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In memoriam

Sidney Smith

1922 – 2000

It is with great sadness that we have to report the death of one of hi-fi's legendary figures, a man who was central to the development of high fidelity in the home. Sidney Smith, or Sid as he was universally known, was the chief engineer at Marantz and one of the pioneers of high-end audio in the USA. He worked alongside Saul Marantz in the creation of designs such as the Model 7 pre-amp, products that are still sought after today, nearly 40 years on. His heritage lives on in the products of those such as Robert Hovland who worked with him all those years ago.

Like so many of us, Sid came to audio by accident, seeing it as a stop-gap way of supporting a burgeoning career as an operatic and choral tenor. But as with other things to which he turned his hand, he demonstrated a natural genius for audio engineering. He was to be responsible for the development of scores of influential products that still affect our view of hi-fi today.

His personal life was a mirror of his professional success, and he continued to sing as well as developing an abiding passion for astronomy. Being Sid this led to the design and creation of several innovative and respected telescopes. But his final project outlasted even his enthusiasm. As a member of the Sea Cliff United Methodist Church he undertook the installation of its pipe organ, firstly as a member of the planning committee and later in collaboration with noted designer Carl Weiss. After Weiss' untimely death Sid took it upon himself to complete the organ's specifications by filling in the remaining ranks, a task he so nearly completed by the time of his own passing. Sid never lost his interest in audio engineering, and his final work was on valve amplifier designs with Loricraft Audio.

In addition to his wife Marilyn, Sid is survived by his three daughters, Jennifer, Patricia and Laura. Memorial donations can be made to the American Cancer society or the Sea Cliff United Methodist Church Pipe Organ Fund, Downing Avenue and Carpenter St, Sea Cliff, New York 11579, USA.

A lot of changes - and still rather a lot of money.



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REFERENCE SERIES



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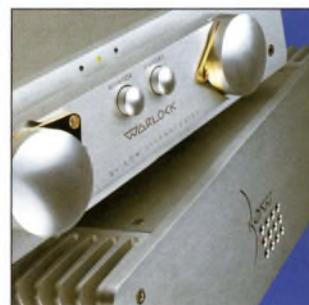
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Great Karma

by Roy Gregory

The recent Kempton Park high-end event, organised by Zentek was a small but exclusive gathering. It set out to offer the general public an opportunity to hear serious stereo systems in a rather more sympathetic and relaxed atmosphere than the frenetic and claustrophobic confines of the Hammersmith Novotel. The results achieved were excellent, and I wouldn't be surprised to see this becoming an annual event with a much wider distributor base than this year. Even so, visitors had the opportunity to sample the delights of the Acapella Violon Plasma/Horn Hybrid in a much more appropriate space, the latest incarnation of the Lumley Monarch 2000, and a whole host of electronics and front ends from the Zentek and Audio Reference stables. Sound quality was impressive, as was the response of the visiting public.

But the star of the show for me was the Kharma Exquisite Reference 1B loudspeaker, making an extraordinarily impressive UK debut. How impressive? Well, having worked the show on Friday and Saturday, I dragged myself out of bed a couple of hours early on Sunday morning for the two hour drive to Kempton just so that I could have a few hours undisturbed listening to the beasts. Worth the effort? Absolutely!

Few of you will be familiar with the Kharmas so I guess I'd better start at the beginning. Despite photographic appearances (in which they look disarmingly cute and normal) the Exquisite 1Bs are both extremely large and hugely expensive. £35300 a pair including the essential stands, to be exact. Mind you, at five feet tall and 260

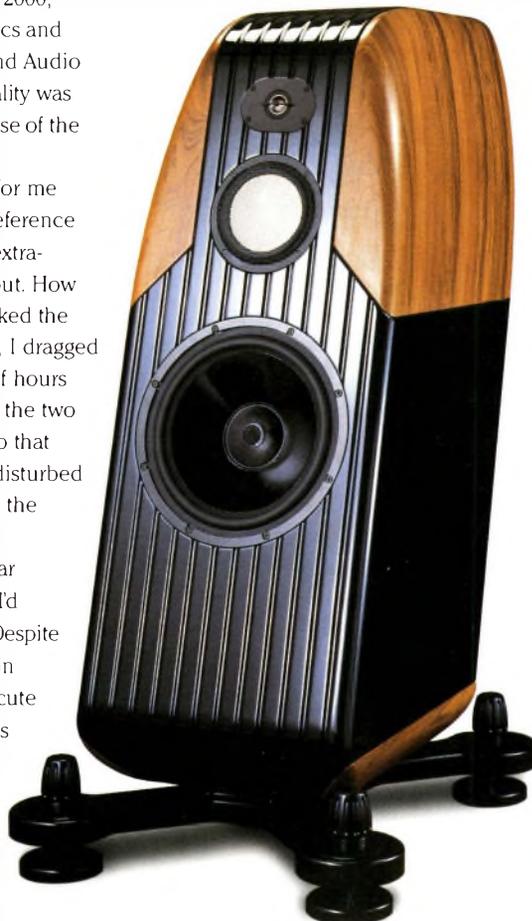
Kilos each(!) you at least feel like you're getting something for your money. That makes each speaker a serious four man lift.

In case you hadn't guessed, the Kharmas take the notion of an inert cabinet to new extremes. The cabinet itself is created from slabs of polymer material, each machined out to provide the irregular internal cavities for the drivers, and then effectively stood on end and bonded together with an elastomeric compound. The sloping baffle provides time alignment for the three drivers, while large, sculpted wooden cheeks soften the appearance and help prevent nasty diffraction

effects in the mid and treble. The end result is massive, imposing but surprisingly friendly, in stark contrast to the angular and threatening persona of a speaker like the Grand Slam, or the sheer, over powering size of a Grand Utopia.

All that money and only three drivers? Ah yes, but they're not just any drivers. Bass unit is a 13" Kevlar sandwich, whilst a Focal inverted titanium (not titanium oxide) dome provides the high frequencies. The use of the metal rather than ceramic tweeter is rather surprising given the choice of midrange unit: a 7" ceramic dish from Eton in Germany. It might look like a cereal bowl, but this is one serious driver, and Kharma use it wide open, without any crossover between it and the amp. All of which makes the incredibly seamless integration of the drivers even more remarkable. Combine that with a performance which reaches flat down to 30Hz and you've got the basis for a seriously interesting product.

But that's not the whole story either. Listen to music and these things just flat disappear, which is pretty neat trick given their size. I have never heard any box speaker with a more natural tonal balance, less cabinet signature, and which manages to sound so small and yet wide bandwidth at the same time. What is more, that cabinet rejects resonant energy so effectively that the music is totally free of the smearing and confusion that we all normally have to put up with. The immediacy of the directly coupled midband is matched top and bottom (which indicates an exceptionally clever crossover) and the rigidity and mass of the whole system seems to translate far more of the signal into noise, rather than



▶ cabinet vibration. The Exquisite 1Bs sound far more dynamically and musically direct than any speaker with their moderate 91dB efficiency has any right to. Combine that level of musical involvement with the neutrality, extension and sonic invisibility that I've already mentioned and you've got an absolutely stellar performer. Music simply happens between and behind them, apparently independent of the system. Low level information and dynamics are amongst the best I've heard, and the whole performance just makes so much musical sense. This was the last of the 1Bs, with the 1C being available by the time you read this. Apparently, the revision offers greater bass extension and even better high frequency resolution!

At Kempton the 1Bs were playing with the ClearAudio Master Reference/ Graham Nightingale combination, the Hovland pre-amp and a pair of Lamm

single-ended mono-blocks, a system which while extravagant is well short of the total excess that's all too possible. The relative easy drive characteristics and wonderfully believable presentation have put the Kharmas straight into that 'If I ever have the space and money...' category, along with Avante Garde's Trios. In the meantime, and for those of us without the space or the money, Kharma also produce cheaper models starting with a \$4000 floorstanding two-way. How much you lose along the way we'll find out when we get to review them, but while we're waiting for that, if you get a chance to hear a pair of the big ones, it's well worth a journey!

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Successful Shows In Dublin and Manchester

Simultaneous shows in Dublin and Manchester achieved great success despite managing to clash with both England and Ireland rugby internationals, the Manchester derby and each other. Hi-Fi+ was at both events (the hi-fi shows, not the rugby matches) and we were really impressed with the enthusiasm and interest of the people attending.

The Manchester show was situated at the Airport Hilton Hotel, and talking to exhibitors they have consistently commented on the quality of the rooms, and the quality and quantity of the visitors. Too many hi-fi shows end up in venues where it is impossible to create a decent sound, which rather defeats the object.

The Dublin show was organised

by Cloney Audio, and again it was a well attended event with good sound quality and brisk levels of business. This is a family show in every sense of the word, with Noel's entire extended clan apparently on tap (at one stage there were no fewer than eight women waiting to meet and greet visitors at the show reception!) but it was especially nice to see the high proportion of couples and families that turned up.

I had a great time in Dublin, and our people in Manchester were similarly enthusiastic about the show there. Events like these, and the earlier Chester show, underline the value of getting out and talking to the public as well as the importance of doing it properly.



Meet The Reviewer

Another lamb to the slaughter... I mean addition to the reviewing team.



Phil Ward

Hi-Fi Experience

Fraught.

Five years in the 80s as Design Engineer at Mordaunt-Short.

Sixyears as Design Manager at Canon Audio.

Three years as Design Engineer and Project Manager at Naim Audio. Did time as a spotty teenager reading Hi-Fi Answers and queuing in the Unileit Sale. Amateurish electric and upright bass player.

System

Naim CDX, nac 52/supercap, nap 250, SBL.

Desert Island Discs

(Note: This is an impossible task - the list would be completely different a few minutes later)

David Sylvian - Dead Bees On A Cake

Keith Jarrett - Well Tempered Klavier

Steve Winwood - Steve Winwood

Laurie Anderson - Strange Angels

Graham Fitkin - Hard Fairy

Eberhard Weber - Chorus

Arvo Part - Passio

Garbarek/Hilliard - Officium

Prefab Sprout - 38 Carat Collection

Lyle Mays - Lyle Mays

Joni Mitchell - Don Juan's Reckless Daughter

Stina Nordenstam - And She Closed Her Eyes

Bach Cello Suites - Any

Books

The Blind Watchmaker - Richard Dawkins

The Alexandria Quartet - Lawrence Durrell

Film

Brazil or maybe The Usual Suspects

Luxury

Fridge full of Cloudy Bay

Indulgence

Steinberger Electric Upright Bass



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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory

Sometimes it's hard to appreciate the myriad tweaks that inhabit the average reviewer's house, and the problems that go with them when it comes to writing reviews. Enough exotic cables to turn the cupboard under the stairs into a snake pit might seem like an attractive proposition, but for the reviewer it's very much a necessary evil. And the problem isn't limited to the simple practicalities of storing such difficult objects, ones with minds of their own and a tendency to become intertwined that puts the crowd at a college disco to shame. You need these cables, and all the other accessories, to do your job properly, but at the same time the sheer proliferation actually complicates matters.

I had a bit of a sort out a few months back and actually discovered cones and spikes I'd forgotten existed, and a few so old that they're no longer in production. "Better put them all in the same place" I thought, "that way you'll be able to find them when you want to." So saying, I set aside a shoebox, and as each new cone or set of cones was unearthed it was duly consigned to its allocated slot. The trouble is, I ran out of shoebox. Better sub-divide by category, I thought. I ended up with three separate shoeboxes, two of them close to overflowing! That's a lot of cones and spikes, but throwing any away is of course, totally out of the question. You just never know when that pair of steel/nylon composite cones is going to provide the perfect

solution to some as yet unimagined sonic glitch. And therein lies the rub. It's all very well having all these bits and pieces, it's remembering what they all do that's the problem. (At this point Victoria suggested that I simply invite all subscribers to an audio jumble, but being the editor has certain advantages – like final say over what actually reaches print for instance.)

Another tendency is what I call "force of habit" behaviour. Basically, it consists of taking things for granted – this rack worked for the last three amplifiers I've used so it's going to work for this one too. The problem lies in the fact that this cuts both ways. On the one hand you might not be hearing just what the equipment in question can do, or on the other you might be hearing exactly what it can do, but only in the context of some very particular (and possible expensive) circumstances. One way you belittle the performance of the amp, the other you belittle the contribution of the rack, cables, mains lead and all the other ancillaries. Sometimes, reading reviews you get the impression that the product under test performed in a vacuum, devoid of an associated system and ancillaries. Other times you get a list as long as your arm, defining every element of the system, the tweaks, a whole range of cables and the phase of the moon. Frankly, each is equally useless.

The answer is to ensure that you define the contribution of each

element in a review system, and part of that means ringing the changes. It's not enough to simply list six different cables, you need to explain what prompted you to change them, and why you settled on the final choice. In other words, what exactly did it contribute? The answer to this question is fundamental in being able to assess the suitability of a product you are trying to slot into an existing system, as well as revealing the cost implication of associated but necessary ancillary equipment. Am I overstating the case? I don't think so.

I recently got a call from CB inviting me to help him optimise the sound of the Bow Technologies amps. That's not unusual, as we regularly poll second opinions on review product, and it's always sensible to have a second pair of ears (and hands) around before you start ringing the changes in any system. It's simply too easy to get carried away, and end up going round and round in circles. Having discussed CB's concerns in some depth, I turned up armed with a few suitable suggestions.

The obvious starting point was support, as the system has migrated to the far end of Binns' palatial listening room, and the amps were sat on a couple of record storage cabinets. Out came the RDC cones and titanium Pulsar Points, along with various support boards, and we started to experiment. I won't bore you with the tortuous details of all

► the permutations, but we settled (or rather the amps did) on a set of Pulsar Points under the pre-amp and RDC cones under the power amp. These provided some much needed impetus and body to the sound, as did a change from SPM interconnects to Clearlight ones (which although they use slightly different technology pursue the same performance parameters as Nordost's *Quattro-fil* cables). But what fascinated me was the specific nature of the improvements. Put RDC cones under the pre-amp and you simply lost the weight and dynamic

best solution in every circumstance.

Let's look at another example. When I first got the Pulsar Points one of the first 'alternative systems' that I tried them in belongs to Nigel. We tried them under his Densen DM12 and found that whilst we liked the clarity and dynamic precision of the aluminium version they also robbed the system of some weight. Moving up to titanium solved the problem nicely – at a price. Now I bumped into Nigel the other day and he'd finally gotten round to getting some aluminium Pulsar Points of his own. Lo and behold, he's using them under his

faintest idea why that might be.

The morals of this story are clear. Anybody who underestimates the contribution of the ancillaries in his or her system is unlikely ever to hear its full potential. Unfortunately the situation is complicated by the fact that the benefits of any given cable or tweak are product specific. It's one of the reasons that we always ask manufacturers for their views when it comes to cables and accessories for equipment that comes for review. We also insist on everything from mains cables to spikes and cones when we receive a system.



presence in the music. Put the power amp on the Pulsar Points and it became hard and metallic, losing bass texture and shape. In other words, you need to find the right support under each element in the system. Whilst a product like the titanium Pulsar point will always improve on a simple shelf, it's dangerous to assume that it is necessarily the

amp. When I looked a little quizzical he flashed an evil grin and replied "Ah yes, but I'm using four!" Our original listening was based on sets of three supports (triangulation and all that malarkey). Sure enough, three Points still produced the same result, but adding the fourth makes all the difference, at least under the DM12. And no I haven't got the

The other thing that springs to mind is that, having spent so much time recommending people to seek out and try these kind of accessories, it's nice to have both their sonic value and cost effectiveness underlined. Like I said at the beginning, it's easy to take them for granted. Reaffirmation is a wonderful thing... But more on that next time.



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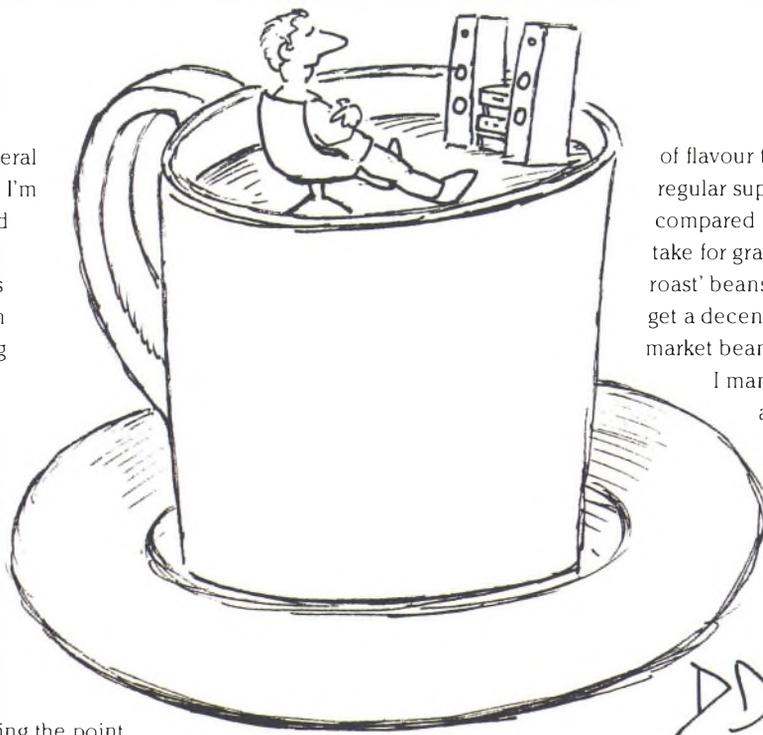
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Speakers Coffee Corner

by Paul Messenger



Hi-fi is just one of several obsessions in my life. I'm also seriously addicted to coffee, and it's not just the caffeine that's responsible. Although one is all about trying to get subtle musical messages through to the ear/brain, while the other is focused on the other sense organs of taste and smell, the two passions are not that dissimilar in some crucial respects.

It's maybe stretching the point to state that making a decent cup of coffee is a bit like setting up a serious hi-fi system, but both procedures require paying similar attention to the fine detail throughout the 'chain' if best results are going to be achieved. Eyebrows were raised when I worked on Hi-Fi News some twenty years ago, as I brought in a coffee grinder and filter to avoid the dreaded 'instant' (a strange brew that bears only a passing resemblance to real coffee).

The relevance of the analogy was forcefully brought home the other week, when the handle fell off my coffee roaster. (I'll get back to roasting in a few paras). I didn't

panic, not straight away that is. I rang the guy who services my car to ask about local welders, but there was a problem. The roaster is aluminium, and the local welder was fresh out of rods for his TIG machine. It was going to take at least a week and probably two. I still didn't panic. My partner was shopping the following day, and could surely pick me up some of Safeway's finest roasted beans to tide me over.

That she did, so I popped them in the grinder and made myself a cup. Yeeeeeuuugh! I was quite shocked at the amount and quality

of flavour that was missing from regular supermarket beans, compared to what I'd come to take for granted from my 'home roast' beans. I simply couldn't get a decent cup out of the supermarket beans, so a day or so later

I managed to get to a branch of coffee and tea specialist Whittards. The coffee beans I got from here were at least drinkable, though still not a patch on what I was used to. By the fourth day I was getting

desperate. I rang my regular coffee supplier, the Monmouth Coffee Company, and ordered a kilo of roasted Guatemala beans for immediate dispatch. I also went onto the web to find a new roaster, like the rather clever (if pricey) one a friend had recently acquired over the internet from America.

Both arrived within a couple of hours of each other, two days later, immediately helping to lift my black mood and alleviate the withdrawal symptoms. However, the interesting bit was the opportunity it presented – a comparative review of 'shop-roasted' and 'home-roasted' beans.

OK, it sounds pretty

► obsessional to roast one's own coffee beans. It's all down to the EEC. First they tried (and failed) to stop us using 4mm plugs and sockets to connect our amps to our speakers, then they decided (round about 1996) that coffee retailers should no longer roast beans on the premises, because it represented a fire risk. 'Shop roasted' no longer exists, and you might have noticed that one of the lovelier smells disappeared from our high streets a few years back, so now all we get is a disgusting combination of fast foods and artificial alleged 'fragrances'.

Coffee is now roasted away from the shops, so it's therefore bound to be less fresh when you come to buy it. Does a few days really matter that much? If you've never tried roasting your own, you'll never know!

I've only been doing it since the EEC stuck its oar in, and (until it broke) only with a relatively primitive and inexpensive (around £30, if you can find one) hand-cranked covered-saucepan affair, used on the gas stove. It proved difficult to achieve both evenness and consistency, filled the kitchen with (rather nice smelling but decidedly pungent) smoke, and covered the gas hob with flecks of chaff. Even so, as soon as I'd tried home-roasted beans, their superiority over those purchased already roasted was immediately obvious.

The new roaster* is a much neater affair. It's electrically powered and roasts the beans by blowing very hot air up between them, keeping them agitated and giving a beautifully even and predictable roast. The hopper is glass, so you can watch if you want, and interrupt the programmed cycle if your beans are getting too dark, though once you've worked out the timing for a particular type of bean, the whole cycle is automatic, the machine blowing through cold air to cool

things down once the roasting is finished. Apart from making as much noise as a hair dryer, this Hearthware machine is altogether more civilised, as it collects all the chaff in the lid, and only half-fills the kitchen with smoke and pungent-but pleasant odours.

Monmouth's roasted Guatemalan beans at least got me out of my 'haven't had a decent cup for days' gloom and irritation. The interesting bit came when I used the new roaster on Monmouth's green Guatemalan beans. The first roast was too light, the second too dark, but at the third attempt I got the roast just right, and was amazed at how obviously superior the flavour was compared to the same beans obtained already roasted from the shop a few days earlier.

Coffee merchants will often tell you that ground coffee is good for three days, and whole roasted beans for thirty days. These people belong to the same extended family as those who promised us that CD would bring pure perfect sound forever. Of course a thirty day shelf life is convenient from a distribution point of view, but as soon as roasted coffee beans are exposed to the air, they start to lose flavour. Vacuum sealing is the only way to preserve the full flavour of roasted beans, and until some coffee merchant offers small enough packs of vacuum-sealed beans to last a household just a day or two, I shall carry on roasting my own.

When trying to think of words to describe the differences in taste between various beans and roasts, I quickly found myself lapsing into the sort of terms I use when discussing hi-fi equipment. Yes it's sad, but no more so than some of the vocabulary I've heard from those who write about wine.

I tend to think of coffees as having 'bandwidth', with 'bass', 'mid' and 'treble' 'notes', and

each kind of bean has its own 'spectrum'. Under-roast a batch of beans and the 'bass' seems weak - the taste is thin, lacking body and richness, though the 'high notes' come through strongly (a little too strongly). Over-roast the beans and it screws up the 'top notes', adding coarseness and bitterness.

I particularly like the Guatemalan beans, which are good for espresso machines as well as filter coffee, for their notably wide taste 'bandwidth'. Freshly roasted, the 'top end' is beautifully even and extended, but as the days pass, the 'top notes' literally evaporate away, making the brew duller and much less interesting, even though the 'body' is retained.

One of the bonuses of home roasting is that you can keep a variety of different green beans (they last for months without deterioration), and ring the changes for the sheer pleasure of it. Every type has its own recognisable character, and I regularly enjoy beans from Ethiopia, Kenya, India and Java. I can vouch for the high quality of Monmouth's beans, not only from my own experiences but also those of several friends.



*Monmouth Coffee Mail Order,
Tel. 0207 645 3561.

*Hearthware Precision coffee
roaster, see www.hearthware.com

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Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

Last issue, I set down a few thoughts regarding tempo, timing, and the way hi-fi systems subjectively alter the apparent speed at which a piece of music is played and influence rhythmic vitality. This issue I want to look at the other main component of music - pitch. If I'm trying out a new tweak, or making changes to cables or support stands, it's differences in pitch reproduction I listen out for.

For me, being able to hear the precise pitch of each note is vital. Everything springs from it. If you haven't got good pitch reproduction, you haven't got anything. Why? Because it's absolutely fundamental. If a hi-fi system faithfully recreates changes in pitch cleanly and precisely, it's usually able to do everything else.

It'll have excellent tempo and superb clarity. There'll be a good sense of dynamic inflection, retaining the shape and rhythmic vitality of the playing. In short, the music will communicate because the essential ingredient (pitch) is being properly recreated. The only thing that might be lacking is a wholly natural tonal balance. But more on this later.

A hi-fi system (or recording) with good pitch definition is easy to listen to. You don't have to struggle to hear what's going on. When several voices or instruments sound at once, clarity between lines remains excellent and individuality is maintained. As I write this, the slow movement of Mozart's *Prague symphony* plays - Ton Koopman's live Tokyo recording on Erato - and it's marvellous to hear the wind writing reproduced so clearly.

Were the musical structure more exposed - the slow movement of a piano sonata, say - rather than orchestrally coloured, it would perhaps seem a little ordinary. What elevates it from the mundane is Mozart's imaginative orchestration, his subtle use of instrumental colour and harmony. The music's wonderfully scored, and being able to hear every detail adds an extra dimension to one's listening pleasure.

Mozart calls for constantly changing combinations of instruments to colour and flavour the sound. It makes all the difference when you can discern the individuality of (say) a paired oboe and flute, and also follow the cellos quietly harmonising their tune. At one point, the cellos suddenly sing out, breaking free from accompanying the winds. It's a wonderfully liberating moment. And being able to hear it brought fresh insights into music I thought I knew fairly well.

Of course the wider picture is important too. It's not just about detail. But in many ways the totality is in the detail. When you can hear such detail it became clear just how much care and preparation the composer lavished on the music. Sounds became living breathing things that mean something. Instead of bass notes being shapeless heavy grunts, they've got pitch and tonality. All at once there's a directing intelligence behind both music and performance.

Lots of different things can erode clear pitch definition (PD). It starts with the recording. If there's too much

messing about with over-dubs and signal processing, PD will suffer. A hi-fi system that's poorly balanced tonally will lack good PD, especially if there's an excess of treble. This partly explains why CD and digital recordings seem more prone to poor PD than good analogue - the top-end's too frisky!

It even happens naturally. You can go to a live orchestral concert and see the cello section bowing away like crazy, fingers flying all over the neck, yet be unable to hear precisely what's being played. Not all concert halls achieve ideal balance - often you have to sit in the right place. Although hi-fi is often spoken of as a poor substitute for the real thing, a good recording on a good system can clarify detail lost in the concert hall, bringing you closer to the composer's intentions.

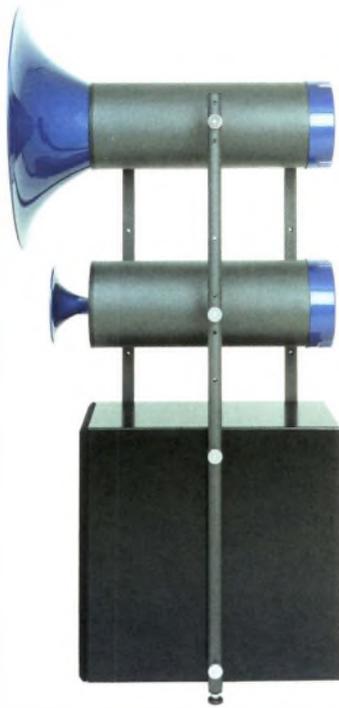
Something else is the ability of a hi-fi system (and recording) to fully 'encompass' the range of notes being reproduced. This is difficult to describe in a few words. Essentially, it boils down to recreating each note - high or low - with the fullness and depth it had in real life. Yet curiously it's not about wide bandwidth as such - wide bandwidth in itself doesn't guarantee good PD.

Subjectively, it's the difference between the notes sounding widely spaced and distinct, or all pulling towards a vague centre point. The most common example of this is 'one note' bass, where all bass notes sound much the same. No matter how the scoring alters, there's little variation in tone colour or texture.

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We intended to put some text here, you know, the sort of trite caption we normally put in our ads. But Pete ran out of ideas, and anyway, the captions always paled after seeing them a few times. So these products have been left to speak for themselves. And this space has been left **intentionally blank**



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► So, listen out for a sense of low notes being properly low, and high notes being properly high. And ask yourself - is the note being 'reached'. This isn't merely a hi-fi thing; you can apply it to musicians. The real masters have the technique to encompass each note, so that tone, volume, and pitch are solid and precise. It always sounds as if they've got ample time to shape and inflect each note. As your technique improves, the whole process becomes easier - allowing you to control things like pitch, attack, and dynamics more precisely.

A hi-fi system is a musical instrument too. It has to convincingly portray a vast range of tonalities and textures. From the pin-point brilliance and attack of a triangle, to the weight and power of a large bass drum; from the percussive attack of a piano, to the smooth velvety warmth of massed violins. It's a pretty tall order!

But recreating 'accurate' sound is only the start. There are two kinds of high fidelity; high fidelity in terms of sound quality, and high fidelity to the music. The first deals with the production of a natural believable sound. The second is more concerned with recreating the music and performance so that it convinces on an emotional level. It's the faithful portrayal of every shift of tone colour and dynamic inflection that recreates the expressiveness of the original performance.

Suppose you were in a hall listening to an orchestra and it was possible to walk around as the music played. In every part of the hall you'd hear 'natural' sound, simply because it's a live event and you're there in person. But, the orchestra would sound better in some parts of the hall than in others. Clarity, detail, tone quality would only be at their optimum in certain areas.

When we listen to a recording of music, most of us have no idea of how it actually sounded at the time. How could we? We weren't there. Did the Tokyo audience hear the wind writing

in Ton Koopman's performance of Mozart's *Prague symphony* as clearly as I did listening to it at home? Who knows! And, who cares? If Erato's recording (and a hi-fi system's reproduction of it) totally satisfies the listener, it's enough - the job's done.

The clues the ear needs to determine clear differentiation of pitch are mainly based in the mid-range. Yet ironically it's this part of the frequency spectrum that many hi-fi systems reproduce poorly. It's not always obvious when things are wrong. Unlike deep powerful bass or brilliant sparkling treble, the mid-band isn't sonically alluring. So your attention's easily distracted by what's happening at frequency extremes, away from the all-important centre.

So far, I've talked about pitch definition as though it were purely down to correct tonal balance and high quality equipment. However, the manner in which the sound reaches the ear also has a big part to play. A worst-case scenario would be sitting very close to highly directional loudspeakers, ears on axis with the tweeter, and the speaker grilles off - ie the way most people listen!

If that describes your hi-fi set-up, try this experiment. Put a recording on, listen for a minute or so, then stand up and listen. Next, (if possible) move further away from the speakers. Finally (with the music still playing) listen from outside the room. Notice any difference?

I think you'll find it easier to follow the totality of the music when you're not directly in the line of fire so to speak. The closer you get to the speakers, the harder it is for the sound to form a coherent integrated whole. Individual speaker drive units, with their different phase and amplitude responses, can stick out like a sore thumb when you listen right up close.

Of course it's a bit of a joke to say your system sounds better and better the further away you get from it, but it even holds true live; the best seats in a con-

cert hall or opera house are never those right at the front. There's always a point around a third to halfway back where the ratio of direct and indirect sound seems just right, giving the sound an alluring sweetness and tonal sheen.

If you asked me if there's any one thing specifically that ensures good pitch definition, I'd have to say no. It's down to a number of inter-related factors; good balance between the mid-band and bass/treble extremes, a sympathetic room in which to listen, high quality equipment that's extremely compatible, being sat at a suitable distance from the speakers, and the quality of your recordings.

Tonal balance is perhaps the most important single factor of the above, and it's interesting to note that changes to the upper mid-band - in the 1kHz to 3kHz range - can subjectively enhance or weaken pitch definition. This part of the frequency range is sometimes called the presence region, and a slight degree of emphasis here make things sound sharper and more forwardly balanced.

However, taken too far, the sound grows shrill and shrieky; the tonal balance exhibits an unpleasant 'hard' quality, and the music starts to sound percussive and crude. Some very old recordings have this sort of sound, caused partly by resonances in primitive microphones and a peaky frequency response. But although unnatural, such characteristics can actually enhance pitch definition, and make the music (and performance) sound more powerful, articulate, and aggressive than it was in reality.

A reduction of emphasis in this region increases tonal openness, enhancing sweetness. But, taken too far, the music loses presence and detail, paradoxically sounding both bright, yet soft and dynamically recessed. Consonants are soft, making words less intelligible. Systems with this problem can actually sound quite pleasant, but won't communicate the passion and drama of great music. ➤



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Incoming!

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

Dear Sir,

Regarding the Issue 1 review of the VPI cleaning kit. The phone and fax no. for Absolute Analogue does not seem to exist, and BT do not have them listed (plus there is no address). Can you help?

Regards,

Chris Livingstone-Lubwama

London SW19

The current distributor for VFI products in the UK is The Cherished Record Co. who can be reached on (44)(0)1579-363603 or at www.cherished-record-company.co.uk. They generally have both the HW16.5 and HW17F in stock, along with a complete range of spares and accessories.

Absolute Analogue are confining their activities to their re-issue label and the distribution of the Plinius amplifiers from New Zealand. They can be reached at (44)(0)208-459-8113 or Absolute_Analogue@msn.com. RG

Dear Sir,

The review of the Nordost burn-in device compares the benefits of this device with the use of a burn-in CD.

I have recently bought a set of Nordost Blue Heaven interconnects and I'm in the process of burning them in. I don't have a burnt in set to compare against and am undertaking the burn-in using my tuner (and Radio 4): five days so far and counting. They still sound a little bit fierce. But I don't have a virgin set to compare against and I may still be oversensitive to their first use.

A couple of questions

1 Does it matter what sort of signal is used to burn cables in? Will my

method take even longer, being mostly a speech based programme?

2 Does the signal level matter, ie is it the integral of time and signal that matters? My new interconnects are between the pre-amp and power amps via the active cross-over. So only one set is seeing a full range signal, the other two get the upper and lower frequency bands individually.

3 When might I expect to have a set of decently burnt-in cables?

One question, which you might consider asking of Nordost is why they don't supply burnt-in cables.

Marilyn Butt, E-mail

The man from Nordost, he say:

Cable burn-in is a function of amplitude and bandwidth, so a speech based signal will definitely take longer than a wide bandwidth signal of the kind used in the Cable Toaster, which actually extends well beyond audible frequencies. When we send cables for review we like to toast them for at least two weeks, and find that a music signal still provides a final polish. On that basis, a speech only signal could be expected to take a couple of months to achieve a similar result, but that's a guess as I've never been patient enough to try it. The best solution would be to have your dealer run your cables in with a Toaster, using phono to din adaptors to make the connections.

As regards supplying cables ready burnt-in, it simply isn't practical. In the UK alone we sell thousands of individual cables in a year. To provide each with a two-week burn-in would require a massive investment in Cable Toasters, not to mention a huge amount

of time. The bottom line would be more expensive cables. That's why we offer the Toaster to dealers. It spreads the investment and allows them to offer added value to all their customers, not just the ones that buy Nordost products.

Persevere with your Blue Heavens, but you'll get a far quicker result if you use a decent wide bandwidth signal.

Dave Sprake, Nordost (UK) Ltd

Dear Sir,

I hope this is of relevance and not just a waste of your time, but I'm ill at the moment and out of sheer boredom decided to pull out my Audioquest Sorbothane (big) feet from under my CD player and amp and put them under my stand mounted B&W 603 S2s. Under the former they had made a subtle improvement, but under the latter I can only describe the change as astounding.

I know that I only have a very cheap set-up compared to the type of gear you review in your magazine, but I have been quite careful about speaker placement and choice in order to get the best out of my system. Therefore I have gone through many different configurations and could never have imagined the difference that isolating the speaker from their environment would make. I thought I had done pretty well so far.

Considering the magnitude of the change this has made, and the relative economy (\$75) of using the feet, you may find it interesting experimenting for yourself. There may be an article in it for you?

Regards,

Peter Olsson, E-mail

► *Sounds good to me. Given the excellence of the results achieved with the Townshend Seismic Sinks in Issue 3 I can easily believe the magnitude of the improvement you describe. I will look into this, but in the meantime let's put it in the public domain and see what other people think of this idea. RG*

Dear Sir,

I wonder whether you could tell me whether you are going to run a review on an SACD machine in the near future please? As a late-comer to digital, I find myself reading lots of hype about SACD and a little about DVD-A (which has been tempered with the knowledge of the Verance encoding) and would be interested in the comments of your reviewers on some of this newer technology.

Thanks for your time.

Daniel. E-mail

Obviously both SACD and DVD-A are matters of significant moment to the hi-fi industry and enthusiasts alike, which is why we regularly report on the current state of play. However, when it comes to reviewing machines I'm reluctant to rush to judgement. The acid test of any new high-bit format will be in replaying recordings made with the equivalent technology, and not just meaningless demonstration tracks either. Let's face it, with what's at stake do you think anybody is going to be stupid enough to put out a dual layer demonstration disc which doesn't exhibit clear superiority for the new technology? What then is the value of any review based on discs of this type.

In order to gain any real insight into a new format you need a whole range of real recordings of real music to work with, preferably from a range of sources. Ideally these should include a combination of new recordings and older or current analogue ones transcribed into the new format, thus demonstrating its capabilities both as a storage and archival medium. It's just

another instance of trying to get it right rather than simply getting it first RG

Dear Sir,

Having just re-read the article from issue 6, I thought I'd give you my own comments regarding my experience with hi-fi and the internet. I have been enthusiastic about the two subjects for approximately the same time - ie as I was getting into the internet, I was realising that I should stop buying Rickenbackers with any spare cash and start changing the way I listen to music.

This would have been about 1992, luckily I was then at a company who allowed me free internet access. Although I had and still have vast knowledge of what goes on up to the mastering stage, the world of hi-fi was very confusing to me; terminology, opinions and engineering.

So I started to use the internet to build up my knowledge of my new instantly addictive hobby: I used Audioreview.com and audiolit.com as places to start - as well as the Linn Web site, (with the excellent Arm and Cart acrobat file that should be downloaded by every LP 12 owner), but the biggest reward and entertainment comes from the newsgroups.

Arrogant, misinformed, nationilistic, rude, argumentative, and occasionally informative, newsgroups like rec.audio.uk and rec.hi-end made fascinating reading.

Most of the stars of the group are still there - but I really should mention two. Russ Sadd, gives technical answers in a real precise way with little of his own views. He is one of the first people I'd turn to in trouble. I've found his advice to be more helpful and forthcoming than any dealer (save for the late Denys-Tricketts) I have used.

BUT the real entertainer is Stewart Pinkerton, he is just SO argumentative, in an entertaining way- I must admit that he winds me up, but still once a week I will go to (and I recommend you try the same) www.dejanews.com

and search for his name and just follow the threads.

Anyone else who is so insulting would get kicked off a newsgroup but he must know the people that run them. I must admit that the threads normally have hi-fi arguments for the first four or so postings, but then it just turns into "handbags at six o'clock" the latest argument turned into a discussion about whether VW Golfs run better on 98 octane than 95. Hilarious. Stewart is one of that strange breed of HiFi enthusiasts who actually hates everything.

As for the home reviews on audioreview.com, it's quite easy to weed out the rubbish and personally I actually value these opinions more than most. If I want to know whether the Linn Genki would match the Quad 44 preamp this is where I would start. Surely the people that have parted with their own cash would give a good opinion, and some of them are shockingly honest.

As a Quad lover and user (am I the only one left?) I must totally recommend the Quad World Web site - it puts all hi-fi mags to shame with the quality of info and pictures. Magazines don't mention Quad much these days and it is this web site and the people that I have met from it that have kept my enthusiasm going.

What do I want next from the Web - easy, on-line, paying subscriptions to my favourite hi-fi magazines like yours and The Listener. I would pay the same price happily if I could download it or you email it to me: magazines take up a LOT of space in my cupboards you know and I am loathe to throw them out.

Have a look at the newsgroups - I think you could do a monthly light-hearted article on Stewart (I hate everything and everyone) Pinkerton on his own.

Tim Groves, E-mail



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"It's A Dirty Job..." making music from the mains.

by Roy Gregory

Way back in Issue 4 I promised you some rather more structured conclusions to my investigation of the mains and their (considerable) influence over the performance of your hi-fi system. Well, ever since, I've been awaiting the completion of a listening room wired exactly as per the Russ Andrews method, and the opportunity to get both Russ and myself in the same place at the same time to listen to it. Why did I need Russ present? Because he was bringing his latest distribution blocks and gadgets, along with a spectrum analyser to actually look at what was happening on the mains.

The room in question is a standard family lounge, albeit one that's devoid of TV and video, belonging to Guy, one of our readers, and his wife Katy. As part of a family home it suffers all the normal pollutants:

computer, dishwasher, fridge, central heating, children etc. Additionally, the fact that its layout places the hi-fi's power source on the opposite side of the house from the main fuse board makes for a long ring main and increased vulnerability to RF. These attributes (plus the inconsequential fact that the floorboards were coming up anyway) made it the perfect choice. The room itself measures about seven metres by five, and is not without its own set of acoustic problems, not least of which is a glass 'wall' on one of its long sides. Lower than the rest of the ground floor it already enjoys a separate ring-main which powers nothing but the table lamps. Finally, and just to make things even more interesting, the resident system consists of DNM electronics (a 3C Primus and a pair of PA1s with

but they were the easiest thing to hand.... honest!). For the purposes of this exercise the turntable sat fallorally to one side, neglected.

We started with the Densen based system, it being a lot easier to work with, and the first thing we did was to listen to it running from the standard ring and an off the shelf extension block and leads, reasoning that this is how most systems end up being used. After a while we switched the extension block's plug from the standard ring to the specially installed Russ Andrews version. This consists of a separate Proteus YX1 domestic consumer unit, as specified by Russ but available from most electrical retailers. We paid extra for one supplied by RATA and treated with DeoxiT contact enhancer (c£50). To this were connected the two 40' runs of Kimber High Current mains cable (£40/ft), joined at the other end by a double, unswitched 'Super Socket', again treated with Deoxit (£17). The Kimber mains cables employ the same woven construction as their signal and speaker cables, which helps them reject RF noise.

Tot that little lot up and it comes to around the £1000 mark, so it needs to offer a substantial improvement in sound quality. We weren't disappointed. Despite the comparatively quiet standard main, the Kimber Ring brought with it a far quieter musical background, better separation and space between the instruments and



special large power supplies) with their stated preference for solid-core mains wiring. Given the possibility of anomalous results I thought it prudent to take along a Densen Beat integrated amp to slot between the Helios 1 CD player and the Audioplan Kontrast 11 speakers, along with the Nordost Valhalla cables (I know, I know,

► greater dynamic range, important to all kinds of music but especially apparent on the upbeat and largely acoustic 'Unforgiven' (Bap Kennedy *Domestic Blues* LSD710 - a fabulous country rock album that y'all should own) being used as the test track. Right from the count-in the differences

were obvious, with greater immediacy and presence, and far more natural vocals. The whole sound became fuller and much less tinny, with notes from the plucked upright bass which were simply non-existent before!

But breaking down the changes in this way tends to diminish the overall effect. The abiding impression was one of much greater presence and colour to the music, and much greater interest too. The other really obvious thing, and one that was to increase the more Kimber cables we put into the chain, was the dramatically lower noise

which is going to hold your attention and entertain you. Worth a thousand pounds? Even on its own the answer would be yes, however, this is just the foundation



layer and there is much, much more to come from it. Next step was to add the eight-way, star-earthed 'Power Block' in place of the standard extension lead. This triangular section ABS construct manages to cram its sockets into a surprisingly small package. Its non-metallic construction is a

theme which recurs throughout the Russ Andrews products, and is considered essential to their superior sound quality.

Given the well documented and clearly audible benefits of plastic casework on audio electronics it's a claim

I'm happy to entertain without the benefit of exhaustive A/B testing. Besides, I've already done that with the Audioplan PowerStar and PowerStar S, and it certainly works there. The Power Block also offers a binding post for a separate external earth, and mains in

and out via Hubbell connectors, so that you can daisy chain more than one block if you have to. With a three foot Kimber High Current Power Kord to hook it up to the wall the cost is £350,

the effect is well worth the outlay.

A further improvement in dynamic range (albeit less dramatic than with the ring-main) was combined with much better separation and tonal naturalness. The three

acoustic guitars and mandolin were far more distinct, one from another, whilst the Dobro lost a rather nasty steely edge which some might see as definition but which actually has nothing to do with the sound of the real instrument. Musically more important however was the significant improvement in rhythmic and timing integrity. Again, right from the first chords the difference was obvious, the band playing as a whole and with far more purpose and energy. The all important musical momentum which is so vital to this track was starting to build. Adding a pair of five foot Kimber High Current Power Kords (£156 each) simply adds to the effect. The drums become hollow constructs with a skin and tuning rather than just a dull thud, tonal and technical subtleties in the playing of the guitars start to emerge.

Fully Kimber-ed, it was time to investigate the application of separate parallel filters. First we used the RATA 'Noise Sniffer' to listen to the effects of what we'd done already. This clever little device converts noise and harmonics on the mains into all to audible and distinctly unpleasant audio signals, played back iar and understandable - the sound of the system.



floor. Whilst this obviously contributes to the other benefits (especially tonal and dynamic range) it's worth pointing it out as a separate issue simply because it's so startling.

Now, none of this was subtle and all of it is vitally important to a system

► The improvement was huge. The increase in transparency and spatial coherence was hard to credit. The texture of instruments was dramatically improved, especially the drum skins, while the discs on the tambourine which had been a faintly irritating rattle were now individually and perfectly resolved. The



vocals too were much clearer and articulate, both the words and their meaning more clearly understood. All of sudden you simply had much greater access to what the performance and song were all about. To elicit this kind of improvement from something so apparently simple is more than just a party trick. It actually demonstrates a profound understanding of what effects the sound of the system, a fact which was made even more apparent by the next box of tricks, the £250 'The Purifier'. This continued along the same track as The Silencer but brought an even more fundamental improvement. A square-ish ABS box that again plugs in parallel to the system, this produced a real increase in the solidity, focus and presence of the instruments. Sonically it was as if it centred each sound, concentrating its previously diffuse energy and preventing it from bleeding out into the soundstage. But it also works the same way in the time domain, placing notes far more precisely in relation to each other. The sense of ensemble playing and purpose improve again, adding to the dynamic swings that the band can make.

Final step was to add the 'Super Purifier' (£350 - and more of the same) and connect the external earth to the Power Block. This last addition was the most surprising of all. I've been running a separate earth for so long that I'd forgotten what it does. Add the sodden ground and the degree to which the new mains set-up was opening the window and the effect was hard to credit. The system lost a whole layer of fine grain while the tonal palette simply blossomed. Rhythmic flow and the sense of energy simply pored into the room and by now the system, and the band, were really cooking. The whole sound was far more stable and rooted, as much a question of its solidity as the bandwidth.

That's a pretty hyperbolic set of descriptions, and by now you could be forgiven for dismissing this as "reviewer speak" and exaggeration. After all, that level of improvement would have rendered the original system unrecognisable, wouldn't it?



Absolutely. A brief return to the original set-up demonstrated just how flawed it had been, to the extent that it was now genuinely unlistenable: compressed,

grainy, grey and colourless, with no dynamic range, bandwidth or rhythmic and musical organisation. In fact, it demonstrated just how much most of us put up with and adapt to on a daily basis.

In the evening we repeated the demonstration for the room's owners, both on the Densen system and there own DNM set-up. The proof of the pudding was the look on Katy's face when I told her I had to take the whole lot away (for photography). Fortunately they already own a block and mains leads, so the addition of a Silencer and Super Purifier was a somewhat sweeter pill to swallow.

One other question remained to be resolved: the ring versus spur debate. Obviously, we were ideally equipped for the comparison and it seemed a shame to miss the opportunity. Thankfully Russ was only too happy to disconnect one of the cable runs at both the wall socket and DCU, meaning that I didn't have to get too close to live electricity. In all seriousness, don't try this at home unless you really do know what you're doing! Listening once again revealed clear differences. Running as a spur introduced an insubstantial quality to the sound and an edge of spit and tizz to the treble. Voices were much weedier with far less presence, while there was a noticeable increase in grain.

Restoring the ring restored the balance, removing the intrusive treble quality, revealing the tonal range and reinjecting the weight that had gone missing from the bass. The other issue is induced noise, to which a ring ►

▶ is potentially more vulnerable. Kimber users don't need to worry so much about this because of the cable's woven construction. However, having heard the difference, and given the performance of The Silencer, I'd still opt for the ring regardless of cable.

At close to \$500 these changes may not sound that big a deal, but believe me,

they are.

Not only are they fundamental to the performance of the system, but they fall in a category which it is hard to achieve by changing anything else. Sure, you could get a smoother treble or fuller bass by changing the cables or equipment, but that is to misunderstand what is going on here, and cuts right to the heart of the problem.

When you listen to music, what you are actually hearing is the mains. Your acoustic signals are created out of the chopped up energy that comes out of the wall socket. The equipment takes and uses that energy, but it's fundamental quality is still there. Your equipment can (and does) bend the signal out of shape, altering what's there. The problem is that with the mains then it's either there or it isn't. Any quality that doesn't make it into the IEC socket on the back of your equipment can't be replaced after the event. Any attempt to do so involves gross aberrations in the signal, all of which come at a cost elsewhere (audio signals are a bit like a balloon full of water - push them in at one place and they stick out at another!) and are

largely pointless anyway, given that mains interference effects are variable by their very nature. And let's not forget that 'high fidelity' actually stands for something - nothing added, nothing taken away. Wander from that path and you're lost. Completely.

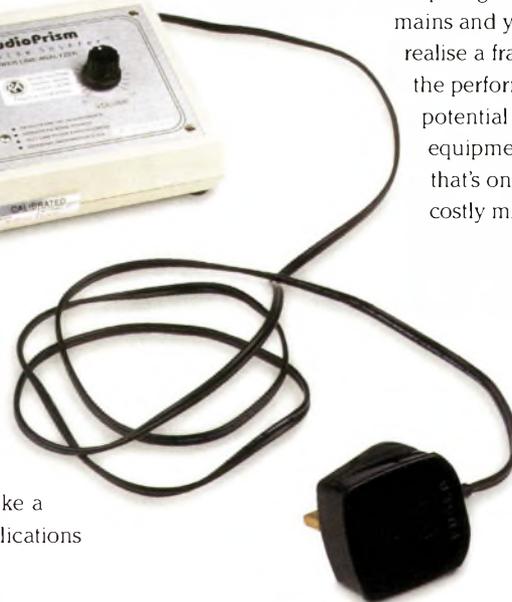
If you are going to build a high performance engine you start with the fuel, and the same applies to a hi-fi system. The mains is like the foundation of your hi-fi building. The deeper and more solid that foundation and the higher you can build. Unfortunately, if you build a four-storey house on the foundations of a garden shed, it may well look the part but its structural integrity and solidity are going to be equivalent to the shed that should have been there. Pretty soon the cracks will start to show and the house will be uninhabitable. In hi-fi terms, that house is just like a system, and without a proper foundation it's your long term musical enjoyment that suffers. The problem is

that it's also roughly equivalent to a midi-system. Any kind of serious hi-fi is much more like a skyscraper! The implications are clear.

Without paying proper attention to the foundations it's foolhardy to extend a house. Like-wise, inadequate mains will severely limit the benefits of upgrades made to your system. You simply won't be able to hear them past the lousy mains that makes up your music.

We listened to two systems, one at around \$5500 + cables, the other costing nearer to \$9500 all in. Both systems were transformed by the quality of the mains supply. The benefits on the DNM system weren't quite as obvious as with the Beat: a combination of the Beat's destructive tendencies and the stellar dynamic performance of the Valhallas, which the DNM solid core cables simply couldn't match. In other words, the Beat offered more to work with while the Nordost cables opened the window that much wider. But in both systems, the benefits were little short of jaw dropping. In this context the expenditure of around £2000 was an absolute no-brainer. Bear in mind that Russ also offers the \$500 Purifier Block which includes a Purifier and a Silencer along with the eight sockets in a single, more cost effective package. Also consider that you can achieve further benefits by installing Silencers adjacent to noise sources on other rings. The conclusion is simple. Ignore the

mains and you'll only realise a fraction of the performance potential in your equipment - and that's one awfully costly mistake. ▶



Back In The Real World...

Although our test provides definitive answers to the questions concerning mains quality, how much you can do about it, and what effect it has on system performance, it doesn't tell you what to do. We applied one, highly developed set of products to the problem. There are others we could have used, as well as other techniques and approaches. As I said earlier, the problem with mains interference is that it is constantly variable, both in terms of specific effects and the differing environments of individual systems. We were keen to apply the test in a "real" home, one that actually proved relatively benign, at least as far as external interference goes. The results achieved simply indicate that noise from within the system is just as big a problem as external interference.

In fact most people end up approaching the problem from the other end, starting with mains leads and ending up with a purpose installed ring constructed from "audio" type mains cable, a fact born out by Russ who sells more of this stuff than anyone else in the country, so he has a fairly good handle on the market. Simple practicality dictates it, and bearing that in mind let's look at the various levels of commitment that form the ladder that leads to a dedicated solution. We could do it with the Russ Andrews products we've already discussed, and I've done just that at home, but I reckon it could be useful to look at a few of the alternatives.

But before we get into that, there's one last point. The effects of mains treatment are cumulative, one layer building on the next. What that means is that you don't get the full benefit of your mains leads and distribution block until you do more work further upstream, or add a separate earth etc. I'm not saying that you won't get a worth-while improvement. It will be

them and because they are representative of a given approach. So, at the end of each section I've also listed the alternatives we've tried and recommend. Again this isn't an exhaustive list, but it helps to indicate the sheer variety of options out there. Once again, a fairly modest system was employed: the Roksan Kandy electronics driving the Living Voice Avatars (a textural and tonal magnifying glass if ever there was one) sitting on the rather excellent IsoBlue rack which made swift connections a doddle. Cabling was Quattro-Fil and SPM, chosen for its unforgiving nature and the opportunity to investigate mains/signal cable interaction.

Step One - A Decent Extension Block And Mains Leads

Fed straight from the wall using standard leads the system really didn't sound bad, a testimony to my fundamentally good mains supply. A little small and grey perhaps, but what should you expect from budget electronics? The answer is an awful lot more.

Substituting a True Colours Industries six way block (£100) and mains leads (from £80 ea.) was a far from subtle improvement. Using the same Bap Kennedy track there was simply more energy, more dynamic range, more colour and more drama. Right from the count in there was a greater sense of both a coherent space and a coherent band. The first (false) strum off to the left suddenly had attack and the body and harmonics of an unmistakably nylon strung guitar. ▶



clearly audible and cost effective. But each step you make will extract more benefit from the bits you've already bought, until a dedicated ring provides the necessary fundamental foundation to the whole kit and caboodle. Starting with mains leads may seem a bit like tackling the tip of the iceberg, and it is. The fact that even this is so effective simply indicates just how big the iceberg is.

In looking at the various steps you can take I've chosen to use a variety of different products from different manufacturers. Whilst they are all recommendable in them-selves, I've chosen them more because I know

▶ The lead vocal, easily submerged on this track, was better separated and far more expressive, as were the many and various guitars. The overall effect was much more solid and altogether bigger. Now the band had some presence, a leader and a bit of purpose.

Not bad for a set of mains leads huh? Stiff and awkward to use the TCIs are well worth the effort. Why? Well, there's all of the above of course, but the real bonus is the adrenaline shot that they give the whole system. This is an infectious dance track which played live has them packing the floor. Introduce the TCIs and the music just takes off. They really put the dance back into proceedings, which is exactly what they should do. Given their modest cost they really do represent the minimum you should be spending, even in the context of a budget system.

Alternatives:

Music Works
LAT International
Kimber
Audioplan
Nordost

Step Two - Adding Some Isolation

The next step is to introduce some filtering into the equation. In the Russ Andrews set-up this was placed in parallel, and certainly there are many people who abhor the idea of placing a filter in line with the mains supply. In general I'd agree, however there are exceptions to this rule. I've talked at great length about the Audioplan mains products several times before, but I make no apologies for revisiting them here because they represent possibly the most developed set-up out there, and there are a few new wrinkles in their game-plan.

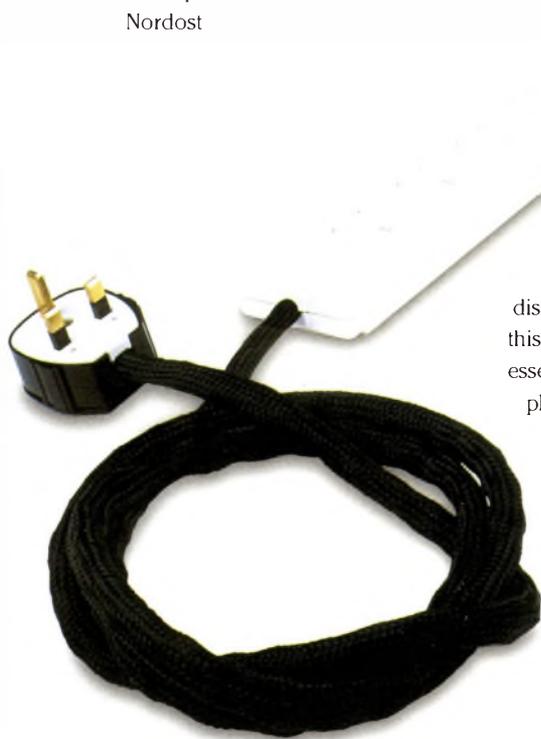
The Audioplan system is modular, meaning that you can build it up over the course of time, and offers two performance levels, the standard range and the 'S' range. It's the latter and more expensive option we are taking here. The chain starts with the Fine Filter 'S' (dm900), an inline RF filter. Into this is plugged the PowerStar 'S' (dm800) seven-way star-earthed distribution block. Like Russ' products this has eliminated all but absolutely essential metal elements. The CD player is the fed via a PowerPlant 100 'S' (dm900) isolation transformer, while the amp connects directly to the centre socket of the PowerStar. All the leads (from dm300 ea.) are heavily damped to prevent mechanical resonance and arrive fitted with continental plugs. That may seem like a disadvantage but not only are these plugs



unfused which probably helps them to sound better, they are reversible which means that it is far simpler to optimise mains polarity for each unit (an important and oft overlooked aspect of system set-up simply because it's such a pain to do with UK mains plugs). The FineFilter 'S' also offers a switchable ground filter as well as three separate main filter characteristics, of which more later.

In use the Audioplan system instantly established a wider and deeper soundstage, a more natural tonal balance and wider tonal palette. The effect of the ground filter was enormous (nearly as great as the impact of the separate ground in the Russ Andrews system) and all listening was done with it in the 'on' position. That first strum was now both more tactile and way outside the lefthand speaker, the voices on the count-in more individual and identifiable.

The sense of added space extended to the playing, with rhythmic subtleties more apparent and the difficult ascending guitar run in the first break (which so many systems fudge) more complete, dextrous and intelligible. Likewise the bass drum which now possessed discernible pitch, volume ▶



▶ and a floor to sit on. The lead vocal was better again but its inflections and the lift as he enters the chorus were much more natural. Dynamic-ally the Audio-plans matched the TCIs at the



wide end while offering a much tidier overall scaling, especially when it comes to micro dynamics.

So what about that switchable filter? I started with it set to normal and established a decent feel for what was going on before setting it to position 2. The difference was marked and interesting. The sound became bigger, bolder, more dramatic in scale but at the same time more rounded and sweeter. Altogether more florid if you like. Switching to position 1 altered things again. More compact, solid and purposeful than either 'normal' or 2 it was the setting I finally settled on. It had the effect of lifting and projecting the vocal in a far more satisfying way. It made the 'normal' position sound a little ragged and insubstantial while 2 was positively murky in comparison. Your choice of setting is going to depend on the equipment you use, and even the room it's in, and whilst it goes against the 'straight-line' grain, I have to say that it's a really useful facility, as well

as demonstrating just how carefully you need to approach both filters and the mains.

By way of a more compact option I also tried the eight-way KE-Power filtered distribution block (\$795). This arrived with a length of its own mains lead attached via a Hubbell connector. In the absence of any of the KE mains leads (£35 ea) I opted for Nordost El-Dorados. The result had plenty of power but was lacking the tonal subtlety, space and texture of the Audioplan set-up. In fact, reverting to the Nordost extension block provided superior performance with better control, focus and much greater subtlety. Not as subtle as the Audio-plan, and without its colour and transparency, but more dynamic and punchy.

Does that make the KE-Power a failure? Absolutely not. It simply underlines the importance of using matching sets of mains kit. Mixing and matching mains leads is just as problematic as mixing and matching interconnect and speaker cables, only it tends to have musically much



more disjointed results. I'll return to the KE-Power at a later date - with the KE mains leads to match!

Alternatives:

The Chord Co.

Step Three - The Surface Spur

Unfortunately it's not always possible to start messing with the household-electrics and fitting dedicated rings or spurs. The house may be rented, or it may simply be impractical. In this instance the best option is to carry the dedicated wiring as far back as possible. Assuming you can't get beyond the wall socket then the next



best thing is to use a massive isolation transformer like the Moth Marketing Pure Power (\$450). Of course designer Ben Duncan has his own

views on dedicated mains systems (see Issue 3) which involve placing a Pure Power at the DCU, but the arrangement employed here represents a less permanent solution.

Using the Pure Power brought a dramatic drop in the noise floor and corresponding increase in transparency. Now you could see right to the back of the soundstage and the music had something approaching the sort of solidity and foundation that the dedicated ring provided. The combination of solidity and delicacy was immediately ▶

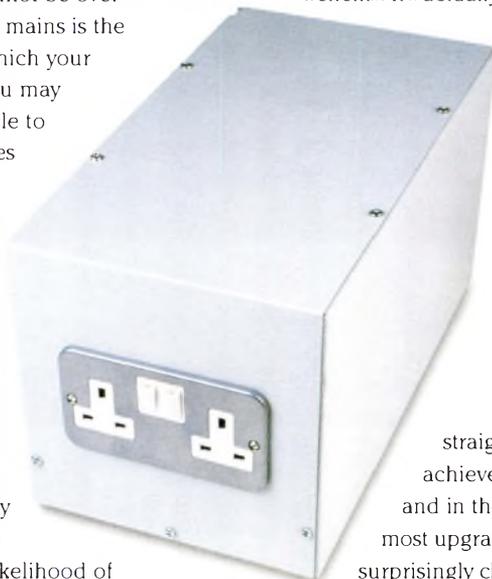


▶ apparent in the guitar picking and tambourine, both of which stepped, solid and real out of the mix. Interestingly the Pure Power was equally effective with either the Audioplan or Nordost mains set-ups, and made the benefits of using the matching signal cable in each case that much more apparent.

Alternative:
AudioPlan

Conclusions

The benefits of a truly dedicated mains supply cannot be over emphasised - the mains is the foundation on which your music is built. You may or may not be able to go to the extremes outlined in the opening section of this article, but however much you do or don't do to ensure a clean mains supply, you ignore at the peril of a woefully underperforming system and the likelihood of a string of expensive but ultimately unfulfilling upgrades.



straight forward to achieve good mains, and in the context of most upgrades, it's surprisingly cheap. Do it now. It's the biggest musical bargain out there. ▶+

Your priorities should be a dedicated ring, quality leads and a clean earth (a subject we'll cover next issue). Once you've got all those you can start playing with exotic cables and other devices, although it's a lot easier to do the job properly once. If you are going to lay a dedicated spur or ring, do it with proper cable, even if it means sticking to standard cables for a while. It'll pay off handsomely in the end, as well as making a very

real difference in the meantime. And remember, for most people this is a gradual process which they undertake by stages. You can start at either end of the chain, but remember, once you've decided on a set of products or a particular approach then stick with it. Mixing and matching different products will undermine or even undo the benefits. It's actually pretty

Suppliers

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Jimmy Hughes, Hi-Fi Choice,
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Life At The Top

Speakers and high frequencies

by Phil Ward

Somehow we seem to have an inherent feel and understanding for bass. Maybe there's something about it's physical nature. The fact that we can see a bass driver move or feel the blast of air from a reflex port. Or the fact that bass is untroubled by directivity or diffraction makes it easier to imagine we understand. Bass seems somehow to be founded in a time and space domain close to ours. But further up the audible range any physical connection and gut understanding becomes more ephemeral. And when we consider the realm of the tweeter? What on earth is all that about? We may as well be talking Star Trek style pure energy beams for all the intuitive grasp. But the role of the tweeter is really not all that tough to understand, it only seems that way. High frequency sound has all the same characteristics as low frequency sound - it's just busier, writ smaller and more at the mercy of reflection and diffraction from objects of our kind of size. It's also, in it's own way, just as significant a contributor to the chances of a speaker making music.

High frequencies weren't always seen as much for the speaker engineer to write home about. Cue history lesson....Twenty years ago the tweeter was often close to an afterthought. When the world of loudspeaker design was so wrapped up in the wonder of new cone materials and

the marvel of the all singing (if not dancing) "eight inch two-way", a tweeter was, well a tweeter, and most likely either a Seas H107 or a Audax HD25.

Now, before anybody reaches for the pen to write a correcting letter to the editor, yes there were alternative approaches to HF around at the time: Wharfedale's "Isodynamic" tweeter; Linn's and Naim's use of the Scanspeak D2008; The KEF T27 that found it's way into a good few "kit" products; Mordaunt-Short's use of the Isophon KK7 and KK9 in the Festival and Pageant; The Audax HD34 that wasn't really a tweeter (it ran out of breath before 15kHz) but owed it's wider hi-fi applications to the fact that it was used in a couple of BBC radio studio monitors where output above 15kHz was "unnecessary". But these were exceptions not the rule. The rule was 25mm soft dome.

And the typical design process? You concentrated hard on your bass/mid unit (primarily trying to get the polypropylene cone to stick to the rubber surround), scratched your head a bit about the flapping cabinet walls and then half blindly screwed the tweeter of choice in the top half of the baffle (oh and you reversed it's polarity to make the system measure flat(ish) on-axis). Voila! Another Mission 770 look-alike, and sometimes sound-alike. Of course,



having just written the above, it occurs to me that there's a few contemporary products out there that still follow much the same philosophy and recipe.

In the mid to late eighties there were three events, and for "events" read products, that were probably responsible for moving the focus of UK based designers' and enthusiasts' attention to include the stuff above 3kHz. One was the Celestion SL6 with it's tweeter from a one-piece copper dome and former. The second was the Roksan Darius with it's tweeter (the ubiquitous Audax HD25?) suspended peculiarly and precariously on springs. And the third was KEF and Seas simultaneously (or so it seemed to me, despite KEF's patent application and litigious sabre rattling) realising that the availability of neodymium-iron-boron magnets made a tweeter small enough to sit on the pole-piece of a bass/mid driver and therefore a true co-planer, dual-concentric driver a practical proposition.

Ironically, none of these technique and ideas was really new. Metal dome tweeters had been around for a while. Philips had a 25mm aluminium dome in their OEM catalogue in early eighties but withdrew it for lack of interest (the tweeter manufacturer equivalent of turning down The Beatles?) and Yamaha with the NS1000, ▶

► a speaker probably never equaled in terms of the application of materials technology, managed to produce remarkable mid and HF domes in beryllium. Meanwhile, Roksan were far from the first people to advocate decoupling the tweeter but the Darius, perhaps because of the “purity” of its decoupling technique and the visibility of the springs, was the one that stuck in folks minds. And KEF’s Uni-Q? Despite the granted US and UK patents, I for one, saw in other product and read in publications and patent documents, enough prior art to have some doubts that the patent examiners in question were living on quite the same planet.

In public, speaker designers scoffed at these three wacky new-fangled techniques.

In private we had a disturbing feeling that the bar had been raised a notch or four. We were right. Suddenly, tweeters and how they were used were big news. Manufacturers with no in-house tweeter capability scoured the world for metal domes and at the same time those who opened their minds and listened found that Celestion, Roksan and KEF were onto something. The sound of a tweeter (the whole speaker

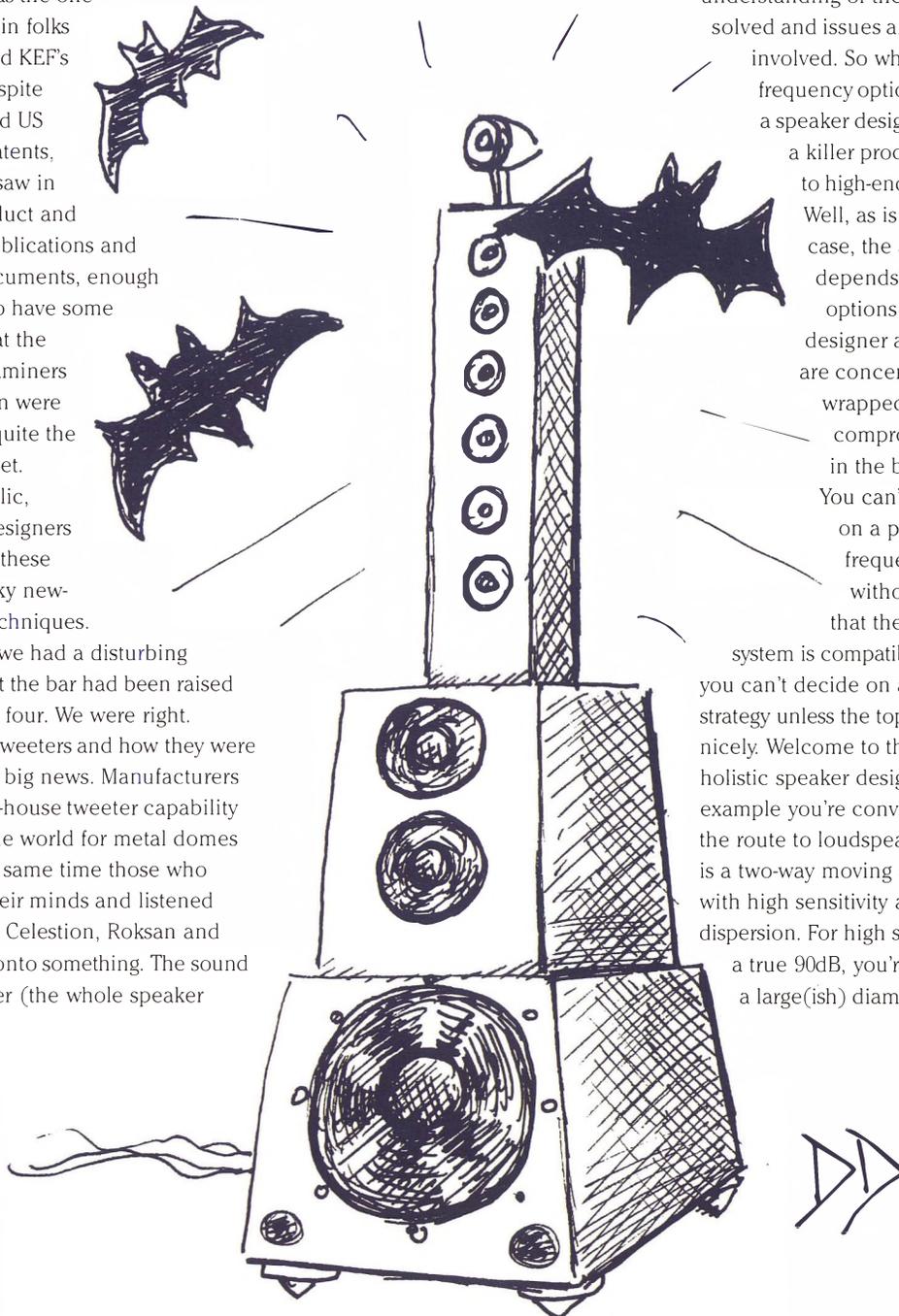
really) could depend on how you screwed it to the baffle. Metal domes with true piston operation to, well, nearly 20kHz could work. And locating the tweeter at the apex of a cone brought in practice all the theoretical benefits of consistent, dispersion and easy driver integration. Ironically, KEF apparently found Uni-Q a difficult

sell because customers missed seeing two drivers.

Fast forward fifteen years and the bit above 3kHz is given the attention in speaker design that it always actually warranted. There’s few brand new ideas or techniques - although some new driver developments from Vifa-Scanspeak are creating a stir - just a far greater appreciation and understanding of the problems to be solved and issues and compromises involved. So what are the high frequency options if you’re a speaker designer developing a killer product for the mid to high-end?

Well, as is so often the case, the answer is that “it depends”. The practical options available to any designer as far as tweeters are concerned are all wrapped up in the compromises inherent in the bigger picture. You can’t just decide on a particular high frequency philosophy without making sure that the rest of the

system is compatible. And similarly, you can’t decide on a bass/mid strategy unless the top end dovetails nicely. Welcome to the world of holistic speaker design. Say for example you’re convinced that the route to loudspeaker heaven is a two-way moving coil system with high sensitivity and wide HF dispersion. For high sensitivity, say a true 90dB, you’re going to need a large(ish) diameter bass/mid ►



▶ driver with relatively low moving mass. And for wide dispersion you'll naturally be looking at a 19mm dome tweeter. But unless you have a piece of smart technology to deploy you'll be facing problems, for the bass unit will almost certainly be a paper coned device with a ragged and narrow response above 1.5kHz or so and the tweeter, with its fundamental resonance typically not far shy of 2kHz, will be struggling to perform below 3kHz. There'll be an unholy mess right in the middle of the ear's highest sensitivity band - just where you don't need it. So the first thing to appreciate about tweeters, even before you decide between dome, inverted dome, 19mm, 25mm, ribbon, electrostatic, air motion, metal, fabric, and how it is to be screwed to the box, is that they are subordinate to the overall performance aims of the system as a whole.

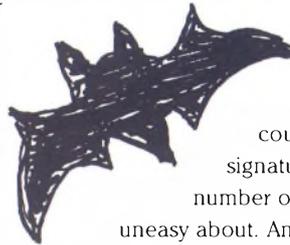
Going back to our hypothetical high sensitivity, wide dispersion two-way then, what strategies could possibly be brought to bear in order to overcome the fundamental difficulty of the bass/mid driver not reaching the tweeter? Well ignoring for a moment the possibility of designing a three way system so that a mid-range driver fills in the gap, or of invoking some yet to be discovered cone material that extends the useful response of the bass/mid driver an octave or two higher, our best bet is to see if there's a tweeter technology out there that can help. There is, and in fact, in the Scanspeak D2008 19mm dome, it's been around for twenty years or so. The D2008 (and later D2010) is an unusual beast in that despite its low moving mass, reasonably high sensitivity (around 90dB at 1m for 2.83V) and wide dispersion (from small dome size), it has an extended low end response and a fundamental

resonance at least an octave below most other similarly dimensioned tweeters. This means it's quite capable of reaching down to knit with a limited bandwidth bass/mid unit - even with a crossover as low as 2kHz. The technology of the D2008 isn't rocket science but simply the combination of rear cavity loading, braided lead-out wires and a very high compliance suspension system carefully optimised to allow generous dome displacement with low distortion. Of course the benefits of the D2008's low fundamental resonance, low distortion, lack of delayed resonance and wide dispersion are felt not only with systems that feature a low crossover frequency. In fact, if you were going to specify a soft dome tweeter to include the characteristics that are widely believed to be worthwhile in terms of fundamental musical ability you'd write a document that pretty much described the D2008/2010.

But however smart a tweeter, the Scanspeak is still a soft dome driven at the edge by a moving coil. And firstly, as any fan of planer speakers will tell you, there's no substitute for driving a light weight diaphragm equally over its full area. And secondly, as any fan of metal dome will tell you there's no substitute for a diaphragm that retains pistonic operation to 20kHz. So why hasn't the electrostatic or ribbon (and it's "air motion transformer" derivative), or metal dome tweeter taken over from the soft dome? Well, cost for a start. The moving coil tweeter is, in engineering terms, a pretty simple device and well suited to manufacture on automatic lines in vast numbers. It's perfectly possible to find fundamentally

competent soft dome tweeters from any number of Far Eastern manufacturers for less than a couple of quid - the typical UK branded Chinese built budget box lives by them. The Scanspeak costs around an order of magnitude more. In contrast, "planer" tweeter technologies have simply never been subject to the production engineering refinement that might make them competitive. Maybe the engineering challenges are such that the refinement could never be achieved to the same degree anyway.

And metal domes? Well there is a small cost issue and a larger, but not insurmountable manufacturing issue (metal domes, especially one-piece dome and former designs, are generally tougher to manufacture than soft-domes), but probably a more significant factor in metal domes not seeing-off their soft dome cousins is the "aural signature" that a good number of listeners remain uneasy about. And what causes the signature? At the risk of answering a question only by oversimplifying the issues, the "problem" with metal domes can only really be down to one or two phenomena. Firstly, perhaps some folks just don't like the stark accuracy of metal domes when it is presented with the particular "dome tweeter" mix of dispersion and delayed resonance artifacts? Secondly, maybe the characteristic high-Q dome resonance just above "audibility" is more significant than traditional text-book psycho-acoustics would have us believe. I've written "audibility" in quotations because, there's much speculation around these days about the significance of audio above 20kHz. There seems to be some serious evidence that, while we don't "hear" these very

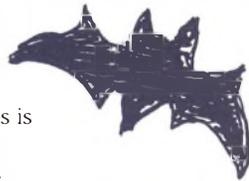


► high frequencies, we are aware of their presence or absence. And there is undoubtedly audio information in terms of instrumental overtones present above 20kHz. Maybe we should expect that, if we are aware of very high frequencies, a 10dB peak at, say, 22kHz with its associated delayed energy, would be significant. Of course this sudden speculation about very high frequency audio isn't remotely associated with the big money interests behind high sampling rate software formats and the sudden rash of add-on super tweeters. That's just a happy accident.

Lumping electrostatic and ribbon tweeters together under the term "planer" might give the impression that they are much the same beast. However, although the end result - a light diaphragm driven over it's full area - is similar, their operational principles are completely different. Electrostatics operate on the propensity of charged plates to attract or repel one another depending upon the polarity of the charge. If one of the charged plates is a suspended diaphragm (or as is usually the case, a charged diaphragm is suspended between two plates), and the voltage on the fixed plates is modulated by the signal, audio output will result. Ribbon tweeters, of which these days the Elac JET and the (30 year old) Heil Air Motion Transformer are probably the best known examples, operate on exactly the same moving-coil "motor" principle as dome tweeters. In the case of ribbons however the conducting coil is usually "printed" onto a flat diaphragm suspended in a magnetic field (in early designs the ribbon was effectively a single turn coil). As signal current flows through the coil the diaphragm moves. Describing ribbon diaphragms as flat however is to do the Heil AMT a disservice. The Heil features a pleated diaphragm, rather like the

bellows of an accordion, and this helps it overcome one of the major problems with conventional planer tweeters - diaphragm displacement. In either electrostatic or ribbon tweeters, diaphragm displacement is limited either by the necessarily small distance between the plates or the rapid fall-off in magnetic flux density further away from the magnet. So, despite the very low moving mass - typically around 15% of a dome tweeter - and consequent increase in radiation efficiency, planer diaphragms have to be pretty large to achieve adequate voltage sensitivity and maximum level.

In using a pleated diaphragm the Heil skins this particular cat slightly differently as the pleats improve radiation efficiency significantly (hence the "transformer" monicker). But the pleats also increase moving mass to a point where it's pretty much equivalent to a 25mm dome, so the Heil still needs a pretty large diaphragm. And a large diaphragm,



whether it's part of a Heil, JET or electrostatic brings limited high frequency dispersion. So yes, there's advantage

to be gained from planer tweeters - low mechanical resonance, low distortion, less delayed resonance and perhaps less susceptibility to thermal compression - but in narrow and dipole dispersion there's also a price to be paid.

The dispersion of a typically large planer tweeter not only falls away quickly at high frequencies (and asymmetrically unless it is square) but also, if it is used unenclosed (and most often they are), is characteristically at odds with dispersion from an enclosed bass or mid unit. The planer tweeter, is

a dipole with opposite phase front and rear radiation lobes. The bass/mid unit has omni, tending as frequency rises, to directional radiation. Bearing in mind that both the body loudspeaker research and design literature, and much practical experience, points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that rapid changes of dispersion with frequency are a pretty bad idea, it seems odd that so many moving-coil/planar hybrids display just such a characteristic. I wonder if a significant factor in the limited penetration of planar tweeters is simply dogmatic resistance to screwing them to the front of a box and suppressing the rear output.

And speaking of screwing tweeters to a box. The common sense of decoupling a tweeter from the chaotic resonant environment that is the front panel of a speaker enclosure can be revealed by one simple sum. Say, we have a tweeter dome with a maximum peak to peak diaphragm displacement of 1mm (that's a tweeter working

pretty hard). And say we have information in our music that is 60dB below peak displacement. In the context of the potential dynamic range of CD, let alone 24/96 formats, 60dB down is small beer. To reproduce that information 60dB down the tweeter dome will need to move only one thousandth of a millimetre. Now, next time you're playing some music, touch the front panel of one of the speakers and ask yourself if its moving more than one micro-metre.

I'll wrap up with a question. Has anybody ever heard a system with a properly decoupled and enclosed ribbon tweeter? Now there's an idea, but remember, you read it here first.





ORCHARD
PRECISION AUDIO
TYPE 101 Loudspeaker CE
Made in England

Orchid Precision Audio LWO Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Some products just sound the way they look: conrad-johnson amps produce big, solid soundstages, imbued with a honeyed golden glow; the sound of Spectral is crisp, clean and uncluttered, with wonderful attention to detail. And what about the Martin-Logan CLS?

Then there are those that don't, sonic surprise packages that catch you unawares. It's difficult to name a less impressive looking speaker than Linn's Sara 9, a foursquare box too big to be little and too little to be big. It had all the graceless clumsiness of the average teenage boy, just without the spots. But the 9, devoid of the uncouth honk of the earlier versions, and driven by a decent amp, brought music to bouncy, energetic, joyous life, stripped of all the hi-fi inhibitions that infected so many of its contemporaries. What it lacked in subtlety it more than made up in sheer fun. You didn't just listen to Saras, you experienced them, and at a time when hi-fi was taking its first steps on a downward spiral toward sterility and boredom, they came as a very memorable breath of fresh air.

But what, you might well ask, has the Linn Sara got to do with Orchid's LWO? It's not like they've got a lot in common, what with the LWO being a floorstanding three-way. Except that, like I said at the start, appearances can be deceptive. What brought the Sara to mind as I listened to the Orchid was a combination of things: its near wall siting, compact dimensions, the fact that it's actually a genuine two-way speaker but uses three drivers, but most of all, the sheer fun factor.

This is one case in which appearances are definitely deceptive.

The Orchid LWO is a squat and extremely compact floorstander. It's also immensely solid. The cabinet walls are a 40mm thick MDF sandwich on the review pair, although plans are



afoot to change the outer half of the carcass to solid hardwood which, as well as improving the external finish, will create a constrained layer constructed from two dissimilar materials. (No bad thing when it comes to dissipating dominant resonance in a cabinet panel.) The front and rear baffles are both 25mm

MDF, the latter rebated and bolted in place. Even without the slate plinth this is a seriously heavy speaker, testimony to the massive construction and impressive magnet assemblies on the Hiel and Volt drivers. Anybody trying to pick one up is in for a big surprise.

Their second big surprise will arrive when they realise that this is, and again despite appearances, a two-way speaker design. A very unusual two-way it has to be admitted, but two-way none the less. Let's ignore that 4" driver sat in the middle of the baffle for a while, and concentrate on the bits that do the work. The bass-mid unit flies firmly in the face of fashion by being an 8" Bextrene coned driver from Volt. Not only is it uncommonly large by today's standards, but there's not so much as a whiff of paper or carbon-fibre anywhere. Most current two-ways use something closer to a 6" driver, as the cone behaves better up into their 3kHz crossover regions, which is why designers abandoned the once standard 8" drivers in the first place. Of course, that argument only holds true if you run your mid-range driver that high. Orchid only take the Volt up to 1.5kHz, which means they have to be using a pretty freaky tweeter – and they are.

The Heil AMT (for Air Motion Transformer) is a focused field ribbon design. The massive wedge that you can see on either side of the diaphragm is just half of the unit's symmetrical magnet assembly. Big? These magnets are huge! Big enough to make credit cards quiver at a range of several metres, big enough to bend watch ▶

▶ hands before your very eyes. So, if you carry your cards in your breast pocket and wear a watch with an expensive movement then it's a good idea to remove them both before you pick up the tweeter end of the Orchid.

In fact, the Heil has long been both something of a legend and one of my high frequency favourites, and it was the presence of the elusive beast that first drew me to these speakers in the first place. However, closer examination shows that Orchid designer David Mate eschews the conventional approach advocated by the unit's manufacturer, and instead of mounting it as a dipole he actually uses the AMT with a sealed rear enclosure. He makes a compelling argument for the technique, pointing out that the lower efficiency is offset by far more predictable dispersion and frequency balance. Put another way, you lose the voluminous soundstage associated with di-poles, but you can place the speaker close to a wall without suffering comb-filter effects and the ethereal lack of substance that goes with them. The speed, detail and peerless resolution that have always typified the Heil drivers remain intact.

Which finally brings us to the crossover, and that extra driver. David Mate employs the four-inch Fane driver at spot frequencies to smooth the transition between the main units in what he terms a Trinary crossover. Thus, all three drivers operate in phase at the crossover point itself. No less controversial is the choice of crossover frequency. 1500Hz places it right slap bang in the middle of the all-important midrange, a position most designers avoid like the plague. Add to that the fact that this is a hybrid speaker trying to blend two essentially disparate driver technologies and any filter network will have its work cut out.

Serious weight aside, positioning the Orchids is dead straightforward. Start with their backs to the wall and ease them forward until you achieve

the best bass balance. That was at about 12cms in my room, allowing the small slot port that loads the bass driver a little room to breath. Toe them in slightly and hey presto. Until you try to fit the spikes that is. The slim slate bass simply doesn't offer a substantial enough ground for the ferrules, and the 6mm spikes are in danger of pulling them free if the speaker is tilted. The shallow depth also prevents any great range of adjustment, which is a more serious problem as the horizontal lobe of the tweeter is very narrow, making



baffle angle absolutely critical to the overall balance.

I experimented with various cones and ended up using a single inch tall brass one under the front centre of the plinth, simply tilting the speaker on its rear edge, which worked fine for my close-ish listening position. I understand that Orchid are aware of the

problem and are looking at replacing the spikes with a pair of cones for the back and a couple of different heights for the front. That should work fine as small increments can be achieved by simply moving the front cones forward or back. My only other set-up gripe was the massive binding posts used for the bi-wire terminals. These simply won't accept 4mm plugs, so if that's what's on your cables you'll need to change them for spades. Of course, this is less of a problem if you are buying (rather than simply reviewing) the speakers. Electronics pose no real problem, and I drove the LWOs with a whole variety of things from the Densen Beat on up. The one option I didn't run was a powerful valve amp, but I suspect, for reasons that will become clear, that this could be a marriage made in heaven.

Did I say these speakers are fun? And how! Take the characteristically meaty, beaty, big and bouncy bass performance of the Volt driver, and combine it with the impressive resolution, speed and presence of the Heil (especially when used in a closed back configuration) and you've got exactly the kind of ingredients that make for a entertaining outcome. Shawn Colvin's 'A Few Small Repairs' (Columbia 484327 2) stands as a testament to producer John Levanthal's art. A careful patchwork of the delicate (voice, acoustic guitar and mandolin) and the driven (drums, bass and electric guitars)

the Orchids provide plenty of urge to the rollicking, propulsive bass and searing Fender, whilst preserving the jangly acoustic guitar and winsome vocals, allowing them the space to coexist with the music's more boisterous elements. The bass seems deeper and more powerful than it has any right to, while the match flare and puff at the track's close is so real ▶

► it's spooky, underlining the Heil's combination of presence and naturalness. Unlike so many ribbons it's not just about speed and resolution, although they're present in abundance, but about the ability to project and track shifting energy levels. The end result is that sounds are driven into the room with their natural harmonic weight as well as their correct speed and dynamic range. Want to hear it in action? Just leave the disc spinning and listen to the sheer solidity and edge on the distorted guitar line that drives 'Get Out', giving the song its vitriolic bitterness. This is exactly the kind of abuse that sends most ribbon or electrostatic owners lunging for the volume control. Not with the Orchids. The louder it is the more they like it.

With its solid and tactile bass response linked to that effortlessly open top end and lust for life, what could be more appropriate than the opening fanfare of Mahler's *3rd Symphony*, especially as a brand spanking new 180g re-issue of the Solti/LSO performance has just arrived (Speakers Corner/Decca Set 385-6). Forsaking my more normal Maazel/Vienna version I gave the Solti a whirl, and sure enough the thunderous opening with its stacked brass tuttis burst forth in all its glory (even to the slightly truncated top which robs the brass of some air and shimmer on this recording). But as the first movement developed I became aware of a band of confusion or congestion across the mid. Switching to smaller scale works brought it more clearly into focus. Violas

were positionally indistinct, blending and shifting with the violins in small ensemble works. At the same time, the bass while refreshingly positive and purposeful, lacked a little of the textural detail that should be present on good acoustic recordings. It's tempting to point a finger at driver integration, but for once the sheer presence of the Volt is well matched by its partner, easing things considerably. Perhaps it's down to dispersion patterns, which are far harder to blend.

How important is it? Musically it's relatively unobtrusive, and certainly doesn't prevent the LWOs from delivering acoustic music in an enjoyable and engaging manner, but it does mean that they lean slightly toward rock, pop or larger scale classical works, where their rhythmic power and ability to respond gracefully to all but the most excessive demands really come into their own.



Likewise, the near-wall positioning will inevitably compromise the stage depth and sense of acoustic which is so crucial to small scale acoustic works. However, stick to rock and power-pop and you'll not be disappointed - you'll be ecstatic. Female vocalists from Dinah Washington through to Nina Hagen were delivered with gusto, while a trawl

through the prog-rock detritus of my formative years was almost embarrassingly enjoyable. Feeling the need to restore some damaged credibility I detoured through Elvis Costello via *London's Calling*. The compact little Orchids responded in a way that no speaker their size should be capable of. If the W doesn't stand for wild then it should!

Neat and (relatively) petite, the Orchid LWO is a wonderful conundrum. On the surface it breaks all the rules: it's complex and compact, uses an exotic driver of a genre renowned for its fragility and crosses over to it at a frequency that is right slap in the middle of most designer's no-go area. It's expensive, rather old fashioned to look at and above all it's a hybrid, all of which means that it has absolutely no right to work. But it does. It displays a joyous disregard for the "accepted wisdom" of hi-fi aficionados, and underlines it with a musical performance that reminds us exactly what's missing from all too many hi-fi systems these days. Under the circumstances there can only be one appropriate parting comment; "Shine on you crazy diamond!"



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two way, hybrid rear ported.
Drive Units:	Volt 8" Bextreme Heil AMT
Efficiency:	89dB/watt @ 1M
Bandwidth:	38Hz - 19.5KHz +/- 3dB
Connections:	Bi-wire terminals
Dimensions (HxWxD):	838x300x355mm
Weight each:	45Kg
Finishes:	Black, Cherry and Mahogany hardwoods
Price:	£3995
Orchid Precision Audio	
Tel/Fax: 01608 684694	
www.orchid-precision-audio.co.uk	



Elac CL330 Jet Loudspeakers

by Pete Christie

I am a sucker for a clever pitch. There have been several occasions in my life when, even though I knew for sure that I was being conned, the skill and plausibility of the patter, in my opinion, deserved the outlay of a few quid on some totally useless bit of kit.

I once spent a depressingly wet and dismal afternoon wandering around a local market when my attention was attracted to a bloke demonstrating yet another "wonder tool". You know the type of thing I mean, ideal home exhibition standard fodder. Usually, it's apple core removers, "super-sponges" which, although being the size of a first class stamp can (and before your very eyes, do) hold at least a gallon of liquid, or "miracle stain removers" which can safely and quickly remove all trace of any substance known to mankind from any surface.

Anyway, this guy was demonstrating a "wonder-knife". Not only a "stay-sharp" blade that was guaranteed to cut swiftly and safely through everything from paper to reinforced concrete, but also a cunning attachment that could cut glass, trim tiles and, if used correctly, would trim beards and moustaches.

As usual, all these features were demonstrated completely successfully to the small multitude that had by now gathered around. Amid the gasps of incredulity and "oohs and ahhs" of appreciation, I heard that little bell ringing in my head. This is the bell that rings to tell me that I'm about to be had, and that there is absolutely no way that anyone will be able to stop me from handing over a crisp fiver for another bit of tat that will no doubt find a home in a dark corner

of a toolbox, never to see the light of day again!

I bought one.

Yes, I don't know where it is now.

No, it didn't work.

Of course, what I should have done was buy the one the bloke was actually demonstrating. I knew that one worked!

The point of the anecdote is simple. I am always intrigued by radical design, and though I am exceedingly cynical, there is still enough enthusiasm and optimism left to at least try anything at least once - just in case!

So here we go again. Back in Issue 3 I was waxing lyrical about some sensational silver things that were called Elac CL310 Jet loudspeakers. Here was a prime example of something that proved that a radically different design could actually deliver the goods. I was totally impressed with them, and at the time, it was intimated that there would be a bigger version on the way. Having lived with the small ones for a few weeks, I did wonder why there was a need for a larger version (or as RG calls them "Jumbo Jets" ha-ha), as the CL310's delivered more than enough wallop for my room. Be that as it may, a few weeks ago two large boxes arrived and lo and behold, BIGJets!

When I say "big", I mean "bigger", as the CL330's still rank as a small speaker in real terms. The one-piece extruded aluminium cabinets, measuring 10" high by 7" across the widest bit, do not appear large when viewed from the front. Their largest dimension is their depth - 14". The review pair were finished in silver lacquer, and their interesting "upside-down keyhole" shape certainly provoked more than a little interest from anyone who saw them.

I was extremely impressed with the stands - an area of disappointment with the smaller Jet CL310's. These were fairly uninspiring, and were swiftly disposed of in favour of something more solid. The CL330 stands however are stunningly slender, and elevate the loudspeaker 30" from the floor. They are superbly sculpted silver supports with their own built-in cable management that succeeds in tidying away any trace of dependency upon something as

mundane as an amplifier!

The spikes, levelling and locking system deserve special mention. We've all seen spikes before. With most speaker manufacturers, it always seems that it's as though the ideas run out when they come to the spikes, and they then fall into the "anything with a point on it" school of thought. Not so the Elacs!

The spikes are big and business-like. ▶



▶ A three-point levelling system is used, the two front spikes are locked tight to the stands, and the rear spike is adjusted and locked by a beautifully finished flywheel. The loudspeakers have recessed location dimples and sit snugly on the spikes, and to increase rigidity (and stop the speakers from being knocked off), the whole lot is secured by two locking rods, again, superbly engineered to ensure a perfect fit.

The completed assembly looks stunning - when the covers are off!

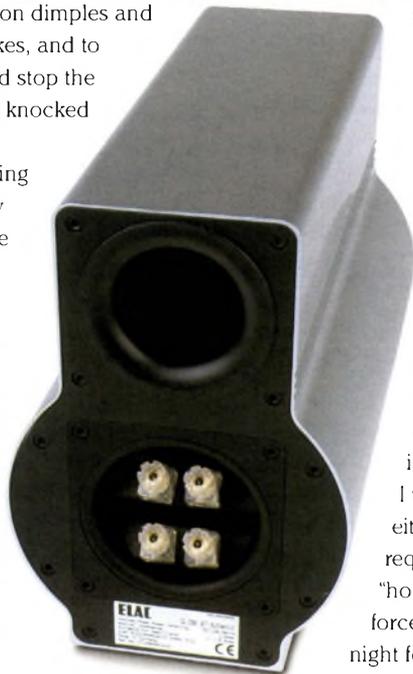
I don't like the covers. In my opinion, no speaker should have metal covers. It was apparent that repeated removal and replacement would (and did) cause scratching to the surrounding edge of the cabinet. They may protect the silver bass drivers, but should be removed for listening purposes, as they do absolutely nothing for the sound quality.

So, what about the sound quality? I was pretty certain that the speakers would destroy my lounge at home, so I elected to do the trials at the shop. I set up a system comprising the Myryad MA240 preamp/MP100 power amp (still warm from their review in issue eight), and a Marantz CD17 KI Signature CD player. I bolted the lot together using Nordost Red Dawn interconnects and speaker cable, turned it all on and let it run for a few days to get used to each other.

This was a mistake.

Not the running-in. Doing it in a shop - that was the mistake.

Even behind two sets of closed doors, it was fairly obvious that something amazing was going on, and it



didn't take long for some of our more "switched-on" customers to gravitate towards the place where the sound was coming from. This resulted in animated listening sessions where I could only get into the room if I was carrying cups of tea for the crowd who had taken up residence.

Adjectives abounded! "Stunning", "Bizarre", "Incredible", "Very Strange" - I could go on, but I hadn't actually listened in real detail as yet. I wasn't going to either. Several people requested them for "home trials", so I was forced to wait a fortnight for my turn! I must point out that this doesn't

usually happen, so it was fairly obvious that these were therefore fairly unusual loudspeakers, and I will attempt to add customer comments within my own review, as I feel that their opinions are every bit as valid as my own.

Alone at last!

I reconfigured the system, and after a suitable warm-up period, I returned suitably armed with a slack handful of CD's (the usual suspects), a cup of coffee, and began listening.

Immediately the opening bars of acoustic guitar began on 'Wild Wood' from the Paul Weller album of the

same name (Go! Discs 82 513-2), it was fairly obvious that the Elac philosophy which had so impressed me with the little CL310's was more than abundant in their bigger brothers. The sound was totally natural. Having learnt from my CL310 experience, I had "toed-in" the speakers so that they were pointing directly at me. The image was precise and hugely "out-of-speaker". And there was that tweeter again. I'd almost forgotten how impressed I was way back in issue 3! For those who didn't read that particular review, I've included the relevant passages for both the tweeter and the bass unit.

The Tweeter

Tweeter is perhaps not the best term to use. Think of a tweeter, and you think of a typical dome-like construction. Not the Elac tweeter. It is, according to the information pack I received, a seven-piece construction with the business end comprising of a folded lamellar foil membrane offering 10 times the surface area of a normal 25mm conventional dome design. This device is driven by an extremely strong magnetic

system composed of neodymium rods, creating high efficiency with an outstanding dynamic range. I can't argue with that, largely due to the fact that I don't have the remotest idea what it means! What I do know

is that I had the impression that the tweeter started lower, and went higher than most tweeters I have heard. Also, the top end appeared seamless and very fast. ▶



► The Bass Driver

What we have here is a 115mm (4") diameter driver. Yes, 4". Now, that has got to be too small for any deep stuff - right? I would like to pass on some more information from the manufacturer. This is not a mere bass driver. It is a long-stroke woofer which is rumoured to produce the best possible large-signal behaviour, and most linear frequency response possible. Also, what's with the shiny stuff? This is a 0.2mm aluminium layer which has been bonded to a more traditional pulp fibre cone to create a sandwich membrane. This not only stiffens the overall construction, but actually acts as a damper, muting any spurious, unwanted distortion.

The CL330 sports a larger bass driver, 180mm (7") diameter, though the principle of construction is identical.

As I said, the acoustic guitar was natural, clear and real. When the bass guitar began, the warmth and depth struck me, and it was also completely focused within the track. As were the drums. As was the voice: centrally placed and in front of the speakers. A quiet track, and the relaxation of the performance was totally convincing.

I then put my copy of *Mr. Love Fans* by the ubiquitous Ian Dury (Ronnie Harris Records DUR1) and selected track 5, 'Itinerant Child', turned the volume up a tad and sat back. From the opening beat, the song just rolled along, the back-line grooving along behind the acerbic lyrics of Mr. Dury. Wonderful stuff, and getting better all the time! The bass notes were handled exceedingly well, and managed to reach depths so low, it was difficult to persuade myself that there wasn't a subwoofer lurking in the system.

For a four Ohm load, the Myriad amp was having absolutely no difficulty in driving the speakers.

They seemed to revel in the 120 Watt power availability, and as the volume crept up, stayed totally in place.

Which brings me to one of the comments made by one of our customers. He had rigged the speakers up to his (large) Cyrus system, and though he was completely sold on the performance at a fairly high volume level, at background level, the system lacked cohesion, and the excitement factor dropped off considerably.



Having been down the path of "which cables to use where" when I played with the CL310's, I also had this problem and I think I can identify the cause of this anomaly. He was connecting a pair of Chario Academy's to the Cyrus using van den Hul CS122. There's nothing wrong with CS122. I like CS122. But I found that it doesn't suit Elacs at all well. The substitution of Nordost Red Dawn or Blue Heaven with the corresponding interconnects made a huge difference to the performance, especially at lower volume levels.

With orchestral pieces, the sheer scale of the soundstage was astounding. I played Beethoven's *5th Symphony*, performed by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Carlos Kleiber (Deutsche Grammophon 447 400-2).

This may not be the best recording of the fifth. It may not be the best performance of the fifth. But in my opinion, it is one of the best-recorded performances. So I played it. The result was remarkable. The sheer excitement of the piece literally shook the walls. I let the disc run to its conclusion and thoroughly enjoyed every moment.

Everything that the smaller Elacs had done, the CL330's managed to do better. OK, at \$2500 they're not exactly cheap, but they combine superlative design with astonishing sound quality.

I'm sure that there will be some who won't like the look of them, but that has always been the burden of a radical design. I have totally enjoyed these little silver gems. So have a lot of our customers (including the one who bought two pairs!). They might be small, but as I said earlier - their largest dimension is their depth. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two way, bass reflex
Crossover Frequency:	2700 Hz
Power Handling:	80/120W
Frequency Response:	40Hz - 30kHz
Sensitivity:	88dB
Nominal Impedance:	4 Ohms
Recommended Amplifier:	30 - 200 Watts
Warranty:	10 years
Dimensions (HxWxD)::	274x188x360mm
Finishes:	Black, silver, green, blue (lacquer)
Price (inc. stands):	£2,500

Distributor:

Sennheiser UK Ltd.
Tel: (44)(0)1494-551551
Fax: (44)(0)1494-551550

Manufacturer:

Elac Phonosysteme GmbH
Web: www.elac.com
E-mail ELAC-Phonosysteme@t-online.de



The Kochel K200/SW200 Hybrid Horn Loudspeaker System

by Roy Gregory

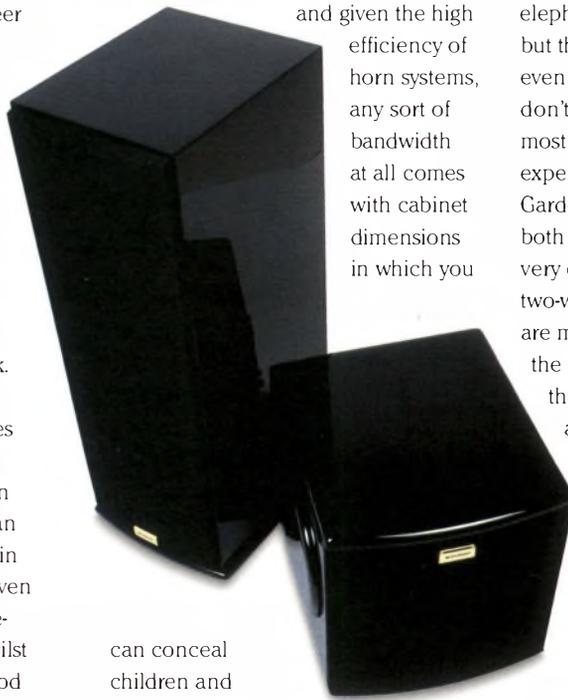
It's sometimes said that anticipation is the enemy of sound judgement, a peculiarly apposite phrase in the context of hi-fi in general and reviewing in particular. The heavy weight of expectation stands against so many products that whole generations of hi-fi enthusiasts have simply passed them by: I'm not listening to that, I know it will be awful! The sheer stupidity of such a stance (and we all do it) beggars belief. Perhaps we really do deserve the products we so often get.

Few products polarise prejudice the way horn speakers can. For one person they represent truth, light and the only way, whilst another will tell you that they curdle milk. One loves the immediacy and dynamic range, the other cringes at the colouration levels. There seems to be little or no common ground. However, there is also an undeniable increase in interest in horn designs, related to and driven by the current fashion for single-ended triode amplifiers. But whilst the horn/triode match looks good on paper, our experience is rather different, with the horn all too often revealing the weaknesses of the SET rather than revelling in its strengths. And whilst that's more of a comment on the standard of rather too many SET designs, amplifiers that are scrambling in the wake of the band-wagon, based more on commercial interest than technological conviction, it's not a situation that actually helps

the poor old horn.

But even if you get to grips with the sound of horn speakers, and you've got the system to drive them to their best advantage, you're still only half way home. The problem with horns is that they're big, no, make that huge. Given the bandwidth - size - efficiency

equation that governs all loudspeakers, and given the high efficiency of horn systems, any sort of bandwidth at all comes with cabinet dimensions in which you



can conceal children and lose pets.

Practicality and domestic considerations are clearly not on the agenda. You can fold horns to make them more manageable, but each corner creates problems and their growth (like so many horns) is exponential.

Which brings us, with a kind of chilling inevitability to the notion of a hybrid. Got problems getting band-

width out of your electrostatic/horn/ribbon driver? Just stick a moving-coil bass unit in a box and do the low frequencies that way. Of course, you'll have to accept all kinds of problems when it comes to trying to integrate the two halves of the speaker to create a coherent whole, a bit like trying to seamlessly match the rear end of an elephant to the front end of a giraffe, but that's the price of practicality. And even taking that lot on the chin you don't necessarily gain that much. The most successful horn hybrids that I've experienced to date are the Avante Garde Trio and Acapella High Violon, both of which are large, complex and very costly. Unfortunately the cheaper two-way plus sub-woofer Avante Gardes are much more manageable but not in the same league as the big Trio with three trumpets a side and four active subs. Yet their popularity can only be partly attributed to their arresting looks, which seems to indicate that anyone who can crack the horn hybrid thing should be onto a good thing. Enter then, the Kochel K200.

Kochel speakers are designed and built in Korea, and we reviewed their large full range (-ish) three-way model in Issue 3, concluding that it offered a near perfect introduction to horn speakers for the uninitiated. The K200 is a smaller two-way design which claims a rather optimistic -6dB point of 50Hz. You might get that if you wedge them right into a corner, but that rather defeats the object. Used about twelve inches out from

▶ the long wall of my listening room I would guess they turn the corner at about 60-65Hz which puts them on a par with a stand-mounted mini-monitor. At nearly a metre tall, 34cm wide and 40cm deep, that makes them a mighty large LS3/5a.

Mind you, no Rogers ever had dynamics like this! The K200 uses an 8" paper-cone bass-mid driver back loaded by the horn. Tweeter is a 1" horn loaded dome which, somewhat unusually, employs a soft diaphragm. These are generally avoided because you can get problems if the pressure on both sides of the diaphragm becomes uneven, as it will do in a horn. In practice it seems to work fine, even down to the rather low 1.75KHz cross-over point, however this may be to do with the chosen treble balance, a point to which I'll return. One shortcoming that needs sorting is the spikes supplied. They're useless. I settled on RDC 1 cones instead.

The review samples came in a rather unconvincing piano black, but the proportions and shape are actually rather pleasing. Given a pale wood veneer which would make more of the curved surface of the horn, I think that the results would actually be very attractive, with or without the grille. The K200s offer enough low frequency extension to be used on their own, as much as the Beauhorns that PM reviewed in the last issue for instance. However, even with a relatively depressed efficiency of 95dB (the Beauhorns are nearer 105dB!), this is still one hell of a big box for the bandwidth on offer. Bring on the sub-woofer.

If the nicely judged dimensions of the K200 add to its appeal, it's the SW200 that makes it into something really rather special. This relatively compact box contains a pair of 8"

drivers, mounted back to back in a labyrinth enclosure and driven by a 100 Watt amplifier.

I can't even begin to describe the enclosure so simply imagine a Bose Acoustic Canon (a long pipe with a driver a third of the way down its length) folded up into a box. That's the nearest

approximation I can make, and whilst I don't think this qualifies as a horn loaded sub-woofer, it's clearly a lot closer than the average reflex box used in most A/V systems. (When it costs so much to build a genuine full range speaker, why do so many people assume that buying the extra bass in a separate box is going to make it any cheaper?)

Back panel controls allow you to vary level and cross-over point as well as the all important absolute phase.

You could write a book on sub-woofer set-up, so I'll limit myself to pointing out that proper integration actually takes a period of weeks, involving careful adjustment of settings and siting across a whole range of music. But the good news

is that with a little time and effort the SW200/K200 combination will achieve superb integration, the subwoofer adding real power and weight to the lower registers without interfering with the midrange speed and clarity. Generally, you shouldn't notice a sub until you turn it off. The low frequency roll-off of the K200s is such that this maxim doesn't really apply, however, the quality of the bass from the SW200 is such that you really are unaware of it as a separate entity.

So Kochel have cracked the practicalities. The K200 is manageable and attractive, and they've successfully mated it to a subwoofer using something other than horn loading. With those not inconsiderable achievements out of the way we can finally worry about the sound.

I ran the Kochels with a variety of equipment but ultimately settled on the Monarchy Audio SM 70 single ended solid state amplifier supplied to partner the speakers by Wollaton Audio (and a steal at £595) and either a Marsh MSD P2000t or Klimo Merlin pre-amp (the former superior for noise and resolution levels, the latter for overall musical flow, tonal shape and sonority). Source was either the Clearlight or ClearAudio turntables, used with Accurate and Insider Reference cartridges.

The first thing you need to know about this speaker system is that it doesn't sound like a traditional horn. It is tonally even and both tonally and dynamically consistent top-to-bottom. There are no violent hot-spots and no shelves in the frequency response. In fact, it's really rather well



► behaved and not at all uncouth. How much of this is down to the fact that the tweeter response rolls quite early (-6dB at 20KHz) is a moot point, but it certainly balances the lightish bass if you use the K200s on their own. You'll want to check out the high-frequency extension for yourself, but personally, whilst I found that the Kochels lacked a little air, using Nordost SPM speaker cables helped maintain the information levels and I really didn't find it a problem.

Played together, the K200/SW200 combination has weight and power on tap (enough to ripple my bath water when Victoria gave the *Gladiator OST* some serious stick!).

It throws a huge soundfield well away from the speakers, and if they can't quite match the sheer scale of the K300s, then they aren't far behind. The dragging thuds that open 'Wholly Humble Heart' (Martin Stephenson and the Daintees *Gladsome Humour and Blue*) advance menacingly until the crashing tumble of the opening drum cascade. The slightly disjointed rhythm clicks in and you're away. The mellowness of the melody contrasts with the rude interjections from drums and guitars, the voice is suitably wry, the studio effects used on both it and the backing vocals laid bare. The Kochels cut right to the heart of the music without dismantling it. Stephenson's lead vocal is immediate and separate, the sibilance slightly emphasised (don't panic, it's on the recording), his almost spoken opening is paced perfectly to integrate with the backing, the powerful swell of the rhythm, the

canon and fireworks of the instrumental punctuation. It's a powerful track and these speakers give it to you live and kicking.

Likewise the propulsive rhythm section on 'Stand Back' (Rockin' Jimmy and the Brothers of the Night *By The Light Of The Moon*) is given free reign. Pace and pitch definition are both spot on, lifting the song and hurling it forward. The Kochels even manage to separate the backing vocals into two distinct contributions, keeping the singers separate whilst their carefully metered contribution stays well and truly together in the great scheme of things.



Classical and jazz recordings make the truncated top end more apparent, although this is at least partly a visual effect as the soundstage doesn't extend vertically much above the top of the speakers which seemingly chops off the air and height in the image. All I can say is that I noticed it but it didn't interfere with my musical enjoyment

one iota. The Ricci/Bizet *Carmen Fantasie* (Decca SXL 2197) is a case in point. The violin is (some might say thankfully) slightly smoothed and robbed of bite, but this is more than made up for by its focus and sense of purpose. As before, the castinets are perfectly positioned in space and time, while the muted underpinning of the double basses breaths convincingly.

By now you'll have gathered that I really enjoyed my time with the Kochels, and I don't mind admitting

to being disappointed when the time came for them to depart. I'm not blind to their faults, but I find them a lot less intrusive than most of the alternatives. This is one book you really shouldn't judge by its cover. Ignore the fact that they're horns and simply enjoy them for what they do best - bringing music alive in the home. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Kochel K200

Type	2-way Horn Loaded Spkr
Drivers	25mm horn loaded soft dome 200mm doped paper cone
Efficiency	95dB
Impedance	8 ohms
Bandwidth	50Hz - 20KHz \pm 6dB
Crossover Freq.	1.75KHz
Weight	26Kgs ea.
Dimensions (WxHxD)	340x915x400mm
Price	£3150 (standard finish)

Kochel SW200

Type	Active Subwoofer
Drivers	2x200mm honeycomb cones
Input Impedance	10 Kohms
Power Amp	100 W into 4 ohms
Bandwidth	25 - 180Hz
Weight	24Kg
Dimensions (WxHxD)	400x440x450mm
Price	£950 (standard finish)

Distributor:

Wollaton Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1159-284147
Fax. (44)(0)1159-280625
E-mail. audio@wollaton.demon.co.uk
Net. www.wollatonaudio.com

Manufacturer:

Marshall Electronics Inc.
Seoul, Korea
E-mail. pypark@bora.dacom.co.kr



The B&W CDM 9 NT Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

It's been six months or so since I reviewed the B&W 802 loudspeaker (see issue no 7) and together with its larger brother, the 801, it did much to stretch and occasionally re-define certain aspects of performance currently available from moving coil loudspeakers. Utilising technology developed for the original Nautilus loudspeaker (the giant snail...), they represented a more real world implementation of the many years of research and financial investment. Inevitably expensive products, they have carved themselves a considerable niche in both the professional and high-end domestic market, so I don't think the bank manager would go for the real world bit. Having lived with the 802's for a couple of months, I can say that they were a fussy, but extremely capable loudspeaker. I say fussy, but they required considerable thought as to partnering equipment, the room, and attention to setting up if they were to deliver the goods. Much as you would expect from a £6000 plus loudspeaker.

Having seen the B&W research and development plant and talked to the people responsible for the Nautilus designs, I know that one of the things that particularly frustrated them was that this level of technology didn't come cheap. There was a genuine desire to make it more universally available, which of course meant less expensive product. The result is the CDM 9. No, you do not get a scaled down 801, complete with moulded enclosures and a 15" bass unit, but what you do get is Nautilus derived drive units in a relatively conventional enclosure. In fact the Nautilus 804 employs virtually identical drivers, but

in a Matrix cabinet. Technology filtered down from above is the way they describe it.

The question is, does it work?

The CDM 9 is a tall, and I think, quite elegant floor standing system, with it's CDM heritage visible in the form of the sloping top, which now incorporates the new Nautilus derived tweeter housing, time aligned with the cone units. The cabinet is reasonably solid, and all edges are rounded off to reduce diffraction, also enhancing their appearance. The real wood veneers are to a high standard, and the whole speaker is nicely finished off. Discarding the front cover reveals the bass and midrange units, an impressive sight. As I have already said, there is a lot of Nautilus technology here, and the drive units themselves deserve

closer inspection.

The high frequency unit is a metal dome unit with a neodymium magnet assembly, vented to allow rear radiation to pass through into the rear chamber, which is effectively a tapered pipe. Filled with absorbent material it soaks up the unwanted energy from the back of the dome, resulting in almost none of it being reflected back to adversely affect performance.

The mid-range unit is the same one used in the Nautilus 800 Series, and is flexibly mounted in its own enclosure to reduce transmitted vibration between the chassis and cabinet.

A bolt tensions this to the back panel, and there is a transit clamp that must be removed once the cabinet is sited. The most striking feature of this unit however, is its lack of surround; the cone is in fact terminated by a polymer ring with a matching mechanical impedance. Thus energy is absorbed and dissipated rather than reflected back toward the voice coil where it would cause coloration.

Not to be outdone, the two 165mm bass units are also unique. The cone assembly is almost covered by the large dust cap, the rear of which is bonded to the extended voice coil thus forming an extremely rigid three-point assembly. This means that effectively the cone is driven at two points, promising better pistonic behaviour with less break up. It also makes them look particularly menacing. The low output from these is augmented by a front mounted port, complete with B&W's flowport technology. What this actually means is that the interior surface of the



▶ pipe is contoured and dimpled like a golf ball to reduce turbulence. This should translate into minimal 'chuffing' or wind noise when the port is active. The crossover is built using high quality selected components onto three separate boards to eliminate interaction, and bi wiring is offered via gold plated terminals, separating the bass from the mid and top.

I sited the CDM 9's in the preferred location my living room, with about six feet between them. The supplied spikes were fairly useless, and failed to achieve any stability as such on my (hardly luxurious) carpet. With a speaker this tall, better spikes are not only desirable, they are essential, if only from a safety point of view. Cables to the CDM 9's were the Nordost SPM, which I used in bi wire mode to begin with, and amplification was the Bow Technologies, reviewed elsewhere in this issue. Time to play some music....

As soon as I put the first CD on, alarm bells started to ring. It was not a pleasant experience, so I put the CD player on repeat and left the room, firmly closing the door - for several days. This was very reminiscent of how the 802's sounded when they first arrived....Cold, and despite what I had been told, not really run in. I was actually working away for the weekend, and so left the system running, which apart from confusing visitors (who would spend hours knocking, convinced that I was really in) probably acted as a good burglar deterrent. Upon my return, things had improved considerably, and to my relief, the tweeter had lost some of the fierceness that had previously got me out of the room so rapidly. Listening to some different types of music, I realised that,

as one might expect, there were indeed distinct similarities to the 802, the most obvious being that this was definitely not a loudspeaker that you could just plonk down and get music out of. What I was getting at the moment was a very flat, but abrasive sound, hard and unforgiving with plenty of detail, but no musical sense.

adjustment was the positioning of the loudspeakers. By moving them further apart to allow about eight feet between them' the soundstage seemed to develop, whereas previously there had been little or no depth to images, now I could now hear music coming away from the speakers to create a believable soundstage. The next alteration involved bridging the bi-wire

option - don't ask me why, but things sounded more integrated and I had less of an illusion of listening to separate drive units.

Further benefits were to be had on this front by tightening the bass units, which proved to be embarrassingly loose.

I also reverted to the Primary valve amps, a combination that had previously worked

well with the 802's, and proved to be the case with the CDM 9's. The Bow Technologies, good as it is, has a refined and clean character that in conjunction with the B&W's proved to be just too much, resulting in a very cold and impersonal sound quality.

I felt that by now I was beginning to get somewhere. The CDM 9's had lost their intimidating and analytical character, and were now a lot more friendly to listen to. Essentially, I would describe their sound as being quite up front, or forward, both tonally and in terms of their precision. In keeping with the 800 series there is so much detail conveyed that it can sometimes become a challenge to keep in touch with the music and not be distracted by individual sounds. But once I had adjusted to this, I began to appreciate what they were actually doing. The new Rickie Lee Jones album *It's Like This*, can present something of a challenge, due in no small part to her voice which can become very hard at times. An album of covers, one is the Traffic song 'Low spark of high heeled boys', and the B&W's conveyed the dark and mysterious mood excellently, although I was still bothered by a slight metallic edge that the tweeter seemed to bestow on her voice. But this did recede with time, and just prior to writing this I went and had another listen. It had gone, and I was excited enough to dig out the original version of this song and give it a spin.

While I had the CDM 9's in residence, I was listening to quite a diverse range of music, due in no small part to the Helikon cartridge that was encouraging me to travel the further reaches of my record collection and pull out lots of old and sometimes embarrassing music. And...out of the murky depths emerged lots of older Steely Dan tracks, particularly the first album, *Can't Buy A Thrill*. This could have been potential suicide with the B&W's, as I would have expected their rather analytical nature to pull ▶



▶ these old recordings apart. Far from it. If anything, the more involving sound from the turntable complimented the 9's superbly, giving real body and bite to the track 'Do It Again', propelling it along with real feel.

More boisterous orchestral music was handled well, a good example being Bartok's *The Miraculous Mandarin*. This flamboyant music came across with all the dynamics intact, and yet plenty of fine detail in the quieter passages, particularly noticeable with percussion. Less successful was more serene music such as Arvo Part, *Tabula Rasa*, which didn't manage to flow in quite the manner I am accustomed to – it lacked the mesmerising quality that the music should communicate.

Having been mentally comparing them to the Nautilus 802's, I had to remind myself that these loudspeakers are less than a third of the price, and inevitably there are some compromises. I sometimes had the impression of some discontinuity between the bass and the rest of the system, leaving the mid and top somewhat exposed. It was only occasional, and I suspect that it could well be my room 'ducking out' at certain frequencies. It is pretty large - so the bass units were having to work hard to fill it. Not that there was ever any signs of complaint or audible stress, and the bottom end was quite even with reasonable extension, underlining the bandwidth you're getting for your money. In fact, the CDM 9 NT is an awful lot of speaker for the money, whichever way you look at it.

It was at this stage that I decided to substitute power amplifiers, putting

a Naim 250 in the system, where it worked with considerable flair. Drum and bass music (The Third Eye Foundation – Little Lost Soul) came across with great punch and considerable dynamics which never lost control, and the rhythmic foundation of the music suited the character of the Naim particularly well.

Regardless of partnering equipment, one thing I did notice was that the CDM 9s had a very distinct operating level, below which they just wouldn't deliver. The music lost all sense of body and sounded totally unrealistic – a bit like trying to listen to something when you have a streaming cold. I can imagine that if you were using them late at night in an apartment this could prove extremely frustrating (or aggravating for the neighbours, depending on your response).

At the end of the day, to address my question at the beginning of this review as to whether the implementation of the Nautilus

technology has

survived a transplant into a mid priced loudspeaker, the answer is yes, it has. It does, however bring a number of problems with it. The CDM 9's are unfortunately every bit as demanding as their more expensive relatives when it comes to matching equipment and setting up, and my concern is that by moving down market the choice of suitable partnering equipment becomes much more limited. The speakers may be a bargain, but I suspect the same won't often be said of successful matching equipment. Amplification



is the biggest problem, in so much as they require plenty of current and drive, but benefit from a more open and relaxed character. Unfortunately, more often than not, the two are conflicting.

The CDM 9 has successfully inherited much of the Nautilus character. The plus points are the potential for incredible detail and resolution, low coloration and wide bandwidth. If you want realistic musical reproduction then these are high priority items, and I suspect that the B&W's will prove a real temptation. Much as I admire their attributes, it concerns me how little provocation they need to mechanise a musical performance, and this is where the partnering equipment is so crucial; a delicate balancing act is required to achieve satisfying musical entertainment without letting the clinical approach take over. Ultimately, the technology has a price – in the wrong system it will take control and strangle the music, but get it right and the benefits are there to be heard.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3 Way vented box system
Frequency response:	-6dB at 30 Hz – 30 KHz
Sensitivity:	90 dB (2.83V @ 1M)
Nominal impedance:	8 ohms (minimum 3 ohms)
Power handling:	50 – 200 watts
Dimensions (HxWxD):	1000 x 220 x 315
Weight:	26.5 Kg
Finishes:	Black Ash, Cherry, Red Cherry
Price:	£1800

Manufacturer:

B&W Loudspeakers Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1903-750750
Net. www.bwspeakers.com

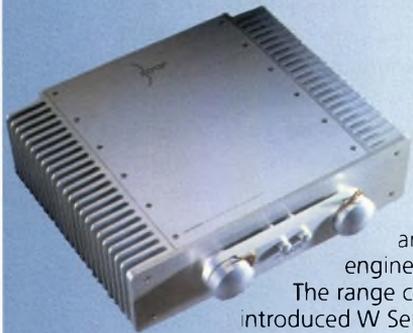
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Nordost Valhalla Mono-Filament Cables

by Roy Gregory

Have you ever noticed how, when you listen to a live jazz group, you can always hear the slapped bass notes clear as a bell below the other instruments. They're not as loud as the rest of the band, and nowhere near as penetrating as brass or piano, but they simply float, independent of what the other instruments are up to, working at their own level, giving the music their own particular momentum.

Have you ever noticed how totally inadequate hi-fi systems are when it comes to reproducing this effect. They are either low and slow, robbing the notes of their air and rendering them as earthbound and, all too often, tuneless thuds; or their truncated low frequencies give a reasonably agile impression of the notes leading edges but rob them of the harmonic bloom that allows them to float free of the rest of the low frequency information. There's no middle ground. I'm afraid that hi-fi systems just don't do it for the upright bass. Until now.

There I was playing Analogue Production's superb re-issue of Basie's *Farmer's Market Barbeque* (APJ029), and before I'd even settled into the listening seat I knew that things would never be the same again. 'Way Out Basie' opened with Basie's familiar insistent piano chords and, glory be, the unmistakable accompaniment of a living, breathing upright bass. James Leary's undulating line simply breezed along, each note distinct in pitch and time, each with that lovely lobe of harmonic decay trailing off from the

initial vibrant impulse. In came the low thrumming of the Guitar swiftly followed by the opening flourish of the first brass tutti, building into that hay-maker of a crescendo, and beneath it all, standing firm and unperturbed was the weaving flow of the bass notes, and

not just the strings but the volume and substance of the soundbox too, clear of the floor on its spike. On into the opening solo and still it floats, adding that subtle propulsive push to proceedings that it does in life. I was captivated, my whole body seemed sucked into the groove, this is what it should be like. But I guess you had to be there...

And as you weren't, and as I'm supposed to act as a surrogate I suppose I'd better spell it out. This is a seventeen piece band I'm talking about here, and still that bass just kept on going, quite distinct beneath even the most shattering crescendo (and remember, we're talking Basie Big Band at the top of their form). This is an audiophile pressing, but it's far

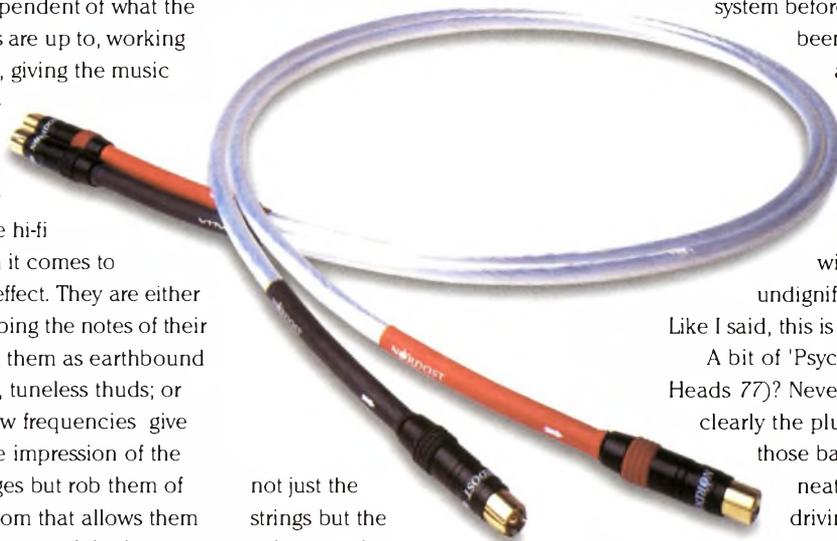
from an audiophile recording. What made this worth the re-issue was the stellar performance, and if you don't believe me then listen to a few other early 80s Pablo recordings. What's more it's a record that I know inside out, and whilst I hadn't played it on this precise system before all the elements have

been to hand for months at least. Yet it stopped me in my tracks, flooding my consciousness with pleasurable surprise (and filling my body with a thoroughly undignified desire to dance!).

Like I said, this is how it should be.

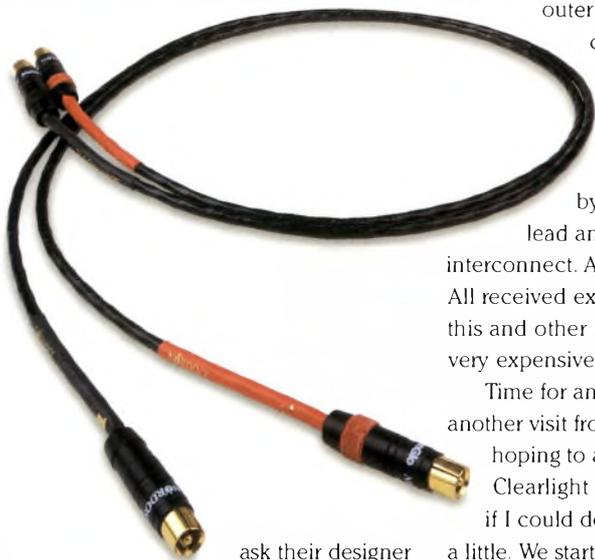
A bit of 'Psycho Killer' (Talking Heads 77)? Never have I heard so clearly the pluck and release of those bass notes, even underneath the relentlessly driving piles of guitar, until even the manic energy of those stacked, abrasive chords can't be sustained and they collapse, allowing the bass to finish what it started. Never has the release of tension been quite as palpable or nearly as effective, and you know that I've played this album to death, partied it through student days, hung on its every nuance. Yet here it is, capturing my attention anew.

How can I put this in perspective? Well, back in Issue 1 I waxed lyrical about the musical accuracy and transparency of the ruinously expensive Nordost SPM interconnects and speaker cables. In the couple of years since they arrived, those cables and the Quattro-fil interconnect have become as near indispensable as



▶ anything in my system, an invaluable reviewing tool. They've reigned supreme (despite my earnest endeavours to seek out a more affordable alternative) until, very recently I finally discovered a viable alternative. Only to discover that Nordost have moved the goalposts again! And not just onto the next pitch or playing field. They're gone. Way, way over the border. And SPM? I find it difficult to listen to these days without its previously minor shortcomings standing out like a wart on the Mona Lisa's nose.

One day I got a visit from Lars. He came to show me his titanium rack, and working with the Morgan mini system (£600 a box) he proceeded to work his way up the Nordost cable range and his own titanium bits and pieces until these mid-price electronics were producing a sound to die for. Just



ask their designer who was in sitting in a state of shock beside me! Titanium rack, pulsar points, and Nordost El Dorado mains cables, Quattro-fil interconnects and SPM speaker cables; that's some set-up. "And you know" says Lars, with one of those evil grins that vikings do so well, "what the weakest part of this system is? It's the speaker cable!" And as he delivers his punch-line there emerges from the depths of his bag a roll of broad flat black wire

which he plugs in with a flourish. And blow me if he isn't right. The system simply takes off: louder, more dynamic, more weight, better timing, much more solid and most importantly, much, much more real. Going back to the SPM made it seem like bell-wire and whilst that is partly a psycho-acoustic trick, the difference is real enough, and it's huge. This had nothing even remotely to do with the law of diminishing returns. This was the demo that caused Victoria to say "S&*%\$@ me! If you can't hear that you're so deaf you're dead." This was the first time I heard a system wired entirely with mono-filament cables.

Mono-filament - what's that then? It's a proprietary technique in which a micro filament of Teflon is wound in an elongated spiral along the length of a conductor, thus spacing it from the outer Teflon insulation and creating a virtual air di-electric. It first appeared concealed inside the Quattro-fil interconnect, followed by the El Dorado mains lead and Silver Shadow digital interconnect. All are good products. All received excellent reviews in this and other magazines. All are very expensive.

Time for another interlude, and another visit from Lars. This time I was hoping to ambush him with the Clearlight interconnects, to see if I could dent that complacency a little. We started out with the system wired with Quattro-fil and SPM and very nice it sounded too. Then I introduced out the Clearlights (at around a quarter of the price of the Quattro-fils) and even Lars had to admit to being impressed. Not as focused and transparent as the Nordost leads but so much more weight and body, so much more purpose in the music. But he's nothing if not resilient, and hastily papering over the cracks in his confident façade he plugged in the new Valhalla speaker



cable, the finalised version of the cable he'd played me before. "Do the comparison again" he suggested, and sure enough, not only did the system sound miles

better than before, but the Quattro-fil had re-established a clear superiority over the Clearlights, a superiority that was significantly extended by the substitution of the matching Valhalla interconnects. Picking up the discarded Clearlights he looked at them and then said, "You know, that's a really fine cable for the money." I bit my lip. I tell you, it's so much more difficult to be gracious in defeat.

Which brings us by a somewhat roundabout (but as we shall see, necessarily so) route to the Nordost Valhalla cables, the subject of this review. At first glance they look not unlike their older, and cheaper(!) brethren, although there's no denying that the pearlescent white finish adds a touch of class, as does the cables' greater girth. The Valhalla interconnects are twice as thick as Quattro-fils, carrying as they do eight rather than four conductors, while the speaker cable is thicker and broader than SPM. Connectors are however, still the same: Neutrick phonos on the signal leads, the familiar low-mass 4mm plugs on the speaker cable. And the price? Almost exactly double that of the already expensive SPM/Quattro-fil cables!

Can they possibly be worth that sort of money? I really wish that

► I could say it wasn't so, but you only need refer to the experiences recounted earlier to see that, correctly applied, they will provide an absolutely fundamental improvement in almost any system. And (just as with the mains cabling reviewed elsewhere) the nature of the improvement is such that it will be near impossible to obtain it in any other way. But you'll note the caveat, "correctly applied". I can't stress how important it is to use these cables as a system. Unless you have mono-filament technology right through the signal chain you'll only receive a fraction of the performance described. Note the lesson of the Clearlight interconnects, which used with SPM gave the Quattro-fils a run for their money, but faded into insignificance once they tried to take on the mono-filaments on home ground. Expensive yes, but if you're going to spend this kind of money only a fool (a very rich fool) doesn't take steps to ensure the maximum return. It should also go without saying that they need running in. The review set had something over two weeks on the Cable Toaster, and still continued to improve in use!

Assuming you do it right, what should you expect? I'll run through this relative to SPM/Quattrofil, partly because it's the people who own these cables who are most likely to take the plunge, and partly because even those who don't own them will have heard them, either at a dealer's or at a show. As references go it's certainly amongst the most accessible.

The simple answer is more, or rather, MORE! The first thing that strikes you when you put the Valhallas into a system is the massive increase in the overall energy level. This is no illusion. The increase in dynamic range and weight is real enough. Just crank the original system up to a goodly level and play something loud and dense,

about as loud as the system is happy to go. Put on the Valhallas, making sure that you leave the volume the same and repeat the treatment. It will be louder. Quite a bit louder. Loud enough to send you diving for the volume control, loud enough to de-centre your bass drivers as they struggle to cope with the increased energy levels. In other words, do it, but be careful.

I opened this review by talking a lot about the bass, but don't make the mistake of assuming that low frequencies are the only thing these cables are about. It just happens to be the area in which most hi-fis are least convincing, and consequently, the one



where improvements are most obvious. In fact, the improvement in dynamic range is consistent right across the musical spectrum. High frequencies which could sound a touch thin and exposed on the SPM/QF set-up have greater body and solidity, leading to much better definition and air. Complex instruments like tambourines and beaded cymbals become the sum of their distinct parts, and that definition applies even at the back of a loud and busy stage, in exactly the way that it applies to acoustic and electric bass. Of course the kicker is the midrange.

Add the foundation that you get from bass that arrives on time and in the right shape, lock in those hi-hats and percussion touches and the mid just snaps into focus. The Valhallas are at once more transparent than previous cables, but also dramatically more present and immediate. The overall effect is a serious injection of life into the proceedings, placing you much closer to the original performers. Which is where, finally, we reach the most important point of all.

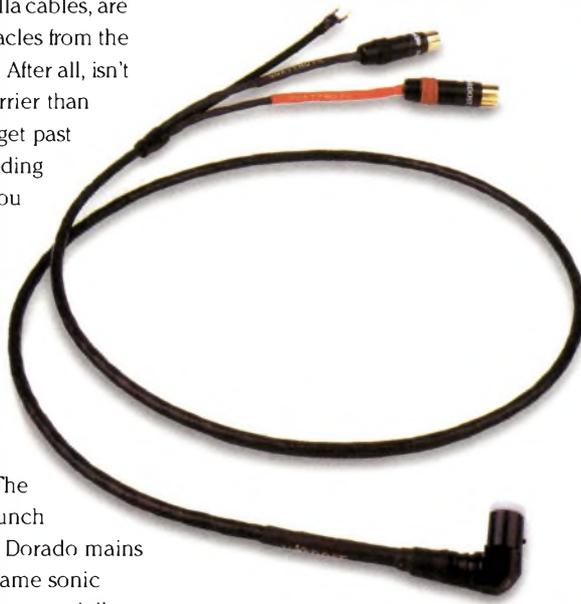
We've all heard (or should that be suffered) 'high definition' systems that claim to extend performance to such an extent that only the very best recordings are acceptable. Boy, have they got it wrong. The Valhallas seem to work in exactly the opposite way. They let more of the recording through which means that where they really score is with those mediocre recordings which can least afford the losses imposed by more conventional leads. Suddenly they spring to life. No one would make great claims for 77 as a great recording, but play it through the Valhallas and listen to the power, precision and edgy purpose of the playing. The Nordost cables seem to pull down the barriers between the various elements in the system, pushing the performance spitting and snarling out into the light of day. They just give you more of what is there, but somehow the music always gets out first.

Don't get the idea that these cables are coarse or ragged. They are just as precise and focussed as the SPM, delineating dynamic steps and propagating micro vibrational harmonics with just as much dexterity. It's just that they can draw from a wider range, colour with a broader palette. They can jump so much further, more quickly, and carrying more weight when they do it. Take all these attributes and combine them with the phase coherence, speed and instrumental texture provided by the existing Nordost ►

► cables and the result is a performance which advances the state of the art not in any one area, but on the broadest and most important front of all, musical coherence. Four things reside in my current system which have resulted in it being more musically satisfying and making more musical sense than ever before. The Clearaudio Master Reference playback system provides more information than I've ever lifted from records before. But the Russ Andrews mains set-up, the Groove phono stage, and most importantly of all, the Nordost Valhalla cables, are all about removing obstacles from the path of that information. After all, isn't it better to remove a barrier than employ extra power to get past it? The proof of the pudding is in the listening and you only have to hear what all these products can do with even modest equipment. Try it and you will be shocked.

How far can you take the mono-filament loom? All the way to the mains if you want. The clarity, dynamics and punch that you get from the El Dorado mains leads are cut from the same sonic cloth as the other cables, especially the increase in energy. Overall I'll stick with the Russ Andrews or Audioplan solution because they benefit from their more sophisticated approach, but in a straight extension block and power leads set-up feeding a mono-filament system then the El Dorados really score, offering extra drive, focus and dynamic range over the others. Likewise, the Silver Shadow digital interconnect seems to lock into the system as a whole, gaining a measure of freedom and rhythmic subtlety. But it was the Quattro-fil tonearm cable that really shocked me. Substituting it for the excellent Hovland lead that I usually use on the SME produced a huge improvement. Re-playing 'Small Blue

Thing' from the first Suzanne Vega album (the Vivante Productions 180g pressing) was like listening to a new track. The soundstage blossomed both in size and presence; the guitars took on a new richness, attack and body; the bubbling punctuation in the bass ceased its bilious excess and took on shape and place. But it was the voice. The whole thing was dramatically more natural, but the voice was just there. The merest hint of sibilance remained, the languid phrasing perfectly at one with the instrumentation.



Special. Very special indeed.

The bottom line here is that I can't tell you how good these cables are. The value of audio reviews has been so undermined by the perpetual presentation of molehills as mountains as to be almost totally debunked. When a truly important advance arrives the vocabulary to describe it has already been appropriated and abused. I was genuinely impressed by the SPMs, feeling that they established new standards in many important areas. The Valhallas have just rendered them obsolete as any sort of reference. 'Tis ruined that I am.

Those of you who come from the world of Music Hose and found the

SPM bright or thin should think again; the Valhalla has changed the rules. And whilst it's expensive, I have once again to point out that there are a whole range of even more expensive products out there. Does that make it a bargain? Monetarily it'll never be that, but musically? That's another matter. And just to ease the burden those nice people at Nordost are going to offer a trade-in on SPM. If you've got the funds I'd strongly suggest you try it. That way you'll end up deliciously ruined too! ➤+

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Quattro-fil Interconnect (1m pr):	£1250-00
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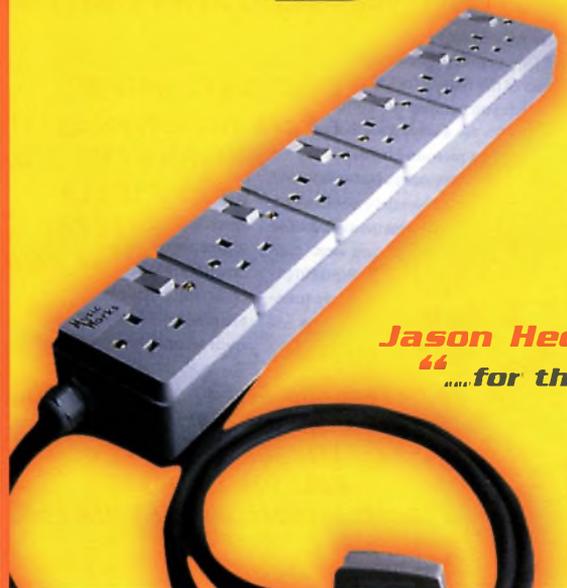
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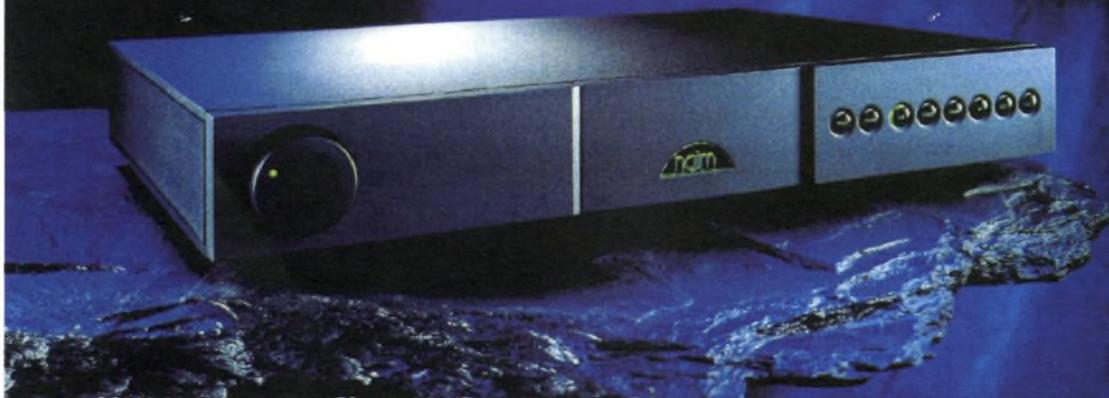
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Naim 5 Series Slimline Electronics

by Roy Gregory

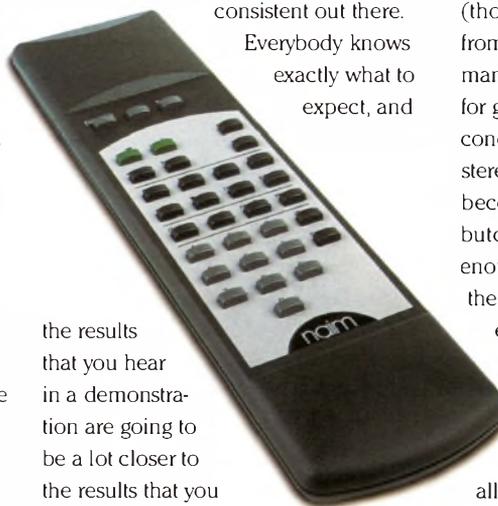
In an industry in which polemic opinions seem to be a way of life - valve versus transistor, moving magnet versus moving coil, analogue versus digital (the list goes on) - there are few companies that can claim possession of one corner, placing all comers across the way in the other. Design approaches, complete technologies, those are the rallying banners behind which the protagonists generally mass. For a single company to hold such exalted status is unusual to say the least, yet wherever audio enthusiasts gather you'll find that, pro or anti, there are few who don't have an opinion on the subject of Naim Audio and the equipment they produce. Vociferous opinions in the main, because Naim's customers exhibit an almost religious loyalty to the brand, and for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Why this should be (the pro side of the argument, if you like) is easy to understand. Once you set foot on the Naim road to audio nirvana, your course is cast in stone, your feet falling on the easy steps of a clearly defined upgrade path. Gone is that insidious, gnawing uncertainty that afflicts the mix and match brigade - what do I change next and where should I get it from? That sense of logical order is a persuasive commodity in a world where so many customers suffer crises of confidence.

But there are other benefits too. Because of the upgrade path, there are always people ahead of and behind you on the trail, which means a ready market for secondhand equipment, easing your progress along the way. Naim equipment holds its value better than most, a serious consideration once you start spending around a thousand pounds a box. Secondly, you are buying a system, along with all the very real benefits in terms of musical coherence

that come with that. Thirdly, issues like cabling that can make or break mix and match systems are taken care of for you, cheaply and effectively. Because the designer of your electronics and speakers knows exactly what cabling will be joining the whole lot together, its characteristics and shortcomings (and all cables have them) are taken into consideration as an essential part of the equation. It also means that you are buying a known quantity. Naim systems are amongst the most recognisable and consistent out there.

Everybody knows exactly what to expect, and



the results that you hear in a demonstration are going to be a lot closer to the results that you hear at home than is often the case.

Finally, let's not ignore the virtues of the company itself. Its products are extremely reliable, and most changes are retrofittable. The quality of its customer service is exemplary, and the company itself is extremely successful, all of which means that anything you buy should give a long working life, and if you do have a problem or want it updated then the company will still be around to do it for you. All in all it's a powerful package and it's not hard to see why it attracts the kind of customer loyalty that most companies (in any field) would kill for.

Why then the opposition? Well, it rests on three main things, but by far the

most important is the sonic character of the products. This is both one of their greatest strengths and their most intrusive weakness, depending on your point of view. Basically it all stems from the premise that a hi-fi system should concern itself with the meaning of the music rather than trying to recreate a facsimile of the original performance. Once you accept this, it radically alters your priorities when it comes to system performance. The accurate presentation of pitch and timing become paramount (those things which separate music from noise, and which, historically, hi-fi manufacturers had been taking entirely for granted); at the same time traditional concerns such as frequency response, stereo imaging and bandwidth all become much less important. The butchering of a single sacred cow is enough to bring howls of protest from the traditionalists: you can imagine the

effect of the wholesale slaughter of the complete herd. Beset on all sides, Naim founder, the late Julian Vereker, along with his erstwhile and even less diplomatically, Ivor Tiefenbrun of Linn Products, argued their corner with gusto, which of course did nothing to calm the ruffled feathers of the audio establishment. The fact that, in market terms at least, they went on to win the argument convincingly, merely entrenched the conflict even deeper. All of which is historically interesting, but the fact remains that the balance and musical presentation of a Naim system differ, in some cases quite radically, from most of the competition.

The second and third factors are really extensions of this. The very difference of the Naim approach and the electrical incompatibility of their products with other makes created a perception of institutional arrogance. ▶

► Not only were Naim products different, they were perfectly happy to be so, and stand or fall on the response of the market place. The fact that they are now one of the UK's largest and most successful audio companies suggests that their confidence was well placed. However, it's not the first time that an excess of self confidence (and nobody that knew Julian would quibble with that description) has led to accusations of arrogance.

And to reinforce the point, Naim's plain Jane approach to aesthetics has almost wantonly ignored the advent of industrial design within the hi-fi industry. It was almost as if the "plain and proud of it" image was the visual equivalent of giving the proverbial finger to the pretty boys that sold on looks: a stark reminder that it's the sound that matters. Such obvious challenges to the bristling egos that inhabit the microcosm called hi-fi could hardly be ignored, and they weren't. Which is why everybody interested in audio seems only too willing to offer an opinion on Naim, their products and their way of doing things.

Of course, the clearest indications of a designer's priorities are found in the cheapest products, laid bare by budget constraints. As you ascend the upgrade ladder there's extra money available to graft on those elements that get excluded by the Darwinian process of evolving the most basic acceptable performance. It's no surprise that it's the cheapest products, the Nait 5s, IBLs and CD3s, that have attracted the most scorn from the opposition, and the fiercest loyalty from the devotees. They took the "it's the message that matters" doctrine to its logical extreme, and in the process they tested the limits of aesthetic acceptability.

But the times they are a changin', and when the CDX, XPS and CDS II

appeared, suddenly we had Naim products that would sit only too happily in other systems. The NBL was next and the svelte elegance of its lines was such a contrast to the stubbornly boxy speakers we were used to that most of us did a double take. The NAP500 marked a move up-market, and if the elevated price demanded an unprecedented performance from a Naim amplifier, it also dictated dramatic improvements in fit, finish and presentation. Of course, all these are expensive products and it was easy to see them as luxury items that needed the benefits of an aesthetic facelift. But now it's the turn of the slimline series, Naim's cheapest electronics. Now we can no longer ignore the changes that are afoot. Where are they taking the company, and who's invited along for the ride? Let's take a look and see.

The 5 Series consists of the CD5, Nait 5 integrated amp, NATO 5 Tuner, Flatcap 2 power supply, NAC 112 pre-amp and NAP 150 power amp. They all share the same slimline casework and styling, and it is this that sets them apart from their predecessors. The new box has a three bay front panel that is derived from the flagship NAP500. Its sculpted contours are complemented by a new illuminated badge, and far more importantly, wonderfully tactile dome push buttons that replace the utilitarian square latches of the older products. To say that the new appearance is an improvement is a gross understatement. Whereas the 3 Series electronics were a constant source of embarrassed apology ("Yes darling, I know they look awful, but they sound really good!"), Victoria described the

5 Series as "Some of the best looking hi-fi you've ever brought home." In fact, for various reasons that we won't go into, she ended up actually collecting the review kit, so 'ownership' might come into this somewhere. However, as far as looks go, there's no escaping the fact that the new slimline electronics haven't just caught up with the competition, they've leapfrogged into the lead.

And the new casework is more than just a pretty face. The front panel is a Zinc die-casting, the top and bottom are identical aluminium castings, and the sides are formed from extrusions. Once machined, these components create an extremely rigid and inert box, complete with all the internal mounting hardware and bosses, ready to accept the internal components. The end result is a box that is better looking, that should be mechanically superior, and which makes assembly significantly easier.

What have Naim done with their fancy new casework? Well, internally the CD5 and Flatcap 2, which along with the Nait 5 form the review system, are essentially refinements of the 3 Series models. You still get the die-cast swinging CD drawer, but the CD5 now has a more sophisticated onboard power supply with separate sections for the analogue and digital stages. Also, and in common with the other 5 Series electronics, the circuit boards are compliantly mounted to offer further protection against mechanical interference. The Flatcap can now also power two units, such as the analogue stages of the CD5 and the separate Stageline phono section. In this system it supplies low noise, regulated power to the CD5 analogue stage and the Nait 5's pre-amp.

The Nait 5 is another story. If the CD5 and Flatcap 2 are refinements

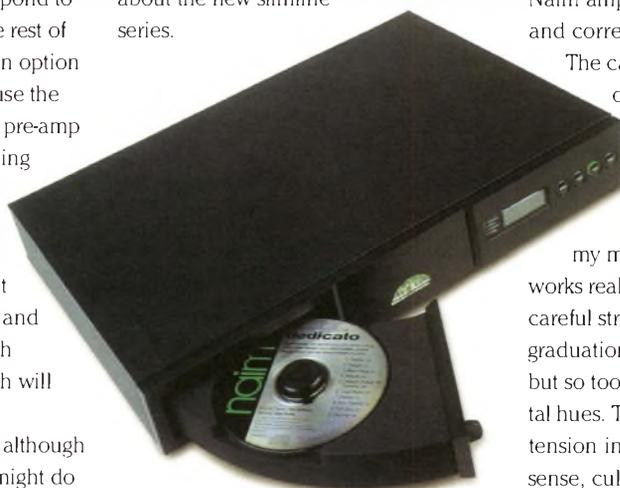


► on an existing theme, then the Nait is more of a complete redesign. Not only is the output circuitry based on the topology developed for the NAP500, but the pre-amp section and its power supply has been completely revamped. At the centre of the line level circuitry lies a micro-processor driven volume control, constructed from a ladder of discrete resistors. The same processor is used to control switching and balance functions, as well as allowing the owner to adjust individual input sensitivities. And before you throw your hands up in horror at the idea of digital electronics polluting the analogue environment, the processor only powers up to respond to a command, sitting dormant the rest of the time. There's also a unity gain option should you (shudder!) want to use the Nait with an A/V processor. The pre-amp runs from its own separate winding on the transformer (unless you are using the Flatcap 2 to power it) and all supplies are now double regulated. The Nait 5 is, of course, remote control, and both it and the CD5 arrived with a Narcom system remote, which will also drive the tuner.

Hook-up is straight forward, although those new to Naim equipment might do a double take at all those Din sockets, and the fact that speaker cable aside, you actually get all the necessary leads supplied. Given a notional budget of 15% or so on cabling (and in many cases that is inadequate) this has a significant influence on the price and value of the final system. I used the slimline electronics exactly as supplied, with power straight out of the wall. The new compliantly mounted boards mean that the sockets can wobble, and it's worth making sure that the cables aren't dragging them against the casework and short-circuiting the suspension. They were sat on my RDC rack and left to play music for a couple of weeks before I sat down to any serious listening. Main speakers used were the NHT 1.5s, although the Indigo Model 1s and

Living Voice Avatars also saw action, the latter with a surprising degree of success. But before we launch into the sound, two other things are worth a mention: the excellence of the remote control, which would work flawlessly from any part of the room, and the fact that I tended to play the system a little louder than normal. Especially with the NHTs it was much the happier for having the volume control past the 12 o'clock point, below which it could sound rather grey and lifeless, but this could be a function of that particular combination.

The success of the Naim/Living Voice combination says a great deal about the new slimline series.



This efficient floorstander majors on instrumental tone and a coherent sound-stage. Naturalness is its middle name, and the 3 Series would have been a marriage made in hell, the £2500 speakers simply showing you the price you were paying for the amplifier's snap and rhythmic coherence. The 5 Series are altogether more rounded and balanced performers, tonally more sophisticated and with better low level detail. The Avatars make the most of their strengths, the weaknesses being far less intrusive. And before you ask, yes they did image. Not like a little valve amp for sure, but well up there with the solid state competition.

Back to the real world and the £600 NHTs, a more likely and certainly

more appropriate match. This was the combination that I started with, and it's the one I spent most time with because, as a system it really clicked. Right from the word go there was an easy pace and coherence to music. Even really sweeping productions like 'The Coral Atoll' from *The Thin Red Line* soundtrack (RCA 09026 63382 2) hung together, and despite the limited bandwidth of the speakers (there's some seriously subterranean bass on this track) the music was full of drama and atmosphere, just as it should be. It's this ability to retain the creative tension in a piece that has always set Naim amps apart, and it's still present and correct in the 5 Series.

The carefully structured opening of Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* (Telarc CD-80331, the Zinman/Baltimore Symphony Orchestra performance rather than my more usual Johanos/ Dallas) works really well on the Naims. The careful structure and ramped dynamic graduations are clear and convincing, but so too are the individual instrumental hues. The swelling momentum and tension in the music makes perfect sense, culminating in the release of that shattering opening crescendo. The accompanying cymbal crash is wonderful for its colour and decay, the vibrant promptings of the repeated violin motif build the tension, contrasting with the skittering glissandi. The pause before the transition is perfectly pregnant, and the layered woodwinds spreading the new air of tranquillity show the greater tonal sophistication of the new products. Music is not nearly as stark and obvious as it was with the 3s, and if that makes it less immediately approachable it's a price that I'll happily pay.

Why is this? In sonic terms, I think it comes down to two things. The sound of the new amps is less edgy, a quality which made the older ones seem crisp and dynamic. Instead, the 5 Series map leading edges more accurately, ►

▶ as well as the decay, or tail of the notes. This increase in low level resolution is entirely consistent with improved power supplies and mechanical isolation, while the loss of edge goes hand in hand with better isolation from the mains, as we've already seen in the case of the CDS II and other Naim products. The results may be less dramatic, but they are also more real.

I've concentrated on a large scale acoustic work because it's here that the developments are most apparent. Switch to small scale recordings like Kieran Kane and Kevin Welch's live album *11/12/13* (Dead Reckoning DEAR 0019) and the new sophistication simply grafts seamlessly onto the expected rhythmic integrity.

On 'While I Was Loving You' the increased tonal and low level information brings out the naturalness in the recording, the clear chemistry between

the two performers and the distinctive identity of their separate instruments. The improvised percussion "squeaks and scratches" from Kevin Welch lock into the insistent rhythm and the music just springs to life. It's a great recording, but on the Naims it's sensational. How good? If I was making my living from selling this kit I'd be ordering a spare copy today.

The smaller scale pieces are always where smaller systems score. Their speed and agility counts for a lot. Wheel out another favourite, Shawn Colvin's excellent *Steady On* (Columbia 466142 2) and again the slimline 5 Series does its stuff. Fabulous as an LP the CD suffers from a touch of hardness and an occasional slight glare. The Naims do nothing to hide this, reminding me where they've come from, but at the same time they inject the necessary

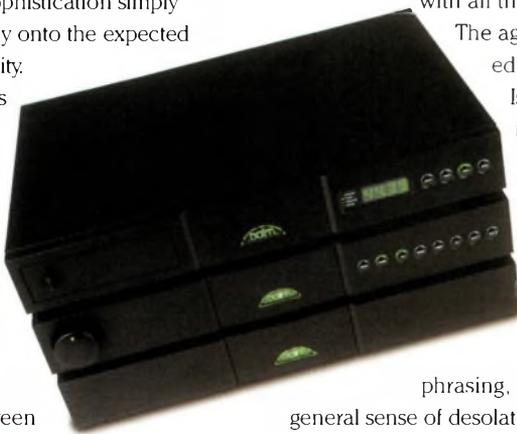
jump and attack into the music. These are jagged songs with a starkness all of their own. Let the system pare them away any more and the results can be quite nasty. The 5 Series stay just inside, fastened to the rigidity of the drum tracks, revelling in the flexibility of the melodies laid over the top. The title track is a case in point. Over emphasise the bass or leave the busy percussion exposed and your attention wanders from the heart of the song. The Naims get it just right. Like I said, these are balanced performers. Balanced enough to handle the infamous Slobberbone (punk meets country, with all that entails!).

The aggressive edge on 'That Is All' survives intact, not rounded or smoothed, but there in all its offensive glory. As is the elastic phrasing, feedback,

general sense of desolation and the strangely truncated coda. Fantastic.

These electronics represent a genuine step forward for Naim. They are better balanced than their predecessors, more versatile and far, far better presented. In many respects they offer levels of musical sophistication that you used to only get much further up the Naim ladder. In moving away from the "Plain and proud of it" school of hi-fi design they retain their traditional virtues whilst adding the aesthetic and tonal sophistication that was previously the exclusive preserve of the competition. They might have lost the transient edge and chopped bass that made the 3 Series so obviously appealing: they've fleshed out the structural elements too, which makes them less like a diagram and more like reality, but the bottom line is that the 5 Series will be more rewarding for longer. Whether or not

you prefer the old sound, and there are some that will, misses the point. The 5 Series bring Naim's musical and structural integrity to the mainstream, which can only be a good thing. I've enjoyed them enormously. I suspect that even more customers are now going to feel the same. Quite how the opposition will feel I think you can probably guess. ▶



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Naim CDS

Type:	CD Player
Chipset:	18bit 4x Oversampling
Output Level:	2.0 V
Output Impedance:	10 Ohms
Remote Control:	Yes
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432 x 58.4 x 301mm

Naim Nait 5

Type:	Integrated Amplifier
Inputs:	6x Line Level (5 Pin Din)
Input Sensitivity:	75mV (User Variable)
Input Impedance:	100KOhms
Outputs:	3x Tape 1x Pre-Out
Output Level (Tape):	75mV
Power Output :	30W/ch - 80hms
Remote Control:	Yes
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432 x 58.4 x 301mm

Prices

CDS	£1125
Nait 5	£799
Nato 5	£725
NAC 112	£625
NAP 150	£750
Flatcap 2	£475
Stageline	£175

Manufacturer:

Naim Audio Ltd	
Southampton Rd	
Salisbury, SP1 - 2LN	
Tel:	(44)(0)1722 332266
Net:	www.naim-audio.com

Second Sight...

by Jason Hector

▶ So what happened to the 4 series? Are they forever to exist, like the Naim electrostatic loudspeakers or tape deck, as a cult product that was just too good (read expensive) to be released? Could their existence have been suppressed by the audio Mafiosi? Well no the explanation is boringly simple, the number 4 is unlucky in the East and sales would have suffered, so five series it was. I am acting as second reviewer on the 5 series, and in my capacity as one of the resident Naim users I have a whole different perspective (and set of prejudices) to RG. Firstly, I was a massive fan of the 3 series these boxes replaced, even though as Roy rightly says, the build and appearance did leave a little to be desired. But once you sat down and listened, the musical ride was more than adequate recompense - I just loved the sheer dynamism of the old system. So what has changed and do I think it's an improvement?

Let's get the one disappointment out of the way before I fully recount my pleasure at using these new 5 series components, and that is the aesthetics of the new badge. On the new units the whole semicircular badge is clear plastic with the naim logo moulded in relief. Fine, except that it lights up like

a beacon. Parked on shelves surrounded by my other Naim gear the badges looked a little garish and out of place with both the old gear and the otherwise superb build quality of the new.

Perhaps it would be possible to mask the logo a little so light only escaped at the edge and through the letters, or move to "smoked" plastic? (Don't give up the day job Jason! Ed.)

But enough of this petty criticism, how do they perform, how do they sound? I normally use an 82,Hi-Cap, 250 set-up to drive my Shahinian Arcs. Sources are an LP12, ARO, DV17D2 with

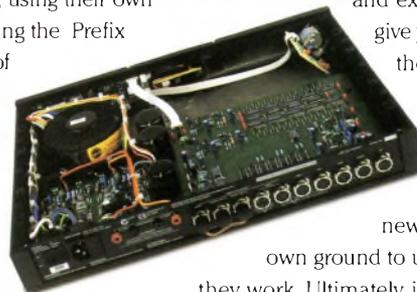
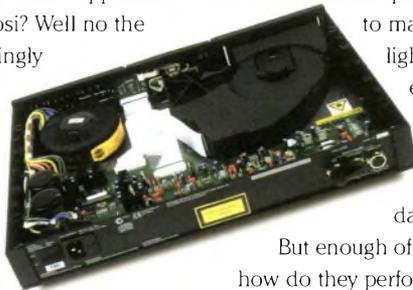
a Prefix and Hi-Cap to step up the signal, and a Micromega Duo transport and Pro Dac. The equipment sits on the excellent Hutter racks, and is hooked up with Music Works mains leads. I simply plugged the 5 Series units straight into the system, using their own mains leads and retaining the Prefix as, in yet another sign of the times, the Nait 5 arrived without its optional phono stage. This gave me ample opportunity to explore the sound of the new products, both in their own right and in the context of an older Naim set-up.

Conclusions? Well I can safely say

they are excellent devices. However, I think that fans of the 3 Series might find them something of a shock, because they sound very different and challenge some old and pretty well entrenched beliefs. I always felt that the 3 Series excelled at presenting the emotional content of the music at the expense of some subtlety in the message, a sacrifice which was usually worth making. The new 5 Series has taken a large step away from this compromise. There's a reduction in the 3 Series' obvious dynamics, but in its place you get a certain poise and far more natural tonality. Although some are bound to be less enamoured, personally I believe the 5 Series will be capable of providing much longer term listening pleasure, as they are less fatiguing and more evenly balanced, ultimately drawing you further into the music. The structure and timing is still there, it's just that now it's got its clothes on. As I said less instantaneous appeal but very satisfying over time. Are they better than the 3 Series? Ultimately the answer has to be yes, but it's not really that simple: they are treading a very different path which makes direct comparison problematic and to some extent mis-leading. If you compare them

and expect the 5s to give you the same as the 3s but more so, then you'll be disappointed. You have to approach the new units on their own ground to understand why they work. Ultimately it's irrelevant anyway, as the 3s are gone and the 5s are here to stay.

So much for the generalities. The other part of my brief was to look

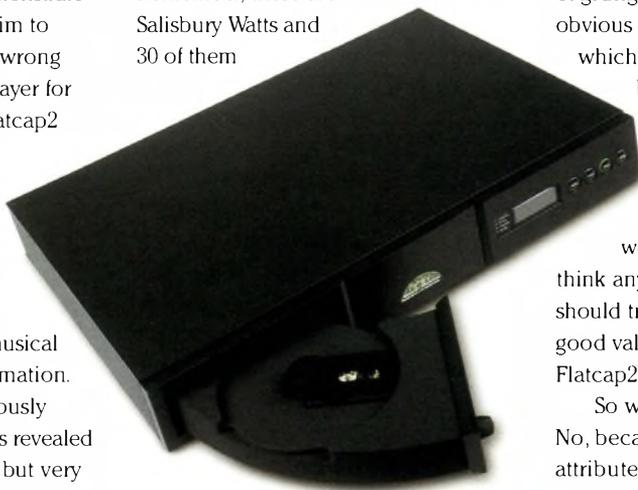


► a little closer at the Flatcap2 and its sonic benefits. RG always ran the system as a three box set-up with the power supply connected. I also wanted to experiment with my Musicworks mains leads as, unlike the 3 Series, the 5 series are equipped with “proper” IEC mains sockets, lending themselves to more experimentation and tinkering.

Adding the Flatcap2 to the CD player was nothing short of remarkable, the positive difference in sound quality making the Flatcap2 upgrade incredibly good value for the CD5 alone. If you can't afford it when you buy a CD5 don't listen to it or you won't be satisfied till you do have one. (And of course your Naim dealer isn't going to demonstrate the benefits unless you ask him to - I don't think.) Don't get me wrong the CD5 is a very good CD player for the money, its just that the Flatcap2 puts in a different league. Put simply, the system seemed to throw off some metaphorical shackles, the sound really opening up into the room with much more detail apparent. And here I mean musical detail, not just spurious information. For example, what had previously been a steadily rising note was revealed to be subtly stepped, a small but very important difference. Returning to the big system confirmed that the new presentation was correct, not that I really needed to check as it sounded so much better that it had to be the original intention.

So far so good then, next the Flatcap2 was removed from the CD5 and attached to pre amp section of the Nait5 and again a marvellous improvement was heard. This time we again gained detail, but this seemed to come from a reduction in the noise floor. It removed a whole layer of murk from the system, injecting energy and quicker dynamics into the performance. Each instrument in an ensemble was given a little more space to breathe and this was achieved without sacrificing

the overall coherence of the music, a neat trick if you can pull it off. Mind you, Naim have been doing this sort of thing with power supplies for many years. The Nait5 had already impressed me powersupply-less by the ease with which it allowed me to really fine tune the downforce on a new Dynavector 17D2 cartridge by ear. It is a revealing amplifier, but with the improvements wrought by Flatcap2 addition this amplifier became very transparent to the source. It was now apparent that the Nait5 is also a more powerful amplifier than the rating suggests, and has also markedly improved on the load tolerance of its predecessor. Remember, these are Salisbury Watts and 30 of them



were more than enough to drive my Shahinian Arcs, the sound staying clean to high levels.

Used as a system as intended, with the Flatcap2 powering both the CD5 and the Nait5 we had most of the best of both worlds, although, I felt that although the gains for each component were less than when they had a Flatcap2 to themselves (shown using the Micromega CD spinner and LP player as source to the Nait5) the sum improvement was still greater than just powering one component. So next step on the upgrade path looks like a second Flatcap2 then. But are there cheaper improvements to be had in the meantime?

Assuming you have a suitable equipment support and aren't going to mess with the Naim signal leads (and I personally don't think its worth it with Naim equipment) that leaves the mains. In Issues 2 and 3 I reported on the extremely positive results I have had with the Musicworks mains leads and distribution block, success which was at the time surprising, as my previous experiments in this direction had failed miserably. So would the 5 series respond in the same way? Simple answer, yes, although the gains were not as great as with the larger equipment I normally use. In the Musicworks review I spoke of grunge removal as being the most obvious improvement in the sound, which allowed both more detail but also better coherence.

This was again apparent with the 5 Series but due, I think, to the lower starting point the improvements weren't quite so exciting. I still think anybody buying this system should try the leads, as they offer very good value once you have got the Flatcap2 into the system.

So was I tempted to downgrade? No, because although they share attributes with the better gear they simply don't do it as well! And should a 3 series user trade in? Probably not. If you chose the 3 Series you liked what it did, and as these devices are a little different they may not be the answer. I think people in this position should save a little longer and try to reach further up the ladder.

The 5 Series components see a slightly new direction for Naim and I am pleased with the resulting equipment it has produced. These units produce a balance of virtues that was only previously available much further up the Naim hierarchy, while retaining the typical Naim musicality and a real emotional connection with the performance. ►

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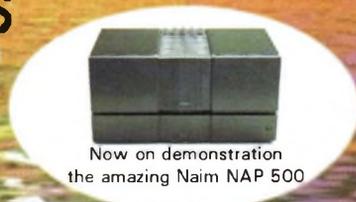
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Carfrae Little Big Horn

by Paul Messenger

Few speakers look more extraordinary than Carfrae's Little Big Horn, and hardly any are more beautiful, in my opinion and those of several visitors, who admired the faintly bizarre but beautifully sculptured shape, the delicious solid wood finishing, and were fascinated by the large 'climb-through' hole in the middle. The photographs are much more eloquent than mere words in describing a speaker which looks unlike any other on the planet, which makes perfect sense in form-follows-function terms, yet manages to do so with considerable panache and a wickedly gastropodic wit.

As the name suggests, this is a horn-loaded design, a factor which accounts for both the shape and the bulk. And it is a bulky beast to be sure, my own quite generously dimensioned room (4.3x2.6x5.5m) is probably just about the practical minimum. In truth the Little Big Horn would fit more happily into rooms at least half as big again - and could happily fill a small church, should the opportunity present itself. But it doesn't loom the way large speakers usually do, the curved profile, deep blue crackle finish around the horn profile and the hole through the middle all help minimise the perception of a bulk which is only really a handicap when you're unpacking and struggling to manoeuvre them into place.

Let's put the LBH into context.

Like Carfrae's swan-neck Big Horn, it's based around a single Lowther DX3 drive unit, but where big brother's horn is 3.3m long and fires into a corner, the LBH loads the rear of the Lowther by a forward-firing 2m tractrix-profile horn. It's much more compact than the Big



Horn, uses MDF rather than plywood, and less real wood veneer, so the whole affair is much less costly at £7,950 (against some twenty grand for the Big Horn). Eight grand is still expensive for any pair of loudspeakers, and significantly (though not dramatically) more than the two other Lowther-driven speakers which have passed through my hands recently (the £5,000 Beauhorn Virtuoso in Hi-Fi+ issue 7, and the £6,000 Veritas H3 in Hi-Fi Choice issue 191).

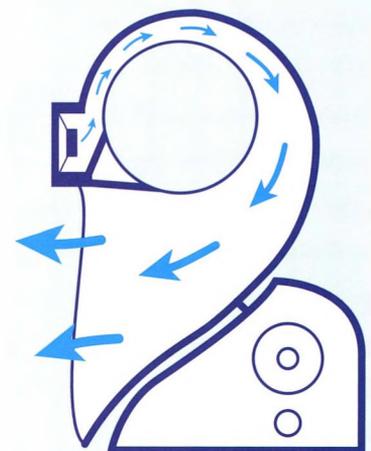
The Little Big Horn can easily justify its premium, however, not just on grounds of aesthetic elegance (where it's in a class of its own), but also because it cunningly incorporates an active subwoofer as an integral part of the design. This is built into the separate teardrop-shaped box which supports and orients the horn proper. (And you can christen it Custer's Last Stand if you want to.)

What we have in toto therefore is a single full-range horn-loaded driver, which, in the Lowther tradition, has an extraordinarily high sensitivity (around 105dB/W on my estimate), at the inevitable expense of limited bass

extension. Jim Carfrae's literature implies that the horn works down to 50Hz, but my measurements indicate a practical in-room lower limit of around 80Hz for the horn section, leaving the subwoofer to take responsibility for the bottom two octaves.

The Little Big Horn differs from the other Lowther-driven speakers I've tried in making no attempt to horn-load the front of the drive unit. I suspect the lack of a short horn on the front is the reason why the LBH's output is just a little weak through the broad midband, but such a horn will tend to add its own coloration which Jim prefers to avoid.

One less happy consequence of the slightly weak output 400Hz-1.5kHz is that it leaves the characteristic Lowther presence-band resonance (about an octave wide centred on 2kHz) just that bit more exposed and obvious. The treble proper is also stronger than average, with evidence of another peak around 8-12kHz, but it remains a notable achievement to create



▷ a high efficiency, mostly horn-loaded speaker capable of delivering a full bandwidth in-room balance which (once I'd fiddled around a bit with the subwoofer controls for best integration) held within +/-4dB on a far-field in-room averaged measurement from 20Hz to 14kHz. This is a total contrast to the Beauhorn Virtuoso's behaviour, which is deliberately tuned to give a smooth and flat midband, while gently rolling off the top and bottom ends.

The more time I spent looking at the Little Big Horn, the more I became impressed by the sheer cleverness, not only of the overall concept but also the fine detail of the design. The driver is carefully arranged to be at seated ear height, and the boss on which it's mounted is a seriously chunky hardwood fabrication, cleverly put together to create patterns in the grain orientation. Subtle hardwood curves frame the horn mouth, and the profile of the subwoofer is curved too (creating an irregular shape which will help avoid standing waves).

Sonically I'm a bit of a sucker for Lowther-driven speakers, and indeed for high sensitivity speakers in general, so the Little Big Horns immediately ensnared me in their enchantment. The sheer immediacy and vividness of the sound catches the attention straight away, much of which comes down to the effortless and natural way they reproduce dynamic contrasts and shading.

Most of the listening took place immediately after I'd carried out

a group test on 12 'normal' loudspeakers (averaging around £1,000/pair and 89dB/W sensitivity), and

these Carfraes instantly sounded like 'real' speakers, where the others had been mere pipsqueak pretenders, lacking genuine scale and limiting expression and communication.

First off I didn't connect up the subwoofers, and just listened to the horns alone. This was very beguiling, and honestly didn't seem as lacking in bass extension as the measurements had indicated. On speech it was particularly magical, with great expression and a marvellous freedom from timesmear and chestiness. Individuals somehow managed to sound more distinctly individual, and regional accents were clearer and more easily identifiable. On simple material with little bass content, such as string quartets, the horn alone was lovely.

I half expected to find the subwoofer a let down, as all my previous experiences of trying to use active subwoofers alongside high efficiency 'satellites' have been tinged with disappointment. While the Little Big Horn's integral subwoofers did compromise the time coherence very slightly, the effect was indeed

very small, and I happily left the subs connected up for the duration, enjoying the worthwhile extra weight and gravitas they brought to anything with serious bass content. The other slight weakness is that their dynamic tracking didn't always match the horns, so the balance seem to shift very slightly with level, but the overall integration was unexpectedly superb, and I was only conscious of their existence on odd occasions.

The one fly in the ointment - more of a dragonfly in fact - is that presence peak, which just happens to be in the region of the spectrum where the ear is most sensitive. This proved difficult to ignore, at least when using my regular Naim (NAC52/NAP500) amplification, which itself has a rather shiny and forward character, and made me reluctant to listen at realistically high levels. I could probably live with it, just as a I can live with the slightly higher frequency peak of my Rehdeko RK175s, but I'm rather more tolerant than most in this regard, and tend to find most conventional speakers (which usually show a presence dip) a little shut in.

As I'd expected from show demonstrations, the Little Big Horn is rather in-ye-face, and not exactly polite or smooth by conventional standards. But that's partly because it's exceptionally revealing of either the sources or amplification. The trick is to find the right components to create a sympathetic whole. High efficiency Lowther horns originally stem from the era of low powered



▶ valve amplification, and make natural partners for the revival of interest in single-ended triode amps, especially as the impedance stays above a comfortable 9 ohms throughout. Jim Carfrae had brought along a pair of monoblocks from Glass Audio Tube Engineering, the GATE SE300 (from £3,335/pair, depending upon the source of the 300Bs), which he felt were a good match for the LBHs.

I've always had a soft spot for this type of amp, based on the magnificence of its midrange reproduction but tempered by major reservations about bass softness.

However, Little Big Horn's active sub means it does its own thing in the bass region, and the system amp doesn't need to supply any serious current below 80Hz. Major reservation dismissed. Measurements taken with the valve monoblocks showed the same presence peak as before, but above that region the treble output proper was some 2-3dB less, and this is probably a major reason for the altogether 'kinder' and less aggressive sound which they produced.

In fact the combination was an absolute delight. Background hiss was reduced while hum increased slightly - but those seem to be the inevitable consequence of going from transistor to valve operation when using a super-sensitive speaker. Best of all was the way the SE300's classic thermionic sweetness took the 'fierceness' and aggression out of the system. It remains a moot point whether one should choose an amplifier or the speakers first. Given the Naim amps I probably wouldn't have chosen the

Little Big Horns; given the Carfraes, I probably would have chosen the GATEs (or something similar).

There are many reviewers who try to describe the sound of their favourite recordings, an approach I avoid, because it's highly unlikely that these happen to be your favourite recordings, or even that you'll enjoy them in the same way that I do. I could ramble on about the brilliantly layered production of the Beastie Boys' *Hello Nasty*, the lyrical lucidity of Eminem's *Marshall Mathers LP*, or the delicate and subtle interplay on the Grateful Dead's *Reckoning* acoustic set.

But I'd rather report on the effect a speaker system has upon my actual behaviour, as this seems much more meaningful. A major strength of the Little Big Horn is that it makes even 'difficult' material that much more accessible than regular speakers. I found myself listening to a lot more Radio 3 than usual, and getting sucked into the wonderful textures of orchestral instruments and instrumentation.

I've now been listening to the Little Big Horns continuously for about three weeks, across a broad range of programming which includes a mixture of vinyl, CD and radio, plus an (un)healthy dose of day-to-day television watching. Jim's coming back to pick them up tomorrow, and I'm not looking forward to his arrival one little bit!

With a speaker this coherent, temporally and dynamically, choice of source and amplification components becomes extra critical, and

I'd certainly suggest valve amplification is likely to be preferable to the solid state variety. Indeed, the enormously high sensitivity of the Little Big Horns is a powerful incentive to go straight down the single-ended triode road, as the modest power outputs will be no handicap, and their sonic marriage might have been made in heaven.

As I sat ruminating while Radio 3 was playing some Mozart, the thought came over me that if I ever get to retire from this loudspeaker reviewing game, this could well be the speaker system to retire with. It's not perfect - no speaker is - but it's such a fine combination of the various qualities I personally rate most highly that I reckon it would fill the bill very nicely indeed. Others might prefer the smoother, more mid-oriented sound of the Beauhorns I reviewed a few months back. But I strongly urge any reader interested in getting closer to the 'real thing' to take the time to audition a Lowther-based speaker system, as the combination of single-driver coherence and massive sensitivity brings its own unique magic to the proceedings. 



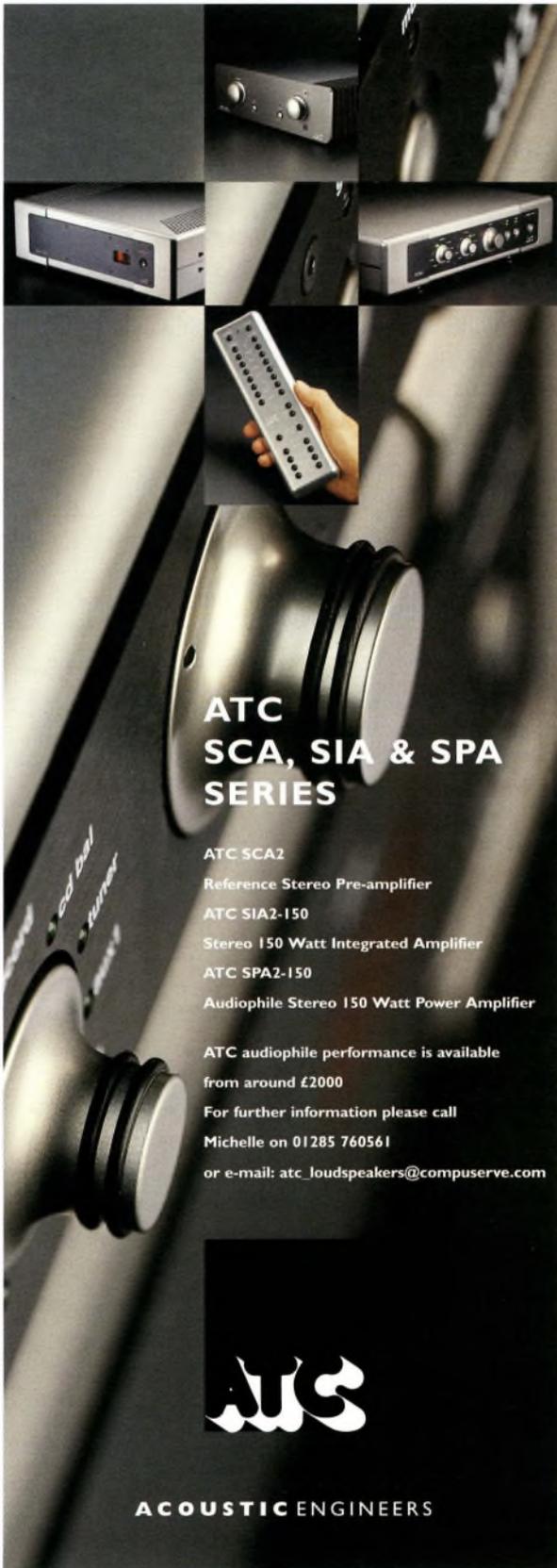
TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single driver horn with active sub-woofer.
Main Driver:	Lowther DX3
Sensitivity:	105dB
Impedance:	<9 Ohms
Bandwidth:	Horn -3dB at 18KHz Sub -3dB at 26Hz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	380x1350x950mm
Price:	£7950

Manufacturer:

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Tel. (44)(0)1803 868461
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ClearAudio Master Reference Turntable and Master TQ-I Tonearm

by Roy Gregory

The ClearAudio Reference turntable, reviewed in Issue 2, along with its Souther derived TQ-I linear tracking tonearm costs a substantial £5475. Add another £1000 for the Accurate Power Generator and £2500 for an Accurate moving coil cartridge and that's one expensive front-end that sits in the corner of my room. Not, I have to admit, that I can justify the investment in material terms. The Reference is simplicity itself, and there's nothing terribly intricate or expensive about the arm. As for the cartridge? I don't think we even want to go there. The bottom line is that there are no fancy air-bearings or suspension systems, no contactless drive system or adjustable damping, nothing to impress the techno weanies. nothing, niente, zip.

All there is, is the sound.

Sound which, whilst it isn't perfect (what is?) brings clarity, openness and vitality to the recorded performance. These are the very qualities that so many turntables seem to crush from the music, but play that same recording on the Reference and the superiority of its portrayal, the natural life and immediacy that flows from the grooves will have you convinced. I liked it so much that I bought one. Despite the material difficulties, and I'm not only talking about the £9K price tag.

But now they've done it again.

Just when I was getting comfortable with the current state of affairs, ClearAudio went and introduced a

new model, and guess what? It costs twice as much! (At this point anybody who has already read the Nordost review can be forgiven a touch of *déjà vu*. I'm just waiting for the third seismic event, whatever that'll be.) Let me introduce you then, to the ClearAudio Master Reference playback system, the latest audio confection to spring from the creative imagination of analogue chef Peter Suchy.



The Master Reference turntable is an imposing structure, but it's also a natural outgrowth of the Reference. The platter and bearing are essentially similar, just beefier. The inverted bearing post now looks substantial enough to hang a gate. The differences lie in the drive assembly and the decoupling between the motors and the platter. Building from the bottom, you first place the three-legged base that supports the motor housings. This stands on three cones and provides stainless steel plates for each motor. Next you simply place the motors, each on its little gaggle of gummy feet,

and lead the power leads away and down through the central hole provided. The next layer is a sandwich construction which supports the platter, and stands over and at 60 degrees to the motor spider. Position the platter, plug in the motors and string the belt and you're almost ready to go. Almost because the main bearing arrives with a new, super viscous grease which takes days to actually settle evenly about the shaft. Set the 'table up and leave it running and when you return three or four days later you'll find it's going way too fast.

Peg it back on the APG and you should be pretty near there, but it's still worth checking it over the ensuing weeks (making sure that you use a battery powered strobe!). So, although the main assembly only takes about ten minutes, they still manage to make you exercise your patience.

Of course, that's probably just as well, as you've also got the Master TQ-I to deal with. The new arm is identical in operating principle to the old one. It just looks like it's benefited from a US department of defence spending programme. Gone are the injection moulded end pieces, replaced with massive acrylic machinings and duralumin horizontal bracing rods. Whereas the Souther always seemed delicate and spindly, the Master TQ-I is an absolute bruiser. I'm used to swinging down the original arm, but even I was shocked by the sheer mass of the new version. Unfortunately, along the way the Master TQ-I has lost the stub which once, long ago sat on the spindle, and which now provides an easy reference for alignment. Combine that with the Souther's notoriously difficult VTA ►

► adjustment and it makes set-up a royal pain in the butt. If ever a tonearm was crying out for a simple jig to help with preliminary alignment then this is it. And Peter, while you are about it, please, please do something about the VTA.

Once you've got it running, the effect of the various layers is actually to place an extra layer between the platter and the outside world, and two between it and the motors. There's also less belt contact to transmit motor noise into the platter, and the three motor drive should improve speed stability. The Master Reference arrived with a specially built Acapella base, itself a sophisticated variation on the sand-box approach, and given the size of the turntable I'd consider this an essential accessory. Heave it into position, but remember to level it before you start to build the record player. And believe me, you will need a substantial support.

The Master Reference was used with a variety of ancillaries, but the key elements were The Groove and the Nordost Valhalla cables, without which the player's true superiority over the Reference and other 'tables would have been obscured. For most of the listening I used either the Audioplan Kontrast 111s or the Living Voice Avatars, both valued for their natural musicality. I also ran them with the Kochel sub-woofer, just

to hear what was happening at the real bottom end. Amps were the JA30s, while cartridges varied, the lion's share of the listening being with the Insider Reference. Naturally enough the ClearAudio Reference and

allowed music its full range of rhythmic expression. Rather than the energy spectrum of the turntable dictating the storage and release of musical energy, the Reference managed to stand

aside, letting the rhythmic structure stand intact and in shape, providing the discipline that allows the musi-

cians freedom to explore its limits. The result was at once impressive (for its transparency) and engaging (because of its rhythmic agility). But it

wasn't perfect. The performance was achieved at the expense of some subtle shaping. The

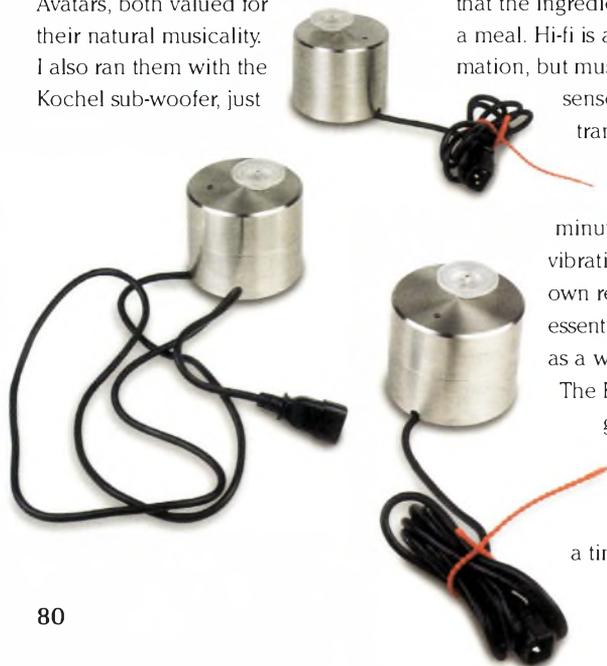
Reference is what I call a double dipper. It's not uncommon in hi-fi, in fact it's a characteristic that it shares with the Nordost SPM cable. A slight drop in output in the upper bass and lower treble et voila, speed, clarity and transparency. The price if you overdo it is tonal thinness and a lack of substance. The Reference judged it pretty well, but you can't hide it completely, as the Clearlight's superior harmonic development reveals.

The Master Reference manages to extend both the transparency and separation of the Reference, whilst simultaneously correcting the aberrations in its frequency balance. Listen to the Corelli *Concerto Grosso op.6 no.7 in D Major* (Stuttgarter Kammer-orchester, Tacet L74) and focus on the separation, placement and harmonic complexity of the harpsichord. So often a jangling afterthought on baroque recordings, here it steps out and provides the necessary continuo, properly supportive but vital and alive in its own right, fragile and delicate yet surprisingly solid in the soundstage. The strings ►

Clearlight Recovery turntables were cast in the unfortunate role of Aunt Sally.

It doesn't take long to realise what the Master Reference is doing. Compared to the Reference it offers increased dynamic range, bandwidth and a lower noise floor. It is more tonally even, top to bottom, and offers a greater sense of power. But this is far from the whole story. It's not just a question of what the Master Reference does, but the way that it does it that matters. There are plenty of turntables whose menu of individual attributes makes them appealing until you realise that the ingredients don't add up to a meal. Hi-fi is about retrieving information, but music is about making sense of it. Mechanical transducers (turntables and speakers) are trying to deal with minute vibrations whilst vibrating themselves. Their own resonant signature is an essential part of the equation as a whole.

The Reference broke new ground by providing uncluttered clarity and micro dynamics, combined with a timing security which



▶ are muscular too. None of your weedy original instruments here. The increase in harmonic development brings welcome substance and individuality to the violins, allowing you to follow each player much more readily, as well as his or her part in the complex patterns and counterpoints of the piece. Gone are the dips, and the thinness with them, but combine that with a lower noise floor (better isolation) and wider dynamic range (probably the drive system but it's difficult to be sure) and you have that magical combination of presence and transparency. In comparison the Reference lacks energy and sounds pared away, the Clearlight less dynamic. These differences become even more marked when you make the comparison using the Insider Reference cartridge. The superior low level retrieval, texture and bandwidth of this ruinously expensive beast stretch the capabilities of a turntable to the full, marking its character in bold, and underlining as well!

Enough of such considerations, it's time to enjoy the Master Reference in its own right (and while we still can - there's no way that I can afford to keep this one in residence, much as I'd like to). One example should suffice, the DCC re-issue of the Stokowski Villa-Lobos *Uirapuru* (DCC LPZ1003). Replayed on the Master Reference this music towers in its magnificence. From the opening crash through its shifting

moods, one moment playful the next menacing, the big ClearAudio simply lets it flow, with effortless security and undaunted dynamic range. There's no



sense that this complex and violently demanding music is ever confused or stretching the turntable's dynamic or information envelope. The sudden rhythmic shifts simply happen, the orchestra scales the dynamic heights unimpeded. But it's not all about power (a quality the Master Reference has in spades), there's the low level resolution and dynamic and tonal subtlety on which that energy rests as well. The piping nose flute survives in the path of the orchestra, the heavy and menacing left hand of the piano is redolent with texture, adding to its menacing presence. The beauty of this turntable is that it builds from the bottom, letting you hear into the structure of the orchestra, all the elements that contribute to the crescendo, rather than just relying on broad brush strokes and crude dynamic swings. Sudden shifts don't phase it, and nor do convoluted rhythmic patterns, because it deals always at the constituent level.

These advances over the Reference are small in quantitative terms, and many will look askance

at the difference in price. However, let me assure you that they are far from subtle when it comes to the credibility, the believability of the musical event. The Master Reference represents a huge step forward. It's still not perfect. I can hear the mechanical grain that's banished by an air bearing, and its lack of an effective clamp combined with the Master TQ-I's short armtube makes warps more of an issue than on decks with a vacuum hold down (I've seen Peter experiment with a peripheral clamp), but overall it's the best compromise I've had at home. Essentially stable and straightforward to use the Master Reference and Master TQ-I offer a level of performance that keeps vinyl head and shoulders above any digital competition. Everyone should hear it - those who can will probably buy it.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

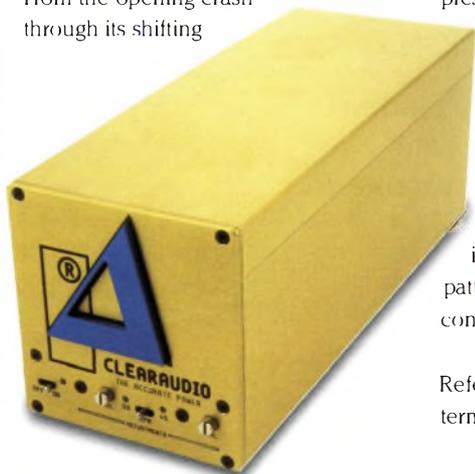
Type:	Three Motor Turntable and Passive Linear Tracking Tonearm
Speeds:	33 and 45rpm user adjustable
Power Supply:	Sinewave Regeneration
Dimensions (WxHxD):	440x500x490mm
Lid:	None
Finishes:	Stainless Steel Chrome (+10%) Gold (+20%) Clear or Black Acrylic
Price:	Turntable £8490 Tonearm £3565

Distributor:

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Fax. (44)(0)1483 301412
E-mail. info@audioreference.co.uk
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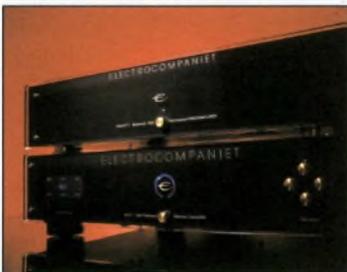
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Celestion

'A' Series Compact Loudspeaker

by Pete Chrisite

I don't know about you, but sometimes I amaze myself with my own ability to be totally unaware of the blindingly obvious.

For instance, I put something down, turn around, and it's gone. Completely vanished. Not a trace. I tend to swear a bit, scratch my head, re-enact my last known movements, but to no avail. Whatever the object was - pen, money, mobile phone, reading glasses, car, elephant, house, continental Europe, - do you think I can find it? - Not a hope!

It is physically still there, but I am totally unable to see it.

Sometimes, the only remedy is to wait until there is a ripple in the space-time continuum, and as if by magic, the missing whatever-it-is reappears. This process can take either five minutes, or in the case of the small key to my bedside table (which I sensibly hid in a safe place before going on holiday), forever. No doubt, it is sitting somewhere in plain view, and I have probably moved it whilst looking for some other, more recently misplaced object.

I tell myself that this is all part of the inevitable process of ageing, and that it is natural to be a bit forgetful. Quite soon, I am sure that I will start forgetting simple things like where I live, my name, how to walk, eat and dress myself, and how to use a word processor.

Which is what nearly happened to the Celestion 'A' Series compact loudspeakers. They arrived with the

rest of the "A" series, and were placed, quite sensibly, out of harms way on a pair of wall-mounted speaker brackets in our demonstration room. That is when they disappeared. The rest of the models in the range were run-in and displayed around the shop,



but the compacts simply vanished.

Luckily (unlike the key to my bedside cabinet), I found them again!

In my defence, I feel that where the Celestion "A" series contains mainly BIG speakers, the temporary misplacing of the compacts (which really are compact!) is quite understandable. Anyway, having rediscovered them lurking quietly behind the leaves of

the rubber plant, I set matters to rights and bolted them on to something or other and left them playing happily to themselves for a week or so to "run-in" before giving them a serious listen.

I have never been a "sizist" (is there such a word?), and I have no problem with a loudspeaker that is a mere 9 1/2" high - as long as it works. I can also appreciate a good-looking design when I see it, and I can assure you, these are very attractive loudspeakers.

The cabinets are small, (but perfectly formed) - superbly made out of braced MDF and finely finished with a high quality veneer. The speakers I was supplied with were cherry; though alternatives in black ash or rosewood are available. Celestion have managed by carefully "rounding-off" and bevelling the edges to not only reduce internal diffraction effects, but also to produce a cabinet of distinction. In fact, the whole thing gives the appearance of being a sculpted block of wood that can also be used as a loudspeaker - no mean feat. Even the covers are seriously "chunky" and seem to be built to withstand the test of time. Removing them reveals a superbly engineered, champagne-coloured anodised aluminium frame which houses a ferrofluid cooled 25mm titanium cooled tweeter, and a serious-looking 100mm bass driver. The back of the box has a nicely contoured plastic bass port, and

► suitably high-quality gold-plated bi-wire binding posts. The whole thing smacks of quality and good design.

According to the info I was supplied with by Celestion, the A series are designed to reproduce all modern sound sources (CD, Home Theatre, Dolby Digital etc.) in all their depth and complexity. The drivers are totally new, and designed individually for each model using state-of-the-art technology throughout. Laser Interferometry has been used to measure speaker kinetics. It says here that the ability to analyse cone motion with such unprecedented accuracy has allowed Celestion engineers to minimise the resonance and response peaks that distort the sound field with conventional speakers. So with virtually no coloration or distortion, they create an undeniably sweeter and distinctively natural sound.

We will come back to this later.

I gave them a quick audition using whatever equipment was in the demonstration room at the time (Marantz CD, Rotel Amp I think) to get some sort of idea of their sonic qualities, and was immediately impressed with the results. OK, I was busy and couldn't afford to give them much time, but it was fairly obvious from the brief try-out that they deserved a serious listen, preferably at home.

So I took them home.

I like my old Rogers Ls3/5a's. They are my "reference point". When I am a bit unsure of what is really going on in the world, my LS3/5a's remind me of good old British hi-fi. It's a warm

feeling of a pre-internet, pre-mobile phone, pre-digital doo-dah age, where happiness was a warm valve, waiting for the wireless to warm-up was normal, and the telly was only used for an hour or so (on the strict understanding that homework must have been finished, and that the washing-up had been done). In other words - they look old-fashioned. They still work - wonderfully well, but (and I cannot argue) aesthetically, they are boring looking brown boxes.

I replaced them with the



Celestions, and waited for "someone" to notice.

It didn't take her long.

Going by the amount of "Oohs", "Aahs", "Aren't they nice" and "Why can't we have a pair of those instead of those ugly old things" girly-type noises, I can immediately award them eleven out of ten on the WCF (wife compatibility factor) scale.

OK, so they look reasonable. I admit that. I'm not a proud man.

They sat on my purpose-built, stone speaker stands and looked as if they had always been there. Solid foundations in place, I plugged them in to my Shear Audio Phase 2 Amplifier using van den Hul CS122 speaker cable, shoved my copy of *Oh*

Mercy by Bob Dylan (CBS 465800 2) into my Helios 2 CD player, selected track 5 - "Man in the Long Black Coat", and sat back to listen.

Impressive.

Clear, controlled, and tonally precise. The imaging was OK though the top end seemed a little "squeaky", but after a bit of rearrangement so that the speakers were firing straight at me, the image became pin-sharp and any tweeter shrillness disappeared completely. All the haunting, hypnotic

qualities of the song were present in abundance, and I

found myself being more than slightly bemused by the sheer scale of the soundstage. For a small box, they were certainly producing a big sound.

The clarity and presence of the midrange and top end were as good as one could hope for in a speaker at this budget, but what really made me sit up and take notice was the scale and depth of the bass. Without being overblown in any way, the bass notes were apparently going down to the cellar whilst totally maintaining their tonal integrity.

For most reviews, I mix up the music types and see how things respond, but with this test I tried something a little different. I decided (just for fun) to play "follow the producer". Daniel Lanois produced *Oh Mercy*, so I hunted out as much as I could find from this Canadian wizard.

The next song I played was "Washing of the Water" from the

▶ piano accompaniment, and the spare, almost fragile vocal line came through brilliantly, warts and all.

On to *The Joshua Tree* by U2 (Island CIDU2 6), and track 5, "Running to Stand Still"; a similar theme, with the light and shade handled exquisitely by the loudspeakers. Just to see how they would cope with a bit more "oomph", I tracked back to "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For". This is where I found a small "niggle". I was getting rather too much top-end sibilance, especially from the vocals. At high volume, this was uncomfortable, and slightly annoying. I tried a couple of well-known squeaky sibilants from my collection, but was mystified to find that they were relatively OK. After a bit of thought, I decided that it was down to a mismatch with the Helios 2 CD player, a machine well-noted for its "bloody-mindedness" when it comes to extraneous high frequencies. With a more polite CD player, I would not expect this to be a problem. Having said that, it still annoyed me - I was actually enjoying myself.

I then went "straight for the throat", and put on one of my all-time favourite pieces of atmospheric music. "Saint Ann's Gold" from the Daniel Lanois solo album *Acadie* (Opal/Warner Brothers 7599-25969-2). On this piece, the loudspeakers performed splendidly! The tweeters behaved themselves, and the impressive soundstage managed to impress me a bit more. A hugely enjoyable listening experience from such a diminutive pair of boxes!

Earlier in this review, I said that I would return to the part that said

"so with virtually no coloration or distortion, they create an undeniably sweeter and distinctively natural sound". So I have. As far as I am concerned, every loudspeaker in the world will "colour" the sound in some way. The Celestions are no different. The important fact is not whether or not they give "coloration", but how any coloration is perceived by the listener. There is no true reproduction. To attempt to achieve this would mean not only having the same equipment as was in the recording studio control room, but

also having the same room layout. As Homer said - "the truth ain't out there!"

The best any of us can do is to try and achieve our own close approximation to what we consider our own personal truth to be. (I think that makes sense?) And as far as I am concerned, I am more than happy with the particular version of the truth I achieved with these speakers.

I have a small room. Lots of people have small rooms. There's nothing to be ashamed of there. There are lots of loudspeakers out there in hi-fi land. They range in price from as little as £50 to as much as you'd care to spend.

When it comes to achieving a suitable sound quality without taking over the room, the Celestion people have managed to come up with a very suitable candidate. I don't think that these speakers are over-priced. I think they offer an alternative to those of us who have to live in the same room as the hi-fi, and more importantly, have to live with others in the same room as the hi-fi.

I'm not trying to sell you these loudspeakers. I would like you to consider them if they are in your size/budget area. If you get a chance, give them an audition, preferably in the comfort and privacy of your own home. If you put them on suitably rigid, dense supports, and experiment a little on positioning, you may get the sort of pleasurable experience that I did.

Will I be putting the LS3/5a's out to grass in favour of the Celestion "A" Compacts - If you want my opinion on that, you'll have to ask my missus!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Frequency Response:	80 Hz - 20 kHz +/- 2dB
Crossover Frequency:	3 kHz
Power Handling:	75 Watts
Sensitivity:	87 dB
Nominal Impedance:	4 Ohms
Magnetic Shielding:	Yes
Enclosure Volume:	5 Litres
Dimensions (WxHxD):	168x245x214mm
Weight:	4.6 kg
Price:	£600

Manufacturer:

Celestion Consumer division
Tel. (44)(0)1622-687442
Fax. (44)(0)1622-687981
Net. www.celestion.com

The Lyra Helikon Phono cartridge

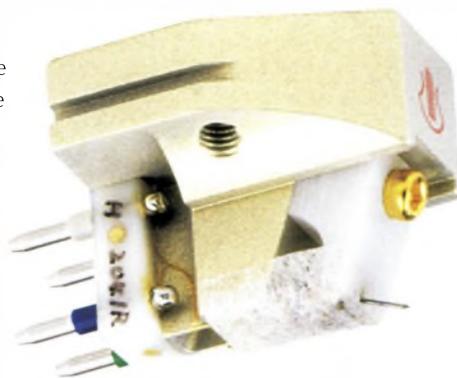
by Chris Binns

I've been lying. Maybe that's putting it a little strongly..... procrastinating, or avoiding the issue might be more realistic. I could have impressed the hell out of the editor by actually presenting this review before the required deadline (and I fully expect a dry witty editorial comment to be inserted at this point) but I didn't. As for Nigel Crump of Path Premier, who imports the Lyra Helikon cartridge.... Well Nigel, I had to be absolutely sure.

By the time you read this, the game will be up. I can't imagine that my bank manager will be particularly sympathetic to the notion of increasing my overdraft limit for the purposes of vinyl replay, and all non-essential items, such as food, drink etc. have been crossed off the Christmas list.

So it must be more than just a little obvious that I think the Helikon is a damn good cartridge. What other reason is there for all this filthy talk of dishonesty and bank managers? Read on.

The Lyra cartridges have been around for quite a while. Lyra is in fact the brand name for Scantech, who have also been responsible for the manufacturing of cartridges for companies such as Linn (the Archiv) and Spectral. The first model of their



own to appear was the Clavis, which appeared some eight or nine years ago if my memory is correct. This was refined into the Clavis Da Capo, shedding the casework in the process, and ultimately has undergone another metamorphosis to produce the Helikon. As an aside, the original Clavis did sound better with the case removed, the downside of course was that it became more vulnerable.

The Helikon comes packaged in a simple cardboard box (No leather attaché case....) with Instructions and specifications. A small point I know, but it makes my life so much easier to have all of the necessary information such as tracking weight and loading recommendations to hand.

Beautifully finished, the Helikon is, as I have said, more or less an

open body design, while installation is made comparatively safe by the incorporation of a really sensible stylus guard. Mounting and lining up can all be performed with this in place, which for anyone who has experienced one of those heart stopping moments when the screwdriver slips and sends the arm skating across the turntable, is a positive aid to a healthier life. The substantial top plate is threaded, and the generator assembly is equipped with a solid boron cantilever with a fine line type stylus, and a compliance that should suit a wide range of medium mass type arms.

Confronted with a brand spanking new sample, I was not particularly looking forward to running it in. Changing records every twenty minutes or so becomes tedious in the extreme, but I have to admit that straight from the box the Helikon was worth listening to. Yes, it did improve with time, but apart from one small surprise it showed none of the schizophrenic tendencies that can sometimes afflict cartridges. Interestingly, it was also quite relaxed about set up, and when the time came for me to fine-tune its installation, it seemed to be relatively uncritical of small adjustments. I started off with the tracking

▶ weight set at the manufacturers maximum recommendation of 1.75 grams, and ended up reducing it to 1.65 g with no apparent degradation. Now there's a first. I used it in both a Mission Mechanic and a Linn Ekos mounted on an LP12 with an Armagedon power supply, feeding the Pass Labs Aleph ono phono stage. Specified loading for the cartridge is a wide 100 – 47000 ohms and there are benefits to be had at both extremes, but I imagine the final choice will be system dependent. In my system I settled on a loading of 1200 ohms which for me yielded the best compromise.

I listen to music on both CD and records. When I get a good CD player to review I'm always happy that my ever-growing disc collection sounds good, and after all, it does now represent a greater proportion of my contemporary taste in music. But I still buy vinyl, so it's not just nostalgia kicking in. But with a product like the Helikon on the turntable, I can turn into a vinyl addict. Did you ever have that craving when you were at school/college that made you run home and play a particular record or track over and over again? Well I've got it now. I rushed home today from the college where I teach to spend several hours feeling guilty while listening to music. Why guilty? I should have been writing this review.

The Helikon sounds delightfully refined, with no trace of hardness or edginess. Possessing a top end response that just seemed to go on forever with no discernible limit gave all sorts of music an open quality that I have often missed with other designs. I was reminded of the Audioquest 7000 that I used to use - hardly suprising in view of the fact that Scantech used to manufacture that cartridge too. Mid-range was similarly open with plenty of detail, with an almost gilt

edged definition. Bass performance exhibited some change as time went on, becoming more tuneful and open, but remaining taut with instruments such as kick drum and percussion.

Some twenty years ago I was working in a large London recording studio when Talking Heads released their fourth album *Remain in Light*. When the first copy arrived in the studio, all of the various artists and engineers working that day were somewhat gobsmacked when they first heard it. Listening to it today with the Helikon, I can hear exactly why. The rhythmic impact and sheer power of each track is tremendous. The complicated percussion tracks were reproduced without any confusion or smearing, and with more detail than I ever remember hearing before.

The last cartridge I used that really lifted my skirt was the Tubaphon PU 3 (see Issue 6) and I still consider it to be one of the finest cartridges I have ever heard. The Helikon graces music with the same tactile quality that the Tubaphon was so capable of, one of the fundamental things that can make listening to recordings so enjoyable. Intriguingly, my recollections of the PU3 were that it had more of an 'organic', (dare I say earthy?) quality to it; and a little more snap in the mid range. By contrast, the Helikon sounds very slightly mechanical in its presentation. But don't forget that a) the Tubaphon is almost twice the price, and b) tracks at 2.5 grams which might distress the more paranoid vinyl junkie. Frankly, I think it's horses for courses – a friend of mine has listened to both and found the Tubaphon a little too 'head on' for his taste; he promptly fell in love with the Lyra.

As we were discussing this, I felt that the Helikon had more or less run in and settled down. But it still had one small surprise up it's sleeve....

Almost overnight it developed a bit more mid-range punch, as if it had been at the steroids. Snare drums were now even crisper sounding with more attack, and string instruments developed more immediacy, with better texture to the sound. Listening to a recording of the Shostakovich *Chamber Symphony* became a much more personal and intimate experience with this new found authority, the sound of the cellos in particular had a vibrant quality that was remarkable.

I don't really need to finish this review with a conclusion. The original Clavis became something of a benchmark, costing £1195 before it was superseded. Nearly ten years later comes the Helikon, refining what was already a great cartridge. But, and I've saved the best bit until last – at £1095 it's one hundred pounds cheaper and with twice the output of the original, a lot easier to use. And if that's not progress, I'll give up drinking. Hell, maybe I'll have to - although I doubt even that would convince my bank manager. ➤✚

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low output moving-coil
Cartridge weight:	8.0g
Internal impedance:	5.5 ohms
Tracking force:	1.6 – 1.75g
Output voltage:	0.5mV
Loading:	100 – 47000 ohms
Compliance:	12 cu
Price:	£1095

Distributor:

Path Premier

Tel. (44)(0) 1844-219000

Fax. (44)(0) 1844-219099

E-mail. premier@path.co.uk

ClearAudio Gamma 'S' 2000 Moving-Coil Cartridge

by Roy Gregory

For many years, the Gamma represented ClearAudio's cheapest moving-coil cartridge, a way-point en route to the stars (well, the Pradikat or Accurate anyway). It looked much like its more illustrious, and much more expensive brethren, and shared the sheer verve and energy that they brought to vinyl replay, but at some cost in terms of overall manners and practicality. Like the top ClearAudios the Gamma was heavy, being built on a lead alloy body, and demanding when it came to tonearm quality. Used right it was capable of stunning results, but drop it into just any old record player and the demands quickly started to out-strip the strengths – rather like the old Decca Gold in fact.

Despite its long shelf life (another thing it has in common with other ClearAudios) the Gamma was clearly falling by the wayside, overshadowed by the cheaper, wooden bodied Sigma and the new Victory models. Except that none of these alternatives, despite superior balance and detail, could match the older design's "life and soul of the party" approach. Clearly time for a makeover!

What the Gamma desperately needed was what all aging lotharios can do with – tidying up and losing some weight. Enter the Gamma 'S' 2000, redesigned and raring to go. It sports a new, all black finish (very slimming), gold coils and most importantly, an aluminium alloy body which makes for a much more manageable overall package.

One thing that hasn't changed is the mounting arrangements. You still

have to deal with those nasty and very fiddly recessed nuts and slot head screws, you still have to stretch the headshell wiring way forward to reach the pins. Fortunately ClearAudio supply a set of their excellent (and very long) cartridge tags. You should use them, even if you don't absolutely have to, simply because they sound better than most of what's out there and don't break.



I ran the Gamma in my Incognitoed Rega RB300, and even the standard counterweight wasn't hanging off the back. Mounted on the Clearlight Recovery, alignment was a doddle, helped by the turntable's excellent armbase with its built in VTA adjustment. Just as well, as the Gamma is just as sensitive to vertical tracking angle as the more expensive models – and that means hyper critical. Tiny increments make very real differences to the musical coherence, balance and drive of the cartridge. Don't even think about trying to use this cartridge

in a fixed height arm. Get it wrong and it either sounds dull and disjointed or bass light and aggressive. But once you get it right the Gamma rewards you with all the power and boogie factor of the original, along with more detail and deeper bass. Whereas the older version sounded fast but a bit truncated, the 'S' has a far more evenly tapered bass response which allows it to step back a little, offering a more natural perspective without any loss of immediacy.

In fact, with its particular blend of virtues, I could see this being the perfect cartridge for an LP12/ARO combination, especially one fitted with a Valhalla or Armageddon kit as opposed to the Lingo. The Gamma offers a similar sense of life and involvement at the expense of technical neutrality, fun and musical enjoyment at the expense of absolute accuracy. If you are the sort of listener who is prepared to ask the question 'Accuracy to what?' then the Gamma's infectious performance could be right up your street. If you feel like your system could do with a lift then look no further, which is why I thought that it might be a good idea to pass it along to.....

Dave Davies

I've lived with a few cartridges recently, some of them pretty fine. In fact 'fine' is the word, as neither my now aging Wilson-Benesche Carbon, or a brief acquaintance with an Ortofon Jubilee, have managed to inject some much needed life into

► my record player. Very detailed, and undoubtedly refined: bags of poise and impeccable manners, but missing that certain something that makes a performance spark. They both sound rather safe and familiar. Oh, okay, I admit it. I've had an affair and now the cartridge at home seems just a little bit boring. The excitement of living dangerously you see.

It all started when Roy introduced me to a rather cute ClearAudio Signature: how vivacious, what fun and so much energy. Life just hasn't been the same since. (And if that doesn't sound like living dangerously, just you try fitting £1500 worth of someone else's cartridge, and then leaving it in a house with two teenagers and a cat, not to mention a suddenly neglected and very possibly vengeful wife!) The trouble is, all good things come to an end, and I was left broken hearted and musically bereft when Siggy transferred her affections elsewhere (someone with the money to support her properly, I dare say).

That was a year ago, and you'd of thought I'd have learnt my lesson, but no. When Roy rolled up clutching this new and re-vitalised Gamma 2000 did I show him the door? Did I hell! I took him straight to the turntable. After all, why install fragile and expensive exotica your-self when you've got a tame editor to do it for you? Besides, it's all his fault anyway.

Mounted in my Mission Mechanic (the rest of the kit is primarily Michell with an upgraded Michell Gyro (Orbe platter, clamp and sub-chassis), an Orca pre-amp, two stereo power amps and an ISO/ Hera into Ruark Paladins), I bunged on an old favourite, Rockin' Jimmy and The Brothers of the Night. The musical involvement was back, and then some, with powerful driving bass, a slightly forward presentation and real speed (the other cartridges seemingly had all the speed of a startled

tortoise by comparison). The snare on 'Stand Back' had real snap and the backing vocals provided their little shove at exactly the right moment. These qualities combined to draw me right into the performance, and the record was played from end to end, along with a vast pile of jazz, folk, classical and blues albums that were dug out as the night wore on. Everything seemed to take on a new vitality: Prefab Sprout's *From Langley Park to Memphis*, no slouch of a recording with any decent gear, was even more open and three-dimensional; The Meters' *Struttin'*, Sonny Rollins' *Our Man in Jazz*, Julian Bream' playing the Arnold *Guitar Concerto*,



the lot! This is a cartridge that simply romps along, majoring on impact, vitality and speed. Rather like an old Decca Gold (but with a lot more bass) the Gamma 2000 puts everything into the life of the performance. It's hard not to love it, warts and all.

In fact, my only criticisms of the Gamma S are minor, and seem almost churlish. Firstly, its wider than average body means that it tangles with the Michell clamp at the end of the run-out grooves resulting in more side end

'thump' than normal. This didn't bother me, but if you're a Gyro owner, or use a record clamp, take note. Secondly, the Gamma lacks a little refinement. Whilst it wrings just about every emotional drop from a performance, it simply doesn't draw the last amount of detail from a recording, or arrange it in nice orderly rows. Mind you, I don't think that was ever intended to be its strength.

By ClearAudio standards (and musical standards for that matter) the new Gamma 'S' 2000 is a bargain. The more expensive Signature has all the power of the Gamma, deeper bass and bags of finesse, and I'm still smitten. That's the cartridge I'm saving for! In the meantime, the Gamma 2000 goes a long way to ward off the pangs, does so at a comparatively modest price, and packs a ridiculous amount of sheer musical enjoyment into its small, wide-bodied frame. What's to dislike? 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low Output Moving Coil
Cartridge Body:	Aluminium Alloy
Cartridge Mass:	4g
Output Level:	0.6mV
Cantilever:	Boron Rod
Compliance:	15cu
Stylus Type:	Trigon III
Rec. load:	50 ohms
Price:	£800

Distributor:

Audio Reference
Tel. (44)(0)1483 575344
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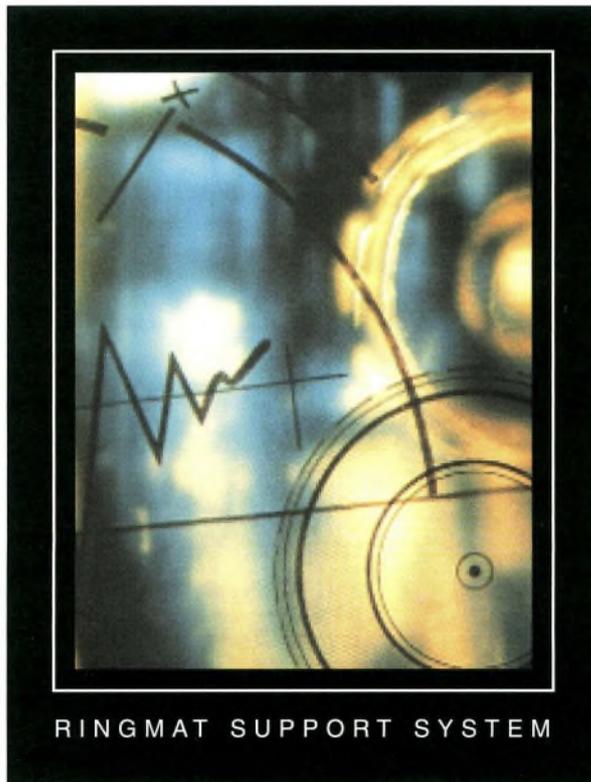
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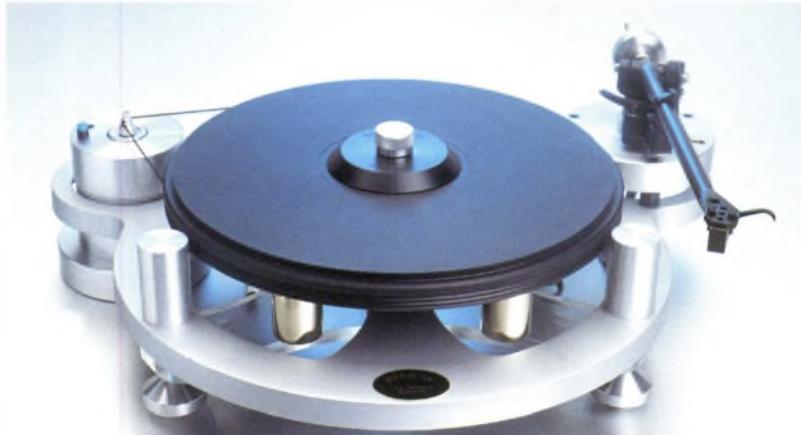
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June 1999

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open

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- skip +

model

Muse Model 9 multi-Standard Digital Player

by Jimmy Hughes

You could say it's been an uncertain time for high-end CD players these past couple of years, what with the promise of higher specification non-compatible Super CD formats in the offing. Agreed, the Messiah's been a long time coming. The gestation period has been enormously protracted - for political as much as technical reasons. And this in itself has created further uncertainty.

Certainly, if I were in the market for a CD player in the 2k+ price band, I'd be concerned to buy something future-proof; something that could be upgraded or converted at a later stage. Just in case. After all, if a new format did come along, and you had to replace your CD player, you'd probably be offered relatively little in part-ex for it - no matter how expensive when new.

The Muse Model 9 in basic form plays CD and DVD-V including the small number of 24/96 stereo discs available, but can be converted to play DVD-A. So the option's there if needed. Costing £3250, it's not exactly inexpensive. But you do get an audiophile standard hand-tuned product for your money. One, moreover, that looks the business as well as sounding it. I used it exclusively as an audio CD player, but it could form the centrepiece of a high-end DVD-V home cinema installation. For the exceptionally well-heeled, an improved 'Signature' version at \$4000 is also listed.

The Model 9 arrived at an opportune moment; impeccable timing in more senses than one. The Arcam FMJ I reviewed a couple of issues back had recently been returned from

whence it came, so it was back to my ancient much-modified and re-clocked Pioneer PD-75. Shock! Horror! When I tried to get the old girl up and running again, she wasn't having it. Clearly, I'd been 'unfaithful' one time too many.

I tried and tried. But electronic Alzheimer's had addled the player's brains and it wouldn't recognise discs when inserted. Happily, I was able to lay hands on a Rotel RCD-991.

But after the superb Arcam it wasn't quite the same. The Rotel sounded fairly lucid and detailed, but the top-end has a damped 'shut-in' quality by comparison - and no amount of tweaking could wholly eradicate it.

Many times I've voiced the opinion that CD has a sort of in-built glass ceiling so far as absolute sound quality goes. It promises much, but reaches a certain standard and then goes no further. There always seems to be something holding back the sound in ultimate terms. To be fair, as the years have passed and the standard of both discs and machines has improved, the glass ceiling has perceptibly risen too. At best, one hardly notices any limitation at all. But it's still there, I feel.

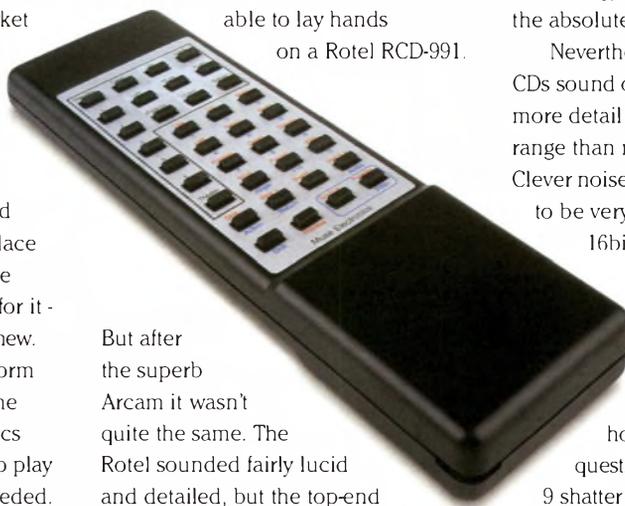
Of course CD's 16bit/44.1kHz specification is limiting. But LPs cut from digital mastertapes with comparable specifications don't sound like CDs. 20bit resolution has been available at the recording stage since the late '80s. While 24bit recording became possible in the early '90s, so clearly home playback technology has seriously fallen behind the absolute state-of-the-art.

Nevertheless, the very best modern CDs sound outstandingly good, with more detail and a wider dynamic range than many systems can handle. Clever noise-shaping algorithms seem to be very successful at tricking the 16bit CD to recreate the

increased performance of hi-bit mastertapes. So, how fascinating to try a player that promises a little extra - just to see how far things can go. The question is - did the Muse Model 9 shatter that glass ceiling?

Well, maybe not quite. But I'm certain there are shards of glass on my carpet that weren't there before! Here's a player with a beautifully natural limpid sound - one that's subtly detailed and articulate without being the least bit hi-fi. Tonal balance is very accurate; neither warm nor cool but just right. Presentation is refined yet powerful, but not in an up-front, in-your-face, blow-your-socks-off manner. Terracing of dynamics from loud to soft is impressive, giving a sense of weight and power to climaxes.

Best of all, there's outstanding separation and space around and



▶ between the notes, giving voices and instruments increased dynamic projection. CD, for all its superficial sharpness and detail, can sound curiously 'flat' dynamically, encouraging you to play music more loudly than you might otherwise want to, in order to achieve a sense of presence. The Model 9 sounds full-bodied and articulate without needing to be played loudly, filling the room comfortably and easily with music.

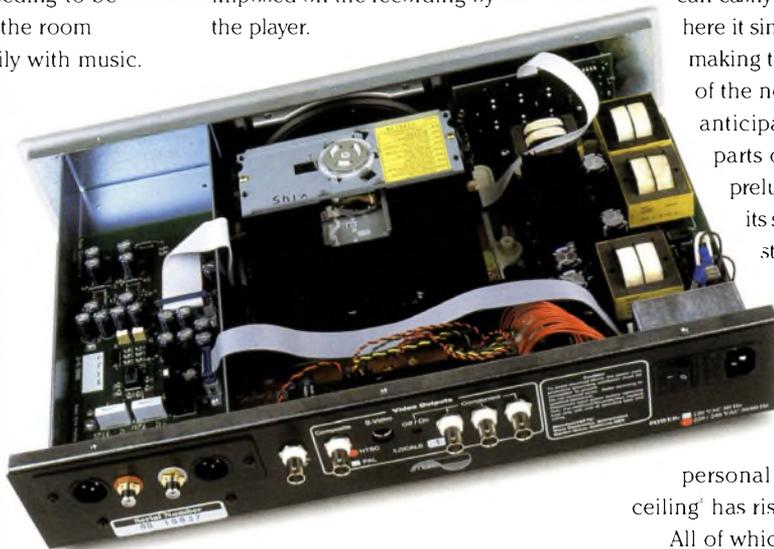
At the same time, the sound has what I can only describe as gorgeous subtlety and refinement. The Muse model 9 is not perhaps an immediately impressive-sounding player, and in any case needs two or three days before it's at its very best. But there's a rightness about things more or less from the moment you switch on; after that, it just get better and better. The sound is wide-ranging but beautifully composed; immediate and engaging, but also alluring.

Trying to analyse the various qualities that make the Model 9 special, I'd say first and foremost it's the articulate presentation that's apparent first. Play a good piano CD and you'll notice how precisely the notes start and stop. Rhythmically, the music has a very precise feel - as though the Model 9 could turn on a sonic sixpence. There's no smearing; none of the tendency for things to 'spread', that you find with lesser players.

But while such clean precise articulation improves the rendition of detail, it can (if taken too far) lead to a presentation that's slightly cold and analytical. Fortunately, the Muse Model 9 doesn't fall into that trap. It's as precise as one could wish, but

also smooth and flowing. When I listen to it, I trust what I'm hearing. It sounds faithful, believable, plausible, correct. It strikes me as both accurate and authentic; truthful in every sense.

You can point to certain sonic qualities or characteristics (as I've already done), but there's never any sense of these things being superimposed on the recording by the player.



Rather, it's liberating what's already there. As a consequence, it's not always easy to predict how the Model 9 will sound on a given recording. Quite a few discs I tried surprised me - not just by sounding better than anticipated, but by revealing hitherto unsuspected qualities and characteristics.

Want a fr'instance? Okay; the 1994 Philips recording of Bizet's *Carmen* and *L'Arlesienne* orchestral suites with the Orchestre de Paris conducted by Semyon Bychkov. It's been a while since I last played this disc, and on past experience I'd not have said the sound was all that special - just a nice average Philips. But, via the Model 9, I finally realised just how good the recording actually is. The detail's remarkable, with lovely naturalness and clarity.

Perhaps there's a slight dryness apparent, but (and this is what I meant earlier by saying I trust what the Model

9 tells me), it sounds like the hall acoustic in which the orchestra was recorded rather than a characteristic the electronics are superimposing on the original sound. Stereo imaging was excellent - notable for its precision and solidity - while percussion sounded incredibly tactile and crisp.

The famous prelude to *Carmen* can easily seem 'noisy' and brash; here it simply sounded bracing, making the hairs on the back of the neck stand up in anticipation. Bravo! Some parts of *L'Arlesienne* (the prelude, for example, with its strongly-bowed unison strings) can seem rather grainy and raw. Here the sound was full-blooded and immediate, with trenchant biting strings. Clearly, my

personal version of CD's 'glass ceiling' has risen perceptibly.

All of which makes me wonder how things might sound playing DVD-A material. Of course the sound should be better still. But early reports are mixed; some listeners have expressed disappointment with DVD-A, especially compared to its SACD rival. However, I feel sure any problems are simply down to the teething difficulties suffered by many new technologies when first introduced.

However, DVD-A will need to get its act together quickly if it's to gain consumer confidence. When ordinary CD is reproduced well, it's pretty damn good. So good, it's probably all most listeners will ever want or need. Indeed, on this very point I have to say there were times when I sat listening to the Muse Model 9 and wondered if things could possibly get any better.

Okay, I don't mean that literally; of course, even the best can be improved. Perfection is unattainable, and in any case the Model 9 is

▶ not even the final statement from Muse. The Signature is their best shot. But that's not the point. When the reproduction of music reaches a standard where you cease to be aware of the mechanics used to recreate the sound, you're 'there' - at the threshold of perfection!

With the Model 9 at its best, there seemed to be nothing lacking. It was lucid and informative, but at the same time easy and relaxed. The music sounded focussed and immediate, without being cold tonally or overly analytical. The top-end is very free and open-sounding, giving the treble a nice sharp tactile quality. I think that's the thing I noticed most, going over to the Muse from the Rotel. The latter wasn't anywhere near as open and airy by comparison.

For normal use, the player has a set of unbalanced analogue outputs using regular RCA type phono sockets. However, for those with amplifiers that have balanced inputs, the Model 9 offers a set of balanced outputs. Unusually, Muse have tailored things so that output levels between balanced and unbalanced are identical - usually, a balanced output offers about 3dB of extra gain.

Simplistically, balanced working has an 'active' negative signal independent of ground. The negative functions dynamically - like the positive, only in reverse. With unbalanced operation, the negative is the same as earth or ground; ie 0V. Because I use a line-matching transformer between CD player and amplifier, it's possible to utilise balanced operation.

The bulk of my listening was undertaken using the ordinary unbalanced outputs, since that's the

way most people will use the player. It was only near the end of the review period (when the player was returned after photography) that I sampled balanced working. It's a pity so few amplifiers feature balanced inputs - it's not unduly expensive to implement, and it produces real gains in performance.



There's no doubt; balanced-operation enhanced this fine player's sound quality further still. There's increased depth and transparency, plus improved sharpness and fine detail. Music reproduction is more vivid and three-dimensional - more expressive and subtly nuanced - while delicacy and naturalness seem enhanced. Stereo sounded more pin-point precise too.

Every CD played sounded fresher and more alive. All the praise I previously heaped on the Model 9 needs turbo-charging. Now, what was I saying just a few paragraphs back about being unable to imagine anything better? Me and my big mouth... Anyway, if you're lucky enough to have an amplifier with balanced inputs, the Model 9's balanced output option is definitely worth taking advantage of.

To sum up - an outstanding audiophile grade CD player that just happens to play movies too. It could form the centrepiece of a home theatre system - though

whether one would reap the full benefit of its sonic excellence in such situations is a moot point. I prefer to look on the Muse Model 9 as a superlative CD player that's capable of being updated to reproduce DVD-A software as and when it becomes properly available. Heartily recommended to those with deep pockets and refined taste. Though not necessarily in that order... 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	DVD-V player
Sampling Rate:	< 96 KHz / 24bit
Output level:	2.0v
Outputs:	2 x Phono (Audio) Balanced (Audio) 1 x BNC (Digital) BNC Composite Video 3 x BNC Component Video S-Video
Dimensions (WxHxD):	440x90x290mm
Finishes:	Silver, Black
Price:	£3250

Distributor:

Audiofreaks
Tel. (44)(0)208-948-4153
Fax. (44)(0)208-948-4250
E-mail. info@audiofreaks.co.uk
Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Muse Electronics, Inc.
Net. www.museelectronics.com



MONITOR STANDBY

WARLOCK

BY BOW TECHNOLOGIES



The Bow Technologies Warlock and Walrus Pre and Power Amps

by Chris Binns

Fzzzz.....Bang. And a flash. The editor looked up and said, "another valve gone?" I sighed. Such occurrences are not uncommon in my system at the moment. Fond as I am of valve amplification, the stress of running a pair of large power amplifiers with lots of output tubes is beginning to show, although to be fair I should add that I am using them to evaluate valves for a forthcoming article on KT88's and 6550's. Needless to say I was struggling with one of the less promising brands submitted for review, and getting pretty fed up as a consequence. Of course the editor was in the room while I was cursing and being petulant, saying that I was definitely going solid-state and that was that. So I shouldn't really have been surprised at the arrival of the Bow technologies pre and power amplifier, the Warlock and rather unflatteringly named Walrus.

In many ways, the timing couldn't have been better. The Bow technologies conducted itself with exactly the demeanour you would expect of a high-end solid-state amp, and mercifully, behaved itself impeccably. The last thing I needed at this particular moment in time was a fussy, troublesome amplifier, and if ever there was an opportunity for solid-state to get on and do its stuff, this was it. So, out came the resident Primary pre and power amps, and

in went the Bow Technologies.

As a result the Bow amps ended up being fed from my normal Meridian 508.24 CD player or the Linn with Ekos and the rather splendid Helikon cartridge, and in the first instance driving the Primary monitors. I gave it a couple of days to bed down, and ventured in for a listen. Initial results were promising, with most of the hallmarks of a good solid-state



amplifier in place, and not too many of the potential vices. The Walrus obviously had no problem with awkward loads, as (extremely) high levels were possible without any sign of strain or hardening up, and the bottom end performance was tight and extended with buckets of authority. Mid range and top end were fine with nothing missing as such, but somehow the sound as a whole failed to really communicate with music that relied on anything other than sheer volume for impact. Most of the more gentle string music that I've been listening to

recently simply didn't click, lacking tension and any sense of interplay. I can handle that! I just listened to loud unsophisticated music for a while... Well, what did you expect?!

The aesthetics of the Bow components are something of a statement. Put it this way, it came as no surprise to learn that Bo Christiansen trained as an architect, and that this is the man who was also responsible for the Primare 928 and 200 series.

There is definitely a sculptured look to the Bow products, most obviously with the pre amplifier where the controls are shrouded by a metal façade that forms a flying front panel. It is purely aesthetic, and looks as if it should be detachable, but it's not. The power amplifier is relatively understated, the only feature on the front panel is a block of LED's that spell out the manufacturers name in sequence when powered up.

Or so I thought. I was somewhat baffled by the lack of a standby switch, assuming, as I always do when the power switch is located on the back panel, that it was designed to be left switched on. It wasn't until considerably later that I discovered that the centre of the 'o' in Bow was actually a switch. It's so beautifully executed that you'd never know that it's a separate part. What a fool....but hey, I didn't have an instruction book.

Remote control is provided in the form of the Wand, an elegantly machined cylinder capable of

▶ controlling both the pre-amp and CD player. Having said that, you only actually get volume control over the pre-amp, as remote input selection would necessitate the inclusion of relays in the signal path and thus compromise performance. A really lovely piece of design, in practice the Wand was not quite as ergonomic as I would have hoped, mainly due to the smooth aluminium finish being rather slippery, and lending it a penchant for hiding amongst the cushions of the settee. However, this wasn't the problem it might have been if the thing had actually worked. After checking the batteries, I conducted a few experiments, the conclusions of which were that unless you were facing the pre amp it would not work

further than a few feet away, and the acceptance angle was only about 30 degrees. Results with the CD player were a little better, but it seems a shame to go to so much trouble and expense for it to be so ineffective. By comparison, I have a B&O system that I use in my bedroom - its remote will operate from the garden, and they are hardly a company that have compromised style for sound quality. And I won't even mention the alternative uses for the wand that various inquisitive visitors came up with.

The finish on all the Bow equipment is absolutely first class. All exposed aluminium has a high quality satin polish, and the build quality and fit is to a superb standard. Always something of a talking point for visitors, the overall effect is quite striking, and I'd guess that for many people it exactly fulfils their idea of what high-end audio should look like.

So where was I? Oh yes. Listening to unsophisticated music. Nothing

wrong with that, but my results with orchestral music were rather less successful. Talking Heads' *Remain In Light* sounded tremendous, and the Bow was obviously doing a good job of sorting out this rhythmically complex music. In fact it seemed to thrive on it, helped by the first rate signal from the Helicon. But at the moment I felt that I was choosing



music for the system, rather than what I wanted to listen to; a late night session of Bantock's *Hebridean symphony* was just not as involving as I wanted it to be. This melodic and hauntingly romantic music seemed to fall out of the speakers without enough projection to actually develop any atmosphere.

So far, I had literally just substituted the Primary system for the Bow Technologies amplifier and had not really paid any attention to system set up. The first option as always was to try some different cables. The balanced option proved disappointing (although this may have been down to the relatively low grade cables used), and discussions with RG raised the subject of the Clearlight Audio interconnects. To that point I had been

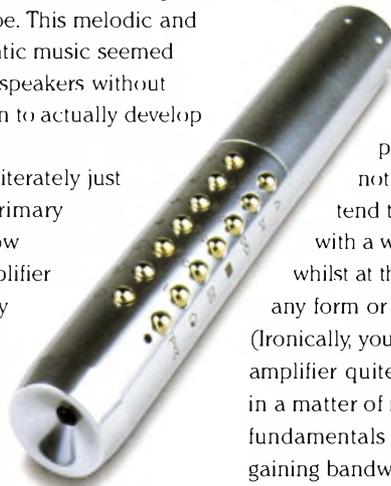
using Nordost SPM right through the system, and I'll admit to being dubious, but the substitution proved worthwhile. Although some of the incisive midrange detail and absolute clarity was lost, the overall sound was much more solid, dynamic and engaging to listen to. Removing the SPM speaker cables and using various other types resulted in a loss of coherence, so I stuck with them.

I guess this is the exception that proves the rule.

The next line of attack was the supports. The addition of a trio of Pulsar Points (unfortunately the expensive titanium ones) under the pre amp helped to improve the fluidity and projection of the sound, and putting Clearlight RDC 2 cones under the power amp introduced some much needed

humanity and colour to proceedings.

I always seem to be going on about running equipment in or letting it settle down, but it does seem to be especially important with large solid state amplifiers where the process can take days if not weeks. From cold they tend to bombard the listener with a welter of information, whilst at the same time lacking any form or structure to hang it on. (Ironically, your average valve power amplifier quite often springs to life in a matter of minutes, getting the fundamentals right from the word go, gaining bandwidth and detail as time goes by.) But now, with the above tweaks in place and some more running time under their belt, the Bows were beginning to sound a lot more together. It still did not have that homogenous quality that a really good thermionic amplifier seems to possess, but the music was flowing ▶



The Warlock is a line level pre amplifier with five inputs, four of which offer both balanced and single ended connection. The two sets of outputs are also thus equipped, and a single tape output (together with input five) offers a monitoring facility for either three headed tape decks or a processor. Back

panel socketry is to a high standard, well laid out and accessible. Front panel controls consist of an input selector, tape monitor, standby and volume. A special mention is made of this in the instruction book, and if I understand correctly, the motorised Alps potentiometer does not pass any signal, it merely shorts a greater or lesser amount of it to ground, thus alleviating this critical component of the potential to degrade the

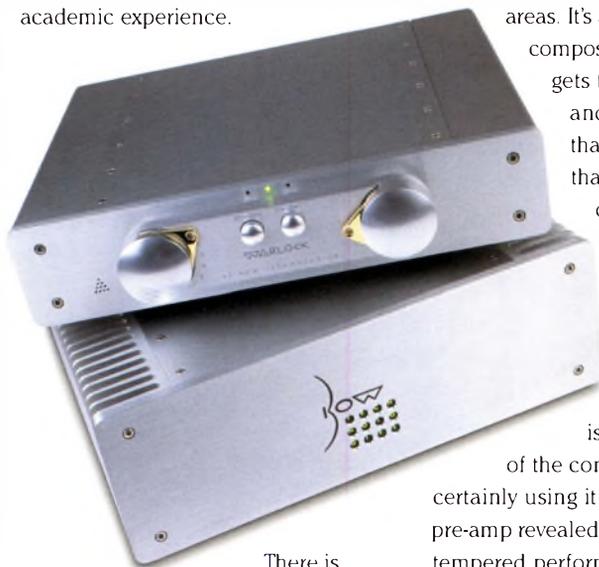
sound. Every endeavour has been made to keep the signal path as direct as possible, hence the lack of a balance control.

The power amplifier is a dual mono affair whose looks belie its weight. It is extremely heavy, due in part to no less than four large mains transformers and its substantial heat-sinking. Two pairs of loudspeaker outputs and again balanced or single ended options feature on the back panel along with the mains switch. Circuitry is basically Mus - fet, employing two pairs of high speed Toshiba output devices per channel, with minimal current feedback employed. Specified at 150 Watts per side into eight ohms, double the output is claimed into a four ohm load, promising good load tolerance.

an exciting sense of precision. It had a real feeling of effortless power, available on demand. The beauty of the Bow is that nothing phases it. Play anything at any volume and you know exactly what you are going to get.

For me, ultimately the Bows miss the mark by failing to wrap me in the music. But you may not want that. If you play predominantly modern music, and you want it delivered stylishly, on time, every time, search no further. They offer one hell of a performance, with exemplary construction and ravishing looks. I want more, but I'm going to have to suffer for it. I'm heading back to my valve amps, soldering iron and fire extinguisher in hand... ➤

► in a far more enjoyable manner. Listening to the Eva Cassidy disc, *Live at Blues Alley* it was now far easier to close your eyes and soak up some of the emotion in her voice. Previously it had been an entirely academic experience.



There is something of a culture shock when going from a valve based system to the ultra competence of a solid-state one. What I missed with the Bow Technologies system was the intimacy that I'm used to. Apparent in particular with more delicate material such as small scale strings or female

voice, there is a lack of texture and vibrational minutiae in the harmonic structure that can rob this music of some of its drama and feel, rendering it a little less satisfying and meaningful.

The Bow's strengths lie in other areas. Its ability to maintain composure when the going gets tough is enviable, and I would often find that complex music that had traditionally disintegrated into a mush was being preserved with considerable integrity. I suspect that the Walrus power amplifier is the stronger part of the combination, and certainly using it with the Primary pre-amp revealed an even and well tempered performer, the sound quality of which remained consistent regardless of loudspeaker load or volume. I thoroughly enjoyed the control and solid stability that the Bow gave to more substantial music, thriving on unravelling complex layers and patterns. It cruised through demanding music, and it did so with

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Walrus power amplifier

Power output:	150 watts rms into 8 ohms 300 4 ohms
Power bandwidth:	2 - 300KHz
Input sensitivity:	2v for full output
Input impedance:	50K ohms
Overall -ve feedback:	20dB
Dimensions:(WxDxH)	434x390x160mm
Weight:	33Kg
Price:	£2995

Warlock pre amplifier

Input sensitivity:	0.35v
Input impedance:	50K ohm
Output impedance:	Less than 10 ohms
Dimensions:(WxDxH)	434x410x110mm
Weight:	12Kg
Price:	£3495

Distributor:

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E-mail. premier@path.co.uk

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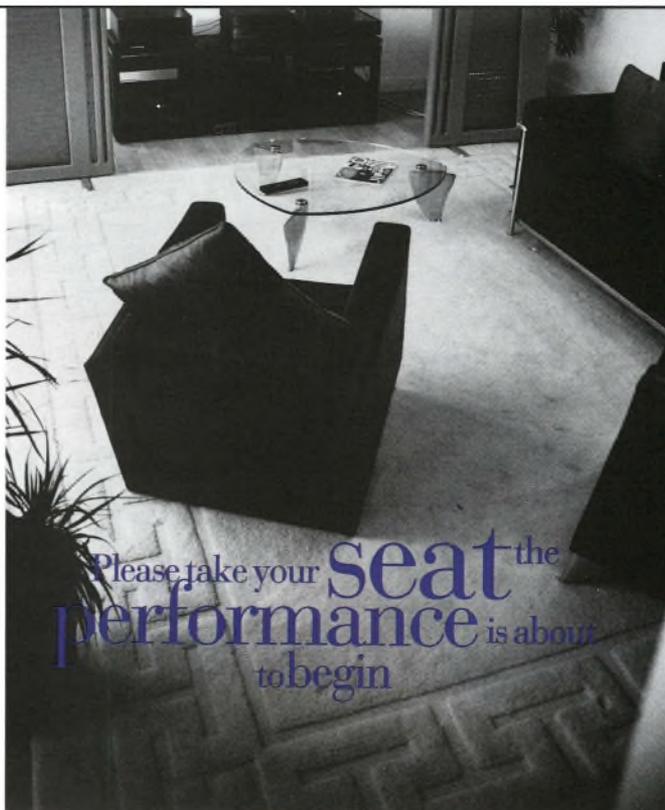
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Kandy

The Real Deal – Roksan Kandy CD Player and Integrated Amp

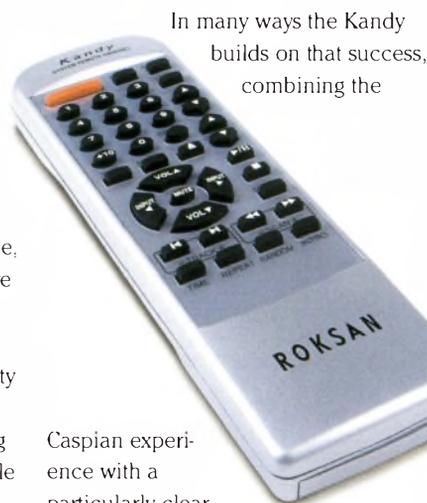
by Roy Gregory

For a product to qualify for the Real Deal it's got to offer sound that sets it apart from the crowd. There are a huge number of "me too" products cluttering up the bargain basement, and as tends to be the case with clones, they don't necessarily possess the spark of the product that inspired them. Sorting the wheat from the chaff can be a long and difficult process, and it's not helped by conflicting reports in magazines and the disparity in some of the competitor's advertising budgets. I mean, all those pages of glossy photographs have got to add up to something, right?

But there's more to it than just sounding good. In today's market place, products are under increasing pressure to offer a whole range of facilities and functions which stand in stark opposition to the straight-line simplicity ideal that has dominated hi-fi design for so long. It's no good simply making the best sounding amp for £400. People have got to buy it for you to stay in business. The reality of the situation is that nowadays, the successful designer is the one who can incorporate the demands of the market place without it impacting the sound quality of his products, and that is a lot easier said than done.

The Roksan Kandy range first caught my eye (or should that be ear) at this year's Bristol show. Using just a CD player and a single integrated amp driving a small pair of Monitor Audio speakers they were making one of the most musically enjoyable sounds in the whole hotel. Add to that a 'package' that includes system

remote control, as many inputs as you are likely to need as well as a few rather nice touches that I'll be getting to, a range of wacky colours and fit and finish that belies the affordable price and you've got a pair of very interesting products indeed. Of course, Roksan aren't exactly new to this game, and the more expensive Caspian range is both a critical and commercial success.

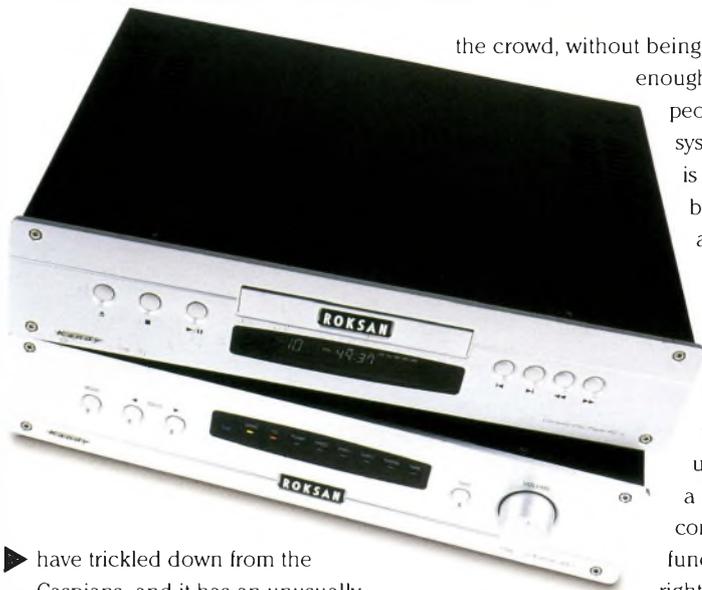


In many ways the Kandy builds on that success, combining the Caspian experience with a particularly clear vision of what's required in the next price band down.

Okay, nice pitch but where's the evidence? Well, as I said, there are a couple of unexpected touches on the Kandys, as well as a few surprising omissions. Let's start with the amp, because that's where they are most obvious. There's the normal rack of inputs and a tape loop, volume control of course, and a standby (mode) button, just to keep everything nice and warm. The surprises start round the back. Firstly there's a headphone socket, exactly the kind of useful facility that so often gets dumped on

grounds of cost or style (after all, what self respecting designer wants a quarter inch hole in his or her product?). Putting it round the back is a nice compromise. Next to that is a switch that allows you to choose between using the phono input via the built-in moving magnet stage or as an additional line level input. And the loop on the back? The one labelled remote out. That's a line level output to run to a remote system in another room. It's fixed level, so it doesn't provide the popular add a power amp option (which is a big surprise) but the provision of a pre-amp input means that it is suitable for use with an out-board processor. So what gives? Look at the specs and you'll see that the Kandy amp is unusually butch for a product at this price (the Kandy boxes cost £495 each). There's a 500VA transformer inside and rated output is 110 W/ch into 8ohms and 210 into 4! Pick it up, and the substantial weight adds credibility to those figures. What we have here is a very versatile and completely specified amplifier which is capable of driving just about any speaker it's actually likely to meet. It reflects Roksan's belief that Kandy buyers want a one-stop solution. They don't want to come back again for an extra power amp, or have to buy add-ons in order to have it do the basic jobs they need. It'll play records, it'll play headphones, it'll play with just about any speaker, but most of all it plays music.

Outwardly (even inwardly) there's little to set the CD player apart. It's got some nice components in it, which

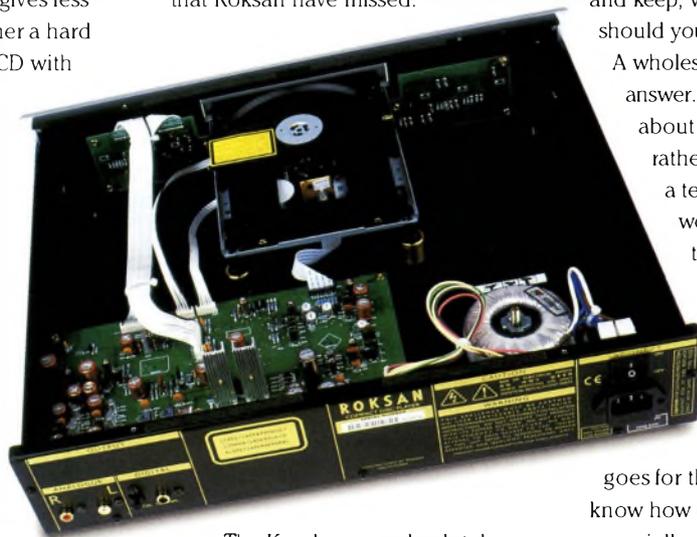


► have trickled down from the Caspians, and it has an unusually sophisticated and heavily regulated power supply. But in practice its main contribution to proceedings is to make the most of the amp's available performance. That means feeding it a decent signal level with plenty of dynamic range at the frequency extremes. Of course, that gives less competent amplifiers rather a hard time, and use the Kandy CD with another budget amp and more often than not you'll find it sounding loud and a bit uncouth. Rough round the edges if you like. But plug it into its matching amp and the whole is very definitely greater than the sum of the parts. Which is another reason why this pairing constitutes the Real deal.

The review units arrived in silver finish, rather than one of the more colourful options (purple, turquoise or blue I believe) and I have to say that they look an absolute treat and far more expensive than their actual price. One hi-fi buying visitor guessed at £1300 a box, and I can understand why. Styling is just unusual enough to set them apart from

the crowd, without being different enough to alienate people. The system remote is the usual button littered affair, but at least it's got a decent range of operation (is there anything more useless than a remote control that only functions from right in front of the product?).

In fact the only jarring note is the clash between the blue display on the CD player and the red status lights on the integrated amp. If you could turn off the displays that would help, but that seems to be one of the few tricks that Roksans have missed.



The Kandys were absolutely trouble free in operation, and given the design brief not surprisingly, happy to work with a whole host of cables and speakers without any obvious sulking or complaint. I ran them with everything from Chord Co. Rumour and Chorus up to Nordost SPM/Quattro-fil, settling for most of the time on the former as more representative. Besides,

it worked really well. Speakers too bridged the market, starting with the little Indigos and topping out with the Living Voice Avatars. Along the way I tried the AudioPlan Kontrapunkt just to see how the amp managed an awkward load. I don't think it even noticed, producing copious amounts of tuneful and propulsive bass from the tiny cabinets. In fact the only display of temperament I managed to coax from the Roksans was a preference for their supporting furniture to be light and lively. A brief experiment with an Acapella platform was near to disastrous, making the sound ploddy and disjointed. Returning to the sunnier climes of an Isoblu rack instantly restored the balance. This one peccadillo aside, it should be easy to get the Kandys to give of their best in just about any situation. It's hard to remember a less fussy set of electronics.

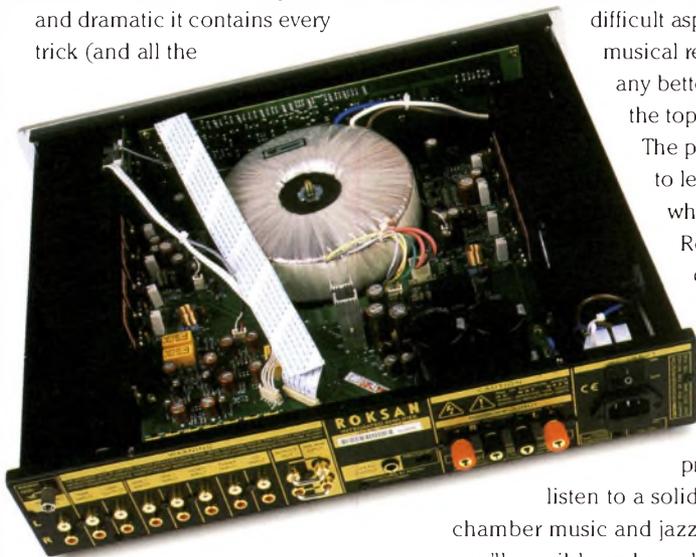
So, given that they're easy to feed and keep, what sort of musical return should you expect from the Roksans?

A wholesome one is the simple answer. Their performance is all about the music in its entirety, rather than in detail. There is a tendency for designers working in this ultra competitive price range to rely on a welter of information to blow the customer away in a quick dem - "Just listen to that - you can hear the drummer's medallions rattling as he goes for the wood blocks!" You just know how irritating that's going to get, especially as all that 'information' isn't properly integrated into a coherent whole. The Kandys start at the other end of the spectrum, getting everything in the right place before starting on the dissection. The results are solid and persuasive which leads to long term listening and satisfaction.

Did I say solid? Just listen to the thump-thump-smack of the classic ►

► bass-bass-snare intro to Slobberbone's 'That is all' (*Everything you thought was right was wrong today* New West Records 0739660212). No sooner has the brain adjusted to the notion that these are proper, big, real drums (not the nasty, thin and insubstantial virtual drums that seem to dominate pop music today) than it's under assault from the calculatedly offensive grunge guitar. That's it. Four bars of rock steady beat, thumped out of the drum kit and you're away. But given the mayhem that's to follow it's difficult to overstate the importance of that rock solid foundation. It literally stops the rest of the track crashing round your ears, the way it does on so many small systems. The Kandys might rob it of a little edge and bite, but otherwise they give it to you, complete and unabridged in all its abrasive glory.

For something a little more refined try the scale and power of the *Gladiator* sound track. Big bold and dramatic it contains every trick (and all the



dynamic range) that Hollywood can throw at it. Again the unflappable stability and poise of the Roksans simply scale each successive crest and crescendo. These electronics are perfectly happy to play loud and large for as long as you can stand it. Their flaws, such as they are, lie at the

other end of the scale. The clue is in the slight lack of atmosphere on the more contemplative parts of *Gladiator*. It's a frisson of tension and anticipation that you get from this music on (much) bigger systems that is missing. By bigger I really mean more expensive, but let's not lose sight of the fact that this is de facto mood music. That's its whole raison d'être.

Play the Sonora recording of *Music for violin and guitar* (SACC 102) and Delmoni's smooth and fluid style is immediately recognisable. Tonally his instrument is spot-on and it's in the right place, above and slightly behind the seated David Burgess. It's the relationship between the two instruments that's at fault. Whilst the structure of what they're playing is fine, the actual chemistry of the performance is lacking. They don't seem to be playing off of each other.

How important is this? Only you can say. Do I know a cheaper option that does this most difficult aspect of musical reproduction any better? Not off the top of my head. The point here is to let you know what the Roksans don't do (and no equipment does everything - especially not at this price!). If you

listen to a solid diet of chamber music and jazz trios then you'll possibly end up elsewhere. Otherwise the Kandys are right on the money. You'll need to listen and compare.

The Roksan combination delivers its music with aplomb. It's engaging and relaxing to listen to, and refreshingly free of strain. It's also stylish and utterly fuss free. It will simply play

your discs with and provide you with real musical pleasure for a very long time. It sounds as solid as it feels, and if that doesn't sound particularly enticing then feed it something demanding and watch the opposition wilt or scream in protest. As Robert Cray might have said, it's a strong persuader. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Roksan Kandy KC1 CD Player

DAC:	PCM 1716 Delta Sigma
Transport:	Sony
Output Level:	2.2 Volts
Digital Output:	Phono
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435x85x350mm
Finishes:	Silver, Black, Blue, Green, Purple, Gold
Price:	£495

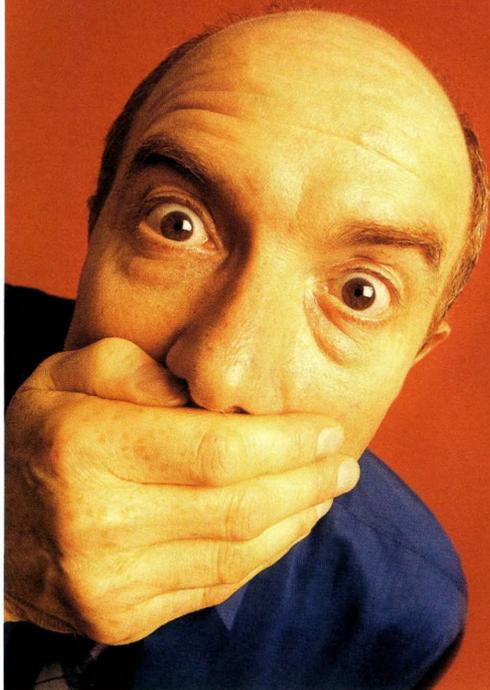
Roksan Kandy KA1 Amplifier

Inputs:	8 line, 1 switchable to MM Phono
Outputs:	Tape, Remote Line
Input Impedance:	47 KOHms
Input Sensitivity:	500mV
Output Power:	110 W/Ch 8 Ohms 210 W/Ch 4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435x85x350mm
Finishes:	Silver, Black, Blue, Green, Purple, Gold
Price:	£495

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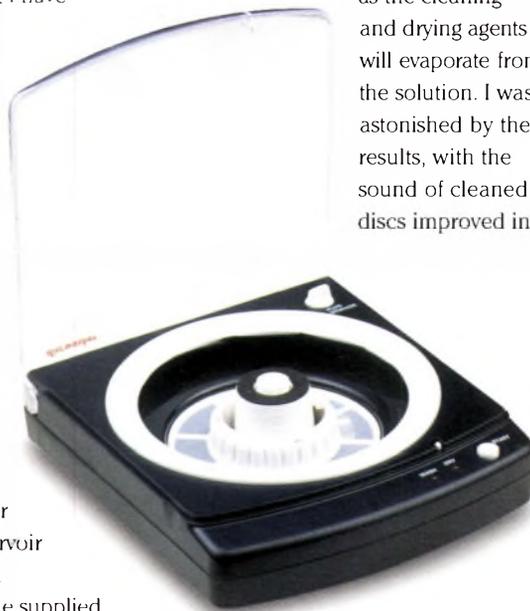
Discwasher CD HydroBath – Non-Contact Cleaning System

by Simon Groome

This is the most innovative system for removing foreign matter from all kinds of digital discs I have come across. It's also very affordable, which makes a nice change. In the past I have tried various methods of cleaning dust, dirt, and grease from discs, with varying success, but up till now, all have involved contact with the playing-surface, which always includes some risk of scratching, however small.

The Discwasher system runs on either four AA size batteries, or uses an optional AC adapter. To use it you start by removing the filter assembly and fill the reservoir to the required level, with approximately 2fl.oz. of the supplied CD6+ solution – refills of 6 fl.oz. can be ordered when needed. After replacing the filter, locate the CD – playing-surface down - over the centre spindle and press until it locks into place. Once the cover is closed the system is ready to go – it is as simple as that. Having pressed the start button the CD is spun, clockwise, while the cleaning solution is pumped, under pressure, onto the playing-surface, creating a foaming action. After about thirty seconds, the motor stops and the CD is spun in reverse, at a higher speed, for fifteen seconds longer, to dry the disc. There are a clear set of instructions supplied,

and one reservoir of cleaning fluid is good for up to one hundred CDs, although it is recommended this is completed in one “cleaning session”, as the cleaning and drying agents will evaporate from the solution. I was astonished by the results, with the sound of cleaned discs improved in



a number of ways.

While these improvements were not as great as the upgrade of a piece of equipment, neither were they subtle. There was more air, detail, and life, making it easier to follow and enjoy the music. The soundstage increased, especially in depth, on a number of the discs, while bass and impact was often improved. Recordings became much more believable, with more natural tones. Images were larger, and more “there”, while instruments became smoother and more palpable. But, it was the removal of much of the harshness, so often associated with digital,

which came as the most satisfying gain. The music from my CD player suddenly had more of the qualities (tonal and in terms of musical flow) that I normally associate with an analogue source. The gains varied from disc to disc, with “audiophile” CDs, generally, profiting less than “ordinary” pressings, but all improved in some respect. Even CDs that had already been cleaned using a different method

benefited from the Discwasher system. Having completed the cleaning most CDs came out dry, although a few had a small number of drops on them, but these dried off in a matter of seconds, leaving no mark.

While the Discwasher CD HydroBath is not perfect for those wanting to clean just a few discs – due to the uneconomic emptying of the reservoir after each session – those with a large collection, and time to clean a batch at a time, should not hesitate to try it. At just £24.95, including enough solution for up to three hundred CDs, it comes highly recommended.

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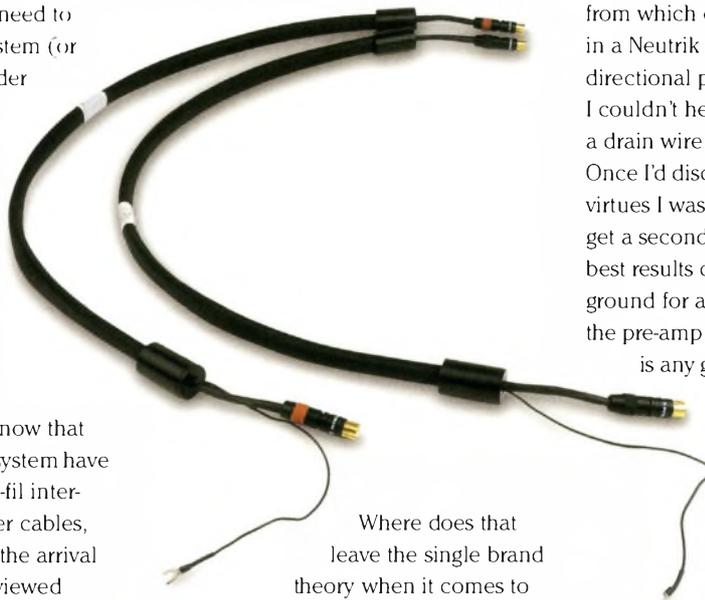
Clearlight Audio Interconnects – audio signals and microwaves

by Roy Gregory

Clearlight Audio, manufacturers of all things RDC and the excellent Recovery turntable, left a pair of cables for me to listen to on their last visit. Now, not only is chez Gregory groaning under the weight of cables vying for attention, but my experience with cabling suggests that you need to be able to apply it as a system (or loom) to the system in order to get the best results. What was I supposed to do with a single pair of one metre interconnects? Consequently it was a fair while before I gave the Clearlights a listen, but when I did I rapidly discovered what I'd been missing out on.

Regular readers will know that the resident cables in my system have been the Nordost Quattro-fil interconnects and SPM speaker cables, spurning all comers until the arrival of the Valhalla designs reviewed elsewhere in this issue. Imagine my surprise then when substituting the Clearlights for a length of Quattro-fil actually brought about an improvement in overall vibrance, presence and tonal colour. Compared to the Nordosts it lacked the lowest level detail and a little of their refinement, but it compensated with wider dynamic range and a greater sense of musical purpose. I've discussed this (and other comparisons) in the Valhalla review so I won't repeat myself here, but certainly in combination with Blue Heaven or SPM speaker cables, the Clearlight is a potent performer.

Impressive in itself, this result becomes even more spectacular when you take the price of the Clearlights into account. At well under £300 a pair they are less than a quarter of the price of the Quattro-fil!



Where does that leave the single brand theory when it comes to cabling your system? Well, intact as it happens. The thinking behind the approach is to ensure technological continuity throughout the system's cable loom, and the easiest (although not failsafe) way of doing so is to shop from a single supplier. The Clearlight cables are based on microwave transmission technology, a field that shares most of its concerns with the thinking behind the Nordost cables. Consequently, despite the apparent physical differences they actually have a great deal in common, including conductor material, primary insulation and theoretical concerns. In practice,

they work together brilliantly.

The Clearlight has a thick, ovoid section, and whilst I wouldn't describe it as stiff, it does link equipment in a single, proud curve. The centre section is wrapped in a nylon mesh, terminated with small plastic cylinders from which emerge short tails ending in a Neutrik phono plug. There's no directional preference marked (and I couldn't hear one either), but there's a drain wire emerging from one end. Once I'd discovered the cable's sonic virtues I was hot foot to the phone to get a second set, and I find that the best results come with a unified ground for all the drains, normally at the pre-amp earth post (not that that is any great surprise given that it's

how you should arrange the drains in any cable loom, flying or not!).

In fact, the only downside that I've discovered is that you are limited to one or one and a half metre lengths.

Now think back a little to the Lavardin amplifier reviews, where Lavardin's own interconnect proved to be one of the few cables that has proved preferable to the Nordost interconnects. Good in other situations, it really sings with its own electronics. And, quelle surprise, it's a microwave cable. In fact, whilst I'm not suggesting that they are made from identical cabling, the oval section of the Clearlight, hidden under the nylon sleeve, bears an uncanny physical resemblance to a pair of the Lavardin cables run side by side. The small plastic ►

▶ 'cans' at each end of the Clearlight are simply cosmetic shrouds which allow neat termination of the two co-axial conductors into a single phono plug.

Cut again, to a recent visit from a cable designer, carrying his latest 'breakthrough' product. Imagine his crestfallen expression when I took one look and said 'Ah, microwave cable'. Mind you, he brightened visibly when I followed it up with "I've been experiencing some really interesting

results from this stuff". And once again, the listening proved enlightening in the extreme.

So what are the conclusions to be drawn from all this. In the long term, microwave cables seem to offer considerable promise in audio applications. They could well be the next big thing, and their relative availability means that they could also be fairly affordable, at least compared to today's exotica.

Meanwhile, anybody who wants to get the best from their SPM speaker cable, or finds the overall balance of the Nordost pairing too thin for their system, now has a more affordable option when it comes to matching interconnects.

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The Ringmat Support System

by Dave Ayers

Picture the scene: it's February 2000 at the Sound and Vision Bristol exhibition and RG and I are manning the hi-fi+ stand and chewing over future articles. Wouldn't it be interesting, we mooted, if we tried using the Ringmat Support System on a turntable designed with a clamped record/ hard platter interface. We know that JMH (and photographer SM) are much impressed using it in place of felt mats (on a Kuzma and LP12 respectively): and we know that it worked wonders on DNM's Reson Rota turntable, so how about using it in place of a clamp based record restraint? Well guess what? As the owner of a Michell Orbe, I got the job. A quick raid on the Ringmat stall and I'm away clutching a bag of goodies before they know what's hit them. So why, you might ask, am I writing this in November for inclusion in issue 9 – I mean, how much time does this man need for heaven's sake. The answer is, of course, the usual sorry tale of unexpected delays, blah blah blah. On the plus side, in the intervening time we have come to realise that there is a lot more to say about the product and its philosophies than we originally thought, so we have decided to present this as an

introduction to a more detailed article in the next issue.

The Ringmat Support System consists of a 12" diameter latex mat with a moulded post that is laid onto the platter surface, having first removed any existing mat: a number of 12" diameter colour coded plastic disks of varying thickness which slot onto the post, an LP version of the Statmat, a Ringmat 330, and a damping disc for the record label. By varying the combination of the plastic discs, the surface of the platter can be raised or lowered, thus allowing VTA to be adjusted to the optimum for each record played. It's recommended to avoid record clamps or weights, but as usual one should feel free to experiment. None were used for the review, although JMH uses a Shun Mook weight on his Kuzma.

Fitting the system to the Orbe threw up another complication. In order for the clamping mechanism to work correctly, there is a raised centre to the platter, created by the knurled locking nut. This had to be removed to give a flat surface for the latex mat to sit on, but I had no qualms about this, as the Ringmat system is not a rigid support,

and the Orbe is so beautifully machined that no rocking modes are evident in the platter even without the nut.

The setting up procedure for the tonearm when using the Ringmat system is quite different to 'conventional wisdom' and will be covered in the next issue. Needless to say it took some considerable time to absorb this alternative approach and to get things just right. So was it worth all the effort? Time to make a cup of tea, and sit back and relax. Picking on a recent purchase of Santana's first album (£6.99 brand new on vinyl, I couldn't believe my luck) I had a few preconceptions about how the sound would have changed from the standard Orbe clamped interface. Typically the Orbe / SME V sound is fast and rhythmic with a rock solid bass but on the other hand it can be somewhat cold with a slight glassiness to the top end. I predicted that the sound would become warmer but looser and with less detail. Well, I was half right, the sound did indeed become slightly warmer, but not in any negative sense. There was no noticeable thickening of the sound, more an enrichment of the overall timbre. The multiple percussionists ▶

of Santana were no less vigorous or fleet of foot (hand?), and if anything the enriched body to the drums increased their impact. In fact I was astounded by how much bottom end clout there was, and what's more the bass seemed to have been released from a straight jacket, flowing free to underpin the complexity of the Latin rhythms. The injection of life and dynamic 'jump' was astonishing (and extremely welcome - witness embarrassing spectacle of person old enough to know better dancing around like a lunatic). As for the glassiness - gone, banished, exiled. The sound was still sharp, but it had lost its slightly unpleasant edge.

Great, and if that was the limit of the mat's achievements I'd still be well happy. But it was what happened next that really got me thinking. Moving on to the Speakers Corner 180gm vinyl release of Supertramp's *Crime Of The Century* required a change of discs to compen-

sate for the increased thickness of the audiophile pressing. Now up until this point I've never got really hot and horny over Audiophile releases. Yes they've (normally) got nice quiet surfaces, and they're sourced from original masters, but generally they've never sounded superior than my better standard pressings. In fact most of the people I know who swear by them rarely play anything else. Now I think I know why. I normally set my VTA for an average 120gm pressing, which means for 180gm the angle is too small. Using the Ringmat Support System to optimise the VTA for the thicker records resulted in absolutely superb results. The clarity, impact, and sheer musicality of the disc was far in excess of what I've managed to wring from my system till now, and I'm not a major Supertramp fan either. So why do Audiophile pressing junkies play them exclusively? Perhaps because their turntables are set up for optimum

180gm playback to the detriment of 120gm pressings.

In the next issue I will examine why, when it comes to the thickness of the discs used, size really does matter, but for now I'll finish by saying that I have no intention of using the Orbe in future without the Ringmat Support System. The changes it makes are entirely positive and far from subtle - even when the turntable is designed to use a clamp!

Price:

- Ringmat XLR - \$50
- Ringmat Support System (incl. Ringmat) - \$160
- Support System (excl. Ringmat) - \$115

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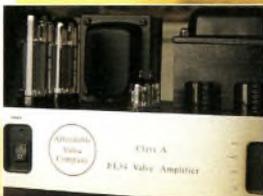
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Thea Gilmore

Interviewed by Reuben Parry

*Thea Gilmore is the 20 year old singer/songwriter whose second album **The Lipstick Conspiracies** represents a radical new direction for the Naim label. In between live acoustic sets on the Saturday afternoon of the Manchester Hi-Fi Show, she spoke to Reuben Parry about her music and the future.*

RP. Music journalists have been falling over themselves to compare you with Joni Mitchell or Patti Smith. Are these fair comparisons?

TG. I think it kind of depends on what viewpoint you take because in my opinion probably not. But then I would say that anyway. I mean, I would like to be considered as an artist in my own right rather than be compared to other people. Actually you missed out the prime example, Alanis Morissette, and that really pisses me off quite seriously. But, obviously, if you're going to be compared with anybody then Joni Mitchell... wow! that's great, but I think it's a bit unfair to them.

RP. In which case who do you feel has influenced you?

TG. Oh God! I constantly get influences from like everybody. I mean at the moment the big ones are Tom Waits and Elvis Costello and Paul Westerberg from The Replacements. That kind of punk spirit is very much something that really gets me at the moment.

RP. When you were born it was post-punk. So you're twenty years too late!

TG. Well, you know, these things come



around again don't they and nobody's up for having a go at the system at the moment. Everybody's playing along like the good little kids and I'm going to be different. So there!

RP. Well, as you've brought that up I'll skip a few questions and go straight to *The Lipstick Conspiracies*. The title and the artwork for your latest album are very eye-catching. What kind of statement are you trying to make here and why?

TG. It's really interesting that you're the first person (interviewer) whose asked me about the artwork on *The Lipstick Conspiracies*, because every male that

ever sees it says "she doesn't look like that. She never looks like that. What are you talking about? Why did you put that on the front cover?". Firstly, I do look like that. Blatantly, I do.

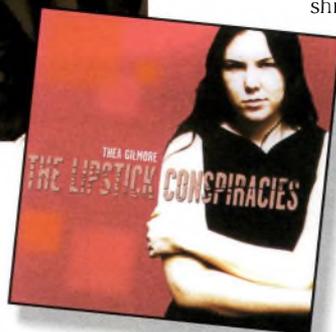
RP. It is a photograph of you, therefore you must look like that.

TG. Yes. Exactly. But we wanted to give a kind of different edge to it. We wanted a cover that would depict somebody who wasn't air brushed. I didn't want a Britney Spears cover, or a Geri Halliwell cover because they're all so perfect and, you know, I've got

shit skin and I'm a little overweight and, you know, so what! And that was kind of the point.

RP. That makes two of us... How did you get into the music business? Because if you're not a "big name" it can be, as they say, "a shit business".

TG. I think no matter who you are, it's a shit business but if you're up to giving it a go and if you're really passionate about speaking to people through music then it's important to try to get through that. How did I get into it? Well, I kind of fell into it really. I always loved music. It was always a big part of my life. I was listening to Dylan records and Beatles records when I was a kid and I kind of missed the Spandau Ballet/Duran Duran era. Then what happened was I got told when I was at school that I had to



► find somewhere to do work experience, right. I was pondering over going to all kinds of weird and wonderful places and then suddenly I just woke up one morning and thought I'd like to go to a recording studio, and there was one a couple of villages down that belonged to Dave Pegg from Fairport Convention, and I just wrote to him and basically said do you fancy taking on a worky? On the first day I was there in swept Nigel (Stonier) in a leather jacket, looking very rock 'n' roll. He was producing an album there. That's how we met and we've kind of worked together ever since, really.

RP. Lipstick Conspiracies is exceptional. Full of strong, well-crafted and intelligent songs. Were they all written with this release in mind?

TG. No. I never tend to write with an album in mind because I think that's quite a dangerous thing to do. You start getting into tailoring songs to fit the particular mood of a particular album and I always think it's best to (I know this sounds really dodgy) let the artistic side of the song writing come out without chopping it around too much. Some of them are very early and some of them are very late because my first album was recorded when I was seventeen/eighteen and I was continually writing songs. Never stopped writing songs, basically. So some of them were taken from the period when I was eighteen and some were taken from a period when I was a lot older.

RP. It's hard to believe you are twenty and these are the sort of songs you're writing.

TG. Well, thank you.

RP. Anybody listening to them, actually paying attention to the lyrics (rather than just going along

with the melody) will think "this woman can't be twenty. She's got to be thirty five. She's got to have had a hard life and lived".

TG. I feel thirty-five sometimes. But never mind that.



RP. You've an exceptionally versatile voice which in the blink of an eye is capable of effortlessly switching between feisty rock, blues impro and gentler folky rhythms. Is this a natural ability or have you developed specific vocal techniques?

TG. I assume it's natural because I've never really thought about it. I always think of my voice as very much the secondary part of what I do, because song writing to me is the most important bit of it and I always think my voice is a bit bland actually. People keep saying Sandy Denny to me and I don't think I sound anything like Sandy Denny. I hope I don't sound like her.... She's great but I'd like to have a bit more aggression in my voice.

RP. No. If I was making a "bland" statement on who I think you sound like I'd say Chrissie Hynde on some of the rockier numbers.

TG. Really?

RP. Yeah! Especially on 'Generation Y' (which I'll come back to in a minute) and on some of the more folkier tracks – Paula Cole, I think.

TG. That's really interesting.

RP. Perhaps that's because of some of the music I listen to.

TG. Paula Cole's great.

RP. On 'Generation Y' you reminded me of the young Chrissie Hynde. Is this something of a parody?

TG. No. Because I know absolutely nothing of Chrissie Hynde at all. Though I sort of know that 'I go to sleep...' (gently sings the lyrics).

RP. So all the early Pretenders is unknown.

TG. I'd probably know some of it if I heard it... heard her voice.

RP. So it was not a conscious approach.

TG. No. Definitely not. I've never listened to the Pretenders particularly. Somebody else once told me I was like the early Pretenders as well. Maybe I am. Maybe subconsciously I've knicked a load of her stuff because you do tend to do that.

RP. It's exactly the same writing record reviews.... Lets go to another one of your songs, 'See If They Applaud'. That opens with a wonderfully tactile image of the hangover and the bloodshot eyes. There's a lot of double

▶ **tracking for the vocals. A sparse arrangement and then by the end of it you're hit with this real contrast – those hard hitting closing lyrics. What were you hoping to achieve by building the structure of the song in that way?**

TG. I think it was very much about my mood at the time because it's one of those typical break up situations where one second you feel completely forlorn and lost – and the next second you're so fucking angry you just want to punch the person involved. Again, it wasn't consciously thought about but when I look back at it now it was probably a way of putting across those two emotions – those strange things that you feel after splitting up with somebody – the wanting to kill them side and the actual 'I quite like you' side as well.



RP. So song writing is dictated by a lot of personal experiences?

TG. Definitely. I mean at the moment I'm trying to bring a lot more politics in but I think the best way to get a kind of political slant to lyrics is to actually put it from your perspective. I mean, I can't really see it from anyone else's, can I?

RP. 'My Own Private Riot' is a good example. Now that I found quite interesting because its got very folky vocals to start with and, then about three quarters of the way

through it there's this really grungy electric guitar brought in. Why was that done?

TG. It is very interesting. I have to hold my hands up here and say it had absolutely nothing to do with me. What happened was we got to the studio (well actually we'd been in the studio for quite a while) and we were working with Chris Sheehan – we met him because we did a tour with the Mutton Birds and he was their guitarist at the time – we called him into the studios because he's got a fantastic way with a guitar. He was coming up from Devon which is where he lives and we were in Lincolnshire and he'd been on the train for like five and a half hours and he finally arrived at

about six o'clock and we thought we can't go straight in and play so we'll go to the pub and come back. So we all went to the pub and got completely hammered and came back at about twelve o'clock at night and just sat. That song was recorded completely live and that was the first take and he just came out with this weird discordant solo. I remember looking at all the other musicians and everyone. The drummer was like... (pulls a face) and Chris was just sat in front of my booth cross-legged and he was just playing with his eyes shut and it was magic.

RP. I thought it worked well because it suddenly challenged all the preconceptions about the way folk songs should sound. I assumed

it was conscious – its wrong to assume isn't it?

TG. It was one of those pieces of magic that just happened and it happened because there was a lot of tension in the room because people didn't know each other very well. The whole lot of us. And Chris was new to the atmosphere and he's just got this amazing way with the guitar where he belts it out and it really fits.

RP. Do you feel that it's more important to perform or more important to record?

TG. I don't think you can be a valid artist unless you are actually prepared to go out and play in front of people. There are a lot of artists that won't. I guess that if it's for nerve reason and you get serious stage fright before you go on – that's different, but I think in terms of people who are just too fucking lazy to go out and stand in front of somebody and play - I think that stinks. The essence of being a musician is about playing directly to a person. There's a lot that can be missed just by sitting down and listening to it on a record.

RP. There is of course the other argument – they can't play and they can't sing.

TG. Well...

RP. Don't mention any names for goodness sake! ▶

► **TG.** The seriously manufactured acts... possibly. I've not seen the Spice Girls live but I understand some of them can sing and even if they just give it a go... its great – even if you can't. There's an electricity that happens between an audience and an artist (sometimes it happens anyway) that firstly, as an artist, can't be beaten and secondly, somebody as a fan or as an audience member, it just beats records hands down.

RP. You're going to upset a lot of people out there. They love their records.

TG. Sorry (quietly, whispered to the mike). Records are fantastic and all the Hi-Fi is too. (Louder... laughs)

RP. Lets not go too overboard with that.... As far as recording plans are concerned in the future is there anything in the pipeline.

TG. I've written the third album – basically twenty or thirty songs so when someone comes along and says "make the third album" then I'll do it. But it's very much one of those situations that wherever the money is – its whether somebody hands us enough to make a record – then we'll make it.

RP. We were talking before the interview about whether you would like to cut LPs as opposed to CDs.

TG. Ah! Definitely. I'd love to! Records just have a warmth in them haven't they that nothing else has and nothing else will ever have again. But if we keep moving into MP3, that is rubbish.

RP. MP3 is the nightmare. Its not music. Anyway, if its on LP, think of the fun you can have with an album sleeve – you can't do much with a CD liner.

TG. I know. God. That'd be great! I'd love to do that. I think in so far as I can say this, "I'm not the most technical gal in the world, I'm very much an artist" because I won't use digital tape. When I record, I always want to record on two inch tape.



somewhere thinking, "how the hell do you package Thea Gilmore". What is happening to you on the record label and that whole promotional front?

TG. Well, people kind of keep dipping their toes in the water and then getting burnt really. So basically I set up my own record label (SHAMELESS) and I did that for the first record just because again we wanted to make things easier. We wanted to keep independent because we figured if we had a couple of albums and enough press behind us then if a major

RP. You are not signed to a major label and I was speaking with Sara (Sara Austin – Thea's manager) earlier and I said to her "You know the problem with you – you're too intelligent and too good for a big label. They're not going to be able to package you. There's probably an executive

came on board, or was even looking at it, they wouldn't be able to change that much because we'd have a winning formula already. And I think to a certain extent we've managed that, but in the end it just comes down to the good old hard cash really, and that means finding willing accomplices.

▶ **RP. It does. So I guess there's a lot of touring going on.**

TG. Yes. Because to sell records you've gotta get out there and show people what you can do. Nobody's going to hear about you if you just sit at home and bang out another couple of records. I might as well get as many people to know my name as possible.

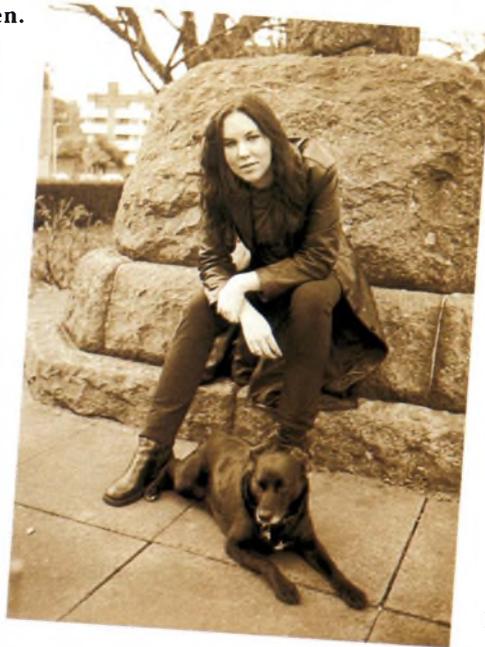
RP. I think that's going to happen. Obviously, you've gone with the Naim label and although they're associated with the audiophile side of the business their CDs are in the mainstream shops. Was this part of that progression?

TG. I think the involvement with Naim was more the fact that they really did want the CD to be as good as possible. They've done a brilliant job. They really did believe in the music and you don't often get that. That's such a rarity. I remember talking to Paul Stephenson (Naim Marketing) and just actually thinking you really do get it don't you. You actually believe in the music. I don't know many people who work in hi-fi companies and at first it seemed very strange to be moving that way – but we soon got to like their attitude and we just thought that their take on the Music Industry was right. They were just up for giving it a go. And it was a difficult one because it's pop and there's nothing harder in the Music Industry to break into than pop. They just approach it in the right way in my opinion.

RP. Now you can't get away without talking about sexual politics and everything else. You are clearly a bit of a feminist.

TG. A lot of a feminist.

RP. One of the things which I like about the songs which deal with "women's issues" (which is an awful tag) is that you might be angry in the song but you don't come across as an angry person a la Alanis Morissette, and there seems to be answers in your songs. Its not like you're just angry, angry, angry and shouting it out.



TG. I tried really hard because I hate this business of people listening and thinking she's a ball basher. She doesn't like men. She's a man hater. I'm not. I love men. I think men are great. But there were a few men that have f**ked me around quite badly. I do think that in political terms things are still very much weighted in the male favour. That's not always the blokes' fault, it can be the female's as well. It's just one of those things. It's not about the male/female divide. It's a social issue. It's about equality. It's not about you're a man and I'm a women. You've just got to get it right.

RP. You don't overcome 30,000 years of history in a 40 year period.

TG. That's exactly it. It's surprising how few people can see that.

RP. The first album, *Burning Dorothy*, from the title are we talking *Wizard of Oz* here?

TG. Yes we are. I'd like to say that at the time I didn't actually realise that a phrase for somebody whose gay is "a friend of Dorothy" and I'm really upset about it now because obviously I don't want people to think I'm homophobic. It's nothing to do with that.

RP. You're being cruel on Dorothy though, you're taking her out of historical context. It's difficult to judge the past by the present.

TG. Its still OK to draw attention to it.

RP. Good come back. See you're far too intelligent. I'm going to make you sign my CD, now.

TG. Oh good!

RP. Is that alright?

TG. Yes, of course.

RP. Do you get asked to sign a lot of your CDs?

TG. Relatively few.

RP. Well you can sign it as many times as you like. Back and front!

TG. I'm sorry about this but I don't know how to spell your name.

RP. R. E. U. B. E. N.

TG. You know Sara has a fish called Reuben?

RP. Does she? I'm going to have a word with her about that.... ➤

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How To Read The Record Reviews

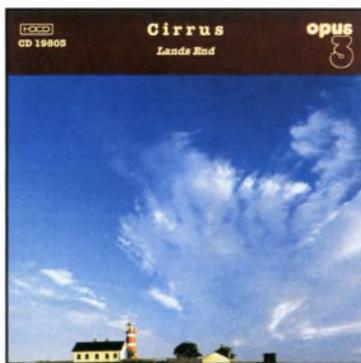
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Key to Icons

-  CD
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-  HDCD
-  XRCD
-  Double Disc
-  96/24 DVD
-  SACD
-  120g LP
-  150g LP
-  180g LP
-  Availability As S/H LP
-  Vinyl Double Album

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

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



Cirrus

Lands End

Opus 3 CD 19803 

This album was briefly mentioned in my Opus 3 overview in issue 8, but I feel it requires a fuller examination. As I noted, the sounds are suggestive of the best of ECM's jazz recordings, with Ari Haraldsson's sax sounding like a less disconsolate version of Jan Gabarek's. The music is a pleasant mix of, evocative, new age with a hint of the avant-garde. The occasional appearance of the Didgeridoo brings an ethnic feel to the proceedings – Nordic trolls and dragons go down-under! All the compositions are original, and the album is full of expression, invention, and proficiency.

The sound is excellent, in the usual Opus 3 way, but with one of the largest, and deepest, soundstages I remember from this source.

The guitars can appear way outside the speakers and you can sit back and wallow in the natural acoustics. Very natural tones, and a tangible sound to the percussion, help to give the sound real life.

Each time I have heard this album it has grown on me more. If you are not sure of this CD on your first listen, give it time. You could be pleasantly surprised.

Available from Pentacone
Tel/Fax: 01924 445039
SG



Gentle Waves

Swansong for you

JPRLP011  

Back in issue 3 I reviewed the first album by this winsome side shoot from those masters of understatement Belle and Sebastian, and there I described the sounds captured in the groove as "music of rare beauty" and so it continues with *Swansong For You*. The band is still completely acoustic employing, to very good effect, everything from brass through to harps and always overlaid with Isobel Campbell's quiet and self effacing vocal delivery.

Is there anything new here? Well this album is very retro, from the Judy Garland cover to the overall layout and detail of the sleeve which both recall the early 60s, and whilst much about this band is bang up to date, many of the songs hark back to earlier times with one or two jiving along very nicely. Added to this is a general increase in musical range so that the album as a whole is even more interesting and varied. Fortunately the tunes and melody are equally as glorious this time around.

Carefully crafted songs have always characterised this band, but in spite of all I said above I can still see some people finding this style of music and its delivery a tad irritating. Personally I would urge a second listen, because there is real quality here.

JH





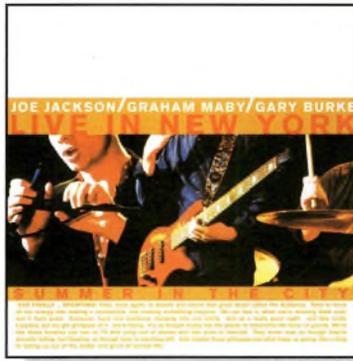
The Cure

Bloodflowers

FICTION RECORDS FIXCD 31/543123-2 (CD)

Classic Cure. Intense, guitar-laden rock pierced by Robert Smith's anguished vocals which have always been capable of stretching lyrics and songs to emotional breaking point – a taught 'Watching Me Fall' (at over eleven minutes) is a prime example of his acute wordiness. This indulgent bloody imagery, strong on sexuality and racked with personal hurt, eats away at you until you are living his pain – and oh how *Bloodflowers* is so full of the pain that comes from close self-scrutiny. It's a worthy successor to the 1996 album *Wild Mood Swings*, where the lyrics revealed that all was not well in the Smith household. Extremely demanding music at least for as long as these open wounds continue to be picked over, but fortunately stability in the band (following Tolhurst's acrimonious court action) has ensured that Smith, Bamonte, Gallup, Roger O'Donnell (keyboards) and Jason Cooper (drums) have established an enviable rapport that instrumentally conveys each twist of the lyrical scalpel blade just enough to soak the dressing in sufficient colour without letting the patient bleed to death.

RP



Joe Jackson

Summer In The City

Sony SK 89237 (CD)

Maybe I'm seeing the start of the rehabilitation of the much maligned live album. I've bought three recently (this one, Tori Amos and Heather Nova) and loved them all. Perhaps now that most studio based pop recording is so far removed from live performance that it all but counts as a different art, the discipline imposed by playing a gig is beginning to result in a rich, new, best of both worlds phenomena? Having said that, this particular live recording is predominantly of material from the 70s and 80s and is by an artist with a long track record of bringing a live feel to his studio recordings.

Britain produced some wonderful songwriters in the late 70s and 80s. Elvis Costello, Paddy McAloon, Andy Partridge, Roddy Frame and of course Joe Jackson. Simply through the accident of timing, Jackson was always associated with "punk" and "new wave" but was in fact a far more accomplished musician than many of his contemporaries. And for those who cared to listen it showed. This disc records a rare gig for Jackson and his long time bass and drums collaborators Graham Maby and Gary Burke and while some may question the selection of songs, and others might have the odd criticism of the recording, it is absolutely everything I, for one, hoped for. Unreservedly recommended.

PW



Eric Bibb

Just Like Love

Opus 3 CD 21002 (SACD)

After about three years, Eric has returned to Opus 3 and his recording roots – sounding much happier for it. Completed in just four sessions, his relaxed state shines through. Musically, the album consists of mainly original ballads, with influences coming from his past, friends, and most importantly, family, and gone are the gospel songs of the last two Opus 3 releases. This album is much simpler, but more personal. Eric is at his intimate, soulful, best – sounding comparable to a refined Muddy Waters – with highlights including the title track, She's Still With Me, and That's Why I'm Here.

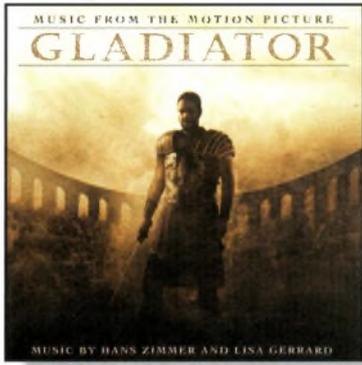
This is Opus 3's first release on Super Audio CD, and it sounds amazing! Being a "hybrid", it can be played on either a machine designed for the format, or an existing CD player. I have heard the HDCD version of this disc, and although good, it pales in comparison. The SACD produces a three-dimensional soundstage that you can almost walk into, more natural tones, and far more detail. With so much more life and presence, I would not even think of buying the standard disc – this is that good. I think I have just heard the future!

Available from www.hiforsale.com

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SG





Gladiator OST

Hans Zimmer and Lisa Gerrard

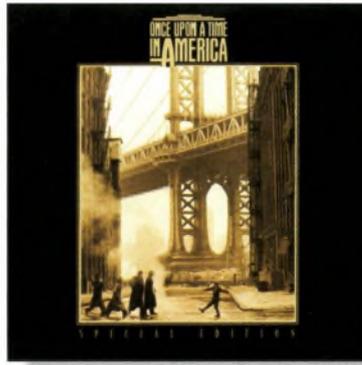
Decca 467 094-2

There's never been much that's original about film music: it's always felt free to rifle existing genres and the classical canon, until many current soundtracks are a simple cut and paste job, rolling together as many pop hits as they can in a scatter-gun approach to extended marketing. At least the *Gladiator* sound track follows the tradition of borrowing from 'serious' music, blending traditional orchestral arrangements with guitar and haunting vocals. The latter come courtesy of Ms Gerrard, previously of This Mortal Coil, and roll together TMC with a serious slice of Holst (Mars appears almost unchanged) and you'll get a fairly good idea of what to expect. Tremendous dynamic range and sheer power counterposed against fragility. There's even a sense of humour at work, as themes from *The Rock* and *Crimson Tide* make brief appearances. Huge, sweeping, bombast and thunderous percussion contrast nicely with the more reflective moments, and let's face it, if you are going to do the epic thing then there's no such place as over the top. If the movie didn't live up to its natural fore-bears *Ben Hur* and *El Cid*, how much more impressive would they have been supported by this kind of musical heavy artillery. Wry, derivative and populist it may be (and all the better for it!) but this is one soundtrack that's capable of standing alone. And impressively so.

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RG



Ennio Morricone

Once Upon A Time In America

OST BMG 7432 161976 2

If Hans Zimmer is the new star of the Hollywood soundtrack, how does his work stack up against the acknowledged masters? Necessarily derivative in nature (so many films are, after all, historical) film music becomes strangely comparable across time. I could have gone for Korngold, Rozca or Williams, but instead I plumped for Morricone, partly because people think that they know what to expect, and partly because they ain't gonna get it.

Once Upon A Time In America may be Leone's time fractured sequel to *Once Upon A Time In The West*, but despite common themes (institutionalised violence, an urbane villain and a reluctant anti-hero) this is no spaghetti western. Tracing the links between bootlegging, organised crime and the unions this inhabits an urban landscape and a different cultural milieu.

The soundtrack writer's skill art is that of the chameleon, and here Morricone draws on the period themes of prohibition jazz, the hauntingly beautiful Amapola and strong personal motifs for the individual characters. Spread across some fifty years and nearly four cinematic hours, the film's action flits through time and it needs the strong resonance of Morricone's music to anchor it. The maestro doesn't disappoint, and if you want to step beyond the familiar spaghetti westerns to his deeper and more studied work then this is a good place to start. It's a pretty good movie too!

RG



The Thin Red Line OST

Hans Zimmer

RCA 09026 63382 2

Terrence Mallick's impressionistic masterpiece is by far the most intelligent comment to emerge from Hollywood on the randomness, incomprehensibility and aimlessness of the condition of war. It stands in stark contrast to that tub-thumping, over sentimentalised and historically editorial tosh *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg's schlock-buster that received all the attention and Oscars.

The Thin Red Line is less about action than it is about atmosphere: anonymous characters occupy an unidentifiable landscape, fighting a largely unseen enemy. I didn't realise just how much of the movie's impact depended on the soundtrack until I heard it in isolation. Zimmer takes the tonality and themes of a Barber and oriental instrumentation, and grafts them onto orchestration reminiscent of Shostakovich at his bleakest. It's a powerful aural counterpoint to the beauty and serenity of the landscape on screen: in isolation it is haunting, even disturbing. Powerful stuff, Zimmer shows his ability to shape music to the task at hand, and whilst it is less obviously approachable than his *Gladiator* soundtrack it is musically far more profound. Beautifully recorded, with the power and range that comes with the cinema, this will last long after the deep bass has impressed your neighbours' neighbours.

Supplier: hififorsale.com

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RG





U2

All that you can't leave behind

CIDU121 Island 2000

U2 have been telling us for years about their intentions to make a happy rock and roll album that goes back to their roots. This, apparently, is it.

The album opens with the cheery "Beautiful Day" and behind the song's smile and slightly banal lyrics lies a guitar line that affirms what we had hoped all along; the Edge is back on form. In fact the whole album is classic U2, Larry and Adam provide solid rhythm duties, leaving Bono and the Edge to carve out that big, fat U2 sound. Yes, big choruses abound, Bono's voice is the best it's been for years and the Edge seems to have been allowed to let his guitar off the leash, for a while at least.

Okay, so it's slightly predictable, and at times, even a little dull, but when it's good it's awesome. "New York" and "Elevation" provide the thrills here, whilst "Ground beneath her feet" and "When I look at the world" are almost painfully exquisite. In all, though patchy, it's their best work for years by far. It's not *Joshua Tree* but it's at least *Unforgettable Fire*.

MC



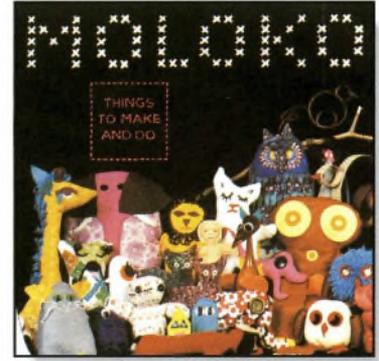
Santana

Supernatural

Arista 07882 19080 2

Have you been disappointed in Santana of late? I know I have. Long gone are the fiery multiple percussionists of the first few albums, and the corresponding excitement of a band running on full throttle. To these ears Carlos has been disappearing into a quiet mist of lightweight funk, pleasant enough but ultimately dull. It would appear that his record company feel the same as they've been touting the CD round the music press as Santana's comeback album; the one where he willingly acted in the role of guest guitarist for the contemporary luminaries drafted in to produce, and play on, the various tracks. With a build up like that one should expect great things, but as is usually the case, it's just so much hyperbole. Having said that, this is still a good album. I'm not sure what's catalysed Carlos but it really is something of a return to form. You've probably heard the singles, and this should give you a pretty good idea of what to expect, at least from the first two thirds of the CD, as it does creep back into quiet harmlessness towards the end. Despite the 'guest guitarist' comment, it still comes out as a real Santana album, demonstrating a sensitivity from the guest artists that I really wasn't expecting. It seems to me that this is one guitar icon that is well on the road to musical recovery.

DA



Moloko

Things To Make And Do

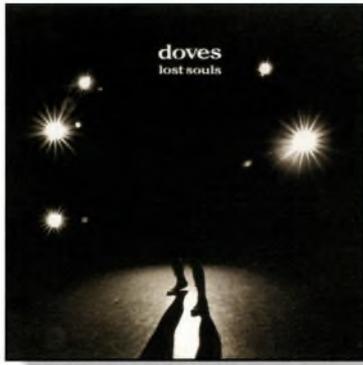
Echo ECHCD31

Whilst 'The Time Is Now' permeated my consciousness over a period of time, it was watching the band play 'Pure Pleasure Seeker' on Later With Jools Holland that reeled me in. With Roisin sounding like Beth Gibbons from Portishead, albeit on happy pills, and an R&B strut that would have made the Spencer Davies Group proud, it's the perfect opener to an album stuffed full of cracking tunes. 'Dumb, dumb, we're dumbing it down' sings Roisin on 'Dumb Inc.' and in a way she's right, for whilst the previous albums had many more ideas, they come across as clever, clever rather than intelligent. With *ITMAD* less is more. There's still enough strangeness to mark the band out from the pack, but this time round there's a cohesiveness that results in real drive and purpose. Presumably for marketing purposes, the band has seen fit to tack on a dance mix of 'Sing It Back' that sticks out like a sore thumb. Perhaps the band have realised this, as there's a monster gap after the penultimate song.

Whilst not a classic, I find myself returning to this CD again and again because it's fun. Now Moloko have deconstructed themselves, they have an opportunity to once again blend their intelligence into the mix and perhaps the next album will be something truly special.

DA





Doves

Lost Souls

Heavenly 2000 HVNLP26CD 

The Doves have had a good year. Formerly Sub-Sub, now part time backing band for Badly Drawn Boy, the Williams twins and their bearded lead singer dropped their sequencers for guitars two years ago and never looked back. *Lost Souls* gives no hints as to the bands past. Skillfully crafted, it was two long years in the making. It treads no new ground ideas wise, but the sheer beauty of the songs, and its effortlessly laid back sound makes the competition seem lame.

"The cedar room" stands out as one of the most powerful songs written this decade. Criminally ignored at release, it clocks in at a staggering seven and a half minutes. However unlike most epic tracks, each and every second of this one is heavenly. The music washes over you in layers and when the song finally stutters to a halt you want more, much more. Jimi's voice, being naturally low and slightly flat, tends to lend a slightly weary, mournful sound that contemporaries like Coldplay sorely lack, and when it lifts, it soars.

Every so often an album comes along which doesn't try to compete, it just sits there in a different league. No one has tried to recreate *The Bends* or *Achtung Baby*. And in the same way no one will try to challenge *Lost Souls*, the album is a timeless classic, slow to warm to, but immensely satisfying.

MC



Cosmic Rough Riders

Enjoy the melodic sunshine

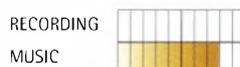
MC5015LP  

When I explained to the editor that I was reviewing an album by the Cosmic Rough Riders I could tell he was impressed. Well when I say impressed, perhaps amused would be more appropriate. OK he laughed – out loud, and yes I guess the band name is a bit silly, but the music they produce is simply excellent!

Lyricaly this band range from the comical, through the wistful to sharply observed social comment. Pile it on top of jaunty rhythms and away you go, but it's the melodies that really reach out and grab you. Writing this review of the album I was typing in time (fortunately the pace allows my typing to (almost) keep up!).

This is Indian sub-continent meets country with a few beach boy surf rock riffs thrown in. It's strongly reminiscent of 60's San Francisco, and sometimes they even approach the anthem (although subtly). These are strange but inspired combinations that are present across the album, although more daring at the start. I guess this might have been done before, but I really enjoyed it, and it was obvious that this was a year 2000 record not a re-release.

JH



David Bowie

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limited edition box set
EMI 7243 528958 2 3 

I would just love the chance to rifle through the BBC radio archives, it's an absolute treasure trove of wonderful music. The latest gem to be unearthed is this limited edition box set covering the Dame's 1968-1972 visits to Auntie, plus a bonus disc from July this year. The first CD covers his early period, with tracks from the Anthony Newly days through to 'Kooks' from *Hunky Dory*. Most of the songs come from *Man Of Music*, *Man Of Words* (re-released as *Space Oddity*), and as such is the sound of a man who has yet to find his true path. The second disc is predominantly culled from *Hunky Dory* and *Ziggy Stardust*. Here we find fledgling confidence, with good but somewhat considered performances all round. Surprisingly, the Spiders only really let loose on 'Waiting For The Man' and 'White Light, White Heat', but it's a cracking disc for all that. As with the Zeppelin sessions from a couple of years ago, there are multiple versions of the same song, but unlike the Zeppelin there is little to choose between the versions. Getting to the third disc finds us in the company of a man who knows he's a legend, and he's comfortable with that. With nothing to prove any more, he just gets on with the job of entertaining the audience of 230 lucky people, a job that he and his excellent band do extremely well. Priced at around £20 for 52 tracks, this has to be the bargain of Y2K.

DA





Gomez

Abandoned Shopping Trolley

Hotline – HUTLP64 

This, the band's third album, is their most difficult for the listener (and reviewer) to date. It contains plenty of previously recorded but unused material – third album and already a retrospective? Are Gomez getting too big for their boots? I don't think so, but then I can forgive them almost anything because they are so good and this album is very enjoyable, although it is not the first Gomez album you should buy (*Liquid Skin* in case you were wondering).

The various influences that have made the Gomez sound are even more clearly shown with this album than either of the previous two. Here for example, we have trancy beats nuzzling up to old school acoustic Blues, and that pervasive get up and boogie Tijuana next to good old rock guitar. But here it's carried a little further, making the mix that much more obvious.

Not surprisingly, some of these tracks are a tad weaker than you would perhaps expect to be gracing a Gomez album, but conversely it is hardly believable that 'Bring your loving back here' has not previously appeared. There is also a wonderful meandering rewriting of several tracks including '78 Stone Shuffle'.

Another Gomez album, and another great review, although this is both their third album and the third one you should buy.

JH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Thea Gilmore

The Lipstick Conspiracies

NAIM CD 046 

Much has been made of the raucous side of Thea Gilmore. Those barbed lyrics and a fearless use of colourful invective have rained blows upon thick-skinned bastions of prejudice like a smithy's lump hammer. The sensitive natured among us might see this as an ugly scarring that disfigures and diminishes the impact of a song. I disagree. Gilmore is an intelligent and articulate lyricist. She knows that sometimes the use of coarser language is necessary. Of course an audience can respond to this in one of two ways. Either they don't get it and simply walk away or, as witnessed at the Manchester show, those who stop to listen relish the challenge thrown down by her words.

From eighteen to eighty, and crossing the gender divide as well, they sat enthralled both in the sparse presentation (just Nigel Stonier and Thea working acoustic guitar) and by the resonant messages contained within songs like 'Bulletin Britain' or 'Resurrection Man'. In an age where popular music is increasingly bland – the tunes may be good but the lyrics are woefully banal – a singer/songwriter whose convictions (political or otherwise) are worn on her sleeve is a rarity, a novelty, even.

Switching to the CD and naturally enough, as you'd expect, the mixes for these tracks are tighter and more sophisticated. However, the arrangement never detracts from a kind of verbal "precision accuracy" that leaves her targets (be they shadowy Corporations, Governments, the Media, fractured relationships of sexual inequality)

reeling from a venomous humour and observational maturity. The dissection is beautifully done.

Listen to 'See If They Applaud' (a personal favourite) and you'll understand exactly what I mean. Fantastic, lyrical images shift from the personal to the public and back, with lines like, "I had too much to drink last night / Now I'm lying on the floor / Watching the coloured patterns in my eyes / Leftovers from the light..." to "Now the grey suits and the big boys / They're all slaves to their bank balance see / The media mass market freedom/ As the ultimate commodity" followed by a return to the acutely personal "And you tattoo my image / On the lips of all your friends / As some tight c**t to f**k and leave / And f**k again..." which makes a whole lot more sense than an angrily twisted diatribe you'd expect from some artists. The fine-tuning of this song is in the delivery. Thea's softly double-tracked vocals and a subtle colouring of acoustic guitar and kalimba delicately underpin the sentiments – sublime!

Throw in catchy pop songs 'Generation Y?', 'Edge Of My Seat' and 'Forgotten' and you have a precocious talent that will (frighteningly) get even better. Comparisons to Chrissie Hynde, Sarah McLachlan and Paula Cole, respectively, on these tracks, serve only as convenient reference points for the uninitiated. Thea Gilmore is a musician who deserves all the superlatives which have been heaped upon *The Lipstick Conspiracies*. As it's my pop album of the year it only remains to score this recommendation.. and oh! how I've agonised. I desperately wanted to award top marks but I just know she'll get better and I'd have to give the next album eleven out of ten!

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC





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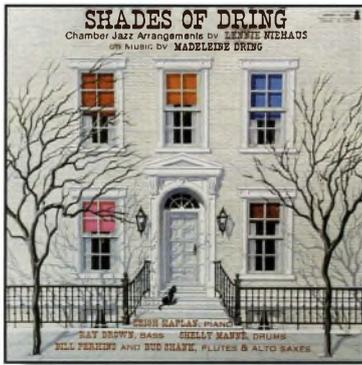
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Shades of Dring

Chamber Jazz Arrangements
by Lennie Niehaus

Cambria Records C-1016 **180g**

Based on music by Madeleine Dring (no, I'd never heard of her either), this is pretty much what it says on the tin: chamber jazz, so don't come here if you want your soul moved. If however you want light, undemanding very nicely played Sunday morning after a particularly heavy Saturday night fare, then step right up. Here's an album that especially on the flute-heavy side one will make the MJQ sound like Eric Dolphy at his most extreme. Despite the presence of sterling players like Bud Shank, Ray Brown and Shelley Manne, this is essentially very high-class elevator music.

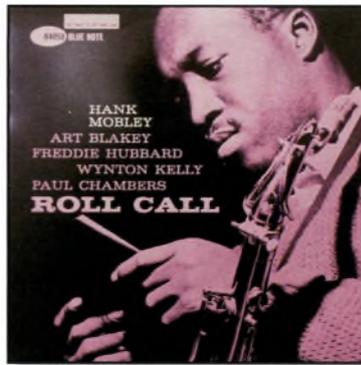
Fortunately I occasionally have a heavy Saturday night or two and crave no more than the musical equivalent of a Radox bath whilst the Anadin Ultra kick-in. For times like those this music has its place, and delightfully retro sleeve and all, that place will be on my shelves. The '81 recording incidentally is very good: clean and open with good staging and on the couple of occasions when Shelly Manne is allowed to stretch out on the drums, plenty of attack.

Recommended in small doses when circumstances demand.

Supplier: Vivante

Tel: (44)(0)208-977-6600

DD



Hank Mobley

Roll Call

Blue Note 84058 **180g**

Freddie Hubbard who plays trumpet on this '60 session is quoted in the sleeve notes: 'I learned a lot about how to swing just being there. I felt so much freer than I ever had before in a recording studio and that's because it's so easy to play with the kind of talent of the guys on this date. And we had just about the best rhythm section there is - Blakey, um, ah, yes! He fills up the whole studio. He makes you open up - he made everyone open up! The truth of this is evident throughout the album. Blakey's drumming powers the whole session along fantastically. Driving, precise and powerful. In a lesser band playing of this calibre might overshadow the other musicians. Fortunately with Hubbard, Wynton Kelly and Paul Chambers joining Mobley, there's not a chance of that and each get their chance to shine. There's some superb interplay between the two horns, plus fine soloing from both, particularly from Hubbard on 'Take your Pick'. Kelly plays beautifully taking some great solos as does Chambers. For all that it's Blakey's drumming I notice throughout the album: he's just in such fine form he's impossible to ignore. The 180g Blue Note pressing is clean and quiet, and the recording good.

Supplier: Vivante

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DD



Gösta Rundqvist Trio

Trecircle

Opus 3 CD 19801 **HD**

This album is all about the evolution of interplay - from the Trio and its playing, to the recording itself. The music is smooth, free flowing, jazz - played to the highest standards. An acoustic double bass, and sensitive drumming - similar to that of the great Jimmy Cobb - back Rundqvist's wonderful piano tones, but it is the interaction of the performers that impresses most. The rhythm and flow of the music seem to grow, as they entwine each element of the music, letting it breathe and then grow. While each instrument is coherently isolated as an individual source, they advance into a single entity, manifesting the ascendancy of each phrase.

This is all made possible by Jan-Eric Persson's single point recording. With one microphone the musicians are able to, directly, connect with each other. The acoustics of the Nacka Hall are superb, and while larger than locations usually used for jazz, the recording sounds very natural. The instruments are well defined, with the size of the piano realistically portrayed.

This is a very pleasant album that should appeal to all those who have heard and love the great jazz issued by the Mapleshade label. Highly recommended.

Available from Pentacone

Tel/Fax: 01924 445039

SG





Blue Mitchell

Out of the Blue

Riverside/ Alto AA 020 

Fronting a fine band comprising Benny Golson, Wynton Kelly, Art Blakey and with Paul Chambers and Sam Jones sharing duties on bass, this '58 recording, the second ever recorded under his own name, is one of Blue Mitchell's best. A straight-ahead bop session it's clear from the start that the band are really enjoying themselves.

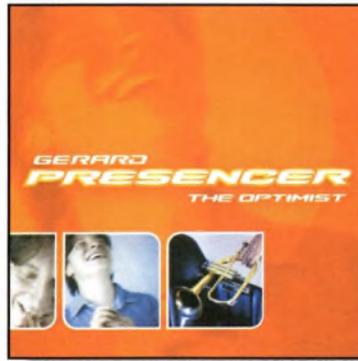
The Golson penned mid-tempo opening number 'Blues on my Mind' engages immediately and really springs to life when the composer's tenor kicks-in. This sets the scene for a superbly relaxed and classy set. There are no frenetic fast runs, no obvious pyrotechnics, just a laid-back (the shortest number here is five minutes), easy session that allows each player to shine. Golson gets to work out in the faster paced Clark Terry number 'Boomerang', but really the main treat throughout is the interplay between the two horns and the ace support they get from some of the finest players in jazz. The album closes with a version of 'When the Saints go Marching In', that should help banish all memories of Acker Bilk.

The recording is fine, a little lightweight in the bass maybe, but the Alto pressing is excellent.

Supplier: Vivante

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DD



Gerald Presencer

The Optimist

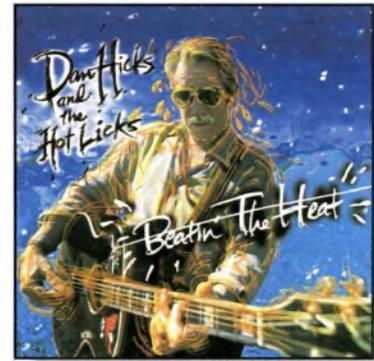
Linn AKD 069 

It was with a sinking heart that I received this CD for review from RG. At first glance it looked like yet another bland modern jazz set from an undistinguished band. Just goes to show how wrong first impressions can be. It turns out that 'though still in his twenties, Presencer has recorded five albums and has played with such luminaries as Chick Corea, The Brand New Heavies, Joni Mitchell, and Herbie Hancock. He was also voted best trumpeter at the British Jazz Awards in '95;'97 and '99. Clearly I must get out more.

Presencer's intention in making this album was to 'make it groove' and he's succeeded. From the 'Siesta' period Davis influenced opener 'blah de blah' the album has a solid bass-driven groove throughout. The band line-up includes John Parricelli, Jeremy Stacey and Laurence Cottle along with Jaqui Dankworth on vocals. The playing throughout the session is seamlessly interwoven, driving ahead with such cohesion that you barely notice the gaps between numbers.

The recording, even though it's HDCD (and I have an HDCD equipped player) is nothing special. A bit flat, and lacking in real punch and definition which is a shame because the music demands a bit more. A highly enjoyable album nonetheless.

DD



Dan Hicks and the Hot Licks

Beat in the Heat

Surfdog Records SD-67112-2 

I've been a fan of Dan Hicks from his early seventies recordings and still have treasured and much played vinyl copies of 'Strikin' it Rich' and 'Last Train from Hicksville'. And although I've never really felt that Hicks went away (he cropped up from time to time, notably on a 'Mountain Stage' live album with 'Hell I'd Go!' a number that's finally appeared here) this is his first studio recording in a good long time. And it's as if no time has passed. Sure his voice is a little more gruff, but joined again by Sid Page on violin from the original line-up along with some all new but damn near identical sounding Hot Licks, time could well have stood still. I always felt a little alone in my dogged persistence in listening to Hicks daffy music, whilst all around me were into The Incredible String Band and other less uplifting stuff. It turns out that I wasn't alone at all, and guests like Elvis Costello, Rickie Lee Jones and Tom Waits celebrate his return by guesting on this album. There's not a weak number here, but stand outs include a great take on Wait's 'The Piano Has Been Drinking (Not Me)', a different spin, with Rickie Lee Jones on 'I Scare Myself', and the aforementioned song of alien abduction 'Hell I'd Go!'. With a good, warm, punchy recording this is an essential purchase for all right thinking people!

DD





Britten
String Quartets, Vol. 2

Maggini Quartet

Naxos 8.554360

The Maggini Quartet's work I have heard has all been marvellous, but this, the follow-up to *String Quartets, Vol. 1*, 8.553883, is impeded by the recording of the the *Simple Symphony* - the sound being dark, with the bass totally immersed in reverberation. The rest of the album is fine, with natural tones and a more realistic sound-stage, but here all is amiss. I can only put this down to differing engineers - two are credited - as the recording location is constant for all works.

The music represents the extremes in period of Britten's chamber works, with the aforementioned *Symphony* being written in 1923 (aged nine!) and the *String Quartet No. 3* one of his last achievements. The intervening *Quartettino* and *Alla Marcia* come from the early thirties. All the pieces are accessible, although the later the work, the more enigmatic it becomes. The Maggini, as usual, play superbly, with the violins enjoying life and verve. Each piece is handled with aplomb, whether in the sinister march of *Alla Marcia* or the subtle textures of the *String Quartet*.

What a pity about the *Symphony's* sound (ignored in the rating) but at this price, where else can you find a performance of these works that comes close?

SG



Bartók
Violin Sonata No. 2/Rhapsodies
Nos.1 and 2/Romanian Folk Dances

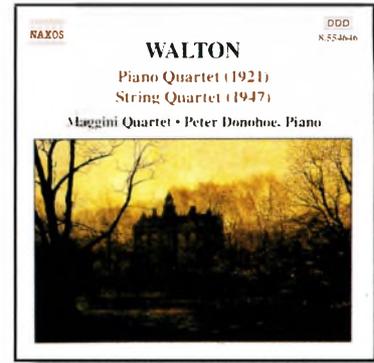
Isabelle Faust/Florent Boffard
Harmonia Mundi HMN 911702

This budget-priced CD is an invaluable follow-up to the duo's first, award winning disc, fulfilling the expectations left by that acclaimed release and matching it perfectly. The intricate performance of the exhilarating *Sonata* is full of deep and thoughtful vigour, and played with impassioned virtuosity, while the other works, including the far too rarely heard *Rhapsodies*, are more simplistic, with expanded phrasing and less lavish tones. Bartók's music is brimming with Hungarian and Romanian influences, and this feel to the music is skilfully conveyed, with help from Faust's drive and vibrato. The pair plays as one, with Boffard's exceptional piano work not just an accompaniment, and neither performer overwhelms the other.

The uncomplicated recording is admirable, without being overly impressive - being not too closely miked - with fine, clear detail and a fair amount of separation between the performers. Although there is little in the way of a natural soundstage, the acoustics are excellent, for a studio recording, and the music is allowed to live and breathe.

An all-round excellent CD of engaging and well-crafted Chamber music, that further consolidates Faust's status as a poignant and talented artist.

SG



Walton
Piano Quartet/String Quartet

Donohoe/Maggini Quartet

Naxos 8.554646

Many audiophiles and music lovers will know Walton for his orchestral works, but this CD shows that he was also an important composer of chamber music.

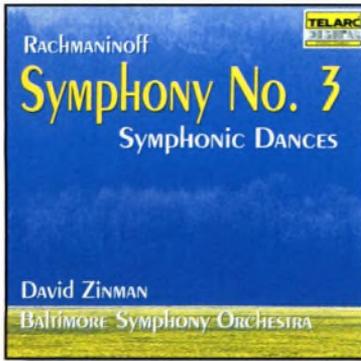
The *String Quartet*, of 1947, encapsulates Walton's craft perfectly, with a mixture of solemnity and powerful attack. The Maggini play with refinement and joy, and portray these feelings perfectly - whether in the wistful and moving *lento*, or the vibrancy of the *presto* - and their phrasing is beautiful. The earlier *Piano Quartet* is fresher and more lyrical, with strains of Ravel, Elgar, and Vaughan Williams. Donohoe communicates the fluidity and energy of the piece splendidly, and obviously has a great instinct for the work.

The sound produced by Naxos is one of their best and, with 20-Bit technology used, there is a real presence to the performance. While the piano can sound a little distant at times, this is preferable to it being in your face, and the Quartet is positioned superbly, within a natural acoustic space.

This is a wonderful CD of some great, yet sadly neglected, pieces of chamber music, and shows another side to Sir William's visionary work. A great accomplishment, and at a bargain price, it should be purchased without hesitation.

SG





Rachmaninov
Symphony No.3/Symphonic Dances

Baltimore Symphony
Orchestra/David Zinman

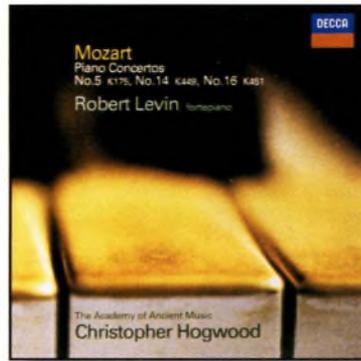
Telarc CD-80331 

This coupling of two of Rachmaninov's later works, begs comparison with earlier recordings from Previn and Johanos respectively. This *3rd Symphony* is closer in feeling to Previn's EMI reading than his earlier RCA performance, sounding more nostalgic, with occasional vigour and rhythmic drive, overlaying the lyrical tension supplied by the excellent Baltimore strings. Zinman understands and communicates Rachmaninov's perceptions of homesickness and melancholia beautifully. The *Symphonic Dances* is much the livelier of the two pieces, with its strains of the composer's own *Dies Irae* absorbed by folk music and plenty of palpable energy. Here Zinman sounds more uncompromising than Johanos, disclosing an underlying tenacity and fortitude. Sonically this CD is exceptional, with a massive soundstage and excellent imagery and bloom which give the feeling of a live performance. There is a phenomenal frequency range, with dynamics to die for. Every nuance of this recording is brought out by the wonderful acoustics of the Meyerhoff Symphony Hall, and well implemented, audiophile, recording equipment. A knockout "demo disc". A marvellous issue, of two great performances, presented on one of the best sounding orchestral CDs I have come across. A must have for all audiophiles and lovers of great music.

Available from www.hififorsale.com

Tel: 0870 2412469

SG



Mozart
Piano Concertos 5,14 and 16

Levin/Academy of Ancient
Music/Hogwood

Decca/L'oiseau-Lyre 458 285-2 

I have always regarded Mozart as a composer of infectious vitality, and nowhere is that better confirmed than here. Mozart believed that to hold the audience's attention, there should be conflict between the fortepiano and the orchestra. This is realised by the dramatic textures articulated by the performers, and rhythms are tight and buoyant, further emphasising the composer's intentions. All the performers hold an obvious love for this music and play with a sparkling fluidity, but it is Levin who holds the spotlight. His cadenzas leave you breathless, and show a spirit of improvisation rarely found, but central to Mozart's music. The whole performance is refined, gracious, and totally appropriate.

The recording is detailed, with fairly good separation, and the soloist is accurately caught, centre stage. The orchestra is situated well back, in a large soundstage, and sounds powerful, even for one using authentic instruments. But, these results were only gained by reversing the polarity at the speaker terminals – something I do with many recordings – otherwise the sounds were typically "digital", with a brightness and edginess to the sound.

This CD represents the pinnacle of a continuing and excellent cycle, holding the benchmark for at least two of these concertos.

SG



Puccini
La Boheme

Pavarotti, Freni, Ghiaurov
Berlin PO, Karajan

Speakers Corner Decca SET 565-6 

Lo Boheme has always been Puccini's most compact and intensely bleak opera, and this Decca double album has always been the one to own. It finds Pavarotti at the height of his powers and Freni makes a seductive and refreshingly fragile Mimi.

Karajan may polarise opinion, and I for one find his orchestral recordings hard going, but his touch for opera is quite another matter (witness the fabulous RCA Soria *Carmen* with Leontyne Price). Here he handles the score's naturalism well, but more importantly he maintains the sense of a coherent performance, undoubtedly helped by the long takes and holistic acoustic of the recording venue, a Berlin Church rather than a studio.

The performance is dramatic, the singing full of range and the necessary humour, and Karajan conjures towering crescendos to contrast with the many quieter moments. The Speakers Corner pressing follows their current pattern, losing a little transparency and atmosphere compared to the original, but compensating the listener with wonderfully quiet surfaces and a solidity and bandwidth that escape the Decca versions. The Libretto is nicely reproduced, as is the box, and for once they also stand comparison with the originals. The drama, natural acoustic and warmth of vinyl come into their own with opera, making this one of Speakers Corner's most welcome re-issues. Encore please!

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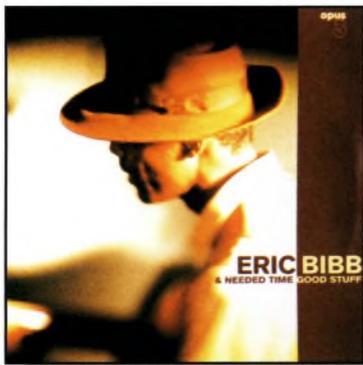
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Eric Bibb and Needed Time

Good Stuff

Opus 3 LP 19603 

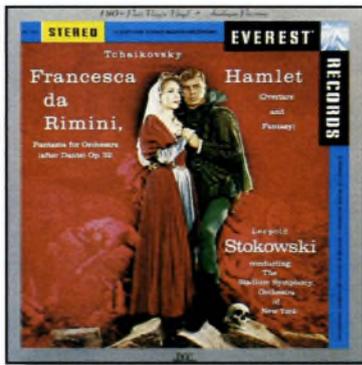
Like *Spirit and the Blues*, *Good Stuff* is now available on 45rpm vinyl, and, like that album, it is vastly superior to its CD incarnation. The music is a personal mix of Eric Bibb's favourite styles, and is very much a follow-up to the previous release – being performed and recorded in a very similar vein. The performances are expressive – as in all of Eric's work – and the whole album is relaxed, yet at the same time, stimulating.

While the CD had an "in the room" feel to it, the LP is more "you are there", with the listener being transported back to the recording session. There is simply more life to the performance, with more natural tones and an incredibly realistic acoustic. Extra nuances add to the appreciation of the performance, such as the inflections in Eric's voice, giving a better insight to the changes in energy, and therefore emotion, that he wishes to portray. You can hear the heavenly voiced Deacons positioned behind and around Eric, and when listening to 'Where The Green Grass Grows', their bass singer clearly turns his head as he first sings the words "under my feet". A wonderful album, that deserves to be in all good collections.

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SG



Tchaikovsky

Francesca da Rimini / Hamlet

EVEREST / DCC LPZ 1001  

Richard Strauss

Don Juan / Till Eulenspiegel / Salome

EVEREST / DCC LPZ 1002  

Leopold Stokowski conducting The Stadium Symphony Orchestra Of New York

Stokowski's fondly remembered SSO Tchaikovsky and Strauss performances at the Manhattan Centre Ballroom in New York both date from the July of 1958, and with the exception of *Till Eulenspiegel* and *Salome*, which were 35mm film recordings, they were re-cut directly from Everest's original three-channel master tapes by DCC back in 1994.

The pick is of course those truly wonderful (definitive?) readings of *Francesca da Rimini* and *Hamlet*. Leopold Stokowski's whirlwind approach single-handedly resurrected works which had previously been considered somewhat lack-lustre. Under the circumstances another release of this famous recording (despite the secondhand availability of an Everest SDBR 3011 pressing or a later World Record Club reissue) was inevitable. Is it as good as four decades of hype would have you believe? Yes, I think it probably is!

Francesca instantaneously catches fire right from the opening bars, as soaring speeds build with the theme of the lover's intertwining passions until its tension becomes too great to bear and we get that tremendous polyphonic

climax. Who says the "Classics" can't be sexy! *Hamlet* is a more dignified piece – its passion has a sombre, introspective quality as befits Shakespeare's emotionally tortured Prince of Denmark. Stokowski is totally convincing here. He has an eye for a dramatic gesture which combines well with Tchaikovsky's instinctive Russian feel for an epic tale.

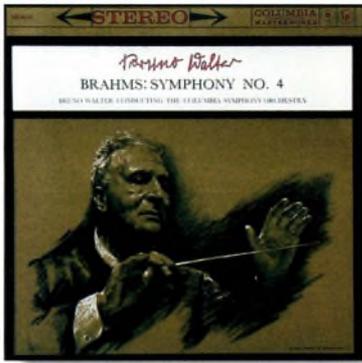
A big sounding, tight, sometimes fierce recording is not for the faint-hearted. The brass tuttis are especially gripping because their rawness suits that emotional intensity found in circumstances that are thematically spiralling out of control.

The Strauss recordings, too, are of a uniformly high standard – inner details like the weeping violin and delicate percussive touches near the opening of *Don Juan* are nicely revealed. Occasionally, though, when strings leap upwards or chest-thrusting horns push forward to their furthest points, the sound does top out. Fortunately Stokowski holds back a little on the great unison horn call of *Don Juan*. It would be interesting to know if he was trying to accommodate the engineers after an earlier playback.

For *Salome* he gives an unashamedly sensuous interpretation. Musically, she is made to seductively pine until it's possible to believe that her dance did indeed become too much for Herod and that he had no option but to put her to death. The elaborate conceit which culminates in *Till Eulenspiegel's* posthumous epilogue is also carried off in some style. Sonorous interruptions by woodwind and a more pointed intercession from the flute lay a real comic foundation here. Of course laughing with Richard Strauss is always slightly uneasy when one recalls his ardent anti-semitism. But who said listening to great composers would be a tea-party?

RP





**Brahms
Symphony No. 4**

Bruno Walter / CSO

COLUMBIA / CLASSIC MS 6113  

Excursions into the Columbia Masterworks back catalogue are a rarity – which is a pity as we’ve missed out on some tremendous sessions from the likes of Szell, Ormandy, Bernstein and, above all, Dr Bruno Walter. His legendary readings of the Brahms and Mahler Symphonies were released (more often than not) in the U.K. on the Philips SABL label and were splendidly recorded. Classic will have returned to the Columbia archives for the original mastertapes while, all those years ago, Philips used second generation copies for their European cuts.

This classic reissue is characteristically well-balanced throughout and possesses an admirably spacious, transparent and warm string tone – which is important as this reinforces a sense of an all pervasive and beautifully lyrical opening Allegro. Walter’s interpretation and the performance from his Columbia Symphony players for these big romantic works are inspired. His strength and authority builds from that gentle simplicity of the Allegro into an exhilarating coda. The slow movement is finely structured, while an intense Allegro giocoso has spine-tingling vitality and great impetus – culminating in those superbly executed final variations and coda.

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RP



**Beethoven
Symphony No.4 / Leonore
Overture No.3**

Pierre Monteux / LSO

RCA / CLASSIC VCS-1102  

Recut from an original 1965 RCA Victrola recording and not a Living Stereo re-issue, Beethoven’s *Fourth Symphony* was only released in the year after Pierre Monteux’s death at the ripe old age of Eighty-Nine. Its popularity came from both an understandable wave of nostalgia for this renown conductor and through the excellence of his performance and the recording quality – which is fortunate because 180gr alternatives are today limited to a Klimo box set of the complete Symphonies under Rene Liebowitz’s baton. Sandwiched between a monumental *Eroica* and the tumultuous *Fifth*, this much gentler Symphony with its serene (almost statuesque) nature has been somewhat overshadowed – a pity because this is a lovely work. Monteux’s handling of an ethereal violin melody in the slow movement is sublime and the Finale (in typical Monteux fashion) is incredibly exciting, though his detractors might call it hectic! Excellent musicianship, and the kind of understanding one would expect from an orchestra and its resident conductor, help to make this a memorable LP. The clear, deeply resonant lower strings from the first movement’s Adagio and Allegro, together with real weight in the climaxes creates a wonderfully expansive whole.

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RP



Various Artists

**Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival
1972**

Atlantic/ Classic SD 2-502 

Forget audiophile quality recordings, BUT if you want a dose of unadulterated festival atmosphere (and this is oozing with it), with the added benefit of clean toilets (well mine are, I can’t vouch for yours), this recording is right on the money. Featuring an eclectic mix from Hound Dog Taylor, by way of Dr John, and Freddie King right through to the mighty Sun Ra & His Solar Myth Arkastra, this Classic re-issue places you smack in the middle of the crowd.

The double album is packed with gems from which I’d single out Koko Taylor performing an incendiary ‘Wang Dang Doodle’, Junior Walker doing the same with ‘Roadrunner’, Howlin’ Wolf belting out ‘Highway 49’, Muddy Waters, Otis Rush...you see the problem. If these albums don’t stir your bones you’re probably beyond help.

If I had to select a favourite number it’d either be the Howlin’ Wolf or maybe the Bonnie Raitt ‘Tribute to Fred McDowell’. The fact is the standard throughout is so high there’s little point in choosing favourites, just pour a drink, light up, crank up the volume to 11, sit back and enjoy.

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DD





Led Zeppelin

(1)

Classic / Atlantic SDB216 180g 3

I have no idea where Classic have sourced the masters for this 180gm re-issue, as rumour has it that the original analogue 2 tracks were lost in the seventies, hence the re-masters for CD. If there's been any PCM in the chain I can't hear it, and with an album as cymbal heavy as this one it's usually pretty obvious. My own copy dates from the early eighties and is pretty poor, but not as bad as the second album pressed in the same period. Whatever! This version is as shiny as a new pin, bringing out the power and intensity of Zeppelin in the period where the arrangements came as much from band interplay as from the dots. Things would never be quite the same again. Not my favourite Zep album, 2 gets that (dubious) honour, nevertheless the trademarks are all there, Page's superb use of the riff, Plant's inspired and inspirational wail, Bonham's big, big drums, all nicely tied together by Jones' understated bass. Despite being released in 1969, for me this album never seems to date. The bass lead in to 'Dazed and Confused' still send shivers down my spine just as it did when I first heard it nearly 30 years ago. Unless you are the proud possessor of a mint original pressing (what were you doing in the 70s?) then take the opportunity to enjoy this all over again. This Classic re-issue should be top of your Christmas list.

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DA



Kari Bremnes

Norwegian Mood

ARS FXLP221 180g HD

The female voice has always held a particular fascination for audiophiles, partly because it's something that hi-fi systems actually do well! The latest in a long (and all too often far from illustrious) line is this offering from ARS in Germany. What makes this project slightly unusual is its co-sponsorship by ClearAudio, Phonosophie, Acapella and Audio Physic, a case of high end audio putting its money where its mouth is. Kari Bremnes is, not surprisingly, a Norwegian chanteuse, and judging from the credits on this album, a member of an impressively extended musical family. The lyrics, all sung in English, are mostly hers, and are delivered in a pleasingly pure contralto, backed by sensibly sparse acoustic arrangements. In fact, everytime I hear this record I think of Judy Collins' bigger sister, the one with an accent. The music is the same intelligent and gentle folk, the diction has the same clarity.

Whether or not you'll like the music is down to personal taste, but it's hard to fault the recording. The voice is immediate and natural, but it's the transparency of the acoustic space and the wealth of beautifully presented low-level detail that takes the breath away. The shimmer and decay of cymbals is wonderfully natural, underlining how false they generally sound, and that quality encompasses the entire audio range.

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RG



Lorna Hunt

All In One Day

Classic Records RTH1015 180g CD 96

If the Kari Bremnes disc represents one extreme of the audiophile craving for the perfect female vocal, then Lorna Hunt's *All In One Day* is at the other. An ultra naturalistic recording of what amounts to a live set, these are self penned gritty folk songs in the American tradition, laid down direct to two-track, and all the more immediate for that.

This record doesn't have the astonishing transparency and detail of the ARS disc, but has other qualities that, arguably, more than make up for that. These are musically far more holistic, with a much greater sense of artistic tension. The sparse, in some cases almost sporadic support of the band is all the more powerful for its restraint and the way it focuses attention on Lorna Hunt's voice. And what a voice. It has the natural purity of tone and pitch that is a prerequisite for an audiophile recording, but it has an edge and underlying strength to go with the beauty. Stand out tracks are 'Long Hard Road', 'Don't Forget Me' and a fabulous 'Whipping Post', the only cover on the album. The beauty of the performance creates a powerful contrast with the bleak material, and for once the excellent recording and pressing is totally sympathetic. Evidence that Classic are losing that cynical streak. I think it might just be.

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RG



A Musical Nativity

– Two sides to an audiophile Christmas

by Simon Groome

When we think of music at Christmas, we usually summon images of carol singers on a frosty night, and it is indeed the carol that has been the musical basis for the celebration of Christ's nativity since the Middle Ages. But more recently two sides to this traditional form of adoration have developed, with two audiophile recordings representing the opposing camps – one from the new world, the other from the old.

In the New World corner is Reference Recording's *Star of Wonder*, which has long been regarded as an audiophile recording of the highest order - having appeared on "Super Disc" lists since the late 1980s. While there are still a few vinyl copies to be found, it is now only readily available in its HDCD format. The performances include a mixture of choral music (the San Francisco Choral Artists), sometimes with various harp, flute and organ accompaniments, and occasional tracks of bell-ringing (the Ringmasters). The majority of works are carols, but with new arrangements their purity and simplicity is corrupted. The motets come across better, due to the lack of modification, but even these spiritual works appear without essence. While the music is always pleasant, it is never inspiring, and what is produced seems sterile. The choir sounds as if they are enjoying their experience, but the traditions of the music are disregarded, and the tracks featuring the Ringmasters are intrusive. The final track, Deck the Hall, fades out to sounds of laughter and merriment – far too corny! While crisp and detailed, the recording is not perfect. The acoustics of St. Ignatius Church produce a large, but rather shallow, soundstage with natural tones, but it is the recording of the flute and harp accompaniment that bother me most – sounding far too close and overwhelming.

Cantate Domino has also been around for sometime, having been recorded in 1976, and winning the Swedish Grammfon Prize in 1977.

The music here comes across as more thoughtful and is produced with feeling, summoning up a more traditional view of Christmas. The performers are the Oscars Mottetkör, conducted by Torsten Nilsson, Marianne Mellnäs (soprano) and Alf Linder on organ. While the works here also include carols and motets, with singing in the language of the music's origin, whether English, German, Latin, or Swedish, melodies are immediately more expressive, drawing feelings of compassion, inspiration and joy. Even the occasional brass accompaniment is in keeping with the perception. The only track that spoils this feeling of inner peace is *White Christmas*, and while the singing is excellent, it is the organ, sounding like a Wurlitzer, that demeans the experience. The recording is more appropriate than on *Star of Wonder*, with a deeper soundstage and more distant performers, giving a sense of scale and power – especially with regard to the sound of the organ. The portrayal of the performers within a natural space is paramount in allowing this type of music to live and breathe, and this is shown here better than on any other choral recording I know. Many audiophiles know and appreciate the Decca/London reissues of Japan's King Record Company. Their Super Analogue pressing of this album transcends the original Proprius release in every way, which in turn trounces the CD. The last, limited numbers, of these very natural sounding pressings are still available.

As for the two sides of Christmas, they can be summed up as traditional and commercial. For those audiophiles who wish to enjoy the traditional, do not hesitate to grab one of the superb King Super Analogue pressings of *Cantate Domino*. While some of you will still want *Star of Wonder*, for its recording quality, this album is one of those audiophile recordings where sound comes before music, and you will end up listening to the kind of music that plays in any Oxford Street store all December long!



Star of Wonder

Reference Recordings RR-21 180g HD

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Cantate Domino

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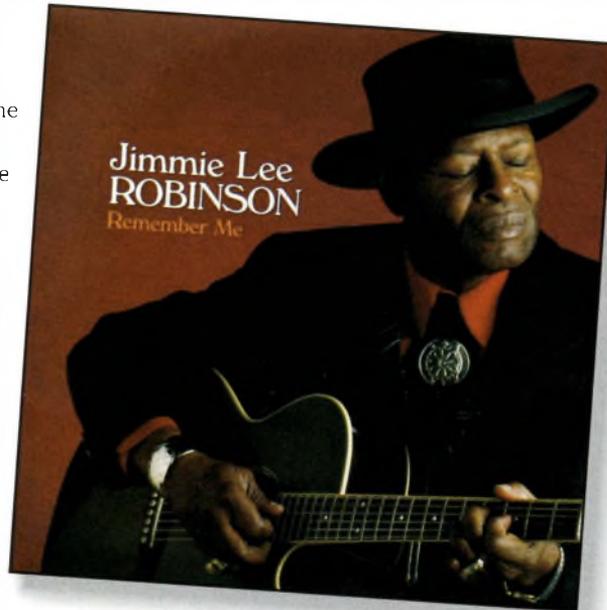
Blue-Prints For Blues-Men... The Analogue Productions Originals

by Reuben Parry

I have often thought that the human condition is an inherently painful one. From the absurdity of biomechanics – how can a number of disparate parts like bone, blood and tissue physically knit together, function and not hurt? - beyond those hormonal hiccups in adolescence to the emotional uncertainty of adulthood – I swear that just to get through each day you must consciously or subconsciously suppress most of this suffering. Occasionally, though, it becomes too much to bear.

Your woman leaves you. The dog dies and then, to cap it all, the Bank forecloses, and all this anguish (no matter how much inner philosophising you do) spills out. The Blues, with its peculiar blend of melancholy which fuses sadness and gaiety, has always expressively tapped into life's fissures - acting as something of a safety valve. This brings me to Chad Kassem, who has memorably steamed into an adventurous and really satisfying recording project with the Analogue Productions Originals (APOs).

His well known re-pressings of such classic jazz and blues albums as the inimitable Art Pepper's *Plus Eleven* (APJ 017) or *Keeping It To Ourselves* (APB 036) with the magnificent Sonny Boy Williamson were a highly commendable if relatively safe proposition. To take a step further and produce your own original, brand new, audiophile standard recordings is either an act of blind faith or the



culmination of a well-judged and long-considered plan. I tend to lean towards the latter. Kassem recognised at a very early stage that music devotees should not be asked to subsist solely on a regurgitated diet, no matter how rich it has become. Great music and great musicians were still out there. They are not merely the preserve of those recording engineers and record moguls of the past. As an example, back in 1984, when Kassem first came to Kansas City from his native Louisiana, he heard someone who deserved to be recorded – a sixty-two year old blues genius, Little Hatch, who was ripping through his stuff at The Grand Emporium. Fourteen years on (and now a modest industry impresario himself) Chad grasped the unexpected opportunity to tape this gritty, natural and sadly under-recorded talent.

Hatch, appearing as from nowhere,

like one of those late summer evening breezes which rustles up through the trees, teasing away the last heat of the day, just rolled in from Missouri to spectate at Jimmie Lee Robinson's *Remember Me* (APO 2006) recording sessions. A day later, on February 15th 1998, he, along with a longtime collaborator, Bill Dye pickin' primitive guitar, put down the grooves that were to eventually bed in for their *Goin' Back* (APO 2007) album – twelve tracks being selected for the 24kt gold CD, while nine including 'I Got

A Woman', 'Woke Up This Morning' and the Muddy Waters, 'Buzz On', grace the LP release.

Dave Baker's technical expertise at the Blue Heaven Studios, Salina, Kansas, draws you in towards recording Nirvana with this live direct to two track (less-is-more) cut. It really suits his gnarled vocal honesty and virtuoso harmonica blowin'. When Hatch shifts through the gears this engineering matches his every move and there's that seamless sense of space, depth and width occupied by rock solid stereo images that have made "naturalness" and "immediacy" the bywords for an Analogue Productions Originals release. I guess I'm in love with these grizzled ol' blues men such as Robinson, Hubert Sumlin and the evocatively named R & B singer, Weepin' Willie.

Although these stalwarts, and the wonderful Provine Hatch, have



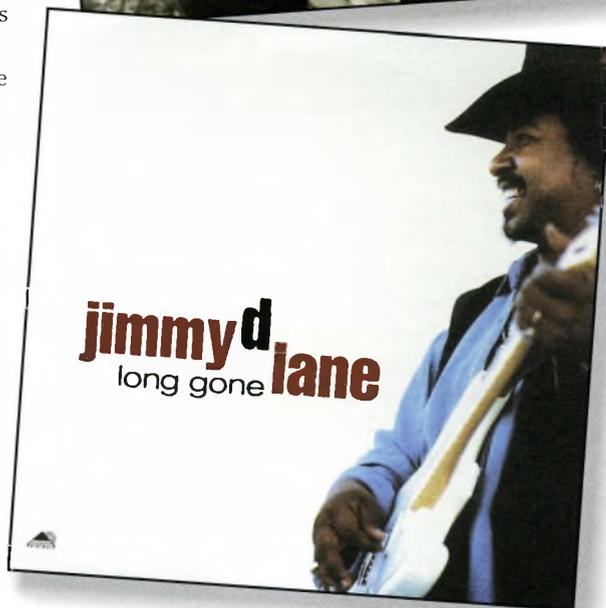
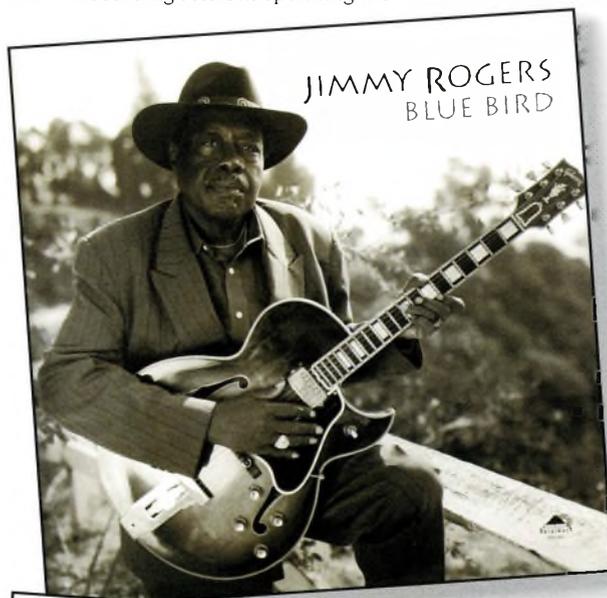
▶ clearly moved Chad Kassem over the years, it was a legendary Chicago guitarist Jimmy Rogers who pioneered the APO label with his translucent *Blue Bird* (APO 2001) disc.

Rogers (christened James A Lane) was an inspirational choice. Acclaimed both as an integral figure and architect within the best of the Muddy Waters bands, and an admired singer/songwriter in his own right, he was a musician with a real pedigree - having performed and recorded with the likes of Junior Wells, Chuck Berry, Howlin' Wolf and Tampa Red. His presence bought into that great blues heritage and gave real credence to this fledgling recording project, just when it needed it, at the start, back in 1993. Moreover, the great man's status attracted an array of classy support men: Dave Myers (bass), Ted Harvey (drums), Carey Bell (harmonica), Johnnie Johnson (piano) and Jimmy D. Lane (Rogers' son) on a blistering lead guitar. Albert Collins, too, was scheduled to guest but died shortly before recording began.

Blue Bird is profound. An astute modern electric blues classic that on LP combines nine terrific Jimmy Rogers originals with four standards - among them a fitting tribute to "Waters" and "the Wolf" with 'Smokestack Lightning', and a Melvin L. Jackson favourite, 'Rock Me'. However it's the three tracks that kick-off side one, 'I'm Tired Of Crying Over You', 'Blue Bird' and 'Walkin' By Myself' that are the killers. They demonstrate a pure synergy and camaraderie amongst band members as their nip'n'tuck magic-making surrounds Jimmy Roger's legendary lyricism.

Running the pure analogue tapes

past "Junior's" undeniably powerful chords was a natural progression. *Long Gone* (APO 2003) released in 1997 was pulled together from four recording sessions spanning the



two preceding years. Jimmy D. Lane opens with his personal Hendrix homage, 'Hear My Train A Comin'. The musical and visual feast that was Jimi Hendrix was the main reason for Lane picking up that first guitar - a fifty nine dollar Harmony - to begin with. So laying down this track, with Freddie Crawford diggin' in on bass and Jim

Keltner coolly beating the skins, is a serious expression of his earliest artistic influences.

Another album, *Legacy* (APO 2005), was issued a year later. Dedicated to the memory of his father, who'd passed away in the December of 1997, it touchingly features a soulful Jimmy Rogers trading both quips and leads with his son in that distinctive, richly engrained, R & B style on 'Another Mule Kick'in In My Stall' and 'One Room Country Shack'. Jimmy D. Lane is fortunate. Like Eric Bibb he, too, is one of those up-and-coming figures who through strong family ties was

positively steeped in a blues tradition. The presence of Dave Myers, Johnny Littlejohn, Wolf, Muddy and Big Walter jamming with your ol' fella at home in the front room has to be infectious. But, of course, being around "the greats" can be double-edged. Do you emulate them and risk becoming a pale imitation that feeds cheaply from the memories of the past? Or, alternatively, become someone who guts it out, digs deep and finds a creditable voice of one's own? Lane does not cling to anybody's shirt-tails.

Comfortable alongside Freddie Crawford, Carey Bell and Co., he mixes his own blistering guitar attacks with Bell's crying harmonica and the tight Crawford bass lines for tracks like 'In This Bed', where Lane's lyrics topically handle more modern blues themes - the sexual needs and human frailties of a party girl in this instance. ▶

Don't get me wrong, this isn't a case of "Jimmy D. Lane meets Germaine Greer", but it is a relevant, living blues for today and I'm sure that thirty years from now people will look back and say "sure, Jimmy D. was something. Wire burnin'. Totally awesome. Right out there in front". These LPs will also be sought for their muscular engineering which really suits Jimmy D's deep, rough-hewn vocals and the ripping electric chords that frequently rock! Nor should those split sessions of Long Gone hold any fears. There's certainly nothing fragmented about John Koenig's production. When Jimmy switches to acoustic on 'I'm In Love', or Keltner augments his stick work with tambourine splashes in 'Shave, Shiver, Ache', the recording clearly defines these subtleties and shifts in pace, shape and texture.

The close knit, communal experience of cutting discs for Analogue Productions is also reflected in Hubert Sumlin's release, *I Know You* (APO 2004). This, the fourth of the Originals, is another meeting place for friends and kindred spirits alike. Sumlin, who went way back with Jimmy Rogers, guested on *Legacy* (alongside drummer, Sam Lay) for a Chester Burnett track, 'Big House'. Here, they are joined by sidemen Jimmy D Lane and Freddie Crawford, while a magical Carey Bell again demonstrates the harmonica's vocal-like qualities, with David Krull's dexterous hands freely working the ivories on piano and organ.

For those who are unfamiliar with the sixty six year old (former) sideman from Greenwood, Mississippi, I will paraphrase Justin O'Briens liner notes: "That's Hubert playing the hair-raising

first guitar licks behind Howlin' Wolf on the indelible Chess classics 'Shake For Me' and 'Killin' Floor'... whose brilliantly inventive guitar work inspired scores of famous guitarists.



He's the one Eric Clapton, in a gesture from a man at a loss as to how to repay his gratitude, let choose from among his vast collection (of guitars)." Moreover, this is Sumlin's recording session. Shrugging off the sideman tag, he nonchalantly leads the guys in an exciting and atmospheric recording of ten songs, including interpretations of two Chester Burnett masterpieces, 'Howlin' For My Darling' and 'How Many More Years'.

Characteristically, poetic and improvisational, Hubert Sumlin's warm, effortless and impeccably old-fashioned artistry (especially when reworking lyrics and imagery on songs like

'I Got It Where I Want It' and 'I'm Coming Home') helps to peel away at the intervening years until the spirit from those early Chicago blues days of the 1950s is reincarnated.

As a consequence, Jimmy D's rockier inclinations are restrained in favour of that more rustic R & B style and Sumlin (sometimes through a softer lyrical execution, which often belies his age but speaks volumes for the man's experience) has a massive impact. For that matter, so does the openness and clarity of those instrumental images which lie at the heart of this Michael C. Ross engineered recording. Microphone positions and acoustic balances are spot on. Take Carey's harmonica notes which introduce the longest track, 'I've Been Hurt', as a good example. For over seven minutes they openly weep but never dry up as the anguish is thickly applied by electric guitar riffs and a strong vocal line.

Rubbing shoulders with this "institution" is a harp man making his recording debut. Eomot Ra Sun is one of those self-taught tongue blockers



▶ whose rootsy Delta blues style musically connects back to that Maxwell Street tradition. He has also been decisively shaped, in turns, by remarkable sharecropper grandparents, an impoverished Southside Chicago childhood, three unpleasant tours of duty in Vietnam and the discovery of a proud African heritage. The latter figures strongly within Eomot's psyche. His given name, Ezra Lee Blakely Jr. was jettisoned, to be replaced by the current handle, pronounced E-oh-maht RAH-sahn. This is very much part of a genuine cultural and ethnic consciousness coming to the fore - the sharp sartorial sleeve design for *Three Days Walkin'* (APO 2008) being no simple masquerade.

Underpinning these ten quintessential cuts, though, are the twin pillars of great musicianship and finely-tuned technical expertise. Dave Baker, down at the Blue Heaven Studios, develops a precise, transparent and tactile quality which beds in nicely around the veteran supporting line-up of bass man Bob Stroger, drummer Sam Lay and ubiquitous electrician Jimmy D. Lane.

Eomot's harp playing is not out of place in this company, and his light vocal touches will also grow on you. I admit to some uncertainty on quick-fire openers 'Goin' To Chicago' and 'Walkin These Blues Away', mainly because I've grown too conditioned by deep, powerful and rugged blues voices. Here, it was the rhythmically slow, almost lazy cadences of 'Last Night' and a deliberate, tightly controlled, pathos on the superb side-one closer 'Poor Boy', that really convinced me about this attractive, tonally sweet, school of blues singing. Establishing a stark contrast between

vocal delivery and themes of poverty is an exceptionally intelligent manipulation and choice of material, proving that maturity as a live performer will always have its place in the recording

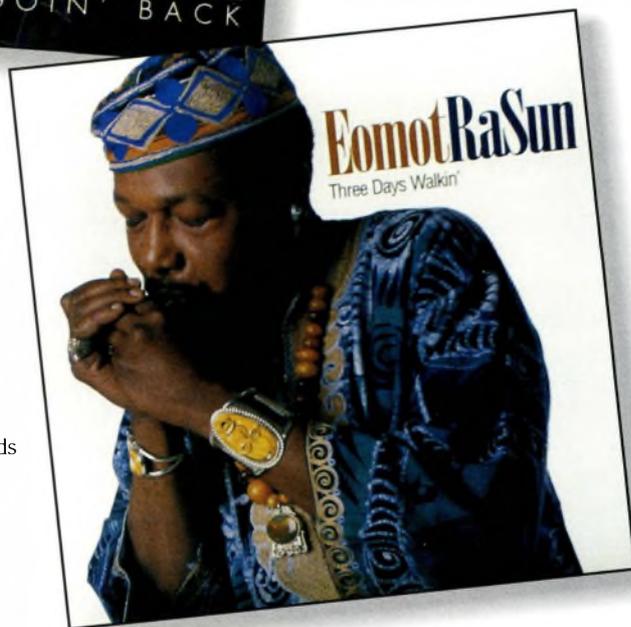


studio, and confirming that considerable (frequently unrealised) talent still exists outside of those walls.

If experience in a large amount counts, then octogenarian David "Honeyboy" Edwards has racked up an unassailable score. He has "seen it all" and (for reasons which will become apparent) "done it all", as well, during a career that has taken him from a seat alongside the unrivalled Charley Patton (who earned a reputation as founder of the Delta Blues back in the early Thirties) to sessions with the late great Big Joe Williams, of Basie Band fame. Edwards, like Patton who was renown for a uniquely personal and complimentary

style of guitar/vocals, is not content to let his (or anyone else's) guitar tamely mimic the rhythms of a vocal line on *Shake 'Em On Down* (APO 2010).

Idiosyncratic, authentic and above all jammed full of surprises where timing and delivery are concerned, going solo for his reworking of inspirational Patton favourites 'High Water Everywhere' and tag teaming with Madison Slim's harmonica for 'Pony Blues' show that blues men (even at eighty four years of age) are rarely over-the-hill. Instead like a rough old tree stump alternately cracked and bleached in high summer and then ravaged by the icy storms of winter, they bring marvelously gnarled textures to these



black folk songs. There is, too, plenty of urgency and emotional intensity from Edwards' playing. Head on gunslinger guitar exchanges with pretender Jimmy D. Lane on 'Bullfrog Blues' perhaps reflects some growing anxieties about mortality (rather than any machismo) because clearly he feels there is still much work to be done in his twilight years. But then ▶

▶ maybe performing is just a drug. As Honeyboy says "Blues is a feeling. ... I've played blues where women just sit and cry over their problems. I've also had people dancing... that's when I get the biggest thrills". Intuitive gigs, such as this, certainly offer up wonderfully addictive and compelling evidence of that...

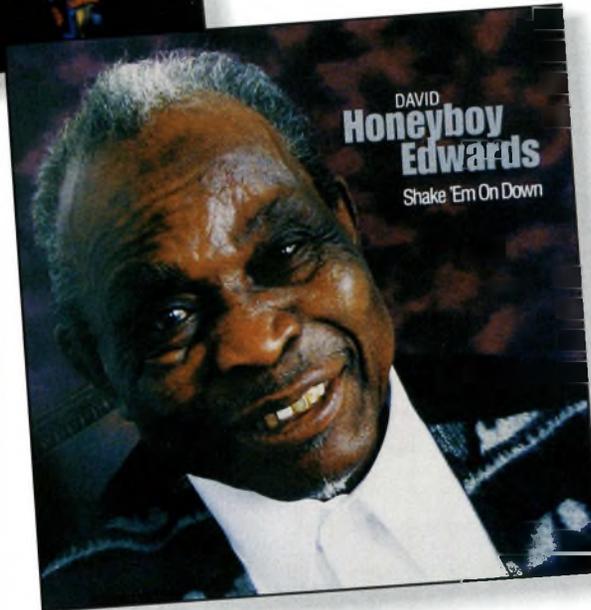


From 78s to the sought after LPs cut for Sun and Chess Records – and now with the Analogue Productions 180gr vinyl, audiophile CD and DVD releases of *Shake 'Em On Down* – David Honeyboy Edwards has weaved a spell and long may it continue. Clearly he has never been better recorded. His rasping, barely enunciated, saliva-filled lyrics sometimes spitting, sometimes sucking back emotions are, together with the improvised acoustic wire bending and full-bodied soundbox slaps, breathtakingly realistic, while Slim Madison's pained harmonica intercessions for 'Drop Down Mama' and 'Monkey Face Woman' have an etched, but never over-indulged, quality. The hierarchy of voice, guitar and harmonica is perfectly maintained. Making this organic Delta Blues album one of the most hypnotic that you'll be

likely to find.

An off-the-cuff chance remark overheard by Mighty Sam McClain while both he and Weepin' Willie Robinson were touring round the Boston blues venues was the catalyst which led directly to one of the finest of these Acoustic Sounds/APO

recordings. After over forty years of singing urban rhythm 'n' blues the frustrations of a seventy three year old Willie Robinson spilled over into his now famous heartfelt statement... "Man, I got to get me a CD out before I die". Well, as it turned out, he's achieved much more than could normally be expected of



a debutant. On hearing those words McClain then went on a personal crusade to fulfil this wish. Joined in this venture by his Audioquest producer, the brilliant Jo Harley, they pitched the idea of recording Weepin' Willie to Chad Kassem who

naturally jumped at an opportunity to cut a disc that would also feature Sam, his band and old friend Susan Tedeschi alongside the veteran vocalist.

What a debut! The converted church that serves as the Blue Heaven Studios is a stunning venue. Songs that include five McClain originals, two Robinson penned numbers and priceless standards, 'Fever' and 'Let The Good Times Roll', are awesome. The principles give it their all – belting out a heady blend of styles: from a typically rich McClain spirituality, to those seductive Tedeschi touches added for those two standards and, of course, Weepin' Willie Robinson living up to that name with an emotive and refreshingly uncomplicated commitment. *At last, On Time* (APO 2009) is a "must own" LP for any blues fan.

Moreover, here's another compelling opportunity to make that all important connection with an authentic blues past.

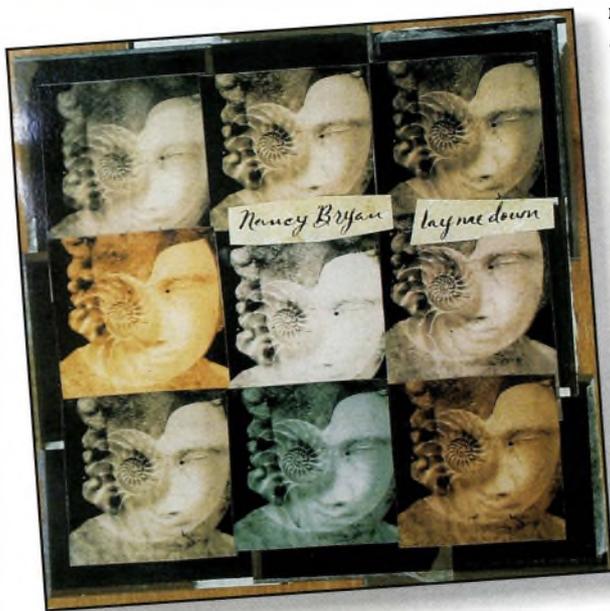
Willie Robinson has lived that traditional life which has provided the inspiration for an entire music genre. Parentless from the age of thirteen; picking cotton in 1930s Georgia; suffering, first hand, the pain of institutional racism while serving in the U.S. Military during World War Two, and then learning his trade with the BB King and James Taylor Bands of the Fifties and Sixties.

These experiences can never be replicated. They have shaped this fine old blues man and (even if he never cut another disc) Weepin' Willie Robinson will have left an honest, truly indelible, mark upon us with cracking tracks like 'Glory Train', 'Love Call' and 'Can't Go Wrong Woman'.



Attentive readers will have noticed an omission – Nancy Bryan’s *Lay Me Down* (APO 2002). In mitigation this is no blues album, so perhaps I can be excused for conveniently leaving it till last.

My opening encounter with the words and music of this sometimes feisty folk rocker came through an excellent (and still available) Fi/Analogue Productions sampler CD from 1997. Featuring just the one of her tracks, ‘Blood Song’, its acutely felt observations on metropolitan



violence lead the way for the 1995 John Koenig produced APO album release. Incidentally, a tireless Koenig also doubles as electric, acoustic and (occasional) bass guitarist; trebles up on cello and Hammond B3, and even lends a hand with percussion, shaker and tambourine. Undoubtedly, her ad hoc studio band is talent filled. Burleigh Drummond lives up to his name - he’s one hell of a stick man, and Hagstrom 8-String Bass monster Dan Schwartz is awesome for the closing track, ‘In And Out Of Time’. Nancy’s husband John, too, proves what a mean acoustic guitar player he can be on half a dozen numbers, including the contemplative title track and the only song not

penned by Nancy – ‘Sweet Havana’ – which just happens to be a John Bryan original!

Nancy’s light vocal touches and stronger songwriting are, however, the creative focal points for this LP. Unaccompanied for a remarkable, ‘Come Back To Me’, she fans smouldering lyrics like, “I can’t believe you’d leave my life / this way / I’m like a cobweb hanging / On the ceiling / Hanging ‘round the hope / You might come back this way”, until they catch alight. Which makes her relative anonymity difficult to explain.

Lay Me Down should be a popular choice, but it’s rare when working the Shows to be asked for a copy. Maybe the bland sleeve artwork is a contributory factor? A poor explanation, I admit, but it’s one backed by personal experience.

A year or so ago a friend (who will remain nameless) received the CD as a “cat sitting” thank you. Last summer

we were groove spinning and ‘Blood Song’ got an airing. Embarrassingly so, as it turned out. Being asked who the singer was, well, my eyes began to roll and having a slightly cruel streak, I tortured my friend with gentle sarcasm until a confession was obtained... The liner hadn’t been eye-catching enough for that particular magpie. Need I say more?

The long and the short of it is that any criticisms levelled against this album are, at their worst, superficial. Nancy Bryan may be a more mainstream artist than the likes of Little Hatch or Eomot Ra Sun, but she’s been just as badly neglected. Which goes to prove that (whether you’re a grizzly old bluesman or folksy crossover artist)

unlimited talent will not always guarantee richly deserved success. The Originals series offers a powerful advocacy for these people, but on their own these records and CDs will not be enough. So don’t hesitate, connect with these fine musicians while the opportunity still exists.

Album Reviews

APO 2001	Blue Bird	RECORDING	
		MUSIC	
APO 2002	Lay Me Down	RECORDING	
		MUSIC	
APO 2003	Long Gone	RECORDING	
		MUSIC	
APO 2004	I Know You	RECORDING	
		MUSIC	
APO 2005	Legacy	RECORDING	
		MUSIC	
APO 2006	Remember Me	RECORDING	
		MUSIC	
APO 2007	Goin’ Back	RECORDING	
		MUSIC	
APO 2008	Three Days Walkin’	RECORDING	
		MUSIC	
APO 2009	At Last, On Time	RECORDING	
		MUSIC	
APO 2010	Shake ‘Em On Down	RECORDING	
		MUSIC	

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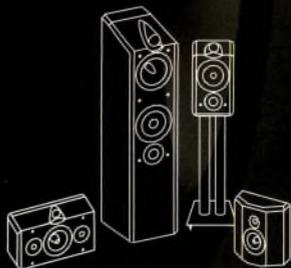
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