

# hi-fi+

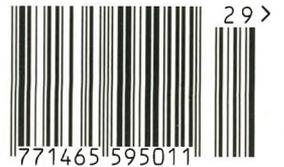
Issue 29  
UK £3.95

## AWARDS ISSUE

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS



The **Blue Pearl Turntable** was supported by **Reimyo**, **Audio Research** and **Vitus Audio** electronics. Not forgetting the **Alon**, **Ferguson Hill** and **JMlab** speakers, or the new **Naim** budget components. Just right for **Talking Heads!**



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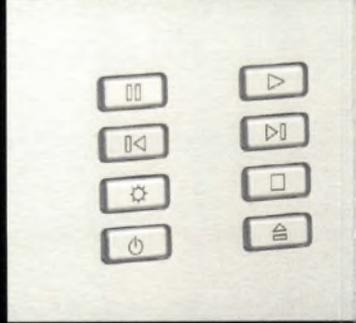
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# Editorial

## Editor

Roy Gregory

## Contributors

David Ayers  
Chris Binns  
Mark Childs  
Richard Clews  
Martin Colloms  
Sian Drinkwater  
Richard S Foster  
Alvin Gold  
Simon Groome  
Jason Hector  
Andrew Hobbs  
Jimmy Hughes  
Jason Kennedy  
Scot Markwell  
Mike Mercer  
Paul Messenger  
Reuben Parry  
Alan Sircom  
Chris Thomas

## Photography

Simon Marsh

## Cartoonist

Dave Davies  
Thomas Divita

## Design

Creative Byte  
Poole, Dorset  
Tel. 01202 690990  
E-mail. info@creativebyte.co.uk

## Printed By

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## The Editorial Office can be contacted at:

Hi-Fi+ Editorial  
Unit 12, Albany Business Park  
Cabot Lane  
Poole, Dorset  
BH17 7BX  
United Kingdom  
Tel. (44)(0)1202-659380  
Fax. (44)(0)1202-659540  
Net. www.hifiplus.com  
Advertising:  
Rebecca Bird  
Tel/Fax. 0208 763-1277  
Email. sales@hifiplus.com

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Well, that certainly provoked a response: The Nordost power cord review that is. Okay, so I printed a couple of letters on the subject, and wrote a short reply. But that only chips the surface of the torrent of mail we received, and the message seems remarkably consistent: Where's the proof? The measurements? The science? But what people really want is certainty. They want someone else to demonstrate, in unequivocal terms, preferably with nice, unambiguous numbers, that what they're told (or what they hear) is actually so. Well, unfortunately, you aren't going to get them.

Let's review the situation:

Most people accept that mains leads make a difference to the sound of your system.

Nobody I've spoken to has a coherent or comprehensive theory as to why.

There is no science to support the aural observations.

The aural effects are all too obvious.

So, should we hold off recommending expensive mains leads in fear of snake-oil and bull-shit?

Take a glass of a decent red wine. With your hand on the base, swirl it clockwise for thirty seconds or so. Now taste it. Roll it on your tongue, really feel the complexity and roundness of the flavour. Now, swirl it anti-clockwise for another thirty seconds and taste again.

The difference is definitely there, it's not subtle, and I have not the slightest idea why it happens. Nor does anybody else I've spoken to. Now, given the potential cost of a good bottle of red wine (a decent Petrus is well on a par with most mains cables – and doesn't last nearly as long) should I hold off buying serious vintages? No, but I'm going to make damn sure that I swirl them clockwise – unless they come from the Southern Hemisphere of course...



**BELOW**  
FRESCO CENTER / REAR CHANNEL  
MOSAIC LOUSPEAKERS  
GROTTO SUB WOOFER

**LEFT**  
PRODIGY LOUSPEAKER  
**BOTTOM**  
CLARITY LOUSPEAKER



# MARTIN LOGAN

**ABSOLUTE SOUNDS'** commitment to Martin Logan has been rewarded with a line of hybrid electrostatic speakers so comprehensive that it now encompasses every permutation of home theatre and audiophile performance, and a price band from entry-level to cutting edge. Because of their sheer beauty - both aural and visual - the Statement Evolution 2, Prodigy, Odyssey, Ascent i, Aeon i and Clarity have established hybrid electrostatic technology as the obvious choice for those who want state-of-the-art sound without suffering a profusion of ugly boxes.

All of the speakers are immediately recognisable as Martin Logan products because of the peerless, oft-imitated, room-friendly appearance, with the captivating see-through panels and furniture grade finish. Best of all, the sound is as clear as the panels themselves. This year, in recognition of its astonishing performance and sensible price, the Clarity - the 'baby' of the line - won the coveted EISA award, proving that the Martin Logan look and the sound are acknowledged across Europe.

For the new season, Martin Logan has applied its years of experience to even smaller, room-friendlier systems suitable for a wider range of applications, by launching a second hybrid technology called ATF. Martin Logan had already demonstrated its skills with home theatre applications with the Theater i and Cinema i centre-channel models, the Script i main and surround speakers, the awesome Descent self-powered subwoofer and its baby sister, the Depth.

Thanks to ATF, an even wider audience can savor the Martin Logan experience. The ultra-compact Fresco hybrids can be used horizontally or vertically, wall- or shelf-mounted above or to the sides of plasma or other flat-screen display, while the Mosaic and Montage floor-standing models have the look of a 'baby Clarity'. Even the subwoofer's size has been addressed: the new ATF designs work wonderfully with the Grotto, literally a miniature Depth!



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**absolutesounds ltd.**  
58 Durham Road, London SW20 0TW  
T 020 8971 3909 F 020 8879 7962  
[www.absolutesounds.com](http://www.absolutesounds.com)  
[info@absolutesounds.com](mailto:info@absolutesounds.com)



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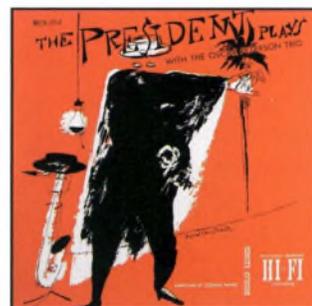
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We strongly believe that technical specifications are not the real key in sound reproduction. Our loudspeakers give real life and space to your music. Our first design is possibly the best example of this concept. The Model One has an extremely spatial sound image, it has rhythm, emotion and their frequency behaviour is incredibly coherent. Despite its size the Model One gives true and dynamic bass. These tones change easily to medium and higher frequencies: coherence is the key to a real music experience. Every principle of our design philosophy is used in the Model One in the most essential way: difficult simplicity. Maybe that's the reason why it has become our best-known speaker. The press have rewarded us repeatedly and are continually surprised by it. For many people, the Model One is a statement in hi-fi, a reference at any price. Many recording studios are using the Model One. Who knows if it will also be an important Totem in your life. We named this speaker "Model One" because, as a company, we wanted to choose something unpretentious. We also wanted to indicate that it was not only our first model, but our prime model!

To receive information on our full range of products, please send your address to [info@joenit.com](mailto:info@joenit.com) or call 003215 285585

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# Incoming!

Please address letters to the Editor at Hi-Fi+, Unit 12 Albany Business Park, Cabot Lane, Poole, Dorset, BH17 7BX.  
or via the web-site at [www.hifiplus.com](http://www.hifiplus.com)

Dear Sir,

I decided to take Mr Gregory's advice and went out and purchased the Philips DV963SA reviewed in issue 27 without even so much as an audition. While I have not really regretted doing so, I was reminded of how "relative" matters hi-fi really are. More specifically regarding the stereo SACD performance of the Philips compared to my 2 year old (and four times more expensive) CD player. Aside from the thinner tonal balance of the Philips what really surprised me was the CD player's superior soundstaging and its ability to flesh out the performers creating an altogether more believable impression. The Philips with SACDs did however possess a certain ease and naturalness reminiscent of LP that I expect is a particular strength of this high resolution format. The point is that there is really no free lunch. At least at this level, SACD doesn't make CD sound obsolete despite all of the marketing hype. While I do believe the format has real potential I am in doubt as to whether it will be able to really establish itself in the market place if it cannot in most cases demonstrate a clear superiority over CD.

Yours sincerely,

**Michael Ingram**

Via e-mail

Dear Sir,

first of all congratulations for issuing the most respectable audiophile magazine out there these days, you have managed to beat the two well known competing dinosaurs from across the Atlantic, and badly so.

Let me also thank you for the review of the Philips DV963SA player: I was intrigued enough and gave it an extensive try, and then bought it, here in Brussels, new for as low as 400 euros (and sold my Rega Jupiter for much more money than that!). I always wanted to go beyond CD but was afraid of spending big fortunes for something that may (but hopefully will not) be obsolete in just a few years time. The little Philips allows me to relax about future developments and finds itself in a system that is worth 80 times as much (including Avalon speakers and AM Audio amps). Oh, and I love the fact that a cheap mass produced unit can demonstrate to a very often overly expensive and noisy audiophile community what can be done. Finally, I really hope you will find the time to properly address

the importance of acoustic room treatment. Once I discovered that I had as much as 12 dB (!) of bass boost on just a single frequency range (in my case 80 Hertz, plus a related suck-out at around 40 Hertz), I realized the importance of room treatment and that there was no going back. I once read and laughed about a view that speaker placement and room-speaker interaction contribute up to 70 percent of the final results while electronics and cables only provide the remaining 30 percent. I no longer laugh about this now.

Best regards,

**Roberto Zadra**, Brussels

Via e-mail

PS: a final curiosity - how do you manage to review all this different equipment every month without losing your mind?

*Whilst I'd never countenance the purchase of any piece of equipment without audition, I'm glad that Mr Ingram is not too disappointed with his DV963SA. However, it seems a little churlish to complain that a £400 SACD player can't better a £1600 CD player. Surely the future of SACD depends rather more on the quality and quantity of software available as well as the ability of machines like the 963 to meet and beat their price peers. Try the comparison with a £400 CD player and see what you think. Indeed, Mr Ingram, if you'd like to get in touch we'll organise it for you. I'll be fascinated to hear what you think. Room acoustics are definitely on the agenda, but they're waiting for a house move so that we can conduct a case study on a new listening room. Hopefully sooner rather than later! As to my mind, what mind? Ed.*

Dear Sir,

As a general principle I subscribe to the 'if it sounds better it is better' view of hi fi and am happy to believe the evidence of my ears even when the scientific explanation for what I am hearing is way beyond my understanding. However, there usually is an explanation which makes sense to people with the appropriate knowledge and expertise, and this can be pleasantly reassuring when large amounts of money are involved. One reason I read hi-fi magazines is to have these scientific explanations translated into language which I can understand.



▶ Which brings me to cables. I found Roy Gregory's feature on Nordost mains cables very frustrating. I got a very clear picture of how the different cables influenced the sound of the system. I also got a very clear picture of the differences in the way the cables were put together. What I couldn't find was any insight into why cables made from certain materials configured in a particular way affected the sound the way they did. I know there are still plenty of people out there who insist that cables must all sound the same but then a few years ago we had a manufacturer who insisted that all properly designed amplifiers sounded the same. Surely the manufacturers themselves must be using certain systematic techniques to give their cables the properties they want, even if these are based more on "We did it that way and this happened so we hoped that when we tried it this way that would happen and it did", than on rigorous scientific theories. Even so manufacturers have for a number of years been producing high quality cables which give results which dealers, experts and customers claim justify some very high prices. I would have thought that by now some definite ideas about why certain cables are better at transferring musically significant information than others are beginning to emerge.

Could we please have a feature fairly soon which deals with this?

Also while an increasing number of sober and responsible citizens who are old enough to know better are becoming computer literate (I see the silly buggers down my local library while I'm wondering how long it'll be before the Council stops buying books altogether), some of us have no intention of ever doing so. So when you give contact information for companies can you please give phone numbers and proper addresses as well as Internet ones so us Luddites can play as well. I would like to buy some stuff from Audio, Fidelity and can't.

Finally, the city guides in your early editions showed that at least some members of the Hi-Fi+ team take an informed and intelligent interest in food. You may be interested to know that the latest, and currently one of the best, of Manchester's excellent Hong Kong style eating houses, the Glamorous Chinese Restaurant (I kid you not!!!), is above the Wing Yip supermarket on Oldham Road and, therefore, very well placed for fortifying oneself with Dim Sum after a hard morning going round the second hand record shops.

Yours faithfully

**Mr Norman Jones**

Manchester

Dear Sir,

I really appreciate the serious equipment reviews and particularly the music reviews. I think you have the balance about right, even if some readers think you should concentrate on equipment. I don't know where else I could read such in-

depth reviews of all sorts of music in one magazine.

But I have two small gripes: the first is to say to Roy Gregory please soft-peddle on the superlatives. The review of mains cables (issue 28) is just overflowing with hyperbole I wonder what he has in reserve for the world's eighth wonder. The other gripe is about "typos". You have improved a lot but there is still more room for improvement. Two typos in just one article in 28 and I was not making a conscious check - maybe there were even more!

But, to sum up, my subscription renewal says enough and it's the only Hi-Fi mag I subscribe to. I read TNT and Stereophile on the web every week too.

Best wishes,

**Michael Shanahan**

Via e-mail.

*We report on what we hear. Listening to the Nordost power cords was a truly astonishing experience. I've re-read the review and I really don't think I've overstated the case. However, so far I've yet to hear a single rational explanation as to why the last few meters of any mains cable should make such a difference. Does that mean we should ignore the evidence? Absolutely not. The problem with science is that it is necessarily limited. Today's science is tomorrow's hokum. Simply because we can't explain something doesn't mean it doesn't exist and certainly doesn't mean that it's not important.*

*At the recent, excellent, Dublin hi-fi show I watched a bemused punter trying to recover his wits after hearing a demonstration of the Nordost power cords.*

*"Well" says he "I can hear what they're doing, but how the f\*\*\* are they doing it?"*

*"Well" says Lars in response "I'm f\*\*\*ed if I know - but they don't half sound good!"*

*Such honesty could perhaps be best described as refreshing.*

*Unfortunately, we only have the internet address for Audio Fidelity. As a practicing Luddite myself I'm only too aware of the limitations and assumptions that go hand in hand with the wonderful world of the inter-web. We do try to provide phone numbers wherever possible. However if you try Vivante, the UK stockist, they should have what you need. You can reach them on (44)(0)1293 822186.*

*Typos? Ah yes, typos. Many people are misled by the sumptuous design and presentation of Hi-Fi+. What they fail to realise is that the magazine runs on a permanent editorial staff of one. And I have to write copious amounts of copy too. What that means is that, currently, the magazine is produced entirely without proof reading! If you've ever tried to edit your own copy you'll understand what that means. Yes, we are aware of the problem, but the only way to deal with it at present would be to make the magazine smaller. Rest assured that it's something that will be sorted as soon as resources allow the time in the production cycle to deal with it. Ed.*



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## We're quite sad to notice

that a lot of our fellow retailers seem to have forsaken the ways of true two channel high fidelity and been seduced down the path of multi-channel surround sound systems. Sure, the films might be good, but the sonic merits of these digitally-processed many-speakered marvels can be summarised on the back of a postage stamp (not that we'll be seeing those for much longer the way things are going). Meanwhile, truly decent sounding audiophile gear is blossoming, especially in the current climate of revival of the Vinyl LP.



The Shanling CD player is a superb example of the quality coming out of China nowadays



From our old friends, EAR, comes the beautiful 864 MM/MC phono preamp



Stax, legendary headphone manufacturers, present their valve driven Omega electrostatic 'phones.



The Klimo Beltaine monoblocks, from Germany, with outboard power supplies are about as purist audiophile as it gets!



Aha! Bit misleading this one - The Sonneteer Byron CD - fabulous sound, and not a tube in sight!



The famous Musical Fidelity X-CAN valve headphone amp, now in v3 form.

Benefits of dealing with Walrus (apart from the very best sounding gear) - We don't believe in "hard sell", you decide in your own time. In-house service on many items, sometimes while you wait. We understand audiophile equipment, especially vinyl playing and valve amps inside out, and have many years experience to draw on. Big accessory range. Interest Free Credit on many lines, subject to approval. And so on, and on ...

Walrus has never, ever, dreamt of being seduced by all this multi-channel nonsense. We prefer to leave that to others. Of course we like a good film as much as anyone, but we love realistically reproduced music much more. And as the ultimate, most engaging reproduction usually comes from vinyl sources amplified by a decent valve amp, this is what we unashamedly do. An ever increasing number of satisfied customers thankfully agree and tell us we are cutting edge in audio reproduction. Funny old world, eh?

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Do you ever get the nagging feeling that our adverts aren't entirely serious? Heaven forbid! Us, not serious? You cannot be serious (J. McEnroe). We are seriously serious guys. Serious about our shop, our products, our wine, and above all, our customers!

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It's a new dimension



# Postcard from Venus



by L. S. Webster

Anyone who has been half-awake for the past dozen or so hi-fi shows can hardly have failed to notice a conspicuous lack of women. However, in the unlikely event you do spot one, you will notice how she appears only semi-conscious. She will probably be being frog-marched from room to room by the bloke she is with, and he will be grinning like a maniac and having the time of his life, completely unaware that she has nodded off again.

Women tend to be bored to death by these shows, whereas they are audiophile's heaven. This is where he can meet like-minded cronies and feel perfectly normal. Though to be fair, it must be hard being an audiophile as there's such an awful lot to deal with. Not least of which is the cardigan wearing, slightly misogynistic stereotype, (possibly unjustified, but he could do a lot more to help himself here). Or there's the alternative anoraky/geeky type reputation; which, like it or not, stems from the obsessive desire to collect odd facts and hi-fi trivia. So again, only himself to blame really.

In my experience there are no limits to the amount of hi-fi trivia the audiophile can devour. No matter how obscure, small or seemingly insignificant, everything will be consigned to memory. But what remains unclear is whether or not any of this will ever be of any use to him. It does not seem to concern him too much, because his insatiable appetite for more information simply keeps him lurching forever forward, bringing him closer, presumably, to whatever it is he is looking for. What is he looking for, anyway? Does anyone know?

And these hi-fi shows are buzzing with people like this, people who are keen to let everyone know exactly how much they know about everything. To be honest I've often wondered why exhibitors bother taking any equipment with them. After all, you can usually guarantee there'll be a bozo next door blasting a hole in the roof with an AV system, so listening to music is out of the question. Why not simply stick a couple of photo's of hi-fi on the wall and have the odd chair knocking about for those wishing to nod off and have done with it. I mean,

if you can't listen to music what else are you going to do? I suppose you could lick it, or stroke it, (and before you start snorting I have been reliably informed that this is not unknown). But apparently a bit of an oggle and general marvelling at will do for most.

And so, not only does the audiophile have all this to contend with, but there's worse yet, for there is a dark, brooding and more sinister underside to the hi-fi scene. Imagine, for a just a minute, if you can, the horror of thinking you may have all the wrong stuff. It can haunt the audiophile like nothing else. There you are, with all your new gear, just kitted out with it all shiny and new. Then, no sooner have you got your CD player home and out of its box, than the upgraded version's out with another two stars. Ah the misery. Imagine the shame of knowing your equipment is visibly and obviously some weeks old. And it is this torture alone that keeps the audiophile coming on back for more and more. It is enough to feed both his paranoia and his masochistic streak.

I'm sure this explains the absence of women. Women are too pragmatic for all this tweeky stuff, far more inclined to take practical approaches when it comes to making choices. For instance, there is just no way anybody could convince me that knowing the insides of my TV will help me enjoy watching a film. It just won't, and my opinion holds true for hi-fi as well. However, what I do know is that if I like the way something sounds and it's not insultingly ugly, or it's even quite attractive, then I'm likely to choose it on that basis. What else do I need to know other than how to use it? Nothing. I really, really, do not want to know what is inside it. In fact, I would willingly pay somebody NOT to tell me.

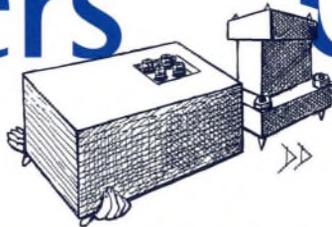
But then there's accessibility. And accessibility is everything these days. The type of hi-fi we are talking about is sophisticated, expensive and exclusive. And although there are many paths a person can take in search of something it is pretty essential to know it exists. Secondly, a person will need a large wedge of disposable income to be able to buy it. Though now that the gap

in earning potential between men and women is starting to shrink, more women are finding they have more spending power. And finally, I can see a glimmer of hope on the horizon, in that more women are beginning to become visible in sectors of the industry where previously there were none; particularly in sales. Which, in terms of attracting the female audience can only be a good thing. Because the problem is that hi-fi has never really bothered to attract the female audience, or at least it's failed pretty miserably so far.

Finishing on a positive note, the good news is that the female count was definitely up at the Scottish hi-fi show in November. All the usual suspects were exhibiting and it

was one of the most enjoyable shows in years. Though this was undoubtedly helped along by the fact it was held in a very grand old hotel with the most fabulous restaurant, its own golf course and beautiful grounds, and all just outside of Edinburgh city centre. But, even more impressively Napier's were there and had laid on a health and therapy zone for the weekend. This was such a scoop. It provided a glorious opportunity to take a bit of time out to pamper and relax, and those disinterested partners could indulge for an hour or so, well away from the maddening crowds. It was such a fantastic idea that I'm expecting more of this from now on – allright? ➤+

# Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

I recently encountered some electrostatic speakers from Dutch company Final Sound, which are coming to Britain via UKD. They weren't perfect – no speaker is, in my experience – but they did show some very interesting potential, as well as making a fascinating contrast with the Seventh Veil speakers I've reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

Both are 'line sources', but whereas the Seventh Veil speakers are regular monopoles, which attempt to block and soak up all the output from the back of the drive units, the Finals are 'dipole' panel speakers, radiating equally front and back, but with the front and back outputs out of phase with each other.

This doesn't matter so long as the front and back sound waves don't get mixed up with each other: if and when they do, the sound will cancel out. A dipole panel speaker will therefore produce output in forward and backward directions, but any sounds generated towards the side will cancel.

Another crucial factor plays an important role. It's to do with the way sounds of different frequencies radiate from a vibrating source. High frequency sounds, whose wavelengths are smaller than the size of the vibrating diaphragm source, are radiated in a beam; low frequencies, where the wavelength is larger than

the source, spread out in every direction, like ripples on a pond. While dipoles do the more directional higher frequencies well enough, the omni-directional bass frequencies simply cancel out, and the actual bass extension is therefore defined by the smallest physical dimension – effectively the width.

Indeed, two core reasons why panel speakers remain rare is that wide speakers are unfashionable these days, yet narrow panels can't deliver deep bass – or even mid-bass for that matter. Which is rather a shame, since they have a unique freedom from boxiness – simply because there are no boxes – that monopole speakers never quite match. That said, they have their limitations too.

As it happens, the Finals arrived as a full surround sound system, with large 500PL panels for the front left and right channels, and much smaller 100PLs for the surrounds. I therefore got the chance to compare two different size models from the range in regular stereo mode.

The large floorstanding 500PL, which sells for £2,750/pair, has a panel 29cm wide and 155cm tall. The £1,395/pair 100PL is much smaller, at just 20x71cm, and is normally supplied with wall brackets (which is not necessarily such a good idea). Any Final system also requires an additional £395 FCU energiser unit to which you can connect up to six separate speakers. ➤

► Being wider, the 500PL has comfortably the better bass extension, though it still only reaches down to 70Hz in-room, leaving the bottom two octaves to be handled by some or other subwoofer system. While the lovely panel transparency is fully evident, this model is not particularly well balanced overall, its tonality and soundstaging compromised by significant over-projection through two octaves (500Hz-2kHz) of the upper midband, followed by a top end proper that's a little too restrained.

The surprise came when I hooked up the little 100PLs, only to find an altogether superior tonal balance – indeed, one of the flattest and smoothest I've encountered. That's providing you don't use the partnering wall brackets: tempting though these might be, they simply don't bring the panels far enough out from the wall; the result is significant unevenness caused by the considerable mid-band cancellation/reinforcement – a suckout at 1.4kHz, a peak at 2kHz, and more further up the band – with the consequent colorations.

Being even narrower than the 500s, the 100s don't do anything worthwhile below 200Hz. Above that point they do very well indeed, apart perhaps from a little too much output through the presence band (2-4kHz). The latter is very unusual, as the overwhelming majority of speakers show some lack of presence energy (usually coinciding with their crossover zone).

This helps them avoid sounding aggressive but also compromises the openness to a degree.

It's that transparency and openness – probably unequalled in my experience – that really won me over here, because of the superb low level intelligibility and clarity that it brings to voices. One could also argue that the 100PLs are a little too open and over-projected, but this speaker also somehow manages to avoid obvious aggressiveness at the same time, which is neat. Quite why, or how, I'm not sure: maybe it's to do with the avoidance of any crossover network; maybe it's because the relatively large source surface area doesn't have to work too hard.

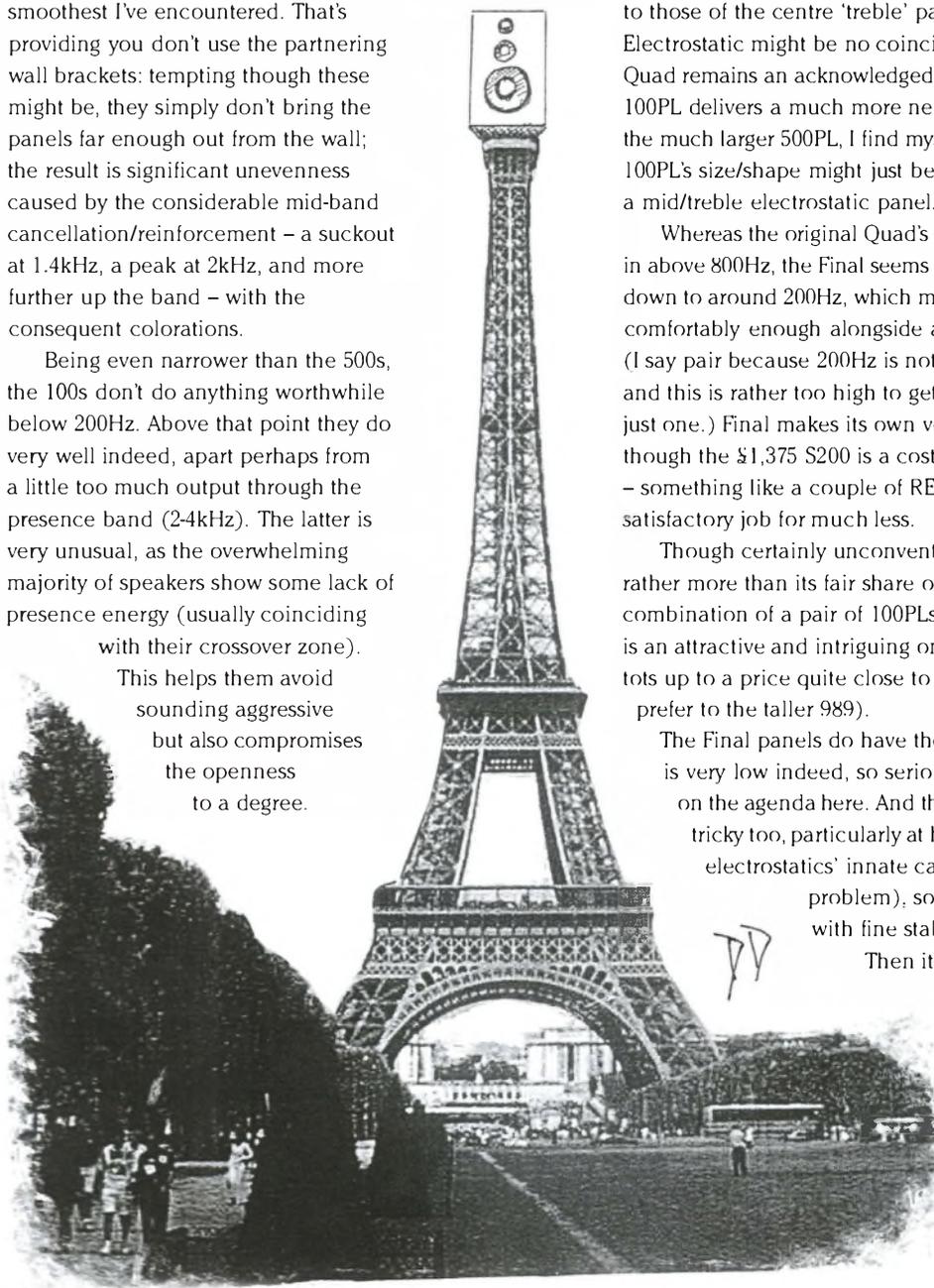
I really like this little panel speaker, and suspect that the fact that its basic dimensions are very similar indeed to those of the centre 'treble' panel of the original Quad Electrostatic might be no coincidence. Since the old Quad remains an acknowledged classic to this day, while the 100PL delivers a much more neutral balance than the much larger 500PL, I find myself speculating that the 100PL's size/shape might just be close to the ideal for a mid/treble electrostatic panel.

Whereas the original Quad's centre panel only comes in above 800Hz, the Final seems happy enough to operate down to around 200Hz, which means that it can be used comfortably enough alongside a pair of sub-woofers. (I say pair because 200Hz is not far below middle C, and this is rather too high to get away comfortably with just one.) Final makes its own very decent sub-woofer, though the £1,375 S200 is a costly example of the breed – something like a couple of REL Q150 should do a very satisfactory job for much less.

Though certainly unconventional, and not without rather more than its fair share of qualifications, the combination of a pair of 100PLs with a pair of Q150s is an attractive and intriguing one, which incidentally tots up to a price quite close to Quad's 988 (which I prefer to the taller 989).

The Final panels do have their constraints. Sensitivity is very low indeed, so serious loudness isn't really on the agenda here. And the amplifier load is quite tricky too, particularly at high frequencies (where electrostatics' innate capacitance can be a problem), so a good quality amplifier with fine stability is essential.

Then it's necessary to find some way of mounting the panels so that they're at least 2ft out from the nearest wall, and accurately directed towards the listening zone. Various DIY options exist, but I'd personally like to try ►



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Diva DV88  
FMJ A32 Int  
FMJ CD33 CD  
FMJ DV27A DVD  
FMJ DT26 Dig Tuner  
FMJ 7 7 ch power  
FMJ AV8 Pre Amp processor

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Puccini SE Int  
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SAM V2 amp  
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PH3SE Phono Stage  
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CVA306 VT Multi Ch. Pre  
CTA520 Power (2 ch)  
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Audience 52 SE  
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Kekektor Pre  
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Ninko Spks  
Katon Spks  
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Ascenti  
CLS IIz  
Odyssey  
Pradigy  
Script  
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MC2102 Power valve  
C42 Pre s.s  
MX134 Pre/processor  
MC402 Power s.s  
MA6900 int  
MVP842 DVD/CD  
LS320  
LS340  
LS360

#### ■ MERIDIAN

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G08 CD  
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G01 Pre  
G02 Pre  
G56 Power  
G57 Power  
G68 Processor  
DSP 5000  
DSP 7000  
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► using fishing line to suspend them from the ceiling and rearward wall, so that they're held a little above listeners' heads, pointing slightly downwards. Then I'd put the RELs on low (1-1.5ft) stands and begin with them immediately underneath the panels.

However, one of the most tempting bonuses that comes from separating the bass from the rest is that the sub-woofers

can be moved around to give the most even room-drive (in terms of mode excitation), while the mid/treble speakers are positioned for optimum imaging and coloration. Get such a whole package properly installed – not such an easy task, I'll admit – and the end result could be a beautiful combination of lovely open transparency, splendid imaging, and a smooth, deep bass foundation. ►+

# Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

Over the years, hi-fi has had its fair share of controversies; people arguing passionately on the merits or otherwise of all kinds of topics. A random selection from the last forty years might include valves versus transistors; mono versus stereo; LP versus CD; analogue versus digital. More recently we've seen multi-channel versus two channel - though even that's an old debate, going back to the '70s and the failed launch of quadraphonic sound.

What's funny is - the issues never seem to get resolved; just when the battle seems to have been won and debate starts to peter out, along comes a fresh twist to re-ignite passions! Given such a backdrop, it was with a mixture of interest, amusement, surprise, and bewilderment that I learned of respected classical recording engineer Tony Faulkner's intention to return to analogue recording technology and launch a vinyl-based record label.

Given that digital has been the norm for classical recordings these past 25 years, it's an amazing about-turn. Of course digital recording has long been controversial. Many audiophiles loathed and detested digital sound when it first came out, and disliked CD even more. I know; I was one. Some still loathe it. But as the years passed my attitudes softened; digital and CD have improved, and for my part I found ways of making my hi-fi system respond in a more sympathetic manner.

For me, visiting Decca's West Hampstead recording studios in February 1984 was a turning point - for several reasons. For the first time I was able to hear what happened when an analogue signal passed through

a professional quality digital processor. It was very interesting; although doing so altered the sound, it wasn't by any means a nasty destructive change; just different. I also witnessed the Decca engineers at work digitally editing tapes.

When I saw how sophisticated digital editing could be, and realised how much more precise it was than conventional cut-and-splice tape editing, I knew there was no going back... Indeed, apparently one of the main reasons Decca developed digital recording technology in the late '70s was to use it as a means of archiving their analogue tapes. Basically, their older tapes were starting to fall apart as the glue used for splicing tape dried out.

Seems I was wrong! Despite being much less convenient and user-friendly, Tony Faulkner has gone back to analogue, having bought a couple of old Studer tape recorders on e-bay and had their electronics updated by Tim de Paravicini. It might be Old Technology, but it works. I know; I heard it. In many ways the sound off Tony's modified Studers proved more natural and realistic than even the latest and most splendiferous digital. Amazing but true.

Hearing Tony compare analogue and digital versions of the same recording, there was little doubt that the analogue tapes sounded truer and more musical. By comparison, the digital recording seemed harder tonally, with a dry slightly leaden quality compared to the brilliant mercurial singing quality of the analogue. ►

► The latter undoubtedly had a subjectively nicer more attractive tonality, but also sounded closer to the direct feed straight from the mixing desk.

What I'm saying here is that analogue was not just nicer to listen to; it was also more faithful to the live source. When we listen at home, most times we have no direct reference so far as accuracy goes. We can only judge the sound in terms of whether or not we like it - a wholly subjective assessment. But at a recording session it's possible to compare the live feed from the mixing desk with the tape - and judge far more objectively how close the copy gets to the original.

So analogue rules OK? Well, yes and no. Speaking personally I'm not sure. While freely acknowledging the sonic superiority of Tony's analogue, I think I'd still favour the best digital if I were recording music. Why? Because I see the flaws of analogue as ultimately insurmountable. You have problems with modulation noise, tape squash, peak-level distortion, wow, flutter, saturation, low frequency irregularities caused by secondary-gap effect, hiss, and so on!

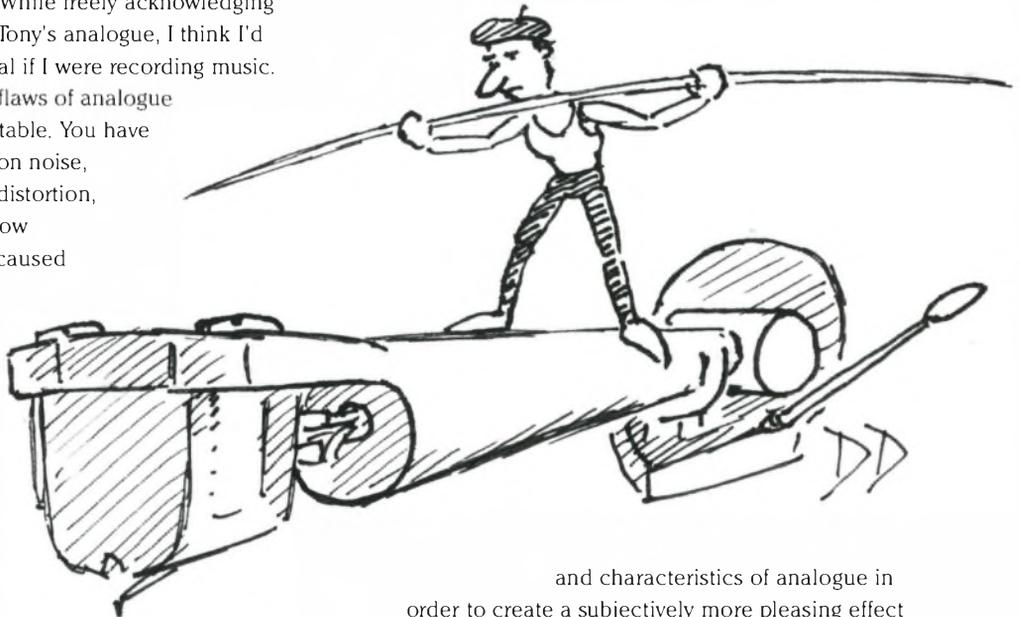
Digital clearly isn't perfect either. But (rightly or wrongly) I believe its subjective drawbacks could be tackled. The question is whether or not analogue's subjective superiority is down to pleasant additive distortions and non-linearities. Or whether it's a genuine superiority based on greater linearity in areas the ear finds very important. If it's the former, it might be possible to mix-in some of these additives while recording digitally, thereby giving one the best of both worlds.

What's hard to understand is why digital measures so well yet still fails subjectively to equal good analogue. Digital should be miles better; more accurate and truer in every respect - both subjectively and objectively. If it's still not as satisfying as good analogue, can it really be down to a lack of quality? Or is it that a few little additives are needed? I'm not thinking of the marked changes introduced by many of the digital sound processing units on the market, but something much subtler.

It's a bit like digital photography. Few cameras produce perfect flawless images. Most pictures, even very good ones, benefit from some tweaking in Adobe Photoshop

in order to maximise their full potential. As digital imaging software programs grow more sophisticated (and as one's experience of manipulation increases), so it becomes possible to create striking results from sometimes quite ordinary photographs - simply by enhancing what's already there.

Agreed, sounds are subtler than images. And photography is less hidebound by notions of having to conform to 'accuracy' than hi-fi. If, for artistic reasons, you want to give someone a pale green face, you can. I'm not advocating the sonic equivalent of green faces here. I'm simply saying it should be possible for digital to mimic the various harmonious and euphonic qualities



and characteristics of analogue in order to create a subjectively more pleasing effect - if that's what's wanted.

It wouldn't even need to be done at the recording stage. It could be built into a DAC, and you could switch in various effects in order to suit your taste and the music being listened to. Such a thing sounds positively utopian. It would allow you to pick and choose, taking the best aspects of analogue - its warmth, tonality, dynamic and harmonic integration, its dimensionality - while leaving out nasty unpleasant destructive things like tape squash and modulation noise.

Although I remain quietly impressed that analogue a quarter of a century old can still see off the best current digital, I still think the future is Numerique. But isn't it incredible that, even after 25 years of development, the best digital still has noticeable sonic limitations. Agreed, Tony's Studer tape machines have modified tube electronics. But I feel certain there's nothing there that probably couldn't have been done back in the late '70s.



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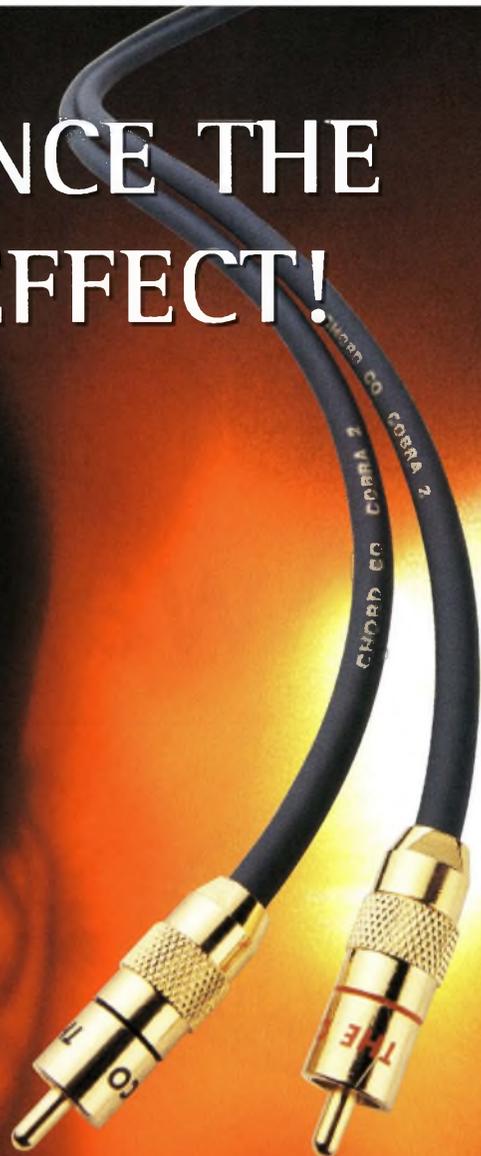
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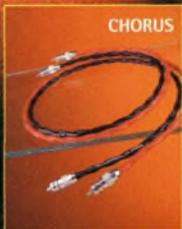
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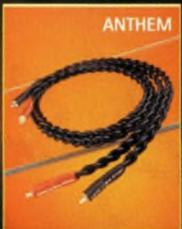
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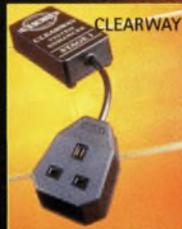
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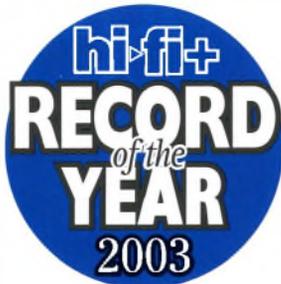


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# Product Of The Year Awards 2003



A new year is upon us and it's time to look back over the last one. Time once again, to remember with affection, those products we've enjoyed the most, and, in some cases, been compelled to buy. For that's the key to these awards: they're purely personal. We make no claims of absolute judgement – no Amplifier Of The Year, or similarly meaningless categories. I've often wondered, faced with the plethora of star ratings and Best buy tags, whether we should introduce our own rating system, albeit suitably left field. Top of the tree? The PIRTAF award – standing of course for a Product I'd Recommend To A Friend. Don't scoff. Anybody who works on a hi-fi mag is constantly importuned for purchasing advice by friends and family. It's no trivial matter. Make the mistake of even hinting that product A might do the trick and they'll buy it. Then look out if it ever goes wrong or fails to meet their every need, if it develops a temperament or the company disappears, because it WILL be your fault. Well, the products here are the ones that we would, happily recommend, even to friends and family. We're not recommending that you buy them, certainly not that you try and build them into a system. But hopefully, if you get the chance you'll listen to them, and along the way you'll learn a little more about what makes us tick.

It's been an interesting year, one that started with the burgeoning clouds of the multi-bit/multi-standard revolution threatening on the horizon. Which makes it all the more ironic that in many respects it's been a bumper year for two-channel and analogue in particular. Even mono's making a comeback. What price progress – and which direction does it lie in anyway?

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "R. G. S.", located at the bottom right of the page.

## ▶ Naim NAP 300 Power Amplifier



Price: £4750

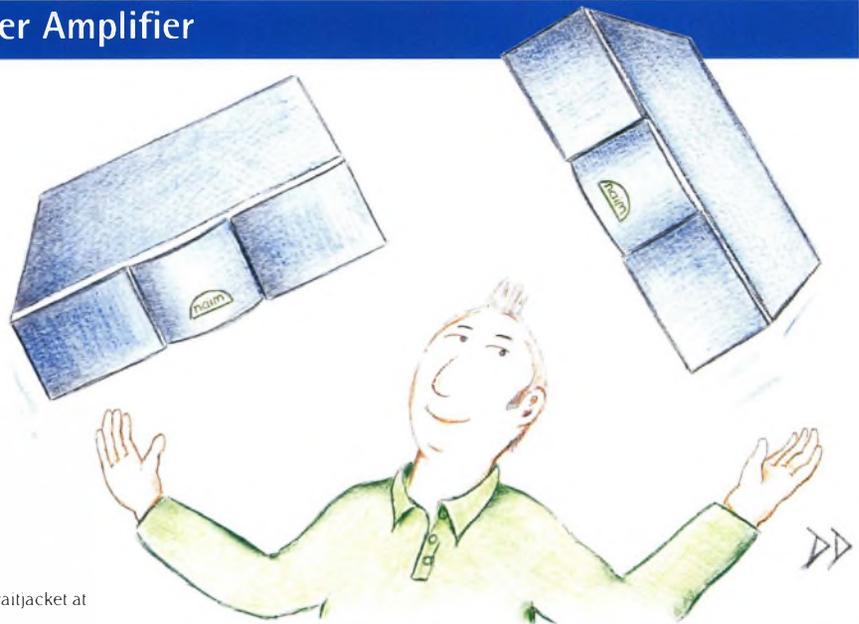
Reviewed in Issue 22

**Manufacturer:**

Naim Audio

Tel. (44)(0)1722 332266

Net. [www.naim-audio.com](http://www.naim-audio.com)



The product that finally broke the system straitjacket at Naim, delivering superb performance whether it was used with its partnering pre-amps or the most unlikely alternatives. That generosity even extends as far as cables, for the first time putting the Salisbury company's products on an equal footing with the rest of the audio high-end, company in which they've proved perfectly happy. PM, CT, CB and RG have all enjoyed this amp under circumstances that a few

years ago might well have been considered heresy. It represents the sonic proof of just how far Naim have come, widening both their performance envelope and appeal along the way. Combining the best aspects of the traditional Naim sound with many of the attributes we'd normally associate with valves, it's a truly great all-rounder.

## Krell SACD Standard



Price: £4250

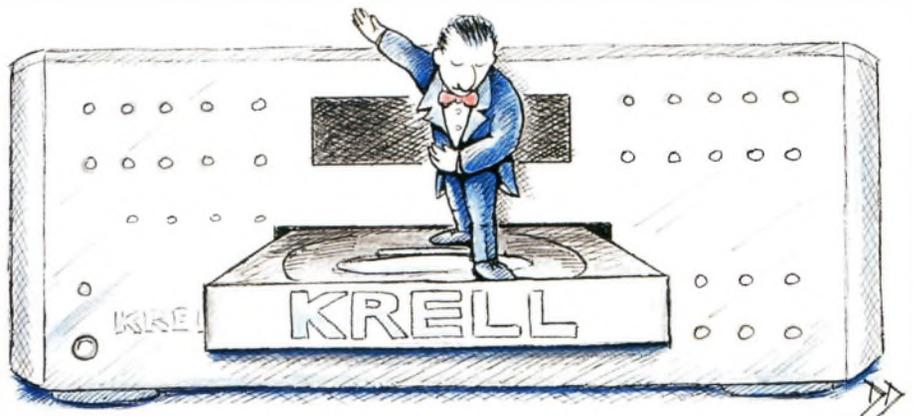
Reviewed in Issue 28

**UK Distributor:**

Absolute Sounds

Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909

Net. [www.krellonline.com](http://www.krellonline.com)



The aptly named Krell SACD player certainly sets the standard for high-end multi-format performance. Delivering solid high-end sound from both CD and SACD (in either stereo or discrete six-channel surround) the evenness of its performance is a first. It breaks no new ground, but then nor does its price-tag, and it does do

everything to an enviable degree. Krell will presumably be taking a tilt at the outer reaches of SACD performance, but until they do this will do very nicely thank you.

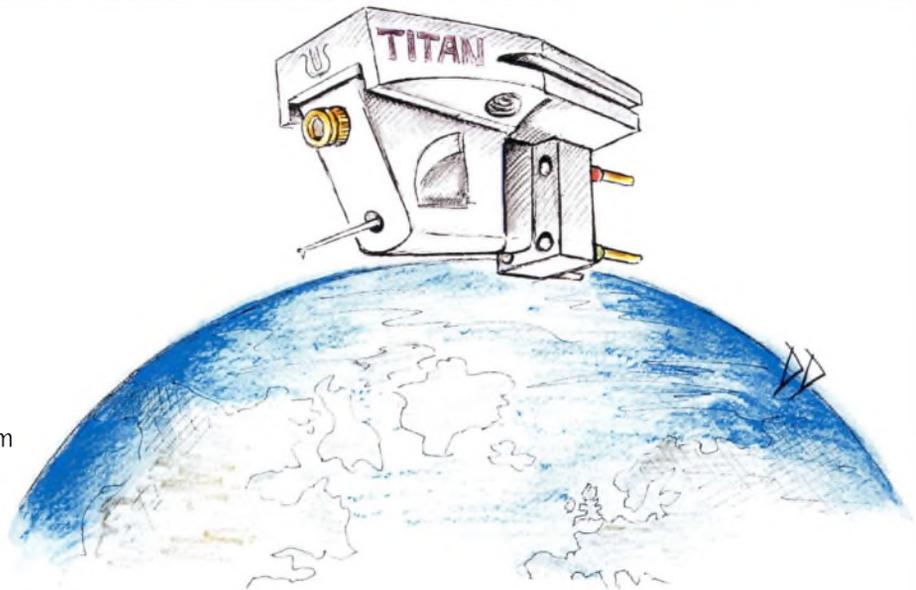
## ▶ Lyra Titan MC Cartridge



Price: £2995

Reviewed in Issue 23

Distributor:  
Path Premier  
Tel. (44)(0)1844 219000  
E-mail. [scantech@gol.com](mailto:scantech@gol.com)



The flagship model of Lyra's third generation of moving-coil cartridges, the Titan builds on the already impressive performance of the Helikon. It manages to combine the superb resolution and detail of the Parnassus with the dynamic energy and presence of the third generation generator to stunning effect. With better dynamic discrimination and timing integrity

than any other cartridge we've come across, it cuts straight to the heart and soul of a performance. It's healthy output makes matching easy and you even get a stylus guard. Don't be misled by its (comparatively) modest price: This pick-up competes with the best (and most expensive) out there.

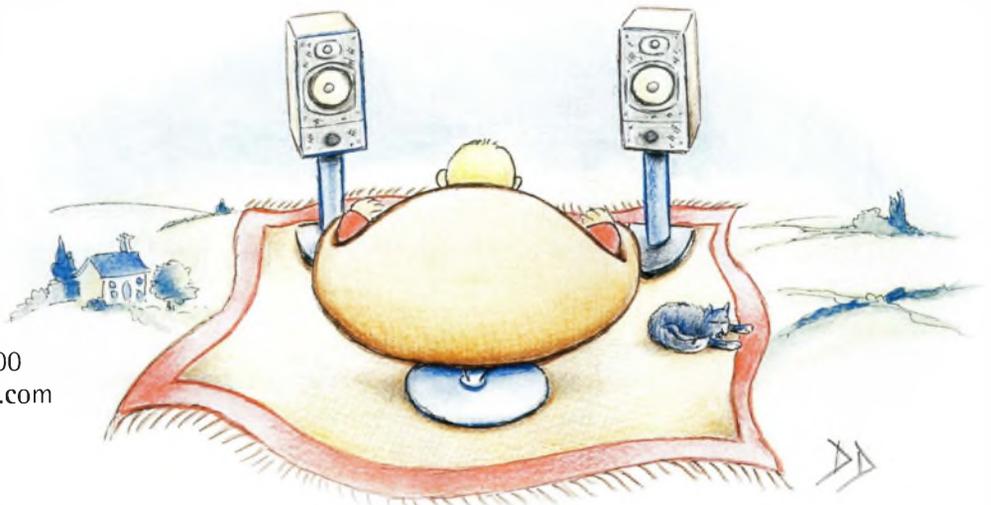
## B&W DM602 S3 Loudspeaker



Price: £300

Reviewed in Issue 23

Manufacturer:  
B&W Loudspeakers  
Tel. (44)(0)1903 221500  
Net. [www.bwspeakers.com](http://www.bwspeakers.com)



Recent critical acclaim for the South coast technocrats has tended to focus on the Nautilus series and Signature flagships. But for us, the real find of the year came from the opposite end of the spectrum. A two cubic foot, eight inch two-way, the DM603 S3 could have stepped straight out of the '80s (you remember – when hi-fi used to be fun). Efficient enough to

deliver convincing dynamics with enough bass to entertain but not so much that it gets into trouble, it's a real blast from the past, but updated with modern levels of detail and refinement. Living proof of the Hi-Fi+ motto – "Old fashioned and all the better for it."



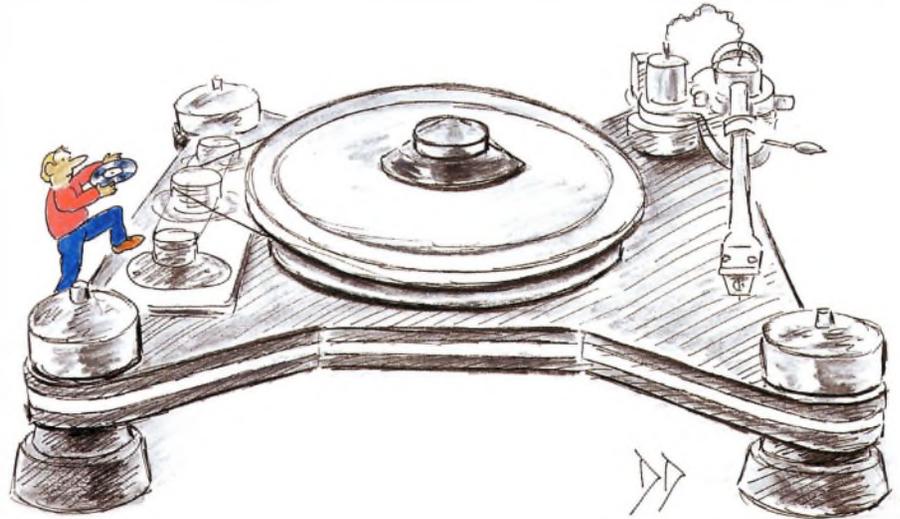
## VPI TNT- HRX Record Player



Price: From £8000

Reviewed in Issue 24

Distributor:  
Cherished Record Company  
Tel. (44)(0)1579 363603  
Net. [www.vpiindustries.com](http://www.vpiindustries.com)



Harry Weisfeld's products have always been dialectic in nature, but the long, evolutionary trail has finally reached a plateau, if not its final goal. After five TNTs and the Hot-Rod, a cathartic creative surge generated the HRX, a VPI turntable but not as we've come to know them. New platter, new drive, new main bearing and new materials

adds up to quite a step forward. Unfailingly musical though they've been, the HRX is the first VPI to succeed in banishing the family sound, achieving levels of resolution and natural tonality to compete with the very best. How good? Good enough for RP to part with a large wad of his own hard earned!

## The Peter Gabriel Re-masters



Reviewed in Issue 24

Record Label:  
Real World  
Net. [www.realworld.com](http://www.realworld.com)



Generally speaking the hi-fi community treat the mainstream record industry with suspicion at best and downright hostility as worst. So it's a real pleasure to find a record label that goes about its business with the sort of obsessive care and attention to sonic detail which we tend to assume is our exclusive preserve. Of course Real World might object to

the mainstream title, but anybody who has heard the results of their efforts, on vinyl, CD, SACD or DVD-V can only applaud their commitment to quality. Long may it continue.



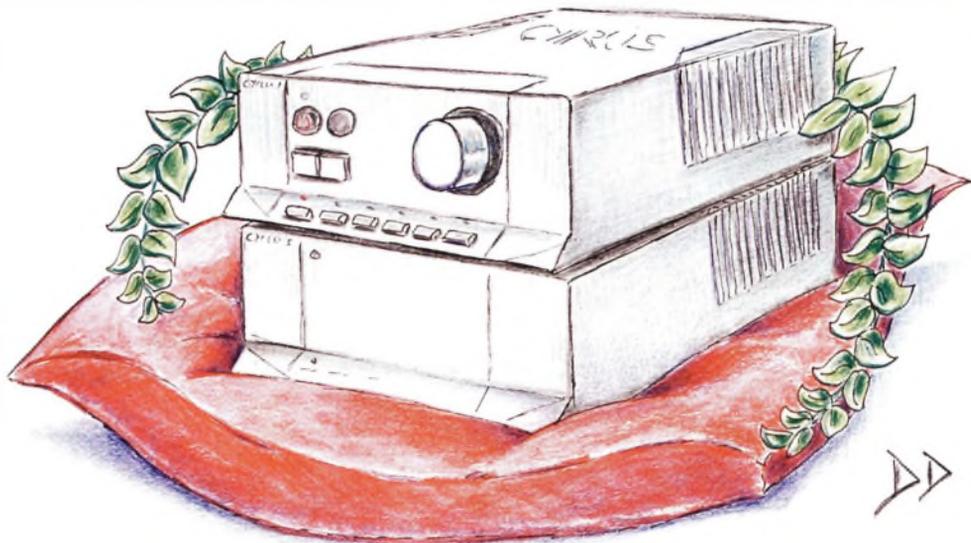
## ▶ Cyrus 8 Integrated Amp and PSX-R Power Supply



Price: £800 and £350

Reviewed in Issue 24

Manufacturer:  
Cyrus Electronics  
Tel. (44)(0)1480 435577  
Net. [www.cyrus.co.uk](http://www.cyrus.co.uk)



Another story of continual evolution and refinement, in its latest guise, the Cyrus pocket battleship is more about finesse, detail, resolution and musical communication than the brute force that tends to characterise the opposition. Combined with the PSX-R it's diminutive dimensions and shoe-box format deliver a real taste of high-end performance

without drawing attention to itself, sonically or domestically. A fuss free delivery system for those with a genuine interest in music, it's practical, upgradeable and stylish, and has become an invaluable asset in the reviewing process.

## Ayre Acoustics CX-7 CD Player



Price: £2950

Reviewed in Issues 21 & 25

Distributor:  
Path Premier  
Tel. (44)(0)1844 219000  
Net. [www.ayre.com](http://www.ayre.com)



Occasionally you discover a product that seems to disappear almost as soon as you've come across it. Such was the Resolution Audio CD55, but the mourning is over, for CT has found a replacement in the shape of Ayre's CX-7. The American machine offers the same engagingly direct sense of musical communication, but adds

significant sophistication and superior construction. CT was utterly seduced by its natural, unforced presentation and excellent soundstaging, concluding that even at this price it still represents something of a bargain.



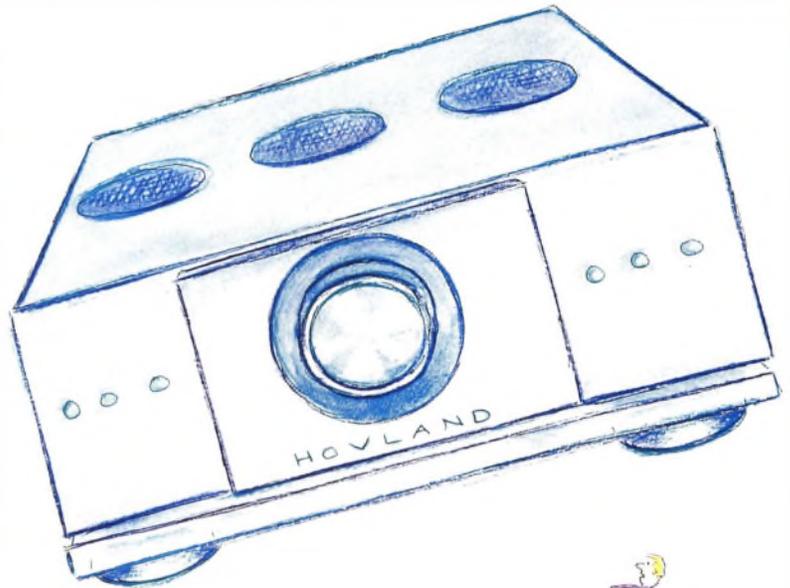
## ▶ Hovland RADIA Power Amplifier



Price: £7995

Reviewed in Issue 25

UK Distributor:  
Metropolis Music Ltd.  
Tel. (44)(0)1892 539245  
Net. [www.hovlandcompany.com](http://www.hovlandcompany.com)



Hovland go from strength to strength. First there was the all-tube HP100 pre-amp, followed (and surpassed) by the hybrid Sapphire power amp. But here we have their piece de resistance, the solid-state RADIA, a product that elevates the design aesthetic to new heights – and then matches those with its sonic performance. Combining small amplifier resolution and agility with effortless power delivery, the RADIA

is an amp for all seasons, versatile without compromising musical communication. A hard act to follow? With the HP200 waiting in the wings, we're about to find out.



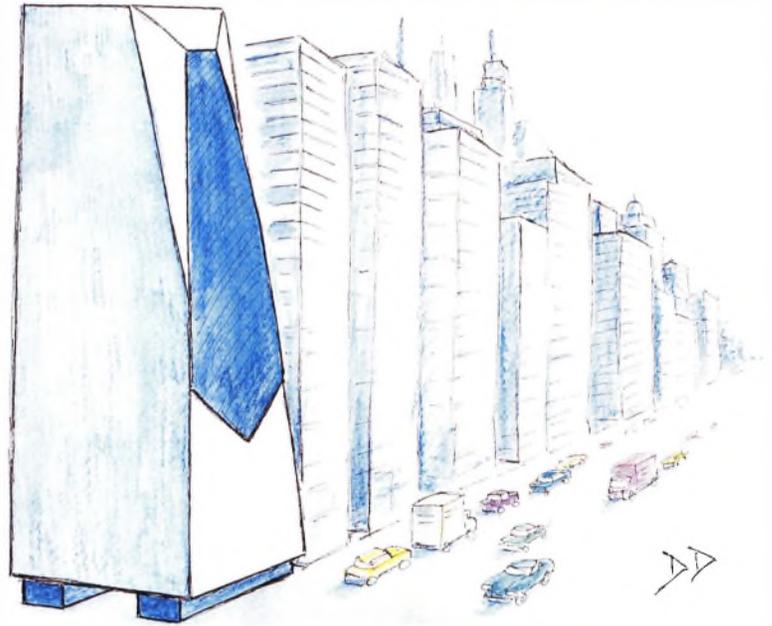
## Avalon Ascendant Loudspeaker



Price: £7900

Reviewed in Issue 26

UK Distributor:  
Audiofreaks  
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153  
Net. [www.avalonacoustics.com](http://www.avalonacoustics.com)



Superb finish and assiduous attention to detail might be a metaphor for the Avalon sound as well as describing the products themselves. But with the Ascendant, designer Neil Patel has added expressive and agile dynamics to the mix without compromising either musical coherence or natural tonality. The result is unforced, open and uncoloured, but above all, it's musically convincing and engaging.

The Ascendant might seem expensive for a two-way floorstander – until that is, you see it. Then you hear it. Exquisite is the only word.



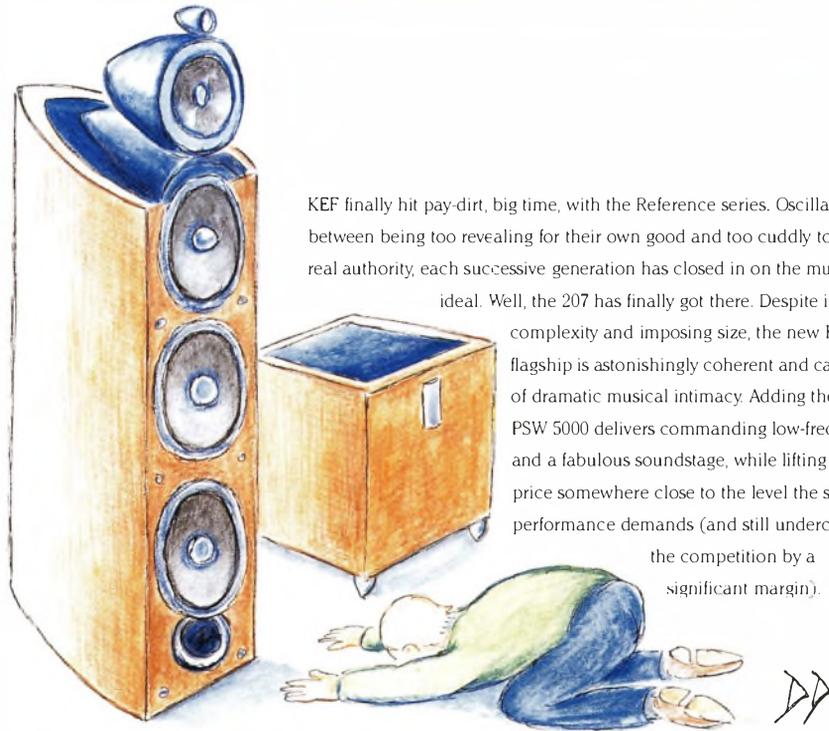
## KEF Reference 207 Loudspeaker (and PSW 5000 Sub-woofer)



Price: £9000 (+£4000)

Reviewed in Issue 26

Manufacturer:  
KEF Audio (UK) Ltd.  
Tel. (44)(0)1622 672261  
Net. [www.kef.com](http://www.kef.com)



KEF finally hit pay-dirt, big time, with the Reference series. Oscillating between being too revealing for their own good and too cuddly to have real authority, each successive generation has closed in on the musical ideal. Well, the 207 has finally got there. Despite its complexity and imposing size, the new KEF flagship is astonishingly coherent and capable of dramatic musical intimacy. Adding the PSW 5000 delivers commanding low-frequencies and a fabulous soundstage, while lifting the price somewhere close to the level the sonic performance demands (and still undercutting the competition by a significant margin).

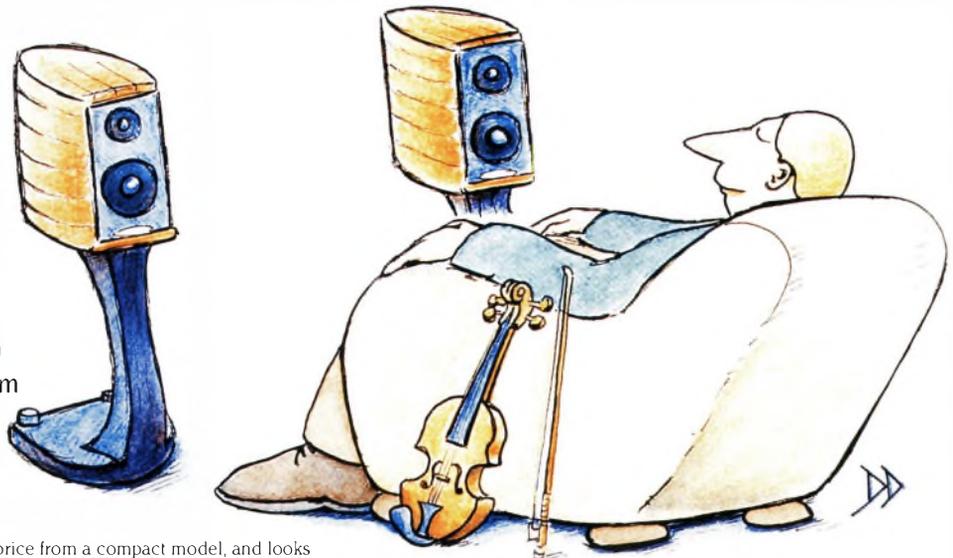
## Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor Loudspeaker



Price: £2149

Reviewed in Issue 26

UK Distributor:  
Absolute Sounds  
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909  
Net. [www.sonusfaber.com](http://www.sonusfaber.com)



Unparalleled performance for the price from a compact model, and looks and finish to die for too: CT wonders how they can do it for the money. Superb musical coherence and refinement combined with a surprising sense of scale mean that the little Auditors respond readily to even the biggest and best ancillaries and cabling. Instrumental colour and texture

are particular strengths as are soundstaging and dimensionality. The Cremona Auditor asks serious questions of equivalently priced floorstanders before showing most of them the door.

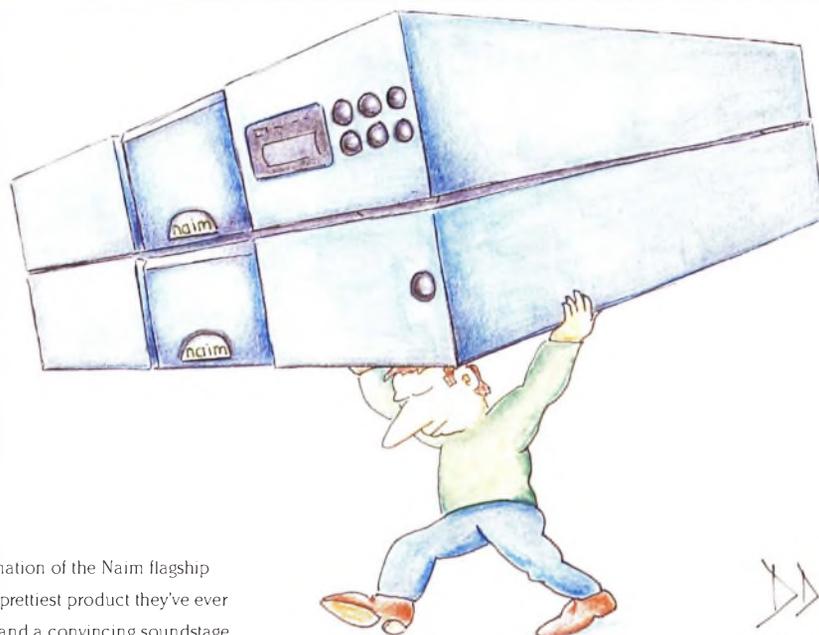
► **Naim CDS3 CD Player**



Price: £7050

Reviewed in Issue 26

Manufacturer:  
Naim Audio  
Tel. (44)(0)1722 332266  
Net. [www.naim-audio.com](http://www.naim-audio.com)



CT was bowled over by the latest incarnation of the Naim flagship CD player, while RG pronounced it the prettiest product they've ever produced. It now adds tonal neutrality and a convincing soundstage to its traditional rhythmic and dynamic strengths. The result is a far more balanced and versatile player than prejudice might lead you to expect, yet another indicator of changing winds in Salisbury. Meanwhile

PM attributes much of the improvement over the earlier CDS2 to changes in the power supply umbilical and suggests it as an essential upgrade to earlier machines.

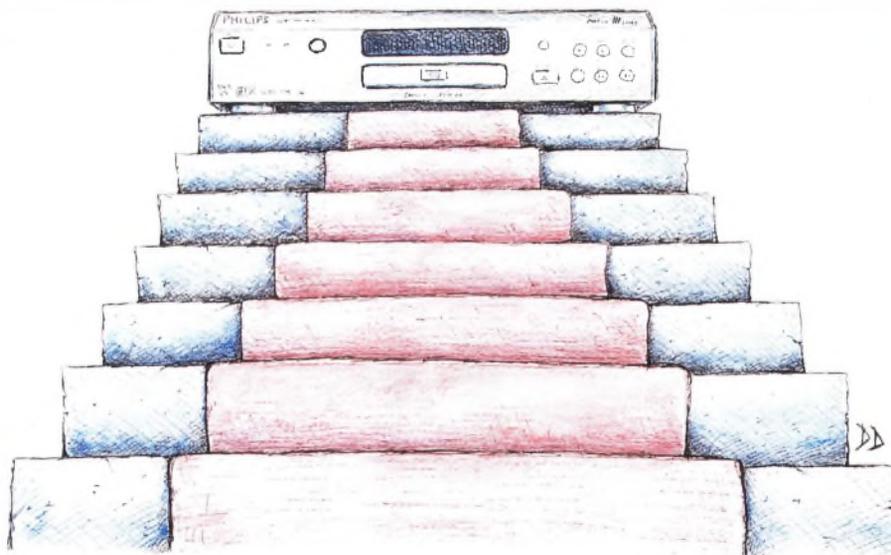
**Philips DV963SA Multi-standard Disc Player**



Price: £400

Reviewed in Issue 27

Manufacturer:  
Philips  
Tel. 0870 900 9070  
Net. [www.philips.co.uk](http://www.philips.co.uk)



Not a true multi-standard player – it doesn't do DVD-A – but the latest in a long line of jolting reminders that the majors can deliver serious sound quality when they put their minds to it. And they can do it at prices that our specialist manufacturers can only imagine in their wildest and most unrealistic dreams. Delivering sound from

CD and SACD to match dedicated players costing a thousand pounds or more, with decent pictures from DVD-V and multi-channel thrown in, the DV963SA represents astonishing value. Just remember to take it seriously and treat it like the pocket high-end player it really is.



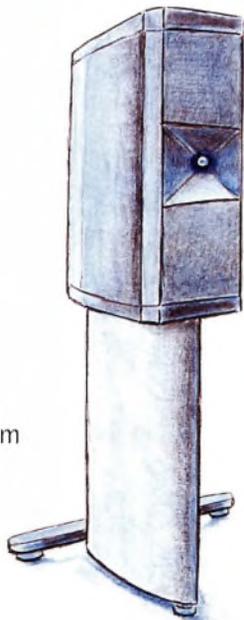
## ▶ Gryphon Cantata Loudspeaker



Price: £12300

Reviewed in Issue 27

**Manufacturer:**  
Gryphon Audio Designs  
Tel. (45)(0)8689 1200  
Net. [www.gryphon-audio.com](http://www.gryphon-audio.com)



Gryphon might be better known for their electronics but their first speaker is a stunner. From the individual styling and quality of parts, to the innovative cross-over technology, this is a product that stands

apart. But the sonic results certainly vindicate the approach. Leaving little or no discernable fingerprint on the music the Cantata really does disappear leaving you to enjoy the performance rather than the system. It's an achievement that many highly rated yet far more egocentric high-end designs would do well to emulate. Expensive, but that doesn't stop it being an absolute bargain.

## The Speakers Corner Mercury Re-issues



Reviewed in Issue 27

**Record Label:**  
Speakers Corner  
Tel. (49)(0)4346 601999  
Net. [www.speakerscorner.de](http://www.speakerscorner.de)

# STEREO

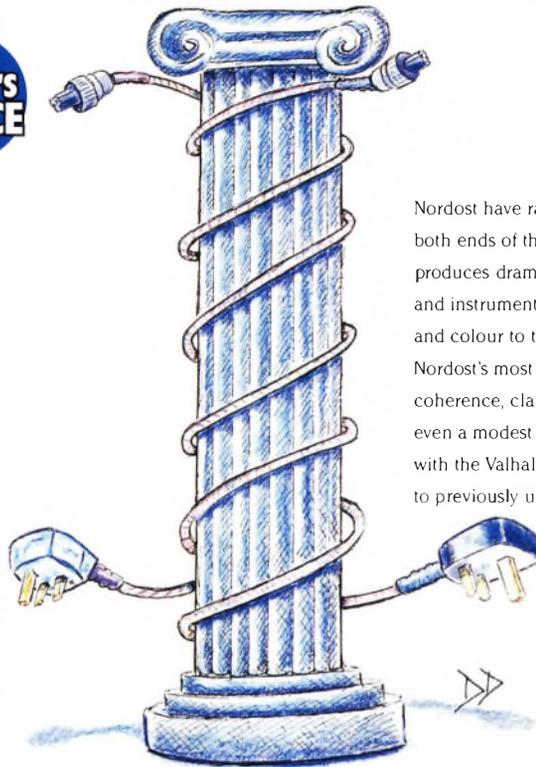
HI-FI



The consistent quality of pressings and superb choice of repertoire coming out of Speakers Corner has made the German company the most interesting and important re-issue label in the world. They really hit the big time with their Ella Fitzgerald *Songbook* series, but their latest major project promises even greater rewards. They've started work on the

legendary Mercury back catalogue, and the first results, three 20th Century works, have elevated their art to even higher levels of performance. From the beautifully reproduced sleeves to the flat, silent and superb sounding pressings, these records define what a re-issue should be.

▶ Nordost Power Cords



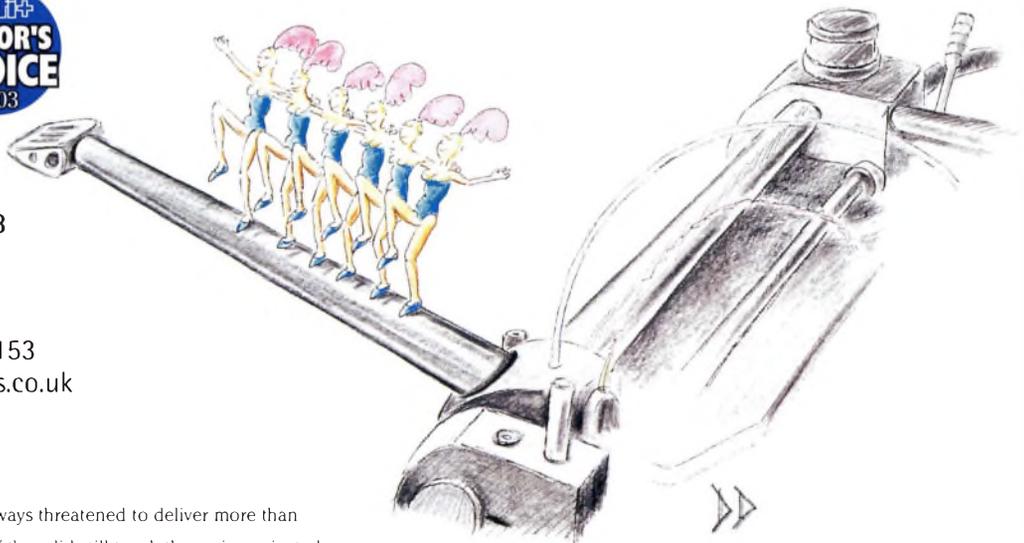
Price: From £230

Reviewed in Issue 28

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

Nordost have raised the bar on power cord performance – at both ends of the price spectrum. The Shiva mains lead produces dramatic improvements in dynamic range, speed and instrumental separation, while the Vishnu adds weight and colour to the mix. But it's the Valhalla leads that represent Nordost's most impressive achievement to date. The coherence, clarity and authority they bring to the sound of even a modest system is quite breathtaking. Combining them with the Valhalla signal leads lifts the performance of the latter to previously unimagined levels. Think you've heard what power cords can do? Think again!

Kuzma Airline Passive Linear Tracking Tonearm



Price: £4700

Reviewed in Issue 28

UK Distributor:  
 Audiofreaks  
 Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153  
 Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Parallel tracking arms have always threatened to deliver more than they actually achieved, even if they did still teach the various pivoted designs a thing or two. Now, the Kuzma Airline finally delivers on that promise. Its high-pressure bearing and massive construction provide astonishingly detailed and stable stereo perspectives, effortlessly explosive dynamics and a thoroughly convincing top

to toe evenness. The result is the most significant single advance in analogue replay it's been my pleasure to witness. And it was a pleasure, believe me. If you've the bank balance and the turntable required, treat yourself today.



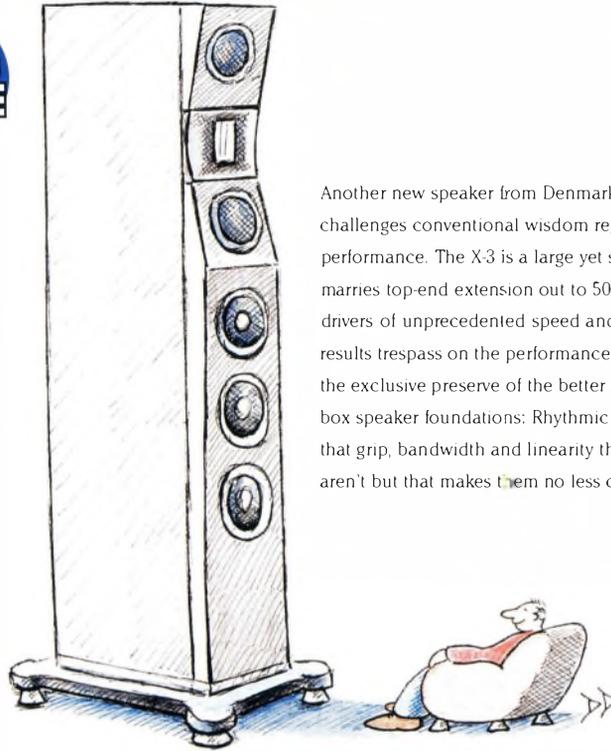
## ▶ Eben Acoustics X-3 Loudspeaker



Price: £8000

Reviewed in Issue 28

Manufacturer:  
Eben by Raidho  
Tel. (45)(0)9816 6027  
Net. [www.eben.dk](http://www.eben.dk)



Another new speaker from Denmark and another design that challenges conventional wisdom regarding loudspeaker performance. The X-3 is a large yet slim floorstander that marries top-end extension out to 50kHz to moving-coil mid and bass drivers of unprecedented speed and dynamic range. The sonic results trespass on the performance domain that was previously the exclusive preserve of the better horn designs, but grafts it onto box speaker foundations: Rhythmic integrity and musical tension that grip, bandwidth and linearity that command. Relaxing they aren't but that makes them no less compelling.

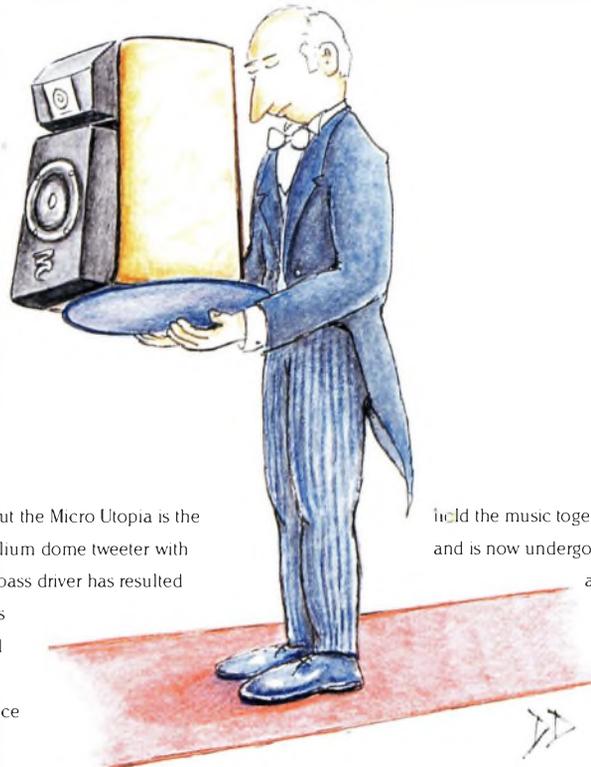
## Focal-JMLabs Micro Utopia Be Loudspeaker



Price: £3600

Reviewed in Issue 28

UK Distributor:  
Focal-JMLab UK Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0)121 616 5126  
Net. [www.focal-jmlab.fr](http://www.focal-jmlab.fr)



It's been a bumper year for small speakers, but the Micro Utopia is the cream of the crop. Combining the new Beryllium dome tweeter with a re-engineered cabinet, cross-over and mid-bass driver has resulted in a compact speaker that delivers new levels of rhythmic and dynamic discrimination and insight. Instrumental detail and identity are astonishing while overall speed and coherence

held the music together. CT was utterly seduced and is now undergoing treatment for withdrawal, a situation he hopes to rectify with an imminent purchase!



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For those of you that require a picture of a scantily clad woman to advertise hi-fi, due to space limitations we can only include the following



We could describe our equipment using the same cliched adjectives as our rivals - acclaimed, amazing, awesome, breathtaking, incredible, pure, sensational, sublime, unprecedented. We could attempt to impart an air of refinement and use a catchphrase purporting to link love of music with buying a product. We could refer to manufacturing aspects, using vaguely technical buzzwords starting with capital letters to indicate How Important They Are and that our equipment has 25% more of A Very Interesting Feature.

At Absolute Analogue we take a no nonsense approach. We are very proud of our entire range of products and some of them do use very interesting technology but we do not claim that that our equipment is the best for everyone. There is no overall "best" - we each have our preferences and, like all equipment, ours is individual in nature. If you do not care for certain aspects, however good they might be, then you might well prefer a rival product (you poor deluded fool).

What we do say is that our equipment is at least as good as other equipment at the same price and in some cases is a lot better value. So, it would be sensible to give our equipment a listen as otherwise you may lose out.

That may not sound as "impressive" as our rival's claims, but should be of more use to you. Get it right!



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*Ray Gregory*

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"Halcro's dm58: The Best Amplifier Ever!"

Stereophile Magazine, October 2002

The music,  
the whole music,  
and nothing but the music.

It is a fact of physics that amplifier distortion is responsible for creating ghost notes. For example, when two notes are played simultaneously, say E in one octave and C in the octave above, the distortion of an amplifier will create a third note, G, in the octave below that of E. Within harmonically complex music, distortion clutters the signal with exaggerated, harsh and confusing sounds.

Halcro's circuitry has been designed to virtually eliminate these intrinsic non-linear effects. Total Harmonic Distortion is less than 1000 parts per billion at full power (20kHz). A fraction of that of other amplifiers.

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# Blue Pearl Audio JEM Turntable

by Roy Gregory

Despite the prophets of doom, vinyl records remain in rude health. Indeed, last year they were the only pure music-carrier to increase their sales in both unit terms and market share. Sure, both those figures pale into the insignificance of microscopic undetectability when set against the global market for DVD-V, carrying as it does, movies, TV images, music videos and computer games. But that in itself tells you something important. The market for LPs is getting more specialist, and that means it's also getting more dedicated – which helps explain why there are more seriously expensive turntable designs than ever before.

Any discussion of state-of-the-art, cost-no-object vinyl replay has to start with the Rockport Sirius III, just the same as any discussion of 8000m peaks inevitably centres on Everest. But in the same way that other peaks (such as K2 or Makalu) quickly become more interesting and challenging, drawing the attention and excitement of the conversation, audiophiles tend to move on equally quickly from the Sirius III. Why? Because the Rockport represents an aberration, not in terms of technology or performance, but in terms of price – an aberration that if you are not careful distorts the whole field. But, bearing that in mind, let's start with the American heavy-weight anyway.

What the Sirius III did in a way that no other record-player ever had, including its predecessor the Sirius II, was adopt a genuinely open ended approach to every aspect of turntable design. You see, that's the thing about playing records: it's a mechanical process with mechanical problems

and engineering solutions. Just as you can always build a longer bridge or taller building, you can throw more mass, weight or technology and materials at record replay. Well, the Sirius III really did take it about as far as you possibly could whilst retaining a finished item



that was actually transportable and self contained enough to be sold into customer's houses. It also set a completely new level as far as pricing was concerned, treading boldly where hi-fi had resolutely feared to go. But not boldly enough as we shall see.

Even when you adopt a cost-no-object approach there are still design choices to be made. Even if you don't agree with those selected by Andy Payor, one thing is indisputable – they were always the most expensive. Thus, the Rockport Sirius III was a high-tech tour de force. It was built around a heavy, stainless steel platter that was supported on a bi-axial air-bearing whilst incorporating a vacuum hold-down and a zero-contact direct-drive motor. This latter design involved a stator built into the outer element of the main bearing while the rotor was built on the interior. It's virtually frictionless operation was developed

to spin mercury mirrors for astrophysical applications (that's laser telescopes to you and me) so you can imagine the tolerances and precision required, especially as regards vibration and speed control.

Add to that lot a self-leveling air suspension, massive cast constrained layer plinth and a dedicated passive parallel-tracking arm, all fed by a sophisticated compressor unit incorporating a refrigeration stage and filter and you quickly develop a picture of purposeful excess. There was no expense spared on materials either, with carbon-fibre rubbing shoulders with mineral loaded polymers.

But the real kicker is that the Rockport actually looked like it was worth the money! It was a visually stunning and mechanically impressive beast loaded with party tricks to impress those with seriously deep pockets. And it had an undeniable quality to its sound.



First offered for sale in the UK for £50000, in material terms at least, it represented an absolute bargain. You what? Well, let's work it out. The conventional parts to retail cost ratio for consumer products is ten to one. So a speaker that retails for £200 a pair will contain parts (drivers, crossover, wiring ▶

▶ and cabinets) with a combined cost of about \$20.\*

If we apply that equation to the Sirius III we immediately get into trouble. Okay, so it was sold direct, which takes out a margin, but even if we reduce the cost ratio to a factor of five to one, the sums still don't add up. The motor/bearing and its control electronics (that's without platter, vacuum hold-down or a box to contain the circuitry) is an off the shelf item, direct from the manufacturer who builds it for NASA.

It carries a price tag of \$12000! Now consider that we need to provide all the other elements of the unit itself and assemble them, paying top-dollar for the limited production runs. Then we have to provide hand built crates and ship the product to its final destination. Take one look at the parts count and you can quickly appreciate that nobody made any money out of the Sirius III, even at a final sale price of \$75000. It was a labour of love that no rational business could possibly support. Which is why it's no longer made.

The problem is that Rockport charged as much as they felt they could and it was still nowhere near enough. But by cutting their own financial throat they also queered the pitch for anybody else by providing a totally unattainable benchmark, as far as the price/technology factor goes. However, as we shall see, there's more than one way to play a record.

### Meet the JEM

Blue Pearl Audio might not be the first name that springs to mind when you start talking high-end turntables. Indeed,

I doubt that it springs to mind at all, as the company has no history in hi-fi to speak of. However, the same cannot be said of the Blue Pearl turntable, their sole product, one that carries a fairly breathtaking price tag of close to \$50000. A fact I'm sure, that will have many readers spitting their coffee across the front-room (avoid the system guys) or shaking their heads in depressed incredulity.

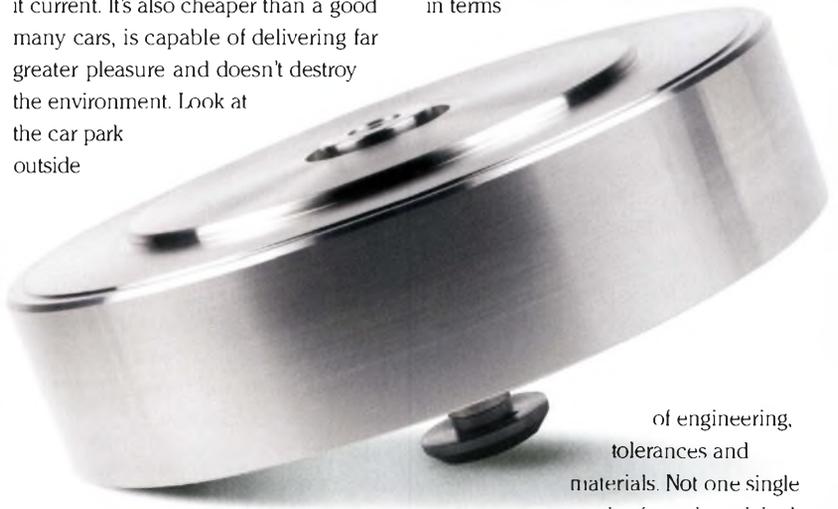
I mean, where's the relevance? Well, unlike the Rockport, this is a real world product, which means that it carries a real world tariff. And if you want to know what's so real world about a turntable that costs more than a terraced house in Leeds, the answer is that it's a unit that can actually be produced, supported and updated in order to keep it current. It's also cheaper than a good many cars, is capable of delivering far greater pleasure and doesn't destroy the environment. Look at the car park outside

trickle down effect is already at work. Blue Pearl might only produce one 'table at the moment, but there will be others, and they'll be a lot cheaper.

Dedicated analogue watchers will take one look at the JEM and breathe the word "Stratosphere", and they'd be right. That turntable was the product of the ever-fertile imagination of one Mr Jeffries. Like many of his projects it was neat in conception but ultimately left unfinished. Also, like any work in progress, it was a constant source of emerging problems that needed solving one after another. At which point, enter one Martin Easton, machinest par excellence, drafted in to manufacture or re-manufacture the various fixes. But what started as a simple enough project soon took on a life of its own. To cut a long story short, the end result was a complete reassessment of the design, based on the original outline concept but totally re-examined in terms



any hi-fi show and you'll see a couple of Porsches and Maseratis, let alone the Audi's, BMWs and Jaguars. Suddenly, a turntable with this sort of price tag doesn't seem quite so absurd. Yes, it will be limited to a very small and very fortunate few, but rest assured that the



of engineering, tolerances and materials. Not one single part remains from the original: It is now a new design. The end result is vastly more impressive in terms of both presentation and sonic quality. Dig a little deeper and it becomes more impressive still.

In selecting the materials and engineering solutions he applied to the Blue Pearl, Martin applied the cynical eye of an experienced engineer to a fundamental reappraisal of the form and function of each and

\*Before you get all outraged bear in mind that doesn't include packaging, development or build costs. Then there's the small question of overheads, transport and a guarantee. Then the people who make and sell the product have to make a living so that they'll be around in five years to service it.

▶ every piece of the turntable.

Whilst it might not look like it, the resulting product is actually a high-mass suspended design and thus a direct linear descendant of the great British turntable tradition. But along the way it's picked up a few other ideas so let's take a closer look.



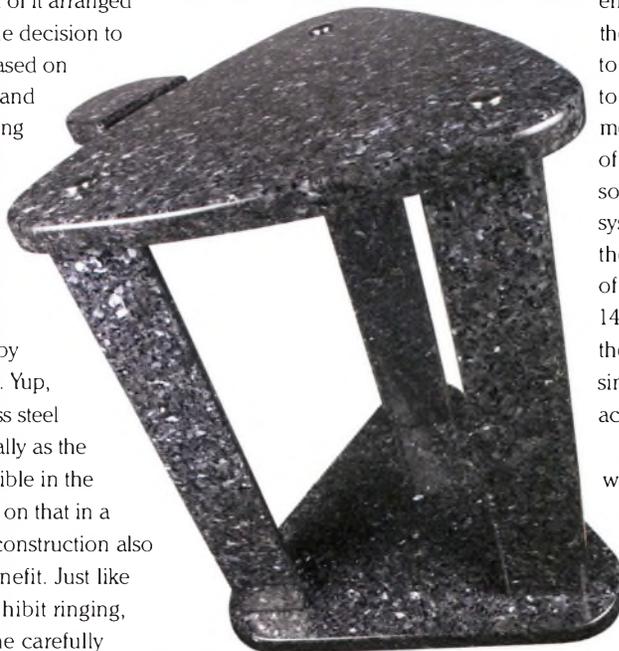
### The big, rotating bits... Platter and main bearing

The heart of any turntable is the platter and main bearing; The Pearl is no exception. Obviously massive, it's not immediately apparent the extent to which that observation is true. The two-part platter is machined from non-magnetic stainless steel and weighs a nice round 100 lbs, most of it arranged around the periphery. The decision to use stainless steel was based on its combination of mass and rigidity. If the stylus is going to measure groove modulation then you need to ensure that it does so from an effective reference. That means making sure the record can't be moved by the reaction of the stylus. Yup, nearly 50 kilos of stainless steel should do nicely, especially as the bearing is effectively flexible in the vertical plane (but more on that in a moment). The two-part construction also delivers a secondary benefit. Just like a Linn platter, it helps inhibit ringing, further suppressed by the carefully

considered proportions of the platter itself. What's more, should you decide against the bonded cork interface supplied on the review sample, other solutions such as machined acrylic can easily be substituted and mated to the high-mass lower portion. Incidentally this also introduces two recurring themes that characterise the design as a whole.

Cork was chosen because it combined the desired firm support with a disruptive structure incapable of supporting a single dominant resonance. The replaceable top element of the platter represents the modular nature of the design. Time and again, different elements can be easily swapped or modified if a superior solution is discovered. It's a reassuring aspect in such an expensive product, especially one with such a long working life.

Now's also a good time to examine the practicality and cost of producing such a massive platter. Using stainless steel has a profound effect, both in the cost of the material itself compared to aluminium alloys or acrylic, and in the



difficulty of working it. Turn stainless on a conventional lathe and machining time for a given task will be eight times as long as it would be for aluminium, a function of the machining rate and depth. The problem is that with a mass this great, automatic machines capable of handling it are (very) few and far between, which means doing the job by hand. How long? How long is a piece of string? Turning just the underside of the main platter takes around 50 hours! Now figure that in terms of production costs.

Of course, using such a heavy platter, whilst representing an astonishingly stable support for the record as well as a pretty dramatic fly-wheel effect, is not without problems, not least the question of providing a bearing to support it. An air-bearing could certainly do it, but as we've seen, it's costly to implement and brings significant collateral complications in the shape of a fussy and electrically and sonically noisy pump. Instead, Blue Pearl opted for the far simpler and more cost effective solution of a magnetically opposed bearing. However, in this case the term cost effective is distinctly relative. The magnets needed to support such an enormous platter are so powerful that they are actually a significant danger to human health. You really don't want to get between one of these and a metal surface. They're quite capable of neatly amputating body parts! The solution was to create a closed magnet system on which a separate platter can then be placed. The large diameter of this supporting platform, around 140mm also serves to limit ringing in the platter compared to conventional single-point bearings that allow flexure across the entire radius.

Of course, the magnets only deal with the vertical axis, but as long as the bearing is vertical, side loading and the friction and noise that goes with it should be limited to the side-thrust effect of the drive belt. Indeed, despite the mass ▶

▷ of the platter, the lateral bearing, an 18mm polished steel inverted design uses thrust pads formed from a sintered mix of bronze and PTFE. The floating, self-centering design of the platter assembly protects these incredibly quiet yet soft pads from mechanical damage, while the bronze element ensures electrical continuity for the platter earth.

The whole edifice is topped off with a substantial stainless steel record weight. Nicely proportioned it is supported on a cork interface, while being heavy enough to require care in handling. But the sheer mass of the weight has a second, less obvious implication. It's heavy enough to effect the ride height of the platter, thus whether you use it (or any other device) or not, you must be consistent, otherwise you will alter the VIA significantly. However, the bespoke nature of the Blue Pearl also means that if necessary, the profile of the clamp can easily be altered to accommodate unusually bulky arms or cartridges; Clearaudio owners might want to take note.

### The motor and power supply... Three speeds and precision control

The next most critical aspect of turntable design is the choice of motor technology. Theoretically you simply need a motor that is quiet and can run at an accurate speed. In practice these performance attributes are astonishingly difficult to achieve. For the Blue Pearl, Martin Easton rejected conventional synchronous motors because of potential cogging problems, especially with a platter this heavy. Out went brushless DC designs too, along with the complex electronics required to run them accurately. Instead he adopted

a sledgehammer approach. A 13 pole, brush DC motor, complete with skew wound coils and precious metal brushes in its commutator was selected. A sophisticated design, the core-less/iron-less rotor runs external to the stator, an arrangement that reduces both moving mass and hysteresis effects.

The end result is a quiet motor with extremely good torque and fast response. This is then fitted with a 500 line optical encoder, linked to temperature and voltage stable internal reference.

The motor can both accelerate and brake the platter as required. The power supply offers three rotary controls: one each for stop/go, 33/45/78 and fixed internal

reference or user variable speed control. The variable setting allows speed adjustment of  $\pm 2\%$  for 33 and 45, with  $\pm 25\%$  on 78. For once, an audiophile record player that actually provides the necessary latitude to play 78s properly. However, in practice, the fixed internal reference stayed absolutely spot-on throughout the review period, no matter how often I checked it, rendering the variable speed adjustment unnecessary.

The motor is attached to a separate, solid gantry attached to the rear of the main tripod. This isolates it from the suspended platter and tonearm, while the free standing motor pod also allows control over belt tension. A rubber mat attached to its base, along with its weight, stop it wandering around. The belts used (there are two) are simple round section ones that seem to do a more than adequate job, certainly unless or until something better comes along.



### The big bits that stay still... The plinth and suspension system

This is where the Blue Pearl diverges most in design from a table like the Rockport, or indeed, the Clearaudio. As I mentioned earlier, this is actually a traditional suspended sub-chassis design, albeit writ large. The main-bearing, platter and arm are all mounted to a substantial (and you'd better believe it) rounded, triangular slab of Granite. The lack of parallel sides, along with the curved profile of the sides themselves, all act to inhibit resonance, as does the material itself. By choosing stone with course grade granules in the substrate, you end up with another random structure that's unsympathetic to resonance.

The tripod base is constructed from the same material, two more triangular plates tied together by the three, solid, triangular section legs. There are leveling cones on the bottom, and the whole thing bolts together with massive, purpose made, stainless steel fixings, so that it can be broken down for transport or delivery. Which is just as well really, as moving it en masse would be a far from trivial exercise. It's to the rear underside of the top plate that the motor gantry fixes, a small D shaped



platform also machined from Granite. One hidden benefit of the material also deserves comment. The blue colouring is derived from Cobalt, the presence of which means the stand provides electro-magnetic as well as mechanical isolation.

The suspension sits between the ▷

▶ two top plates and consists of a simple, off the shelf solution in the shape of six Feet of Silence. Made by Solid Tech in Switzerland, these clever isolation devices each constitute a mini suspension. Concentric cylinders each have three arms positioned at 120 degrees to each other. In the case of the inner one these are at the bottom while the outer's are at the top, slots cut in



the side of the outer cylinder allowing the two elements to fit together. Each vertical pair of arms is then tied together with a pair of O rings. The end result is a unit that stands on a wide footprint, its inner section suspended from the outer. Add a large diameter, single-contact ball to the top of the floating piece and away you go – a simple, self-contained suspension unit. The original Stratosphere relied on the Air Pod opposed magnet supports, but the Feet of Silence offer a simpler and arguably just as effective suspension system. All you do is place them equidistant around the periphery of the stand top-plate and then place the sub-chassis on top of them. Leveling is carried out once the turntable is fully assembled by using the cones on the bottom of the stand. I have only two reservations about this approach. One concerns the longevity of the O rings themselves. Whilst it's not exactly a tragedy should one decide to break, it would be a significant annoyance, requiring the deconstruction of the deck in order to replace it. The second is purely aesthetic; I don't think they look very nice. On a product at this

price I feel that a more elegant appearance would be appropriate - even a simple skirt fitted to the turntable top-plate to hide them from view. Still, at least such a solution is totally retrofitable, even if it would stop you checking the suspension status.



### Nuts and bolts... The mechanics of arm matching and mounting

Being solely a motor unit, the Blue Pearl relies on other manufacturers to provide its tonearm. Thus it requires a universal mounting system to accommodate a range of different designs. The chosen solution is a little work of engineering art. A separate arm pod is constructed from three, modular elements. The base bolts to the turntable top-plate, separated by a cork layer. An imbedded stud that runs in a profiled slot in the bottom of the base allows the arm base to spindle distance to be set precisely, the whole pod being free to slide on a fixed, radial track, prior to bolting into place. A large aperture pointing to the rear of the deck allows the arm-cable to exit, while the 100mm diameter of the base allows plenty of room, even for the SME's right-angle entry plug.

The next stage is an interface that accepts the arm-board proper. The clever thing is that this interface is connected to the base element by a knurled collar, itself held under tension. A thread cut into the top of the base means that the interface can be readily raised or lowered through

a height of around 6mm, allowing easy compensation for deep cartridges, short arms, or those arms that fail to provide proper VTA adjustment. Add in the brass arm-board (arm-plate might be more accurate) and you have a simple, versatile and incredibly solid arm-pod that will happily accept the vast majority of arms, as well as being readily adapted to the real oddballs if necessary.

What's more, a second arm-pod (with suitably positioned cable port) can be mounted on the rear left corner of the deck. That means that the 'table doesn't just deliver the necessary speed adjustment for correct 78 replay, it also allows you to fit the necessary dedicated cartridge. With the rising appreciation of mono recordings also creating a similar demand, the Blue Pearl is one of the few decks that can easily accommodate such a requirement – and the only one that provides replay to this standard. Which brings us, finally, to how the deck sounds.

### Moving Air... Listening to the Pearl

I had the Blue Pearl at home for a usefully long period of time, partly

I suspect because of the sheer difficulty in



moving it around. During that period I got to play it with a goodly proportion of different equipment in the general run of reviews. More importantly, I also got to play with different arm and

▷ cartridge combinations, essential to isolating the character of the 'table itself. As initially installed the JEM was mounted with a gold edition SME 5. Listening soon convinced me that the sonic character of the combination was dominated by the sound of the arm, a product I know well. Swapping to the Triplanar quickly confirmed my suspicions. The improvement was sufficiently dramatic to render irrelevant all previous experience, and all sonic impressions recorded below are based on this combination, used with either the Clearaudio Accurate or Lyra Titan cartridges.



Most of the listening was done with my normal Groove Plus phono-stage and Vibe/Pulse line-stage, driving the Hovland RADIA and a range of speakers including Revel Performa F50s, Living Voice OBX-Rs, Reference 3A Royal Virtuosos, Audioplan Kontrast Illis and Alon Lotus Elite SEs. Cabling was Nordost Váhhalla throughout, including the mains leads, although I tried XLO and FM Acoustics arm leads with the Triplanar, and Hovland and DNM arm cables with the SME. I also had the superb Vitus Audio line and phono-stages to hand, which proved invaluable in establishing the tonal superiority of the Blue Pearl.

As regards the direct comparisons with the Clearaudio Master Reference record player, the physical distance between the two necessitated a mobile phono solution, so I ran the Groove Plus on long leads, moving both it and its supporting Voodoo isolation platform between the two decks as listening demanded.

### Comparison 1: The Clearaudio Master Reference

Direct comparisons between the Blue Pearl and the resident Clearaudio record player quickly established the absolute superiority of the newcomer. Generally speaking, the Clearaudio's quick, uncluttered clarity and dynamic zip are untroubled by comparison to other 'tables. They might offer greater weight or a richer balance, but all the time the Master reference sounds cleaner and more organised it holds its own. Now for the first time the tables have been turned. The JEM makes the

Clearaudio sound homogenous and hurried. The extraordinary stability and transparency coupled to natural weight and harmonics offer far superior separation of instruments and definition of acoustic space – normally the Clearaudio's exclusive preserve. What's more, that weight and harmonic development in no way inhibits the dynamic range or responsiveness of the deck. Indeed, the lively dynamics of the Triplanar revealed just how unobstructive to energy the drive system really is.

Playing the original Roulette pressing of the Basie *Chairman Of The Board* is the perfect way to high-light the differences between these two turntables. On the Blue Pearl, the contrast between the opening chorus and the brass tutti is heightened by the phrasing of the players, the slight

pause before each interjection. The development of the central theme, propelled by the clearly defined bass pattern and the Count's subtle piano prompts, is a masterful extrapolation of pace and swing. And boy does it swing. The brass has that wonderful ripping blat to its sound, full of speed and presence. The rhythm players underpin the proceedings without ever getting swamped, keeping the track moving inexorably towards its helter-skelter climax, allowing the brass to stretch out, coil itself and finally deliver the final climax. Play it as loud as you like: The sound doesn't harden, the dynamics don't compress, you don't end up with the orchestra in your lap.



In comparison the sound from the Clearaudio lacks the instrumental individuality and impact that you've just got used to.

It's partly to do with less explicit spatial separation, partly the lack of tonal differentiation. The result sounds forced and muddled in comparison – on a track on which the Clearaudio normally excels. There simply isn't the space, the insight or the rhythmic sophistication that comes with the Blue Pearl.

It feels like the system is scrabbling to get the sheer energy through in time, whereas with the JEM, the superb sense of ensemble really lets you hear the musicians easing ▷



▶ slightly, gathering themselves before that final crescendo. There's a real sense of question and response, of musicians exploring the limits of the score and their combined power.

Classical works and pop music proved equally revealing. Indeed, you should be aware of these differences regardless of what you play, it's just that the better the performance the wider the gap becomes. And it's not just about scale and energy, it's about encompassing and cradling the musical event. Playing the Chesky repressing of the Reiner/Chicago *Beethoven 6th* once again demonstrates the superior phrasing and the natural tonality of the JEM. It's not a hi-fi difference per se, it's all to do with the sense and character of the performance. The *Pastoral* atmosphere is simply more convincing, the bird calls more apparent, the whole event just makes more sense.

Playing smaller works on the Blue Pearl, the details of Martzy's bowing or Shawn Colvin's breathing and intonation brings these recordings vividly to life, adding drama and humanity to the proceedings. The poise, power and control of Martzy's purposeful and commanding *Kreutzer* has never been so obvious, so compelling or so breathtaking in its authority. She masters the score and shapes it, where the Clearaudio relies on the structure of the piece itself. Impressive as it is it simply can't match the artistic vision delivered by the JEM and that's the real difference between these decks. It's not that the Master Reference is bad – it clearly isn't. It's just that the Blue Pearl is better. It's better in hi-fi terms such

as the naturalness of its harmonic structure and weight, its dynamic range and its effortless control of the musical dynamic. But what really elevates its performance above an

otherwise outstanding deck like

the Master Reference, is

its ability to move

you closer to the

purpose of the

performers;

It unravels

the sense in

a performance

with such totally

convincing ease. In

this regard I'd place

it on a par with the

Connoisseur 4.0 pre-amp,

and that dear readers, is

praise indeed. This is a

turntable that deals in the

emotion and sense, the

overall shape and intent of

each player's contribution

and the piece as a whole.



### Comparison 2: The VPI TNTs

In many respects the sheer weight and substance of the Blue Pearl's sound makes the VPI TNT turntables more obvious challengers than the Clearaudio. Harry Weisfeld's latest HRX is his most accurate and neutral deck to date. In that regard it comes closer to the Blue Pearl than the Clearaudio does, delivering the weight, presence and substance of the massive deck. What it can't match is its dynamic range and the transparency of its sound stage. Indeed, it's ironic but the earlier TNT Hot Rod gets closer to the JEM in terms



of overall character than its more expensive and technically superior cousin. Why? Because it has slightly more of what makes the Blue Pearl so special.

Comparisons between the TNT Hot Rod and the HRX reveal that the cheaper and simpler deck still carries the hallmark flaws so successfully eliminated by the HRX. To wit, it has a velvety darkness to its tonality and it smoothes micro dynamics, particularly at low frequencies, leading to plenty of life but a loss of texture and bite. The HRX does all these things dramatically better, with a lighter, defter touch. But what the Hot Rod refines to its apogee is the sheer sense of musical enthusiasm that's always driven the sound of the TNT. Regardless of vintage, playing records on the big, solid acrylic VPI always left you with the feeling that the musicians really loved what they were doing, whether it's the sheer in your face energy of big-band Basie or the poise and pathos of the slow movement in a violin sonata.

What does that tell us about the

Blue Pearl? Well, it betters

the HRX for

instrumental

identity and

separation, and

matches it for

dimensionality and

soundstage definition.

But dynamically its

both far quicker and

more precise, as well

as delivering greater

dynamic range. The

unfettered dynamics

are what elevate the

performance and

communicate the purpose

and energy of the players.

The Hot Rod lacks the

dynamic definition of the

HRX, but its sheer gusto helps lift that

sense of musical enjoyment and

commitment. The HRX is the better

deck overall, but the Hot Rod gets ▶

▷ the balance between accuracy and communication better. However, the real lesson is that it's the Blue Pearl that makes us aware of that fact. I always had a regard for the Hot Rod and now I know why. Once again, the Blue Pearl manages to match the traditional strengths of an established performer while ruthlessly revealing its weaknesses.

### Comparison 3: The Rockport Sirius III

This is where it gets tricky, because I have to rely on my sonic memory to a far greater extent. However, having spent some considerable time with both the Sirius II and III I'm fairly confident that I've got their measure. Besides, I've got the Master Reference as a bench-mark.

The thing that always separated the Sirius III from other decks was its zero-contact bearing and drive system. This removed any sense of the mechanical process of reproduction from its sound; music simply ebbed and flowed as the performance demanded.

It also delivered a previously unprecedented degree of low-level information and detail, which combined with the positive attributes of its linear tracking arm,

produced a soundstage to die for. Nothing came close to the scale, transparency and stability of the Rockport's stereo perspective. Nothing matched its dimensionality or individual image localisation, or the believable proportions it delivered. The result really was the proverbial walk-in soundstage, with space around and between the performers, clearly defined boundaries and totally convincing presence and stability. Even those who don't believe in, or don't think that stereo is important, couldn't help but be impressed.

But it was not all milk and honey. Both the II and to a slightly lesser degree the III, suffered from two persistent weaknesses. The first was a muting of the tonal palette which I suspect was a result

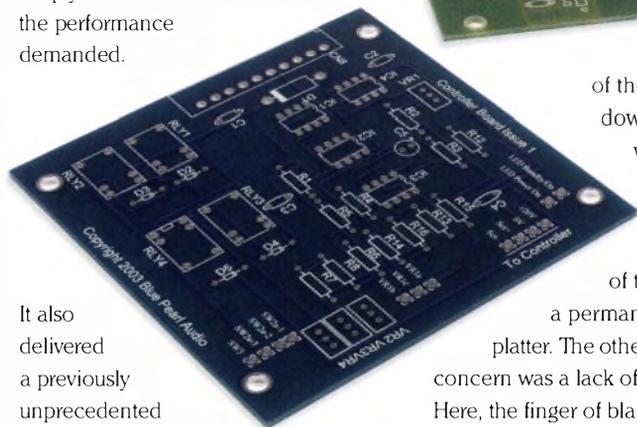
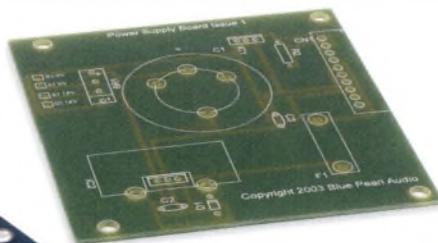
to be more rigid as well as correcting the effective mass for lower compliance cartridges (Andy Payor always preferred the relatively high compliance vdH Grasshopper). But it still never really dealt with the lack of dynamic jump that deflated an otherwise stellar performance. Now, hindsight is a wonderful thing, and subsequent experience with the Kuzma Airline demonstrates just how

important pressure in the bearing is



to dynamic integrity. The conclusion has to be that the 2 bar run in the 7000 simply wasn't up to the job.

In comparison the Blue Pearl gets close to but can't match the absolute musical ease and expansive staging of the Rockport Sirius III. I'd put that down to the residual contact in the horizontal bearing and the fact that it relies on a drive belt that will inevitably transmit some noise. It also uses a pivoted arm, at least for the duration of the review period. But, in the realms of dynamic range, tonal colour, instrumental and orchestral weight as well as sheer musical communication there is simply no comparison: The Blue Pearl stomps on the Sirius III. Mind you, in dynamic terms so does the Clearaudio, so that gives you some idea of just how wide the gap is. But that's not all. Much depends on the choice of tonearm



of the vacuum hold-down, something it was impossible to confirm because of the mechanics of the lip seal that was a permanent part of the platter. The other, far more serious concern was a lack of dynamic range. Here, the finger of blame points squarely at the tonearm, as evidenced by use of the 6000 model from the II on other decks. The 7000 version fitted to the III added a tapered arm-tube that promised



▶ – the SME 5 for instance, flattens and slows proceedings significantly. So, what price the Kuzma Airline on the JEM? On paper at least it's a marriage made in heaven. The arm should extend stereo performance and dimensionality, further improve separation and build on the already impressive dynamics. A mouth-watering prospect to say the least.

Even with the Triplanar (which isn't exactly slumming it) I'd still rate the Blue Pearl as clearly superior to the Rockport. There are those who might carp about accuracy and neutrality, but for me the acid test is musical communication and the ability to bring a performance to life, not just physically or spatially, but in terms of its emotional intent. Where the Rockport is controlled and academic, the Blue Pearl is vivid and communicative. It's the difference between reading about events and actually being there. Ultimately, in musical terms, I'm afraid it's no contest. Which, thankfully, finally lays the specter of the Sirius III to analogue rest. The King is dead and at least the new one is actually alive.

### A conclusion... Of sorts!

Leaving aesthetic considerations aside (personally, I could live without the copious gold plating) it is hard to fault the constructional detail, engineering and modular ethos that underpin the Blue Pearl JEM. All the more so when the superb performance is taken into account. Longevity is a difficult thing to predict, but the choice of materials alone should provide long-term mechanical stability, while wear should be all but negligible. And bear in mind too, that this is no newborn product. The developmental history has been long and tortuous, first with the Stratosphere, then with its complete redesign as the JEM. It's an unusual story, as is the

combination of mechanical skills and audiophile input that has led to the ultimate result; Martin Easton has had access to a captive critical audience in the shape of existing Stratosphere owners. But whatever the circumstances, the sonic results speak for themselves.

The Blue Pearl matches or exceeds the existing benchmark for each and every individually



important hi-fi performance parameter. Tick them off: dynamics, staging, tonality and harmonic development... the list goes on. The JEM has no obvious weaknesses, or hidden ones either. An air-bearing might, possibly, deliver that last ounce of musical flow - at some considerable cost. I'm also confident that the addition of the Kuzma Airline would elevate the performance still further, moving the stereo staging into Sirius III territory.

But what is far more important than those individual aspects of performance is the sense of performance as a whole. What elevates the Blue Pearl from the impressive to the addictive is its ability to weld all those disparate elements into a single, balanced, immediately recognisable whole. It does it with such ease that, listening to the music you don't even hear the turntable working. It is this that makes it better than every other deck I've ever used.

If I play Ella singing the Gershwin *Songbook*, I can simply relax and enjoy the fabulous phrasing, the way she interprets the different songs – open for 'Funny Face', seductive for 'Lorelei' smoking for 'I Got Rhythm'. You can pull

the presentation apart – reduce it to image size, presence, diction, sustain, micro-dynamics, detail and so on - but the simple fact is that they're all irrelevant when considered against the single, glorious whole that represents Ella's performance. Impressive as it is with instruments, the acid test of communication will always be the human voice, and here the Blue Pearl excels itself.

As it stands, this is unquestionably an expensive deck, however, that price reflects the cost of manufacture and is fully reflected in the performance. If you want records to sound this good then this is the price you'll have to pay. I've not heard the Walker Proscenium or the Italian Vyger air-bearing decks (the latter's on the cards) but they represent the only logical competition to the JEM. I always said that if I won the lottery, I'd buy a Sirius III out of sheer respect for the engineering: I'd buy a Blue Pearl because I wanted its performance. It's simple, and as of now, it's the best. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	High-mass suspended motor unit
Bearing Type:	Magnetically opposed
Speeds:	33, 45, 78 internally referenced and user adjustable.
Adjustment:	Electronic, $\pm 2\%$ (33,45) $\pm 25\%$ (78)
Tonearm Mounts:	Two
Lid:	None
Platter Mass:	47kg
Total Mass:	127kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	600x1000x700mm
Finishes:	To order
Price:	£48000

#### Manufacturer:

Blue Pearl Audio  
Tel. (44)(0)1243 514284  
E-mail. sales@bluepearlaudio.co.uk  
Net. www.bluepearlaudio.co.uk

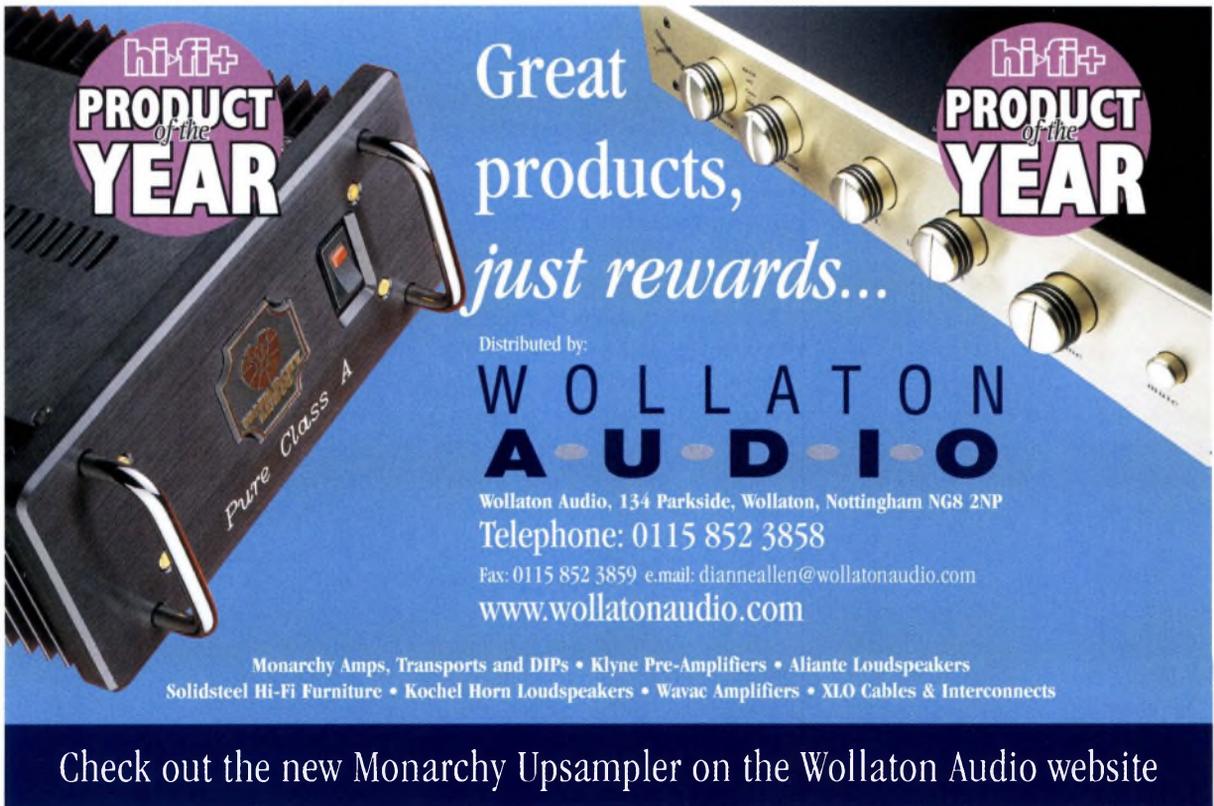
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**WOLLATON  
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Wollaton Audio, 134 Parkside, Wollaton, Nottingham NG8 2NP  
Telephone: 0115 852 3858  
Fax: 0115 852 3859 e.mail: [dianneallen@wollatonaudio.com](mailto:dianneallen@wollatonaudio.com)  
[www.wollatonaudio.com](http://www.wollatonaudio.com)

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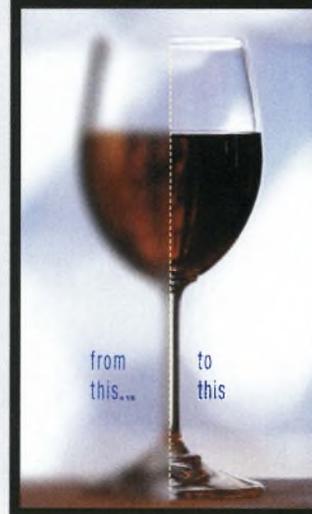
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## PUTTING SOUND INTO FOCUS



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# Vitus Audio Statement Series Line and Phono Stages

by Roy Gregory

Vitus Audio may be a name familiar to you as the provider of the optional phono-stage offered with the Nordic Concept turntable. On paper at least, it's an option that looks like something of a bargain. Ostensibly similar to the unit reviewed here (but without the exquisite casework and £8600 price-tag) it'll cost the Nordic Concept owner a mere £2800. Sounds good? Well, actually no, it doesn't. Read the review and you'll discover that despite its fabulous tonal purity, its lack of dynamic range and authority actually preclude it from serious consideration.

Why then, you might well ask, would I waste my time reviewing the vastly more expensive Vitus Audio version, along with its equally pricey partnering line-stage? The answer's quite simple: On a recent trip to Denmark I enjoyed the opportunity of hearing these units in the designer's own system. If they lacked any grip or authority then I couldn't detect it. Clearly, something wasn't the same, but more of that later. More to the point, who exactly are Vitus Audio and why do they think that someone might part with £18500 for one of their four-box pre-amps?

Vitus Audio might be small, but they're also perfectly formed. This is a long, long way from your average small-scale manufacturer. Just one look at the casework that wraps these units should tell you that. Fit, finish and presentation are as good as anything in the high-end. Although the company might have started small it clearly has big plans, the expertise behind the internals being derived from designer Hans-Ole Vitus's day job with one of the largest semi-conductor manufacturers. Besides manufacturing their own range of

electronics (there are mono-block power amps too) they are also the Danish importers for the highly regarded dCS digital products, Oracle turntables and electronics, SME and Soundlab: It's clear the company they wish to keep. Externally at least, they've got it right so far. Indeed, they carry all the hallmarks of the highest-end. Firstly there's that casework. Then there's the software driven controls and multi-configurable display. There's the plethora of audiophile components and the quality of the internal construction. But most of all, there's the power supplies.

Batteries are far from new when it comes to hi-fi. Indeed, the history of the hobby is littered with attempts to harness the theoretical superiority of battery power. I say "theoretical" because they've generally been messy, impossibly complex, unreliable or hopelessly flawed. The most obvious examples came from Pink Triangle (whose pre-amp and turntable power supplies seemed intent on locking the owner out) Crimson (who seemed incapable of generating any run-time) and Rowland (where the supplies were so intelligent they often refused to communicate with mere humans). Even DNM, perhaps the highest profile of battery users, abandoned them in the end, able to extract superior performance from a carefully designed mains supply.

However, recent attempts have proved far more promising, with both the Amazon and Nordic Concept turntables proving totally trouble free

in operation. Both also delivered excellent sound, although how much of that was down to the chosen power source it's impossible to say. Nevertheless, they gave grounds for hope, especially in the light of the sonic performance of the musically supreme (but supremely impractical) Final Music amplifiers. If only someone could get round the practical issues associated with keeping batteries charged and the sonic issues of their declining performance as they discharge, then



battery power might, just might have a future in amplification. Well, that's exactly what Vitus seem to have done, with both the Phono and Line stages running from internal, rechargeable cells, trickle fed from the smaller, external supplies. A front panel switch selects between charge and operate, with an automatic override if you forget to engage it when the amps are not being used: Simple, effective and above all, failsafe.

The phono-stage offers two, independently user configurable inputs, again selected from a front-panel button. They can be configured for moving-magnet or moving-coil, with parallel sockets allowing you to alter capacitive loading for magnets, or impedance for coils. Despite the front-panel display ▶

▶ that allows you to name each input (as well as showing charge status) actual input sensitivity is fixed, an indication of the straight-line simplicity of the circuit. The display can be dimmed or switched right off, only activating when a button is pressed. Internally the unit is entirely dual-mono and built from discrete components. Even the banks of rechargeable cells are separate. This is the big difference between the Vitus Audio phono-stage and the one supplied in the Nordic Concept. The Vitus has twice the battery on tap and it shows.

The same is true of the line-stage. Twin battery packs feed the dual-mono, discrete circuitry, but this time offering five, single-ended inputs and two single-ended outputs. Neither unit offers balanced connection. Other than that, the line-stage has an extra button on the front panel to allow you to mute the signal, the same, configurable display and the biggest volume knob I've seen in a long time. This carries a subtle LED position indicator, but is manual in operation. Vitus have been unable to discover a remote control whose sonic and ergonomic performance satisfies them, although the search goes on. The matte aluminium panels are beautifully chamfered and finished to create a box with entirely flush faces apart from the dark-grey relief panel that supports the display and provides visual contrast to the flying front-plate. This is some of the nicest casework I've ever seen, and along with the carefully chosen socketry goes a long way towards establishing the products' high-end credentials. This is external appearance executed to superb standards rather than simply to impress. Having said that, it impressed the hell out of me. If these units sound half as good as they look and feel, Vitus will have justified their price.

I used the Vitus Audio electronics with a variety of associated equipment, but predominantly the Clearaudio

Master Reference and Blue Pearl record players, the latter fitted with the Triplanar tonearm and Lyra Titan cartridge. Power amp was the Hovland RADIA driving either the Reference 3A Royal Virtuoso or Revel Performa F50 loudspeakers.

Cabling was Nordost Valhalla throughout,



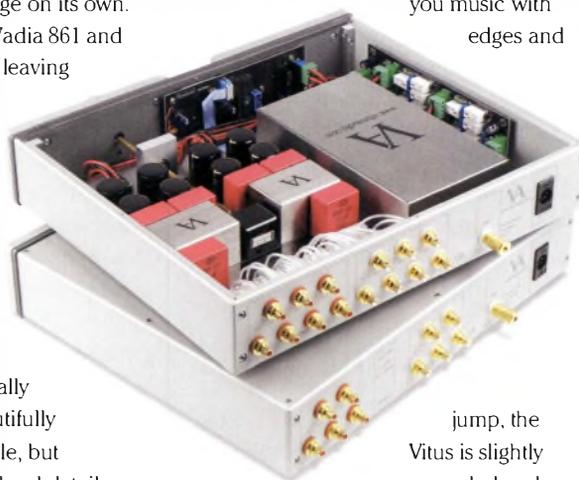
although I couldn't detect any benefit to using the mains leads on the battery supplies!

Having had some past experience with a version of the phono-stage, I decided to separate the two units and start by using the line-stage on its own. Placing it between the Wadia 861 and the Hovland RADIA and leaving it for a couple of days to warm up, I was ready to start listening. What a pleasure: I was greeted by a wide, wide sound-stage and a wonderfully clean acoustic space, totally devoid of grain. Music was presented with a totally convincing tonality, beautifully coherent and full of subtle, but superbly integrated, low-level detail. Playing 'The Thing You Love...' from Dolly Varden's superb *The Dumbest Magnets* (Flying Sparks TDBCD 052) I was astonished by the wealth of inner detail in the chords played by the strummed acoustic guitar. The subtle cymbal work was equally impressive, the horizontal dispersion of the closing

hi-hat almost uncannily realistic. Diane Christensen's voice is solid and convincingly present, her harmonies with Steve Dawson perfectly pitched and spaced. Indeed, the whole performance was remarkably impressive, and for once I wasn't missing the Vibe and its ability to cut to the musical quick. Time for a little experimentation.

Swapping back to the Vibe with the Pulse power supply provided a fascinating contrast. Rarely have I heard two units that are so similar (in terms of musical communication and level of resolution) but so different in their presentation. The Vitus can't match the inky blackness of the Vibe's background, or the agility and absolute authority of its micro-dynamics. In its place it relies on what I can only describe as poise and musical confidence. Whereas the Vibe is uncompromising, even stark, the Vitus is gentler and more beautiful.

Whereas the Vibe gives you music with edges and



jump, the Vitus is slightly more rounded and rather more genteel. The problem is that such descriptions almost inevitably overstate the case. As I said, in terms of detail, resolution and absolute dynamic rang, the two units are hard to separate. What sets them apart is the way they deal with the astonishing amount of sheer information on offer. The Vibe ▶

▷ excels in terms of leading edge placement and definition, preserving the timing cues that establish the form and relationship within the music and performance. Its micro-dynamic control gives an intimacy and directness to the playing that communicates the energy and creative tension at work. The Vitus is supreme in terms of the overall shape and especially the decay of notes. If it doesn't place the initial transient with the laser like precision of the Vibe, it's unerringly accurate in its centring of notes, thus matching the Tom Evans design when it comes to unraveling the overall structure and strands within a piece. Just listen to the timing and juxtaposition of the phrases that make up the opening to the Dolly Varden

### Moving-Coil Cartridges and Impedance Loading

The critical impact of cartridge loading on overall system performance is finally receiving the attention that it deserves. An increasing number of phono-stages now include user adjustment of loading as standard, often employing either dip-switches or, as in the case of the Vitus, plug-in resistors (either as external plugs or directly onto the board). If we can only get them to treat precise gain matching equally seriously we'll actually be getting somewhere! Especially if, alongside the adjustable option they provide a couple of solder posts so that once the user has settled on the precise value required, they or their dealer can hardwire a high-quality resistor of the preferred value into place.

The problem is that cartridge loading is a system parameter rather than just a cartridge one. The load applied to the cartridge effects the damping of its generator mechanism: Not hard to understand how that is going to have a pretty profound effect on the sound as a whole. But think beyond the cartridge interface to the dynamic performance of the tonearm and indeed, the system as a whole and it should become clear that these factors also influence the choice of load. I say "should" because it's only just dawned on me, despite nagging away at the back of my mind for some years now. The final decision on

track and you'll see what I mean. The overall shape of the musical strands as well as the way in which they mesh together is beautifully captured, but at a note by note level. So convincing is the structure, harmonic identity, spacing and shape of each note that the whole to which it contributes becomes a given. That's what I mean about musical confidence.

The Vibe oozes authority because its music is grounded so obviously. You can hear each note start from nothing. With the Vitus the effect is

loading must be based on the dynamic performance of the system as a whole, something that makes specific recommendations on the part of the cartridge manufacturer almost impossible. Experience with the Vitus really brought this home. Whereas with the Groove I am perfectly happy to load both the Clearaudio Insider Reference and the Lyra Titan at 100 Ohms (there are internal electronic reasons to do with the chips used) the Vitus displayed clear preferences for more precise matching with dramatic sonic benefits in evidence. I ended up with the Clearaudio running into 300 Ohms, the Lyra looking at 500 Ohms. Yet the rest of the system, pre-amp aside, was identical. Consider then, the possible influence of amp and speakers on proceedings. These changes were the result in the differing dynamic potential of the Vitus phono-stage in particular, and to a lesser extent, the line-stage. What do you reckon? Incidentally, this whole issue throws an interesting light on the transatlantic debate regarding cartridge loading. To what extent is the oft-stated US preference for 47K loads with MC cartridges a function of the relatively slow dynamic response of the huge amplifier and wide bandwidth speaker systems so often in use. The massive absolute dynamic range on offer needs all the help it can get in terms of front-end speed, while the large-scale sound-stage that results from the 47K load will actually be in appropriate proportion to the enormous dynamic swings on offer. Hmmmm...

different: almost like reverse engineering. Here, the notes slip so effortlessly into the prescribed pattern that it's almost like constructing a musical jigsaw. Which came first, the notes or the structure as a whole? With the Vitus you almost start to wonder.

Clearly, the next stage was to factor in the phono-stage, and once again

I used the Tom Evans units for comparison. Initially, I'll admit to a degree of disappointment but that



quickly evaporated once I'd optimised the cartridge loading (See sidebar). In fact, the performance of the phono-stage mirrors the line-stage virtually point for point. The sound-stage is even deeper and impressively dimensional, with nicely scaled and solid images within the acoustic, but I suspect that that's more a function of the superior source material than the electronics themselves. Playing the Colin Davis *Tosca* reveals that the Vitus combination falls short of the sheer drama you get from the Groove, but the scale, dimensionality and the naturalness of the vocals is adequate compensation. Noise performance is fine, although I wouldn't recommend the use of really low output cartridges. I reckon that around 0.3 mV would be a sensible minimum, with the likes of the Ortofon MC7500 definitely being below the acceptable threshold. The loading system works, although a hard-wired option would be nice, as would some control over gain. On the

▶ positive side, the two independent inputs were an absolute blessing, especially for those who want to optimise mono replay, while the provision of a proper, indeed a WBT, binding post for earth termination was also welcome. Why can't more people get this simple thing right (Mr Evans take note!).

If I was to pick sonic holes in the performance of the Vitus they would centre on the smoothing of bass textures, which

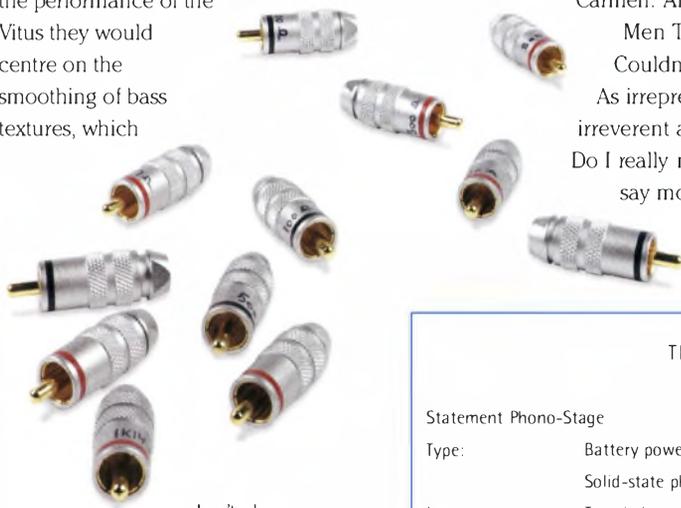
don't show the same insight and inner detail as the mid and treble. The top-end is sweet and unforced, but again, if anything lacks the last ounce of edge, bite and air. Do these things concern me? Not one iota, because they contribute to the sheer, addictive listenability of the Vitus pre-amplifier. This is a solid-state, battery powered combination that delivers all the seductive musicality normally associated with the best valve units, levels of detail and resolution that approach the best solid-state competition and fit and forget practicality to match any mains powered units.

I've spent some time comparing the sound of the Vitus electronics to the benchmark performance of the Vibe, Pulse and Groove Plus. That in itself should tell you a lot. That they pass the comparison unbowed, asking questions of their own should tell you even more. Across all the music that I've played, the Vitus combination

has never disappointed and never failed to reveal the beauty and emotion in a performance. The pacing and phrasing, the delicacy, shape and grace of Yvonne Lefebure's playing has never been so apparent, her Bach never so beautiful. The power and emotional depth of Caballe's *Tosca* is equally as seductive, while Leontyne Price IS

Carmen. And the Men They Couldn't Hang? As irrepressible and irreverent as ever. Do I really need to say more?

Vitus audio may be small; they may be the new kids on the high-end block, but that they deserve their place is indisputable. The name might not be that well known but I've a feeling that that's only a matter of time. Take the trouble to seek them out and I'll be surprised if you are any less impressed than I was. More evidence indeed that the status quo in high-end audio is on the move. These electronics might seem expensive, but unlike so many of their price peers, they deliver full value in both engineering and musical terms. I loved them!



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Statement Phono-Stage

Type: Battery powered Solid-state phono-stage

Inputs: Two, independently configurable

Connections: RCA phonos

Outputs: 1 pr RCA phonos

Output Impedance: 80 ohms

Gain: MC 61dB / MM 30dB

Input Loading: Via RCA plugs on rear panel.

Run Time From Full Charge: Aprox 48 Hours

Battery Life: 10 years

Dimensions -

Phono-Stage (HxWxD): 80x435x370 mm .

Charger (HxWxD): 80x148x360 mm,

Weights -

Phono-Stage: 12Kg

Charger: 2Kg

Finish: Natural Alu w. dark grey inner front or inverted. Other colours available upon request at additional cost.

Price: £8600 / €12700

##### Statement Line Stage:

Type: Battery powered Solid-state line-stage

Inputs: 5x single-ended RCA phonos

Input Impedance: 10Kohm

Overall Gain: 6 dB - 12 dB optional

Outputs: 2x single-ended RCA phonos

Output Impedance: 80 ohms

Run Time From Full Charge: Aprox 48 Hours

Battery Life: 10 years

Dimensions -

Line-Stage (H x W x D): 80x435x370 mm,

Charger (H x W x D): 80x148x360 mm

Weights -

Line-Stage: 13Kg

Charger: 2Kg

Finish: Natural Alu w. dark grey inner front or inverted. Other colours available upon request at additional cost.

Price: £9800 / €14400

##### Manufacturer:

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# Reimyo CDP-777 CD player

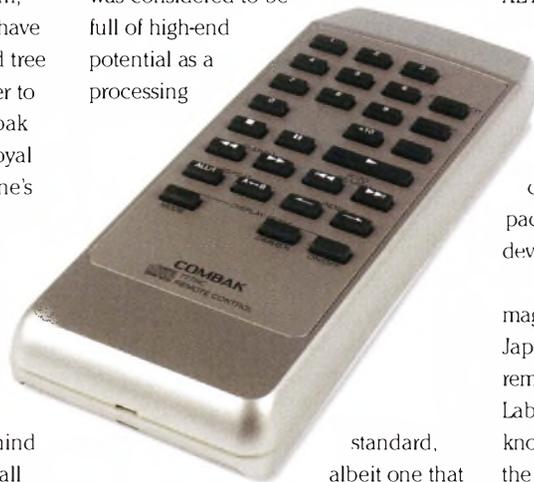
by Alan Sircom

High-end audio is often much like a game of poker; the most obscure hand wins. I'll see your Blue Circle AG3000 dual mono pre-amp and raise you a GLIM M-8 three-box single-ended triode mono power amp. But when it comes to CD players, the great audio poker game suddenly goes all conservative. Accuphase, Krell, Linn, Wadia, Naim, Mark Levinson... the same names have remained at the top of the high-end tree for a decade, with nary a challenger to up the ante. Fortunately, the Combak Reimyo CDP-777 represents the Royal Flush of CD players – almost no-one's seen one, it costs a cool \$9,500 and it sounds bloody marvellous. So it should: the word "Reimyo" is Japanese for miracle.

The Combak Corporation of Japan is best known for producing remarkable bits of high-end tweekery: It's the company behind Harmonix, those tuning feet and wall dots that change the sound of your system by releasing a stream of metronomic particles in the quantum foam and reversing the polarity of the neutron flow - or something. The company also makes a range of very well-respected cables, mains conditioners, 300B-based single-ended triode power amps and even a pair of mini-monitors called Bravo, but most of the electronics stay firmly ensconced in the Pacific Rim. Only the CD player and an older, cheaper DAP-777 digital converter are readily available in Blighty.

At the heart of the CD player beats an Extended K2 processor from JVC, the same beast used to produce the XRCD-2 discs. This 20-bit DAC effectively 'guesses' the beyond-20kHz frequency response of a PCM-based data-stream and fills in the blanks, in a manner not dissimilar to the systems used so effectively by Pioneer

and Wadia. Once upon a time, such technology was available to mere mortals on JVC's own CD players (it still exists on JVC's top DVD Audio/Video players, but these models lack the battleship build of the best JVC players or the Combak, and the sound suffers accordingly). Right from the outset, K2 was considered to be full of high-end potential as a processing



standard, albeit one that – thanks to the comparatively cheap JVC players sold in the UK – never quite achieved its potential. The Reimyo liberates the K2 from the strictures of price and shows just what it is capable of. The K2 system used by the Reimyo CDP-777 is the most recent Version 2.0 system, which was never seen on JVC CD players in the UK, so it represents a unique slice of what the best of the technology can do. Effectively, it's a 176.4kHz 24bit player with four times over-sampling, so theoretically this means a data rate in excess of 700kHz. The analogue frequency range is suggested to hit its end-stops at around 88kHz, so sonically it has more in common with a SACD player than a vanilla CD player in terms of frequency response. It also features a JVC based top-loading magnetic puck transport mechanism and a manually

operated smoked glass sliding door that only allows the disc to play when fully shut. Somehow, this glass manages to feel like it's damped and slides perfectly. Double-glazed French window fitters take note – it can be done! Essentially, the internal organs are those of JVC's never-hit-these-shores, top of the line XL-Z900 CD player, but don't make the mistake of thinking this is just a JVC player in a different case. The PCBs inside the CDP-777 may use JVC components but the circuits themselves are entirely Combak-created. Naturally, of course, it is also packed with those resonance tuning devices that made the Harmonix name.

One word about build quality – magnificent. We rarely see this sort of Japanese fit and finish in the West. But remember, Japan is the home of Shindo Labs and Japanese audiophiles are well known in the industry for demanding the sort of standards that would make Swiss watchmakers blanch. The end product has been designed and assembled by precision measuring instrument manufacturer Kyodo Denshi. On the basis of the CDP-777 alone, Kyodo Denshi must rank up there with Rolex, SME and Bentley.

The CDP-777 is simplicity itself in layout, with those over-large buttons, a big display and quite a gap between sockets on the back panel. Add in even bigger green LEDs (you can turn off the display, but not the green LEDs, from the remote) and this at first looks rather like it was designed for those with restricted hand movement and limited vision. But it is actually a relief after attempting to fiddle around with pissy little plastic buttons to come across a product that's built to last longer than I will. The RCA/phono analogue audio sockets are reassuringly well made WBT style ▶

► devices, all over-engineered and gold plated, while the XLR balanced analogue audio and co-axial digital audio sockets are held in place by professional-style mounting plates. Such build quality doesn't come cheap and this stacks on the pounds, both Sterling and avoiddupois; there are many transistor power amps that are smaller and lighter than this player. Apart from the nice-but-unexceptional remote control, this is one of the very few products that would satisfy the person who just placed an order for a pair of Purdey shotguns.

Over-engineering and a build quality to die for doesn't automatically produce a CD player that can pass musical muster. In fact, it can be a real albatross around the neck of the audiophile, as a product that sounds dreadful but has a wonderful build quality is likely to go on forever. Fortunately, the CDP-777 isn't just good, it is a truly transforming player. It makes your CDs sound like you always secretly wished they did. It doesn't make them analogue-sounding, so it isn't a wannabe record player. Nor does it make them sound like the very best digital audio. It just makes CDs sound like music, removing not just the player from the sound, but the carrier and the studio too. We audiophiles instinctually liken such rare qualities to the best in vinyl because only a handful of CD players get this close to the music.

It takes CD listenability to new levels. You could sit in front of this CD player, feeding it discs for days on end without the least listener fatigue. But it's not soporific; music will excite you and drive you to play the next disc,

exploring deeper and deeper into your music collection. All those fads that languish in your collection begin to sound interesting again; the brief fetish for baroque harpsichord twiddling, that oh-so-brief dalliance with



Mexican Techno-Folk-Punk, the month you bought nothing but novelty records and cheesy listening... they all come out to play with the CDP-777. And, when you play them, you remember why you bought the disc in the first place.

This player takes a refreshingly non-interventionist approach to music, even if some may have a knee-jerk criticism of the K2 process as adding an unnecessary level of extra processing between disc and listener. Forget what the CDP-777 is doing on a technical level, however, and listen to what it does to the music. It does practically nothing; no addition of fizz, tizz, glare or blare, no lengthening, widening or foreshortening of the image, no enhancements or deletions to the

detail on the disc. Nothing, zip, nada. It just gets on with playing what's on the disc as accurately as possible, and in the process demonstrates just how few players even attempt the same goal.

It joins the very select handful of CD players that challenge your conception of what CD is all about.

It's clear that, although from a technical standing the CDP-777 is extremely competent in its own right. The player has been built from the ground up with the sophisticated ear of a musician and

an instrument maker instead of the engineer. As a consequence, this makes the vast majority of CD players sound like an exercise in electronics first, a musical reproducer second. Instead, you get the impression that the CDP-777 is made by people who actually enjoy listening to all kinds of music with a real passion and it pushes the right and proper musical sound to the fore.

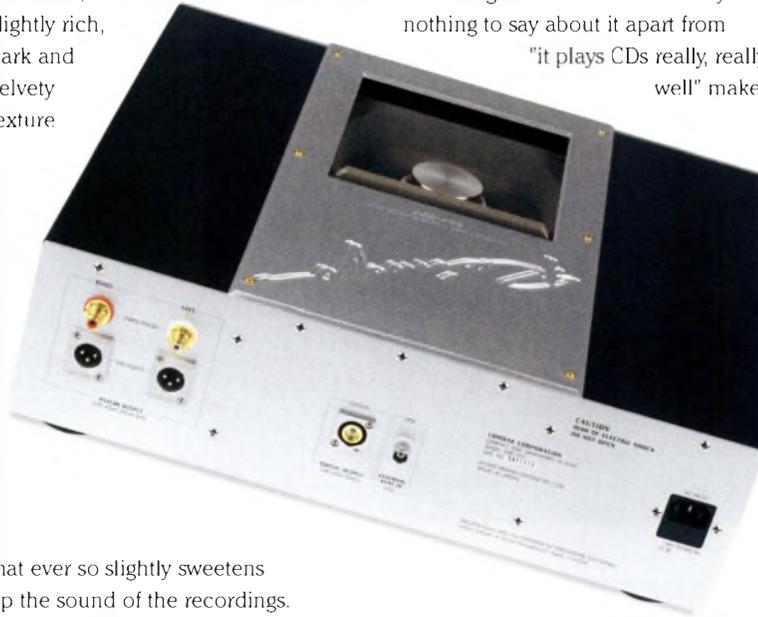
What you are left with is an uncanny naturalness (uncanny because any CD player is essentially a small music computer, and this sounds nothing like computing at work) and a sense of scale that fits any type of music at any volume level. You can play whatever you want at any level and you get plenty from it. This sometimes



appears to go against the grain. Playing The White Stripes at polite background levels and Damien Rice at thrash volumes seems somehow wrong. Yet, the faithful

▶ reproduction of the recorded dynamic makes it possible to play these tracks at incongruous levels. This comes from the CDP-777 having virtually no sonic signature to colour the sound of discs being played.

Ultimately, no player is entirely transparent and this one has its character; a slightly rich, dark and velvety texture



that ever so slightly sweetens up the sound of the recordings. But, you're hard pressed to find this character, as it's often masked by recording quality. The player is staggeringly faithful to the recording. It's also extremely transparent. The two don't necessarily go hand in hand, and the CDP-777 shows why. The 'faithful to the recording' bit comes in when you find yourself listening to every last instrument in the Augustin Dumay Mozart *Violin Concerto 3* on DG. The 'transparent' bit is when you can focus on the glorious midrange and his deft (albeit slightly saccharine) violin solos, clearly delineated within a perfect midrange.

This is a surprisingly hard player to write about, as it seems to change its spots with whatever disc you put on – that's how transparent it really is. Put something with a bit of gusto in the sled and the player will turn in a powerful, gutsy performance, regardless of whether that gusto comes

from Stravinsky or Sonic Youth. Swap that disc over for some cool late 50s/early 60s Blue Note jazz and the player immediately starts to bring out the inner detail, micro-dynamics and complex time signatures. Nothing phases the CDP-777, and that's where the reviewer problems kick in. A player that's so good that there's virtually nothing to say about it apart from "it plays CDs really, really well" makes

both a boring (and very short) review and often sounds like it is damning the product with faint praise.

But this simply plays CDs really, really well.

You don't focus on the sound, the presentation, the performance or the recording. You certainly become unaware of the hi-fi. Music through the CDP-777 just sounds like very good music. That's all. Remember all that 'perfect sound forever' hype that came out when CD was launched? In a way, this is the sound they were claiming we were all going to hear, not the thin and weedy, bright CD sound we have spent the last two decades listening to. With players like the CDP-777 (and the likes of the Naim, Wadia and the other few rarefied top-flight models) CD finally comes of age. Ironical that it does so just as the industry turns its attention to DVD-Audio and SACD.

There is no doubting the performance of this player – the CDP-777 is right up there with the very best of the best. It may seem like a left-field choice compared to the likes of Accuphase, Wadia and dCS, but it really lives up to the 'Reimyo' tag. It's a miraculous player that will make your CDs come to life. And I want one, badly enough to guest star on *Crimewatch* to pay for it. If there is something niggling you about the sound of all high-end CD players, give the Combak Reimyo CDP-777 a spin. 

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single-disc CD player
Signal Processing Chip:	JVC Extended K2 Processing LSI (V 2.0)
Sampling Rate:	24bit/ 176.4kHz
Digital filter:	24bit 4times over-sampling (176.4kHz x 4)
D/A converter:	24bit Data rate 705.6 kHz (176.4kHz x 4)
Digital Output:	RCA co-axial (16bit/44.1kHz)
Analogue Bandwidth:	88kHz max.
Audio Outputs:	1 pr XLR balanced (6Vrms) 1 pr single-ended phono (3Vrms)
Digital Outputs:	Co-axial phono and BNC synchronisation connector for outboard DAC
Power Requirement:	Selectable 100V, 120V, 230V / 50-60Hz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430x116x391mm
Weight:	15Kgs
Price:	£9500
<b>UK Distributor:</b>	
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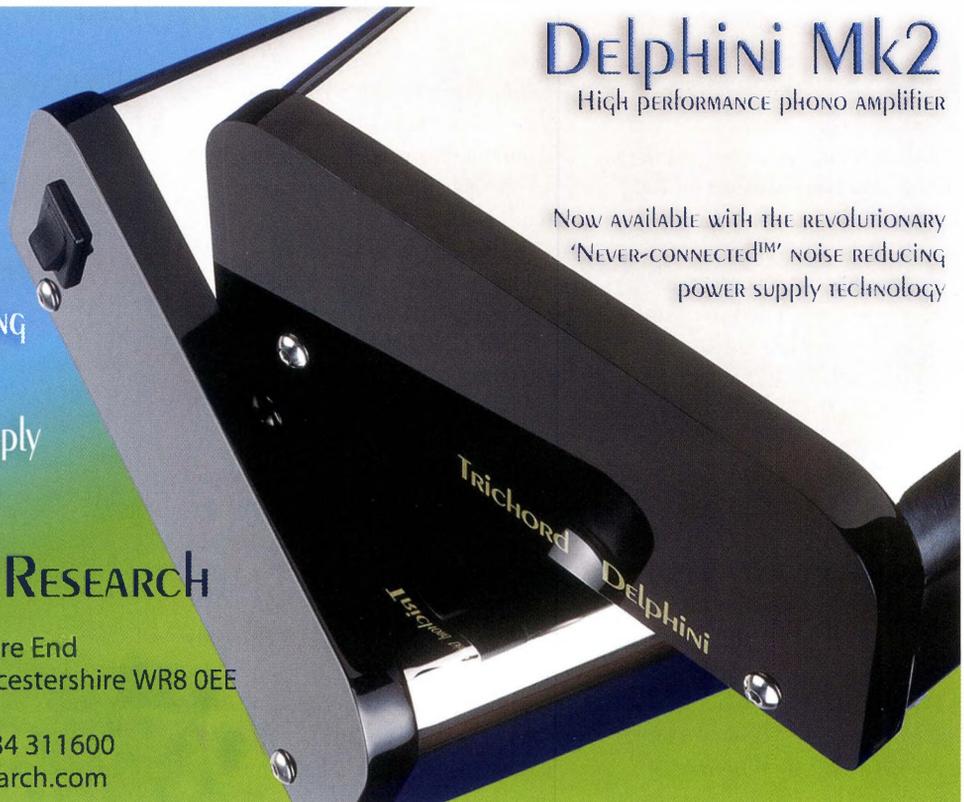
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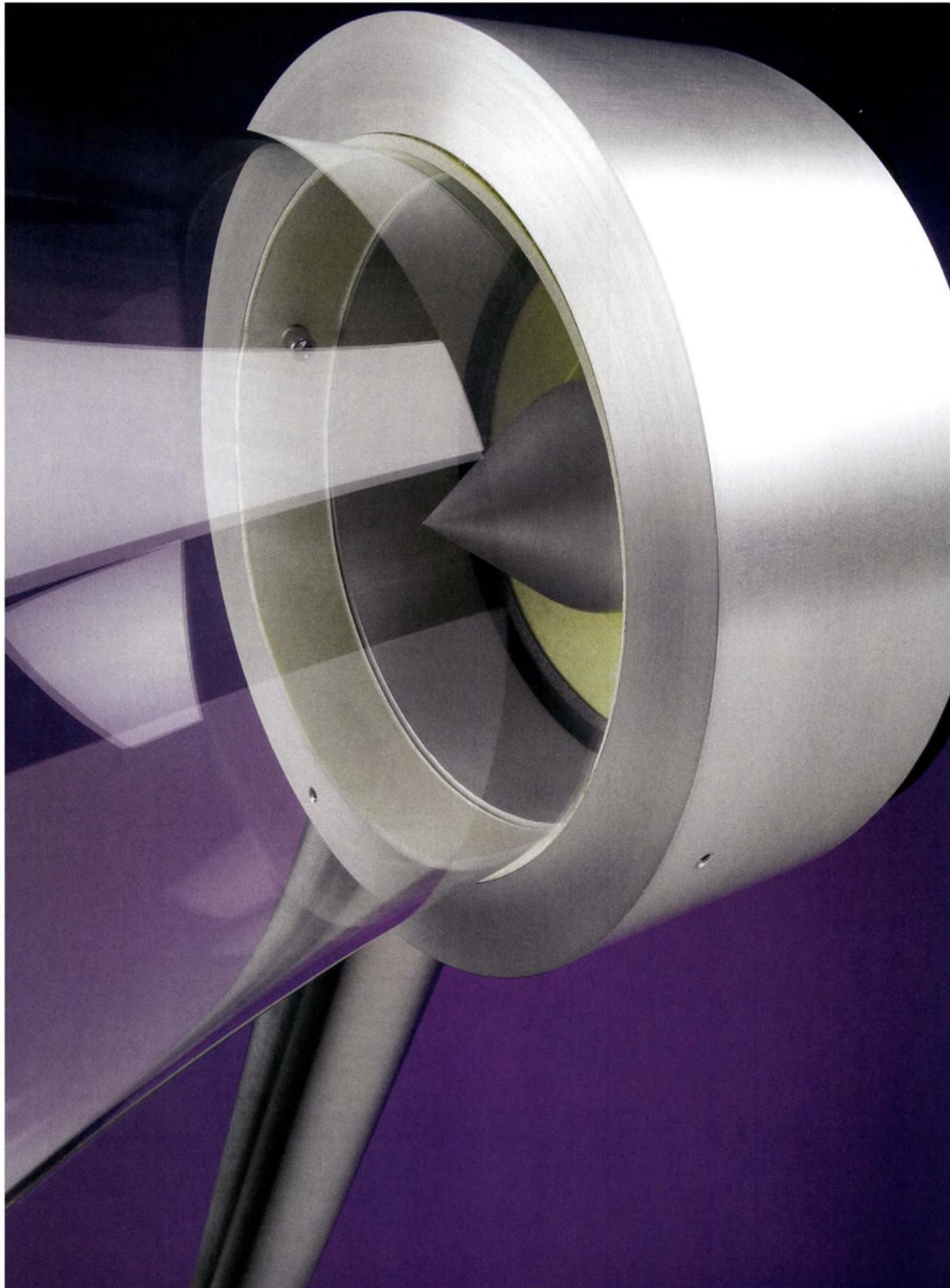
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# Ferguson Hill FH001 Loudspeakers

by Jason Kennedy

The Ferguson Hill FH001 has to be the most striking horn loudspeaker for aeons, the last time I can remember a horn making this sort of impression was ten years ago when Living Voice put itself on the hi-fi map with the remarkable Air Partner. And even that didn't escape the bounds of the dedicated audio press (or the accepted aesthetic) in the way that the FH has managed to.

Photographer Tim Ferguson-Hill has been making his own horn speaker systems for the last ten years but when he hit on the idea of forming a front loading horn from acrylic he reckoned he had a design that could go places. The FH001 is a stark contrast to its rather drab name, making a significant yet positive impression on all who see it. It's clever in both the audio and commercial respects. When it comes to selling a loudspeaker these days aesthetics play as big a part as sound quality for all but the hair-shirt brigade, yet there's no way you can build a horn speaker that is both purist and compact. The use of transparent acrylic gets around this conflict of demands by letting a big thing take up so little visual space.

The FH001 is not a small loudspeaker; it stands 5'5" tall and over three foot wide yet the transparency factor means that what you really see is a stainless steel leg and a Lowther driver along with some reflections of bright surfaces or lights. The latter are strangely appealing because of the distortions the curves produce, windows sit sideways for instance. When the light is strong the rim of the horn describes arcs on the walls and your dusting skills are ruthlessly revealed!

Despite its scale this is still a relatively narrow-band horn. It rolls off sharply at 150Hz and 12kHz; a subwoofer is clearly essential. Unfortunately most serious sub bass systems don't have the bandwidth to meet the FH. I listened with a REL Stadium III wicked up to its maximum reach of 95Hz which left a gap nearly an octave wide in the combined response. Nonetheless with a lot of material this did not prove

to be a problem, at least not such a great one that the music lost its appeal. In many respects this is because the FH makes up for its



shortcomings with an extremely engaging sound. Tim is not content to let things lie however and has built his own stereo subwoofer system specifically for the FH001s, clad in transparent acrylic, naturally.

The Lowther DX3 driver on this speaker may not have the whacking alnico magnet of earlier Lowthers but it is claimed to have a more even response, which if you've come across the breed you will realise is quite desirable. The DX3 has a 'rare earth' magnet and loaded with the FH horn delivers sensitivity of 100dB. This is therefore one of the few speakers around that you can drive with amps offering a single figure output, which as a rule means single ended triode designs. In fact you almost have to use a low power amp because this level of



► sensitivity reveals the noise floor in most of the alternatives. I couldn't, for instance, get away with a Gamut D200 or the Korato Renaissance reviewed last Issue. The only amps that proved quiet enough were a Tom Evans tweaked Pioneer A300R Precision and a Border Patrol SE300B. As you might imagine the latter option bore the juiciest fruit when hooked straight to the binding posts on the Lowther drivers; there is nothing in the way of a crossover on this speaker. Tim has thoughtfully provided silver cable links that reach down to terminals at the base of the support strut but the terminally obsessed (yes, me) will be tempted to bypass this.

Even with a low gain version of the Border Patrol SE300B you have to be very restrained with the volume control on the matching BP pre-amp and this proved an occasion where the variable output on my Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD player came in very handy. In fact I went through a phase of bypassing the pre-amp altogether and driving both power amp and subwoofer from the Opus 21 (single-ended to the power amp and balanced out to the REL). Tube power amps tend to complain if asked to drive active subs via the preferred speaker terminal route.

This matching issue is also being addressed by Tim with a dedicated amplifier for both horns and subs. This is a kind of double hybrid that uses SE valves to drive

the horns and a valve/trannie stage to drive the subs; very much a dedicated solution to this system's unusual demands. In order to get the set-up off the ground swiftly Tim is concentrating on building an amp for the new sub system first and I went up to his London studio to hear the complete set-up to get



an idea of where it is going. The subs were not finished in as much as Tim was waiting for new custom drive units from Adire in America. When these 12inch units are installed in his 150 litre spherical acrylic cabinets he will have a sub system that covers the range from 50Hz to 200Hz and neatly complements the horns. The 600mm acrylic spheres are already a great aesthetic match and the sound produced by the system as a whole is more substantial and full than the result with a relatively ill matched sub like the standard REL Stadium III, though the bass doesn't go down so far. Tonal balance is very good on Tim's system and with less dense material it can transport you to places that other systems only dream about. Yet the complete FH set up is still a work in progress and I was not able to use his passively cross-overed subs at home. There are plans to build a high frequency driver into the phase plug thus extending treble coverage up above the Lowther's roll-off, a plan which would allow that driver to be rolled off even earlier albeit one that would require the addition of a network that would probably effect transparency. Tim would also like to build his own drive unit and attempt to retain the Lowther's strengths while minimising its weaknesses - he's a brave man.

Those of you who visited the Heathrow show last year may have seen the FH equipment rack that suspends Tim's largely home brewed electronics in London. This stainless steel construction decouples a pair of support platforms using springs and has to qualify as the tallest

► equipment support in the business, yet he has had plenty of interest in it which is a testament to its originality and style.

Back in my listening room the thermo formed horns did a remarkable job of not overwhelming what is not a huge space. Putting Shostakovich's *Jazz suites* on the Resolution Audio I was immediately reminded of the charms of this classic drive unit, it's delicacy and nimbleness is unmatched in the dynamic drive unit universe. The sound produced manages to escape the confines of the speakers, revealing a remarkable ability to disappear thanks presumably to the inert nature of the acrylic. Imaging on this occasion was smaller than the horns themselves but the sense of body to instruments like violins and bells is uncanny.

Tonal resolution is also a major strength. While horns have a tendency to colour the tonal balance this does not seem to undermine their ability to produce convincing instrumental tone. Maybe they exaggerate it, which makes up for limitations elsewhere in the chain, but whatever is happening it seems remarkably natural.

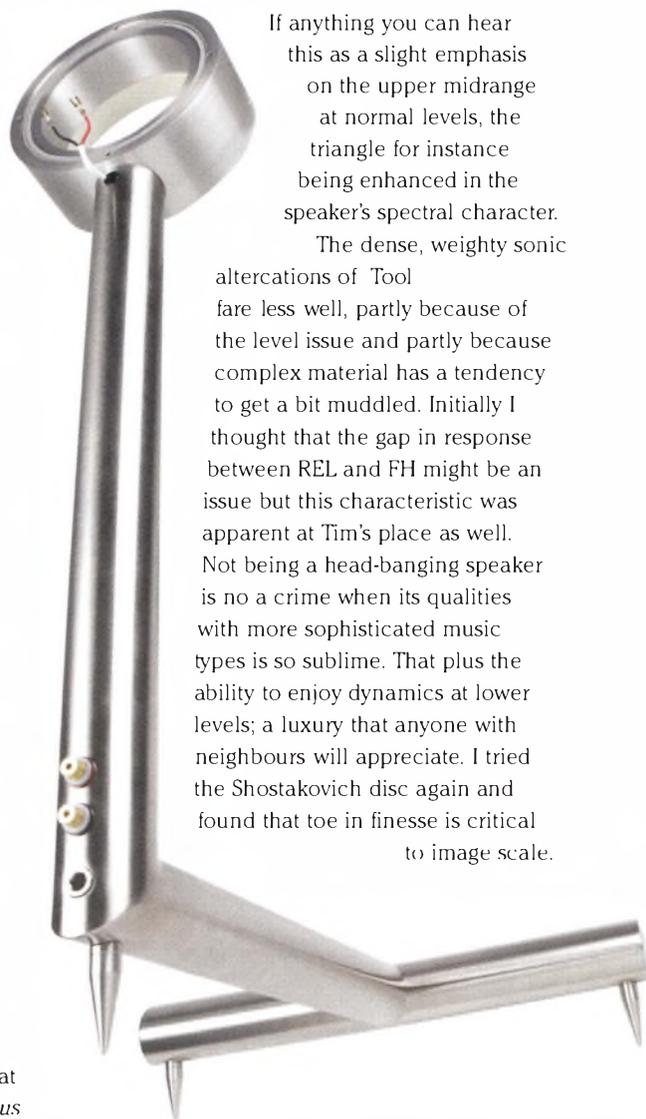


Moving on to the Pioneer A300R Precision Satsuma Castanet Turbo of Tom Evans' doing brought a welcome removal of noise floor and a new

meaning to the term hear through. EST's remarkable *7 Day's of Falling* taking on an emotional power that is rare, the speakers turning the experience into an addictive one that might keep you from almost all other activities for hours if not days. It's a bit like a direct connection to the soul of the music, or a more transparent one at least.

After a bit of upper lip stiffening it's possible to be rather more objective about the performance and note that cymbals could have a bit more 'air'. In other words the HF roll-off is notable with some material.

Yet the hi-hat on *Cornelius* (vinyl) has a remarkable presence while the band as a whole are delivered with impressive dynamics, the sense of energy flowing even at lower levels. Unlike your average box speaker the FH001s seem happiest at low to medium levels, the Lowther has never been a high level drive unit and though front loading seems to help in many respects it doesn't improve the rather forward leaning balance when you turn the wick up.



If anything you can hear this as a slight emphasis on the upper midrange at normal levels, the triangle for instance being enhanced in the speaker's spectral character.

The dense, weighty sonic altercations of Tool fare less well, partly because of the level issue and partly because complex material has a tendency to get a bit muddled. Initially I thought that the gap in response between REL and FH might be an issue but this characteristic was apparent at Tim's place as well. Not being a head-banging speaker is no a crime when its qualities with more sophisticated music types is so sublime. That plus the ability to enjoy dynamics at lower levels; a luxury that anyone with neighbours will appreciate. I tried the Shostakovich disc again and found that toe in finesse is critical to image scale.

It also became apparent that orchestral crescendos are reproduced in a highly satisfying manner, the lack of overhang and sense of speed being extremely gratifying.

Putting on a favourite LP, John Fahey's *Let Go*, proved a full immersion experience, one that you can't help but be engaged by and engrossed in. Maybe the lack of low frequency energy in the material makes the speaker's life easier or possibly it's because this is just a solo guitar, but whatever the reason this type of material takes on a life of its own with the see

▶ through horns. You hear things that had previously hidden and wonder “is that mic buzz on tracks one and three? - surely not”.

Tracks such as 'Poem' from Bugge Wesseltoft's first NCOJ album reveal the stereo potential of the speakers, the extreme phase manipulation on certain sounds placing them beside the listening position at the opposite end of the room to the speakers. The low noise floor of the system as a whole making the experience even more uncanny.

Bringing the Border Patrol pre-amp and SE300B power onto the scene further enhanced listening pleasure. The pairing's relaxed yet precise character makes listening at higher levels

more pleasurable whilst delivering a bundle more resolve than the Koratos, for instance. This speaker was made for single ended amps so it's no

particular sounding beautiful and even with it. Putting Jarrett's classic *Köln concert* on the turntable revealed how little coloration the construction of these speakers brings to the party, there's none of the woodiness that you get with many horns just a window into the music.

The Ferguson Hills are very impressive speakers. They seem to get round many of the shortcomings of both horn technology and Lowther drivers with a delicacy and transparency that only electrostatics can approach. The lower octaves require specialist sub-woofery but once Tim has finished his spheres that end of things should be sorted. This is not a loud speaker and those looking for domestic PA style levels should steer clear, but anyone wanting to discover the real meaning of terms like dynamics and speed could do a lot worse than spending some time with these attractive charmers.



surprise that it sang with one of the best of the breed. It even made Eminem more amusing than usual: you can't beat lines like: “of course they're going to know what intercourse is” (from *The Real Slim Shady*), can you? The EST improved as well, developing greater solidity and subtlety of detail, the piano in

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single unit elliptical horn
Drive Unit:	Modified Lowther DX3
Sensitivity:	100dB
Nominal Impedance:	8 ohm
Dimensions (WxHxD):	920x 1650x720mm
Weight:	27 Kg each without damping fill
Price:	£7,943

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# Seventh Veil Nonsuch 4 Loudspeaker, Little Awesome Sub-woofer + ABE1 Active Bass Crossover

by Paul Messenger

Steve Margolis must have been making speakers like this for decades. I first encountered one of his Seventh Veils way back in 1990, when I reviewed a MkIV for another magazine. Now, fourteen years later, the Nonsuch 4 has plenty in common with its predecessor.

I still remember the MkIV quite clearly. It was sonically and conceptually very interesting, but also one of the most lounge-unfriendly designs ever to come my way – heavy, bulky, mostly steel, with wickedly sharp spikes, and a tendency to leave a little spoor of sand behind on the floor when it was moved.

Steve has learned a few lessons about domestic acceptability since then, and even though it retains many of the features of the earlier model, his new Nonsuch 4 is a much more sociable and attractive proposition, with a few unusual and original ideas of its own.

Like its predecessor, the core of the speaker is a four-strong vertical array of small 50mm Bandor drive units, while the prime task of the enclosure is to position these so that their mid point is the same height as the seated ears of the listeners (of which more later).

That original model loaded the driver array with an egg-shaped, sand-filled enclosure, coupled to a long folded transmission line integrated into its stand. This new version dispenses with much of that complexity (and weight) by opting for a simple sealed-box arrangement, with a delightfully slim, attractively curved and elegantly veneered enclosure. (Black lacquer finish is an option.) However, in order to supply sufficient bass, it's necessary to underpin the main speakers with additional sub-woofery.

The net result is necessarily a quite complex speaker system, and a costly one too, partly because of the expensive technique used to create the curved enclosures. The Nonsuch 4 itself costs £4,495 for the pair; each of the (passive) Little Awesome sub-woofers costs £1,545 – we were supplied with two for this review. The ABE1 (valve) active bass filter costs a further £745, and then there's the extra power amplification you can choose for yourself.

There's an obvious attraction in going for the complete collection, if only because of the way the sub-woofer styling cleverly mirrors the towers. But the towers are where the real action is going to happen here, so an obvious alternative is to partner them with one or more much cheaper subs – a couple of REL Q-series models should do a very adequate job with a considerable cost saving. Which is not to play down the simple fact that the Little Awesome is a very capable sub-woofer: one that does its job with impressive smoothness and dexterity. Initially I struggled with a trace of hum, but eventually managed to eliminate this almost entirely.

The cabinet construction is particularly unusual, taking full advantage of the ability of CNC machinery to be programmed to replicate complex shapes consistently. Both the sub-woofers and the main speaker enclosures here are built up from a series of hollow elliptical discs, carved and shaped from sheet MDF, then glued face to face to

build up each multi-layer enclosure, prior to wrapping in wood veneer.

This has considerable potential for creating unconventional shapes, Seventh Veil opting for a flattened ellipse for its towers (flattened at the front face for driver mounting), that should help smooth the lateral distribution, and a full ellipse for the sub-woofer, where the single driver fires downwards towards the floor. The insides of the elliptical

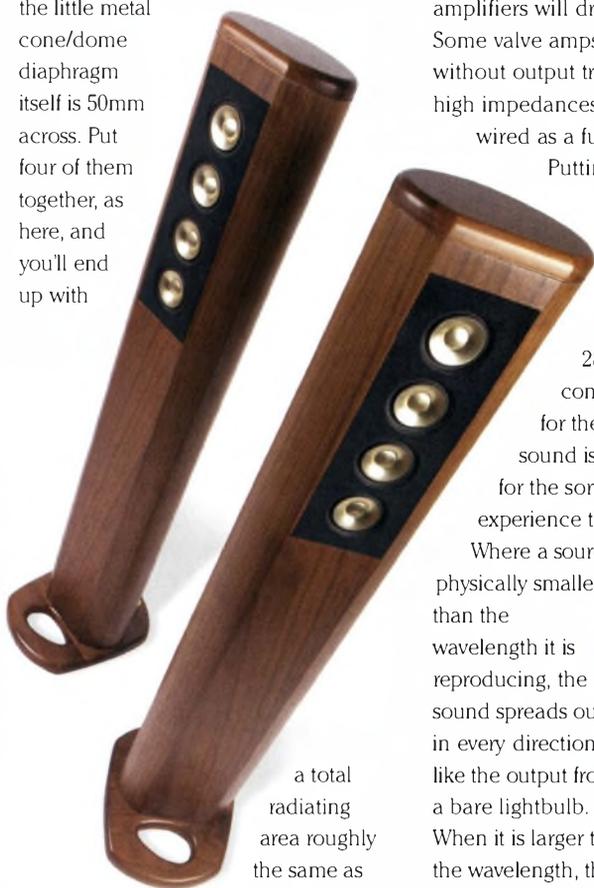


discs have an egg-shaped cut-out – an ideal shape for distributing standing waves and reflections, while also creating variable thickness walls. And the inside back edge of each disc has a 45 degree chamfer in order to deflect rear radiation from the driver downwards rather than back through the cone. Light damping around the middle of the tower helps absorb the vertical standing wave.

Another original and interesting idea involves fitting the base of each speaker with four door-stops, each of which has the right shaped indentation to locate one of those ultra-bouncy 'superballs' (available from your local Toys-R-Us!) This seems quite effective at providing very low frequency decoupling, and of course it won't damage the floor in any way, though spikes may also be fitted if preferred. Although 'our' towers did have additional plinths to give the speakers some stability, the fact that they rocked quite easily and alarmingly when touched made them less than child-friendly: larger plinths will be fitted ►

► in future to improve stability.

The little Bandor drivers have been a familiar feature of the hi-fi scene for longer than yours truly. Their inside-frame diameter is around 65mm, while the little metal cone/dome diaphragm itself is 50mm across. Put four of them together, as here, and you'll end up with



a total radiating area roughly the same as a single 5.25-

inch driver. No surprise then that bass output is a little limited before you add in the sub-woofers with their 150mm diameter cones.

The bonus with these little drivers is that they lie part way between a woofer and a tweeter, and are expressly intended to be used 'full range'. This has the major benefit of avoiding the need for any form of crossover, with its attendant distortions, though there are (as usual) some other factors to consider.

However, the use of four drivers has some clear benefits. Amplifier power is shared between the four voice coils, so thermal power handling will be ample. If each driver has a 4 Ohm impedance,

connecting a pair in series will give a combined impedance of 8 Ohms. Take two such pairs and connect them in parallel and you're back down to 4 Ohms again, which most of today's amplifiers will drive happily enough. Some valve amps (especially those without output transformers) prefer high impedances, so the four can be wired as a full series 16 Ohms.

Putting four small drivers in a vertical line will effectively create a relatively small and narrow 'line source', 50mm wide and some 280mm high, which has considerable implications for the manner in which the sound is radiated, and hence for the sort of listening experience that results.

Where a source is physically smaller than the wavelength it is reproducing, the sound spreads out in every direction, like the output from a bare lightbulb. When it is larger than the wavelength, the sound is beamed like a car's headlight. With a line source like the one here, the fact that it's nearly as narrow as a tweeter ensures that even high frequencies are distributed evenly across a wide angle. However, because it's much larger than a tweeter vertically, those same high frequencies are restricted to a relatively narrow vertical 'window', effectively defined by the top and bottom of the line. On the one hand you have to be seated in order to hear the sound properly; on the other, there's much less reflection from floor and ceiling in the sound reaching the listeners.

The ABE1 equaliser/filter is intended to operate with either valve or solid state

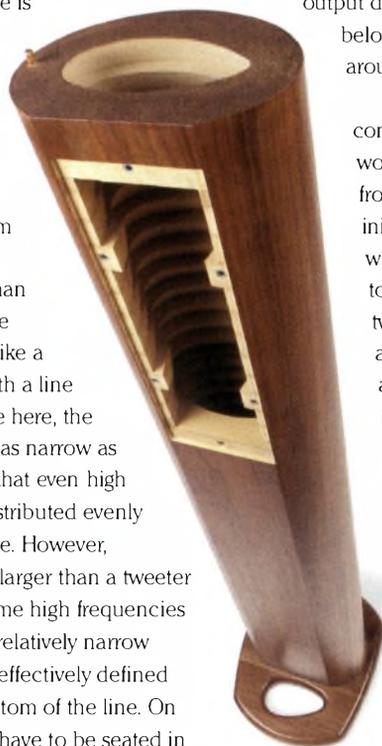
electronics – though I found trying to mix the two rather tricky. It has a 'pass' output with a gain of 4dB, and an adjustable filtered output with a gain of 13dB. It uses low noise dual miniature triode valves, selected for channel matching and performance, plus low noise heater regulators for each valve. Power is supplied via a dedicated umbilical from a chunky external mains transformer.

While this wasn't a simple system to set up, what with all the extra electronics and connections to organize, it proved unexpectedly easy to get very well balanced results. Because they're operating with sealed-box loading, the main speakers do actually extend quite deep into the bass end (under in-room far-field conditions). With the speakers well out from walls (ie with no extra mid-bass reinforcement) there's decent output down to around 120Hz, below which they average around -10dB.

Again under in-room conditions, the pair of sub-woofers deliver fine bass from below 20Hz, rolling off initially slowly above 60Hz, with still useful output up to around 250Hz. Put the two together and you get an impressively smooth and even balance right through the bass and lower mid-band, with the subs integrating beautifully with the main speakers.

Presumably reflecting the coupling of the driver array, there's a little too much mid-band output, 400Hz-1kHz. Above that point, output falls gently

and progressively away, in a trend that remains smooth and progressive right up to 11kHz. There's some unevenness thereafter, with a 13kHz dip and 20kHz peak, but these are close to the limit ►



► of human audibility. Under our far-field conditions, sensitivity registers a quite generous 90-91dB.

As usual, the measured balance trends are directly reflected in the perceived sound quality, and that slight mid emphasis was indeed quite audible as a slight touch of 'shout' on voices in particular. Some modification of tonal characteristics is possible, either by adjusting the main speaker placement and angling, or the relative level of the active bass filter. The latter proved quite sensitive – too much and the balance could sound a little too heavy; too little and the mid-band 'shout' became more obvious, especially if the volume was wound up.

Get it right, however, and the sonic view from the listening seat was most impressive indeed. Overall neutrality is only modified by a shade too much presence restraint, and any 'boxiness' is very well controlled. Sitting down to 'tune into' the listening window is absolutely essential, but once this is done one is immediately aware of very superior image definition, focus and precision compared to conventional speakers, presumably because of the reduced ceiling reflections. In fact the excellent stereo sound-staging was one reason why I quickly became aware that my second Densen tuner sample was strictly monophonic!

The second very obvious thing here was the superior clarity and intelligibility of voices. I was spinning the White Stripes' *Elephant*, an album with which I was already very familiar, and was startled to find myself picking up on some of the

lyrics for the very first time. The same exceptional vocal clarity was subsequently evident with several other discs. This could be due to several factors that are difficult to isolate: there's that slight mid projection, which could play a part; but the overall coherence of the full-range driver approach is probably also relevant.

The freedom from crossover artifacts is an undoubted strength of this design, giving a strong impression of phase coherence and making for very natural voice reproduction, while adding its own contribution to the superior stereo imaging. In truth, there isn't a whole lot to criticise here. Low box coloration ensures a wide dynamic range, though dynamics themselves were maybe a tad limp and lacking in grip. And the extreme top end, near the limit of hearing, is a little lacking in openness and sweetness.

There's an obvious valve bias here, given the active bass filter design, and it would probably make sense to use valve electronics throughout. That wasn't possible in this instance, though tentative explorations in this direction suggested that the slight mid projection should make the most of the mid-band purity and transparency of valve amps, rather than revealing the typically thicker, more congested sound of solid state designs.

Despite its undoubted elegance, this seems a rather quirky design in terms of the ingredients involved. So it's all the more creditable that the all round performance is actually remarkably free from quirks, with an even tonal balance alongside a very sensible sensitivity – a rare combination indeed with crossover-less full-range designs.

The sub-woofers integrate exceptionally well with the main speakers, which themselves manage to provide full range top-to-bottom coherence with good practicality and very little compromise. The 'line source' effect brings very positive benefits to the stereo imaging, so provided the restrictions on the actual listening zone are no handicap, this looks like a very persuasive and practical, if rather costly, proposition. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Nonsuch 4 Loudspeaker

Impedance:	4 ohms (can be 16 ohms)
Power handling:	120 watts RMS
Sensitivity:	88dB/2.83V (1m) (claimed) 90dB/2.83V measured field)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	200 x 1130 x 130mm
Finishes:	American walnut or black piano-lacquer
Price:	£4495 (pair)

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Impedance:	8 ohms
Power handling:	120 watts
Sensitivity:	88dB/2.83V (1m) (claimed)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	40 x 40 x 32 cm
Finishes:	American walnut or black piano-lacquer
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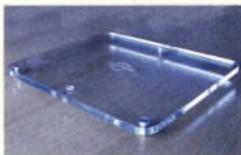
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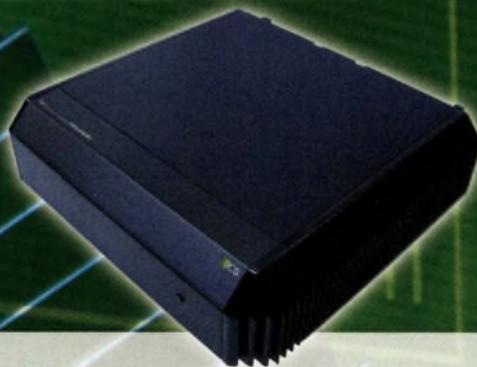
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# Alon Lotus Elite SE Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Back in Issue 25, I reviewed the Lotus Elite, an unusual speaker from US company Alon. This follow-up covers the SE version of that speaker and should be considered Part II of that original piece. Highly regarded in their home market, the Alons have only been sporadically available in the UK, which is a shame, because of all the US speakers I've listened to, the Alons are arguably the closest to traditional UK virtues. Most of the media attention has tended to settle on their extravagant flagship models like the Phalanx, but the Lotus series are in many respects just as interesting and far more approachable. The Elite that I reviewed was the middle one in a range of three models that, rather like the Living Voice Auditorium/Avatar/OBX, are outwardly virtually indistinguishable. The SE under consideration here is the next one up, and just like the OBX, it features an external crossover and upgraded drivers.

Having said that, the Alon speakers are certainly distinctive and definitely plough their own technological furrow. I'll refer you to that earlier review for the full technical low-down, but here's the potted version. The Lotus Elite speakers employ four drive-units in a three-way configuration (although the basic Esprit model has only a single bass driver). The twin bass units each enjoy a separate sealed enclosure, each volume being different. Alon's claims that this delivers a more linear bass performance certainly seem to be borne out in practice. The mid and treble drivers are mounted open baffle and in the case of the Elite SE, all the drive units employ AlNiCo magnets – good for linearity, not so good for efficiency or motor power. Take a look at the caps on the rear of the exposed mid and treble units and you'll notice their serious depth – an attempt

to compensate for the relatively low magnetic power of AlNiCo with sheer material quantity. It has to be considered successful as the SE gives nothing away in terms of efficiency to the conventionally driven tweeters and bass units on the Elite, although neither scores particularly high marks in this regard. However, the SE does claim an extra 7Hz of bandwidth, with a –3dB



point of 28Hz, which is pretty astonishing given the modest overall dimensions of the cabinet.

The separate crossovers are built into small, veneered enclosures, shaped and finished to match the speakers. They carry three sets of flying leads to link to the terminals on the back of the main cabinet, and are supported on the same, blunt spikes that are used to angle and stabilise the speakers. Bi-wire input terminals are provided. However, those flying leads must be considered something of a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they save the owner the cost of extra, short speaker cables to hook the crossovers to the main cabinets. But on the other, they make it almost

impossible to use the same cable all the way from amplifier output to speaker input – a critical consideration if experience with the OBX is anything to go by.

So much for the material content, can the performance of the SE justify nearly doubling the price of the Elite? Even a cursory listen reveals that the SE has diluted none of the standard Elite's virtues, always a risk when you try to build on an established success. The seamless coherence, scale and easy intimacy that made the more modest version so enticing are all present and correct. Indeed, the imaging will come as your first major surprise if you haven't heard the Alons before. It's those open baffle drivers don't you know? But along with the dipolar style and dimensions of the soundstage, the other thing you get is the absence of box colouration and it's here that the differences between the Elite and the SE really begin.

So let's start at the bottom and those extra 7Hz. Now I have no way to reliably verify that claim save to say that the quality of the bass extension from the SE is quite distinct from my memories of the Elite. I'd say it goes deeper, but also that it's lighter and more subtle, with a defter rhythmic touch. Bass lines are easier to follow and the notes are more precisely timed, albeit at the expense of a little weight. But it's the absence of that weight that is so critical to the sound of the speaker as a whole. The open baffle may leave the midrange refreshingly free of boxy effects, but if you want to make the most of extending the AlNiCo magnets across the entire drive unit complement then you



▶ need to prevent the cabinet from obscuring the benefits. The lighter touch of the SE's bottom end is deeper and more linear, bringing clarity and timbral definition to the entire musical range – exactly what you need if you want to hear the theoretical improvements in tonal balance and accuracy.

And it works too. Whether what you're getting is the result of isolating the crossover from mechanical interference, or the superiority of the AlNiCo motors, there's more low-level information, more texture and more instrumental colour on offer from the SEs.

Playing 'Poortoun' from Jackie Leven's *Fairy Tales For Hard Men* it's not just the expansive dimensions of the acoustic space that impress but the transparency and atmosphere that goes with them. Sat front and centre, Jackie's characteristic voice is unmistakable, as is the way he works and accents it. The varying weight and attack of the plucked guitar notes adds to the expressive melancholy of the track; the spacious, subtle underpinning of the keyboards helps it swell and flow. But listen further into the mix and you can hear the length of the guitar's fretboard and the length of its strings.

The myriad instrumental voices that make up the wash of sound that opens Debussy's *Images*

*For Orchestra* (Munch/BSO RCA LSC-2282) are totally distinct, the shifts in pace and density natural and without strain. The orchestra is a stable entity, locked in its impressively dimensioned acoustic, wandering neither with time nor level. Nor does the SE suffer to anything like the same extent as the Elite when it comes to the issue of listening threshold. It's far happier (and more convincing) when playing at lower volumes, although it too accepts power with grace and confidence. The slight metallic sheen that could infect the Elite's high frequencies is also all but gone, arguably at the expense of some bite although this could be an effect of lower

overall distortion reducing energy or the increase in low-end reach. Either way, the Elite seemingly had a shade less air but more sparkle. But the upside is that the same easy, natural tonality now extends across the entire range, delivering even greater overall coherence.

The wide open presentation and tonal sophistication of the Lotus Elite SE make it a natural choice for all kinds of acoustic music, be it solo voice and guitar, a small jazz band or the classical repertoire. Meanwhile, its grace under fire and sense of scale make it equal to the demands of all but the most excessive orchestral works (and there are always sub-woofers for those). Opera of course is spectacular. The real question is how to

get the best out of it and who's going to appreciate

the benefits. Their lowish efficiency makes them less than ideal with really low powered amps, despite the designer's protestations to the contrary. They really come into their own with an amp that combines subtlety and power. The Conrad-Johnson MV60 would be a good starting point, the Premier 140 or Hovland RADIA even better. But in the same way that the speaker has had to be careful to preserve its fragile benefits, you'll have to exercise equal care in system matching. The SE can offer convincing performance advantages over the standard Elite, but they are easy to mask or bypass. The system needs to be right and so do the recordings to make the upgrade worthwhile: What price subtlety? ▶+



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way loudspeaker with open baffle mid and treble drivers and separate crossovers.
Drive Units:	25mm aluminium dome, AlNiCo magnet 130mm tri-laminate cone with AlNiCo magnet 2x 200mm pulp cone with AlNiCo magnets
Efficiency:	89 dB (estimated)
Bandwidth:	-3dB at 27Hz
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal, 4 Ohms minimum
Dimensions (WxHxD):	255x1030x380mm
Weight:	35 Kg
Finishes:	Cherry or black ash
Price:	£8000

#### UK Distributor:

Alon UK Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0)20 7684 1490  
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# Audio Research VSi55 Integrated Amplifier

by Jimmy Hughes

I hate prejudices. Always try to approach things with an open mind, free from pre-conceived ideas; that's my motto. That said, I had an inkling of what the VSi55 might sound like. And sure enough, as soon as I'd got it plugged in and nicely warmed-up, I heard a distinctive tonality that said 'Audio Research'. Never mind that it's been a good few years since I had any Audio Research equipment at home. If there is such a thing as a distinct Audio Research 'house sound', Lo and Behold there it was...

So much for avoiding prejudice! As the first notes emanated from the speakers, there was a rich silky warmth and smoothness. Now valves are supposed to be warm and euphonic; transistors cold and analytical. In practice most amplifiers (whether tube or transistor) offer a mixture of both qualities. But the VSi55 is most definitely a tube amp. It's not lacking in brilliance or bite, but just the same there's a deliciously rich toffee-treacle tonality no tranny amp could approach.

Those all-important first impressions were of a warm honeyed sound with a full ripe bottom end and smooth open top. The mid-band was very sweet, with an alluring liquid quality that managed to be delicate and detailed at the same time. The VSi55 is deceptive though; there's definitely an element of iron fist in this amplifier's velvet glove. For all its warmth and richness, the actual sound is quite lucid and forceful, albeit in a smooth refined manner.

Orchestral climaxes had impressive weight and sonority, with an attractive tonal bloom to strings and brass. Somehow the VSi55 creates a very

integrated impression. It offers excellent separation of parts, but overall the impression is one of seamless homogeneity. Bass is very full-bodied - not as solid and tight as the best transistor amps, but rich and voluminous. This creates a warm nicely-rounded bottom end, worlds apart from the tight/dry bass one gets with many solid-state amps.

With an output of 50W per channel the VSi55 is reasonably (but not massively) powerful. More to the point, it sounds surprisingly big. It creates a convincing impression of scale and weight, giving climaxes plenty of presence. Played at lowish volume levels it displays lots of muscle, as though it had plenty of power in reserve and was just ticking over. Most amplifiers lose presence when played quietly. Not this one; it sounds surprisingly punchy and dynamic even played at a whisper.

In some ways the VSi55 is an amalgam of opposites. On the one hand it has a rich creamy tonality that's warm and beguiling. At the same time it sounds lucid and definite. Playing one of the Beethoven *violin sonatas* with Maria-Joao Pires and Agustin Dumay (from the complete set on DG) I was struck by the sheer beauty of the sound - piano and violin placed in a warm spacious acoustic. The fiddle sounded sweet and mellow, while the piano was spacious but cleanly focussed.

A little later, playing the recent Gergiev recording of Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique* on Philips, it was the power and sonority of the orchestral sound that impressed. Climaxes had real presence, even when playing at lowish volume levels. Most amplifiers need to be played at a certain volume level before the music snaps into focus.

The VSi55 is no exception. However, it creates a convincing sense of scale even when played quietly. Remarkable!

All this makes the VSi55 a very engaging amplifier to listen to. It doesn't sit on the fence, but projects the music strongly toward you. Stereo imaging is vivid and impressively holographic - if not quite in the

Jadis class! Playing Ferenc

Fricsay's vintage 1957 DG

recording of Beethoven's

*Fidelio* I was impressed

by the way the voices

separated out from

the orchestra,

and projected

out from the

speakers

into the

room - and

this despite

being played

at a moderate

volume level.

Not having to play things loudly in order to achieve a sense of room-filling presence and immediacy means that old recordings like Fricsay's *Fidelio* do not sound excessively thin or hissy. Indeed, I'd never have realised the recording was so old, so clear and vivid was the sound. The VSi55's combination of brilliance and warmth created a result that was vivid and



▶ detailed, yet forgiving and flattering - playing to the strengths of the recording, not its weaknesses.

Although the VS155 is a tad spartan when it comes to facilities, it does offer that rarity - a stereo/mono button. So few amplifiers include this simple yet effective feature. You'd mainly use it when playing mono LPs with a stereo pickup cartridge.

of minimum/maximum loudness. The usual drawback with this type of volume control is that increments are stepped rather than continuously variable - which means you can't adjust levels quite so finely. However, I can't say this turned out to be a problem in practice; level gradations

seem quite fine, allowing you to set the volume precisely.



Switching to mono effectively cancels the cartridge's vertical component, greatly reducing pressing rumble and surface noise. For those with sizeable mono LP collections it's a facility worth its weight in gold.

It's also useful for checking the mono compatibility of stereo recordings, or dealing with early stereo recordings that offer excessive separation. If 'ping-pong' stereo effects annoy, simply press the mono button. You can also employ it when setting up your speakers - switching to mono in order to find the correct toe-in angle for the speakers to give a solid central image.

The remote volume control works very well, and there's an led display so you can tell where you are in terms

of minimum/maximum loudness. There's no balance control.

Only those using very efficient speakers (Lowthers) might have cause to grumble at the gap between level increments at the bottom-end of the volume control. The steps between led 1 and 2 are quite large. However, there is an intermediate setting between these two points - albeit not marked. Suppose you've got the amplifier at minimum volume (led 1 lit) and lightly press the Volume Up button. There's an audible increase in loudness. It's about +2dB to +3dB, even though the first led stays lit and indicates no change. Although it would seem that the VS155 only offers

20 discrete level changes, the in-between points make it more like thirty. Using fairly efficient Impulse H1s and the Chord DAC-64 (which gives a couple of dB extra output compared to most CD players and DACs) I tended to play the VS155 at a setting of between 6 and 8.

Connections for speakers are via large gold-plated binding posts with outputs to match 4 Ohm and 8 Ohm speakers, and whichever of these gives the loudest volume with the speakers you use is 'correct'. However, sonically you should find that the 4 Ohm setting gives slightly better control and tightness, albeit with a slight restriction on maximum loudness. Incidentally, the speaker binding posts are almost impossible to use with 4mm plugs.

There are five line inputs with a sensitivity of 0.5V for full output, and no phono stage. Usefully, there's a single line-level mono output for a sub-woofer. AR claim a remarkably wide frequency response, ranging from 1Hz to 100kHz at 1W and -3dB. Build quality and finish are up to the expected standards, but the styling is rather brutal. The electronics, including valve bases, are mounted on a large mother-board, keeping internal wiring to a minimum.

There are no rotary knobs on the VS155; just a selection of press buttons for volume up/down; input selection; mute; stereo/mono; and power on/off. All functions can be accessed via a supplied remote control. Mine had the Input and Mono functions reversed - hopefully a one-off fault! Helpfully, for those of us who have a habit of 'losing' remote handsets, all functions can be addressed from the amplifier front panel. Hum and noise are very, very low - more than 100dB below rated output.

The amplifier is very simple to use, and having all functions remotely controllable makes operation quick and user-friendly. A comprehensive owner's manual is provided, and

► this contains some useful details on use and operation. Apparently the amplifier takes between five and ten minutes to fully settle and stabilise after switch on, though the mute switches out after about thirty seconds. Although the amp is fully usable after a minute or so, it doesn't reach optimum performance until properly warmed-up.

The VSi55 puts out a reasonable amount of heat.



Obviously, the valves get fairly warm, but less predictably so too does the mains transformer and (to a much lesser degree) the two output transformers. With the latter, the rise in temperature is almost certainly down to heat conduction from the four output tubes and mains transformer. Certainly, after the amp's been on a couple of hours or more, the whole case warms up.

Wisely, AR recommend you NOT to leave the amp switched on all the time. Doing so would serve little or no purpose sonically, and drastically shorten valve life. The makers suggest a valve life of about 2000 hours,

incidentally. That's probably a conservative estimate; you'll almost certainly find the valves last much longer than that, though after 2000 hours or so there may be some deterioration in absolute terms. You can re-bias the amp when fitting new tubes using an external voltmeter.

There are five tubes altogether. Matched pairs of 6550EH output tubes (four in all) and three 6N1PAs for the input and driver. The amplifier weighs approximately 15.5kg but feels heavier - perhaps because most of the weight is concentrated at the rear where the three transformers are situated. Mechanically, the VSi55 is very quiet - just a barely audible mains transformer buzz with the ear pressed close by, and little or no valve noise - even while warming up.

A very good amplifier then: One that combines refinement and creamy-rich tonality with commanding presence and immediacy. It's a small amp with a big heart; one that produces warm involving music. I'd especially commend those unable

to play their music as loudly as they'd like, to listen to it. If your experience matches mine, you'll find it possible to play the VSi55 at moderate volume levels without losing presence or immediacy. It sounds like an Audio Research, it looks like an Audio Research and listening to it you can appreciate why the company's reputation rides so high in audiophile circles. Definitely a chip, albeit a small one, off the old block. ►+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Vacuum-tube line integrated amplifier
Inputs:	5x Line level
Input Sensitivity:	0.5V
Input Impedance:	50 Kohms
Rated Output:	50 Watts/channel into 4 or 8 Ohms
Valve Complement:	3x 6N1PA, 4x 6550EH
Dimensions (WxHxD):	356x203x406mm
Weight:	15.5kg
Price:	£2895

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# Consonance Reference 8.8 Integrated Amplifier

by Jimmy Hughes

Integrated valve amplifiers come in all shapes and sizes. This one's decidedly chunky and very retro looking. Speaking personally, I loved the styling. However, some visitors were slightly bemused by the combination of gentle curves and angular lines, wood and metal. Nevertheless, all agreed the amplifier was solidly built and beautifully finished. It has a stylish, quality appearance, and at 30kg certainly feels weighty and substantial. And everyone loved the Magic Eye!

First impressions were of a clean strongly-profiled presentation - a shade on the dark side tonally, but open and clear. The sound wasn't especially rich or euphonic; rather it was well-balanced and very controlled without seeming 'tight' or excessively straitjacketed. Dynamic separation was good, as was pitch definition. Voices and instruments had plenty of space around them without the sound seeming overly airy or spacious.

The Reference 8.8 definitely did nothing to glamorise the music. Rather, it presented things in an ordered, controlled, and finely shaded manner. Initially perhaps not exciting and 'busy', but actually (once you really sat and listened) truthful and believable. It avoids the classic valve amplifier characature

of being overtly rich warm and euphonic, yet does so without being cold, hard and anaemic. I found it detailed and articulate, yet smooth and beautifully integrated.

It's quiet too - mechanically and electrically. With my ear virtually inside the mid-range horn of an Impulse H1 speaker I could only just tell the



amplifier was operating - a faint virtually inaudible buzz was just detectable. Even so, I had to plug and unplug the speakers a couple of times in order to be sure! So, unless you're using Lowthers in a broom cupboard, residual hum and noise should not be a problem. Same with mechanical transformer noise: virtually none to speak of.

Warm up time is fairly short - under five minutes, if that. But I did find the amplifier improved after I'd

used it a few days. Those all-important first-impressions were certainly favourable, but after a few days I was even more pleased with what I was hearing. The Reference 8.8 is capable of great finesse and delicacy. Yet it never sounds fragile; the sound always exhibits a reassuring solidity and full-bodied quality. It's fine-grained, but not lacking in substance. Bass and treble extremes are very well-balanced.

The bottom end is firm and solid; full and weighty, with excellent tightness and control. At the same time bass quality is nicely rounded: there's a believable shape to bass notes, rather than everything sounding excessively lean and tight, or soggy and warm. The mid-band is full but open, with excellent clarity and articulation. Treble is very smooth and clean - so smooth it's almost not there at times.

I'd almost describe the Reference 8.8 as understated. But perhaps a better description would be unexaggerated. It's very clean and natural, without lacking substance or personality. Okay, there isn't the incredibly dimensionality one gets with an amplifier like the Jadis DA-50; the 8.8 doesn't quite create the amazing sense of height and width the Jadis seemed to conjure up. But - it's one of those things; ▶

▶ what you don't know about you don't miss...

The amplifier images very well. Having experienced the Jadis DA-50 I can't truthfully say the Reference 8.8 matches the more expensive French design for holographics. But it's good - very good. The placement of images in the soundstage from left to right is vivid and precise.

Build quality is very good - solid and substantial. The chassis is made from stove-enamelled steel, while the massive front panel is 10mm thick and made from brushed aluminum. Internally there's quite a bit of wiring, showing that the amplifier is largely hand-made. A couple of fairly small printed circuit boards are employed, but by and large the amplifier is hard-wired throughout - something that definitely improves sound quality.

Heat dissipation is always a concern with valve amplifiers. And while the Reference 8.8 needs more space around it than a typical solid-state amp, it doesn't run that hot. All eight valves are positioned at the back of the amplifier. And although this concentrates the heat in a confined space there should be no problem in practice. In point of fact, the Reference 8.8 is actually quite a cool runner, even

after being left on for four or five hours the chassis gets barely warm.

With an output of 50W the Reference 8.8 is fairly powerful. I used mine with fairly

'correct' matching impedance is the one that gives the highest volume. Likewise, you should find the 4 Ohm setting provides improved control and a tighter more resolute musical presentation.

Facilities are pretty limited - essentially you're provided with the basics:



efficient speakers, and found I could play the music as loudly as I wanted without breakup. Two sets of speaker outputs are offered - 4 Ohms and 8 Ohms. Just as with the ARC Vsi55, the

mains on/off, volume, and input selection. No Tape Out is provided. The only bit of window dressing is the Magic Eye, which moves in sympathy with the music, warning you when you're approaching peak output levels. The Reference 8.8 is fairly heavy. But the weight is reasonably well-distributed; it's slightly front-heavy but avoids the unbalanced weight distribution of some valve amplifiers. Valve line up consists of four 6550s (KT-88s); two 12AU7s and two 12AT7s. The instruction booklet is well-written and very informative, ▶



▶ giving details of circuit design/theory of operation and useful hints and tips about tubes and the different types of output biasing arrangements - A; B; A/B; Ultra-linear, etc. Reference 8.8s can be supplied with an optional remote-control to adjust volume levels (pictured)

Reference 8.8 virtually every day. Although I enjoyed it very much from the start, I found I liked it more and more as I used it. Whether it bedded in over

built, beautifully finished, and sounds excellent. Styling, as always, is a matter of personal taste. But the design is very eye catching and it looks expensive. If you're shopping for a good amplifier in this price bracket, the Reference 8.8 is definitely one you have to hear. ▶+



- but my review sample was a non-remote version.

Priced at £1995, the Reference 8.8 represents good value. It's not exactly cheap, but given what you get for your money it is fairly-priced. It more than holds its own against other similarly-priced valve amplifiers in terms of build and performance, and should outperform most transistor designs in areas like cleanness, solidity and control by virtue of being transformer-coupled to the speakers. For me, the output transformer is the principle sonic difference between valves and transistors!

In a review period that began well before Christmas and extended into the New Year, I listened to the

several weeks I can't say, but it definitely seemed to improve. I also made a few changes to my system (Townshend speaker cables and Super Tweeters - watch this space) and found the exceptional cleanness of the 8.8 a real benefit.

The Townshend Super Tweeters proved to be noticeably louder than my home-made set, and with the EAR 859 they had initially seemed slightly more obtrusive. However, the inherent smoothness and cleanness of the 8.8 helped create a more integrated effect, making sure the high treble remained beautifully clean and detailed, with excellent separation. All in all the sound was gorgeously open and informative - lively and involving.

I have to say - I'm very impressed with the Reference 8.8. It's solidly

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Vacuum-tube line-integrated amplifier
Inputs:	4x Line
Input Sensitivity:	180mV
Input Impedance:	50 KOhms
Rated Output:	50 Watts/channel into 4 or 8 Ohms
Valve Complement:	4x 6550EH 2x 12AU7 2x 12AT7
Dimensions (WxHxD):	470x200x400mm
Weight:	30kg
Price:	£1995 (including remote control)

#### UK Distributor:

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Net. [www.Aliumaudio.com](http://www.Aliumaudio.com)

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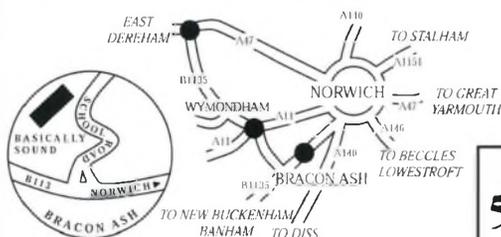


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# The Roksan TMS 2 Record Player

by Chris Binns

It's 1985 – and business is booming with people keen to invest in the new technology of compact disc. The classical enthusiasts are welcoming the prospect of playing a whole symphony uninterrupted and without the distraction of scratches and background noise, while the twenty something baby boomers are embracing all of the utterly pompous post 'live aid' stadium rock by playing Dire Straits, U2 and simple minds on their new toys, that is when they are not talking property prices while getting drunk in the nearest wine bar. Compact disc players, having been unleashed on the general public last year, are definitely the item to have, and are positively flying out the doors of hi-fi shops; the new technology is here and it fits just perfectly with the air of hedonism that is the mid-eighties. Already the word on the street is that the LP has had its day.

Not, then perhaps the best time to launch a new and relatively expensive turntable, especially if it is your only product. But Roksan's Xerxes proved to be an interesting and controversial rival to the still omnipresent Linn LP12, and managed to thrive in what was even then a diminishing market, aided and abetted by the company's mildly pugnacious attitude and strong cynicism toward CD. Roksan consolidated their market presence by introducing a top flight tone arm, cartridge and phono stage (the somewhat overlooked Artexerxes, that was the first design to fit inside the turntable and thus reduce degradation from the arm lead) and of course the unusual Darius loudspeaker. Together with more budget products these helped to keep them afloat during what could now be considered the dark days for analogue replay. A little later, the company diversified into electronics, and are now responsible for a quite a range of products that hold a strong

position in the market place, amongst which you'll find two CD players.

But Roksan are obviously still passionate about vinyl replay, due in no small part to a continued fascination for the engineering involved in turntables. Company founder Touraj Moghaddam has been ardently cultivating his approach to squeezing better performance from the LP. While the original Xerxes presented some fairly radical solutions to age old problems, these have been refined considerably over the years and incorporated into newer models, notably the Xerxes X, while the recently introduced TMS 2 represents a no compromise design that reflects the full fruits of his research to date.

Compared to most high end turntables the TMS is relatively compact. While the general geometry, engineering concept and some of the components such as the platter assembly may seem familiar from earlier designs, the implementation and construction is considerably more complex than a casual glance would suggest. The plinth is a four tier construction, based around three chrome plated pillars that serve to couple the unit to the outside world via adjustable spiked feet with locking nuts; these are designed to fit into the machined foot bases that form the final part of a complicated suspension system. The pillars support the sandwich that comprises the three plinth sections, while these either hang from or are supported by each other via an extensive number of elastomer 'blobs' (a Roksan term, not mine). The end result is an arrangement that provides a high degree of mechanical seclusion for the pickup arm and turntable.

However, unlike conventional springs or 'rigid' designs, this intricate structure is said to provide vibrational isolation over a far wider bandwidth, with each tier absorbing specific frequencies, thus ensuring a greater degree of immunity to both structural and airborne interference from the loudspeakers. Setting up is aided by the provision of three tall feet that allow access to the underside of the unit for adjustment. A lot of research went into suitable materials for the various sections. For example the

composite resin that goes to form a large part of the TMS has a consistency that varies with thickness, while the arm board is fabricated from Acetal, and

as a result there should be no problems with the 'sagging' that afflicted the older Xerxes models.

The TMS 2 also employs a considerably superior main bearing assembly, the company having been prospecting for manufacturers to produce a unit with even tighter tolerances than were currently available. Unexpectedly, the result was a self aligning single point bearing engineered out of tungsten carbide that has a concentricity of less than 1 micron, and a noise floor ten times lower than the standard unit.

It retains Roksan's innovative mounting arrangement for the low voltage synchronous motor, whereby it is held rigidly in the vertical plane but allowed to rotate around its axis by seating it in a bearing. I have never quite got my head around this approach; common sense tells me that every time a demand is made on the motor (as in the drag from the stylus interfacing with the groove) the speed must drop. ▶



► But both of the Roksan Xerxes turntables I have owned have had no problems with pitch stability, therefore my understanding of the engineering involved must be wide of the mark and likewise, I would expect perfect speed stability from the TMS. The substantial power supply for the motor is housed in a box similar to that



used for the Caspian range of electronics, while further regulation, speed selection and control is provided within the turntable itself.

Both the Artimez tone arm and the Shiraz cartridge were introduced fairly shortly after the original Xerxes made its debut. The most striking feature of the arm is the use of a counterweight that is pivoted and thus hangs free from the arm tube, later versions substituted the rather clumsy 'block' type with a more elegant cylinder that is prevented from excessive rocking while manoeuvring the arm by being virtually grounded on the arm board during cueing. The one piece arm tube and headshell is fabricated from a single piece of aluminium alloy tube. This is supported by unique pyramidal bearings that are offset, which together with the pivoted counterweight provides superior control when playing records that are warped. In essence, as the stylus rides the warp up the counterweight's centre of gravity moves away from the bearing and tracking force is reduced, returning to normal on the decline. And how many records are there (particularly from the seventies – think oil crisis, RCA and 'Dynaflex') that are perfectly flat?

The Shiraz cartridge is based around an EMT sourced generator system, which unusually is clamped to the machined aluminium body with three spikes to provide accurate alignment and good mechanical grounding. The Gyger II stylus is a Swiss made super fine line profile design, and cantilever material is aluminium.

Whether it is a result of the ascendance of CD I don't know, but the diversity of turntable design is pretty fertile as we chip away at the 21st century, particularly toward the high end. Given the compromises, achieving results is always going to be something of a balancing act, and while I would be loath to start

do tend to be particular paths or philosophies that designers follow. High mass platters, rigid construction or suspension, DC vs synchronous motors... each have their attributes and followers, and are suitably different for there to be no consensus as to which is the best. I always felt that the original Xerxes (when working correctly) provided a satisfying balance between the qualities of sprung sub chassis decks such as the Linn, and the authority and 'big' presentation of high mass,



rigid designs like the VPI's. My first impressions of the TMS 2 were much the same. I would like to think that using a turntable system that costs nigh on ten thousand pounds would bring a smile to my face; I was not disappointed.

Having been carefully delivered by the distributors in a set up state, I was able to put the TMS to work more or less straight away, whereupon it widened the gulf between vinyl and compact disc reproduction in my system to such an extent that I don't think I played a single CD over the Christmas period. The TMS 2 was fuss free in operation, and once you get used to the slightly peculiar feel of the arm it is simple to use. It's also refreshingly free of the record clamps and suchlike ancillaries that other decks require to work correctly; and for someone who is sometimes inclined to sessions of schizophrenic track hopping,



this is important. Of more interest, as I got used to the deck and understood more of the complicated construction (aided by the users manual) I started to adjust and fine tune the turntable... and felt for a time as if I was pulling a rabbit from a hat. Orientation of the belt, accurate levelling of the various components and the support structure and material all affect performance considerably. There is definitely a point at which the suspension 'clicks' and starts to work coherently - whereupon the results go from being merely good to breathtaking. Most noticeably the noise floor drops, musical dynamics expand dramatically, and the timing ►

▶ of music snaps into focus.

The TMS 2 while remaining essentially neutral, was never cold or clinical in its reproduction. In the new 'heightened state' of set up, it had a gentleness and delicacy which coupled with extremely low vinyl noise offered a beguiling presentation of individual voices and instruments, and I think it is possibly the quietest turntable I have ever used in this respect. Speed stability was excellent, and piano music had a realism to it that is only attainable when this is just right. There was a great sense of control and stability, which gave dynamics an extremely stiff board to spring from - which they used to good effect. Whether it was orchestral crescendos or drums, the TMS excelled at allowing music to be explosive when required.



I know from previous experience with the Shiraz cartridge that it is capable of being a fast and snappy performer, and it is obviously well suited to the TMS. Substituting it for the Lyr Helikon SL yielded disappointing results, and it sounded as if it was disagreeing with the arm - I can't see any reason on paper why it shouldn't work, but there was no sense of coherence to music any more, and it sounded edgy and very unhappy. Returning to the Shiraz, timing and rhythm were set down with a fundamental rightness that gave all music the correct pace. Rock or dance music had all the energy necessary to give you foot ache, while the flow of orchestral music was allowed to develop naturally, letting the full mood of a piece such as the Barbirolli Vaughn Williams Tallis Fantasia expand to eerie effect.

Bass performance was extended and solid, and definitely not to give a false

impression of speed; it was just there when necessary, with a clarity that again must have something to do with the lack of noise from the mechanics. It was refreshing to have really deep bass that did not interfere with the rest of the performance; lesser turntables (particularly sprung chassis types) sometimes have a tendency to get muddy when there is a lot of low frequency energy bouncing around, clouding other aspects of the music, possibly one of the few areas where CD can claim occasional superiority. But not in this case. The only aspect of performance that I was less than knocked out by was the ability of the TMS to retrieve fine detail, although I feel this is more a reflection on the

arm than the turntable itself. There were a number of occasions when I was playing a record that I was familiar with and found that little touches of percussion were not quite as apparent as I have heard them. However, this in no way compromised the sheer musical enjoyment that the TMS was able to give, and I know that I shall miss it when it is returned to the manufacturers.

There is a certain irony in the fact that anyone wanting to spend serious money on a high-end turntable has a considerably wider choice than ever before; Thus the competition for the TMS 2 is pretty fierce. As a complete system, I feel that possibly the Artimez arm is now overshadowed by the potential of the turntable, and I would dearly like to experiment with other options (like the latest Triplanar) but the Shiraz continues to be an interesting and worthy performer at the price. Compared to something like a TNT HRX the TMS 2 seems like understated engineering, and requires a lot more patience in setting up to realise its full potential. But do not be fooled by its compactness. It is capable of startlingly good results, and easily demonstrates just how good top

flight vinyl replay can be. If it doesn't quite redefine the state of the art in any one particular area of performance, it offers the best all round musical performances that I have heard from my records yet.



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### TMS 2 Turntable

Type:	Suspended, belt drive turntable
Motor Type:	Synchronous
Speeds:	33 and 45, electronically switched
Platter:	Two piece aluminium
Bearing:	Self-centring, standing bearing with tungsten carbide shaft

##### Artimez Tonearm

Type:	Gimbal bearing with "intelligent" counter-weight
Geometry:	Rega
Effective Length:	240mm
Effective Mass:	9.0g

##### Shiraz Cartridge

Type:	Low output moving-coil
Output:	1.05mV
Tracking Force:	2.5g
Mass:	8.2g
Cantilever:	Aluminium tube
Stylus:	Fritz Gyger II

##### Dimensions (WxHxD):

Turntable:	450x150x370mm
Power Supply:	432x80x380mm

##### Weight -

Turntable:	18kg
Power Supply:	12.5kg

##### Prices -

Turntable:	£7500
Tonearm:	£1000
Cartridge:	£1250

##### UK Distributor:

Henley Designs Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0)1235 511166  
Net. [www.henleydesigns.co.uk](http://www.henleydesigns.co.uk)

##### Manufacturer:

Roksan Audio Ltd  
Net. [www.roksan.co.uk](http://www.roksan.co.uk)



# VPI Scout Master Record Player

by Roy Gregory

In case you haven't noticed, record players have been quietly changing over the last few years. Once was, you couldn't sell a turntable without a three-point suspended sub-chassis, at least in the UK. Pretenders came and fell by the wayside as the philosophical hegemony rolled steadily on towards an infinite horizon. Until the wheel came off: or rather, CD arrived. In some respects the little silver disc was the best thing that ever happened to record players – at least as far as development is concerned. With their declining market share the powers that were slackened their iron grip, allowing 15 years of stagnation to ebb away. Suddenly, new players started to arrive from abroad and the old checklist of desirable features evaporated along with the rules that went with it.

Ironically, the first cracks appeared from within, the Rega arm forcing people to reassess their confidently held beliefs. But it was rigid plinths with separate motors that really did the damage. Not only did they deliver excellent sonic results with good speed stability (always a weakness with suspended decks) they were inherently simple and stable too; A happy coincidence given the return (with a vengeance) of uni-pivot tonearms. Suddenly the whole cost equation that had ruled the record player market for years was turned on its head. It was acceptable to use a thousand pound cartridge mounted in an RB300, fitted to a really very basic deck. It even made some sort of sense! But you could take the logic further with an even better arm, which is exactly what Harry Weisfeld did

by combining a chopped down version of his JMW uni-pivot with a textbook solid plinth and separate motor.

When I reviewed the VPI Scout back in Issue 16, I was ill prepared for the results. No player at this price should deliver this much music. Mind you, there were a few interesting wrinkles in the design. By using a thick, acrylic platter rather than his previous mass loaded designs, coupled to an inverted bearing Weisfeld was able to employ a teflon thrust pad. This seemingly trivial change generated benefits out of all proportion with its cost and simplicity.

Until you hear a truly quiet bearing it's hard to credit just how intrusive the mechanical noise they generate can be. It's the real lesson to be learnt from air bearings, and whilst Harry's new design can't match the ghostly quiet and pure musical flow of such exotica, it's not far off and it's a fraction of the price (or trouble). The low noise and stable platform allowed the simplified JMW 9.0 arm to show its true qualities – to stunning musical effect. Still, the suspicion remained, just how good could the arm sound on an even better motor unit. The Nordic Concept went some way to demonstrate, and now we have the Weisfeld response, in the shape of the amusingly titled Scout Master.

The basic ingredients remain the same – just beefed up a bit all round. The platter comes from the top of the range HRX, as does the optional

peripheral clamp and record weight. The main bearing has been lengthened to accommodate the thicker platter, and remains threaded, just in case you opt to use VPI's screw down centre clamp.

The whole thing is bolted to a sandwich plinth assembled from two layers of MDF bonded either side of a thick steel plate to form a constrained layer. The result is a stable and very dead structure. The conical feet still stand on imbedded ball bearings although an additional level of mechanical isolation is provided by foam rubber discs between the feet and the spacers on the plinth. The motor housing is bigger and heavier, having come from the TNT Hot-Rod, except that in this case it's painted black rather than brushed and polished. The motor inside is a 300 RPM model (rather than the original Scout's 600 RPM version) which lowers the drive system's resonance well below that of the arm/cartridge. However, why the motor cut-out couldn't have been round I'm really not sure, as it would certainly have looked neater. There again, you

can't actually see it once the platter's in place so what the hell. All things considered, the end result is Clydesdale to the Scout's Arab pony. The JMW 9.0 is essentially unchanged, although the intervening months have seen considerable refinement in terms of both mechanics and finish. The VTA adjustment collar works far more smoothly and precisely than before, while the threaded counterweight stub, a relic of its beginnings as a the 12.5 fitted to the Hot-Rod, has also gone, making tracking force far easier to adjust. The low-rider weights on the



► azimuth ring are now blind bolted into place, which is far neater, while the bearing pivot is now far finer. The virtual bias arrangement (applied through a twist in the lead-out wires which also apply a modicum of damping to the arm's motion) and the rear mounted termination box remain the same, except that the box is now also painted black. Personally, I'm not sure that's a step in



the right direction, but once again, it's pretty much out of sight so...

Final part of the jigsaw is the SDS speed controller, another optional extra that regenerates the motor's mains supply. Like most such devices it's worth every penny and if you can't afford it initially you should certainly plan on its subsequent acquisition at the earliest possible opportunity. So, at least one of the old wives' tales still holds true.

Set up is about as straight-forward as it gets. The deck simply needs putting down whilst the alignment protractor and instructions regarding VTA and azimuth are simplicity itself to optimize. You should get the best from whatever cartridge you fit, even if it's the first time you've done it. Just take a little bit of time and be methodical about it. Aside from that, it's a case of providing a nice level, well damped surface, a decent phono-stage and a set of proper lead-out cables (Incognito or Cardas probably offer the most cost effective options – or Audioplan Super X Wire if you can find it). The rest of the system was either the Groove/Vibe combination or the Vitus units, each feeding the RADIA amp and either the latest Living Voice OBX-Rs or

the Alon Lotus Elite SEs. Cabling was all Nordost Valhalla, apart from the arm-cable where I finally settled on Discovery Plus Four, which seemed to work especially well with the Vitus.

Now, please note that in both the above systems the phono-stage costs more than the record player driving it. This is no accident and

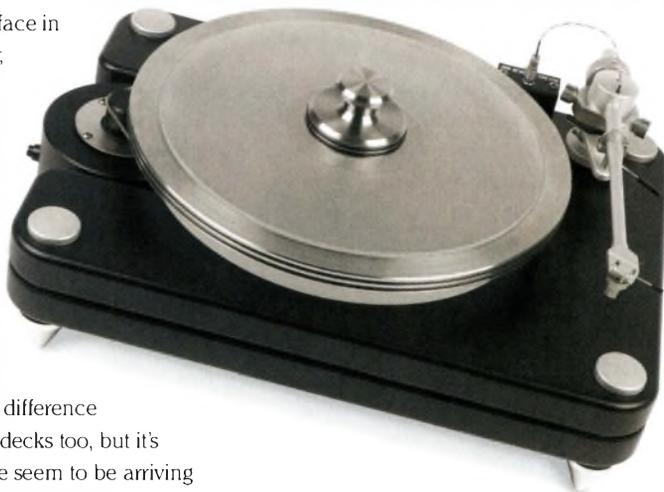
no, I never for a moment felt short-changed; The Scout Master really is that good.

Arriving immediately after the Blue Pearl JEM was never going to be easy for any deck, but the VPI took it in its stride, partly because it offers the same basic strengths – albeit to a lesser degree. Compare and contrast the two designs and their similarities become obvious: Minimal mechanical interface in the main bearing; stand alone motor assembly; stable motor to platter relationship; sophisticated electronic speed control. Don't get carried away – there's a world of difference between the two decks too, but it's interesting that we seem to be arriving at a new status quo nonetheless.

What made the Scout so special was its silky fluidity and sense of musical flow. Hearing it for the first time you might dismiss it as overly smooth, but comparison with other sources, analogue or digital, quickly demon-

strated that what you were really hearing was its astonishing confidence and sure footed grace. Music happened with such an unflustered and natural sense of progress and pace (fast or slow) that you simply didn't worry about it. It wasn't perfect, but boy was it fun to listen to.

Well, not surprisingly, the Scout Master builds on that same easy confidence but what it adds to the party makes it very special indeed. Here you'll find wider dynamic range and an even quieter background, allied to rock-like stability. In fact, exactly the virtues you'd expect from adding the SDS, a heavier platter and better isolation (in the shape of the heavier motor housing and decoupling rings between the feet and the chassis). If I was going to point a finger at the Scout (which seems churlish at the price) then its greatest weakness was a grey-ness to its musical background. Well, the Scout Master sorts that out in no uncertain terms, the performance emerging from a velvety black space that stands rock steady behind and beyond the speakers. It comes from a combination of a lower noise floor and the wider dynamic



range, which as well as delivering bigger and faster dynamic jumps, also brings better micro dynamic life and the instrumental colours that go with it.

Listen to the mix of electric and acoustic instruments that back

▶ Alison Krauss on her album *Forget About It*. Her voice is beautifully stable and separated, but so too are the instruments. Yet with so much going on, the deliberately measured tempo of 'Stay' is never hurried, the pace of the track totally dictated by the phrasing of the vocal line. Each instrument is clearly separated in space and instantly identifiable, yet also a coherent part of the whole. Not bad when you consider that you're dealing with two voices, guitar, mandolin and dobro. The potential for confusion is enormous but the Scout Master keeps things cool, uncluttered and calm. It also effortlessly up-shifts for the faster tempo and urgent playing of the title track. Unforced is the word that springs to mind,



with the music happening just as quickly as the musicians make it – something that's astonishingly rare in systems that are supposed to represent high-fidelity, yet is essential to a real range of emotional and musical expression. Along the way you get the shape of notes and lyrics, the texture of hands on strings, the cascade of brushes on cymbals, all of which minutiae animate the musical event, emphasising the human over the mechanical. They stand testament to the VPI's superb levels of transparency.

But detail and definition stand for nothing unless they are not just integrated into a coherent whole, but that whole is balanced and in proportion. The real strength of the Scout Master is that it has built on the

virtues of its cheaper sibling without bending them out of shape. When Scott LaFaro embarks on the meandering bass solo that winds up 'My Man's Gone Now' (*Bill Evans Trio Live at the Village Vanguard – Alto AE004*) then the agility and articulation of the playing matches the stabbed runs and fluidity of the piano. Notes happen fast or slow, just as he dictates, with shape and attack, enduring no softening or slurring at the hands of the system. And it's that way whether he's playing solo or providing the foundation for Evans' commanding keyboard. That evenness of pace and energy, irrespective of frequency, is the VPI's real

hallmark. It's what welds everything else together into such a believable whole. Its perspective is natural, as is its tonal balance; combine them with equally natural pace and energy levels and the result is extremely convincing. Not the sense of reality that you get from the Pearl of course, but an easy acceptance that leaves you enjoying the music rather than questioning the recording. And don't underestimate the importance of the deck's stability in this. It's very difficult to accept the truth of any musical performance if it wanders between the speakers or steps front and centre every time things get loud or busy. The Scout Master convinces in no small part because of its combination of iron hand and velvet glove – it might have a steady grip, but you simply enjoy the absence of movement rather than remarking on how tightly it's held.

Searching back through the aural memory for a point of comparison, the

one that surfaces is the Well Tempered Record Player. The Scout Master shares the same grace and total absence of grain that set that turntable, in all its various guises, apart from the crowd. But the VPI adds greater air and focus, and better high frequency extension, all without the complexity and eclecticism of silicon baths. With its mix of virtues grafted so seamlessly to real musical authority the Scout Master establishes an enviable benchmark for vinyl replay. Not the nicest to look at, nor the easiest to upgrade, the deck might well respond "Well, why would you want to?" It's got a point. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Rigid record player with separate motor
Speeds:	33/45 with optional SDS electronic supply
Platter:	Acrylic
Clamps:	Option of peripheral mass ring with or without record weight
Lid:	None
Tonearm –	
Type:	Undamped uni-pivot
Effective Length:	230mm
Effective Mass:	8.7g
Geometry:	Rega
Dimensions (WxHxD):	483x228x330mm
Prices –	
Turntable and Tonearm:	£2095
SDS Power Supply:	£950
Peripheral Clamp:	£450
Record Weight:	£145

#### UK Distributor:

The Cherished Record Company

Tel. (44)(0)1579 363603

E-mail. email@cherished-record-company.co.uk

#### Manufacturer:

VPI Industries Inc.

Net. www.vpiindustries.com

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# Naim Audio CD5i CD Player And Nait 5i Integrated Amp

by Roy Gregory

When the original Nait 1 was first released just over 20 years ago it was a masterstroke of simplicity and down-scaled design. Low in power, but high in quality, for me it had the sheer listenability to put many other amplifiers to shame - some of them embarrassingly expensive. It was a chip off the old block. Unmistakably Naim in sound, this cranky little thing was enough to irritate everyone who was not a fan of the company, with its 6 or 7 watt output, limited inputs and baffling balance control. I have several friends who still use them and I have recently sent mine back to Naim for a general going over and it returned sounding better than ever. Even today, it is an excellent little amplifier and can drive most speakers, though the low power output is obviously a serious limitation on level. But over the years the Nait has grown up and been through several incarnations, ending in the Nait 5. Now, I like the Nait 5 but I have to admit that it had lost that baby Naim image as it had grown more powerful and more sophisticated, even allowing for an upgrade in the form of an external add-on power supply. My guess is that Naim thought it had become a little bloated and complex over the years and decided to take it back to its original concept as an entry level integrated amplifier. Gone are the expensive sockets and circuitry for an external power supply as is the resistor ladder volume control. Only the

essential remains in the shape of a remote control and the inclusion of RCA phono sockets alongside Naim's preferred DIN sockets for CD and tuner inputs, while AV and the tape loop are RCA only. Naim have however included a programmable unity gain facility for integration into surround and AV systems. Personally I have never met anyone who has upgraded a previous Nait with a separate power supply as I have found that most users would prefer to make the jump to separate pre and power amplifiers, so I don't see the loss of this ability as a problem at all.

In fact the Nait 5i is a completely new amplifier altogether with new circuit topology and components, especially the Senken output devices, which have never been seen on a Naim before. This is also the first amplifier

Naim have ever built with a passive pre-amplifier section, and the volume is now controlled with the same pot as found in the NAC 252.

Externally it looks very much like a Nait 5, which is now discontinued, with its die-cast zinc and extruded aluminium casework. But at 50 watts output into 8 ohms and as Naim claim, a 500 watt peak capacity at 1 ohm impedance this

is no Nait 1. When you consider that, for the first time to my knowledge, the company are giving a general thumbs-up to the use of other speaker cables with one of their amplifiers you'd better

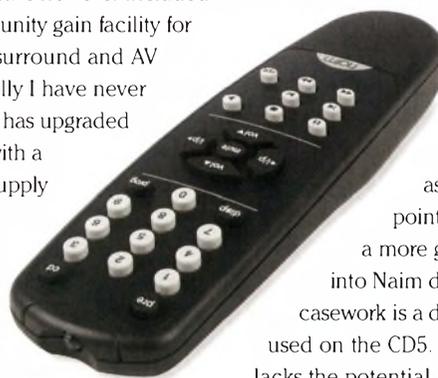
believe that things have moved on.

Of course, they'd still prefer you to use NACA5, but...

The CD5 remains, as it has its own price point, but the CD 5i offers

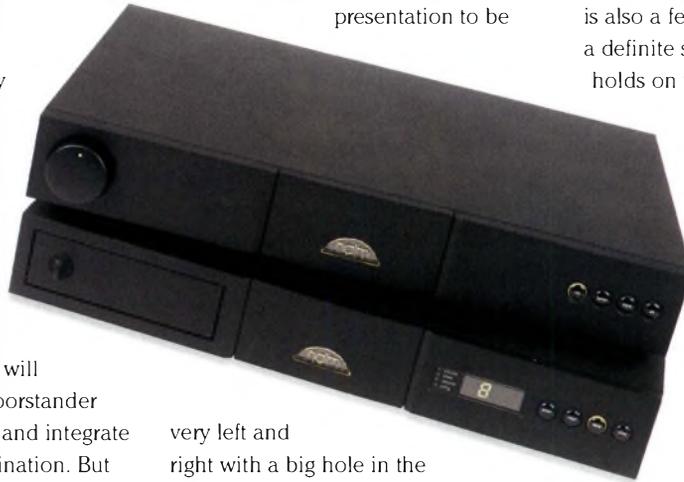
a more gently priced entry into Naim digital electronics. Its

casework is a development of that used on the CD5. Like the Nait 5i it lacks the potential for power supply add-ons, and it also offers both RCA and DIN socketry for the outputs, which means that you are not tied to Naim interconnect cabling. Internally though it is all change and the machine is built around the new Phillips 1202-transport mechanism and chipset. The drawer and transport suspension is straight from the CDX2, but on the 5i the tray itself carries the board that performs the conversion processes so the signal that comes from the tray board is already analogue. This helps in keeping the critical digital signal paths as short as possible and is entirely in keeping with Naim's philosophy that started with their first player, the CDS1 that bucked the trend for separate box converters. Both components have very basic but appropriate remote control units, though the volume control on the Nait 5i could certainly have been smoother in its operation. Setting a precise level was more difficult than it should be, especially as the volume level comes on quite quickly in the



► knob's rotation. I have mentioned this to Naim who assure me that future production versions will be much better in this regard.

As a company Naim have changed enormously over the past few years, not least in their catalogue. At one time I could have named every one of their products with ease, but now I'm not so sure. For a while it has seemed that we have had a new Naim product to review in just about every issue. And there is more to come, as very soon Naim will announce a new small floorstander designed to complement and integrate with this particular combination. But until then I listened to them through a pair of Neat Petite loudspeakers and hooked them up using NACA5 speaker cable. It wasn't all plain sailing at the beginning though. For at least a week both the Naims sounded promisingly lively yet disjointed. Normally I could recognise the Naim sound blindfolded but their equipment has become more sophisticated and subtle over the past few years and as far as this new combination



and the Nait 5i, both sitting on the Frain, seemed to have so much going on that the rhythmic emphasis seemed a side issue. What suffered initially was the overall integration of the sound.

There was also a tendency for the presentation to be

very left and right with a big hole in the middle and every morning I would ease a CD into its tray wondering how far the musical reconstruction would have evolved that day. As with all such issues, it happens slowly and then one day it all comes together and stays there, but this little combo took as long to begin singing as the NAP 500 did when I reviewed it a couple of years ago. Whether it was the amplifier, the CD player or both, I don't know, but do not let a dealer play you either of them straight from the box, as you will get very little idea of their capabilities. And this would be a real shame as they are considerable.

With such a healthy power output and the sort of composure that enables the power to be used to musical advantage, a fully warmed Nait 5i makes a strong case for itself. Feed it with a CD5i and you are talking a level of performance that is quite rare for the £1500 or so that the pair cost. Even the Neat Petites, normally so polite and restrained, were whipped

into action and sounded fast and incisive. The latest Nait is full bodied and even a little pushy in the mid-band, I was pleased that that definitive leading-edge control and dynamic ingredient was still there. But there is also a feeling of ease about it and a definite sense that the amplifier holds on to the note and allows it to develop. And it retains its sense of equilibrium even when you play music designed to rush it into snatching at notes. It is very difficult to fluster it or push it seriously out of shape, and like the far more expensive NAC 252/NAP 300 it always sounds like it has reserves of power and resolution in hand to cope with any extra rhythmic or instrumental questions the music may ask.



Comparing it with my Nait 1 and staying within reasonable volume limits, it may seem that the original amplifier is initially faster and more exciting. But this is because it has leading edge emphasis and is much, much leaner. It simply cannot live with the way that the 5i resolves instrumental strands or copes with polyrhythmic elements and tonal variations in the music. And it lacks the pure driving power that is so much a part of the newer product's appeal. ►



was concerned I wasn't sure what to expect. It took two weeks for the whole system to settle down and I am not sure that it is quite "there" yet even as I write this, a month on.

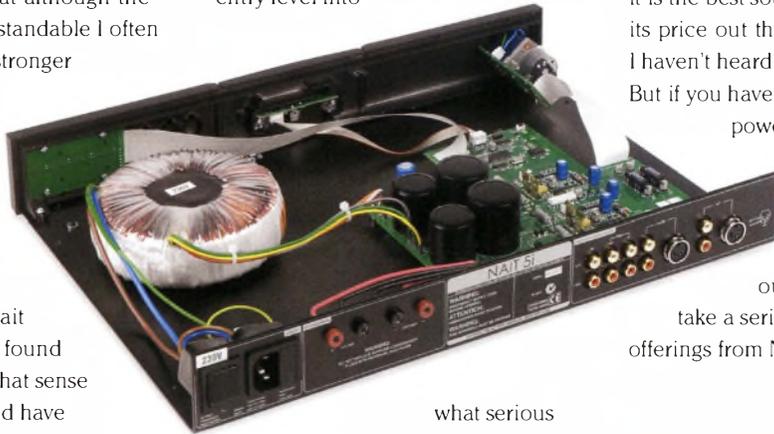
Normally a Naim CD player and amplifier, from whatever price level, will impose itself upon you with its speed and sense of movement. It gets in the groove pretty quickly. The CD5i

► I must say though that it still does extremely well for a 20-year old design.

At low levels though the Nait 5i can seem a little lightweight and the bass never feels completely focussed or powerful until you start to drive it a little harder. And if I was to cite a weak point I would say that although the bass is always understandable I often thought it could be stronger and more imposing and powerful in its nature. I even ran my own CDS3 through it for a while to see if this could have been a trait of the CD5i but I still found the Nait to just lack that sense of impact that I would have expected from a 50 watt Naim amplifier. I also noticed it when the JMLabs Chorus 706S was sitting on the end of the system. It could be a by-product of the forward mid-band and quite dry high-end. But, when I think of all the bass-heavy speakers out there, it may not be an altogether bad thing.

The CD5i is noticeably less refined and expansive musically than the pricier CD5, but you would expect that. It is however a very well balanced machine that it is difficult to criticise when the price is taken into consideration. Even at the front end of an unfairly revealing system it shows itself to be very direct and comes to the musical point very quickly. It doesn't major on depth or an overly glamorous

portrayal of ambience. It has a forward, almost pushy sense of presence and a sharp clarity and focus particularly in the treble where it is particularly tidy, concise and expressive. These attributes it largely shares with the Nait 5i and as a pair they really do offer an entry level into



what serious audio is all about. I think that they are one of the most different sounding of all Naim's new offerings; particularly the Nait that I suspect could be the heartbeat of any number of satisfying systems. For many people who want to enjoy quality music at home but are not particularly interested in hi-fi or signing up for a lifetime's upgrading they are, as a pair,



strong candidates and a solid choice. With them both in place you are going to have many options when it comes to choosing suitable speakers, whether they be Naim designs or not.

I think Naim have done absolutely the right thing with the new Nait 5i and now they have to make sure that the cost doesn't creep up too far like the previous models. They should always

have an entry-level set of electronics available at this sort of price, as it will be the first step into their way of making music for a whole new generation of people, who don't want to spend all their spare time in pubs or playing computer games. Whether it is the best sounding equipment for its price out there I don't know as I haven't heard all of the competition. But if you have a serious interest in the power of music and believe its influence can be profound and life enhancing I would suggest that you seek out a local dealer and take a serious listen to these new offerings from Naim. 

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### NAIT 5i:

Type:	Integrated amplifier
Power Output:	50Watt continuous into 8 ohms.
Inputs:	2xDIN, 4xRCA phono
Input Sensitivity:	225mV, 20Kohm.
Tape Out Level:	225mV, 100 ohms.
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432 x 70 x 301mm
Finish:	Black
Price:	£699

##### CD 5i

Type:	Single box CD player
Line outputs:	1xDIN, 1pr RCA phono
Output level:	2.0V rms @ 1kHz
Output impedance:	10 ohms maximum
Disc compatibility:	Red book CD, CD-R and CD-RW
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432 x 70 x 301mm
Finish:	Black
Price:	£825

##### Manufacturer:

Naim Audio  
Tel. (44)(0) 1722 332266  
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# The Real Deal

## Focal-JMlabs Chorus 706S Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

There has been something big happening at JMlabs for a while now. The French company recently released a new Utopia range which included the quite wonderful Micro Be that I reviewed last issue. That speaker surprised and delighted me by revealing a new and exciting voice, balance and level of performance for JMlab speakers. At first it seemed obvious that the availability of the Beryllium tweeter had provided the Utopias with a new capability by opening up and extending the really useable range of the speaker and that the more adventurous and realistic balance was a by-product of that. But now, after having spent some time with a model from the far less expensive Chorus S range I can say that, as new technologies have come on-line bringing new drivers with them, the whole of the JMlabs sound and style seems to have been transformed, much to the better. It's become a range of speakers that does not put safety first and dares to be that bit different.

It has been a long time since I spent any serious time with such a low-priced speaker. The Chorus 706S is certainly that. It sells for a mere £250 without stands and forms part of a nine model range comprising three compact loudspeakers, three floor-standers, two

centre-channel models and an active sub-woofer. From the above it's not hard to see that the Chorus range has been designed with more than a passing regard for AV use. There was a Chorus range that preceded the new "S" models, which were introduced late last year but, make no mistake, this is not a cosmetic exercise or simple tarting-up of an existing range but an entirely new set of designs

that share virtually nothing with their predecessors. The 706S is the middle model of the three compact designs and they can all be supplied with or without their own stands.

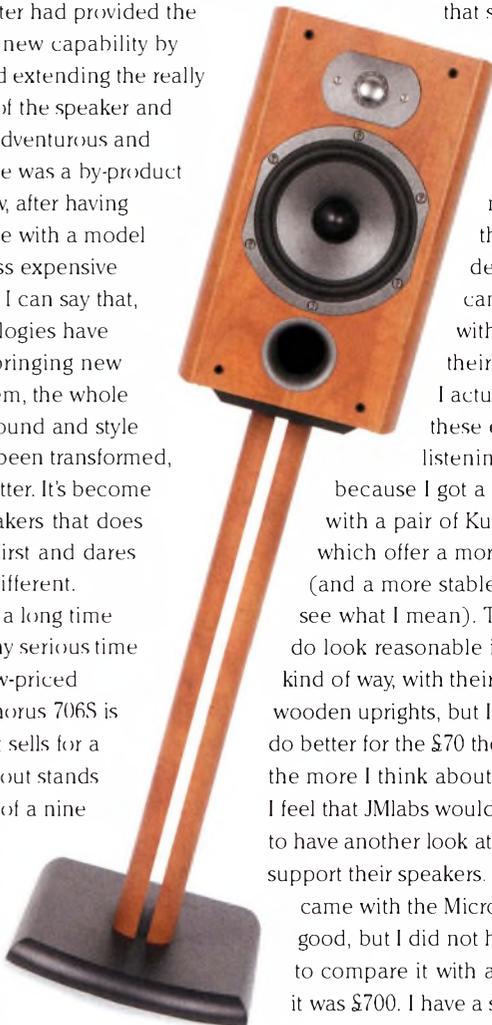
I actually discarded these early in the listening largely

because I got a better sound with a pair of Kudos supports, which offer a more stable base (and a more stable bass, if you see what I mean). The JM stands do look reasonable in a furniture kind of way, with their twin matching wooden uprights, but I think you can do better for the £70 they cost. In fact, the more I think about it the more I feel that JMlabs would be well advised to have another look at the way they support their speakers. The stand that came with the Micro Utopias was good, but I did not have very much to compare it with at the time and it was £700. I have a suspicion, based

on previous experience, that their speakers would work extremely well with a high rigidity, lightweight, skeletal support of the type made by Audio Solutions a few years back, but which no-one seems to produce any more.

The Chorus 706S is a classic 2-way front ported design that boasts a pair of JMlab's latest drivers. The 6.5 inch bass / mid unit has their familiar Polyglass cone, which they have been using for over 20 years now, mounted in a new Zamak chassis which replaces the ABS-type used in the previous range. The new cage is stiffer, lighter and better shaped to reduce turbulence behind the cone. The inverted-dome tweeter design, which has also been a JMlabs trademark for over 2 decades, has certainly reached something of a performance peak with the Beryllium version. But, using experience gained through that development program, they wanted to produce a more affordable unit for use in cheaper systems and have come up with a 1-inch design, which utilises an aluminium/magnesium alloy for its dome material. JMlabs have designated it the TNC.

These two drivers are mounted in a compact bevel-edged cabinet and complemented by a rather large reflex port with a flared plastic insert and a set of bi-wire connections. The cabinet is very well finished for the price and comes fitted with detachable plastic-framed grilles that should be removed as soon as possible. Some of the JMlabs literature describes them as wall-mounted speakers and they have a pair of attached key sockets, which could be used to hang the speaker, ►



▶ which is not something I attempted. It would seem to indicate though that these speakers would be tolerant of close sitting to a rear wall. Personally, when stand mounted, I preferred them up to a couple of feet or so



into the room. It is well worth experimenting with the 706S because although it is a small low-cost speaker it does have a sonic potential stretching beyond its modest asking price. This must be considered when choosing your source, amplification and cabling. Don't make the mistake of thinking that system synergy is any the less important at this end of the

market. It would be so easy to find this speaker hooked into the back of a £150 Japanese AV amplifier where it will sound bright and thin with very little happening in the bass. It really does deserve better and to see what it was capable of when pushed to its limits I tried it with Naim Audio's new budget pairing, the CD5i and the Nait 5i using all Naim cabling.

The tweeter is the first thing you notice about this speaker and like its flagship stable-mate,

the Micro Utopia Be, it really defines the 706S and its performance. I just was not expecting it to be so good in terms of its controlled and uncompressed extension, but even more so its refinement, resolution and sense of texture. This end of the speaker's performance is where the vast majority of budget designs really fall down but not here. It leaves the whole speaker sounding wide open, all of the time, and when you couple this with a real sense of speed and control you've got a speaker which, while it may live life a little on the edge at times, can usually be relied upon to get you involved in the music

regardless of the level of sound quality you are used to. In another quirky parallel with the Micro, the 706S never really seems able to quite muster the depth or weight of bass that you may be expecting given the size of the cabinet and this can leave it sounding a bit lightweight at times. Also the bass can have a recessed quality and this inevitably contributes to the leanness of its sound. On *Alison Krauss+Union Station Live* (RRCD-0515) you get both the best and the worst of the 706S. You'll notice that the female vocal, a little nasal even on the best of systems, just lacks that sense of body and strength - but you'll be hooked by the way the band moves,

rhythmically, through the songs, locked, even without a drummer, into the rhythm section of the acoustic guitar and bass. Few groups have both the sheer technical ability and feel of a bluegrass band of this quality. It's that sense of the foot-tapping feel-good beat without a snare or bass drum marking time. Once they've set it up it flows under its own momentum and the musicians play with it, encouraging it with different chord inversions, up strokes and off-beats. You name it; they throw it into the mix. And this is exactly where the 706S excels: It opens the tracks - wide. There is nothing thick or cloying about their sound on this music. Jerry Douglas and his bottleneck Dobro sounded more metallic, free from compression and full of expression than I have heard on many speakers costing three times as much.

On albums, which rely more on tonal development and bass subtlety and texture, the 706S is rather less successful. Charlie Haden and Pat Metheny's ultra moody *Beyond the Missouri Sky* (Verve 537-130-2) lacks that element of lower mid-band focus and warmth that provides the backdrop for much of the music. It isn't that the 706s put in a bad performance, just that the speaker lacks a little bite ▶

▶ and resolution outside the tweeters hot zone and the music tends to drift by without making a connection. Not so Antonio Forcione and his latest and I believe his best offering on the Naim label, *Touch Wood* (Naim CD069). We're right in the Jmlab's preferred territory here and the close miking of Antonio's guitar brings the irresistible flavour of tonewood and metal together in the sort of performance that we have no right to expect from a £250 speaker. It's a vivid picture but easy to relax into as the speaker keeps a great hold and control of all those blistering leading edges and note flurries. And the sense of focus and note control it manages to maintain through both the quieter and more frantic passages let you see that Antonio is playing with real depth and quality. The presentation works in its favour too, as the ability to hold and maintain a soundstage is commendable. The speaker's strongpoint is the way it can articulate musical expression and this it manages for most of the time. At times you have to remind yourself that this is such a low priced speaker.

Loudspeakers in this price range can often be more frustrating than satisfying but this modest little two-way stands out, largely due to its high frequency performance which is as good as some £1k designs that I have heard over the last few years. It would be easy to criticise many aspects of its performance and point to areas, like the low bass or its tendency toward being a little thin at times, but once the price is factored in, I can't see much cause for complaint. If you give it a chance to shine by asking it questions with a good source and

amplifier and I can heartily recommend the new Naim combo, it will reward you with a surprisingly involving experience. Take *The Song Lives On* by Joe Sample and Lalah Hathaway (GRD 9956) for instance and the instrumental track 'Living In Blue'. This track is all about Sample's superb touch and the relationship of his two hands on the keyboard. Over a gently walking and sparse rhythm section he sits a



sustained root chord with his left hand and embellishes it with a wide range of right hand techniques. It is beautifully played and lushly produced. It also showed just how good the 706S could be. The sense of the piano keyboard as a physical thing and the distance between his hands carries echoes of the Micro Utopia's precision, as does the pure articulation of the note and the use of the sustain pedal. And when he plays at the high end of the instrument that tweeter really lets you hear the way he is addressing each key and the type of touch he is using. Sure, it may be a little lightweight to really give you a glimpse of the pure power and size of the piano and those bass chords

never quite carry the authority, impact and harmonic richness that they should. But hey, this is a £250 speaker.

I like this little Jmlab speaker for what it does and I can forgive it a lot because, despite its shortcomings, it is fun and I have genuinely enjoyed listening to it for the past month. Only occasionally was it disappointing. But even the best speakers in the world suffer from that. If you are putting together a low cost system then you should definitely consider them, but be aware that they need a serious amplifier driving them because they will respond. And I can also recommend them as a useful stopgap speaker for those who ultimately have their sights set a lot higher. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	2-way reflex port
Bass/mid unit:	Focal 6.5 inch Polyglass
Tweeter:	Focal 1inch TNC inverted dome
Sensitivity:	90dB
Nominal Impedance:	8 ohms
Crossover Freq.:	2400Hz
Power Handling:	80 watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	220x370x250mm
Weight:	7kg each
Finishes:	2 wood and 1 black
Prices -	
Speakers:	£250
Stands:	£70

#### UK Importer:

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# Just Like Buses...

## How to ignore a whole decade's worth of tweaks and then discover them all at once!

by Paul Messenger

Listen up, and don't skip over this section, 'cos I'm about to reveal the biggest improvement in my hi-fi system for a decade. More than that, it actually puts CD reproduction right up there as a serious competitor to vinyl – something I never thought I'd ever find myself writing. Indeed, it's such a momentous change, I'm still struggling to come to terms with it.

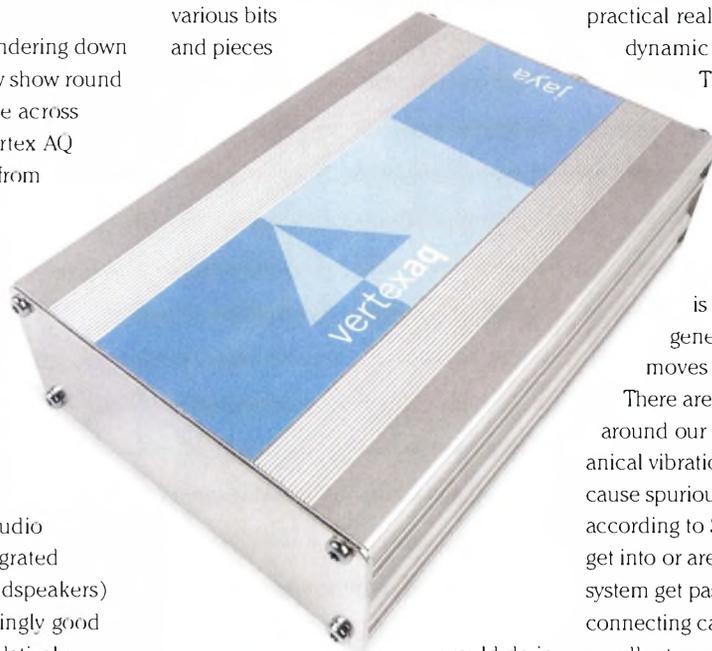
It all started whilst wandering down a corridor at the Heathrow show round about closing time. I came across a room with the name Vertex AQ on the door. This I knew from nothing: nor did it carry any obvious meaning. I hovered: it was late: should I go in, or just pass by?

I entered cautiously, to find a room empty of all but the exhibitors (not unusual towards the end of a trade day). A simple system (comprising Simaudio Moon CD player and integrated amplifier, and Perigee loudspeakers) was making some surprisingly good sounds, considering its relatively modest pretensions.

The reason for the superior sound, I was told, lay in the various 'accessory' components that Vertex AQ has developed, and which underpin and link the whole system together. They consist of a slightly oddball granite platform, plus a variety of cables decorated by strategically placed little metal boxes. These have equally peculiar names – proof positive that

this is no marketing-led operation – but essentially a common purpose, which is to reduce the mechanical and electrical noise throughout the system.

Although impressed by what I heard at Heathrow, I don't trust my judgement under show conditions, and so suggested it would be interesting to hear what these various bits and pieces



would do in my own home

and system. Would they like me to try them out?

A couple of weeks after show I got a phone call offering to just that, and a couple of weeks after that Steve Elford arrived with a large box of quite costly goodies in the back of his car. It was lunch time, so we adjourned to the pub, giving Steve a chance to explain what it was all about, and how it all worked.

The simplistic theory or rationalisation behind Vertex AQ's approach and products is that our systems receive, generate and pass around wideband mechanical (ie sonic) vibrations. These, it is suggested, adversely interfere with both digital and analogue low level electrical signals, which in turn compromises the practical real-world noise floor and dynamic range of our hi-fi systems.

This might sound a little far fetched at first hearing, but it shouldn't be totally dismissed. After all, a pillar of electrical theory and practice is that current will be generated if a conductor moves within an electrical field.

There are plenty of electrical fields around our hi-fi systems, so mechanical vibration could quite possibly cause spurious signals. Furthermore, according to Steve, any vibrations that get into or are generated within the system get passed around via the metal connecting cables, because metal is an excellent conductor of sound.

In order to absorb mechanical vibrations, the company uses a number of different 'accessories' (for want of a better word). These consist of support platforms and connecting cables, the latter with chunky little metal boxes along their length. These are distributed throughout the system, as this is the best way of absorbing the vibrations and preventing them from being passed around.

## Jaya

One could describe the effect of treating the whole system, stem to stern, and while that is truly dramatic, it didn't actually happen that way. First off, Steve handed me a Jaya mains filter unit. Priced at £295, this is a small, featureless but quite hefty alloy box (17x11x5cm) on the end of about twenty centimetres of decent mains cable, with a good quality 13-amp plug.

Unlike conventional mains filters, it doesn't sit between the mains and any particular component, but is instead plugged into a spare socket nearby. The box contains some sort of electrical filtering (no details divulged), to remove not only spikes but especially the radio frequency interference (RFI) that increasingly pollutes mains purity these days. Apparently, the biggest improvement is found with digital sources. Vibration absorption materials are also included.

I haven't had happy experiences with mains treatments in the past, usually finding that they 'slug' the sound, slow things down and rob the music of some of its vibrancy. That didn't seem to be the case with this Jaya device, however. As I plugged in first one and then a second Jaya, I was conscious of a sweetening and 'tidying up' of the top end, and a general reduction the 'graininess', although the quality of the musical communication seemed in no way compromised or impaired. Indeed, rather the reverse, since the cleaner, sweeter top only served to make the finest detail that much clearer, enhancing the whole experience. I wouldn't describe the improvement here as massive, but it was certainly worthwhile.

## Roirama

After Jaya, the next stage was to use Vertex AQ's Roiramas mains leads (£329 each) to feed the system CD player and pre-amp – a Naim CDS-2 and NAC 552, in case you wanted to know, and replacing Naim's normal mains leads. Roiramas

are made from 2m of fairly stiff cable, with a decent 13amp plug at one end, and a classy Furutech kettle adaptor at the other.

Halfway down its length is a small alloy box that looks the same as that used in the Jaya, though in this case there are no electronic components involved. The chunky box is filled with solid heavy material that purely acts as a vibration absorber (in both directions).

It was suggested that it was important to apply Jaya prior to introducing Roirama, which may or may not be true, but changing to these mains leads did seem to make a rather larger total effect than had just applying the parallel Jaya absorbers.

The system was now really starting to get into its stride. The background noise seemed to have become quieter, resulting in an increase in overall dynamic range. Stereo images seemed better layered and started showing more coherent and convincing depth perspectives. I was starting to get seriously interested now!

## Kinabalu

Phase three was rather different, and I was initially very sceptical. The rather grandly entitled 'Kinabalu Coupling System' (from £327.50) is basically a support platform, albeit a rather elaborate and carefully specified one. At its heart lies a seriously hefty slab of granite, which serves as a 'pseudo mechanical earth', and this was placed on three squidgy Sorbothane discs on top of my regular Mana support platform.

However, the key component here

is a 'Precision Coupling Tripod', a carefully shaped and wickedly sharp piece of specially chosen and heat-treated metal that provides a single path route for 'sinking' vibrations out of the CD player. Two rubber-tipped cones create a three-legged support for the player, but are merely there to match the height of the Tripod.

Frankly, my expectations were low. Unlike the vast majority of CD players,

Naim's CDS-2 is already equipped with 'floating' internals, independently spring-suspending the transport mechanism and the circuit board. Why should an additional support offer any further advantage? I put this to Steve who merely smiled knowingly and went on putting the arrangement in place.

Sceptically I cued a well familiar CD – Christy Moore's *Live at the Point*, as I recall – and was slightly shocked at what I heard. No longer was my silver disc version of this recording the obvious poor relation of the slab of vinyl I also possess. That grungy grain that always seems to put an upper limit on the transparency of the digital source had somehow been substantially reduced. And the system could be played significantly louder without fatigue too.

I queried how such a support could improve a fully spring-suspended ▶



▶ device like Naim's top CDP. Steve pointed out that a spring will only provide isolation across a relatively narrow frequency band – and furthermore that the Kinabalu's prime role is to try and remove, or 'sink' wideband vibrations generated by the player itself.

I'm still experimenting with Kinbalus. I've placed other examples under my NAC 552 pre-amp, and the power supplies that feed both the pre-amp and CD player. Each extra one added has pushed the sound ahead a little further, adding to the openness and freedom from boxiness, though none as dramatically as that first one under the CDP. I've also still to play around with the placing of the tripod spike, as this can significantly influence its effectiveness. Elsewhere in Smorgasbord, Chris Binns contributes his own Kinabalu experiences, in quite different system contexts.

### Moncayo

Naim's DIN socketry made it difficult to use the Solfonn interconnects, so the final Vertex AQ component which I tried on that first day was the Moncayo speaker cables. These are costly affairs, prices starting at £1,295 for a mono-wire 3m pair (plus £50 per extra metre), or £1,745 + £100 for the bi-wire equivalent.

High class locking WBT 4mm connectors were fitted at the amp end of the set I used, with spades at the speaker end of things, though I gather the plan is to change over to Furutech terminals. Whatever, the mechanical integrity of the connection is considered a very important part of making the cables work properly.

The conductors themselves not specifically identified. They're quite stiff, but can easily be bent into shape. Most significantly, there are two alloy absorber boxes here – rather longer (23x11x5cm) and heavier than those used on the mains leads – situated about a metre from each end. It's

not a particularly pretty looking arrangement, but it does seem to be rather effective.

I don't normally hear dramatic changes when swapping speaker cables, but Moncayo is something different, and the word dramatic is nothing short of the truth. While it's true that the Naim NACA5 cable I mostly use is inexpensive – dramatically so compared to Moncayo – that's not for want of trying numerous alternatives, and finding that they offer relatively minor differences.

Aided no doubt by the substantial improvements 'upstream', Moncayo wrought changes which were altogether more obvious. Once again it was noticeable how effectively this 'quietened' the system's background, yet allowed full range to the dynamic expression and 'punch' of the music.

More obvious still was the improvement in coloration and a considerable reduction in 'boxiness', plus superior stereo depth and spaciousness. The top end was sweeter and cleaner and the bass seemed to go deeper with more weight – perhaps a tad too much weight I sometimes felt.

### Solfonn

I did get to try the Solfonn interconnect a couple of weeks later. This is another costly device, priced from £595 for a 1.5m phono-terminated pair, and also available with balanced XLR connectors and 2m lengths. It uses high quality WBT locking phono plugs, ensuring a tight mechanical linkage, and has two of the vibration absorbing alloy boxes a few centimetres from each end – a little like the speaker cable, but very much smaller and lighter here.

The sonic improvement it offers is rather similar to – if quantitatively rather less than – that supplied by the speaker cables. Once again the sound took on extra air and freedom from boxiness, and fine detail was enhanced, especially at the frequency extremes.

### Conclusions

One can fairly criticise the various Vertex AQ treatments for being costly and decidedly tweaky, and hardly enhancing the aesthetic appeal of the system. But the proof of the pudding lies in the dramatic effect they have on sound quality, lowering background 'grunge', improving dynamic contrasts, cleaning up colorations, reducing 'boxiness' and enhancing the stereo image depth, coherence and precision.

Although all sources are improved, the biggest and most dramatic improvements are found when playing CDs. Indeed I'd go so far as to say that the full Vertex AQ treatment puts CD replay up on a par with vinyl overall, which is a comment I never thought I'd make. Through their removal of 'digital grain', these accessories elevate CD replay to previously unsuspected heights.

While there's no denying the high cost of these treatments, there's no denying their considerable effectiveness either – or their considerable cost-effectiveness in a high end system context too. I'm impressed by the way Vertex AQ adopts a holistic system-oriented approach, underpinned by a consistency of philosophy and methodology. Good results may be obtained without going the whole hog, as I have done here, but the bottom line is that this stuff really works, and that's by no means always the case in the wacky world of hi-fi accessories. ▶+

Contact:  
Vertex AQ  
Tel. (44)(0)1454 326496  
Net. [www.vertexaq.com](http://www.vertexaq.com)

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# Record Reviews

## How To Read Them



Travis

### 12 Memories

Independiente ISOM 40CD 

For the record, I hated their first album. Their second and third albums were nice, but a bit, well, beige. I always got the feeling Travis were a band looking for a purpose: they could write catchy tunes, put them together in a format that could sell millions, but still lacked that certain something. It didn't matter how delicate the guitars, or how pained Fran's vocals became, they still didn't really stand out.

*12 memories* then is less a pop record, and more a protest album. It comes packed with thinly veiled attacks on modern politics, and more specifically modern military practices. With track titles such as 'The Beautiful Occupation', 'Peace the F\*\*\* Out' and 'Mid-Life Krisis' they were obviously courting controversy. As it is, all this gives the album a certain direction, without substantially changing anything. Travis have spiked their simple, sparse tunes with sharp satire and allegory. And to that they have added a fair amount of dark, heavily orchestrated tracks. But the fact remains, this is a Travis record. It's slightly more rough, slightly harder and slightly more varied, but Travis it remains. *12 Memories* is their best record yet. If you quite liked them before then it's likely you will find this album a welcome progression. If not, then you'll still dislike them, for all the same reasons.

MC

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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.

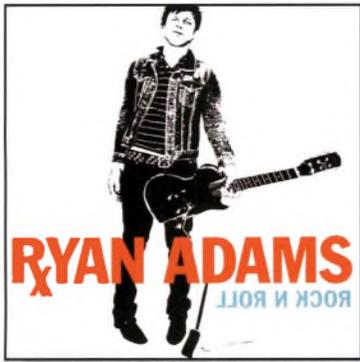
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard,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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

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

#### Key to Icons

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



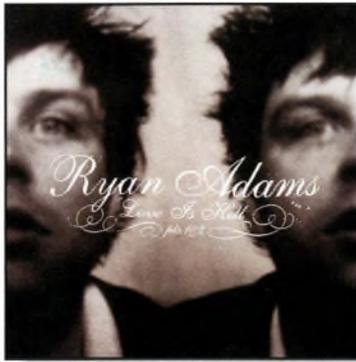
Ryan Adams

Rock N Roll

Lost Highway 986132-4

The new Dylan for a New Millennium? Well, no, not by a country folk rock mile. On the evidence here before my ears, Ryan Adams is much more rowdy than revolutionary. His new album, *Rock N Roll*, pitches up somewhere between the excesses of Oasis Brit-Pop and that introspective navel gazing sound crafted by Morrissey. The guitar lines and swearing are oh so Gallagher. While the loneliness, repeated references to substance abuse and a general air of neediness are lifted straight from out of the Smiths' songbook. Manchester clearly has plenty to answer for. Yet, 'So Alive' and 'She's Lost Total Control' are still solid enough songs. The latter in particular has those classic lyrical strengths one naturally associates with Adams, but its mood is black, depressingly dark in fact, and this leaves you craving for one of the few ballads on the album like 'Wish You Were Here'. Elsewhere, though, it is difficult to know if one of the finest singer songwriters around really wants to metaphorically don a pair of tight leather trousers for such fast and furious rock songs as '1974'. Or whether he is merely striking a well-worn pose before a return to those familiar moments of tenderness and honesty heard throughout *Gold* and *Heartbreaker*.

RP



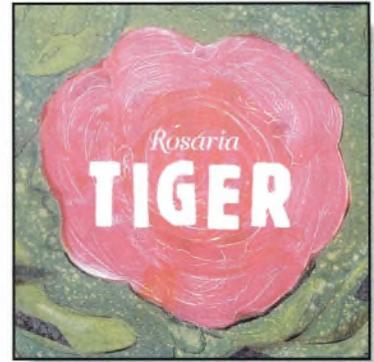
Ryan Adams

Love Is Hell pts.1&2

Lost Highway 986 136-1

A fifteen-track brooding ten-inch gatefold LP is a marked departure from the overblown and quite raucous stance adopted for *Rock N Roll*. These songs have a "cut me and I bleed" quality about them. They burn more slowly and ignite into waves of love-lorn self-pity. Yet these deliciously depressing ballads still rock but to the beat of a bleeding heart instead. Is this posing or has Adams really suffered at the manicured nails of a siren? Does it matter? These are questions to which we don't really need answers because the lyrics and the music that he so sensuously drapes around those barbed observations are intriguing enough on their own. Even when the characters in these songs inhabit seemingly stable relationships they are still racked by doubt- 'I See Monsters'. Or are prone to the petty jealousies and outbursts of frustration - 'Hotel Chelsea Nights'. You always want to hear more of this jaundiced vision which often so artfully couples disturbed emotions to bleak cityscape images. His preoccupation with fragile love-its unpredictability and uncertainty-is simply that engaging when presented against this backdrop. Gritty insights abound as 'Afraid Not Scared', 'Love Is Hell' and the plaintive cry of the drowning lover, 'Please Don't Let me Go', leave us all feeling "Washed up in a shore of memories".

RP



Tiger

Rosaria

TUGCD10 Tugboat Records

*Rosaria* was Tiger's second full length album. Their first album was critically acclaimed, and, for a short while, made them relatively hot property. Making their name with extremely simple songs, played with buzz saw guitars and single finger keyboard parts, they were spiky and full of energy. Rosaria took this youthful excitement and forged something a little more substantial from it. Tying the songs to a more traditional drum line, and fleshing out the song structures, Tiger created a much fuller sound. The closest musical relative to Tiger would have to be the Fall. Indeed, front-man Dan Laidler sounds like nothing more than an excited Mark E Smith on helium. But Tiger keep their music more firmly routed to basic tunes, and reap the rewards with a far easier listening experience. Songs such as 'Root Cage' are pure bursts of punk, whilst other tracks mix more baroque influences to make something more exotic. Lyrically Tiger are unrivalled. Occasional lyrical masterpieces leap out throughout the record, but, for the main part, they are possibly the most obscure and obtuse mental outpourings ever recorded.

*Rosaria* was a bold step from a seriously underrated band. Tiger effortlessly create a sonic powerhouse, belting out high-octane pop. Match this with a little lyrical masterwork, and some leftfield musical influences and you get a great album, one I never tire of.

MC





Misty Dixon

Are You Lost

Twisted Nerve Records TNO 44  180g EP

Misty Dixon

Iced To Mode

Twisted Nerve Records TNO 46 

Feeling a little catty? Want to know what singer-songwriter Jane Weaver of *Like An Aspen Leaf* fame does in her spare time? Then why not indulge yourself with that sweet hypnotic purr of her haunting electro-pop alter ego in the four-piece band, Misty Dixon. What began as a series of studio based projects has quickly blossomed into a fully-fledged live set up that supported The Thrills and headlined for festivals both in London and at home in Manchester. The three girl vocalists, Jane (guitar, piano and keyboards), Anna Greenwood (piano and keyboards) and Sam Yates (bass, guitar and keyboards) were soon joined by the multi-talented Dave Tyack on drums, piano, violin and melodica. Though Jane claims his motives for almost too readily offering his services to the band were not wholly pure. She says that he did it "probably so he could meet girls". However, a four-track demo, 'I, So Many Times', which Jane wrote on an old Farfisa organ appeared as part of an EP in the Spring of 2001. To be followed by the *Are You Lost* EP in 2002 and

a debut album *Iced To Mode*, last year. There is definitely an experimental feel about the EP right from the opening grooves of 'Intro' to a closing 'Outro', but this happens within some known parameters. Harmonies have a choirgirl quality reminiscent of lullabies. The singing in French for 'La Chanson De Noel' (a track which closes out the album) comes over as nostalgic and sepia coloured rather than pretentious, and although the languid tempo is similar to that of the Weaver solo works, she does draw out darker emotions - ones which have not been heard since her sad heavy metal days - through a dreamy almost drug induced electronic drift. All of this reinforces a general sense of moody ambiguity that grows from within the densely packed and reverberating instrumental passages that clothe these lyrically simple songs. *Iced To Mode* takes up and expands upon those possibilities suggested by the EP. Among its eleven tracks are songs like 'Coco', 'The Sea Is Not Far' and 'Milk Money'. All are low on philosophy but generously glow with the essence of an idea, sensation or sentiment that is weighed and measured by simple choruses or refrains which in the case of 'The Sea Is Not Far' mimic those rolling undercurrents beneath the surf. Even when Jane's concerns stray inwards towards those more intense matters of the heart in 'No More Too Long Ago' and 'You're So Cruel To My Heart'

you are still not really encouraged to engage with any particular character on an intimate or deeply personal level. Instead, the notions of love - the moodiness surrounding loss and longing - are hinted at through the subtle use of layered instrumentation and lyrical and melodic repetition. Here we are spared the complexity and ambiguity that surrounds this theme as Weaver musically strips back the feelings to a reassuringly straightforward and almost childlike emotional state. The simplicity of these laments is appealing. It intentionally lulls you. But that is the artisans trick. Suddenly it dawns on you that this monochrome world does not really exist. It's a flight of fancy. Only then do you begin to speculate and construct your own three-dimensional backdrop to these songs as the Farfisa organ eerily colours your thoughts. Technically, this is a remarkably unfussy recording. Clear sounding and reasonably detailed. Though it does struggle with those more congested electronic sections, the presentation of the waif-like vocal lines is done with delicacy and sweetness.

RP





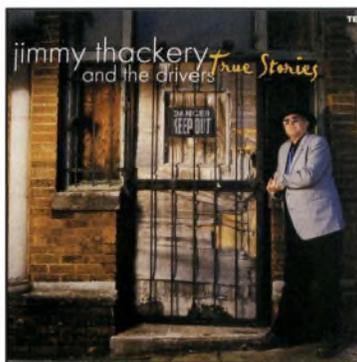
Lloyd Cole

Music In A Foreign Language

Sanctuary Records SANCD 182 (CD)

The belt fed, thousand rounds a minute delivery of telling political, philosophical, cinematic and literary allusions have now absented themselves from Lloyd Cole's lyricism yet these new songs are still packed with all the familiar metaphysical witticism, carefully phrased observation and those kind of linguistic striations which will in the space of one short breath completely alter your take on any incident or emotion. Sparkling syntax, meaningful melancholia, sideways smiles and trademark backing guitars play across ten tracks that chart the pit falls, privations and punch drunk platitudes that accompany his romantic vision. Of course "love bites" really hard for an opening title song and in the closing track, 'Shelf Life', but this is because they also musically allude to those "industry bloodsuckers" which have placed pop idol images ahead of song writing talent and musicianship. All are brought into sharp focus by a figure-hugging recording of Cole's acoustic guitar and beautifully enunciated vocal lines. His craftsmanship unerringly captures the shifting patterns of light for 'Late Night, Early Town' and the emotional crutch behind 'My Aibibi'.

RP



Jimmy Thackery

True Stories

Telarc CD 83572 (CD)

A while back I was reading Mojo's 'Top 100 Guitarists poll' and was horrified to find Rory Gallagher languishing somewhere around the 75 mark. I could just about accept that opinion (I certainly don't agree with it) but the total omission of this man from the list was baffling, offensive and totally unforgivable. Jimmy Thackery is one of the blues world's most precious jewels. As good as youngsters like Jonny Lang, Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Jake Andrews and Aynsley Lister are, they all have some way to go before they're as good as this guy. *True Stories*, Thackery's latest for Telarc, is up there with his greatest recordings – in fact, it might very well be his best ever. It's a beautifully balanced affair containing 11 majestic tracks, 10 of which come from Thackery's pen. There aren't any fillers and each song rewards the listener in different ways. You want rock? No problem, 'Got It Goin' on' and 'Too Tired' shake mountains. Into instrumentals? Lose yourself in the nine minute epic 'The Messiah Will Come'. Jazzy funky blues your thing? Thackery's nailed it with 'Bluesman On A Saturday Night'. Want your heart broken? Make your way to 'Baby's Got The Blues', which contains one of the most fluid guitar solos in the history of electric blues.

Next time you do a guitarist's poll Mojo, make sure Thackery's where he deserves to be – Top 10.

AH



Rickie Lee Jones

The Evening Of My Best Day

V2 Records VWR 1024732 (CD)

Rickie Lee Jones, always the Bohemian, once again delivers an album of musical surprises. A couple of the early tracks, 'Ugly Man' and 'Second Chance', have a definite "meets funky Dave Grusin" feel about them. Plenty of over layered vocals and a modern mix can't completely disguise those electric guitar licks, flute, sax, organ, trumpet and flugelhorn filled grooves. Even if all those Seventies jazz-pop fusion tunes badly damaged you in the past it's still worth persisting with this CD. Whereas the likes of Grusin, Lee Ritenour and Chuck Mangione hit you with a bland and quite blunt sound, RLJ not only has that clipped and characteristically pinched voice going for her, but she can also effortlessly draw upon an incisive thematic or lyrical thread at any moment. There's a sharp edged tension at the outset in the snappily titled 'Lap Dog' and in the juxtaposition of the track called, 'Mink Coat At The Bus Stop'. These and the folk idioms and acoustic simplicity which lies behind 'Sailor Song' are definitely the salient points of both musical interest.

RP







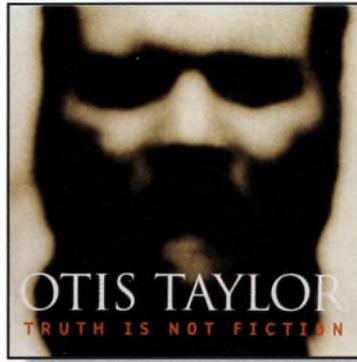
Various Artists

Blues On Blonde On Blonde

Telarc: CD 83567

The music scene is absolutely swamped with tribute albums. They pour out of the woodwork with alarming regularity, often paying homage to little known bands or totally undeserving solo artists. Here's another, but this time the inspiration being his royal Bobness, an artist who certainly can't be deemed undeserving. To be fair this is a tribute album that approaches its subject matter from a slightly different angle, with male and female blues artists tackling 12 of the original album's 14 tracks, placing their own individual styles on them and, on the whole, succeeding quite admirably. *Blues On Blonde On Blonde* doesn't exactly come out of the traps at a gallop; Brian Stoltz' 'Rainy Day Women' is competent but uninspiring, Sue Foley just sounds like a sub-standard female impersonator and although Walter Trout injects 'Leopard Skin Pillbox Hat' with some typically fearsome playing, his version comes over as strangely lifeless. Elsewhere there are sterling performances to be found though; Eric Bibb's 'Just Like A Women' definitely hits the spot and even eclipses the original for me. Joe Louis Walker (one of the finest singers in Blues) breathes fire into 'Stuck Inside Mobile' with some sensuously funky playing and Clarence Bucaro's lounge room presentation of 'One Of Us Must Know' works an absolute treat. So, by no means the disaster it could have been and worthy of investigation, if only for that Bibb track.

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Otis Taylor

Truth Is Not Fiction

Telarc CD 83587

In the seventies Otis Taylor played bass for cult blues/rock band Zephyr. After a major falling out with other band members he turned his back on music and pursued a career in his other love – antiques. Taylor resurfaced again in 1996 with the album *Blue Eyed Monster*, but it wasn't until 2001's *White African* that he started to gain the recognition his highly individual style warranted. *White African* garnered universal praise, and rightly so. Here was a bluesman not afraid to push the boundaries of the genre to create a fresh and exciting new sound. His sound is sometimes Banjo led, mainly drummerless and built around one hypnotically repetitive chord; it sounds dull but it's anything but. *Truth Is Not Fiction* continues in the same vein as *White African* and its excellent follow up *Respect The Dead*. Again there's no drummer present but there's a lot going on elsewhere, so you tend not to notice. Electric Mandolin, Banjo, Cello, various Guitars and Bass weave in and out of your subconscious and wrap themselves around Taylor's heavily tortured voice and politically charged lyrics, creating a sound quite unlike anything else in modern blues. Otis Taylor's Music is Urban but thought provoking, dark but uplifting, intense but enlightening, along with Chris Thomas King he's pushing the boundaries and taking blues full speed into the 21st century. Jaded fans looking for inspiration, start here.

AH  
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The Jayhawks

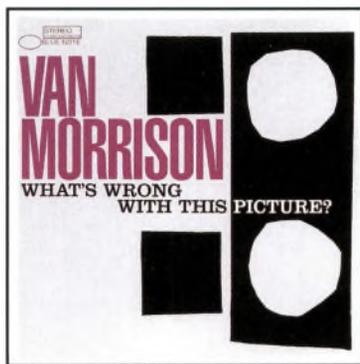
Rainy Day Music

American Recordings /  
Lost Highway B0000080-01 B

Since the middle of the 1980s The Jayhawks have, in one guise or another, been playing their own brand of R&B influenced country-rock. Of the original line up from Minneapolis only Gary Louris (vocals/guitar) remains and it is his song writing on sixteen of the twenty tracks that sets the tone for *Rainy Day Music*. With titles like 'Tailspin' (about imprisonment) and that "mourning wind" of 'Come To The River' you could easily be forgiven for believing that this album is as depressing as a Minnesota winter. But from the tempo and opening Byrds-like chords of 'Stumbling Through The Dark' it's clear that we are not being asked to meekly accept caustic observations on life without some notes of optimism. Another positive is the Dylanesque quality in the Matthew Sweet vocals on 'All The Right Reasons', 'Tailspin' or 'Eyes Of Sarahjane', where a romantic tryst opens into a bittersweet examination of falling in and out of love. Music generously tinged with colourful tonal scoring for banjo, chamberlain, dulcimer, harmonium, pump organ, accordion and B-3 as well as those bedrock acoustic, electric and lap steel guitars.

RP  
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RECORDING   
MUSIC



Van Morrison

What's Wrong With This Picture?

Blue Note Records 7243 5 93651 2 1

A mouth-watering association with the legendary Blue Note label marks a fascinating return by Van Morrison's to his soul and R&B roots. Apart from an exceptional cover of the Lightnin' Hopkins song, 'Stop Drinking' and the reworking of those morbid themes in a traditional 'Saint James Infirmary', we are treated to another eleven self-penned numbers which do not diminish his reputation as an intuitive modern day troubadour who can traverse any genre. There are classic blues tracks such as 'Meaning Of Loneliness' and 'Whinin Boy Moan'. The more pensive songs in the shape of 'Too Many Myths', 'Goldfish Bowl', 'Fame' and 'Get On With The Show' share with us his grizzled insights on the nature and personal price of success. And there's romantic tints found amongst the pastoral scenery of 'Once In A Blue Moon', 'Somerset', 'Little Village' and 'Evening In June'. All are impeccably underscored by the likes of Gavin Povey on piano and the soaring trumpet and flugelhorn playing of Matt Holland. There's even a spot for the Acker Bilk's clarinet on 'Somerset', while Foggy Lyttle lays down electric guitar licks and both Bobby Irwin and Liam Bradley beat out the rhythm on drums. Van, meanwhile, headlines as lead vocalist and treats us to his glorious acoustic guitar chord changes and alto sax interludes.

RP



Belle & Sebastian

Dear Catastrophe Waitress

Rough Trade Records RTRADECD 080

Not exactly known for their chirpy optimism, *Dear Catastrophe Waitress* may at first listen seem like something of a departure from previous Belle & Sebastian form. However, don't be fooled by the jaunty brass sections and upbeat tempo; lead singer and main songwriter Stuart Murdoch still retains his dark sense of humour. After all, who else would have the imagination to write a song about the trials of working in admin ("My output is in decline/ I was burned out after Thatcher.") Competition for songwriting duties from guitarist Stevie Jackson has only improved matters. Those who believe Belle & Sebastian are simply twee indie popsters obviously aren't listening very carefully. Musically, this LP reflects new ground for the band. Sweeping melodies and well-constructed harmonies add much appeal, whilst 'Stay Loose' represents a stylistic shift; a jerky number which sounds more like the Clash than Nick Drake. *Dear Catastrophe Waitress* seems to conclude that whilst life is rarely easy in Belle & Sebastian's, it's certainly never dull and as the band put it themselves in 'If She Wants Me', "It's always worth living at least for a while." This may well be Belle & Sebastian's best effort since *If You're Feeling Sinister*. Not bad coming from the producer (Trevor Horn) behind Tatu.

SD



Isobel Campbell

Amorino

Snowstorm Records STORM 024LP

Amorino is a pre-rock 'n' roll concept of popular music, one which conjures up scenes in very much the same way as that of the mid-Twentieth Century French art house new wave movement. Breathless vocals, an expanded musical palette (with violins, flutes, cellos, double bass, trumpet and trombone) and some indulgent jazz accompaniment recreates a pastoral idyll reminiscent of Vashti Bunyan or a down tempo Basia Trzetrzelewska - she who lead the female vocal line for Matt Bianco some two decades ago. This melodic and affected vulnerability, together with an absence of any real urgency or drive is still Isobel Campbell's most charming asset and her biggest liability. All those accusations of mannered self-consciousness and a childlike naivety, levelled when she was part of Belle and Sebastian, can be said to resurface here, especially if you are of a particularly unreceptive mind. But there is no denying its sweeping moments of lyrical and instrumental beauty as songs like 'This Land Flows With Milk', 'Monologue For An Old True Love' and the duet, 'Time Is Just The Same', transcend "twee" and "cute" to end with that burnt bitter flavour of contemporary desperation.

RP



# Take A look At This Band...

## A short history of Talking Heads

by Roy Gregory

*The Ramones (were) in a very odd position, because they had like a manifesto. There was a look that went with that manifesto, a dancing style – and every time they'd stray from the basic premise they lessened the impact of the original thing, which was brilliant. And yet, how many times do you say it over and over again? It's quite a horrible dilemma.*

*We saw the danger in that immediately. We became known as a band that changed all the time, so if we had a formula, it was that we'd never be the same.*

Jerry Harrison

Where on earth do you start with Talking Heads?

Most bands can be defined by a sound, a look or an event; Most have a common thread or theme that binds their work. Not the Heads. Yet at the same time, their music is instantly recognisable, the character and personality of the band unmistakable. It's not a presence that defines or labels them, but an absence. There is no theme – just a view.

When David Bowman, author of the superb Talking Heads bandography *fa fa fa fa fa fa fa*, described them as a "group that was completely of its time and totally outside it", it has the ring of a throwaway cliché. But in its own way it's a statement that gets closer to the essence of the band than almost any other, if not in substance, then at least in feel. If you want to define this band then think in terms of contradiction: Everything they are they also aren't.

They're an art-rock three-piece and a ten-piece funk band. They revolve around David Byrne but the starting line-up is the key. They write intellectual rock yet the premise seems to be "grab 'em by the feet and their hearts and minds will follow!" The Heads rock, but they also think. And they dance...

Oh yes they do.

Definitions are too static for Talking Heads. The band, their music, their story is all about movement and evolution. To understand them you need

to recognise their dialectical nature: To see the now you must also understand the before and the after. The story has a start and a finish but it's the middle that we're interested in.

Why the difference? Just another example of Byrne being difficult or obtuse? Bowman again:

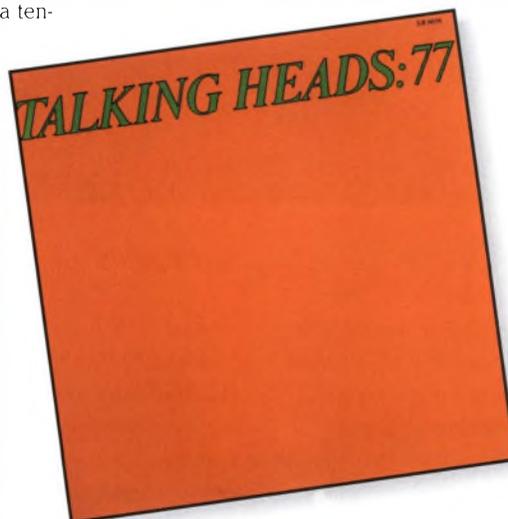
"Just as the story of the Beatles can be reduced to a tale of the love/hate relationship between John and Yoko and Paul, the story of Talking Heads can be reduced to a similar equation between Tina (Weymouth) and David (Byrne)."

This is a story of creative tension: Tension that generated the extraordinary musical development of the band, but tension that ultimately ripped it apart.

### Beginnings

Talking Heads carved a rapid and spectacular path across the musical heavens. They rose, they peaked and then they fell, but in that time they traveled fast and far. To understand the glorious heights of that arc, you need to see where it started as well as seeing where the pieces landed. Ask anybody about Talking Heads and they know two things: 'Psycho Killer' and 'Road to Nowhere', two tracks that happen to perfectly bracket their glory days. The first was David Byrne's inaugural attempt at song writing, but more importantly his first collaboration with

Tina Weymouth. As we'll see, it predates Talking Heads but stands like a signpost beside their track. The second was a surprise commercial success from the album *Little Creatures*. Like 'Sledgehammer' it was an early beneficiary of the MTV revolution, its quirky video drawing repeat plays, and like Gabriel, Byrne was a disconcerting figure against the background of mainstream rock. And, just as Gabriel carried the mark of his public school origins, so Byrne grew out of his college experiences.



▶ David Byrne met Chris Frantz at the Rhode Island School of Design (he says he chose the school because it had the best graffiti in the rest-rooms). Byrne had dabbled with performance art, Frantz had a long line of garage bands behind him. Together they formed the Artisticks, a college band that played really loud. The band soon attracted the nickname Autistics, an early indicator of Byrne's jerky, disjointed style and movement. It was here that he first put down his song writing roots, starting with 'Psycho Killer', written with Frantz, with Chris's girlfriend Tina drafted in to help with the French lyric. It was a sign of things to come, a collaborative effort drawing on disparate influences. Byrne had been playing with songs for a while, but nothing really emerged. They were all too kooky. 'Psycho Killer' was the first time that jarring discontinuity was successfully shackled to a playable structure. Weymouth brought more than just her linguistic skills. Byrne was attempting to roll together Alice Cooper (his *Billion Dollar Babies* was all over the radio) with a Randy Newman neo-reality. But being Byrne he wanted to work with sensations rather than simple, observable facts. Frantz and Weymouth were big Otis Redding fans, and played Byrne 'Sad Song'. The sweet, lilting chorus of fa's was quickly appropriated and (typically) bent out of emotional shape.

That collaborative, spontaneous combustion of different ideas and influences was to become a Talking Heads trade mark, along with the sheer speed of creation. But in the meantime, at the end of '74 the Artisticks collapsed under the pressure of impending graduation, and the Byrne-Frantz-Weymouth axis moved to a shared apartment in New York, a guitar and drums in search of a bass player. This was the New York of the Velvets, Ramones, the New York Dolls and emergent bands like Television and Blondie. The assumption was that bass players would be ten a penny, but that wasn't the case. In the end, Weymouth, a novice guitarist simply bought a bass and taught herself to play. Her limited abilities kept things simple, adding a starkness and sparseness to the songs, further differentiating them

from the mainstream. Perhaps Chris Frantz summed it up best when he said "we weren't really sure what we wanted to do, but we did know what we didn't want to do."

Talking Heads debuted at CBGB, supporting the Ramones, on June the 5th 1975. It was awkward, it was stilted but it made an impression. In a world of thrashing guitars and impossibly contorted solos, the songs were delivered deadpan, Byrne and Weymouth sleight and immobile, caught like rabbits in the headlights. But people talked and it wasn't long before Seymour Stein of Sire Records, out to hear some new Ramones material, happened on the Heads and was transfixed. He offered them a contract almost immediately but the band declined. Tina, their business voice explained that they wanted to feel more confident and substantial before taking on a record deal. They were actually paranoid about being remaindered as a tax loss.



## New York '77

The rest of '75 and '76 saw the band building a reputation, accelerating upwards on the surge of interest in the CBGB/No-Wave movement to the point in June '76 that they were able to give up the day jobs for good and become a full-time three-piece. It wasn't until that November that they finally succumbed to Stein's protracted courtship ▶

► (Columbia and RCA had also shown interest but the band was suspicious of the big labels' motives) and they signed with Sire. Meanwhile, one last, vital piece had dropped into place. Byrne was concerned that the combination of the three-piece line-up and the sparse arrangements meant that the songs almost literally hesitated if anybody stopped playing. They started a search for a keyboard player and the industry grapevine put them in touch with Jerry Harrison, studying architecture at Yale. Tina made contact and invited him to a show. He accepted.

Harrison had been a member of the by then defunct Modern Lovers. He draws many parallels between Jonathan Richman and David Byrne. With 25 years of hindsight he comments "Both David and Jonathan had an arresting presence. There was a certain uncomfortable quality they were able to portray." More tellingly he identifies a similarity in arguing style between Byrne (and Eno) and Richman – all three intelligent, self-educated men. "People who are sort of self-educated and very bright feel emotionally attached to their ideas. But in college you're taught to break things down. To give credence to another's argument".

More to the point, Richman was the prototype for Byrne's preppy, outward looking yet arty vision. Whether David knew it or not, Jonathan had eased his path. Harrison could see the similarities and possibilities but had been financially hurt in the self-immolation of the Modern Lovers. He was wary. He wanted to finish out his architecture course, which would take until the following spring. The Heads happily agreed – they just didn't tell Stein.

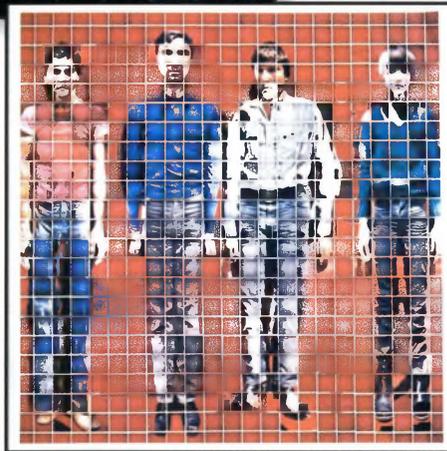
As it happened, Seymour Stein was rather pleased by the arrival of Jerry Harrison. The Lovers-Heads continuum made perfect sense to him. Jerry joined the band at the end of February, and whilst it felt like one too many in the bed at first, within a month or two he'd integrated seamlessly into their sound. They were ready for the studio, even overdue. The Ramones, Blondie and Patti Smith all had two records out. With just a single to their name, the Heads were in danger of missing the boat.

'77 was put together in a month. The band had the songs, but even so, this is astonishingly quick when you consider that it was their first time in the studio. Producer was Tony Bongiovi, arriving with a long track record and strong commercial credentials. The Heads were prepared to give it a go, feeling their music might need the help. It wasn't a happy experience. In trying to make the music more accessible Bongiovi also diluted its feel and individuality. Byrne in particular reacted against the intrusion. The end result is surprisingly authentic, and looking back

from the experience of Punk and the myriad rap genres one wonders why it might have ever been considered inaccessible in the first place. It might be stark and angular, full of edges and corners, but the one thing it certainly is, is direct. Byrne once said that they wanted their music to be as simple, as essential as possible; reduced to the bare minimum. The tracks on '77 have a brash, almost shocking clarity to them, rather like seeing a house whose front has fallen off in an earthquake. The structure's laid bare while the perspective is shocking.

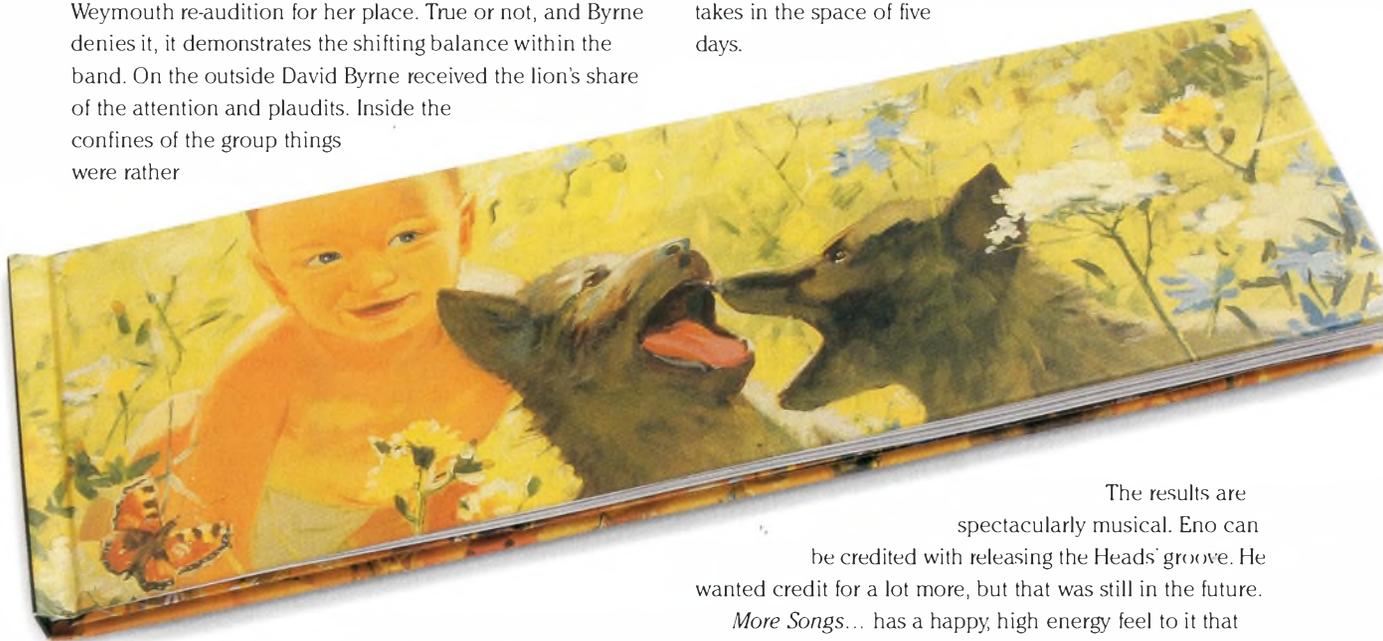
Byrne's lyrics and unconventional chord selections offer the jolt, but they hang on the structure of Chris and Tina's rhythm section, and are fleshed out by Jerry's Fender Rhodes. It's a bit like a mural; The image catches the eye but it's nothing without the wall that's

supporting it. This is where we find the crack that becomes the fissure that eventually destroys the band. With the tapes in the can, Talking Heads took off for Europe, supporting the Ramones. They were a huge critical success, with Byrne finally settling into a stage persona that he was comfortable with, a situation he hadn't enjoyed since his days with the Artistica. This arresting, fascinating yet disconcerting front-man became the face of Talking Heads. He became the leader simply because people assumed that he was. Singer, songwriter, spokesman and stylist – it seemed a natural conclusion, but it seriously underestimated the importance of the other members in the band.



▶ Playing clubs in New York in '75 and '76 it was normally Tina who garnered the attention (and dealt with all the business). Now roles were becoming reversed. The story goes that when the band first signed with Sire, Byrne made Weymouth re-audition for her place. True or not, and Byrne denies it, it demonstrates the shifting balance within the band. On the outside David Byrne received the lion's share of the attention and plaudits. Inside the confines of the group things were rather

rhythmic discipline of the music and wanted to capture the feel of the band live. After a couple of weeks of rehearsals, in which most of the baffles were banished from the studio, the tracks were recorded as single takes in the space of five days.



different. Not only were Chris and Tina now married, but Jerry Harrison was external to the long relationship between the other members. David had to persuade people to his way of thinking – and it rankled.

One other thing happened on that UK tour. The band met Brian Eno. He and David connected immediately, and coming off the Bongiovi experience it wasn't hard for him to convince the others that Eno should produce the next album.

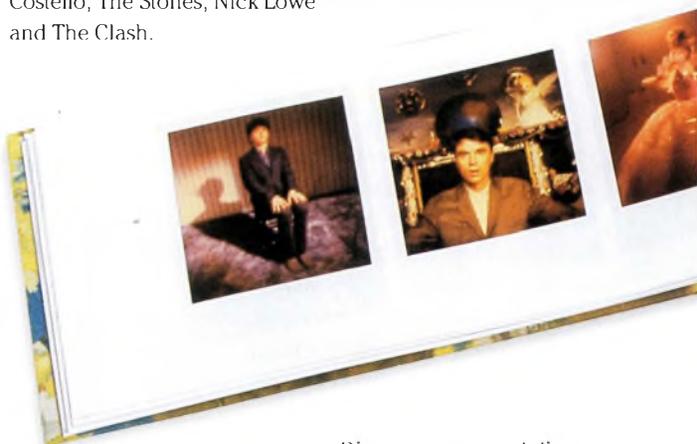
'77, with its bold cover and sharp graphics was finally released (after distribution delays) on the 16th of August, with the second single 'Uh-Oh, Love comes To Town' hard on its heels. It was an immediate success, but things really started to happen in January with the release of 'Psycho Killer'. The song got a lot of airplay, its insistent menace striking a chord. Things were happening fast.

### More Songs...

The second album quickly followed. *More Songs About Buildings And Food* was released on the 14th of July '78 and the band got their way. But their insistence on using Eno to produce was to have unforeseen consequences. However, at this stage, his anti structuralist approach was a breath of fresh air after the multi-track strictures of Bongiovi. The album was recorded at Compass Point in the Bahamas and enjoys the excellent sound and low frequency definition that go with the venue. Eno was attracted by the

The results are spectacularly musical. Eno can be credited with releasing the Heads' groove. He wanted credit for a lot more, but that was still in the future.

*More Songs...* has a happy, high energy feel to it that carried over into the summer tours of Europe and the States. The Al Green cover, 'Take Me To The River' was released as a single at the end of August and helped push the album to 29 in the Billboard charts, higher than any other New or No-Wave album to date. It made fifth in the Village Voice end of year poll, beaten by Elvis Costello, The Stones, Nick Lowe and The Clash.



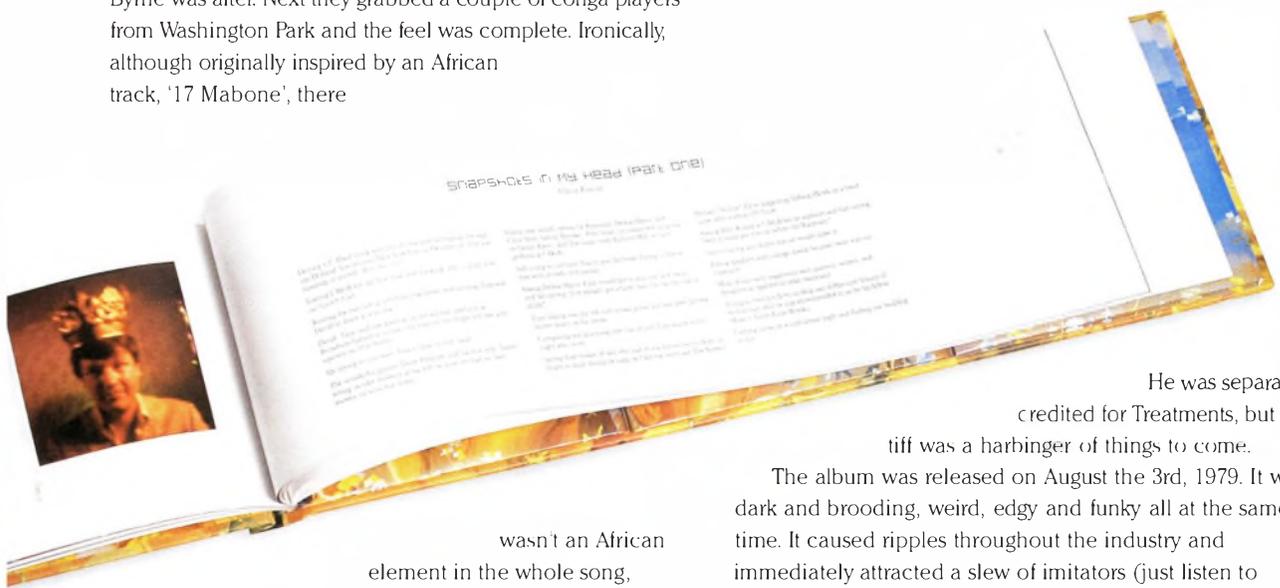
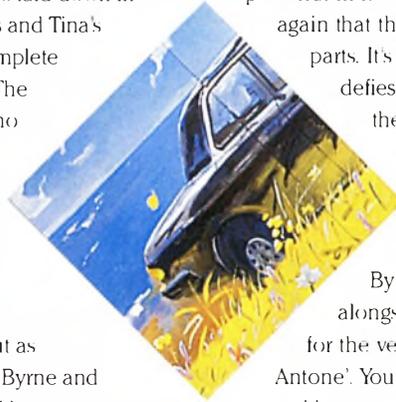
Dizzy company and dizzy times. But three of the tracks on *More Songs...* predated the first album, while the rest were in the repertoire. The band had got as far as it could on the experience and output of its formative years. The next album had to be all new, and for the first time Byrne was writing with the added dimension delivered by Jerry Harrison in mind. It was an open invitation to do what the band did best, ▶

▶ hoovering up as many disparate influences as possible.

*Fear Of Music* contains 11 tracks, nine of them penned or at least initiated by Byrne, the other two jams developed out of the recording sessions. The basic tapes were laid down in two days, recorded on a mobile rig at Chris and Tina's Long Island loft. A few tracks existed as complete structures, others just as a lyric or melody. The band chewed through the raw material in no time. Then the tapes were handed over to Eno and Byrne for mixing and post-production, including the application of Eno's various limiters, reverbs and other gadgets. A closer examination of some of those tracks proves instructive.

The album opener 'I Zimbra' started out as a straight jam with a deep, funky feel. Both Byrne and Jerry Harrison attempted to supply lyrics without success. Eventually, Eno suggested drafting lyrics based on a nonsense poem written by Hugo Ball, the father of Dada. Produced as a chant they delivered exactly the feel of an African dialect that Byrne was after. Next they grabbed a couple of conga players from Washington Park and the feel was complete. Ironically, although originally inspired by an African track, '17 Mabone', there

and it all fell into place, the stark simplicity allowing space for David's voice to blossom and hold center stage. The result is fragile (in its simplicity and the naïve melody) yet powerful in its structural coherence, underpinning once again that the band was far greater than the sum of its parts. It's pure Talking Heads. The chord structure defies conventional musical logic and laws, yet the disjointed step between verse and chorus, written by Byrne, re-engineered by Harrison lends a primitive, jarring power to the music. It also demonstrates the diversity of influences at play. Byrne cites Herzog's film *Fata Morgana* alongside Neil Young, while the chord sequence for the verses was lifted from 'The Rose Of San Antone'. You can see why the band's members found it so exciting to work in this intellectually voracious and demanding way, fluid yet creative. Eno pushed hard for equal credit with the other band members, but in the end Frantz, Weymouth and Harrison stood firm.



wasn't an African element in the whole song, although it did mark the start of an abiding fascination with African forms and syncopated rhythms that was to last for four years and carry the band to the verge of destruction. The track demonstrates perfectly the way Eno could bend the product of a recording session into another shape – in this case with spectacular results.

In contrast, 'Heaven' arrived almost fully formed in the studio. Byrne was looking for a big, crooner type song – sort of a cross between Neil Young and Frank Sinatra, but definitely something that he could really SING. The problem is that it wasn't really working, with a strange transition from verse to chorus. Jerry rearranged it and transposed it into another key. Chris and Tina laid down a traditional country rock rhythm

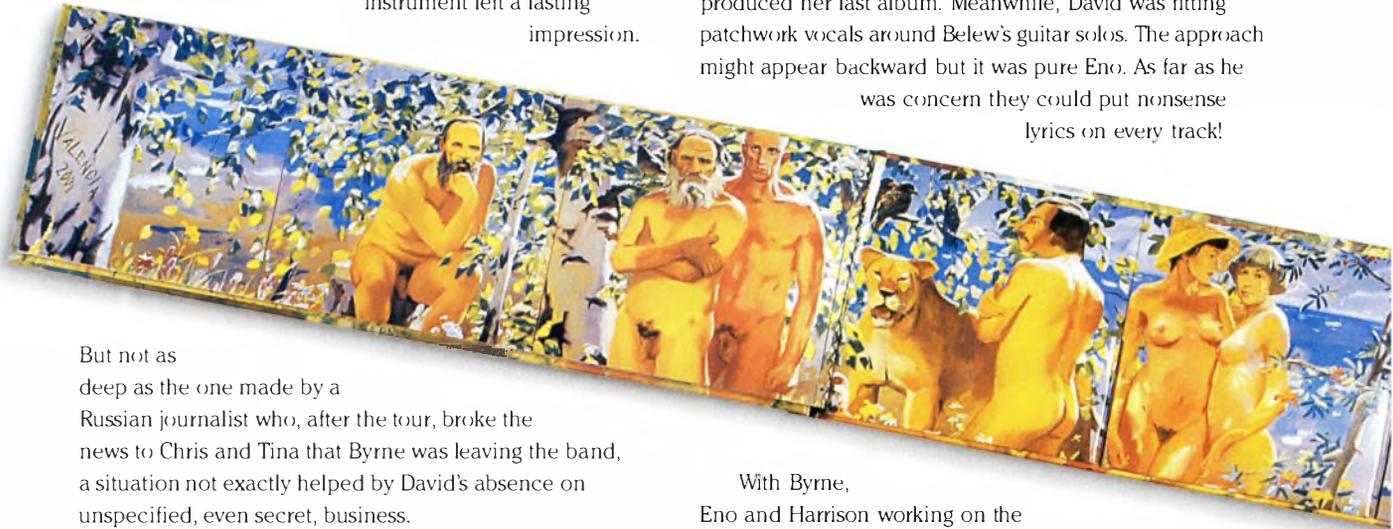
He was separately credited for *Treatments*, but this tiff was a harbinger of things to come.

The album was released on August the 3rd, 1979. It was dark and brooding, weird, edgy and funky all at the same time. It caused ripples throughout the industry and immediately attracted a slew of imitators (just listen to Bowie's *Scary Monsters* as a sincere example of flattery). The Heads had outgrown their No-wave roots, and when Byrne sang "This ain't no Mudd Club, this ain't no CBGBs" on the single 'Life During Wartime' you knew they'd left that scene behind. And whilst the record didn't sell as well as 'Take Me To The River' it signaled the band's graduation from cult to global influence. It's no exaggeration to say that *Fear Of Music* changed the course of pop.

### Remain...

The *Fear Of Music* tour was a huge success, reinforcing the band's influence and status as style leaders in the pop ▶

► world. But perhaps more importantly, a chance meeting introduced them to Adrian Belew, recent guitarist with one David Bowie. His only contribution to the tour was a conuscatig guitar solo appended to a 'Psycho Killer' encore in Peoria. But the sheer range of Belew's repertoire, the almost animal sounds he wrung from his instrument left a lasting impression.



But not as deep as the one made by a Russian journalist who, after the tour, broke the news to Chris and Tina that Byrne was leaving the band, a situation not exactly helped by David's absence on unspecified, even secret, business.

In fact, the great secret was simply a separate project with Eno that was ultimately to produce the album *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts*. In many ways it was no different to Chris and Tina's investigation of Caribbean music, or Jerry's sojourn as a producer, but it certainly helped to create an us and them feel within the band. More importantly, based on the abstract, experimental structure of 'I Zimbra' it reinforced a musical approach that was to reach maturity on the Heads' next album. Ultimately, the release of ...*Ghosts* was delayed over a dispute regarding a section of found speech, taped from an evangelist preacher, but it's use of disparate sound fragments and multiple influences, as well as a strong, African theme were to set the agenda for the next group project.

Talking Heads reconvened at Compass Point late in '79 to lay down the basic rhythm tracks for the new album, provisionally titled *Melody Attack*. Bass lines and drum tracks were established alongside guitar and keyboard phrases. By keeping everything in the same key it was possible to chop and change the tracks like a musical collage, one with ever changing rhythms and textures. In this way, whole songs could be built from fragments, evolving and layering new material that often, the original riff might be submerged or removed altogether. Nowadays of course, with synthesizers, sequencers and samplers this

approach is almost standard practice, but back then it was exciting, complex and original.

The raw material was taken to New York and there, Adrian Belew was drafted in to add colour and shape to the funky, polyrhythmic base. Along too came Nona Hendryx on backing vocals, drafted in by Jerry who'd just produced her last album. Meanwhile, David was fitting patchwork vocals around Belew's guitar solos. The approach might appear backward but it was pure Eno. As far as he was concern they could put nonsense lyrics on every track!

With Byrne, Eno and Harrison working on the tracks, Frantz and Weymouth started to work on the cover. They drove up to MIT to enlist the aid of the computer department there in manipulating images. This was early days for computers and the steam driven mainframe was funded by the Defense Department, which meant working out of hours and unofficially. The sleeve was to feature warplanes flying over the Himalayas, but computer solarized for an almost irradiated effect. Tina chose Grumman Avengers, a tribute to



her father who'd flown the type. The back of the sleeve featured the faces of the four band members, erratically masked by cursor blocks.

It almost seemed to mock the cult of personality that so dominates the rock psyche. ►

▶ But when they showed the sleeve to Byrne he praised the images but announced that M&Co, a New York agency he'd engaged to work on the cover for ... *Ghosts* was going to do the graphics for the new Heads' album too. Tibor Kalman, the firm's head would do the work for free. Tina flipped. The band had always done their own sleeves and there was no way she was giving up on the artwork she and Chris had designed. But meanwhile, two other things were happening. The more the music took shape the more it became apparent that the *Melody Attack* title simply didn't fit. This was deeply undulating, complex, rhythmic music of the hips. Melodic it wasn't. The project name was changed to *Remain In Light*. Meanwhile, Eno, ever concerned with his status and respect was mounting a fierce campaign to have the album credited to



Talking Heads AND him. He even came up with a formula to split the royalties depending on original input to each track. It proved totally unworkable, but with only four faces on the sleeve the song writing credits became a critical battlefield. Assaulted from three sides, Weymouth eventually gave ground. The album sleeve was reversed, the faces now on the front (no one seemed to notice that the four 'planes on the back now made no sense).

She told Kalman to provide graphics in block capitals, preferably Helvetica, and the credits were to read Byrne, Eno, Frantz, Harrison and Weymouth – in alphabetical order.



When the sleeve finally appeared it carried the graphics just as Tina had specified, but with the As inverted in the main title. It also ascribed the songs to Byrne, Eno and Talking Heads, a change made by Byrne but only under Eno's persuasion. To this day, Tibor Kalman still regularly receives the credit for creating the ground-breaking cover. He also benefits on the sleeve. The depth of the bitterness this caused can be gauged from Weymouth's comment on the Byrne/Eno axis:

"By the time they finished working together for three months, they were dressing like one another. They're like two fourteen-year-old boys making an impression on

each other."

But while the tension was mounting the music was cooking. The only problem was that there was no way that four people could play it live. In came Steve Scales to add percussion, Bernie Worrall on keyboards and Busta Jones on bass. Dolette Macdonald sang backing vocals (Nona Hendryx had to drop out at the last moment, although



later, the two often sang together). The new tracks and the expanded line-up were debuted at the Heatwave festival in Central Park on August 27th, 1980. The new members were introduced one at a time on the old songs before the whole band launched into the new material. The response was ecstatic, the music positive and upbeat. Black and white, male and female, Philadelphia and New York, the mix was contagious.

*Remain In Light* was released in October to rave reviews: critic's copies were accompanied by a missive regarding the African influences, polyrhythms and even a reading list. It was the first Chris Frantz had heard of his African experience and he hadn't read any of the books. Byrne, the note's author was forced to apologise and whilst this can't be described as the last nail in the coffin it seems that from this point on there was no going back. With two bass players in the band (necessary to play the polyrhythmic lines overdubbed in the studio) Weymouth was further marginalised, at least in the public eye. What's more, the expanded line-up, far from diluting Byrne's influence, simply reinforced his stage persona as band-leader. But one thing was clear, Eno was out of the equation if the band was to survive.

Four more studio albums were to follow (*Speaking In Tongues* in '83 and *Little Creatures* in '85, *True Stories* in '86 and *Naked* in '88) and whilst the departure of Eno certainly eased the tension, there's no denying that it also diluted the mix. It's downhill all the way from *Remain In Light*. Even the stupendously successful concert film and soundtrack *Stop Making Sense*, released in '84, was more innovative in the visual



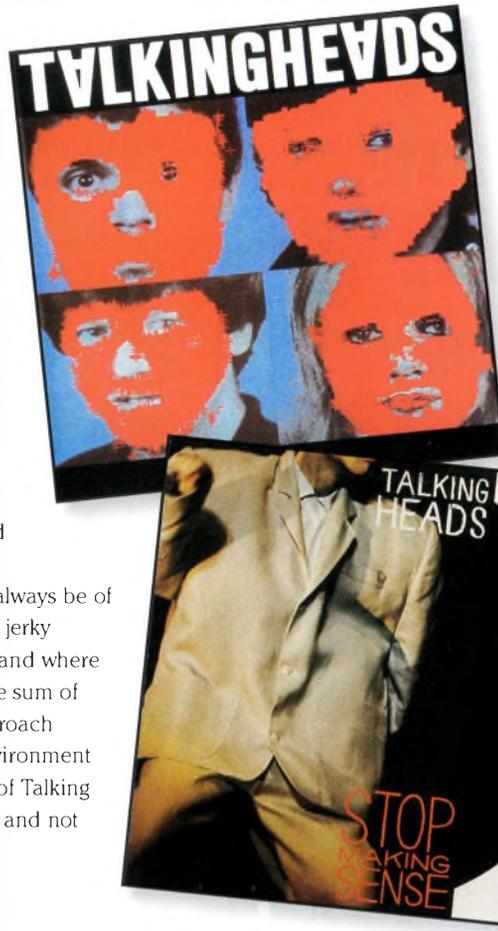
▶ than the musical sense. The performance was simply a synthesis of everything that had gone before, even the gradual arrival of the band's members was a faint echo of the Heatwave gig.

It seems undeniable that Byrne needs a foil, be it the rest of a band or the influence of Eno. Even in his college days he never worked alone. The solo output of the various members, whilst interesting, has never matched their collective brilliance, and whilst the abiding image will always be of Byrne's intense stare and thin, jerky frame, this was very much a band where the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. Byrne's eclectic approach needed a stable but fertile environment to thrive. The other members of Talking Heads provided exactly that – and not a little creative input.

## Heads On Disc

The entire output of Talking Heads was pressed on vinyl, apart from a small number of cassette only compilations. All the major releases crop up regularly on the secondhand market. Everything is also available on CD, although I've yet to find the appropriate numbers for '77, a strange oversight in all the available literature. There are various combination sets available, combining two or more of the early albums, and *Sand In The Vaseline*, a double disc retrospective including several early tracks only previously available as singles. Recently, EMI/Warner who now own the Sire catalogue have released a major retrospective entitled *Once In A Lifetime*. This three disc set includes all the material from *Sand...* plus additional tracks and a 12 track DVD. The packaging is fantastic and includes some genuinely interesting insights into the band, their music and its impact.

So getting hold of the band's music is pretty straightforward, but which is the best option to go for? There are two answers to that question. For sound quality, good copies of the LPs still offer by far the best results, especially when compared to the early CD transfers which suffer from the typically anaemic sound and gutless dynamics of the period. The thin and glassy presentation robs the music of its visceral impact and funky, dance inducing appeal.



Rather than a contrast to the solidity of the rhythm work, Byrne's jerky, jangly guitar and mannered vocals just sound like a cheap instrument and a teenage whine. Not good!

Thankfully, help is at hand in the form of the two retrospectives. *Sand In The Vaseline* sounds noticeably better than the original CDs, and with its additional, rare material certainly offers a far more attractive option. But the real gem is *Once In A Lifetime*.

Extensively re-mastered and re-mixed, the sound is full, weighty, rich and mobile. Comparisons are blurred by the fact that you are listening to what amount to different tracks, but in no case is the later version inferior to the original, and in many cases it's dramatically superior. Add the extra tracks from the later albums (a good cross section of the better offerings) and the superb presentation and it becomes a no-brainer. The videos available on the DVD are also

a bonus. Committed fans will want the LPs as well as the retrospective, but for those wanting to simply extend their knowledge, even those dipping into Heads territory for the first time, *Once In A Lifetime* is definitely the place to start.

## Discography

### Talking Heads:'77

US LP – Sire SR6036  
UK LP – Sire 9103 328  
CD – Serial unknown

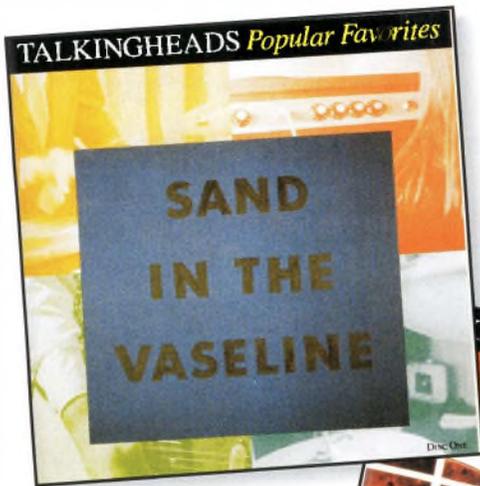
### More Songs About Buildings And Food

US LP – Sire SRK 6058  
UK LP – Sire K 56531  
CD – Sire 6058-2

### Fear Of Music

US LP – Sire SRK 6076  
UK LP – Sire K 56707  
CD – Sire K256707





Naked  
 US LP – EMI EMD 1005  
 UK LP – EMI EMD 1005  
 CD – EMI CDP 7901562

Sand In The Vaseline  
 Talking Heads: Popular Favourites  
 CD – EMI 0777 7 80466 2 2  
 Double CD retrospective

Once In A Lifetime  
 CD – Sire/Warner Brothers  
 R2 73934  
 Major retrospective in special packaging with extensive notes: 3 CDs plus a 12 track DVD-V of the band's major videos.

► Remain In Light  
 US LP – Sire SRK 6095  
 UK LP - Sire SRK 6095  
 CD – Sire 256867

**The Name Of This Band Is talking Heads**

US LP – Sire 2SR 3590  
 UK LP – Sire SRK 23590  
 Double live LP based on the Remain In Light tour. Recordings made at Emerald City, NJ, Central Park, NY, and Sun Plaza Concert Hall, Tokyo, between August '80 and February '81.

Speaking In Tongues  
 US LP – Sire 1/4-23883  
 Special Limited Edition Sleeve by Robert Rauschenberg – 1-23771  
 UK LP – EMI 9238831  
 UK Special Edition – EMI 9237711  
 CD – EMI CD 9238832

Stop Making Sense  
 US LP – Sire 14-25186  
 Special Edition US LP with 20 page colour booklet – Sire 14-25121  
 UK LP – EMI TAH 1 (Some with booklet as above)  
 CD – EMI CDP 7460642  
 Selected tracks from concert film of same name.

Little Creatures  
 US LP - Sire 14-25305  
 UK LP – EMI TAH 2  
 CD – EMI CDP 7461582



I haven't included the soundtrack from the movie *True Stories* as, although this is technically a Talking Heads title, it's much more of a David Byrne album really, featuring band arrangements of the tracks composed for the film. That doesn't mean that it isn't worthwhile, but stylistically and musically it sits more readily with Byrne's solo work, and that's beyond the scope of this article.



Singles and promo discs are far too numerous to list (I recommend the comprehensive discography found in the back of David Gans' excellent book *Talking Heads: The band and their music* ISBN 0.7119.0980.6, published by Omnibus) but the most important was:

Love Goes To Building On Fire b/w New Feeling  
 ABC/Sire SAA737

It represents the band's first outing on record and was previously unavailable on any of the albums until the emergence of the EMI retrospectives.



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## Concord Jazz Sampler

### Concord Jazz

SACD-1032-6 (SACD)

Concord may not be up there with Blue Note or Atlantic but they have nothing to be ashamed of and although I suspect that sound quality predominated in this selection, musicians of the calibre of Art Blakey and Stan Getz are represented here. Standouts include a percussion and bass driven 'Come With Me' from Tania Maria, 'Listen Here' from the Gene Harris Quartet with some nicely predominant bass from Ray Brown, Stan Getz in fine form in his take on Strayhorn's 'Blood Count' lifted from his *Pure Getz* album, and Art Blakey in a storming version of 'In Walked Bud' from his album *Keystone*. Sitting a little uneasily alongside these are a very mellow Michael Feinstein with The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra interpreting 'Spring Will Be A Little Late This Year' and an even richer toned Mel Torme with big band performing 'Love Walked In'. The standout number here and worth the price of admission alone is Carmen McRae's 'My Handy Man Aint Handy No More'. This live number with Hammond B3 very evident, is a sly and bluesy delight and the best-recorded track of the set. Taken from *Fine and Mellow - Live At Birdland West* it's an album that's immediately gained a place on my wanted list. And if that's not a recommendation for a compilation I don't know what is.

DD

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RECORDING   
MUSIC 



## Jazz Sexy

### Various Artists

Chesky CD JD261 (CD)

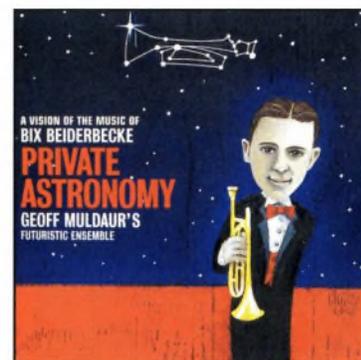
Well, with Valentine's Day imminent why not? The cover which features the rear view of a model making passionate love to a corner does suggest that the contents are a little hotter than they are, but this is nevertheless a very enjoyable set of mostly relaxed (I suppose 'laid back' would be more apposite), numbers. Standouts are John Faddis' take on Coltrane's great 'Naima' that whilst it doesn't add anything (how could it), does the original no disservice but complements it with a beautifully recorded and played rendition. Rosa Passos and Ron Carter deliver a gorgeous and truly sexy take on Jobim's classic 'Insensatez', and Chuck Mangione injects new life into that hoary old chestnut 'La Vie En Rose'. Peggy Lee, a little past her peak maybe but more expressive as a result contributes an impassioned version of Kern's 'Remind Me'. There are no duff tracks here although I could live without yet another take on 'My Funny Valentine'. The whole thing hangs together well, the tracks all complementing each other. For me the Faddis and Carter tracks are the strongest here and as these compilations are designed to do have spurred my interest to seek out the albums they're taken from.

Jazz Sexy? Maybe. Jazz enjoyable? Definitely.

DD

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RECORDING   
MUSIC 



## Private Astronomy

### Geoff Muldaur's Futuristic Ensemble

Edge Music B0000907-02 (CD)

As the owner of a nicely restored HMV upright gramophone and a treasured set of jazz 78's, I've long been a fan of Bix Beiderbecke, his 'At The Jazz Band Ball'/'Sorry' having been amongst the first batch of records I salvaged along with the player. Based around five piano pieces, his most impressionistic and arguably finest pieces of which only one 'In A Mist' was recorded by Bix, these have now been orchestrated and arranged by Geoff Muldaur and complemented by a selection of Bix's better known numbers. Vocals are shared by Muldaur and Martha Wainwright, with an outstanding rendition of 'There Ain't No Sweet Man That's Worth The Salt In My Tears' by Martha that tops even the wonderful Norma Waterson rendition, the main strength of this set is in the instrumentals. Here the true depth of Beiderbecke's genius comes to the fore and you can sense the influence of Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky in superbly evocative numbers like 'In The Dark', 'Flashes' and best of all 'Candlelight's'. Muldaur has brought together a superb ensemble to record these pieces and the recording does them full justice. Full-bodied, with a solid bass foundation, just listen to those tuba lines, this set is as 'in the room' as CD has got for me to date.

DD

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



Lee Morgan

Indeed!

Classic Records/Blue Note 1538 

Trumpeter Lee Morgan was just 18 years old when he made this debut for Blue Note in 1956. Premature? Not if you consider the evidence of the recording, or the fact that it came on the back of a short stint with and a subsequent invitation to join Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. Nor when you realise the quality of the backing band: the likes of Horace Silver and 'Philly' Joe Jones don't sit down with just anyone. Throw in Clarence Sharpe on Alto and Wilbur Ware on Bass and you've the makings of a seriously solid backdrop to Morgan's contributions. And his playing does his partners proud. Ripping, fast fingered lines on 'Roccus', hold just the right degree of control and sustain, while the deft economy of his playing on 'The Lady' demonstrates just what he could do with a slower tune. There's more than simple pyrotechnics here. The underlying feel leans towards Bird which makes for a fascinating contrast with the Lester Young album. Classic have transferred the mono tapes to their flat-formed 200g vinyl, doing their normal, flawless job. Even so, the recording is denser (though arguably more coherent) than the Lester Young, lacking the breathy immediacy of that disc. Perhaps not surprisingly, it also lacks a little of the musical depth and timelessness.

RG



Three Guitars

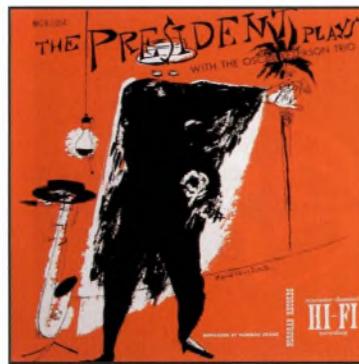
Larry Coryell, Badi Assad, John Abercrombie

Chesky CD JD248 

This is Assad's first recording with jazz musicians but her Brazilian flavours merge seamlessly with the established styles of Coryell and Abercrombie. The three (Coryell left, Assad centre and Abercrombie right) were recorded in an "old church in the heart of a very cold New York City winter", thankfully the cold stayed outside since the warmth engendered by this all-acoustic set is palpable. The guitars joined occasionally by vocals, percussion or copper flute from Assad interweave superbly. Featuring their own compositions throughout there's not a weak track here. I particularly like the jointly composed 'Descending Graces' which features some particularly adroit body percussion from Badi, better still with yet more body percussion is the duo 'No Flight Tonight' with Badi egging Coryell into some superbly energetic playing. The closing number 'Timeless' is perhaps the strongest of the set. Its relaxed pace allows each musician to gently spread their wings and the effect is both soothing and stimulating. The recording is an example of understated excellence, avoiding the pitfalls of so many closely miked sets where you can be more aware of the sound of fingers on fretboards than the music itself, although you can indeed, as the sleeve notes suggest, hear the sound of the heaters keeping out that New York chill.

DD

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Lester Young

The President Plays With The Oscar Peterson Trio

Speakers Corner/Norgran MGN-1054 

In 1950, when Norman Granz gave Lester Young a recording contract he probably saved both his career and his life. Rising to prominence in the '30s with the Basie band, Young was well into a destructive spiral of drink and drugs by the time Granz happened by. Recording, first with Norgran and then Verve, gave him a new enthusiasm and lust for life, ultimately making him one of the most influential Tenors in Jazz history. This set was recorded in 1952, and finds the Peterson trio (filled out with J.C. Heard on drums) in relaxed and expansive mood, providing the perfect foil for Young's extended improvisational lines. Peterson himself is full of confidence, his phrasing perfect, his lines more adventurous than they often appear later in his life. It's an enticing mix, especially on standards such as 'Tea For Two' or 'On The Sunny Side Of The Street', where Lester's meanderings stay just close enough to the root to keep you interested whilst never making you work too hard. The recording, mono obviously, is big, close and immediate on the sax, while the playing has the fluidity and coherence of single takes. If you find Coltrane obtuse and Hawkins staid then this will be right up your street. Delightful.

RG





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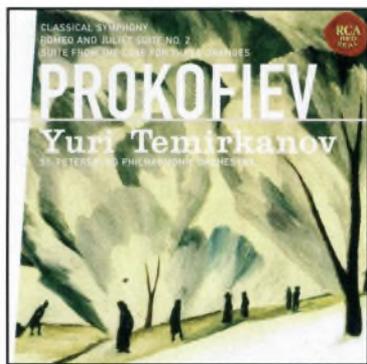
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**Prokofiev**  
**"Classical" Symphony**  
**Orchestral Suites**  
**St. Petersburg Philharmonic**  
**Orchestra/Temirkanov**

RCA Red Seal 82876 50475 2

These recordings were made over a decade ago, and one has to wonder why RCA have sat on three such gripping accounts for so long. The engineers have managed to capture the natural acoustics both St. Petersburg's Hall of Columns and the Blackheath Concert Halls beautifully, revealing every nuance of these highly expressive performances, although the volume does need to be turned up a fair way to appreciate them fully. The *Romeo and Juliet Suite* is excellent, and it is just a pity there is no Temirkanov recording of the complete work as, on this evidence, it would certainly eclipse the current opposition. Its love scenes are mirrored by the seriousness of their counterpart in the *Love for Three Oranges*, where the *March* is treated in a rather jazz-like manner rather than the quaint court ceremony that is often the norm. The only letdown on the whole CD is a missing stroke of the timpani in the *Infernal Scene*, as the cards are slapped down on the table, but this is a minor problem in an otherwise outstanding performance, underlining the view that Temirkanov has to be one of the great interpreters of Prokofiev's music.

SG

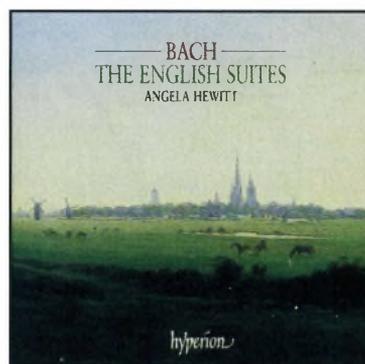


**Rorem**  
**Symphonies Nos. 1-3**  
**Bournemouth Symphony**  
**Orchestra/Serebrier**

Naxos 8.559149

I have long admired American composer Ned Rorem's song-writing, epitomised by Susan Graham's excellent recording for Erato, but have to admit to previously being rather ignorant of his orchestral work. This disc shows precisely what I have been missing, and contains all three of his symphonies from the 1950's. Having been recorded over a period of just two days, the results are a testament to the professionalism of the performers, with orchestral playing of both grace and power throughout. But it is the music that remains at the forefront, thriving in its effort to grab the attention, with the composer interspersing long, lyrical passages, full of Gallic charm, with the vigour and thrust of pure Americana. This is all beautifully highlighted by the opening *Third Symphony*, with its Debussian elegance fused with more extrovert moments that are undeniably Copland-like. During the *Allegro molto* finale there is the added touch of a perfect Ravel pizzicato, while Rorem's *First* and *Second Symphonies* also exhibit glorious melodies that can only have been inspired by the French composer. With first-class engineering, this release can only be recommended as an extraordinary example of beautiful orchestral music at its best.

SG



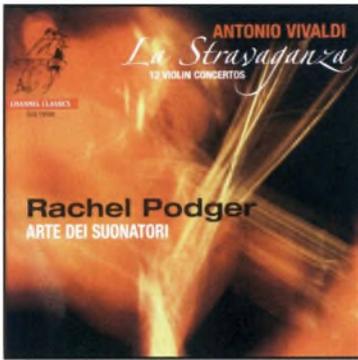
**J.S. Bach**  
**English Suites**  
**Angela Hewitt**

Hyperion CDA67451/2

Angela Hewitt has set such a high standard of excellence in previous installments of her Bach cycle with Hyperion that almost all are a guaranteed first-choice. This is also the case here, unless you prefer an authentic instrument or are impressed by the outrageousness of Glenn Gould (Sony). The six *English Suites* - so-called because they were allegedly composed "...for an Englishman of rank" - are no more English in style than Bach's *French Suites* are French. What they do exhibit throughout is an unusually brilliant and elaborate prelude to their standard sequence of dances. With Hewitt's earlier background in dancing she seems able to articulate these dance-form origins better than others, with the use of tempi and rhythms that bounce and cascade, without a hint of mechanical constraint. She may lack a little of the spontaneity revealed by Perahia (Sony) or Schiff (Decca), but is generally more subtle than either, orchestrating and illuminating each piece through the use of more varied dynamics and vivid articulation. Her clear singing tone and inventive ornaments pay marvellous dividends, as does Hyperion's excellent engineering, making these joyous, searching performances a pure delight from start to finish.

SG





Vivaldi  
Violin Concertos Op. 4 "La Stravaganza"

Rachel Podger/Arte Dei Suonatori

Channel Classics CCS 19598 

Many will feel inclined to pass over yet another set of Vivaldi *concertos*, but this is one of this often underestimated composer's most vibrant in the catalogue. While the first half-dozen pieces remain relatively familiar but instantly appealing, the second disc of six is where things start to get particularly interesting. Here Vivaldi has experimented with more adventurous solos, unusual orchestral shadings and textures, and harmonic variations, revealing his mastery of melodic and rhythmic effects, all gained from a minimum of instrumental forces. Rachel Podger's masterful and stunning display of violin-playing, exhibiting her technically assured and wonderfully expressive abilities to the full, is emphatically accompanied by the Polish period-ensemble, Arte Dei Suonatori, who perform with committed excellence, producing ravishing tones throughout. The engineers have done more than a decent job, capturing the event in a perfectly balanced, naturally vibrant and totally palpable manner. While the music may stand out for its energy, excitement and rhythmic flow, this is simply emphasised by the superb performances and the outstanding recording. Together they allow Vivaldi's compositions to fill one's listening room in a manner that should enthrall even those who might overlook this release as just another *Four Seasons*.

SG



Debussy  
Images and Études

Pierre-Laurent Aimard

Warner Classics 8573 83940-2 

Debussy's *Études* are the direct forerunners of those by György Ligeti, but despite the contemporary works' far more mechanical style, it is not surprising to find that Pierre-Laurent Aimard, whose Ligeti performances remain unsurpassed, delivers another masterful recording here. He also exhibits a total sureness with these earlier pieces, despatching these studies for chromatic scales with dazzling virtuosity, revealing the textural counterpoint and the compositional richness held within each and so taking them beyond mere keyboard exercises. He is alive to their expressive possibilities, driving the music forward with a certain momentum. But he still lacks the total rhythmic freedom commanded by Uchida, on one of the most outstanding piano recordings released in recent times. Along with Aimard's superb playing, this release possesses very good sound, exhibiting a similar warmth and richness of tone to Uchida's earlier, Philips disc. But Aimard has the not inconsiderable bonus of including recordings of both of Debussy's books of *Images*, from which he conjures landscapes of colour and pictures of poetic imagery. In the end, I could not be without either CD, as they simply both take the playing of these beautiful works to the height of artistic expression.

SG



Boccherini  
Cello Quintets, Vol. 2

The Vanbrugh Quartet and Richard Lester

Hyperion CDA67383 

Compared to the standards set by Haydn and Mozart, Boccherini's quintets are relatively leisurely affairs, but they also contain much that is absorbing, and are full of sensuous delight. They are able to constantly exploit the ensemble's potential for rich and flamboyant sonorities, and the Vanbrugh Quartet, with guest cellist Richard Lester, are superbly eloquent, performing with all the colour, refinement and vigour these pieces require. They mould and shape the music to reveal detailed and expressive flourishes that are so much more than simple decoration, and manage to fully realise the composer's inventive surprises, bringing a certain swagger to the Iberian-influenced movements, with guitar and castinet effects. They also lend the music some explosive moments during the faster movements, yet the general feeling is for music that, by sustaining a richness and grandeur, particularly in the love duets between violin and cello, is smooth and harmonious. The engineering is also first-rate, being warm, faithful and able to create the illusion of the players being in the room with the listener. As with their first outstanding disc of Boccherini's *Cello Quintets* (Hyperion CDA67287), this ensemble seem once more able to raise ones spirits.

SG



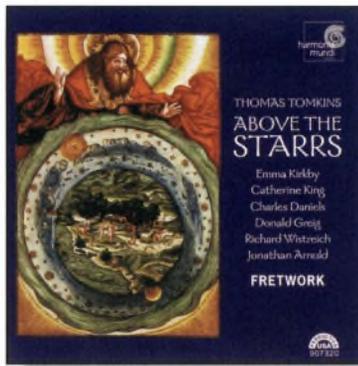


**Holst**  
**The Planets/Lyric Movement**  
**Matthews – Pluto–The Renewer**  
**Hallé Orchestra/Ladies of the**  
**Hallé Choir/ Elder**

Hyperion SACDA67270 (SA)

Some may argue whether Colin Matthews' rather directionless composition *Pluto-The Renewer* should be grafted onto Holst's perennial favourite or not, but I believe that any future recording will include the extra piece, as is the case here. The offending track can of course be "skipped", and the SACD layer on this disc includes both versions, with and without the new work, anyway. More importantly, how does this release stand compared to others on the market? Well, the opening *Mars* is a little on the polite side, lacking the full dynamics of the best available. Mark Elder's direction is certainly more relaxed than most, although *Venus* is actually a touch rushed in parts, and *Saturn's* crescendos of brass fail to achieve their full potential. On the other hand, *Jupiter* is superb, which along with *Mercury* are the most convincing movements here, and there is a nice performance of the *Lyric Movement for Viola and Orchestra*. While the performances may be undistinguished, Tony Faulkner's engineering is first-rate, revealing plenty of detail and natural vibrato, but ultimately leaving us with a disc that is unlikely to be a first choice, except possibly with audiophiles, with so many great performances available.

SG



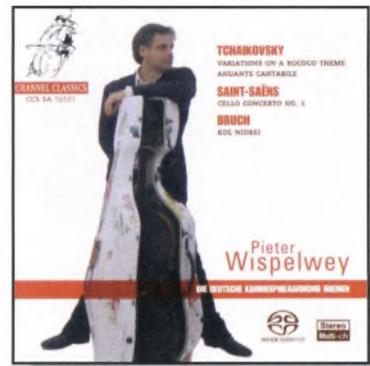
**Thomas Tomkins**  
**Above the Stars**

**Fretwork with Emma Kirkby,**  
**Catherine King et al.**

Harmonia Mundi HMU 9073220 (CD)

This disc features a collection of verse anthems and consort music from the pen of West-Country organist, Thomas Tomkins. The verse anthem grew from the Elizabethan fashion for solo songs accompanied by a consort of viols, as opposed to their performances by cathedral choirs – the vogue prior to the civil war of 1642. While those that appear here were published for solo voices, choir and organ in 1668 by Tomkin's son, we know they appeared half a century earlier for either solo voice or vocal ensemble with viol, and that is the arrangement here, with the more meditative anthems, such as *Above the Stars my Saviour Dwells*, succeeding particularly well. The ensemble of distinguished singers perform with authentic élan, revealing the particular vowel sounds of the composer's day, with Catherine King – for her eloquent performance of the sacred song *Woe is me* – and Richard Wistreich's strong bass tones standing out. Fretwork's accompaniment is always sensitive, while they also perform the consort pieces that make up two-thirds of the programme with animated rhythms, well-shaped contrapuntal lines and dexterous finger work, producing some wonderfully biting tones. With excellent performances and sound that is well above average, this is a most rewarding release.

SG



**Tchaikovsky – Variations on a**  
**Rococo Theme. Saint-Saëns – Cello**  
**Concerto No. 1. Bruch – Kol Nidrei**  
**Wispelwey/Die Deutsche**  
**Kammerphilharmonie Bremen**

Channel Classics CCS SA 16501 (SA) (CD)

Of the two works here by Tchaikovsky, the *Andante Cantabile* is the more satisfying, simply because Pieter Wispelwey's style suits its tender sensitivity more than the characteristic fervour and the associated apprehension of the *Variations on a Rococo Theme*, his performance of which cannot approach the captivating eloquence of Rostropovich and Karajan's, only existing as a muted impression to the Deutsche Grammophon release. Likewise his touching affection in Bruch's *Kol Nidrei* does not furnish the required and explicit exhilaration. But it is the performance of Saint Saëns' *A minor Concerto* that is the highlight of the disc, encompassing everything from precise proficiency to expressive imagination. This work has long remained an enigma, but Wispelwey has resolved its unanswered questions with an amazing exhibition of insight and treating it as large-scale chamber music. Although he misses some of the brilliance and verve that the likes of du Pré and Starker exhibit, this is a small price to pay, and the engineering is excellent, with superb, natural sound that put it near the demonstration class. So, while this release may not be the most extravagant, the performance of the Saint Saëns piece alone is enough to get my recommendation.

SG





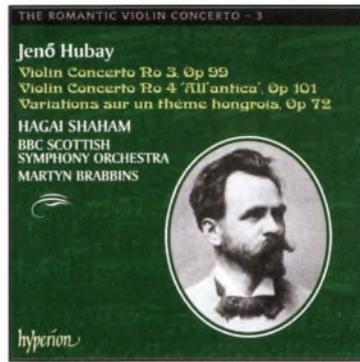
## Rainbow Body

Atlanta Symphony  
Orchestra/Spano

Telarc CD-80596 

The title of this new release comes from the opening work by Christopher Theofanidis. It opens with cello murmurings, emphasised by the woodwind, which eventually awake the whole orchestra from its slumber to announce the main theme. This beautiful melody is scattered with more dramatic sequences, building to the work's impressive climax. Robert Spano has carefully planned the program so that each piece reflects on the preceding one, before introducing the next. Barber's *Symphony No. 2* follows with its boisterous opening, with Spano directing a superb reading. The more reflective qualities of Copland's *Appalachian Spring* then introduce a fresh mood, and it receives such an impressive performance as to rank along side the best available. This piece closes with comparable bell sounds to those which open the closing work; Jennifer Higdon's *Blue Cathedral* – an imaginary journey through an aerial glass church. The composer employs some original styles to help us visualise her heavenly voyage and this is aided by Telarc's state-of-the-art engineering. The Atlanta players perform with supreme enthusiasm, great confidence and total polish, all meaning that despite two of the included works being rather familiar, every piece appears entirely fresh.

SG



## Hubay – Violin Concertos Nos. 3 and 4 (All'antica)/Variations sur un thème hongrois Shaman/BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra/Brabbins

Hyperion CDA67367 

This disc is the third volume of Hyperion's Romantic Violin Concerto series, and features works by Hungarian composer Jenő Hubay. Why his work is not better known today remains a mystery, with his *Third Violin Concerto* being full of searing virtuosity, strong melodies and eminent orchestral contributions. In fact, this is the kind of concerto that someone like Heifetz should have made famous. All four movements are superb: a dramatic opening *Introduction quasi Fantasia*, the *Scherzo* (of which Mendelssohn would have been proud), one of the most gorgeous *adagios* to be found in any violin concerto, and a sparkling *finale*. Despite being slightly less remarkable, the *Hungarian Variations* and the *All'antica Concerto* also reveal superb craftsmanship. But it is the *Third Concerto* that remains the highlight here, and must be regarded as a high point in late-Romantic violin composition. Hagai Shaman plays like a foremost virtuoso, performing with total equanimity, managing the most difficult passages, which flow from his instrument with ease, and backed by an orchestra on top form. With Hungarotone also releasing a set of all four concertos, I hope this marks the beginnings of a revival in Hubay's work.

SG



## Chopin Scherzos

Arthur Rubinstein

JVC JM-XR24009 

JVC's XRCD re-issue series continues its trawl through the RCA Living Stereo back catalogue and finally reaches the stellar output of one Arthur Rubinstein, an artist who divides opinions almost as starkly as his stable-mate Jascha Heifetz. Not that his style, his impact on the music is nearly as pronounced as Heifetz. But if you're going to start on Rubinstein then there's no better place to start than his Chopin; You can choose between this *Scherzos* disc and another of *Piano Sonatas Nos. 2 and 3* (JVC have also released the Brahms *Piano Sonata No. 3*). This one was recorded in March 1959 at the height of RCA's powers and the sound shows, with a rich, stable piano sound that makes the most of Rubinstein's fluid, virtuoso playing. JVC have captured the full glory of both the recording and the performance that it encapsulates. It demonstrates just exactly how far you can extend the performance of good old Red Book CD if you take the care and have the technology. AS loved the Reimyo CD player that uses JVC's K2 chipset, the very same one used in the XRCD standard. It's no coincidence that these discs sound so good. Try this one and if you like it, try the Sonatas too. I love them both.

RG



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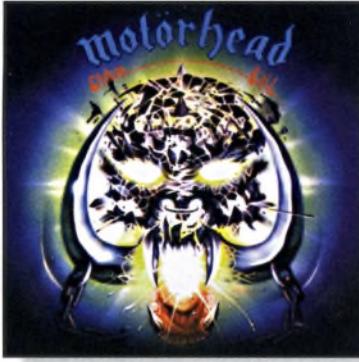
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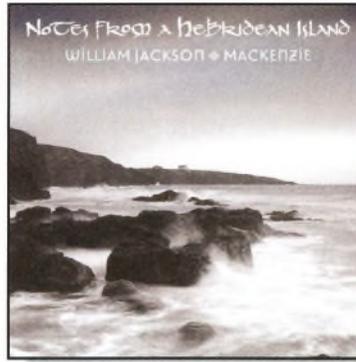
## Motörhead

### Overkill

Silverline 288189-9 

Many British men aged between 30 and 45 have a Motörhead story. It almost always involves a live gig, head/bass-bin proximity and how many days it took for the storyteller's hearing to return. Classic Motörhead had Lemmy on bass and that peculiar throat-barking that passes for vocals, assisted by Fast Eddie Clarke on axe and backing shouting and Phil "Philthy Animal" Taylor on drums. That's the line-up on *Overkill*. *Overkill* wasn't Motörhead's first album, but it was the first of the classic discs on the Bronze label, made in 1979. It blends punk and heavy metal in the band's onslaught style, perhaps not as OTT as later noise-fests from the likes of Prong and Sepultura, but *Overkill* still goes up to 11. It's not an attractive recording (engineers were eaten alive for attempting to turn down a fader), but from the first manic drum intro of the title track to the final (and quite nasty) alternate version of 'Louie, Louie', *Overkill's* wall of metal sound still represents audio artillery at its finest. 5.1 channels of Motörhead is just dangerous, but is also a great test for your surround sound system. It demonstrates how specious some statistics can be, 'cos played at full tilt, most "5x100W" mini systems will collapse under the strain. *Overkill* – it does exactly what it says on the tin.

AS



## William Jackson and Mackenzie

### Notes from a Hebridean Isle

Linn AKD 197  

Named after a Bill Bryson book, this release forms an interesting introduction to the traditional folk music of the Hebrides, reflecting the barren landscape and solitude of the isles. It is not an album of jigs and reels performed at a furious pace, but instead the tunes are treated with delicacy and respect, leading the listener on a fairly sentimental musical journey, although the last track, 'Looking South Over the Border', is certainly non-traditional in its approach. After an almost oriental opening, it becomes the nearest thing to Celtic dance music here. Multi-instrumentalist, William Jackson, is present on a number of tracks, specialising in various harps, which are played with great tenderness, while the three sisters of Mackenzie sing their Gaelic songs with utmost control and beauty. They are backed by a number of excellent musicians who play accordion, bass, fiddle, guitar, keyboards, percussion, and of course pipes, and Linn's engineering is very good, being detailed, with plenty of clarity, but never over bright. While the idea of such a release may not appeal to all, this disc of poignant, atmospheric music is good enough that it should attract anyone looking for a fresh musical experience.

SG

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## Aaron Neville

### Devotion

Silverline 288028-9 

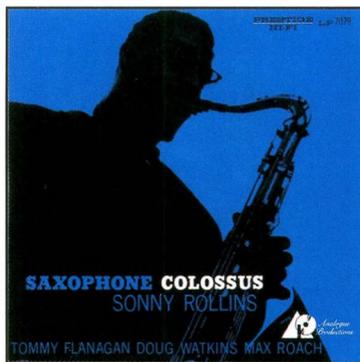
As you might expect from a title like *Devotion*, this is a spiritual, semi-gospel album. Gospel is broadly divided between fantastic singers of other genre making statements of faith on record (Elvis, Aretha and Sam Cooke spring to mind), and committed God-squad acts that never do anything other than devotional records – Cliff straddles the divide. With Nawleans' finest Aaron Neville (of Neville Brothers fame) at the microphone, *Devotion* is very much in the former camp.

The 13 tracks are gospel standards ('Banks of the River Jordan'), some new material ('What Would Jesus Do') and classic 'spiritual' rock tracks (like 'Bridge Over Troubled Water'). This 2000 recording is simply beautiful; Aaron may look like a bad Huey (Fun Lovin' Criminals) Morgan clone, but has one of the most gentle, soaring and sweet voices around. The transfer from stereo to 5.1 sound is done with care and delicacy (even the Dolby Digital mix for DVD players is open and expressive) and shows what intelligent mixing can do.

The record stays just on the right side of saccharine, especially 'Mary Don't You Weep', which shows just how close early soul was to gospel music. If you are a fan of gospel – or just like fine singing – this is worth seeking out.

AS





Sonny Rollins

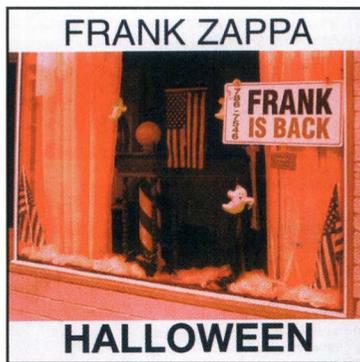
Saxophone Colossus

Prestige/Analogue Productions CAPJ 7079 SA 

What an incredible twelve months 1956 was for Sonny Rollins. In May he recorded *Tenor Madness* for Prestige. Later on that year there was an eponymous Blue Note debut, and for the April there had been a mighty jazz masterpiece in the shape of *Saxophone Colossus*. By now Sonny who was playing for both the Clifford Brown and Max Roach Quintets had the freedom to indulge in wonderfully expansive melodies and kinetic solo flights of fancy. And although there are only the five tracks cut for *Colossus*, they remain stylistically varied enough to reveal the inherent versatility and significant emotional tenor depths carved out by Rollins. Soaring blues sax solos and Max Roach polyrhythms can be heard in 'Blue 7'. There's the delightful 'St. Thomas' with its melodic and calypso-like flavour. An intense and heartfelt 'You Don't Know What Love Is' pricks your conscience. That interpretative triumph in the Kurt Weill / Bertolt Brecht composed 'Moritat' shows you how entertaining his brand of ingenuity can be, while a tribute to a generation of Chicago role models, 'Strode Rode', reminds us of their brilliance and his gratitude for the inspiration they provided. All the numbers possess a natural and luxuriant sound and this makes this album even more indispensable - if that was possible.

RP

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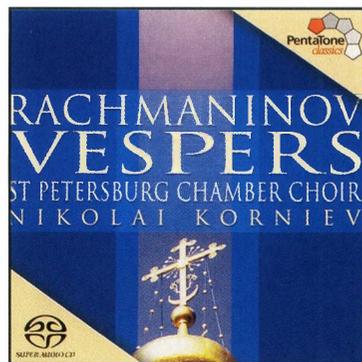
Frank Zappa

Halloween

DTS Entertainment 69286-01101-9-9 

Live Frank Zappa from 1978 in full-on 5.1 channel sound is either going to leave the listener cold with all that widdly-widdly fuzz guitar playing, or hungry for more releases on DVD-Audio. Officially the 71st release from the world of Zappa, this *Halloween* concert was previously only available as a dreadful-quality bootleg. Frank's son Dweezil has produced this from the master tape, 70 minutes of extremely fine live recording. One of the finest, in fact; the recording quality is truly remarkable and sounds like it came straight off a mixing desk last week, not 25 and a bit years ago. You are in with the crowd as it should be on a live recording and every instrument is clearly delineated on stage. People these days expect video footage with their live concert material; fortunately the recording is so pin-sharp and entertaining, you don't need no steenkin' pictures. Musically, this is Zappa at his odd best, with one of the most slick backing bands he ever had. If the dozen or so tracks aren't Zappa's very finest moments, they are some of the more approachable (and mercifully short) examples of his random viewpoint - weird but sort of fascinating. So be prepared to collect the other 70+ Zappa discs. Sadly, many of the Ryko CDs completely fail to live up to this extremely fine recording, so be warned.

AS



Rachmaninov  
Vespers op.37

St. Petersburg Chamber Choir  
(Korniev)

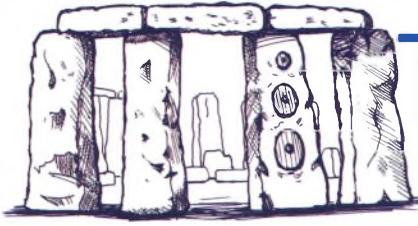
PentaTone PTC 5186 027 

Orthodox Church music with a Russian choir singing under the baton of Nikolai Korniev has rarely sounded this well marshalled. The super audio digital format suits an expansive presentation of the massed St. Petersburg choral ranks, yet it also picks out the varied and delicate shifts which help to make the *Vespers* such a satisfying work. There is that incredible richness of the sonorous basses - they revel in this darkly affected music. Those sweeter and more persuasive tenors are memorable for their fluency and control as they lean towards the highest parts written for the male register, while in the alto and soprano roles (whether it is in the soaring and inspirational "Hallelujah" interjections or even when they recite liturgical texts) you can hear confidence and beauty easing through their delivery of those sustained notes and full-voiced chords which enrich these melodies based on Church modes. Beguiling in its most intimate and devout moments, generous and candid with a gently overpowering collective voice that exudes innocence, joy and elation in equal amounts as they zealously praise God and His works.

RP

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# The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

2003 was a "record" year for both sales and releases by the manufacturers of vinyl LPs and CDs, at least the specialists that relate to our hobby. Perhaps you've read in the main stream press or in other publications the problems some of the larger conglomerates are having. I guess there is only so much Andrea Bocelli or Charlotte Church that the 'mainstream' public can absorb and although these artists have sold well, they are only two examples from large corporate conglomerates who seem to have lost touch how broad a marketplace exists in this world. Look, there is nothing wrong with Andrea or Charlotte or the 3 or 4 tenors, but I have to draw the line at 'the divas'. Using that term to describe singers like Diana Krall, Celine Dion, Mariah Carey et al. Divas? I just shake my head when I hear those artists referred to in that fashion.

I conducted a small survey of some of the specialty labels dedicated to enriching our collective musical lives. Without a doubt, everyone had a smile on their face because their sales and product lines have increased. And the demand is continuing to increase.

Chad Kassem, owner of Acoustic Sounds - also Analogue Productions and co-owner of Acoustech, the mastering arm of his company - told me that "Vinyl sales are at an all time high! It's a great time to be an audiophile. Look at the releases that have come out in 2003: Creedance Clearwater Revival, The Rolling Stones, Peter Gabriel, The Beatles, AC/DC, to name but a few. We've done phenomenally well with our 25 45 rpm releases and will certainly be doing another series this year."

Acoustech is doing mastering for a variety of companies and this bodes well for what is going to be coming out in 2004. I'm very excited about this.

Not only is Acoustic Sounds doing well, other companies in North America like Red Trumpet and Music Direct are all busy moving product. And if you think it's just vinyl...you can think again. All formats are really flying off the shelves.

Sundazed Records, with a great philosophy of keeping prices down on 180gram vinyl, seems to have found a market in the 20 something age group that is buying product sold in a variety of venues. Bob Irwin of Sundazed is committed to "...remain all-analog, wherever and whenever

possible." Tim Livingston, Sundazed Records' Director of Publicity/Sales is very excited about how good 2003 was for them and they are predicting a great 2004. Coming out, I'm sure by the time you read this, will be Bob Dylan's Self-Titled album in mono. Around the corner in the early part of the year we're going to get Vanilla Fudge's first album, also in mono as well as Love: *Four Sail* and the Yardbirds: *Live Blues Wailing*.

Colie Brice, Director of Marketing and Communications for Mobile Fidelity is very bullish for 2004. While they had a great 2003 for releases in the digital domain and they have some great titles heading your way in CD and SACD formats for the coming year, the big news is:

"The introduction of GAIN 2 Ultra Analog™ will reactivate Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab's position as the world's leading audiophile vinyl record label, where passion for music is merged with extraordinary sound quality. (For additional technical information, visit: <http://www.mobilefidelity.com>.) Though a relatively modest market in size and sales volume, the vinyl market is also a sustainable one. Kept alive for years after its supposed demise by collector's, music lovers and audiophiles, vinyl is also catching on in the youth market due to the prevalence and popularity of good old vinyl within DJ & underground rave culture. Thankfully a growing segment of the youth population is developing an interest in the sound and "vibe" of records, thus reducing the prominence of peer to peer file sharing as a mere audition tool for consumers, like the radio once was. So let the kids have their MP3s, those same types of kids were taping cassettes of FM radio broadcasts back in the 70's & 80's, finding out what artists and music they liked, and then purchasing. . . records." Upcoming GAIN 2 Ultra Analog LPs from Mobile Fidelity include John Lennon's *Imagine*, Alison Kraus's *So Long, So Wrong*, and Aimee Mann's *Lost In Space*."

According to Robert Pincus, Domestic Sales Director of Cisco Music, "Our goal has always been to release the best recordings possible, in the best format possible. We were the first to offer 180-gram pressings in North America with the Super Analogue LPs, and we were the first to properly re-issue classical records from Capitol's golden age. Audiophiles are very quick to recognize that

► Capitol was responsible for the often inferior Angel pressings of U.K. EMI material, but at the same time, they are unaware that Capitol, prior to EMI's intervention, made their own recordings, had their own engineers, and a damn nice catalog. Collectors know the great recordings by Nathan Milstein, Michael Rabin, Rudolf Firkusny, Felix Slatkin, and The Hollywood String Quartet, but, sadly, most audiophiles do not know these great artists. I blame the audiophile press for this, but also I blame the forced deletion of Capitol's classical recordings. Our 180 gram Milstein and Slatkin LPs rival the best RCA and Mercury re-issues!

Due to the recent public awareness of rural and folk music we decided to approach folk music with the same TLC as classical LPs. As a genuine 60's folk freak, I see this as a long overdue project that's finally getting off the ground. This is great music and anybody who's heard our recent pressings of Doc Watson's *Southbound*, Ian and Sylvia's *Northern Journey*, and Joan Baez's *Farewell Angelina* knows it, even if they didn't in the past. The Vanguard catalog is a goldmine of treasures. Many audiophiles know the Weavers, but there's so much more!

What's in the future? More of the same. In other words, something different, and something good. Same old-same old is not the way we do things at Cisco."

According to Troy Thompson, Director of Wholesale Sales for Classic Records, "2003 was a very good year, better than the previous two years." As you all know Classic came out with some really strong titles this year including a limited edition Heifetz box set, the Led Zeppelin box set (as well as individual releases), Peter Gabriel releases and of course how many Nora Jones albums do you think they Sold? Quite a few and good for them. It's great to have that recording on vinyl. 2004 will offer the Bob Dylan *Rolling Thunder* box set, Dylan's great sound track to *Masked and Anonymous*, The Allman Brothers *Live at the Fillmore* and some other surprises. Thomson closed our conversation with feelings mirrored by everyone I spoke with, "There is certainly a resurgence in vinyl."

Kai Seemann of Speakers Corners was very pleased with how his company fared in 2003 with a solid increase in sales. At the end of 2003 he began an exciting project with the Mercury Living Presence catalogue and we'll see some new titles out by the time you read this. There'll be more Ella Fitzgerald in 2004 and some surprises from the RCA popular catalogue including albums from Big Joe Williams and the King himself, Elvis Presley. Who knows, we may even see some of those great mono blues records from the fabulous Chess catalogue: Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, John Lee Hooker... I just can't wait!

Although I've mentioned mostly vinyl in this article, let's make no bones about what's in store for those readers who find their enjoyment in the digital world.

Mobile Fidelity is very bullish about what they are working on and their release plans for the coming quarter. Some of these exciting titles include:

Ultradisc II Gold CD

\* John Lennon *Plastic Ono Band* January 2004

Ultradisc UHR Hybrid Stereo SACD

\* Jim Hall *Concierto* Feb 10, 2004

\* Blood, Sweat & Tears 3 Feb 10, 2004

\* Aimee Mann *Bachelor No. 2* March 9, 2004

\* Los Lobos *It's Time* April 6, 2004

Ultradisc UHR Surround SACD

\* Mussorgsky *Orchestral Works* TBA Feb 10, 2004

Some great music in a variety of formats, something for everyone in every way!

Cisco is also releasing Hybrid SACD, SACD and regular CD issues, not to mention their gold series. It couldn't be a better year for digital releases either!

Classic is moving into a high definition HDAD which is a two sided disc that is encoded with 24/96 on one side while the other side is 24/192, and all playable on your DVD equipment. More great news for those who like this format!

Acoustic Sounds has indicated that every digital format is flying out the door! It seems just incredible that all these formats are doing so well, but with a plethora of new material in the pipeline, as well as what we've all seen in 2003, we truly are living in exciting times!

Having just returned from the CES in Las Vegas, it was a great opportunity to talk first hand with Steve Hoffman (of DCC fame+), Kevin Grey of Acoustech, Colie Brice at MO-FI, Robert Pincus from Cisco, Chad Kassem and others I know I've forgotten. What I saw were several things: software, whether SACD, DVD-A or LPs was moving out at an unbelievable pace. It was great to finally get my hands on real MOFI vinyl again! Classic released CSNY's *Deja Vu*, Alto re-issued a Stan Getz recording and it just kept on coming.

The Burmester room had wonderful digital; the Immedia/Audio Physic/Lyra room offered great sound on both vinyl and compact disc. There were so many others, I will leave the CES report to the Editor. I will say this: there seems to be a movement afoot where vinyl and digital are co-existing once again. Not only were there mid-priced tables and budget tables present (there are always state of the art tables available) these tables were sitting right next to the digital playback setups in almost every room. It was a great experience.





## Stravinsky Le Sacre Du Printemps

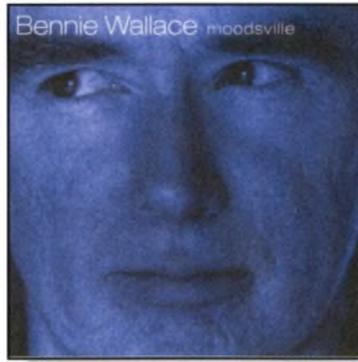
Solti / CSO

JVC JVCXR-0225-2 (XR)

Decca's recording techniques - the Decca Tree mix with two outrigger microphones and spots for winds, horns, timpani, basses and percussion - really suits the explosive quality of an imaginative and wide-ranging composition like *The Rite* which so evocatively captures those colourful, pagan, primitive and frighteningly violent landscapes of Russia. These Chicago Medinah Hall tapes from May 1974, engineered by Kenneth Wilkinson and produced under Ray Minshull's clear-sighted gaze, provide a fantastic template for this re-master. Georg Solti and his Chicago Symphony musicians deliver the goods as well. This is a powerful and unrelenting performance, breathtaking in its delivery of hammer blows and thoroughly transparent as inner instrumental details recreate the gnawing, scratching and clamouring sounds of nature awakening as a young girl dances herself to death in *The Sacrifice*. There is delicacy too in spades for the mystical scoring of woodwinds, flute and strings as they build towards those swirling brassy climaxes and savage ripped string barrages in the *Adoration of the Earth*. Compelling music making then, with a superbly realistic, tactile and dynamic transfer to XRCD that captures the very essence of Stravinsky's visionary work.

RP

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## Bennie Wallace

Moodsville

Groove Note GRV1010-3 (SA CD)

Moodsville is a beautifully recorded and carefully executed nine-track album where those Cole Porter standards like 'Love For Sale' and 'I Concentrate On You' tread the boards alongside Billy Strayhorn's 'My Little Brown Book' and 'A Flower Is A Lovable Thing'. Wallace, a tenor saxophonist of some stature, is rhythmically backed by strong Lewis Nash stick work, Peter Washington bass and Mulgrew Miller piano lines. Yet, in the midst of their considered and efficient approach to all these timeless songs, I felt that there was still something lacking. Jazz by its very nature needs a spark of compelling brilliance to remind us of those deep and uncomfortably dangerous roots. But here even in their take on the classic Miles Davis 'Milestones' this is a quartet which never quite throws down the gauntlet in an unmistakable challenge to the accommodating and polite cuts that blight the catalogue. This CD reminded me of that bland and frighteningly obsequious music which can often be heard from the dem rooms at Hi-Fi Shows around the country. You are drawn in with a seductive promise of something much more intimate than the warm platonic embrace that is finally delivered.

RP

Supplier: Vivante - Tel. 01293 822186



## Britten Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge Britten / LSO & ECO

JVC JVCXR-0226-2 (XR)

The composer vigorously conducts a charming exploration of instrumental possibilities and a performance of brilliantly played *Bridge Variations* that were originally conceived as vibrant display pieces. There is also great presence and a sense of complete assurance when this music is developed under his baton - one that others are hard pressed to match. In the Variations, as well as developing those more light-hearted rhythms heard in the *Introduction, Adagio and March*, he also coolly teases out a solemn and sombre mood in the *Funeral* piece and then delivers a suitably serious note for the closing *Fugue Et Finale*. This, together with an atmospheric development of half tones in the waltz parody *Romance* reveals true depth in the writing. Yet it is Britten's brisk approach work both here and in the headstrong reading of *The Young Person's Guide* which has the most striking effect upon proceedings. It certainly accentuates those wonderfully uninhibited and youthful sentiments one naturally associates with this music. All its theatrical qualities and the delicate tonal shifts in colour are beautifully displayed in an XRCD 24-bit transfer that recovers a rich and translucent sound from those Kingsway Hall tapes of the early 1960s.

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**Debussy: Petite Suite, Prélude À L'Après-Midi D'Un Faune.  
Ravel: Le Tombeau de Couperin,  
Valse Nobles et Sentimentales  
Paul Paray, DSO**

Speakers Corner/Mercury SR90213 **180g**

It's good to revisit old friends. I haven't listened to the original Mercury in at least three years and was delighted to hear it again. Let me get this out of the way very quickly—the original, in a stone-cold mint first pressing, is superior to this wonderful reissue by Speakers Corner. Having said that, you're going to get ninety+ percent of the sonic virtues of the original U.S. pressing for ten percent of the price. Should you be lucky enough to find an original, be prepared to part with about \$250...but the chances of even finding this elusive record in really mint condition is pretty close to impossible.

Now let's get to the music, the conductor and the orchestra. The Ravel was recorded in 1955 – nearly 50 years ago and the Debussy was recorded 45 years ago. You'd never know it from this production. These are classic, with a capital "C", French works conducted by one of the greatest French conductors of the 20th century, leading an orchestra that, under Paray's tutelage (1952 – 1963), was considered THE finest orchestra for this repertoire by the critics of the day. Believe it! Better than Munch in Boston, better than Monteux in San Francisco and London and even superior to Cluytens and his contemporaries in Paris. I'm sure most of you are now on the floor laughing yourselves silly.

But that's simply because you've never heard this record. It's stunning—from every point of view. It contains every element one could dream of from a record. If you have the slightest interest

in these works, grab this. A jewel among gems.

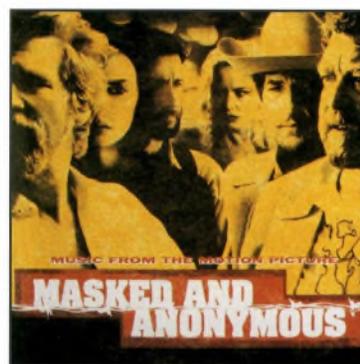
RSF

Having just given Speakers Corner a record of the year award for their brilliant if eclectic box-set of 20th Century music from the Mercury label, I couldn't wait to see if they could maintain the standard with more mainstream offerings. Well, RSF has called it right, except in one regard that I'll get to shortly. Both musically and in recording terms this was one of Mercury's most successful efforts. Hardly surprising then that it's so highly sought after on the secondhand market.

Paray's direction is superb, combining delicacy and power, poise and tension to superb effect. Just the first few bars of the *Prelude* should be enough to convince you of the reading's merits, as well as those of the orchestra. So where did the History Man get it wrong? Well, the re-issue is clearly superior to my AMS16066 original, pressed by EMI at Hayes. It's more detailed, more transparent and has a(n even) better sense of the flow and phrasing so vital to these works. OK, I know, the US pressings, especially the earlier ones, are better. But here's the point. Unless your original fits that category then this re-issue is going to be better than most of the rest. And it'll have perfect surfaces, which makes it an absolute bargain. So, not so much wrong as undersold.

Perfect it isn't – there's way too much tape noise for that – but if you want to capture the concert experience then orchestral recordings don't come much more convincing than this. It represents a milestone for Speakers Corner as well as a monument in any record collection. Purchase essential.

RG



**Masked And Anonymous**

**Bob Dylan et al.**

Classic Records/Columbia C 2K90618-1 **180g**

Nice. No other word for it. Here we have a double album of Dylan penned tunes (plus two traditional arrangements), sung by a cast of characters ranging from Dylan himself (four of the fourteen tracks) to Jerry Garcia, the Grateful Dead, Shirley Caesar, the Dixie Hummingbirds and a host of Latino performers, including Los Lobos. In common with many other soundtracks, recording quality is definitely a cut above the pop/mainstream norm, especially as regards dynamics. Unlike the current trend for simply loading down your soundtrack with hummable hits of yesteryear, this has a musical validity and integrity that comes from a single composer and dedicated recording sessions.

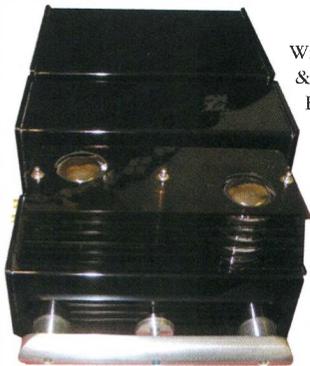
It's got style and character too. Just listen to 'Come Una Pietra Scalciata' by Articolo 31. That's 'Like A Rolling Stone' to you and me – the Spanish rap version, of course. Now, speaking as someone who loves Dylan's music but has a limited tolerance for his "voice" this is all great stuff. Nice to see Classic applying their expertise and superb packaging to something other than another audiophile banker. This has really whet my appetite for the *Rolling Thunder* box-set.

RG

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keeping the music alive

new releases for the new year

**The Allman Brothers Band: At Fillmore East**

We have been waiting for months for this double album beauty to hit the Vivante decks, but at last our patience has been rewarded, everything from the heavy cardboard out to the vellum inner feels and looks just right. The pressing is absolutely superb and the sound coming up from the grooves is excellent.



If you know *At Fillmore East* and want to replace your worn out copy then don't hesitate to get this new Classic re-issue, it's a marvel. If you are not familiar with this album, then you are in for a real treat. An absolute must-have!

**Classic/Capricorn SD2 802 2LP 180g £39.95**  
**Pressing Quality: Excellent.**

**Peggy Lee: Sings Her Greatest Hits Bewitching-Lee**

This is the first vinyl release from the new S&P label. Mastered by Steve Hoffman, the sound and quality of this pressing is arguably better than that of older DCC releases. The emphasis of this 1962 album is placed on her hits of the 40's and '50s (several featuring the Goodman Band) with *Fever* being the highlight. Aside from being completely re-mastered, the album has also been expanded to include three bonus tracks (*Unforgettable*, *You Don't Know* and her giant hit, *I'm A Woman*) not found on the original release and sports new liner notes.



**S&P LP 180g - £ 25.95**

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# Brazilian Impressions

## The artistry of Magda Tagliaferro

by Richard S. Foster

In issue 26 I finally 'fessed up to my penchant for the French School of Piano and in particular one Yvonne Lefebure. Well, several years down the road and a few dollars later, nothing has changed except that my appetite continues to increase. It's not that there are no other pianists in the world that I enjoy - check out Murray Perahia's two CDs of the Bach *Keyboard Concertos* (with the Academy of Saint Martin in the Fields) Sony SK 89245 and 89690 - his performances are spectacular. You must also explore one of the greatest young talents of today, Nikolai Lugansky. What he does with Chopin and Rachmaninoff will send you to another planet. Find his performances on Erato (*Etudes Op. 12 and 25* on 8573 80228-2; 24 Preludes on 0927-42836-2 and some stunning Rachmaninoff on a disc containing *12 preludes and six Moments musicaux* on 8573-85770-2). I love all the Angela Hewitt Bach recordings on Hyperion - don't miss them. And finally, I would be remiss if I didn't tell you about a stellar talent from Canada: Naida Cole. Her initial release on Deutsche Grammophon, 7697-48021-2, contains performances of works by Gabriel Fauré, Emmanuel Chabrier, Erik Satie and Maurice Ravel. I find her playing to be passionate and truthful, with insight you don't often find with a performer of her age. It took the brain trust at Decca almost three years to release her second recording of Ravel, Bartok and Liszt on 2894724642.

These performers stand in stark contrast to so many of today's "hotshots", hailed by massive advertising and

promotion - not to mention HUGE budgets. I have little time for the Bis recording artist Freddy Kempf. He has shown me nothing in his Rachmaninoff, Schumann or Beethoven sonatas that warrants, at this time, further exploration on my part. Please don't get me started on the artistry(?) of Lang Lang. I am only just beginning to believe that, possibly, Arcadi Volodos might just have the talent he's touted to possess. Never let it be said I don't have a point-of-view.

These "stars" pale in comparison to their counterparts of yesteryear. Vladimir Horowitz ...there is so much to love about his performances and stellar musicianship. And if I don't mention my love for the great Martha Argerich, I might as well turn my fan club card in now. You should not miss the great Russian artistry of Maria Yudina and Tatiana Nikloyeva because they are so absolutely wonderful that to not explore them would be like living in a world with no sunshine. Of course, there is no doubting the fabulous talent of Sviatoslav Richter or Glenn Gould (I still haven't decided whether

Gould's first *Pictures at an Exhibition* is better than Richter's Bulgarian performance of 1958). I have great fondness for all those mentioned above - as well as the many I've saved for another time - but my first love remains the artists that came from the French School of Pianism.

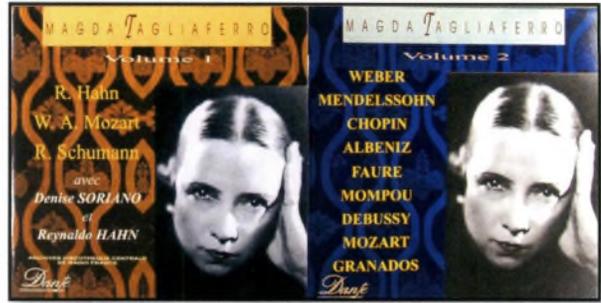
One of the fascinating points about these artists is



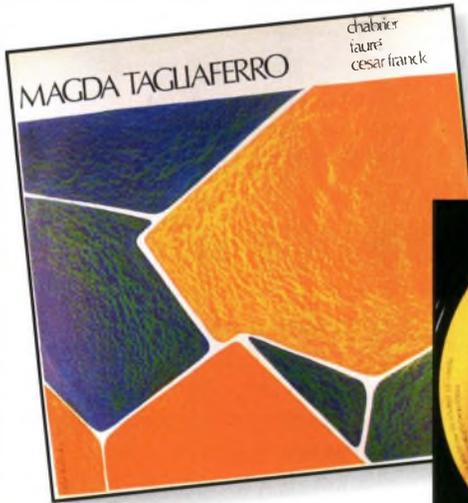
▶ that they were not, and not by a long shot, all French. Aline van Barentzen - an artist of magnificent talent that left us all too few recordings - was American. Lili Kraus was Hungarian. Clara Haskil was Rumanian. Then there's the legendary but mostly, and sadly unheard of Russian Youra Guller; try and find Nimbus NI 5030: *The Art of Youra Guller* on CD. There is also an LP that contains somewhat different repertoire. She was one of the finest pianists I've ever heard...and she only made four LPs in her lifetime.

And last, but by no means least, there is that great

Brazilian  
"firecracker"  
Magda  
Tagliaferro.



to the Paris Conservatoire and was almost immediately recognized for her talent by the director, Gabriel Fauré. In less than a year she was awarded the First Prize for talent by Saint-Saëns. She toured in France playing some of Fauré's works (with the composer in duets), became friends with the Casals-Cortot-Thibaud trio and not only played with them on occasion but socialized with them as well.



My first exposure to Magda was with a 2 CD set from French EMI, 7243 5 694726 2 7, that contained performances that spanned an era from 1954 in Paris to 1972 in Rio. These two CDs contain perhaps some of the most exciting playing I've ever heard, a hearty 154 minutes and 39 seconds of sheer magic. The set begins with Falla and continues with Granados, Albeniz, Villa-Lobos, Mompou, Debussy, Chopin and ends with the Schumann *Piano Sonata No. 1*. Magda could play it all. And she did. Her repertoire was very broad.

Magda Maria Yvonne Tagliaferro was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in January of 1893. Yes, her parents were French, however, she was Brazilian. Her very early training in Brazil was with her father and a Brazilian teacher. Magda's first public performance was at the age of nine in 1902. In 1906 she moved with her parents to France. Magda was admitted



Her history is fascinating and her personal life even more so. She had an international career in the 30's both as a soloist and with many orchestras. She socialized with Ravel, D'Indy, Poulenc and Milhaud. Reynaldo Hahn dedicated his piano concerto to Magda. Tagliaferro has the distinction of releasing the first world recording of a work by the Spanish composer Frederick Mompou and winning a Grand Prix du Disque. She also made the first recording of Fauré's *Ballade for piano and orchestra*.

Magda taught at the Paris Conservatoire, developed what is known as the "Tagliaferro Technique" (based on muscular relaxation of the hands and wrists) while putting ▶

► 'weight' on the top of the arm and using her elbows to remove some of the strain on her wrists. The war years were spent in Brazil where she began the Tagliaferro School. In the early 1950's, upon returning to France she created the Magda Tagliaferro International Piano Competition. At the age of 86 she "wowed" the audience at Carnegie hall in New York. Her last recital was in 1985, and sadly Magda was virtually blind, but walked on and off the stage unaccompanied. The following year saw the end of an era and her passing. There is much to know about this artist and much to learn and I suggest our readers explore the history of this important pianist. There are many websites dedicated to Magda and I suggest you do your own research and find the sites that interest you the most.

We are lucky to have a wealth of her craftsmanship available in all forms - 78's for those so inclined, as well as wonderful recordings on vinyl and a plethora of compact discs. Some of the CDs you're going to have to dig for as they won't be readily available at your local shop . . . but believe me, they are out there because I've picked many up in the last 12 months alone. I've been teased by many of my friends who are just waiting for me to get that 78 cartridge for my refurbished Thorens 124. Hold your breath guys . . . I am resisting that temptation - at least for now.

Magda's style is electrifying. Yes, she may embellish with respect to the specific notes the composer wrote, but what artist doesn't? As Agerich plays Agerich, no matter who the composer, Tagliaferro plays Tagliaferro. What she does, and this is apparent from the first time you hear her play almost anything, is to totally captivate and grab your attention - completely. When Tagliaferro is playing, there is nothing else you want to do but listen.

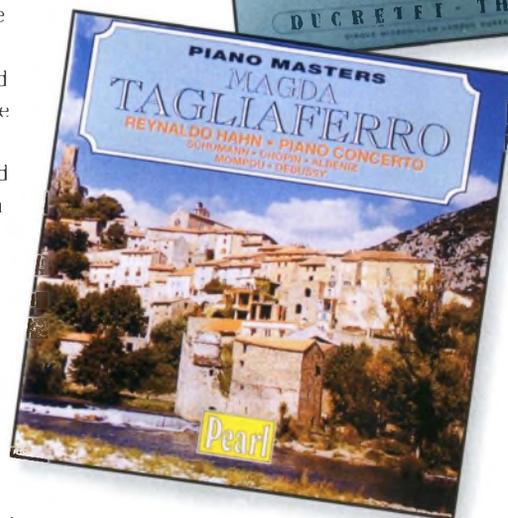
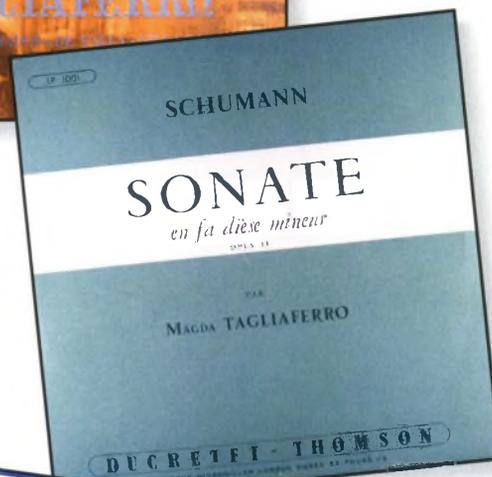
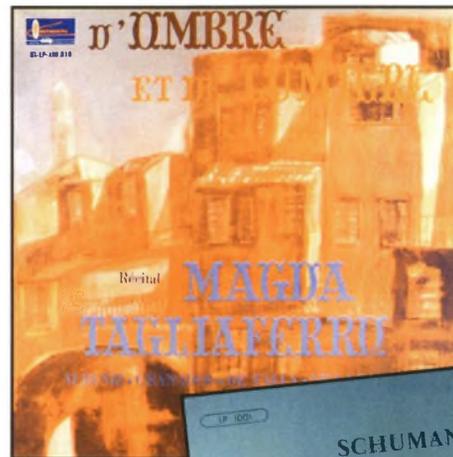
The French EMI CD I mentioned above begins with Manuel de Falla's *Darise Espagnole*, continues with *Darise du meunier* and we then move to Enrique Granados and the heat begins to get ratcheted up to ultra-high. She is just explosive! After hearing this compilation, and being the vinylholic I am, my attention turned to trying to obtain some of the unobtainable.

In the beginning I found three LPs: Erato, Jardin des arts series: EJA 12. (There is a stereo, EJA-S but the mono is the one to covet.) *Le piano Français de Chabrier a Debussy* which contains works from between these two composers by Déodat de Séverac, Reynaldo Hahn and Camille Saint-Saëns.

The playing is magnificent. The second, was the Schumann *Piano Sonata in F sharp Minor* on a 10" Ducretet-Thomson LP 1001 (yes, their first release). Schumann you say? Yessir. But like no other Schumann you've ever heard. Schumann the way he would like to have been played!

The third recording is a recital on 12" Ducretet-Thomson, but NOT the French release. Believe it or not, the better record, using French metal work, comes from a Brazilian pressing. DT LP-400.20 containing works by Albeniz., Granados, de Falla and Villa Lobos. I've compared the French issue (which was also later released in stereo . . . but not very good stereo) and there is no doubt to my ears how vastly superior this Brazilian pressing really is. This of course was a tip I received from a fellow collector and dealer and I am ever so grateful for this. Keep your eyes peeled on e-bay

as this Brazilian copy does turn up. In the early 1970's(?) Pathé Marconi re-released much of this material on the Trianon label, TRX 6131. The sound quality is quite

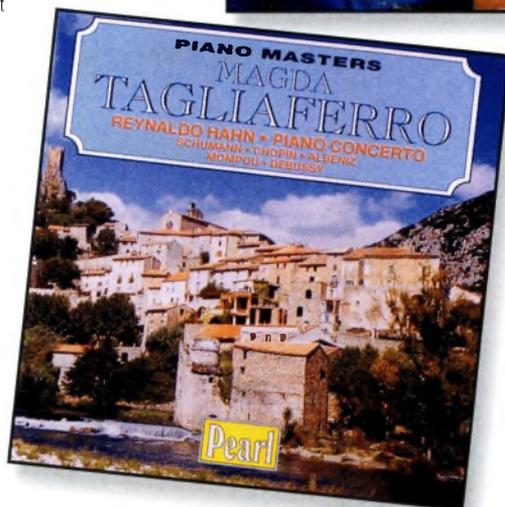


▶ excellent and I found a copy in San Francisco in August of 2002 for \$1.95.

There are a variety of recordings Magda made not only for Ducretet, but also in Brazil for London as well as Angel. Sadly these were never released for export so in order to obtain them on vinyl you're going to have to get very creative. To my knowledge there are two releases on Angel: S3CBX 483 (Villa Lobos) and a two record set S3CBX 484/5 of some of the finest Chopin I have ever heard. There are three London's I'm aware of - one contains works by Chabrier, Fauré and Franck; another is a complete Debussy recital and the third is titled *Danças Espanholas*. These were recorded and released in Brazil only in the mid 1970's and are highly sought after by collectors.

One of her most exciting records, again on the Brazilian label Copacabana COLP 12463 was released in 1980 and was a live performance given in Brazil in 1979. Side one contains performances of Chopin, Debussy, Hahn and Schumann. Side two contains the complete Schumann Carnival and is a masterpiece. The ambience of the crowd, the respect for the artist, the production is just a mesmerizing experience.

I've been able to obtain several compact disc collections, some containing performances I already have on vinyl but I thought I would share them with those readers who feel they should explore this great artist in that format. Aside from the EMI issue mentioned earlier, keep your eyes out for the following:



Philips 438 959 - three CDs (The early years) containing works by Liszt, Chopin, Von Weber, Saint-Saëns, Granados, Villa-Lobos, Brahms, Schubert and Schumann.

Dante has released two volumes:

volume one (HPC088) contains works by Hahn, Mozart (a *Violin sonata, K.454* with the great Denise Soriano, that will leave you breathless), Schumann and Hahn's concerto for piano and orchestra with Hahn conducting. Volume two (HPC095) contains works by Von Weber, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Albeniz, Fauré, Mompou, Debussy, Mozart *K.331* and Granados.

Pearl has released a wonderful disc on GEM 0157 containing some of the same works mentioned above . . . however this may be a more accessible disc for many. I have one disc from Brazil on the Master Class label - MC-014 - that has devoted a series to great Brazilian pianists. This disc contains new performances

(recorded in analogue in April 1970 in Rio [God . . . is there an LP of this?]) including works by Chabrier, Séverac, Hahn, Saint-Saëns, Debussy and Fauré.

Let me finish by saying that many of the performances on the compact discs ARE NOT repetitive. They are from different periods of her recording years. Magda Tagliaferro's repertoire is so vast and deep you will have, I believe, a truly enjoyable experience in exploring this exciting and superb musician.



# VALHALLA

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Roy Gregory Hi Fi + Issue 9

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## NORDOST CORPORATION

200, Homer Avenue,  
Ashland, MA 01721, USA.  
Tel: (508) 881 1116  
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