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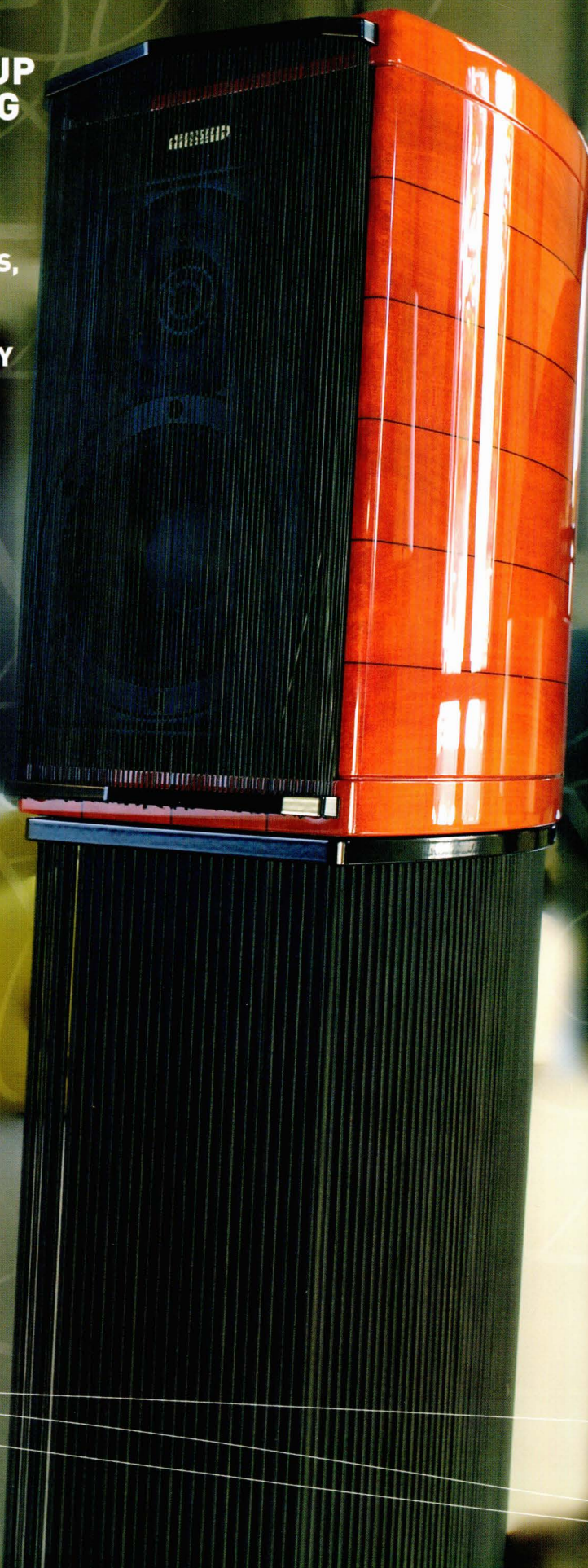
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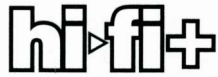


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editorial

Welcome to the new-look, new-size *Hi-Fi Plus*. I hope you like it.

Magazines have to modify their design on a regular basis, to stop them from looking stale. And *Hi-Fi Plus* has remained essentially untouched for almost a decade. So, it's high time for a change. We've responded to your complaints about the magazine's visibility on the newsstand by moving to a larger size. We've resisted the temptation to add lots of colourful devices and 'page furniture', though... we want to change the magazine, not break it.

What's not changing, though, is the brace of excellent products we test every issue. That stays constant, whether it's the latest, greatest loudspeakers from America, top valve amps from Switzerland, solid-state amps from Japan, floorstanding loudspeakers from Germany or cables from Whitehall... it's in here.

With all this change going on, you might have missed the name above the logo – *The Absolute Sound*. For the last few years, *Hi-Fi Plus* has been a part of the NextScreen group, which includes magazines like *Playback* and *The Absolute Sound* in the US. This is an important partnership that we've been singularly under-exploiting since we came under their wing.

As you can probably guess by the increased signage, that's going to change. Both magazines have their own direction, their own audience and the differences between UK and US rooms mean a very different set of products on sale in both countries. As changes occur on both sides of the pond, the two magazines can react faster to new products and trends, while retaining that unique UK or US flavour. Or flavor.

And, on the subject of change, perhaps the biggest shift in the UK audio market at the moment is the change going on with the Audio Show 2009. No more Heathrow... this year the September Show moves north – to the Witlebury Hall Hotel, not far from the Silverstone racetrack, near Towcester in Nottinghamshire. The event runs across the whole of the last weekend in September (26-27), and you can read more about it on pages 58-59. We'll be there, will you?

Finally, we hope UK readers will be delighted with our sublime cover-disc, made by Crystal Cables to celebrate the launch of the Arabesque loudspeaker. The 19-track, full-length classical compilation is a minor musical masterpiece. Unfortunately, the album is only available to UK readers of the magazine, but we have a treat in store for all readers... next issue, we get to check out the Arabesque loudspeaker in its full glassy glory. +

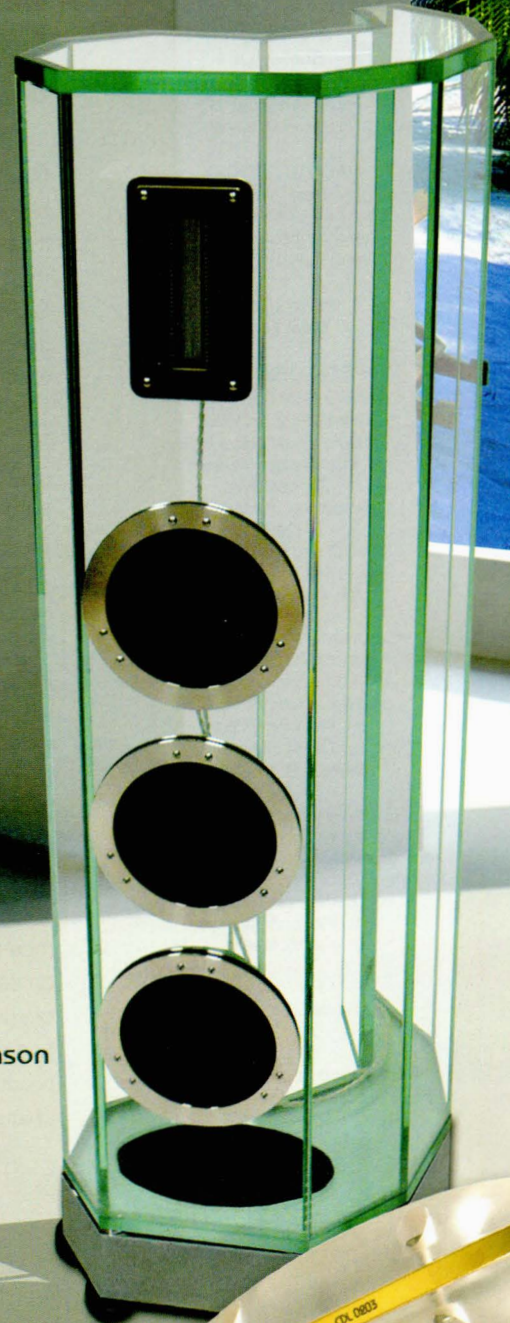
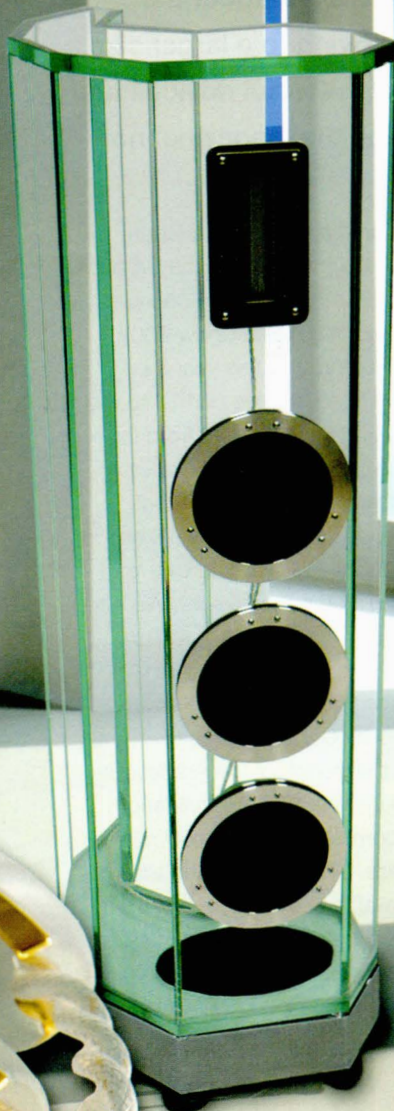
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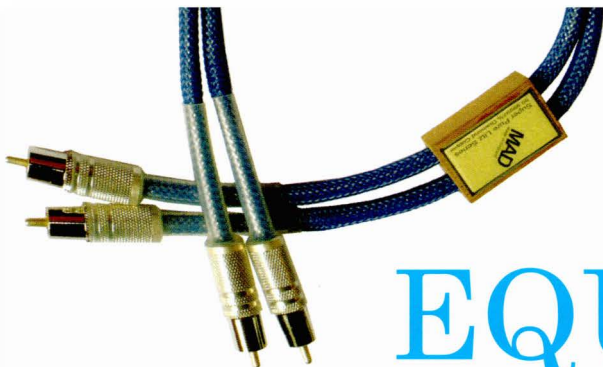
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Colleen Cardas

Of Hummers and Humblers

music matters

By Alan Sircom

AT THE SERIOUS END OF HIGH-END HI-FI, audio systems are undergoing a subtle revolution (that could be an oxymoron – I don't recall people subtly storming the Winter Palace). It's a revolt in the right direction, better music, but it comes at a price. Fortunately, the revolt is starting to trickle down to the sort of prices that don't command a millionaire's budget.

Traditionally, a lot of high-end audio's appeal has been in its impressiveness. Impressive size, impressively finished cases, impressive no-compromise engineering that would be overkill on a NASA mission. And, let's face it, impressive price tags too.

Such systems are like Hummers; big, bold and bling. Whether the instruments playing required a big, impressive sound is academic to Hummer systems, whether it's a tympani or a piccolo, it's a big tympani and a big piccolo. There is, of course, a sense of scale to Hummer systems, but that scale goes from 'Big' to 'Huge'. To paraphrase The Grateful Dead, think of the Transitive Nightfall of Diamonds... but now with added diamonds!

A change is beginning to happen. New system concepts are emerging, and I call them Humblers*, because when you play music on such systems, you are humbled by the music and the musicianship. Such systems 'scale' naturally. They handle the full might of the orchestra with as much aplomb as they do a fey Girl With Guitar recording. They do this without undermining the dynamic range of one or the articulation of the other.

I've been lucky to encounter a few Humbler systems recently. But they are still rare, and the full component set needs to be better defined. So, those who seem to have the most repeatable Humbler systems are those who control as much of the system as possible. One such company is Gryphon, more specifically, the top Gryphon system as installed in Glasgow's Audio Salon. Granted Jack Lawson of the Audio Salon (soon to be re-renamed The Music Room) has ticked all the right Hummer boxes too, here; a truly huge, six-figure pair of four box Gryphon Poseidon loudspeakers, fed by a Gryphon Mikado Signature CD, Mirage preamp and Antilon power amp, all resting on Grandprix audio stands and all wired up with JPS cables. The system works well in part because it's in a glorious room; a large, first floor drawing room in an elegant Regency townhouse in one of the more salubrious

parts of old Glasgow. So, it's a six-figure system in a wholly appropriate setting.

It's not about the money, though. It's the sound. And that's where the Humbler bit kicks in. This system has the dynamic range and the solidity and the scale to cope with just about anything you could play and make it seem like real-world music. Put on Dave Brubeck and it sounds like a band playing in front of you in a natural acoustic. Swap that out for Carl Nielsen (you can't visit the Audio Salon without a Nielsen session) and you get the feeling of an orchestra playing in your living room. You can't escape it, you are humbled by the music.



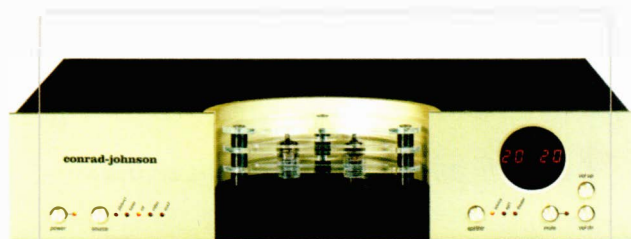
As this is a Gryphon-based system (albeit with JPS cables), there's a greater degree of control over the selection of components, but there are still a number of high-end one-make systems that make a big Hummer of a sound. And the possibility of making a Humbler-type system with a range of components from a number of brands is not impossible – I've heard similarly humbling sounds from a 'bitsa' system using more than one make. And not just six figure sum systems, either.

I'm hoping this is the start of a trend, one that permeates through the entire audio business. Because a change needs to happen to audio; those big scale Hummer systems are all well and good, but sometimes there's more to life than scale.

Time will tell. +

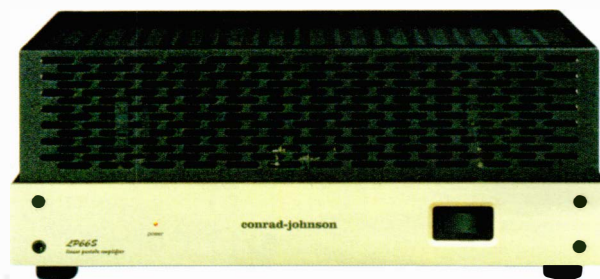
**'The Humbler' was a nickname ascribed to Danny Gatton (1945-94), a musician of such remarkable talent that other, often more famous, guitarists were frequently humbled by his guitar playing. It was also a medieval torture device designed to keep a man on his knees in a manner you really, really don't want to think about.*

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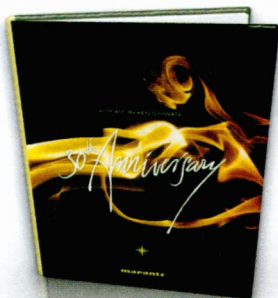
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speakers corner

by Paul Messenger

LOOK BACK OVER THE PAST TWO OR THREE DECADES, it difficult to avoid the impression that the prices of 'real' hi-fi – as distinct from the more mainstream consumer electronics stuff – have steadily outstripped the rate of inflation, over a period when the prices of most general consumer electronics products, such as flat screen TVs and PCs, have been deflating rapidly.

Obviously one would expect that prices would follow inflation, at least to some extent, and those with web access might well find the following site makes interesting reading:

<http://safalra.com/other/historical-uk-inflation-price-conversion/>

I'm not certain that this website is accurate over the long haul. I know what it cost to build my hundred year old house (though not what it cost to purchase the land), and I also know its current value is more than four times the index-linked build price, downturn notwithstanding. Maybe houses are an exception to the inflation rules, though at least they're not subject to exchange rate fluctuations, or offshore manufacturing advantages.

A major difficulty with hi-fi equipment is that individual models rarely stay the same over any length of time. However, there are certain model stereotypes that persist through the decades, such as B&W's medium size (around 14 litres) stand-mount speaker. Back in 1991 I reviewed a DM610 that cost £200; I examined the current equivalent, the 685, in 2007, by which time it cost £380 – almost 20 per cent above the £320 indicated by the inflation tracker. The latest model naturally incorporates some improvements, including the more elaborate tube-loaded tweeter, but it's also made in China, so the current price does seem rather high, especially when compared to the offerings of less well known brands, such as Armour's Q Acoustics range (also made-in-China).

However, I was in for a surprise when I took an example from the high-end sector of the market. In 1994 Wilson Audio's System 5 version of the Tiny Tot/Puppy two-box combo had a £16,300/pair pricetag. By the time we reached System 8 in 2007, the price had risen to £22,000 – £2,000 less than inflation predicted. And that's despite a whole succession of evolutionary improvements.

That said, if we look all the way back to 1961, a large reflex-loaded Tannoy with 15-inch Dual Concentric driver cost £150/pair – that's £2,600 in today's money. However, a comparable model today, albeit with more luxurious cabinetwork, costs a whopping £11,700 (though a 15-incher with a plainer box and ferrite magnet can be had for half that).

Likewise, the 'classic' Rogers LS3/5a cost £160/pair in 1978, the equivalent of £690 today – but in fact that was the price ten years ago. By 2008 the price of a pair of Rogers LS3/5as had risen to £1,495.

Electronics are harder to compare, because they've been through so much more technological evolution. However, not so long ago IAG, the parent company of Quad, created a deliberate reproduction version of the classic II valve monoblock power amp. My 1961 Yearbook lists a pair of Quad IIs from the Acoustical Manufacturing Company Ltd at £45, a modest sounding figure that translates to £770 in 2009.

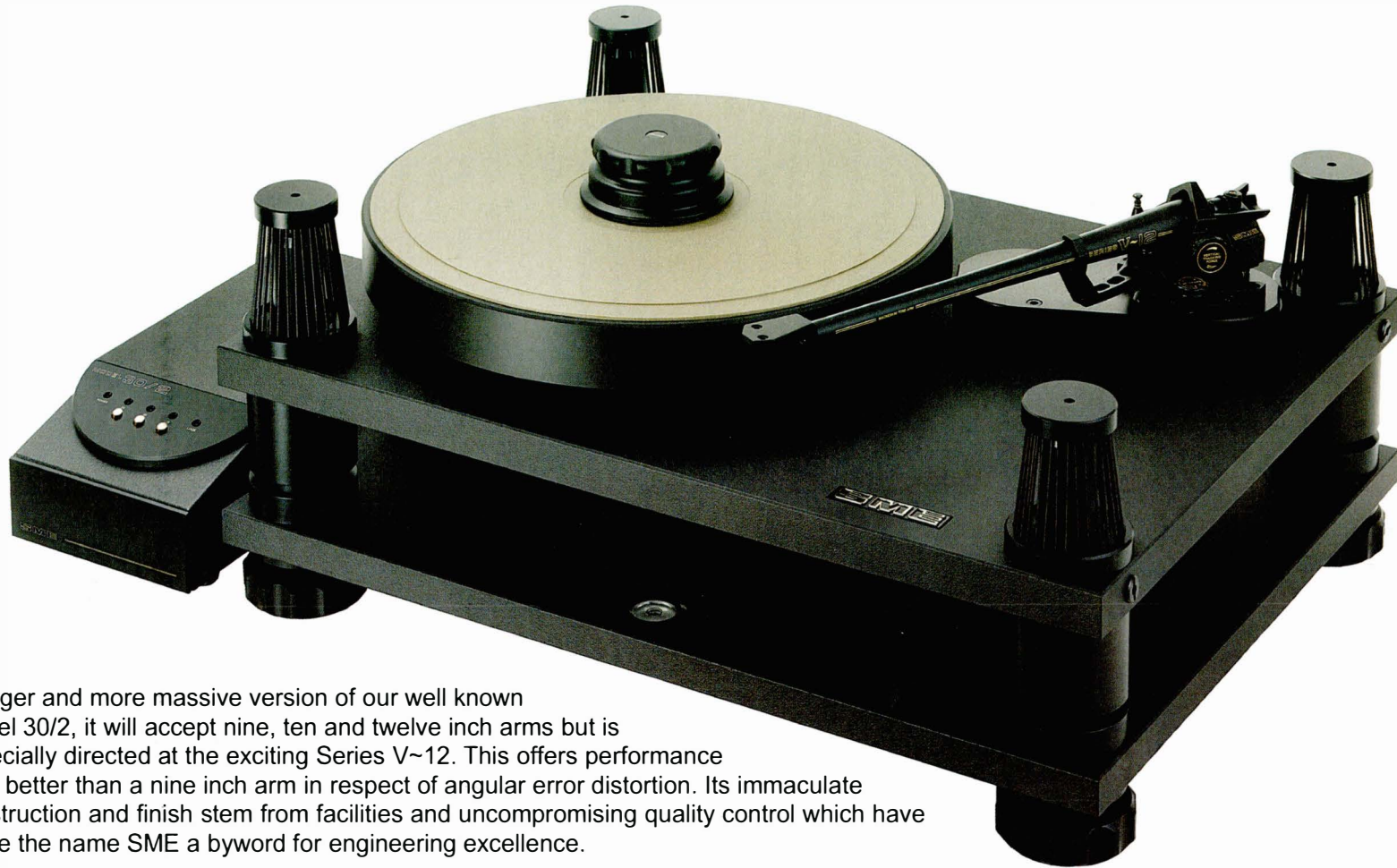
Trouble is, IAG's Chinese made replicas cost £2,400 per pair. John Howes (of Audiojumble fame) has recently been tarting up secondhand original Quad IIs, giving them a re-spray and upgrading some of the components. The result is some truly exceptional sounding valve amps for £1,000 less than the Chinese copy.

In 1977 an early Linn Sondek LP12 cost £185 without arm, while an SME 3009/2 tonearm was £35. Put those figures into the inflation calculator and it comes out at £1,000 in 2008. That was the year that Linn launched its Majik LP12, essentially a stripped down 'back to basics' model very similar to that original in many ways, but fitted with a modest arm (and cartridge). Sadly, the 2008 Majik LP12 pricetag was closer to £2,000, not £1,000.

That's quite enough hi-fi price archaeology for one column. The above examples might be no more than a straw poll, looking at classic components that have been available more or less unchanged over a long period. It would be interesting to carry out a much more detailed examination, but it remains rather depressing to find that nearly all the quoted examples have suffered price increases above – often by a considerable margin – the rate of inflation. This is further compounded because the high end continues to develop increasingly costly components and accessories.

As long as hi-fi is seen as part of the consumer electronics firmament, serious hi-fi pricing will remain well out of kilter with the mainstream, will continue to be ignored by the mass market, and will continue to be forced into its own specialist ghetto. +

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Ken Kessler Review – Hi-Fi News, March 2009

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the view from the other side

By *The Hi-Fi Heretic*

I'D HOPED THAT THE COMPUTER AUDIO REVOLUTION

would bring about a degree of sensibility in audio.

Unfortunately, it didn't happen – if anything, a new layer of audio nonsense was plastered over some of the already nonsensical statements made in the past. One of the most absurd of these new statements is that a .WAV file sounds 'better' than its lossless equivalent.

For those not familiar with file names, your original 16bit, 44.1kHz data files on a CD, when loaded on a computer translate to .WAV (PC) or AIFF (Mac) files. If these CD files are extracted ('ripped') using an application dedicated to the task – either audio players like iTunes and Media Monkey, or specific ripping software such as Exact Audio Copy for PCs or Max for Mac – the CD and the extracted PC file are bit-for-bit identical. Such files can be converted and stored in lossless format (FLAC and APE are widely used on PCs, while ALAC is the default choice of iTunes and Mac people).

This does to music files what zipping does to a photo or a program – it compresses the data for storage and moving from place to place. When you play the piece of music, it unpacks the data before it gets played. The hint is in the name – Lossless, as in 'without loss'. There is no difference between a file and its lossless equivalent in audio performance. It's interesting that people who reject lossless compression systems forget that the files on their precious CDs might have

The hint is in the name – Lossless, as in 'without loss'. There is no difference between a file and its lossless equivalent in audio performance.

spent some time in lossless form; if you buy a disc made in the last few years that was recorded in one country and the CD produced in another, the data files were probably distributed using FLAC, APE or ALAC.

Lossless compression might reduce the file size by as much as half, but lossy compression can shrink the data file size by considerably more. Lossy compression is an abomination to most audiophiles, but this appears to be based simply on fears of the word 'lossy'. However, listeners can easily (and reliably) test compression systems at home. Transparent lossy compression systems exist, and you can prove it for yourself.

Some audio player programs include an ABX comparator. These allow the listener to compare potentially similar sound files to determine if you can spot differences between them.

Load up an audio file in lossless, do the same for a lossy file and compare the two side-by-side, at the same volume level. You can control how much of the two files you want to hear and the switch between A and B, if you want to compare two complete symphonies, so be it. If you want to switch between the two tracks every three seconds, go for it.

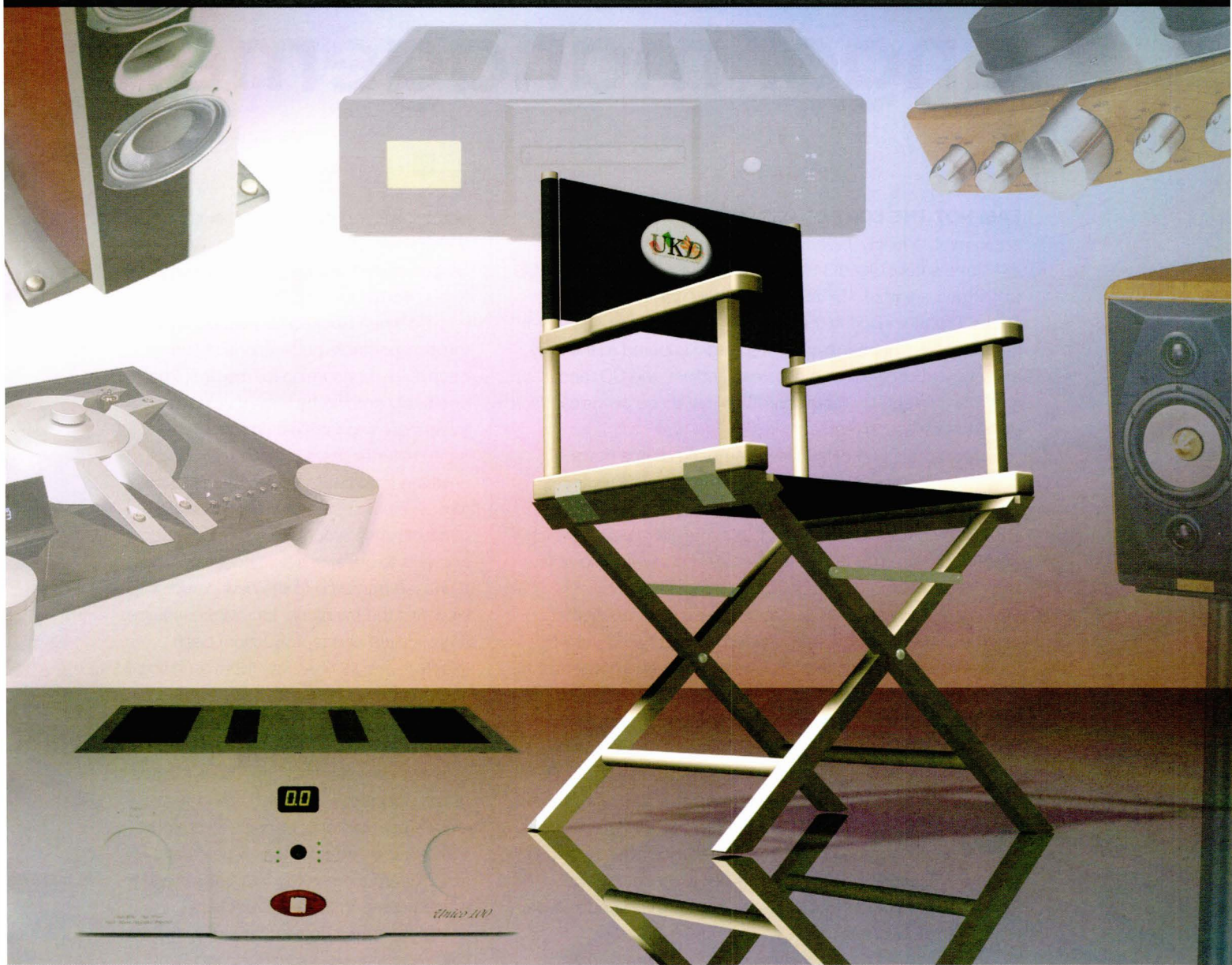
Say you compare A and B just once and hear a difference. Is it down to audibility or just chance? If you were to toss a coin, you might get lucky and predict 'heads' or 'tails' two, three or even four times in a row, so any test has to eliminate the likelihood of chance. So running a test between a lossless and a lossy file should be performed several times, as many as 16. At which time you could say with some confidence that the two sound files do/do not sound identical.

Earlier, I said .WAV is functionally identical to lossless, but don't take my word for that... test it for yourself. Although, perhaps a more interesting and useful test is to listen to those lossless files (assuming you didn't hear a difference) against a good lossy compression codec, and see if you can hear what it does to music, if indeed it does anything. This takes time, is surprisingly stressful, and you also need to train your ears to listen for artifacts, but the results might surprise you.

Why is this useful? Because you can end up extracting files from discs, store them lossless for archive purposes and then use lossy transparent compressed audio files on a laptop or small PC in your audio system, without devoting terabytes of drive to audio files for no good reason. I now have a laptop that has replaced my whole CD playing system (and turned all the CDs into attic fodder), and I can use my music maker for work, too. +

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No names, no pack-drill. Just a chance to leave no spleen unvented

anger management

by *The Mystery Scribe*

I AM NOT THE SORT OF PERSON that changes their equipment regularly. I lived for around 17 years with virtually the same setup: Quad 34/306 amp, a Marantz (later Sony) CD player and a pair of KEF standmounts whose model number I have forgotten. During that time, I hardly ever perused a hi-fi magazine. But I remember having gladly adhered to the new and application-promising physical medium, the CD, and it was with no regrets whatsoever that I set those unwieldy black discs to everlasting rest.

Toward the end of last year, I embarked on a major house refurbishing, and since one of the KEFs fell victim to an accident, I decided it was also high time to look around, and the best way was to buy a few of the specialized English-speaking magazines (three high-brow, one low-end) for a few months non-stop, to get a feeling of things again.

Imagine my surprise (to say the least) to discover that whereas, when I left the field, the technology had gone from the needle to the laser, the gurus of the high-end publications had travelled in exactly the opposite direction, and have now firmly declared ours to be a 'vinyl world'. The typical popular publication, while paying lip service to stereo respectability, wants us all to fill our expensive living space with 5.1 setups. By standing for so long in denial of reality, what the hi-fi industry has already lost is a couple of generations of consumers whose idea of musical experience does not go beyond 128 or 256 kbps compression, and cannot, in all fairness, be expected to carry a bunch of LPs around in order to enjoy their favourite tunes.

I find vinyl exceedingly endearing, it resurrects youthful memories for me; the music is there, certainly, and so is that reassuring background presence of the needle sliding against the groove. Nice listening experience? Certainly. Future? No way. After all, when one travels on a high-speed train, one does not enjoy the smell of the countryside any longer: should we all go back to the steam engine? If a young gun leafs through one of the more prestigious publications, the overriding impression he gets is that he should go back to that countryside smell. It all sounds so high-brow, holier-than-thou elitist, the objective seems little more than an intelligent ploy to maintain a publication with an exclusive veneer to it.

There is some irony in the fact that, having opted for a technological breakthrough many years ago, I now find myself on the brink of another, because discs, of whatever hue, are fast on their way out, to be replaced simply by files; and this irrespective of whether the respectable hi-fi world likes it or not,

bemoans it or not, because that is where the vast amounts of money are. And that, despite my advancing years, is where I want to be headed too.

So when I looked for help from the three respectable publications I have been avidly consuming for months, I got practically nothing by way of guidance toward coming realities. Faced with a home entertainment budget stretching anything from five to ten thousand Euros (yes, even the currency does not smell of countryside around here), I looked for answers to questions like: how can I make a phased transition to the new paradigm? How has the traditional triumvirate (source, amplification and reproduction) been affected, and in what way (both technically and box wise)? If I want to gift a small portable player to one of the grandchildren, which ones support lossless formats, and how can I transfer files from the hi-fi setup to this little intruder? Which brands have really embarked on a strategy to support this digital environment, and what can I expect from them in the near future, and in which price-performance brackets?

In the end, I decided to play safe and just replace the KEFs with a Quad 22L2 pair, and shall keep on reading the elitist press (whose reviewers seem amazingly immune to the ravages of time on their hearing apparatus) for a few more months yet. But I suspect that when I do decide to jump forward, it will be without their unqualified approval.

*The author's opinions do not necessarily represent the opinions of the magazine, its editor or its publishers. But if you feel strongly about hi-fi, why not pen your own **Anger Management** column? Please send your 700-word rant to editor@hifiplus.com. Your identity will remain a closely guarded secret +*

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the numbers game...

In pursuit of measurements that matter – and make sense!

by Roy Gregory

Over the years, *Hi-Fi Plus* has run quite a few public demonstrations, ranging from the first (and quite possibly only) ever LP, CD, DVD-A, SACD comparison – an almost Busby Berkley scale production that included two and discrete five-channel options too – to giving the listener examples of the kind of language used in reviews and the audible effects it refers to. But perhaps the most surprising and successful was the demonstration developed for last year's London and Denver shows. Using three identical sets of electronics and two identical pairs of speakers, we showed just how big a difference careful set-up could make, and just how far you could take it. Using cables from Chord and Vertex AQ, along with supports from finite element and Stillpoints, the transformation wrought in the system was simply astonishing. Indeed, I remember sitting in the room at the end of one day, chatting with Steve Elford of Vertex, who'd been helping out with the demos, and saying, "You know, these differences are so huge I don't believe that they can't be measured." And therein starts this story – at least the latest and in some ways, most dramatic chapter.

Of course, regular *Plus* readers will know that I've been banging on about the crucial importance of coherent cable looms, clean AC supplies and well engineered supports for quite some time. Somewhat more conveniently termed Foundation Theory, it was exactly this approach that the demos described above were designed to illustrate. After all, I've also always been a firm believer in getting out and giving your readers a chance to hear what it is you are describing in print. It validates the process, broadens experience, but above all it keeps us honest. Would you want to stand up in front of a room full of audiophiles and try to demonstrate a difference so illusory or trivial that no one hears it? Not if you want to retain any credibility... In fact, in no small part stepping down from editing *Plus* and my subsequent move to Nordost was prompted by a desire to take these findings further: not to just demonstrate them but to investigate them on a scientific level. Yes, that throwaway comment got me thinking – but it got Steve Elford thinking too and in the end this is a tale of shared effort and combined forces, a whole that's greater than the sum of the parts.

In terms of technological development, to a large extent the hi-fi industry has been standing still for the last 20-years. Where are the great leaps forward that have transformed musical reproduction and dramatically extended the state of the art? So far, DVD and SACD have failed to deliver in any truly meaningful way, barely challenging the performance achieved by vinyl playback systems, and in some cases, offering sound little better than CD. Likewise, high-quality surround sound systems, whilst capable of superb results have totally failed to materialize in market terms and designers continue to struggle with Class D amplification, again failing to challenge existing performance standards: All this despite supposedly clear benefits in terms of measured performance. Instead, the advances in performance that we have made have tended to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary, refining existing technologies and approaches – some of them dating from the dawn of audio development. Valve amps have never produced better sound than they do now, while Focal's EM technology that helps make their current Grande Utopia so impressive, has its roots well into the first half of the last

century! Why has technological development proved so disappointing? Isn't it time to wonder what constitutes the limiting factor?

Meanwhile, Foundation Theory offers clearly demonstrable benefits that are quite capable of transforming the performance of even a modest system, and which are equally applicable at all levels of system, irrespective of cost or complexity, technology or materials involved. Nor is it limited to specific products. Instead it's a non brand-specific conceptual approach that can be applied to any range of cables or supports that meet its broad criteria for qualification. But we can't measure these effects – despite the fact that properly demonstrated, they're as clear as the nose on your face, as audible as a police vehicle in hot pursuit. Indeed, right about now, alarm bells should be ringing, because if our accepted science can't quantify or identify these effects, we need to get some better science!

Existing approaches to audio measurement are inherently limited by their technological basis. The result of this is that what we can measure tends to define what we consider important, exactly the thinking that has led us down the blind alley of the last two decades. Quite often we can measure various technical parameters with great apparent accuracy – yet it's almost impossible to really pin down the importance of these results, a fact that's reflected in the extremely poor correlation between what we measure and what we hear. Indeed, quite often, the importance of what we measure can only be defined by what we observe through aural examination. In other words, we know what we measure, we know what we hear and we try to match the two. What we can't do – what we've never been able to do – is measure what we hear.

One of the key reasons for this is the reliance of so many of our existing and most trusted measurement techniques on FFT analysis. This is a crucial blind-spot because FFTs can ONLY measure steady state signals. In other words,

they have no way of seeing or reflecting the complex dynamic demands of a constantly changing musical signal. In other words, we're measuring hi-fi that's actually doing something entirely different from the job we ask it to do when we listen to it. A bit like trying to judge the handling of a motorcar based on its performance on a rolling road.

A second, more insidious effect is the tendency to rely on those parameters that we can measure, safe in the knowledge that any reduction looks good, even if its sonic importance is less clear cut. After all, take a given criterion such as jitter: we assume that less is definitely more, but at what point might other criteria actually become more critical? How low is low enough that we can no longer detect a difference? Until we actually know the answer to that, it's rash to simply rush headlong into jitter reduction at the expense of all else. Product design is a question of balance: the marketing imperative of "Better Numbers" can all too easily disturb that fragile equilibrium.

Which brings us to the departure point for this unlikely journey. Unlikely because few people would expect a cable company to champion measurements in audio, let alone two cable companies that most would see as competitors. But that's exactly what is happening. Steve Elford's other business is serving as a defense contractor on various classified projects, a role that brings him into contact with a wide range of leading edge technologies and the people who research them. One of these was Dr Gareth Humphries-Jones, a leading expert in data and signal processing as applied to radar and sonar systems, a skill set that opened up a whole vista of possibilities. Remembering our earlier conversation regarding measurements, Steve approached me, in my new role at Nordost to see if the company would be interested in co-funding a dedicated audio research project to investigate the measurement of audible differences, possibly leading to a new measurement protocol. The answer to that was an emphatic "Yes", leading to a three way intellectual alliance between Vertex AQ, Nordost and Acuity, the newly formed audio arm of defense contractor Avansys.

Starting point was to supply a CD player and a range of associated products ▶



► for test. These included a mains lead and support platform from Vertex and a Quantum Qx4 from Nordost. With these, working in isolation, Acuity were able to examine the affect of each in turn on the player's performance. They did this by reading the musical signal encoded on a CD and then using their sophisticated signal processing capabilities to compare it with the analogue output of the player.

First order of business was to see whether or not the various ancillaries supplied produced discernable results – which they certainly did, reducing gross error at output by as much as 50% in some cases! The results discussed here relate to a Quantum Qx4, but similar sets of results (differing only in detail) also exist for AC power cords and the Vertex AQ Kinibalu platforms. You can also get a much fuller explanation of them on the quantumqrt.com and vertexaq.com websites.

But as impressive and revelatory as they are, this is only part of the story. For the first time we've seen clear, measured evidence that these products make a difference to the player's performance. What we needed to do next was see if Acuity could discover what exactly those differences are – which errors are eliminated – and how musically important they are. In other words, both the what and the how of the damage being done to the recreation of the information encoded on the disc; what happens to the signal and what happens within it.

Which is where the real work starts. Acuity spent many days and tried many different approaches to the analysis of the data delivered by their initial tests. Then there was the small matter of verifying that the results measured actually apply to more than just one machine. Which is pretty much where we've got to now. Those first results, although exciting enough, pale into insignificance against the implications of the insights now being produced. Not only are we seeing reductions in cross error, but the errors themselves can now be categorized in terms of noise floor, reductions in dynamic range and dynamic and frequency dependent phase errors – which helps explain why mains cords, equipment supports and Quantum technology are so effective and sonically audible. What's even more interesting is that the three main elements of Foundation Theory, AC supply quality, a coherent cable loom and effective equipment support all seem to act in a complementary fashion, further underlining the importance and effectiveness of the strategy.

"So what?" you might well be thinking, "How does this apply to me?" Well, whilst this process is being driven by Nordost and Vertex AQ, the work itself is being carried out as an independent research project by Acuity, whose interest might seem a little less obvious. I mean, cable companies have been crying out for actual measured evidence of their products' effectiveness since the LCR brigade first decided to ignore the evidence of their ears and rely instead on shaky A Level physics. For them, this is the Holy Grail. But what's in it for Acuity – or anybody else for that matter? Let's look at the implications...

Firstly, we are, for the first time, able to look in detail at what is happening to the "data packets" (the discrete pieces of musical information) that together make up the signal. We can see just how big the effect of a change in the test system is, and its nature. And, also for the first time, there's a clear correlation between what we're measuring and what we're hearing. Here is the bridge between what we can measure using conventional FFT techniques (what is happening) and what we're hearing (what it's doing). In product development terms that's huge, simply because it starts to connect specific technical parameters to aural importance, redefining our design priorities and refocusing our efforts on often neglected areas, challenging the assumptions that hog tie

genuine advances in performance.

The thing that has made this possible is the unusual (in the hi-fi industry, almost unheard of) cooperation between apparent competitors. Nordost bring product development and a unique set of listening/explanatory skills to the mix: Acuity's contribution lies in their esoteric signal processing expertise: Vertex provide a common language, able to converse and translate between two disparate worlds – as well as chipping in with their own hi-fi skill set too. This process can only work with all three parties involved, but the testing protocol, the ability to create a valid, academically stringent methodology belongs to Acuity – along with the ability to create a software based solution that, in combination with a commercially available data capture package should allow any manufacturer to benefit from this approach.

That's a way off, but it is in sight. Problems – such as the complexity of dealing with speakers as opposed to electronics, or developing a test protocol and source material for analogue replay systems – remain to be solved, but those solutions are no longer beyond the horizon. The traces you see reproduced here are only the first steps on a path that could be of enormous significance across the hi-fi industry. +

NOW SEE (AND HEAR) IT FOR YOURSELF...

Nordost and Vertex AQ will be running a series of seminars at both THE National AUDIO SHOW '09 at Whittlebury Hall in the UK, and the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, at which members of the public will be able to hear changes made to a system as well as viewing the measured results of those changes, allowing a direct assessment of just how effective this approach can be. These seminars will be ticketed, so look at the show websites for details of availability. Timings and other details still need to be confirmed, so don't expect to book immediately, but do book, because this will definitely be worth seeing!

[sometimes]
technology meets art...



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Avalon Acoustics Aspect Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory



Some products just sound the way they look. Others simply sound the way you expect. In a world with too many loudspeakers and not enough designs, products emanating from the Boulder, Colorado premises of Avalon Acoustics have always been amongst the most singular and distinctive. One look and you knew it was an Avalon; one listen and you were sure. The beautiful craftsmanship that marked out their sloped and faceted cabinets was as intricate as it was precise, as instantly identifiable as any trademark or logo.

Okay, so the more conventional rectangular boxes of the NP1 and NP2 broke that rule, but even they managed to retain

a strong strand of the brand's aesthetic DNA, embodied in the shape of their grilles – grilles that like the rest of the line (and totally opposed to common practice) stay firmly fixed in place. But even if the stylistic markers weren't enough, exposure to the demanding character of even these 'entry level' speakers would quickly remind you just what you were dealing with. It's a very select group of speakers that respond quite as dramatically to the care that goes into placement and the matching of the system

doing the driving. That let you hear every shift, every change in the set up. It's just the way they are... Its what makes them special; it's also what can leave you cursing on occasions.

Oh yes, if you were waiting on the arrival of a pair of Avalons you definitely, indubitably knew what to expect. Until now, that is!

The new Aspect, which first saw the light of day at the 2009 CES, doesn't just look different, in at least one significant way it really is very different indeed. It's a lesson you learn from the moment the two, unconscionably large crates containing the speakers arrive on your doorstep. This is neither a large nor a particularly heavy design, yet each of the boxes that it's packed in would be sufficient to encase and preserve a life-sized crystal sculpture of a large domestic appliance, complete with separate kitchen sink. Indeed, I can only assume that the extravagance of the packaging is matched by the enormity of the carbon footprint that trails in its wake. I understand that a slightly more elegant solution is being sought, but until it is, purchasers of Aspects (and once people hear them that number should be significant) owe it to themselves as well as the planet to have the crates removed forthwith.

Once the speakers are freed from their 'vaults', you'll be refreshingly surprised by their compact dimensions and solid feel – not to mention their novel appearance. A fairly conventional, truncated pyramidal cabinet is lifted off the ground by 'planks' attached to either side. This allows further shaping of the cabinet itself, a deep V section being formed in its base. The immediate benefits of this construction are obvious, the lack of parallel cabinet sides helping to minimize internal standing waves while the side panels create a stand of incredible stability. However, they actually go a bit deeper than that. In a more conventional approach, the two faces that remain parallel are the top and bottom – the two faces that are furthest apart and potentially therefore the most problematic, supporting the lowest frequency internal resonance. The Aspect's design does away with that problem. In addition, the side-walls are reinforced and damped by the planks of the 'stand', the top face by a half-inch slab of granite. The angled base panels are also smaller and stiffer than a single, horizontal panel would be.

Doesn't that leave the front and rear panels parallel? Yes, but they are tapered, with no parallel sides and the front baffle's face is broken up by the drivers. These are the familiar 19mm ceramic dome tweeter and 165mm Nomex-Kevlar bass-mid units seen in other Avalon designs, here arranged in a two and a half way topology. The baffle is as narrow as the drivers allow, the internal volume increased by the depth of the cabinet, which is reflex loaded by a pair of long, downward firing ports, positioned one each and one behind the other (because they're so long that they cross) in the bottom panels. A deep, felt layer, inset into the baffle, surrounds the tweeter. This is reinforced by a similar, contoured layer mounted in that area of the grille that covers the driver; and yes, the grilles should be left in place. The Aspect is single-wired via one of the excellent Cardas terminal blocks, an arrangement that



also adds to the physical integrity of the critical rear panel, avoiding unnecessary cutouts or plastic plates full of binding posts.

The Aspects arrive each fitted with four rubber feet, which are certainly practical and convenient, but as soon as the speakers are positioned properly they should be replaced with the supplied spikes. Which brings us to the whole question of placement – and the least Avalon-like, errr... aspect of this speaker. Unlike any other Avalon speaker I've used this latest design is so unfussy, indeed, so downright accommodating that you'll be astonished just how good it sounds simply plonked in the room. So good in fact that you'll be patting yourself on the back and thanking your lucky stars that you happened on the sweet spot by sheer chance – or because you've been especially virtuous in some way. Such celestial rewards are an attractive

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, three drive unit design

Ports: Two, down-firing

Treble unit: 25mm composite neodymium dome

Bass unit: 2x 175mm Nomex/Kevlar cone drivers

Nominal impedance: 4 ohms

Bi-wireable: no

Sensitivity: 92dB

Suitable amp power: 15-200W

Dimensions (WxHxD): 39x102x43cm

Weight: 34kg each

Standard finishes: quilted cherry, curly maple or figured walnut

Price per pair: £8,750

Manufacturer:

Avalon Acoustics Inc

URL: www.avalonacoustics.com

Distributed by:

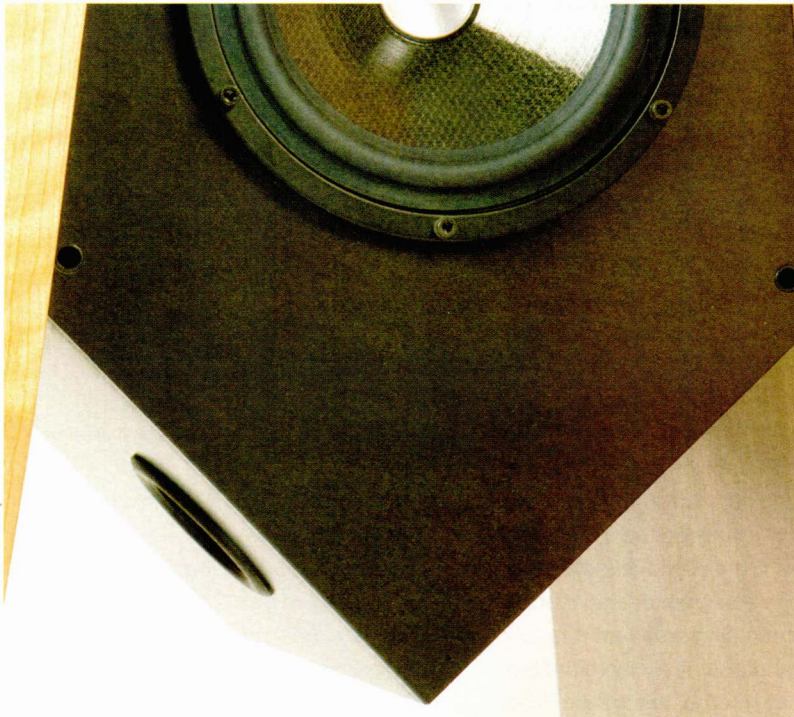
Audiofreaks Ltd

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)208 948 4153

▶ proposition but they're well wide of the mark. Believe me; you haven't found the sweet spot. You are probably not even close. And therein lies the Aspect's little joke. Like the Wilson Duette, it sounds so good from the off that you'll think, you'll be happy to believe, that you've got all there is to come from the speakers. But there's more – much, much more.

For what is a comparatively small cabinet the Aspects produce a prodigious depth of bass and sense of scale. What's more, they do so with an easy, unforced musical generosity that is engaging and astonishing in equal measure. What it does mean however, is that despite first impressions, really careful positioning (probably a shade further forward than you expect) together



with precise spiking and leveling – which means actually tightening the supplied lock nuts – delivers unanticipated dividends. And in another break with Avalon tradition, this is a speaker that seems unfailingly forgiving when it comes to partnering equipment, accentuating the positive aspects of whatever you plug into it. They are neither power hungry nor picky when it comes to preference for valve or solid-state partners. Instead they simply seem to get on with what they're given, with the 50 Watts supplied by both the Renaissance RA-02 and VAS Citation 2 mono-blocs more than adequate to the task. Move up-market, via the (sadly defunct) Levinson 383 or Burmester 032 integrated amps, all the way to the Ayre KXR/MXR combination and the Aspects simply grow to encompass the quality and demands of the signal you feed them, yet never – ever – losing that sense of easy, relaxed grace and fluid energy that instantly marks them out as something special.

Hi-fi reviewing is awash with cliché, yet even clichés originate with a grain of truth. So yes, the Aspect does sound uncommonly convincing when you

are listening from the kitchen – and yes, even when it's simply providing background music it has that ability to stop you in your tracks and fix your attention on some feature in the playing or lyric. And yes, it makes your feet tap and stops you reading the paper. But the best bit is... it does all that and it does the hi-fi things as well. So sit and listen and you suddenly find yourself deeper into the soundstage, deeper into the performance than you expected. In fact, it's a bit of a surprise package in many, different ways...

Play a solo acoustic instrument and you'll hear all the timbral finesse and harmonic intricacy that you should expect from an Avalon speaker, coupled to considerable transparency and a significant absence of box. Julia Fischer's Bach Sonatas and Partitas (Pentatone PTC 5186072) are a peerless display of expressive poise and understated technique. The Aspects really allow these starkest of compositions to speak, not just because of the uncluttered accuracy of their tonality, their unforced, unconstraining dexterity, but because of the way they combine those virtues with a sense of instrumental body and presence. Play the Starker box (the Speakers Corner re-issue) and the effect becomes even more obvious, the physicality to the bowing, the size of the instrument even more apparent. It's enough to make you pause – and not just because it brings an uncannily lifelike verve and energy to proceedings. Somewhere, deep at the back of your mind, something just threw a switch and your hands are reaching for something meaty and big and bold and bouncy. ▶

*And in another break
with Avalon tradition,
this is a speaker that
seems unfailingly
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to partnering equipment.*



Solstice

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► And yup, that subconscious impulse was right on the money. Lloyd Cole's anthemic pile-driver of a track, 'Forest Fire' ticks all the boxes. Solid, insistent drum patterns? Yes. Deep, deep, tuneful and propulsive bass? Yes. Sky-high air guitar quotient? Yes. Great vocal, beautifully captured amidst the mayhem? Absolutely. Now, if you want to wick up the intensity another notch, just reach for the Radio Session cut on the DeLuxe Edition bonus disc. The Aspects deliver this gloriously unselfconscious slab of power pop with exactly the sort of joyous abandon that has you reaching first for the volume control – and then for the repeat button.

At which point you might well be forgiven for wondering what exactly is going on? Avalon speakers: aren't they all about finesse and integration, detail, focus and control. Well – up to a point. But, even the giant step forward represented by the Isis, Indra and NP series didn't prepare me for this! These speakers don't just get down and get dirty, they get downright rude and do it with a smile!

So, what gives? Well, in part it's down to a bass voice that's a little more generous, dare I say, a little looser than some of its nearest and dearest. Add to that the standard Avalon trick of getting surprisingly deep and linear low frequencies out of

what seem like boxes that are too small to support them and you've got a recipe for fun with a capital F. Next, add the Isis DNA and the unobstructive musical fluidity that comes with it and things get really interesting – and engaging.

Of course, simply turning up the bass is generally a recipe for disaster. That's not what's going on here. Just witness the clarity and impeccable musical manners displayed on everything from Cat Stevens and Janis Ian through to Charlie Byrd. This isn't about quantity per se; it's about deliverable energy – weight and dynamics that are in place and on time, providing exactly the kind of low frequency foundation that's just as important to well-recorded rock music as it is to a full scale orchestral show piece, just as important to the power of a soprano voice or solo violin.

Which invites an interesting question; where exactly does the Aspect fit into the Avalon family. In one sense at least, it doesn't, disturbing an otherwise



These speakers don't just get down and get dirty, they get downright rude and do it with a smile!

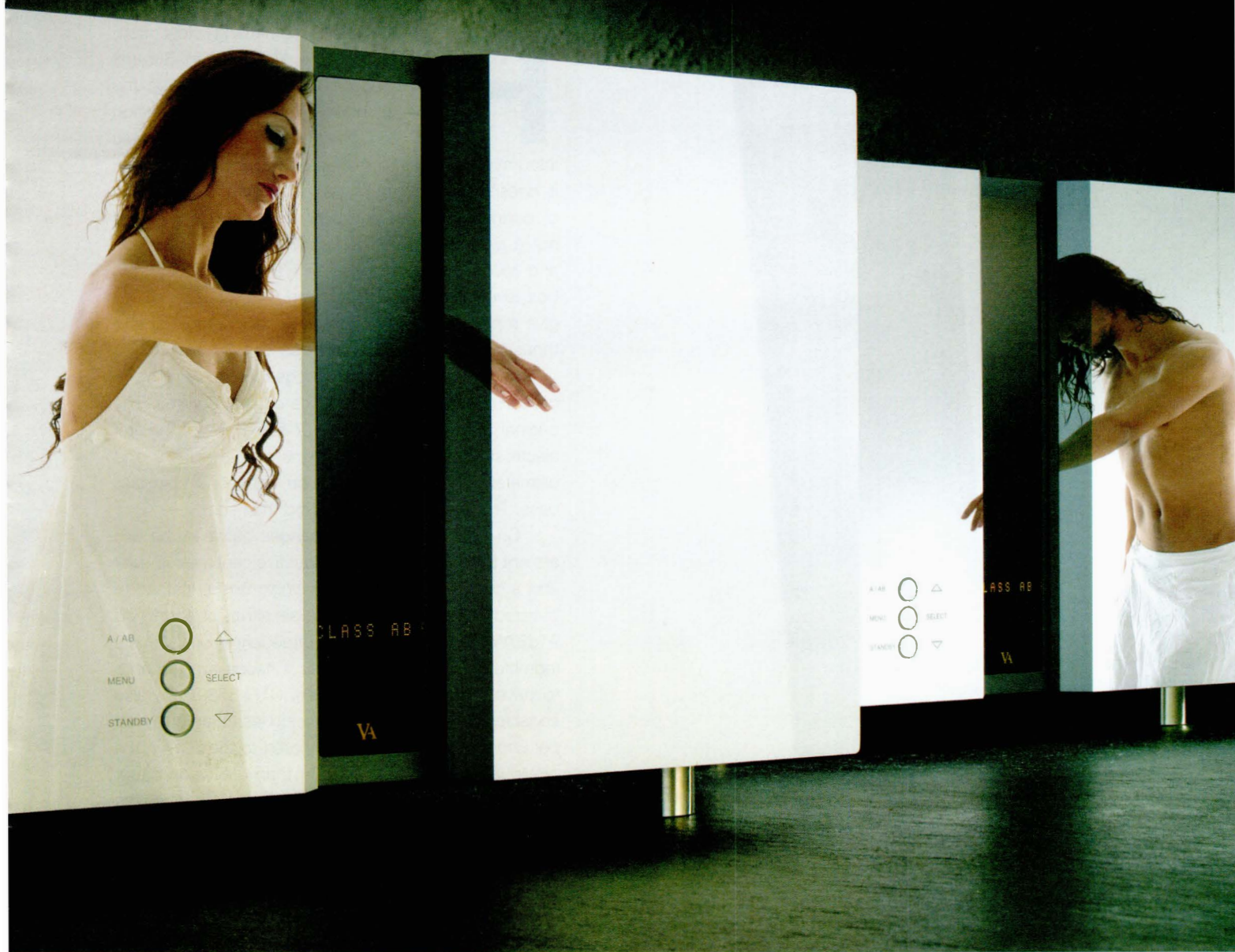
seamless progression of ever increasing musical insight and bandwidth. The Aspect communicates in a different way – but boy does it communicate. I'd love to hear it side by side with the Ascendent. I'm sure that the latter offers detail and a deftness that escapes the Aspect, reveals subtleties in the playing and greater spatial coherence too. But I'd also put money on the junior partner coming back loud and proud, because the Aspect is that difficult middle child: louder and more demanding of attention, but cleverer too.

There are speakers out there that have character: this one has personality! Lordy be, I hear you say, Avalon have made a 'Rock' speaker! That they have, but being an Avalon it has all that breeding and subtlety too – not so much a Rock Avalon as an Avalon that Rocks. And it rocks with surprisingly little encouragement and in systems you'd normally never dream of using with an Avalon speaker. And if you are the competition, that's very scary indeed! +

we want your **music** to touch you...

" ...but all I can say is that this remains a remarkable amplifier and I can only give it and the cabling a huge thumbs-up. "

Chris Thomas, Hi>Fi+ Issue 65 (Vitus SS-010 v2 / Andromeda Cables)



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The MartinLogan Summit X Loudspeaker

By Alan Sircom



Right, let's get something clear from the outset. The MartinLogan Summit X is one of the best speakers on the market at this time. The combination of full-range performance, seamless integration between treble and bass and the fact that it doesn't cost as much as a Gulfstream jet to buy or partner make it a package that's hard to beat. It's not a panacea and is demanding of both installation and room dynamic, and it won't win over hardcore box lovers or die-hard Quadrites, but for many it will give a performance you'd have to blow many tens of thousands more to get even close to.

As the name might suggest, the Summit X builds upon the strengths of the original Summit. The original Summit was praised for being one of the first electrostatic/cone hybrid designs to have finally and ultimately 'nailed' the integration between treble and bass. The same holds here... and then some.

On paper at least, the changes between the two are not that significant. It's almost five centimetres taller and a couple deeper. It's now single-wired, instead of bi-wired. It's one decibel more sensitive, at a claimed 91dB/W/m, but a minimum impedance of 0.8ohms (admittedly at 20kHz) suggests it needs a good amp to drive it (we used a darTZeel CTH-8550). It's also considerably more 'green', drawing less than one watt per channel in idle mode, compared to the 20W in the previous model. But there's more than just the on-paper changes; between the Summit and the Summit X, the MartinLogan design team came up with the mighty CLX full-range electrostatic. A considerable amount of the R&D that went into that new range-topper went into adding that X-rated suffix to the Summit.

The curved 112mm tall XStat stator panel seen in the original Summit remains effectively unchanged, as does the aluminium AirFrame housing the stator panel sits in and the ClearSpar alloy spacers used to keep the assembly stiff (MartinLogan clearly loves its TradeNames). A very different crossover from the one in the Summit feeds this, and it's here where the CLX development cycle shows its hand.

Once again, this is a Vojtko Voiced design (no special ingredients here; Joe Vojtko is the no-nonsense lead engineer at MartinLogan, who has been influential

in producing some of the best products in the company's history). However, this has been extensively reworked since the Summit. It still uses air-cored inductors and polypropylene capacitors, but the CLX taught the MartinLogan team that greater component matching and a heavily revised circuit topology (once again, a Joe Vojtko strong-point) brought even greater mid-band clarity.

Physically at least, the single biggest change is to the bass cabinet. As before, the Summit and Summit X notionally share the same dual 250mm aluminium drive unit bass module, powered by a 200W power amplifier. However, the Summit X now features 'controlled dispersion', adjusting phase as the bass approaches the crossover point. Below 100Hz, the two bass drivers are in phase, which helps enhance bass extension. Between 100Hz-160Hz, however, the bass units phase shifts to 180°. This effectively makes the bass act as a dipole, just like the main panel. There are also two bass adjustment controls at 25Hz and 50Hz.

Adjustment of the loudspeaker is limited to the spikes, or rather ETC (Energy Transfer Coupler) spikes. By mixing and matching the 75mm long spikes carefully, you can adjust the vertical angle of the speakers from 11° to -1°. This is incredibly important in getting the right sound for the listening position. Last, and entirely inconsequential to the sound, is a set of lights behind the logo, over the control panel and under ('Ground Effect') the speaker. Inconsequential, yes... but do add a lot to the overall appeal of the speaker. You can switch one or all off if you want. There are seven wood finishes and either black or silver metal work as standard and a Custom Shop for virtually any finish you can think of.

The manual suggests a unique way of installing the speakers. Begin with the speakers firing directly down the room and the front centre point of the speaker precisely 60cm from the rear and side walls. Then measure the distance between the two loudspeakers (X) and describe a triangle with the two speakers at the base and you sitting either at the vertex of an equilateral triangle (each line X cm long) or an isosceles triangle (with the base line X cm long and the other lines up to 2X cm long). Then, sitting in the hot seat, shine torchlight from under your chin (really) onto the MicroPerf stator front. The light should reflect back from the inner portion of the curved stator, not the centre or outside section. You can also then adjust the vertical angle using the ETC spike assembly, to make the reflected light. The closer you are to the speaker, the nearer you get to forward tilting. This is only the start; once you have run in the

speaker, experiment with all this over again, and the manual has even more suggestions on this, too.

Running in is suggested at 72 hours played using real music programme at moderate listening levels (around 90dB). But that comes with some caveats, not in the manual. If you move the speakers or turn them off for any significant length of time... run them in again. Electrostatic panels are sensitive to movement and not being constantly energised, even at low powers. This means it's hard to get an instant demonstration and dealers need several days notice to set them up.

It also takes a bit of time to get used to the sound of the Summit X after a life spent staring at 'monkey coffins'. The sound is very laid-back and almost undynamic on first listen. Then, you begin to acclimatise, and acclimatise quickly. About three tracks will do the trick. What came across as laid back is the absence of tweeter beaming. That undynamic sound is in fact the lack of box coloration rumbling along with the music. Granted, if your musical collection is limited to the stretch between AC and DC and you dream in power chords, this will always sound somewhat flat to you, but those who are not afraid of unplugging the instruments are more swayed by the Summit X.

It's strange; the Summit X both has and lacks the properties that sum up electrostatic loudspeakers perfectly. It has that big, effortless midrange and treble, but



- ▶ not with the sort of pin-sharp stereo soundstaging commonly found with big flat panels. Instead, what it sounds like is one dirty great big electrostatic panel stretched between the loudspeakers, albeit still retaining some of the point-source properties of other stator panels.

It's not the last word in neutrality, with a distinct 'enriching' character to the sound, but this might not be a bad thing. Some will love its performance, citing how it enhances articulation and integration of sounds, especially in the midrange. Others will listen to the same and criticise it because of the word 'enriching' and 'enhancement'. Whatever, it's clearly a speaker that's going to promote healthy debate. These speakers are all about musical flow, and that might even occur when 'flow' is not a word that sums up the music. Themes in a piece of music blend together with a sense of naturalness that could turn Stockhausen into Rachmaninov. And when it comes to Rachmaninov... *Isle of the Dead* becomes the ambient tone poem it so often fails to be in other systems.



There's something particularly wonderful about the Summit X and voices. Especially voices recorded in a natural ambience. One of my less played (or at least, less discussed) demo discs is *Canticles of Ecstasy* by Sequentia, a series of Hildegard of Bingen's works played by a seven-piece female vocal group, accompanied by medieval harp and fiddle and released by Deutsche Harmonia Mundi back in 1994. I don't play it that often because it so rarely works. But through this system, the effect is hypnotic in that kind of atavistic way that pre-modern music can – and should – behave like. Hairs raise on the back of your neck, you feel more spiritual and yet strangely keen to burn yet another unbeliever for daring to question Aristotle's horse-tooth counting abilities. Or something.

In more modern music, John Mayer's 'I'm Gonna Find Another You' could have been composed for the Summit X, or vice versa. Its combination of blue-eyed 60s soul meets mellow Hendrix-esque guitars is neatly brought to the fore, in part because of the excellent articulation and instrument separation. It rates at least a four or even five 'o' smooth, too.

As mentioned earlier, the default criticism of MartinLogan speakers in general is the integration between bass cone and the stator panel. The bass driver can never keep up with the speed of the electrostatic panel, so the

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Hybrid electrostatic/dynamic loudspeaker

Drive units: 1120mm curved electrostatic panel

2x 254mm cast basket, high excursion, aluminum cone with extended throw drive assembly

Subwoofer type: integrated, nonresonance asymmetrical chamber

Subwoofer power: 2x200 watts per channel (into four ohms)

Controls: boost/cut controls at 25 and 50Hz, accent light controls

Input: Single wired, custom binding posts

System Frequency Response: 24Hz–23kHz \pm 3dB

Dispersion Horizontal: 30 Degrees

Vertical: (112 cm) line source

Sensitivity: 91dB/2.83v/m

Impedance: Nominal 4ohms, Minimum 0.8 ohms at 20kHz

Crossover frequency: 270Hz

Power handling: 300w per channel

Mains power draw: Standby <1W/channel

Max: 350W/channel

Weight: 34kg per speaker

Dimensions (WxHxD): 32.2x154.8x54cm

Price: £12,998 (black, dark and natural cherry)

£13,998 (all other finishes)

Manufacturer:

MartinLogan

URL: www.martinlogan.com

Distributor:

Absolute Sounds Ltd

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

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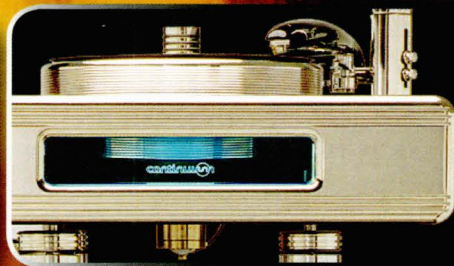
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logic goes. In fairness, this criticism has its roots in ML designs of old, so it's not without some grounding in reality. But it does not apply here at all. Take that old fave, 'The New Cobweb Summer' by Lambchop; a mellow, laid back presentation underpinned by some extremely well-defined and deep bass. Everything kept time well, and the deep bass rumbled along nicely. Where the really big guns score over the Summit X is when the bass gets really deep and the speaker cannot differentiate those low pedal notes on an organ, for example. That being said, the 'Holcane Attack' from *Apocalypto* moved some serious air in the opening sections.

This is perhaps why the Summit X has got itself a reputation for being the CLS-beater. Those with the older, full-range speaker from 20+ years ago still cling to the design because it was the first – and still by many standards, the best – do-it-all electrostatic. It did this by effectively bolstering up the panel with a deliberate 50Hz resonance, but the result was extremely effective. Although it had a few running changes and improvements, it took a couple of decades for the basic CLS design to be superseded by the CLX. Unfortunately for CLS owners, this was a bit of a double whammy, because MartinLogan began to come up with hybrid loudspeakers that also deliver the goods at the bottom end with no sign of problems elsewhere. The Summit X only adds to the CLS-owner's pain. Sorry guys... the Summit X are a better package in every respect. Still, the fact it's taken 20 years to come up with that conclusion shows just how good those original electrostatics were.

Despite hammering down the coffin lid on the CLS, no system is perfect and even the Summit X has its limits. In particular, it falls short in delivering the sort of grunt needed to make a CD remaster of the first Johnny Winter album sound more than just a mess of instruments. It's almost as if there's too much information being thrown at you and where on some systems, the two guitars at the edges of both channels work well together, here your attention switches from one to the other too fast. In fairness, this is a tough call at the best of times, because such recordings usually have none of the subtlety we normally crave in high-end.

However, this acts more as differential diagnosis, to highlight where the Summit X fits in the pantheon of high-end loudspeakers. As you might imagine, it fits snugly between the refined-but-undynamic sound of many electrostatic-only designs and the dynamic-but-boxy sound of cones and domes. For some, the True Path to high-end audio is the electrostatic speaker, but if you have spent years listening to boxes, the move to panels is too great a sonic change; the Summit X represents the no-compromise compromise between the two. In effect, it's a gateway loudspeaker for that True Path, offering the dynamic range of boxes with the transparency of panels.

Especially in recessionary times, people are quick to jump on high-end audio as an expensive folly, irrespective of the stratospheric performance such products can deliver. In part, this is because they see prices that would make De Beers blush. Then there are products that also deliver stratospheric performance, but at a more manageable price point. The MartinLogan Summit X is one such product, delivering reference-grade performance that you'd struggle to match at double the price. This could spell the end of monkey coffins for many listeners.

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Luxman L-550A-II integrated amplifier

By Ed Selley

Save for a brief period at the end of the last century, Luxman has been producing a distinctive range of high end audio equipment since 1925. Re-launched in 2005, the current range includes both vacuum tube and solid state amplifiers and a range of CD, SACD and universal disc players. The L-550A-II here is the entry level Class A integrated amp with another integrated and a range of pre-power amps above it. The L-550A-II is a descendent of the original L-55 Class A amp of 1981 and shares much of the same design philosophy whilst at the same time benefitting from nearly thirty years of technological advancement.

Arriving well packed in a truly enormous triple-thickness box, the L-550A-II is nothing if not imposing. The overall dimensions are more in keeping with an AV receiver and it is likely that the top shelf of an equipment rack will be required to accommodate it. Fit and finish is extremely good – the casework is non resonant and the major controls operate with a precision and solidity that is reassuring considering the number of them on the front panel. Unusually in this day and age, the L-550A-II has front panel controls, for bass, treble, balance, recording input selection, speaker selection and a stereo/mono function. In addition there are push button switches for additional functions- including of course a button to switch most of these functions out of the circuit. The large input selector control and volume knob flank a pair of backlit VU meters that help to give the L-550A-II an unashamedly retro appearance. Special mention must be given to the remote which is a rather lovely affair comprising a one piece wraparound aluminium top section with well spaced and clearly marked buttons that control volume, input selection, stand by and muting. I can also hopefully save a would be

owner a few minutes of head scratching by pointing out there is a master power switch on the underside of the unit. I am sure this is mentioned in the manual but as the entire document is in Japanese, it is not entirely obvious for us *gaijin*.

The rear panel has four line inputs, a switchable moving magnet/moving coil phono stage and two tape loops. Two of the line inputs can be selected to run via balanced inputs, a function that is increasingly useful as this connection becomes increasingly common on source equipment at the price. An interesting feature of the balanced inputs is that both wiring types of XLR connector are accepted as the earth can be switched by pushing a small button next to the input. This is welcome as the L-550A-II will work happily with any balanced unit irrespective of its origin. A linked set of connections allow the L550A-II to operate as either a pre or power amplifier. Out of the box, all the connections are covered with blanking plugs which if nothing else help to keep the connections dust and dirt free.

Internally, the L-550A-II is as well constructed as its exterior suggests with a well laid out circuit and good quality components throughout. The lower plate of the chassis and the four feet on which it sits are heavily damped and suggest that

considerable effort has been taken to make the amp as inert as possible from the ground up. Stated output is 20 watts into 8 ohms rising to 30 watts into 4 ohms at commendably low distortion figures. The output is split over two sets of speaker terminals that can be switched in and out independently. The L-550A-II makes use of a proprietary Luxman circuit described as Only Distortion Negative Feedback (ODNF) which works to identify distortion and noise and apply only sparing levels of feedback to suppress them. Also present is a line phase sensor, a device that can ascertain if the mains outlet is incorrectly wired. I am pleased to say that the sensor indicated that all was fine with my mains, which is perhaps just as well as I would not have had the faintest idea on how to correct the situation if it wasn't.

Sonically the Luxman is a talented and in some ways surprising amplifier. First and most obvious is that the 20 watt output seems to go an awfully long way. Partnered with my B&W's which although not insensitive do respond well to a healthy power input, it generated more than adequate levels for my listening environment. Elaborate preparations I had made to do much of the critical listening through a pair of Living Voice OBX's proved fairly irrelevant although one extended session was carried out with them revealing that results with larger, more sensitive speakers were no less impressive. At no stage did the L-550A-II suggest that it was anywhere near running out of steam. The output from unbalanced inputs, balanced inputs and the phono stage were all surprisingly close and all could achieve levels that were more than adequate. Like other Class A designs, the L550A-II takes a little while to reach its working temperature and optimal performance but this is only a matter of minutes and although warm, the top plate is safe to touch at all times. The overall presentation is reasonably neutral with slight warmth to the upper registers giving lushness to vocals I found extremely appealing. It is extremely

At no stage did the L-550-A-II suggest that it was anywhere near running out of steam.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: Phono (MM/MC), 4x single-ended line inputs, 2x tape monitor inputs, 1x XLR input

Outputs: 2x tape outputs, XLR output, 2x speaker terminal sets

Continuous Output: 20W + 20W/8Ω Class A

40W + 40W/4Ω

Total Harmonic Distortion: 0.006% or less (8Ω at 1KHz)

0.03% or less (8Ω from 20Hz-20KHz)

Input Sensitivity/impedance

Phono (MM): 2.5mV/47kΩ

Phono (MC): 0.3mV/100Ω

Line: 180mV/42kΩ

Balanced line: 180mV/79kΩ

Main-in: 450mV/51kΩ

Output Voltage

Recorder: 180mV and Pre-out: 1V

Signal-to-Noise Ratio

Phono (MM): Above 91dB

Phono (MC): Above 75dB

Line: Above 106dB

Frequency Response

Phono: 20Hz-20kHz (±0.5dB)

Line: 20Hz-100kHz (+0dB, -3dB)

Tone Controls: Bass ±10dB at 100Hz and

Treble ±10dB at 10kHz

Loudness Control: +7dB (±1dB) at

100Hz, +5dB (±1dB) at 10kHz

Controls

Power meter, headphones jack

Recording selector

Speaker selector (A and B), stereo / mono selector

Tone controls, balance and direct line

Sub sonic filter, loudness and line phase sensor

Remote control

Electric Power Consumption: 190W (on, but without a signal), 1.3W (idle)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 46.5x17.8x43.4cm

Weight: 21.95kg

Price: £2,995

Distributed by Select Audio

URL: www.selectaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1900 813064

► accurate with piano, strings and other instrumental tripwires sounding tangibly real and possessed of a genuine presence. This tonality and detail is achieved without falling into stridency and harshness which is a welcome achievement. A convincing soundstage is generated by a single piano or full orchestral work and the L-550A-II has no difficulty in being totally believable irrespective of the music being played.

This accuracy extends to the timing and sense of rhythm that the Luxman brings to the music. Where rhythm should be present – Kraftwerk's peerless *Minimum Maximum* for example, it is present in spades with the Luxman imparting real force and flow to proceedings. When this propulsive force is less desirable – the delicacy of Cinematic Orchestra's *Ma Fleur* being one, this urgency is reined in leaving the recording to move as it should. This even handedness is welcome for those of us with music collections that span the gentle to the lunatic as all recordings are presented as they should be. Indeed after some weeks with the Luxman unobtrusively playing everything "just so" I am left aware that my permanent amplifier is not so even handed in this regard. All of the recordings are further assisted by the Luxman's agile and tuneful bottom end. More powerful Class AB amplifiers can go slightly deeper but what there is reproduced with convincing force and at the same time the details that are easily submerged in the quest for power are all present and correct.

Special mention must go to the on board phono stage. Switched to the moving coil section this formed a very happy partnership with my Dynavector DV20x and meant that a goodly proportion of my listening was done with vinyl. The stage should be considered a viable alternative to some serious separate contenders up to the £500 point. The excellent detail retrieval coupled with low noise and the same beautiful even handedness are extensions of the amplifier as a whole and even flattered very poor pressings such as Placebo's *Meds* which normally defies attempts to derive much enjoyment from it. Furthermore, the convenience of having the stage internally and consequent freeing up of a mains socket and interconnect was a welcome bonus as well. By the same token, the headphone amplifier is more than up to the job of occasional listening on cans.

The Luxman L-550A-II manages to offer a beguiling audio performance matched with the convenience of an excellent feature set.

I had envisaged summarising the attributes of the L-550A-II with provisos about the available power and the limitations that this would impose. In truth unless you are possessed of a very big room and very insensitive speakers, these provisos do not really apply. In fact, the L-550A-II provides a far more complete solution than I had anticipated. The performance of the amplifier is easily competitive with similar designs but when the solid build quality, excellent connectivity and superb phono stage are taken into account it must be considered exceptional value even at its relatively lofty price point. The Luxman L550A-II manages to offer a beguiling audio performance matched with the convenience of an excellent feature set. Behind the retro appearance is a thoroughly modern and extremely well thought out amplifier that should work well in a many systems. +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Cardas Clear cables

By Alan Sircom

Cardas is not a cable company that comes out with a new product every few months. And it certainly doesn't add a new layer of cables on the top of its portfolio regularly. So, when Cardas Clear was first seen at the CES last year, there was a bit of a stir.


The thick, blue cable represents George Cardas' crowning achievement, and takes all the company's patented technologies found on Cardas already-well-respected ranges of Litz-design cables to new levels. In essence, Clear takes the tried and trusted geometry of the Golden Reference cable; including 'Golden Section', multi-gauge stranding in a symmetrical, helical tri-axial design and 'Constant-Q' construction, which places the smallest strands of the cable at the centre of the conductor to reduce stored energy and conductor resonance. Cable resonance is further reduced with what Cardas terms 'controlled propagation' and 'crossfield' construction, which means matching conductor to dielectric characteristics by using carefully computed strand layering.

What this means in simple terms is Cardas slowly builds up strand-upon-strand of increasingly larger low-eddy copper wire, until the inside of each conductor looks like a little copper nautilus shell in cross-section. This is then thrice-shielded and coated in its own dielectric and these conductors then form their own Golden Section layout, alongside Teflon pipes creating a useful dielectric of air.

Clear takes this already demanding construction to obsessive-compulsive levels. The geometry has been improved still further, to produce an ultra-fine tubular construction. It still retains the basic Cardas DNA, copper conductors, Teflon and air dielectric, rhodium-based connectors, but each and every aspect of the cable have been modified in the process.

Nothing is left to chance at Cardas. For the record, some companies buy cable off the shelf, some 'roll their own', but Cardas takes the long route. The cables are actually drawn and annealed from copper rod using the company's own equipment – because most commercially available copper was not of sufficient quality to make it to high-end cables. Let's face it, any company so determined that it buys its own foundry to make its own cables, is going the distance; even Jamie Oliver doesn't go as far as owning his own farms. Even this wasn't enough for Clear though. George Cardas went back to first principles, discovering new insights into metallurgy and the relationship between conductor and dielectric in the process.

Here's what we mean. Cardas traditionally uses its



“George Cardas went back to first principles, discovering new insights into metallurgy and the relationship between conductor and dielectric in the process.”

Eutectic Solder to connect the loudspeaker cable to the spade lug. Not so with Clear; instead, there's a new forging process, which means Cardas forges the spade lug directly, joins the lug to the cable by further compression forging, which crimps metal on metal so powerfully it's almost impossible to think in terms of separate pieces of metal. Of course, this does make the spade lugs difficult to use in some quarters – they don't like WBT terminals, for example – but the connection is as good as it gets. The quality of connection in both the phono and air-sealed XLR plugs – all custom designs – is similarly uncompromising.

There's a high degree of consistency in Clear. The balanced and single-ended interconnects and the loudspeaker cable are functionally identical in sound. But that doesn't mean a 'family' or 'house' sound;



instead Clear sounds as close as you can get to having no sound.

That might sit almost uncomfortably for Cardas fans, at least at first. The cable range starts warm and entertaining, with an expansive soundstage, but not so strong in detail resolution, top end clarity and dynamic range. As you climb the Cardas ladder, so you get more of the good bits and less of the bad bits, but some have felt that even up the top end of the range, there's a bloom to the bass and upper mids that – while immensely attractive – deviate from absolute accuracy and do perceptibly slow the sound. Previously, even at the breathless end of the Cardas range, the cables traded pace for space; a big, luxuriant and sublime soundstage, but at the expense of the sort of pace that would make the product appeal to Naim owners, for example.

Clear redraws the map. Although still musically insightful and expansive, this is a cable that is as neutral as they come. No more upper-mid softening, no more bass bloom, but a lot more dynamics and energy. This might come

as a bit of shock for owners of top-end Cardas cables, it's a lot more accurate – still as entertaining as ever, but less warm. If you built a system with a lot of top-end energy and used Cardas' slight softening effect to compensate, Clear will expose that energy in full effect. In fairness, at the level where you'd use cables of Clear's status, you shouldn't be thinking of using cables as filters.

Clear also helps increase the perceived speed of the overall sound, too. There are some cables that make a big thing of transients, making leading edge transients appear so filled with attack they almost make the music sound like it's a couple of beats per minute faster. Of course, this isn't the case, but it's a common audible illusion, all the same. Cardas is not known for its speedy transients, but Clear redresses the balance. ▶

► This is a faster cable than usually heard from Cardas, with leading edge delivery that might even endear Clear to those who normally shy away from Cardas designs. I still maintain the Cardas/Naim connection is an unlikely one (in the past, Litz-construction speaker cables and Naim amps were a distinct no-no), but this has far more pace than previous Cardas cables.

But, perhaps the biggest demonstration of Clear's superiority happens when you take the cable out of the system. Other cables sound contrived by comparison; perhaps brighter treble, seemingly deeper bass or a faster overall sound. But these seem like sounds imposed upon the system; Clear genuinely sounds like there's no such imposition. Especially in bass depth – everything else either makes the system sound slightly light or slightly 'tweaked' by comparison. Here, bass depth and definition is absolutely state of the art. Interestingly, Clear seems to make other cables seem 'noisy' by comparison, but when comparing side by side with lesser cables, pin-pointing the source or nature of that noise is functionally impossible. Nevertheless, when played

“The biggest demonstration of Clear's superiority happens when you take the cable out of the system

to people with no vested interest in the matter, they talk (without prompting) about noise levels between Clear and other cables.

In the early days of hi-fi, cables simply didn't matter. Then they did. When people began to recognise the difference cables made, the guidelines at the time were to spend something between five and fifteen per cent of the total cost of the system on ancillaries like cables. Recently, all hell broke loose, and you can get a £20,000 system sporting £35,000-worth of cables. Cardas Clear makes a good case for moving back to that five-to-fifteen per cent rule.

Here's why, if you have a good, but not expensive system and slot in Cardas Clear, the performance will improve, but only up to a point. You'll come away impressed, but not mind-boggled. Put the same cable into a system where it's appropriately balanced and there will be at least a 75 per cent increase in boggling.

A good analogy here is HD television. If you sign up to a HDTV service and play the picture through a HD-ready 15" TV screen, you'll see a small difference, but wonder what all the fuss is about. Replace that baby screen with a whopping great 50" plasma, and the difference between standard and high-definition pictures are easy to spot and even easier to justify.

If you are going through a radical series of upgrades, moving from a high-end to a very, very high-end system, Clear could be your first 'super-serious' purchase. It's like setting a neutral point of reference in the wiring, ticking off one of the many boxes in advance of the next series of big purchases. I'd guess Clear is unlikely to be many people's first cable; they will have risen through the ranks. If so, there is a high likelihood that people will have had some experience with Cardas cables before. Clear represents the best of Cardas, so if you are already impressed with Cardas but want more, Clear could be the first, 'last' upgrade you make, sure in the knowledge that however high up the audiophile ladder you climb, Clear will be there, waiting for you to catch up. Little wonder that George Cardas considers this his "most enduring statement." And it is

– the level of uncompromising engineering that goes into this cable commands a lot of respect, even from the most cynical of cable sceptics.

But, there's more; there's Clear Beyond. That's a double-strength (eight conductors instead of four) speaker cable designed for bi-wiring, or serious shot-gunning, for the absolute pinnacle of performance. But more about that later... +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cardas Clear Interconnect

Outside Diameter: 10.2mm

Dielectric Type: Teflon, Air

RCA Capacitance: 16 pf/ft

XLR Capacitance: 8 pf/ft

Cable AWG: 25.5

Shield Type: 100% spiral x 2 and Teflon graphite composite

Conductor Type: Matched

Propagation, Golden Ratio, Constant Q, Crossfield, Pure Copper, Litz

Connectors: Cardas custom SRCA or XLRs

Cardas Clear speaker cable

Outside Diameter: 15.2mm

Dielectric Type: Teflon®

Inductance: .0176 uh/ft/loop

Capacitance: 278 pf/ft

Bi Wire Option: No

Cable AWG: 8

Conductor Type: Perfect Mirror Quadaxial

Connectors: Forged spade lugs compression die forged to cable

Prices as tested:

Clear (RCA) £1,650 for 1m pair

Clear (XLR) £1,950 for 1m pair

Clear loudspeaker cable £3,550 for 2x2m terminated pair

Manufacturer: Cardas Audio
www.cardas.com

Distributor: Audiofreaks Ltd
www.audiofreaks.co.uk

+44 (0)208 948 4153

High End Cable

www.highendcable.co.uk

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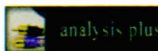
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Colleen Cardas meet your maker

by Alan Sircom



WE SPOKE TO COLLEEN CARDAS, President of Cardas Audio about the genesis of the Clear cable line, and how it calls on more than 20 years of development by Colleen's father and chief designer, George Cardas.

AS: How did Cardas Audio start?

CC: My father started Cardas Audio in the late 1980s. He's always been involved with a lot of live music, and he recognised that they were unable to recreate the live experience, when they brought it into living rooms. He identified that one of the things that was lacking in that area related specifically to cable.

AS: Why is the Golden Ratio so important to Cardas?

CC: When people think of Cardas Audio, they think of the Golden Ratio. The Golden Ratio is found everywhere. It's in nature. It's not like we created the Golden Ratio, but we identified it as something we could use in cable design that made cables sound better.

It's a big part of our lives, in terms of what Cardas is. That stranding and the sizing of the strands has been used in everything from the first cable Cardas released up to and including the Clear. We may make improvements in the dielectric, and the terminations used along the way, but we would never stray from that being what's most important.

AS: You make almost everything. What does that involve?

CC: It requires more 'hands on' treatment, so the copper being mined in the US and drawn to our specifications – that

includes going through diamond dies and being coated – all of that process is not only time consuming, but requires a lot of involvement with suppliers. But each component can be made to our specifications in terms of purity and manufacture. So it actually makes for a longer, more difficult process, but it makes for a purer end product.

AS: Does Clear continue to build on the successes of the past?

CC: Clear is the evolution of all that is Cardas. There have been four 'families' of Cardas products; the initial range, then there's the family called Hexlink Gold, followed by the Cross series (with its air-cored dielectrics and crossfield conductors). After that, we created the Reference series of products. And now Clear. Each one is a derivative of the improvements made in the previous cable.

AS: How long did Clear take to design?

CC: The product took the longest of all for George to develop. It was a bit frustrating because he had to develop things like the process of terminating the speaker cable. It's not 'oh let's smash a connector on the end of it', we had to make custom dies and machine custom spades. There was no buying anything off the shelf; we even made each machine to make the connectors. And, then there's the stripping the cable itself, because there's no solder involved in the speaker cable connection, it uses an elaborate crimping system, but we still have to deal with the litz coating.

We announced the speaker cable in January 2008, and it took us another year to get the process just right. By which time we had two speaker cables, an interconnect and a revolutionary new XLR to go with the phono interconnect line.

AS: Where do you go from here?

CC: The Neutral Reference cable separated out into a three product line, with loudspeaker cables, interconnects and power cords in each one. The technology from Neutral Reference went into a greater product line and I assume that's going to happen with the Clear as well. As opposed to Neutral Reference, though, we are going to work from Clear down, and probably have less expensive variants of the Clear. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Vacuum State DPA-300B mono-bloc power amps

By Roy Gregory

I think it's fair to say that there are certain approaches to the problem of reproducing recorded music that struggle to light my fireworks. High on that list of failures to launch would rank, amongst others, triode output stages and balanced connections. Which would tend to suggest, at least at first glance, that Vacuum State's DPA-300B mono-blocs could be facing something of a struggle when it comes time to ignite the distinctly dampened Gregory enthusiasm. Soggy incoherence, curtailed and disjointed frequency extremes, a lack of transparency – that's what I've come to expect from triode amps.

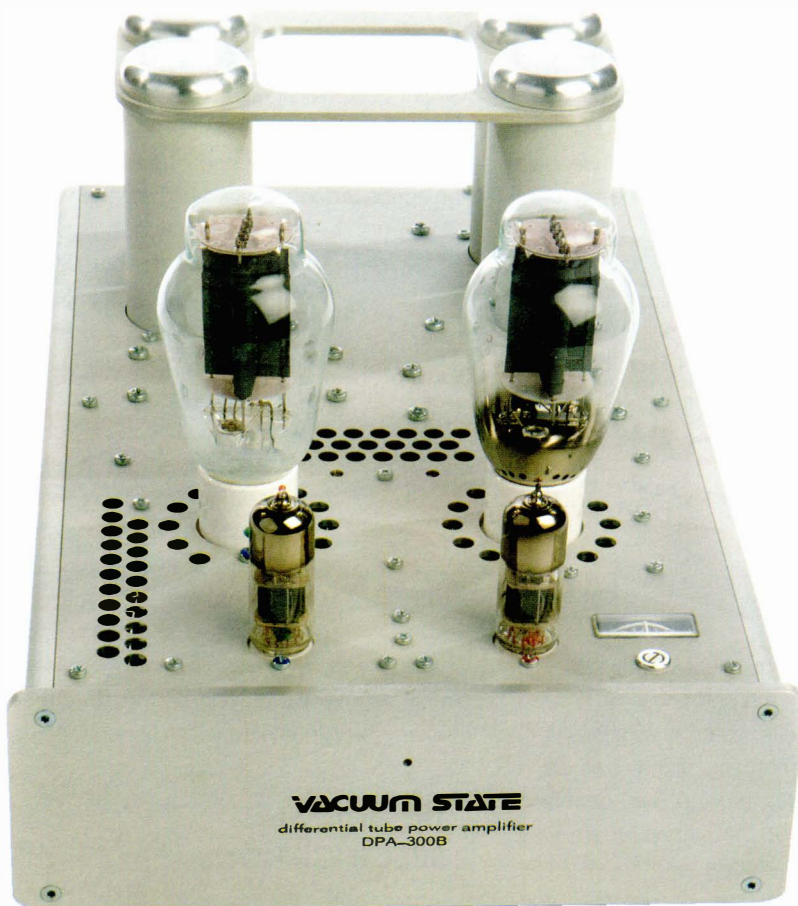
But not these.

The very first notes are enough to convince you that this is no ordinary amplifier, irrespective of circuit topology and output devices. But then, this really is no ordinary amplifier. The DPA-300B is a fully differential design, an approach that's rare enough amongst valve amps of any sort, let alone those with direct heated triodes at the angry end – so much so that they almost constitute a culture clash. They're also surprisingly small, each compact chassis being perfectly easy to lift, one-handed by the aluminium plate that protects the four, large reservoir caps. In fact, their diminutive dimensions, graceful musical delivery under quite surprising demands and the ease with which they can be moved about has made them something of a fixture around these parts – and that's definitely a first for any triode amp.

I will, at this point, make a claim for extenuating circumstances. When it comes to hi-fi, I'm reluctant to damn anything out of hand, being a firm believer in the old adage that it's not what you use that counts, but how you use it. This is not the first DHT design that I've enjoyed – but those that have survived past an initial session have virtually all had two things in common: 300B output tubes and a higher than average rated output. They've also tended to rely on large, choke regulated power supplies. And when it comes to balanced, frankly, it only makes sense in the context of a fully differential circuit. The Vacuum State Amps tick all those boxes, so perhaps their abilities aren't quite as surprising after all – until, that is, you realize just how capable they are...

Whip the bottom off of a DPA-300B and you'll find plenty of physical evidence to support the news being delivered via your ear canals. The rear half of the chassis is dominated by three beautifully crafted Lundahl transformers, one each for output and the choke power supply, the third (at three times the size of the others) for the





mains. The small size of the output transformer might lead to a few raised eyebrows, but for the 20 Watt rated output (which is generous for a 300B design) it's perfectly adequate. Put the iron in the mains transformer, that's what I say; a policy that makes even more sense in a triode design where the inherent simplicity of the circuit exposes the quality of the power supply to ruthless scrutiny. Get this basic balance between input and output transformer wrong and you'll lose linearity, bandwidth, dynamic agility and musical authority. Vacuum State have got it just right – and it shows as soon as you listen to the amp. It's not the only thing they've got right either. Designer Allan Wright is convinced (and convincing) that the differential topology delivers the best of single-ended and the best of push-pull without the disadvantages of either. It's an argument he makes lucidly and in some detail, along with an extensive explanation of this implementation of the topology, on his excellent website, one that's refreshingly long on theory and short on BS and bluster.

The physically symmetrical, zero feedback audio circuit is hard wired, using a combination of silver wire and ribbon, the input tube supplies being heavily regulated by Vacuum State's own, solid-state Super Reg circuitry, an upgrade they offer separately to the DIY and upgrade brigade. The component count in the audio circuit is astonishingly low, with most of what's inside the chassis being devoted to the extensive power supply and keeping the operating conditions of the two circuit halves perfectly balanced. The result is an incredibly short and direct signal path. Apart from a pair of Russian 300Bs, you get two Sovtek 6H30s, which I found it advantageous to fit with tube dampers – and that's your lot. A chassis-top meter allows for balancing the output tubes, and once set these proved to be remarkably stable.

Even the rear panel on the DPA-300B sets it apart. As well as an RCA/phono input socket and a balanced XLR connection, there's also a miniature Redel 6-pin connector. You get two pairs of basic chassis mount 4mm sockets (both offering the same 6 Ohm output impedance) which might not look impressive but actually sound very good indeed, as well as a Centronics 25mm computer-type ribbon socket. This and the Redel connector are for use with dedicated versions of Vacuum State's own cables – although the ones supplied with the amps (and reviewed in Issue 60) feature more conventional, lightweight connectors. Finally, and in keeping with the DIY/bespoke aspect of Vacuum State's business, both the overall gain of the amplifier and its output power can be internally adjusted to further system optimization. Casework is functional and tidy but employs neither the exotic materials and manufacturing nor the fit and finish that are *de rigueur* in certain sectors of the high-end.

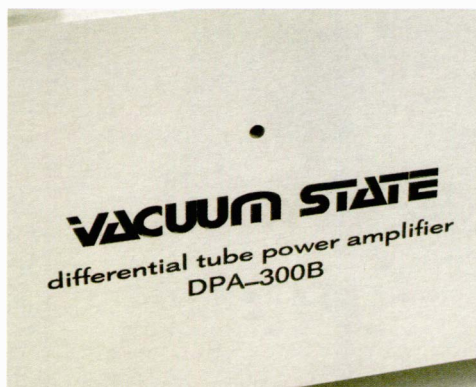
The small size of the output transformer might lead to a few raised eyebrows, but for the 20 Watt rated output it's perfectly adequate.

Sonically, the DPA-300B is just as much of a surprise package as it is in design terms. Hook it up and the immediately obvious authority, bandwidth and linearity belie its choice of output device and modest rated output. The numbers might not say so but this is confident, competent and sure footed performer. Add to that a welcome clarity and directness as well as the absence of intrusive colouration and you've got the makings of something very special indeed. ▶

▶ Despite the manufacturer's assurances (we've all heard those before), the first thing I did was look around for a speaker that wouldn't suck all 20 Watts dry and spit them out without even chewing. But once again, my assumptions proved groundless. The DPA-300Bs are genuinely more capable than their rated output suggests. Power is power, but these 20 Watts had no problem driving speakers as varied as the Sonics Amerigo, the Ayra C1, the Avalon Aspect and, to spectacular effect, the huge Martin Logan CLX. In fact, the only speaker with which the Vacuum States failed to click (somewhat to my surprise and very much to my disappointment) was the Focal Grande Utopia EM. Again, on paper the match looks made in heaven, given the speaker's high sensitivity and controllable bass output. And again, the paper lied. The DPA-300Bs never got hold of the Focals, and whether as a result of the speakers' impedance characteristic or sheer bandwidth, the results were always somewhat less than the sum of the parts.

In fact, the speakers that gave the best results, the C1 and the CLX, sonically share more in common than you might think, both with each other and with the amps. Clean, clear and direct, devoid of any softening or unwanted harmonic padding to slow or muddle the signals, there was an instant and obvious affinity between the DPA-300Bs and these most tactile and communicative of speakers. Combine the natural, unforced and unexaggerated presentation of the amps with the immediacy and dynamic responsiveness of these speakers and the result is some of the most lucid and expressive music you'll ever have heard. You want drive, energy and purpose? Look no further than Vacuum State's matching SVP-2 pre-amp. You want to temper it a little and add refinement and poise, look to a unit like the Herron. But in either guise, the amps do their job with a wonderful sense of ease and musical invisibility. Change what's upstream and they clearly let you hear the difference, so little of themselves do they impose on the signal.

There was an instant and obvious affinity between the DPA-300Bs and these most tactile and communicative of speakers.



Playing 'Time (The Revelator)' from Gillian Welch's album of the same name, via the Vacuum State amps and CLXs, the immediacy and presence of this recording, the space around the two guitars and voices – and the separation between them – made for an almost spookily realistic presentation. The scale was right, the height and relative position of the vocals and instruments. But it was the clarity and lack of obstruction that set it apart from what most systems deliver. There was no sense of anything between you and the performers, no smearing of finer detail or compression

of attack and dynamics. Instead there were simply two people playing and singing, their intimacy and innate musical understanding ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Differential vacuum tube power amplifier

Tube Complement: 4x 6H30, 4x 300B per pair

Inputs: 1x XLR

1x RCA/phono

1x Redel 6-pin

Input Impedance: 100 kOhms (internally adjustable)

Gain: 20dB (internally adjustable)

Rated Output: 20 Watts/Ch

Output Impedance: 6 Ohms

Output Socketry: 2prs 4mm sockets

1x Centronics 25mm edge connector

Weight: 9kg ea.

Dimensions (WxHxD): 260 x 220 x 412mm

Price: £16,477+VAT per pair

Manufacturer: Vacuum State GmbH
Switzerland
+41 (0)52 620 3581
www.vacuumstate.com

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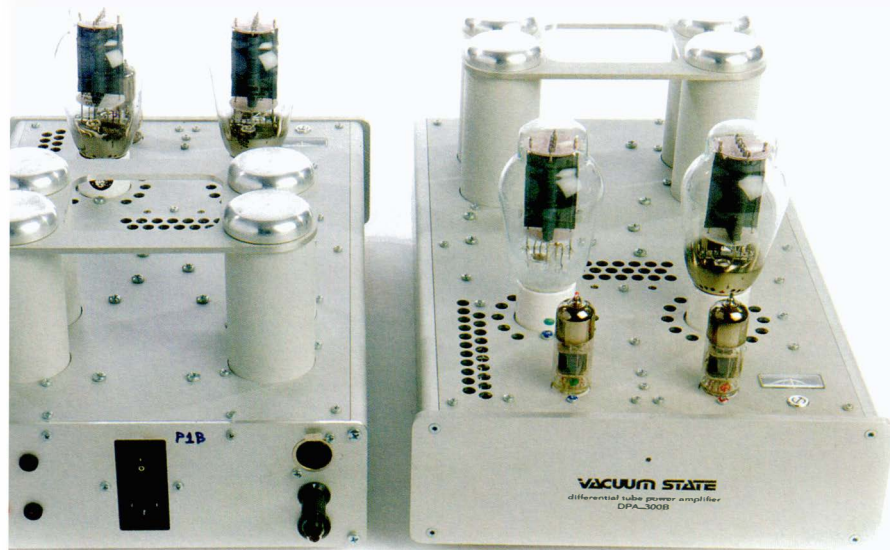


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▶ giving the song a weight and drama, a power that belies the modest forces deployed. And where many systems get edgy and raw as the song builds, needing more volume for the quite delicacy of the intro than they do for the dynamic demands of the full-on finale, the Vacuum State's are dynamically coherent enough to embrace both ends of this spectrum. It is an ability that underlines a key aspect of their performance; that power supply keeps things stable, allowing them to scale all but the most outrageous dynamic shifts, whilst the short and uncluttered signal path allows them to deliver huge amounts of low-level detail. The way that performers are locked in space, fleshed out with the tiny nuances of vocal and instrumental technique, the incidental noises of their clothing or chair, all exactly when and where they should be brings a sense of natural clarity to the performance, explicit without ever being obvious.

It's almost disingenuous to separate out performance specifics when you are dealing with an amplifier whose hallmark is integration and the recreation of a single, intelligible whole, but two other qualities are both illustrative and informative. The first is the DPA-300Bs' way with acoustic space. Where it's on the recording, they reproduce a palpable sense of acoustic space, with instruments within it and boundaries to define it: But only if it's on the recording. Don't look to these amps to wrap everything in a warm, expansive embrace. So with the Gillian Welch track, you are hearing more of the space around and between the performers, the floor below them, than the walls of the room – entirely consistent with the close miked production. But play the XRCD transfer of the Mehta Planets and the orchestral perspective is spot on, the dimensions of the stage clear to hear. And within it? Instrumental spread is natural and beautifully separated, but this is not the pinpoint, instrument by instrument hyper-reality that is delivered by some systems. Location and relative position are clear, just as they are in the concert hall, but don't expect to pick each violin out of the fourth row.

Much of this is down to the clean and linear low frequencies delivered by the Vacuum State amps. Resisting the temptation to overspec the output transformer or add a little extra weight and warmth by other means, pays dividends when you hook the amps up to a speaker like the CLX, with its

peerless bass transparency and texture. This pairing offered the most natural and easily audible reproduction of jazz bass I've ever heard. None of that subterranean mumbling produced by all but the biggest of systems, but distinct notes, underpinning the rhythm section despite being so much quieter and less obvious than the brass. And it's not just on small ensemble recordings either: Playing the Basie Big Band on the Grand Prix Audio turntable through these speakers, the precise placement of bass phrases, their lock-step with Basie's left-hand was a revelation.

These Vacuum State mono-blocs fully deserve their seat at hi-fi's sonic top-table. There are certainly speakers that they won't drive and they won't ameliorate poor recordings or threadbare components elsewhere in a system. They are honest to a fault, which perhaps, is their one flaw – at least as far as more romantically inclined listeners might conclude. They also have a distinctly hands-off approach to delivering music: If

These Vacuum State mono-blocs fully deserve their seat at hi-fi's sonic top table.

you want to hear your amp really getting a grip on your speakers, you will find yourself looking elsewhere. There are certainly amps that are more impressively presented and there are amps that deliver even greater focus and micro dynamic resolution – but none in my experience that make better use of their available musical resources: At least, not at this price. It's the deftness with which they deliver the complete musical performance that makes these amps special.

Interestingly, one of the very few amplifiers that does better the DPA-300B overall is the Berning, a product that costs considerably more but is just as unusual in design and execution. And therein lies its appeal. Consummately musical and sonically unobtrusive, the Vacuum State is an amp that should be heard not seen. If you need your hi-fi to say something about you then you'll wonder why these Vacuum State amps cost so much. But if it's your music that you want to do the talking, you'll wonder why they cost so little. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Well Tempered Amadeus GT turntable

By Malcolm Steward

The Amadeus GT truly is a wonderful machine to behold: a record player whose design elegantly combines genuine innovation and extreme pragmatism... and a complete absence of BS. Its designer, William Firebaugh has worked for many years at the cutting edges of technology and engineering but you won't find his turntables littered inappropriately with hi-tech go-faster stripes, carbon fibre or titanium. The Amadeus is purely and simply, utterly pure and simple. Its wholesomeness and lack of chromium-plated clutter make a refreshing change from others in the high-end vinyl arena where unnecessary and prodigious over-engineering are so often the order of the day.

Take, for instance, the Amadeus' unipivot tone-arm, whose 'bearing' arrangement is constructed using fine thread suspending a golf ball that is partially immersed in high viscosity silicone fluid because Firebaugh's experimentation, which involved no less than around fifty prototypes, demonstrated that this outwardly unsophisticated approach delivered music far more coherently than others. The design does away with the problems inherent in tone-arms that use ball- or needle-bearings, which need an – admittedly minuscule – amount of free play in order to operate: free play that is not so tiny when compared to the microscopic deviations in a record groove that the stylus is attempting to trace.

As well as the Amadeus GT under test there is also a non-GT version, which sells for around £500 less. I asked the UK importer what differentiated the two models and he told me, with remarkable forthrightness, that the performance of the two turntables was identical as far as he could discern but that

the GT had a classier-looking finish. Such candour is exceedingly welcome in these times when so many manufacturers are so desperate to sell customers up.

The turntable, as I've already observed, is incredibly simple yet elegant. One could almost describe it as the Heidi Klum version of the Rega Planar. It's not at all blousy or brash: instead it exudes class subtly. The design's cleverness will shine most brightly in the eyes of the turntable aficionado who will be able to appreciate the ingenious lateral thinking behind this device.

One element of the Amadeus that is virtually guaranteed to raise eyebrows is the power supply, which is a wall-wart of the type you'd normally expect to find charging mobile phones. However, this is not powering a regular turntable motor but a compact, proprietary, servo controlled DC design that drives an acrylic platter with sufficient inertia to provide virtually immeasurable wow and flutter though a unique, near friction-free, round-spindle-in-a-square-hole bearing. The belt comes as even more of a surprise being just a length of 0.004-inch diameter polyester filament, which is knotted to make it belt-shaped. The motor pulley has been specifically designed to accommodate this

departure from the norm. If you lose or damage the belt just sending an SAE to your dealer will get you a replacement under Well Tempered's Belt-for-Life policy.

The only drawback I found with the power supply, however, was that even having the unit connected to the mains was sufficient to dull and smear the sound of the rest of my system. Both my CD and HD players sounded bloated and lacklustre with the supply plugged into the mains. Thankfully, the offending item can be replaced for little expense: you can pick up a linear multi-voltage 1.2A regulated power supply, such as the one I used, for under £20 that does not degrade the performance of the turntable nor the rest of the system. If you replace this item, though, do make sure that you avoid switched-mode or poorly regulated devices at all costs.

The Well Tempered's dual layer MDF plinth is as equally minimalist as the rest of the design but it nonetheless provided sufficient isolation atop my Quadraspire Sunoko Vent stand from both footfall and airborne vibration. And I was not playing music at the sort of sound pressure levels that neighbours, if I had any, would appreciate.

The Amadeus is not a design that is different from the mainstream purely for the sake of being different. It is far removed from being a cynical marketing ploy and can trace its origins back to a seminal 1977 paper published by Bruel and Kjaer called 'The Audible Effects of Mechanical Resonances in Turntables'. This concluded that a high fidelity tone-arm should have a low effective mass and be mechanically damped to a Q of 0.5 to eliminate the side-band distortion – that is particularly objectionable to human hearing – caused by mechanical instability. As a result of this conclusion, many companies developed light weight arms but ignored the damping issue because of the difficulties involved in implementing it successfully.

Firebaugh's answer is the fibre-suspended, silicone-damped golf-ball pierced by a narrow aluminium tube that itself is damped with a fine sand filling. This construction will not find favour with those who enjoy obsessively tweaking their tone-arm's adjustments. Anti-skating, which is applied through a twist in the bridle suspending the arm cannot be further adjusted in any more conventional fashion. What is more, the company displays equal disregard for cartridge alignment fiddlers: the 10.5-inch effective length arm features a fixed head shell that provides no tracking alignment (or overhang) adjustment and the instructions warn that alignment protractors might well disagree with Well Tempered's settings. "Regardless," says the company, "we stand by our convictions."

Firebaugh states that with this design he set out to achieve a high degree of mechanical stability, and that much is obvious from the moment the stylus of the Dynavector XX-2 moving coil drops into the groove of the first LP I played, an old recording of Vernon Handley conducting the London Philharmonic playing Vaughan Williams' London Symphony. The dynamic contrast is perhaps what impressed most; the awe inspiring weight and solidity behind the orchestral climaxes successfully removing the impression that one was listening to a recording of a piece of music rather than the music itself. The performance, however, was not all about sheer weight and muscle: the Amadeus GT showed itself to be delicate and detailed when appropriate; for example, faithfully rendering the decay of a triangle at the rear of the stage even when more prominent lines were being played in front. All this combined to

build a musically and emotionally persuasive performance of considerable appeal. As one listener noted as the music finished "That makes you feel really proud to be British," a sentiment that certainly would have met with the composer's approval.

The unwavering foundation that this turntable constructs provides a solid platform for LPs that can tend to sound fragile or lightweight on other decks. Played on the Amadeus GT, these exhibited none of the shoutiness or brittle tonality that results in those edge-of-the-seat moments, or that "will it track this groove?" paranoia. In this respect it had the beating of my beloved Funk Vector LP12/Naim Uni-pivot/Lyra, which sounded a little nervous whenever Alison Stamp's voice soared to the rafters in Allegri's Miserere. On the WT her voice sounded absolutely stable, sweet and secure. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Well-Tempered Amadeus GT turntable and arm combination
 33/45rpm (speed change on pulley)
 Acrylic platter
 Zero Tolerance platter bearing
 Servo-controlled motor, with vibration controlled mounting
 0.004" polyester thread belt
 Fully damped tonearm, with golf-ball suspended in silicone fluid for optimum variable damping
 Easy azimuth adjustment
 Fixed headshell
 Dual layer sandwich construction plinth
 Isolation base with proprietary feet included
 External power supply (7v-12v, 100mA minimum)

Price: £2,500

Manufacturer:

Well Tempered Lab
 URL: www.welltemperedlab.net

Distributed by Pear Audio

URL: www.pearaudio.com
 Tel: +44 (0)1665 830862

▶ Alison Stamp's voice soared to the rafters in Allegri's *Miserere*. On the WT her voice sounded absolutely stable, sweet and secure. The deck coped just as well with noisy records, and did not make a meal of any pops or clicks it encountered, dealing with them as quickly and quietly as it could. Here, I reckon, my Funk LP12 exhibited an edge over the WT, seeming to 'distance' record noise from the music: forgive the single quotes but this is a phenomenon best heard rather than clumsily described in print. The Funk seemed somehow to move the noise away from its presentation of the music while the WT subjugated noise but it retained its attachment to the music. Does that make any sense? I did not imagine it would.

None of what I have written thus far should be taken as suggesting that the WT was overly smooth or laid-back in its portrayal: it certainly gave an accurate account of the instruments used by the Academy of Ancient Music under Christopher Hogwood playing Pachelbel's *Canon*. And it gave a truly vivid appraisal of the lusciously rounded, rich timbre of the *trompettes naturelles* playing Vivaldi's *Concerto for 2 Trumpets*. The difference in every facet of their presentation and that of a modern instrument's was clearly portrayed and a delight to savour.

I am convinced, however, that the WT saved its finest performances for choral works: it sounded utterly magnificent playing the Trevor Pinnock recording of Haydn's *Missa in Angustiis* with the English Concert and Choir again using original instruments. It was not in the least perturbed by the dynamic vocal excursions of soprano, Felicity Lott, or contralto, Carolyn Watkinson. Even the massed choral and orchestral, loudspeaker-destroying might of 'O Fortuna' that opens *Carmina Burana* could not provoke the WT to mis-track, even slightly.

At this juncture I feel obliged to note that I am not truly a classical music fan but the Amadeus teetered on the brink of turning me into one. It made me find delight in records that have sat unplayed on my shelves for, quite literally, decades in some instances.

Nonetheless, I retain my passion for the Devil's music and plenty of that invariably found its wicked way onto the WT's platter.

The WT thoroughly voiced its appreciation of George Thorogood and the Destroyer's insistent rhythm, rich guitar tone and the dynamic variety in his playing on 'One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer' and particularly his slide playing on 'Kind Hearted Woman'. Apart from painting a vibrant picture of his guitar and vocal stylings and approach, the deck captured the varied emotion and energy of each performance perfectly.

Patti Smith's album *Easter* is nowhere near being an audiophile recording but the Amadeus rendered it with remarkable control, detail and precision. Regardless, tracks like 'Rock'n'Roll Nigger' did not suffer one iota from this veil of composure; they rocked as hard as ever but the added definition and insight allowed me to connect more easily with Smith's poetic lyrics and the dexterity of her approach to compositions such as Springsteen's 'Because the Night'.

One strength of the Amadeus seemed to be the surprises it was able to throw up when you selected albums you had not played for years. Albums that had been confined to a lofty shelf because you imagined they had little to give frequently revealed all manner of depths and delights you perhaps never appreciated on earlier playing.

Thankfully those surprises were usually very favourable because the WT seemed adept at digging intensely to find musically relevant information: the only albums with which it had a struggle were 'eighties stadium excess from the likes of Simple Minds. Nothing unpredictable there, so I made sure to give U2's output a wide berth as well!

As well as its facility with classical music the Amadeus proved exceptionally communicative with 'fifties' jazz recreating the vivid playing-live feel of albums such the 1959 Riverside recording of the Thelonious Monk Orchestra in New York. As well as revealing the wealth of instrumental colour and dynamics buried in these discs the WT, more importantly, latched onto the groove that the rhythm section so fluidly established for Monk and the other players to work around. Furthermore it presented this music without any hint of artifice to spoil the illusion that one was in the privileged position of being able to sit and listen to Monk play.

I then moved on to listen to a few Miles Davis LPs. I began with 1955's *Blue Moods* but found that the playing was, quite literally, far too blue for the time of day and quickly switched to *The New Quintet* album where Trane's sax and Philly Joe Jones' brisk drumming quickly elevated my spirits. This recording era and labels such as Verve and Prestige make life simple for any turntable with an inclination to sound good to do so but the WT's capacity to allow the music to connect directly with my moods absolutely astonished me.

Ultimately it behoves me to confess which of the turntables that currently inhabit my music room is, in my opinion, 'the best'; my Funked LP12 or the Amadeus GT. That is a truly difficult question, not unlike asking me to decide whether tea is better than coffee. I would be more than happy to live with either of these fine decks' but if I were ever to become a real devotee of classical music or to increase the amount of jazz in my diet I could easily see the Amadeus winning the title. +

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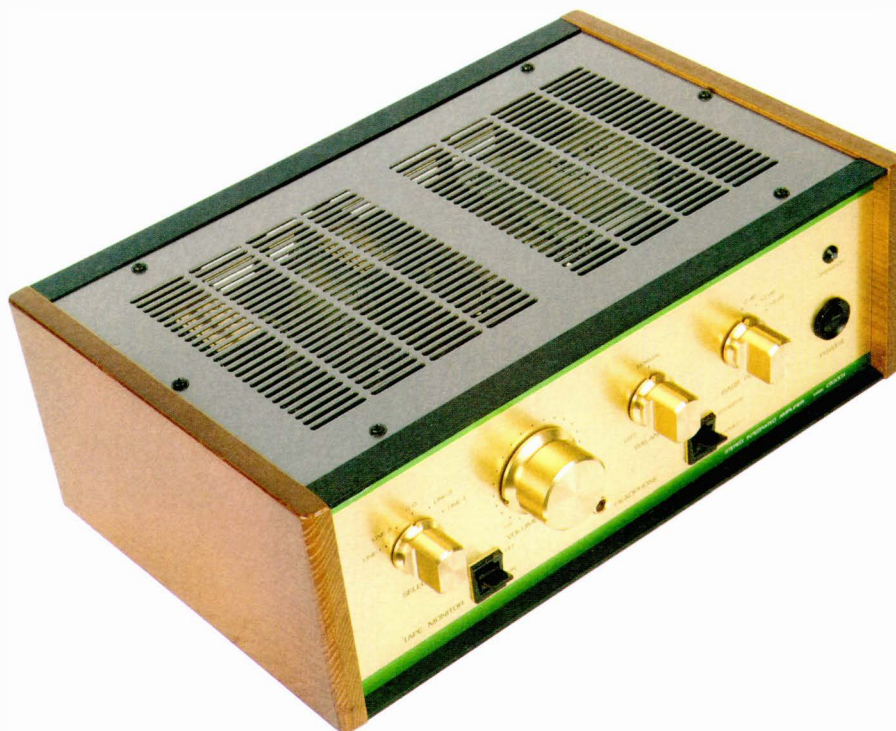
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Leben CS-300XS integrated amplifier

By Alan Sircom

Leben – with its distinctly Japlish mission statement of ‘A Motion Sound’ – is a relatively new name in European hi-fi circles. In fact, it’s a Japanese company that has been making high quality valve amplifiers since 1995.

The brand is the brain-child of one Taku Hyodo. Hyodo-san is one of the most respected valve amp designers in Japan, having spent his formative years at Luxman. He’s an obsessive collector of valves, a hardcore tube-roller and has a very distinct (and possibly very right) set of ideas about how a valve amp should behave.

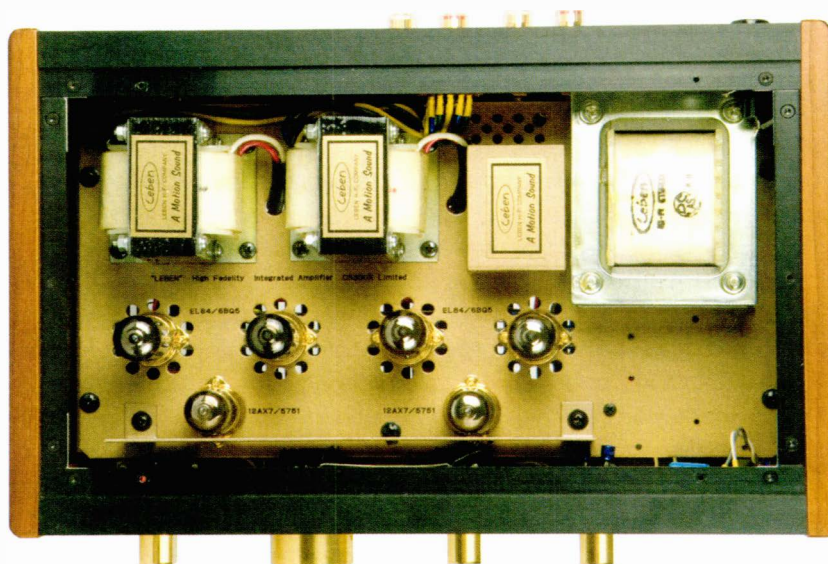
There are currently just seven products in the Leben line; three integrated amps, two preamps, one phono preamp and a stereo power amp. The CS-300XS is not the entry-level amp (that honour goes to the standard CS-300), but the difference between this and the basic amp just comes down to improved component quality. This gives rise to a slight increase in power output, with the XS model delivering a claimed 15 watts compared to 12 watts in the standard model.

Both have the same valve complement, comprising a pair of GE 5751 input double triodes (these are basically premium versions of the popular 12AX7) with a matched pair of Sovtek EL84 power pentodes per channel. Specially designed transformers, Sanyo OS-Con and ELNA Silmic capacitors abound inside. The power transformer – originally designed for the limited edition, Mullard valve-sporting CS-300X – helps

raise the power output. Everything is beautifully wired point-to-point on a solid alloy chassis, with 24K gold-plated valve seats. The amp has just five line inputs and a tape input/output (all phono), but there is also an earth tag on the rear of the amp.

The overall look is a big part of the Leben’s appeal. Seemingly the sole concessions to modernity are the green LED on the round on/off switch and a red ‘operation’ LED above this (which takes about 30 seconds to come to life). The rest is pure early 1960s chic. Wooden side cheeks, gold front with green accents and matching 24k gold-plated knobs, big black switches for tape monitoring and headphone operation. No remote and even – horror of horrors – a working bass boost circuit with +3dB and +5dB options. The rear panel has gold phonos and plastic coated gold-plated WBT speaker terminals, and a three-way selector for four, six and eight ohm speaker impedance. There’s an IEC socket if you decide to blow money on expensive mains wire.

“By all means spank down three times the cost of the amp on funky cables, special tables or magic beans if you want. The CS-300XS takes it all in its stride and turns out exactly the same performance.”



That's one of the joys of the Leben; it's disarmingly down-to-earth in approach. By all means spank down three times the cost of the amp on funky cables, special tables or magic beans if you want. The CS-300XS takes it all in its stride and turns out exactly the same performance. Whether these things make a whole host of difference to the performance is moot – it sounds good on a coffee table with wheels on it and played through the cheapest cables I could come across. Valves are inherently microphonic, so 'the better the support, the better the performance' goes the logic. But I must confess that short of trying to knock out a few paradiddles on the nearby surroundings with a ball pein hammer, this is one of the least microphonic valve amps I've come across.

It's also charmingly unfussy as to source component. Run a CD through a DVD player, play the best CD player you can call upon, run sound from a laptop (with or without DAC), it brings out the best in each setting. It's not indiscriminating, and you will hear bad sounds from bad discs and poor players, but it's as if the Leben sees the good in everything and tries its best to bring out that good from source components.

Secretly, I so wanted to hate this amplifier. Or even dislike it a little. You see, the Leben is the toast of t'internet, the darling of the digirati. Seemingly from nowhere, fuelled by some very positive reviews online, Leben has become the valve amplifier du jour. It would be great to prove the supremacy of magazine reviews by finding the flaw in this web wonder. I failed — you can't hate the Leben CS-300XS. It's way too seductive. In looks (and outlook), the Leben profile fits somewhere between Luxman (perhaps not surprising, given Hyodosan's background) and Shindo in the Japanese valve amp pantheon. And the sound fits snugly there, too.

There was a lot of music – appropriate and thoroughly inappropriate – thrown at the Leben. I predicted the amp has its happy place in jazz and easy listening, and the CS-300XS didn't disappoint. Julie London summoned up distinctly naughty in-head images from the 1950s and Charles Mingus's *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* moved into early 1960s beatnik weirdness easily.

What came next was unexpected, though. It's not as old-fashioned as its looks and it makes a very modern detailed sound. Swapping out Mingus for Ryan Adams had the same effect. It cut through the compression (it was still there, just not so disc-ruining) leaving the music more entertaining than

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated valve amplifier.

Inputs: 4x line (phono)

1x tape (phono)

1x earth tag

Input sensitivity: 600mV

Outputs:

1x tape (phono)

1x speaker terminal set (WBT)

Output impedance:

4/6/8 Ohms (Selectable)

Valve complement GE 5751 x2, Sovtek

EL84 x4

Power output per channel: 15W

Frequency Response (-2dB): 15Hz-

100kHz

Distortion (@10W): 0.7%

Power consumption: 82w

Dimensions (WxHxD): 360x140x270mm

Weight: 10.5kg

Price: £2,450

Manufacturer:

Leben hi-fi Stereo Company

Net: www.lebenhifi.com

Distributor:

RT Services

Net: www.rtsaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 1235 810 455

► normally happens on hi-fi. With John Mayer's live *Where the Light Is* album, you can hear the limits of the stage microphones, but it doesn't undermine the sound compared to most audio systems. Same applies throughout; good discs sound great, poor discs sound less good, but the Leben doesn't gloat over recording flaws. And there's something oh so wonderful about an amplifier that looks as if it would turn up its volume pot at playing something as gauche as Sinatra, but is actually capable of playing 'Mein Teil' from German industrial metallurgists Rammstein at nasty levels.

This last highlights a rare treat for valve fans; decent, well-controlled bass that works well with modern speakers. There's none of the weak hold over woofers that typifies small, poor transformers; here, even reggae beats (Toots and the Maytals definitive, remarkably upbeat reworking of Radiohead's 'Let Down' on the excellent *Radiodread* album) posed no problems. There's another treat in store, this time for headphone listeners. The built-in headphone stage takes advantage of the amplifier's excellent sound quality, bestowing a richness and elegance to the sometimes hard-edged sound of headphones. It's also an indicator of just how well-made this amplifier really is, because any valve hiss or hum would be clearly audible through this socket. There was nothing, just great sound.

In down-the-line hi-fi terms, this is an articulate and detailed amplifier with excellent dynamic range, a smooth, open midrange, neatly extended frequency extremes and first rate imaging properties. Perhaps more crucially, in non-hi-fi terms, it sounds 'good' to almost all who hear it. 'Good' in this context is surprisingly hard to pin down, but the last amplifier that's played successfully to such a non-audiophile community had a Leak badge on the side. Like classic British valve amps from the early 1960s, the amp fills a room elegantly, making music that bit more listenable and approachable by making it a fraction richer, in a thoroughly 'good' way.

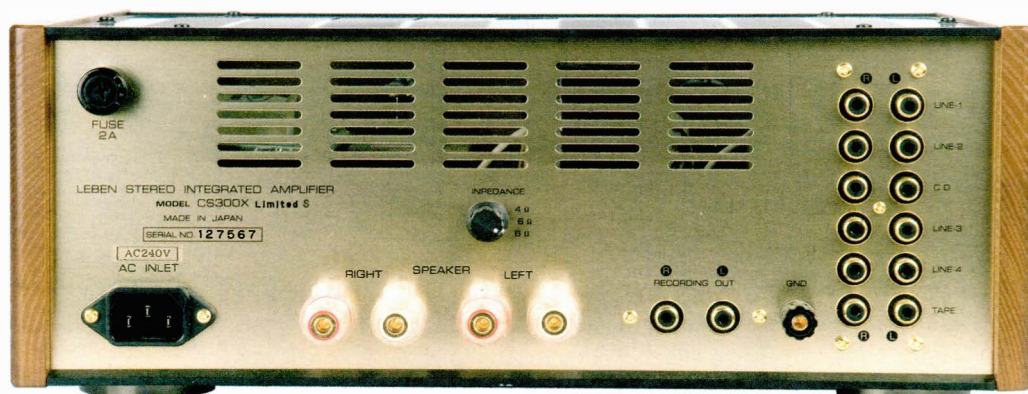
There's some real class happening here. It almost cries out for a pair of Harbeths or Spendor and would make a set sound almost irresistible. It also goes loud for its 15 watts, or rather its distortion spectrum is so full of even order harmonic distortion, you tend not to notice it and just drink in the sound – distortion and all, which means you can go further into clip without it sounding uncomfortable. Coupled with speakers from 85dB on up and in typical British listening rooms, you'd really have to go for ear-threatening listening levels to cause the CS-300XS to begin to sound edgy.

In comparison with that other similarly priced valve fave – the Border Patrol modified Pure Sound – the two are closer than one might imagine in performance. Both have an elegance and a powerful sense of full-force dynamic range to the sound, and an overall richness of sound that most solid-

“Like classic British valve amps from the early 1960s, the amp fills a room elegantly, making music that bit more listenable and approachable by making it a fraction richer, in a thoroughly ‘good’ way.”

state equipment would struggle to match. Of the two, this is the more 'comfortable' sound, where the Border Patrol/Pure Sound combo has the edge in expansiveness of soundstage. Neither amplifier draws attention to itself in playing, whatever the music in play, but the difference between the two manifests in approach to that music. Take Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, played by The Sixteen; the Border Patrol/Pure Sound rig takes you deeper into the mix, allowing you to hear individual singers and instruments with greater ease, where the Leben just flows effortlessly through the music from one theme to another. In fairness, the difference in approach is mild (the Leben lets you listen into the mix and the Border Patrol/Pure Sound is no stranger to the score).

If I were not spending a significant proportion of time listening to the performance of source components, I'd be reaching for the credit card on this one. For a reviewer, the Leben CS-300XS's ability to see the best in everything it is hooked to precludes it from daily use. If you aren't a reviewer, though, and you want to sit back and listen to music – of all kinds – day in, day out, I can't think of a better way to do so. +



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Roy Gregory, HiFi+ issue 54

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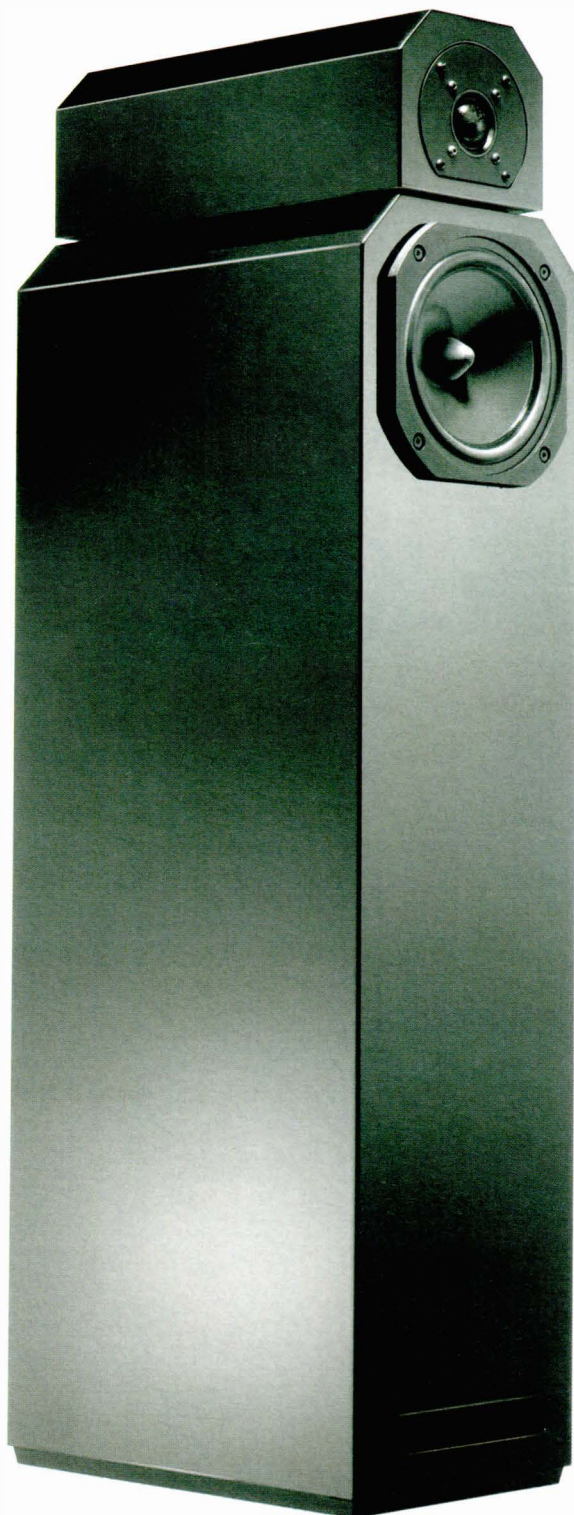
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

AUDIOPLAN KONTRAST V LOUDSPEAKERS

By Chris Thomas



I wonder to what extent my own personal taste influences me when I write about a product. It would be great to be able to come to each and every review with a mindset free of preconceptions and leanings toward a particular style of musical reproduction. In fact I am always intrigued when I speak to friends and they tell me they do or don't like a component or a system because they prefer this or that type of sound. If I were to allow myself that particular luxury many of my reviews would last no more than a few lines. I guess that my own home music system exposes my particular prejudices more than words and I also have no doubt that those subliminal influences lie deep within and I will never be able to shake them completely, no matter how hard I try. We are all victims of our own tastes. There is always a period of adjustment for me when I assemble a previously unheard system for a review as well as a new learning curve which helps me resolve what I am hearing with the need to wring every last drop of performance from the component in question and to feel satisfied that I understand what it is doing and that I have given it every chance. The nice thing is that this involves listening to music throughout the process, initially to set the thing up and then to (hopefully) enjoy it. I am not really sure how other reviewers go through the process only that it seems obvious that some obviously take infinitely more care than others. Every experience offers the chance to listen and learn in a different way and from a new perspective.

What became clear, as soon as I plugged them in was that, being a fan and full-time user of Focal's remarkable Diablo, certainly meant that Audioplan's Kontrast V was going to need a period of readjustment at my end. The clarity and fine sense of musical resolution and transparent dynamism that the Diablo brings is coupled with delicacy of touch and given a suitable system (no small feat in itself), excellent involvement. It is like walking a tonal tightrope and never falling off. And it is certainly true that the beryllium tweeter and its low crossover point makes most speakers sound dull in comparison at first listening. So,

substituting the Audioplan in essentially the same position as the Focals had occupied soon left me realising that a period of re-training the good old ear/brain interface was going to be necessary and this is always best accomplished by sheer listening time. But, even from those initial sessions, I understood that this was a speaker with some very engaging qualities. As the days passed I delved deeper. They found themselves on end of the very excellent Vitus SS-010 integrated amplifier and Burmester CD-001 CD player all linked together with Vitus Andromeda cabling. Like many speakers the Kontrast V comes equipped with bi-wire connections capable of accepting 4mm or spade terminals. Unlike the majority of those designs though, these really do improve the sound and I would strongly recommend that you take advantage of them. I also had the opportunity to spend some time with Audioplan's own very interesting LS 16 Mk11 speaker cables in this configuration and they re-inforced the positive benefits that bi-wiring brings. I'll avoid that particular detour for the moment but intend to return for a more in-depth look at their cables and power conditioners in the near future. Audioplan have been ahead of the game with regard to cabling for many, many years and along with Naim Audio, were one of the first to extol the importance of consistency throughout the system.

The Kontrast V sounds an attractive proposition almost wherever you place it and because of this I can imagine many users just leaving them there, but there are huge benefits to be had by spending time to get their siting absolutely perfect. Physically this is helped no end by the fact that Audioplan reject spikes in favour of the explicitly named anti-spikes which mount each corner on an adjustable (delrin?) fitting. Even if you think you have things optimised I would suggest that, whenever you are setting up a pair of speakers or re-configuring your own system, you employ a tape measure and a friend's ear to measure the distances exactly and for toe-in a cheap laser is invaluable. Be precise! The Kontrast V must be absolutely level (in fact add a spirit level to the above list). I started with the equilateral triangle set-up but, so strong was the soundstage, I ended up using 1 to 1.1 where the distance between them was 10% greater than the distance from the tweeter to a centrally positioned ear. I also employed just a few degrees of toe-in. This, along with the distance to the rear wall, is going to vary from room to room and will also be system-dependent, but I cannot emphasise strongly enough the huge benefits that this fastidious approach brings to this speaker as it moves the performance and musical focus to another level completely. There is a very useful chapter in the manual covering this as well.

This speaker is the result of constant evolution and has its ancestry in the Kontrast models of the early 80's. The latest version is a tall, slender, angle-shouldered bass/mid reflex cabinet with a separate, softly decoupled "floating" tweeter enclosure on top. Audioplan use a modified Audax woofer unit with an amorphous membrane in the lower cabinet and designer Thomas Kuhn is very specific in his material choice here. Too light and you get speed but loose bass precision and too heavy and there is too much self-damping. It's a delicate but critical balance. There is also the question of integrating this unit with the modified 27mm fabric-domed Scanspeak tweeter, a design aim which has been admirably achieved I think. There is a lot of inner constructional detail in the bass cabinet. A separate resonance chamber is incorporated internally to shape the speaker's response, forming a labyrinth aimed at passing bass energy at the correct level, while a slot port is mounted at the very bottom and as far from the driver as possible to optimise energy transfer into the room while. This cabinet within a cabinet also features varying damping panels, though Thomas always tries to use the least amount as possible. Deciding

where to place the damping and in what quantities would seem to be the trick here if that thick, one-note, ponderous bass often found in large cabinet/small driver designs is to be avoided. Both cabinet's walls are 21 mm thick and each houses their individual crossover. Everything, from the gauge and shape of wire to the custom-made pots and capacitors are painstakingly selected and vibration isolation is also high on the list of priorities. Many components are also potted.

With over 20 years development behind it, the Kontrast V has the sound and feel of a thoroughly sorted design. Tonal balance is generally excellent, though perhaps a tad warm at times and the bandwidth is very impressive with much better top-to-toe dynamic control than I was expecting. The feeling of low frequency presence and sheer air-moving power is so much a part of the attraction of these speakers. It brings a nice physicality and a good sense of scale to the music without ever impeding the overall speed. It can add and loose bass energy remarkably quickly but is also pitch coherent which further illustrates just what a successful design that bass enclosure ►

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two box two-way bass reflex

Drivers: Audax-based mid/bass driver, Scanspeak soft-domed tweeter

Freq. response: 36 Hz – 28 kHz

Sensitivity: 86 dB (1 W/1M)

Impedance: 8 Ohm nominal

Dimensions: 990x210x310mm (HxWxD)

Weight: 33 kg

Finishes available: Enquire with importer. Wood and enamel finishes mainly.

Price: From £6300-£7900, depending on finish

Manufacturer:

Audioplan. Germany.

Web: www.audioplan.info

Distributor: Ikon Audio Consultants

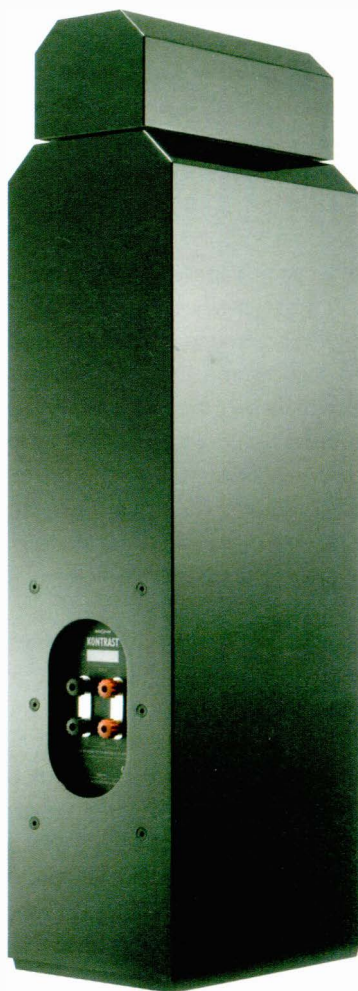
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► is. The Scanspeak tweeter is never going to have the ultra high frequency extension of a beryllium or diamond design and nor does it have the sparkling airiness either, but here it is extremely textured and tonally expansive and I reckon that overall integration was far higher on the designer's list of priorities anyway. In this it succeeds admirably and it remains one of the speaker's greatest attractions. The music rolls from it in a natural and wholesome way. There is no sense of the bandwidth being disassembled through individual drivers and fired into the room. This is a completely coherent design and the more you listen, the more it may just encourage you to re-evaluate what is important in a music system. I crave resolution and an explicit characterisation of instrumental nuance and tonal flavour and this is also one of the speaker's major strengths. The Kontrast V certainly lacks the impressive needlepoint focus and blinding impact speed of the Diablo and presents the musical picture entirely differently, but it is still extremely subtle and responsive to small dynamic shifts. It gives you a look at the heart of the musicianship but never slaps you round the face with it. But ask it to do some serious dynamic work and it you'll find you may have misjudged its slightly laid back nature. Anoushka Shankar's album *Rise* really hooked me and is a great example of how the Kontrast V maintains its remarkable, independent, layered bass agility and rhythmic drive set against the delicacy and droning, shifting harmonic resonance of the Sitar with its unique spiky leading edge. It's almost as if the name Kontrast was borne from this ability and the Vitus amplifier is a willing and very able partner as it too is full of supple vitality while being able to drive with serious transient power from that still and quiet background.

Try as you may, regardless of the music you ask it to play, you won't shake this speaker's sense of composure nor its willingness to convey musical performance. It has an almost nonchalant character and this makes listening to it for hours very comfortable, but its tonal palette and overall expressive abilities just creep up on you and you certainly find your concentration being drawn toward different aspects of the music that you may not have considered before. In this way it is full of surprises. So, like all exceptional audio components, just when you think you understand where it can go and what it can do, you ask it another question and its answers will charm and even intrigue you. I noticed that I played a lot more acoustic music than usual through the Kontrasts, just to enjoy the organic sound of each instrument. I also particularly like the way that it captures the mood of each piece and this encourages a musical connection with the emotional part of our senses. It's that sensation that moves beyond the sounds we are hearing and into the area of pure feeling and listener response. And I think that this is helped by the way it projects the picture into the room. Perhaps it is that low-slung slot port which



makes the picture seem so tall, but the music disengages from the cabinet and the soundstage is wholesome, deep and very solid. The spaces and relationships between the instruments and vocalists are quite different to the portrayed by most speakers, but there is a certain naturalness to the presentation and this makes for an unreconstructed view of the recording that I have noticed before with many of those components that seem to stand out from the crowd. Of course, we must not ignore the contribution of the excellent Burmester CD player or the undoubted qualities of that Vitus amplifier and cabling, to say nothing of the other system-building attributes, like a decent support system. The Kontrast V cannot perform in a bubble and needs as much quality as you can surround it with. I was rather surprised to

read in the spec sheet that it is only 86 dB efficiency because it felt higher than that to me. The SS-010, at only 25 watts output had enough power for me, but my advice is to look at an amplifier of quality rather than paper watts to drive this speaker. Valve or solid-state, I doubt that the Kontrast has a preference, as long as it is good.

This speaker is very well worth a serious listen and certainly a home demonstration where it should be installed with care and precision. In many ways it is an antidote to so many designs on the market as it does many things so differently. It took me a while to appreciate them but then I was completely won over by their musical attractions. The Kontrast V will not be for everybody I know, but neither are the Focals, B&Ws or Shehansians and there's really only one way to find out if they are for you isn't there? +

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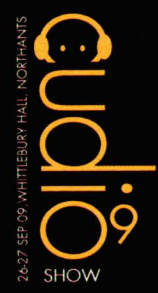
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

My Audio Design cables

By Jimmy Hughes

MAD is a pretty good name for a company that specialises in cables for audiophiles. It neatly sums up what most non-audiophiles think of those of us who profess to hear differences between cables. Over 30 years have passed since Jean Hiraga's infamous 'cable sound' article was published in the UK – the first to talk about such things in detail. Yet, despite this, cable sound remains a bit lunatic fringe. Ironically, Hiraga's article was printed in the highly conservative title *Hi-Fi News*, then edited by the doyen of anti-subjectivists John Crabbe.

I believe Crabbe only published Hiraga's article for fun – he didn't believe a word of it. But, in retrospect, it opened a Pandora's box. It was the journalistic equivalent of throwing a pebble into a vast expanse of still water – like in *The Lord of the Rings*, when the Fellowship are outside the entrance to Mines of Moria and Merry (or was it Pippin?) tosses a stone into the lake and a terrible monster is aroused.

MAD stands for My Audio Design, and the UK-based company produces a range of cables that include some very reasonably-priced offerings, as well as more expensive types. These include analogue interconnects, speaker cables, digital interconnects, and mains cables. Ultra high purity 99.99997% copper conductors – extruded using diamond dies – are employed, with silver being reserved for the more expensive cables.

Unlike many such cables, MAD chose one of the best names in the business to supply these copper conductors – Cardas. Each one of these Cardas strands (usually seen as

chassis wire in the very best quality amplifiers) is individually insulated with special enamel that eliminates oxidation – always a danger with very pure copper – and potentially corrosion, too. The cable is terminated in Neutrik Gold-plated RCA connectors using Cardas Silver Eutectic solder. These plugs are light mass connectors to eliminate the problem of vibration energy storage and are used by many famous cable brands.

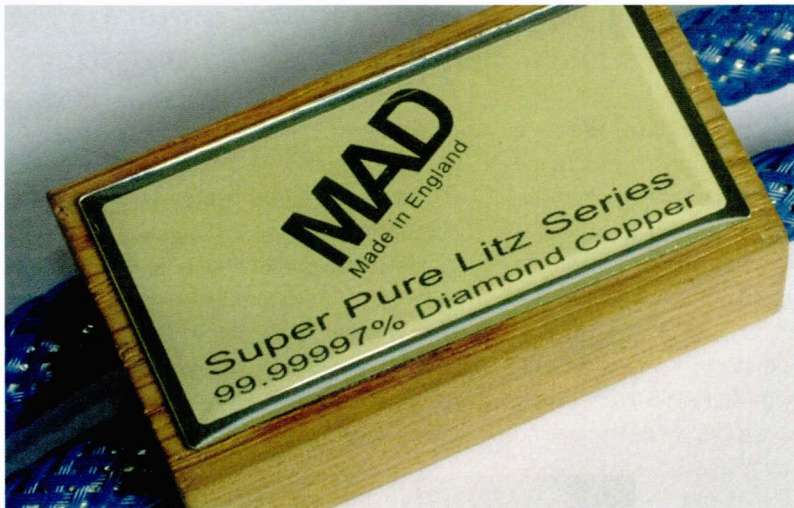
MAD place great emphasis on the physical relationship between the individual strands, using a distinctive woven Litz layout. Unlike traditional woven designs (such as Kimber Kable) the MAD weave is a lot looser, meaning the individual cables cross at closer to 45°, rather than the 90° weave used elsewhere in audio cables. This retains much of the RF and EMI self-shielding properties of traditional weaves, but gives the cable greater flexibility and, potentially, a more free and open sound.

Now this is all very interesting, but subjectively what does one look for in a cable? Are you trying to find something that sorts out a problem with your system – eliminating bright scratchy treble, say, or lightening thick heavy bass? – or is it all about neutrality? And, if it's the latter, how do you judge? How

do you know when a cable's neither adding nor subtracting? Choosing a set of cables is all about getting something that's right for your system in your room. So reviews will only help up to a point. So - having lightly rinsed my hands of responsibility - here's what I found...

Faced with listening to a range of cables at different price and performance points, it's usually best to start with the cheapest and most basic. So I began with the cable called My BABY, a shielded interconnect using woven two 0.55mm thick cables of super-fine 99.99997% pure copper per side.

I tried the My BABY cable (the blue one) between CD player and amp, replacing a Kimber interconnect I've had for a decade or more. First impressions were of a smooth, open, well-balanced sound that seemed natural and unexaggerated, yet clear and detailed. The top-end sounded sweet and incisive, while the bottom end was rich and full.



I listened a while, then moved on to the scarlet My JOCELYN cable. Essentially a similar design, My JOCELYN also uses a twisted pair of copper cables for each side, but this time opts for 0.95mm thick conductors. This offers a similar sort of tonal balance to My BABY – albeit, a bit more refined and focused. I later tried the turquoise My MELODY Mk II and born-to-the-purple My PARIS interconnects, which move from two conductors to four ('Quadcross', as MAD call it), and the big change between the two cables is the use of Neutrik connectors in the cheaper cable and Cardas' own Rhodium over silver-plate connectors. And once more heard further improvements along the same lines.

The integration and homogeneity initially noted with My BABY were maintained, while the sound seemed to gain added refinement and clarity. I chanced to play George Michael's song 'Cowboys and Angels', and noticed how the 'fat' bass on this track cleaned-up nicely without losing richness and weight.

The bass line (string bass?) on this track is very full and deep, and sometimes my system doesn't cope as well as it might. But with the MAD cables (even My BABY) it sounded good – rich and fruity, with plenty of depth, but at the same time nimble and articulate. It almost seemed as though the speakers were coping better – going deeper and handling the extra bass energy with greater ease.

The important thing to understand here is that the improvement in bass clarity did not come about because the sound got leaner and tighter – if

anything the opposite occurred. The bass sounded richer and deeper, yet at the same time the pitch of individual notes was clearer. The bass line on this track should sound weighty and fat, and (via the MAD cables) it did.

All in all, there was nothing 'spectacular' about the way the various MAD cables sounded. Never once did I sit there thinking - Wow! But I don't mean this as a criticism – quite the opposite. The sound being made had an innate rightness and 'realness'. It was natural and believable. And while important differences were noticeable when A/B comparing, I also felt my system sounded better when I listened the next day. This, for me, is always the acid test. You can fool yourself (or be fooled) at the time, but if things sound better next day, chances are the improvements were real. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Prices

Interconnects

My BABY (0.5m pair)	£70
My JOCELYN (0.5m pair)	£90
My MELODY (0.5m pair)	£150
My PARIS (0.5m pair)	£230

Loudspeaker cables

My PARIS (2m pair)	£575
--------------------	------

Mains cable

My ENGLAND (1m, IEC terminated)	£230
---------------------------------	------

Manufactured by: My Audio Design

First Floor

35 Whitehall

London

SW1A 2BX

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Substituting My PARIS immediately improved the smoothness and refinement of the sound, while increasing dimensionality and creating a more holographic soundstage.

▶ A 2m run of My PARIS speaker cable was also provided. My PARIS in speaker cable form is identical in construction to the interconnect, but it's the only one of the SPL (Super Pure Litz) range that can be made into speaker cable. This was long not enough to replace the 7m runs of Townshend Isolda I normally use, but sufficient for a short run of speaker cable that goes between my Musical Fidelity kW-750 power amp and an output transformer that connects it to my loudspeakers.

This also made a worthwhile improvement. Admittedly, I was only using simple solid-core – nothing exotic – but substituting My PARIS immediately improved the smoothness and refinement of the sound, while increasing dimensionality and creating a more holographic soundstage.

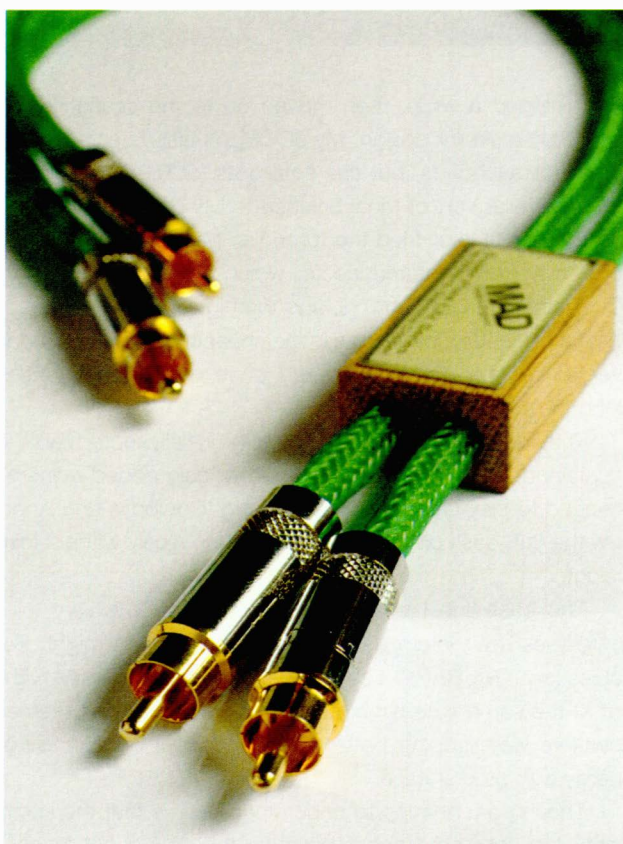
By now, I was enjoying a bigger cleaner sound that had greater projection and dynamics. Voices and instruments had more space around them, yet the cohesiveness and integration I value most was fully maintained. Sometimes, a component gives you improved soundstaging and detail, but at the expense of coherence – the music sounds more detailed and dynamic, but doesn't hang together as well.

But that wasn't the case here. If anything, coherence was enhanced, and my system sounded more integrated. Even the MAD mains cable My ENGLAND produced an audible difference. This was the final cable I tried, and it proved excellent. I was a bit surprised, since I used the cable to power the PS Audio Premier power conditioner that my system runs off – and you'd think this might eliminate mains cable effects because of what it does. But it didn't. Again, the sound seemed to be sweeter and nicer to listen to; just as sharp and clear, but somehow relaxed and more effortless-sounding.

MAD cables are well-made and look good. The stereo interconnects are kept together by a wooden holder. I wondered if this had any effect on the sound – you never know when the Voodoo stops – but apparently not; it's purely there for aesthetic and practical reasons.

The cables I listened to were all copper based. But, for those wishing to spend more, MAD also offer a range of more

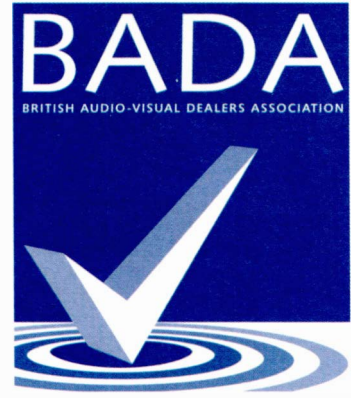
expensive silver cables. Hopefully I'll get to grips with these during the next few weeks and report back in a future issue. For those wishing to dip a toe into the world of MAD cables, the company offer a 30-day trial period on all their products, available direct by mail-order only. So, if after a month of listening, you're not convinced, you can get your money back. Anyway, do give these cables a try – you'd be MAD not to. +



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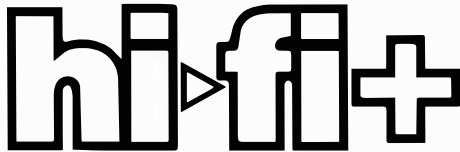
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Tannoy Definition DC8 loudspeaker

By Paul Messenger

Perhaps because Tannoy is one of the oldest names in British hi-fi (as well as sound reinforcement and pro audio) loudspeakers, it has been through numerous changes of ownership over the years, including a less than glorious period as part of US conglomerate Beatrice Foods.

Such adventures notwithstanding, the company has been remarkably successful in preserving its engineering heritage, especially in the form of the unique Dual Concentric single-chassis two-way driver which first appeared way back in 1948.

The company is currently part of the Danish ProAudio operation TC Group, and since that merger back in 2002 its main attention seems to have been primarily focused on its sound reinforcement activities, rather at the expense of the hi-fi side of the business. However, the last couple of years has seen more effort going into the hi-fi side of things, first with the 2008 introduction of the under-£1,000 Revolution ranges, and now with the new and much more upmarket Definitions.

This £2,500/pair DC8 is the smallest of three Definition models, none of which bear much similarity to the range of the same name that was marketed back in the mid-1990s. It's the only stand-mount in the range (at this stage anyway), and as

the name suggests the heart of this beast is an 8-inch (200mm) Dual Concentric driver. For the uninitiated, the DC driver mounts two drive units on a single chassis, firing a horn-loaded tweeter through the acoustic centre of a bass/mid cone, where the pole-piece normally sits.

This is a simple two-way design, the Dual Concentric driver combining a 145mm flared paper bass/mid cone with a 25mm horn-loaded tweeter, so it's effectively a two-way full-range drive unit.

Interestingly, unlike the larger Definition models, whose 10-inch drivers have fabric surrounds formed into a 'double-S' profile, this smaller 8-inch driver has a conventional rubber roll surround. That's because rubber provides better termination for midrange frequencies across the shorter coil-to-surround cone radius.

Unlike the earlier, more costly but still current Dimension series, there's no extra ▶

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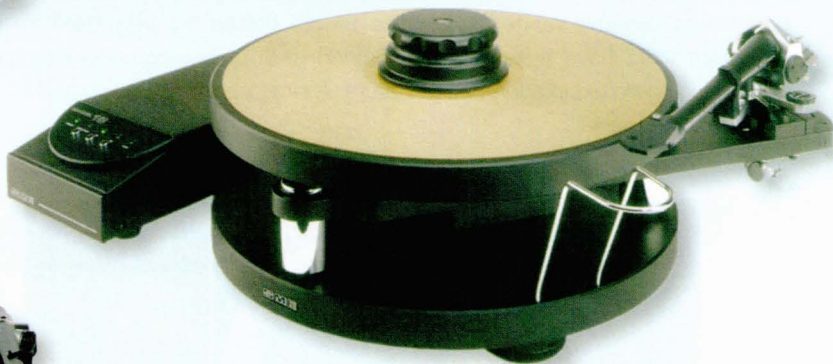
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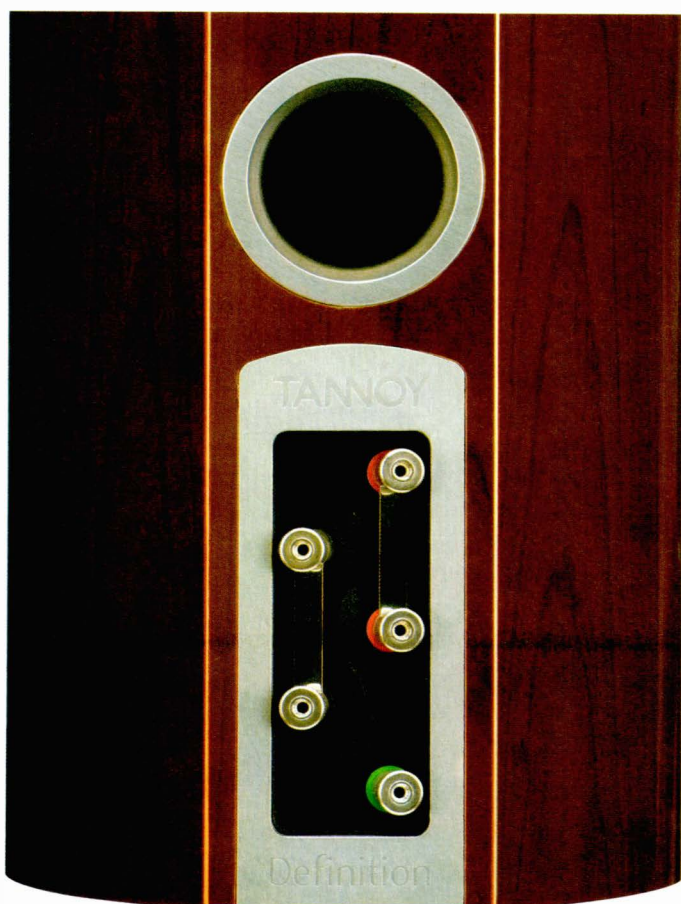
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▶ external supertweeter here. Because the tweeter used in this Definition model uses a titanium dome just 25 microns thick, it has a frequency response to 35kHz. As a bonus, Tannoy's 'tulip waveguide' tweeter horn keeps this delicate diaphragm well away from accidental damage.

Other engineering features include a crossover network whose components have received Deep Cryogenic Treatment (DCT). This technique, found in several hi-tech applications, involves cooling key components slowly to around minus190 degrees Centigrade, then restoring them equally slowly to room temperature. It's believed the process relieves micro-mechanical stresses created during manufacturing. Although the evidence that DCT improves audio signals is largely anecdotal, Tannoy reckons: "DCT processed crossovers will sound more natural have greater resolution, more air and space, together with an absence of grain".

Twin terminal pairs are fitted for bi-wiring or bi-amping, and internal wiring is silver-plated high purity copper. A fifth terminal is also fitted, allowing the driver chassis to be earthed to the amplifier, to reduce RF interference and enhance dynamic range. In practice 5-core cables are very hard to find, though I did have a set of LFD-sourced and Tannoy-branded examples, allowing some exploration of this feature. A large port is also mounted on the narrow rear panel.



All this considerable engineering is packaged into a beautifully finished enclosure with notably clean contemporary lines. Our samples came in a mid-brown real cherry wood veneer, nicely figured and book-matched across the pair. Dark walnut and black finishes are also available, all three covered in a decent quality high gloss lacquer. A wide silver trim ring around the driver and a shaped silver strip across the lower edge provide decoration.

Behind the front panel, the sides are curved into a narrow back, to help disperse reflections and internal horizontal standing waves. The grille is held in place by magnets concealed beneath the front panel veneer, and these are therefore invisible if the grille ▶ is not used.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: two-way Dual Concentric reflex-loaded stand-mount

Bass/Mid Driver: 1x 200mm, 140mm paper cone

Treble Driver: 25mm diam titanium dome

Frequency Responses:

Spec: 42Hz-35kHz (-6dB)

Measured (in-room) 38Hz-20+kHz +/-6dB

Sensitivity:

Spec: 88dB

Measured: 90dB

Impedance:

Nominal: 7.5 ohms

Minimum: 5.5 ohms

Finishes: high gloss over black or cherry, dark walnut wood veneers

Weight: 10kg

Dimensions (WxHxD): 27x47x26mm

Price: £2,500

Manufacturer:

Tannoy

Tel: +44(0) 1236 420199

URL: www.tannoy.com

UK Distribution:

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Tel: 0845 603 1375

URL: www.icondistribution.net

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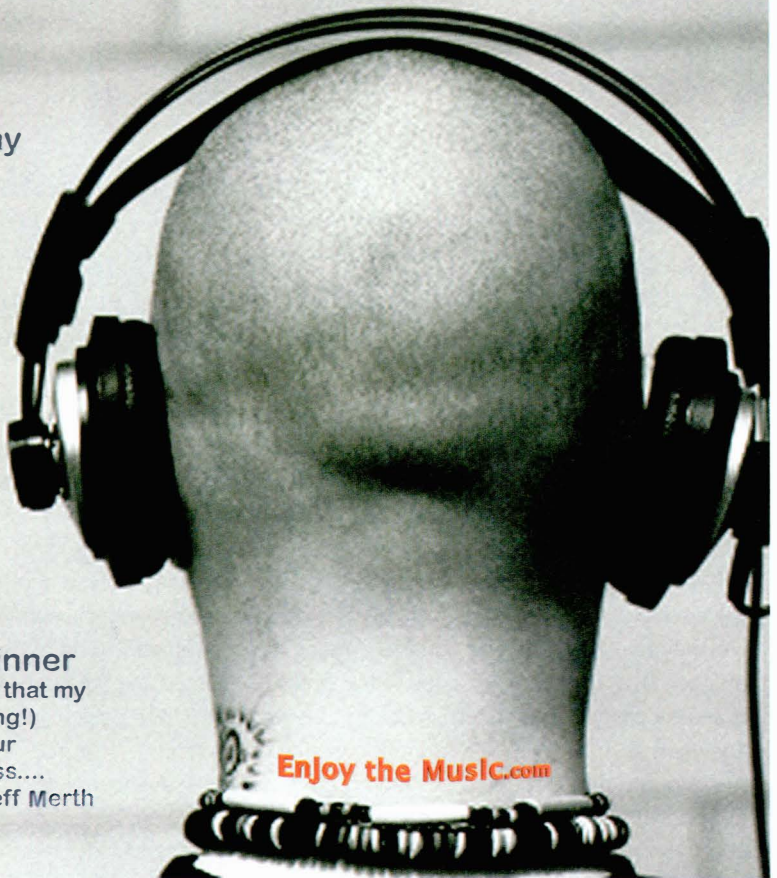
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In fact, the Axiom Audio EP500 works so well that my wife and I both stood mouths open (not kidding!) as it shook the rafters and window glass in our house. Amazing! Love that palpable, tight bass.... Thank you again for the awesome prize! — Jeff Merth



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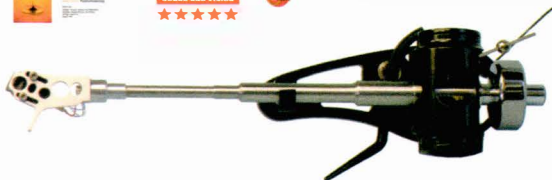
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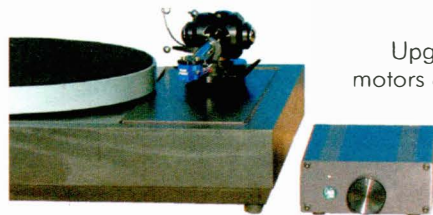
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The bass quality is firm and its relative level sounds well judged, with a crisp and clean delivery that's undoubtedly assisted by the 'true free space' benefits of a stand-mount-on-open-stand configuration.

▶ Beneath the pretty presentation, the carcass is made from birch plywood, deliberately sourced from slow growing cold regions of the world for high density and tight grain. The bracing incorporates Tannoy's Differential Material Technology (DMT) techniques to couple the driver/enclosure interface rigidly, and with appropriate self-damping.

The measurements threw up some interesting findings, notably that the ports are tuned to a relatively high 55Hz. This came as something of a surprise, as Tannoy normally tunes its ports to a much lower frequency. (The ports of the larger DC10T I recently tested were tuned to 28Hz, a full octave below this smaller model.) That in turn is bound to restrict the DC8's bass extension somewhat, as indeed the in-room response traces confirm.

Although the far-field averaged in-room responses show little bass output below 40Hz (in marked contrast to its bigger brother), and rather too much mid-bass (50-80Hz), there was no sign of the crossover dip that had afflicted the DC10T. Instead the DC8 delivers an exceptionally smooth and flat response, give or take a couple of room modes, right up to 9kHz. The final octave or so (above 9kHz) looks rather uneven, but output is well maintained nonetheless.

Sensitivity is a very useful 90dB, the more so because the impedance represents a relatively straightforward and easy to drive amplifier load, only briefly dropping below 6 ohms to minima of 5.5 ohms. That said, the pair matching might have been closer at mid and high frequencies.

Most of the listening was carried out using my usual Naim-based system (NAC552 plus NAP500 amplification. Other amplification included an XTC PRE-1 pre-amplifier and a pair of MSB M200 Platinum monoblock power amps. Sources were a Naim CDS3/555PS CD player, a Linn/Rega/SoundSmith vinyl player, and a Magnum Dynalab MD103T FM tuner. Ancillaries included Vertex AQ and the five-conductor LFD-sourced Tannoy-branded speaker cables, while mains power was delivered via Phonosophie, Music Line, Vertex AQ and Synergistic Research components.

Clearly intended to be used well clear of walls, at the manufacturer's suggestion, the DC8s were Blu-tacked to the top plate of my normal Kudos S100 stands (rather than using spikes).

First impressions were mostly very positive, especially regarding the overall smoothness and neutrality. Although some lack of genuinely deep bass was obvious enough, the bass quality is firm and its relative level sounds well judged, with a crisp and clean delivery that's undoubtedly assisted by the 'true free space' benefits of a stand-mount-on-open-stand configuration.

A horn-loaded tweeter, like those used in Tannoy's Dual Concentric drivers, is different from direct radiator types in a number of respects. One practical bonus is that the fragile diaphragm is well hidden and therefore protected from prying fingers. Acoustically speaking it has high inherent efficiency and therefore plenty of headroom in reserve, so it never sounds strained even when working hard. The top end integrates well with the midrange, giving good

overall coherence, though it could perhaps sound a little smoother and sweeter.

Another consequence of horn-loading is that the treble output is concentrated into a 90 degree cone. This doesn't affect the sound reaching listeners directly from the speaker, but it does reduce the relative amount of room-reflected treble, and in consequence the stereo imaging is somewhat sharper and better focused, but some of the airiness and spaciousness is sacrificed. In practical terms this tends to give greater insight into the actual recording process, but it reduces the contribution of the room and the illusion of bringing the musicians into the listening room acoustic.

Certainly the imaging is exceptionally precise and focused here, and in most other respects there's not a great deal to criticise. However, there's no disguising a degree of midband coloration here, adding a slight 'cupped hands' character, alongside a mild degree of mid-forwardness. That said, it's hard to say whether the latter emphasises or is responsible for the former.

Whichever, one suspects that the use of a relatively large paper bass/mid cone might be responsible. Yet that is also probably the key ingredient that endows the Definition DC8 with unusually good dynamic expression for a compact stand-mount, and the sort of liveliness normally associated with much larger models.

As has always been the case, loudspeaker design involves making compromises. The DC8 isn't perfect, but it does a lot of the right things rather well, doesn't fall down in any significant respects. It's not exactly inexpensive, but it also just happens to be one of the most stylish and attractive speakers my better half as ever seen, and that's a factor that shouldn't be taken lightly. +

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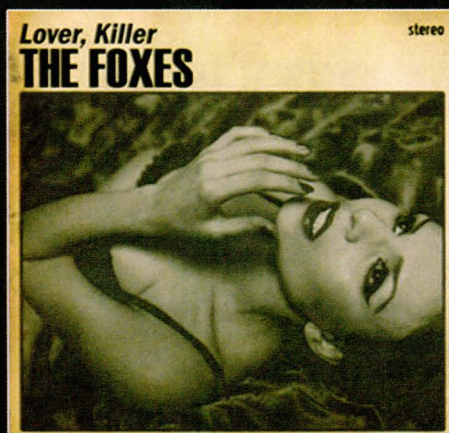
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The Violinist who came in from the cold

by Ann Kathrin Bronner

20 years ago, a violinist from Novosibirsk called Vadim Repin won the prestigious Queen Elisabeth Music Competition in Brussels – at just 18, Repin was the youngest winner ever, and the classical music world had a new star in the making. Now 38, Repin still commands great respect. But why? Is it his superb technique, his special tonal colour, or his serious, but relaxed attitude toward the music biz? Or is it his energetic, powerful interpretations of the great violin concertos, and the sonatas as well? In fact, it's a combination of all of these parameters – plus a good shot of naturalness and a very personable manner, as I could see myself when I interviewed him in Dresden recently:

Ann Kathrin Bronner: Vadim, why did you choose the violin?

Vadim Repin: By chance - and that was probably the greatest luck of my life! I wanted to play harmonica, flute, or percussion. When I was five, my mother wondered what to do with me, because I always wanted to make music. So, we went to music school, but there were no places available for these instruments. But they had one place free for violin. She said: "Okay, we don't want to lose a year. Let him study violin, and next year he can switch." But as soon as I saw the violin, it became my favourite toy – even today.

AKB: When was your first public performance?

VR: Six months later. It has been a kind of public competition between Novosibirsk's school children, and I won the first prize! Of course, I do not remember what I have been playing. But what I remember is actually the feeling of performing, because that's what gives you the kick. That's like adrenaline. It is something unexplainable, dangerous, beautiful, but never predictable. And, that's the best thing in music, in performing arts.

AKB: You studied with Zakhar Bron at Novosibirsk. What made his lessons so successful?

VR: Zakhar Bron is a very special teacher for violin, as he combines two wonderful things: An enormous, systematic knowledge so that he can explain technical things; and his wonderful abilities as a violinist that he would show right in front of you. Through the years I spent learning violin with him, he gave me an enormous package of little and very big secrets, and plenty of knowledge. But it is not that he tells you these secrets, you have to develop them for yourself, and how they work best for you. That means developing your own technique and that takes a lot of years.

AKB: That must also mean a lot of practicing and rehearsing?

VR: Practicing is one of these difficulties in life. Because you have to practice and rehearse no matter how tired you are, how many flights you have had or how many concerts you have played, no matter if you are feeling mentally exhausted: The next appearance, the next audience that comes to listen to you, they want, no, they must see you at your top! So, to achieve a certain standard is actually difficult. But to maintain and progress at a certain level is even more difficult. It takes an extra of motivation, enjoyment and discipline. Discipline is very important. Underline three times!

Many musicians, especially young people, play by ear. They hear something and just do it, without actually finding the meaning of the music or a logical connection to the rest of the piece. I make myself play the piece first. After that, after I am finished with my own judgement and analysis, I listen to other concerts or other recordings with great pleasure. But not before! I create my own view of the piece. And then, of course, it will get a little bit influenced; not only by concerts, but also by performances of other works. Anything in life influences you. That's how it goes, I think. But before you get influenced, you need to have your own conception, your own opinion for that particular piece of music.

AKB: That takes discipline. Was this something you learned along the way?

VR: I had to learn it. Because, since I tasted this – let's say – fruit of performing so early, it gave me not only the pleasure and fun, but it also gave me the feeling of responsibility: Responsibility in the way that once you are on stage, you have only one time to play the piece through. You have to be 110 per cent ready in order to give 95 per cent, you know? *(laughs)* So, I learned discipline at an early age. And since our teacher was organising our appearances in many places, I understood that the working process is very, very hard, but extremely important.

AKB: Have you ever had to face technical problems?

VR: I don't know if you should call them problems. They are obstacles – or rather, challenges. It's all down to motivation and discipline; you never give up trying. Jump a little bit higher than you can!

AKB: Is that ethos why there are so many talented violinists coming from Russia?

VR: Russian children, from a very early age, make their ▶



vadim repin

▶ choices without thinking, “Will I succeed, will I get a career?” or, “Will I make enough money for living?” Instead they think, “This is my thing, I want to go!” And then, strict education is actually helps somebody who is so determined. In Europe, and in America, music is often treated more like a hobby. This might be the reason.

Deutsche Grammophon © Mat Hennk / DG



AKB: Today, you play with orchestra, as a soloist, you have recitals and you play chamber music. Which is the most interesting for you?

VR: A combination of them all, I think. Each kind of making music requires a different approach. Just to give you an example: To play with an orchestra and to play a recital, already for preparation, these are two completely different things. To play a recital, a *Sonatenabend*, you grow together with your pianist. You have to develop the piece with him. So, it is endless hours of rehearsing together. For a concerto, you create your own vision of it, then you have two, three rehearsals with the orchestra, and you can show in concert.

AKB: And it is rather that the orchestra is supporting you, and not so much an interaction?

VR: It's a different type of music making. I like very much this chamber music feeling when playing with the symphony orchestra. In every concerto, there are passages that you cannot just play by yourself. You must be together with clarinet, or oboe, and so on. Playing with the orchestra, you need not only to communicate with the conductor, but directly with the player. And it is fantastic when it comes to a special result, you know. When you feel that this player is actually giving you much more than he would do in a usual concert.

AKB: Do you feel a musician stamps their personality on the music, or is it simply interpretation of the composer's ideas?

VR: It is 100% interpretation. We interpret, and that's it. Of course, your personality comes with your sound, with your feeling of time, with your using of time. Because that is how

your heartbeat's working, and how your temperament and feelings are making the connection between the physical and emotional level. But there is no recipe. If one would know as a recipe, it would be less magical.

AKB: When you are playing a work of contemporary composers, you have the chance to discuss the music with the composer. Does that change your approach to the music?

VR: Well, in my case, I have done quite a few modern concerti. For me, it was – actually equally important as the condition of going through the work – having the chance to perform together with the composer. So, I performed the *Metamorphosen* concerto with Penderecki at the stand, and we had a quite wonderful time. Also with John Adams, for example, we performed his concerto with him. I not only studied with him, but the first couple of times, I performed it with him conducting. So, it is really a special time in the rehearsals, and between and after the rehearsals, especially when you go to the dressing room and you have a special question, and: Here he is, the composer, and you can ask him. It's beautiful!

AKB: Isn't it harder to have the composer conducting?

VR: No, it is wonderful! You are making music WITH him. So, you interpret the work as a kind of discussion, as a sort dialogue with the conductor. At least for me, I have always felt the need of feedback with the conductor. There is probably not another person that will be even more involved in that particular piece than the person who wrote it!

AKB: Do the composers ever say: “I'd not imagined this passage being played like, but I think it's better than I had intended?”

VR: (*smiling*) Yeah, yeah, it happened. Of course, you try to improvise in some points when you learn the piece. And there is one little advantage in special: There is no tradition created yet – in a good sense AND in a bad sense. Because, for me, tradition has always, just like everything, more faces than one. It can be a good face and a bad face. And in this case, well, it is kind of an advantage that it is a clean page that you can draw on.

AKB: It's not just great composers you've worked with. You played with Yehudi Menuhin, didn't you?

VR: Well, you know, growing up in Novosibirsk, people have been touched by his early recordings, his phenomenal Beethoven concerto. He has been one of my idols, always! And later on, when you have the chance of performing together, travelling together, and getting so close to his person, that has been a blessing. All I can say is that I am really grateful to destiny that I could make this experience which also gave me ▶



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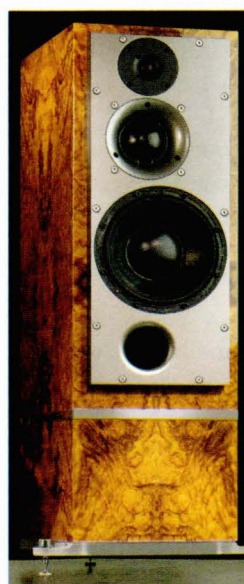
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▶ a great deal of understanding more about our profession, as a global: Not only being on stage, and playing the music. But in a way discovering how to interact with your own audience. And he had such a wonderful energy, you can say love, towards everybody, you know. It was really unbelievable. Rostropovich was very similar: He was so happy to see everybody. Anybody! It doesn't matter who. It was such a positive energy getting out of him. There are only few personalities like that...

AKB: What do meetings with other artists do for your music?

VR: They give you so much... You know, when you meet a great artist, it makes YOU be much better than what you are. YOU grow. You grow yourself much quicker and much stronger. You are much more nervous, of course, even tense sometimes. But once you passed the tension, the result is wonderful I find.

AKB: Tell us about the instruments you play: You had a Stradivari and are now playing a Guarneri. Which violin suits your temperament better?

VR: The latter. The latter! I always wanted to play Guarneri. Of course, I was extremely blessed and lucky in my life playing the great instruments made by Stradivari. As a child I had a 3/4 Stradivari, and then the *Wieniawski* and then the *Ruby*, and between these two some other wonderful instruments. But my wish was always a Guarneri. I don't know why. But I never had a chance to have one. But then, four years ago, a very good friend of mine – he has a little collection and owns a few beautiful violins. He said: "I know you always wanted a Guarneri. Why don't you try my violin? And if you like it, you can use it!" So, I am very, very happy to play this. Apart from being a wonderful violin, it is quite a special, unusual story behind. And for me, it is not only sound. It is also the way the Guarneri is projecting the sound. Because it is a quite different way of making sound with these two violins: One needs much more bow, whereas the other one needs more bow tension, but less bow. So, it is a completely different technology.

AKB: Did it take some time to become friends with the Guarneri?

VR: Definitely it takes a lot of time. It could be up to a year until you really feel not only confident, but feel being one with your instrument. And, actually sometimes, what's happening while practicing a new violin is that you may get an idea of something that you never have had before. When creating a sound, you must first have it in your fantasy, your imagination. And then, you need technique; you need hands to produce it. But it starts all here, in your mind. And by playing different violins, if you are very careful with your ears, you can find some expression that was not in your vocabulary of sounds.

AKB: Does this have any impact on your interpretation?

VR: Oh yeah, everything. Yes! The Guarneri delivers your personality much more than a Stradivari that wants to sound the way it sounds anyway. So, the balance is a little bit different. But both makers are fantastic. It is a matter of choice.

AKB: One last question: If you had to spend one day without your violin, what would you do?

VR: Oh, I would teach my son another word of Russian. (laughs) +

A VADIM REPIN DISCOGRAPHY

Johannes BRAHMS
Violin Concerto op. 77
Double Concerto op. 102
Vadim Repin · Truls Mørk
Gewandhausorchester · Riccardo Chailly
Deutsche Grammophon / Universal Music Group

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN
Violin Concerto op. 61
Violin Sonata op. 47 'Kreutzer'
Vadim Repin · Martha Argerich
Wiener Philharmoniker / Riccardo Muti
Deutsche Grammophon / Universal Music Group

SERGEI TANEYEV
Klavierquintett · Piano Quintet op. 30
Klaviertrio · Piano Trio op. 22
Vadim Repin · Ilya Gringolts
Nobuko Imai · Lynn Harrell
Mikhail Pletnev
Deutsche Grammophon / Universal Music Group

A NIGHT OF ENCORES
Wieniawski · Tchaikovsky · Kreisler Paganini · Gardel (Arr. Williams)
Vadim Repin
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra
Mariss Jansons
TDK (DVD)

Peter I. TCHAIKOVSKY – Nikolai MYASKOVSKY
Violin Concertos
Vadim Repin
Kirov Orchestra
Valery Gergiev
Philips

STRAUSS/ BARTOK/ STRAVINSKY
Violin Sonatas
Vadim Repin
Boris Berezovsky
Erato

AU LOUVRE
Debussy · Schubert Prokofiev · Ravel
Vadim Repin
Boris Berezovsky
Ralf Gothoni
Anton Barachovsky
Roby Lakatos and his ensemble
Erato

TUTTA BRAVURA
Paganini · Tchaikovsky · Bazzini Wieniawski · Sarasate · Ponce Ernst (Schubert)
Vadim Repin
Alexander Markovich
Erato

LALO/CHAUSSON/RAVEL
Édouard Lalo · Symphonie Espagnole Op.21
Ernest Chausson · Poème op.25
Maurice Ravel · Tzigane

Vadim Repin
London Symphony Orchestra
Kent Nagano
Erato

TCHAIKOVSKY, SIBELIUS
Violin Concertos
Vadim Repin
London Symphony Orchestra
Emanuel Krivine
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W. A. MOZART
Violin Concertos Nos. 2, 3 & 5
Vadim Repin
Wiener Kammerorchester
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Sergej PROKOFIEV
Violin Sonata No.1 Op.80 F minor
Violin Sonata No.2 Op.94 bis D major
Five Melodies Op.35 bis for violin and piano
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SHOSTAKOVICH, PROKOFIEV
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RAVEL, MEDTNER
Maurice Ravel · Violin sonata
Nikolai Medtner · Violin sonata No.3 "Epica" Op.57 E minor
Vadim Repin
Boris Berezovsky
Erato

VADIM REPIN violin
R. Schumann · Fantasia in C major Op.131
P. Tchaikovsky · Scherzo in C major Op.34
Meditation op.42 No.1 · Violin Concerto op.35
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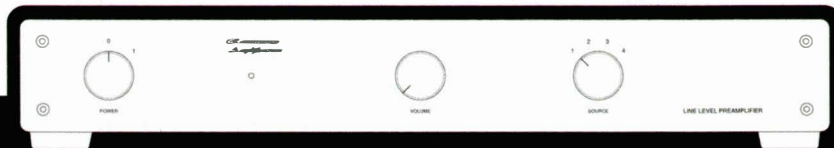
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record reviews

How To Read Them

The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – 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.

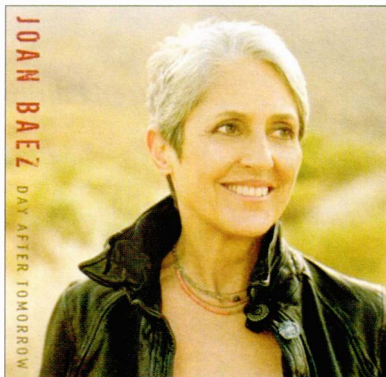
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard,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

This issue's featured reviewers are:

- GC** – Greg Cahill **AD** – Andy Downing
- NG** – Neil Gader **WG** – Wayne Garcia
- BG** – Bob Gendron **TL** – Ted Libbey
- BM** – Bill Milkowski **AQ** – Andrew Quint
- DR** – Derk Richardson

Key to Icons

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-  **Gold CD**  **150g** **150g LP**
-  **HDCD**  **180g** **180g LP**
-  **XRCD**  **10"** **10" LP**
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Joan Baez
Day After Tomorrow
 Razor & Tie: 7930183002



Joan Baez's crystalline soprano and hummingbird vibrato no longer reach the highest notes. But time hasn't dulled the sixty-eight-year-old singer/social activist's compelling message and radiant interpretive powers on her latest release, *Day After Tomorrow*. Produced by indie-country maverick Steve Earle (who penned three songs), *Day After Tomorrow* is an intimate, acoustic prayer for a world fallen from grace.

The album starts off with Earle's "God Is God," an ode to life in the here and now. Nine other tracks touch on universal themes of social justice, faith, and peace. Tracks like Elvis Costello's anthemic "Scarlet Tide" challenge our misplaced priorities, and the title song by Tom Waits reveals a soldier's doubts and loneliness. But hope is at this disc's core—the spiritual "Jericho Road" suggesting that somehow, one day we'll get there. The musicianship is stellar, with accenting instrumentation the flavor of world music, appropriate for the songs' universal themes. Sonics are warmly understated and natural thanks to the Greg Calbi mastering, and at 36 minutes *Day* is tailor-made for LP. Despite 180-gram vinyl, however, Razor & Tie's quality control needs work: the surfaces are shamefully noisy. **NG**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Antony and the Johnsons
The Crying Light
 Secretly Canadian: SC194



Antony Hegarty owns the most distinctive voice in contemporary pop. His rich, intensely expressive alto is an ethereal sound that seems not quite of this world. Inviting yet haunting, Antony summons mysterious places that may or may not be entirely safe.

On *The Crying Light*, the band's third full-length release, Antony's songwriting is as beautifully melodic as ever. While most of the tunes move at a ballad's pace, "Epilepsy is Dancing" floats to a gentle waltz rhythm, "Kiss My Name" maintains a jagged pop edge, and "Aeon" unleashes thickets of distorted electric guitar chords. And though Hegarty's vague, surrealistic lyrics evoke unfulfilled longings, remembrances of things past, and frequently touch death, and this music could never be called "upbeat," it has a strange lightness to it, along with a mesmerizing power that keeps you playing it again and again.

The recording is remarkably good: airy, open, and relatively natural sounding, with Hegarty's voice occupying pride of place within a minimal yet lush orchestral backdrop. The piano and bass have a physically satisfying feeling of weight and texture, and the few tracks with drums deliver a realistic snap and crackle. **WG**

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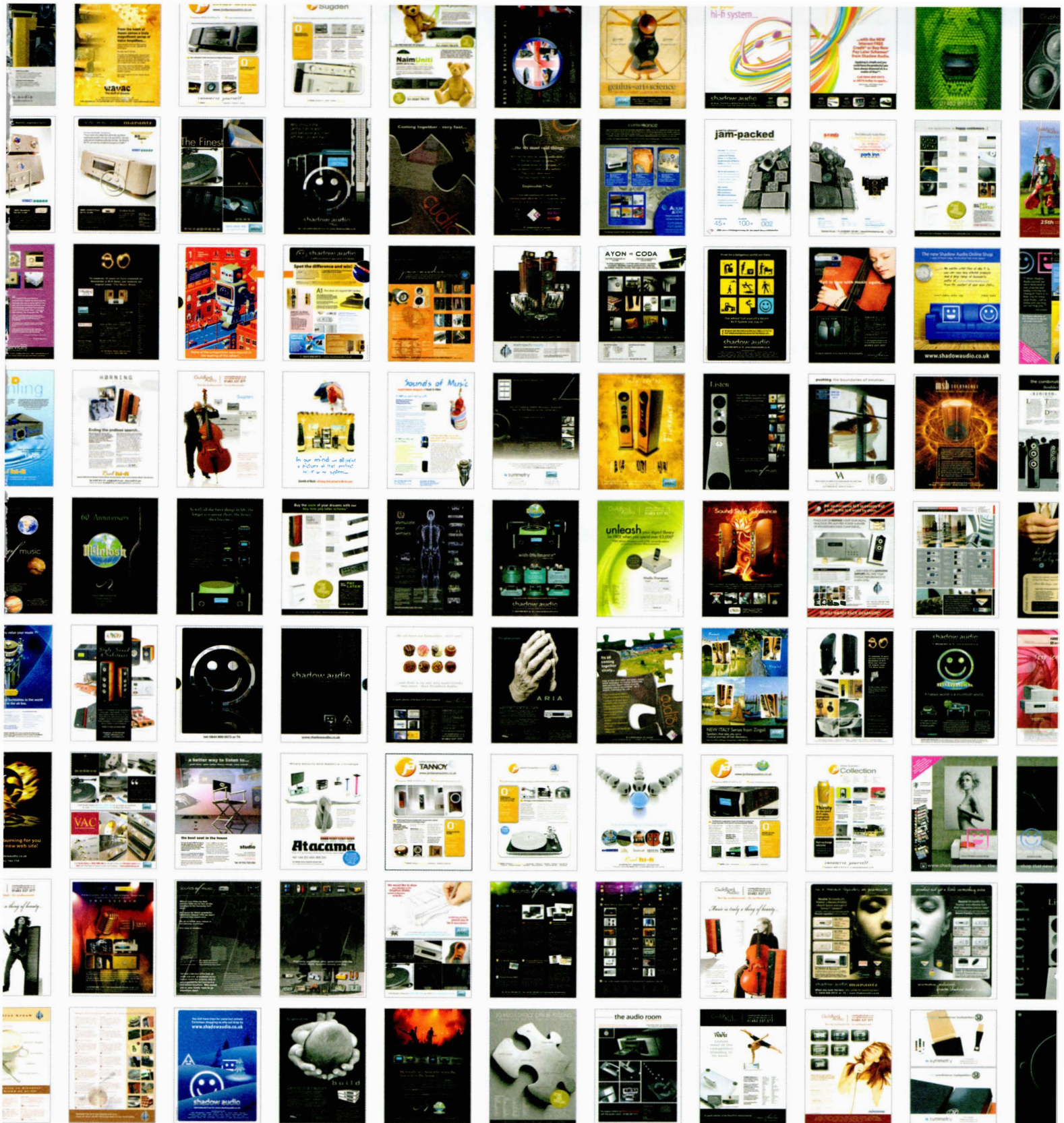
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TOP 10 – 21st century test discs

(part II)

by Alan Sircom

Last issue, we served up 10 discs that have been made in the in the last nine years, but still offered the ultimate in sound quality. Then we asked you to do the same. This is the result.

To recap, we tried to find the replacements to *Couldn't Stand the Weather*, *Famous Blue Raincoat* and the rest of the pantheon of test discs all created more than a generation ago. The records had to be within the rock/pop/ contemporary realm (because jazz and classical enthusiasts usually know their genre well enough to know – or reject – what's current) and not necessarily audiophile recordings, because these should be the sort of albums normal people can buy on the high street... if there's still a place to by CDs on your high street.

We picked the 10 most talked about, most recommended and most interesting discs from your letters and emails. They seemed to divide into three categories; new recordings from new bands, new recordings from old faithfuls and 'lads and dads' transmissions from teenage iPod to parental hi-fi system. Realistically, we could have put together a top 147 discs. So, our apologies if some or all of your recommendations didn't make it; we consider all of them, but those who got more than one recommendation generally made the grade.

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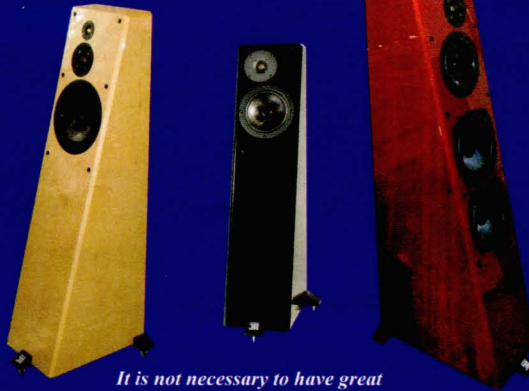
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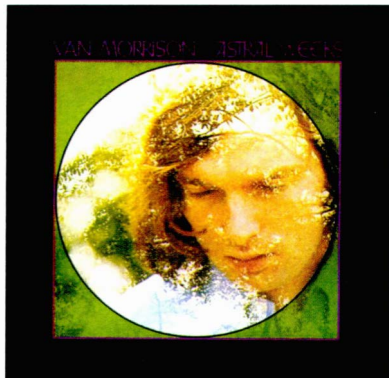
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**Warner Bros.’
Van Morrison
180-gram LP reissues**

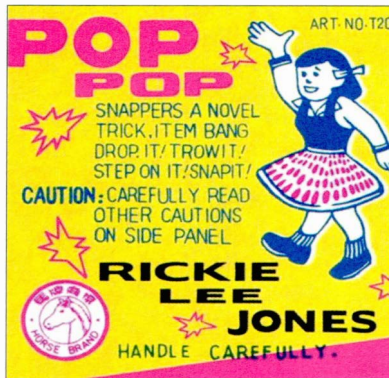
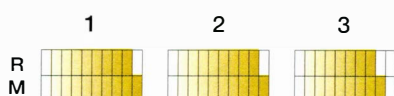
180g

The most striking aspect of Warner Bros.’ 180-gram vinyl reissues of Van Morrison’s ***Astral Weeks***¹, ***Moondance***², and ***His Band and the Street Choir***³ isn’t how fantastic they sound but how wonderfully effortless, joyous, and dedicated the vocalist sounds.

Remastered at AcouSTech from the original analog master tapes by Kevin Gray and pressed at RTI, these LPs are definitive. Once the needle drops, it’s as if the music is being piped in from the heavens. Ultra-quiet surfaces allow the faintest nuances to emerge, hover, and decay. Hearing the true tonalities of the myriad woodwinds, acoustic basses, folk strings, jaunty horns, and hand percussion enmeshed in the hybrid arrangements provides previously unavailable transparency on the majestic atmospheres of classics such as “Ballerina” and “Stoned Me.” Vocals are lifelike, levels non-fatiguing, and instruments richly detailed.

The experience is transfixing—and slightly bittersweet. Just as the enhanced sonics magnify the music’s spirituality and scope, they’ll prompt fans to wonder: What happened, Van?

BG



Rickie Lee Jones

Pop Pop

Geffen/ORG Records: ORG007

180g

Rickie Lee Jones’ eponymous 1979 debut, subsequent Grammy awards, and hit follow-up album sealed her commercial success and inspired a legion of female singer-songwriters. Like Joni Mitchell, Jones quickly shifted into ever-tighter avant-garde circles, though not with the same success. But when she released 1991’s *Pop Pop*, Jones again stymied expectations with a collection of cool, low-key covers, jazz and popular standards.

Producer David Was provided the ideal breathing room for the off-centered punch of Jones’ interpretations but was thwarted by necessary equalization—vinyl reissue specialist ORG Records’ new pressing does justice to *Pop Pop* at every level. The hefty two-LP set is gifted with remarkable inner detail, extension, and micro-dynamics. The thick surfaces are quiet though not altogether pristine. But it’s the sheer natural vocal quality from this Bernie Grundman remastering that warrants attention.

When you lock in the right volume and shut your eyes, Jones could very well be singing to you, live. This shimmering handful of sparklers shouldn’t be missed. NG



**Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock,
Jack DeJohnette**

Yesterdays

ECM: 12451 CD

If a mesmerized fan of Keith Jarrett’s seminal Bremen, Lausanne, and Köln solo concert recordings somehow time-traveled from the mid-1970s to 2009 without hearing any of the jazz giant’s work in between, he or she might wonder if the same pianist was performing these eight classic American songbook and bebop tunes recorded in concert and at a sound check in Tokyo in 2001. But those who have kept close tabs on Jarrett’s copious output comprehend and savor the evolution of his “standards” trio with bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Jack DeJohnette.

“You’ve Changed,” the title track, and “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” breathlessly ply tender, reflective moods. Otherwise, the overall temperament is upbeat and buoyant. And while the piano legacies of Art Tatum, Oscar Peterson, and Bill Evans are unmistakably present in Jarrett’s dazzling right-hand runs, judiciously powerful left hand, and harmonic imagination, it’s the magical rhythmic interplay of the longtime mates that establishes new precedents.

The warm, balanced sonics are almost as impeccable as the playing. Only Peacock’s bass deserves a tad more fullness.

DR



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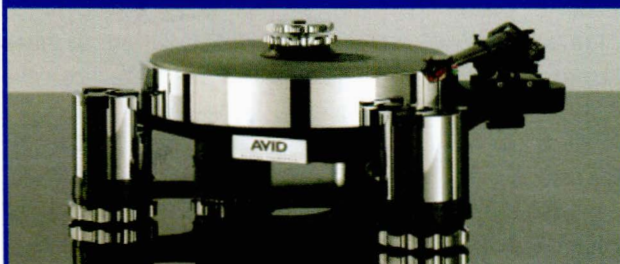
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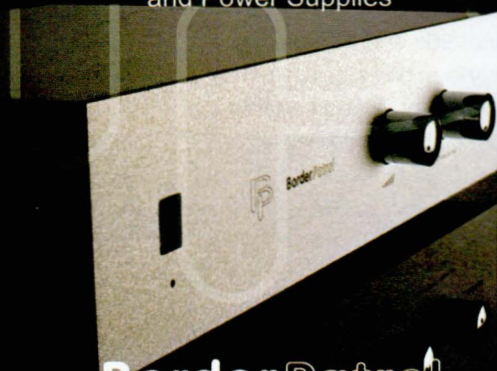
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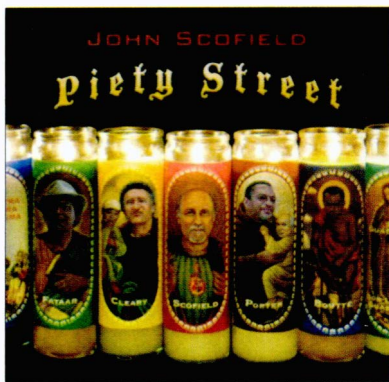


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John Scofield

Piety Street

EmArcy: 1791136



Recorded in New Orleans with a cast of local all-stars including The Meters' bassist George Porter, Jr., pianist-organist Jon Cleary, drummer Ricky Fataar, and the incredibly soulful vocalist John Boutté, this gospel-themed project has the subject at age 8 of an Oscar-nominated documentary, like Dorothy Love Coates' "That's Enough" and Thomas A. Dorsey's "The Old Ship Of Zion" as well as traditional numbers like "Ninety Nine and a Half" and "His Eye Is On The Sparrow." They turn in a menacing rendition of "Motherless Child" with a reggaeified tag, then rock the congregation on "It's A Big Army." And the perennial poll-winning guitarist unleashes some nasty wah-wah licks on an infectious rendition of "Something's Got A Hold On Me."

A bona fide fusion guitar hero in the '70s with Billy Cobham and '80s with Miles Davis, a respected jazzbo with his own stellar quartet through the '90s and a godfather of the jam band scene since his 1997 collaboration with Medeski, Martin & Wood, Scofield has reinvented himself here as pastor of the New Church of The Sanctified Groove. **BM**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Julian Lage

Sounding Point

Emarcy: 17914476

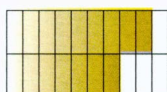


Jazz guitarist Julian Lage (pronounced like "large"), had his international debut at 12 on a live Grammy telecast—in front of a billion viewers! One of those was vibraphonist Gary Burton, who invited the young jazz lion to join the Generations Band. On this solo debut, the now 20-year-old Lage teams up with banjoist Béla Fleck, mandolinist Chris Thile, and a band of gifted classmates from the Berklee School of Music. The music, both electric and acoustic, is ambient, presented here with a wide-open soundstage that suits the shimmering, rainy-day vibe.

Lage is reminiscent of three other Burton alumni: Pat Metheny, John Scofield, and Larry Coryell. Not bad company, but Lage has a way to go before he steps out of Metheny's shadow. That comparison is most evident on the opening track, the Lage original "Clarity." Still the guitarist shows that he's capable of putting his stamp on this music, as on his delicate rendering of Count Basie's classic "Lil' Darlin'." He even draws inspiration from as far afield as Alfred Hitchcock's thrillers for the guitar solo to the original tune "Familiar Posture."

Lage is one to watch. **GC**

RECORDING
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Freddie Hubbard

Without a Song: Live in Europe 1969

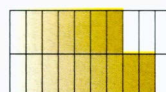
Blue Note 36957



At the peak of his powers during the early 60s, Freddie Hubbard was playing the trumpet like no one else on the planet. No one blew louder, faster, higher, and with more conviction than Hubbard at that time. By 1969, when these live concert recordings were made, he was still flying high, blowing brashly into the stratosphere with bold tones and ideas, swaggering as he swung.


The ease with which Hubbard double-times a tempo and executes his signature dazzling runs is evident on the title track, the hard-charging "Blues by Five," and on his spirited romp through Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia," which includes a breathtaking cadenza by the trumpeter. Elsewhere, Hubbard acquits himself with thoughtful lyricism and grace on ballads like "The Things We Did Last Summer" and "Body And Soul," and treads into avant-garde territory on his own adventurous composition, "Space Track." In short: an excellent outing by the late, legendary trumpeter and his stellar crew of pianist Roland Hanna, bassist Ron Carter, and the marvelous drummer Louis Hayes. **BG**

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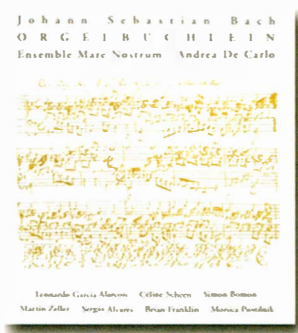
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Bach: Orgelbüchlein

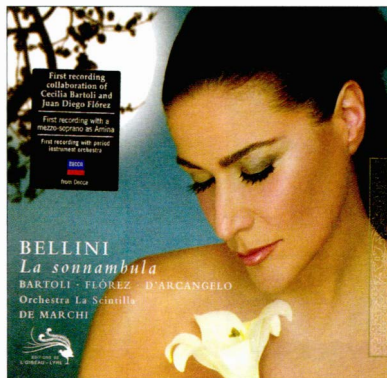
Ensemble Mare Nostrum, Andrea De Carlo, director. Todd Garfinkle, producer. MA Recordings 076 **CD**

This is the sort of “audiophile” recording you can get excited about: A terrific program of lesser-known Bach pieces, beautifully played and sung, and very naturally recorded.

As with many of Bach’s compositions, the *Orgelbüchlein* (“Little Organ Book”) was a teaching tool, in this case one “...in which the beginning organist learns to perform a chorale in many different ways, and to master the use of the pedals.” The eight-piece Ensemble Mare Nostrum—organ, tenor viol, two bass viols, violone, archlute, soprano, and boy soprano—performs at a high level that conveys a real feeling for these 49 short works.

Recorded in Belgium’s *l’église de Franc Waret* by Todd Garfinkle, the CD is exceptionally realistic in its recreation of air and the venue’s reverberant ambience. Instruments are placed at an intimate distance that fills the front wall of your listening room. And as in life, imaging is not spotlighted but slightly vague for voices and organ yet solid for strings, which all “bloom” and recede with the music’s gentle dynamic waves. Textures are lovely, with a nice “rosiny” sound to bowed strings and a soft breathiness to the organ. Lovely stuff. **WG**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Bellini: La sonnambula

Cecilia Bartoli (Amina); Juan Diego Flórez (Elvino); Ildebrando D’Arcangelo (Count Rodolpho); Chorus of the Zurich Opera House; Orchestra La Scintilla, Alessandro De Marchi, conductor. Decca 478 1084 **CD**

From our cynical 21st century vantage point, the story lines of *bel canto* operas can seem improbable at best, laughable at worst. To bring such creations to a contemporary sensibility requires not only a steadfast dramatic commitment but also stylistic rigor and technical brilliance—that is, great singing. This new Decca release meets all these requirements.

La sonnambula’s narrative, basically, goes like this. Amina, an orphan and the village beauty, is engaged to Elvino, a prosperous farmer. Lisa, the town’s innkeeper, has the hots for Elvino and gets a chance to derail the youngsters’ nuptials when Amina, who has the unfortunate habit of sleepwalking, wanders one night into the bedroom of Count Rodolfo, a guest at Lisa’s establishment. Nothing untoward has transpired but, presented with this news, the excitable Elvino decides immediately that he should marry Lisa instead. In the nick of time, Amina is spotted sleepwalking again, this time on the roof of the town’s mill, proclaiming in her sleep her devotion to Elvino. Amina’s innocence is apparent to everyone, the young man’s faith in his (again) beloved is restored, and all ends happily ever after.

Remarkably, Cecilia Bartoli is the

first mezzo-soprano ever to record the role of Amina—though clearly she epitomizes a voice type that the composer approved of for the part. Her creamy, superbly controlled, and subtly inflected singing seems more miraculous than ever. The way Bartoli dreamily softens her voice for the two scenes when she’s asleep on her feet, turning it into a sort of entranced monotone, is magical. Juan Diego Flórez is unsurpassed in this kind of repertoire and performs with an unfailingly appealing vocal timbre, power, and great sensitivity to the texts. Elvino’s easily aroused jealousy is palpable when he assumes his somnambulist girlfriend has been fooling around with an out-of-stater at the local Motel 6. Bass-baritone Ildebrando D’Arcangelo renders the role of the benignly mysterious Count artfully, and the other smaller roles—especially Gemma Bertagnoli as the conniving innkeeper—are covered well. Orchestra La Scintilla is billed as a “period instrument” group, but its sonority is robust and richly colored. The important role of the chorus is expertly executed, helping to propel the action forward.

This is a major label *studio* recording of a full-length opera—something we weren’t sure we’d ever see again. The vocal character of two of the world’s greatest practitioners of “beautiful singing” is faithfully represented here. Balances between orchestra and singers are exemplary, and the spatial differentiation of off-stage instrumentalists and the main orchestra at the outset of Act I is nicely done. Decca’s two-disc production of Bellini’s classic is a worthy addition to even the most select opera collection.

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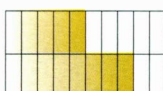
Beethoven: Piano Concertos Nos. 1-5

Richard Goode, piano; Budapest Festival Orchestra, Iván Fischer, conductor. Max Wilcox and Hein Dekker, producers. Nonesuch: 992830 (three CDs) **CD**

The best thing about these accounts is the playing of Richard Goode. His manner is that of a seasoned musician: someone who knows all of Beethoven and is intimately acquainted with the sonatas, someone for whom matters of tempo, phrasing, articulation, and nuance simply fall into place. Yet there is nothing dry or routine about his approach.

The orchestra (recently proclaimed one of the world's Top 10 by a venerable British publication; we laugh) does a creditable job. The strings get points for trying to play with reduced vibrato and a leaner sound, but their tone is far from burnished. To be fair, they get no help from the engineering. The recordings were made in Budapest's National Concert Hall, a brand-new venue with "adjustable" acoustics. And while the piano is closely miked and impressively captured, the glare of an excessively reverberant surrounding imposes itself on the orchestra whenever dynamics get above *piano*. Tuttis invariably sound harsh and murky. Pizzicati register very believably. **TD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Strauss: Eine Alpensinfonie; Horn Concerto No. 1

Alan Civil, horn; Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Rudolf Kempe, conductor. Testament SBT 1428 **CD**

This is the first stereo recording of Richard Strauss's majestic and sumptuously scored *Alpine Symphony*, and it caused a sensation, both musically and sonically, when it was released on an RCA Red Seal LP in 1967. Produced by Charles Gerhardt and engineered to perfection by Kenneth Wilkinson, it captured in what was then state-of-the-art sound. The full complement called for by Strauss—130 musicians—was mustered in Kingsway Hall for the recording, which presents a soundstage so detailed you can distinguish the first violins from the seconds even when they are playing in unison. Testament has delivered a superior CD remastering. The thunder machine has real resonance, the organ real bass, and the cymbals, especially when rolled, produce an unmistakably metallic ring, rather than a splash of white noise.

The coupling is Alan Civil's magisterial account of Strauss' Horn Concerto No. 1, recorded with Kempe and the RPO for *Reader's Digest* a year after the *Alpine Symphony*. Excellent sound, but in the third movement one notices crackle and hiss not evident in the first two movements, suggesting a problem with the original tape. **TL**

RECORDING
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Song of Songs. Stile Antico

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CD

The Old Testament's *Song of Songs* can be viewed in several ways. First, it can be heard for what it's felt to be historically, a love poem written in the tenth century BC by King Solomon for an unnamed Shulamite girl. Later, the love relationship was seen as involving God and the Israelites; or Mary, the mother of Christ. In any case, the verse appealed enormously to Renaissance composers and this new disc from the British choral group Stile Antico taps into that.

The composers represented on the CD include well-known ones—Palestrina, Lassus, Victoria—and some that will be familiar only to early music specialists. Interspersed among these settings are brief passages of plainchant. The music ranges in construction from four parts to many more, as with the gloriously rich seven-part textures of Jacob Clemens non Papa's "Ego flos campi." The music is at once devotional and luxuriantly sensual.

The dozen singers of Stile Antico soar in beautifully contoured and shaded performances. Harmonia Mundi's engineering honors the purity of the group's sonority; ensemble blend is perfect, yet it's possible to pick out individual voices. **AQ**

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By Alan Sircom

THE YEAR 1959 HAS A LOT OF RESONANCE IN POPULAR MUSIC.

It was the year Morrissey was born, Buddy Holly died and a young Jimi Hendrix bought his first guitar. But perhaps most significantly, 1959 marked the high water mark of the jazz album. Several of the most important jazz LPs ever cut were made 50 years ago, each in its own way setting the tone for the way jazz was to be played and listened to even to this day.

In some respects, it's hard to see past the titanic *Kind of Blue* (Columbia). Miles Davis' album — the best-selling jazz disc of all time — is many people's first (and sometimes last) exposure to the medium. It also stands outside many of the standard genre of jazz at the time. Traditionally, jazz musicians improvised around the chord changes in a piece of music, whereas modal music (like *Kind of Blue*) concentrates on the key signature of the piece of music. This might explain why the album is so beloved by rock fans (rock is inherently modal in nature). Davis concocted a 'dream team' line-up, with the likes John Coltrane on tenor sax, Julian 'Cannonball' Adderley on alto sax and Bill Evans on piano.

Bill Evans would also feature strongly in his own right in 1959, with his Trio's excellent *Portrait In Jazz* (Riverside/Conchord). This time using standards (like 'Autumn Leaves' and 'When I fall In Love'), Evans moved to move bass and drums from mere accompanying instruments to equal performers with the piano. This set a standard for jazz trio performance that holds to this day.

Charles Mingus' tribute to his musical forebears — *Mingus Ah Um* (Columbia) — takes the then-popular Hard Bop sound and twists it in new (and very old, Ellington-style) ways. The best-known track on the album (from a non-jazzers' perspective) is 'Boogie Stop Shuffle', a frenetic twelve-bar blues that's been used as the soundtrack to every 1950s/1960s TV fight sequence ever since, but it's 'Fables of Faubus', a musical snipe at the segregationist Arkansas governor, that really sticks out. Perhaps the least immediately influential of the bunch, *Mingus Ah Um* nevertheless set the archetype for big band sounds ever since and its themes can readily be heard in many 21st century jazz albums.

Time Out (Columbia), by the Dave Brubeck Quartet is best remembered for the immortal (and hugely overplayed) 'Take Five'. *Time Out* is unique in the album uses different — and some distinctly non-jazz — time signatures. So, 'Blue Rondo à la Turk' is performed in 9/8 time, 'Take Five' (as the name suggests) is in 5/4 time and others are played in 6/4, 4/4 and 3/4 time. Many tracks flip from one time signature



to another and still more are played in one time signature by the band while Paul Desmond (sax, composer of 'Take Five') holds everything down to a strict 4/4 time. Ultimately though, this is not the most influential jazz album from 50 years ago.

That award must go to possibly the least approachable album of the year; Ornette Coleman's *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (Atlantic). The man with the plastic saxophone redefined the musical landscape with unstructured, improvised sounds, which make everything else in this line-up sound arch and contrived. This is the sort of jazz that makes non-jazz types run for cover (tracks like 'Especially' sound like someone gave a saxophone to an angry wasp on first listen), but freed the jazz musician from the strictures of chord structure and binds them to only the briefest melody. The worlds of avant-garde and free jazz began here.

There were to be many great jazz albums after 1959, including several from artists like Miles Davis, Bill Evans and John Coltrane who were so active during this purple patch. But, by the early 1960s, a new generation of album buyers was already moving on from jazz, and the popular album charts began to fill up with Bob Dylan and Beatles LPs. In many respects, jazz is still attempting to recapture that magical year. +



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