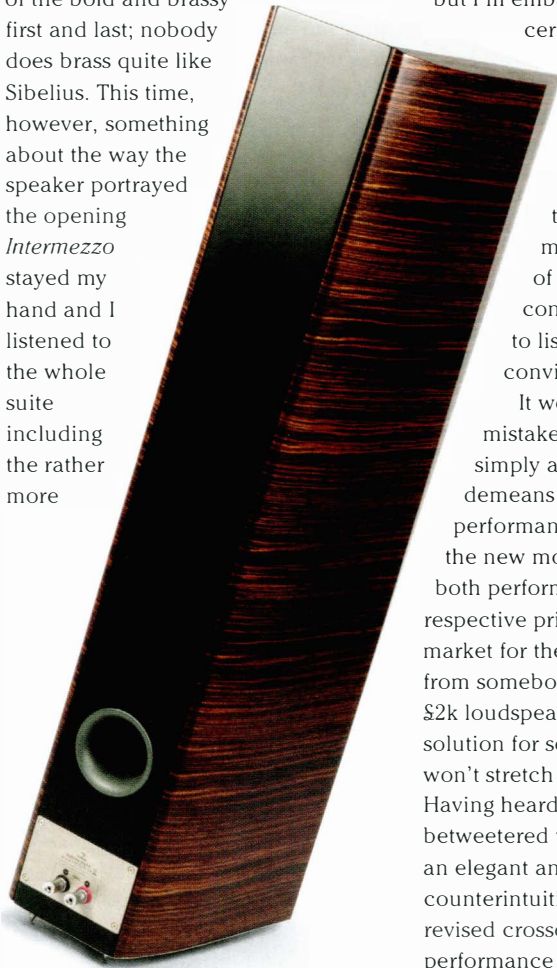
tomfoolery and just play some music.

There is great top-toe coherence in these loudspeakers, bass goes deep while remaining tuneful and agile all the way down, midrange is expressive and natural, and the top end is clear and utterly unforced or stressed. I listened mostly using my faithful NVA 60 Watt integrated and never felt that this either hobbled the loudspeakers, or embarrassed the amp. On the contrary, the pairing produced

some very satisfying music. In this, they differ from the similarly-priced and otherwise excellent Elac FS210 Anniversary, which really needs a very good and powerful amplifier to give of their best, most particularly in the region of bass control. The Electras, in contrast, will not unduly tax even quite modest amplification, though they will amply reward quality.

When I’m getting a feel for a new piece of kit, I often just take an amble through my music collection, letting my next choice of track be suggested by the last. This can be instructive because if you find yourself favouring one genre over another, it may tell you something subtle but important about what that equipment is doing with the music. In the case of the 1027S, my first listening session took me on a trip through the pop, rock and jazz end of my collection, clearly this is a loudspeaker that thrives on energy and enthusiasm and has the ability to convey that through sheer drive and élan. There is a freshness and fleet-footedness about this loudspeaker which threatens to turn any listening session into a party, and an all-nighter at that. The word here is “fun” and it is a word used more than once by other people who’ve heard them at my place. Make no mistake, however, this is no mere bouncy, bassy speaker for upbeat, modern music. I turned my attention to more serious matters and the 1027S rewarded me with scale, depth, subtlety and vibrant tonal colour. For orchestral and choral ►

► music, they are easily able to portray mass and drama, while still allowing subtle interplay and fine detail to be freely expressed. At one point, I put on Sibelius' *Karelia Suite* (Mackerras, RPO, TRP013) and I confess, I usually skip the middle movement, in favour of the bold and brassy first and last; nobody does brass quite like Sibelius. This time, however, something about the way the speaker portrayed the opening *Intermezzo* stayed my hand and I listened to the whole suite including the rather more



atmospheric *Ballade*. And when you do that, the closing *Alla Marcia* makes much more sense, picking up from the second movement it is clearly very much more than just a bombastic set-piece. Oops, silly me, missing the point. Sibelius 1: Dickinson 0, a lesson taught to me by what was quickly turning out to be a rather fine all-rounder.

They do calm and sophistication too: more Sibelius, this time *Valse*

Triste, and the 1027S' phrasing, the ebb and flow of the orchestra carries you along effortlessly. Putting on Gershwin's 'I got rhythm' variations for piano & orchestra (Virgin Classics 7243 5 6147829), the 1027S encourages not merely foot-tapping, but I'm embarrassed to recall a

certain amount of arm-waving, nodding and pointing as well. Music through the 1027S is a very interactive experience, the conveying of musicianship, and the aim of creating an emotional connection from performer to listener, is expertly and convincingly achieved.

It would be a serious mistake to consider the 1027S as simply a 'budget' 1027Be. That demeans the quite remarkable performance achievable from the new model. The two speakers both perform impressively at their respective prices and I can see the market for the 1027S coming equally from somebody moving up from a £2k loudspeaker as from providing a solution for somebody whose budget won't stretch to the £4k 1027Be. Having heard both, the beryllium tweetered version offers not only an elegant and silken top-end but, counterintuitively, the tweeter (and revised crossover) elevates bass performance beyond that available in the S, a performance as unobtrusive as it is effective. The S's bass doesn't exactly draw attention to itself, although in a bass-heavy or large-scale piece the Be is a little more circumspect, as befits its seniority. Honestly, though, I wouldn't argue with anybody who said they preferred the former over the latter

Apart from the sophisticated tweeter technology, Focal designs also feature phase-linear crossovers, something I have come to properly

appreciate while also using the Electras with the Accuphase 213 integrated amp. Accuphase (name, clue, ok?) also expound the benefits of phase linearity and the results, manifested most obviously in superior imaging and soundstaging qualities, bear out this viewpoint handsomely. If you already like what the Electras do, try to hear them working with a phase-linear amplifier if you can; the 1027S will repay the effort with interest, proving that as easy going as this speaker is, it definitely rewards audiophile ambitions. When Focal introduced the 1027Be they brought genuinely high-end musical performance down in price; with the 1027S (Beryllium tweeter or not) they've done it again. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way bass-reflex floorstanding loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	2x 165mm 'W' sandwich woofers 1x 65mm 'W' sandwich midrange 1x 25mm Al/Mg inverted dome tweeter
Sensitivity:	91dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms, (3.5 Ohms minimum)
Bandwidth:	42Hz - 30kHz ± 3dB
Crossover:	300Hz and 2.5kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	264 x 1050 x 350mm
Weight:	31kg ea.
Finishes:	Black silk body with Macassar ebony or Gold cherry side panels
Price:	£2999 pr.

Distributor:

Focal-UK.
Tel. 0845 660 2680
Net. www.focal-uk.com

Manufacturer:

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Standing Tall... The Usher 6371

by Roy Gregory



Usher first arrived on these shores, not so much with a splash as with a resounding thud. Two ranges of speakers were each given their own room at that year's London hi-fi show, the one on the left containing the "Jmlabs" look-alikes, the one on the right, those "inspired" by Sonus Faber. Imitation may well be the sincerest form of flattery, but this was taking homage at least several steps too far.

But the times they are a changing and the capability of emerging economies to both mimic existing designs and deliver astonishing value for money are now solid parts of the hi-fi landscape. It was Usher's misfortune to be well to the fore in the first wave of such designs, but their products, like those of their compatriots, have started to develop and take on their own identity. I remain to be convinced by the beryllium domed tweeter that graces their more expensive models, but further down the range there's definitely nuggets to be dug out – whacking great big ones too...

The 6371 is an imposing and impressively finished, two-and-a-half way loudspeaker; faintly ironic given the hoo-hah the manufacturer makes over their use of Joe D'Appolito as a designer. If the 'central carcass and contrasting wooden side cheeks' formula is far from original, then it's fair to say that the 6371 at least offers its own take on it: the deep, sloping, central cabinet is beautifully lacquered and profiled, set off by the side panels that flank the drivers and the tweeter faring on top. At 1150mm tall it's a substantial beast by anyone's measure, but to that you can add the weight of a massive cast iron base. There's even a cavity in the bottom of the cabinet which owners can fill with lead shot. The whole lot stands on four massive brass cones, threaded into the base to allow leveling. This is one speaker that's absolutely, definitely not going anywhere. There's a neat grille provided (but best discarded on sonic and aesthetic grounds) while the bi-wired crossover is fed from four

► good-quality terminals placed in a recessed panel at the bottom of the cabinet rear, beneath the howitzer-caliber, carefully contoured reflex port. The 176mm woofers employ carbon-fibre reinforced paper cones, and are mated to a 28mm coated silk dome tweeter. The end result is a large, visually imposing and impressive speaker system that shows considerable

attention to detail and a high-quality finish.

But the best thing about all that substance and the performance it most definitely delivers, is the price: Usher's 6371 costs just \$2000 – a pair, not each! And as you'll see, this is no "never mind the quality, feel the width" exercise in surface appearance over genuine achievement.

This is both a very serious and a seriously good loudspeaker system.

Rated at 91dB efficient

with a flattish 4 Ohm load, ease of drive offsets the problems that could emerge from a speaker this large and this affordable with a -3dB point at 30Hz. Indeed, one of the things that becomes very obvious, very quickly with the 6371 is just how willing it is to work with a whole range of contrasting amplification. I ran it with everything from the Gryphon Diablo to the VAS Citation Sound 2 mono-blocs, 200 Watts down to around 40, and the sheer

enthusiasm and gusto with which the Ushers took to the task was entertaining and encouraging in equal measure. But the amp that really clicked was the Audionet V, a five-channel design that allowed the 6371s to be bi-amped from a single chassis. Now, adding \$3K to the bill for the speakers moves them well and truly outside bargain basement territory, but take a listen to this system and you'll see that the whole is considerably greater than the sum required to purchase it. This is one hi-fi system that your non-audio friends won't be able to ignore – and which you won't end up making excuses or apologizing for. These two together deliver the real deal, and you don't need audiophile sensibilities to appreciate that fact.

If you want one word to sum up the 6371s then it has to be "generous": they're generous when it comes to material content and they're generous by nature too. These are not the sort of pinched, pained, ultra-high resolution, buttock clenchingly serious speakers that are all too common in these days of high-prices and less than high-performance; if you want to suffer for your art then look elsewhere, because the Ushers will be way, way too much fun for you. And this is no apology for an unruly or under-damped delivery. The 6371s do what they do because they've been carefully balanced and voiced that way. In this regard at least, there's something rather quaintly traditional about them – loudspeakers done the way they used to be, but managing to incorporate recent driver and crossover technology along the way.

I don't have measurements on these speakers, but for once I'd be intrigued to see some, simply because they sound so unlike all the other MLSSA clones on the market. Tonally, there's a sweetness and roundness to the sound, a sense of warmth, substance and a welcome lack of edge. In part I'd put that down to the use of larger than fashionable bass-mid drivers, reflected in the lower than average 2450 Hz mid-treble crossover

frequency. In part I'd put it down to the really well behaved, silk-domed tweeter. Together, the drivers blend seamlessly to create a coherent sound of considerable scale, impressive weight and real presence, a sound that rewards long-term listening and banishes fatigue.

The downside of this comfortable balance is that the speakers need to reach a certain level before they really wake up. It's not super loud and doesn't



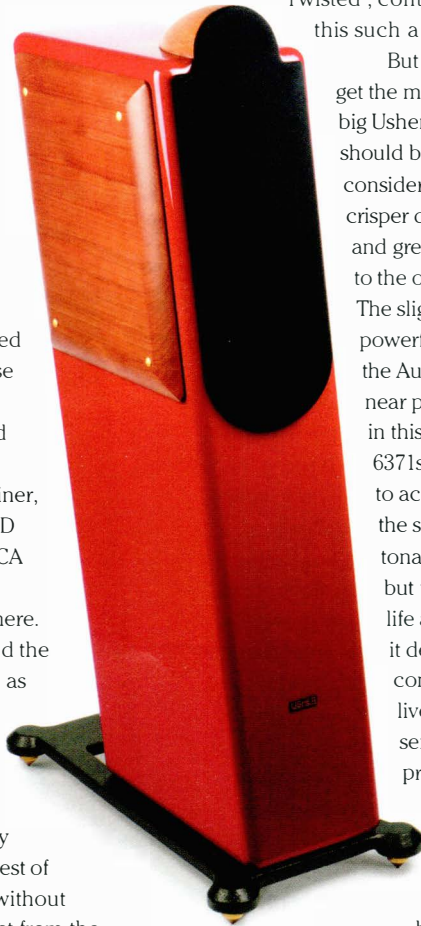
demand a bottomless pit of

power to deliver it, but these aren't the best speakers for late-night, low-level listening sessions. Instead, they like a bit of stick and a healthy dose of dynamic range – one of the reasons they work surprisingly well with modest amounts of valve power, amps that deliver exactly the sort of uninhibited dynamic coherence they thrive on. The other danger is that you inadvertently apply a "nice filter" to everything you play ►

▶ – attractive at first, frustrating after a surprisingly short time. With that in mind I ran a little exercise in compare and contrast, using various recordings of that old orchestral warhorse, *Scheherazade*. It's music that should play straight to the Ushers' strengths and sure enough, they had no problem encompassing the scope, romantic sweep and drama of the Reiner reading. But impressive as their performance was (and I ended up listening a lot longer than I'd intended) what really ticked the box was the way they rendered so obvious the different acoustic, perspective and orchestral tonality/ bias of the Royal Philharmonic as opposed to the Chicago, the poise and dynamic contrast of Beecham as opposed to the more lyrical and flowing rendition of Reiner, the quality of the EMI CD in comparison to the RCA SACD. No collapsing of differences or nuance here. Wheeling in Karajan and the BPO, on record, as well as Chesky and Classic transfers of the Reiner merely served to underline the fact that the 6371s are happy to reveal even the subtlest of mastering differences, without allowing them to distract from the music.

Big speakers that do big are not exactly news, but big speakers that are able to sound small are altogether harder to find. The beautifully crafted delicacy of Eliza Gilkyson's *Hard Times In Babylon*, complex, intricate arrangements embellished with tiny flourishes and musical accents test's a speaker's balance; too much detail and the tracks stutter and lose momentum,

too much muscle and they lose much of their sheer beauty. The 6371s tread a near perfect path, Eliza's distinctive voice is spot-on, the subtle workings of the interlocking melodic strands clear to here, the little touch here, the almost throwaway riff there, highlighting and lifting the music, capturing the haunting poignance of the title track, the dirty smooch of 'Twisted', contrasts that makes this such a special album.



But if you want to get the most out of the big Ushers, bi-amping should be a serious consideration, adding crisper dynamics and greater control to the overall mix. The slightly lean yet powerful balance of the Audionet V is a near perfect match in this regard, the 6371s are easily able to accommodate the slightly hollow tonality of the amp but thrive on the life and dynamics it delivers. It's a combination whose lively, engaging sense of musical presence also lowers the threshold level for satisfying listening, bringing greater intimacy and immediacy to smaller works into the bargain.

So, if you major on the structural, the mathematical symmetry and patterns in music, the Ushers might disappoint. But if you want music to draw you in and carry you along; if you want to hear who's singing and why; if you want a system you can simply listen to rather than one that demands attention then these could be just the ticket. Just be

warned; the 6371s bend the rules when it comes to budgets and expectation. You will end up with a lot more speaker and a lot more bandwidth than you were probably anticipating. Make sure they'll fit and your room can handle the bass before you fall in love. They worked beautifully in my room, but I'm blessed with a really well behaved bottom end. If they don't work in yours you could struggle to find an alternative this musically satisfying and all embracing without spending a lot more money. To say that the 6371s redefine notions of value when it comes to both material and musical delivery rather understates their achievement. Prepare to be surprised... No, make that prepare to be shocked. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two and a half way, reflex and mass loaded floorstander
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm coated silk dome tweeter 2x 176mm carbon/paper coned mid/bass
Crossover Frequencies:	350Hz, 2450Hz
Bandwidth:	30Hz – 28kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	91dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Finishes:	Black, ivory, red, yellow or silver lacquer
Dimensions (WxHxD):	350 x 1195 x 650mm
Weight:	52.5kg ea.
Price:	£2000 pr.

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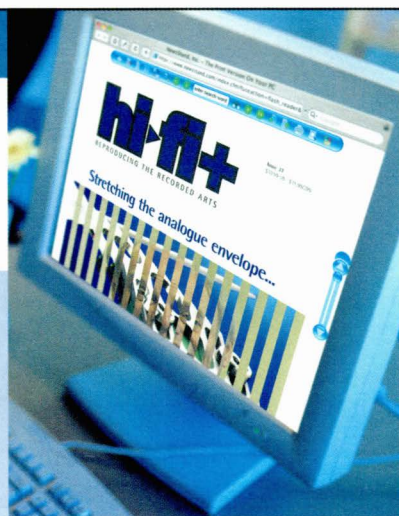
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The Consonance Droplet LP3.1 Turntable

by Jason Kennedy

Opera Audio is a Chinese company that has garnered an excellent reputation for the tube amplifiers it's been building for 14 years. This hasn't stopped the company branching out into source components and loudspeakers, and its stand at the Munich High-End show was replete with CD players, turntables and horn loudspeakers. Horns are notoriously hard to get right and truly low coloration, wide bandwidth designs are rarer than hen's teeth – still that's no reason not to keep up the search.

Consonance is Opera's primary brand, possibly named to avoid a clash with a certain Italian company that uses the Opera name in this part of the globe. The Consonance Droplet series consists of CD players and turntables, the former being particularly attractive examples of the art. With both analogue and digital varieties there are entry level and hardcore options; the LP3.1 is the more affordable of two vaguely puddle-shaped turntables and is very straightforward in appearance and largely in execution too.

It is based around an acrylic plinth that sits on three stainless steel towers that offer adjustment for level and a degree of decoupling by means of fairly soft, squidgy feet. The main bearing is clamped to the plinth using graphite rings on either side of the acrylic in an attempt to isolate the platter with what Opera describes as a "hard damping system". I suspect that it's the difference in materials that affects resonance transmission more than any damping that might accrue from such hard interfaces.

The bearing itself is a stainless steel shaft in a brass bushing with a ceramic

ball and pad taking the weight of the platter. The platter itself comes from the Consonance Liu turntable, which has a square plinth and the stylish Forbidden City square dot finish. Like the plinth it is acrylic albeit with a machined black finish, which makes a change, and has a label indent and a slightly larger spindle than usual. It's turned at the usual speeds by a free-standing AC motor of the same type found in the more expensive Droplet LP5.0 (no sub-woofer required?). The motor is apparently of German origin and has soft feet to stop it exciting the supporting surface. Speed change is manual and, just to keep you guessing,

the smaller pulley is under the larger one. Which made me wonder if someone put it on upside down but the image on the website seems to be the same. Because the motor has a switch on top it makes sense to orientate it so that the belt does not obstruct this switch, but doing so means that the mains lead comes out directly underneath the turntable when it would be a lot neater to have it exiting backwards. This freedom of motor movement also means that you can have different degrees of belt tension depending on how it's placed and while the manual suggests an easy switch access set up there is scope for variations within that.

The ST100 tonearm is apparently made for Opera by another Chinese company and shares the impressive appearance of the ST600 recently reviewed by RG. It can be purchased on its own for £595. The main tube on this nine inch, gimbal bearing arm is carbon fibre and extends an unusually long way behind the pivot, necessary because the supplied counterweights are unusually light.



This approach flies in the face of contemporary thinking, which suggests that a heavier counterweight placed close to the pivot will exert less influence on the behaviour of the stylus. The arm clamps onto the plinth in much the same way as the main bearing, with graphite rings under large knurled nuts, a system which allows height adjustment if you loosen one side and tighten the other.

On our first sample one of these nuts had a damaged thread so had to be replaced, while on the second sample the bolt that locks adjustment of azimuth at the headshell could not be undone because the allen socket had been damaged, factors which took some of the sheen off the otherwise ▶

▶ impressive quality of build, but were easily enough and quickly rectified. The headshell is a rather beautiful thing, albeit one which can't offer a great deal of rigidity.

Getting the deck up and spinning with a van den Hul Canary cartridge in its grip (all of my more affordable MCs seem to have suffered cantilever deviance) proved a relatively straightforward affair. The counterweights can be adjusted very finely and the ability to slide the cartridge in, bolts and all, is quite handy. The resulting sound is calm and

arm base can only be tightened by hand – there are no flats for a spanner. There is little in the way of real damping so perhaps a slightly looser arm coupling is to be preferred.

Moving over to a Linn Adikt MM cartridge seemed to ameliorate this quality a little even though the cartridge has a stiffer (less compliant) suspension. This set-up proved surprisingly subtle and revealing with solid highs and reasonable if not spectacular timing. It certainly encouraged me to force more LPs over the beefy centre pin

about a dramatic tightening of the bass and the delivery of a far more complete sonic picture. The extra height of this stand also let me see the belt gradually ride up the platter edge and then drop down every ten seconds or so, something I couldn't see a reason for unless the motor doesn't sit quite upright on its padded feet.

The Consonance Droplet LP3.1 sounds remarkably good and offers excellent material quality for the asking price. There is a tendency to emphasise detail that doesn't help worn vinyl, but with a smooth enough cartridge this could easily be balanced out. While we had a couple of glitches with the ST 100 arm, these were readily sorted out. It is remarkably well finished and nice to use, which in many ways sums up the turntable as a whole. The Droplet LP3.1 is a good value addition to the growing ranks of affordable turntables. ▶+



substantial, much like the Canary itself really, because this is a surprisingly neutral and self-effacing turntable. It produces plenty of space and air around acoustic instruments and resolves the leading edge of notes with considerable precision. The fretless bass on Tom Waits' *Swordfishtrombones* for instance being superbly intonated. There is a slight tendency to emphasise the upper midrange however, which pulls out certain instruments more than others, vibes and piano on one album, steel acoustic guitar strings on another.

This characteristic makes for highly detailed soundscapes but not always relaxed or exceptionally fine ones. Spatial relationships are well defined in terms of the outlines but are not as fleshed out as they would be with a warmer sounding turntable. I am inclined to point my finger at the 'hard damping' along with the fact that the

and only a few of these revealed slight fluctuations in speed, those with sustained notes from piano for instance. Next to CD the Droplet adds a shine to piano and the usual 'air' of the vinyl medium as well as the groove powered fun factor that makes record players so enjoyable.

With the more luxuriant records it is apparent that some of the depth and body of the sound is missing. Rickie Lee Jones' *Flying Cowboys* usually sounds as if the plush filter has been applied in the studio, but here all that expensive hardware seems to have little effect. You can hear right into the mix however, which makes up for a lot and is certainly on par with the asking price.

The Droplet does appreciate a well-isolated support. Moving it to a Townshend Seismic Stand brought

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Belt-drive record player
Speeds:	33/45, manual shift
Motor:	AC synchronous
Main Bearing:	Stainless steel
Bearing Sleeve:	Solid brass
Bearing Ball:	Ceramic
Platter:	Acrylic
Dimensions (WxHxD):	500 x 130 x 320mm
Finishes:	Black, coffee, grey, brown, blue or clear acrylic
Price:	£1195 inc arm

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Living In The Shadow... Carat's C 57 CD Player

by Chris Thomas

Occasionally you come across a truly exceptional performer. Maybe it extends your notion of what's possible; maybe it extends your notion of what's possible at a given price. The Carat A 57 amp is one such component – but examples are few and far between. The truth is that most products are a little better or worse than their peers, especially at the lower end of the market. Which makes the burden of expectation a dangerous thing. If you want to like a product too much and it fails to match your hopes, do you mark it down as a result? Being a little better than average is a long way from being bad. Given my extremely high regard for the A 57, this was exactly the challenge facing both me, and Carat's C 57 CD player. Frankly, it was always going to have its work cut out to match the performance of the amplifier.

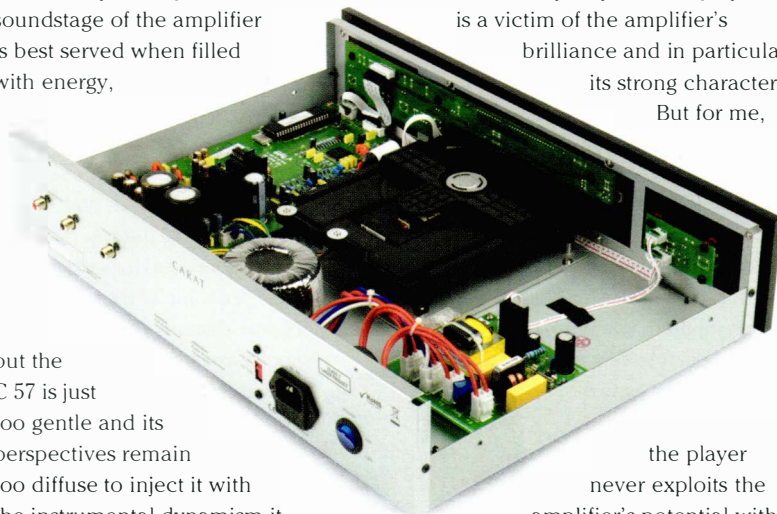
As with the A 57, it all looks good from the outside with sharp looks and build. The black acrylic fascia and blue illumination are visually appealing and the C 57 comes handily equipped with a decent pair of OFC leads with locking RCA plugs and of course, a remote control. Internally the player uses a Phillips transport and Burr-Brown 24/96kHz converters and output devices, all of which give it a good pedigree and the ability to read both CD and (the increasingly rare) HDCD discs. I had no qualms about sticking it straight on the front of the successful (if unlikely) combination of the A 57 amp and Micro Utopia Be speakers, and although the supplied interconnect was better than expected, the Vitus Andromeda cables gave a much clearer picture of each component's contribution.

The C 57 needs considerable run-in if it's to escape a clenched and constricted sound – a couple of months of continuous use at least. It has reasonable, though not ▶



▶ remarkable resolution and its overall balance is somewhat soft. It lacks that bite and defined edge to its delivery that CD can be so good at. The designers seem to have steered away from too bright a balance at all costs. Instead they have opted for an altogether silkier and less sharply focussed view of the music, but have they over done it? I could understand this if the matching amplifier was a lean and sharp performer, but nothing could be further from reality. The A 57 is a truly great little amplifier and a steal at the price. It might be slightly lightweight in the bass, especially when driving hard, but it has real delicacy and a quite remarkable sense of musical perspective. When it came to the C 57 I guess I expected (or hoped for) more of the same but, in many ways, it moves in the opposite direction, even to the point of muting the A 57's attributes. Which is where I need to be careful, because whilst the musical results are perhaps a little too bland and uninvolving for my taste, on the other hand there is absolutely nothing to dislike about the sound the Carats produce together.

The lively and open soundstage of the amplifier is best served when filled with energy,



but the C 57 is just too gentle and its perspectives remain too diffuse to inject it with the instrumental dynamism it thrives on. I soon switched to the no-nonsense Electrocompaniet ECI-5 and found that this amplifier's sense of drive and bristling power delivery

suited it far better, especially with the Micros. Here the player does not sound quite so hesitant and that sense of lush smoothness does not dominate. The ECI-5 grabs hold of the music and seems to re-energise it in a way that the A 57 doesn't. Yes, these amplifiers are very different in both

attitude and price, but they give you a completely different view of the CD player's capabilities. It also illustrates in the starkest terms how dangerous it is to make assumptions or assess any electronic component in a single system.

As part of an all Carat system the C 57 feeding an A 57 brings mixed virtues. In many ways the CD player is a victim of the amplifier's brilliance and in particular, its strong character. But for me,

the player never exploits the amplifier's potential with enough vigour. Speaker choice is going to be absolutely critical and with the right chemistry perhaps a better balance could be achieved,

but with the Micros I definitely preferred it in combination with the gutsier sound of the ECI-5. Outside of the context of an all-Carat system I think the C 57 is a perfectly reasonable option – safe and smooth and solid, crying out for enthusiastic partners. As a matching system, the Carats certainly provide an undemanding,

smooth and fatigue-free flow of music - one that you could listen to for days on end. Is that enough? You be the judge – but for me, despite the obvious aesthetic appeal, these units perform better apart than they do together. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	One-box CD player
Converter:	Burr-Brown PCM 1732 24 bit/96 kHz
Outputs:	2x RCA (analogue) 1x RCA (digital)
Output Level:	2V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	420 x 100 x 330mm
Weight:	6.3 KG
Price:	€699

Manufacturer:

Inovadis, France.
Tel. (33)(0) 155 091830
Net. www.inovadis.com



UPGRADES FOR THE KUZMA STABI XL AND A NEW VERSION OF THE STOGI 313 REFERENCE TONEARM

by Roy Gregory

An essential part of Kuzma's eagerly awaited new 4POINT tonearm (reviewed in the next issue) is its VTA adjustment tower. Based on the elegant arrangement first developed for the Air Line parallel tracker, this uses the same large and smoothly damped horizontal knob and locking cam set up, but this time in an outrigger design conceptually and geometrically similar to the layout adopted by the Triplanar and VPI JMW tonearms. The substantial horizontal gantry supports the bearing assembly for the tonearm, while the vertical screw and lock allow precise and repeatable height adjustments to be made on the fly.

Of course, once the tower and gantry exist, the dimensions and layout can be adapted to accept any tonearm bearing and armwand the manufacturer deems appropriate. In this case that means the proven components from the Stogi 313, creating a hybrid arm denoted by the Reference/VTA suffix.

The significance of this is twofold. Firstly, it adds one of the best VTA solutions currently available to the already excellent performance of the 12" Stogi tonearm. If you use a deck with built in VTA adjustment (like Kuzma's Stabi XL) then the benefit is limited to the improved ease of use, but such decks are few and far between, so given the critical musical importance of record by record VTA adjustment, this is

a welcome development indeed. In use the 313 Ref/VTA retains all the confident poise, unforced dynamics and stability of the original, but adds the greater temporal and spatial precision that comes with optimized VTA. What was already an excellent arm now boasts a more lucid and communicative quality, making music more involving, more natural and easier to listen to; All very good things. But the second factor is, if anything, more welcome still. The outrigger

arrangement allows the VTA tower to absorb the extra spindle to pivot distance necessary to provide accurate alignment of the 12" arm. Combine that with Kuzma's adoption of Linn style arm mounting and what you have here is a proven 12" tonearm (with all the sonic benefits that accrue) that offers repeatable VTA adjustment (along with excellent azimuth and overhang arrangements too) that will mount on any deck capable of accepting a standard 9" tonearm. It will literally drop into the same cut-out vacated by a Linn Ittok or Basik,

Alphason or equivalent. If you currently use a Rega arm, all you'd need is an off the shelf Linn type armboard.

Within Kuzma's own range for instance, that makes it possible to mount a 12" tonearm on the Stabi Reference for the first time. But the same is true of decks as diverse as the Gyrodec and Orbe, various SMEs, the VPI Scout and a host of other possibilities, promising the benefits of really precise set up and reduced tracing distortion to owners of these players. The LP12 anyone? Arm-mass and the off-set centre of gravity might be a problem there, but it's an intriguing prospect, n'est ce pas? The 313 Ref/VTA starts at £2250 including Crystal internal wiring and is available now.

The second part of this upgrade package is a new power supply for the Stabi XL4, along with a neat little set-up device to ensure simple and accurate spacing for its four separate motor pods. The latter is basically a solid delrin cylinder with a recess in the underside that sits over the motor pulleys, effectively increasing their diameter by precisely 3mm; simply move the motor pod towards the platter until the set-up tool touches its periphery and hey-presto, you are there. It couldn't be easier – or more accurate, ensuring considerably simpler and quicker set-up, more consistent belt-tension and therefore (one assumes) reduced motor vibration and improved speed stability.

When originally launched the four-motor upgrade simply used Y-adaptors to double up the twin outputs on the



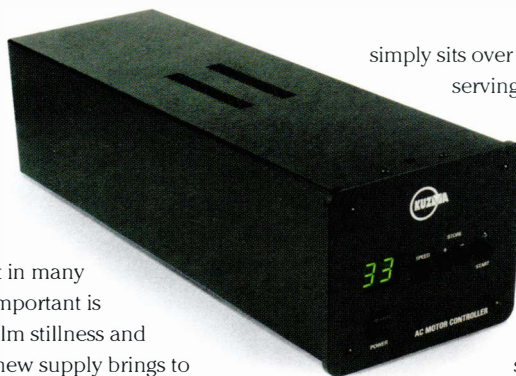
▶ standard supply. As well as the provision of four discrete output sockets on the rear panel, the new PSXL4 supply also has push button speed control/adjust (a big improvement on the grub screw adjuster of the standard supply) and a numerical readout of platter speed. The supply itself generates a quartz derived dual sine wave, with a sophisticated computer control circuit to govern the fine speed control. And the best bit? The new supply can also be used with the standard two motor set up. Good news because it represents a significant upgrade. Order a brand new XL4 and you get the new supply included. If you have the original supply with an XL4 or two-motor XL it can be upgraded for £1290 plus your old supply, or it can be added to a new XL for the same price.

In use, the new supply is simplicity itself, with one button for speed select and two to adjust the settings. Plug it in, set the speeds with a battery-powered strobe (I used the KAB Speed Strobe) and away you go. What will you hear? The drop in noise floor and blacker backgrounds that result are immediately obvious in the increased separation, solidity and dimensionality of images, the greater immediacy of micro dynamics and the better

definition of acoustic space and its boundaries. Less immediately apparent but in many ways more important is a sense of calm stillness and stability the new supply brings to music. Performances take on a spacious, unforced quality that adds significantly to their expressive range, allowing more room for the musicians, making interpretation much clearer, making more sense of the musical picture. So, if you take Nanci Griffith's 'Listen To The Radio' as an example, not only is the instrumental spread and tone more stable and natural, but each instrument and voice is fuller and more solid, almost as if it has a new, lower centre of gravity. The backing vocals are now on a level with the lead, three distinct voices, the opening piano part offers shape and line, rather than just a spray of disconnected notes, while

the instrument itself gains weight and body. Indeed, as so often, it's piano that reveals the real benefits of the increased speed stability, with the space around notes, the delicacy of their decay and above the stability of their sustain all significantly improved. The natural focus and poise, the absolute stability and anchored image of Janis Ian's 'Some Peoples' Lives' is breathtaking in its simplicity and realism, the piano not betraying itself, the voice poignant and direct; neither disappoints.

Which brings us to the third part of this jigsaw: a new wooden record weight to replace the screw down clamp. Carved from the same Mpingo wood as the legendary Shun Mook Record Clamp, thankfully the Kuzma one doesn't share the four-figure price-tag of the Japanese model. A carefully shaped and slotted cylinder, the new weight



simply sits over the spindle, serving to amplify the benefits of the new power supply. Tonal colours are more natural, especially the decay and also the spacing of the

notes. As a result, phrasing and the expressive shape that players and singers put into their performance are far more apparent and effective. Add the new weight to the mix and the natural beauty of the Janis Ian track lifts the performance clear of your hi-fi – it just is.

Eagle-eyed readers will notice that the clamp has two sets of interlocking slots, one long and one short. It can be used either way up, positioning the short slots down offering a quicker, leaner sound. But for my system, the long slots proved significantly superior in all cases. Still – it's nice to have the choice. Besides which the performance of the weight suggests it might well be worth trying on other 'tables.

The differences I'm describing here are not small, nor are they confined to acoustic recordings, affecting all music equally. The results are more natural, more engaging, the system easier to forget. Collectively, the new power supply and record weight lift the Stabi XL4's performance another, significant notch, safeguarding its position in the face of renewed competition. ➤



Prices -
 Stogi 313 Ref/VTA: £2250
 PSXL4 Controller: See text
 Ebony Record Weight: £425

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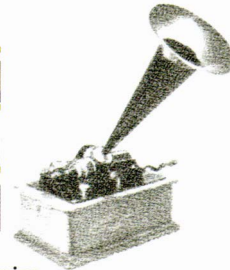


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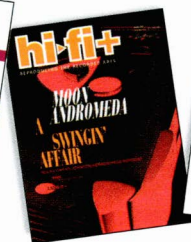
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NIGEL KENNEDY

SELF-STYLED CLASSICAL COOL CAT...

Interviewed by Anke Kathrin Bronner

Please note that Nigel Kennedy is well known for his use of “colourful” language, language some might well find offensive. How much of it comes naturally, how much of it is part of his public persona is a fascinating question that we’ll allow you to judge. So, we’ve reproduced his words verbatim for that reason (rather than simply to shock). We hope you’ll understand. Ed.

I’ve waited years to interview Nigel Kennedy; so long that when the opportunity finally arrived, I grabbed it, even if it meant conducting our conversation in a limousine, travelling the autobahn between the airport and his hotel. It’s just that no one thought to mention the fact, the tiny detail, that the “chauffeur” in this instance was a former racing driver! In one sense at least, I can guarantee that this is the fastest interview on record... one for the *Guinness Book of Records!*

Bizarre and not a little frightening, it was an experience I wouldn’t have missed. Kennedy contradicts all of the clichés circulated about him. Of course, he is different, but being different doesn’t mean being nasty! Instead of the “enfant terrible of classical music”, I met a loveable and approachable person. Admittedly, at first glance, Nigel seems somewhat strange, the obvious attitude, the faux Cockney accent, the punky hairstyle and singular dress sense. But these things constitute a hardened shield constructed to protect a sensitive, vulnerable soul. Behind this facade, there is a totally different person: Polite, intelligent, humorous, profound, gifted with a deep understanding for music!

AKB: Nigel, what is your relation with your violin? How would you describe it?

NK: Well, I have got about three or four violins that I use regularly and I have got a very close relationship with each of them. I have got the Guarneri del Gesù I have had for 12 or maybe 15 years, quite a long time. So I know the idiosyncrasies of that violin. I have let some other people try it and, you know, they find it very hard to play. It is not so readily gratifying as some of the Stradivari violins. But, you can go into that violin more deeply, get deeper, more expressive sounds and more variety. You just have to work harder for the notes.



So, that one has being part of my life for a long time. Then I have got a Barrett violin which is the one which I practise on, which I can play in the desert, I can play in the pub, without having to worry about climatic control. For the Guarneri I have to keep things cool all the time, ‘cause it’s a great work of art from so long ago. With the Barrett I know that I can play it in heavy sunshine, or go out in the garden and play it. So, I love that violin too, because of the great sense of freedom it gives me, that I can take

music everywhere and not have to be like Howard Hughes with the fucking instrument, you know. Then I have three Violectras, five string electric violins, which I find make a very nice sound. They’ve also got the warm sound that I am looking for, whereas most of the electric violins that I have tried like Zeta and other new models of electric violins, they sound too synthetic for me, like plastic. So I’ve got those in combination with a Rivera amp which I really like using, and some pedals. So really my setup has been the same for quite a long time now.



► **AKB:** And what about carbon violins?

NK: I've tried carbon bows and think they are dreadful, I have to say. You know, I have heard people saying how great carbon bows are. But... you know, the design of the violin has been in wood for quite a long time, and to me it always seemed more important who the craftsman was, who made it, rather than if it's a particular type of varnish or if it's a particular... Yeah, obviously you need some type of wood which is pretty good, and like, various materials, but really, it's a bit like: Does it really matter what the canvas is made of, or does it matter who painted it?

AKB: The soul?

NK: Yeah, the soul, and the individual who did it. You know, it is not the material, what it's made of, it's the human being who makes it.

AKB: When did you discover your talent for jazz and pop music?

NK: Man, I guess I discovered it when I was about 11 or 12, playing on the piano. Then I met Stéphane Grapelli when I was about 13. And I thought: "Well, fuck, yeah, you can do it on the violin!" And I dared to play jazz on the violin after hearing Stéphane play. And so, I guess, that since I was about 13 I have been doing that – and enjoying it, you know. I think if you enjoy it then there's always a chance you might take it further! It's cool!

AKB: And do you need different techniques when you are playing jazz?

NK: I don't know, man, because I think you need a totally different technique playing Bartók than if you are gonna play Vivaldi. Or if you are gonna play Mozart, you need a totally different technique, anyway, just within the realm of classical music. So, you know, if a C sharp is in the fucking top of an E diminished chord, then it's got a different function than if the C sharp is the root of C sharp minor, you know. And that's what makes technique work. It's like the instinctive understanding of harmony and the purpose of the notes. So, I wouldn't say necessarily that it's a huge difference in technique. I mean, the main difference in my technique between jazz and classical is that I am playing an electric violin with five strings and using sound pedals, guitar pedals, and an amp. So, it's a different technique because of that. Not so much because of the music, but because I am actually playing an electric violin, you know.

AKB: And when you are playing jazz, are you thinking: "Oh, I could do more chords? Today, I would love to have a lot of double stops in my playing?" Or is it just spontaneous?

NK: It is never technique first with me. You know, I think if hypothetically someone like me decided to do a lot of double stops that would be really disrespectful to the other musicians. You know, with jazz you have to listen to what everybody is doing even more than with classical music, and do something which is relevant to the flow of the music that's going. And so, you can't really premeditate, like just on a whim, what you might be thinking you might wanna do. So really my technique just follows my mind and my heart, just like in classical music or in folk music. I think the players who think technically first, they're really not serving the music or their colleagues. It turns into a kind of library music, museum music, instead of being live. And maybe that's where you are talking about some special energy. One way of killing the energy is making up your mind too strongly exactly what you are gonna do. Because then you are not open to what energy there is in the air, from the audience, from the orchestra, or from the band. If you are open to that, then you can have energy. But if you decide: "Oh shit, I'm gonna play some tenths now" (laughs), it's not gonna happen. It just be some clever violinist doing his shit.

AKB: You certainly have more freedom in jazz than in the strict classical repertoire where you have to play all the notes that are written. But are you also improvising in the classical repertoire sometimes? Adding some notes?

NK: Well, I do my cadenzas. And in the Baroque repertoire, where you are expected to add notes, then obviously I will. But I think there's just as much freedom in classical music as in jazz. You have got much more dynamic variety that allows spontaneity, and you have got rhythmic pacing which you can do spontaneously to a much bigger degree. And the tone colour: I guess in jazz you have got that as well, but in classical music a very important part of the expression is the tone colour, vibrato, things like that which you would not normally use in jazz. You have got these extra things you can do. So, I wouldn't really think that there is more freedom in jazz. It is just a different type of freedom, you know..

AKB: But doing so much improvisation or playing jazz, does that inform your classical technique?

NK: Well, since I have been playing jazz since I was 12 or 13, I don't know what it would be like if I didn't do jazz, you know. I certainly think the type of musician I prefer is a more open minded, more well-rounded musician, playing quite a diverse repertoire rather than a specialist one, you know. I think that makes a better musician. And for me, it's my only way anyway. I like to play a good variety otherwise I might get a bit bored. Variety is the spice of life, so they say! ►

► **AKB:** Of course! What I really appreciate is your vitality and your power on stage. Maybe classical music also needs such different approaches?

NK: I think the power and the vitality and energy of people and of music is always there. And everyone's got it, right? But I think maybe some of the teaching and some of the pedagogues and the pedantic ways that are used in the teaching of classical music maybe kill the energy. So I don't think it's that I've particularly got any special energy. I think it's more like:

The energy is there, but many people are paranoid and they hide behind technique, or try to impress people. You know, that stops the energy coming through. Because you have got a whole orchestra around you, or a jazz band, and you've got the collective energy of all those people which can be showed in a controlled way, but also a spontaneous way. Or else, you can kill it by just resorting to play an automatic, formula interpretation!

AKB: But I think a lot of musicians are afraid of letting the energy out, or afraid to improvise. If they don't have their sheet music in front of them, they don't know what to play.

NK: Well, I don't think that classical musicians are any less intelligent, it's just that they are frightened and that they grow up in an atmosphere of fear where the first thing they learn is: "You should not make a mistake." Because otherwise someone else says: "Oh, that guy is not such a good violinist as the other guy because he made one more mistake." You know, that is a stupid way to play music. If you are listening to someone like Fritz Kreisler or Jacques Thibaud: they recorded live, so they were always making mistakes, but you get much better music from them than the note perfect readings modern recording techniques give us!

AKB: I think the problem was Heifetz, because he made so few mistakes!

NK: Well, he did actually. He was playing the Walton *concerto* one time and he totally messed it up. He forgot where he was and had to start again. So, even that guy who

everyone says was perfect, he did some absolutely horrible things. And when he recorded the Bach, who cares if the notes were right? It's an absolute crime against Bach what he did. You know, he's an amazing guy with the control of the bow and everything, but he has been the worst influence on the violinists in the 70s and the 80s. Luckily now, I think the violinists of today have got better role models than that. More varied, as well. Anne Sophie Mutter is a very good role model. Gidon Kremer has been a good role model. Even straight after Heifetz, you had the choice of Stern, Milstein, much more human players, you



know. Menuhin as well, even though his technical level was not what it should have been. But still, sometimes in three, four bars, he could communicate more than 1000 of the modern violinists.

AKB: Who were your role models?

NK: Man... (makes a long pause). I am not sure. I think I really stopped having a role model by the time I was a teenager. But I remember really admiring the playing of Isaac Stern, because to me he is the only violinist I have ever heard who's got any concept of structure – and harmonic knowledge. Like mostly, even the great ones, they play with melodic beauty and some nice vibrato. But Stern is the only that you can tell where you are in a movement. If you put on the old vinyl shit for instance, if you put it on in the middle of the track, you can tell: We are in the middle of the movement here. We are coming to the end of the movement. We are at the beginning of the movement. You can tell exactly where you are because of the internal logic! And then there's the clarity of his playing, beautiful intonation and great sound, no bullshit, no fucking posing around, you know. I just don't know how Lambert Orkest played those Beethoven *sonatas* with Mutter for instance. The piano has to play twice as fast as the violin, because the violin has to be the big star. That is no way to play chamber music, man!

AKB: It's a sonata "for pianoforte and violin"...

NK: Exactly. So, how can Lambert Orkest be the fucking clown in this fucking partnership?!? Isaac Stern would

▶ never do something like that. Like his recordings with Serkin for instance – phenomenal! Great stuff, man! Even now, above every violinist I have heard, I would say that Stern is way above: In the honesty, the integrity, the understanding of music in a holistic way, not just from a violinistic point of view, you know.

AKB: Its musical intelligence, you mean?

NK: Yeah. And with great analysis, laser clear, fucking understanding of the music. Brilliant!

AKB: You close your eyes when you are playing. Are you on another level of consciousness when you are playing on stage?

NK: Yeah, I think you do get into a different level of consciousness when you are playing – once you are absolutely sure that you are not gonna fall off the front of the stage. Then you know if you... (laughter)

AKB: Have you ever had an accident?

NK: Well, I do check, just to make sure I'm not gonna fucking go over. If you close your eyes, you fucking hear better, man! You know, as well, you are using your ears more... I have been doing a lot of work with orchestras and no conductor, which is so much better. Because I don't think the visual thing is as important to music as getting the whole orchestra to feel like an oversized string quartet. And if you can get everybody feeling that they are in a chamber orchestra, then you've got an orchestra playing with passion, control and everything, man!

AKB: And they don't rely on the conductor, they start to listen?

NK: Exactly! And they start playing together, and reacting to the playing as well.

AKB: And are you a good team player?

NK: Yeah, I think so, but I'm a captain, too... But I'm a good team player. I mean all that which I said about not playing

tenths just because you want to play your double stops, that is all about being a team player. And in my gigs I get the best out of the orchestra. I give them as much autonomy as is humanly possible. But of course, people ask me to go and play with them because I've got an interpretation, so I should lay down some parameters. That's my job, being the one who stands up, to bring in and establish the parameters. But I bring in parameters that leave space where people can still play as individuals!

AKB: And are there musicians you would really like to play with? Particular jazz or classical musicians?

NK: Man! Not really, you know. I mean mainly it's music led; whatever you wanna do musically. I'll write it and then see after I have fucking written it, who I think might be the best person for that. So, it's not particularly that I wanna play with a player because they play in a particular way and I admire the motherfucker. Obviously there are many players that I do admire, but really it's the music that comes first. It's not to play with someone because I love him, I choose to play with them

because they might be good for the music that I am trying to do. So, it's a slightly different outlook.

AKB: You played with Ron Carter and Jack de Johnette, who are great musicians.

NK: Exactly, and that's fucking amazing. Obviously, I've been listening to Ron Carter and Jack de Johnette for a long time and would have loved to play with those guys. But it needs the right music. It was because of the repertoire that I chose for that particular album that

I chose them, and those guys said: "Yes, it would be fucking amazing." So I was lucky, you know, and it was just an amazing experience playing with them cats! Just seeing that they've come so far and got so much respect in the music business and they still behaved just like normal people and no bullshit, you know. Great and refreshing!



► **AKB:** Please tell me a little bit about Stéphane Grapelli!

NK: He was cool, man! I met him when I was at the Yehudi Menuhin School. And like all young kids, you think: “Hey shit, what is the fucking proper way of doing these things?” And like: “How do you be a good musician? I wanna be a good musician. How do I do it?” You know, all kids ask themselves that, if they’re gonna try being a musician. So, I saw Yehudi and he was one of my main role models. He would eat muesli and he did hell for shit, always immaculate, and never say a bad word about anyone, like a living saint! And then I met Stéphane Grapelli, totally different: drinking fucking malt whiskey, smoking spliff, fucking life. But also, he never did nothing bad to no one. A totally different lifestyle. And so, it was a great lesson to me that you could be yourself. There is not one way to do it. And with Stéphane: even when he was an old man, he put the violin under his chin, and suddenly he’d become like, 30-years younger. It was just such an amazing process, seeing him play.

AKB: Young eyes?

NK: Yeah, and the whole energy. And the smile, you know! Brilliant. The enjoyment of the moment! Cause with classical musicians, sometimes listening to Yehudi, it was a bit like one could tell he was going through some traumatic things with his technique and different stuff. Unlike with Stéphane, it was just a matter of joy. Whenever he picked up the violin, it was just like sharing so much of the joy of music and the moment, you know. Not thinking: Oh, shit, there’s a difficult run coming up now! Just effortless playing. Enjoying every moment!

AKB: That’s great! I think a lot of musicians have lost this feeling!

NK: Yeah, people get too wound up about what they do, instead of just letting the music take over. They are always thinking. “What is coming next?” or “What did I just do?” Which is too egocentric! Just let the moment take over. And then something good can happen, you know. I think a good time to be wound up about what you do is when you are practicing at home! But not in front of an audience: At that point you should be more thinking about: “Let’s share some beautiful moments with these people who have come all this way on the bus or in the fucking car”. It’s really nice that they’d come to the gig, or whatever. Share some times with them.

AKB: But I think it is a gift if you have this ability to be on stage and forget everything. A lot of professional musicians aren’t able to forget the things around them.

NK: Yeah, yeah. I don’t think a teacher or a professor should really criticise one of their students after they have

done a concert. It is good to work with a student. But when the concert has happened, there shouldn’t be that extra pressure on the guy. Give them a break, ‘cause quite often the professors teach them in a very easy way, they teach everyone the same way. They all get to do almost the same thing. They all use the same approach to interpretation. That’s not the way to teach people, you know. Each person’s an individual! And if they’re gonna be a great violinist, they’re certainly not gonna become better by being told to play exactly like the other students or exactly the way some professor wants. The good professors encourage individuality, saying, “Well, that’s fantastic. I love hearing something I have not heard before, you know!” I was lucky to have teachers like that. But others... lots of them, they said: “Well, I have never heard it like that. That can’t be right!” And that’s a bullshit approach, really!

AKB: Thus you can’t develop your own personality and your own tone colour.

NK: Or your own relationship with the music! And with the instrument, which is very important. If you want to honestly share something with your colleagues and the audience, you can’t be sharing second-hand ideas from your teachers or from CDs or LPs and stuff. You have to think yourself and say so to the audience and your colleagues: “This is what this fucking music could be like. Let’s enjoy it!”

AKB: I think most pupils are little “mini-Mes” of the teacher, you know!

NK: But I think that’s the teacher’s fault more than the student’s. Because I think it is much more convenient. I don’t see any point in that! And it was very early on in my career when I realised that a lot of people in the classical musical industry were expecting me to be like the next Menuhin. I was lucky that I met Stéphane Grapelli and a few other people. I just thought: “Well, I’m not gonna do that. I prefer to be the best that I can be rather than to be a second-rate Menuhin!” Because no one is gonna play like Yehudi Menuhin. Only that motherfucker got that DNA, isn’t it?

AKB: But I imagine it was hard for you to go your own way!

NK: Yeah! I even had arguments with Yehudi himself, because he was very disappointed once I decided I didn’t wanna be the second Menuhin. You know, he helped me a lot.

AKB: You were like a son for him?

NK: Kind of. Well, he paid for everything for ten years for me. And, yeah, at one point it was almost like that. ►

▶ But then, you know, every kid has to grow into a man at some point in life.

AKB: To go your way?

NK: Yeah. But it was a lot of pressure for a young guy starting in the classical business, so to speak. They wanted me to be the same as the other violinists at that particular age, to just slot in like a puzzle piece. But you might wanna be part of a different picture than that!

AKB: So, you felt a lot of pressure!

NK: Well, it was for me. But there it is not much pressure now, because I am just doing what I do and I am enjoying it.

AKB: So, what was it you learned from Yehudi Menuhin?

NK: Well, it was a kind of quite a broad area where I learnt things from. For instance: In the school, they had a different religion. It wasn't just Christianity, but sometimes there'd be Buddhism or Taoism or like even just stuff from a great writer. So, I learnt a certain amount of open-mindedness about that, like Yehudi's respect for people like Ravi Shankar and Stéphane Grapelli. That was very big. I also learnt, on a more superficial level, not to be too frightened of the media. Because like Yehudi was sticking his face in front of TV cameras all over the fucking place. Which was quite unusual for a classical musician! So, I learnt: Don't be frightened of the media (laughs). Oh, I've been ungrateful! The real thing I learned is like... hearing him play, sometimes, on his best day, just four notes of his could be better than a thousand notes from someone like Itzhak Perlman or someone who plays happy all the time. That teaches you what music is like. 'Cause someone like Perlman is such a great violinist, yet he can never really express sorrow in his playing. It is always bright playing, happy playing and "hoho". Fantastic. But someone like Stern or Menuhin, they can express the whole range of emotions. You know, to hear Yehudi playing, it was just intense, the beauty when he was working well. Playing

slow movements is probably what I learnt the most from him, 'cause everybody can play fast music. There's no problem with that. Anybody can do it. All you have got to do is just practice hard enough to get some bow speed and do some fucking contests, right. But with a slow movement, you have to get in touch with the soul of the music, and quite a lot of these virtuosos, they've got no idea 'bout the soul of the music. And when you put a simple melody in front of them, they don't know what to do. So listening to Yehudi playing so honestly and so

deeply with just a simple melody like the second movement of Brahms for instance, that was what I got from him. I think it was the enjoyment and the heart of playing more intimate music!

AKB: Is playing slow movements like being naked on the stage?

NK: Yes, because there is no technique to hide behind.

AKB: And it's like giving all your emotions to the audience, right?

NK: Absolutely, yeah! And nothing else, you know! So if you don't have any emotions and you're just a technical merchant..



AKB: Like a lot of players today...

NK: Well, quite a lot of it seems to be that way, because the world is very technical place now.

AKB: Unfortunately yes.

NK: Yeah man. Don't get Clark Gable any more, do you man? (laughs)

AKB: You are living part-time in Poland. Has the country and the culture changed your approach to things?

NK: It certainly has. For me, it is the first place I've really managed to get a jazz band together that I am totally happy with, because there is such a strong jazz movement there. And the Polish musicians, they work hard and they play ▶

► hard! But they don't say: "Oh shit, we have got five minutes, otherwise we're gonna be going into triple pay." You know, it is not like that. It's like: Work until it's good, and then stop. It is much more like that!

AKB: But you also play Vivaldi. What do you like about his music?

NK: Well, I don't like it as much as Beethoven or Bach, but it is certainly music where you can communicate very quickly with your colleagues and the audience. It is vibrant, it's got vitality. And the slow movements are very beautiful as well. So, it is not very deep music, the construction of it is nothing compared with Bach, for instance. But you can't only play Bach. You can't only eat fillet steak. You have to eat some vegetables sometimes and some other things, too. You can't just play one composer unless you are fanatic (laughs).

AKB: And you are in the *Guinness Book of Records* for your *Four Seasons*. Are you proud of what you have achieved up until now?

NK: Now, that *Guinness Book of Records* never sent me any Guinness, so, you know, I never got nothing! (laughter) When I was a kid, I thought: Fuck, you're gonna get some barrels of that fucking beer man. But no, nothing, you are just in that fucking *Guinness Book of Records* which only sounds like Guinness!

AKB: But are you proud of where you are today? I mean: All the recordings, all the awards, all the music you have given to audiences. Are you proud of what you are doing?

NK: I don't know! I've got a gig tomorrow and I don't wanna fuck up there (laughter). It is the next gig and the work you are doing now that's really important. As with every artist, I think it's much more important than what you have done in the past. You know, the show is finished when it is fucking over. But I'm pleased to have got classical music in particular, into a lot more people's homes and to have opened the doors of the private club of classical music and let everybody in. You know, some people got annoyed with me for that because they liked to think they know more than everybody else does. Once I let the proletariat in, it ruined their dream of being super fucking human beings, 'cause everyone's the fucking

same, you know! And it is not even an age thing, what I done with that: A lot of older people started listening to classical music for the first time with that Vivaldi shit I was doing. It's not just kids. Everybody's got a right to enjoy any type of music! Classical music was pretty much hidden except for some particularly, upwardly mobile corporate-type people. Old bourgeoisie, or new bourgeoisie, those are the people who heard that music. And I am quite proud that I have managed to bring classical music to a broader spectrum of people than just these whatever... "privileged" people.

AKB: To be in the charts?

NK: Yeah, well, the charts, that means something. But you know, it is not being in the charts. It's the fact that you have got it to more people! People that otherwise would have been kept out by obvious horrible fucking stuffy noise and shit.

AKB: And what makes you really lucky in your life?

NK: Phhhhhhhhh. Many things, man. Waking up in the morning. That's not bad! (laughs) So, it's a new day, man. It's cool (at the driver's)

It's not time for a suicide yet! We are young beauties!

AKB: So, you are always looking forward?

NK: Puhhh... Yeah, to breakfast! (laughter)

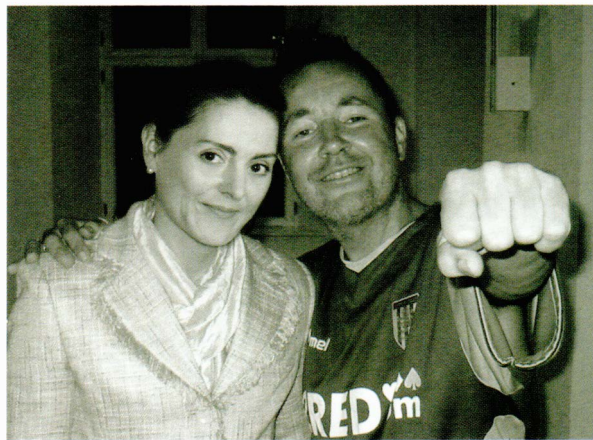
AKB: After jogging!

NK: Yeah, I don't mind getting up and running a bit. I tell you, you need to be pretty fit for playing long concerts! I don't get tired very easily, and that's pretty good. You need to have that! To be able to play with other musicians and consider what they need, not just what you need yourself. And then you have to be okay physically. Otherwise you just become a passenger in it, you know!

AKB: But you are the captain, right?

NK: Got a tramp, I'm the captain! Take the ship in the right direction! (laughter)

AKB: Thank you for the interview, captain!



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.

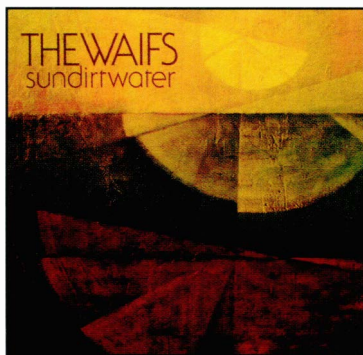
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard,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



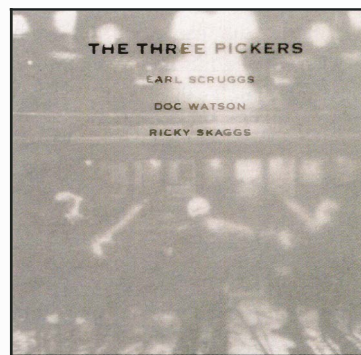
The Waifs

Sundirtwater

Jarrah Records WAIFSCD010

It's been an amazing ride for The Waifs and they've come a long way since they first began in the deserts of Western Australia 15 years ago. They've built a loyal following by being fiercely independent and touring relentlessly. Waifs-mania reached fever pitch when they stole the show at the Cambridge Folk Festival a few years back, culminating in a smash record *Up All Night* and various *Aria* awards. In 2005 they released a fabulous double live album *A Brief History* which captured all the magic and intensity of The Waifs on stage. Now they bring us *Sundirtwater*, something of a departure from the country folk sound of old. Recorded in Nashville with some pretty esteemed guests, this record is a real musical chameleon. There's still the gorgeous blend of Donna Simpson and Vikki Thorn's voices - both sent from heaven - but more emphasis is placed on Josh Cunningham's guitar playing; it's earthier, bluesier and in some places, downright dirty. That's not to say The Waifs have abandoned the tender moments; 'Vermillion' lifts gently in the breeze, the girls' voices accompanied by the sweetest of blues solos, whilst 'Feeling Sentimental' harks back to the golden era of Peggy Lee. I don't know why, but as I listened I kept getting reminded of those classic Linda Ronstadt albums - not a bad reference point for this lovely piece of work.

AH



Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson & Ricky Skaggs

The Three Pickers

Rounder RRCD 0526

A celebration of kinship and sumptuously and spontaneously plucked and picked bluegrass from this Holy Trinity of guitar, mandolin and banjo players is a delicious prospect and this evening's live entertainment recorded in December 2002 at the R.J. Reynolds Auditorium in Winston-Salem, North Carolina never, ever disappoints. The musicianship, improvisational virtuosity, connectivity, sheer dexterity and interpretative excellence are enviable. Those standards are maintained throughout a generous twenty-three track, sixty-five minute running time. The crowd-pleasing guest appearances of the radiant Alison Krauss on tracks like 'Earl's Breakdown', 'Down In The Valley To Pray', 'The Storms Are On The Ocean' and 'The Banks Of The Ohio' is the glacier cherry on this perfectly iced cake. Each richly spiced slice of storytelling - be it a Carter Family, a Monroe Brothers number or one of those many Scruggs, Watson and Skaggs signature tunes - is an aural delight. Throw in some old fashioned jousting between guitar and banjo in tunes like 'Katy Hill' and symbiosis is complete. This is an acoustic and artistic tour de force, almost matched in the sympathetic, clean sounding and detailed treatment meted out at the recording console.


RP





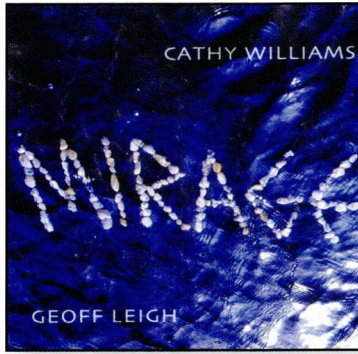
The Believers

Lucky You

Corazong Records CRZ255106 

The Believers cut a great album full of driving rootsy rock a few years back. Two tracks from that are included on this new release; the ultra-catchy 'Railroadspikes And Shotgun Shells' and 'Long Way To Heaven', and both fit in seamlessly with these ten new songs. Blessed with two cracking singers – Cyd Frazzini and Craig Aspen – The Believers come at you with all guns blazing. Aspen's guitar crackles into life on opener 'Lucky You', urging Frazzini on to spectacular heights as she rips off a steaming vocal. She's one of those singers who can adjust her voice to suit the song; it can be tough, powerful and direct one minute, then softly sensuous the next. Aspen's no slouch either; his has just the right amount of grit and harmonises beautifully with Frazzini's. As with the first album, repeated plays are necessary to uncover what's hidden underneath. After a few spins, what might have sounded almost throwaway on first listen comes to the surface and nestles in the memory banks. The harmonies wash over the senses sending a warm glow to the listener's centre, and although Frazzini doesn't sound like Emmylou Harris there's more than a hint of the latter's work with Gram Parsons here. The Believers tour relentlessly and have honed their particular brand of high-octane roots rock to perfection. This is the sound of a band in their prime.

AH



Geoff Leigh and Cathy Williams

Mirage

Hard World HWC004 

Mirage is a performance art fusion where the North Indian Raga tradition cascades into the world of contemporary folk and jazz improvisation. Cathy Williams' ethereal female vocal effects, half chanted and half sung, and those mystic arrangements for harmonium, tempura and zither constantly hover out there, just beyond reach. They are musically anchored by the soprano sax and flute playing of Geoff Leigh who brings a semblance of clarity in the aurally and visually arresting soundscapes evocatively entitled 'Desert', 'Windfall', 'Gaia' and 'Peacockspreads his tail!' The overall impact is one of an acid trip-like journey in experimentalism but without an addict's inevitable emotional withdrawal. Shimmering images have a calming and hypnotic quality and beyond this sensory stroking is an occasional direct statement of intent in music like 'Boepa Rangzen!' that has been crafted to encapsulate, through percussion, bells and singing bowls, the cultural traditions and by implication the aims of the free Tibet movement. From a personal perspective, I can't be overly judgemental where this oeuvre is concerned because my points of reference extend little further than the environs of the New Age Windham Hill recordings which definitely have greater substance and longevity.

Supplier: frontier@btconnect.com

RP



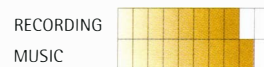
Jack Savoretti

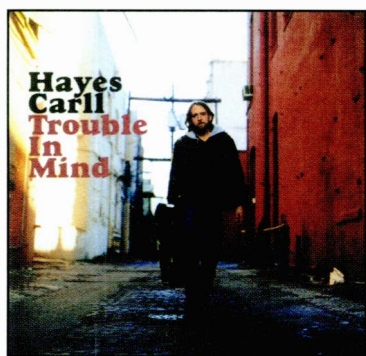
Between The Minds

De Angelis Records DAR11CD 

Between The Minds slipped out quietly last year but still managed to eclipse everything else I heard to become my favourite album of 2007. Savoretti is a premium grade songwriter; they only come along once in a blue moon and when they do they must be cherished. There are songs on here destined to become as relevant as anything written in the last 40 years. They're beautifully sung in a voice with haunting tones, and they stream into the consciousness on a wave of gorgeous melodies and deeply poetic lyrics. Soulful, sad, uplifting – this young man nails every emotion and feeds them back to us with breathtaking skill. He connects in the same way Paul Simon does, and like him has the power to move the listener to distraction. If you haven't already purchased *Between The Minds* then now is a good time to do it, because it's been reissued with an extra disc of unplugged versions of the songs. In naked form they sound just as good but there are five new songs as well, the best being 'Lucy', a real heartbreaker guaranteed to open the tearducts. Savoretti is the best young songwriter walking the planet right now, and if you have any romantic bones in your body then you need this album in your collection. If justice prevails, he'll go on to conquer the world.

AH





Hayes Carll

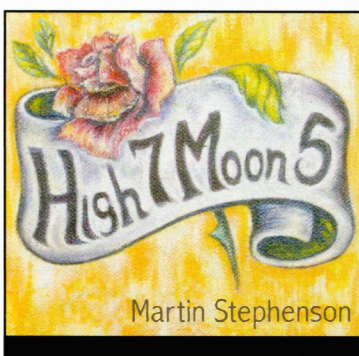
Trouble In Mind

Lost Highway 0602517544635 

Heaven knows what it is they put in the water down there in Texas, but great singer/songwriters just seem to tumble out with amazing regularity. Hayes Carll has been around for a while now and had a particularly difficult initiation, playing to hostile crowds in the Galveston suburbs. That gave him a backbone of steel and endless fuel for his imagination, and taught him that nothing in this life drops in your lap; hard work is the key to success.


Trouble In Mind has its feet dangling in a pool of influences; Steve Earle, Townes Van Zandt, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Guy Clark – all can be heard in his sound. Like those illustrious names, Hayes Carll knows how to spin a story, his characters and the lives they inhabit become very real in his skilful hands. That tough induction course in Galveston is documented in 'I Got A Gig' where he sings of "burnt fried chicken and Lone Star beer" and how "the cops and the kids drink free 'round here." He writes with humour too, one of the funniest being 'She Left Me For Jesus', where he loses his girl to the bearded one and promises, "if I ever find Jesus, I'm kickin' his ass!" I love this guy; he's got a giant-sized poet's heart, a great, lived-in voice and a superb band. He'll go far.

AH



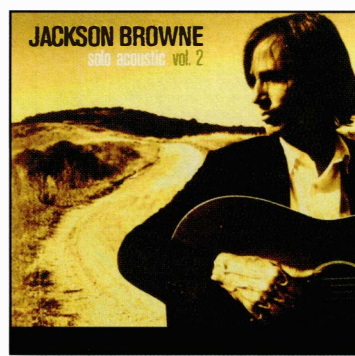
Martin Stephenson

High 7 Moon 5

Stovepony Records WCMF004 

Martin Stephenson remains a fiercely independent, prolific and unique exponent of a countrified R&B/folk crossover genre. His largely unheralded technical accomplishments as a guitarist have rightly over the years been compared to Santana and Thompson. He is that good. The style is effortless and undemonstrative. Even when picking at a banjo for the bluegrass infused 'Hungry Hash House' it kind of creeps up on you unannounced. Martin's song writing and storytelling too has much in common with Richard Thompson. He has always had the stubbornness to plough his own groove regardless, but with an unmistakable sad-eyed gentleness for love songs like 'Joy That U Give' and 'Tynemouth Sands' that separates him from his contemporaries through an unforced observational quality. He makes modern folk music but tells us tales without preaching a social gospel. The acoustic simplicity of High 7 Moon 5 is comfortably old fashioned in this respect. It harks back to and celebrates a music scene from yesteryear. 'The Hangman' is a fine example of this. Yes, it's an acquired musical taste but one that I have advocated from the very beginning. Occasionally, Stephenson even steps forward and teases us with a return to his roots. 'Mountainous Spring', its cadences and vocal thread, takes me back nearly a quarter of a century to that precociously talented lad fronting for the Daintees in the North East of England.

RP



Jackson Browne

Solo Acoustic Vol. 2

Inside Recordings INR8021-9 

The mark of a great song is how well it stands up when stripped of all the trimmings. When it's taken right back to its conception and presented in all its naked glory, and it still has the power to move and connect, then it truly is the work of genius. This is Jackson Browne's second 'live and alone' disc and it's bursting at the seams with timeless tales of the heart, along with occasional references to the struggles going on in the world right now. Anyone who's ever seen Jackson live will know that he loves to interact with his audience. Between songs he spins fascinating stories, and some are included here. However, any listener who finds this intrusive won't be offended because each intro has its own track number and is easily passed over. There's no doubt that Jackson Browne is a fine storyteller and a singer of warmth and integrity, but what's sometimes overlooked is just what a splendid guitar player he is. He tends to favour gentle picking rather than hard strumming and always marries it perfectly to the song. He knows his way around a piano too and accompanies himself quite serenely on the gorgeous 'Sky Blue And Black'. Beautifully recorded, *Solo Acoustic Vol. 2* is Jackson Browne in front of an audience and at his best: peerless, fearless and untouchable.

AH





Patti Larkin

Watch The Sky

Vanguard Records 79851-2 (CD)

The way records are made today is changing, with more emphasis placed on Pro-tools and other computer wizardry. Patti Larkin likes to combine the old with the new and she does it to such amazing effect that it's sometimes hard to hear the join. What she's created with *Watch The Sky* is a piece of ethereal beauty; the music drifts through the cosmos on a sea of blissful harmonies as drum loops, vintage acoustic guitars, bazoukis and all manner of strange instruments weave their way out of the speakers and into the senses. Larkin's a brave girl; she sings, plays and produces everything on this album, and it's a tribute to her skill and vision that it all hangs together so beautifully. It makes no difference if she's singing a tender ballad with the simplicity of 'Cover Me' or creating a semi-tribal groove as she does with 'Beautiful' – she always pulls it off with grace and a knowing for what sounds right. Her breathy vocals with their stunning range caress every song, and her guitar playing is never short of wondrous.

Patti says she loves moonlighting as 'Gizmo girl' but she's a novice engineer, therefore there's the odd tape hiss or amp buzz. They're hard to notice because the sheer beauty of what she's created has the same draw as the most magical summer sunset: in other words, heaven sent.

AH



Paula Cole

Courage

Decca Records 80008292-02 (CD)

Prodigal Paula's return to the recording studio after a seven-year self-imposed hiatus is a poignant, subtle and far calmer affair that deliberately avoids the more didactic qualities that permeated *This Fire* and *Amen*. Don't get me wrong, I'm an ardent admirer: those albums cut through the mediocrity of late 1990s pop music with their genuine concerns spectacularly delivered through the beautifully breathy and multi layered vocal strains. Joy! Her voice has lost none of its delicacy or power to inflict bittersweet emotion. *Courage* is populated by richly diverse songs – from smouldering piano bar numbers like 'Lonely Town' that effortlessly recreates the romance of yesteryear – to the trademark stretched pop vocals for the teenage rites of passage track, '14' and even extend to an imaginative 80s synth-chic crafted for 'Lovelight'. There's still that burning desire deep inside to tell it how it is through wonderfully varied hues. Principals like independence and integrity which anchor that artistic vision still course through her veins and vocal chords. Cole's pulse here is strong and regular, yet so much more considered and not as unrelenting, drum-like or unforgiving as before. The production is evocative: tactile textures by turns pungent and sparse, jockey for aural prominence.

RP



Stormwarning

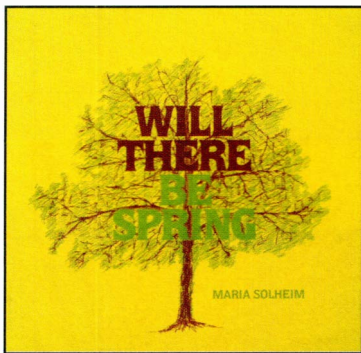
Something Real

Lightning Fingers Records SWCD50802 (CD)

Now here's a fabulous ray of sunshine to combat those ever-increasing household bills and fuel prices... a band with a sound that harks back to the glory days. Pop it in the player and prepare to be entertained with a capital 'E'. The first thing to hit is the sound of the guitars; they pulsate with energy, the kind of energy Richie Blackmore generated with Deep Purple. Now before we get ahead of ourselves, Stormwarning are not a heavy rock band – more a heavy blues band with a light jazz coating and a strong rock backbone. Seven-minute opener 'On The Road' is a perfect example of what they do best; there are 30 seconds of haunting keyboards and tinkling guitars before the band kick in on the coat-tails of a throbbing backbeat. It's a sublime way to introduce any album and I guarantee you'll go straight back to the start and play it again before moving on to the remaining eight tracks. Bob Moore is a terrific guitarist, as comfortable playing the heavier stuff as he is when he's in more authentic blues mode, whilst Son Maxwell has the perfect voice for this sort of thing – and he blows a really tasty harp to boot. More space is needed to do Stormwarning full justice. I don't have it so I'll just say go out and buy...you won't be disappointed!

AH





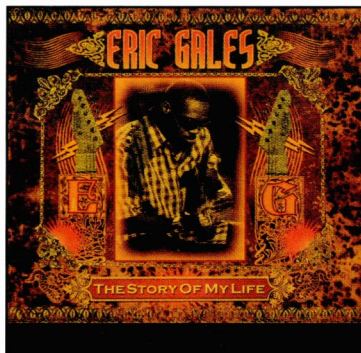
Maria Solheim

Will There Be Spring

Strange Ways Records Way 256

Barefoot, *Behind Closed Doors* and to a lesser extent *Fragile* dealt with the fissures, fractures and the emotional and physical upheaval of abuse and relationship breakdown. Maria's delicate, eminently vulnerable and exposed vocals suited this material as this confrontation purged her of these fears. For her latest album, *Will There Be Spring* these themes appear less frequently and instead, with songs like 'Mountain Song', 'Wildest Day' and 'Burn The Books' she chooses to lead us to a more devout and spiritual place that finds its answers in faith rather than through fortitude, self belief and personal determination. Philosophically, while I won't deny her the strength of her convictions, I am a little nervous placing my life in His hands when such bad things happen in this World with frightening regularity. That said, Maria's gently probing Norwegian-inflected folk-pop style, with its acoustic simplicity, absence of didacticism and lyrical economy develops some memorable and enduring vistas. The tentative love song, 'Ocean Needs Water', her emotional analysis for 'Different Seasons' and that barely disguised potential for pain that exists just below the surface in 'Take My Heart Revisited' effectively probe these areas with their prosaic images.

RP



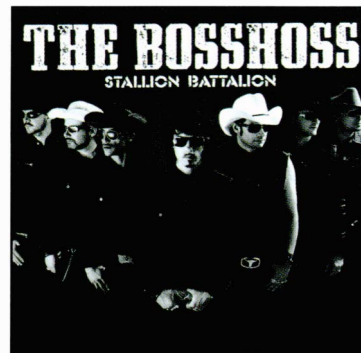
Eric Gales

The Story Of My Life

Provogue Records PRD7252 - 2

There's no shortage of great guitarists out there and Eric Gales is one of them. He doesn't just play, he attacks the instrument with the ferocity of a more melodic Jimi Hendrix. A wealth of pedal effects accompany his extraordinary ability with the six strings to create an explosive fusion of psychedelic sounds. Gales has kept this relentless attack on the senses going for most of his career, but this time he's mixed it up with more traditional blues shuffles to create a far more balanced affair. 'Ain't No Shrink' is a great example of how to play it straight ahead; the notes ping off the fretboard but are only placed where they're needed - it's how to give an electric guitar freak what he craves without taking it to extremes. 'Laying Down The Blues' is more of the same and bounces along on a powerful groove; it's just amazing how a three piece can manage to swing so effortlessly. This is an Eric Gales album though, so there's still plenty of hard-driving, wild psychedelia going down; 'The Sound Of Electric Guitar' and 'Very Educated' hit that particular spot with a vengeance. Gales has to be the finest exponent of heavy funk-rock treading the boards right now and this album is definitely the story of his life; across its thirteen tracks, he's left nothing out.

AH



BossHoss

Stallion Battalion

Universal 0602517340428

The country-trash punk rock sub-genre just can't be ignored. Unashamedly macho, rocking and a sure-fire 110% proof, *Stallion Battalion* is the place where country music and pop culture collides in a beer swilling, chick-chasing crescendo of slick tempo fun. The gritty gravel chewing vocals are supplied by Boss Burns and Hoss Power, their wry, sometimes surprisingly intelligent and always catchy lyrical twists leave an indelible sidewinder-like patina across ten originally penned numbers whose titles include 'Free Love On Free Love Free Way', 'Omniscient Lover', 'High' and 'Truck'n'Roll Rules'. Hell! These boys and the five other band members make it pretty clear that they like their crop tops low and well-filled, so don't expect to make eye-contact with them any time soon. Yet beneath the bravado there lies some serious musicianship and smartly executed arrangements which take this album beyond the posturing and puts some tightly drawn flesh on the bones of their growing cult status. Covering 'Drop It Like It's Hot', 'Gay Bar' and an exceptional version of Depeche Mode's 'Everything Counts' irons out a few wrinkles, but it's their take on swamp rock (Tony Joe White's 'Polk Salad Annie') that hints at deeper social concerns.

Supplier: frontier@btconnect.com

RP





REBEL YELL...

STEVE EARLE, ANGUISH AND OUTRAGE

by Andrew Hobbs

Understanding Steve Earle requires an open mind. He's outspoken for sure, but unlike an awful lot of politicians and hard line bigots the man has the knack of pressing buttons and hitting home. That's probably because when it comes to life experiences Earle's covered most of the bases – and then some. Drug addict since the age of thirteen, serial wedlock practitioner, state execution witness, fireball political activist, alcoholic, staunch believer in the 12-step programme, jailbird, songwriter extraordinaire...if the qualifications needed to be a real rock 'n' roller are formed around the depths of debauchery and excess, then Steve Earle has the diploma, the T-shirt, the reputation and the notoriety.

Born in Hampton, Virginia in 1955, Earle spent most of his early years growing up in Schertz, Texas. By the time he was thirteen he was already a heroin and hash user and getting himself in a whole lot of trouble. The musical seed had already been planted though – he'd discovered Jimi Hendrix. If a musical career is how you see your life going, then there are worse places to hang out than Texas. With the help of Guy Clark, Earle managed to secure a deal as a hired songwriter with RCA and scored a few minor hits for others. At that time his style was very much in a rockabilly vein; a good place to start but hardly hinting at what was to come. Shovelling pills down his throat as if they were Smarties, snorting Cocaine for the pain (later to be immortalised in song with 'CCKMP') and with a heroin habit worsening by the day, Earle needed more than minor hits to pay for it all, so he relocated to Nashville, signed for MCA and ten years later (!) released one of the most important

collections of outlaw hillbilly country ever - the mighty *Guitar Town*.

Quite how a renegade rebel with a huge appetite for the (self)destructive and unconventional ever managed to get an album so radically different from the Nashville mainstream into the stores is still something of a mystery but he did, and it was soon a certified gold record. *Guitar Town* has no fillers; it's stacked to the gills with absolutely incredible song-writing and playing. His band at that time

included some of Nashville's finest sidemen: folks like Richard Bennett on guitars, Bucky Baxter on pedal steel, Harry Stinson on drums and Emory Gordy Jnr on bass. Country music is at the core of *Guitar Town* and is well served by the likes of 'Little Rock 'n' Roller', a true story about a trucker who calls home to speak to his little boy and apologises for his continued lack of presence, but the album possesses a much grittier side too. 'Someday' and 'Fearless Heart' romp along on a bed of dirty guitars, road songs that could

only have been written by somebody who'd been there and done it. Steve Earle had arrived in spectacular style and the record buying public were lapping it up.

Guitar Town's follow up - *Exit-O* - leaned even further towards rock; the guitars still had plenty of twang but the knobs on the amps were wound well hard against the end stops. Songs about girls and the open road mingled seamlessly with more autobiographical tales – 'Angry Young Man' being one of Steve's most personal to date. With lines like "dreams die easy out here on the streets" and "you keep your mouth shut and you do what you're told", Earle was allowing us into his

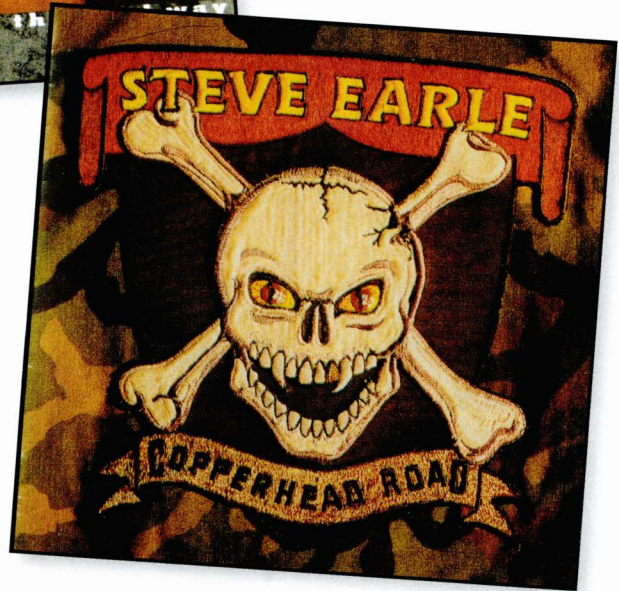
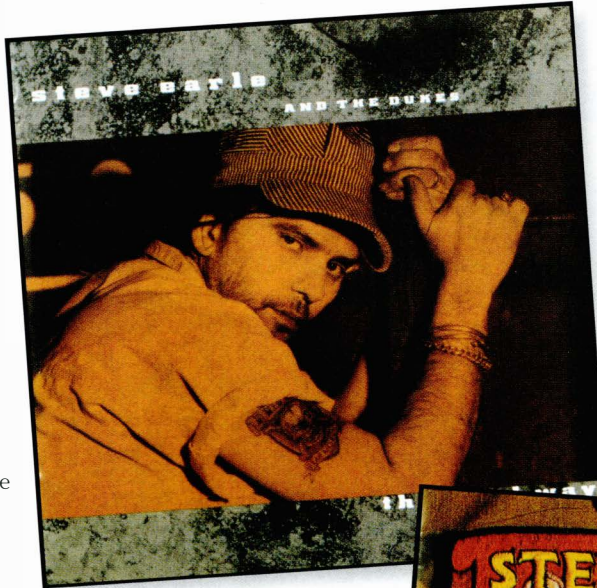


▶ private world of pain and anguish. He was indeed an angry young man and, but for the grace of God, could quite easily have slipped off the edge of the world. God had more far-reaching plans for Steve Earle though, even if this hardcore troubadour couldn't quite see it at the time.

The metamorphosis hinted at on *Exit-O* fully materialised in 1988 with the release of *Copperhead Road*; Earle's hair was now halfway down his back, there were a few more tattoos and, judging from the photograph on the sleeve, an acute shortage of soap. However, this band weren't just all about image; they had the songs to back it up.

The title track – about moonlighting whisky down the Copperhead Road – became something of an anthem; the way it builds on a mandolin intro into a stomping, all-out swell of melodic rock still makes the hairs on the back of the neck sizzle. Sister track 'Snake Oil's full-on hard rock bellow is heralded in on the back of a rolling piano, with Earle declaring in full southern drawl: "Ooh, I like that echo, goes right through my head...I had that once but it was chemically induced." Murderously infectious, 'Snake Oil' showed that Earle had no intentions of becoming 'the next Bruce Springsteen'; he was by now far more bad-ass than that. But bad-ass attitudes need hard living friends and Earle found them in The Pogues. 'Johnny Come Lately' steamed along with the Irish jig masters for company and it made for an intoxicating mix – in every sense of the word! The Texan rebel and his new-found drinking buddies were up for some serious partying and Earle had another gold record on his hands. *Copperhead Road* has just been re-issued, re-mastered and expanded as part of Universal's Deluxe Edition series; there's never been a better time to invest in an album that has stood the test of time better than most from that era.

When *The Hard Way* appeared in 1990 Earle's drug habit had become something of a runaway train, and quite how he managed to keep up such a high standard of writing is anybody's guess. For this writer, *The Hard*



Way stands as one of his finest pieces of work, and with 'Billy Austin' – an acoustic tale about a guy who holds up a filling station and blows away the attendant in the process – Earle brought to the attention of his listeners a subject very close to his heart: the death penalty. As a story song it's very reminiscent of Springsteen's narrative style; told in the first person, Billy Austin describes exactly what he did in minute detail, about how "the kid done like I told him, he lay face down on the floor" and even manages bragging rights later in the song when he says "I didn't make the papers, cause I only killed one man." It's harrowing stuff, provocative and a subject Earle

would return to at a later date. Losers and the darker side of life surface regularly on *The Hard Way*; 'Esmeralda's Hollywood' (a co-write with Maria McKee) is the sad tale of a hooker who "comes out when the sun is gone" only to get murdered in a town where "no one shed a tear that day... it was just like any other day."

As The Verve famously said, "the drugs don't work" and they weren't working for Steve anymore. Life in the fast lane was fast coming to an end for a man whose answer-phone message once proclaimed: "Hi, I'm Steve Earle. I am not at home. I'm out beatin' up cops, shootin' heroin and chasin' girls." Aside from the mental and ▶

► physical damage, Steve's addiction was costing him a fortune; he admitted in a recent interview that "a million dollars worth of guitars went in my arm."

Unlikely salvation came in the form of a jail term in 1994 for possession of heroin, and it was whilst inside that he was introduced to the 12-step programme – a mantra in which he was to fully immerse himself. By the time he resurfaced, heavily bloated by steroids, Steve Earle was well on his way to reversing a lifetime's worth of bad habits when he released his first album in five years, the critically acclaimed and predominantly acoustic *Train a' Comin'*. It was fashionable back in 1995 for bands to do 'Unplugged' sessions for MTV, a point not lost on Steve Earle. In the liner notes he wrote: "...make no mistake, this ain't no part of no unplugged nothin' – God, I hate MTV." Same old Steve; still pissed off and in no mood to grow old gracefully. He might not have been young anymore, but he was still an angry man.

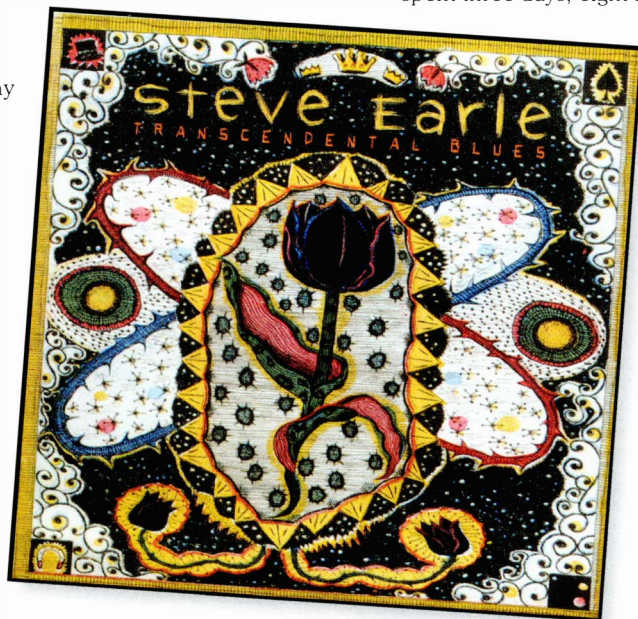
It must be scary for a recovering addict – especially so for a creative one – because there must be a belief somewhere in the mix that the drugs drive the creativity. That hasn't been the case for Earle, his intricate and highly complex mind took off round the cosmos; being clean meant chasing dreams - and he chased them fervently. The second post-prison release, *I Feel Alright*, received rave reviews and again crossed musical rainbows. This is the album that housed the aforementioned 'CCKMP' (Cocaine Can't Kill My Pain) and had Earle proclaiming in the title track, "I've been to hell and now I'm back again." Thumping country rock surfaced on 'Billie And Bonnie', essentially a re-write of the Bonnie and Clyde story, but Earle's lust for romanticism wasn't to be denied either and he let it spill out in spades on 'Valentine's Day...' weeping strings, and all.

1997's *El Corazon* found Steve rearranging the musical chairs to somehow accommodate bluegrass kings The Del McCoury Band and bad boy punks The Supersuckers. The latter back him manically on 'N.Y.C.' where the amps get close to boiling point on the insanely catchy chorus, as Steve insists he's "going to New York City, 'cause I've heard the girls are pretty." *El Corazon* also harbours two beautifully constructed and touching numbers, 'Christmas In Washington' which pays homage to Woody Guthrie, and 'Ft. Worth Blues', a tribute to one

of Earle's biggest influences and closest friends – Townes Van Zandt.

One of the most profound and devastating moments in Steve Earle's incredible life occurred in 2000 when he was asked by Jonathan Noble – a prisoner he befriended on Death Row – to be a witness at his execution. Earle spent three days, eight hours every

day in his company before Noble was transferred to Walls Unit, Huntsville to be, as Earle so eloquently puts it, "pumped full of chemicals that will collapse his lungs and stop his heart forever." The whole episode left Steve swearing never to repeat the



experience but doubly determined to fight harder for the abolition of the death penalty. He wrote a fantastic article for the Guardian newspaper that captures the whole sordid event in riveting but quite disturbing prose, and it can be seen in its entirety at www.guardian.co.uk. Earle also included a song dedicated to Noble on that year's *Transcendental Blues* entitled 'Over Yonder (Jonathan's Song)' and after reading the article above it takes on a much deeper meaning than it would otherwise.

In 2002 Earle did something that would have flattened the career of lesser mortals; he wrote a song about John Walker Lindh, the American who joined the Taliban in the wake of 9/11. Nothing extraordinary about that, I hear you say. Well no, except Earle wrote it from the Muslim viewpoint and that, to patriotically blinkered Americans, is tantamount to treason. But hey, that's Steve Earle for you; he sees in glorious technicolour whilst a fair proportion of the rest of the world's eyes reside in the darkness of their orifices. He was recently quoted as saying: "I'm not one of those Americans who think that the United States is the be-all-and-end-all of fuckin' anything. Why do we have to be number one?"

Steve Earle for president, anyone?





Alboran Trio

Near Gale

ACT 9469-2

Classic acoustic jazz trios have enjoyed something of a renaissance over the last few years and based on the experience of hearing this set from the Italian Alboran Trio it's easy to see why. They combine traditional jazz forms with delicate touches of world music, and deliver the whole with a skill, surety and melodic invention that is hugely enjoyable.

With the exception of one number, all the tunes here are written by the pianist Paolo Paliaga, and whilst throughout you are aware of the way working with musicians from around the world influences him, this is very much a collaborative venture, which no single musician dominates. As Paliaga himself says: "We're the Alboran Trio, not the Paolo Paliaga Trio... there are very few groups where everyone is on an equal footing." So seamless is the music making and so high the overall quality that it seems churlish to single any particular track out. That said I particularly enjoyed the swirling 'Fuori Stagione', the bowed bass that opens and then carries through 'Invariable Geometries', the African influences in the percussion of 'Also Sprach Raul', and so on. Doubtless new favourite tracks and moments will emerge in repeated listening to this gently engaging and delightful album.

DD



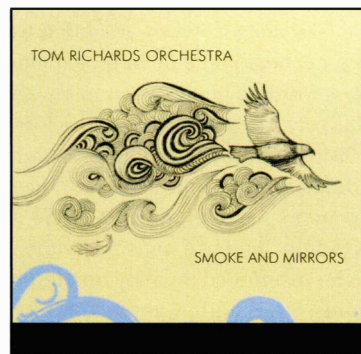
Irene Kral

Where Is Love

Choice/Pure Pleasure CRS1012

Pure Pleasure's latest batch of releases includes three female vocalists, and each of them (including Betty Carter's *Now It's My Turn* and Nancy Harrow's *Wild Women Don't Have The Blues*) are exceptional LPs that deserve wider recognition. This set of duets with pianist Alan Broadbent, however, took my breath away. The AllMusic jazz guide calls this one of the finest sets of ballads ever recorded, and I don't know how to say it any better. Kral died of cancer at the age of 46, and did not record extensively, but this selection is a masterpiece, and I can think of few examples of piano accompaniment as sensitive as Broadbent's. Recorded in December 1974 at Wally Heider Studios and released on the Choice label, Kral and Broadbent run through nine slow ballads, but there is never a slow or boring moment. Their version of 'Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most' is routinely cited as the definitive version, and a similar case can be made for every tune on the album. I listen to a lot of records, and even some that I like very much seem to go no further than one listen before I am on to the next. I've played this one perhaps a dozen times since it arrived. The sound captured by Heider's Gabby Garcia is near perfect, and Ray Staff's mastering is on a par. Top recommendation.

DDD



Tom Richards Orchestra

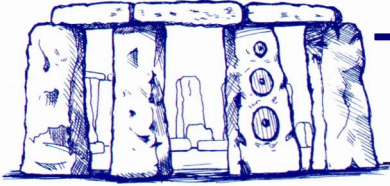
Smoke and Mirrors

Candid CCD79850

This debut album includes five original numbers from leader saxophonist Tom Richards and one joint composition in the title number with guest star Jamie Cullum. The album reflects Richards' ambition to compose accessible music with a strong melodic content that ranges from lush orchestral textures through swing to electronic soundscapes. Ambitious, but very well realised, the title track being a good case in point: With treated vocals from Cullum that wouldn't be out of place in a '70's concept album (I mean that as a compliment), coupled with driving percussion, beautifully judged piano (as ever) from the hugely talented Gwilym Silcock and excellent electric guitar and electronic textures within a great arrangement, it works superbly. The other standout is the two-part epic 'They Came From The Stars, I Saw Them' again for its superb arrangement and outstanding playing throughout. The opening 'Dropping Pennies' includes a lovely piano and vibe duet that stands out like a small jewel in the velvet texture of the surrounding arrangement. It's truly remarkable that Richards at a mere 26 has delivered such an accomplished debut. On the evidence of this powerful release we'll undoubtedly be hearing very much more from him. He's touring both this band and a smaller version throughout 2008. Catch him if you can.

DD





The History Man...

by Richard S. Foster

Igor Stravinsky – influential revolutionary...

His Mercury Living Presence Ballets: *L'Oiseau de Feu*; *La Sacre du Printemps*; *Pétrouchka*

Igor Stravinsky, born near St. Petersburg on June 17, 1882, passed away in New York on April 6, 1971, a naturalized American citizen. In the intervening years, his influence on the development of classical music was profound, making him a giant of the 20th Century. His compositions included works for stage, ballets, operas, as well as scores of instrumental pieces that include string quartets, piano sonatas, extensive music for chamber orchestra, symphonies, suites, choral works and compositions for voice and orchestra.

He was, to say the least, prolific.

But three of his works stand head and shoulders above the others in terms of popularity – the three early ballets: *The Firebird*, *The Rite Of Spring* and *Petrushka*.

It's a prominence echoed in the Mercury Living Presence catalogue, where the company's recordings of these works have long been sought by collectors and students of classical music alike – in the process, pushing the price of mint, original pressings through the roof. Well, help is at hand; Speakers Corner Records has released the three Mercury Living Presence recordings on 180g vinyl, combining them in a slipcase with a 12 page booklet containing detailed information regarding early performances and the history of these works. I consider all three of these ballets to be 'must haves' in any classical musical library and the re-emergence of these now readily available and rejuvenated recordings is a cause for serious celebration.

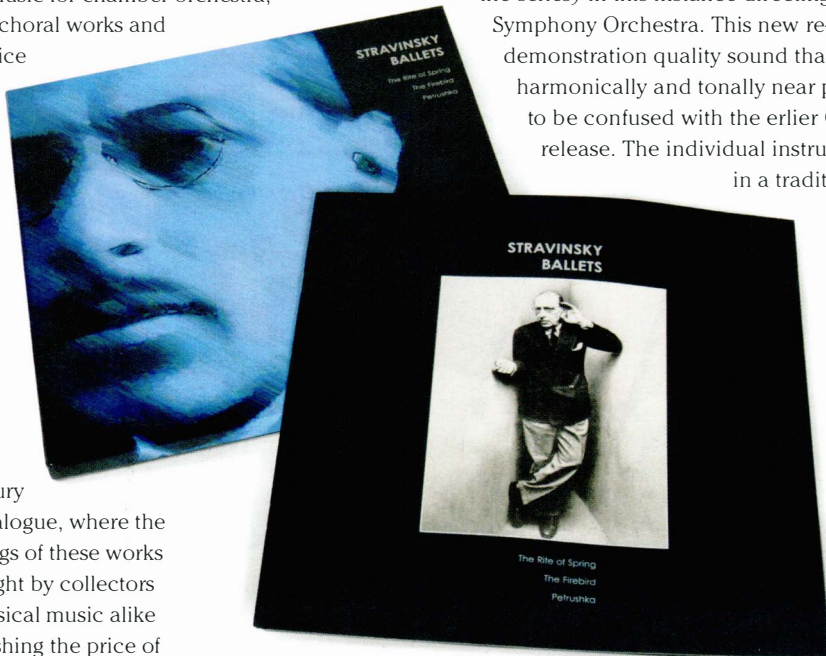
The Firebird, written in 1910 and debuted in Paris in June of that year, was the first Stravinsky ballet

commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev for his Ballets Russes. The work is based on Russian folk tales of a magical glowing bird that is both a blessing and a curse to its captor. Originally released as SR90226, this is one of my favourite Mercury Living Presence records, a sonic tour-de-force I have enjoyed for many years. Antal Dorati conducts this performance (as well as the other two in the series) in this instance directing the London Symphony Orchestra. This new re-issue contains demonstration quality sound that is, in my opinion, harmonically and tonally near perfect, and not to be confused with the earlier Classic Records release. The individual instruments are laid out

in a traditional orchestral spread, beautifully and accurately reproduced by Robert Fine and the engineering crew who recorded this at Watford Town Hall over 50 years ago.

The ballet is divided into two parts, each containing several scenes, the structure

and pace of the piece perfectly balanced as a result. This is a very dynamic recording and was wonderfully produced using then state-of-the-art production techniques to capture the nuance, majesty and spectacle of all that Stravinsky wrote. Listening to this record is an exciting outing! Ballet music in general is very dramatic partly because of the emphasis on storyline, partly because you need loud bangs so the dancers know when to jump, or so a friend of mine always maintained! Once you understand what the ballet is about, you can clearly follow the flow and form of the music as if those dancers were in your listening room.



► *Petrushka*, Mercury SR90216 was, like *The Rite*, performed by the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra and recorded at Northrop Memorial Auditorium. While I have always enjoyed these Dorati performances in the past, I must admit to being surprised by the astonishingly good sound quality on these re-issues. I had always felt that the Northrop recordings were a little on the dark side, sounding almost muddy in places. No longer: These Speakers Corner pressings are wonderful-sounding discs that have become a vital addition to my library. This ballet, subtitled 'Burlesque Scenes in Four Tableaux', is the revised 1947 version. Again, commissioned by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, this was first performed in 1911 by the incomparable Vaslav Nijinsky. *Petrushka* is the story of a traditional Russian puppet, a rag doll made of straw with a bag of sawdust as a body. He comes to life and has the capacity to love, a storyline not so far from that of *Pinocchio*. The 1947 revision contains fewer bassoons, flutes and snare drums than the original 1911 version. Very beautiful and quite dramatic, Dorati takes us for a beautifully guided ride through the four phases:

Part I: The Shrovetide Fair

- Introduction (at the Shrovetide Fair)
- The Charlatan's Booth
- Russian Dance

Part II: Petrushka's Cell

- Petrushka's Cell

Part III: The Moor's Room

- The Moor's Room
- Dance of the Ballerina
- Waltz - The Ballerina Et the Moor

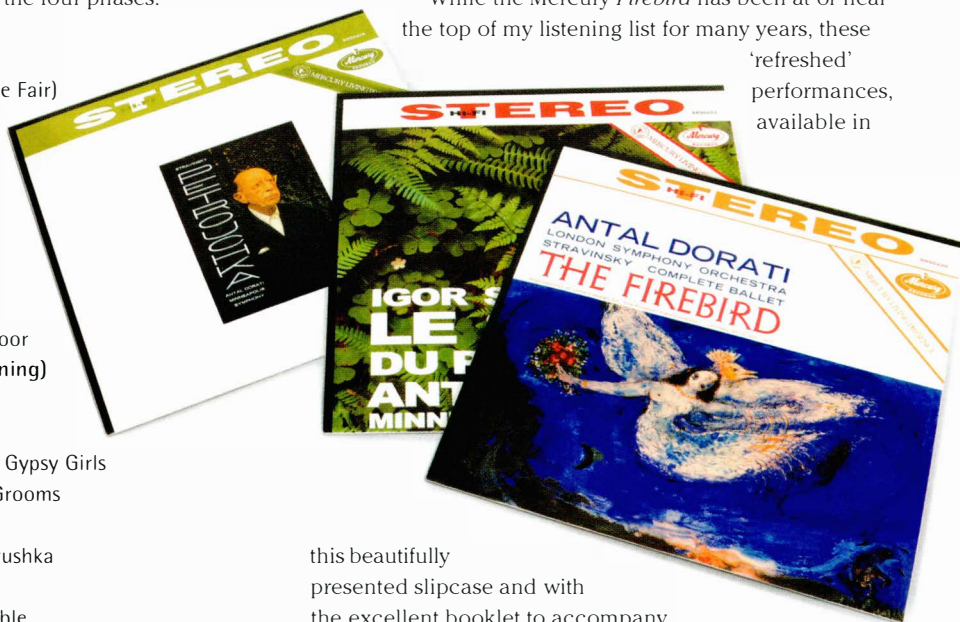
Part IV: The Shrovetide Fair (Evening)

- Dance of the Wet Nurses
- Peasant With Bear
- The Jovial Merchant with Two Gypsy Girls
- Dance of the Coachmen and Grooms
- The Masqueraders
- The Fight - The Moor and Petrushka
- Death of Petrushka
- Apparition of Petrushka's Double.

Just by reading each of the sub-titles above, you get a strong sense of the episodic continuity that this music is all about. This is a joyous outing. If you want to hear *Petrushka* with the original, expanded score, try Monteux on Living Stereo (LSC 2376) or Ansermet on Decca Mono (LXT 2502), and while I have my personal, musical preferences for the original 1911 version – Ansermet, if you must know – I am now ecstatic to have this rejuvenated Dorati edition nestling alongside the other two. Listening to the re-issue of *The Rite Of Spring*, I am struck with how

wonderful this new production really is. As mentioned earlier, I was never too fond of the Northrop Auditorium recordings, but listening to this re-mastered aissue has changed my view. This ballet, once again a Ballets Russes production, dates from 1913. It caused quite the stir when it premiered in Paris (with Pierre Monteux conducting!) and you can read about this on the liner notes of the jacket as well as in the aforementioned booklet. Another composition structured in two parts, each of several scenes, the first section is known as 'The Adoration of the Earth' while the second is sub-titled 'The Sacrifice'. With refreshed sound, *The Rite of Spring – Pictures from Pagan Russia* in two parts, will give your system a serious workout. Following the liner notes carefully, you will 'see' the scenes develop and play out right in your listening room. I am really glad to be reintroduced to this fantastic reading and performance – although don't miss Solti and the Chicago on Decca SXL6691 – and feel this pressing finally delivers the sound the superb playing always deserved.

While the Mercury *Firebird* has been at or near the top of my listening list for many years, these 'refreshed' performances, available in



this beautifully presented slipcase and with the excellent booklet to accompany them, have finally elevated the partnering pieces to a similar sonic standard, one that matches Dorati's superb direction and understanding of this challenging and important music, each piece a vital stepping stone in the evolution of the 20th Century classical tradition.

Speakers Corner Records has once again delivered a winning combination of performance, pressing quality and presentation. This set should be a keystone in every serious classical collection. Actually, let's make that every collection, period. These records really are too good to miss.



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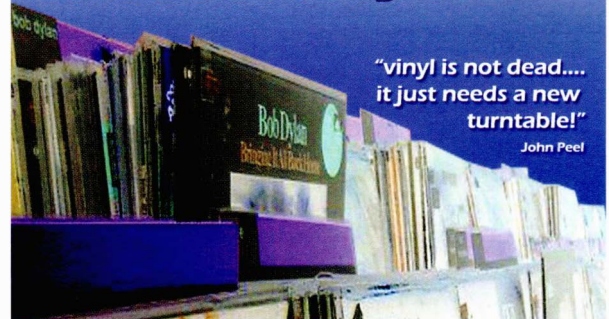
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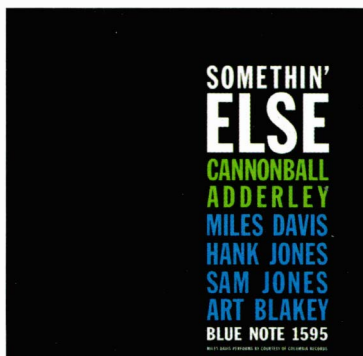


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John Peel

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Cannonball Adderley

Somethin' Else

Blue Note/Analogue Productions 1595



Cannonball Adderley's *Somethin' Else*, with Miles Davis, Hank Jones, Sam Jones and Art Blakey, is one of the most eagerly anticipated Blue Note re-issue titles, and it deserves its superstar status. The performance, whether it is really a disguised Miles Davis session or a peak in Adderley's catalogue, includes five tunes imprinted on every jazz lover's psyche. This is one of the best-loved titles in the Blue Note catalog. How does this 45 RPM two disc re-issue stack up to the original? Will this new remastering of 'Love For Sale' have you thinking about putting your original pressing up for sale? The sound of my original mono and stereo pressings, as well as the Mobile Fidelity CD are all pretty good sounding recordings of great jazz. But this version leaves them all in the dust. Keep in mind that this is a typical Blue Note recording, and it exhibits the well-known flaws found in most of Rudy Van Gelder's work, including a muffled piano sound. It's in stereo and the horns are, like the original stereo release, stuck in the left and right speakers. But the rock solid horn sound and the improved timbre add so much to the "you are there" feeling on this new release, that for me there is no going back to my original pressings. The same holds true for the equally fine Coltrane Blue Train session being released concurrently with this issue.

DDD



Juan Diego Florez
Bel Canto Spectacular

Orchestra de la Comunitat Valenciana – Daniel Oren

Decca 478 031 4 (CD + DVD Limited Edition Set)



Mention the "highlights approach" to a serious opera lover and you risk being regarded with utter disgust for even entertaining the dismantling of what is (possibly) the perfect, artistic marriage of sound and vision. Albums of operatic arias are often similarly crucified – and for a reason. Devised as a convenient platform with which to demonstrate a singer's vocal bravura, they rarely manage to project the real ability of that singer across many roles or the contrasting demands that arise in the staging or recording of a complete work. Juan Diego Florez, firmly established as one of the light, lyrical tenors of modern times, once again shows how it should and can be done! At his best singing work by Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini, Florez compiled an exquisite collection of arias from their (predominantly) less frequently performed operas (Donizetti – *La Favorite*, *Linda di Chamounix* and *Lucrezia Borgia*; Rossini – *Il Viaggio a Reims* and *Otello*) with only a couple of "best" moments from Donizetti's *La Fille Du Regiment* and *Don Pasquale*. Assisted by Placido Domingo and Anna Netrebko, Florez shines throughout this album demonstrating his ability to sing any type of aria or passage with unsurpassed emotional involvement and technical perfection. For once, a "Bel Canto Spectacular" indeed! Treat yourself to the limited edition package including a DVD and enjoy an interview with JDF, his discography and – a few more beautiful arias.

DS



Beethoven
Symphony No. 3 (Eroica)
12 Contredanses
Helsingborg S.O.
Andrew Manze, cond.

Harmonia Mundi HMU 807470

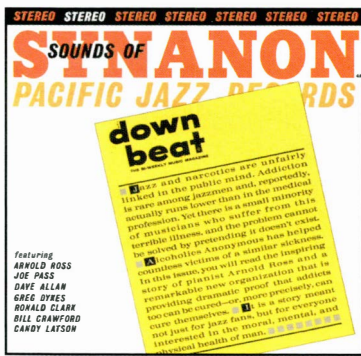


The original dedication of this symphony was to have been Napoleon Bonaparte, someone Beethoven admired greatly as a 'constitutional reformer'. However, prior to its first playing, Napoleon declared himself Emperor, which so enraged Beethoven, Napoleon's name was then removed from the dedication page. I must say I was quite surprised when I heard this disc. Initially I expected this to be something of a 'period' performance, but the Helsingborg Symphony, numbering only 60 players, gives us a full-bodied account of this monumental work. This is an extremely satisfying production of this great symphony and I take my hat off to Manze for his fine conducting skills. There is enormous insight into Beethoven's work sprinkled throughout this disc. There are many fascinating nuances and I am especially fond of what he does with the fourth movement, *Finale: Allegro molto*. In addition, the thirteen minutes containing the dances is a delight and we are treated to a superb performance of the finale from 'The Creatures of Prometheus'. All in all a near 70-minute outing I wouldn't want to miss. This is a very welcome addition to my collection and you should definitely investigate this disc for your own library. Highly recommended.

Supplier: www.harmoniamundi.com

RSF





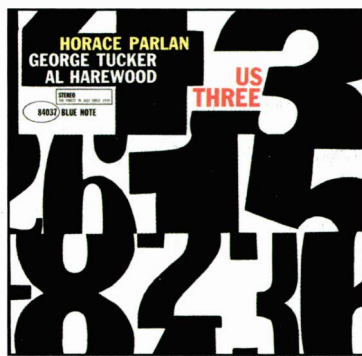
Joe Pass

Sounds of Synanon

Pacific Jazz/Pure Pleasure ST48 **180g**

Guitar legend Joe Pass became a star after Norman Granz signed him to his Pablo label and recorded him extensively in duets with practically everyone on the label, and in solos in the outstanding Virtuoso series. Before that, Pass recorded for the west-coast jazz labels of Richard Bock – Pacific Jazz and World Pacific, but only after wasting a decade of his life addicted to drugs. This was Pass' first album, recorded in 1961 while still attending the Synanon Drug Center and accompanied by a half dozen other patients. Pass plays a borrowed solid body rock guitar. While the group effort is more than adequate, Pass turns in a stunning performance that resulted in his eventual recognition as one of jazz's premier guitar artists. This is perhaps the hardest Pass LP to find and its rediscovery by Pure Pleasure is a delight. Bock's shoestring operation produced some great sounding recordings, and this one is exceptional. Steve Hoffman and Kevin Grey remastered this LP (along with John Lewis' *Grand Encounter*, also an exceptional release). They've done a remarkable job. This sounds as good as any jazz recording made in the early 1960's. Instrumental timbre is suburb, balance among the instruments near ideal and the stereo spread is very natural. I'm guessing the drug rehabilitation center had no recording studio, so the unnamed recording engineer squeezed out this magic without props. Highly recommended.

DDD



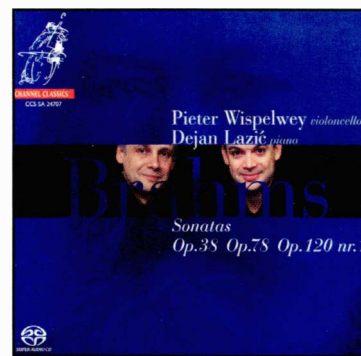
Horace Parlan

Us Three

Blue Note/Music Matters 84037 **CD**

In case you haven't noticed, Joe Harley and Ron Rambach of Music Matters really like Blue Note's Horace Parlan titles. Five of their 63 announced titles, and two of the earliest releases are led by Parlan. *Us Three*, as the name implies, is a piano trio with George Tucker on bass and Al Harewood on drums. Horn players sell records, so why did Music Matters go with a piano trio from an underappreciated recording artist? One listen to this 45-RPM double LP set makes the answer seem obvious. Parlan's unique touch carries the day, without the need for a horn player, and the sound is ravishing. Parlan's technique, more familiar from his duos with Archie Shepp and his contribution on Mingus' *Blues Et Roots* and *Mingus Ah Um*, blends gospel with bop in a set of mostly standards. And the sound? I used to think that Rudy Van Gelder always produced something a few notches below the very best jazz recordings of the day, but I'm not sure I can sustain that opinion in the face of what Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray have accomplished here. This is about as close to recorded perfection as you could hope for. Instrumental timbre is to die for and the trio is laid out in a perfect stereo array. This is as good as jazz LPs get!

DDD



Brahms

Sonatas for Violoncello and Piano, Op. 38; Op. 78; Op.120

Pieter Wispelwey, violoncello, Dejan Lazi, piano.

Channel Classics CCS SA 24707 **SA/CD**

Wispelwey and Lazi are the perfect team to present these three great Brahms sonatas. They present us with rich, glowing performances of exquisite detail. Their tone, sonority and phrasing capture the essence of these works and it is hard for the listener to be anything other than captivated by the strong melodic lines. These are heartfelt performances and these soloists stand as equals to create, in my mind, one of the finest interpretations of these sonatas. Jared Sacks has given us a balance that places the artists clearly front and center in the room, with demonstration quality sound. Wispelwey and Lazi are perfectly matched. I first came across this pair playing the Beethoven sonatas (Channel Classics CCS SA 22605) and was immediately impressed by their musicianship. I can tell you that their Brahms disc is comfortably in a class of one. Wispelwey's violoncello has a wonderful tone, which is offered perfect accompaniment by Lazi's Steinway, with neither artist overwhelming the other. I consider the CD layer excellent but the DSD layer does offer an even richer and more pleasing experience. This disc is a "must-have" addition to any classical collection – definitely not to be missed and highly recommended.

Supplier: www.channelclassics.com
RSF





EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE ONE

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

by Reuben Parry



Frederick "Fritz" Russell Jones aka Ahmad Jamal was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on July 2, 1930. His formal musical studies, although completed while still a teenager, were taken to the equivalent of master's degree level and his illustrious early influences came in the shape of piano legends Art Tatum, Teddy Wilson, Count Basie and Erroll Garner. Jamal's excellent trio work alongside bassist Eddie Calhoun and guitarist Ray Crawford had by 1951 brought them to the attention of Columbia Records executive John Hammond, earning a slot on its Okeh label. The trio's line up was ever shifting with regular changes in personnel before the famous Jamal/Crosby/Fournier Trio was finally settled in 1958.

Meanwhile, a couple of albums including *Pavanne* and the highly original *Ahmad's Blues* were recorded for Okeh under the Ahmad Jamal Trio banner before they switched labels in 1955, joining the Chess Argo subsidiary. Jones had converted to Islam in 1952, hence the name change. It was here, after cutting the *Chamber Music of New Jazz*, that he came to the attention of Miles Davis, whose subsequent quintet recordings he was to profoundly influence. His economic style was a method unheard of at the time, placing far less emphasis on technique and creating dramatic tension with its almost Pinteresque approach to the use of the silence and those spaces left between and around notes, phrases and passages. Cleverly, it even heightened the impact of those inventive and improvisational Jamal moments of piano virtuosity.

But Jamal's unique piano work and its influence upon the great Miles Davis is just one of the reasons for unequivocally praising the 1961 *Ahmad Jamal's Alhambra LP*. This album was one of only two live recordings made that year at Jamal's own elegant Chicago Jazz club, the Alhambra. The sessions cut here encapsulate all that was best about his trio's work. Tightly focused and intelligently structured chamber-like ensembles; eccentrically fast tempos that can cause you to completely re-evaluate standards such as 'Autumn Leaves' and 'Love For Sale' and those groundbreaking pianistic manipulation of time and space carried mainly through left-hand chord voicing, makes *Alhambra* a masterpiece of harmonically inventive melodies and delicately swinging, yet eminently accessible jazz. It carries the mark of a true musician.

Another reason to place this record on a pedestal is the tactile transparency that surrounds and emboldens these tunes. The textures are palpable, especially in the pressing that I've been privileged to own for the last decade – Bernie Grundman's 180g vinyl re-master for the German Alto label. It's so forward it sits on your lap and nibbles at your ear, allowing

the senses into a secret and oh so intimate interior space that then opens out into an emotionally powerful, vibrant and deliciously engaging series of performances. Electricity courses through every single number, captivating even in the onomatopoeic simplicity of 'Snow Fall', where the piano drifts gently down, down, down with its soft percussive tints. Tenderness, subtlety and a compelling infusion of beauty underpins 'Willow Weep For Me' and 'We Kiss In A Shadow' - making a dispassionate appraisal of this music quite impossible. Equally, I defy anyone to find fault with the ensemble playing of the Jamal/Crosby/Fournier line up. They are at the height of their powers and the acoustic, Ron Malo's engineering and closely miked solutions that capture the synergy, mobility, intricacy, momentum, dynamism and overriding excitement present in this atmospheric club setting are outstanding. Listen to this album and it's hard to believe that the trio split before 1962 had reached its end. Ultimately, Jamal's *Alhambra LP* doesn't need to be debated. It is a bizarre testimony to this pianist's inexplicable underexposure that simply needs to be enjoyed. ▶+

Ahmad Jamal's Alhambra

Recorded in June 1961 and originally released on Chess 180g re-issue by Alto (AA 005)

CD currently unavailable

Track Listing

We Kiss In A Shadow
Sweet And Lonely
The Party's Over
Love For Sale

Snow Fall
Broadway
Willow Weep For Me
Autumn Leaves
Isn't It Romantic
The Breeze And I

Personnel

Ahmad Jamal – Piano
Israel Crosby – Bass
Vernell Fournier – Drums

Engineers: Ron Malo, Leonard Chess
Re-mastering: Bernie Grundman

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Roy Gregory - *hi-fi+* issue 51

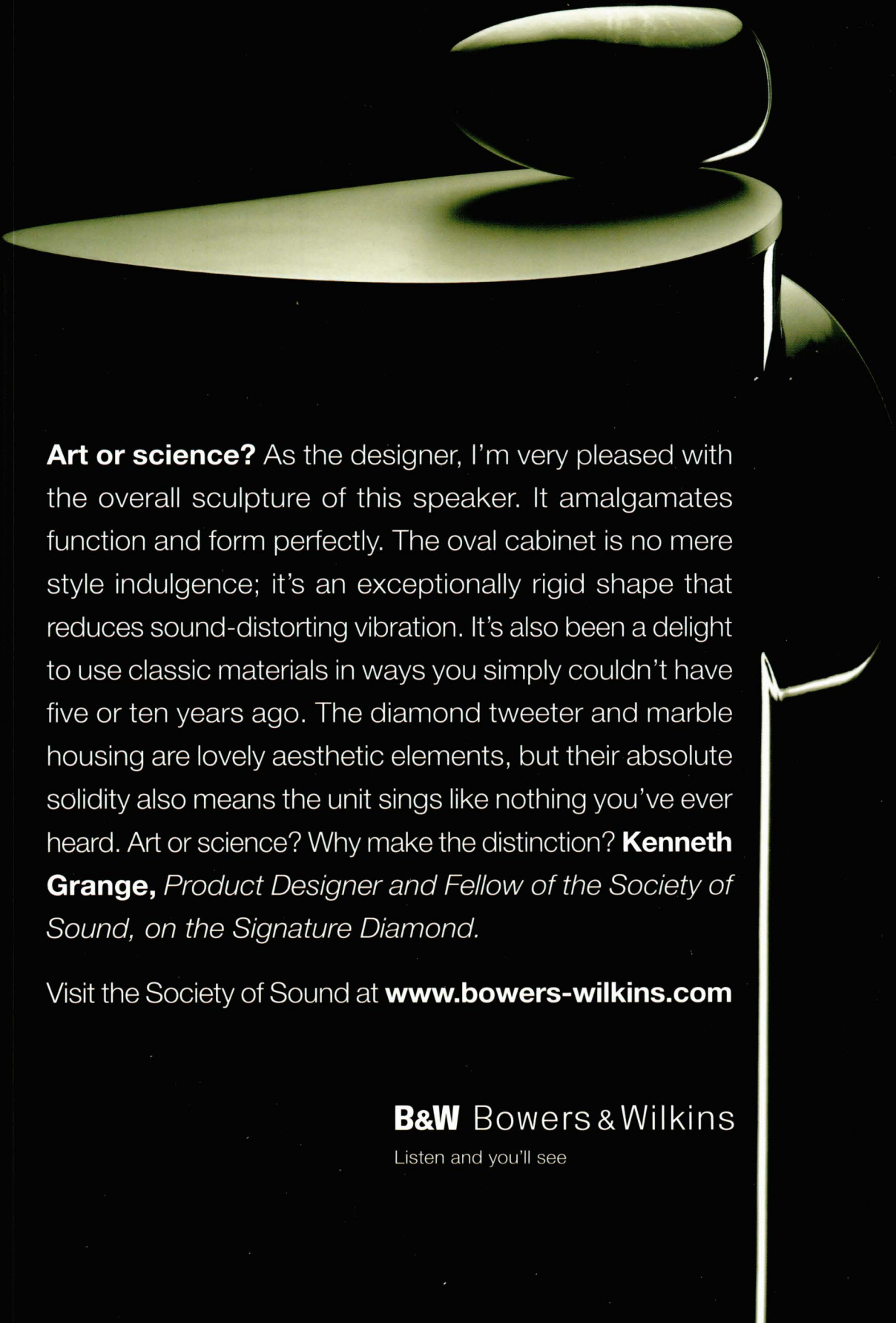


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Art or science? As the designer, I'm very pleased with the overall sculpture of this speaker. It amalgamates function and form perfectly. The oval cabinet is no mere style indulgence; it's an exceptionally rigid shape that reduces sound-distorting vibration. It's also been a delight to use classic materials in ways you simply couldn't have five or ten years ago. The diamond tweeter and marble housing are lovely aesthetic elements, but their absolute solidity also means the unit sings like nothing you've ever heard. Art or science? Why make the distinction? **Kenneth Grange**, *Product Designer and Fellow of the Society of Sound, on the Signature Diamond.*

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