

hi-fi+

Issue 10 - Mar / Apr 2001
UK £3.95

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS

hi-fi+
**AWARDS
ISSUE**

► Amplification

Sugden Masterclass
Lavardin IS Integrated
Marsh Sound Design
Rogue Audio
Rega



► Analogue

Kuzma Stabi S And Stogi S
VPI TNT 'Hot Rod' and JMW 12.5"
Clearaudio Evolution And Tangent Turntable,
Insider Reference And Signature Cartridges
Trichord And Clearaudio Phono Stages

► Music

Records To Die From
Michelle Shocked
Lyrta

Hi-Fi+ Products Of 2000



Editorial

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Printed By

Stones The Printers, Banbury

**Hi-Fi+ is published six times
a year by; Hi-Fi+ Publishing Ltd**

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In the face of the relentless (and media powered) advance of Home Cinema, it's nice to see evidence of continued interest in the high quality reproduction of music in the home. And, shock horror, people seem to be doing it with a mere two channels! Can you credit it?

Not only do we hear tell of the first direct-cut records for absolutely ages (and the most musically valid ever! Superb blues recordings from Analogue Productions) but we are faced with the evidence of the Clearaudio Insider Reference setting new standards in moving-coil cartridge performance, the Resolution Audio CD55 making music from silver disc, and most impressive of all, the Lavardin IS integrated amp, a product which simply forces you to reassess your notions of what is possible, and how much it'll cost. We seem to be on the verge of a new golden age of stereo reproduction, just as the prophets of doom declare its' complete irrelevance.

Given the number of stereo discs, black and silver, in circulation, it's a brave man who writes off two-channel. Major corporations have been trying to stamp out vinyl ever since CD arrived on the scene. They've achieved such success that now they're having to get back into the black disc business themselves, with a steadily increasing number of new pop albums appearing on the 12" format. Public demand has its effects, but at the end of the day it's the sheer inertia of all that stereo software out there that's going to ensure the continued relevance of the two-channel format, and by extension, the equipment to get the best from it.



Roy Gregory

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



Speakers as universally revered as our Reference Series are a tough act to follow. After all, what can you do to improve on excellence?

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Like all the best things in life, they still don't come cheap - but to anyone who really appreciates sound, they're better value than ever.



REFERENCE SERIES



Contents

Equipment+

Regulars

- 4 News
- 8 Letters to the Editor
- 10 Columns

- 19 **Product Of The Year Awards, 2000**
Those products that did it for us in the last listening year.
- 29 **Iconoclasts**
Movers and shakers. Speaking with those who are only too happy to challenge convention and plough their own furrows.

Equipment Reviews

- 40 VPI TNT-Hr Turntable and JMW Memorial 12.5 Tonearm
- 50 Sugden Masterclass Line Stage and Mono-blocks
- 56 Resolution Audio CD55 CD Player
- 60 Clearaudio Insider Reference Moving-Coil Cartridge
- 64 Marsh Sound Design P2000 Pre-amp and A400S Power Amp
- 68 Rogue Audio R 99 Pre-amp and M 120 Mono-blocks
- 76 ATC SCM50A SL Active Loudspeaker
- 80 Clearaudio Evolution Turntable, Tangent Linear Tracking Tonearm and Signature Cartridge
- 86 Lavardin IS Integrated Amp
- 90 Neat Petite Loudspeaker
- 96 Kuzma Stabi S turntable and Stogi S Tonearm
- 100 Myriad Cameo System

The Real Deal - budget gear that works

- 106 Rega Planet CD Player and Integrated Amplifier

Audio Smorgasbord

- 113 Budget(ish) phono stages, CT's continuing love affair with the NAP 500 power amp, and making sure (and I mean sure) that your turntable shelf doesn't part company with your wall.

Music+

Feature

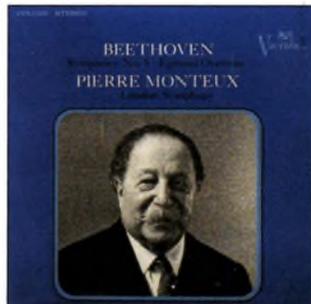
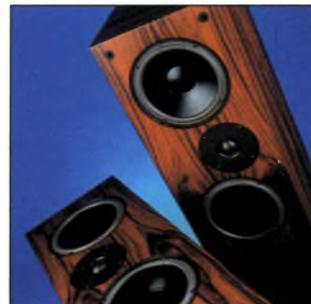
- 114 **Records To Die From**
All those discs that get played in demonstrations so often that people in the industry can't bear to listen to them anymore. Why should we be the only ones to suffer?

Music Reviews

- 125 Popular and Contemporary Music
- 131 Michelle Shocked
- 134 Jazz
- 136 Classical
- 138 Audiophile Recordings
- 141 **The lure of Lyrita**
An introduction to the legendary and highly collectable British classical label, long time Holy Grail for second-hand record collectors.

Departments

- 16 Subscriptions
- 85 Back issues
- 140 Advertisers Index



BADA Aid For Studio 99 Customers

Following the closure of Swiss Cottage dealer Studio 99 and the resultant creditors meeting, it is clear that some customers have lost deposits and are unaware that these MAY be covered by the BADA Bonding Scheme.

Studio 99 was a British Audio Dealers Association member until June 2000 and BADA are working to ensure that an appropriate rescue package is put in place for affected customers. Like ABTA, BADA is an independent body holding a substantial financial bond for such eventualities. BADA guarantees that their members' customers will never lose a deposit! Customers who have paid in part or full for undelivered goods should get in touch immediately on Tel. 0800

596 4444 to check the situation.

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Garrick Stands

Garrick is a new name in speaker stands, offering something a little different. They have produced a range of speaker stands and spiked slabs (for equipment or floorstanding speakers) to serve as examples of what can be done: Examples because, in reality, every item they build is constructed to order incorporating the customer's exact requirements. The stand shown is built from solid Limerstone, chosen for its fine grain and excellent sonic qualities, but other stone can be specified. Likewise, height, top and bottom plate size and everything else can be altered to your precise specification. They can



even be individually engraved. Prices start from around \$240 for a pair of slabs, and \$410 for speaker stands (including UK delivery).

Want something a little more exotic? These guys can supply literally anything you want; speakers resting on the shoulders of Vestal Virgins – no problem. But, between you and me I think most of their business will be rather more conventional, probably supporting the likes of Sonus Faber speakers, or B&W Nautilus 805s, both of which would look right at home perched on the Garricks. We have both a pair of stands and also some slabs for floorstanders for review, so expect those soon.

In the meantime you can obtain more information from Garrick at:

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RATA Errata

The gremlins struck in Issue 9, eradicating almost two complete paragraphs from the mains feature, resulting in a degree of confusion. The omission occurred at the bottom of page 23. We've reproduced the text in full below (with the deleted section in *italic*), together with the sections either side. Apologies all round, I think...

Fully Kimbered, it was time to investigate the application of separate parallel filters. First we used the Audio prism '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 too audible and distinctly unpleasant audio signals, played back *by the internal speaker. This revealed that whilst the ring itself was ghostly silent, as soon as we plugged in the system things turned very nasty indeed, underlining the fact that whilst it's all very well protecting your system from outside interference, the components themselves are perfectly capable of messing up the sound themselves. In this case it proved (somewhat surprisingly) to be the Beat that was doing most of the damage, rather than the CD player, so don't go jumping to any conclusions when it comes to your own system.*

At this point, Russ whipped out his piece de resistance, a moulded block with 13amp pins sticking out of it called 'The Silencer' (£4). Sticking it into the Power Block beside the mains leads was like switching off the Noise Sniffer! According to the audible output from the speaker this little moulded block had just eliminated, eaten or in some other way consumed all the mains distortion emanating from the

equipment, a fact confirmed by the spectrum analyser which measured a drop of nearly 80dB. Presented with this sort of result from something so prosaic it's tempting to scream "fix", but rather than risk making an idiot of myself I resorted to something familiar and understandable - the sound of the 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'.

Just to make matters worse, some of the pricing went astray too. The correct figures are as follows:

High Current Ring Main (Single insulated) £12/ft (rather than the £40 we suggested)

And Russ also asked us to point out that a slightly more basic cable option also exists, similar to the HC but using a lower grade copper and PVC rather than Teflon insulation - Hi-Fi Ring Main (Single insulated) £6/ft

There are discounts available on both cables for lengths of over 25ft.



Whoops!!

In a classic example of exactly why we don't like people using quotes from our reviews out of context, mail-order accessory supplier hififorsale.com have succeeded in blotting their copybook. However, unlike most offenders they've actually had the backbone to stand up and be counted. In their latest flyer they used an extract from our Issue 9 review of the Clearlight Audio interconnect cables to highlight their quality. Unfortunately, the article in question covered rather more ground than that, and in editing it down hififorsale.com inadvertently managed to not only give the impression that the Clearlight and

Nordost Mono-filament cables share the same technology (they definitely don't!), but that we feel the Clearlights are superior to the Nordost Quattro-fil cables at four times the price (we definitely don't).

In fact the article explained that it is possible to make the Clearlights sound better than the Quattro-fils and vice-versa, depending on the other cables used in the system. Not really the same thing at all.

Hififorsale.com would like us to forward their apology for any confusion that they might have caused, and wish to point out that it was not their intention to suggest that technology used in the the Nordost and Clearlight cables is in any way similar. With knuckles duly rapped they have now retired to sample the many and various flavours of humble pie which will doubtless be forthcoming from the industry in general. *Bon appétit*, guys.



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Incoming!

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

Dear Sir,

I am so glad that Roy Gregory did the excellent article - "It's a dirty Job..." in Issue 9 - on mains interference. It has been spoken about before in many magazines, but not to the detailed clarity of this article. The reason I am responding to the article? Our bungalow is the last receiver on our line from the sub-station, so we suffer a great deal of 'grunge', it is also not uncommon to see anything up to 9V DC in the mains AC that we receive at peak time.

The point being, that I have also used a dedicated domestic RCD specifically for the hi-fi ring main supplying the four double wall sockets. The wire I've used from the RCD on the ring is 19 / 0.45-mm (12 - awg) ptfе insulated silver-plated stranded copper wire (available from R.S. - part number 358-179 - Book 1) rated at 1000 V rms at 38 amps, 3.31-mm dia per lead, sleeved in 19.1-mm dia red polyamide (also available from RS - part number 267-2247) for easy identification in the loft. The disadvantage with using this wire is that it only comes as a single run, and only in pink insulation, so one has to be very careful of what one's doing, twisting the wire into a three conductor run - live, neutral and earth, courtesy of an electric drill and a convenient door handle (as close to one complete twist per 25-mm length as one can get - best done when the wife is out though!).

This has made a huge difference to our system too, using the same technique for the leads from the wall sockets to the HiFi equipment - but using black polyamide sleeving - (RS part number - 211-6270 and grey megamide woven sleeving - for the aesthetics - part number - 398-470).

I cannot overstate the two points that Roy Gregory makes:
1 - It improves sound quality beyond the sum of the outlay - making a Jaguar equivalent hi-fi into something more akin to a Rolls Royce.

2 - Never ever attempt such work unless you really do know what your doing. Mains voltage is dangerous at 13 Amps, and lethal at the supply to the RCD box.

An excellent article - and no, I don't work for RS.

John Owen Ellis

Dear Sir,

Firstly I would like to congratulate you on a very fine magazine. I always look forward to buying a new issue because you try to get people's systems to sound better, and not urge them to get the latest hot products.

I would like to seek your advice on the following matter:

I am building a dedicated listening room, and what concerns me after reading quite a few of your articles is the mains supply to the system. The question is, would it be better to upgrade the mains like you do in issue 9's "It's A Dirty Job..." with, say, Russ Andrews, Audio Plan or Yamamura - Churchill products, or would it be simpler and better to buy something like a PS Audio P600 or Accuphase Clean Mains 1200?

I would really value your advice on this matter as I am in two minds as to what to do and I want to get it right first time if possible.

Yours sincerely

Miguel

Whilst we are reluctant to recommend specific products, one over another, without much more specific information, in this instance it is more a matter of approach. Mains cabling and regeneration units operate in the same arena, but are not quite interchangeable. My advice would be to sort out the ring main and cabling first: it's more cost effective, and then you can experiment with a regeneration unit on top, maybe just for the source components and pre-amp, rather than trying to find a monster regenerator that will run the whole system. Ed.

Dear Sir,

First of all I would like to say that, although the Editor does not like the term "best", the magazine is head and shoulders above what any of the other magazines (naming no names - they know who they are) might offer.

Reviews are rounded, honest and informative.

An innocent buyer of hi-fi like myself is actually able to get a pretty good idea of the products to shortlist when the dreaded upgrade bug strikes.

One thing which may be useful for auditioning would be to suggest an ultimate test disc. A track list could be drawn up detailing the best tracks to use when listening to new equipment including notes regarding what the listener should look out for. Alternatively, if the magazine was to produce its own CD.....but I guess this would work out too expensive. Keep up the fantastic work!

Rob Moores, via E-mail.

All I can say is watch this space! Ed.



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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



So, suddenly a single product moves the goal posts. Unless you are producing an \$80,000 speaker your company is no longer a serious player. But let's just stop for a second and think about the wider implications of this. The product that started the stampede comes from a singular company that have a long and illustrious track record in producing small runs of complex design, involving expensive materials and specialist modification of drivers. The same cannot be said of many of the competing products that sprang into being. And what becomes of the previous flagships, the ones that cost a mere \$20,000. Suddenly they've been marginalised and are somehow no-longer considered really high-end. In other words, high-end has become a price point rather than a performance benchmark or (and perhaps more importantly) a question of approach.

The events that I've just related refer to the American market, which is after-all, the origin of the expression high-end as applied to audio. It's also the most active in the arena of ultra expensive equipment, and arguably the most vulnerable to marketing. Because that's precisely what the expression 'high-end' has become: a label used to add value to cheap equipment, or to justify the price of the most expensive products out there. It's a concept that has been colonised and corrupted by the marketing imperative that demands a product for every price point, whether those price points equate with a manufacturer's engineering expertise or not. Just take a look at the market, in the US, the UK or anywhere else. For each product category there's a series of key price points, and all the major players inhabit every single one. The concept of high-end, with all its positive connotations, is used to push the price of membership to ever higher and more exclusive levels, and unfortunately, along the way, performance all too often gets abandoned on the roadside. These price tags are about conspicuous consumption and male jewellery, rather than serious attempts to further the state of the art (another phrase that's been through the semantic mangle).

Why does that matter? Because it confuses the issue of high quality music reproduction in the home, littering the world with product that fails miserably to perform even the most basic function of a music system - entertaining and

involving the listener. Am I saying that the Grand Slamm is a lousy product. No I'm not. But the market dynamic means that it created the space for a whole host of dubious 'competitors' and me too look and costalikes. Products at these stratospheric price levels should be clearly and profoundly superior to the equipment that we mere mortals use. Sadly, this is rarely the case. Whether or not they are capable of delivering the sonic goods, they all too seldom do so, which is a huge problem in itself.

We need to re-examine our understanding of the whole notion of the high-end. We need to appreciate that it's a concept, descriptive more of an attitude than the use of inch thick aluminium front panels, that it has more to do with the approach or direction that a product takes than what it costs. I've said many times that it's a major mistake to confuse price with quality. Yes, there is some very expensive equipment that represents a genuinely elevated level of performance (some of it's in this issue), but there is also a whole host of cheaper products, some of them even at starter level, which are just as true to the ethos of high-end performance, and which offer outstanding value at their more approachable prices. As I said, high end is an attitude, with musical communication as its goal, and high end products don't necessarily have to be the most expensive.

Okay, let's say I won the lottery tomorrow, allowing me the space and funds to buy whatever system I wanted, what products would be on the list, and more importantly, where do they fit into the price spectrum?

Well, front-end would be the ClearAudio Master Reference record player and Insider Reference cartridge, close to \$20,000 but a snip compared to some of the alternatives (The Rockport Sirius III, made only to order, if you can get enough subscribers, and around \$80,000 without cartridge). Pre-amp would be the Hovland, although the DNM electronics would figure in there somewhere. Oh what the hell, I might as well have them both. A Groove phono stage would be in there, as well as

▶ the Nordost Valhalla cables (again, expensive but well off the pace when it comes to paying top dollar). Power amps would start as the JA30s (an absolute bargain) but the new Hovland amp sounds interesting. Speakers would be Kharma Exquisite References or Avant Garde Trios, one at half the price of the Slamm, the other a quarter. I tell you, you could spend more than my total budget on just a pair of speakers. Or Amps, or cables if you put your mind to it.

Like I said, high-end is about attitude. From a manufacturer's point of view, it might cost a fair bit to get where you want to be, but it rarely has anything to do with spending huge sums of money on over dressing or over complicating your products to hit a price point.

For me, the Rockport Sirius III is the archetypal high-end product. Doesn't that just fly in the face of everything that I've said? Let's look at the sums. The accepted component cost to retail price ratio for any manufactured product is one to ten! Your £200 CD player has a parts cost of around £20. The rest goes in building it, packing it, shipping, marketing, guarantees and margins. Which means that the Sirius III should have a parts cost of around \$8000. The motor and air bearing used (an off the shelf item) break that barrier by some 50%. Okay, so it gets sold direct which saves the retail margin, but do you have any idea what it costs to ship

one of these things. So designer Andy Payor has blown his parts budget wide open. Add to that the fact that he still has to provide an air suspension table, a compressor (complete with refrigeration), a plinth, an extremely sophisticated power supply, a platter with vacuum hold down, a passive linear tracking tonearm, crates to put it all in, and that all these items are manufactured in quantities of less than ten at a time, specifically for the Sirius, and you begin to realise that this turntable might be expensive, but it's also one of the biggest audio bargains out there! Andy Payor has decided on a design path and pursued it remorselessly to it's logical conclusion. There is nothing spurious in the product, nothing there to make it look good or seem expensive. And there is absolutely nothing that you can point a finger at and say "It'd sound better if he'd done it like that". You may or may not agree with the approach, but you can't fault its execution. That's what makes it a high-end product, not the price-tag.

Next time you look at a ludicrously expensive product, examine it in those terms. It's surprising how many will fall at the first hurdle - the outside appearance. The Rockport is a perfect example of form following function, and it simply oozes quality. In fact, if I won the lottery I'd have one anyway. Not to show off but simply to encourage the purity of spirit that created it. ▶+

Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

That good amplifiers sound different is something hardly questioned nowadays. Even when paper specifications match closely, amplifier A can still sound quite different to Amplifier B. At least some of us kid ourselves there's a difference! The question is, which one's right? Which is correct?

Back in the 1970s, hi-fi witnessed the birth of Subjectivism - and what a messy traumatic birth it was! The most hotly-contested topic was amplifier sound, and whether or not two competently-engineered amplifiers of similar power output and general specification could

sound different to one-another.

Engineers argued that differences in sound quality were impossible - providing one stayed within the operating parameters of each amplifier. Nonsense! roared the Subjectivists. Even amplifiers of near identical design and performance sound different. Despite measurements indicating otherwise, just changing the brand of capacitors or resistors used could alter things dramatically. And so the arguments raged back and forth.

During the late '70s Quad came up with an interesting experiment designed to show that their 33/303 pre- ▶

▶ power combination had no intrinsic sound of its own but merely amplified signals with neither loss nor addition. In other words, the proverbial 'straight wire with gain' that defined the perfect text-book amplifier. Quad had a rougher ride than most from those into subjective assessment, and wanted to prove a point.

Actually, Quad's position on amplifier sound was often misunderstood and misrepresented. They never said all amplifiers sounded identical; only that competently-designed and engineered amplifiers used within their performance envelope should produce results that are virtually indistinguishable from each other. If there was an audible difference, then this difference would show up during measured tests.

To demonstrate the fact that their 33/303 produced results that were truly neutral Quad created a special switch box that allowed amplifier comparisons. But not straight A/B comparisons between the 33/303 and something else - they weren't interested in subjective comparisons that asked listeners to choose which amplifier sounded more natural, more realistic, more neutral, or even more musical.

What Quad wanted to show was that the 33/303 neither added nor subtracted from the signal fed to it. To prove their point, they did something amazingly daring. They concocted a circuit that allowed the loudspeaker output of an amplifier (the one being compared) to be fed direct to a set of loudspeakers, or back into the 33/303, via the magnetic pickup input!

To achieve this, the comparison amplifier's output was massively attenuated from several Volts down to about 3mV, and given inverse RIAA equalisation so it could be fed into the 33/303's phono input. A rotary switch with about six positions (so one could switch from one state to another without knowing which was which) selected between one of two options.

The first was the comparison amplifier going direct to the loudspeakers - a pristine feed apart from having a selector switch at the output. The second option was the comparison amplifier again, after being fed through the attenuation circuit and back through the Quad 33/303! If Quad's claims were true, there'd be little or no difference,

meaning the 33/303 amplifier was neither adding nor subtracting to the output of the other amplifier.

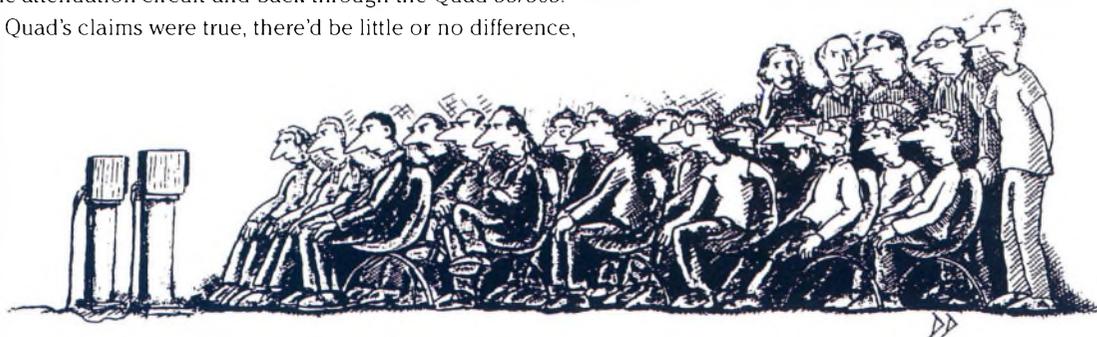
Quad's sales rep took the switch box around to dealers, allowing them to test the neutrality of the 33/303 against the amplifier (any amplifier) of their choice. Scary, Huh? The other thing you need to know is that the test wasn't done with a special 33/303 provided by Quad. No, the shop demonstration model was used. And why not, if Quad's claim of the 33/303's neutrality was fact?

I experienced this demonstration myself, and (trying to make the test as difficult as possible) chose the Michaelson and Austin TVA-1 Export valve amp as the comparison. I chose this because I thought it gave a very distinct sound that would be smothered by the 33/303. To my shock and dismay there seemed to be little if any loss with the 33/303 in circuit. Surprised? I was flabbergasted!

I mean, even if the 33/303 was absolute total bloody perfection (and it was far from that, in my view) just the effect of severely attenuating the signal and putting it through an inverse RIAA circuit should've knocked the stuffing out of the sound. But, damn and blast, it didn't...

There's nothing like having your prejudices and fondly cherished beliefs swept away! I argued against what my ears were telling me, yet secretly was very impressed - and not a little confused. How to reconcile the fact that the 33/303 seemed not to mask or dilute the distinct sonic signature of the TVA-1 to any significant degree, with my belief (prejudice?) that generally the 33/303 sounded terminally dull and 'flat' dynamically, with little or no life or sparkle. In a word - boring!

Of course, in just saying that, I've nailed my subjectivist colours firmly to the mast. 'Life?' 'Sparkle?' I can imagine Quad's Peter Walker saying - 'What's that?' His view was far more pragmatic, far more circumspect, far more sensible. One based on engineering certainties rather than subjective opinions. A good amplifier should neither add nor subtract from the signal it receives. When that happens, all amplifiers must sound the same. Very simple! Very scientific! As the late Eric Morecambe used to say "There's no answer to that..."



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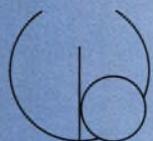


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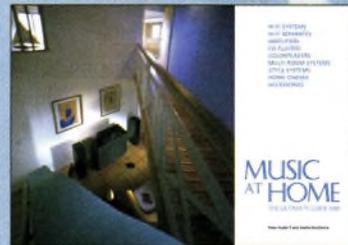
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Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

I was really pleased to hear the news this month that Philip Swift, one time co-founder of Audiolab, had purchased Spendor Audio Systems from Soundtracs PLC. I had some involvement in the early days of Spendor, but Philip was much closer to the action, so he's well steeped in the company's heritage, and has subsequently spent his working life in the hi-fi business. The takeover should be good news for a brand for which I've always had great affection.

By a series of coincidences, very early BC1 production samples were the first 'serious' loudspeakers I purchased, way back in 1968. I had a close friend who was working in the same BBC studio as Derek Hughes, son of co-founders Spencer and Dorothy, and he'd mentioned his dad was making some classy speakers, for \$50 a pair. (That's in an era when a Mini cost under £500 and a Jaguar E-type £2,000, so it's at least £1,000 in today's money!). I'd been looking to spend around \$50 and took a chance, against all the best advice that one should listen before buying.

Initially I knew them as Hughes loudspeakers, because Spencer was still working at the BBC research department at the time, building speakers in the garage in the evenings, and the company hadn't yet been formed or named. The wood veneer wasn't very well fixed either, because, I discovered later, it had been applied to the plywood boxes using Dorothy's iron.

I knew very little about the speakers, so went down the local library to look up Dudley Harwood's *Wireless World* articles on BBC Monitoring Loudspeakers, emerging only slightly the wiser. I talked the local hi-fi shop into letting me bring them in one wet Tuesday afternoon, and try them out against the

commercial opposition. They acquitted themselves well, though the Tannoy Lancasters (which had been on my original shortlist, as a possible secondhand purchase) provided a memorable 'other side of the coin'.

One problem with the earliest BC1s (and other BBC monitors of the era) was the soft plastic material used for the main driver cone surround, which tended to lose its shape over time. A few years later my own speakers needed re-coning, and when I went to collect them I found the company was moving down to Hailsham in Sussex. I was about to graduate as a teacher, but lived nearby, and thought it would be more fun to work for a small hi-fi company which I respected than a large Education Authority. I stayed a year or so, learning plenty, including how little I really knew about loudspeakers, before moving on to journalism with *Hi-Fi News*.

Spendor prospered without me, though not without some ups and downs, notably the sad loss of founder and prime mover Spencer Hughes in 1983. His widow Dorothy and son Derek took over the reins, and then in 1994 the company was bought by ProAudio brand Soundtracs, best known for its mixing desks. This inevitably tilted the emphasis towards the professional side of things, especially in the UK, though overseas distributors have kept its hi-fi reputation going.

One reason I'm pleased that Philip has taken over is that I can well remember Spen talking about "Philip and Derek" way back in the mid-1970s. At the time he and his erstwhile business partner Derek Scotland were both working at



▶ Audio T in West Hampstead, probably the most progressive UK dealer of the era, and Spendor's largest UK outlet. In the best traditions of small specialist manufacturers, manufacturers solicited feedback from dealers, and they were very much part of that early Spendor 'network'.

Having moved on from Audio T, the two were responsible for the very first range of Mission speakers, then spent some years at Lentek where they created a fabulous looking integrated amplifier, before founding Audiolab in 1983. Both stayed on for a while after Audiolab was bought by TAG McLaren Audio in 1997, but have subsequently become free agents again. I'd been wondering for some time when Philip would re-surface in the industry, and can't think of a better place for it to happen. It's too early to say where he'll take the company, though it's obvious we're going to see a higher hi-fi profile and wider distribution here in the UK.

I don't have any experience of recent Spendor models - the Classics are stand-mounts, very much in the BBC monitor tradition, while the Elegance models are more domestically oriented and mostly floorstanders - but I have hung on to a pair of BC1s from the mid-1970s. Although you have to be careful not to apply too much power to those ageing voice-

coils, these classics can still provide nearly all of today's speakers with a few lessons in midband accuracy and transparency. Indeed, perched high up on rigid spiked stands (which didn't exist in 1975), driven from modern sources and amplification, they sound a whole lot better than they did back then, and show what an important contribution Spendor made to Britain's reputation as a loudspeaker innovator.

You can contact Spendor at the following address:

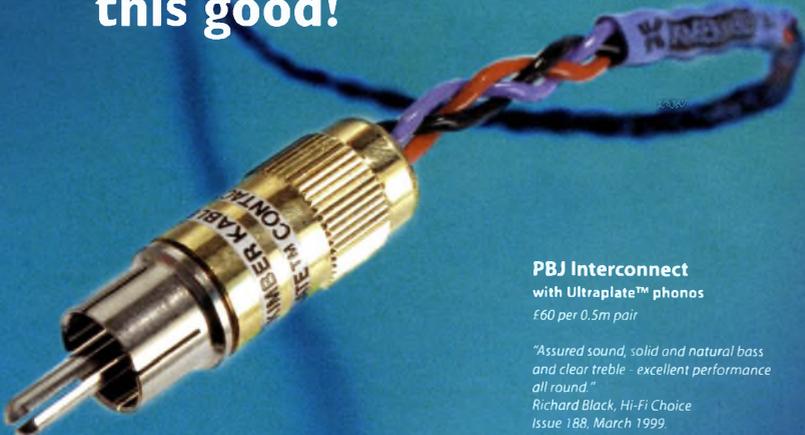
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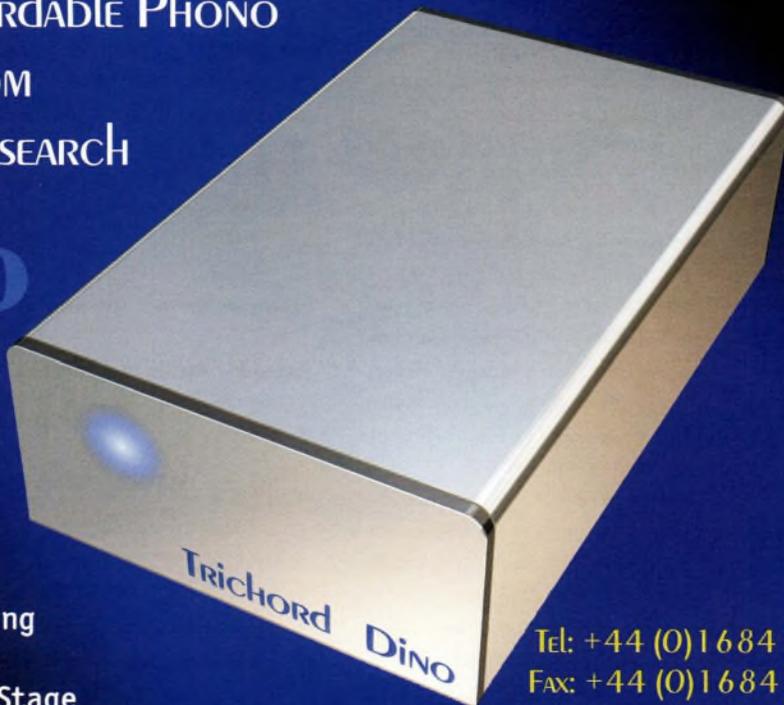
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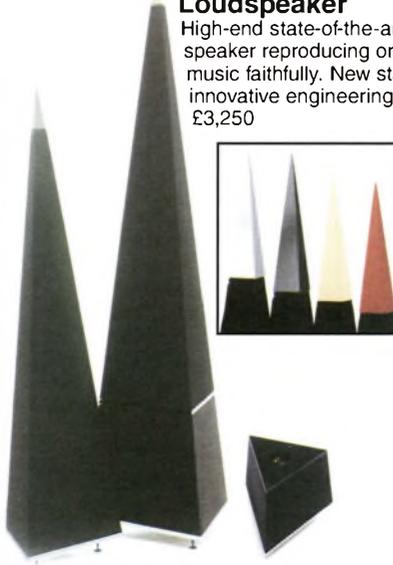
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Product Of The Year Awards 2000

Magazines are very fond of giving away awards. It helps inflate their own sense of self-importance, as well as giving them something else to sell to (or reward) their advertisers. There are those people who try to tell you that the awards they give out are voted for by the public (as if they've heard all the products in question, as well as their competition, and done so under controlled circumstances). There are those who tell you that they represent the "best" products of the year. There are those who simply use it as an excuse to print an extra issue, and massage the circulation figures.

Cynical? You bet! Whilst *What Hi-Fi? Award* fever might have subsided somewhat in the last few years, I well remember being besieged by customers wanting the 'Awards System', a disparate collection of bits and bobs in which the whole represented considerably less than the sum of the parts. Not a "system" at all; not a good idea; not good for the victim's long term interest in hi-fi.

In fact, all awards are simply an extension of whatever agenda the awards committee, whoever they may be, are choosing to follow. And like all committees, their decision will be

made by the member with the loudest voice.

Why then, bother with awards?

Simple really. In the course of a year reviewing, there are certain products that stand-out from the crowd as special. It's well worth recognising that fact, but to do so without creating some kind of Frankenstein's monster you need to adopt a very specific approach. Understand then, what these awards represent.

As a bunch of hardened audio cynics, these are the products that got us really excited. They aren't sub-divided or limited by category or number of awards, we've simply given them to the products that we, personally, feel deserve them. And that's the key word - personal. I polled the writers individually, and collated their views. The results were, in fact, extremely predictable. Dealing with these guys on an almost daily basis it's very easy to tell what they think are the stand-out products, the ones they continue to talk about, long after they've gone. The ones in many cases, that they buy. You'll notice also that some of the awards are identified as Editor's Choice. These are wholly personal choices (this job has to have

some perks), but more importantly they reflect the fact that I carry a heavy burden of reviewing duty, including many products that no one else gets to hear. That, and that alone, is the significance of the distinction.

In fact, the only false boundary hemming in these awards is the time span. There are products that we reviewed in the first three issues that would have been genuine contenders; the Lavardin IT, DNM PA3/S, Final Music and SAP amplifiers, the Shahinian Starter, Revel Ultima Gem and KEF Maidstone speakers to name a few. Likewise, within the year in question, no digital product has won an award. The Wadia 860x would have been a cert, but it's been replaced by the 861, and we haven't heard that yet, and Naim's CDS 11 (owned by both PM and CT) arrived too early. So circumstances have their effect, as well as a product's performance.

But at the end of the year, trying to be too adamant about the rules simply makes the whole process meaningless. Take these awards for what they are. A recognition of the products that we've really enjoyed, and which have helped us enjoy our music.

Roy Gregory, Editor

▶ Tom Evans Audio Design "The Groove" Phono Stage



Price: £1595

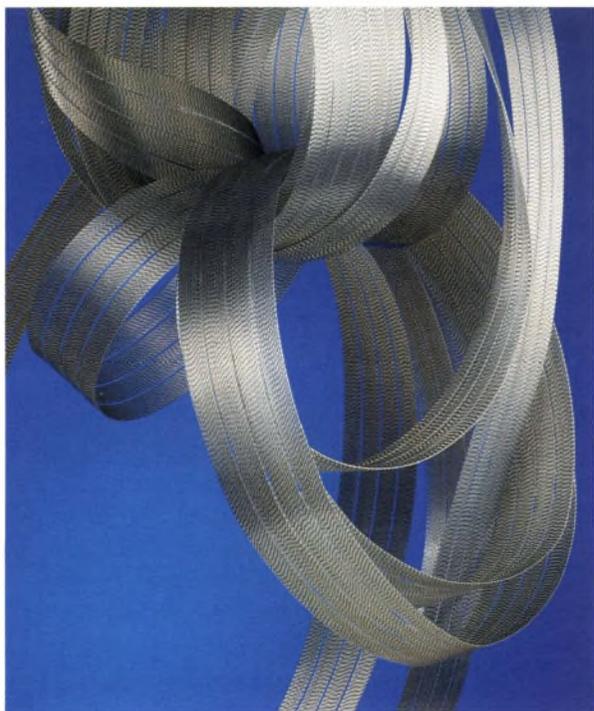
Reviewed in Issue 4

Manufacturer:
Tom Evans Audio Design
Tel. (44)(0)1443-833570



The latest in a long line of superb and affordable phono stages from the prolific pen of Tom Evans, "The Groove" advances the state of the phono art dramatically in terms of access to the recorded event and its overall intelligibility. It has found its way into no fewer than three of our permanent systems, displacing some pretty exotic hardware along the way. It quite literally places you closer to the original musical event, which is after all, the essence of high fidelity reproduction.

Nordost Valhalla Mono-filament Cables



Price: Various depending on type and length.

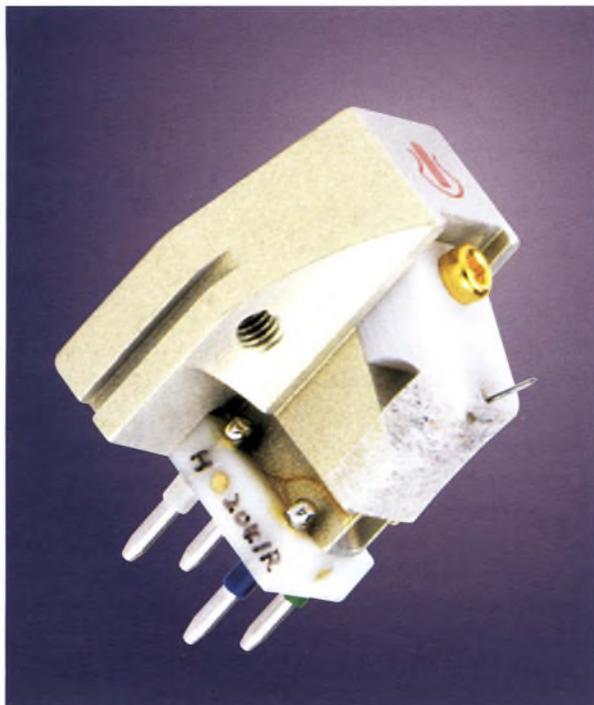
Reviewed in Issue 9

Distributor:
Nordost (UK) Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1352-730251
www.nordost.com



Nordost's SPM cables had already forced a serious re-evaluation of the importance of the cable loom in system performance. But if we were already looking in the right direction we were totally unprepared for the shocking improvements offered by the Valhalla cables. Ruinously expensive (the more so because you can't mix and match them with other cables and expect anything like their full performance) the mono-filament designs (Valhalla, Quattrofil, Silver Shadow digital and El Dorado mains leads) make a mockery of both conventional cable budgets and expectations of cable performance. ▶

▶ Lyra Helikon



Price: £1095

Reviewed in Issue 9

Distributor:
Path Premier
Tel. (44)(0)1844-219000



The cartridge that finally put an end to CB's long march in search of a replacement for his Alpha Genesis 2000, the Helikon steps firmly into the shoes of its predecessor, the Clavis, establishing the benchmark against which all moving-coils are measured. With more presence, energy, drive and output than the Clavis, and no loss of detail, it offers a much better performance that is easier to realise. The Helikon represents the most that many people are prepared to spend on a cartridge that, after all, wears out. You can easily pay a great deal more, and human nature dictates that these super expensive exotics receive a lot of attention, but the Lyra's confident balance and musicality mean that potential purchasers can forget fears of slumming it and simply enjoy their records.

ClearAudio Master Reference Record Replay System



Price: £12055 (incl. Tonearm)

Reviewed in Issue 9

Distributor:
Audio Reference
Tel. (44)(0)1483-575344
www.audioreference.co.uk



Big, complex and unmistakably German, the Master Reference breaks just about every taboo in British turntable lore. It lacks a sprung suspension, it uses a parallel tracking tonearm of dubious rigidity, and most damning of all, it costs an absolute mint. It also offers superb transparency, dynamic range, delicacy, speed stability and overall neutrality. It's capacity to bring the music, live and unobstructed into the room surpasses anything else I've heard, and in combination with the Insider Reference cartridge it represents a new (and mind boggling though the concept is) relatively affordable version of the state of the art when it comes to record replay.



▶ Hovland HP100 Pre-amplifier



Price: From £4450 (Line only)

Reviewed in Issue 8

Distributor:
Zentek Music
Tel. (44)(0)1892-539595
www.hovlandcompany.com



If CB's quest for a cartridge represents a marathon quest, then mine for a pre-amp matches it. The answer has arrived in the shape of the Hovland HP100, a valve design of so little intrinsic character that it sounds neither solid-state nor tube, but simply like the music that it plays. Beautifully styled and built, it offers functional flexibility and the option of an excellent phono stage (MM or MC), but above all it provides fuss-free and unobtrusive musical excellence. The fact that it is also realistically priced compared to the competition is just a welcome bonus. Pre-amps that actually work are pearls indeed.

Lavardin PE Pre-amp and MAP Monoblocks



Price: £8500

Reviewed in Issue 7

Distributor:
Audiocraft
Tel. (44)(0)1895-253340



Lavardin's IT integrated (reviewed in Issue 2) was one of the revelatory products of '99, redefining what was possible from an affordable solid-state design. The PE/MAP combination builds on that performance, addressing the IT's few weaknesses, and providing a slightly less hair-shirt quota of facilities - at a price. But whilst the PE/MAP might be expensive, and they're certainly not the steal that the IT represents, compared to the opposition they're still a huge monetary and musical bargain.



▶ **Sim Audio Moon I-5 Integrated Amplifier**



Price: £2500

Reviewed in Issue 5

Distributor:
Red Stripe
Tel. (44)(0)131-226-1981



CB was very pleasantly surprised by the solid build and performance of this Canadian design. The I-5 is a supremely competent and fuss free all-rounder: it plays most things and will drive just about anything. A beautifully judged balance of capability and facilities, the Moon lets you simply sit back and concentrate on the music rather than the system. A new, and rather more sedate black finish dispenses with the massive gold badge and the only jarring note, although the original finish is still available to order.

Living Voice Avatar Loudspeaker



Price: £2500

Reviewed in Issue 8

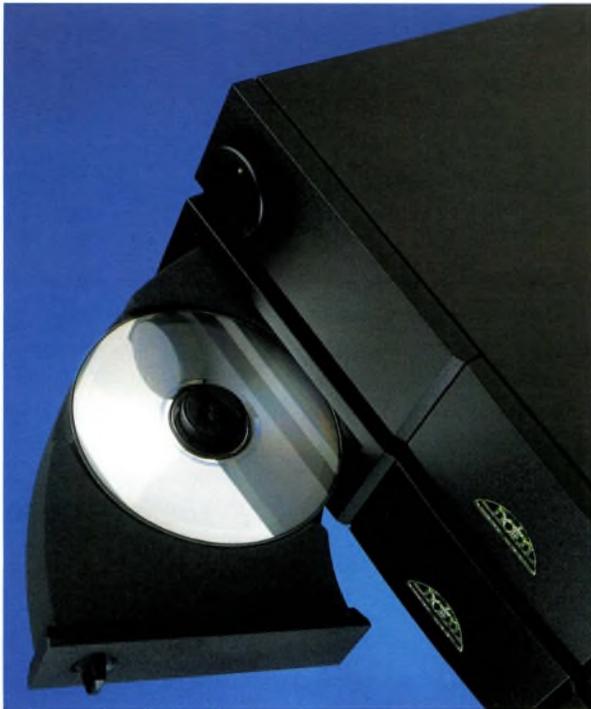
Manufacturer:
Living Voice
Tel. (44)(0)1159-733222
www.livingvoice.co.uk



The middle model in Living Voice's conventional (ie. non horn-loaded) range, the Avatar is a near perfect balance of size, bandwidth, efficiency and tonal refinement. Its slim lines and small footprint deliver a genuine 94dB sensitivity, and excel when it comes to delivering the scale, vibrance and colour of the music. It's unobtrusive quality allows it to cut straight to the heart of a performance, unlocking the music trapped in the recording, whilst its refinement makes it equally at home with both basic and surprisingly expensive amplification.



▶ Naim 5 Series Electronics



Price: From £650

Reviewed in Issue 9

Manufacturer:
Naim Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1722-332266
www.naim-audio.com



Naim's replacement for their ageing Slimline Series is possibly their most accomplished product range to date. Combining superb style with the lessons learnt from the monster NAP 500, the result is a system whose musical performance matches its visual sophistication. More balanced and refined performers than the designs they replace, the 5 Series manage to address the weaknesses whilst retaining their traditional strengths. Altogether less obvious in presentation, they place Naim right at the centre of the separates market, burying once and for all the hair-shirt image (and sound).

Spectral DMC-12 Pre-amplifier and DMA-100S Power Amplifier



Price: From £8500 (incl. Cables)

Reviewed in Issue 4

Distributor:
RT Services
Tel. (44)(0)1235-810455
www.spectralaudio.com



Flawless finish and musical virtues define the performance of this, the cheapest pairing from the American high-end old-stagers. In fact, both Spectral's longevity and clarity of vision suggest parallels with Naim Audio. Perhaps it's no surprise then that the DMC-12/DMA-100S seduced a smitten CT's hand out of his wallet. The poor boy's never looked back.



▶ Russ Andrews Mains Accessories



Price: From £40

Reviewed in Issue 9

Manufacturer:
 Russ Andrews
 Tel. (44)(0)1539-825500
www.russandrews.com



How can something so fundamental be so comprehensively overlooked? When we listen to our systems we are actually hearing the mains, yet the vast majority of us take the quality of our electricity supply very much for granted. Big mistake. Huge! A well sorted mains supply is the biggest and most cost effective upgrade you can make to any system. The Russ Andrews products offer all the hardware you need, unique and effective solutions as well as a clear and logical approach. Essential to realising the full potential of the system you already own.

Clearlight RDC Products



Prices: From £25, Turntable £3345

Reviewed in Issue 5

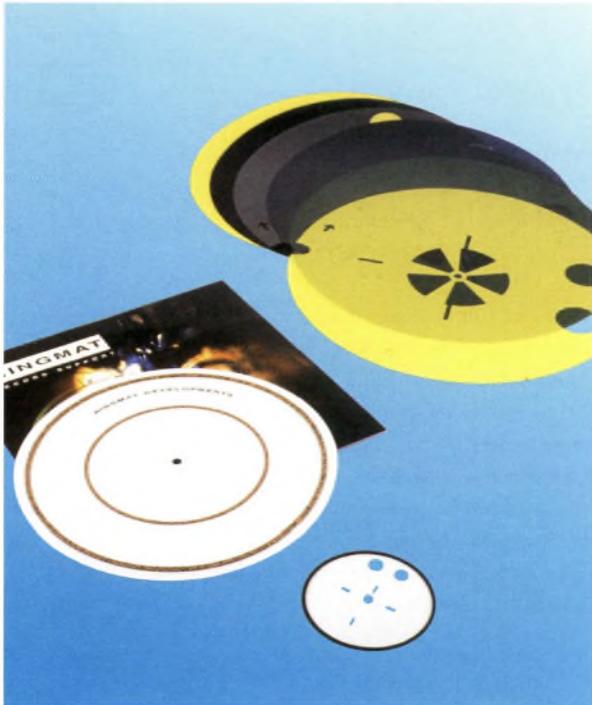
Distributor:
 Hi-Fi For Sale
 Tel. (44)(0)870-241-2469
www.hififorsale.com



What started out as a range of accessories and OEM components has matured into a series of equipment supports and a high-end turntable. The wonder material came winging in from leftfield, unexpected and unannounced, and promptly proceeded to convince all comers. From its simplest form (support cones) to its most complex (the Recovery turntable), RDC breathes natural colour and expression into a system.



▶ Ringmat Record Support System



Price: From £50

Reviewed in Issue 9

Manufacturer:
Ringmat Developments
Tel. (44)(0)1277-200210
www.ringmat.com



Ringmat Developments' range of eclectic and effective accessories are perhaps best typified by their Record Support System. A genuinely clean sheet approach, the basic Ringmat optimises disc support, while the complete Support System allows precise adjustment of VTA/SRA (a vitally important aspect of vinyl replay which has been shamefully neglected by UK tonearm manufacturers for years). Add the thoughtful approach to turntable set-up outlined in the accompanying booklet and you've got a package that will breath new life into virtually any deck.

Morgan Audio Deva System



Price: From £600/unit

Reviewed in Issue 6

Manufacturer:
Morgan Audio Systems Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)151-255-0946
www.morgan-audio.co.uk



Svelte and stylish midi separates that deliver true hi-fi performance from their compact dimensions. Their clean fascias conceal thoughtfully designed circuitry that provides a musically satisfying and muscular performance, with dynamic range and drive to belie both their size and price. Capable of embarrassing full width units at many times their modest price, the Devas are easily overlooked because they're just so cute. Don't be fooled by their pretty face.



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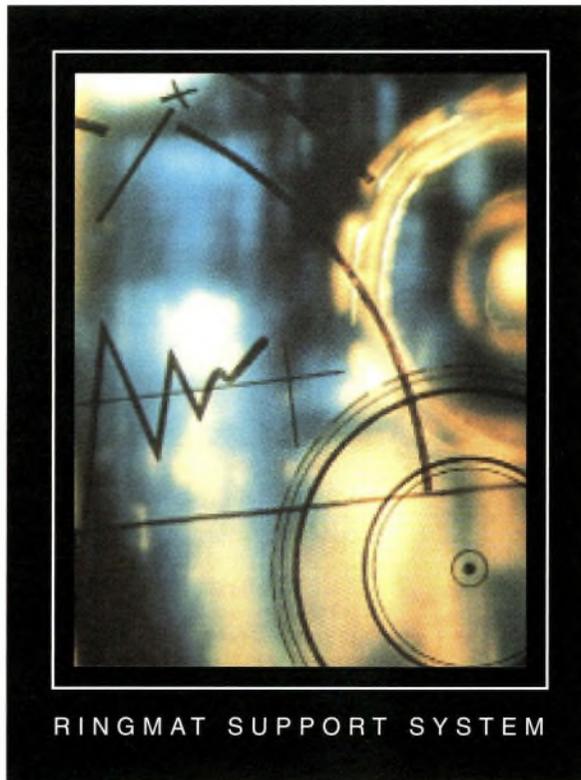
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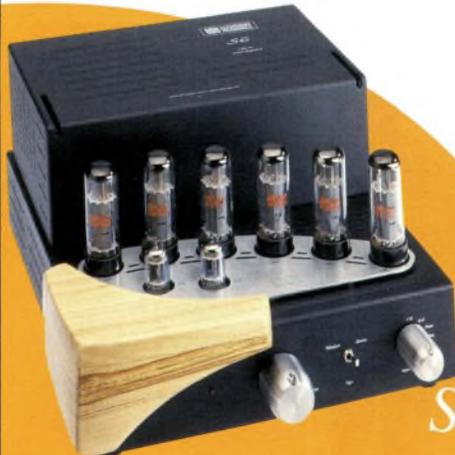
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Iconoclasts

by Roy Gregory

The dictionary variously defines an iconoclast as: one who destroys religious images or opposes their veneration, or, one who attacks established beliefs or institutions. The hi-fi industry has belief systems and religions aplenty, and never tires of telling us what to do and how to do it (why else would we need magazines?). But those beliefs are a shifting pattern, developing dialectically as fashions and theories change, new gurus come and the old ones

fade. But against that backdrop there are also those individual characters and companies who have resolutely stood apart, ploughing their own furrow, challenging whatever happens to be established wisdom at the time, and doing so with consistent success (otherwise they wouldn't still be around). Meet then, three members of the UK industry who not only do things a little differently, they're happy to be that way.

Be Yamamura and Robert Churchill of Yamamura-Churchill

Yamamura-Churchill offer a range of complete system solutions individually (and expensively) matched to a customer's requirements and listening environment. Their accessories and cables are widely available, but to hear their distinctive equipment you'll need to visit their showrooms, based in a converted barn, outside Salisbury. That's exactly what CB and I did.

RG. Be, perhaps you could start by explaining how you got involved with hi-fi and how that involvement developed?

BY. It had always been a hobby, and in Japan, when I was 14 or 15 it was quite normal for kids to build their own amplifiers or radio receivers. When I reached University I got involved in a pop group and we made a few records, and that got me interested in studio work. I was also playing guitar, so I made myself a better amp using KT88s and that's how it really started. I came across Western Electric, which is well known now, but at that time was pretty esoteric, and very high quality. I was never educated or trained in electronics, but while I was at University I read all the WE service manuals and books, learning English to translate them. So my training is completely informal, which gives me a slightly different approach to trained designers.

CB. The Radio Designer's Handbook? I can see the marks on your fingers from the high voltage electricity.

BY. (Laughs) I left Japan and came to London in 1970, and worked organising recordings with the people I knew from my time in Japan. I was still building amplifiers, and somebody asked me to build them a small domestic valve amp. They liked it, so I built some more and pretty soon people were coming to my place to hear my amps. That's when I got involved with a shop called Knightsbridge Audio, who were selling pretty expensive stuff. They came to me and asked about specialist cables for audio. I made some suggestions as to how



▶ such a cable should be designed and then they asked me if I could source it from Japan. That was really the start of the business.

I knew Akio Morita's son, and he told me that some of the young designers at Sony were doing some really interesting things. The first one he introduced me to was Kondo, who was working on silver cable. He asked me to introduce this product to the European market. That would have been about 1976. I organised an arrangement for the UK, and in Denmark through Peter Quorstrup. The cables sold well in London and all across Scandinavia.

CB. I remember seeing them at the last Hammersmith show, before it moved to Heathrow.

BY. Yes, in about '79. Of course, I was very busy with my own, totally separate business, involved with motor racing, so hi-fi was still really a hobby. The guys at Knightsbridge wanted me to start building serious products but I was really just playing with things like the 845 and 211. But then I got divorced, and suddenly I was very free. I rented a garage at the back of Kilburn High St, and that's when I started doing the real work on hi-fi. If you look at this mains cable here, it's the end result of a long process. Over the years I've looked at absolutely everything to do with hi-fi. Lot's of people think that what I do is very traditional, even old fashioned, but that is not the case. Everything I do has been arrived at as a result of a proper and straight forward scientific approach. But when I build an amplifier it's almost like a painting, because the music must come first. Even if you make a mechanically perfect speaker or amplifier, if the feeling is not there then you get tired of listening. That's really bad. So what I try to do is create equipment that first doesn't destroy the music.

If you go to a hi-fi show most of what you see is really old equipment. It may look different, use a few special components, but there is very little innovation. That's terrible. That's why I'm so lucky to have a partner like Robert (Churchill) who is really only interested in the music. If I can't satisfy him then I'm in trouble, but I also don't need to prostitute the products. So, everybody uses such and such a drive unit, that's something I don't have to do - follow fashion. Otherwise I end up making the same mistakes as everyone else.

RG. Yes. As soon as something catches the imagination of a magazine or the public, suddenly everybody is rushing to clone this new marketing imperative. The metal dome tweeter...

CB. Paper in oil capacitors, single ended triodes...

RG. Everybody tells themselves that "this" is the magic ingredient that they must use, without ever pausing to ask if they should. It has a really stultifying effect on the market.

BY. Oh yes. It's really boring. I'd much rather see lots of people with all kinds of different ideas and approaches produce a single goal - beautiful music. The fact that everybody is just doing the same, variations on a few basic ideas, is one of the biggest problems in the industry. If the crowning passion is gone then how can you expect people to stay interested?

RC. It's the same as the people who say that you must listen to vinyl rather than CD. It's completely irrelevant. The chances are that digital will

ultimately be much closer to reality, but they're both far from perfect. That's not the issue. It's irrelevant to the millions of people out there who buy music. If you tried to tell them that they had to listen to vinyl, they'd just turn round and tell you to get a life.

RG. The aim has to be to get the best out of what people have.

RC. Of course. If you have a big vinyl collection then you'll want to listen to it, and rightly so. It's wrong to compartmentalise music by means of its replay - to say you have to listen to it on a valve amp or it's no good. You either get the feel of the music or you don't, and people need to adjust their focus away from the equipment, back to the music itself.

CB. I've often noticed that people's openness to music changes as they grow older. Often, as a teenager, there's a piece of music that really gets you, almost like a drug. You've got to have it, yet that weakens as you get older. I wonder if you get less receptive, if systems have to work harder?

RC. I used to listen to a lot of early recordings, Toscanini and so forth. One of the great things about the systems that we have here is the access they give you to the performance. 78, mono, it really is far less important than on most systems. What you are listening to is a performance, and that's what ▶



▶ people have lost now. So many people who have expensive systems only listen to audiophile recordings, which is just a nonsense to me.

CB. Suddenly the recording or technology is dictating your choice of music - not the orchestra, the interpretation or the sense of the music. We had this argument recently with a speaker manufacturer who said that their designs were so ruthless that you couldn't play bad recordings on them. They didn't understand that they'd missed the point.

BY. It's really important that when anybody comes to us they can play any sort of music and get satisfaction.

RC. Even Kari Bremnes!

BY. (Chuckles) When they get home they say, I never realised that this sounded like this (their system!).



RC. It also effects the horizons of your musical enjoyment. Music which is considered difficult is much easier to relate to on a better and more musical system.

RG. Put it another way - live music broadens your horizons. If you are walking down a street and you hear a live instrument, it has an immediately arresting quality, almost regardless of what or how well it's played. I'm beginning to believe that the more steps you put between the original instruments and the recording medium the worse it is. There's a continuum from wax cylinder to 78, mono LP, stereo LP, CD,

multi-channel digital disc. The further down it you go the more you become concerned solely with the fact of the music, the less you have the essence of the performance. Listen to transcriptions of old wax cylinder recordings and even transferred they have a wonderful immediacy and life. No bandwidth or hi-fi qualities at all, but phenomenal communication.

RC. We have an old HMV gramophone that has the same quality.

BY. As soon as you get to LP you have to start using equalisation, and that total destroys the immediacy. The first time Robert came to see me in Toscana I was still playing mainly LP.

RG. How did you first meet?

BY. He bought one of the accessories.

RC. I bought some really expensive equipment from a large store in New York. Ultimately I was really disappointed with the sound. Like a lot of people who read hi-fi magazines I believed that this stuff had to be the best. This was back in 1992, and I saw an article in Hi-Fi World about a little box that Be made, that sat between the CD player and the amp, so I tried it, and was really impressed. I tried some of the cables and was impressed with those, so I went to see Be, who was designing complete systems in Italy.

BY. And we made a decision. Within about three days we'd started.

RC. What I heard was simply beyond anything I could imagine. As you say, the problem is to get somewhere close to live music. Every year we have live piano recitals (at the Wardour Festival, also organised by Robert). How can you reproduce the sound of a Steinway D on an audio system, it's impossible. But you must get some sort of believability. Yet at the same time the audio industry were telling us that they could reproduce this so closely that you couldn't tell the difference. 1000 Watts with huge speakers, but it

▶ simply doesn't work. Power is not the answer. It's all about believability and Be's system was the first I'd heard that allowed that.

RG. When you first formed your association, what were your aims?

RC. Good question. I think we started out believing in the system approach, and if you look at our original brochure you'll see that it offers everything. Now I think we realise that there are better ways to market what we are about, but in the early days we used to go to shows with a complete system. We started at the summer CES in Chicago in 1994, then Vegas and so on.

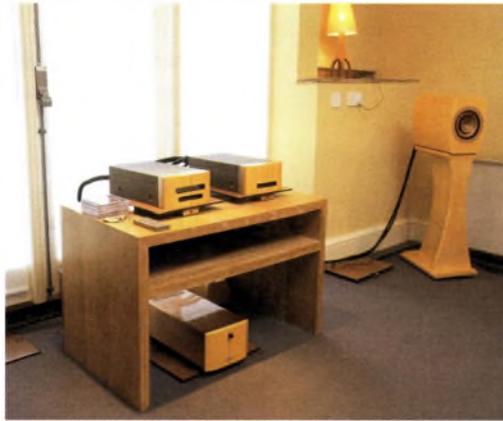
RG. When you started out did you envisage a conventional marketing strategy; dealers, distributors etc?

RC. Well, to date, our main volume sales have been the audio cables and accessories and that will always be the case. I think that we felt then, and still do, that dealers have a vital role. You can't expect to get your product out to the general public solely by mail order or if you expect them to come here. We have international distribution across the world, but things are changing fast, and the internet has rendered a lot of the distribution chain itself redundant. Dealers will always be important, but we can do more of the communication functions ourselves now. We get a lot of contact with individuals, and we are happy to deal with them as long as they understand that they won't get a discount or conventional dealer back-up.

RG. If somebody wants to buy a set of your amplifiers, how do they go about that?

RC. We've never given dealers the opportunity to stock the electronics or speakers.

BY. As far as I'm concerned it's very important that I can build the electronics for each individual client. You'll see later when I show you how they are made (Readers will need to wait for the next Issue for that. Ed.) that they are



completely handmade and bespoke. Even many of the components are handmade. I have to be involved, to hear what they need and what they hear, to ensure that it is suitable for them. Supplying through a dealer you lose that adaptability. We start to become like all the other products.

RG. The amplification you build now is all solid-state. Back in 1984, when I first came across your amps, through Chris Rice at Altarus, they were valve designs. You have gone from ultra simple valve circuits to transistors. Many people have travelled the other way, but I think you are unique in this.

BY. It is similar to the LP/CD point that Robert made earlier. When he first came to Toscana he influenced me. I was still working on a really high-end turntable, but it was really, really expensive. Robert said to me,

"This is very nice but it's very inaccurate".

He proved to me that despite its problems, CD is fundamentally more accurate. I'd been

working on valve amps for

years, and I was beginning to reach their limitations.

One limitation is the transformer. I used to have my own transformers wound back in Japan, but it is becoming so expensive that you start having to compromise.

What's the point of a huge and expensive valve amp with a compromised output transformer. Good quality valves are also difficult to get. My favourite models are things like the 300A and 5300, and they are almost impossible to obtain now. I also worked on OTLs but again valves are a problem.

The argument that Robert gave me about CD made me work on the converter (DAC), and if you do that properly then you can recover the immediacy that is lacking from so many players, and of course, despite the problems it is still more accurate. This was what got me started on the solid-state amplifiers.

In the next issue we will look at the Yamamura-Churchill products in more detail. It's well worth the wait, I can assure you.



Kevin Scott, Definitive Audio/Living Voice



Kevin Scott is the founder and leading light of the small but dedicated team that make up dealer Definitive Audio and loudspeaker manufacturer Living Voice, based in an old mill building in Nottingham. It's unusual to find one person in this industry that wears both hats equally successfully, but then Kevin's an unusual guy.

RG - How did you first get into audio?

KS. I was always interested in music, grew up in a music culture. I had a significant collection of both east and west coast 50's and 60's jazz on Blue Note, Contemporary, Impulse etc and a feast of Baroque and Classical on EMI, Decca, L'Oiseau Lyre, Erato and so on. All good performances, but good productions and good recordings as well.

After graduating I worked for several years in mental health rehabilitation- people with major mental health problems - so a career in audio seemed like a natural progression.

I was, within reasonable limits, interested in the equipment but I was more motivated by the music. At 14 I was using a mono source with a 100 watt EL 34 guitar amp and two stage monitors with 4 x 12" paper drivers. I remember this as very entertaining and found conventional Hi-Fi rather limp in contrast. When I eventually moved over to mainstream Hi-Fi the more natural tonal balance was welcome, and so was stereo, but the lack of scale and energy was a big loss. I assumed that you could

have it all, so my quest for serious audio flickered into life; I suppose this was the beginning of the road to the Air Partner speaker system.

By my early 20's two friends and fellow frustrated music lovers took things a little further. Unhappy with the turntables of the day they designed the Voyd which became very respected and something of a benchmark design. Helping them out at exhibitions here and overseas, it was obvious that many audiophiles - and this includes manufacturers and retailers - do not have any real interest in music. This was infuriating, amusing, sad and encouraging in equal measures. This must have appealed to an evangelist spirit in me.

I considered that this lack of real interest in music was a major impediment to both designing and selling good audio systems. A passionate music lover wants to experience an uninterrupted 'willing suspension of disbelief', and will therefore have a clear insight as to what the issues are. It is this motivation that is the mother of invention and a lot of manufacturers don't have it. Some are perfectly content to listen repeatedly to the same one or two 'audiophile' discs. For the recording to be more important than the performance is, to say the least, an unusual type of pornography. Perhaps this is why some of the least convincing designs are produced by the most technologically driven companies. Technological skills are important but are only half the story.

RG - When was Definitive Audio established?

KS. I started to sell complete systems in the mid 80's - principally Voyd, Audio Innovations and Snell analogue systems. These had an overall balance of strengths that were charming, unusual and pretty unique at that time: Well proportioned dynamics, greater than average overall contrast and, most importantly, a sense of musical coherence. The importance of how the system worked as a whole was the primary issue - the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. This approach was fruitful and I have developed it considerably over the years. It is this holistic approach that is at the heart of Definitive Audio.

RG - So where does Living Voice fit in to this?

KS. Definitive Audio systems at the time, which would have been about 90/91 were limited by the loudspeakers. I preferred the speakers that I was using to anything else I had heard, but they simply weren't

dynamically extensive enough.

I wanted believable natural contrast with believable natural scale. As far as amplifiers were concerned it was obvious ▶



▶ that simple class A triode output configurations were offering vastly better performance in this regard than alternatives. We needed a speaker to build on this strength, a truly amplifier friendly loudspeaker both in terms of load and sensitivity.

RG- This was the birth of the Air Partner of course?

KS. Well if you are going to do something you may as well do it once and do it properly. The Air Partner was never really about commerce. It was about doing something in absolute terms. An exploration of what was possible.



RG - The Air Partner was something of a first if I remember rightly. I don't remember seeing a multi-way pure horn speaker at a show before then.

KS. It was a first. It took the 1992 Heathrow show by storm. People were incredulous and obviously shocked by the performance. One of the magazines described it as 'throwing a gauntlet down to the industry', and it did. We rocked the boat and it was very gratifying indeed. The Air Partner has inspired a lot of speaker designers since that time. Just look at some of the stuff at the CES this year, and the number of horn designs appearing in the UK.



crossover and added a much needed high frequency system it became obvious that there was whole world of performance that conventional Hi-Fi could not even dream of, namely an ability to move air with uncanny ease and freedom. We had many discussions with David and Neil Young of Vitavox (whose father had established the company way back when) and eventually agreed to a meeting with the board of

directors. We agreed on a joint venture, funded by us but utilising their technical resources. Remember that Vitavox supplied very sophisticated horn systems to reinforce large-scale orchestral performances in the Royal Albert Hall, the Royal Festival Hall and Queen Elizabeth Hall amongst others. This is not FA, it is sound reinforcement of the highest order. Vitavox had other markets including cinema and theatre installations, but the sound reinforcement designs were the really interesting ones. How this pair of Thunderbolts ended up at GM I have no idea, I hope they enjoyed them. David Young is Vitavox's design brains and was responsible for the remarkable RH330 mid range horn, S5 pressure driver, AK 147 bass driver, all used in the Air Partner. He revised the Thunderbolt

bass horn geometry, already the result of tens of thousands of pounds worth of development, for the Air Partner project. We carried out 9 months of meticulous empirical development on the crossover and composite cabinet.

RG- How did you come up with the design?

KS. At the time I could not have designed a loudspeaker if had tried. I knew what I wanted in broad terms and so did my colleague Guy Sergeant. Trawling around for evidence of uncompromised madness in the annals of audio history, it became clear that Vitavox were clearly certifiable. This venerable British company has a catalogue of sound reinforcement, cinema and high-end domestic horn designs dating back to the 1930's. Their range of drivers and pressure units made conventional loudspeaker hardware look frankly 'toy town'. We located a pair of Vitavox Thunderbolts with S2 mid range and AK147bass drivers at a PA dealer in Luton. They had previously been used for staff entertainment at General Motors. We bought them principally for the drive unit complement but overall they were an education. The cabinets were not entirely adequate and the crossover clunky but they did some promising things. When we replaced the

It was introduced in 1992. We subsequently bought the tooling and the rights to the RH330 mid-range horn, and were appointed by Vitavox as their distributor for domestic audio products.

The Air Scout and Bass Bin system came next. This was a compact solution for those who could not physically accommodate the Partner. This project involved Vitavox for the Bass Bin geometry whilst the mid-range and HF system is the same as the Partner. This was domestically far more manageable, and has been commercially more fruitful than the Air Partner, probably due to size.

RG- So how do you go from this mad stuff to the ultra sensible Auditorium?

KS. While all this extreme stuff was going on I was still short of speakers that satisfied real world needs. The speakers I had been using were deleted and predictably replaced with



▶ something worse. The experience of working with Vitavox was invaluable, the learning curve steep to say the least. With both the Air Partner and the Airscout established, I could turn my attention to a more conventional solution for Definitive Audio. We were importing a range of Lowther based horns that satisfied our needs from £3 k upwards, but we had nothing below this. One budget speaker that impressed me was the humble Dali 104, an apparently simple \$400 D'Appolito 2 way. With basic crossover modifications, a good LC-OFC wiring harness and dedicated spiked plinths it became a very satisfying £650 speaker. The above average sensitivity of 94db allowed the use of 25 watt ultra linear amps giving a big expressive picture. I found its short-comings benign and its strengths highly entertaining. If you had a pair of these there was nothing up to £2k that you would be prepared to part company with money for - they were a great leveller. We sold a lot of these but they created a wasteland for us up to this £2k price point. So we developed the Auditorium. This shared the D'Appolito configuration that allowed the modified 104 to punch above its weight, and kept the same manifestly popular dimensions. The D'Appolito, however, is a tricky configuration to design. There is a knife-edge between an obnoxious and a joyous result. So the Auditorium took 18 months to finalise. It has been and still is a great success, but again it created another wasteland for us, this time from its £1.5k price point up to £4k. We had two successful brands in this territory that the Auditorium outshone. Again it was the benign weaknesses and entertaining, easy, expressive strengths that made it more musically convincing than technically better endowed peers. Anyone with broad musical tastes will be happier with a system that does all things to an 80% standard rather than one that does 80% of things to a 100% standard. Hi-fi neurosis is an insidious and easily acquired disorder. We had to

produce the Avatar to fill the void that the Auditorium had created. This is a far more serious endeavour, the only similarity being size and configuration. The components are more sophisticated than I see in products at ten times the price. It's common practice for speaker companies to spend all their money on the outside of their products. That's marketing common sense I suppose. The Avatar is quite the opposite. All the

money is spent where you can't see it. The Avatar has been a great success. It in turn stimulated demand for yet more performance from a domestically acceptable package, hence the \$4k OBX-R. This is a cost no object implementation of the Avatar with better everything, out board crossovers and the Scanspeak Revelator HF unit. Surprisingly we sell more of



these than the standard model. I find this loudspeaker immensely musically satisfying. It is seamlessly coherent, wide open and paints a huge picture. It has a balance of virtues that are normally assumed to be mutually exclusive.

RG. Is there a conflict of interest between LV and DA? How do UK dealers feel about the LV brand when it's available from DA?

KS. Any diligent and sincere dealer who cares about what they do shares our values and therefore has an empathy with our aims and products. We are flattered by their choice of Living Voice to complement their systems so we support them to the hilt. In fact Living Voice and Definitive Audio are mutually beneficial generating a number of valuable insights. Because we are both a manufacturer and a retailer we hear our speakers in a greater range of environments and with a broader range of ancillaries than if we were exclusively in manufacturing. We also get to hear a lot of

other speaker designs. I think this allows us to provide advice to customers, and our dealers, that has real depth and breadth. Over the years several amplifier designers have developed their products with our speakers, which again has provided valuable insight into the whole synergy issue, allowing us to take the holistic approach even further. ▶



Tony Revelle, Audio Excellence



Tony Revelle is the founder and owner of the successful Audio Excellence chain of dealers. A past chairman of EALA, co-organiser of the Bristol Hi-Fi Show, his close association with the Audio T chain was a ground breaking response by a specialist dealer to the advent of high street multiples using their financial muscle to offer discounts on hi-fi products. His forthright opinions are backed up by his successful business.

RG. You've been doing this for an awfully long time now, but where and when did you get started.

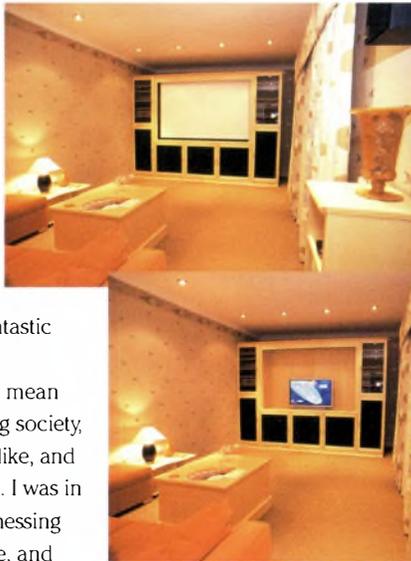
TR. I started working at Radford's in Bristol as a Saturday boy.

I was always mad about music, and having been a teenager in the sixties it was probably the most important thing in my life - apart from scooters and girls. By the start of the seventies I was trying to build my own speakers, buying secondhand Quad amps because I couldn't afford the stuff I wanted to buy. And then, around 1973 (I can't remember exactly)

Radford's opened, and it was just this fantastic place to go. I was in there all the time and it was that that got me into trouble, I mean this business. I was working for a building society, out on the road visiting lawyers and the like, and I always managed to end up at Radford's. I was in there one afternoon and the staff were messing around. A customer wanted some advice, and they just pointed at me. There they were dressed in jeans with me in my suit... this guy believed them! I ended up having to help him and made the sale. After that they offered me the Saturday job. I did that for a couple of years and then they wanted me to go full time. That meant taking a cut in

salary and reorganising all my personal finances, but it was something I wanted to do.

I stayed at Radford's until the early eighties, by which time Graham (Radford) had got involved in other projects like importing, so I was running the firm, doing the ordering, hiring and firing, and loving it. I went to see Graham because I felt I was worth more than just a manager's salary but he was reluctant to allow that, for reasons that I can understand now. The end result was that I left and took a job on the road with Pioneer. It was that that really got me started on the idea of starting my own business. I'd been put off by people saying how risky it was, and that I had a good job and why would I want to give it up. But once I started visiting other dealers I was amazed at how poor most of them were. Most of them had no idea how to run a business. I was calling on dealers with no form of stock control - not even a paper list! It didn't take me long to realise that if these guys could make a living out of owning a shop then I certainly could, so that was what I decided to do. I was on holiday and I met this accountant from Bristol on the same trip, and we got chatting, and after a while he said "You've obviously got the knowledge and the enthusiasm. Why aren't you running your own business?" I explained that I didn't have the start-up capital and he said "Well, I can introduce you to a bank manager. If you can come up with a plan then I'm sure you can convince him to give you the money." And that's pretty much what happened, and I started up in Cardiff in the beginning of '82, in a small shop in King's Rd.



RG. When did you move to this shop?

TR. 1983.

RG. So you moved quite quickly?

TR. Yes, we grew out of the other one very quickly. I wanted to open in Bristol but it would have been very difficult with Radford's being so strong, as well as other shops, and a lot of the more important suppliers were keen to get some representation in South Wales, so that was what I decided to do. Looking back it was definitely the right decision. I don't think

we could have grown so fast in Bristol, where we would have always been second string.

RG. How many shops do you have now?



► **TR.** Seven, across the South and West (of England and Wales).

RG. I first remember Audio Excellence from around 1983, and even then what made you stand out was your commitment to high-end audio. How has that market changed over the years?

TR. That's a difficult question because it comes down to how we define high-end. Right from the beginning I always wanted to stock a wide range of equipment, the best choices at any particular price point. You also had to have products in the shop for people to aspire to, even if you weren't going to sell huge numbers of them. We started that off pretty early.

RG. The thing that I always remember was that when some new hot product like the Krell rolled up, you'd see it in all the magazines, and Audio Excellence were listed as stockists. Then the Magneplanars arrived, and again, Audio Excellence were on the list. There were maybe ten dealerships that made up that hard-core, and you were one of them. That really set you apart, certainly from anyone else in this area.

TR. True. Although that was fuelled very much by my own interest, and not by the amount we sold. I actually personally bought a lot of that equipment to use at home. We were dealing with Absolute Sounds, who are still the agents for most of those products, but it was all pretty new at that time. I think they really got going about the same time as us, and it was everywhere in the press with lots of interest, and it was a very good thing to be involved in.

I actually got quite a bit of stick from Linn and Naim over it, who didn't think the products were worth what they cost. They hadn't actually listened to them of course! I remember taking the (Krell) KSA50 down to Naim in Salisbury because they wanted to hear it, because I'd said I thought it sounded better than the NAP 250. Anyway, I turned up with it at a dealer training session and lent it to Julian (Vereker). Later in the day we all walked into the dem room and there it was all set up with a NAC32, and it finally dawned on me what was going to happen. Julian was going to do a number on it, convincing

every-one present, using all the standard little tricks that we all know, but mainly his considerable force of character, that it wasn't as good as the 250. I'm afraid we fell out over that, because I pointed out that I'd brought it down for him to listen to, personally, and that if he wanted to use it as a sales aid he could damned well buy his own. With that I put it back in the car.



RG. You brought it along in the spirit of investigation and he wanted to use it as a marketing weapon?

TR. Exactly. Julian, bless him, was rather well known for that sort of thing. I might have been a little naïve, but I didn't half learn quickly! But you asked me how the market has changed. I think the main thing is that there are far more products on offer from far more sources, and customers are prepared to be far more mobile. Partly because of the internet

and just the fact that information (eg. foreign magazines) is so much more available, we come under much greater pressure on price than we used to. Given the enormous investment that you have to put into those products it is becoming increasingly difficult to make a profit on them. You can

spend a huge amount of time advising a customer and demonstrating products to him, only to have him pick up the phone or get on the net and tell you that so and so (who might not be in this country, and probably doesn't hold the unit in stock) will do it for such and such a price. Maybe he can get one directly from the importer, or doesn't realise that his self imported unit may not be to UK specification,

won't have a guarantee, or be set up for him. Maybe he doesn't realise that he'll have to pay duty and VAT. Unfortunately, the proliferation of suppliers chasing a smaller and smaller market means that it's a case of anything goes. Customers may be able to buy cheaper, but more often than not they don't get the full benefit out of their purchase because they don't get proper dealer support. At the same time it is becoming harder and harder for us to make a sensible return on these products, so we can't afford to stock and demonstrate them.

Particularly at the high-end, we won't stock a product unless we've had plenty of time to check it out, in the shops and our home systems. That's often a problem because manufacturers expect us to stock things without having



▶ the opportunity to listen to them properly. That's becoming far more prevalent. It is becoming much more of a business thing at the high-end. It used to be that the people selling these products had a deep personal interest in them. There are still a few companies like that around, Wilson-Benesch for instance, but they're becoming few and far between. Many distributors treat it purely as a business: "We've got a great product, it's got a great review and a huge margin" but they don't want to spend the time learning about it and then convincing you.

RG. It's becoming a business rather than a passion?

TR. Yes, and I think that's because the market itself is changing. There seem to be people out there who are prepared to buy increasingly expensive items with little or no personal experience or understanding of them. Not just in hi-fi but in all sorts of markets. How many people who buy expensive high performance cars really need them or know how to drive them? Hi-fi used to be seen as the province of nut cases and enthusiasts, but increasingly we are coming across people who are buying it simply because it's expensive, and therefore, they assume, the best. We don't really want to be involved in that market.

RG. You have actually shifted direction quite noticeably in the last few years.

TR. There's lots of reasons for that. As I already said, we can't really get a return in that market place because people don't appreciate the value we're adding to their purchase. Sadly there are more and more dealers who are prepared to sell at lower and lower prices and simply not give the level of service we do. That is true of the whole price spectrum, and it comes right from the top of government. Nowadays, low price is

seen as good value, in all walks of life. But if you are buying a specialist product like hi-fi then value has to be seen not just in the product, but in the service you get: the original demonstration, the installation, the guarantee and back-up if anything goes wrong, not just the price.

When we look at a new product the first thing we consider is its performance. Then we look at the company behind it. Are they going to support us? Do they have a good marketing strategy so that they'll still be around in a few years time? These are things that are almost totally overlooked by the buying public. We notice it more because we do all our own servicing, but we still have customers bringing back 15 year old equipment, so it's important to us, and them, that we can still get parts.

RG. Between you and Audio T you organise the Bristol Hi-Fi show, which is fast becoming the most important in the country. What made you get into that?

TR. The show started in 1987, after Jerry (Lewin) and I were both looking for ways to improve business. We both knew that shows give the public a chance to look, and in our case listen, without the intimidation inherent in coming into a shop where someone might sell you something, or make you feel inferior. We chose Bristol as the central point for our various shops. Then you have to find a hotel which will let you in and work with you. So we started the show simply to promote our

businesses, but we are still doing it because we get a buzz out of it. I think that's why it's so successful. The exhibitors, even though they're working, the public, even the hotel staff, everybody has a good time. Because we'd been on the receiving end of show organisation, we were able to actually institute measures to avoid the more chaotic and frustrating aspects, like struggling to get in and out. We use scheduled arrivals and porters. It amazes me that no one else in this country has ever copied us, except that

it's expensive and takes some organising so that it eats into profits. Fortunately profit's not our main reason for doing the show.





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JMW MEMORIAL TONEARM

JMW
made in USA

VPI TNT

Hot-Rod Turntable and JMW 12.5 Tonearm

by Roy Gregory

The VPI TNT first hove onto my personal horizon around ten years ago, and yet, strange to relate, this is the first time I've ever put pen to paper on the subject of the company's top turntable. I owned what was probably the first TNT Mk I in the country, bought blind after a brief but happy association with an HW19 Mk III. It's a decision that I've never for a moment regretted, and one that has formed and informed my audio thinking to this very day. Big, black and heavy, this complex, brooding beast of a turntable, used with the Eminent Technology ET II air-bearing tonearm made me reconsider both what was possible and the structure behind accepted wisdom.

Remember, the TNT appeared at the height of the three point suspended hegemony, with the likes of Linn, Pink Triangle and Roksan well and truly in the driving seat. Its four point suspension and separate motor/planetary drive set-up, its high mass and two inch thick suspended acrylic chassis all set it apart from the crowd – but so to did its sound. The TNT/ET combination was an ear-opening experience, re-defining the dynamic range, soundstage volume, transparency and dimensionality and overall speed stability of the vinyl source. It produced a big, confident,

poised sound, full of subtlety, colour, life and power, completely over-riding the performance of 'tables that we British, in our insular way, had arrogantly assumed were world beaters. Yet, despite this clear superiority, its wider acceptance met with dogged resistance as magazine editors in particular stood with their fingers in the dyke of a crumbling belief system. History has finally swept away those blinkered individuals, but for me it will always be the TNT that represented that all-important first crack in the edifice.

Of course, much has changed with the TNT itself since that first incarnation, its designer Harry Weisfeld being nothing if not an inveterate tweeker. The platter has become an aluminium/lead/acrylic composite (Mk II) while the motor went from square to round and was physically separated from the pulley assembly (Mk III). I'm not sure about the Mk IV, although I believe there were changes to the main bearing as well as the more obvious advent of a separate flywheel to further decouple the motor and improve speed stability. The Mk V introduced air suspension pods in place of the springs and a vastly improved power supply in the shape of the SDS, a sophisticated sine wave regeneration unit and a welcome replacement for the aging

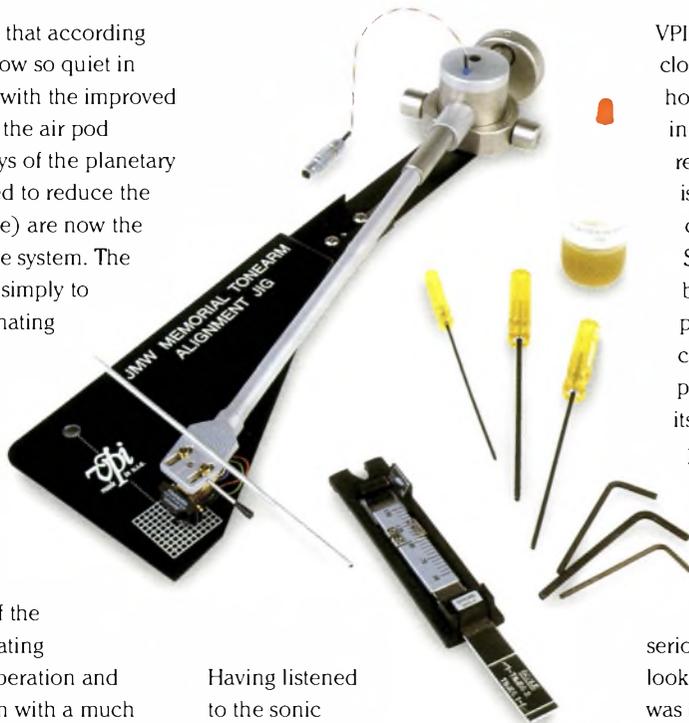
PLC which was flakey at best and downright frustrating at worst, when its reluctance to switch to 45rpm could teach the average mule a trick or two. Whilst this was more of a problem in Europe and the UK than its home market, the PLC was well past its sell by date. Along the way there also arrived the JMW Memorial tonearm, named for the Weisfeld's son Jonathon who was instrumental in its development but tragically died in a car accident before it reached production. It is an elegant damped uni-pivot available in 10" and 12" lengths, which along with a specially commissioned low output moving iron design from Grado (yes, before Grado decided to market one themselves) made a complete VPI front-end a reality for the first time.

Finally we reach the subject of this review, the Hot Rod or HR. This sports the latest incarnation of the main bearing, now sporting a "60 Case" ▶

Let's not forget that as well as demonstrating new levels of vinyl performance, revealing the inadequacies of existing UK 'references', the TNT also showed the door to the first generation of audiophile CD players, establishing a performance margin that even ten years on, with CD finally starting to deliver on its musical promises, it still easily maintains.

▶ tool steel shaft, a unit that according to Harry Weisfeld is now so quiet in operation that, along with the improved isolation provided by the air pod suspension, the pulleys of the planetary drive system (designed to reduce the transfer of motor noise) are now the noisiest element in the system. The obvious solution was simply to get rid of them, eliminating a major sub-assembly as well as the machining they necessitate in the top plate. And while he was on the simplification trail he decided to get shot of the armboard too, eradicating another machining operation and providing the tonearm with a much more massive and mechanically consistent termination, albeit at the cost of one of the TNT's great claims to fame; the ability to accommodate any arm known to man (or more importantly in this case, woman). Of course the deck will still accept them, but you'll need to choose in advance.

The end result is a slimmer and lighter looking beast (more like the TNT Jr) and whilst it is now pre-cut for a particular arm, the vast majority of customers are buying turntables as a whole these days.



Having listened to the sonic benefits Harry reckoned that the loss of flexibility was a cheap price to pay for the gains involved. Of course, starting out with a Jr and upgrading to full TNT status becomes more complex, but should you wish to upgrade from say, an RB300 to another arm,

VPI can supply an acrylic plug to close the redundant mounting hole. For those who really want interchangeability the Mk V remains available, but the HR is the better sounding (and cheaper) alternative. Setting up the TNT has always been a straightforward procedure, the major complications being the practicality of accommodating its enormous footprint and protecting the acres of acrylic from dust. (VPI did make a dust cover at one point, but it was enormous and had such a deleterious effect on the sound as to be beyond serious consideration. Besides, it looked like a fish tank. My solution was to use a silk dustsheet, which worked fine without causing any static problems.) Having decided where you are going to place the ▶





► deck, make sure its support is absolutely level and position the main chassis. Originally this involved placing the suspension towers and idlers with considerable precision before lowering the massive floating deck into place. Now however, the idlers are gone and the air suspension units hang from their sleeves, retained by their valve covers, making the task simplicity itself. Next you need to gently place the platter on the main bearing, ensuring that you align the guide marks properly. Place the flywheel and motor assemblies and install their belts, assemble the arm (not forgetting to attach the lead-out wires) and you're ready to set the suspension.

This involves pumping air into the small bladders in each suspension tower until the 'table floats'. Don't expect it to wobble like a jelly, just to be clear of mechanical contact. To get air into the bladders you'll need a Schraeder (car) type bicycle pump with a lock on action (the only item missing from an otherwise refreshingly high quality and comprehensive tool kit, especially welcome given the Imperial fixings used on both deck and

arm). Traditional screw on pump adapters will simply let all the air out of the tiny pockets as you remove them. Air suspension forks on mountain bikes suffer from similar problems and there are a variety of special hand pumps for inflating them, as well as at least one nifty screw on adapter that allows you to release tiny amounts of air under perfect control. Which is of course how you level the beast. It's simply a case of dipping the valves slightly to lower the appropriate corners, at the same time making sure that you don't ground the deck. It will take a little practice to get a feel for the microscopic adjustments necessary, but it's easy enough to start again, and you'll soon get it right. Replace the valve covers and you're away. For more extreme adjustments you can twist the Delrin feet that support

the air pods, winding them down the fixing screws, however, a good solid mating of pod to foot is to be preferred (sonically as well as in terms of practicality and overall stability), and as long as you levelled the support properly then this shouldn't be necessary. Don't be tempted to overfill the bladders as the suspension offers greater isolation at lower pressures. The 'softest' should provide 3mm of clearance and no more.

Ah yes, those valve covers. I know that VPI are serious about offering value for money, but those nasty plastic screw on caps have no place prominently displayed on a product at this price. This is one situation where a nicely executed bit of bespoke machining would go a long way. Who knows Harry, keep 'em light and offer them in a range of anodised colours and you could sell your valve covers to the cycle industry and make some real money!

Final step in the process is to set the speed of the deck using the SDS. This allows you to set the speed with incredible accuracy (using a battery powered strobe of course), but its very precision means that



initial set-up involves a lengthy session of button pressing as you vary the output frequency by 100ths of a Hz. However, once set the unit gives you instant switching between 33 and 45 and required no further adjustment

▶ after the first couple of days and the bearing settling down. This is such a massive operational (and sonic) improvement over the PLC that every VPI owner should put the SDS at the top of their wish list - now.

So much for the deck, what about the JMW arm? The 10" version was covered by JMH in his review of the VPI Aries back in Issue 8, but given that Editorial privilege allows me a little extra space I can afford a more in depth examination of this fascinating product. The guiding principles behind the arm are structural simplicity and optimised replay. Doesn't every arm set out to optimise replay? Well yes, but it's remarkable how few designers agree on what that aim actually entails, or provide the tools to achieve it.

VTA - the forgotten factor.

Considering that arms like the RB300 dispense with it all together you could be forgiven for wondering whether all this effort expended on VTA adjustment is worthwhile? The answer is an emphatic yes! The RB300 has never had pretensions to state of the art performance, and you only need to look at how many people have tried to offer solutions to this particular mechanical blind spot in order to appreciate how importantly other people view it. The fact that no other British built arm has actually done the job any better, relying on simple locking collars for the most part, merely reflects another aspect of the UK's institutional analogue arrogance.

In fact, the one area in which serious state of the art tonearms can readily better budget killers like the Rega is in providing more precisely adjustable geometry and operational parameters - especially VTA. The ForceII, ET II and Rockport, Triplanar and Spothem arms have all done so successfully. The JMW betters them all.

How critical is correct VTA, and what effect does it have anyway. Let's use the JMW and the Aito re-issue of the Argenta *Concierto de Aranjuez*

In developing the JMW, Harry Weisfeld (a man with a serious collection of tonearms and the scars to prove it) quickly realised that his prototypes sounded better the more he removed from them. One sacred cow after another went to meet its maker, including the provision of bias adjustment, until he settled on mechanical stability and correct VTA as the critical factors. The result was a 12" uni-pivot with a low-slung centre of gravity. Contrary to appearances, the azimuth is set by rotating the eccentric mass ring around the base of the bearing housing. The groove in the headshell accepts a light alloy rod that sits at right angles to the cartridge. Viewed from the front it allows rapid setting of basic azimuth, although the

(SCLL 14000) as a working example. It's vast and coherent soundstage makes it an obvious choice, but that's far from all I'm after. With the JMW's height scale set at 15 the sound is warm, round and indistinct ("blowsy" according to my listening notes). Raising it to 20 introduces much needed substance and stability. The opening of the 2nd movement now hangs together better, with greater front to back depth, overall focus and rhythmic coherence. The guitar, almost clumsy before offers greater range and dexterity. Raising the arm to the optimum 23 setting locks everything into place, not just spatially but temporally as well. The opening guitar strums become individual, precisely spaced and accented notes, the melodic theme wonderfully expressive. Suddenly you can understand why this was Rodrigo's favourite recording. It's not just the focus and substance of the notes, but their shape and spacing that brings Yepes' brilliance to life. The thuddy bass that is a feature of this disc now has far more shape, the notes complex and centred, while the soundstage takes on a special transparency, accentuated by the immediacy and perfect timing of the orchestral contributions. Raise the arm again, to 30, and the sound becomes

final adjustment should always be made from the cantilever/stylus, or using a mono recording with one channel in reverse phase and then summed. In this instance the counterweight is 'dropped' simply to keep its mass below the plane of the bearing. It slides for downforce adjustment, its locking screw running in a vertical slot to prevent accidental offset. You also get a dedicated single point alignment protractor which works on the same principle as the Dennesen universal device reviewed in Issue 1. I'd still prefer to see a complete tracing arc, but this is the next best thing.

Damping is provided by filling the bearing cup with a heavy oil. The precise level is critical to the ▶

pinched and dry, the playing mechanical, losing all delicacy and expression. Suddenly the whole thing sounds like an exercise rather than a vivid and dramatic performance, while the soundstage is infested with a fine silvery grain that destroys its depth and far focus.

This listening was conducted with my ClearAudio Accurate whose Trigon stylus profile is nowhere near as extreme as a van den Hul, and yet the window of acceptability was less than ± 2 graduations. And the differences noted are neither subtle nor musically unimportant. In fact, they're vital. Now consider that each graduation on the JMW's scale amounts to 0.35 of a thousandth of an inch in arm height at the pillar of a 12" arm. The implications for 9" arms trying to make adjustments with basic locking collars are pretty horrendous - and I haven't even started on the subject of different record weights and thicknesses. Oh yes! I think it's about time that we started taking VTA seriously, given the amount of money we spend on trying to recover a signal most of us have already lost at the Still not convinced? Try a Ringmat support system with its built in VTA adjustment. You will be.

▶ overall sound of the arm, and in most cases less is generally more. You can remove oil with the tip of a Q-tip, and in most cases a minimal amount of damping is all that is required. It is well worth spending some time getting this right, with a little experimentation paying musical dividends.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the arm is the absence of a conventional bias mechanism relying on a spring or falling weight. Instead, the user simply puts an anti-clockwise twist in the lead out wire before connecting its high quality Lemo plug to the termination box. Purists will wince but having run my Accurate in a JMW for around six months of heavy use I detected no untoward or asymmetrical wear on the stylus. Nor did I have any problems with the stability or location of central images. So, on the whole I can only applaud the elegance of the JMW's solution to a problem

you say, except that the VPI's adjustment is precisely calibrated, allowing simple, but more importantly, repeatable adjustments of VTA. So simple in fact that those with the inclination can adjust it for each and every record, and record the appropriate setting for next time. However, it is when you combine this facility with an arm tube that can be physically removed, complete with counterweight, that you hit pay dirt. Forget interchangeable arm wands or headshells, the JMW is the first arm that allows you to swap a cartridge, complete with all its alignment parameters preserved intact, in a matter of seconds:

Remove one arm assembly, replace it with another, connect



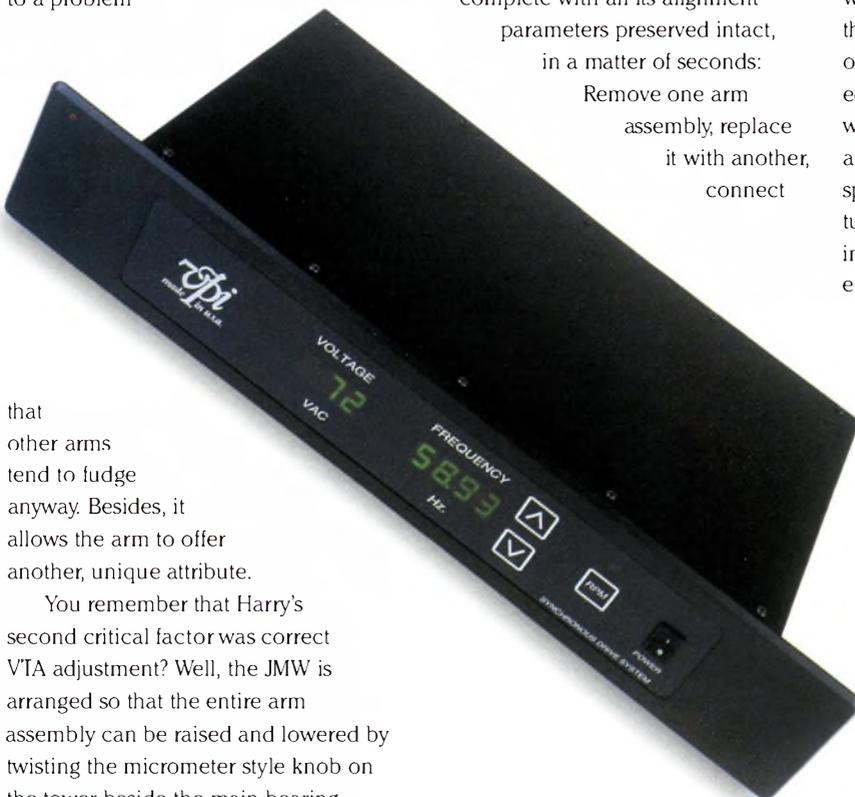
the Lemo plug and dial in the VTA. That's all there is to it! For audiophiles who want to run more than one cartridge, shops who want to compare and demonstrate them, or reviewers who need to optimise their source for other equipment, this is a Godsend. And whilst you might scoff, consider for a moment the lengths that someone spending this sort of money on a turntable will be prepared to go to in order to maximise their musical enjoyment.

Are there costs involved? Well, you end up with two breaks in the arm cable (at the Lemo and the Phono output sockets) so it would be nice to see a hard wired terminal box as an option, with the lead-out wires connected directly to the Lemo socket, but that is one nasty solder job, which means it's best done at the factory, which means in turn that you lose the flexibility of choosing your own arm cable. After all, a botched solder joint is worse than a decent set of connectors.

The other factor that you can't ▶

that other arms tend to fudge anyway. Besides, it allows the arm to offer another, unique attribute.

You remember that Harry's second critical factor was correct VTA adjustment? Well, the JMW is arranged so that the entire arm assembly can be raised and lowered by twisting the micrometer style knob on the tower beside the main bearing. Nothing particularly new in that I hear



► adjust is the damping (at least not readily and repeatably). As long as the various cartridges don't require wildly different degrees then go with the minimum - it's a compromise but a minor one given the alternatives. No, all in all it has to be said that this is the most thoroughly thought out arm since the ET II, and that is saying something. This is a massive and very real benefit. It's also typical of an arm that is so clearly the product of somebody who is personally passionate about vinyl replay.

In fact everything about this table suggests that it's a labour of love, not least its musical performance. If I had to pick a single word to describe the TNT/JMW's sound then it would be "honesty". It offers a complete and wonderfully credible view of the music, devoid of the doctored frequency response, truncated bandwidth or sonic hyping that so often makes hi-fi so obvious in its operation. That's not saying that music from the VPI is indistinguishable from reality. However, it gets two critical aspects of reproduction spot on, and that makes its version of events much easier to accept. Firstly, it's a well balanced product doing everything equally well, with no obvious flaws in its performance, and no standout attributes to draw the listener's ear and distract from the music as a whole. Secondly, it gets the proportions and perspective of the performance just right. No huge images at the front of the stage supported by pygmies at the back, and no tiny orchestras right up close. The overall scale of the presentation, and the relative scale of players within the picture are both extremely natural, making the performance itself a natural extension of the listening experience. Like I said, easy to accept and satisfying as a result.

How does the Hot Rod sound compared to the Mk V? We're going by aural memory here, which is always dangerous, but what the heck.

Playing Buddy Holly *Legend* (MCA MCMD 7003) an album that has graced all my TNTs, I'd have to say that the most obvious benefits of the Hot Rod are improved focus, transparency and low level detail. It seems at first more forward, but this is actually simply a case of greater immediacy and the absence of residual texture in the acoustic space. The bass is also slightly leaner, with less bloom than before, providing a more natural overall balance with the treble. Compared to the (vastly more expensive) ClearAudio Master Reference, the VPI lacks that table's astonishing "reach out and touch" clarity and inner instrumental detail. It's sax is not as three dimensional, the distance from reed to bellmouth not as well defined, but it makes up for it with the absolute solidity and coherence of its presentation. There's nothing thin or insubstantial about the sound at all. Whilst the TNT may not be the last word in information itself, the information it provides is properly presented and backed with a creamy smooth sense of power and substance and security. There is a telling inevitability to the Hot Rod's music - you know it's going to get there, and you know it's going to do it without any unnecessary histrionics.

The DCC re-issue of the Stokowski/Villa Lobos *Uirapuru* (LPZ 1003) is a case in point. You don't get much more dramatic music, or much greater dynamic contrasts, but the VPI sails through it, instruments never shifting or growing with volume, the loud never trampling the quiet, the constant shifts in tempo evolving naturally to drive the music. Even behind the loudest crescendo the texture and complexity of the drums and percussion is still apparent, as befits their critical role in this atmospheric music.

This is the key to the TNT/JMW's appeal. It is musically unobstructive and unobtrusive. The extreme stability

of its musical presentation helps to create the wonderfully palpable soundstage that has always been a VPI hallmark, whilst its Row M perspective, bandwidth and dynamic range keeps the overall scale natural, and more importantly, believable. This turntable is unmistakably the product of a designer who puts musical considerations first. Listen and you hear music, rather than the system playing it. This is one product that gets it right. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

VPI TNT Hot Rod

Speeds:	33 and 45, independently switched and adjustable.
Platter Mass:	11Kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	787 x 254 x 483mm
Total Weight:	50Kg

VPI JMW Memorial Tonearm

Type:	Damped Unipivot
Effective Length:	(12") 308mm (10") 256mm
Effective Mass (12.5):	11.5g

Prices:

Turntable (incl. SDS and JMW 12.5)

£6500

JMW 12.5 Tonearm £2195

Spare 12" Armtube £995

JMW 10.5 Tonearm £1895

Spare 10" Armtube £895

SDS £950

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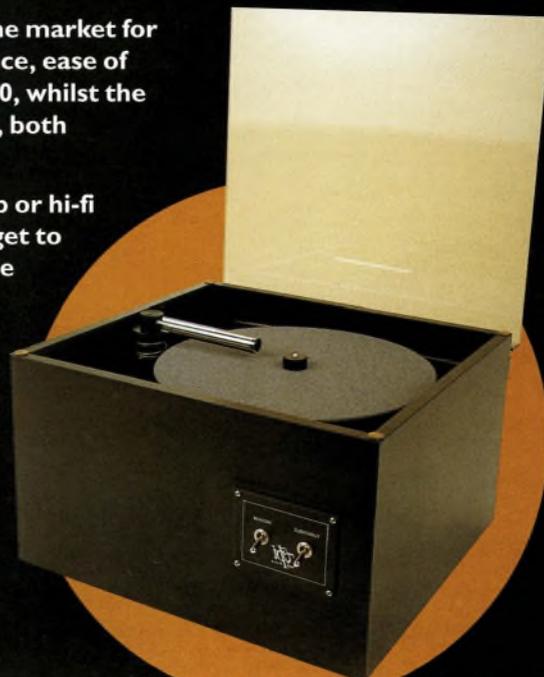
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We intended to put some text here, you know, the sort of trite caption we normally put in our ads. But Pete ran out of ideas, and anyway, the captions always paled after seeing them a few times. So these products have been left to speak for themselves.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



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Audio Physic Virgo 2, from £2999



Transfiguration Spirit £950



Amazon Audio Model 1 £2500
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The Sugden Masterclass Pre-amplifier and Mono Power Amplifiers

by Chris Binns

Even if the Sugden Masterclass amplifiers had proved to sound awful, I will always be grateful that I reviewed them. On an extremely cold and wet January evening, after a very pleasant night out, my companion decided we should move from the conversation and warmth of the kitchen with the Aga to the intimacy of the living room. She had no idea of the arctic conditions that normally prevail in there - and it was only after she had accepted my offer of coffee that I realised that I had not lit the fire. In fact, apart from throwing in the Sugden gear and switching it on to settle down, I had not been in the room all day. Having prevaricated long enough for her to become suspicious we eventually went in, to be greeted by a blast of warm air, courtesy of the Sugden power amps. "Oh, you're a hi fi nut". Not wanting to appear like some kind of geek, I said, "No, actually I'm a heating engineer". One of the bi-products of class A amplification is plenty of heat, and the Sugden power amplifiers are pretty large. But not inelegant. Despite their size, they manage to look quite subtle and understated, while the pre amplifier shares the same visual design features within a slimline case.

Despite not having a particularly high profile in the UK over the last few years, Sugden products need little or no introduction being one of the longer standing British manufacturers of audio equipment. The company first came to prominence in the mid sixties with the introduction of a class A solid

state integrated amplifier in the shape of the A21. It caused something of a stir, if only because at this stage valve technology seemed to be on the way out, largely taking with it the bulk and inefficiency of class A operation.

The new solid-state technology offered high efficiency and cool running, and as a result, greater power



from relatively compact designs.

Loudspeaker manufacturers took advantage of this by sacrificing efficiency in favour of bass extension and smaller enclosures, and so started a trend that was to continue for quite some time.

So the idea of a transistor class A amplifier went somewhat against the grain, except with a minority of enthusiasts. Much discussion and airing of views took place, usually within the pages *Wireless World* magazine, where quite a few designs were published by people who passionately believed that this was the only way to listen to music properly. Now I could be wrong, as this

is way back in my childhood, but I have a distinct recollection that one of the louder voices arguing the sonic benefits of class A design was Joe Sugden - as far as he was concerned, it sounded better.

In the interests of efficiency and power output, later models might have drifted away from pure class A topology, but never too far, as all Sugden models have exhibited fairly high levels of bias and run relatively warm as a result.

My first encounter with a Sugden product in the flesh was in about 1977 while working in a hi-fi shop. At the time, the industry was beginning to trash paper specifications in favour of real amplification, i.e. sod the power output, would it drive a loudspeaker? The rush of new products such as the A&R Cambridge A 60 had started to turn around peoples' perceptions regarding integrated amplifiers, and rather than buying equipment for its performance on paper, the important thing was how did it sound in real life. The Sugden A48 had been around for a while, and I admit that I dismissed it out of hand, due in part to the fact that I thought it looked hideous and old fashioned. For those of you who don't remember, it was finished in a ghastly orange and cream Nextel. Enough said. In the days before single speaker demonstrations, many dealers were equipped with comparitors - vast switching devices that gave you instant access to almost any combination of say, amplifier and loudspeaker. At that time one of my favourite loud-



► speakers was the gale GS 401, and they had a reputation (I'm afraid deserved) of being a real pig to drive, causing most amplifiers of the day to sound truly awful, or in the worst cases curl up



and die completely.

Quite by accident, a customer hit the buttons that paired these up with the Sugden A48, and it earned my respect by driving the Gales with considerable flair and authority.

The Masterclass range of amplification reflects the early heritage of the company by leaning heavily in favour of class A technology, which is of course, now back in fashion in a big way.

The Sugden Masterclass mono power amplifiers are rated at 160 watts apiece, comfortably doubling their output into four ohms. The large heatsinks get warm, but not uncomfortably so, and certainly not hot enough to suggest that they are running within an inch of their life. Due to the size of the case work, no fans are necessary, but as I have already said, they will warm the room up. I gather that the first hundred watts or so is pure class A - which means that in practice most listening is contained within that magical envelope. Sustained high level listening into a less than kind load succeeded in raising the operating temperature by only a few degrees, which would bear this out. The substantial machined aluminium front panel is featureless save for a power switch and a pair of red leds that come on after a short while to indicate that the unit is ready

for operation. Operating in a balanced mode, the monoblocks bear considerable resemblance to the stereo version, as effectively the two channels amplify each half of the waveform, and are coupled across the loudspeaker. Connections at the back are straightforward enough, with IEC mains and a single pair of WBT terminals, which fortunately are capable of taking two sets of 4mm plugs. Input is via an XLR, wired for



balanced operation;

single ended use is not an option, something to bear in mind if the use of a different pre amplifier is a possibility. As a result, I didn't try my usual mix and match with pre and power amps to see where the strengths and weaknesses of each unit lay, I just used them as a combination.

The pre amplifier is finished in much the same fashion as the power amps.

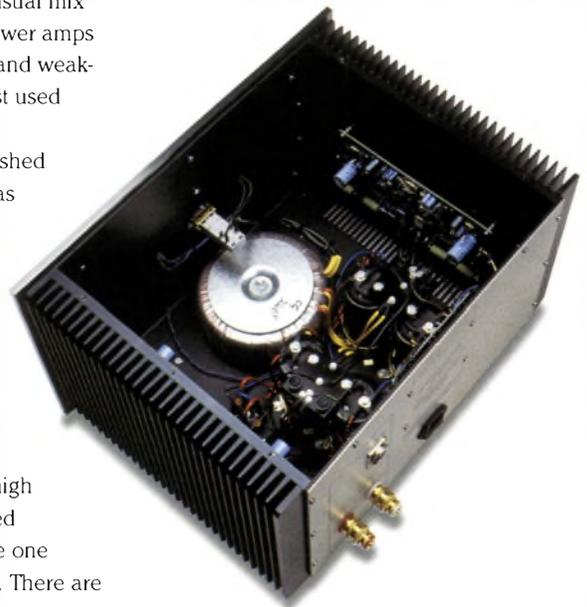
Front panel controls consist of selection for the one balanced and four unbalanced inputs, standby on, tape monitor, record output on, tape one or two, and volume. Rear panel connections are all high quality RCAs for unbalanced connection and XLR for the one balanced input and output. There are

two unbalanced main amplifier outputs, and the two tape inputs have full monitoring facilities allowing processor connection if desired.

Remote operation of the pre amplifier is limited to volume control, while the supplied handset will operate any Phillips type CD player including, of course Sugdens' own. I suppose I have been spoiled to some degree by recent products with flash controls such as the Advantage or the Bow technologies, but the supplied handset does not do justice to equipment of this calibre. But at least it works (unlike the gorgeous Bow).

Internal construction is to a high level, neat and well laid out. I have the impression that there has been some rigorous component

selection during the development of these products, and there is an absence of high profile 'branded' audiophile parts. I can imagine they attract the same amount of scorn from a Yorkshire man



▶ that a pint of crap lager does. I can't help but agree - just because amplifier A has Wonderblah caps and resistors in it doesn't necessarily mean that it sounds better than amplifier B - a few flashy components is no substitute for good design.

Unlike an awful lot of high end equipment, the Sugden power amps performed capably within about twenty minutes of switching on, which is just



as well, bearing in mind their hefty power consumption, but I tended to leave the preamplifier on all the time. Right from the word go, I found the Sugden extremely easy to live with. The sound that these components produced did nothing to impress or astound me in hi fi terms, but neither did they disappoint. The sound was just eminently listenable, without any of the fuss that some hi fi equipment seems to invite. They seemed relatively immune to things like supports and cones, and don't really encourage such fine tuning almost because they don't need to - they just get on with the job.

My first impression of the Sugden system was of a warm and inviting character, that didn't favour any particular type of music, always a good sign. Its interesting that when first listening to a product the things one notices are quite often the negative aspects, and I can honestly say that the Masterclass took a fair amount of head scratching to produce any useful criticism. Orchestral music sounded full bodied with plenty of authority, and smaller scale string

works had a lifelike quality to them - although the sound was quite lush, there was plenty of definition and edge where required. Soundstaging was deep and wide, although not having quite the same ability for three dimensional positioning of instruments that I have sometimes heard in my system.

Rock music was well presented,

and despite the quite warm balance, the bass end of things was extremely tight and rhythmic. Playing a collection of early 70's Island recordings such as Free - fire and water, it all sounded totally believable, and exciting - people actually playing instruments, rather than the more usual 'processed' imitation. Even at extremely high levels, the system remained in control, and if I really pushed it, I could occasionally detect a slight softening of the sound as it ran out of steam, but we are talking totally manic levels into an awkward impedance here.

The Sugden equipment makes listening to music very easy, and writing reviews very hard. I sometimes wanted to criticise it for having a certain lack of 'high end magic' whatever that might be - I suppose the physical aspects of the equipment itself did not excite me greatly, which I feel at the price it would be wise to, given the competition. But the very fact that it did not draw attention to itself meant that I just carried on

listening to music, which is surely how it should be. In fact, with its fuss free but reassuringly competent presentation and build quality, the Masterclass perfectly embodies the Sugden ethos. They'll let other, flashier products show off, while they simply do the job. If you want bells and whistles buy a steam organ. I know that when the time comes for the Masterclass to go back, that is when I will miss them, because they have quite unobtrusively crept into my life and got on with the job of reproducing my music very effectively. It's difficult to offer a higher compliment than that. ✚

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

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Inputs:	Four single ended One balanced Two tape loops
Input sensitivity:	100mV for 1 volt output
Maximum output:	14V
Frequency response:	10Hz - 200kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430x70x320 mm
Weight:	10kg
Price:	£2150

Masterclass Mono Power Amps

Power output:	160 watts / 8 ohms
Frequency response:	10Hz - 250kHz +/- 1dB
Input sensitivity:	1v for full output
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430x250x320 mm
Weight:	25kg ea.
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Resolution Audio CD55

by Roy Gregory

Recent events in digital development have left the whole CD player situation in the shadow of a gigantic question mark. What with up-sampling, the new high-bit digital formats (SACD and DVD-A) and the premature hysteria over DAD (which was in reality simply a 96KHz/24bit two channel configuration of DVD-V), poor old CD has taken quite a caning in the last couple of years. But for all their puff and bluster, these new format options have so far failed to deliver in terms of the essential market hegemony or software availability that ensure consumer confidence. Up-sampling is no longer the hot digital technology it once was, as the measured criticism that accompanied its launch has slowly been heard above the fanfares of enthusiasm. Once again we are reminded that there's no such thing as a free lunch. Meanwhile, both SACD and DVD-A are locked in a struggle for their own survival, which exposes the widespread predictions of CD's imminent demise for the intemperate sensationalism they truly represent, and we are only now beginning to see a range of DVD-V machines such as the Muse reviewed by JMH in the last issue, which are engineered to provide something approaching optimum audio performance from 96/24 discs. As Mark Twain didn't say, reports of CD's death are greatly exaggerated.

In fact, completely the opposite is true. CD replay has actually evolved into a mature technology, with all the benefits that that implies: consistency, cost effectiveness, consensus. Over the years we've worked out the important bits, what works and what doesn't, the priorities when it comes to spending the design budget. The result is that even basic players are capable of

visually from a host of cheaper machines. That is until you play it. Even before you listen to the first notes you'll remark the positive feel of the long travel buttons and the mechanical stability of the casework they grace, but it's the music that will make you sit up and take notice. Bill Malonee and The Vigilantes Of Love (*Audible Sigh* Compass Records 7 4295 2) know a thing or two about crafting a song – kind of like REM without the tortured self-obsession.

Trouble is, when it comes to getting those tracks down on disc they don't know dick. Try telling Resolution Audio that. The CD55 simply cuts through the digital congestion to the heart of the music, releasing its inherent drive and energy, revelling in its complex patterns and contrasts.

The first track, 'Goes Without Saying' opens with an impressive wall of sound, impressive that is until you realise that it's obscuring the patterns and dynamic surges in the music. Play it on the CD55 and it sorts out the terraced dynamics, building them around the repeated three chord motif that makes the song so compelling (and such a great opener). It even separates the normally submerged vocals, bringing diction and expression without pushing them forward in the mix. The challenge on the third



a performance that easily surpasses the first generation of "audiophile" machines. Those hastily re-badged boxes are, for the most part behind us, with the serious audio companies now buying in sub assemblies for construction of their own mechanical and electrical architecture. The results are a level of performance from the humble CD that once seemed impossible. Leading the charge are a group of American companies intent on solid engineering and what are (by high-end standards) approachable prices. The Muse we've already seen. Enter then, Resolution Audio.

The CD55 is a refreshingly plain, slimline box, with little to separate it



▶ track is rather different, but overcome with equal ease. Here the delicate acoustic guitar and plaintive vocals need an anchor that should be found in the drum line. If this is left muffled and indistinct then the whole song can wander from the point. Again, the Resolution lives up to its name, sorting out the reticent drums and giving them that all important leading edge. They even start to sound like someone hitting something! Emmy Lou Harris guests on backing vocals, and for once her distinctive voice is both separate and clearly identifiable, panned to virtually coincide with the lead, but retaining its own distinct acoustic space.

And so it goes on, all the way to the closer, 'Solar System', with its meandering, fractured acoustic intro necessarily

nailed into place by the metronome insistence of the snare. This isn't about ripping away veils or digging deeper into previously unimagined depths of

detail. It's about sorting out musical priorities and rendering tracks intelligible. It's about dynamic shading and rhythmic organisation. But above all it's about musical sense, and making it out of the morass that comes from the surface of all too many discs these days.

That's not to say that this player can transform a run of the mill recording into a masterpiece, simply that it manages to extract the musically important core from the mire, a trick which was beyond the majority of players until very recently indeed. In fact, CD's

attributes tended to the opposite, its lack of tonal colour and real dynamic range merely highlighting the glaze, spatial grain and mechanical intrusion of the replay process. That made CD a great leveller, of both hard and software. The latest generation machines have finally turned that corner, learning to maximise digital's attributes rather than trying to hide its weaknesses. In many respects, the Resolution Audio is an archetypical example of a modern



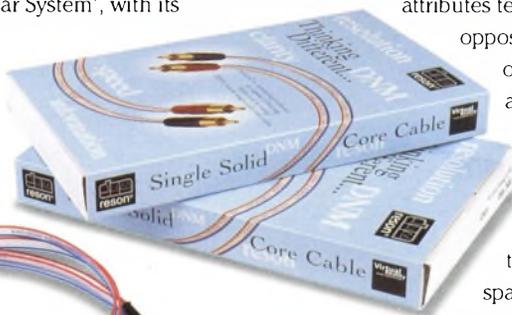
audiophile machine, drawing together the disparate solutions adopted over the years into a single coherent whole. Let's see what makes it tick.

The plain Jane exterior of the Resolution Audio is nicely rather than extravagantly executed. Pick it up and the heavy gauge steel casework, an increasingly common response to the RF problems that afflict CD players, is reassuringly solid. But even here there are clues to suggest that this is no simple clone; the extra display window for the output level, and round the back, the unusual array of socketry. Unusual? Well, the CD55 offers both balanced and single-ended, variable analogue outputs, a fixed level single-ended output via a five-pin din(!) and not a digital output in sight.*

Inside, the electronic guts represent a logical continuation of the good, sound engineering found on the outside. The circuitry reads like a "How To" guide to digital design priorities, albeit with its own particular flavour. At its heart lie the by now obligatory three separate transformers, providing power for the digital, analogue and servo/display circuits. Less obvious is the filtering on the mains input, designed to help prevent mains distortion reaching the circuitry, and, just as importantly, distortion leaving the machine itself, via the mains supply.

Jitter is the second big bug-bear for CD players, and Resolution Audio tackle it in two ways; by providing their own master-clock, crucially located next to the DACs rather than the transport, and secondly, by implementing their own transport servo and display circuitry, eliminating that source of jitter too.

The DACs are Burr-Brown 1704 chips, four of them arranged in the now familiar dual differential



The 5 pin din is a legacy of the Reson company, manufacturers of the DNM amps, who build this machine in Switzerland (the design originates in the US) for the European market. Used with a conventional pre-amp it sounds significantly cleaner and crisper than the variable option run wide open, using identical cables. However its margin of superiority paled into insignificance given the gap in performance between the DNM interconnects supplied and the Nordost Valhalla. As the chances of shoehorning that into a din plug are just about zero, I ran the Nordost cables from the single-ended, variable output for most of my listening.



► arrangement, but the filtering is unusual, being a hybrid solution employing both an HDCD filter and a re-programmable DSP chip, allowing Resolution to maintain full HDCD compatibility with 16x oversampling. The variable output is engineered in the analogue rather than digital domain (both approaches have their adherents) and unusually, the CD55 takes the trouble to sum the signals for its single-ended sockets.

The resulting sound is, as already discussed, refreshingly clear, direct and extremely engaging. The keynote of this design is clearly musical communication, above and beyond the hi-fi niceties that can sometimes intrude.

Playing Joe Jackson's live set *Summer In The City* (Sony SK89237) you can't miss the enthusiasm of the event. The intimacy between the three long time friends and musicians, the chemistry with the audience is infectious. And if I found myself sucked into the atmosphere and enjoyment of the performance, then listening to this sparser, well recorded three piece gave me clues to the CD55's musical success, a success which involves a subtle but beautifully judged slight of hand.

The sound of the Resolution Audio is subtly clipped, notes decaying faster than they would in life. Now, this is not exactly unfamiliar. After all, Naim have been doing it for years (and let's not forget that DNM started out building power supplies for Naim amps). The result is to shift the emphasis of the note to its leading edge, as well as clearing the decks for the next one. Musically it keeps things rhythmically taught, maintaining that all important

sense of momentum, and the listener's attention along with it. But as I said the effect is subtle, and more importantly, it's tailored. That leading edge crispness is concentrated in the broad midband, but tails off slightly towards the frequency extremes. Far from being a bad thing I suspect that this is entirely intentional. The overall effect is to provide the drive and structural definition required, without the sound becoming forward, bright or relentless. It's not mid-prominent, or bandwidth limited, it's just not as in your face as most players that offer this sort of clarity.

Listen to Graham Maby's bass on the Jackson disc. Its leading edges are very slightly soft (especially in comparison with the voice and



piano). but its notes are mobile and tactile, their pitch absolutely secure, their pace unwavering. They provide the perfect foundation for Jackson's piano and its evolutionary wanderings through jazz and his own back catalogue.

Ultimately, this is the second most enjoyable CD player I've had in the house. Its sound is engaging, encouraging and enthusiastic, positively enticing you to carry on playing music when you should be doing other things (like writing this review!). I've found myself playing more rock, pop and jazz than classical, but that's as much a mood thing as anything else. This machine revels in

the sheer energy of performance, and besides, most of my classical collection won't fit in its tray. Its separation of instruments and voices is as much tonal as locational, and it's way with structure certainly suits both orchestral and chamber works alike. Did I say that this is the second most enjoyable machine I've used? Oh yes - the first place in that particular race still belongs to the Wadia 860x - but then it does cost three times as much as the CD55.

This Resolution Audio machine offers exceptional musical value for money in a compact, no-nonsense package. Hear it soon, and remind yourself of the continuing health and relevance of CD.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD Player
Variable Outputs:	Balanced XLR, Single-ended Phono
Fixed Output:	5 pin DIN
Output Level:	3.5mV maximum
Output Impedance:	100 Ohms
Transport:	Philips P10500
DAC:	4 x Burr-Brown PCM1704 24bit
Digital Filter:	16x Oversampling Hybrid, custom DSP and HDCD
Weight:	11.5 Kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 90 x 320mm
Finish:	Black
Price:	£2500

Distributor

Reson Audio (UK)
Tel. (44)(0)1277-227355
Fax. (44)(0)1277-224103
E-mail. dnm.reson.uk@reson.de
Net. www.dnm.co.uk

Manufacturer

Resolution Audio
Tel. (001) 650-493-5090
Fax. (001) 650-493-5590
Net. www.resolutionaudio.com

ClearAudio Insider Reference Moving-Coil Cartridge

by Roy Gregory

There are some companies that seemingly exist solely to push the barriers of what the committed music lover will pay to pursue his (or her) passion. The prices asked for top of the line speakers, electronics and cables have never been so high, the astronomical made to seem so commonplace. And sadly, all too often these stratospherically priced objects of desire prove disappointing in practice. As a magazine we already have a reputation for featuring the unaffordable, yet, as editor, I see things rather differently. We have yet to scale the heights of fiscal absurdity (give us time) and whilst we assuredly do feature some ruinously expensive equipment it's never simply because it's expensive. In fact, the rationale behind its' selection is exactly the same as for the cheaper products we review - it has to deliver on its promise of musical performance.

Which brings me to the ClearAudio Insider Reference, a low output moving-coil investment that rings the till to the tune of £6700! And let's remember that this is one piece of hi-fi equipment that wears out as you use it. A £6700 stylus? You could be forgiven for asking whether the world has gone mad and yours truly has been carried along (albeit not exactly kicking and screaming - like you'd turn down the opportunity of an extended holiday with this particular baby!). My defence of the cartridge is simple; it delivers a more lifelike, intelligible



and believable rendition of the musical event than anything else I've ever tried. So there are a few contenders waiting in the wings, notably the vdH Colibri, but for the moment the Insider Reference is it, and by a surprisingly substantial margin. If you want the best, then this is it.

The price? The Insider Reference shares the same basic hammerhead layout as its cheaper siblings, but with a polished and curved wood body that you'll also see (in simpler form) on the Sigma, the cheapest of the

company's moving-coil cartridges. The boron cantilever and Trigon stylus are also common to the entire range. So's the packaging and the accessories supplied. In fact, outwardly and technically there is little to separate this from any of ClearAudio's other cartridges. Until you play it. Then you hear the evidence of the relentless selection and matching of parts that the eye can't see. You hear it very clearly indeed. Whether you hear £6700 worth of selection and matching is one thing, whether you are prepared to part with the asking price is quite another. Either way, that performance is all the justification you'll get. For the lucky few for whom reading this review is more than simply an academic exercise then I suspect it's all the justification they'll need.

The second string defence consists of an inversion of the first.

ClearAudio aren't exactly strangers to the ranks of high priced audio equipment, but in the same way that the Insider Reference is barely distinguishable from a £550 Sigma, the purchaser of the cheaper unit is, quite literally, buying a slice of the top cartridge's performance. Indeed, you need look no further than the Evolution turntable reviewed elsewhere in this Issue precisely to demonstrate the company's commitment to providing performance at more approachable price levels, to



► appreciate that this is so.

How then does the Reference relate to ClearAudio's previous flagships like the Accurate and Insider? Now I've been using an Accurate for a while, and I bought it in preference to the Insider, the two cartridges having rather a different balance of virtues. The Accurate lives up to its name, whereas the Insider is faster, more detailed and more dynamic at the expense of some exaggeration at the frequency extremes. The result is a performance that is full of life, vigour and drama, but at the expense of musical proportion and instrumental colour. The Insider is bold and incisive even when the music isn't. Rather like a Van Gogh compared to the Accurate's Constable. Just like with the paintings, each will have its advocates. What the Insider Reference brings to the equation is a combination of these virtues, but the whole is greater than a simple sum of the parts. It has the evenness of balance and the natural tonal colours of the Accurate, it has the speed, dynamics and detail of an Insider, but it has more life, top-end extension and transparency than either. One minute it can snap and snarl, the next it's all delicacy and decorum. It's this ability to apparently change its coat according to the demands of the music that really sets the Reference apart from any other cartridge that I've used. This lack of character, the ability to stand aside and let the performance pass, is unusual in any component, let alone a transducer.

It stems from the even handedness, the absolute lack of emphasis with which the cartridge treats the entire audible spectrum. That and its lightning speed, an ability to respond so quickly that even the fastest and

widest transients are scaled without any sense of hesitation or lag. Sudden dynamics are exactly that. All of which is fine for the aural fireworks set, and there are other cartridges which can do the same (the old vdH EMT-1B for instance, which brought a new brilliance to fireworks of every hue), but what draws me to the Reference is the way that notes happen at their own pace. There's nothing worse than a fast cartridge that makes everything fast. The thing which makes this cartridge special is the way an individual note, and hence the music as a whole evolves. Now

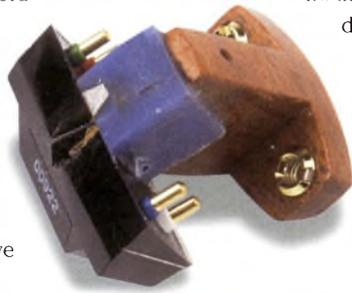
it's the performance that dictates terms and perspective, rather than the medium by which we hear it. Compare 'Someday' and 'Think It Over' from Steve Earle's *Guitar Town* (MCA MCF3335), the one

slowly built from carefully woven layers, the other almost Hank Williams steady state. The plaintive lyric and two off pace guitars that open the former build into a complete band across the course of the song, but you never lose track of those first two, as they maintain their fragile lament. The shattering conclusion is followed by the jaunty, almost jokey lyric and tune of 'Think It Over'. The Insider Reference is totally un-phased by the mood swing, switching stride with such sure footed alacrity that a transition that can sound false or hollow on many systems seems just as natural as can be. Likewise, it passes on the lovely pitch evolution in the middle 16 of the title track that you don't even notice it doing it until you realise there's a silly grin spread across your face.

The Reference has had me thinking about the Lexicon of hi-fi terminology. It breaks new ground in what I can only describe as its range of expression. Listening to the glorious

throbbing chug of the basses underpinning the *Allegro Molto* in Rachmaninoff's *2nd Symphony* (Slatkin and the St. Louis on Reference Mastercuts), I marvel again at the ability of this cartridge to get the individual so right, so present, so textural and immediate without compromising the whole. Davrath's worldliness sits so comfortably with Canteloube's classical orchestration that again I conclude that this is the only way to hear the *Songs of the Auvergne*. Again, you don't even think about the stereo, the perspective and scale seem so obviously right.

Time and again the ClearAudio adapts, apparently effortlessly to the demands of disparate musical styles. It offers less of itself and more of the music, moving you so much closer to the recording. It does it through sheer insight; the ability to work equally well at the lowest level and the highest, with an individual instrument or an orchestra, never sacrificing one for the other. Its ability to separate musical strands without dismantling the whole is unparalleled. It is, quite simply, the best. 



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low Output Moving-Coil
Stylus Type	Trigon II
Cartridge Weight	4.5g
Output	0.7mV
Separation	<45dB
Compliance	15cu
Price:	£6700

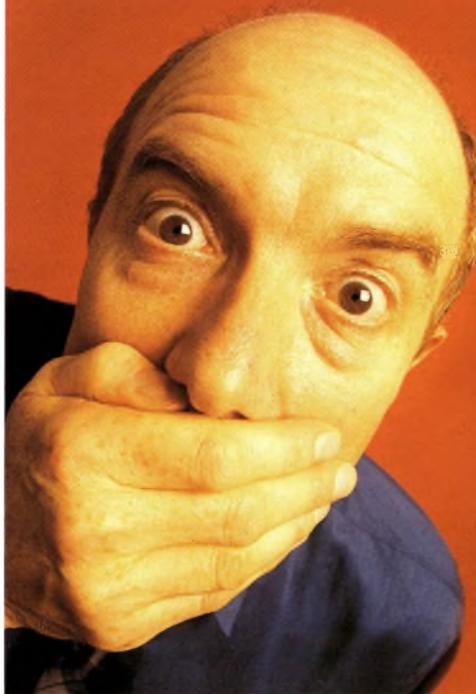
Distributor:

Audio Reference
 Tel: +44 (0)1252 702705
 Fax: +44 (0) 1483 301412
 Email: info@audioreference.co.uk
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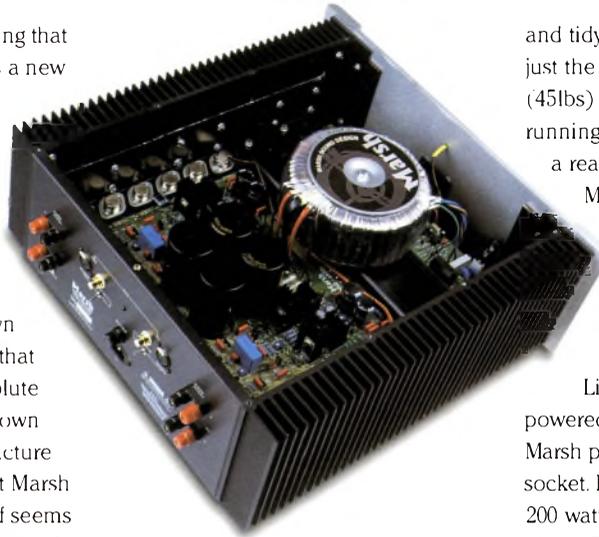
MSD-A1001

MARSH Sound Design P2000 Pre-amp and A400S Power Amp

by Chris Thomas

You could be forgiven for thinking that the last thing the world needs is a new 2-channel pre/power amplifier but Richard N. Marsh would disagree. For more than 30 years Marsh has been involved in the world of American audio as author, lecturer, engineer and inventor, though he is perhaps best known for his work as a consultant for that excellent publication, *The Absolute Sound*. Now he has formed his own company to design and manufacture audio components and called it Marsh Sound Design. The general brief seems to be to offer very high performance for relatively little money and yes I know we've all heard that one before. But you really have to admire men like Marsh. After all, who would be more aware of the current state of the American market than him? Who would have a better understanding of the quality of his immediate rival companies? It is one thing to have a few good ideas and designs kicking around in your head but to go through the undoubted traumas of forming a manufacturing business requires a deep feeling that you have something to offer, something that will make your product unique from either a performance or a price point of view and preferably both. As far as the American audio press is concerned this Californian based company has struck pay dirt, as the reviews of the power amplifier at least, seem just short of orgasmic.

For the past six weeks or so I have been sampling two of Richard Marsh's products in the shape of the p2000 Class A pre-amplifier and the A400S



power amplifier. These are both solid-state designs (there is also a tube hybrid pre-amplifier, the p2000T and a smaller power amplifier, the A200s available) and when you look at the specification of these two products they certainly seem to offer a lot for the money. The p2000 is extraordinarily comprehensive in that it has no less than 7 line level inputs (all RCA) plus two in/outs and two separate pairs of outputs, which would be handy for bi-amplified installations. Surprisingly, or perhaps not considering the price, there are no balanced connections even though the power amplifier does offer this option. All of the front panel controls are motorised and controlled by a very neat little remote control unit. When I first lifted the p2000 from its box I thought there must be a separate power supply as it was so light. Taking a peek inside reveals a tiny pair of transformers, easily the smallest I have seen in an audio component of this class but otherwise an extremely neat

and tidy layout. The power amplifier is just the opposite. It is big and heavy (45lbs) with extensive heat-sinking running the length of the case and a rear panel that reminds me of a Mark Levinson 3-series amplifier.

It can accept balanced (XLR) or unbalanced (RCA) inputs and has the useful feature of two sets of speaker connections per channel.

Like the ML it can be remotely powered-up by a control unit such as a Marsh pre-amplifier via a 12V mini-jack socket. Power outputs are impressive at 200 watts into 8ohms and 330 into 4 ohms. Externally, both of these MSD components are unremarkable. The casework is simple but adequate and I get the distinct feeling, especially after reading the literature, that Marsh has spent most of the money on the internals which when you are building down to a modest price is most certainly the sensible option.

When I first received these amplifiers I hooked them straight into my home system using an all Nordost cable loom of SPM interconnects and loudspeaker cable and left them cooking for a couple of days only occasionally taking a short listen to see how things were developing. First impressions through the ruthlessly revealing Revel Gems were mixed. This was obviously a quality set-up with a big, somewhat relaxed sound. It was detailed, very clean and quite lively with wide bandwidth and a very even overall tonal balance, but there was a whiteness of tonality to the sound that I was hoping would vanish as the amplifiers warmed and bedded in. ▶

▶ After a few days I began some serious listening but it was still there. Time to try some new cabling.

Now the SPM is a truly remarkable cable and in the right system it can be stunning. But when it is in the wrong system, like this, it can sound thin and tonally quite bleached at times so I began by substituting them with a bi-wired set of Naim NACA5 leads and hey-presto things began to look up. The slight gloss was still there but the set-up now sounded stronger, more confident and tonally a lot more colourful. The midband is the thing that just leaps out at you and puts you in mind of far more costly devices, as it is so open and at ease with itself. And although it was still a tad unfocussed, there was an elemental togetherness to the music that was certainly promising. The biggest breakthrough at this stage came when I introduced the Spectral/MIT cables. Now the sound really snapped into focus, in a big way. With similar resolution levels to the SPM there was now a real sense of balance, harmony and liquidity to the performances. Congratulating myself on stumbling across such a tasty hardware amalgamation I was browsing the Spectral website when I discovered the name of the designer of the filter networks of those very cables. None other than Richard Marsh. What a small world.

In this configuration the MSD combination makes for both a tantalising and frustrating amplifier. It does so many things so well and yet it always left me feeling that I was getting mere glimpses of its potential. What it really lacks is note articulation, especially at the frequency extremes, which are too soft and unfocussed. The amplifier has decent pace though the

dynamics are somewhat muted. Firmly in its favour though is a broad and elegant soundstage, particularly in the midband where you will find that addictive sense of expansive ease. Where lesser designs often seem as if the sound is being squeezed out of



them the MSD is calm and relaxed at all times and this is perhaps one of its strongest characteristics. When you put this air of nonchalance with an amplifier that is not overly articulate you do lose a little tension and anticipation from the music. Timing-wise it is good though. There is no smearing of tempo, instrumentation seems nicely centered in time and space but I was still troubled by its lack of real grip at note level. By this I do not mean that it is not a tight amplifier. I just found its ability to portray a musical note, in all its complication, disappointing. If you think of an amplifier as a magnifying glass onto the music then the best amplifiers will (or should) enable you to examine the characteristics of every note with greater clarity and resolution. Expression starts with the smallest things, not the biggest and a really high quality amplifier, and I don't mean just expensive ones, simply must have that sense of the note. This is one of the main reasons that Naim amplifiers have been so successful and that I like them so much. They have

a control and sense of lucidity and articulation that goes right down to note level. The NAP 500 has it and so, to a lesser extent, does the Nait. Call it resolution, detail, or whatever, the fact is that because of this, Naim amplifiers are great to listen through where this Marsh combination with all of its power and other sonic attributes is less musically interesting and involving.

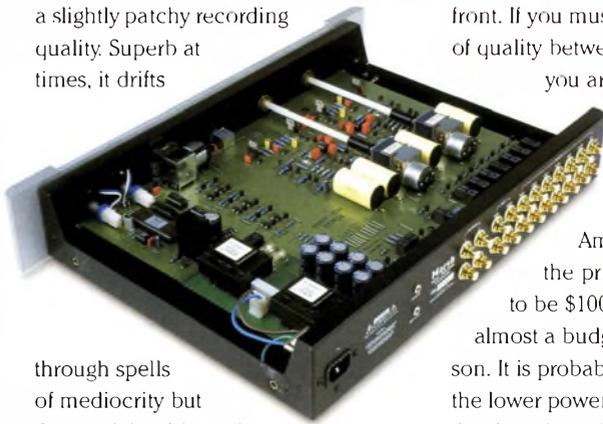
I suspected the pre-amplifier as being the main culprit, if only because it usually is. Substituting it bought a sigh of relief as it showed the power amplifier in such a different light that I could hardly believe it. If you ever doubted the absolutely vital importance of the pre-amplifier in an audio system here was the proof slapping you, very musically, around the face. Introducing the Spectral DMC 12 was like setting the amplifier free. I could immediately begin to hear how the Marsh had gained such a big reputation in such a short time. With the Spectral telling it what to do most of my criticisms became redundant. The already impressive bandwidth was now more fully useable and the instruments and voices contained within



it were much cleaner, more dynamic and a whole lot more realistic. The Spectral is a hell of a pre-amplifier and the A400S was now performing at a different level completely. Just the sense of focus and clarity was persuasive enough but the way that the whole shape and framework of the music had expanded emotionally was what held my interest. Now there was a real sense of anticipation to the performances, a feeling that here were real people ▶

▶ playing real instruments. The midband is the attention-grabber, particularly the degree of dynamic independence and separation it offers and the laying bare of every sort of reverberation and acoustic space. It is also remarkably relaxed and progressive on vocals, which now came from mouths powered by lungs with inflection and subtlety.

The New Standard, a 1996 Herbie Hancock release (Verve 517-715-2) has a slightly patchy recording quality. Superb at times, it drifts



through spells of mediocrity but the musicianship and cohesion of the playing, particularly on the slower tunes, is of wonderful depth and feel and it has been this that has always drawn me to the album. Before I substituted the Spectral there was a vague indecisiveness to the sound and the music only really came alive when the instrumentation was sparse. It was all quite pleasant but the more involved and intense passages just kind of drifted by.

But the DMC 12 bought layer upon layer of texture, complexity and rhythmic freedom. Now I could appreciate Herbie's wonderful left hand on the keys as he sat the chords and melodies on different foundations, always suggesting new harmonic and structural possibilities. 'Norwegian Wood' (the Beatles song) is such a simple melody that, with his jaw dropping sense of phrasing, the opportunities for subtle improvisation and variation are limitless. Hancock stays true to the theme but with the aid of that left hand takes it to new

directions. This is the beauty of this music to me and is what makes it worth listening to and thinking about. It is also the kind of improvement to a sound system that really makes sense and is well worth paying for.

I really do not want to be too hard on the Marsh p1000 pre-amplifier, firstly because it costs just £1000 and the Spectral would set you back over four times as much. It is just that the balance of this combination is back to front. If you must have such a disparity of quality between your pre and power you are far

better having it the other way round. Also it must be remembered that this is an American amplifier and the price in the States is likely to be \$1000 which makes it

almost a budget product in comparison. It is probably a better match for the lower powered A200S. The star of the show is undoubtedly the A400S, which costs £2000 and is certainly highly competitive with other comparably priced equipment. Richard N. Marsh is right to be excited by this design. It does offer a real foothold into the sort of performance that you could realistically pay twice as much for. Put it this way: I have, quite recently, heard amplifiers costing £5000 that are no more musically enjoyable than the A400S, but have far tastier casework and no, I'm not going to name them. It both needs and deserves a really good pre-amplifier, but really good pre-amplifiers are the rarest of all

Hi-Fi components, and those that fit the bill do not come cheap. To really appreciate what this amplifier is capable of you will certainly have to pay £2000 plus and it would be quite easy to justify spending much more. But, with this in place, the power amp has very little wrong with it and any criticisms are minor and certainly have to be taken in the context of its price.

The Marsh A400S is not one of

those big, fat, powerful ambient American amplifiers that are the audio equivalent of a comfortable old pair of carpet slippers. It is sharp, detailed and rhythmically excellent but needs to be mated with the right pre-amplifier. Thus equipped you really should hear it. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

P2000 Pre-amplifier

Inputs:	7 line plus tape and VCR loops (all RCA)
Outputs:	Two pairs (RCA)
Input impedance:	50 kOhm
Maximum Output at 1kHz:	6 Vrms
Dimensions (HxWxD):	3.5x19x13 inches
Weight:	4.6 Kgs
Price:	£1000

A400S Power Amplifier

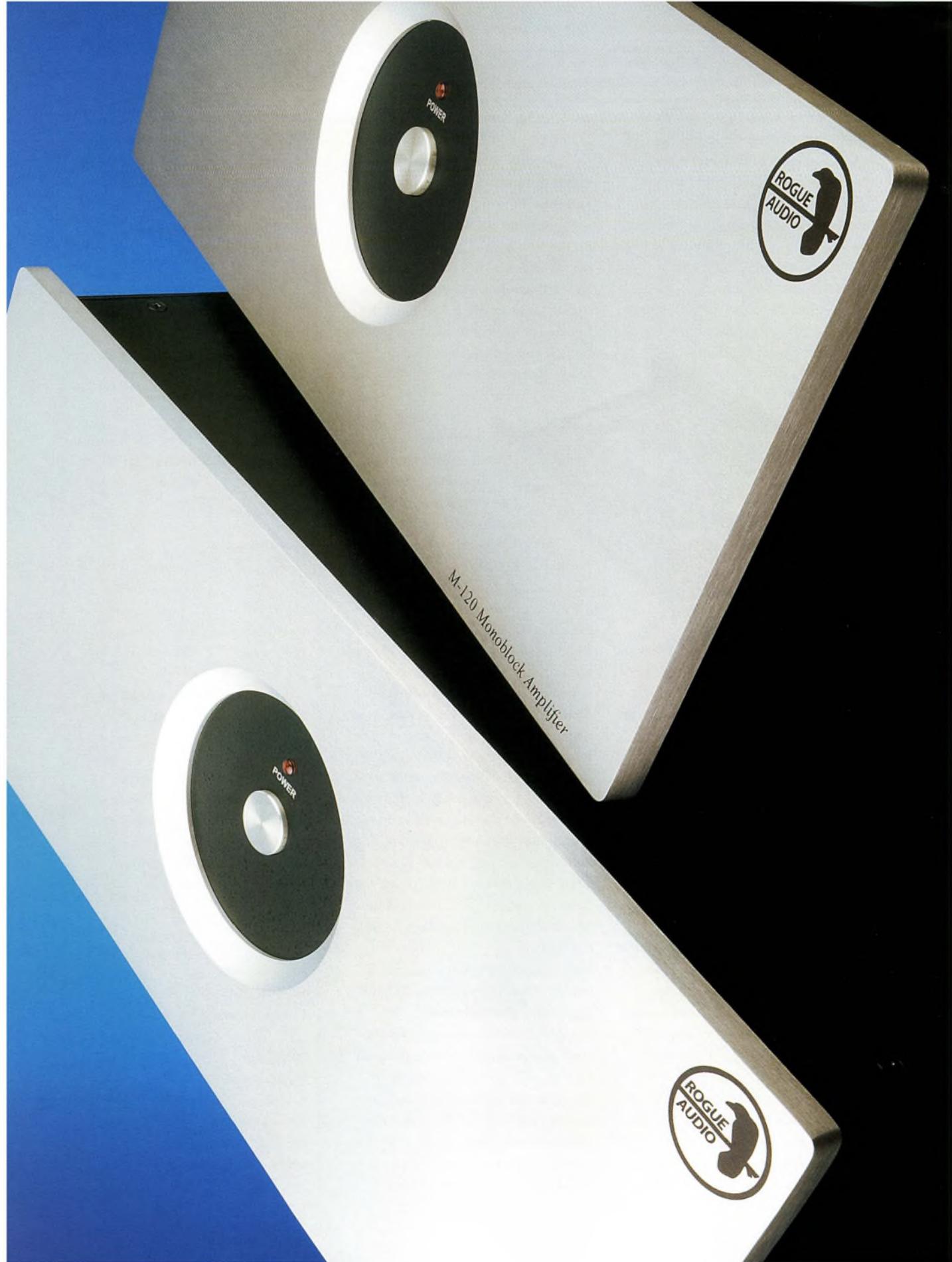
Inputs:	Switchable 1 x unbalanced (RCA) 1 x balanced (XLR)
Speaker connections:	2 pairs per channel
Power outputs:	200 watts into 8 ohms at 1 kHz 330 watts into 4 ohms at 1 kHz
Input sensitivity-200 W at 8 ohm load:	1.4 Vrms for balanced and unbalanced.
Input impedance:	56 kOhms unbalanced, 4kOhms balanced
Power consumption:	900 watts max
Dimensions (HxWxD):	7x19x18 inches
Weight:	20Kgs
Price:	£2000

Importer

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Tel. (44)(0)1252 702705
E-mail. info@audioreference.co.uk

Manufacturer

Marsh Sound Design
Corte Madera, California 94925
Tel. (415) 924 4672
Fax. (415) 924 6846
Net. www.marhsounddesign.com



M-120 Monoblock Amplifier



Rogue Audio

R 99 pre-amp and

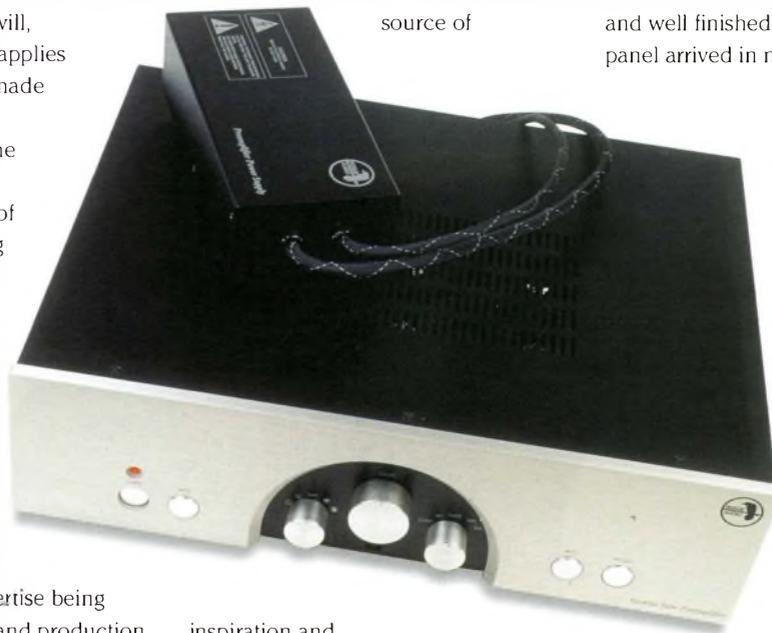
M 120 monoblocks

by Chris Binns

Never read too much into a name. I always felt that there was a certain amount of kind-heartedness in the expression "he's a bit of a rogue...." or "loveable rogue". Not of course that my school reports said anything of the sort. The Oxford English dictionary defines a rogue as amongst other things 'An inferior or defective specimen', or 'a wild fierce animal driven away or living apart from others'. Make of this what you will, but I don't think that it applies to the hi-fi equipment made by Rogue Audio.

Founded in 1994, the company has already established something of a reputation for offering good sounding, value for money products in the States. Rogue Audio is formed around a management team consisting of Mark O'Brien, Mark Walker and Phil Koch, their respective areas of expertise being electrical, mechanical and production engineering. So the product should sound good, look good and be reliable. That should just about cover

everything, right? After leaving college, Mark O'Brien, (the man behind the electronic design) worked at Bell labs, a company who historically have had quite a lot to do with the development of thermionic devices in the USA. Rising to the post of senior engineer enabled him to rub shoulders with some of the longer serving employees, and they must have been a considerable source of



inspiration and knowledge when it came to designing his own valve amplifiers. Mark didn't have to read the valve application

manuals, he could actually speak to the people that wrote them. The result a few years later is the Rogue Audio range, consisting of the 66 pre amp (also available with remote), the 88 stereo power amp and the flagship models reviewed here.

The R 99 pre amplifier retails in this country at £2495 complete with phono stage and remote – a line only version is available for £200 less. Solidly built and well finished, the substantial front panel arrived in natural brushed

aluminium, but is also available in black. Four line inputs plus moving magnet cartridge are provided, while the remote control adjusts volume level only using a motorised Alps pot. Situated within a semi-circular cut out on the front panel are rotary controls for volume, input selection and overall gain. To either side are

push buttons for power, mute, mono operation and record off, which are ▶

► nicely recessed into the metalwork, leaving the rotary controls look a little bit 'clumpy' by comparison. On the back panel all audio connections are made with high quality phono sockets, while the external power supply is connected via two multi-pin connectors. Although these are of the lockable type, they are not that substantial and, once fastened, remained disconcertingly loose, which did nothing to inspire confidence, especially as one of them carries mains voltage. There is also a headphone socket – not something you see that

often these days. The switchable tape output is a nice touch as it means you can



leave your recording device connected without compromising performance during really serious listening sessions, but note that there is no tape loop available for monitoring, or connecting AV processors for that matter.

Internal construction is to a high standard, with good quality selected components on substantial printed circuit boards - the actual signal path is hard wired from point to point on the underside of the boards, which should yield substantial sonic benefits. The external power supply contains two transformers for the valve filament supplies to minimise hum, while the separate HT transformer and smoothing circuitry is in the main chassis. High-speed rectifier diodes are used throughout, and there are no less than seven individually regulated supplies.

The line stage comprises four 6SN7 double triodes. In what appears to be a m follower configuration, these are paralleled to offer a low (by valve standards) output impedance. The phono stage consists of two 12AX7 and two 12AU7, the latter can be substituted for 12AT7s to provide an additional 10dB of gain.

Not to be outdone, the M120 power amplifiers also have their fair share of interesting features. Built in much the same fashion as the pre amp, they share a visual identity in the form of a brushed aluminium panel with a circular cut out containing the power switch and LED. Internally, the majority of components are mounted on a substantial PCB, while the transformers are mechanically decoupled on a separate chassis. Based around a quartet of KT88's (which will comfortably achieve 120 watts of output), these are driven by a low impedance cathode follower configuration using 12AU7's, offering superior stability under dynamic conditions. At the beginning of the circuit a 12AX7 acts as a voltage amplifier and phase splitter.

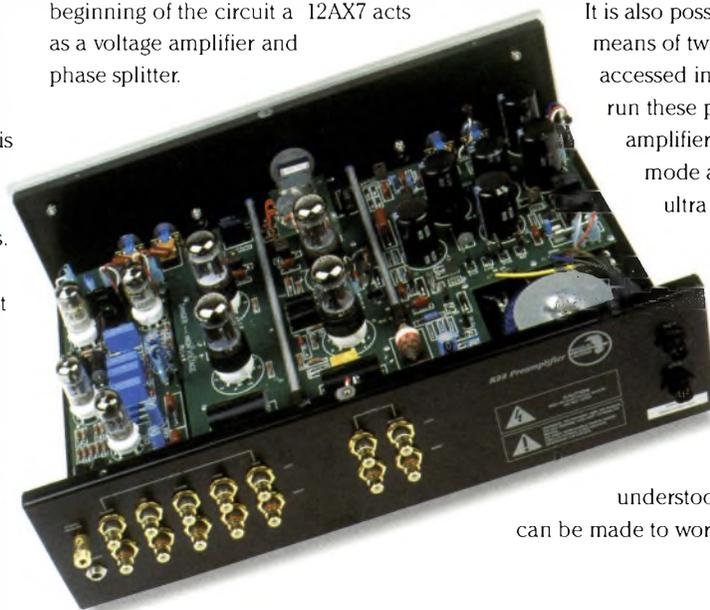


All the filament supplies are rectified and smoothed, including the power valves, which as far as I know is unique in a commercial design.

The HT supply is automatically delayed for a minute or so until after the valves have warmed up, which should increase valve life and overall reliability. The output stage is cathode biased which is unusual in an amplifier of this power rating (see Audio smorgasbord for more on this). Input is by means of a standard unbalanced RCA, while the speaker output is tapped for matching to 4 and 8 Ohm units.

It is also possible (by means of two switches accessed internally) to run these power amplifiers in triode mode as opposed to ultra linear, where upon the power output is reduced to 60 watts or so. I must admit that I have never understood how this

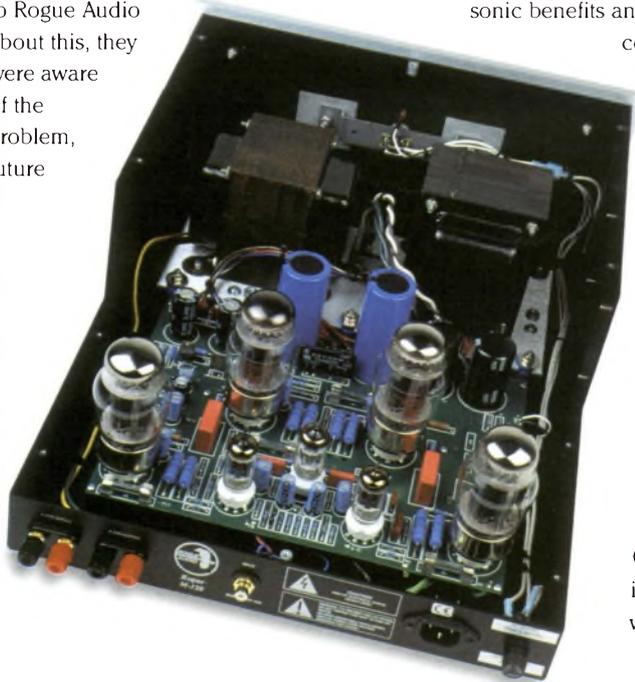
can be made to work



▶ effectively, as without changing the output transformer the valves are no longer correctly matched to the loudspeaker.

If all that goes whizzing straight over your head, the really important thing to grasp is that these amps are the product of serious thought and genuine innovation, rather than just a re-hash of some old application. Both the pre and power amps exude a confidence that comes from this considered approach to their design, and this is also reflected in use by the lack of the thumps, buzzes and farts that can sometimes plague tube equipment.

As they were new, I left the M120's to run for a few days in another room and put the 99 pre amp into my main system. Powering up produces a reassuring click of relays, and the unit remains muted for about a minute until everything has settled down. Not that you would know until you played some music - the line stage is exceptionally quiet for a valve design. Unfortunately, the external power supply is not. When first powered up it sounded as if someone was using an electric razor somewhere, but this subsided to a more reasonable level after an hour or two. When I spoke to Rogue Audio about this, they were aware of the problem, future



production models should prove to be quieter. (To be fair, I also know that my mains supply is not the cleanest in the country.)

In the absence of the M120's the 99 was partnered with a Krell KSA100 power amplifier, perhaps something of an unusual combination. Having allowed it to warm up for an hour or so, I had a listen. My first impressions were very favourable, and the sound was one I was immediately comfortable with. In fact, I felt a small wave of nostalgia, as I was reminded of a time when it was popular to partner Audio Research pre-amplifiers such as the SP8 or SP10 with Krell power amps, to good effect. What it didn't have was the slightly 'spongy' quality that those systems possessed. The sound I was getting was detailed and articulate with a wide and spacious sound stage - very promising. The inclusion of a gain control proved useful, as it allows you to maximise the use of the volume control, with obvious sonic benefits and greater

control at lower volumes. Wiring up the M120 monoblocks proved uneventful except that with the Nordost SPM interconnect there was a tendency for the system to hum. I ended up using the Clearlight Audio interconnects which proved to

be quieter. It would seem the M 120's have quite a forward tonal character, which complements the 99 pre-amplifier very effectively; the overall balance lending itself well to different types of music. I could listen to aggressive tracks where the sense of urgency and drama were delivered as required, yet string music came across with good tonal character and an almost soothing quality in more gentle passages. A Lyrita recording of Herbert Howells chamber music was a good example of this, the sound of the quartet had a seductive quality that made listening really enjoyable.

I get frustrated when amplifiers are classified as typically valve or solid state. I have heard good and bad examples of both genres, and if you think that valve amplifiers always sound warm and mushy, think again - or go listen to the Rogue combination. It is lively and very self-assured. Its presentation of most of the material that I played through it was handled with real confidence. Against my expectations (and I have to admit that I was slightly dubious about cathode bias with 120 watts - see Audio Smorgasbord for more on this) the bass performance was fast and taught with plenty of punch and above all ▶





else, tuneful. Best of all, it didn't get in the way of the midrange which was detailed and full, without being too lush, and it managed to project the music away from the loudspeakers in a fashion that I found very engaging. The top end was lively, and at times a little undisciplined, depending on the source material, but certainly not enough to prevent it integrating well with the mid range. With heavy rock music played at high levels there was sometimes a tendency for the sound to harden up, and I could hear the power amps losing a bit of grip at the bottom end, but we are talking 'post pub, and sod the lodgers' levels.

As the triode operation was reasonably accessible I thought I had better give it a go. If the word 'triode' fires your imagination with thoughts of sonic nirvana, and you have reasonably efficient loudspeakers, maybe you should try it. To me, the system immediately sounded like it was playing in another room, vague and indistinct while simultaneously removing all the fun from the performance - and all the attributes that contribute to making these amplifiers special. This smacks of market imperatives to me.

I had so far been using the Pass

Labs phono stage feeding the auxiliary input of the 99 pre-amp, I doubted very much whether the Lyra Helikon, with an output of 0.5 mV, would work into the Rogues phono input. It didn't, but the extra 10dB of gain available by substituting two valves and flicking an internal switch on the phono board made all the difference, and the combination was workable with all but the quietest of recordings. It didn't have the ultimate precision that the Pass labs had, but listening to vinyl was thoroughly enjoyable none the less.

The Rogue audio pre and power amplifiers offer tremendously good performance, filling a real gap in the UK market. What makes them special however, is that they are definitely 'real world' products - powerful enough to drive most loudspeakers to trouser flapping levels, straightforward and easy to use, and judging by the quality of construction, should prove to be reliable. These are genuine all-rounders. The really impressive bit though, is the price. At £2495 and £2995 for the pre and power amps respectively, they represent a real bargain. I can't wait to get my hands on the sub £3K 66/88 combination.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

99 Pre-amplifier

Inputs:	4 line and one phono
Overall Gain:	23dB
Phono Gain:	65 or 75dB
Outputs:	one tape, one main out
Output voltage:	1.5V
Output impedance:	100 Ohms
Dimensions (wxHxD):	432 x 127 x 356mm
Weight:	12.75kg
Finishes:	Black or silver
Price:	£2295 (Line only) £2495 (incl. Phono)

M120 Monoblocks

Inputs:	1 x RCA phono
Input Sensitivity:	1V
Power Output:	120W/8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	370 x 178 x 483mm
Weight:	19kg ea.
Finishes:	Black or silve
Price:	£2995 pr.

Distributor:

Audiocraft
Tel. (44)(0)1895-253340
Fax. (44)(0)1895-238238
E-mail. kevinwalker@genie.co.uk

Manufacturer:

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New this month

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Naim Nap 250	£ 795.00	£ -
Cary SLA 70 mk II	£ 1,450.00	£ 2,250.00
YBA 2 Alpha amp (DT, HC)	£ 2,295.00	£ 3,050.00
Audio Refinement Complete Amp	£ 695.00	£ 895.00
Audio Research VT200	£ 7,795.00	£ 9,998.00
Audio Research Ref 600 mk II	£ 29,995.00	£ -
Tag Maclaren F3-601 int.	£ 495.00	£ 800.00
YBA Passion Monoblocks	On Dem	£ 8,995.00

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PRE AMPLIFIER		
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Mark Levinson 380S	£ 3,995.00	£ 6,495.00
Naim Hi Cap	£ 350.00	£ -
Cary SLP 50	£ 795.00	£ 1,195.00
YBA Pre 1 Alpha & psu mm/mc	On Dem	£ 4,900.00

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JM Lab Electra 90S	On Dem	£ 1,195.00
Avalon Ascents	£ 6,995.00	£ 12,000.00

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Teac P30	£ 1,995.00	£ 2,500.00

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Transparent Audio Music Wave Ultra	Plus XL Bi-Wire	£ 3,200.00
Cary PH301 MM/MC	£ 995.00	£ 1,695.00
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Mark Levinson No 28	£ 2,250.00	£ 4,000.00
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Naim 42.5	£ 195.00	£ 450.00

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Rogers LS55 (new)	£ 330.00	£ 430.00
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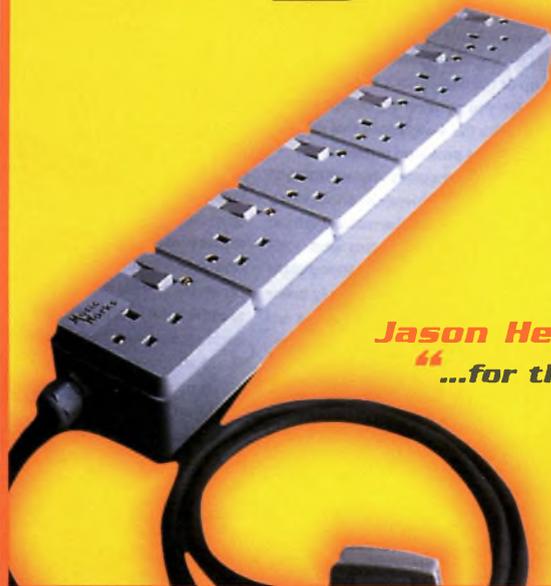
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ATC SCM 50A SL

by Paul Messenger

Given the large number of loudspeakers I get to review each year, there's a good chance I'll get to try the most interesting models as a matter of course. Every so often, however, something important slips through the net, and that's certainly the case with ATC's £6,500 SCM50A, which probably deserves to take its place as a modern classic on both longevity and popularity grounds.

ATC is unusual (though not unique) amongst speaker manufacturers in enjoying equal respect from both professional and hi-fi customers. The pro market has always set the company's agenda, which is why so many of ATC's most serious models are active-powered - ie, come with built-in multiple power amps and active filtering in place of the usual crossover network - which sets them apart from regular conventional loudspeakers. The company operates out of Stroud in Gloucestershire, and has been established for more than twenty five years, principal Billy Woodman coming over from Australia to join Goodmans in 1970, then leaving to found ATC in 1974.

He's first and foremost a drive unit specialist, and ATC makes some of the most beautiful and massively engineered bass and midrange drivers on the planet. Best known of these is the 3-inch dome midrange unit, which the company has made since its earliest days, and which has long been a popular choice amongst pro users, partly because of its high power handling. ATC's most recent innovation, applied to its bass and midrange

drivers, is 'super linear' magnet systems, which coat the metalwork surfaces with a magnetically permeable material of low conductivity, suppressing the circulation of distortion generating eddy currents within the motor structure.

Although ATC still sells its drivers to other speaker builders, the main part of the business is



packaging them as complete systems. The core SCM-series consists of six basic models, each type number corresponding to the bass enclosure volume in litres. The '10 and '20 are two-ways, while the '50, '70, '100 and '150 are much larger three-ways. All but the relatively recent

'70 are stand-mounts, while the '50 and '100 in particular have long enjoyed a fine reputation amongst serious hi-fi enthusiasts. All models are available in passive or active form, and in a variety of finishes.

Interestingly, the budget seems tilted very much towards the loudspeaker rather than the electronics: a passive SCM 50 SL costs £5,000, whereas the active SCM 50A SL, complete with built in 200W, 100W and 50W power amps, adds just £1,500 to the overall price. From a hi-fi perspective I'd expect to split the budget a little more evenly between the power amp(s) and the speakers, though I gather the pro sector is reluctant to spend much money on amplification.

Having reviewed the SCM 70A SL elsewhere a year or so back, I had the option of trying the 50 or the 100 this time around. My back wasn't feeling too great, and both these speakers have to be lifted onto stands, so I went for the smaller, lighter option - 49kg rather than 65kg. Did I say lighter? Comparatives are only relative, and this is still a massively weighty loudspeaker. The packing carton was appropriately bulky, but having struggled it out of its box, I was very surprised at how small the SCM 50A SL turned out to be.

I'm not frightened of large loudspeakers myself - like many who got into hi-fi in the 1960s, I've always had a yen for a seriously large transmission line. But it appears that most people are, and compactness seems to be considered a major - if not THE major - virtue these days. And the SCM 50A is not a particularly large ►

► loudspeaker. Indeed, it's a classic stand-mount, rather larger than those commonly encountered these days, but in size and shape very reminiscent of those archetypal 'two-cubic-foot' BBC monitors like the Spendor BC1 and Rogers LS something/something (5/5 I think, but I'm always getting them mixed up!)

In fact it's just a little larger than those classics - a couple of inches deeper and three inches taller - but the effect is very similar. I rather like the size and shape myself, but maybe that's nostalgia as my first serious speakers were BC1s.

Although I like the styling and proportions, that doesn't mean that others will, and at least two described them as old-fashioned and "very '70s". I also like the 'industrial' pro-look front baffle under the grilles, which I guess is also a matter of taste. Having had a host of floorstanders through here, I quite like being able to see underneath the speakers again. I started off using 14-inch stands, properly spiked and slightly higher than the unspiked 10-inchers that ATC normally supplies, but although the taller stand brought the tweeters up to seated ear level, it did no favours for the bass-to-mid transition - the 'official' stand gave superior acoustic floor-coupling for the bass driver.

This Active version of the 50 weighs nearly 9kg more than the passive, indicating that there's plenty of copper in the power supply feeding those power amps. There's plenty of heatsinking too, which is probably just as well as the amps run quite warm. A couple of large grab-handles will

help keep the heatsinks clear of other objects, and are handy for manoeuvring the speaker into position.

There are no external means of adjusting the electronics in any way here: there's an IEC mains socket and fuse, an on/off switch, and a balanced XLR input, end of story.

The three drivers are flush-mounted into a very thick, matt black front panel which is festooned with chunky fixing bolts.

Everything's chunky here, with a very thick and heavily braced MDF enclosure, nicely wood

veneered on our sample (at an extra \$200), and huge magnets and metalwork on the drive unit motors. It might not be the most subtle engineering approach, but it seems very effective. The driver line-up consists of a bass unit with a 9-inch frame and 180mm doped paper cone, the midrange's 3-inch soft fabric dome is loaded by a short horn flare, while the tweeter has a 1-inch fabric dome, again with short horn flare. A modest front port reflex-loads the bass enclosure.

Active drive removes several options for the reviewer. Short of dismantling the thing, there's no impedance data, and hence no means of establishing, for example, the port tuning. Sensitivity is not relevant either, but it's still possible

to define the overall in-room frequency balance, which remains the tonal 'fingerprint' of any loudspeaker. The SCM 50A SL's most impressive and unusual characteristic is that it delivers seriously deep bass while remaining free of the 'thumpy' mid-bass excess that's nearly always the unwanted accompaniment. Its most obvious weakness is a slight excess through the upper bass/lower midband (150-250Hz), though elsewhere the balance looks very well ordered.

I tried out ATC's pre-amp a year ago with the '70s, and didn't really find it to my taste, preferring the results with my regular Naim NAC 52, even though this only supplies an unbalanced output. I started off using the NAC 52 with the '50s, but by chance a Bryston BP25, complete with balanced socketry, came on the scene, and proved an even better match, adding worthwhile extra top end 'sparkle'.

Even with the NAC 52, first impressions were very positive, largely because of this speaker's wonderful clean, deep and powerful bass delivery, which is more than a match for any subwoofer, but also for its fine dynamic range and

considerable loudness capability, though the top end did sound rather too restrained. The top end brightened up noticeably with the Bryston's balanced connection, and then - rather to my surprise - improved still further when I used Kimber IEC mains leads into the speakers.

Even so, the top end never quite seemed to ►



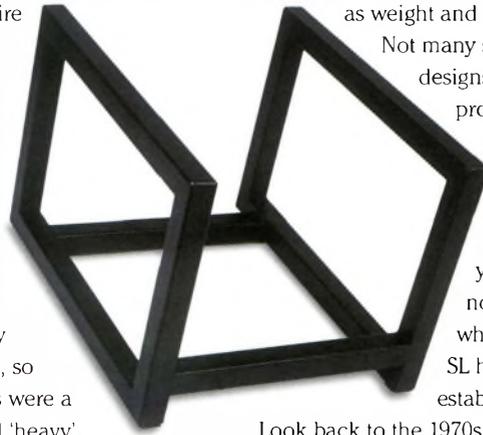
▶ match the delicacy and transparency of 'high end' hi-fi gear.

I developed increasing respect for the 50s over the several weeks I spent with them, because they handled all different types of material with equal aplomb, and would play happily at whisper-quiet or ear-threatening levels with great consistency. As I pumped the volume up above the 100dB level, there did seem to be some increase in harshness and stridency, but it wasn't easy to say whether that was the speaker's responsibility, or simply its ability honestly to reproduce the inadequacies of the original recordings, and these speakers were amongst the most convincing I've heard at recreating a rim-shot.

At heart, this is a monitor loudspeaker designed primarily to reveal the differences between sources and material. The presentation

sometimes seems a little matter of fact, and there's not a lot of romance about its music-making. This is a speaker which demands respect, but will not necessarily inspire affection.

Tonality is close to neutral, but there is some extra thickening of textures. Ultimately, I found the midband slightly undernourished, so that male voices were a little hollow and 'heavy'. That most familiar of all broadcasters, Alistair Cooke, somehow didn't quite sound himself, and I felt there was some lack of projection and coherence through the midband. Yet



the bottom end is quite extraordinary. The complex figures on Basement Jaxx's 'U Can't Stop Me' were handled with great deftness and coherence, as well as weight and welly.

Not many speaker designs get to stay in production, albeit with regular under-the-skin improvements, for fourteen years, but it's not hard to see why the SCM 50A SL has become an established classic.

Look back to the 1970s and you'll find monitor loud-speakers tended either to be low-power/coloration devices (eg Spendor BC1), or high power/coloration affairs (eg Tannoy/JBL/Urei). The SCM 50A SL gets close to giving you the best of both worlds, all tied up in a tidy and compact package. I suspect some hi-fi enthusiasts might find it a little too matter-of-fact and unforgiving, but as an all round thoroughly capable performer, the SCM 50A SL demands recognition and serious respect. ➤

Active Drive

Active loudspeakers aren't a new idea by any means, and the case in their favour seems to become stronger as the years pass. But while they've long been the rule where serious professional monitors are concerned, they remain very much the exception in the hi-fi marketplace, and the pros and cons of active versus passive drive have long been a topic of vigorous discussion.

Note that an active speaker is not necessarily the same as a powered speaker. Some active speakers are powered (eg ATC, Meridian), some are not (eg Linn, Naim). Likewise some powered speakers are active, though others (such as the 'power towers', popular in the USA) are part active, part passive, and others still are purely passive, featuring a single built-in power amp.

Active drive offers a number of advantages, the most obvious being the elimination of the 'passive' crossover network, which is by its nature a rather crude affair that sits between power amp and drive units, adding distortion and phase shifts and compromising control. In an active speaker, a power amplifier is connected directly to every driver, and the crossing over between the drivers is carried out electronically, effectively as an extension of the pre-amplifier. This doesn't avoid the phase shifting associated with any form of equalisation or filtering, but it does allow much more subtle response tailoring, and the low impedance of the power amp output stage is theoretically available to damp speaker voice-coils and diaphragms. Furthermore, individual power amps can be 'tailored' to the specific drive unit, especially useful for avoiding damage accidental 'over-drive'

However, passive protagonists can also make persuasive points. It stands to reason that a signal passing through a single power amp is innately more likely to maintain its coherence better than one that's split up and sent through two or more. They also tend to point out that the inside of a speaker cabinet is possibly the worst available environment for mechanically sensitive electronics. Passive speakers also allow a free choice of power amplification, where the active offers little or no choice.

And of course there's the cost factor, best illustrated by the concrete example of someone wishing to upgrade a Naim NAP250 power amp and SBL loudspeaker combination. One option is to 'go active' with four NAP135s, a NAXO and power supply. Alternatively, for a not too dissimilar price, one could stay passive but upgrade to a NAP500 power amp. Which is better? Maybe I should check it out.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way active loudspeaker
Input:	Balanced XLR
Input Sensitivity:	1V
Amplification:	HF - 50 Watts MF - 100 Watts LF - 200 Watts
Maximum Level:	112dB/1m
Frequency Range:	38Hz-20kHz/-6dB
Dimensions (HxWxD):	717 x 304 x 425mm
Weight::	49kg
Finishes:	Various
Price:	£6500

Manufacturer:

Loudspeaker Technology Ltd.
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Clearaudio Evolution Turntable with Tangent linear tonearm and Signature cartridge

by Dave Davies

Having spent four years of my life in art college, and not a little time since those days managing design for various corporates, it'll come as no surprise to you that design is very important to me. When it comes to music in the home it's sound quality first, but design comes a very close second. That's certainly helped my decision making process in choosing my Michell Gyrodek/ Orbe and Orca/ Alecto amplification: It not only sounded great, it looked great, really distinctive and different, and was beautifully constructed too.

I've always had great regard for Clearaudio cartridges, I use the latter in my system and have been mightily impressed with the cartridge that is part subject of this review when mounted in my Mechanic arm on the Gyro. 'Til now I've never had a chance to get close to their turntables 'though, with the exception of tempting bursts of exceptional sound when visiting the Editors house, so I leapt at the chance when this review was offered.

First an empirical point: Having watched (as is my wont) Roy struggle into the living room, unpack the turntable and arm from a large box, then dismount the Signature from my Mechanic and set it up in the Tangent, and carefully select new and interesting variations on the Anglo Saxon tongue my advice is this: 'Don't try and set this up on your own'!

The deck itself is simplicity. The free standing motor is plonked in position, the deck lowered over it with the motor centred in its cutout. Everything is levelled using the adjustable feet one of which conveniently contains a spirit

level, fit the platter and drive belt and that's about it: Apart from the arm and cartridge of course. All I can say is rather Roy than me. It has to be said that he's set up a few in his time (parallel tracking arms that is), and that this one didn't actually take him more than 25 minutes with a subsequent visit for fine adjustments. It's just that like brain surgery and quantum physics, some things are best left to the experts. Of course this is all really a reflection on my general kack-handeness when it comes to matters technical, but it was



obvious that mounting the cartridge and setting the arm required a number of fine adjustments each of which was inter-dependent with the others. Re-adjust one parameter and all the others would need re-adjusting. Fortunately once set up the arm stayed set up. A huge relief this!

OK, so now the ensemble was sitting proudly on my Bright Star platform, Roy had completed his

surgery and departed, what did it look like? A million dollars is the straight answer. With no cover and a much smaller footprint than my Gyro, the Evolution shrieked class. With its rectangular chunky clear Perspex base stylishly cut off at the corners, acrylic platter and parallel arm it was even more sculptural and pleasing to the eye than my much loved Gyro/ Orbe. And despite its lack of a lid, my worries of cat damage have not been realised. Its sculptural appearance is only enhanced by its lack of clothing. For those of a more timid nature, or for any families with young kids, an acrylic cover is available as an optional extra for just over £200.

The Clearaudio is also designed with future proofing in mind since it's upgradeable pretty much infinitely through the rest of the Clearaudio range model by model, stopping only at the mighty Master Reference.

The Signature cartridge has much in common with the Gamma 'S' that I've already reviewed, sharing the same basic technical data but this time the body is heavy rhodium plated and tempered. Like all Clearaudio MC cartridges it shares a completely symmetrical design (mechanically, magnetically and electrically) as they all share the same basic layout with Clearaudio's patented Series Coil System, with coils mounted symmetrically in front and behind the cantilever pivot. Clearaudio call this 'Tolerance Field Technology'. Prior to the Evolution arriving I'd had a good run with the Signature in my Mission Mechanic arm mounted on my

▶ Gyro/Orbe and had been mightily impressed. The cartridge had exhibited the inherent musicality I've found in all the Clearaudio designs I've sampled to date, and in my system had provided just the right balance of balls Vs finesse across a wide range of music.

Initially I handled the process of spinning my first record with great trepidation: warily approaching the deck and very gingerly releasing the arm lock. Lowering the arm across the record, sliding the cartridge into position and dropping it ever so gently onto the record was very unfamiliar and seemed to take forever.

Fortunately after a few plays the process became second nature and worrying thoughts of a £1,600 cartridge crashing against the arm block receded. Now, after a few weeks of operation, setting up a record takes no more time and no more fuss than the old clamp n'play process of my Gyro so I clearly needn't have worried at all.

So how did it all sound? Well, one of Clearaudio's most deeply felt convictions is that a turntable should have no sound of its own and I'd say they've fairly successfully brought this to bear with the Evolution. It immediately displayed a very precise and well-controlled character delivering a sound that was akin to the rock solid stability of CD replay but without losing the essential characteristics of vinyl. Surface noise too seemed significantly down on my Gyro/ Orbe/ Mechanic.

Sticking to familiar recordings, I first played the Mingus classic *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*. Again precision was the first impression, the rasp of brass at the start of 'Solo Dancer' was precisely captured, so too was each player within the broad soundstage, from the tuba stage centre

at the back, to the alto sax stage left and so on. And importantly these images stayed rock solid throughout the piece. And as the band really kicked in with full-on blowing from all, the impression of a band precisely in place stayed: Impressive stuff. The key thing is that this precision was not at the expense of musicality. Far from it, it simply served to enhance the realism of the whole experience.

Moving to an old favourite I loaded up



Little Jimmy and the Brothers of the Night. Now this is an album that mixes traces of Little Feat, Dr John, Mink DeVille, Creedence Clearwater, and a large dose of the bands own character into a steamy and delicious gumbo. Rhythm is all if you are going to get the best from this album: Play it on a system that doesn't have great timing and it just doesn't cook. Fortunately the Clearaudio was well up to the job. From the first notes of 'Little Rachel' it drove along beautifully, capturing the rhythm section to perfection, layering convincing vocals on top and catching the metallic edge to the guitar work very well. The choruses on 'Crazy' opened out well, the lead vocalist positioned centre stage, well in front of the speakers, and again the way the

guitar lines were captured was just, and I make no apologies for not finding a better word, 'right'. Bass lines were satisfyingly deep

And if they seemed a little lighter than with my Gyro/ Mechanic, they were undoubtedly better controlled, quicker and displayed more detail.

Espana in the Decca LSO/ Argenta recording is a favourite classical test disc, mainly because it contains great music making but also because it's one of Decca's best recordings, delivering a very convincing rendition of an orchestra in full flow. The album opens with Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnol* which here superbly demonstrates the piece's original conception as a virtuoso composition for violin and orchestra. Designed by the composer to 'glitter and dazzle with orchestral colour' it does just that. The lead violin solo passages are perfectly caught, and the

Clearaudio helps keep the soloist in scale with the orchestra throughout this thrilling piece. This piece perfectly demonstrates the capabilities of the Clearaudio combination: Staging is wide and suitably deep, the character of each instrument of the orchestra from the solo violin through each section, strings, brass, percussion, woodwind, is very well captured. Orchestral crescendos occur naturally and in keeping with the scale of soloists, and the essential flow of the music is preserved. Most importantly of all, the system has the vital capability to sweep you away with the music, forgetting absolutely the mechanics of its reproduction.

So what about the efficacy of the parallel tracking arm? Picking a sample pretty much at random from my collection, Art Pepper's *Living Legend* runs pretty close to the label on its last track 'Samba Mom-Mom'. This has never been a major problem with ▶

► my Gyro/ Mechanic but the sound quality; try as I might with anti-skating adjustment, is noticeably inferior towards the close of this number. A bit less detailed, a bit woollier overall is how I'd best sum it up. I'd just learned to live with it. Well, the Clearaudio played it faultlessly from start to finish with absolutely no sense of degradation – obviously I suppose – but a real joy nonetheless, with the short drum solo towards the end rendered very crisply and convincingly. This proved true of every culprit I could dig from the shelves and is a major plus for the Clearaudio system, adding greatly to what is already a highly consistent performer.

So is this the fabled 'perfect player'? Of course not: One of the joys of my current set-up is the way it can still surprise me.



Clearaudio, it delivers a larger scale picture. Whether this is principally down to the differences between fully suspended decks (Gyro) against non-suspended decks (Evolution) is neither here nor there. It is however a huge comfort to me since both decks have their strengths and particular qualities. I'm certain that the Clearaudio is the most accurate performer overall, but the bigger scale of the Gyro along with its capability to 'surprise' is very appealing to me and overall I'd say that both systems are fairly evenly balanced. This'll help keep me with my Gyro, and my overdraft safe from further damage for at least a few more months. If I

were looking from scratch though, the consistent

performance and sheer beauty of the Clearaudio would make it very appealing.

Often this is by the sheer realism of a particular recording or the punch scale and dynamic clout of a band in full swing. This didn't happen with the Clearaudio, which I guess is a sort of backhanded compliment in that it was so damn consistent that everything was at the same high level throughout. Images were very solid and tangible and timing, dynamics and detail were real strengths. The Gyro I feel is at least as good in the dynamics department, not as good in the timing or overall finesse but in comparison with the

Essentially neutral in character and delivering a well-judged balance between detail and power across all types of music the Clearaudio Evolution, Tangent and Signature make musical involvement their watchword. Mechanically the system proved dead quiet and totally reliable in operation and I'm confident that this is a set up that will provide many years of happy listening. Its upgradeability through the Clearaudio line makes it an even better investment. It does things very differently and in a more even-handed

way than my normal set-up, banishes end of side distortion forever and is the first combination I've found that looks even better than the lovely Gyro. It also demonstrates how effectively Clearaudio can incorporate the thinking and sonic benefits of their truly unaffordable designs into something much more approachable.

Highly recommended. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Evolution

Type:	belt drive
Speeds:	33/ 45rpm
Drive:	Physically separated synchronous motor
Bearing:	Hardened steel, bronze plated, inverted
Platter:	Acrylic
Weight:	approx. 11kg exc.
Motor Dimensions:	500mm x 400mm x 140mm
Price:	£2325

Signature cartridge

Body:	RF-GC Technic
Total mass:	12 grams
Stylus:	TRIGON PII, tip radius 5/40µm
Cantilever:	Boron
Compliance:	15/15 µm/N
Recommended tracking:	2.2 g
Channel separation:	<35 dB
Output voltage:	0.6 mV (at 5cm/sec peak)
Recommended break-in time:	>50 hours
Price:	£1685

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 Fax: +44 (0) 1483 301412
 Email: info@audioreference.co.uk
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Lavardin IS Integrated Amplifier

by Pete Christie

The Nightingale is an interesting bird. Seeing one in this country is difficult. A glimpse of this plain-looking creature is about all one can expect. It lurks about in dense cover, occasionally revealing itself for the briefest moment before disappearing back into the undergrowth. Its plumage is a fairly uniform grey-brown, and to be honest, it looks a bit like a more boring member of the Thrush family. There is really very little about its physical appearance that gives the slightest indication as to the sound it makes. However, if one still, warm, May evening you are fortunate to hear one, the sheer scale, power and beauty of its song will impress itself into your memory, and it will remain there for the rest of your life!

The Lavardin IS amplifier is made in France. It is not large - neither in physical proportion, or in rated power. It is black, and boasts as minimalist a design as you could possibly expect. Two knobs, a logo, four silver screw-heads (one in each corner) and a red light - that's it! The left-hand knob is a four-way selector switch, and the right-hand knob serves as the volume control. The centrally placed red light is, well, a red power lamp. The rear panel is not exactly over-crowded either. Five pairs of under-stated, though obviously high quality, gold plated phono sockets, a pair of 4mm speaker outlets, an IEC mains inlet and a power switch. Oh, and a label telling you what it is and who made it and so on.

As I said, there are four positions on the selector switch - imaginatively labelled 1, 2, 3 and 4. Positions 1 - 3 are normal line-level inputs, and position 4 serves as a recording circuit with the corresponding input/output phono



sockets suitably indicated on the rear panel. There is no "Tape Monitor" switch - if you want playback, you just go to number 4 on the selector knob. Simple or what? Oh, and by the way, there's no remote control facility either.

The physical dimensions are fairly standard, the finish is good without being overly classy - for instance, its top panel tends to "ring" if it is tapped. There are only three feet underneath, and this surprised me a bit when I made the mistake of leaning on one corner. I won't do that again in a hurry!

The power output is also fairly diminutive, rated at 30 Watts per channel into 8 Ohms, and there is

no facility to "bolt-on" an additional power amplifier. So, on the face of it, I'm looking at a slightly larger amp than, say, a Rotel RA931, with less facilities (and feet!). Why then will the Lavardin IS set you back £1500 (yes, fifteen hundred quid!)? That's eight times as expensive as the little Rotel!

Unfortunately, the information I was supplied with was even more minimal than the amplifier itself - i.e. nothing except the box, and an interesting looking 1m long wooden pencil case containing a Lavardin interconnect lead. Oh, and a French type mains lead that they prefer you to use (after fitting a 13 amp plug). Not even a manual or specification sheet, so I had to resort to skating the world-wide interweb thing to see what makes this beastly tick.

That was fun! I managed to trawl up a couple of reviews from around Europe, which mentioned something, called "low-memory distortion circuits" and "temperature stabilisation" which, as you can imagine, impressed me greatly! The reviews went on to enthuse greatly about the sound quality, and in one example, a Swedish reviewer went as far as to state "This (amplifier) is totally nuts!" or as he put it: "Rena Snurren!" Whether the Lavardin IS amp is "rena snurren" or not, would no doubt become apparent upon audition.

I took it home and hitched it up to my Helios 2 CD Player through Chord Chameleon interconnects, and bolted my faithful Rogers LS3/5a's to the business end using van den ►

▶ Hul CS122 speaker cable. I turned it all on and made myself a cup of tea while I let it warm up for half an hour or so.

Having been listening extensively to the latest Paul Simon album *You're The One* (Warner Brothers 9362-47844-2) on various systems, I decided to see how the Lavardin would deal with it. The introductory bars of track one, 'That's Where I Belong' were more than enough to persuade me that this was definitely not a Rotel RA93! The Wurlitzer piano drone and bamboo flute introduction seemed to fill the entire room, and when the rhythm track rolled in, it did just that. When the effortless vocal arrived, it was so real, I felt that I could see it! The complete album was stunning, and the largely acoustic arrangements were allowed to flow effortlessly through the system and into the room.

The soundstage was huge, and things were sounding more and more real until I suddenly noticed something rather important. On one of the most interesting tracks, "Pigs, Sheep & Wolves", I could hear all the words - clearly. That might seem a slightly obvious comment, but on all other systems that I had played this particular song through, I had always felt I was straining to pick up the words. Which is a shame, as the lyrical content of the song is Paul Simon at his dry, humorous best!

Most effectively, track 11, "Quiet", probably the most subtle song on the album proved the most involving. The introduction creeps in like the tide, and the superb orchestration and haunting vocal melody is quite spellbinding. It was good before, but through the Lavardin, it all became totally natural.

Staying with accomplished songwriters, I moved on to the 1997 James Taylor album *Hourglass*

(Columbia 487748-2), and track 4, 'Gaia'. Now, these boys are both experts in their fields, Paul Simon, in my opinion, has grown by amalgamating world music influences, and has the skill to craft rhythm and lyric into a distinct and recognisable sound. James Taylor on the other hand



has simply expanded what he had to begin with. A distinctive vocal ease coupled with excellent arrangements. This song shows all the facets of the latter. The soundstage with the Lavardin was quite simply enormous. Silky slick backing vocals with almost too much reverb, mysterious synthesiser chords and background bells all paint a perfect sonic picture for the acoustic guitar and typical smooth delivery of the lyrics. Just when it all seems to be just a bit too smooth (4 min 10 sec) he wakes everything up with a quite enormous drum passage which, to be quite truthful, was just about enough to wake the dead. Definitely a bit of "rena snurren" going on here!



So to get a bit more, I replaced the Chord Chameleon with the interconnect made by Lavardin. Upon opening the "pencil-case", I was presented with a good-looking, fairly lightly constructed pair of interconnects. The two cables were physically identical, and direction and channel identification were effected by hand-painted "Left", "Right", "Amp" and "Source" indicators. I quite liked this touch - hand-made cables by the people who make the electronics have always been well worth an audition.

Immediately, I was aware of a perceptible increase in both the bass weight, and the width of the soundstage, and perhaps a slight overall relaxation of the music delivery. The clarity of the sound was as great, but I felt that a little urgency was lost - but I could be accused of being slightly "picky".

Returning to the 'Gaia' by James Taylor, the drum passage was now "wall to wall", and the inherent power was awesome. There was an impression that this amplifier was going to be able to handle anything with consummate ease. I can't remember my LS3/5a's ever sounding as good - a 15 Ohm load wasn't bothering the Lavardin in the slightest!

According to the interweb stuff, several studios use the Lavardin IS as a monitor amplifier in classical music recordings. I can see why. So I selected a couple of my favourite "difficult" recordings to see how well the amplifier would sort them out.

I decided (as I usually do) to confuse the system with some serious congestion, and I played one of my "biggest" recordings - Verdi's *Requiem*, with John

Eliot Gardiner conducting the Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique, with the Monteverdi Choir (Philips 442.142.2) It certainly ▶

► fits the “big recording” requirement. Just for the record, the total complement of musicians and singers totals 22 Sopranos, 15 Altos, 16 Tenors, 16 Basses, and an orchestra of 84. That’s a total of 153 souls, playing and singing their socks off with the necessary gusto. There is no way on God’s earth that any thirty watts per channel amp could accurately reproduce this piece - or is there? Track 2, *Dies Irae*, came through with more power, control, realism, and sheer wallop than it had any right to!

Again and again, the more I threw at this little French gem, the more it proved its class. I was beginning to understand that at £1500, perhaps it was a bit of a bargain. It was



without a doubt the finest single box amplifier that I had ever had the privilege to listen to.

The detail was stunning, - on everything! From simple arrangements for a few instruments (Debussy *Cello Sonata*, J.S. Bach *Partita* played on solo flute, Chopin *Sonata No. 3*), right up to massive orchestral pieces (e.g. the finale of Mahler’s *2nd Symphony*), the overall effect was enthralling. In fact, it was almost frightening! Every instrument was identifiable. The soundstage was presented in front of me as clearly as if the musicians were in the same room.

With all styles of recorded music, both electronic and acoustic, it became increasingly difficult to turn the system off and go to bed! There was always something else in the CD collection to explore. In fact, “explore”

would be an excellent term to use. It was difficult to just listen to the music, the detail, contrast and natural colours of the orchestra were far too interesting to be ignored.

Going back to a favourite piece - Lyle Lovett and the album *Joshua Judges Ruth* (MCAD-10475), and the track ‘She’s already made up her mind’. No Problem! The production of this album, especially this particular song, can totally confuse many lesser systems. Not today! The higher frequencies, cymbals, piano etc. came through with total clarity and without the slightest edginess. When I had finished playing the track, my wife commented that for the first time, she had heard all the lyrics clearly. “Eureka!” -

It wasn’t my imagination then! The Lavardin does achieve something that no other piece of equipment has ever done in my house.

I have listened to an awful lot of hi-fi in the last 17 years. I have had the pleasure to review a lot of hi-fi in the last three or four years. This is the first time I have ever been so completely and utterly impressed with any single piece of equipment - ever. I like minimal. I don’t care that it doesn’t have a remote control thingy. As far as I am concerned, lack of facilities equals lack of problems, and I can live with that. Four inputs is one more than I need, so that’s no big deal. If you think I am going to readily give this amp back to the editor, you are making a big mistake. You want it Mr. Gregory - you’re going to have to fight me for it!

It’s just like I said at the start - the Lavardin IS integrated amplifier is an interesting bird. Seeing one in this country is difficult. A glimpse of this

plain-looking creature is about all one can expect. It lurks about in dense cover in some of the better hi-fi emporiums, occasionally revealing itself for the briefest moment before disappearing back into the undergrowth. Its plumage is a fairly uniform black, and to be honest, it looks a bit like a more boring member of the multinational budget amplifier family. There is really very little about its physical appearance that gives the slightest indication as to the sound it makes. However, if one day you are fortunate to hear one, the sheer scale, power and beauty of its performance will impress itself into your memory, and it will remain there for the rest of your life!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs:	4 x 330mV gold plated phono sockets Optional mm input (factory fitted in place of input no.4)
Input Selection:	Sealed Relays
Input Switching Contacts:	Gold, silver and palladium alloy
Nominal Power:	2 x 30 Watts RMS into 8 Ohms
Output Current:	2 x 10 Amps peak
Dimensions (HxWxD):	70x430x300mm
Weight:	6Kg
Price:	£1495

Distributor:

Audiocraft
Tel. (44)(0)1895-253340
Fax. (44)(0)1895-238238
E-mail. kevinwalker@genie.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Lavardin Technologies
Tel. (33)(0)254-853186
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Neat Petite 3

by Chris Thomas

It came as a bit of a surprise to discover that the Neat Petite is approaching its tenth birthday. Any product that has been around for so long in what is an ever-changing hi-fi market these days almost deserves classic status. Designer and musician, Bob Surgeoner has followed the "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" rule. He knows when something is right and has resisted the temptation to make big changes to the Petite's overall design package, so the speaker has remained almost unchanged throughout its production. I say almost unchanged, as there have been two alterations to the tweeter along the way, making the current Petite a Mark 3 version. The most recent of these has been the introduction of a 'radial' version of the EMIT ribbon tweeter found in the Mark 2. The key advantage being that this device can be crossed-over more effectively than its predecessor and this has led directly to a simpler crossover application for the bass/mid unit. Apart from that, the cabinet and its dimensions have not altered, nor has the reflex tuning port at the rear.

The Petite is either small or tiny, depending on your point of view, standing only 30 cm high. The two drivers are the above-mentioned EMIT ribbon tweeter and a 168 mm woofer made by an OEM supplier to Neat's own specification. The cabinet is constructed from MDF and there are twin connections at the rear which Bob emphasises are really there to facilitate bi-amping, as opposed to bi-wiring, which represents a cost-effective upgrade to the system. There is really

little else to say about the Petite from a physical point of view. The cabinet is straightforward with no grille or overhanging lips or rims to interfere with the drivers' voices. It is simple and the thinking is clear. Each component within and without has been chosen solely for their ability to make music. This means that items like the crossover and all of its component parts have been painstakingly designed with that one goal in mind. But, perhaps the most interesting thing about them is that the sole arbiter of their musical abilities has been Bob's ears. No measurements, other than those to examine impedance, were taken



during the Petite's development period. I like this approach and wonder how many times a loudspeaker's potential has been sacrificed to the Great God of the flat frequency response? This fact alone may well, as Bob claims, make Neat unique in the field of commercially produced speakers.

The Petite's need stands and I was

supplied with a pair of Kudos S50s, which are a straightforward single, sand-filled column design upon which the speakers, secured by lentil-sized bits of blu-tac, performed admirably. Though small, these Neats do not take too kindly to corners, and are not overly keen on close proximity to rear walls in my room either. Neat themselves recommend a near rear wall placement, but I am not so sure. Sigh them too close to either and you will be rewarded with an artificial lift in the bass, which some may find desirable but I found produced a reduction in transparency, depth and rhythmic fluidity. I preferred to pull them well out into the room, reminding myself once again that small stand-mounted speakers sometimes need just as much care in siting (and room) as a pair of bigger bandwidth floor standers. They have such potential for musical integration and sound-staging that you are going to need careful experimentation here.

Amplification needs to be carefully selected. At 87db efficiency the Petite requires a healthy dose of power to really get it going, but the quality matters even more as this speaker will tell you what the amplifier is doing with no problem whatsoever. Naim amplifiers are a popular choice among Petite owners and it is easy to hear why. I used a NAC 72, powered by a Hi-cap and a NAP 140 power amplifier and I have to say that they do seem natural partners. I also had very special results with the Marsh A400 power amplifier driven by the Spectral DMC-12 preamplifier

▶ which offered a quite different view of the music to the Naim. But for the purposes of this review I will stick to the Naim/Petite combination, as I doubt anyone, other than me, has ever heard the Spectral/Marsh configuration with them.

For the first few days the bass was disappointingly squashed as if the speaker was producing more than it could actually resolve and this had a dragging effect on the Naim's low frequency dynamics. But, ever so gradually it began to disappear as the days passed and after a week or so it never really bothered me although if you are using an amplifier with serious low-end strength and agility it never quite vanishes completely. Not a big problem and one that could be possibly be alleviated by a different stand perhaps but it should be noted. On the positive side though the actual quality of the bass from a pitch point of view was very good. It goes without saying that with a cabinet of these proportions there is no low bass but there is always the option of adding Neat's Isobarikally-loaded Gravitas sub-woofer.

All the good things that small loudspeakers can offer have been exploited by Neat in the Petite. The simplicity of two drivers in a small box means that top to bottom musical integration goes hand in hand with a conciseness of soundstage that few big speakers can match. With the Petite the music sounds as if it is all coming from the same place. The quality of the tweeter is I feel, critical to its performance. Neat have managed to integrate the EMIT ribbon quite superbly as its lack of harshness or brittleness probably do more to define

the Petite than any other single thing. It has a delicacy and sense of texture that often seems lacking in the more conventional dome-type that one would normally find in a speaker of



this class. It is perhaps slightly softer on leading edges but is still fast and dynamic enough to make the point. It behaves more benignly when under stress too. Rivet cymbals have always been a *bête-noir* for tweeters (as have violins, pianos, alto saxophones, timbales and many others) as both the energy and complexity of what

is actually happening at the cymbal's surface is just too much for most microphones, let alone drive units, to cope with. Strike the cymbal surface and all hell breaks loose. After the initial impact of stick upon metal the cymbal becomes energised and the rivets go wild as a wash of metallic brightness settles over the music. Here is where the Petite is so good. Listen to the drummer riding a rivet cymbal and on most small speakers you hear an unfocussed fizz that sounds more like white noise than part of a drum kit. But, having struck many rivet cymbals in my life and having stood next to many more being unmercifully thrashed by lunatic drummers I can attest that what really sizzles from them is energy. High frequency, metallic, self-sustaining energy with a lot of presence and not the ssssssss-type sound that we are so often presented with. The EMIT tweeter does "white-out" a little but it never grows thin or hard. It has a sweet clarity about it too, and it integrates quite wonderfully with the midband.

There are small speakers that are highly detailed and obviously so. Often described as being analytical, they tend to shred the music into its constituents but have a job stringing together a musically enjoyable experience. What is so often missing is the performance and that sense of communication that a good audio system should have. RG recently said to me "There's nothing worse than having a great system that you can't listen to", and to me this means a system that has all the ingredients but never achieves the whole. Well, the Petites are just the opposite. They always manage to convey that feeling of balance and intimacy on a musical level and they manage it with very little stress. They are ▶



▶ not the fastest small speaker I have heard or the most overtly dynamic but nor are they impolite enough to snatch at notes or over emphasize leading edges to the detriment of the tone or sustain. Rhythmically they are more relaxed than you might expect from a speaker of this size and this is one of the reasons why the Naim amplifiers work so well with them as their sense of drive and



dynamics really grab hold of the speaker and pushes it along at a fair old pace.

Rachelle Ferrells new album *Individuality (Can I be Me?)* on Capitol 984980-20 shows what the Petite can do. The things I really like about this album are the way that she makes every song her own with her feel for the lyric and the brilliant arrangement and production that allows her so much room for expression within the songs. It helps that she has a wonderful voice, sings in tune (something of a rarity these days) and a totally musical sense of phrasing. But I have

heard such talent fall into the hands of big-name producers who seem more intent on leaving their mark on the music rather than allowing the artists qualities to shine. 'Sista', the second track on the album, features George Duke on keyboard bass underpinning a sparsely arranged backing track on which Rachelle sits her vocal. There's no mistaking this for a bass guitar as it slides around some wicked lines, but it is the relationship and contrast between

bass and voice that is so compelling. The Petites had Rachelle standing well into the room singing in my ear while George and the drummer were anchored behind locked tightly in a rhythmic embrace that draws you into the song while piano chords dropped in now and again light the song harmonically from within. Making an album is about pulling all the elements together to create and sustain an atmosphere and a "feel" and I believe that the Neats manage to convey that emotional connection extremely well and over a large range of types and styles.

They often seemed so sweet that I wondered if they were not sugar-coating the music to some extent. Tonally they can seem quite warm at times and I admit that they do not have that startling sense of clarity or etched detail that some people crave. I like that sort of thing too, but it can make for a relentless experience in a small speaker. But, then again, I have seldom heard a speaker at this price that performed so consistently, or one that was so easy and undemanding to sit in front

of for hours at a time. And this is perhaps their strongest point. They do just about everything well and I really cannot imagine many people disliking them. But they do require high quality source, amplification and cabling to really give their best. There may also be scope for improvements in the stands and I think that your Neat dealer will have had more experience of this aspect of their performance than I have. In fact the biggest problem that I had with the Petite was in getting the review done at all. Because every time I sat down, notepad in hand, to crystalise my thoughts about them I would find myself, a couple of hours and several musical interludes later, just kicking back, enjoying the music so much that my pad remained blank. And I guess that this is just about as big a compliment as I can pay them.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	2-way Bass Loading Rear Reflex Port
Tweeter:	EMIT ribbon
Woofer:	168mm treated paper
Sensitivity:	87db (2.83V/1M)
Recommended Amplifier Power:	25 – 150 watts
Impedance:	8 ohms
Dimensions (HxWxD):	30x20x18 cm
Finishes:	Cherry, Natural Ash, Rose Ash, Black Ash – Other veneers to order
Price:	£795

Neat Acoustics

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website <http://www.neat.co.uk>

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Kuzma Stabi S and Stogi S

by Jimmy Hughes

Entry-Level products are usually a compromise. Can it be otherwise? A company starts by producing the best product it knows how, and to hell with the price. With the item in question established as a reference, attempts are then made to cheapen and simplify the design to make it more affordable.

But is it possible to simplify and scale back a well-designed product, and still have it work effectively? Answers on a postcard please... Certainly, if a product has many 'extras' and added refinements to gild the lily, it might be possible to lose a few baubles and bring down the price without compromising performance.

The danger, for those of us forced by limited funds to choose the less expensive alternative, is that such economies may result in a product that looks, feels, (and probably sounds) like second-best. And who wants that? There's a difference between a product that's been compromised to make it cheaper, and one that's skilfully designed from the outset with economy in mind.

And Kuzma? I seriously believe Kuzma are temperamentally and biologically unable to make the kind of compromised Entry Level product outlined above. Rather than take one of their more lavish designs as a starting point, and then go on to cheapen it, they take a clean sheet of

paper to try and create a fully-fledged product in its own right - not a scaled-down version of something else.

The Stabi S turntable is a perfect example of this. It bears very little physical resemblance to Kuzma's more expensive Stabi and Stabi Reference turntables, nor does it follow similar design principles. Instead, form follows function, creating a product of striking elegance and simplicity. As a consequence, simplicity (and economy) become virtues rather than limitations.

Compared to the Stabi, the Stabi S is not so much inferior as different. Instead of having the Stabi's suspended sub-chassis and heavy plinth, the Stabi



S features a heavy cross-shaped tubular brass chassis that sits on rubber O rings for decoupling purposes. Immediately there are cost savings; no plinth, no lid, not to mention much reduced assembly time.

Rather than attempting to simplify the Stabi's sprung suspension system, the Stabi S dispenses with it altogether. The result is a simple yet surprisingly solid, inert, structure that offers excellent rigid support for arm and turntable. Both designs employ the same turntable platter, but the Stabi S

has a smaller diameter main bearing, and a brass record weight rather than a screw-down clamp.

These differences are reflected in the sound. The Stabi, with its heavy wooden plinth and suspended sub-chassis, gives a full, rich, warm, and weighty, rather vibrant, sound, with strong powerful bass. By comparison, the Stabi S sounds leaner and drier, with a brighter more crystalline kind of sonic presentation. It's perhaps a bit more CD like: Taut and lucid, rather than relaxed and warm.

The Stabi S was launched some years back, and at the time Kuzma promised a uni-pivot arm would soon follow to match - the original Stogi arm being a shade expensive for those on a tight budget. The new arm is superbly finished and looks reassuringly expensive with its black and brass solid metal construction. It definitely doesn't look like an Entry Level model! Nor does it sound like one...

Once again, by comparison to the more expensive Stogi, it's not so much a question of better or worse, as different. The control of unwanted torsional motion has clearly been uppermost in the designers' mind, with high stability as the main goal. To this end, the uni-pivot is placed high in the roof of the arm's central turret, while the main counterweights are low-slung.

This keeps the centre of gravity low, minimising the destabilising effects of lateral force. Finally, there's a dashpot filled with viscous fluid to damp torsional motion. Fluid damping is common with arms of this type, and used judiciously it greatly increases ►

▶ stability, giving greater clarity and firmness. However, too much damping can rob the sound of life.

Interestingly, the last couple of arms to come my way (the Graham and VPI's JMW Memorial) have both been uni-pivots. But in each case the amount of damping has been fairly minimal - that's to say, fluid which isn't overly-viscous and a damping trough that offers limited contact with the moving section to be damped. The Kuzma design is different; it's clearly intended to provide heavy damping.

The fluid Kuzma supply is quite viscous, while the dashpot is unusually large at about 5cm in diameter. The underside of the arm structure (the bit that sits in the fluid bath) is 4cm in diameter with a flat base. This ensures that spurious side-to-side movement is checked, while still allowing the arm to freely rotate around the pivot in order to follow the groove.

Is heavy damping a good thing? Actually, a lot depends on your choice of cartridge, and to a lesser degree on personal taste. Some pickups seem to benefit enormously from being damped; others respond less positively. You just have to suck it and see, increasing or lowering damping till things sound right.

Potentially, then, the Kuzma arm allows a higher degree of damping than most of its rivals. However, there's nothing that says you have to fill the

fluid trough to the brim. Nor do you necessarily have to stick with the thick silicone fluid Kuzma supply. Those with the dedication and patience can experiment with degrees of damping to find the optimum value.

Increased damping levels undoubtedly improve the stability of the arm, but over-doing it may lead to a somewhat thick dull sound. Too little damping makes it possible for the arm to oscillate on its uni-pivot (torsional motion), reducing stability and

precision. Instead of images being locked firmly in place in the stereo soundstage, a slight vagueness becomes evident.

I began my listening with a cartridge that loves damping; the London Jubilee. This is a refined variant of the famous Decca/London series of cartridges that began life back in the '50s. Having no cantilever (the sensing coils are close to the stylus tip), the London Jubilee is very sensitive to shocks and spurious lateral movement. It's also a very microphonic pickup that produces fairly high needle-talk.

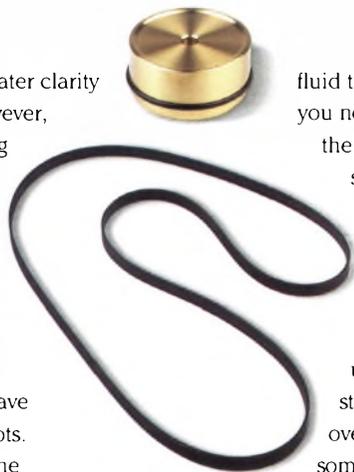
All Decca/London cartridges are notoriously difficult to please. So it speaks volumes for the Kuzma when I say it handled the Jubilee with aplomb. Detail was incredible; the 'positive scanning' stylus tip offers the sort of speed and transient attack most pickups can only dream about. Rhythmically, the presentation was remarkable for its drive, momentum, and subtle shades of emphasis.

Like other London pickups, the Jubilee proved rather prone to picking-up induced hum. The Stabi S employs the ubiquitous Phillips 24 pole synchronous AC motor, which produces reasonably high stray hum fields. It's no problem for most pickups, but the London is different. And while the alloy platter provides some shielding, it doesn't totally screen the pickup from noise.

With most turntables that use this motor, you've got to accept things as they stand. However, with the Stabi S, the motor is fitted into its own separate brass housing that's free-standing and thus independent of the turntable itself. So it's possible to choose where it's placed (within reason) around the circumference of the centre bearing - allowing you to place it for minimum hum pickup.

One useful side benefit of the Stabi S, and its' unusual chassis, is the option to opt for a version that accepts two tonearms, the Stabi SD. My review sample came supplied with the Stogi S uni-pivot and a standard Stogi for comparison purposes. Of course the latter arm is more expensive, so it should sound better. However, for much of the time I felt the dearer arm wasn't so much better as different.

The cheaper arm has that wonderfully airy, smooth, spacious



▶ presentation that's the hallmark of good uni-pivot designs. There's a sense of the music floating on air, such is the relaxed ease of its sonic presentation. By comparison, the Stogi wasn't quite so effortlessly spacious or refined.

The sound wasn't quite as smooth.

It's almost as though arms with conventional bearings suffer from a tiny amount of bearing 'chatter' that uni-pivots eliminate. Alternatively, perhaps the fluid helps damp some resonance from the tube and counterweight system. Certainly, damping helps hold the cartridge body 'still' so far as spurious movements are concerned, allowing the stylus to do its job without loss of information.

Be that as it may, there were other times when I felt the Stogi sounded more lucid and focussed than its uni-pivot stablemate. One LP that highlighted key differences between the two arms was that old hi-fi demonstration standby *Computer World* by Kraftwerk. The Stogi's presentation seemed more alive and three dimensional, putting space, width, and depth around synthesiser lines.

Given the sterile contrived nature of this recording, it's one of life's little mysteries that *Computer World* highlights differences in depth layering and rhythmic cohesion so superbly. Reproduced badly, it can overwhelm you with a welter of fast leading edges that fail to cohere into meaningful rhythmic patterns. But reproduced well, there are all sorts of subtle rhythmic games being played. And good equipment highlights this.

By the time I started making arm comparisons, I'd dispensed with the London Jubilee and was using the fabulous Koetsu Urushi Black. Initially I set the playing weight to about 2g, but on reflection this seemed a shade too

high. So, to help redress the differences in tonal balance, I tried lowering the playing weight slightly.

This had the effect of altering the relationship between bass/treble extremes, creating a slightly leaner brighter sound, and an increase in liveliness. Taking a little damping fluid out of the dashpot livened up the sound still further, without noticeably compromising the stability and solidity of the presentation.

By the end, the two arms were sounding far closer sonically - though something of the original difference remained. On balance I think the Stogi is a bit better - it seems to offer increased separation and sounds slightly more lucid and articulate. But there's a smoothness and control with the cheaper arm that's very beguiling. Can't decide? You'll just have to buy both!

Quite a few high-end turntables feature the 'open plan' style of construction adopted by the Stabi S. In many respects it's a good way to build a turntable; eliminating resonances caused by wooden plinths and suchlike. But I must say I miss not having a lid! Apart from keeping dust at bay, it affords protection against inquisitive little paws - whether human or animal.

Using the superb Benz Glider cartridge, with its open-body construction, wickedly-long exposed stylus, and lack of stylus guard, I was a little concerned the tip might

accidentally get damaged. And I say this as someone without children or pets to worry about. But such caveats could be levelled at quite a few turntables, some of much higher cost than this one. So my remarks should be taken in context.

Other than that - a superb turntable/arm combination,

one that gives a real taste of high-end analogue at an agreeable price. Naturally, you might still prefer to go for one of Kuzma's more expensive designs. And, given extra funds, why not? But if you do settle for their 'Entry Level' model, rest assured you won't be buying second best. No way. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Stabi S

Type:	Belt Drive Turntable
Speed change:	Manual
Lid:	No

Stogi S

Type:	Damped Uni-pivot
Effective Length:	229mm
Effective Mass:	11g
Mounting:	Unique
	Linn adaptor available

Price:	Stabi S + Stogi S	£1250
	Stabi SD + (1) Stogi S	£1650

Distributor:

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

by Dave Davies

Sometimes, just sometimes, I get a hankering to regain some of the square metre or so of floor space that's lost to my two racks of hardware. The problem is that with few exceptions (step forward Samuel Johnson and Morgan Audio), smaller systems just don't cut the mustard, lacking in resolution and weight when compared to my bulky and admittedly more expensive equipment, and simply not delivering a convincing musical performance. Thankfully, as the aforementioned companies have proved, there are a few oases in the small systems desert.

Enter a new contender. The Myryad Cameo system's technology is derived from the highly regarded 'M' Series, and if I'm to believe the marketing blurb it should represent 'an unrivalled combination of performance, engineering, aesthetics and value for money'. Now I'm in marketing so I've long ago developed a healthy scepticism of all marketing copy but let's see how the Cameo system stacks up against these claims. To tackle the penultimate point first, they've definitely got it right. Although the components are full-width, they're remarkably easy on the eye. Their already slim vertical profile is made slimmer still with a neat elliptical cut out across the base of each component. Finished in silver/ grey brushed aluminium with simple, well laid-out black buttons, a neat indented volume control, and blue LED's (red in standby), the complete system, amp, CD and tuner, occupies little more space than my Copland

CD Player. Objective achieved Myryad. The construction quality seems good too, with a solid feel to the controls and well mounted gold-plated sockets and speaker binding posts to the rear, and a generally chunky if not quite 'hewn from the solid metal' feel to each component.

The system is fully remote controllable, with all three

components powering up from standby and, a smart move this, unselected components such as the CD if you're listening to the tuner, reverting to standby after 10 minutes. If powered down with a disc in the drawer, the CD if selected from standby will power up the amp and play immediately using the last selected volume level. An alarm timing option can power up the system to play after a pre-selected period of time. This is all great fun after the comparatively pre-historic remote options on my usual gear. My only quibble here is with the less than ergonomically laid out system remote. Many was the time I tried to operate it the wrong way around since despite the Myryad logo



proudly emblazoned at the base of the fascia, it just felt right that way around. Operation wasn't helped either by the fact that all the (many) remote buttons are the same size with no prioritisation of key functions like volume, pause and play. Although the remote worked faultlessly and at greater range than my usual system, a few tweaks to the handset design would make it even easier to operate.

So, that's aesthetics and engineering dealt with, but what about performance? Hooking up the system with decent quality interconnects and speaker cable to a pair of the tiny but highly capable ALR Jordans it was immediately clear that this was another 'oasis' contender. Rather unfairly I'd selected *Ginger Baker and the DJQ20* (Atlantic 7567-83168-2) as my opening choice. It's a storming 'direct to stereo' set powered by Bakers energetic work.

Involving much bass drum abuse, this is accompanied by some equally hefty horns including some great baritone sax work from James Carter. It's a great credit to the Myryad system (and to the diminutive Jordans) that much of the character of this set was revealed intact, from the spacious soundstage, to the driving force of Baker's percussion and the fruity, breathy tones of Carter's sax.

Incidentally, although the Myryad demonstrated its pedigree straight away it really demands proper care and attention in set up and siting. Lifestyle product it may be but you can't just plonk it down on any



▶ surface and expect to get the very best from it. Sure it worked OK when sat on a chunky antique table in my living room, but only really came on song when positioned on some decent racks and a Seismic sink platform. Experimentation with and careful choice of cables too (see below) will also pay dividends. Treat it like the serious hi-fi gear it is and you'll be properly rewarded.

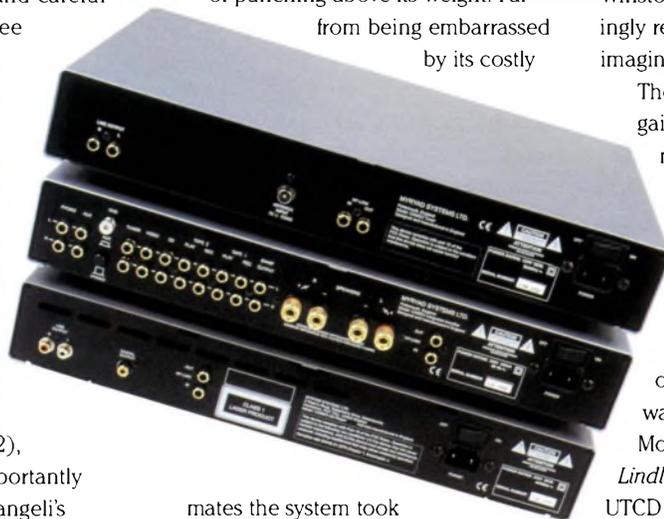
Moving to something a little more genteel, the EMI Great Recordings of the Century reissue of Michelangelo's *Ravel Piano Concerto in G* (EMI 7243 5 67236 2), the piano tones and importantly the subtleties of Michelangelo's playing were well captured.

Radio too came across well. Connected to a roof-mounted antenna and with due allowance for the gawd awful compression on so many stations, the tuner offered near silent backgrounds, convincing speech reproduction (the Archers have rarely sounded so real – if that's the right word), and plenty of life in a wide selection of music. With RDS, auto search and up to 29 channel pre-sets, the tuner proved very easy to use.

This was all splendid but somehow I felt the Myryad had more to deliver than the neat and petite Jordans were able to cope with. So taking a step somewhat above the likely accompanying price bracket of the Myryad and using the only other kit I had available at the time of the review, I substituted the cables with the newly revised Nordost Red Dawn and hooked it up to the brand new Ruark CL20's. Yes I know that £1,500 speakers and not dissimilarly priced cables aren't obvious partners for a £1,500 lifestyle system but if anything can show what it's capable of and give

a clue to how it might perform with slightly more comparably costed partners this was it.

Popping Mr Baker back in the CD drawer I was immediately convinced that the Myryad was a system capable of punching above its weight. Far from being embarrassed by its costly



mates the system took to them as though nature intended them to be natural partners: the slam of Bakers drumming, the decay of each hard struck bass note was much more lifelike and the whole set powered ahead with great drive and attack. Sure it didn't have the absolute weight and definition of my much more expensive (and much, much bigger) set-up (Copland 289, Michell Orca and 2 x stereo Alectos), but it did a creditable job.

The staging was also a little less deep but was very wide, throwing solid images well ahead of the speaker plane. The bass although it was less weighty than my reference system was well extended, tight and if anything had more definition.

Moving to another favourite recording, Ian Bellamy's *Pepper Street Interludes* which is centered around a series of duets for sax and button accordion. (I know, I know, but once you get over the initial surprise, it's a great CD that digs deep into familiar and not so familiar tunes in a way that is both fresh and strangely evocative). The Myryad delivered the goods with

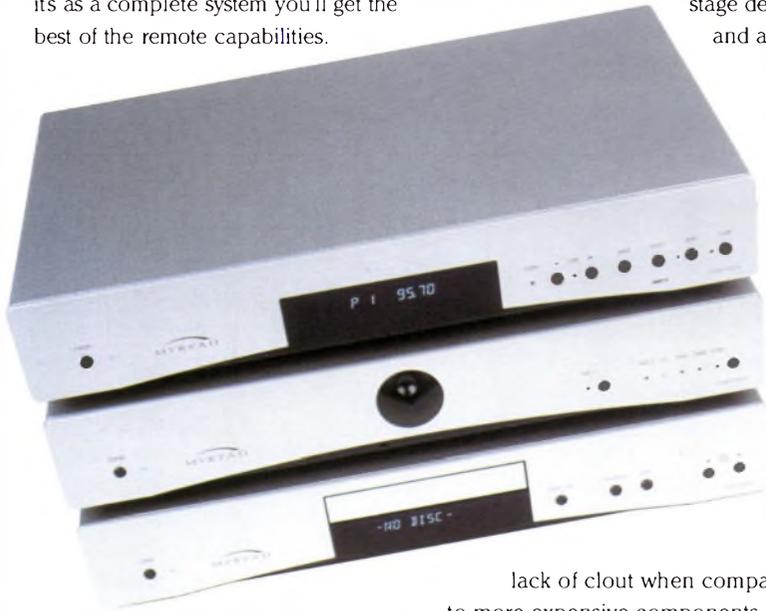
aplomb. In some respects, maybe because the Myryad was untroubled by attempting to reproduce every piece of accordion 'buttonwork', it allowed me to focus better on the music making than my usual system. Norma Winstone's vocals were also convincingly reproduced adding height to the imaging qualities of the Myryad.

The Ravel *Piano Concerto* also gained greatly in realism with much more weight and scale to the orchestra and more sense of the sheer beauty of Michelangelo's playing, the contrast between the lyricism of the Adagio Assai and frenetic jazz influenced passages of the opening Allegramente was much more apparent.

Moving to raunchier stuff, *David Lindley and El-Rayo X Live* (Ulftone UTCD 015), benefited from the tight bass performance driving nicely along and contributing to the essential 'you are there' feel. Strangely it was this less than perfect recording that gave the first hint that the Myryad would be happier with more like priced kit. It did a great job but a little more resolution and punch is required to get the best from this session. At times the bass despite its overall tightness took on a slightly hollow sound, and the vocals could have been more prominent. These criticisms are more a reflection of the greater resolving power of the speakers and cables than of the Myryad. I'm certain that carefully matched with more comparably priced components – I'd look elsewhere in the Ruark and Nordost lines for starters – the system would perform at its optimum. The tuner stepped up in performance much in line with the CD player demonstrating just how well matched this system is.

I briefly tried the amplifier as part of a two channel AV system, hooked up to my Ruark Paladins and fed with a Pioneer 626 DVD player to my Sony widescreen TV. It did a fine job,

▶ reproducing speech crisply and clearly, convincingly conveying subtle effects and tackling the more outrageous Hollywood demands, Men in Black for starters, with ease. The tuner was a little less happy out of context seeming a little low in output compared to my usual tuner. However I think the strength of these components is as a system. Not only do they visually match but they're perfect sonic partners, and it's as a complete system you'll get the best of the remote capabilities.



It was only on re-connecting the system and re-reading the manual that I noticed the cutely concealed 3.5mm headphone socket sitting within the black cut-out section of the front panel: what a neat solution. Headphone sockets can mar an otherwise cleanly designed fascia and I've never appreciated the inconvenience of rear panel versions. This is so neat that as I proved, it's not noticeable 'til you look for it. All this would count for nothing if it didn't work well. Thankfully it's excellent, automatically muting the speakers it drove my Grado '60's with ease delivering oodles of clean, dynamic sound.

So, how would I summarise the Myriad's performance: Good ++. It certainly exceeds expectations with particular strengths in dynamics, in its

ability to throw a wide, open soundstage, and in taut, detailed bass. At its pricepoint it demonstrates good if not startling resolution. Most importantly it is able to convey the essence, the emotion of a musical performance and that's more important than all the preceding points. The fact that it sports an outstandingly good headphone output is another plus point. Minor weak points are slightly foreshortened stage depth, and a mild

lack of clout when compared to more expensive components. The latter point I suspect would be ameliorated with the addition of another power amp. It showed absolutely no favouritism giving equally good results in jazz, classical, rock, whatever I threw at it. And the tuner was well matched in its sonic capabilities to both the CD player and the amp. Note also although I was unable to try it as part of this review, the amp comes equipped with a mm phono stage, adding to the systems flexibility.

So, that's high scores in aesthetics, engineering and performance but what about value for money? No argument, an excellent and well-deserved rating applies. Glancing again at the marketing copy I see I've missed one word: 'unrivalled'. Sorry guys, you can't have everything, contenders include the little Morgan Audio Deva system

(one I'd definitely audition against the Myriad), Arcam and Cyrus (which just goes to show that this is very definitely real hi-fi despite its pretty face) all of which will offer a different balance of strengths and weaknesses. The Myriad though can stand proud. I have absolutely no doubt that it's earned its place in the oasis! ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Amplifier

Continuous rated power, 8ohm (<0.1% THD):

50W

Inputs: Tape 1, Tape 2, CD, Video, Tuner, Phono

Signal/ noise ratio: 102dB

Input sensitivity: 370mV

Frequency response (20Hz - 20kHz) ±0.3dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 436 x 78 x 316mm

Weight: 6.7kg

Tuner

Usable sensitivity: (IHF, mono) 1.5µV

Signal/noise ratio: 74dB (stereo)

THD (1kHz): 0.2% (stereo)

Frequency response (20Hz - 15kHz): ±0.5dB

Stereo separation (1kHz): 45dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 436 x 78 x 300mm

Weight: 4.7kg

CD Player

DAC: 24-bit, 96kHz delta-sigma

Frequency response (20Hz - 20Hz): ± 0.5dB

Signal/noise ratio (A-weighted): 105dB

Output level at 0dB: 2.5Vrms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 436 x 78 x 286mm

Weight: 5.3kg

Prices

System price: £1,499.95

Individual component prices:

Amp - £529.95

Tuner - £489.95

CD - £579.95

Myriad Systems Ltd

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FLAT - PLASMA SCREEN ON DEMONSTRATION



The Real Deal -

Rega Planet CD Player and Mira Integrated Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

Rega Research have always ploughed their own, distinctly Bauhaus-ian furrow. They have, over the years, produced a string of pared away, back to basics designs that have challenged the accepted wisdom of the day, in the process providing astonishing levels of performance at distinctly real world prices. In fact, Rega more than any other company represent the ethos behind The Real Deal - genuine hi-fi without the frills and fancy price tag.

Their approach is most obvious with the Planar 2 and 3 turntables, and most spectacularly so with the RB300 tonearm. No sooner had SME produced the Series 5 with its one-piece precision cast armtube and four figure price ticket, than Rega joined the party at around a tenth of the price! The rest as they say is history. Of course, the two products are far from identical, the Rega eschewing even VTA adjustment in pursuit of better value (a decision that makes considerable sense in the context of the company's own turntables and cartridges but which has left the rest of the analogue fraternity pulling its hair out) but it's impossible to ignore the outstanding performance on offer at a bargain price. Ever wondered why nobody makes mid-price tonearms any more? Nowadays people either buy a Rega or they spend the wrong side of a thousand pounds.

Take a product like a Planar 2 and its RB250 tonearm and form pretty much is function and simplicity is God.

Along with the mechanical elegance comes a simple, uncluttered sound and the secret of Rega's success - they get the fundamentals right, mechanically and musically. Customers might bitch about the manual speed change, but they just love that accessible and engaging sound. And whilst it might not



be quite so obvious, similar concerns dominated Rega's original electronics, the Planet CD player in particular becoming a minor classic. Take a look at those clamshell castings used for the casework, and the minimalist controls and 'optional' remotes. Each element has to contribute to the product's value and performance. The problem was that with so much more competition the appearance of the electronics was more of a liability. Lacking the clean aesthetics of the Planar turntables their eclectic looks fell into the love 'em or hate 'em category, which is making life hard for yourself. Also, and in common with most other Rega products, they had already enjoyed a long and healthy shelf-life. With the advent of the Planar 25 and the sleek new P3 turntable, they

were clearly living on borrowed time, so it was no surprise to hear the announcement of the new 2000 series electronics, and what we have here are two of the central players, the new Planet and Mira models.

Well, you can't miss the new casework with its far more conventional appearance. What is less obvious is the thought that's gone into it and the reasoning behind it. Sculpted in two planes it's a far more sophisticated looking beast than the old case. It's also bigger. One of the key pressures on the old die-cast casing was its lack of internal space. The new case is both taller and deeper, allowing Rega to introduce circuit changes that were impossible on the previous models.

The other quality which isn't apparent until you pick one up is just how solid the new case is. Each unit has a dedicated, extruded aluminium base, including in the case of the Mira the amplifier's heatsinking. This interlocks with a second extrusion which forms a common lid for all the products. Front and back panels then bolt to the resulting 'sleeve'. This allows much more room and flexibility when it comes to placing sockets on the back, which always seemed a little cramped on the old amps. The Planet uses a revised and simplified version of the original top loading lid, shifted to a central position. It lacks the solid feel of the earlier version (as well as the diagonal CD access pits) but is much simpler to produce, enabling the company to hold the price on the new player to the old level. It's already ▶



▶ been dubbed “the Enterprise” (as well as other, less flattering things) but once you get used to picking the disc up fore and aft it works just as well as the original. The other gripe is to do with the front panel. This is a plastic moulding which looks fine but can’t match the solid feel of the rest of the casework. It was a conscious decision on Rega’s part, necessary to hold the prices on the products, and true to form, they made the cut where it might be seen but wouldn’t be heard. Besides, they reasoned, most people will operate the almost buttonless units from the (new and much improved) Solar remote anyway, and the panel certainly looks the part, so I guess it makes sense. Whether they will get away with that argument on thousand pound products remains to be seen. Oh, and there’s even a finish option, so how’s that for progress.

Internally, the Mira gains the Alpha-Encoder control circuitry which allows digital control of all the switching functions. The nice broad back panel allows plenty of space for input socketry, including pre-out and power-in connections. You also get four line level inputs, a tape loop and of course, a moving-magnet phono stage. Volume control and source switching are both done remotely, the new Solar allowing far finer volume settings than the old handset) while the front panel knob is designed to allow that last little tweak. This means that adjusting volume from zero using the knob can be laborious, but that’s not what it’s meant for. The circuit now

uses high grade Evox film-caps and a common base driver stage based on the Exon power amp. Overall gain is 28dB, improving compatibility with external processors and the like.

The Planet also benefits from upgraded componentry, as well as a separate winding on the transformer for its display, a major source of jitter in many cheap machines. As well as the new lid assembly, it also gets a new 24bit Delta Sigma DAC, manufactured by Wolfson and dubbed IC40 by Rega, and configured again for minimum jitter. The display itself on the new model is a vast improvement on the rather garish old one, and you now get a choice of optical or co-axial digital outputs should you wish to use an external DAC.

These revisions bear the hallmarks of considerable thought and consultation. The new aesthetics are far more mainstream than the old, without risking the loss of Rega’s individuality, and the overall effect is far more classy. But if the external changes are to be voted a success, then the internals have to stand up sonically as well. You’ll be glad to hear that they do, and whilst there’s a very definite shift in the sound, its very much a family thing with the characteristics common to both the Planet and Mira, as well as the Brio which I’ve also played with. So, under the circumstances I’ll concentrate on the Planet, as that’s where they are most obvious

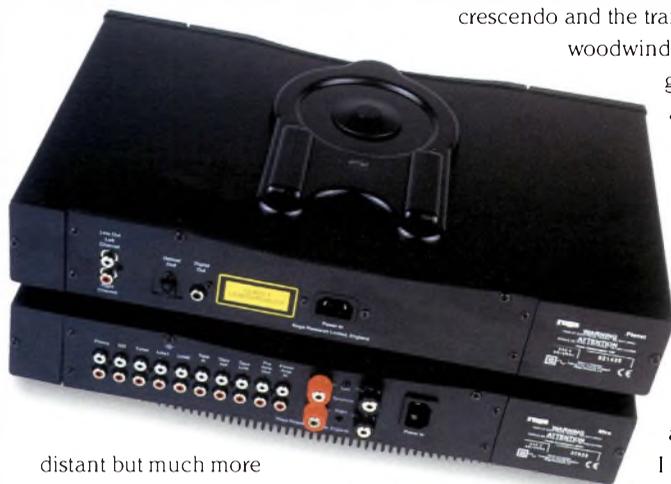
As regular readers will know, I’ve been a long term user of the Jupiter and Io combination, so it forms a ready benchmark for the Planet. What I wasn’t prepared for was the superiority of the cheaper model. The new Planet costs a shade under £500 while the two-box and a Nordost digital interconnect is nearer £1300, but the planet exhibited clear areas of superiority. First generation Rega CD machines were more remarkable for their musical integrity than their detail, and whilst they retained that ability to satisfy long term, it was despite a thickened and relatively



low-resolution sound rather than because of it (despite what some aficionados would have you believe (“It sounds much more like my turntable.” Strange, I thought it was supposed to sound like music!)).

Play something simple and there’s a stark contrast between old and new. Let’s use ‘While I Was loving You’ (Kieran Kane and Kevin Welch *11/12/13 Live In Melbourne*) as an example. The music from the Jupiter and Io is big, bold and robust, the simple rhythms are impressively propulsive and the ‘non vocal’ accompaniment of Kieran Kane is right on the beat. But switch to the new Planet and a whole new vista of information opens up. Kevin Welch’s voice is far more natural, more

► focussed and not as forward. The individual strings of his guitar (and their harmonics) are more easily separated, the notes have more shape while the impromptu accompaniment has much greater texture and subtlety. But it's the overall perspective that's the biggest change. The two-box machine pushes that voice way forward, with everything else kind of trailing in its wake. It's a real larger than life approach to the music, long on drama, lacking a little insight. The new Planet offers a much more restrained and truly scaled vision of events. The sound-stage is slightly more



distant but much more coherent, and whilst it's not apparent from the 'creative' mic-ing on this track, it's also more fully developed. Given the sense of purpose and substance that marks out the older machine I could see some people calling this one swings and roundabouts. However, apply those same characteristics to something a bit more complex and you get a totally different story.

Switch to the Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* (Johanos/Dallas, Analogue Productions APCD 006) and the Planet rapidly establishes its total superiority. Initially it seems quieter than its older brother but that's just a function of its greater dynamic range and discrimination. Right from the opening violin motif and the way it spreads across the strings, the sense

of space and performance are far more apparent. Instrumental tone is more truly shaded, the strands and elements that build each succeeding crescendo in the opening non allegro that much simpler to differentiate and appreciate. Just listen to the tambourine, separated in space and locked in time as all hell breaks loose around it. A nondescript rattle on the Jupiter/Io, not only is it readily identifiable on the Planet, its contribution makes perfect sense. Overall, the result is much greater anticipation as the music scales each height in turn before that last great crescendo and the transition to the woodwinds. The Planet

gets the structure and meaning of the piece spot on, as well as the dramatic tension of the performance. In comparison the Jupiter sounds muddled, crude and clumsy. Like I said earlier, the same applies, albeit to a lesser extent,

to the Mira. Both these products are significantly more transparent, spatially and musically more coherent, and altogether more sophisticated than the ones they replace. They work beautifully together, and will do so in some surprisingly august company (the Living Voice Avatars for instance) without losing their poise. Take the traditional Rega virtues of structural discipline and rhythmic integrity and graft on additional resolution and information and you end up with something which, whilst it might be less obvious, is ultimately far more satisfying. It will also work better on a wider range of music. I love the old Jupiter/Io combination, but as

of now I'm hassling hard for its one-box replacement. In the meantime, the Planet will have to do. Unfamiliar and altogether more chic, musically as well as aesthetically, it's worth getting used to. Come to think of it, that sounds awfully familiar. Who says you can't teach an old guard new tricks?



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Rega Planet

Type:	CD Player
DAC:	24bit 16x o/s Rega IC40
Outputs:	1x Analogue 1x Co-axial Digital 1x Tos-link Optical Digital

Dimensions (WxHxD):	420x95x270mm
Weight:	5.7Kg
Finishes:	Black or Silver
Price:	£498

Rega Mira

Type:	Integrated Amplifier
Inputs:	1x MM Phono 5x Line
Outputs:	1x Power Amp 1x Pre Out 1x Tape Out 1x Speaker Binding Posts

Input Sensitivity (Line):	200mV
Input Impedance:	24Kohms
Output Power:	60 Watts into 8 Ohms 90 Watts into 4 Ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD):	430x85x270mm
Weight:	6.9Kg
Finishes:	Black or Silver
Price:	£498

Rega Solar

Type:	RC5 System Remote
Price:	£25

Manufacturer:

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See page 110 for stockists.

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Final Daruma

- 3II Ball Bearing Isolators

by Simon Groome

It is well known that all hi-fi produces unwanted vibrations, which inherently affect sound quality. Conventional wisdom has therefore dictated that equipment should be mounted on a secure, rigid stand or rack designed to damp or modify these unwanted vibrations. But, this causes the support itself to vibrate and excite the surrounding air, passing vibrations back into the equipment, and so distorting the signal. Bespoke, Japanese, hi-fi builders, Final, have come to the conclusion that it is better to live with the internal vibration and isolate the units from the outside world.

When at the Novotel Show, I visited Final's demo-room I found all their equipment, from CD player to speakers, placed on their Daruma-3II Ball Bearing Isolation units. To demonstrate their effectiveness they had arranged an open CD transport playing an eccentric disc atop three isolators. Sure enough, despite the extreme vibration experienced in the transport, you could feel nothing in the support, the Darumas establishing an effective barrier (in both directions).

The Daruma-3IIs come in a set of three, with each unit consisting of two steel vessels - the base being the one with the product's name on it - and a ball bearing, which sits between, in the cups of the two receptacles. The equipment then sits on the three units. While not new in their basic application - Yamamura Churchill's Millennium Anti-Vibration Supports have been around for a few years -

this is the first chance I have had to experiment with such a concept.

I was advised that my CD player or turntable would benefit most from their use, and so that is where I started. Listening to these devices under either source component was a revelation, but I was not entirely happy with the way my highly sprung turntable wobbled about. Things were more stable with the CD player, but it is still amazing how much unwanted energy can be produced. There was far more detail, with previously unheard sounds on Roger Waters' *Amused To Death*

(Columbia 468761 2) appearing as if from nowhere. While



there was a little more extension at both frequency extremes, it was the bass that really impressed, with the drumming on the soundtrack of *Dances With Wolves* (Epic ZK 66817) exhibiting more detail and extension. When listening to Madonna's foremost

album, *Ray Of Light* (Maverick/Warner Bros. 9362-46847-2), everything sounded more controlled to the extent that when the Darumas were removed, the music seemed to "shout". I also found I was listening at lower levels due to the increase in life and dynamic range, and consequently Kendra Shank's voice on *Afterglow* (Mapleshade 02132) sounded much more natural, the system working well within itself rather than relying on the slight edge that creeps in at the edge of the performance envelope to provide a false sense of "life". The soundstage on Zinman's wonderful performance of

Rachmaninov's *Symphony No. 3* (Telarc CD-80331) was more coherent and much deeper, with a quieter, "blacker", background.

Trying the units under my much modified Audio Innovations 500 amplifier produced gains in similar areas, but to a lesser degree.

While not cheap - £70 per set - I have found that these units, and the concept behind them, do have a dramatic effect, and are far more capable of revealing hidden details, reducing noise, and producing a more three dimensional soundstage than any cones I have yet tried.

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NAIM NAP 500

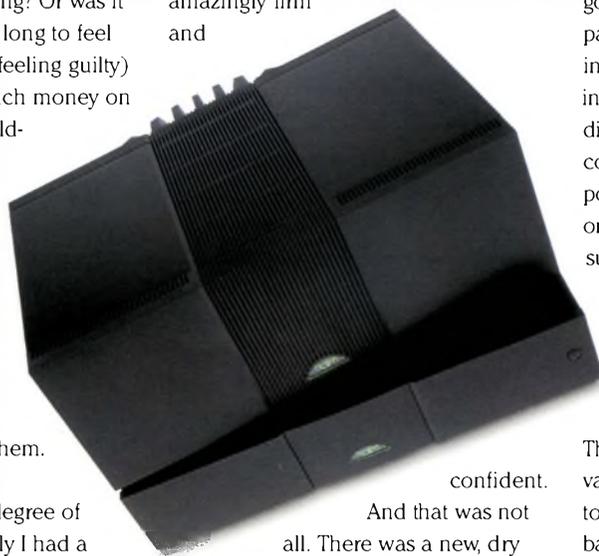
– Further thoughts and running in.

by Chris Thomas

A friend recently told me that his Naim active system took at least 6 months to warm-up, another that it was a year before he felt totally comfortable with his speakers (often described as being one of the best in the world). This complex sonic evolution that so much equipment seems to go through is one of the more intriguing aspects of audio and one that edges us uncomfortably close to the weird world of psycho-acoustics. Did his system really take that long to start performing? Or was it that it had taken him that long to feel comfortable (or stopped feeling guilty) about having spent so much money on it? And what of those world-beaters? A year for them to run in? Could it not have been that it took him that long to come to terms with the fact that the bass was never going to be as tight and focussed as he had been expecting, having spent many thousands buying them. These are questions that I cannot answer with any degree of certainty but quite recently I had a similar thing happen with the NAP 500 that I reviewed a few months back. I had managed to hang on to the amplifier by not answering the door when the courier called and had been listening to it continuously for several months, getting to know it well, whilst its performance had become reassuringly predictable. It had also been very consistent, as is the way with Naim amplifiers, and though it had certainly settled, there was still a sense that it had been improving by slowly gaining an easier and more linear feel to the way it went about its business.

Then one afternoon I arrived home early and thought I'd have a couple of hours uninterrupted listening.

I knew from the first few bars that something big had happened. I was playing the new Fourplay album when the bass hit me. I had never heard anything quite that low come out of the little Revel Gems before, but not only was the increase in extension so surprising but the whole shape and pitch of the note was amazingly firm and



confident. And that was not all. There was a new, dry closeness to the sound, which moved me forward a few rows and immediately made the system seem even more intimate and involving. The Naim NAP 500 is a very clean sounding machine but now the backgrounds were pitch black. It had lost none of its rhythmic agility, in fact it now sounded tauter and more dynamic than ever and it did all this with a sense of ease that can only be described as arrogant. The more I listened I just could not escape the conclusion that something really fundamental had happened and whatever it was, I wanted some more.

What if my brain had undergone a startling chemical change, forever altering my aural perception?

Could it be the NAP 500's lengthy run-in period that was making this remarkable improvement or had the Revel Gems (now 5 months old) suddenly loosened up overnight, their drivers having been given a punishing work-out by the Naim? Was it the Nordost SPM cables perhaps, which are notoriously reluctant to deliver the goods until a few hundred hours have passed and in fact really need running-in on a Nordost machine prior to installation? But come to think of it, the differences I heard were more consistent with having installed a power regenerator like an Accuphase or a PS. I contacted my electricity supplier to check if I was the lucky recipient of a less distorted mains supply. They thought I was a nutter but told me nothing had changed. They also recommended a shop where I could buy a new anorak. The more I thought about it, the more variables seemed to arise, so I decided to forget the whole thing and just sit back and enjoy the music.

What an amplifier the NAP 500 has turned out to be. The sheer grip it exercises in the bass is amazing and I am struggling to think of any amplifier I have heard that is better at actually telling you what the bass player is doing. Nothing seems to faze this thing. Listen to the most complex piece of music you have in your collection and it just shrugs its shoulders and says "Is that the best that you can do, haven't you got anything more challenging than that?" This lack of temperament really elevates it above a pair of 135's. Great amplifiers that they

▶ are they do not have that feeling of confidence under-fire that a NAP 500 has. The way in which Naim amplifiers convey the rhythmic message of music is always mentioned whenever they are reviewed and I think it is true to say that, in this area, they have been ahead of the game for years. The way in which an amplifier responds to, controls and recovers from a transient has an enormous bearing on its perceived speed but the heavier "weight" of sound that the NAP 500 delivers can make it seem slower and more ponderous than the 135's at first. But advance the volume control of that NAC 52 and the mono amps grow harder at much lower levels and in comparison become a little compressive in their treatment of the leading edges of notes. Often, when I hear an amplifier that is touted as

being fast I find that this trait, flavoured with a touch of tonal brightness, gives the illusion of speed. But the amp is ill at ease with itself as the

harmonics that are so much a part of each notes character are all over the place and not speed-integrated at all. With the NAP 500 Naim seem to have got this spot-on as it manages to pull and hold all the musical threads together in a way that I personally have only heard once before. It does this with the power, bandwidth and resolution that you have every right to expect from a £10K amplifier. The more I hear it the more I like it. Oh, and it's still getting better too. ➤



The Power of the Press

by Roy Gregory

No sooner had VPI's Harry Weisfeld read the draft review of his new TNT Hot-Rod turntable, and its winging about the valve caps gracing the tops of the air suspension bulbs than he called to say he'd be putting things right. Yeah, yeah, every time you criticise a product the designer always says that the corrective is already underway. Except that Harry was as good as his word. Within a few days a small package arrived containing four beautifully machined, stainless steel valve covers, complete with internal rubber sealing grommets. Just the



ticket, and far more in keeping with the rest of the engineering on the £5K deck. Despite my earlier suggestion they'll not be finding a home on the Gregory velocoped. They're a bit too massive for bicycular use, and anyway, I use Presta valves. But if I had a vintage motorcycle... What does all this tell us about VPI? Well, they concentrate on the things that effect the sound, the purely cosmetic only catching up when someone bothers

to remind Harry about it. No bad thing for a company with a healthy reputation for providing solid sonic value for money. Ah yes, money. How much for the microscopically machined marvels? They'll come as standard on all future TNT 5s and Hot-Rods, and will be supplied free of charge to all existing owners. Value for money and customer care, that's what I like to see. If you are entitled, then just give VPI or your local distributor a ring, and they'll organise the rest.

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Basic Phono Stages From Trichord and Clearaudio

By Dave Davies

For many years I've clung on to my Michell ISO. It's stuck with me through numerous cartridge changes and one change of deck and has performed faultlessly throughout. And 'though it was rewarded for its good behaviour after its first couple of years operation with a beefed-up Hera power supply I'm the first to admit that the Iso is less than perfect – it casts a slightly rosy hue on all it touches giving a marginally larger than life feel to everything. It's also not the most nimble performer and (particularly with the Hera in tow), can sound slightly leaden in comparison with the better (but much more expensive) contemporary opposition. But it's always sounded 'right' in my system. Its star may have faded a little in the marketplace but despite several 'pretenders' that I've reviewed, I've never been tempted to change.

Never one to give up, Roy has tempted me with not one but two alternatives: The Clearaudio Basic, as its name implies is just that. A basic 'fit n'forget, entry level MM/MC phono stage. It provides a first foot on the ladder of Clearaudio's comprehensive line of phonostages. The Trichord Dino is something else again. Although, in its standard form, it's not hugely more expensive than the Clearaudio, it's a much more flexible beast.

To begin at the beginning, the Clearaudio Basic is a simple, solidly constructed, small and slim black box modestly priced at £255. It provides the entry point to the range of (currently five) Clearaudio phono stages which culminate in the £2K+ Reference.

Finished in brushed black aluminium and sporting well-spaced

firmly mounted phono sockets in a straight row on the rear, with the usual discreet blue Clearaudio LED shining from the front panel. The Basic is supplied with a simple in-line

transformer and it's designed to be permanently powered up.

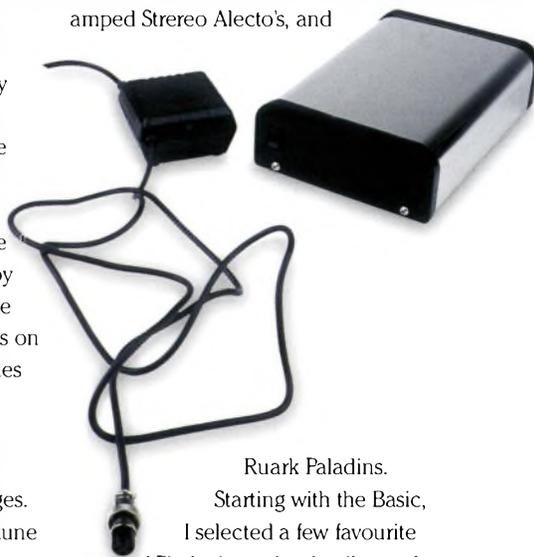
A small button on the base of the unit provides selection between mc and mm operation.

The Basic is obviously solidly constructed and gives no hint of its near 'bargain basement' cost. 'Quality' is the one word I'd use to summarise the look and feel of this product.

The Trichord Dino at a marginally less modest £299, is something of a visual break from the more expensive Delphini phono stage (which I've previously auditioned and not been tempted by). For starters gone are the chrome metal cases to be replaced by a fetching silver plastic casing. But the obvious and key point of difference is on the base of the unit. This sports a series of dip switches that allow simple adjustment of a very comprehensive range of capacitance and resistance settings for both MC and MM cartridges. A real bonus this since you can fine tune settings almost as you listen with no farting around removing covers between every setting. It also means you're immediately ready for any future cartridge changes. At roughly twice the size of the little Clearaudio Basic, it's still fairly compact, taking up roughly the same shelf space as my old Iso. With its plastic casing it doesn't share the same

obvious quality feel of the Basic, but of course that's no measure of what's inside and I have no reason to doubt the quality of Trichord products – look at the rest of my system!

The Dino comes with a standard 'wall wart' transformer but for a substantial additional investment a more capable 160VA high performance transformer can be purchased. More of this later. The phono stages were hooked up to a Clearaudio front-end comprising the Evolution turntable, Tangent parallel tracking tonearm and Signature cartridge. Nordost Red Dawn Rev 2R cables were used for all but the tonearm connection where Audioplan X-wire was employed. The rest of the system was my usual Michell (Trichord) Orca pre, bi-amped Stereo Alecto's, and



Ruark Paladins.

Starting with the Basic, I selected a few favourite LPs. Let's get the detail out of the way early here: Art Pepper *Living Legend* Contemporary S7633. Argenta/LSO *Espana* Decca SXL 2020, Rockin' Jimmy and the Brothers of the Night *By The Light of the Moon* Sonet SNTF 857, and the Classic Records re-issue of *Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Cole Porter Songbook*. ▶

▶ The Basic immediately impressed. Showing more than a hint of the qualities of the Evolution/ Tangent, it was very even handed in its performance. No part of the audio spectrum seemed to be emphasised, and in comparison with my warm and cuddly Iso, the bass notes that open 'Ophelia' on the Pepper album were extraordinarily tight with much more detail evident. Horns were well projected, the overall presentation being slightly forward. The Basic also appeared much more nimble than the Iso with this track sounding faster with more engaging timing than the slightly laid back Iso.

Moving to the Argenta, the first movement of 'Capriccio Espagnol' sang forth with bags of gusto with no hint of compression as the music swelled. Stage depth was a little limited confirming the slightly forward character of the phono stage. Plenty of detail was evident but also a tiny trace of hardness that kept the music a tad more 'hifi' than the entirely natural, breathing, tangible quality that characterises well sorted and almost inevitably much more expensive components. This was not a problem, least of all at the modest price level of this component, just a hint of the 'glass ceiling' that defines the inevitable trade-offs at these price levels.

'Stand Back' from the Little Jimmy album brought the best from the Basic: The tight bass and speed of the Basic gave this track the foundation it needs and my foot was tapping within seconds. Guitar lines were well-defined and the horn parts had plenty of spitty character. Great stuff, and a more capable performer on this number than my Iso/Hera which is a creditable performance given the price differential. Ella's performance of 'Let's Do It' would sound great on a scratchy 78, but the Basic did a pretty fine job here too although I felt the slight hardness

constrained the number a little, snatching an atom of warmth from her vocals that made the performance more 'in the box' than 'in the room'. This is a very fine point though, 'Everytime We Say Goodbye' grabbed me like it always does and minor degrees of performance mattered not a jot. Keeping the same album on the deck, I hastily swapped to the Trichord. Wow! Less obviously precise than the Clearaudio, the music really sang. Ella was undoubtedly in the room. The bass had lost a slightly thuddy quality evident on both the Clearaudio and my Iso, and although it was a little lighter in weight, it sounded more natural and organic. Stage depth, even in living mono, had also gained a few feet.

Little Jimmy sounded great too, although I did miss the taught bass and driving quality of the Clearaudio. The vocals of both Jimmy and the backing singers were projected much more convincingly although the extra detail of the Basic let you hear better just what they are singing. This track in particular helped identify the differences between the two 'stages'. The Trichord sounding the more 'real' with better staging but the Clearaudio possessing more drive, a tighter bass and a tad more detail. Horses for courses here then. They both did a great job with this album.

The Dino was a clear winner with 'Capriccio Espagnol, it didn't convey the individual sections of the orchestra with the precision of the Clearaudio, but gave a much better sense of hall acoustic and the sheer flow of the music. Drawing me into the performance and (dammit, it's a busy Sunday morning as I'm writing this), keeping me there for the whole of the first side. Art Pepper's 'Ophelia' too,

whilst the bass quality lacked a little precision and was slightly soft and less driving in comparison with the Basic, sang out with real conviction. The stage was again a little wider on this album.

These brief demonstrations were enough to convince me that here were two exceptionally good products. Although they both clock in at less than half its price, both better my ISO/ Hera in particular (and important) areas. Both are well made and very quiet in operation with no spurious pops and clicks, despite the relatively dirty mains in my house.

The Clearaudio is neat, beautifully made, fast, detailed and excellent value for money. The Trichord has all the makings of a giant killer. With its in-built flexibility, and exceptional performance, its particular strengths are in excellent staging, and sheer naturalness. It is slightly bass light in comparison with the Basic but I can't say that this troubled me particularly. Both in standard form are highly recommended and well worthy of serious audition.

The flexible little Dino has one more trick up its sleeve though. The standard power supply can be replaced. At present, the only option is the unit used with the Orca, based on a low noise 160VA toroidal transformer and full

active voltage regulation. It also comes with a price tag of £400, although if

you already own the Orca supply it will drive both units. (There will be a slightly less sophisticated off-board supply targeted at £200 in due course). Now of course an extra £400 places the Dino in a different financial league, albeit only comparable to the original cost of the Iso/ Hera, and substantial gains in performance should be expected.

Fortunately the extra cost is justified. The Pepper track opens out considerably, gaining extra layers of detail, a wider ▶



▶ and deeper stage, and more headroom, solos singing free and unconstrained. Each instrument gains more body, more realism and the whole experience is more musically satisfying. The bass performance is also much improved with more resolution apparent, a lower 'floor, although I still miss the bass precision of the little Basic.

Espana showed very similar benefits: a more expansive stage, more headroom, more solid and '3 D'. Music flowing more naturally. Little Jimmy too benefited from firmer deeper bass and more headroom, with more punch although I have a suspicion that the little Basic with its taught, fast performance, drove this track ahead just as well albeit at the expense of less well defined staging and vocals. Ella was superb with the enhanced Dino. More in the room. More tangible. More real. More Ella. Great stuff!

I've been very favourably impressed by both these products. Whilst the basic Dino is extraordinarily good, the Dino

plus the dedicated high-resolution power supply is exceptional value for money giving more than a hint of the performance of much more expensive products. The basic Dino may well provide all you'll ever want in a phono stage, but it's a comfort to know that a few hundred pounds will buy you even better performance with no sacrifice to its essential sonic character. If you already own the Orca with its off-board supply, then the Dino's value goes through the roof.

The Clearaudio Basic does just what it says on the box and more. It provides an essentially neutral, detailed and nimble performance with a sonic character well in keeping with rest of the Clearaudio range. It's tempted me to try other Clearaudio phono stages – the 'Symphono' for example is comparably priced to the Dino + large supply, and would be great to audition against it. One thing is clear though, much as I've loved my Iso/ Hera, its days are definitely numbered. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Trichord Research Dino

MC loading: 33ohms 100ohms,
1Kohm, 47Kohms
Capacitance: MC 1.1nF, MM 100pF

Switch selectable gain:

MC: 0.1-0.25mV 74dB MC: 0.25-0.4mV 70dB
MC: 0.4-0.6mV 63dB MM: 2-3mV 52dB
MM: 3-5mV 48dB

Dimensions (DxHxW): 175mmx58mmx112mm

Price with standard power supply: £299

Dedicated High resolution power supply: £400

Trichord Research Limited

Tel. +44 (0) 1684 573524

Fax. +44 (0) 1684 577380

Email: info@trichordresearch.com

Web: www.trichordresearch.com

Clearaudio Basic

Dimensions (DxHxW): 150x45x100mm

No specs supplied

Price: £255

Audio Reference

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Splendid Isolation

by Reuben Perry

Those of us who are a certain age will recall from their childhood days the grainy black and white image of a bearded and bedraggled figure staring in bemusement at footprints in the sand. He (Robinson Crusoe) knew a thing or two about isolation and so should we. Not because of any archetypal "male loner" Hi-Fi tag that is commonly attached to our pastime, but because a failure to adequately support key components will undoubtedly compromise the reproduction of recorded music. How many of us have seen or for that matter been guilty of poorly siting thousands of pounds worth of amplifier, CD Player or turntable?

Of course sometimes circumstances will conspire to make "splendid

isolation" a less than straightforward proposition. If your listening room does not have solid/concrete floors and you're determined to employ a free-standing racking system, then modifying joists and boards may be a workable solution. Then again one's Hi-Fi room might just be situated on the first floor where, believe me, chopping up the woodwork is unattractive. Wall mounting, though, is a good option. I've always been a fan of wall shelves (especially with turntables) but on this occasion it would take a little more thought than that needed for the drilling of half a dozen holes, pushing in rawl plugs and tightening an odd screw.

For starters I was dealing with a behemoth – the Pierre Lumé Audiomeca J1 Turntable. Don't ever be

fooled by aesthetics. A delicate piano-black finish can be deceptive. Inside beats the heart of a Gallic heavyweight champion and several stone of motor, bearing and platter as well. Moreover, the J1 usually sits astride an equally heavy and sand-filled Bright Star platform, which I was keen to continue using for its fine acoustic properties.

Another prime consideration was the structural integrity of the listening room wall. Clearly a plasterboard partition (despite the most radical of modern fixing methods) can not be expected to bear this kind of load. My problems, however, were somewhat different. Once you've drilled through 35mm of crumbling hundred year old plaster the bit hits locally made ▶

(Peak District) brickwork. This, unlike today's brick, contains plenty of foreign material which can (and does) deflect the drill. It makes accurate hole-drilling awkward, which was one of the reasons for not using an "anchor and bolt" fastening system on the wall shelf. In fact the approach that I finally settled on (after considerable discussion with professionals of my acquaintance) is ideal for anybody facing fixing to ancient walls of most types, or anybody needing to support really heavy equipment.

The turntable support chosen was a Target VW1 Pro (now sadly unavailable since the recent demise of Target - not that it will be long before someone clones it!). It offers a choice of either MDF or glass shelf that sits nicely upon four spikes which can then be easily adjusted through the metal frame from below with an allen key. This shelf provides a generous 490mm x 410mm footprint with the potential for a further 80mm of all-round overhang.

To fix the VW1 Pro half a dozen pre-drilled 6mm holes are provided in the rear framework. I decided that I would pass 6mm steel threaded rod directly through these and into the wall. Here the rod would be fixed using only the versatile Hilti HIT-HY150 adhesive mortar.

Firstly, the VW1 Pro was centred exactly one third of the way along the side wall and hole positions marked. This is an ideal acoustic position for a shelf. If this ratio proves impractical, divide the wall into fifths or sevenths but never by an even numbered fraction.

Next, holes were drilled with an 8mm masonry bit to a minimum depth of 80mm. The Hilti literature conveniently provides a schedule of depths for holes up to a 24mm diameter, together with mortar drying times and practical instructions on its applications. Had anchors and bolts been used, then a 12mm diameter hole would have been necessary to accommodate an M6 6mm anchor arrangement.

Once these holes were drilled, threaded rod was then cut with a hacksaw into six lengths. They were long enough to ensure that an adequate amount of rod passed through the VW1 Pro allowing the 6mm nuts, which would hold the frame against the wall, to be tightened. Excess rod can be cut off later. To check the hole locations and shelf level, a "dry run" was carried out. This involved a washer and nut being threaded onto one end of each piece of rod, which was in turn, passed through the frame and into the wall. The nuts were then tightened and the



frame checked with a spirit level.

If hole "redrilling" proves unnecessary, any loose material within the holes must now be either vacuumed away or blown out using the hand pump that's provided as part of the essential Hilti MD2000 fixing kit. This kit includes a specialist applicator (similar to a silicon gun) into which the Hilti HIT-HY 150 cartridge is slotted. This mixes the adhesive mortar as it passes through the applicator nozzle. Initial trigger pulls automatically open the cartridge and a screwing mechanism within the nozzle carries the adhesive outwards – the first two shots are unsuitable for fixing and should not be used.

The mortar must then be injected into each hole without letting air pockets

form. To achieve this, the nozzle is inserted as far as the base of the hole. For holes of up to 14mm in diameter only one trigger pull of adhesive mortar is required. The threaded rods are then pushed into the holes – I used exactly the same method employed during the earlier "dry run" to correctly locate the VW1 Pro against the wall.

Time is now of the essence. This adhesive mortar will gel in only 6 minutes at a room temperature of 20° Centigrade. So, for those six minutes, I held the VW1 Pro in place – using the spirit level to double-check its attitude until it was secure. Amazingly, after just 50 minutes, a full load can be applied to the shelf. The 6mm nuts are then

finally tightened and any protruding rod cut away. Quite literally the rods would shear off or shelf buckle before sufficient weight/force could be applied to separate the rod from the wall – Hilti mortar is that powerful!

So there you have it – from marking out the wall to cutting back a last piece of rod – the complete installation done, single-handed, in under three hours. Leaving plenty of time to boogie on down, disco or even pogo without fear of upsetting an audiophile appcart.



Tools

Tape measure
Electric drill
8mm or 12mm drill bits
Hacksaw
Hilti MD2000 fixing kit £62.46
Spirit level

6mm spanner

Materials

6mm threaded rod £0.80p per metre
6mm washers £0.04p each
6mm nuts £0.05p each
6mm M6 anchors/bolts £6.99 for 5
Hilti HIT-HY adhesive mortar cartridge £13.80
Target VW1 Pro Shelf £89.00

Dangerous Curves - The Art of The Guitar

by Phil Ward

OK so I love guitars. But I love guitars not just for the sounds they can be made to produce, but also for the creativity they encourage; for their seductive, “unputdownable” looks and feel (well some of them); and also, and this is bordering on the pseudo-intellectual, for the cultural and musical history they represent.

We of the, rock-n-roll generation that assumes the guitar as the primary instrument of popular music to be a phenomena of the second half of the last century, couldn't be more wrong. The guitar has been at the centre of things since the middle of the 1500s. And that angle, the musical, cultural and historical context of the guitar, is something that differentiates *Dangerous Curves*, and I guess the

exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston that gave birth to it, from other coffee-table guitar picture books. And makes it a fascinating read as well as gorgeous to look at.

I'm going to run a premise by you - one that at first pass sounds like the kind of idea that's initially plausible but becomes less so the harder it's examined. But read *Dangerous Curves* and you'll see that this one has some hard currency: A guitar is one of very few consumer products that can trace an unbroken lineage back nearly half a millennium and, at the same time, reflect so much of the culture and society of the age in which it was conceived. You try naming another product for which that is true (straying dangerously I fear into *Life of Brian* style “what have the Romans ever done for us?” territory)? In the same

way that automotive design has been like a mirror held up to society over living memory, so has guitar design - but over 500 years. And in a neat illustration of the point, in 50s America, when the car as a cultural icon really took off, guitar design borrowed heavily - even to the extent of Leo Fender finishing guitars in automotive paint.



But along with being an erudite and revealing treatise on the subject, *Dangerous Curves* is full of sumptuous photographs of wonderful instruments. A few interesting examples, chosen almost at random: An instrument thought to have been built in Lisbon by Belchior Dias around 1590 is the one of the earliest to have survived - and it's utterly recognisable as a guitar. No academic persuasion necessary. A guitar built by Austrian, Johann George Stauffer in 1830, not only incorporates a truss-rod to provide neck adjustment but also an extended fingerboard that floats over the front of the body right up to the sound-hole - so that one's not a modern innovation. A beautiful 1957 blond Fender Telecaster with maple neck, chrome fittings and white scratch plate looks for all the World like a fragment of cool

and contemporary Scandinavian design. And, one more, the completely bizarre three neck, two sound-hole, forty-two string “Pikasso” guitar built for Pat Metheny by Linda Manzer looks to have been inspired by the same wild ideas that gave birth to the bewildering variety of harp/guitar hybrids that punctuate the instruments history.

But I do have a couple of quibbles. The first one is perhaps selfish. I'm a bass player, not a guitarist, and bass doesn't warrant a mention in *Dangerous Curves*. Perhaps there's a justification for this in that the electric bass as we now know it is really the bastard child of the solid-body electric guitar and the double-bass, so not really part of the guitar lineage. But if the bass isn't really a guitar, I'd argue over the

inclusion of the Chapman Stick in *Dangerous Curves*. And one last quibble. With all those *Dangerous Curves* to chose from, why is the front cover shot a close-up of a decidedly underwhelming 1980's Aria Urchin?

Note: For those who's immediate response to *Dangerous Curves* is, “gotta have one”. I suspect a serious book shop will be able to source a copy, but mine arrived via a trouble-free purchase from the MFA online store. Go to www.mfa.org

Dangerous Curves -
The Art of The Guitar
MFA Publications
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
www.mfa.org
ISBN 0-87846-485-9

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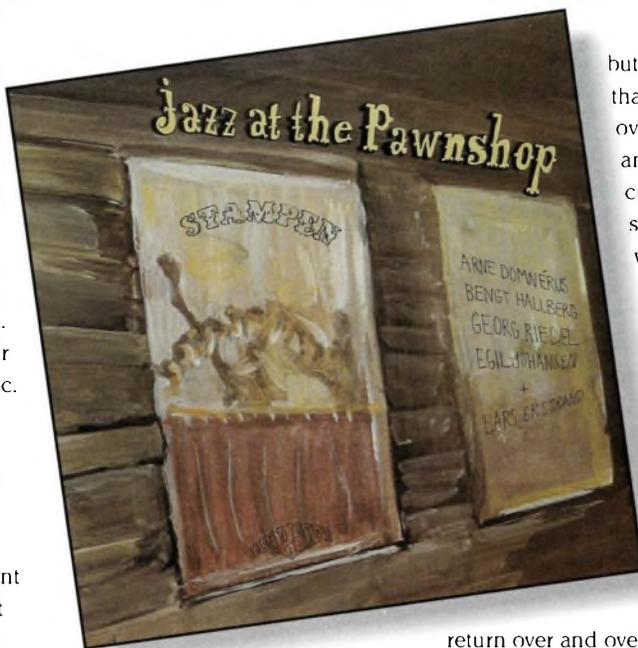
Records To Die From

by Roy Gregory

There is an affliction that just about anybody who works with hi-fi has to endure. Whether developing, demonstrating or selling hi-fi it's a burden that we all have to bear. In fact, it's so contagious that even customers can catch it. What is this evil spectre? Our familiar friend the demo disc.

We all have them, those records and CDs that we automatically reach for when we're confronted with a new piece of equipment. They are the audio equivalent of a comfort blanket, except that demo discs can all too easily wear out their welcome, especially when it comes to hi-fi shops or shows. Fine, it's great to hear the same music on a whole range of systems, but spare a thought for the poor guy who has to stand and listen to that music, over and over again for days on end. What invariably starts out as a really great track soon takes on the hideous grating inevitability of the Chinese water torture; Drip... drip... drip... drip... drip... until just the opening chords are enough to send you screaming from the room. Played to death takes on a whole new meaning.

These things come and go in waves, one record rising to universal popularity before sinking again into blessed obscurity, damned by sensory saturation and a welling up of common consent. At one point in my life as a retailer, Dire Straits' 'Private Investigation' had become so all pervasive that sanity required its banning from our dem rooms. One unfortunate still insisted that we play it, whereupon the salesman, who we'll call Bob, relented,



but only on the understanding that as soon as the track was over he'd turn the record into an attractive flower-pot. The customer didn't take him seriously until he disappeared with his disc, reappearing a few minutes later with the fully formed pot. Fortunately it was one we'd prepared earlier, but you'd do well to recognise the sentiment. You can push retailers too far...

Of course, there are the perennial favourites, so called "audiophile demonstration discs" that return over and over again to haunt the corridors at hi-fi shows, massing once or twice a year from their sojourns in regional record collections and dem rooms dotted around the country. However, there's also a lesser known category, confined to reviewers, retailers and serial purchasers, the "personal demo disc", our own favourite torture track, the one we fondly believe that no one else knows about but which instantly clears our compatriots, work mates or partners from the listening room. And even some of those have worn so thin that they now only come out to work - even we don't play them for pleasure anymore.

And the point is? Well, whilst every note might grate now, we only suffered the chronic over exposure because each and every one of these discs started out as something special. One track wonder or not, these are some of the best recordings out there, and that makes them worth knowing about, especially if you're in the lucky position of never having heard them. ▶

The Most . . .

Offensive Audiophile Demonstration
Discs Of all Time - Play Them Publicly
At Your Peril.

The Top Five

And if you're really sad, then I've listed the audiophile re-issues which have been available at one time or another

▶ **Jazz At The Pawnshop** (180g by ATR)

Mediocre jazz played by a mediocre band in an impressively live acoustic - oh, and the biggest vibraphone you ever heard!

Dire Straits - Love Over Gold - Private Investigation
Nothing more needs to be said.

The Eagles - Hell Freezes Over - Hotel California

The cold harsh edge of commercial cynicism from everyone involved (including the hi-fi industry). Old fat musicians who hate each other and don't need the money don't make for a great performance, but this managed to be doubly offensive by becoming an A/V standard as well.

Tracy Chapman - Between The Lines

The perfect PC album before the phrase had even been coined.

Muddy Waters - Folk Singer - Good Mornin' Little School Girl (200g by MoFi)

Even great artists can be killed stone dead by chronic over exposure.

Best of the Rest

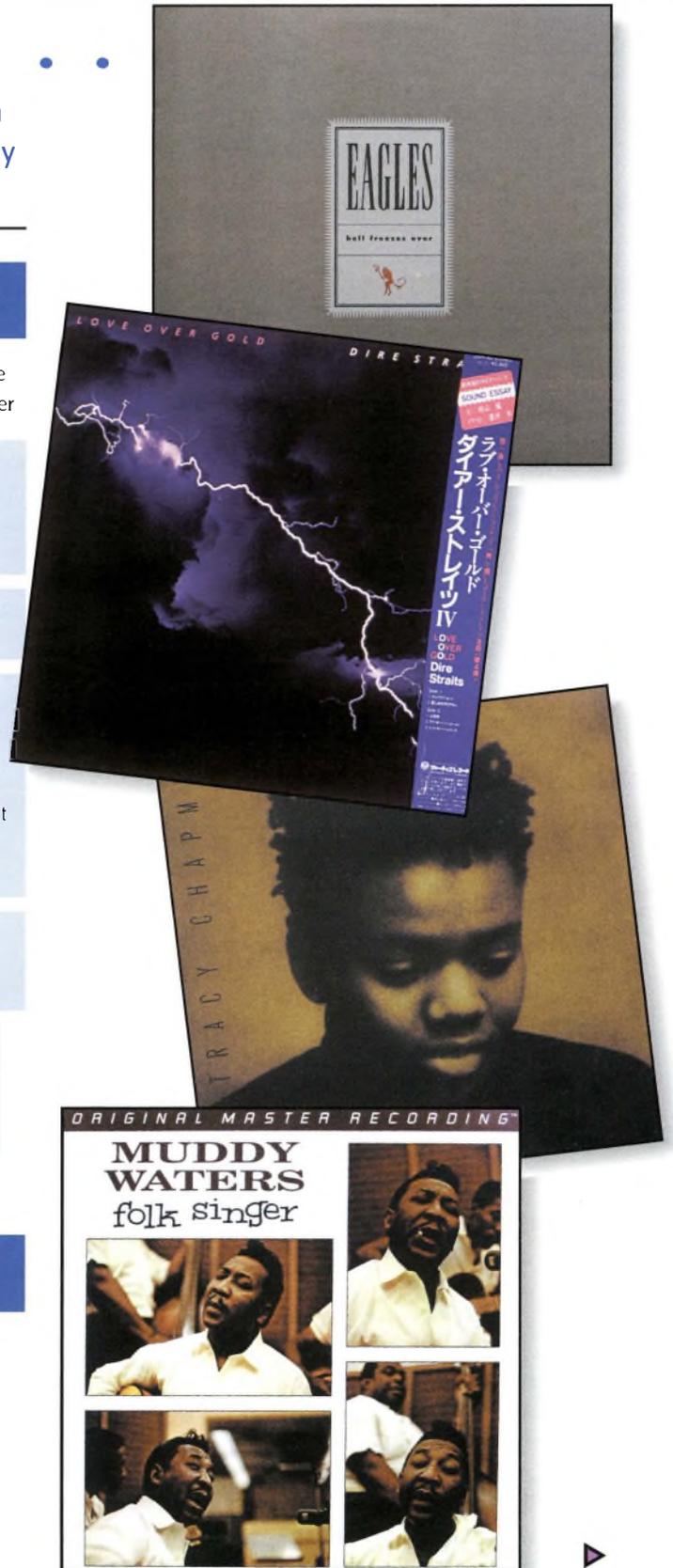
Rickie Lee Jones* (Nimbus Supercut by Practical HiFi, 180g by Warners)

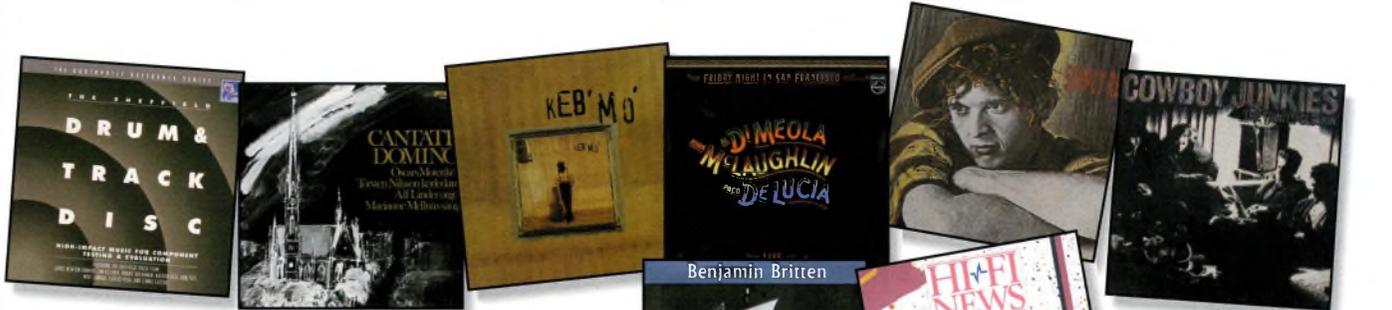
Stevie Ray Vaughn - Couldn't Stand The Weather - Tin pan alley* (180g by Absolute Analogue)

Oscar Peterson Trio - We Get Requests* (Various 180g Re-Issues, some from digital sources)

Radka Toneff - Fairytales - The moon is a harsh mistress

The Telarc 1812 Overture





▶ **Micky Hart and Flora Purim** - Dafos
The terms 'audiophile' and 'percussion' should never, ever be used together.

The Sheffield Drum and Track Disc

Two direct to disc pot-boilers transferred onto a single CD!

Thelma Houston - Pressure Cooker

James Newton Howard and Friends

Fleetwood Mac - Rumours* (180g by Warners)

Jennifer Warnes - Famous Blue Raincoat -

First we take Manhattan* (180g by Classic)

Pink Floyd - Dark Side Of The Moon*

Anything on DMP (but especially Flim and the BBs)

Hi-fi News Test Disc - The Garage Door

Loud noise to impress your mates. Later they graduated to a Harrier jump jet, but the garage door retains its complete and utter irrelevance. From a group of people who should have known better.

Keb' Mo' (180g by Absolute analogue)

Frankie Goes To Hollywood - Relax

Sade - Diamond Life

Simply Red - Picture Book

Paul Simon - Graceland (180g by Warners)

Thanks John! And yes, you know who you are.

Yello - Stella

Oh Yeah, Ciel Ouvert - but
The Race would have done
just as well.

Cowboy Junkies - The Trinity Session

(180g by Classic)

Cantate Domino (180g by Proprius)

Suzanne Vega - Eponymous*

(180g by Vivante)

Joan Armatrading - Eponymous*

(180g by Speakers Corner)

Al Di Meola, John McLaughlin and Paco De Luca -

Friday Night In San Francisco (180g by Vivante)

Grace Jones - Demolition Man

Herold-Lanchberry - La Fille Malle

Gardee* (180g by Vivante)

Britten - Noye's Fludde

Massenet - Le Cid (180g by Klavier)

Patricia Barber - Split (180g by Alto)

Gary Karr - Adagio d'Albinoni

Classical standards transposed
for Double Bass
and Organ!!



* Particularly fine examples of music and recording combined.

** All records and discs used in the illustration of this article were originals. "Were" because as soon as photography was complete they were destroyed with extreme prejudice for humane reasons I'm sure that all audiophiles will appreciate.

*** The classical entries make interesting reading. Most of it's ballet music, with plenty of loud bangs so that the dancers know when to jump! Either that or it has been rewritten for bass and organ, or involves cannon. What does that tell us?

Record Reviews

How To Read Them

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

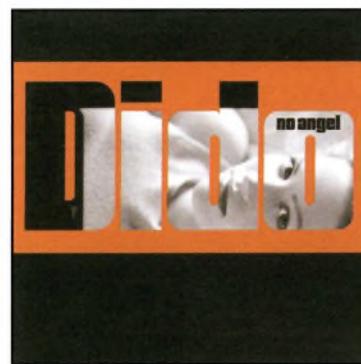
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard,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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

They are:- Chris Binns, Pete Christie, Mark Childs, Dave Davies, Roy Gregory, Simon Groome, Jason Hector, James Michael Hughes, Jon Maple, Reuben Parry, Dave Ayers, Andrew Hobbs, Chris Thomas.

Key to Icons

-  CD
-  Gold CD
-  HDCD
-  XRCD
-  Double Disc
-  SACD
-  120g LP
-  150g LP
-  180g LP
-  Availability As S/H LP
-  Vinyl Double Album



Dido

No Angle

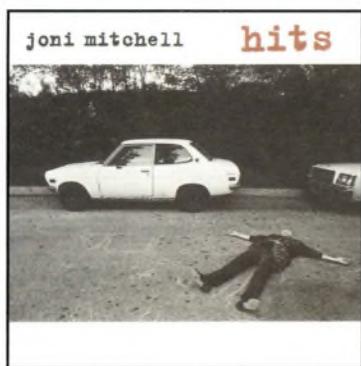
Arista B0000506EC 

Who is Dido? *No Angel* constantly sounds familiar, and a quick look at the sleeve notes tells us why. Quite simply, Dido is Rollo's sister. Rollo is the brain behind Faithless. So it's no surprise to find most of Faithless credited on her UK Debut. Dido herself was the backing vocalist for both previous Faithless albums. By now you should also know that this is the album that contains 'Thankyou' which, if you've been awake any time in the last six months, you will recognise as the rather catchy chorus sample from Eminem's 'Stan'. 'Thankyou' is pretty representative of the rest of the album, laying folk melodies over ambient dance soundscapes. So a good pedigree without a doubt. And the album is pretty good as well, lying as it does, somewhere between Beth Orton and Faithless. But alas between some superb tracks the album contains too much filler, and even the key tracks never quite hit home. The backing production is reasonable although pedestrian, but Dido's vocals have been criminally recorded, too high in the mix and frequently distorting. If you've heard the singles and are thinking of buying the album, go ahead, you won't regret it, although don't expect it to change your life. An album worth buying, even if only for the car, but Dido still remains Faithless-lite.

MC

RECORDING
MUSIC





Joni Mitchell

Hits

REPRISE 9 46326-2 (HD)

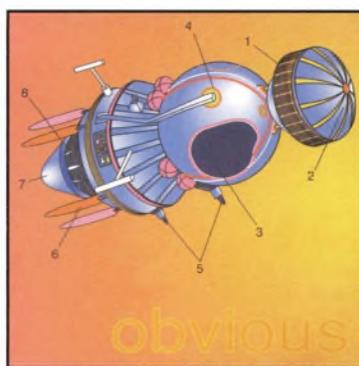
In '96 Joni's practised eye, without the hint of a squint or the need for corrective lenses, cast its wry ironic gaze back across her own career through a pair of laconically titled (as opposed to rose-tinted) CDs. Chronicling those commercial and less-commercial sides to her songwriting, *Hits* and *Misses* (released appropriately enough on the reprise label) are testaments to clear-sightedness. *Hits* also serves as a first rate introduction to one of the most influential of popular artists while the HDCD remastering by Joe Gastwirth is a (sonic) bonus. Classic material like 'California' and 'River', taken from the famously introspective *Blue* LP, or 'Big Yellow Taxi' - *Ladies Of The Canyon* - and memorable 'Help Me' and 'Raised On Robbery' lifted from a tightly arranged, yet luxuriantly textured *Court And Spark*, snap sharply into focus.

Hours spent down in the Atlantic library vaults were prosperous ones. But don't get blindsided by the process. Retrieval and reinvigoration of these tapes have been an archivist and engineer's dream - such is the high esteem with which Joni Mitchell will always be held. However, for those that have 20/20 vision, it's the brilliantly conceived, written and executed songs that remain the true focal point.

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RP



Obvious

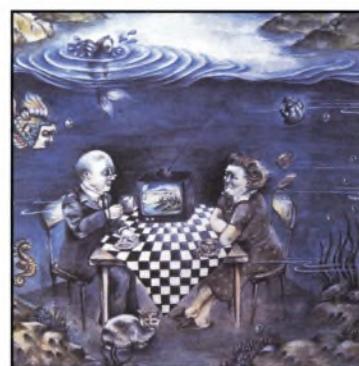
Obvious

Tube Records 0002 (CD)

Tube records is a Pink Floyd connected label dealing exclusively through the internet and this CD is amongst their first batch of releases. Obvious is a pseudonym for Andy Jackson, who has engineered previous Pink Floyd albums, hence the connection. Following a well trodden path of Floyd engineers as recording artists, Jackson has gathered together a few friends, including Mike and the Mechanics drummer Gary Wallis, to record this fairly low key first CD. Despite the Floyd connections being heavily pushed, the album sounds more like one from The Alan Parsons Project, albeit on a smaller scale, which is ironic as Parsons is another ex-Floyd engineer. I have to say this is not necessarily a bad thing, as APP were very popular, and I must confess to owning quite a few of their albums myself. Unfortunately Jackson is not the producer that Parsons is, and so the CD lacks some discipline, making it a little unfocused. There some good ideas within fighting to get out and it will be interesting to see how Jackson progresses, but in the end this CD will end up in the occasional listen pile, thus warranting only a guarded recommendation. I would suggest you try before you buy, especially as downloads are available from their website:

www.tuberecords.com

DA



Steve Hackett

Feedback 86 -

Cambria Records CAMCD21 (CD)

A belated release at an approximate street price of £10.99 for Hackett's 'lost' album from 1986, recorded after the sadly underrated GTR album. Lost in the mire of contractual problems that is, for the guest artists here include Queen's Brian May, Manfred Mann's Earthband vocalist Chris Thompson, Bonnie Tyler, and Marillion's rhythm section. I was quite excited when I read the line-up in the press release, as I already own most of his other work, and the promise was that this would be a cracker. Unfortunately not. Whilst not a bad album per se, it ultimately disappoints, being for the most part a fairly straightforward 80's rock workout. When Hackett formed GTR with Steve Howe in answer to all the American big-hair bands, it was the little quirks that put the band musically ahead of the pack (and probably what held them back commercially). There is little of that here, and apart from the two vocalists, the guest artist contributions largely go unnoticed. Annoyingly, *Feedback 86* would probably have sold better than its predecessor, had it been released immediately, but its time has passed, and so will mainly appeal to completists. If you are a newcomer, then I'd go for *Spectral Mornings* instead. The CD is enhanced, with an extra 20 MP3 tracks, a 15 minute video sample, and a few biographies etc. which gives you the chance to sample his other work, even if it isn't hi-fi.

DA





KEB MO

The Door

EPIC/SONY 501000 2 (CD)

Kevin Moore's fourth album, *The Door*, is another of those articulate and tuneful contemporary blues releases which successfully combines his own original compositions and strong collaborations with the lives of Mellissa Manchester, Bobby McFerrin and Leon Ware. Keb' remains, of course, a highly polished artist who has continued to expertly criss-cross between genres. One minute there's a soulful pop song like 'Come On Back' – the next gospel spirituality can be heard in the refrain for 'Stand Up And Be Strong' – returning to a traditional blues man's roots when simply pickin' over his emotions in 'Loola Loo' and 'Anyway'. It's a stylish and accessible blend which is working well for both Keb' Mo' and Sony Music. A fifth CD, *Big Wide Grin*, is promised for later this year. Mellow vocals and exceptionally tasteful slide work effortlessly eases the passage of this attractive and varied amalgam. The sidemen, too, including keyboardist Greg Phillinganes, drummers Jim Keltner and Steve Jordan, bassist Reggie McBride and pedal steel guitarist Greg Leisz offer understated but effective backing that comfortably accommodates all these stylistic shifts. "Accommodating" can also be used to describe the sound engineered. Mark Johnson and Co. deliver a robust and pacy acoustic for the more complex textures, while reserving sufficient detail and subtlety for Keb's solo vocals and guitar when it's needed.

RP
RECORDING

■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■

MUSIC



P.J. Harvey

Stories from the city, stories from the sea

Island 8099/548 145-2 (CD)

Stories from the city, stories from the sea builds on Harvey's 1998 album *Is this desire?* although, notably, John Parish is absent here. Perhaps because of this the album is slightly less adventurous than previous offerings, but what it lacks in imagination it more than compensates for in beauty. Instead this album, like many of recent months, relies heavily on emotionally intense, richly produced guitar music.

Stories... treats us to some of PJ Harvey's smoothest vocals alongside some seriously blues-y guitar sounds. The mood of the album is distinctly more optimistic than her usual output, with the remorse replaced by anger on the stories from the city, and by contentment and serenity on the stories from the sea. The material here also moves away from her usual territory of assuming a character, becoming more personal so that the songs appear to be Harvey's own views and feelings.

From the soaring opening track, through the recent single 'Good Fortune' to the (now obligatory) duet with Thom Yorke, 'The mess we're in', the album strides with deadly purpose. If there is to be any criticism it's that the last few songs lose pace and drag slightly.

Her most focussed and mainstream offering to date *Stories...* comes highly recommended.

MC

RECORDING

■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■

MUSIC



Alabama3

La Peste

ELM053 (CD)

Suddenly famous (well they are compared to my usual favourites!) through their song 'Woke Up This Morning' being chosen for the theme of the gangster series *The Sopranos*, Alabama3 are an amazingly surprising (and large) group in an ocean of blandness. Firstly their style, a mix of club, biker and country chic also reflects their music, which fuses infectious dancy stuff with ... country!!! Country? Yep, country, coupled with heavy sarcasm concerning American style evangelists. Hell, one's alter ego is the Reverend Dr. D. Wayne Love. Its quite astonishing how successful this amalgam is.

The band aren't afraid of delving into the darker side of their chosen influences, telling stories of drug abuse (most of this seems to be from personal experience, mostly bitter at that,) and they are never going to be a happy bunch of campers which is why it was strange that the first album, *Exile on Coldharbour Lane* always seemed to make me smile. This outing is more serious but still has its witty moments. They even dancify that old perennial 'Hotel California' which has to be better than what the Eagles did with it. I would expect nothing less from a band who have one member who's job is to simply stand at the front with tattoos, strange but true. I can only advise you to give it a whirl.

JH

RECORDING

■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■

MUSIC



Brigitte Bader / Johnny Griffin

Passion, No Future, But Love

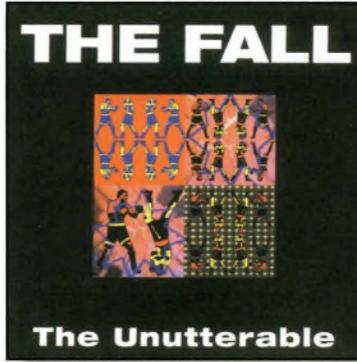
BB PRODUCTION BB CD 00190

Noted Europhile bebop tenor man, Johnny Griffin, and the accented Swiss chanteuse, Brigitte Bader, mix'n'match to good effect on half a dozen of these studio cuts that include Gershwin's 'How Long Has This Been Going On', 'Prelude To A Kiss' (Ellington/Mills) and the Mingus/Mitchell composed opener, 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat'. For the eight remaining songs Griffin and sax step aside, allowing a Pan-European sextet of musicians (together with the South African drummer, Makaya Ntshoko) to gently swing through standards like 'Sophisticated Lady' or Kurt Weill's, lovely, 'Speak Low'. What comes across the most during a little over an hour's intimacy with Brigitte Bader is her rootsy jazz personality. She is certainly no sugary Swiss roll that requires washing down after each number. Her voice is a more complex mix of ingredients, and has something in common with the greats from the past – though elevating her to the status of a Vaughan or a Holiday is quite inappropriate. What she does offer, however, is a redolent alternative to the Holly Cole's and Jacintha's of this world. The only miss here on *Passion, No Future, But Love* is an insipid instrumental, 'Opus De Funk', which is of little account in the greater scheme of things.

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RP



The Fall

Unutterable

Eagle EAGCD164

The Fall return with this years LP, their 54th making them, surely, Britains most prolific group ever?

With the new band in place the sound is fine, the rhythm section grinding repetitively to perfectly complement Mark E. Smiths freestyle vocals. They seem to have absorbed elements of dance music like it was their own idea, without ever compromising their more gritty roots. Indeed dance music probably was their own idea, they invented and inspired so much else. Listening to the album is a little like listening to the influence behind every alternative album since 1995. Suddenly the concepts behind Elastica, Blur, Tiger and so many other bands seem to be laid bare. Look out for the fantastic 'Dr Buck's Letter', which kicks in with a fearsome blast of bass and filters with serious guitar stabs punctuating Smiths self confessional monologue, and 'Octo Realm/Katamine Sun' which stomps through more progressive territory. However, it can start to jar as Smith performs like a man who has just discovered the Oxford English Dictionary, and is determined to fit in all those new found words, one per track. And the sound isn't always fresh; 'Hot Runes' sounds like a track the Shadows might have thrown out for sounding too cheap. It's an accessible album but should you buy it? Yes, if you enjoy late nineties alternative music and find yourself searching for the next step. It's in there somewhere!

MC



K. D. Lang

Invincible Summer

WARNER BRÖS9362-47605-2

Kathryn Dawn Lang has come a long way from those rural Alberta roots. Her early records were a carefree passage through the leaner C & W sound, which by the beginning of the Nineties had confirmed she was a torch bearer for Country's New Tradition. *Ingenué* (1992) marked a sudden shift in direction that coincided with the life-changing decision to "come out". Now, nearly a decade on, her latest CD again reveals what an assured pop-crossover artist she's become. This is reflected in those sophisticated and lusciously textured songs like, 'the consequences of falling' and 'it's happening with you', where arrangements involving violins, cellos and violas are artfully blended with drum programmes and studio mixes. Sharply cutting across these tactile images, Lang's rich vocals, (soulful and Dusty Springfield-like), with a hint of country twang tossed into her delivery, attractively explore any number of romantic nuances in 'suddenly', 'extraordinary thing' and 'curiosity'. It's strong, accomplished songwriting supported by a decent mainstream recording out of the Conway Studios in Hollywood. Good string definition behind Lang too, whose beautiful voice (sometimes double-tracked) is wisely never overwritten in the mixing suite.

RP





King Crimson
Larks Tongues In Aspic

CD 24 bit remastered
CDVKCX5

King Crimson
Starless And Bible Black

CD 24 bit remastered
CDVKCX6

King Crimson
RED

CD 24 bit remastered
CDVKCX7

When King Crimson self-destructed on tour in 1972, founding member and guitarist Robert Fripp had to decide whether to create a new incarnation or to do something completely different. In the end there was too much mileage in the KC name to give it up, and so he recruited drummer Bill Bruford from Yes, bassist John Wetton from Family, violinist David Cross, and finally blood spitting percussionist Jamie Muir. Although the five piece line-up was only to last for *Lark's Tongues*, the musical die had been cast for the next three albums, each being a mix of pure improvisation, quiet melodic reflection, precision musical patterns and out and out blood and thunder.

Lark's Tongues In Aspic is the most accessible of the three, having the least free improvisation. The opening instrumental 'Lark's Tongues In Aspic Part I' quietly hovers above the noise floor with tuned percussion and scattered sounds until the violin motif sets in. Temptation at this point is to turn it up - lots - until the whole band crashes in with the dirtiest, fuzziest riff imaginable and sends you rushing back to the volume control. Oh yes, this time KC have attitude, and they want you to know all about it. After recovering with a couple of quiet

songs, where Wetton's unusual husky voice counterpoints some exquisite violin/sustained guitar interplay, 'Easy Money' ups the pace, taking a basic rhythm and giving Muir the space to interject all manner of rubbed, scraped, and walloped contraptions in a manner that absolutely fascinates me. Galloping off towards the finish with 'The Talking Drum' takes us to the studied precision of the closing track, 'Lark's Tongues In Aspic Part II'. Precision it may have, yet this is the real head-banger on the album, the one that'll have you playing your air guitar all round the room. What a finish, and with it Muir left to join a monastery, hmm.

Putting the LP of *Starless And Bible Black* on the turntable is sure to have you running for cover, as the painfully bright balance and incredibly fierce sustained guitar of the opening track 'The Great Deceiver' turns any but the dullest system into a long distance ear syringe. This CD reissue tones it down a bit, but not much, so once again KC are making their intentions clear right from the off. The frenetic pace soon calms down, however, as the band start to stretch their improvisational muscles and it becomes obvious that Bruford has learned much from Muir before he left. Unfortunately most of the improvis meander a bit, but then again the fragile beauty of 'Trio' makes it all worthwhile. Closing again with an exercise in precision, 'Fracture' is less of a headbanger than 'LTIAI', but still a cracking finish.

The tour which followed produced the LP *USA*, and the much more interesting 4CD box set *The Great Deceiver*, both of which were released after *RED*. After the tour Cross left, and by the time *RED* was released Fripp had broken up the band. On the title track we are again presented with Fripp's fascination with repeating motifs, something that was taken to its peak a decade later on the *Discipline* album. This time though the mood is dark

and sombre, the jangling guitars teetering on the brink of discord. For me however, the real standout track on the album is 'Starless', featuring founder member Ian McDonald on saxes. Just as it seems as if KC are going for a chill-out finish, time signatures fracture and then, once you're sufficiently disturbed, the band go hell for leather to the big finish. In swoops the big, Big, BIG sound of the mellotron, and you simply cannot hold up enough lighters. Exit album, exit band, and what a way to go.

As part of an ongoing re-release program for King Crimson, each of these CDs is beautifully presented in a replica gatefold sleeve with collectors booklet, which is somewhat ironic as two of the original albums didn't have gatefold sleeves in the first place. As far as the transfer to CD goes, this is about as close as you can get to the original, warts and all. Even though they are not touted as audiophile pressings, I would be very happy with these had I not got the original pressings. In fact, as my *LTIA* is badly damaged in places, I will be happily playing the CD in preference from now on.

DA

Larks Tongues In Aspic



Starless And Bible Black



King Crimson



Shock Treatment

by Reuben Parry

Michelle Shocked's undeserved reputation as a "difficult artist" stems largely from the now almost obligatory spat with her record company. A conflict between artistic integrity and Industry commercialism seems to have been at the root of an acrimonious parting of the ways. Mercury Record executives had by 1993 found it increasingly difficult to market a singer/songwriter whose regular stylistic shifts could not easily be compartmentalised. Their refusal to release a proposed gospel album, *Kind-Hearted Woman*, was a catalyst for the rift that culminated in Shocked sacking her manager and dramatically taking legal action to be released from her contract. Typically it was the wry side of Michelle Shocked that surfaced, when the Thirteenth Amendment's Abolition of Slavery was cited as a reason for nullifying her contract.

Once freed from Mercury's constraints, she independently released both *Kind-Hearted Woman* and *Artists Make Lousy Slaves* (1996). In the absence of a major record label distribution deal these albums were really only made available at Shocked's regular concert dates. Although *Good News* (1998) did appear on her Mood Swings label, none of these discs are to be found in the high street. Yet, she remains a tireless performer and one who is apparently still quite content to continue in this relatively anonymous vein. Undoubtedly, that is our loss because hers is a versatile and provocative talent that has, throughout fifteen years in the business, challenged and entertained in equal amounts.

Scroll back amongst the early releases issued from 1986 through to 1992, or even with the compilation Mercury CD *Poise* (1997), and the sense of disappointment that Michelle Shocked is not a more prolific recording artist becomes palpable. When adjectives like "reflective", "plaintive", "confrontational", "playful", "literate" and "cathartic" are regularly used to describe an alternative brand of folk

music, it is to my mind worth taking the trouble to search out these LPs and CDs for yourself, rather than just accepting the say so of us hacks.

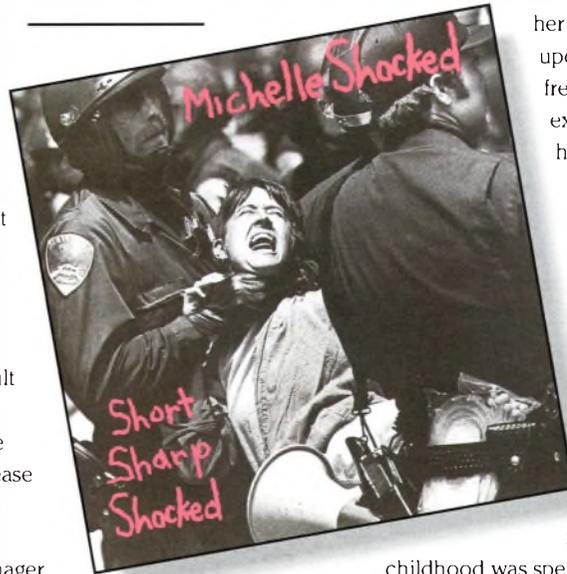
The quality of the issues raised, and nature of the demons slain by songs in her 1986 debut and U.K. Independent Chart topping, *The Texas Campfire Tapes* (COOK 002), made it quite clear that this was a most unusual personality, who armed with the gift of story telling, actually had acutely-

felt tales to tell. Many of her lyrics were founded upon compelling and frequently disturbing experiences taken from her formative years.

So any Michelle Shocked retrospective would be incomplete without sketching out some of those essential biographical details which have shaped a fascinating musician.

Born, Karen Michelle Johnson, on February 24th 1962

in Dallas Texas, Shocked's



childhood was spent kicking her heels

around Military Bases. At the age of sixteen, she ran away from a Mormon fundamentalist mother – eventually settling with her estranged father (an amateur mandolin player). It was he who introduced this impressionable teenager to the music of contemporary songwriters like Randy Newman and, perhaps more importantly, the works of country bluesmen like Leadbelly and Big Bill Broonzy. Having successfully fostered this unlikely interest in a bluegrass tradition, he encouraged Karen Michelle to explore a local underground folk movement. By the start of the 1980's she was honing those songwriting skills which would, later in the decade, place her at the forefront of contemporary folk music.

Dropping out of the University of Texas, she moved to San Francisco, where the attractions of that City's vibrant hardcore punk scene pushed her into new and unrelated musical directions. The undercurrents feature strongly on the more rebellious songs found in *Short Sharp Shocked*.

When she returned home her mother (proving that possibly the only thing worse than a Mormon fundamentalist is a lapsed Catholic who becomes one) had Shocked committed to a psychiatric hospital. She was only released when the medical insurance ran out, which must be one of the few advantages in an American style healthcare system.



▶ Turning her back on those unhappy days of enforced confinement in Texas, she travelled extensively throughout the United States and, following spells of homelessness, became a passionate voice within the New York squatters movement. It was around this time that Karen Michelle Johnson changed her surname.

As a vociferous protester, she was jailed on a number of occasions until finally this disaffection with the excesses of a Reagan Presidency hastened her departure, in 1984, to the more libertine atmosphere of Amsterdam. I believe I'm correct in saying that while in

Europe Shocked became a victim of rape and this led to an understandable return to familiar Texas surroundings.

Choosing to pursue a musical career, Michelle submitted a demo tape for the 1986 Kerrville Folk Festival at the Quiet Valley Ranch situated in those idyllic rolling hills of East Texas. The tape for the contest had been lost in the post and her sanctioned appearances were subsequently limited to several guest spots and a session under the "Ballad Tree". But, famously, it was amongst those many campfire performances that the British record producer, Pete Lawrance, first heard one of Shocked's Cajun tunes – as the twenty-four year old "stepped forward, fiddle in hand and transformed (the evening) into a joyous celebration". Striking up a conversation with Shocked, he asked her to record a few songs on his Sony Walkman Pro. That evening has now entered folklore as, later in the year an album focusing on a dozen remarkably personal and touchingly intimate tracks was released by Cooking Vinyl Records. The myth of *The Texas Campfire Tapes* was born and it has inspired generations of hopefuls at Festivals around the World ever since.

Though its recording was notably "Low-Fi" this simply doesn't matter when a slightly self-conscious, "girl 'n' her guitar", gradually growing in stature and confidence, emerges to deliver such a charming performance. The contrast between her fresh, innocent-sounding voice and the impact of striking songs like '(Don't you mess around with) My Little Sister', 'The Incomplete Image' or 'Down on Thomas St.', is jarring.

Her first venture into the recording studios was a varied and self-assured one. The 1988, Pete Anderson arranged and

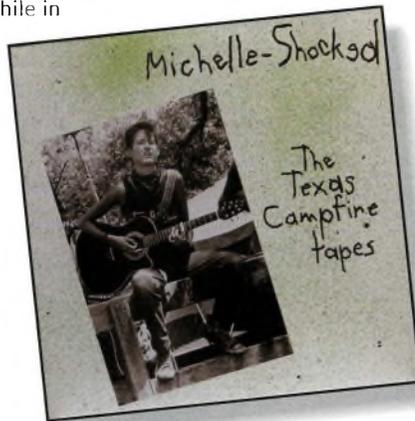
produced, *Short Sharp Shocked* (CVLP1) cut across the boundaries of folk, blues and country to touch upon punk and post-modern feminist pop. Critically acclaimed at the time, and especially well received within alternative circles, it still, today, stands up to scrutiny both thematically and as a recording. Never frightened to court controversy, the artwork for this disc, which pictures Shocked in the choke-hold of a riot cop, was lifted from the annals of the San Francisco Examiner which had unwittingly captured for posterity her 1980s activism in the flesh. It's a penetrating image that epitomised an intolerant Republican America.

Unsurprisingly, overtly political sentiments permeate its protest songs like the bluesy, 'Graffiti Limbo'. Here, Shocked reflects upon the death of a young black New York Graffiti artist, Michael Stewart, who was "mysteriously" strangled in the presence of eleven Transit Police Officers. None of whom were successfully prosecuted. The old-fashioned simplicity of an acoustic guitar and harmonica lament crystallizes the engrained sense of injustice found amongst these lyrics.

Fast on its tracks comes the rhythmically rolling electric blues of 'If Love was a Train'. This is a revealing song that wittily explores the subject of sexual disappointment. A regular use of the personal pronoun, 'I', throughout its lyrics can be no accident and even if it is well disguised by innuendo and an amusing feminist perspective in lines like, "If love was a train I'd ride me a long one... I'm talking fifty

boxcars long. Aw what's the use! Most trains these days ain't got no engine much less a caboose", there's still evidence here of Shocked's own dissatisfaction with relationships. An obvious candidate for a single, the 12" version of 'If Love was a Train' (FRY 002 T) features

three previously unreleased Campfire recordings; 'The Chain Smoker', 'Stranded in a Limousine' (Paul Simon) and 'Goodnight Irene' (Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter), which prove that she is also an effective interpreter of other people's songs. No self-respecting fan would be without this record. Back on the album, Shocked intelligently takes an opportunity to revisit the unhurried style of

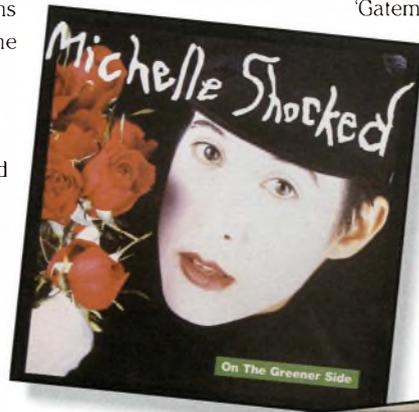


▶ a '60s folkster with a beautifully sculpted, 'Anchorage', and finely drawn, 'Black Widow', that has a terrific twist at the end of its tale. Playing beyond this, (the last of the listed tracks), there is an eleventh untitled song – one that busts a gut with its pure punk spirit. Quite a bonus coming as it does on top of blues, folk and the terrific country numbers 'Hello Hopeville', 'Memories of East Texas' and 'Gladewater'.

Another Pete Anderson crafted LP quickly followed in 1989. Those ten songs penned by Shocked for *Captain Swing* (Cooking Vinyl 838878-1) completely wrong-footed her fans and the music press alike. No one had anticipated an album that owed much to a '40s big-band tradition. In typical Shocked fashion she successfully blended her own distinct brand of social observation with the jazz rhythms and swaying brass as clarinet, trumpet, trombone, baritone and tenor sax, figured prominently in the arrangements of songs like a wry, 'God is a Real Estate Developer', the moving homeless lament, 'Streetcorner Ambassador', or an acerbic depiction of love in, 'On the Greener Side', which was also released as a 12" single (LONX 245). The album title, too, maintains strong ties to an issue-based songwriting agenda, taken as it was from the name of the leader of a Nineteenth Century farm labourer's revolt.

But if passion and polemics fail to excite you, then there is always the excellent playing of the band and a series of fascinating guest performances from Bobby Bland, Randy Newman and Fats Domino. Their presence is testimony to the high esteem in which Shocked was now held.

During a three-year hiatus, until the release of her fourth album, Shocked extensively researched early American Music. A rootsy, *Arkansas Traveler* (512189-1) 1992, embracing bluegrass, Cajun, country, hillbilly and all points North, South, East and West of Little Rock, set out to dispel the myths surrounding a black-faced minstrel legacy by using her own traditional style of songwriting to illuminate matters. Fearing a back-lash, the over-sensitive Polygram/Mercury Record Executives immediately clashed with Shocked over the proposed sleeve artwork – refusing to issue an LP with her face "blacked up" on its cover. A telling disclaimer was also added to the CD liner notes



which loosely stated that the views expressed were solely those of Michelle Shocked and did not necessarily represent the other musicians present.

Despite the controversy this remains a quite remarkable album that attentive listeners find increasingly rewarding. Shocked is cast in the ubiquitous role of "Arkansas Traveler" whose epic journey across America, and further afield to Dublin and New South Wales in the search of enlightenment, has some obvious parallels in both history and literature. On this quest she meets, along the way, fellow musicians like Pops Staples, The Hothouse Flowers, Taj Mahal, Clarence

'Gatemouth' Brown, Alison Krauss and Doc Watson

who contribute insights and memorable moments of their own. It was an ambitious recording project. At its centre lies an elaborate metaphor, a Canterbury Tale-like conceit, only in song, that is in turn irreverent, political, funny, instructive and even on occasions a touch bawdy.

Superficially a track, say, about fruit, sugar and boiling water appears an unlikely vehicle for intelligent songwriting. Shocked and Doc

Watson take the quirky 'Strawberry Jam', with its holistic themes and gentle comedy, and cleverly impart subtle messages about family and blunter criticism of the dominant food producing Corporations.

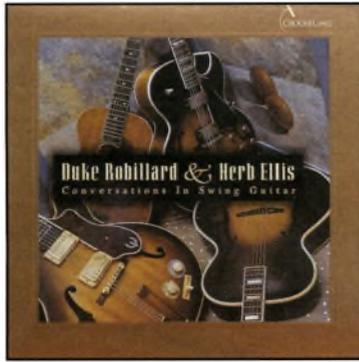
Other special moments have to include 'Jump Jim Crow' (Shocked alongside Taj Mahal),

a deliciously ironic

'Prodigal Daughter' (which explores the unequal treatment of sisters and brothers within families) and a marvellously colloquial dialogue in the title track between farmer and traveller.

Dissenting voices, where Shocked is concerned, have largely tended to follow ideological lines. Their lexicon of quite different adjectives for her minstrelsy varies by degrees depending on how far to the Right beliefs are stretched. Junior, in The Whitehouse, would be an unlikely fan. But, putting political prejudices aside, her celebrated songwriting skills, purposefulness, integrity, humour and ability to recover from some heavy knocks make enviable music whether you disagree with her sentiments or not.





Duke Robillard & Herb Ellis

Conversations in Swing Guitar

Grooveland GLS 107 **180g**

This is a real departure for Robillard who has previously been known for his blues and R&B work. Ellis has been on the jazz scene for decades and has played with many of the greats including Peterson, Ellington and Holiday. Despite the disparity in their ages and backgrounds, Robillard and Ellis take to this set like a pair of ducks (drakes?) to water.

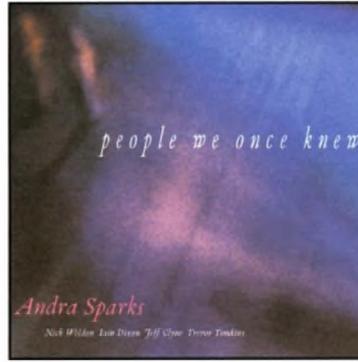
The title sets the agenda although it perhaps suggests a slightly more laid back approach than some of these frenetically paced conversations (take the opening 'Flying Home' which for speed of conversation could even teach my sister in law a thing or two) suggest. The beauty of the set is in the skill of the players: they never lose control, and inject warmth and personality into every note they play. After the opener the album takes in Coleman Hawkins' 'Stuffy', Ellington's 'Squeeze Me' and a good mix of original compositions. The high standard set by the opening number is maintained throughout.

The recording quality is good, a little forward maybe, but that suits the music pretty well. The 180gram album includes a bonus 45rpm LP which repeats 'Flying Home' and 'Moten Swing' from the main album.

Supplier: Vivante – Tel: (44)(0)208 977 6600

DD

RECORDING
MUSIC



Andra Sparks

'People We Once Knew'

Verge 002 **CD**

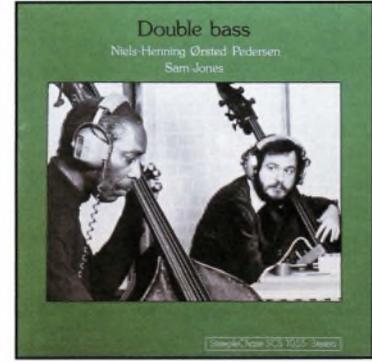
Andra Sparks' background has been in more classical fare – the songs of Poulenc and Samuel Barber are examples – so it was with some trepidation that I bunged this disc into the Copland. Previous classical jazz crossovers just haven't worked for me: too much vibrato, too studied diction being common failings. I needn't have worried. This is a fine debut set. Backed by an excellent quartet featuring Nick Weldon on piano, Iain Dixon on sax and clarinet, Jeff Clyne on bass and Trevor Tomkins on drums. Sparks has a beautiful, expressive voice. Her classical training is evident, but this time in a positive way, a standout example being the Coleman/ Leigh number 'You Fascinate Me So' where every word of the spiralling vocal lines is clear, but with no loss of feeling.

The album comprises a mix of standards and contemporary compositions some of which, for example 'The People We Once Knew', verge a little nearer to show tunes in their treatment (no bad thing). That is until some very fine and well judged playing from Weldon and Clyne keep the jazz core in place.

The recording is clean; nicely three dimensional with Sparks' vocals well projected stage front.

DD

RECORDING
MUSIC



Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen and Sam Jones

Double Bass

SteepleChase SCS 1055 **120g**

There's no arguing that you get just what it says on the sleeve: Two of the worlds best double bass players on a single album. Sensitive accompanied by Philip Catherine on guitar and Billy Higgins, percussion (replaced by Albert Heath on three of the albums eight tracks), the bassists have thankfully chosen favourite numbers on which they lead, Ørsted Pedersen on the left channel, Jones on the right, and have avoided indulgence in unnecessary sparring. I hate all those *Battle of* albums that appeared in the '50's and 60's.

Standout numbers on this fine, enjoyable set include a lilting, Brazilian flavoured 'I Fall In Love Too Easily'; Sam Jones leading his own composition 'Miss Morgan' (some lovely acoustic guitar work from Catherine here); and 'Yesterdays'. The set closes with a rousing take on Villa Lobos' 'Little Train'.

This was never going to be an easy album to record and whilst not outstanding, Emile Elsen has done a pretty good job. The essential character of each player's technique and instrument is well caught, although a little more presence from the accompanying instruments would have been good since the percussion seems a bit lost in the mix.

Recommended.

Supplier: Vivante – www.vivante.co.uk

DD

RECORDING
MUSIC





Handel, Monteverdi, Telemann, Roman

Anne Sophie Von Otter

Proprius PRCD 9008

Anne Sophie Von Otter is one of the great mezzo-sopranos of the modern era and this CD, taken from her 1983 debut solo recording, reveals her full potential at that time. The arias are all taken from the baroque period, and highlight the contrasts of passions that the era personifies, whether it is Cleopatra's hopeless loss and torment in Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, or the satirical grief of Telemann's *Canary Cantata*. Always able to bring forward the charm, elegance, or grace, balanced with sorrow, rejection, and fury, she sings with poise and precision. Sweden's foremost ensemble of baroque music, The Drottningholm Baroque Ensemble, accompanies her beautiful voice with assurance and finesse. Playing on period instruments they achieve a marvellous rhythmic accuracy. The recording, captured in a Stockholm church using a Nagra tape deck, is natural, without being in the demonstration class. It has ambience and plenty of presence, and Von Otter's voice is beautifully presented within a natural space, shimmering in the surrounding air. A CD that beautifully demonstrates the grand postures and extravagant sentiments of baroque period vocal works, as well as an historical insight to the early talent of Sweden's most admired diva of her generation. Recommended.

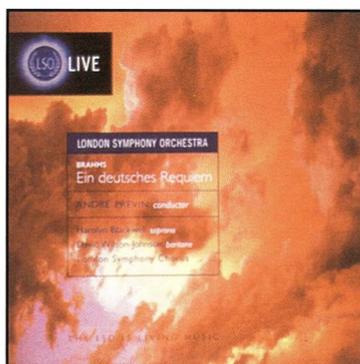
SG

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RECORDING	
MUSIC	



Brahms Ein Deutsches Requiem

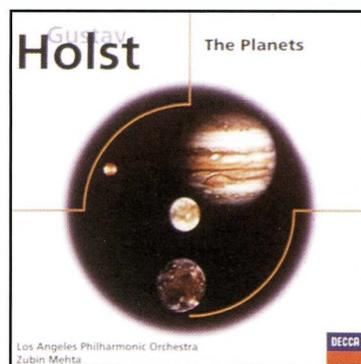
Previn, Soloists; LSO and LSO chorus

LSO Live; LSO-005CD

Back in 1986 Teldec released an epic version of *Ein Deutsches Requiem* with the RPO conducted by Andre Previn lasting nearly 76 minutes. This new live recording from Previn and the LSO, recorded in the Barbican Centre, is notably swifter than the RPO version, being about 9 minutes shorter overall. Perhaps it's the dryish acoustic of the hall, but the new performance hasn't the spacious breadth and grandeur of the old one; there's less atmosphere too, which gives a slightly perfunctory feel to things. Clarity is good, and Brahms' sometimes thick scoring is kept transparent. Deep bass is impressive, with some weighty organ pedals for those with big subwoofers! Sadly, the choral singing is fallible and sounds tonally undernourished, with uncertain intonation - a point enhanced by the dry acoustic and a balance that emphasises the upper frequencies. The recording benefits from being played back at a generous volume level, but even then it does not create the impression of a big hall and massive forces. Previn's old RPO/Teldec version, recorded in the massively reverberant acoustic of All Saints' Church, Tooting, is a little too resonant perhaps, but it recreates the dignity and scale of this monumental work better than this new one which (curiously for a live performance) fails to catch fire.

JMH

RECORDING	
MUSIC	



Holst The Planets Suite

Zubin Mehta, LAPO

Decca Eloquence 467 418-2

In the UK, Zubin Mehta's 1971 Decca *Planets* never raised more than half a cheer among reviewers, being compared unfavourably to Boult's Stellar 1967 HMV account with the New Philharmonia on both sonic and musical grounds. Surprisingly, it was Mehta's version that made it on to the TAS list of best LPs. And it's been sought-after by audiophiles ever since. Actually, it's not a bad version; a fast, showy, virtuoso performance that certainly packs a punch. There are some balance oddities (strangely forward tuba in Mars, for example), but it's all good clean fun. The recording's been out on CD at least twice before, but for this new remastering, something called Ambient Surround Imaging (AMSI) has been used to 'improve' the sound. On LP, the tonal balance was on the thick side, with a full bottom end and smooth top. Original pressings sound best - most later recuts were at a lower level - though early '80s US copies (pressed in Holland) sound excellent. AMSI has given the sound a slight presence kick, increasing impact and brilliance, and I slightly prefer this new reissue to my Weekend and Double Decca copies. The filler is the suite from John Williams' film score to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, plus the main title from *Star Wars* - both played with the brilliance and panache one expects from musicians based so close to Hollywood. Here the sound is very good - vintage late '70s Decca - especially *Close Encounters*.

JMH

RECORDING	
MUSIC	



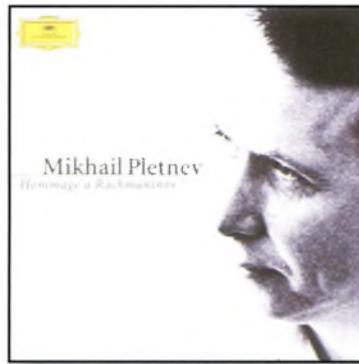
Mahler Das Lied von der Erde

Bernard Haitink
Royal Concertgebouw orchestra

Philips Eloquence 468 182-2 

On vinyl this was always among the best recordings, technically, of *Das Lied*. This is its third outing on CD, and for this budget-price reissue, the 1975 recording has been newly remastered using AMSI (Ambient Surround Imaging) technology. This has sharpened the tonal balance slightly, making it sound more immediate. Unfortunately, this brightening-up has made James King's tenor voice (already rather strained) seem even more strident and edgy. If your system's very smooth and refined, it'll probably sound okay. But, if your equipment produces a forward balance, the result may be harsh and shouty. Haitink's performance is sensitive but full-blooded, and the orchestra play with great intensity and passion. James King was somewhat past his best when the recording was made, and his singing lacks refinement and richness of tone. Janet Baker's contribution is something of a mixed bag too, though her many fans (who waited patiently for her to record the work) would doubtless disagree. Speaking personally, I find her singing too obvious in its emotional point making, and prefer a stronger purer line - for example, the horribly droopy entry to *Der Einsame im Herbst!* Yet there's no doubting the sincerity of her performance; clearly she feels the words deeply - the long final song is very moving at times.

JMH



Mikhail Pletnev

Hommage à Rachmaninov

Deutsche Grammophon 459 634-2 

This CD is a virtuoso recital of music played in concert by Rachmaninov, performed on the composer's majestic sounding Steinway, at his own villa near Lucerne. This is a performance of stature, but while Pletnev plays with passion and an underlying fire, he does not reveal the last word in finesse. Whether it is the composer's own works, or Chopin's *Grande Polonoise*, he shows a complete affinity with the music, but is slightly less happy with the Germanic tones of Beethoven and Mendelssohn. Having said that this recording is no less than compelling, with the pianist showing pristine technique, and excellent rhythm and phrasing in Rachmaninov's *Variations on a theme of Corelli*.

The recording is detailed and dynamic - to match the performance - revealing the size, impact, and tonal qualities of this impressive instrument. The sound is only let down by the closeness of the recording, giving the impression that you are almost inside the piano - impressive but far from natural.

On the whole, this is a wonderful performance, recorded impressively, but ultimately let down in both areas by a lack of finesse. But, it is still well worth having to hear a passionate performance of Rachmaninov's work performed on the composer's own wonderful piano.

SG



Respighi Feste Romane; Pini di Roma

Lorin Maazel,
The Cleveland Orchestra

Decca Legends 466 993-2 

Originally released in 1977, Maazel's LP of Respighi showpieces was one of Decca's sonic blockbusters; a recording that pushed vinyl to its limits. In *Feste Romane* especially, the sound had ferocious power and weight, yet the orchestra was nicely set back in a lively spacious acoustic that imparted a sense of depth and atmosphere to the proceedings. Although climaxes had enormous impact, there always seemed to be plenty of space for the music to grow and expand. Maazel has all the necessary stick technique for this sort of music, and in the Cleveland orchestra he had a disciplined virtuoso ensemble able to meet every challenge. Although nearly 25 years old, the recording wears its years lightly and still impresses. Only the rather fulsome bass gives the game away. That and the fact that the very wide dynamic range of these rather over-blown pieces is slightly stage-managed by the engineers (Wilkie at the controls) to keep everything within bounds. The two Respighi items have been out on CD before, but this new 96kHz/24bit remastering sounds slightly cleaner and fuller. However, the filler - the suite from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Coq d'or* - is new to silver disc. Here, the sound is not quite as good nor is the playing quite so distinguished, with Maazel delivering a well-drilled but somewhat perfunctory performance that fails to catch fire.

JMH





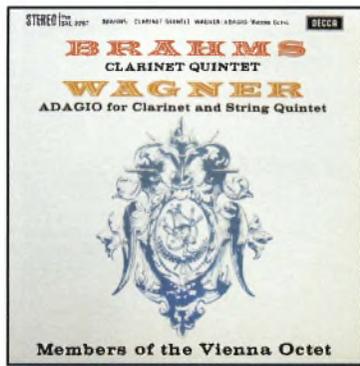
Beethoven
5th Symphony and Egmont Overture

Pierre Monteux / LSO

Classic RCA VICS-1103 180g 1

Beethoven's *5th symphony* is cursed, like *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, by its familiar opening passage. How many of you have listened beyond it, would recognise the second movement, or even the third? But the 5th's reputation as possibly THE classical symphony is well deserved, and for any conductor to carry it off he must nail all three. Of course, given its popularity there's no shortage of secondhand offerings, especially those from Karajan and Klemperer, which perhaps explains the paucity of audiophile repressings. There are only two: the one in the AAA/Rene Liebowitz *Nine Symphonies* box set, and now the Monteux/LSO reading first seen in 1965, released on Victorola a year after the conductor's death. Spread over most of two sides it's the Monteux that offers superior dynamic range and focus (although not perhaps the same coherence of soundstage). Purists might find the performance marred by an overly quick exposition of the (in)famous opening theme, but Monteux takes the whole piece at a fair clip, with a majestic second capped only by the masterful third movement. The *Egmont* makes a great filler and RCA's sumptuous, velvety tone is perfectly suited to both performance and work, while Monteux's inimitable command breathes new life into the familiar. Go on - treat yourself.

Supplier: Vivante - Tel: (44)(0)208 977 6600
RG



Brahms / Wagner
Clarinet Qunitet / Adagio

Members of the Vienna Octet

Speakers Corner DECCA SXL 2297 1

A facsimile of DECCA's 1961 release in almost every department, these performances from Members of the Vienna Octet are highly commendable. Their approach to Brahms' contemplative and colourful work has character, poise and virtuosity. Alfred Boskovsky's richly ambient clarinet tone spreads warmth throughout all four movements, while a fine sense of ensemble (that interaction of musicians drawing upon one another, which is integral to these small scale compositions) is never in doubt with this gentle interpretation. An excellent recording compliments a relaxed reading. Cello, violins, viola and clarinet are beautifully reproduced, as is the natural timbre of Johann Krump's double bass in the Weberian styled 'Adagio'. In terms of sheer presence and transparency, this recut outshines the splendid sound available from my original 1D pressing of this LP in which the instruments were a touch leaner and less rounded. A good stereo soundstage, and the secure location of the individual musicians playing in their own space within it, completes the overall picture. Despite the record also being recut by King Super Analogue KIJC 9122 these smallscale works consistently get overlooked in favour of orchestral sonic blockbusters. So buck the trend and enjoy the intimate pleasures of the Chamber.

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RP



Dvorak
Cello Concerto

Fournier, Szell, Berlin Phil

Speakers Corner/DGG SLPM 138 755 180g 2

Though I yearn for a reissue of Janos Starker's larger-than-life Mercury recording (where Antal Dorati really does put the LSO through its' paces) this release, courtesy of Speakers Corner, is certainly no poor substitute.

Pierre Fournier gives a wonderfully relaxed reading. Unashamedly romantic, his grand sweeping vision for this work (ravishing in tone and phrasing) has the cello elevate Dvorak's notes into a magnificent realisation of dignity, beauty and tension. The slower, poetical passages, are simply beguiling and, (proving that he has the complete armoury), Fournier then goes on to raise the temperature further - even to beyond boiling point - in a finale which is as virile and exciting as Starker's. Moreover, this was one of Deutsche Grammophon's better engineered LPs from which this enhanced repressing delivers an abundance of warmth for the cello's deeply resonant moments.

The recording balance, pushing the soloist forward, but not into your lap (à la Starker) is also extremely well-executed. Bowing may sound slightly exaggerated, yet, when placed within an orchestral context under George Szell's vice-like grip, it does make complete sense. We are, after all, listening to a record and this positioning hits the sweet-spot every time.

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RP





Led Zeppelin 2

Classic Records / Atlantic 508236



'Classic Album' is a much abused term, but in this case its use is not only justified, its mandatory. The fourth album may get all the attention due to 'Stairway To Heaven' but as far as I'm concerned 2 is the brightest star in the Zeppelin firmament. After this they may have become more considered and sophisticated, but in the process I feel a little life was lost. Now we have the chance to thrill again to the familiar *Top Of The Pops* riff of 'Whole Lotta Love', marvel at the unsophisticated but fun stereo ping pong of the guitar on 'What Is And What Should Never Be', and air guitar round the room during 'Heartbreaker'. If you consider yourself a rock fan and don't know every riff, bend, and break on here, then you really haven't been paying attention. This transfer to Vinyl is probably the best this album has ever had, full of verve and vigour, giving Page's guitar the body it needs for the ultimate impact, freeing up the rhythm section to keep things cracking along, and letting Plant's voice soar free above the maelstrom. Simply stunning. If you only buy one audiophile LP this year, make it this one. Oh, and a quick message to Classic Records: "For the love of God, don't stop now".

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RECORDING
MUSIC



Paganini / Wienawski Violin Concertos.

Rabin / Goossens / Philharmonia

Testament / Capitol SP 8534



A fluent, extremely versatile and sometimes astonishing Michael Rabin shows a remarkable technique that has the capacity to make us believe that the music is better than it really is. This is especially true of the Wienawski *Second Concerto*. Whilst it possesses many nice moments of virtuosity – amongst them the gypsy-styled finale and earlier sonorous lyric line – this is still not quite in the same league as Paganini's bold, exhibitionist D Major work. Fiendishly contrived for a violinist of it's composers' own legendary stature, this is an exacting Concerto that needs the soloist on top of his art at all times. Not only must he be the master of precision timing, but there also needs to be a correspondingly flashy show of catwalk cockiness to carry off all the chords and harmonics in this one. Rabin, with unbelievable fluidity and a lovely (tonally rich) shape, does this with panache, right from the diabolically difficult first movement, and never looks back. An older Rabin might just have generated a little more personality, but that's being picky. The orchestral support is good, although not flawless, as Sir Eugene occasionally gooses it. A decent, well-balanced, piece of engineering compensates with plenty of space, warmth and detail.

RP
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RECORDING
MUSIC



Swedish Jazz Kings (featuring Kenny Davern)

Comes Love

Opus 3 9703



I first became familiar with the clarinet playing of Kenny Davern on the 1980 recording *Tomas Örnberg's Blue Five* (now available as Opus 3 CD 8003). Once again the big, dynamic, sound he produces is the highlight of an excellent album and although his style is pretty unique, it matches that of the Swedish Jazz Kings superbly. The music on this CD is typical of the classic jazz of the 1920's – a mixture of blues and swing – and is produced here by probably the best exponents of the style, this side of the Atlantic. Their performance is unpretentious, with great piano playing by Englishman Martin Litton.

The recording was made during three sessions, in May and September 1997, and is pretty typical of the high quality found on Opus 3. If I had to be ultra critical, I would prefer a slightly deeper soundstage, but the recording is far from flat. The tones are lifelike, with all instruments having real presence, especially the crisp saxophone of Tomas Örnberg. There is plenty of detail and it sounds like you are in a small club.

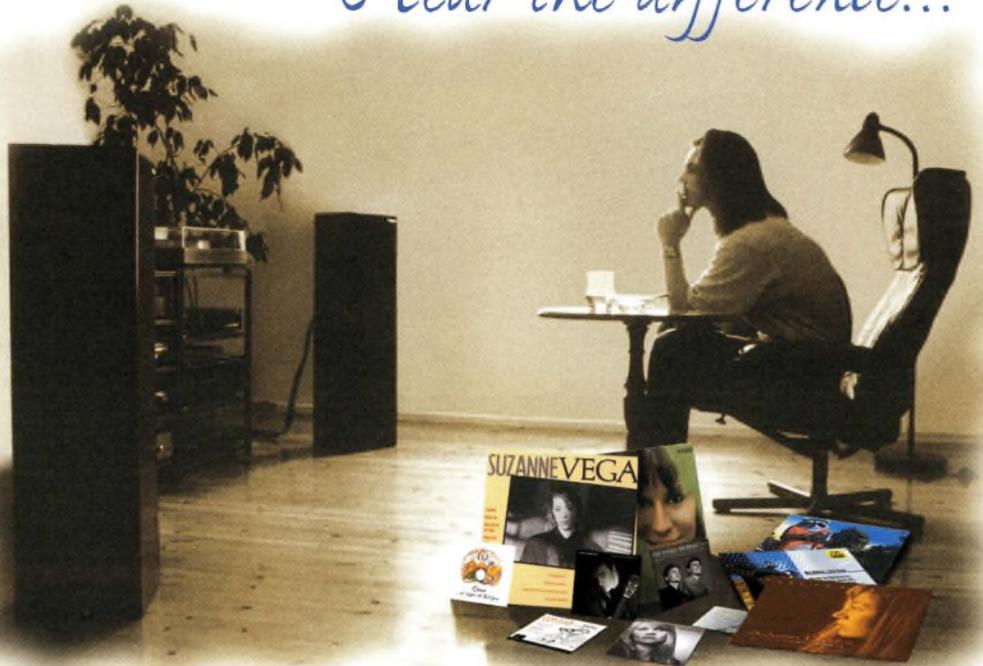
While much jazz clarinet can sound jaded, this album, and Davern's playing, put those notions to rest.

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Audio Atmosphere	Pg 95	Heatherdale	Pg 54	Premier Audio	Pg 55
Audio Consultants	Pg 63	hi fi for sale.com	Pg 121	Progressive Audio	Pg 54
Audio Counsel	Pg 104	Howards	Pg 54	Radfords	Pg 105
Audio Craft	Pg 62	Infidelity	Pg 112	Radlett Audio	Pg 112
Audio Image	Pg 55	Kef	Pg 2	Rayleigh Hi Fi	Pg 105
Audio Reference	Pg 7	Kevin Galloway	Pg 95	Ringmat Developments	Pg 27
Audio Synergy (Sugden)	Pg 49	Leicester Hi Fi	Pg 105	RogueAudio	Pg 62
Audio TV/ Audio Excellence	Pg 13	Michell	Pg 75	Ruark	Pg 39
Audiofreaks	Pg 28	Midland Audio Exchange	Pg 55	Russ Andrews Accessories	Pg 15
Auditorium	Pg 85	Mike Manning	Pg 104	Signals	Pg 55
B & W	BC	Monitor Audio	Pg 7	Sound Image	Pg 73
Basically Sound	Pg 111	Moth	Pg 94	Sound Organisation	Pg 112
Better Hi Fi	Pg 105	Movement Audio	Pg 63	Sounds of Music	Pg 5
Castle Sound & Vision	Pg 112	Music Works	Pg 75	Sounds Perfection	Pg 55
Cherished Records	Pg 47	Naim	IBC	The Cartridge Man	Pg 95
Chestergate	Pg 84	Neat Acoustics	Pg 94	The Chord Company	Pg 9
Cornflake.co.uk	Pg 112	New Audio Frontiers	Pg 111	The Right Note	Pg 74
Definitive Audio	Pg 49	Nordost (UK)	Pg 18	Thomas Heinitz	Pg 111
First Vinyl	Pg 121	Oranges & Lemons	Pg 112	Trichord	Pg 85
Fortissimo	Pg 105	Path Premier	IFC	UKD	Pg 28
Garrard/Loricraft	Pg 74	Pear Audio	Pg 74	Ultimate Sonics	Pg 17
				Vivante	Pg 140
				Walrus	Pg 48
				Wollaton Audio	Pg 62

The Lure of The Lyrita

by Reuben Parry

Of all the Independent classical music labels from the U.K. there's one above all others that has a real mystique surrounding it. Lyrita Recorded Edition, the spiritual home of British Composers, released a hundred stereo LPs between 1966 and 1984. The relatively infrequent addition of performances to the catalogue can be directly linked to financial constraints – many of the records being sponsored by Private Companies, Charitable Music Trusts and eminent organisations like the Arts Council. Although there were a number of earlier (equally eclectic) mono recordings, including Horsley's *Piano Music* (RCS.9) and the Randell, *Fantasy Waltzes* and *Sonata alla Toccata* (RCS.16), it tends to be the "stereos" that set collector's hearts a racing. They began with a selection of John Ireland's *Orchestral Music, London Overture / Concertino / Pastorale* (SRCS.31) and closed on a rather tired note when the Elgar *Symphonies* (SRCS.131/132), which the LPO had cut under Sir Adrian Boult's baton in 1968, were reissued as a double album.

Having seen Lyritas go priced as cheaply as 15p (charity shops) and watched supplicants willingly part with as much as £75.00 from a dealer for the Malcolm Arnold *English, Scottish and Cornish Dances* (SRCS.109), I'm minded to ask a rhetorical question. Are they really worth the asking price? I will prevaricate. Some Lyritas are musically more significant than others and most, with the exception of a few later Dutch pressings done in the 1980s, are exceptionally fine-sounding.

A repertoire hierarchy is the more difficult and subjective of topics, so the simplest thing is to first deal with the pressing variations. There are three of them to look out for courtesy of DECCA, NIMBUS and subsequent European repressings. They are all easily identified through a quick examination around the record run out grooves. The DECCAs employ their standard matrix, typeface and stamper numbers. For example, my Holst *Double Concerto* (SRCS.44) where Imogen Holst conducts the



English Chamber Orchestra, has the ZLY – 5087 1W / ZLY – 5088 2W numbering format engraved on both sides of the record. The NIMBUS cuts have the words "NIMBUS ENGLAND" pressed into the run out and, lastly, later European pressings have their "hand written" matrix numbers scrawled into the vinyl. Given the generally poor standard of LP pressing during the Eighties these Continental cuts are still very good. Leaner sounding than those from DECCA or NIMBUS, they do not, however, suffer from those frequent pressing faults found on many records at a time when vinyl quality control

was virtually non-existent. The DECCA and NIMBUS LPs, though, are universally excellent. Moreover, all the Lyritas were at one time or another pressed by either DECCA or NIMBUS – even the last Lyrita, proper, the Vaughan Williams *Piano Concerto* (SRCS.130) is a NIMBUS. Sometimes, as with the Arnold *Dances*, there are pressings from all three sources to be had.

While DECCA's World famous New Malden record plant needs little praise from me, and enough has been said of the later foreign efforts, the NIMBUS cuts perhaps require further exploration. Nimbus Records (who will be the subject of a future article) had their own mastering and manufacturing facilities, as well as a recording studio at Wyastone Leys in Monmouth. During the Seventies and the Eighties they independently produced, recorded and released a series of classical performances – concentrating upon Sonatas and Chamber works by the likes of Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Franck, Kodaly, Schubert and Soler. Many will also recall the superb series of Supercuts done by Nimbus for Practical Hi-Fi magazine.

They included reworkings of Elgar's *Second Symphony* (EMI ASD 3266) and a delightful Delius concert from 1958 (EMI ASD 357) with Sir Thomas Beecham and the RPO. It gave Nimbus Records the necessary credentials to take over the pressing of Lyritas from DECCA when (in an act of analogue criminality) the New Malden plant was closed. Where the technicalities are concerned my advice is simple – always be

▶ prepared to part with a little more cash when it's a DECCA or NIMBUS pressed LP.

Returning to the hoary old question of placing repertoire in some sort of order of merit, I am greatly aided by a recent slump in Lyrita prices. Many classical specialist shops have always known that their long-suffering customers were prepared to pay a premium for these records. A blanket price, regardless of title, has for years hovered between £15.00 to £20.00 an album – prices that milked the collector. Few shops, however, bothered to differentiate between (say) a William Alwyn *Symphony* or an Absolute Sound listed record like the Gerald Finzi *Intimations of Immortality* (SRCS.75), which I guess (especially for audiophiles) must be the more desirable of the two. I was pleased to learn that the across-the-board ask had now fallen to around £7.50 an album. Personally, I wouldn't dream of paying ten times this sum to dance to Arnold's expensive tunes, but there are still a number of Lyritas that I would recommend paying a premium for.

At home, amongst the record shelves, are approximately half of the listed Lyritas. Enough to provide a strong cross-section from which to assess the relative merits of our idiosyncratic composers recorded there.

Whilst all the performances are uniformly good, (as one would anticipate from the LPO, Philharmonia, RPO and English Chamber Orchestras under the batons of English conductors like Boult, Del Mar, Braithwaite and Handley – with some outstanding contributions by soloists of the calibre of Eric Parkin, Ossian Ellis, John Ogden and Robert Tear thrown in as well), it is still not always possible to be consumed with enthusiasm for (say) Rubbra's *Symphonies*, or another reading of *Falstaff* and those deadly *Enigma*

Variations (SRCS.77). Oh! and don't forget a seemingly endless procession of Overtures and Marches. OK, so I'll admit to being guilty of flippancy. When these records are reasonably priced, I buy them, without hesitation. However, there are a few Lyritas which are well worth a concerted effort to track down and I've selected half a dozen of them here as my preferred choices.

I have a great fondness for old warhorses, and a definite sentimental weakness where a musician's close association with a composer or work are concerned. Ernest J. Moeran's three movement *Cello Concerto in B Minor* (SRCS.43) fosters these feelings by successfully combining a wily and sympathetically focused reading from Sir Adrian Boult and the LPO, with that genuinely heartfelt bow work of Peers Coetmore (Moeran's widow and dedicatee of a concerto that was written in 1945 as a present for their wedding). Delius-like, these very English pastoral themes – melodic, vigorous and lyrical – reach back towards the composer's past (his father was a Celt) to draw out a lively Scottish dance (reel), love-song and celebratory jig in the Concerto's concluding allegro con brio. It is a beautifully illustrated piece scored for normal orchestra and structured to give the soloist immediate impact through a long melodic opening.



This is not a record without shortcomings. Peers Coetmore is an able cellist, but not a virtuoso one. I've chosen to ignore this fact because her close emotional attachment to this work favourably influences the playing. She more than proves that an intensely moving interpretation can occasionally allow those niceties of technique to be placed aside.

A wholly endearing and exceptionally well-recorded Concerto is complimented by two decent fillers: a tuneful and unmistakably Irish-flavoured, *Rhapsody No 2*, and the high-spirits, pomp and circumstance of an *Overture for a Masque*. Enjoy this music and the natural progression to Moeran's cello-based chamber recital (SRCS.42) and an impressive *Violin Concerto* (SRCS.105) will be assured.

There's a brace of Gerald Finzi compositions that sit proudly at the top of my Lyrita list which should also receive your special attention. They are the truly expressive *Clarinet Concerto Op. 31* (SRCS.92) – definitely one of his finest efforts – and an ambitious *Cello Concerto Op. 40* (SRCS.112) that should rightly be allowed to stand alongside the Walton and Elgar concertos for its' sheer power and poignancy. In both cases the conductor is Vernon Handley. His approach with (respectively) the New Philharmonia and Royal Philharmonic Orchestras is a revelation. These concertos demand a tremendous degree of sensitivity to effectively draw a balance between ▶



▶ pastoral lyricism on the one hand, and that overriding presence of Finzi's personality on the other. The understanding achieved here, through each set of orchestral players, is unrivalled where recordings of these works are concerned. The eloquent soloists, too, offer up significant insights of their own.

In his mid-twenties, the youthful spirited Yo Yo Ma gave Lyrta a genuine uninhibited exhibition of his art. The infectious notes from a 1722 Goffriller cello unequivocally speaks of the passion and force present within this concerto. It's an appropriate, valid and symbolic reading, because Ma draws inspiration from Finzi – himself a man possessed by the deep mistrust of virtuosity – who knew when writing this, his final work, that he was dying of leukaemia. To place emotion ahead of precision playing in this context, is an instance when a display of flawed genius is genius.

It can be heard in an ominous, energy-filled, first movement. The *Allegro Moderato* allows Yo Yo Ma to infuse its' themes with an unburdened poetical style. Giving way to a more spiritual second movement – there is time for contemplation and yet more sensitivity. Ma again delivers. Later, a strongly autobiographical *Adagio-Allegro Giocoso* sees the return to a probing and passionate advocacy by this cellist. In typical Finzi fashion, the movement collects our composer's feelings of urgency and frustration at being near death to bravely instil a

brighter mood in the closing *Rondo*. Terrific performance. Great music. Superb recording and DECCA cut.

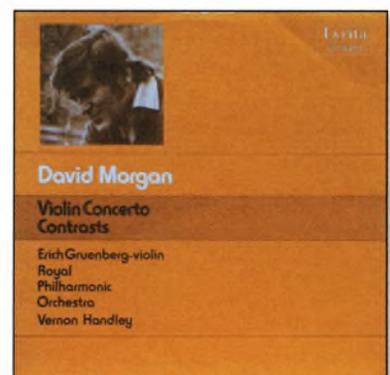
Less contemplative and more expansive, the clarinet score (SRCS.92) is especially memorable for a piquant finale that so embodies the landscapes in which it was written, that those fine panoramic views across the Hampshire Downs are effortlessly brought to mind. This musical recreation of the English Countryside is greatly aided by Finzi's unconventional use of the clarinet. Released from its traditional role as an "opposing voice" the full potential in John Denman's reedwork is realised by a composer who (drawing deeply upon noted skills as a writer of song) freely explores all the vocal-like tonal qualities available from this instrument.

Back-peddalling to a second movement *Adagio* and the versatile (and ethereal) clarinet notes are differently employed – this time as a counterpoint to the seriousness of Finzi's string music orchestrations. Another supreme strength is the *Concerto's* compact nature. Finzi's concentrated approach avoids the potential pitfalls of sluggish (meandering) pastoral cul-de-sacs. Which is why, from the opening bars of an *Allegro Vigoroso*, a balance between energy and repose is perfectly struck. Here, beauty and momentum are given equal propriety until side one (and the concerto) finally closes.

Contrasting fillers feature strongly on side-two. They are a lively and quite daring, *Grand Fantasia and Toccata Op.38*, (that often switches between idioms as diverse as the Baroque and those patterns and harmonics familiar from twentieth century Russian music), and a graceful certainty found amongst the chords of *The Eclogue Op.10*. Both pieces were conceived for piano and orchestra – the latter with New Philharmonia strings. Front man, in

each case, is an impeccable, considered and empathic Peter Katin, whose presence is some bonus.

A "make-weight" on one of my other favourite LPs, is a dark and brooding study in duality. The first movement, heavily dependant upon a melodic representation of a Shostakovich musical monogram, *D-S-C-H*, has Vernon Handley and the RPO (who, incidently, were the first performers of this work in 1975) excel throughout some very un-English moments of power, violence and morbidity.



Contrasts 1974 (SRCS.97), as it's title suggests, differs greatly in its second movement. Optimism brightly burns, here in a more traditional, sonata-like, form. Stretching almost to symphonic proportions, the seriousness of David Morgan's vision cannot be underestimated. Nor can his scoring skills for an intriguing *Violin Concerto*, (found on side one of this record), ever be doubted.

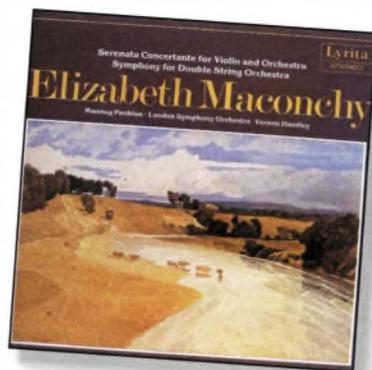
In three movements, (employing an oversized orchestra that includes more than a dozen percussion instruments), he adopts a noticeably formal structure. A slow-building opener, with Eric Gruenberg's violin, picking over those main themes about the powerlessness of an individual against irresistible forces of modern society, leads into a heavily autobiographical second movement. Where our soloist's virtuosity

▶ develops "... the struggle, aspirations and despair of the individual" and the oppressive, inescapable and fatalistic role of the orchestra creates a sense that the "... destiny that nobody wants but everybody must share" will ultimately overtake us. By the time Gruenberg launches into the false optimism of an *Allegro Deciso* and wild instinctive coda, it is clear that all will be swept aside through another unstoppable orchestral barrage. A recording, which places a high value upon detail and transparency, beautifully reveals the violin's personality and character, as it challenges and competes, only to succumb to those battalions ranged against it.

Strangely, in spite of the thematic material, the lyrical influence of Walton, Vaughan Williams and Delius do regularly appear, yet Morgan's edge, here, comes from a style that embraces the likes of Bartok, Berg, Shostakovich and Stravinsky close to his chest.

A gem in the Lyrita crown was the 1985 collection of works by a composer who tragically died at Tobruk during those sweeping Western Desert battles of 1942. Walter Leigh's infrequently recorded music is a versatile, non-autobiographical and rewarding experience which, in many ways is more indebted to the Eighteenth Century. His *Concertino for Harpsichord and String Orchestra* (1934), *Music for String Orchestra* (1931-2), *Overture and Dance from the Frogs* (1936), (SRCS. 126), are three compositions that have imitative and adaptive qualities indelibly written into them. Pastoral lyricism, this is not, but they do possess an Elgar-like depth to their wide ranging melodies.

Frogs and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are examples of pieces written specifically for the theatre. Interesting comparisons to Mendelssohn can be heard – the string parts are drawn with meticulous care – while Dionysian themes in both, sharply affect our



senses through lively scorings for flute, clarinet, trumpet, horn and violins.

However, to my mind, it's that *Continuo* and *Music for Strings* which are the precious stones in this Nimbus setting. Nicholas Braithwaite and the LPO are joined here by Trevor Pinnock's harpsichord for an elegant, French-styled, neo-classical chamber work that is as lovely as it is accessible.

The *Music for Strings* is another tightly, yet simply, structured four movement invention. Concise? Yes. The third movement lasts little more than two minutes, but the music never seems hurried or incomplete. A fulfilling piece that gives an impression of tremendous space and freedom particularly through satisfying bow-work amongst the violins.

Any one of those five Lyritas featured so far could, depending on mood, be my top choice. At the moment, though, accolades must go to an Anglo-Irish composer whose, *Serenata Concertante for Violin and Orchestra* (1962) and the *Symphony for Double String Orchestra* (1953), (SRCS. 116), are wonderfully reminiscent of Michael Tippett and Ralph Vaughan Williams at their best. The gloss is only ever so slightly taken off by a Continental pressing source for my LP. I guess, if I was grading this for the Classical Music section of Hi-Fi +, I'd award it a seven out of ten. Which is still well above average for recording quality. However, I would keenly look out for a DECCA or NIMBUS cut to illuminate proceedings further, because even this slightly second-rate pressing can not disguise

an incandescent and vividly detailed string tone found within Elizabeth Maconchy's traditionally flavoured compositional textures. Opening with a highly-rated, *Serenata*, there is a sparing use of percussion and brass instruments, but this is still a violin concerto in all but name. The London Symphony players, under Handley's impressive direction, rise to the occasion and deliver a superbly committed set of performances from each and every orchestral department. The soloist, too, is excellent. Though I admit to knowing relatively little about Manoug Parikian, outside of the fact that it was this violinist who debuted the work some twenty years earlier. The simply expressed lyricism is a revelation.

The *Symphony*, as Maconchy herself suggests, has "weight and serious content..." but "...does not conform to the conventional idea of a Symphony, which is harmonically, rather than contrapuntally, organised." The significance of this is reflected by those opposing ranks of orchestral string players. All four movements are beautifully scored in that way, but a slow-burning *Fassacaglia* is definitely worth the proverbial entrance fee alone, as the theme moves from cellos to violins, and from there to the violas before returning, with some vigour, to a highest violin register. Maconchy is ambitious, imaginative and Brit Pop lyrical.

My concluding thoughts on Lyrita Recorded Edition. Well, an unparalleled advocacy for British Music, sympathetically interpreted and so brilliantly played and recorded, may not (topically) appeal to all, but there has never been a better (or should that be more cost-effective) opportunity to experience Lyrita. Go find before record price fluctuations turn in the wrong direction and collecting once again becomes an expensive pastime.

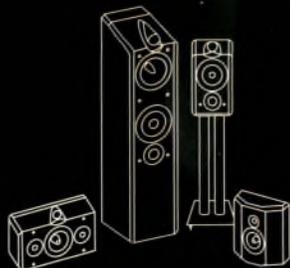


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