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Editorial

So, it's done – and we're living in Box City at our new address. Which means that finding anything, let alone something specific like a certain recording, presents a bit of a problem. Not as big a problem as sorting out the system, though. It's here, it's working and the good news is that the room sounds really nice and even. The bad news is that with wooden floors, bare walls and minimal furniture, the acoustic could best be described as challenging. In short, with so many reflective surfaces the imaging is a complete mess. What's more, having just escaped from a Room Tunes-ed lounge and promised a review kit free environment once the listening room is finished, reinstalling any kind of permanent acoustic solution could be tantamount to signing my own death warrant. So, rather than dying in horrible, sniveling agony I've arranged the imminent arrival of some Echo Busters, which I'm hoping might deliver a portable fix for the short term... We shall see.

What's more astonishing is the sheer quantity of equipment that one acquires as a reviewer. How many speakers do you think we moved? 22 pairs! Some of which I had no idea were still around. Now some of you might think that upwards of ten pairs of free speakers would be great. But just stop to consider the following: you don't get to choose them, the ones you really like always get collected, you have to store them and last but not least, you can't even sell them because they belong to somebody else. Suddenly the idea starts to lose its appeal, huh? And I haven't even started on amps or turntables.

Time for a clearout methinks. Those taking advantage of the extremely reasonable terms formerly offered by the Gregory Hi-Fi Warehouse can expect a letter forthwith...



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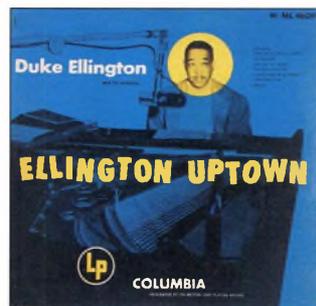
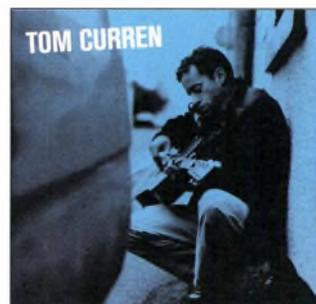
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Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

If you've read any of my scribblings over the past 175 years or so, you'll perhaps know the importance I place on getting volume levels right. For your hi-fi system to sound at its best, you've got to play it at the optimum volume level. Put simply, there's a volume level at which the whole sonic picture snaps into focus. Of course, this not a fixed thing - it depends heavily on the music and recording, your room, and your hi-fi system.

But what is the 'right' volume?

Surely it's all down to personal taste? Ultimately that's true; the optimum level is a matter of opinion. Nevertheless, if you know anything about the way the human ear works - its logarithmic sensitivity curve and changing frequency response with loudness - you'll appreciate that there is a volume setting that produces subjectively better dynamic range, clarity, and signal-to-noise. Exciting, huh?

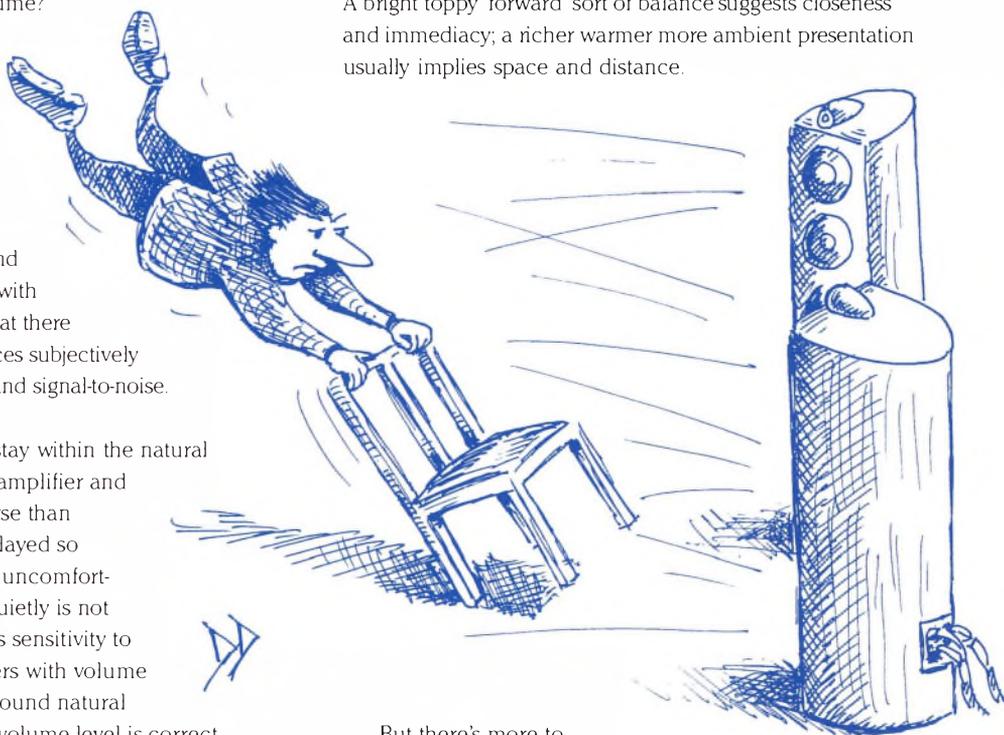
First off, it's important to stay within the natural dynamic capabilities of your amplifier and speakers. There's nothing worse than hearing a hi-fi system being played so loudly it sounds strained and uncomfortable. But playing music too quietly is not very satisfying either. The ear's sensitivity to high and low frequencies alters with volume level. So the music will only sound natural and well balanced when the volume level is correct.

But - how do you determine the optimum volume level? Firstly, you need to take into account the acoustical qualities of the recording being played. For example, a spacious balance that puts the musicians at a distance in a large reverberant acoustic often benefits from being played at a slightly reduced volume level - doing so enhances the subjective impression of space, depth, and distance.

This ties in with our real-world experience when sound is heard from a seat in a large hall. Conversely, a close dry recording that presents voices and instruments with greater

forwardness generally requires an increase in volume level. This aids the impression of impact and immediacy, mimicking what happens in real situations where music is heard close up in a dry acoustic.

When you understand this, and set an appropriate volume level, you create a more truthful and realistic illusion of real people playing in a convincing and believable acoustic space. Similar 'rules' apply regarding tonal balance. A bright topky 'forward' sort of balance suggests closeness and immediacy; a richer warmer more ambient presentation usually implies space and distance.



But there's more to it than that. Good live acoustic sound has a presence and projection that hi-fi struggles to imitate. Some while back, I went to a Live versus Recorded comparison organised by a hi-fi manufacturer. The music being recorded was small in scale - just clarinet and piano - without massive dynamic contrasts. The idea was to hear the music live, then listen to it reproduced via various amplifiers and loudspeakers.

Given that the music being recorded was not ambitious in scale or frequency range, you'd probably think it

▶ would be easy for a good hi-fi system to convincingly recreate the sonic impression of clarinet and piano. Yet this was not the case. Far from it! Try as they might, none of the hi-fi systems we tried that day could match the sheer fullness and solidity of the live sound. Quite simply, the live sound had an easy effortless projection that was painfully absent from the reproduced version.

Live, the sound had been full and 'big' without being the least bit loud. It hadn't been the least bit impressive or imposing. Yet when we went to the control room to hear a playback, the sound seemed emasculated – as though the instruments were 'small' and very far away. Volume levels were increased to try and replicate the sense of scale we'd all experienced in the hall.

But then the sound took on an unpleasant 'loud' quality – it seemed pushy and aggressive by comparison to the smooth effortless ease of the instruments live. Worse, increasing volume levels distorted the dynamic relationship between clarinet and piano. Suddenly there were balance problems between the two instruments. The clarinet – so smooth and velvety live – started to 'hoot' on the high notes, while the piano tone hardened noticeably in climaxes.

Although we were using a hi-fi system costing tens of thousands of pounds, and studio master tapes as our source material, the reproduced sound lacked the easy effortless realism of the live experience. It was enjoyable and pleasant providing the volume was not increased beyond reasonable bounds, but it failed to recreate the impression of real people in a real acoustic making music together.

Clearly, apparent loudness is a function of sound quality. There is, if you like, a Factor X - an ingredient or quality that creates a subjective impression of presence and solidity. If this ingredient is lacking, then the natural tonal body and presence one hears from live instruments and voices will be compromised. To make up for what's missing, you can try increasing volume levels. But this only falsifies things more.

If I learnt anything that day, it was that massive amounts of power doth not a big sound make. It confirmed something I realised a long time ago - that good hi-fi systems somehow have to create a big, full, strongly-projected sonic impression without having to rely on high decibel levels. Of course power, and the ability to encompass wide dynamic extremes, is important. But more important is the subjective ability to sound big.

Something I've noticed with my own hi-fi system, as it's got better and better over the years, is that I don't have to play things as loudly as I once did to create a big room-filling sound. The sound I get is certainly loud subjectively – climaxes have plenty of power and presence – but it isn't that 'loud' in terms of actual decibels. This is a crucial distinction to grasp, so let me try and enlarge on it.

I've lived at the same address for a little over 25 years.

Getting personal...

So, the question is; do certain parts of a hi-fi system determine its' ability to create a big strongly-projected sound? If so, which piece? Alas, there's no magic fix. Inevitably, it's a team effort. But putting names to faces, I have to say that Chord's Blu CD Transport and DAC-64 digital to analogue converter played a pivotal role in creating the subjective impression of greater power and projection in my own system. When I've returned to other lesser CD players, it's been something a shock to register the way the sound suddenly seems to shrink. Suddenly, the music loses much of its power and ease.

Naturally, having a good amplifier and efficient speakers also helps. I've actually used the same loudspeakers for over 15 years now – Impulse H-1 Horns – and these create a big sound by virtue of being horn loaded. But even the H-1s benefit from the right partnering equipment. Having used the superb Consonance Cyber 222/800pre-power combination for the past few months, I have to acknowledge the enormous contribution they've made in the areas discussed in this article. They give a really big, powerful sound that has an impressive sense of scale and presence. You can hear it the moment you switch on and it often sets your mind to thinking...

So, virtually all my many different hi-fi systems have been heard in the same room. Of course I can't claim to remember exactly how a system I had (say) 20 years ago sounded. But something I do recall is how loud and clear the music used to sound, back in the 1980s, when I listened from the upstairs hallway.

Indeed, I used to half-seriously joke that my hi-fi sounded better when you listened to it from the upstairs loo than the living room! Naturally, there was some loss of volume level as you moved from the living room to the upstairs hallway. But the reduction was surprisingly small. At the time I placed no value on this – it was simply a fact; the way things were.

Now the drop in volume level as you move upstairs is very noticeable, and I feel this is very significant. Why? Because it confirms that I'm not actually playing the music as loudly as I did (say) ten or fifteen years ago. One pointer to this is the way that background noise – for example, tape hiss from older analogue recordings – is nowadays only rarely apparent. Another is – my neighbours haven't complained!

Of course, background noise is a relative thing – if a recording really is hissy you'll hear hiss. But generally ▶



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▶ speaking, I find that most recordings – even pre Dolby analogue material – have little or no audible tape hiss. If you understand the human ear's logarithmic response to level, you'll realise that playing music at a lower volume puts background noise on the steeper part of the hearing curve, making it less audible.

Confused? Perhaps this little experiment will illustrate the point I'm trying to make. Take a recording that has a degree of background noise, and choose a volume level that makes the noise audible. Now decrease the volume slightly, and notice what happens. You should find that background noise is more affected by slight reductions in volume than the music itself.

Of course, this is an illusion; there is no difference, since the relationship between music signal and noise is a fixed one. But subjectively, the annoyance value of noise is more affected by changes of volume than the music. Why? Because noise (being lower in level than the music) is always on the steeper part of the aural listening curve where the ear is more sensitive to changes in level.

Ultimately, you should be able to find a point where a further slight decrease in volume level makes the hiss disappear altogether. Find this point, and then increase the volume by a notch so that the hiss becomes audible again. Notice how little difference this change in volume makes to the loudness of the music – by comparison to the effect it has on noise levels it should be quite tiny.

When you play music very loudly, you force the ear to operate on the upper part of the listening curve, which is really flattening out. This means that linear increases in volume level subjectively register as smaller and smaller changes in actual loudness. This explains what happens when a very loud rock concert is experienced live; beyond a certain point the ear fails to register increases in loudness because its response curve flattens out as the threshold of pain (120dB) is reached. Self-preservation setting in or just another case of evolution? Mind you, whether that evolution is taking place upon the stage or within the audience – now that's a moot point! ▶+

Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

On the face of it, DualDisc is the perfect product for the music retailer. It is a one disc, many formats concept; with CD on one side and DVD on the other. It has also been rolled-out stealthily, in part because the customer doesn't need to know about the disc, just that it plays on their players.

Trouble is that that's the pivotal point; can DualDisc play on all sorts of players? The disc itself is thicker than the standard CD or DVD blank. Although it is thin enough to stay within the broadest definition of Red Book CD standards, it is possibly too thick for some players. Hardware manufacturers have been quick to issue notices to warn people of the dangers of using DualDisc with their disc-spinners.

DualDiscs have already been launched in America and have just arrived in Europe. So far, it's still too early to say how compatible the discs are. Manufacturers of players are

naturally cautious of recommending something that may not work in their players, because the likelihood is that people will lay the blame at the feet of the player, not the disc. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence from purchasers of the discs suggest there is greater compatibility than the likes of Linn and Marantz suggest. (AG noted significant rejection rates with the first batch of discs when tested across a whole range of players ranging from in-car and table-top to high-end audiophile. Ed.)

All of this is academic, however. I believe DualDisc will fail. Here's why. Put simply, no-one's that interested. If you want the album, you buy the CD; if you want the music videos, you buy the DVD. A small percentage of the buying public might want the one disc to do all things, but suddenly this poses a problem for the store – it means less sales, not more. Whereas, a fan today will happily buy two discs for two different uses, they will end up paying slightly more ▶

Walrus

11 New Quebec St, London W1



This ad features a few new products we're excited about, as well as a couple of old favourites (which we're still excited by even after all this time!) From top right, going anticlockwise, first off are the Anthony Gallo Reference 3 loudspeakers (£2400/pr). You can't tell from the picture, but these are actually very compact (about 3 feet tall) but have the most amazing bass extension and a very open sound. Next, the brand new Musical Fidelity A5 series amplifier (250W/ch) and CD player, at £1499 each, are superb value. They are designed to be better, and cost less, than the popular 308 series, and don't even feel embarrassed in the company of the famous Nuvista and Trivista series. The CD even features a valve output stage, just like the late lamented Trivista DAC! The Duevel Bella Lunas (£3160 to £4160/pr dependent on finish) need no introduction. This superb Omni design, featured at the recent Heathrow Show, should be on everyone's shortlist. Origin Live's new Sovereign turntable (£3850 plus arm) sets new, even higher standards for this already envied manufacturer whose decks already receive huge acclaim from the press. Next up is something we thought we'd never see - a valve / transistor hybrid power amp from Tom Evans, famous for their Groove phono stage and Vibe preamp. The Linear A (£3999) is a truly innovative design which draws on the strengths of both technologies to give transistor speed and control with valve naturalness and texture, another milestone for Tom! Many people will still remember the success we had with the Magneplanar MG 1.6 speakers at the show. These flat non-electrostatic panels with ribbon tweeters produce the most amazingly believable soundstage, all for the direct import no-middleman price of £1500/pr. The new Duevel Shuttle-Disk rechargeable battery CD player (also £1500) is on permanent demo - bring your own CDs and be pleasantly surprised! Lastly, we had to squeeze it in, what we regard as probably the finest all round (pardon the pun) turntable in the world, the Brinkmann LaGrange with the Brinkmann 10.5 tonearm (£8395 in total), a truly staggering combination.



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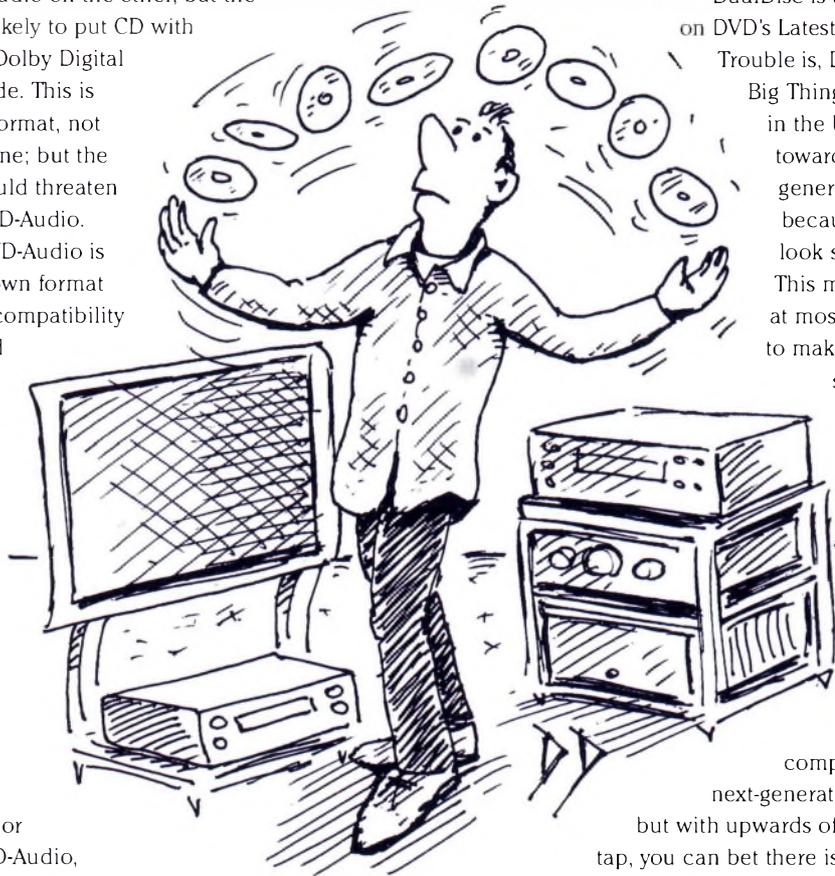
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▶ for one disc – but slightly less than they would for buying two – to keep the stores happy with single inventory stocking policies. This makes little real financial sense.

Worse, the scope offered to the software company when putting together a DualDisc is so broad that it cheapens the concept. All that's required of the DVD layer is the a slightly better version of the CD track. So, it's entirely possible to have a 44kHz PCM track on the CD side, and 48kHz on the DVD side. You may be holding out for a disc with the CD soundtrack on one side and DVD-Audio on the other, but the reality is more likely to put CD with something like Dolby Digital 2.0 on the flipside. This is a compromise format, not an audiophile one; but the compromise could threaten the future of DVD-Audio. Here's why – DVD-Audio is not the best-known format around and its compatibility is strictly limited (unlike SACD, it has no CD playing layer). If a disc manufacturer can get away with placing something less profound and expensive than DVD-Audio on the DVD layer of a DualDisc, they'll do it.

This is a major set back for DVD-Audio, which needs all the help it can get, especially in the UK. The lines between DVD-Video and DVD-Audio are blurred to the greater public, with many people thinking a DVD-Audio disc is merely a music DVD. This does nothing to differentiate DVD-Audio as a separate format in it's own right. Unfortunately, with the DVD-Audio format in a troubled state, DualDisc gets in by the back door... but is that really much more than a cat-flap? People don't buy DVD-Audio discs because they aren't really bothered, not because of incompatibility. Here's the flaw in the logic; if a format offers so much for the listener, people will put up with the hardship of new purchases to get that format. Witness the resurgence

in vinyl sales, even among those born long after vinyl was written off. It would be oh so easy for a bedroom DJ to buy a couple of Pioneer CD scratch decks and a mixer, so why do these people seek out Technics 1200's and a crop of 12" singles? If DVD-Audio offered something substantial to the mass market, we'd have hundreds of DVD-Audio discs in every HMV, every Virgin, even every WHSmith. We don't. Why should we expect people who didn't want DVD-Audio to want DualDisc?



DualDisc is also trying to cash in on DVD's Latest Big Thing cachet.

Trouble is, DVD ain't the Latest Big Thing anymore. People in the US and Japan look toward forthcoming next-generation launches because their DVDs don't look so hot next to HDTV. This means DualDisc has at most three or four years to make its mark before it starts to look like it is piggy-backed on a old format, and the words 'cynical marketing ploy' get bandied about. Unfortunately, there's no automatic audiophile component to the next-generation formats as yet, but with upwards of 100GB storage on tap, you can bet there is back room interest.

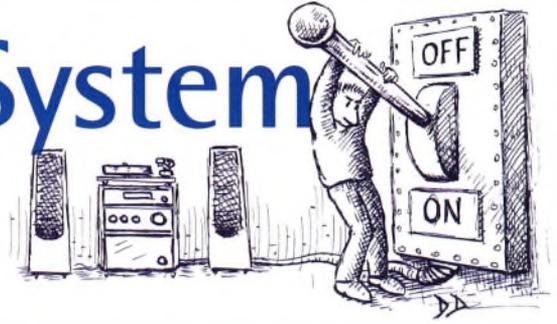
In fairness, it's far too early to discuss the likes of HD-DVD or Blu-Ray as yet. Although the prototypes of both have been shown to the public, the reality is neither is likely to appear for a year or two, and so far the interest in the formats has been strictly from the home cinema and computer markets.

I think there's a place for high-definition audio, but it isn't on DualDisc. Those who want the standard version should buy the CD: those who want the deluxe version with all the rockumentaries and alternate endings should buy the music DVD and those who want the best possible sound should buy the LP. This is all just a ploy to keep people buying polycarbonate in a downloading world. Don't buy into it!



Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



Let's talk about phase . . .

A familiar enough subject in the world of hi-fi, you might well think, and one whose understanding is central to achieving good system performance. More so indeed, than you might realise. You see, the phases I'm talking about aren't electrical or physical – and they certainly aren't absolute. In fact, they're entirely personal.

It was reading RSF's Dorian review (see this issue's History Man column) that set me to thinking. In it, he talks about the various phases of cartridge sound that he's been through – imaging, detail, dynamics and just about anything else you can think of. It's a familiar syndrome to a lot of us, I'm sure, as our tastes and systems evolve. The question is, is it any more than that? Is it just a succession of knee-jerk responses to what went before, or is it part of a wider perception, something which if understood might actually prove informative and useful?

Well, cartridges are transducers, so they have more character and greater differences between examples than other products, such as amplifiers – at least on the surface. They are very much a matter of taste and as such, they offer us an opportunity to subtly (or not so subtly) bend the system to our own personal desires. In this respect they are much like speakers. They also represent a discrete purchase. A new one arrives and simply replaces the older model. There's no dialectic involved – more coup d'etat! Or is there? You see, the more I think about it, the more I conclude that in fact, our tastes, our systems, our prejudices constantly evolve. Our product purchases are each simply a snap-shot in time. Just as Richard can identify specific trends represented by his various cartridge purchases, I can identify distinct phases in the development and shaping of my system(s) as a whole.

The only difference is that the system evolves more slowly over time, without the punctuation provided by the moment of purchase/ installation.

Looking back, I can identify clear phases (or ages of "enlightenment") in my hi-fi existence. Each one promised Nirvana, each has been superceded. It all started with rhythm and timing; no real surprises there then. Historical evidence far more dramatic than the mere shape of the hi-fi industry demonstrates just how successful and attractive a simple, dumbed down solution can be. Pick a cause

(or target), any one will do just so long as it's visible (audible) and you can hang everything on it. A good story and a simple, easily demonstrated idea go a long way to convince a customer, especially one who is looking for answers. The only problem is when the curtain slips and they realise that there's actually much more going on behind it. For me that happened in my first ever Absolute Sounds demonstration, when I suddenly became aware of the fact that stereo imaging not only existed but was also important to the experience as a whole.

That did produce a knee-jerk reaction, and for several years I pursued imaging with a dedication that bordered on religious mania. It too is an attractive and easily appreciated virtue. And, just like rhythm and timing, if pursued to the exclusion of all else, it leads to a distorted worldview. In exactly the same way that a system can enhance the rhythmic aspects in its reproduction of music, becoming an active participant in the process and imposing its own rationale rather than the one encapsulated in the recording, imaging can be enhanced and exaggerated. The problem is that doing so bends everything else out of shape. In the same way that some people never need or want to move beyond rhythm and timing, some imaging freaks never get over the purely spatial aspects of musical reproduction. But for me, when the pursuit of ever greater expanses of acoustic space started to interfere with the other elements that separate music from noise (including rhythm and timing) it taught me a lesson; transparency isn't an end in itself, but must be linked to resolution.

With resolution comes information and it's not long before you realise that the important thing about information is not just the data itself but the order it's arranged in and the proper internal proportions between the parts. Suddenly, imaging, rhythm and timing all become sub-sets in a greater whole, the one necessary to the others, all necessary to that whole. Intellectually speaking it's an attractive thesis (like a lot of closed systems). The problem was that in this case the music was simply bursting to escape!

Resolution and order are all very well, but they impose their own constraints. Just listen to a classic late-'80's

▶ system with ruler flat speakers whose heavy drivers, wide bandwidth and overall inefficiency dictated the sort of solid-state power more appropriate to a motor vehicle than a hi-fi system. The resulting sound was, unsurprisingly, flat and lifeless, despite being crystal clear and lifeless. It's a developmental cul-de-sac that much of the highest-end is only just emerging from. But while the industry fell in love with metal drivers and obsessed about getting ever more bass out of ever-smaller speakers, I'd set off on a quest for the dynamics I needed to graft to my sense of musical organisation and resolution. Something was out of kilter and to me, the lack of dynamics was the most obvious failing.

From there it was a direct path through high-efficiency systems back to low colouration and instrumental character. The lesson as always involves several truisms, of which the most obvious concerns babies and bathwater. My current stance, the phase I'm currently occupying is perhaps best described as the "building-block" or "energy parcel" model. The overriding element is the notion of balance, the correct relationship and proportion between the inner elements of the music. To achieve this, each one must be correct in its fundamental musical spectrum, the actual energy that makes it up. Start thinking at this level and you soon realise that the energy generated by an instrument defines the colour and shape, duration, magnitude and character of a note. Correctly placed it also defines its location in space and time, reconstituting the temporal framework on which the music's structure hangs. We're back to an all embracing thesis, but this one is at last more inclusive and holistic.

Looking at this process in terms of phases, it's easy to define the changes in philosophical direction. I can even couple them to the influence of specific equipment: the Magneplanar MG3a, the Jadis JA30 and more recently the Connoisseur 4.0 pre-amp and the Zanden CD player. You might even add to that list, in an example of circular congruence, the Jadis DA88S reviewed in this issue. But the identification of individual equipment is less important than appreciating the lessons that it taught, which often took a lot longer than buying it (or reviewing it) in the first place. Yes, you get the odd "Eureka!" moment; Take the Absolute Sounds experience – or the Connoisseur 4.0. But generally your understanding develops more gradually, the odd revelation really being a case of dimly discerned

parts finally falling into place. Which is where the notion of phase comes in. In as much as your current fascination is easy to identify, it also reveals those areas open to potential neglect. Ask yourself what your pursuit of imaging is actually costing, what that trip-hammer beat obscures, and you'll be far further along the road to achieving balance. Following my own history, you can see how each switch in emphasis has been to some extent, an over compensation. Now, imaging onwards I'd argue that the extent of the error has diminished through each phase (well, I would, wouldn't I?)



producing something akin to balance by grafting on greater understanding as I've travelled. Thus, I've tended to build on and incorporate experience rather than discarding it and moving on to something new.

Don't get the idea that there's any self-congratulation going on here. The interest is in the process and what we can learn from it. The answer is: a great deal more if we understand it. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and always 20x20. Perhaps we should try looking sideways, or even backwards occasionally, rather than simply charging full-bore for the latest object of desire.



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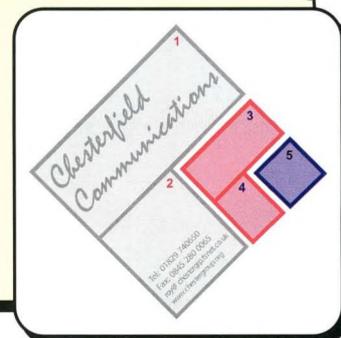
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Incoming!

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

Dear Sir,

Kudos on the Van den Hul interview, it made me want to go out and buy all his cartridges! Now, I have no idea if Decca LPs really need a different set up or whether you can make a bespoke cartridge for a customer after a single phone call, but, hey, if a professorial Dutchman sitting in a collegiate mess says so, it must be so, I am sold. I was also intrigued by his comments on reel to reel tape, which I too think is a far better way to enjoy analogue sound.

Kind regards,

Ali Elam

(best kind of reader: buys each issue at retail for \$10)
New York City
Via e-mail

Dear Sir,

I have a couple of simple questions that I hope you can help me with.

The background is that I currently have a set of speakers (Keltiks) on spikes going through holes in a wooden floor sitting on concrete plinths. I am thinking of upgrading to, say, B&W802D's and do not really want to drill even more holes. I have read an article in your magazine talking about CeraPuc/Base feet and know that there are other bases claiming to improve the sound.

My questions are:

- Are the improvements in sound quality relative to spikes into wood or relative to any form of speaker platform, e.g. concrete?

- Given that I probably have to go down this route, what have you found to be the best product? (This may not suite you to print because of advertising/and difficulty in like for like but if you can guide me)

Many thanks

Graeme Anderson

Via e-mail

Hoe topical. Having just moved into a new home with wooden floors in place of the previous concrete ones, I am facing exactly the same question. Firm recommendations are impossible because they will vary with speaker and specific

environment. At its simplest, the solution could consist of cups or discs beneath the speaker spikes and that should be your de-facto reference. Against that you should consider either Cerabase or CeraPuc feet, either of which are excellent. Inevitably, the more expensive option (in the shape of the Bases) is superior, and given the weight of 802Ds, also more appropriate. Titanium Pulsar Points are the other serious option when it comes to high-tech feet. However, a more cost-effective possibility is available mail-order from hififorsale.com in the shape of RDC cups and cones. I believe they also stock the Titanium Pulsar Points so this would be a good place to start. On a try before you buy programme.

If you are coming from rigidly mounted Keltics then suspension platforms (Townshend or Voodoc) might be a step too far, but have you considered a hardwood plinth spiked through the existing holes? Chopping boards seem surprisingly affordable compared to hi-fi. My final suggestion would be the Stillpoints component stands (available from TACT Audio). Look at the Montreal show report for details, but they produced a seriously impressive result there under the Verity Audio speakers. Ed

Comments on Dynavector P75

12 April 2005

Dear Sir,

Please allow a comment on Jason Hectors review of Dynavector P75 Phono-stage back in issue 30 of hi>fi+.

First things first - I fully agree with his overall praise of this excellent little amplifier.

Secondly, I would also characterize the sound coming through it as devoid of additives, or in JH's words: "it lacks background noise; it lacks a constrained dynamic range; it lacks mechanical timing".

It is like something "sticky" has been removed from the notes (and hence the silence between them). Left behind is a truly neutral, stable sound - no flirting with the audience, no easy-points taken, but very, very satisfying listening.

However, as Jason Hector puts it, "the Dynavector stage has a further trick up its sleeve", where the P75 acts as a "current amplifier". (I guess this is quite similar to a 47Lab phono-stage with its peculiar design?)



► It is at this point my opinions differ a bit from Jason Hectors:

He describes the sound as quite similar in character, only better on most accounts. I think the neutrality is still there, and certainly nothing "sticky" adheres to the notes, but it is still like a totally different amplifier!

The soundstage has increased in depth - up-front figures take two steps in front of the loudspeakers, and in a high quality recording with real depth information there is a stunning sense of "being there" as the rear wall vanishes into thin air and instead you suddenly are at The Pawnshop, without even paying the entrance fee. (We must discuss your source of free vinyl! Ed.)

This opening-up of the scene is not at the cost of a more diffuse instrumentation. On the contrary, each and every participant is delineated very, very realistically with instruments not only as "dots" in space, but as spheres, occupying a "real" volume.

Jason Hector made a vague promise about an audition of the P75 in a different combination, and that would be interesting. My own combination is a bit too close to Hectors to deduce anything from: a Dynavector Karat DV17MkII mounted in a Mørch DP6 12" arm on a custom made record player, Aleph pre- and amplifiers.

Finally, I had a tube-equipped RIAA amplifier of good reputation before, but I must emphasize this - it is light-years between them!

Yours sincerely

Jan Kährström

Via e-mail

Glad you like the P75. I can understand your thoughts. The P75 is a far better phono-stage in phono-enhance mode than in normal mode and this is especially true with the Dynavector cartridges that have the ideal electrical output characteristics. I think we actually agree on this and perhaps we have a slight misunderstanding through my use (misuse?) of the English language. What I was really trying to get across is that while the P75 in phono-enhance is better than in standard mode it still offers a similar "type" of sound. Perhaps this has caused the misunderstanding?

I also try to be balanced with my reviewing and so I tend to avoid heaping too much praise on a product without hearing it in a number of systems. I now have that experience with the P75 and I might be tempted to strengthen the phono-enhance part of the review. That said, with some cartridges the phono-enhance delivers less gain and with the Dynavector cartridges noise is increased so all is not perfect. But as I said in the review, if you happen to have a suitable cartridge then the P75 is almost impossible to beat without spending a lot more money.

Regards

Jason Hector

Dear Jason Hector,

In issue # 30 I read with great interest your review of the Dynavector P75 Phono-stage. As is usually the case with hi-fi+ reviews, it was instructive both in terms of technical details and sound impressions. Because I am in the process of replacing my old Audible Illusions M3 pre-amp with another device (probably an Audio Valve Eklipse, but in all cases a valve-based model) without phono-stage, I am eagerly reading all phonostage reviews I can find. Therefore I have the following questions:

1) After having praised the P75 for relaxedness and accuracy (which are qualities I value very highly) you rightly note that trying it with a Dynavector cartridge was "home territory", and add that "you can expect an away match in a forthcoming issue." When will that be? I am waiting ...

2) The Phono Enhancer trick sounds most interesting. But possibly an "away match" is even more needed in this case? Currently I use a Transfiguration Esprit (high-output MC) on my Kuzma Stabi player. Do you think the Phono Enhancer will work its magic also with a Transfiguration Spirit (or other non-Dynavector cartridges)?

3) Comparing the P75 with the many other phonostages that have been evaluated in hi-fi+ lately, I find the most attractive to be the Trichord Delphini (review by Dave Davies in # 31), although I realise it comes at double the price. It should be better, then, but how much and in what way? How would you compare the two?

4) On a general note: What would be the combined wisdom of hi-fi+ in the case of the many phono-stages that you have reviewed over years? Judging from how you introduce the reviews, from time to time I get the impression that you have been embarking on a comparative project that perhaps might result in a new "award class" or something similar through which an overview might be given. I am not proposing a "recommended components list" (nor any kind of rating system!), but I sure would like to read an overview article for each component category once in a while, in fact that would be even more interesting than the annual award presentations. At least for us who live in a country with less than half the population of London, and without audiophilia shops that sell equipment they do not also import.)

Best regards,

Stener Ekern

Oslo, Norway

Via e-mail

Dear Sir,

I am in a real state!!!! I have been given a box containing around 20 issues of your fine magazine and have had my eyes opened to all sorts of sonic possibilities that have left me in a spin (no pun intended!).



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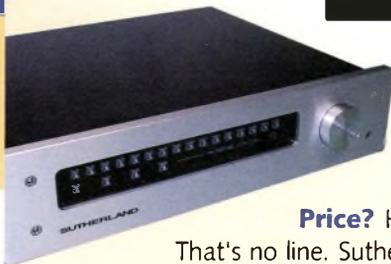
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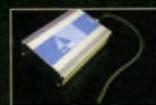
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► This has come at a bad time as the upgrade bug has bitten. I have recently bought the upsampler board for my AH! Njoe Tjoeb (have you ever reviewed this mighty spinner?) and am looking for the next tweak.

I noticed a couple of reviews with regards to isolation platforms/devices, which I found very interesting, and have therefore embarked on a voyage of discovery funded by a budget of under £5. So I have just thrown a trio of LR 20 batteries (cheapo brand) under my amp and another trio under the CD player, tiny end up. Amazingly they have helped open up the sound another notch.

Does this mean that everything makes a difference? Would Duracell sound better than Rayovac? Will Nordost bring out their own? Is a rechargeable battery better long term, as they can be recharged and used again elsewhere if a proper set of isolation units are purchased? Has Jimmy Hughes already gone down this route in secret?

Next up a trio of golf balls in ceramic eggcups, then marbles held inside a pair of opposing Polo mints... aaaghhh!!! Where will it end?

If I find out anything more perhaps the sanitorium will lend me a crayon to write another letter to you.

Yours sincerely and fraying at the edges,

Paul Bell

PS. If you decide to publish this disguise my name in case my wife reads it!!

Dear Sir,

Just as a follow up to the last email I sent with regards to the batteries as isolation units -

Firstly, they do work, albeit to an extent which, although easily noticeable, I cannot compare to proper units. I am hearing extra instruments in Vernon Reid's fairly densely populated *Mistaken Identity* CD that slipped past unnoticed before.

Secondly, it would be interesting to run the letter and see how many folk try it for themselves and notice any change.

Perhaps there is a psychological element to a lot of this tweaking, in so far as doing anything to a system must by logic change it, therefore the decoding of the information entering the brain is coloured by the knowledge of the tweak.

That's it for now. The men with the white coats are ready and waiting at the door.

Yours once more sincerely,

Paul Bell

Via e-mail

Personally, I'm more surprised if things don't make a difference! The only question is whether the change is a step

forwards, sideways or backwards.

I well remember Hi-Fi Answers running an extended series of articles by Peter Turner in which he constructed a whole range of Turner-Table record-player supports from slabs of various materials (Chipboard, MDF etc) perched on three turned wood drawer knobs, all purchased from his local DIY shop. His budget was about the same as yours.

Many isolation products are essentially simple. It's turning them into a product, packaging them and adding margins that makes them expensive. Note how many manufacturers make claims regarding "special" materials or secret mechanical relationships in an attempt to short-circuit the spirit of adventure. If you can forego the finish and label, then assuming the thinking is similar, you should be able to achieve some fairly impressive results by tinkering at home. Welcome to a long and (sometimes) illustrious hi-fi tradition. Ed.

Dear Sir,

Unless I am not understanding this correctly (Issue # 35 page 53, article entitled Border Patrol S20 SE Power Amp written by Jason Kennedy...)

On page 55 Jason states..."It reminds you of why Quicksilver was such a good name for a valve amp brand: not such a great name that the company still exists, but you can't rely on a name alone."

That is an interesting statement and I think I know what it means but maybe I'm wrong ...

Quicksilver is very alive and very well and I can assure you of that ...I THINK! I do believe it was Mike Sanders and Quicksilver Audio that I just sent a package to the other day and I think it was Mike Sanders and Quicksilver Audio that I spoke to last week on the phone (775) 825 - 1514... I dare say that one might think that he is out of business, simply because rarely does one need to contact him because rarely does one have a problem with any of his products. You should see his new triode 6C33C – actually, you should hear this unbelievable product.

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Sincerely,

Mike Klementovich

Quicksilver Owner and Lover!

Via e-mail

Just in case anybody missed our correction in Issue 37, we're only too happy to repeat that our diagnosis was distinctly premature; Quicksilver are indeed alive and kicking and we may well be receiving product for review. Ed.



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What we learnt today... Le Festival Son & Image, Montreal

words by Roy Gregory, pictures by Richard S. Foster

So, what DID we learn today?

We learnt that Montreal is a great place for a hi-fi show.

This is the same show that RSF reported on so enthusiastically last year, and even allowing for the fact that he's a renowned "homer" (as our footballing friends would have it) there's enough going on in Canada to encourage an exploratory visit. Not only that, but every time someone publishes a list of the top-ten cities in the world, Montreal is at or near the top. I came, I saw and I'm mighty glad that I did. This is indeed a wonderful city to visit, even if she's not looking her best in early April. The cocoon of winter snow has only just retreated, leaving little dunes of detritus in corners and against the fences. But we were blessed with unseasonal sunshine that brought the natives out in droves to simply sit and bask in the unaccustomed warmth. While exhibitors laboured to prepare systems and rooms, we strolled the old town and drank in the atmosphere.

But back at the business end, laboured was the word. The show was split across two, modern hotels, the high-rise Delta and the conferencing suite at the neighboring Holiday Inn, located right at the heart of the town. With many exhibitors unable to access their rooms for set-up on the Thursday until 2PM, it was late nights all round. Friday ran from nine in the morning until nine at night, with Saturday running ten 'til seven. Ten 'til five on

the Sunday followed by breakdown meant some pretty shattered expressions by the end of the show – not that the enthusiastic visitors appeared to notice.

The rooms themselves were far larger than the bedrooms we're used to seeing in the UK, with asymmetrical shaping presenting an interesting challenge that many exhibitors were able to overcome – just so long as they weren't expecting deep, deep bass of any real quality. Access was good too, an express lift carrying the crowds up to the ninth floor from which they could meander slowly down through the show, while the more mundane organisational tasks were handled with unobtrusive confidence. Size wise, the show was about the size of Bristol in terms of exhibitor numbers, although the quality of the exhibitors was significantly higher, with every major US brand represented – as well as a few I'd never heard of. And that's before we get to the Canadians and Chinese!

With a great location, a city full of varied influence, eating opportunities and great shopping, this is definitely a show to visit. With a host of eclectic and unusual exhibitors (at least as far as we Europeans are concerned) as well as plenty to keep the non hi-fi members of the family engaged, this is a great show to visit, especially with the dollar the way it is. Now that the German show has moved from Frankfurt this could well become my favourite annual outing – it really was that much fun.

So, what did we learn today?

That most of what we already knew is still true.

By which I mean that there was little revolutionary to be seen at this show, outside of image related AV technology, where the US preference for really big, back projection screens at least provided a change from the ubiquitous plasmas that we see on our side of the Atlantic. And whilst screen technology isn't exactly central to Hi-Fi+, one product really does make so much sense that it simply demands a mention. Goo (I kid you not) is a roll-on surface treatment that basically allows you to apply the high-tech, colour balanced and high-gain surface that makes projector screens so expensive directly to a wall. The Canadian distributor offers a DIY kit, including tray and roller, that gives you enough undercoat and acrylic top layer to cover 150 square feet of surface, as well as a special black paint to create a frame if you so desire. Total cost of the kit in Canada is \$249C. In the UK it is sold in individual pots at £22 for undercoat and £105 for topcoat. Compare that to £1500 for a decent roll-down unit. The manufacturer claims that Goo actually performs better than many expensive screen surface layers, so if you're an LCD/LDP kind of guy and you can live with one (extremely neutral) pale gray wall then you should take a serious look at this. The saving on the screen will move you at least a couple of models up the projector range!

Wilson Audio, encamped in a ►

▶ cavern of a room at the Holiday Inn were running an interesting three-stage demo. They took the listener on a journey that starting with Sophias driven by Bryston amplification and an uncompressed WAVE file replayed on an iPod (model and colour undisclosed) via a high-quality two-channel system comprising the MAXXs driven by Spectral amps and Peter McGrath's own "tapes" replayed from the Nagra digital recorder, culminating in a MAXX/System 7 surround set up employing a Runco projector and Levinson Reference electronics. I enthusiastically applaud the enterprise this displays, although I'm not entirely sure that the message survived the delivery. Wilson's 'speakers first' philosophy may well have some justification, and the MAXX might well be the tool to deliver it, but they're going to need a far better acoustic environment than this room provided to prove the point. We're hoping to arrange just such an opportunity, where these most critical of speakers can be heard in a situation where the company is confident of the results, of which more, hopefully, later.

At the other end of the price and size spectrum, but no less critical in application, the Eben X-centrics were sounding excellent in a standard bedroom. Driven by the latest incarnation of the Chapter electronics and an Electrocompaniet CD player the sound had the familiar tight, dynamic and transparent qualities that typify the brand, but there was much more besides. The wide-open soundstage was wonderfully precise and stable, while the sound combined refinement, colour and body with the sudden dynamics that make these speakers so dramatic. Texture and delicacy were fabulously first rate, supporting the superb rhythmic integrity. Music as varied as jazz (heavy on the double bass), female

vocal and chamber music were brought vividly to life, while larger and more complex work was handled with equal ease. The bass-weight and precision, smoother tonal balance and range of tonal palette suggest that ongoing work with the Rhaido tweeter and fine tuning of the internal wadding are reaping huge benefits in what was already an impressive design. The results are more even-tempered and I suspect less ruinously critical than before, even entertaining Chapter (rather than Nordost) cabling. Either way, the smaller Ebens were far happier than the much larger and more capable X-3s used in the Nordost room (which quickly gave way to a pair of the Rhaido company's much smaller and cheaper Emilias). Later, I also heard the X-baby to similarly impressive effect, so clearly this was one room and system that was really copasetic.



So, what did we learn today?

The Chinese are coming – and they're learning faster than anybody thought they would!

By now, only a blind-man or a fool could be unaware of the influx, nay flood, of cheap Chinese built products threatening to swamp established manufacturers. Offering levels of fit and finish to make western designers weep with envy and frustration, US and European companies have either been quick to seize the opportunity for a quick killing (transferring production to mainland China – often without passing on the savings to their customers), or to clutch at the straw that, good as this stuff looks, the sound isn't so clever, consistent or reliable. As with all such generalizations there are certainly exceptions to the rule, as well as complex shadings to the advantages (and risks) involved. However, what is undeniable is that by asking someone else to manufacture your product you are also teaching him how to put you out of business. The lessons of both the car and camera industries have soon been forgotten. What makes the high-end audio industry think that China can't do what Japan did to the mass market? Add into the mix trading practices that are frankly chaotic and you're looking at a situation that is going to seriously rattle the existing status quo, with product, clones of product and

clones of clones of product emerging here there and everywhere.

Chinese products (by which I mean indigenous designs – with or without outside help – sold under their own banner) were everywhere in Montreal, their presence perhaps exaggerated by the influx of Hong Kong yan to the country when that colony was handed back. The interesting thing was that in amongst the ▶

There's no place like...

RSF avoids even a trace of nostalgia.

RG leaves little wiggle room for me to add anything he may have missed. He doesn't miss much. For me, going to a show with Roy while HE is writing the show report, is a tremendous learning experience. (I'll take that raise now please). I always find it amazing how some products, in show conditions, just don't live up to their reputation – and I'm always delighted when small changes offer stunning benefits. I must admit I wasn't impressed with what I was hearing with the Wilson Maxx speakers. This is the second time I've heard them and the second time I've been disappointed, both times at shows. Which probably says more about using hyper-critical wide-bandwidth speaker systems in hotel rooms than it does about the speakers themselves.

RG mentions the Stillpoint/Verity/Berning room

and I must say that having heard the room the first day while Stillpoints' Paul Wakeen used his Stillpoints only under the Parsifals, I thought things sounded quite good. I wasn't prepared for the astonishing change for the better on the second day when he removed the 'points and replaced them with his Component Stands. My request is in for a pair as I'm currently using the Stillpoints under my Micro BE's – and if I can gain half of what I heard in Montreal by swapping out the Stillpoints for Component Stands, I'll be one major step closer!

There were several companies which were new to me and it was sheer pleasure to hear some VERY reasonably priced components making beautiful music. I mean really excellent sound with a tremendous bang-for-the-buck factor—what could be better than that!

A tip of the hat to my son Samuel for spotting GOO, a product RG liked. We both missed that and although Sam is not a big talker, he really

liked this one a lot.

I'm also glad Roy liked the Aurum Acoustics room as much as I did. It's a very interesting product and we hope to hear it in house soon. The Montreal show was a most enjoyable experience. I like the people, the venue and especially the city. (Sorry RG, I lived here for 18 months, 35 years ago...give me a little latitude with missing some of the tourist spots). I thought as shows go, it offered some excellent sound, especially from moderately priced products. Although the show size was smaller than 2004, the crowds were as big and enthusiastic as ever. Although our tourism day on Thursday offered beautiful weather, overcast and then full-blown rain for the weekend is nearer the norm and probably encouraged the crowds. There's nothing to do outside so they might as well go to the show. I'll definitely be back next year and if I find as many new toys as this year I'll be very happy indeed.

► familiar offerings from the likes of Shanling and Aurum Cantus were new contenders offering not just great prices but sound to match. Enseicom showed a pair of beautifully presented, traditionally styled, integrated push-pull designs featuring EL34 or KT88 output tubes. The sound, via FAA Sound Technologies speakers was sweet, lucid and fluid, with plenty of presence and dynamic heft – all the things you expect from a good tube amp. Priced just either side of \$1500CDN these things are a stone cold sonic bargain. Yep – do your sums. That's well the right side of \$800! Also in the range are single-ended stereo and mono chassis designs, as well as a beautiful looking valve line-stage for \$545CDN. Pair that with an EL84 push-pull amp (12 Watts – \$721CDN) or 6P14A single-ended design (2.5 Watts - \$642CDN) for real bear budget high-end.

Mons Audio showed an innovative parallel single-ended 2A3 OTL design that offers 14 Watts a side and restrained but nicely unconventional styling. I'm not sure what it'll drive, but it shows that the Chinese are starting to think for themselves,

a fact further underlined by Uniko's AVM fluid. It had to happen and now it has – China's first tweak product. AVM, or Anti Vibration Magic to give it its full title, is a lurid blue liquid solution that can be painted onto components or cables to damp extraneous vibration (www.accentusaudio.com). Suggested applications include: tubes (a stripe round the middle), fuses (ditto), loudspeaker baskets, transformers, wires and cables and even CDs. This stuff is almost worth buying just for the instructions, which include the following gems: "Contents – Exotic, high-tech like materials, proprietary" "Virtually no odor, non-eatable or drinkable (seek medical help immediately if swallowed or inhaled by mistake)."

You'll also be pleased to know that the manufacturer accepts no responsibility for "harmful medical consequences" as a result of improper or wrongful applications" or damage to equipment or suspension of warranties as a result of his product's use. He does however warn us to "expect huge overall improvements".

Okay, so I'm game for the tubes and

fuses and I'll let you know how it goes. I've got a whole bottle of this stuff (it's only small) for any of you budding reviewers out there who feel it's time to put your system/body on the line and then report back. I, of course, accept no responsibility for the results...

One new name to me was JAS-Audio, who manufacture a range of interestingly different speakers, including a large floorstander with a spherical horn-loaded upper register. However, it was two stand-mounted compacts that were being demonstrated, the \$4500CDN Orior that combined a novel twin ribbon tweeter with a ceramic bass unit and faceted cabinet, and the cheaper (\$2800CDN) Orsa. It was the latter that really impressed. The two-part cabinet housed the same twin ribbon driver in the upper box, while the lower one contained a 6" Morel bass-mid unit on a sloping, time-aligned baffle. The small dimensions and tilted front make for a rigid structure that should also minimize standing waves pretty effectively. But the really clever part happens between the boxes





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Transfiguration

There's one at every show...
Part One

Crowson Technology were showing a user interface of quite a different kind. The TES 100 Tactile Effects System consists of a square tile, some 5" square and about an inch thick which is placed under the leg of your chair: Isolation pads go under the other three to keep things level. The transducer tile is connected to the Crowson TES stereo amplifier, which is fed from the sub-woofer output of a 5.1 set-up, in parallel with the sub proper. The Crowson amp will drive a pair of the transducers, allowing individual control of each, thus accommodating two armchairs or a single sofa.

Yep, you guessed it. These things literally shake your booty, allowing you to feel the bass as well as hear it. If proof were needed that AV and quality music reproduction occupy parallel and widely separated universes, this is it! Having said that, I can just imagine the sucking lemons look that would cross the face of the average, anal retentive hi-fi snob at the indignity of having his personal cage so unceremoniously rattled. Maybe I should get some Crowsons after all...



strayed too far to the lean and tight for me. I'll take the speed, life and musical enthusiasm of the cheaper model every time thanks. This is the first Chinese speaker design I've heard that's brought something new to the table in design and sonic terms, rather than simply relying on price.

Whilst it's not cheap, the finish and sonic performance mean that it is a bargain.

So, what did we learn today?

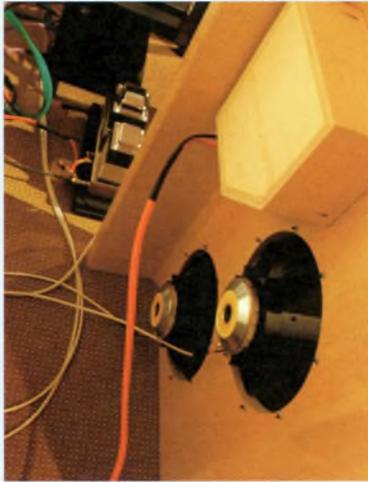
Small is still beautiful in the world of hi-fi shows.

Pretty much everybody with big speakers or a big room was suffering. Those with sub-woofers were by far



the worst off. So much so that you wondered why they persevered with them? One new speaker brand making quite a splash was Wiener Lautsprecher Manufaktur, with two rooms of their own as well as providing the speakers for *The Inner Ear* magazine demonstration. With three models and a whole host of system configurations, including active drive and a choice of three different sub-woofers, these are serious products with finish and technical credentials to match. The sound was disappointing but that's probably down to a serious case of over ambition with the show systems. Nevertheless, this expensive ▶

▶ themselves. Spaced apart by brass studs, the lower cabinet is vented into the slot this creates. A ring of foam around the mouth creates a resistive port arrangement that is both discrete and extremely effective with excellent dispersion. Efficiency is 88dB while the load presented is an easy 8 Ohms. Playing on the end of the new Shanling CD-T300 disc player (looking like it's stepped straight off of the set of *Batteries Not Included*) and the fascinating Qinpu A-8000 solid-state integrated amp (\$1900CDN) the sound was clean, crystal clear and totally devoid of boxy artefacts, yet still retained impressive impact and immediacy, making for an articulate and involving sound in true mini-monitor style. Bass was refreshingly light, agile and quick, rather than overly weighty and "impressive". The Orior sounded rather similar, but with even greater focus and a balance that actually



There's one at every show... Part Two

What can you say about a speaker that mounts a pair of 12" bass-drivers on a three-foot square open baffle, team them with a 10" mid-range with its own sub-enclosure and a pressure driver for high-frequencies, horn loaded by a turned wooden trumpet? Well, let's add into the mix active drive with OTL amps on the tweeters, single-ended 300Bs for the mid and solid-state on the bass. Oh, and the need for two pre-amps to equalize levels within the system! Take a bow Poth Audio. As one of the guys manning the room said, "Pretty sick, huh?" I couldn't agree more.

standers, a centre channel and a sub. But the best thing is the price. The Aingel 3201 stand-mount costs £171/pr while the most expensive model, the Oran 4305 floorstander weighs in at \$620/pr. Driven from a cheap Cambridge amp and CD player the sound was refreshingly lively and engaging, while finish and presentation are both superb. With UK distribution about to be announced, this is definitely a brand to keep an eye on.

But the ultimate proof of the small is beautiful maxim was to be found in the Stillpoints room. Here, an Audio Aero Capitole CD player was feeding some seriously wild prototype amps from David Berning, hooked up to a pair of the small but perfectly formed Verity Audio Parsifal loud-speakers. Naturally enough, the entire system was Stillpointed to death, with component stands under the speakers and the latest and far more aesthetically pleasing version of the equipment rack supporting the front-end components. The pre-amp in particular is worthy of note, a vacuum

▶ brand is one to keep an eye on, the smaller Aura model managing to deliver notably smooth and seamless sound from Audio Aero electronics and a Wilson-Benesch Full Circle turntable, in stark contrast to its bigger brothers.

The one honourable exception to the big room/big speaker rule was Avalon, who achieved excellent results from a pair of Eidolon Diamonds driven by a VTL 7.5 pre-amp and Siegfried mono-blocks, from a Meridian front-end. Wonderfully spacious and natural, unfortunately, high ambient noise levels (why can't people speak outside the demonstration rooms) limited ultimate enjoyment, although it was still possible to get a good idea of just what these remarkable speakers are really capable of.

One new name to me was French loudspeaker manufacturer Highland Audio. They were offering two ranges of



speakers, the Aingels and more expensive Orans, which are externally almost identical. But where the Aingels are built to be as cost effective as possible and employ an imitation wood veneer finish, the Orans come in real tree and armed with better bass-mid drivers, better wiring and better connectors. Each range offers a compact stand-mounted speaker, two slim and extremely elegant floor-

tube design running from a switching power supply; you twist the valves to control the volume! It's okay, they run pretty cool, but this is one amazing looking piece of kit. Not, however, as amazing as the sound, which was lucid, colourful, dynamic and totally free of both the boxes and the mechanics of reproduction. The music really breathed, occupying clearly defined acoustic spaces, different ▶

► for each recording. The natural, unforced presentation was underpinned with real dynamic jump and life, allowing the performers to really communicate and hold your attention. This was one room that I kept returning to, and delivered what was for me, the best sound at the show (by quite some margin).

What did we learn today?

Anyone with a screw-driver and a soldering iron can produce a loudspeaker – but it doesn't mean that they should!

In one respect, Montreal was no different to any other hi-fi show; there were more new and hopeful loud-speaker manufacturers than entries in all the other product categories put together. Well-intentioned attempts came in just about every conceivable shape and size, employing a mind-boggling array of different driver technologies and cabinet materials, some of them all in a single design. Higher efficiency seemed to be the order of the day, although horns were few and far between, instead designers opting to dispense with crossovers wherever possible.

NHT showed a remarkable sub-sat set up, the Xd system, which comes complete with an outboard crossover/ equaliser and five channels of active power amp housed in a box the size of a budget integrated amp. Styling is cute and curvy and technological content extremely high. It will be

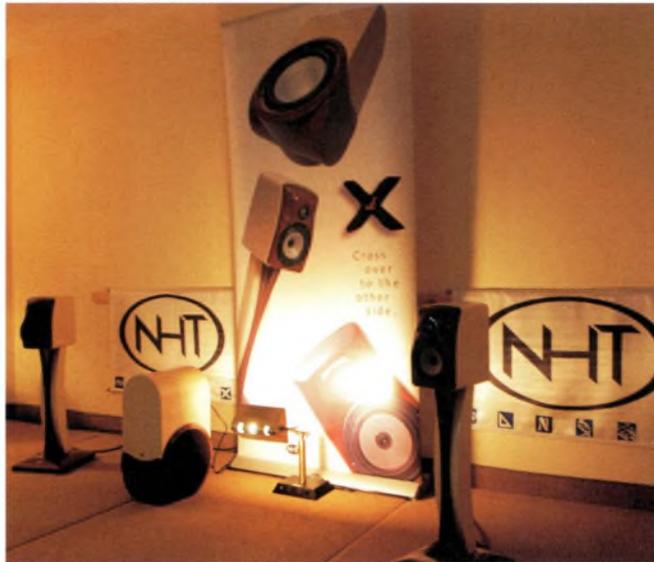
interesting to see whether such a sophisticated room matching solution ends up throwing out the musical baby with the bathwater, but full marks to NHT for actually trying something sensibly different.

StudioLAB Reference were making sweet sounds with their Revelation, a massively constructed floorstander

accounts for the serious weight. Bandwidth is a claimed 29Hz to 22kHz $\pm 3\text{dB}$ with efficiency realistically cited as 91dB. Finish is auto lacquer, and the quality is absolutely excellent. The sound was open, natural and well balanced, handling dynamics with easy grace and control. Harmonics were a particular forte, which

delivered the sound with realistic colour and weight. Even at \$13000CDN these represent a lot of speaker for the money.

Reference 3A showed a new floorstander, based on a 6" version of their established, in-house mid-bass driver. Called the Veena, its slim dimensions are attractive and save the cost of loudspeaker stands. With a 90dB efficiency and the standard single capacitor to the tweeter arrangement favoured by Reference 3A, these should continue their tradition of intimate, tactile and agile sound well suited to lower powered valve amps. Expect them to cost around £3000 in the UK, placing them above the well-regarded Dulcets in the range. Also on show was a novel auto-former input line-stage from



employing top-flight Scan drivers in a d'Appolito arrangement. The tapered, trapezoidal cabinets weigh around 75kgs each and feature external crossovers, loaded with such goodies as Hovland caps and Alpha-Core coils. The walls range between an inch and three-inches in thickness, with internal compartments further damped with a mix of lead-shot and sand, which

Antique Sound Labs, using 6SN7 tubes for gain and a transformer output stage. US price will be around \$3250 for this unusual design, which has the solidity and aesthetics of a block-house. Auto-transformers have a spotty reputation in hi-fi circles, but then so too do volume controls. Only time will tell, but it should be fun finding out!

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► One of the few really successful large loudspeaker demonstrations was delivered by Gershman Acoustics: no surprise there. Their new Black Swan speaker is a modular affair that sits a head-unit over a separate sub-bass cabinet, the extended, sloping sides of the top cabinet falling all the way to the floor, flanking the bass unit to create a single visual piece. As well as providing exceptional isolation of the vital mid-range from intermodulation distortion by bass

frequencies, moving the bass cabinet backwards and forwards between the “legs” of the head-unit allows precise alignment of the bass driver relative to the mid. It’s a system similar to that used in the Wilson System 7 but enjoying better physical isolation. The cabinets are massively constructed and heavily damped, with the show pair finished in immaculate, but rather threatening, piano black lacquer. The time-aligned baffle and sloping sides give the Black Swan the appearance

of a solid, brooding, truncated pyramid which seems totally at odds with the name – although not the sound.

Driven by a McCormack UDP1 universal player and the unknown (to me) but mightily impressive Linar Audio Pre-Amplifier 2 and Mono 500 amplifiers, the big Gershmans managed to sound effortlessly wide bandwidth and yet delicate and intimate at the same time. Bass was clean and tight with excellent pitch definition and



▶ agility. The sound-stage was big, stable and completely free of the speakers, while dynamics were crisp and emphatic. Tonality was good if a little dark, with the three drivers seamlessly integrated into a single coherent whole. This speaker might cost \$30000CDN but it was one of the few large designs at the show that actually sounded worth the money. Surely a decent UK importer is long overdue for a brand that produces such consistently excellent sounding products.

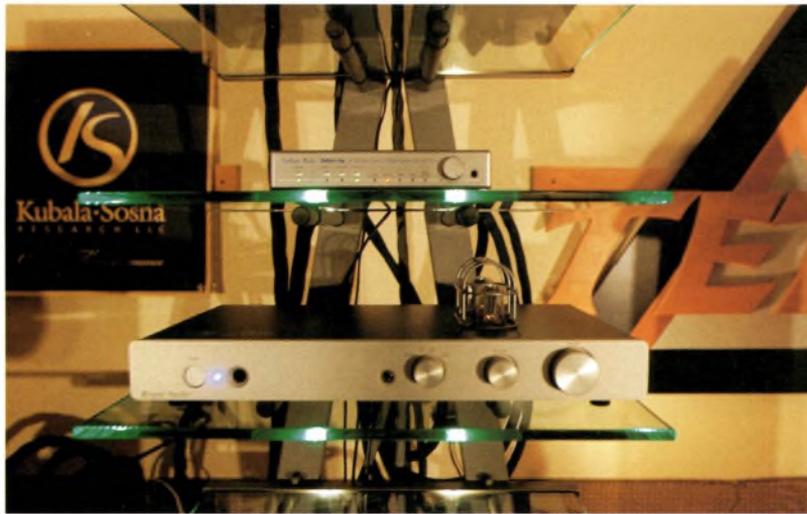


Electronics, who launched a new flagship line, based around the two-box Andromeda CD player and sporting a more conventionally styled box with a sculpted front panel

reminiscent of Theta's Dreadnought amplifiers: Very tasty indeed. The CD player consists of the player itself and an external power supply (a la Naim) so it's no surprise that the matching P-8 pre-amp adopts the increasingly popular "signal in one

box, power supply and control circuitry in another" two-box configuration. The W-8 stereo power amp offers 250 Watts into 8 Ohms, with the required doubling into lower impedances. All the new units are fully balanced and employ differential circuitry throughout, so with projected UK prices of around £9K each, they bring this technology the right side of five-figure price-tags for the first time.

At the other end of the high-end ladder another of our favourite transatlantic manufacturers, Rogue Audio were seeking to re-establish their presence in the face of the flood of cheap Chinese imports. Improvements to their existing range had seen the prices creeping up, so it was time to get back to their roots with some serious value for money offerings. Enter then the Metis pre-amp, Atlas power amp ▶



What did we learn today?

There's nothing new under the sun – well, almost nothing...

Despite the number of new names and new ranges on show, it was difficult to find much that was really novel. No change there, then. One effect of the internet is that it has reduced the dependence of new companies on shows to announce or publicise their developments. Instead, it was left to established brands to unveil new ranges, seeking to adjust their market position.

Perhaps the most ambitious step came from local boys Moon



► and Kronos integrated. The Metis is a remote control, tube line-stage but arrives complete with an internal, solid-state phono-stage. In the UK, supplied with a machined metal remote handset, it is going to cost \$995. The Atlas is a traditionally styled, open chassis push-pull power amp, based around a single pair of

that contains three-way, active, tube cross-overs along with six channels of amplification. The tweeters and midrange units of the dedicated floorstanding speakers are fed by single-ended 300B amplifiers, while two solid-state channels handle the bass. Fit, finish and presentation are all first rate, and like many interactive

simple merely made it more intriguing. I'm hoping to renew my acquaintance on home turf, something which I'm seriously looking forward to. Hopefully Aurum can overcome the traditional hi-fi prejudice against one-brand/one-time solutions; they certainly deserve to. In the meantime, consider this as B&O for people who want the convenience but do actually care about the sound. It's not small, but it is seriously clever.

What did we learn today?

We learnt that the long-harboured suspicion that the real action on the other side of the Atlantic is happening North of the



EL34s a side. Complete with a valve cage, this will set you back £1300 on this side of the pond. The Kronos simply takes the Atlas chassis and adds a volume control and source select to the front panel. The sound at the show was exactly what you'd expect – sweet, open and quick. When it comes to entry level high-end I reckon Rogue are back – and with a bang!

However, there was one other really impressive product, or rather, system, on show. First raved about in prototype form by RSF in last year's show report, the Aurum Acoustics system is finally nearing production – and it's unusual to say the least. Front-end is the Integris CDP, a combined CD player and pre-amp. This then feeds the power-amp section, a single chassis

systems, material value is also exceptional, if the company hits its projected pricing.

Listening to the Aurum system, it fools you at first into thinking that it's a little slow and lazy. It's not. It's actually so relaxed and unforced, so devoid of edge or strain that you're not getting the normal cues that you expect from a hi-fi system. There's no stridency to suggest pace or urgency, no grain or glare to infer drama or leaps in level. Instead the system takes almost anything in its stride, sounding spookily realistic on vocals in particular. Sonically, this was one of the most rewarding sounds at the show. That it came from a system that was both innovative and in a weird paradox, conceptually complex yet physically

border contains more than a grain of truth. We learnt that although RSF lived in Montreal for several years, he still can't find the main landmarks. And finally, we learnt where we'll be at the beginning of April next year. Why don't you join us – Montreal is well worth the trip. ➤



Living Thing...

The Sonus Faber Stradivari Homage Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Well, if nothing else and like it or not, you'll be hard pressed to deny that the Sonus Faber Stradivari Homage is at least decidedly different. It's different in appearance, different in construction and very different in concept. Just how different you're about to find out.

I've never been particularly comfortable with the notion of loudspeaker as musical instrument, holding to the view that the speaker should contribute as little of itself as possible. Proposing the speaker as an active participant in the reproductive process flies in the face of all accepted philosophy. But stop for instant and reconsider; don't speakers contribute to a greater or lesser extent whether we like it or not? Isn't this just an acceptance of reality and in its recognition the seeds of a solution – or at least an accommodation?

Even the briefest of listens to the Stradivari Homage will tell you that this isn't a classically neutral speaker. It's a little lean through the bass, fuller in the mid and a touch dark as it transitions to the lighter reaches of the airy, extended treble. These are tonal shifts that sit atop an otherwise seamless energy spectrum, a dynamic coherence that makes the music uncannily convincing, fully justifying the speakers' status as the Sonus Faber flagship. However, how it achieves those results, indeed their specific nature, is inextricably entwined with the speakers' structure and the philosophy that underpins it.

This is not Franco Serblin's first

homage to the artists of the Cremonese tradition of master luthiers. With the Guernari Homage and Amati Homage already in the range you didn't have to be a genius to realise that Stradivarius would happen along soon, and that when he did the results would indeed be special.



The first clue to just how special lies in the shape of the Stradivari cabinet. The graceful, deep curves that adorned the earlier enclosures (faces that launched a thousand imitations) were based on the rear body of a lute. The Stradivari is wider and much flatter, taking its inspiration from the violin. That might sound far-fetched, but examine the cabinet structure in detail and the parallels are both surprising and significant.

The unusual shape of the Stradivari evolved from a desire to better simulate the theoretical model of an infinite baffle. The gentle curve of the broad baffle is perfectly mirrored by the rear face of the shallow enclosure, and constructed

from multiple layers of grain-orientated and carefully selected hardwoods with substantial internal bracing. The surface is then treated with a special lacquer similar to that used on string instruments. The end result is critically damped structure with a well controlled, broadband resonant character. Indeed, the shape, the materials and the mechanical behavior are already remarkably similar to a larger, less lively instrument body.

But the real similarity lies inside. The shallow cabinet presents a number of problems in dealing with the rear wave generated by the drive-units. The 150mm midrange driver enjoys its own, vented cardioid enclosure, constructed from wood, which as well as handling that energy is clamped between the front and rear faces of the cabinet, acting as an energy bridge directly analogous to the Anima so crucial to a violin. The driver's voice-coil is built on a Kapton former and employs the latest motor technology.

Alongside it, and sharing the separate sub-baffle is the tweeter, a 25mm silk ring radiator optimized with dual, annular wave guides and its own, rear mounted acoustic labyrinth – again constructed from wood. The bass drivers are large, 260mm aluminium and magnesium alloy units built onto 50mm, long throw motors. Rear ported, the internal arrangement is reputedly novel, again to overcome the



▶ issues of the shallow cabinet depth and prevent early reflections influencing the drivers' output; Serblin is however, understandably coy as to the details. Likewise the specifics of the crossover remain something of a mystery – save for one important fact. The midrange driver covers the range from 300Hz to 4kHz, approximating the span of the human voice.

Unpacking the Stradivari Homage it's impossible to be anything but impressed by the fit, finish and care that's gone into this product – enough on its own to convince many a customer to take the plunge. Personally, the aesthetics leave me cold, but even I was impressed by the sheer quality of the execution. The tall, slim cabinet screws to a massively heavy, cast-iron base plate which accepts the four substantial spikes. Longer ones at the front provide a degree of backward lean, and the precise angle proved critical to the overall performance, as did toe-in. Likewise, these speakers demand space behind them, although don't be fooled into placing them as wide as the proportions of the baffle suggest – you'll end up with a hole in the middle of the soundstage and phase-y vocal images.

Apart from the exceptions noted later, I listened to the Stradivaris with Nordost Valhalla cabling and the Jadis DA88S – a sublime amplifier as well as a sublime combination. Front-ends were the ARC CD3 Mk. II and a Lyra/SPJ combination. But before we get into the sound, one warning – ditch the

grilles. The heavy metal plates and elastic cords combine to create the most sonically intrusive grille I've ever experienced. The results with them in situ are dark, shut-in and tonally uneven, wildly exaggerating the slight bottom



to upper-mid shift and altering the top-end out of all recognition. Listening height and distance are critical too, if you aren't going to suffer a congealed and turgid sound – hence the importance of the speakers' vertical angle. Don't be fooled by

the cuddly mid-band. Unless you take the time and trouble to position these speakers with real care, ensuring that they are exactly symmetrical and that you are also at the correct height and distance, you are going to be short changed. And that would be a crime, because they can (and should) sound so much better than simply "nice".

In fact, their sound is, in my experience, unique, and thus takes a little understanding.

Where we need to start is with the sound of individual instruments. It really is as if the Stradivaris manage to instill a little of themselves into the recorded sound. Yet it's not a reductive process; far from making everything sound the same it's as if they chime with and accentuate the inner character and tonal structure of each individual instrument. It creates fleeting, almost disturbing instances of recognition as the gestalt character of an instrument or ensemble takes momentary, living shape before you: The basses on their riser in the Barbirolli *Tallis Fantasia*, Narcisco Yepes' guitar, the body and strings of the instruments breatching in their presence and complexity. Diane Christansen or Eliza Gilkyson, Leontyne Price or Lou Reed (with whom I really did experience a perfect day) all take on a communicative presence and solidity that stems from the vivid recreation of their distinctive tonal characters. This is communication through colour, but taken beyond anything I've experienced before.

Playing the Barbirolli Sibelius *2nd Symphony*, the vivid tonal contrasts that typify the composers work take on a vital richness that illuminates the work. The plaintive woodwind phrases that start to open out the pizzicato introduction to the Second Movement hang in the sound-space, ▶

▶ the contrast of the gentle Timpani rumble that underpins them adding depth and flavour. When the horns add a gentle prompt the distinctive tonal colour makes perfect sense, heralding the coming crescendo, the arrival of the swelling strings that add the substance to carry the soaring brass tutti and their woodwind echoes. With the Sonus Fabers the manipulation of the orchestral palette, the interchange and interplay of tonal colours brings emotional weight and contrast to the music, carrying and uplifting the listener. Now you know exactly what instruments the composer has brought into play, but like no other speaker in my experience, it's also clearly understand why.

Cooks talk about a symphony of flavours and that's what you'll experience here. Like the lime juice that cuts and enhances the flavour of a seared Tuna steak, bringing out both its taste but also the translucent quality to its texture, the Stradivaris highlight the textural and harmonic contrasts that enrich and enliven music. So, the contrasts between the orchestral tone of Dorati's LSO and Munch's Boston Symphony offer another side, another dimension to the comparison between Starker's Dvorak and Piatigorsky's. It's almost as if the speakers eschew the conventional mode of hi-fi expression, opening instead a vibrant, alternative landscape.

Voices are a particular joy. Whether it's the live version of 'The Thing You Love...' (Steve Dawson and Diane Christansen, *Duets*), Jackie Leven, or any of the other singers already mentioned, there's a warmth and humanity to their presentation that enhances their communicative capabilities. Diction

becomes incredibly clear, as is the way a singer shapes and works his words. So when Jackie states that he "ran away to sing" there's plenty of speakers and systems that leave you thinking he ran away to sea!



– especially given the nautical bent of the song itself. With the Sonus Fabers you wonder why there was ever any confusion. Leontyne Price's

dramatic entrance (in every sense of the word) in the Karanjani/Vienna RCA Soria recording of *Carmen* simply oozes animal grace and disdain, wound round with the conundrum of innocence (the singer's, not the character's) combined with the promise of something dark and seamy. It's a million miles from the crystalline control and purity of a Milanov or the earthy experience of Callas. Again, it brings a new dimension to the dramatic power of the character, as well as an unusual fragility – the flaw that marks all great tragedies. But it's here also that we first start to appreciate the price we're paying for that kaleidoscope of colour and range of emotion. When she advances on the hapless Don Jose and flings the flower at his feet, the "Attrape" comes across as more self-contained, even self-satisfied, than threatening and venomous. Why? It's to do with the way the Stradivaris handle individual notes.

Few speakers will give you a better sense of musical shape or line, the phrasing in a piece. Play John Coltrane's 'My Favorite Things' and the busy repetitions and re-inventions of the theme are reproduced with poise, purpose and clarity as the lead role is handed from one player to the next, the shape and curve of the melody bent and stretched but never broken. The musical genius is clear to hear, the extended extrapolation a thing of beauty, fragile and

wonderful in its grace and delicacy; superb. Now listen to the easy flow of McCoy Tyner's lines, and the way he punctuates and accents them. Those crisper, weightier ▶

► notes are a little soft, lacking the pace, attack and impact that gives them their full effect as punctuation. What you are hearing is the way the speaker rests on the heart and tail of the note, its harmonic shading, development and decay, at the expense of tracing the leading-edge shape and slope.

It's almost as if, in listening terms, the note is there in body, less so in mind. It's a fascinating effect and one that needs some explanation.

The easy way the speaker grasps the shape and pace of a phrase, the rhythmic momentum of a piece, tells you that the placement of notes is spot-on. But what you are lacking is the initial attack and jump. Not new, and there have been plenty of speakers that have softened leading edges before now. But to understand the effect in this instance, you have to combine it with the vivid colours and sweeping flow that the Stradivaris bring to proceedings. So, let's see what happens in musical terms. Using the Dvorak *Cello Concerto* I've already touched on, and playing Piatigorsky on XRCD and vinyl (the 180g Classic Records re-issue), Starker on CD and original US pressed Mercury LP, the differences between the formats, pressings and performances are great indeed. It's also apparent that Starker is the better player and that Dorati's interpretation is more to my taste than Munch's. However, why that is remains more obscure, as if the speaker is concentrating on what is being played rather than how. The details of technique, whether in the case of Starker or Yepes, Janis Ian or

McCoy Tyner, are subordinated to the purpose and effect of the whole. Likewise the life and immediacy in the music is slightly muted, offering a more distant and

assess for themselves.

A further extension of this voicing is the way in which the speaker presents the soundstage. Familiar acoustics are extremely broad but slightly shallower than I'm used to (that doesn't of course mean that they're wrong, just that they're different). Combined with the reduced sense of immediacy the overall effect is less transparent than is currently fashionable. Yet, rather than the grain or mist that can normally be blamed for such a reduction, the Stradivaris bring an almost velvety texture to the intra-instrumental spaces, a blackness that contributes to the dramatic tonal and harmonic contrast between those

instruments. I first talked about tonal separation (as opposed to spatial) in the context of the Lamm electronics. These Sonus Fabers take it to its logical extreme. No, you don't get the precise focus and dimensionality that comes with ultra transparency, but instruments are just as effectively separated, while the width of the soundstage leaves you in no doubt as to their relative locations.

Reading this you could be forgiven for concluding that combining the

Stradivaris with the Jadis DA88S might be altogether too much of a good thing. Far from it. This is a speaker that dominates the sound of the driving electronics meaning that you need to play to its strengths. That the Jadis most certainly does. A brief flirtation with solid-state



some would certainly argue, a more comfortable vision. It's a perfectly valid choice but it is a choice and it's one that the potential purchasers will have to

▶ in a vain attempt to improve leading-edge definition and transparency simply revealed the speakers' reluctance to play ball. Instead of compensating for each other's weaknesses, the two simply fought to impose themselves, ultimately delivering the worst of both worlds. That doesn't limit the use of the Sonus Fabers to valve electronics, but it does mean that whatever amp does the driving will need to do so in a sympathetic way that cherishes their strengths rather than chivies their weaknesses. A far more effective solution was delivered by the Nordost cable loom, which succeeded in maximizing the existing dynamic jump and definition, rather than trying to add to it.



decent efficiency and bandwidth, along with the body and substance that comes with its rich tonal shading, means that it plays loud and proud, with a real sense of power. The 60 Watts delivered by the Jadis was quite sufficient for room-clearing levels, without the onset of audible strain or distress. The effortless sense of shape and overall structure works wonders with jazz and matters just as much to rock. So whether it's big-band or *Never Mind The Bollocks* the Sonus Fabers rise readily to the occasion. One recent sale was to a dyed-in-the-wool AC/DC aficionado – and they don't come much louder or prouder than that.

in delivering genuine high-end sound in a package that is both financially and domestically more approachable. But more importantly, it's also a product for the future – your future. Choose this speaker and you'll be enjoying it for years to come. It's a design that fastens on the beauty in music, and that never goes out of fashion. Bravo Franco – vive la difference!



It's also possible to purchase speaker cables constructed from the same wire that is used internally, and whilst an entirely Nordost cable system provides a pretty hostile environment in which to assess such a product, it nonetheless acquitted itself well. With a rounder and richer sound than the Nordost, bought at the expense of some lucidity and dynamic differentiation, it certainly offers a valid alternative for those lacking an existing, coherent loom.

You might also conclude that the Stradivari is a speaker best suited to classical music. Well, not so; it's far simpler than that, being suited to music full-stop. The combination of

The Stradivari is a surprising speaker in many ways. It's surprisingly different and distinctly unexpected. Its strengths and weaknesses make it a less than obvious choice for someone with my listening biases, yet it was astonishingly engaging and satisfying, encouraging longer and longer listening sessions. Franco Serblin is to be applauded for having the courage to pursue his own agenda and beliefs, admired for having achieved his goals so completely. The Stradivari Homage is a product of the moment, offering as it does, true cutting-edge, wide bandwidth performance at a fraction of the price of other flagship designs. It joins the likes of Avalon and Marten

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way ported loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm silk ring radiator 1x 150mm midrange unit on Kapton former 2x 260mm aluminium/ magnesium bass units
Crossover Points:	300Hz and 4kHz
Bandwidth:	22Hz – 40kHz \pm 3dB
Efficiency:	92dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	650x1350x500mm (incl stand)
Weight:	75kg ea.
Finishes:	Graphite or red violin lacquer
Price:	Violin red £22,000 Graphite £24,000

UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:

Sonus Faber
Net. www.sonusfaber.com



The Audio Acoustics Sapphire Ti-C Loudspeakers

by Paul Messenger

Just how obsessive is your particular hi-fi addiction? How much are you prepared to adjust your lifestyle in the service of your hi-fi? To put it another way, how much are you prepared to let your hi-fi system impose on your lifestyle? It's a discussion that often rears its head during rambling phone conversations between self and Editor Roy, who is a much more 'hardcore' enthusiast than I, and the debate re-surfaced with a vengeance during the course of this review.

At the extreme end of hi-fi fanaticism, some enthusiasts dedicate their systems to reproducing just a single source, using just a volume control on power amp (or CD player) and hence eliminating the need to include a pre-amplifier in the chain, to the benefit of sound quality. I, on the other hand, expect to be able to select at will between any of four different sources. Likewise, Roy cares little for remote control operation, whereas I've come to regard it as a crucial part of enjoying my system. While I don't therefore consider myself amongst the fanatics, most of my non-hi-fi friends regard me as just a step away from certification, especially when they see the size of the loudspeakers that are parked at one end of my living/listening room.

The Audio Acoustics Sapphire Ti-C, subject of this review is by no means a daunting prospect physically speaking. In fact it's an exceedingly elegant design, and beautifully finished too, showing an obsessive (there's that word again!) attention to detail throughout, though I suspect the news that it costs £32,000 per pair might well give rise to gasps of incredulity. Whether any

speaker system can justify that kind of money might be a matter for some debate, but there are definitely people out there for whom cost is no consideration, and quality is the only criterion.

That's certainly what Audio Acoustics believes, and the company has ambitious plans for models that are considerably more costly still, using crystalline diamond driver diaphragms. There's also a Fundamental K2 model, that might be described as a (relatively) cost effective variation



on the Sapphire Ti-C theme, with simpler enclosure construction and less expensive drive units, and which sells for £14,000/pair.

Shabir Bhatti's Audio Acoustics operation has been around since the late 1970s, beginning in 'high end' retail, where he became a strong advocate of zero-feedback single-ended triode (SET) valve amps, subsequently getting involved in manufacturing. The move into loudspeakers is relatively recent, however: this striking looking speaker made its public debut at last Autumn's Heathrow hi-fi show, after a painstaking development period of six years.

Shabir, who describes himself as a "perfectionist and manic extremist when it comes to the reproduction of music", is a total obsessive with a mechanical engineering background, and believes he can develop the world's finest speaker systems, essentially by combining costly hi-tech

drive units made by German

brand Accuton with his own elaborate ideas on enclosure engineering, plus that obsessive attention carried through to every last detail. While all the ingredients are clearly of the finest possible quality, and the cabinet construction is very

complex, the

Sapphire Ti-C is actually a simple two-way design, featuring twin bass/

mid drivers mounted above and below a central tweeter, in what is sometimes described as a d'Appolito configuration.

The brochure makes the mildly controversial statement that producing an optimised enclosure is actually more difficult than creating the drive units. But having myself recently compared B&W's 802D and 803D - two very similar designs distinguished mainly by the former's heavyweight shaped Marlan midrange enclosure - I reckon this has more than a ring of truth. Few if any speaker designs pay more attention to the enclosure and ancillaries than the Sapphire Ti-C.

The surface finish here is a gorgeous high-gloss, deep-lacquer 16-coat gel suspension paint job, right up there with the best custom cars. ▶

▶ Various metallic colours are available, including black, silver and red, though any alternative may be specified.

Although the shape is fundamentally rectilinear, the front panel consists of four separately angled sections. Only the tweeter section, with its own extra sub-baffle, is vertical and located at seated head height. The bass/mid drivers are mounted on tilted sub-

panels above and below the tweeter, so that both point towards and



are equidistant from the listener. The lower section accommodates a very large and elegantly flared port. All the edges are very heavily chamfered, which lends the enclosure an attractive multi-faceted appearance, while also providing a good acoustic environment for lateral sound diffraction.

If the external appearance is quite beautiful, the real heart of this design lies in the complex construction of these enclosures. They're actually built up from six separate layers: the outside

is 30mm thick, separated by a special sound-absorbing membrane from 25mm thick sections formed from another, different membrane, a 2mm stainless steel lining, and a further 10mm thick membrane layer. The intention is to control enclosure movement down to molecular dimensional levels, yet while the enclosure itself is massive and heavily damped, the space inside is quite deliberately left unfilled.

The drive units are top quality devices, and all three use Accuton's unique solid ceramic (aluminium oxide) 'Sapphire' diaphragms, which represent the stiffest material available (bar diamond). The two bass/mid units have 120mm diameter diaphragms and are mounted within 170mm cast alloy chassis, and driven by titanium wire voice coils. The tweeter has a 30mm diameter diaphragm, equipped with little damping 'ears' to control the out-of-band break-up resonance.

Floor coupling is accomplished by a tripod arrangement, using large hardened-steel, nickel-plated machined cones, used alongside floor-protecting pucks. Twin pairs of top class WBT terminals feed the incoming audio signal to a simple crossover network that uses tight-tolerance silver capacitors and air-cored inductors.

Internal wiring is done using specially developed multi-strand silver cables, in which each conductor is individually wrapped in damping membrane.

As the above recipe shows, Shabir has (obsessionally) ticked all the right boxes in his quest to create the ultimate loudspeaker. Crucially, how does it all pan out in practice? Potentially very well, it must be said, though the word 'potentially' does require considerable further explanation.

A core problem with assessing - or indeed designing - any loudspeaker is that it can only ever sound as good as

the system driving it allows. My normal approach to reviewing a pair of speakers is simply to connect it up to what I regard as a top quality system, with characteristics with which I'm very familiar. It's an approach that works fine nearly every time, though it does require that the driving system is of sufficiently high quality to avoid compromising the sound of the speakers. Which will shortly bring me back to that discussion about obsession and fanaticism in the introduction.



I started off by connecting the Sapphire Ti-Cs to my regular system, which consists of a Naim MAC552/ NAP500 pre/power amp combo, fed from a Naim CDS-3 CD player, a Magnum Dynalab MD102 FM tuner and a Linn/Rega hybrid vinyl spinner, using Vertex AQ and Chord Signature speaker cables. While results were undoubtedly very good, with great timing, dynamic range and fine authority, there were ▶

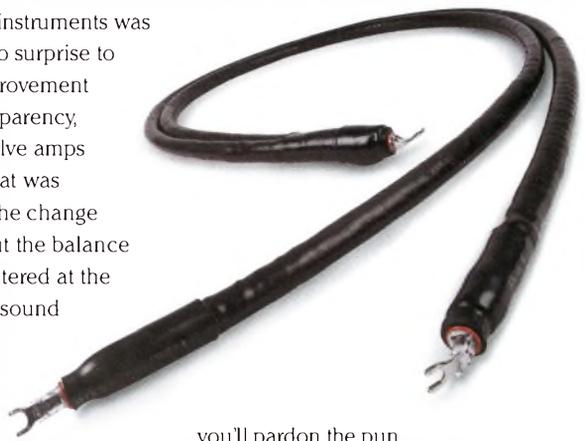
▶ also grounds for criticism in an overall tonal balance that both sounded and measured a little too warm, rich and laid back.

Shabir naturally wanted me to hear what he knew the speakers were capable of delivering, so we arranged a day when he could come down with his own bits and pieces to make the speakers really sing. That he did, most successfully, but the route he took to achieve this sonic nirvana was, to say the least, a little extreme. First there was a massive, prototype valve amp, a zero-feedback SET design featuring large and glowing vintage GE VT4C output valves (211s are today's equivalent). There was no pre-amp, just a volume control on the front of the amp, and a pair of phono sockets alongside the speaker terminals on the rear. We're strictly in single-source country here.

That beast paled into insignificance, however, compared to the monstrous connecting and mains cables that were also part of the package. These inch-diameter black hawsers - the mains leads had three of them! - look tough enough to tie-up a cross-channel ferry, yet the speaker leads were way too short to get near the rest of my system. These cables are not only made up of around 50 strands of silver-Litz, each strand is individually hand-wrapped in damping membrane, which I guess explains why each costs thousands of pounds - though I guess that's a minor detail if you can afford the speakers and are prepared to put up with the cables' downright ugliness and inflexibility.

My CD player was moved up to the middle of the room, to be within connection range of the amplifier, and uglified by covering it with a stack of Shabir's damping pads. The 'approved' system was therefore complete, and the results were quite sensational - the dramatic

realism of voices and instruments was truly magical. It was no surprise to hear a substantial improvement in dynamics and transparency, because that's what valve amps invariably do best. What was unexpected was that the change also seemed to sort out the balance problem that I encountered at the start. Not only did the sound now possess awesome dynamic expression alongside a remarkably low noise floor, with spectacularly precise and delicate imaging, it also sounded beautifully neutral and well balanced too. I was really getting into some favourite CDs, almost as though hearing them for the very first time - which in a sense I was. Nitin Sawhney's brilliant *Beyond Skin* was revealing hidden depths, if



you'll pardon the pun.

But I was puzzling about that change in perceived balance, which simply didn't seem to fit. I powered up the test gear and repeated the in-room response that I'd originally done, this time with the valve power amp in place of my regular solid-state power, and there it was - a virtually flat response right across the band, with no extra warmth or laid-back presence. Investigating further, I first confirmed that the valve amp could deliver a flat response when unloaded, and then discovered that its output became anything but flat once it was connected to the variable

impedance of a typical loudspeaker. Directly tracking the Sapphire's impedance, including both the reflex 'double hump' and even the small resonant 'glitch' visible at 150Hz (probably a box standing wave), amplifier output was around -2dB across the upper bass, and then +2dB through the broad upper-mid and presence zone.

This not only explains why the Sapphire sounded so much more neutral and better balanced when driven by the (literally matching) valve amp, it also suggests that this speaker will probably always work ▶



▶ rather better with an SET valve amp than with a low output impedance solid state amp. A minor worry is that the Sapphire might have been deliberately aligned in order to work as well as possible with just this particular SET amplifier, which is taking system optimisation to the logical extreme, but like many extreme solutions might not play too well in the real world marketplace. One related factor is that SET amps have limited power output - the one provided is rated at just 18W per channel - which is why they tend to be partnered with high sensitivity horn-loaded speakers. The Sapphire does have a decent enough sensitivity rating of around 90dB, though that's well below a horn-loaded system, and is also mildly compromised by the 4 Ohm impedance. Used with an SET amp,



absolute loudness is therefore likely to be somewhat limited, though this speaker's exceptionally low 'noise' floor provides some compensation.

Even though the best tonal balance was achieved with the SET amp, and the sweetest results came with that vipers nest of silver cables, I still got very good results on the end of my regular solid-state-and-copper system. The speakers worked particularly well with Chord Signature speaker cables, delivering a sound with great authority, fine dynamic expression and very superior transparency and coherence. I do disagree with one line in the manufacturer's specification, which claims a +/-3dB frequency response

starting from a low 19Hz, which is rather optimistic since the port is tuned to around 45Hz. Even with room gain and that rather strong mid-bass, the speaker will be struggling a bit to reproduce the bottom octave (20-40Hz) with full weight, though it makes a pretty good fist of things above 30Hz.

If the Sapphire lacks a little low-bass weight, it's pretty well impeccable across the rest of the band (aside from the aforementioned balance factors). I don't think the ceramic tweeter is quite as self-effacing as B&W's diamond diaphragm device I've been using recently, but it's certainly no cause for complaint, and the simplicity of a two-way configuration

brings its own bonus in coherence and transparency. The elaborate enclosure is extraordinarily - indeed unprecedentedly - inert, even with the heaviest, loudest material, so you just get to hear the drivers, just as it should be, but so rarely is.

An acid test for any speaker lies in how well it reveals distinctions in the material with which it is fed, and here again the Sapphire Ti-C's performance was, to these ears, unprecedented in its sensitivity to, and the clarity with which it revealed, changes in source, amplification or ancillaries. FM radio in particular was spectacularly good, and if listening to the Sapphire was always a highly enjoyable experience, it wasn't

always a relaxing one. This speaker's fastidious nature is never far away, tempting one to start fiddling around with the system rather than settling down to enjoy the music.

Carrying out this review has proved an educational as well as an entertaining experience, and has certainly served to broaden my personal hi-fi horizons. Shabir's speaker is a remarkable achievement, and a tribute to the passion and enthusiasm of the man, though I also feel that its full potential will only be achieved when operating in an optimised system context, and that in turn imposes significant life-style constraints, over and beyond considerations of cost. Single-source SET valve amps with hawser-like silver cabling is not for me, but I daresay there are those out there who, like Shabir, will be unwilling to settle for anything less once they've heard the results. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way floor-standing loudspeaker
Bandwidth:	19Hz - 33kHz (+/-3dB but see text)
Impedance:	4 Ohms (nominal)
Drive Units -	
Bass/mid:	2x 170mm sapphire ceramic, titanium voice coil
High Frequency:	30mm sapphire ceramic concave dome
Nominal Power Handling:	100W
Standard finishes	Carbon black, titanium metallic, silver metallic, mirabelle maroon
Dimensions (WxHxD):	290x1226x390mm
Weight:	68kg
Price:	£32,000 per pair

Manufacturer:
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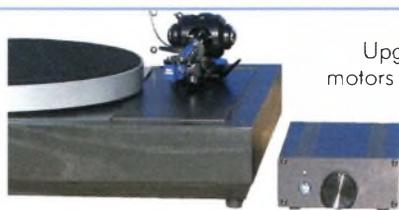
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MARTEN
DESIGN

The Marten Design Duke Loudspeaker and Ellington Sub-woofer

by Roy Gregory

There's only one problem with making a great £30000 speaker; no matter how well-regarded it is, or how much critical acclaim is heaped upon it, sales aren't going to pay the rent. To do that you need something affordable that a few more people can actually buy. Which brings us to the problem. Looking at his lovingly crafted masterpiece, which elements does the designer sacrifice in order to cut costs?

Well in the case of Marten Design, when it came to decimating the budget for the Coltrane to produce the £3500 Duke, designer Leif Mårten Olofsson didn't have to look too far. First to go was the diamond tweeter, followed in short order by the fancy cabinet and a whole hunk of bandwidth. The question is what have we been left with? Well, in the case of the Duke, the answer is quite a lot. Whichever way you look at it this is a speaker that offers a few surprises.

Take the performance on paper: 87dB sensitivity and a -3dB point at 39Hz look pretty standard stuff for a speaker this size, even if that bass extension goes deeper than you might expect. You start to form a mental picture of how the speaker is going to sound – only, once you actually listen you find that it doesn't. In fact, it sounds far more immediate, focussed and dynamic than any 87dB speaker has a right to. Somewhat surprisingly, the Dukes struck up an instant rapport with the Tom Evans Linear A – all 25 Watts of it – no doubt helped by the 5.8 Ohm minimum impedance.

There's a crispness and liveliness to the music that you'd normally associate with far more efficient designs, like the

94dB Living Voice OBX-R2 that I normally use. In fact, it's an interesting comparison, because on paper, the OBX offers an extra 7dB of sensitivity but not a lot more bandwidth, with a -3dB point at 33Hz. But listen to the two speakers side by side and you'd swear that the Duke is far more sensitive than the specifications suggest – and that it doesn't go as deep in the bass. Just listen to Britten conducting the ECO, playing his *Young Person's Guide...* (XRCD-0226-2). The opening is impressive enough, with a lovely sense of space and orchestral space, but where the OBX tracks the bassoon that underpins the second section with perfect weight, pitch and precision, it's a mere ghost on the Dukes. So whichever way you cut it, this speaker isn't quite what it might seem.

There again, it looks pretty surprising too. The cabinet is built from 26mm MDF internally damped and

order crossover, set at 3kHz, while on the outside there's a 25mm ceramic dome tweeter and a 180mm ceramic cone (or dish) bass-mid unit. The back panel sports a large diameter, flared port and a set of nice bi-wire binding posts, mounted on a rigid, aluminium plate rather than the more normal plastic

molding. It might seem like a small thing but it's also one that's often overlooked. (Molded panels look pretty but introduce a weakness and flexibility to the cabinet.)

Now, generally, a compact stand-mount would be expected to sit atop a pair of 24" stands or thereabouts, the fashion being something that weighs considerably more than the speaker itself. Now

the Duke isn't that compact (its front baffle is fully 400mm high) yet the price includes a matching stand that's 30" tall once you put the spikes on it. With three, large diameter extruded aluminium uprights it looks incredibly solid and rigid – which it is – yet pick it up and it's also astonishingly light. You also get four thick foam pads to space the speaker from the top-plate. The Dukes need to be placed a little closer to the wall than you might expect, about 15" in my room, and you need to toe them in to point almost straight at the listener. Also, be aware that such is their transparency that you need to get the stands absolutely vertical.

Set up in this way and driven by the Linear A, the Dukes deliver a fantastic performance on smaller scale recordings. The Steve Dawson and Diane Christansen album *Duets* springs to life, the familiar voices immediate, focused and lifelike against the inky black background. Both have tremendous



tapered heavily towards its tail, vertically and horizontally.

It makes the speakers look a little like you are viewing them through a wide angle lens, although combined with the good quality veneer, the effect is far from unattractive. Inside, there's a second



▶ presence, stability and dimensionality, while the sparse instrumentation is beautifully handled. Acoustic guitar notes are reproduced with a clarity and precision that leaves playing, placing and pitch, the energy that goes into each note, in no doubt. It's this combination of micro-dynamic discrimination, energy and spatial definition that makes the sound so convincing.



Even something as grungy as the fabulous Wilko album *Back In The Night* has just the right combination of drive and aggression. Just listen to the live closer 'Roxette' to appreciate the way this speaker organises the rhythmic aspects of a track. The trip-hammer beat and surging, heaving bass line underpin the man's vocals, the angry, confused blues of the lyric, absolutely perfectly, propelling the track into high-energy overdrive. Yet even here you learn something about this speaker: notice the way in which the vocals are held back within the coherent soundstage rather than projected forward in the way that so many (especially small) speakers do. It's also far more forgiving of recording quality than the Coltrane, which along with its other strengths

make it a superb transducer for live recordings. More Fun? You might think that but I couldn't possibly comment...

How much of that sense of precision and clarity, especially at the bottom end, comes from the extension available at the top. With the ceramic dome going out beyond 40kHz this is one speaker that doesn't need a supertweeter. Which makes it kind of appropriate that what it does need is a sub-woofer. As impressive

as the performance on smaller scale, especially acoustic recordings is, play larger works and the Duke's shortcomings at low-frequencies become all too apparent. The bass that there is, is quick, agile and pitch perfect, but it lacks substance and weight, robbing orchestral music of its essential foundation and rock music of power.

Enter then the Ellington sub-woofers (shouldn't the names be the other way round?) active units that replace the stands below the Dukes. Imposing in

their black satin finish, each Ellington contains two, forward facing 8" long-throw aluminium coned drivers, loaded by a substantial port in the bottom of the cabinet. The footprint is tapered in the same way as the Duke, while a backwards slope limits internal parallel surfaces in exactly the same way as the smaller cabinet, just in a different plane. Rear panel connections are provided at line and speaker level, along with controls for phase, roll-off, level and equalisation. The internal 200W Class D amplifier will offer

potentially damaging levels at anything down to 18Hz, making these pretty serious subs, as they should be at £4000 per pair. The satellites sit perfectly on top, again resting on the foam pads, while larger sheets of open cell foam are used to block their ports and roll them off a little earlier.

Although I tried the subs run at speaker level, I preferred the sound with them fed directly from the line-stage. They also enabled me to pull the speakers forward into the room, giving the Dukes even more space to breathe. Of course, the best results will be obtained with the satellites left on their stands and the subs sited separately to best exploit the room nodes, but I'm not sure that option was really considered in the design brief - or would be visually acceptable in most situations! As it is, the Dukes and Ellingtons make for an undoubtedly imposing combination, but one that has enough style and character about them to carry it off without being awkward or ugly. The sharp edges might jar with more traditional décor,

but fit right into a modern aesthetic.

If ever a speaker was crying out for a sub then it's the Duke – and the Ellington certainly delivers. It's a powerful beast, which is something of a double-edged sword if you get the set up wrong, but as with all subs, patience delivers serious sonic dividends. My

only gripe is the lack of fine gradation on the control panel, a provision that makes set up and repeatable adjustment so much easier. But with a properly sorted set of Ellingtons in play, you are left in no doubt that this is an extremely capable, full-range speaker system. As expected, the soundstage simply opens out while images take on a new sense of solidity and dimensional presence, further extending the



► Dukes' already impressive performance in this regard. Playing Janos Starker's performance of the Dvorak Cello Concerto for Mercury demonstrates the available weight and power. The soundstage extends well beyond the speaker boundaries while the speakers themselves simply disappear. Starker's instrument is larger than life, exactly as one expects with this recording, wonderfully vibrant and woody, the tension and power in the playing having an almost reach-out and touch quality. The agility and mastery in the playing does full justice to the maestro's skills.

Just like its more expensive sibling, playing the music of this speaker's namesake is instructive. The complex rhythms and melodic lines of Ellington's music are the perfect playground for this system's easy flow and top to bottom agility. The bass, despite its extension, never slows or plods, and powerful rock music has real drive and purpose.

Of course, with the £7K speaker market just about to wake up (all those new B&Ws don't you know...) the Marten combination faces stiff competition, but such are its strengths that it need have no fears. With a remarkably lucid and clear sound that manages to offer resolution without becoming clinical or dry in the process, coupled to a seamless coherence capable of casting a huge soundstage and realistic dynamic range capabilities, they seem to have all the bases covered. And they're easy to drive into the bargain.

Their weakness lies in a slight bleaching of tonal colours through the mid-bass and lower mid-band, which leads in turn to a slight pinching of

harmonic roundness. If you want warm and cuddly then this isn't it. You also need to take considerable care in matching the subs and satellites to avoid a mid-bass thinning which exacerbates the character. I managed to minimize it but never eliminate it in my room – however, given the bass performance of the Dukes alone it might be down to the room rather than the system itself, so experiment here. Get it right and

I suspect my tonal reservations would evaporate. As it is this speaker system delivers many of the qualities of the four times the price Coltrane but with a more accessible and less demanding character that really invites extended listening. The clean sound is devoid of edge or strain, especially at the top, which soars clear and high, delivering air and detail without drawing attention to itself. Leif Mårten Olafsson has successfully pulled off that hardest of all tricks, downsizing without eroding the essential quality and character of the product. Along the way

he has created a system that is far less demanding of accompanying equipment, easier on the ear, and potentially as a result, more fun to listen to. Yes, they lack the absolute resolution, the preternatural evenness and refinement of the Coltranes, but boy do they make up for it with sheer musical enthusiasm. The Duke/Ellington combination could hang on the end of an extremely rewarding, genuinely high-end system, and one that's not extortionately expensive. Add a Lavardin IT and a decent front-end and you'd have an awful lot of highly enjoyable music for your money.

The icing on the cake is the Duke. Not as a standalone speaker, in which

capacity it's limited by its bandwidth, but because it offers the option of a stepping stone via a cheaper alternative than the Ellingtons, making the performance even more accessible. This is one speaker system that anybody spending up to five-figures should definitely hear. Just don't lose sight of the fact that it is a system. And I still think that they got the names round the wrong way. 



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Duke Satellite

Type:	Two-way, reflex loaded loudspeaker
Drivers:	25mm ceramic dome tweeter 180mm ceramic cone woofer
Sensitivity:	87dB
Bandwidth:	39Hz – 40kHz ±3dB
Impedance:	8 Ohm nominal (5.8 Ohm minimum)
Cross-over:	3kHz, 2nd order
Dimensions (WxHxD):	220x400x330mm
Finishes:	Walnut, maple or cherry veneers Piano lacquer, any colour, £200 extra
Weight:	13kg ea.
Price:	£3500 including stands

Ellington Sub-woofers

Type:	Active sub-woofer system
Drivers:	2x 205mm aluminium cone
Amplifier:	200 Watt class D
Bandwidth:	18 – 150Hz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	290x700x330mm
Weight:	25kg ea.
Finish:	Satin black
Price:	£4000 pr.

UK Distributor:

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The Avalon Acoustics Studio Pro Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

If nothing else, the Avalon Acoustics Studio Pro loudspeaker started an interesting and ongoing debate in these parts about just what differences one should expect to exist between a domestic speaker and one specifically designed for monitoring the recording process. It's a little known fact that Avalon, as well as building some of the world's best loudspeakers for use at home, have a professional range that includes both a recording and a mixing monitor that have been finding serious favour with audiophile recordists Stateside; well, they are now available to British music lovers.

As someone who has spent a reasonable amount of time in recording studios over the years, I have seen the rise of the near-field monitor from its early beginnings. Talk to producers and ask them why they are using such obviously limited speakers when they usually have a pair of seriously full-range monitors sitting at their disposal and they will offer many explanations. It seems to me that, at the heart of these is a general dissatisfaction with what they are hearing through the large resident monitors and how that translates when the music is finally scaled down and marketed in Compact Disc or vinyl form, to be played through a domestic system. Many years ago a trend started for producers to use a much smaller speaker (inevitably with less bandwidth and often with reduced resolving power) usually fixed to the back of the mixing desk a few feet or so away from the listener's

ears. As someone used to setting up domestic systems with some degree of care I was always amazed at the slapdash way in which such things were done in recording studios and I have seen these little transducers hanging loosely in the air, attached to the desk by a combination of bits of metal and that product without which no studio could function, Gaffa tape. My early experiences were with the Videotone Minimax, which transmogrified into the AR 18 and then on through the near universal Yamaha NS10. Studios are very fashion conscious and had to have them because other studios had them and producers felt comfortable with them for reasons that, to this day, I can't fully understand. I always used to ask them just what information they were getting through such an obviously coloured device as the NS 10 and how did that help them? For them the speaker is purely a tool. It is not there to be enjoyed but rather to supply them with data, however inaccurate, with which to guide their hand on the mixing desk. Consistent performance, combined with what they hear from the larger monitors plus their experience manages to give them a great feel for what is actually being laid down. I have heard quite a few albums being made from beginning to end and have almost always been amazed that, having heard the truly diabolical sounds that these guys use to work with, they regularly produce such great sounding music.

There has always been something

of a culture clash between the studio world and the domestic one, which is perhaps one reason why relatively few producers or musicians have remotely ambitious audio systems at home. One producer I have known for years has a really top domestic set-up that he uses every day, after a recording session, to check what he has done in the studio the night before, begging the question of why he doesn't use his home set-up in the studio if it is so ultimately revealing? But there is most definitely an element of black art in the producer's psyche. The personality of these people and the way in which they evaluate what they are hearing make the best of them, musicians who, operating at the highest level of their art, play that desk like an instrument against their ear in an ultra expressive and musical way. It is not so much what the producer is hearing as to how his ear and sensitivity to the music and musicians translate that information. Which preamble is by way of explaining just what baggage the Studio Monitor label carries for me.

Designer Neil Patel describes the Studio Pro as a professional speaker that is also applicable to the domestic environment. Take it from me that he's talking about the sound rather than the looks. This is one Avalon product that makes little sense if you require aesthetic beauty from your loudspeaker. It looks like a piece of Pro gear and makes absolutely no concession to conventional home design or



► style. It is very basically but robustly finished in a black Nubuck texture to withstand the rough handling it is likely to get in a studio or a mobile recording environment. A classy wood finish would be destroyed in no time. The two 5.25 inch ceramic coated drivers bear the company name and are bolted onto but not rebated into the baffle, and the classic D'Appolito arrangement is completed with a centrally mounted inverted titanium domed tweeter surrounded by black felt. As with all of Neil Patel's Avalon speakers, the shape tells you that they have paid a great deal of attention to both energy storage within the cabinet and edge diffraction and reflection. You could

pair of plugs. Long-term, dedicated, single-wired cables are the sonically superior answer, but it can make auditioning some-what problematic in these bi-wire obsessed days. It also reflects the increasing realisation that bi-wiring can be a double-edged sword, with single-wiring offering more consistent results.

One thing that became very obvious very quickly was that the Studio Pro shares the domestic range's general disdain for inadequate amplification. There's no two ways about it: You are not going to get away with anything other than a very, very good amplifier if you are to understand what

before a bit of suppleness slowly begins to appear. From then on they start to sound progressively looser as they begin to add a degree of tonal colour to their already impressive dynamic qualities. I pushed them pretty hard for days on end trying to speed up the process, but even by the end of the lengthy review period I never felt that I'd got right to the bottom of the



certainly never call it beautiful but it does have a certain rugged functionality about its appearance.

It can be used vertically or horizontally but for home use will certainly need to be stand mounted. Those with 4mm bi-wired cables terminated in 4mm plugs should be aware that their connection is going to be difficult. Like all Avalon speakers, there are a single pair of terminals, binding posts with a 4mm socket but no hole in the shaft through which to fit the second

this speaker can do and make it remotely viable.

The quite modest sensitivity of 87 dB also means that a decent 50 watter will barely be enough for most people, especially if you want to hear them at level and let's face it, why would you want a pair of studio monitors if you didn't. These Avalons are different enough to warrant pre/power combinations of several times their price and will respond accordingly. They also require a lengthy run-in period as they are cold, austere and somewhat impersonal for many, many hours

sound lurking beneath that cool exterior. Even, as I packed them for collection I still felt there was some way to go in the break-in process, each day revealing new musical insights.

But what was abundantly clear was the remarkable quality of their responsiveness to instrumental and vocal energy. They are fast, very fast and they can loose energy as quickly as they gain it. They can swing huge transients with ease, but it is the

► focus and sensitivity of their low-level performance that makes them so interesting. They, like all loudspeakers, are a slave to the source and their driving amplifier and these Avalon's will tell you more about these components than you might wish to know. Overall, their resolution is extremely good, though not as refined and delicately shaded as you will hear from Avalon's domestic speakers.

At first and until you get used to their different sense of balance they will seem very dry and quite forward in their presentation, but their rhythmic power, subtlety and ability to describe tiny dynamic shifts hooks you into the music and holds your interest. In fact, for me there was a whole psychological barrier to be overcome before I could really relax into their performance. That's because they are simply so different from what I am used to. I couldn't get past the issue of whether the differences were essential to their studio identity? I spent too long trying to understand those differences before getting around to actually enjoying them. If the exact same speaker had arrived not bearing that studio monitor tag and presented in domestic drag, would I have approached them in the same way? You see, that's the suggestive weight of expectation. Of course, unless you share my studio background, or you're writing a review, you won't suffer this handicap.

There is a great deal to enjoy about the Studio Pros' musical performance and the bedrock of this is certainly their superb dynamic grip and pure, unadulterated speed. This means that rhythmically they are beautifully stable and focussed, regardless of what you ask of them. Imaging is clear and extremely

explicit, with well recorded material delivering solid, believable instrumental shapes within a well defined acoustic space. On *Lonely Runs Both Ways* by Alison Krauss and Union Station (RRCD 525) the Studio Pro lets you isolate each of the excellently recorded guitar tracks with complete ease. Every collision of plectrum and string,



every upstroke and chopping guitar chord just sits in front of you separate and naked. And the vocal, less warm than you remembered, is vivid and more 'real', as if the reverberation that cloaked it before has been greatly reduced. It is certainly a little cool but nevertheless still very expressive. It just lets you listen to each of the separate elements of the song in their isolated glory and this is where they differ most from my own domestic speakers,

which in comparison seem as if they have polished the music and added a bit of flesh. They also have a greater sense of the 'whole' than the Avalons which never put the music together in quite such an organic way.

There is also a noticeable feeling of leanness and meanness throughout the upper mid-band and top-end with the Studio Pro and certainly less in the way of colourful harmonic development. None of this makes the Avalon immediately attractive when it is sitting alongside a speaker like the JM Labs Micro Utopia Be with its high-tech Beryllium tweeter, a speaker which seems positively sumptuous in comparison. But the bass? Well that's a different story. I cannot think of another speaker of approximately similar size that manages anything like the sheer extension and quantity of low-end information that these Avalons manage to generate, or that possesses the grip that consistently underpins so much of what is really good about this speaker. They seem on the face of it to have an extra octave available to them at any time over what you would expect.

And this is yet another reason why they are so fussy when it comes to amplification. A couple of well respected integrated amplifiers that I tried were left sounding just a little flabby and imprecise in the bass when confronted with such surprising potential and I had to up the ante considerably by driving them with the Connoisseur 4.0L and the Hovland Radia before feeling that order had been fully restored - though I should add here that the more affordable Pathos Inpol 2 also did a good job. ►

► But, when correctly driven, their transient abilities are superb right across the bandwidth, especially that bass which has tremendous weight and punch and that unerring ability to reflect the dynamic and textural qualities of each instrument or drum in such an energetic way. Play a piece of music with real driving, bass-led power at high level and you will be knocked out with the sheer grounded solidity of the sound. There is a ruthless sense of drive and a rhythmic precision here that is almost addictive and as you pour the power into them they respond with vigour and never seem to run out of breath. Impressive stuff.

The Avalon Studio Pro is certainly different in the way it goes about its business. Resolution is good - certainly as good as most other speakers in its price range, but not out of the very top, cost no object drawer. There is also a feeling that they can be a bit ruthless and unforgiving in a domestic environment. Poorly matched, that could make them difficult and frustrating to live with, precisely because they haven't been voiced for the comfort zone of home use. But the other side of that coin is that their clean and precise handling of the individual components in a recording mean that they are never less than clear, never rhythmically confused or smeared when it comes to timing issues, and this will go an awful long way to making them an attractive proposition for certain people.

I know I always say that you

must listen to any review product yourself before parting with your hard earned money but never has this been more true than with these Avalons. I have heard people say that hi-fi these days is much too safe and cosy. They should listen to the Studio Pros, one product

continuously enjoyable. Some will hate them. Me? I think they offer a fascinating alternative to established domestic designs. Their combination of studio clarity with more than a touch of domestic finesse can deliver startling authority and insight from a speaker that's far more astutely balanced than appearance might suggest. If you want your music gripping, take the trouble to hear what these Avalons can do. ►+



that certainly does not fall in that category. Those who love to pick their way through the mix will hear them and recognise exactly what they have been looking for in a loudspeaker. Others that they are very interesting, engaging even, but that they are a little too ruthless in their musical dissection to be

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	2-way, rear-ported stand-mounted loudspeaker.
Drivers:	2x 130mm ceramic coated mid/bass drivers. 1x 25mm Inverted dome titanium tweeter.
Sensitivity:	87db.
Impedance:	4ohms (3.6 ohms minimum).
Connections:	2 rear binding posts
Dimensions (HxWxD):	508 x 216 x 266mm
Weight:	12kg each.
Finish:	Black textured Nubuck.
Price:	£2300 per pair.

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PUTTING SOUND INTO FOCUS



WITH TIGER FEET



The ProAc Response D38 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Sometimes it's enough just to be big; other times sheer bulk can be an embarrassment. Confronted with a speaker as big and bluff as the ProAc Response D38, one is forced to wonder which will apply in this case, for outwardly at least, there is nothing fancy or special about this large floorstander. There's no exotic cabinet materials, high-tech drivers or gemstone diaphragms to justify the price-tag – just the imposing dimensions.

So, how big is big? Let's put some numbers on the beast. Standing a full 1244mm high and 235mm wide in its stocking feet (that is, without spikes) the D38's bulk is emphasized by the cabinet's considerable depth. Add in the lack of any softening contours or chamfered edges and this ProAc meets the gaze upright and square-on, the review pair's pale maple veneer doing nothing to diminish the visual impact. Buy a pair of Response D38s and you, your other half and anybody who visits will know that you're seriously committed to your music.

The external dimensions are if anything underlined by the contrast between the sheer size of the cabinet and the relatively small drivers employed, a pair of six-and-a-half-inch bass-mid units flanking a one-inch tweeter. The use of a downward-firing port further reduces the population of the front-panel. But the real surprise comes when picking the speaker up. At 40kg it's no lightweight, but it is lighter than you expect – which is when the alarm bells might start ringing. A box this big comes with a lot of baggage and the designer needs to get things just right if the available volume isn't

going to escape control. Well, breathe a sigh of relief, because Stuart Tyler is on top of his game and the results might appear prosaic, but the performance is anything but.

Of course, ProAc have been building large cabinets for an awfully long time, starting with the original Studio 3 and its larger brother, the EBS. Those were a different kettle of fish to the speaker you see before you, being three-ways with plywood cabinets and built to a price. But the market has evolved and when ProAc launched the Response range back in 1989, it reflected the fact that speakers could finally be designed to hit performance parameters rather than price points. The original Response 3 appeared in 1991, followed by Signature, 3.5 and 3.8 versions before the appearance of the current D38, differentiated by its use of the downward and slotted port arrangement. It sits squarely in the middle of the Response range, the D15 and 25 floorstanders below it and the D80 and monster D100s above, spanning a price range of £1800 to £15000. At \$4500 in its standard finishes, the D38 offers the customer an enticing combination of size and price, promising much of the larger models' size and bandwidth without the price-tag that goes with them. Time for a few more numbers.

The manufacturer quotes a bandwidth that stretches from 20Hz to 30kHz and a sensitivity of 90dB (which experience suggests is more realistic than many such claims). This makes the D38 a genuinely full-range performer on what passes for a mini-monitor budget

these days. The drive to greater efficiency rests squarely on the shoulders of new, higher sensitivity drivers, but the bass extension also mandates considerable, well-behaved internal volume. That means a carefully considered balance between dimensions, weight and rigidity if the cabinet and the air it contains are to avoid the pitfalls of standing waves and stored energy that so often mars the bass performance and neutrality of large boxes. To that end, the beautifully veneered MDF cabinets are extensively braced as well as critically damped with bituminous pads. The air volume itself is controlled by the careful application of acoustic foam along with the port arrangement that provides a controlled boundary environment.



The new drivers use a coated polypropylene cone linked to a massively powerful motor, rather than resorting to ultra-lightweight but poorly damped cone materials. This is key to maintaining the company's reputation for studied neutrality. Next comes the simplicity of the crossover, built with minimal components. The end result is a system that, in combination with the unobtrusive cabinet, leaves so little thumb-print on the passing signal that you might need CSI to find it.

On listening to the D38s it soon ►

▶ became apparent that they are uncannily transparent to the driving electronics. In this regard they approach closer the style and performance of the Avalon speakers, rather than other British designs. It also means that they demand a well-sorted system to give of their best, with attention to what some consider trivial details like supports and a coherent cable loom reaping clearly audible benefits in terms of musical sense and coherence.



To what extent this is down to the basic

precept of a simple approach, carefully executed it's hard to say, but there is no question that the ProAcs deliver a wide open window on the world of your system. More complex systems and crossovers can hide a multitude of sins, robbing the performance of energy, life, immediacy and transparency. The D38s hide little or nothing. That unvarnished truth is not always comfortable, but as much as it reveals the inadequacies of a poorly matched or tuned system, it thrives on the benefits as things get better.

Voicing speakers is often described as a black art. Comparing the way in

which designer Stuart Tyler achieves a satisfying performance from products as varied as the Tablette and Response D38, very different but each equally convincing, it soon becomes clear that bass balance and alignment are, if not the whole story, then the plank on which everything else rests. On the one hand,

the Tablette offers astonishing scale and presence from its tiny dimensions. On the other, the D38 offers the effortless dynamic scope and colossal soundstage that comes with real bandwidth, yet doesn't draw attention to itself or its dimensions by letting its box intrude on the music.

One is a case of gently overstating the contribution of the bottom-end, the other very much an example of understating and containing it. The evenness and lack of bloom or extends

across the broad mid-band and on up into the treble without a hump or lump in sight. The lack of the familiar mid-bass emphasis, used by so many designers to add a bit of warmth and (clogging) colour to their products can leave the D38s sounding lean and exposed on first acquaintance. Work

through it. Once you readjust to tea without sugar it always tastes better and it's the same with non-additive systems: Adjust and it's hard to go back. The Response D38 is like that. It's so unobtrusive, its inherent balance

so normal that it withdraws into the musical background. Swap it out and put in a less competent speaker and suddenly the non-linearities and discontinuities, phase shifts and colourations become not just obvious but irritatingly obstructive to musical

enjoyment. The return to ProAc land is always accompanied by a sigh of relief, and suddenly you realise that you've relaxed into the music again.

With amps as varied as the Hovland RADIA and Tom Evans Linear A on hand, it was still the warmer, richer tones of the Jadis DA88S that proved preferable, pointing to the speakers' inherent balance, with its lack of additive colour and body. It's not that it's lean or thin, thus that it errs to the subtractive rather than the fuller figure presented by so much of the competition. Those products fill out the stark, etched and hyper-defined picture provided by a lot of today's high-end electronics (and CD players) creating a situation in which two wrongs don't actually make a right, just another wrong that doesn't actually sound too offensive. By splashing a bit

of excess colour and weight around the

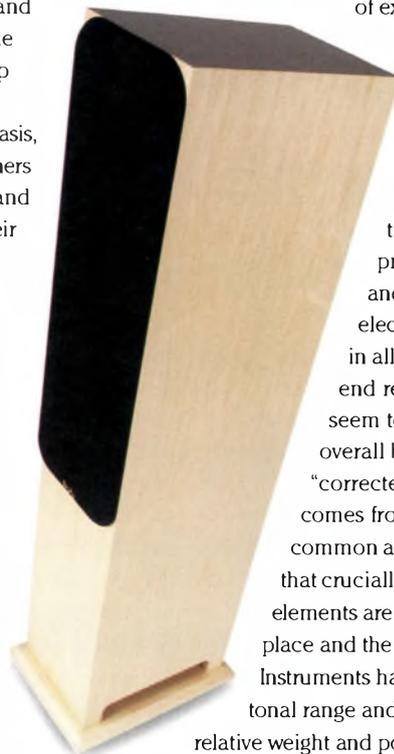
place they deliver some much needed body, drama and impact. In contrast,

the ProAcs allow properly balanced and musically correct electronics to flourish

in all their majesty. The end result might not seem too different in overall balance to the "corrected" sound that comes from the more common approach, it's just that crucially, all the musical elements are now in the right place and the right proportion.

Instruments have the correct tonal range and energy spectrum, relative weight and position.

Writing a review like this one you have to be careful; so much of what you describe consists of what the product doesn't do that it's easy to create a negative impression from a positive performance. The D38 doesn't add; it doesn't distort or conceal and it



▶ doesn't have a readily discernable character. You get my point. If this speaker was a person they might well be admirable but would you want them as a friend? Well, fortunately for ProAc, loudspeakers and people are rather different. The very fact that it doesn't contribute should be what makes the D38 so appealing to potential buyers. Instead of concentrating on what it doesn't do, let's look instead at what it allows.

Let's start with the Chesky re-issue of the Barbirolli/RPO recording of the Sibelius *2nd Symphony*. A Ken Wilkinson (every bit as good as Johnny in his own way) recording for RCA, the Second Movement opens with a soft timpani roll and a protracted, almost muted pizzicato passage on the double bass. Many systems reduce this to a disjointed collection of thuds and thumps with no real musical shape or direction. The ProAc's let you hear the familiar Walthamstow acoustic, the tims placed slightly left and at the rear of the stage. The texture in the rattle of soft sticks on skins is perfect – you can clearly hear the layer of energized air above the drum. The bass is placed precisely across the stage, its tonality unmistakable (it's surprising how many speakers can't differentiate lower register cello from double bass) the notes progressing in a beautifully even walk, the pitch and level of each one picking out the melody and phrases in the convoluted progress, rising, falling almost dying away before coming back again.

That's clever enough, but what really impresses is how, as the movement starts to build, layer on layer, the contribution of the

tims and bass are just as clear, the drum subtly underpinning the woodwind entry, the bass doggedly marching onward into the maelstrom of the opening crescendo. That level of low frequency discrimination is rare indeed and it's a trick that the D38s manage to extend across the entire range of both audible frequencies and musical genres. Just think what that level of separation and textural definition does for the slabs of flanged bass that the likes of Moby or EST enjoy so much.

As a strength, like many strengths, such bare faced honesty can also become a weakness. It places a heavy burden on the accuracy and honesty of the partnering equipment – especially its musical coherence. If I was really picky I could ask for a little more top-end air and detail, definition on cymbals for instance. But I'd not willingly trade the seamless junction of tweeter and mid-bass units to achieve it, and therein lies the rub. All products represent a compromise, and Lord knows, speakers are a bigger compromise than most others, especially if you want to get something approaching full-range performance at this sort of price. The ProAc Response D38 does it right. It prioritizes bandwidth, driver integration and lack of intrusive additives and cobines those qualities into a readily driven package.

Somewhere along the way it discards hi-fi fashion and high-end credibility, domestic brownie points and an impressive showroom persona. It's a tool; a beautifully presented tool to be sure but a tool none the less. Like all good tools it feels just right in your hand and makes you want to use it. Using this one you should be able to build something pretty special, something that's going to last a while.

The D38s make wanting more seem almost greedy... ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way floor-ported loudspeaker
Drive Units:	25mm soft-dome tweeter 2x 165mm coated polypropylene mid-bass
Bandwidth:	20Hz – 30kHz \pm 3dB
Sensitivity:	90dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	235 x 1244 x 343mm
Weight:	40kg ea.
Finishes:	Maple, black ash, mahogany or cherry as standard. Ebony and bird's eye maple to special order.
Prices:	£4495 (standard) £5370 (special)
Manufacturer:	ProAc
Tel.:	(44)(0)1280 700147
Net.:	www.proac-loudspeakers.com



The JMLab Cobalt 806 Signature S

by Steve Dickinson

My Oxford Concise English Dictionary defines cliché as “a hackneyed literary phrase”. The thing about clichés, though, is that they only became hackneyed through regular use. When they were first uttered, they encapsulated a thought so well that pretty soon, everybody was using them. If the original was dull or unimaginative rubbish it wouldn't have become a cliché. Today, of course, the cliché is not confined to the literary. Our multimedia world admits pictures, sounds, even objects. How many iPod lookalikes have you seen recently? Form follows function. Another cliché.

So, to hi-fi's very own cliché: the two-way, reflex-loaded, standmounting loudspeaker. Blah blah, yadda yadda, yawn yawn... As clichés go, though, this one has the undeniable benefit of a certain variety. This format of loudspeaker can be found attached to fifty quid high street boom-boxes or cost-no-object hyper systems. The difference being quality, and that being constrained by cost.

With the Cobalt 806 Signature S, JMLab have made a mid-priced loudspeaker costing £630 plus a further £190 for matching stands. As a range, the mid-market Cobalts sit comfortably above the budget Chorus range, but below the upmarket Electras and flagship Utopias. They therefore represent either a decent upgrade option, or a more expensive entry level, depending on your point of view and/or budget. A quick look at the drivers reveals where the money has mostly gone. The tweeter is the

justly famed inverted titanium dome and the main driver is a 6.5 inch W-cone unit first developed for the original Utopia models. This ability to transfer technology from further up the food chain is undoubtedly a significant advantage: I suspect if they didn't make



their own drivers, JMLab would find it hard to cost hardware of this quality into a speaker at this price. Which is not to say it looks cheap. The cabinet is well-finished, as you have a right to expect of any product in this price range, but it looks smart rather than sophisticated. Think, Habitat rather than *House and Garden*. The side cheeks are real cherry veneer, with shaped and profiled front and rear edges and a rich red lacquer finish, denoted by

the “Signature” in the model name. The front, back, top and bottom are finished in a gun-metal Nextel-type textured paint finish which both looks very tidy, and also nicely complements the natural colour of the drivers. A detachable, shaped metal grille fits over the front baffle. The overall effect is modern and neat and they should fit easily into a wide range of domestic settings. The speakers feel pleasingly solid and reasonably heavy for their size. The crossover is visible through a clear view panel on the back, above the two sets of binding posts, and boasts high quality components (or they'd surely have hidden it away, methinks).

Connected into my system and listening casually, initial thoughts were of a very engaging and musical performance, which conceded very little to my usual (Focal based and Electra equivalent) speakers. Putting on some familiar music, ‘Take Five’ from Dave Brubeck's *Time Out* album and the first impression is of really quite pronounced percussion, certainly somewhat brighter than my usual fare. It would seem that this speaker has been voiced to play to its strengths. The main driver is undoubtedly very good indeed, there are useful amounts of low-level detail throughout the range, but it is the tweeters that Focal/JMLab are renowned for. They certainly sing here. If you spent similar sums on the rest of the elements in your system, you'd have every right to expect a well-sorted sound without obvious



► sonic evidence of cost-cutting. You'd be looking for speakers that allowed your choices to give of their best, but that wouldn't disappoint when you upgraded the other components. I suspect the Cobalts' extended, shimmering treble and good levels of low-level detail will flatter decent kit, while allowing great equipment to shine.

My wife described them as "Tinnier than yours", pithy, and not entirely untrue, but she



wasn't really paying attention, so let's not get too hung up on that idea. Besides, that'd make for a rather short review. I'd describe the treble as "analytical" rather than "spotlit". The Nordost cables I use are not exactly shy in the upper registers, of course, and it might well be argued that more typical cables for use with systems in this price bracket would probably roll-off the treble a wee bit more than the Nordosts and that the speakers may have been balanced with those in mind. However, my regular speakers use a fairly similar Focal tweeter and the upper registers, while far from dull, don't draw attention to themselves to quite the same extent. 'Take Five' is a piece that relies on the bass and

piano for the underpinning rhythm, not the percussion. A long-ish drum solo makes up the larger part of the piece, supported by the piano and bass repeating a one-bar ostinato theme which they keep up for most of the track. Through the Cobalts, the piano and bass are slightly withdrawn, giving ground to a clean, crisp treble which really brings out the snare and cymbal work. This definitely shows the

percussion to advantage, but the dogged persistence of the rhythm section during the off-tempo bits of the drum solo are slightly lost, in consequence.

Time and again, I play tracks where the top end assumes a tad more prominence than I'm accustomed to. The speaker is not bright, exactly, it is far better balanced than that, but the amount of treble energy it can convey is certainly its defining attribute. This makes for a very good first impression, if you heard it in a shop it would surely be attractive, but unlike lesser designs,

it doesn't disappoint on longer acquaintance. Allowing the speakers to settle in a bit confirms this slightly forward treble, albeit of very good quality. Bass is a little dry and the midrange, in comparison, is somewhat recessed. It feels as if the acoustic centre of gravity has shifted upwards by a half octave or so. 'Every Morning' by Keb Mo' sounds like the overtones in his voice are given more emphasis than the fundamental. He sounds breathy, rather than chesty.

Similarly, Barry White is more "Lurve" than "Walrus". Often, though, it is less obvious. Bill Withers' 'Ain't No Sunshine' comes across with a full and tuneful bass, admittedly this acoustic track doesn't dig deep into the lowest register, but it does point out very effectively that the bass delivered is the real deal, and agile with it.

My own speakers can tend towards a slightly "fruity" bass on occasion. Tracks with heavy or deep bass can sound a little boomy in my smallish listening room and in these circumstances, the slightly drier acoustic of the Cobalts is no bad thing at all. The soundtrack album to *American Beauty* opens with the title credits track, 'Dead already'. Percussive, with a powerful marimba theme and fast stick work, with a deep and reverberant kick drum, the Cobalts deliver the speed, attack and urgency of the track, without any tendency to an overblown bass. It does lose a little of the atmosphere ►

► and sense of space, though, as a result of the reduction in slam right at the bottom end, but the neighbours aren't complaining. Adjusting the position of the speakers didn't seem to make a huge difference to the overall balance. My regular speakers have a rear-facing port and I keep them about half a metre away from the rear wall. The Cobalts' port is forward firing and they didn't seem to mind whether they were a little closer, or a little further away than usual. Toeing them in so they fired more-or-less directly at the sweet spot did help with imaging and stage depth, however.

Playing some larger-scale orchestral stuff revealed good stage depth, most of the action in *Rhapsody in Blue* (Bernstein playing and conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic) occurred well behind the plane of the speakers and for the most part, the piano occupied a believable space, centre-stage. Only rarely did I get that "wide piano" thing where the sound extends from speaker to speaker. Overall, the sense of depth and a natural acoustic space was well portrayed. Other orchestral music was similarly accomplished in presentation, although the changed balance brought out some interesting comparisons. For example: I have two recordings of Beethoven's *5th Piano Concerto*, one played by Claudio Arrau and the Staatskapelle Dresden under Colin Davis, the other Alfred Brendel and the Chicago Symphony with James Levine. Both versions were dealt with in a musical and involving fashion, the analytical nature of the speakers led to good instrumental separation and effective rendering of the interplay between soloist and orchestra. Through my own speakers,

I find I prefer the Brendel, the contemplative, liquid playing and the contrasting drama of the orchestra makes for an engrossing performance. Through the Cobalts, I surprised myself by favouring the Arrau because the orchestra seemed to exhibit a greater range of tonal colour, and the interplay between orchestra and piano was somehow more engaging. Perhaps because the drama of the Brendel was slightly attenuated due to the lighter bass, the strengths of the



other performance were more apparent. Massed strings are dealt with particularly well, with no tendency to sound smooth, or like one big violin. Orchestral timbre does seem to be a strong suit.

I have heard more expensive loudspeakers that didn't engage me as much as the Cobalts. While the clean and extended treble is their most obvious attribute, the midrange and

bass are effective, quick and punchy, with plenty of subtlety and finesse. The slightly shy midrange might be a disadvantage if vocal music is your thing; contrapuntal choir music, for example, could be slightly compromised in the middle voices, but there is something inherently musical about the speaker as a whole that wins me over. The lack of deep bass is nothing new in a two-way stand-mount of around 15-20 litres. JMLab have, sensibly in my view, opted for quality, not quantity in the bass - for typical UK-sized living spaces, it is probably well-judged - and the overall presentation is natural and unforced. I think Jack Nicholson is a better actor than Cary Grant, but I'd rather have the latter as a neighbour. Passion and drama have their place, of course, but real life requires compromises. So it is with these speakers. Once or twice while reviewing the Cobalt 806 S, I found myself simply listening to the music, and completely forgetting to assess the sound and take notes. Can't say fairer than that, really. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	2-way, reflex loaded, stand-mount
Drive Units:	165mm W-cone mid/bass 25mm ti-oxide inverted dome tweeter
Sensitivity:	90dB
Bandwidth:	50Hz-22KHz (± 3 dB)
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Weight:	8.9 Kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	220x385x278mm
Finishes:	Various with black or silver grill
Price:	£630 pr.

Manufacturer:

Tel. (33)(0)477 435700

Net. www.focal-jmlab.fr



The Triangle Altea ES Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

Triangle speakers are decidedly different from the hi-fi norm, in both their presentation and the in-house drive units that they use. And if I don't think that the styling does them any favours in the UK marketplace, those drivers certainly bring unique qualities to the sounds and music they create.

I really discovered Triangle back in 1999, when a model called the Zephyr II stomped its rivals in a group test I was doing by the sheer vividness of its dynamic expression. I've tried a number of other models since then, from the inexpensive to the seriously high end, and even paid a visit to the company's base at Soissons, in North West France, and still find this brand of speakers amongst the most interesting around, even though they also have more than their fair share of peculiarities.

None more so than the Solis that I reviewed in the last issue of Hi-Fi+, and which is a rare example of that most unusual type – a three-way stand-mount. In contrast, this Altea ES is a more conventional and much more cost effective package. It features a very similar looking driver line-up, this time in a floorstanding enclosure, yet at £795/pair costs only half the price of the Solis, albeit with a much more prosaic finish and presentation.

One feature of the speaker market is that you tend to get best value for money at the bottom of a manufacturer's range. You might not get fancy (or plain) real wood veneers to pretty up the cabinetwork, but the crucial core ingredients – the drive units themselves – often look very similar indeed. That's certainly true in this case, though

closer examination of the specs does reveal that the Altea ES' drivers have different type numbers from those found in the Solis, and are presumably less costly variations on the essentially common theme.

Another significant difference is that this floorstander is actually a two-and-a-half-way design (using both cone drivers through the bass region, but rolling off the lower one well before the mid-to-treble crossover point is reached), rather than the three way implied in the manufacturer's spec. This is obvious enough because the midrange driver shows a similar degree of cone excursion as the bass unit when the speaker is fed low frequency sinewaves, and is confirmed by the relative simplicity of the impedance trace. As far as this reviewer's prejudices

is concerned, this is probably a good thing, though the relative merits of two-and-a-half and three-way designs has long been debated. The three-way will certainly have superior power handling, but the two-and-a-half-way has the advantage of a much simpler crossover network, which to my mind is likely to prove an advantage at low and medium levels.

However, whereas most two-and-a-half-ways use identical drivers for the bass-only and bass/mid duties, Triangle has its own rather different approach to the midrange. Although its bass units are conventional in terms of

using rubber roll surrounds between cone and frame, the mid drivers have pleated fabric surrounds. It's an old fashioned approach, for sure, but one that seems to minimise energy storage at some expense in terms of coloration,

and as such seems to benefit

dynamic expression. Both the bass-only and bass/mid driver have hefty cast chassis' and magnets, and flared, doped paper cones, 120mm and 115mm in diameter respectively.

The tweeter is equally distinctive, the 25mm titanium dome diaphragm loaded by a good size cast alloy horn, which has several implications. It controls the directivity, focusing the treble output in a forward direction, increasing the effective sensitivity (by around 6dB) and hence the head-room, while also limiting the all round distribution. The latter factor will tend to improve image focus, at some expense in terms of the 'performers-in-the-room' impression. Triangle also believes that the horn's relatively large mouth diameter improves the transition from mid to treble drivers.

The enclosure is a rather dour looking affair, with a convex black-painted front panel, while the rest of the box is covered in an adequate though unexceptional vinyl woodprint. The three alternative colours – light, medium and dark – are described in best estate-agentese as Champagne, Cognac and Bordeaux. The enclosure is partitioned between the cone drivers, the lower two-thirds loading the bass-only driver with a flared port close to the floor, while the upper sealed section loads the bass/mid driver.

Although the finish is uninspiring, there can be no quibbling with the high quality engineering content, ▶



▶ which starts from the ground up with a truly impressive plinth/spike arrangement. This is a quite elaborate steel affair, nicely shaped and securely fixed via a rubber gasket. It usefully improves the lateral stability, and comes with four chunky brass spikes with generous knurled lock-nuts. The rear two are active, while the front two act a little like bicycle stabilisers, sitting just clear of the floor unless needed, as the main floor-coupling component at the front is a large central cone immediately under the front baffle, again with a generous locking ring.

In room measurements show one of the best judged overall tonal balances I've seen from a Triangle speaker (though admittedly that's not saying a great deal, as waywardness has been widespread). While the balance looks very good overall, it does lack smoothness, but again that's a Triangle trait, and arguably acceptable as sensitivity is a high 91dB (albeit alongside a substantially 4 ohm impedance). The bass shows decent extension and a slightly dry alignment with the speakers sited well clear of walls, so they can probably be moved a little closer without causing undue mid-bass thickening.

Hooked up to my regular Naim-based system (CDS3, NAC552, NAP500), the Altea's essentially neutral balance was immediately evident, and very welcome too. But alongside that slightly unexpected feature is something that Triangle has long done better than most – genuine midband dynamic tension, and a rare ability to communicate the emotion and meaning of a performance.

It's not a sweet sounding speaker, and can get a little edgy when that's a characteristic of the recording. I switched power amps from the big Naim to an ancient but recently restored Leak Stereo 20, and the combination worked rather well, mollifying that slight

aggression somewhat, and making the most of the superior midband transparency. It's truly excellent at distinguishing the different singing voices in a choral work, and

orchestral material was equally well served.



The more complex and textured the material, the better this speaker seems to rise to the challenge of sorting out the structure and fine detail. Even applause was uncannily clear and realistic, with no evidence of time-smear.

It's no deep bass excavator, for sure, but there's satisfactory warmth and good basic agility.

The bottom end doesn't quite match the superiority of the midband, but it still provides good impetus and a fair measure of weight. And if the top end is inclined to be a little too assertive at times, it seems well integrated with the whole, and sounds crisp, clean and free from strain. Imaging is precise and well-focused,

helped by the lack of time-smear effects, the fine midrange dynamic range, and the fact that cabinet colorations are very well controlled.

Speech is particularly clear and convincing, even when playing the system at very low levels, and it proved surprisingly easy to identify different individuals as the character and accent of a particular voice was very clear.

The Altea ES might not be the most costly or pretentious of Triangle's loudspeakers, but it's certainly one of the best, combining a fine tonal neutrality with the righteous midband dynamic tension and expression that has long been one of the best features of this company's speakers. While the finish and presentation is unlikely to impress British sensibilities, those interested primarily in sound quality, are unlikely to find a better speaker under £1,000. Like other Triangles, the Altea ES is remarkably effective at getting the listener interested and involved even in unfamiliar and 'difficult' material; unlike many other Triangles, this one doesn't require the ears to adjust to balance anomalies at the same time. ➤



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity:	91 dB
Power handling (continuous/programme):	100/200W
Impedance nominal/minimum:	8/4 ohms
Crossover points:	800Hz, 3kHz
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Roy Gregory - Hi-Fi magazine issue 28.



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Consonance Cyber 222 Pre-amp and 800 Mono-block Amplifiers

by Jimmy Hughes

The first impression was one of panic. Faced with three huge boxes, my initial thought was – where on earth am I going to put all this? Having mostly used integrated amps and fairly compact pre/power jobbies like the Chord, Consonance's massive Cyber 222 pre-amp and 800 mono-block power amps came as a bit of a shock. And while the boxes are generously over-sized to protect the innards, the innards are still pretty massive.

Now those among you with long memories may recall that, many aeons ago, I used to have a tri-amped active system with three Krell KSA-50s. Given all that – what the hell am I complaining about? But things have changed. Such youthful folly occurred in my carefree bachelor days, when I could do whatever I wanted and had only myself to please – literally and metaphorically! Now I'm married it's a different tune...

But whatever minor practical concerns I might've had when the amps were waiting to be installed, all such reservations were quickly swept aside once everything was up and running. The sound was truly sumptuous - big-boned, rich, warm and very weighty. The impression was one of considerable power and solidity. Bass in particular sounded very deep and powerful, yet extremely clean and articulate.

The real 'lows' were very extended, underpinning the music with

a firm solid foundation. Yet it was musical muscle, not flatulent flab. Bass instruments had real individuality and character. With the Cyber Sisters, the lower frequencies actually sounded cleaner and more articulate than they had with the lean 'n' mean tranny amp I'd been using previously – despite the increase in richness and voluminosity. Now that's a word I haven't used before – indeed, I'm

not certain it exists – but it perfectly describes this remarkable amplifier.

As usual, I've started this review in the middle, mentioning the outstanding bass quality first. Why? Because it's more fun that way, and (hopefully) makes you read the whole thing. But also because low frequency performance is absolutely fundamental. A good bottom end provides a solid foundation for the whole sound, and subjectively influences the mid-band and top-end.

Bass quality was certainly the thing that struck me first when getting to know the amplifier.

As valve amplifiers go, the Cyber 800 power amps are quite powerful. They're certainly the most powerful amps offered by

Consonance, who seem to prefer low-power single-ended designs rather than high-output push-pull. That said, 78W is not that massive – at least not on paper. But you'd be wrong to judge a book by its cover. This amp has a really big sound; not just loud, but BIG.

We're talking Scale and Depth; Breadth and Width; the sort of sound that has Presence and Projection, creating impressive three-dimensional sound-staging that make it seem as though your loudspeakers have grown physically larger. There's a real sense of 'height' too, as though the speakers were a few feet taller. Don't ask me how or why this happens, but that's the effect subjectively.

Despite their large size, my dear wife did not notice the amps at



► first – a single blonde hair on my shoulder would have been very different – but as the first notes sounded out she spontaneously remarked on how good things were sounding tonight. I'm always pleased when she spots a change without my having to point it out. For me, the difference is so big, how could it not be noticed? But while the difference might not be subtle, it's nevertheless nice to have someone else confirm your opinion without being asked.

At I said, the amps produced an impressively big sound. At the same time, for all their Presence and Scale, I found the Cyber Babes sounded very comfortable and refined. There was power and presence, yet at the same time a smooth, relaxed and controlled presentation that was friendly and inviting. Here's an amplifier that can be played at low/medium volume levels without sounding reined-in and constrained. Yet, play it loud and the sound grows and expands.

It's definitely an amplifier that invites you to play loud. Outstanding smoothness and refinement, coupled with exceptional control and effortless ease, make it very impressive at highish volume levels. Put simply, it doesn't flinch when you turn it up. And while power is clearly limited on paper, subjectively the Cyber Twins sound as though they have (almost) unlimited

headroom so far as peaks and transients are concerned.

The good thing in all this is that (in terms of actual decibels) the sound's not actually as loud as it seems.

You think it's louder than it actually is. Sonically, there's such presence and solidity, the music sounds very much in the room with you – rather than staying

locked in the speakers struggling to escape. The amp's dimensionality and projection give it a vivid immediacy at all volume levels.

Another reason you want to turn it up is – it sounds so clean. One of

(many) discs I played was

Daniel Barenboim's



1974 CBS/Sony recording of Elgar's First symphony. I originally bought it on LP thirty years ago, and the upper strings always had a bit of an edge.

Although remixed for CD, the bright/ thin slightly harsh tonal balance was never totally eradicated. Until now, that is... Via the Cyber combination, the treble sounded deliciously bright and fresh – sharp and tactile, but rich and not at all edgy. Yet there was no lack of treble brilliance or high frequency sparkle – quite the reverse in fact. This speaks volumes for the cleanness of the treble, but also that lovely rich full bottom end that creates ►

▶ a proper sense of weight and depth, giving the music a proper foundation.

Tonal balance is warm and rich, but also smooth and natural sounding. There's a lovely seamless quality from deep bass to high treble, with a deliciously full mid-band. Although the treble has a nice sharp tactile and

clarity – the presentation is attractive and inviting, allowing you to hear every detail without strain. Everything feels natural and correctly proportioned,



highly detailed quality, there's no sense of it being detached from the rest of the sound. It's beautifully integrated and beautifully refined. It tames all but

resulting in a sound that is detailed and informative, yet beguiling and relaxed.

So – was there/is there anything I didn't like? Funnily enough, yes... I don't care for the way the preamp always returns the volume to zero and the input selector to Mute when first switched on. Speaking personally, I'd prefer if it 'remembered' last night's settings rather than me having to start all over again. You have to rock

of getting used to. It's motorised with click stops, but there's a sort of delay built in.

Sometimes you turn the volume up a notch and (seemingly) nothing happens – the loudness remains much the same. You then increase the volume another notch or two, and there's a noticeable jump in level.

Now, suppose this is a touch too loud and you turn it down a single notch – again, very often there's no discernable change. I like to set volume levels precisely and repeatably, and find the Cyber 222 doesn't offer the fine control I like. Nevertheless, it wouldn't put me off owning the combination – I could live with the problem! Indeed, it's a measure of the amp's excellence that this is the only thing I can seriously criticise.

Incidentally, the Cyber 222 offers remote volume control and input selection. To minimise noise it has a fairly large outboard power supply. Warm up times seem pretty minimal; the amps sound so great after five or ten minutes, that any further improvement is a bonus.

The power amps get quite warm, as you might imagine – though not so the preamp, despite having five tubes.

The pre-amp's valves certainly get warm to the touch, but not excessively so. When first switched on and still warming up, the preamp treats you to a flashing lights show – a minor conversation piece in itself. The power amps runs hotter, of course, though not excessively so. Tube compliment consists of 4 x 6CA7s; 2 x 6922s, and 1 x 5686 per power amp, with 4 x 6NS7s, and 1 x 5AR4 for the Cyber 222 pre.

The Cyber 222 offers four



the most laceratingly bright recordings!

Timing is excellent. The full solid bottom end provides clear fluid bass lines, giving the music rhythmic subtlety and flow. The amp's overall smoothness ensures cohesion and integration that aids

the selector knob back and forth to get it to select input 1, then turn the volume up to the required level.

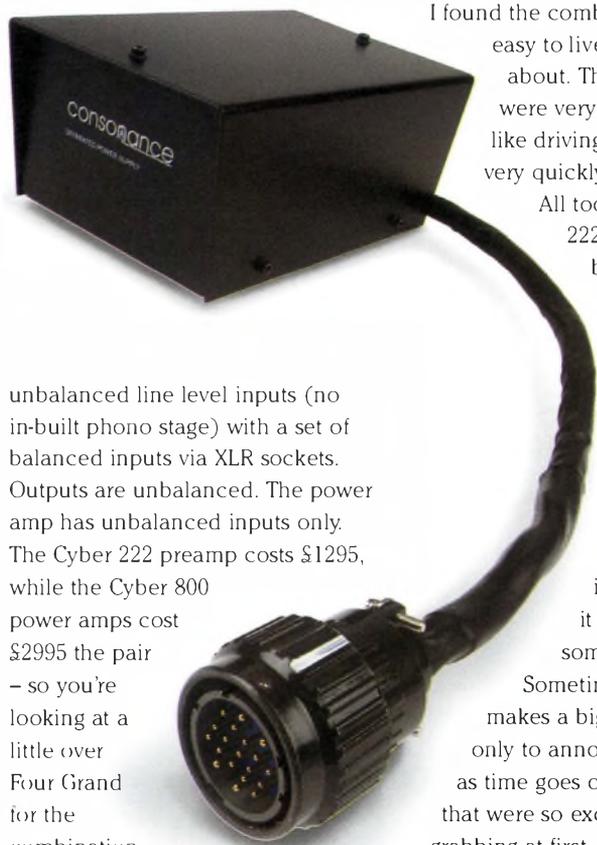
The volume control takes a bit



quality and quantity. Finish and build quality are exemplary; the amps look and feel very solid and well-made.

In many ways, the subjective assessment of this amplifier's sound – as outlined above – describes my early impressions; the initial impact it had – albeit, recalled after a month or two. I was deeply impressed to say the least.

that remains poised, refined and controlled at all times, producing a big but relaxed and highly enjoyable sound. I quickly 'forgot' all about it – taking it for granted in much the same way one accepts (and under-estimates) the qualities of good live sound. It's a great amplifier; one of the finest I've ever heard. Whew!



But even more important, I found the combination very easy to live with and forget about. The first few days were very exciting. But it's like driving at high speed; very quickly you get used to it.

All too soon, the Cyber 222/800 combination became 'everyday'.

I quickly grew accustomed to it – as though all amplifiers sounded this good! Which means I will doubtless only realise how good it was/is when I box it up and return to something less special.

Sometimes, a product makes a big initial impression, only to annoy or aggravate you as time goes on. The very qualities that were so exciting and attention-grabbing at first, eventually become tiresome.

But this was not the case here; the Cyber 222/800 is a thoroughbred

▶ unbalanced line level inputs (no in-built phono stage) with a set of balanced inputs via XLR sockets. Outputs are unbalanced. The power amp has unbalanced inputs only. The Cyber 222 preamp costs £1295, while the Cyber 800 power amps cost £2995 the pair – so you're looking at a little over Four Grand for the combination. It's a lot of money, but exceptionally good value for what you get – both in terms of

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cyber 222 Pre-amp

Type:	Remote-control valve line-stage
Valve Complement:	4x 6SN7 1x 5AR4
Inputs:	4x single-ended line inputs 1x balanced XLR
Outputs:	1x single-ended tape 1x single-ended pre out
Weight:	15 Kg
Price:	£1295

Cyber 800 Mono-blocks

Type:	Push-pull ultra-linear valve power amp
Valve Complement:	1x 5686 (each) 2x 6922 4x 6CA7
Input:	Single-ended only
Input Sensitivity:	700mV
Input Impedance:	100 ohm
Rated Output:	78 Watts/8 Ohms
Weight:	30 Kg ea.
Price:	£2995 pr.

UK Distributor:

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Jimmy Hughes, Issue 37 Hi-Fi+

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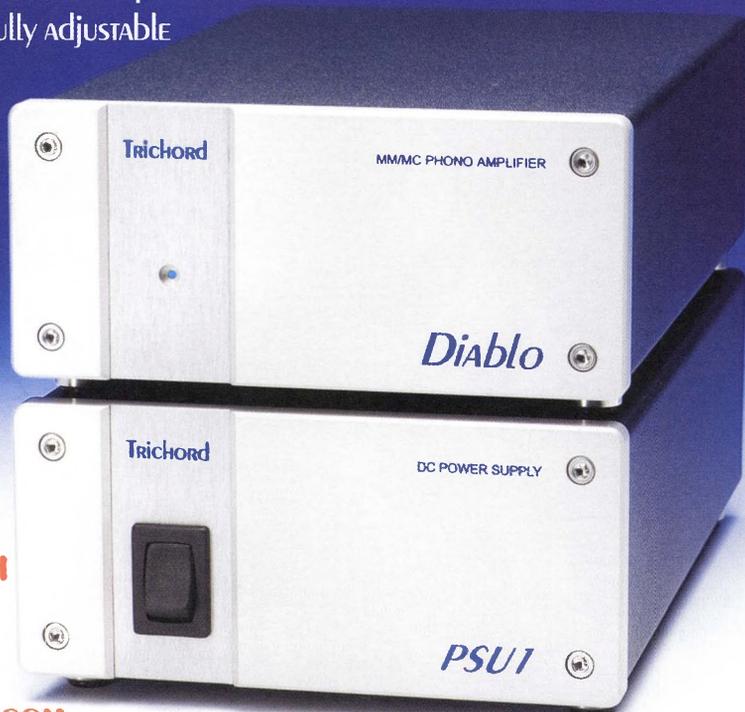
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The Jadis DA88S Integrated Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

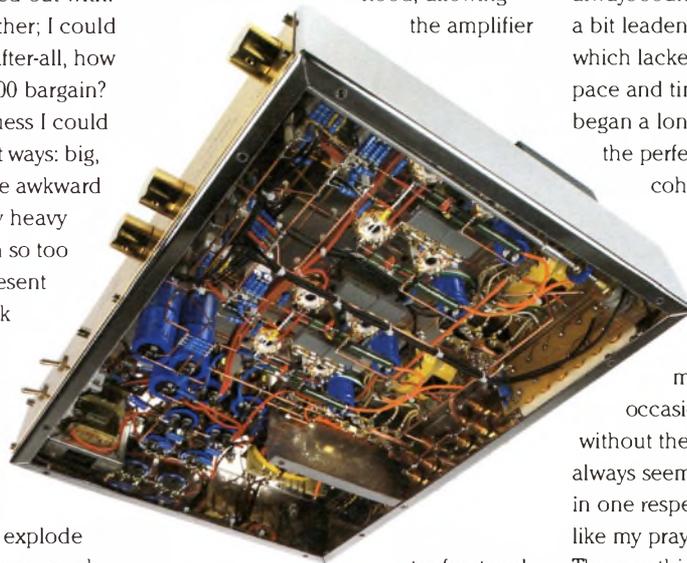
“What’s a conundrum – and what’s a five-letter word for it?” asked my 11-year old niece.

Well, I could have answered “Jadis”; what else do you call a deeply respected high-end manufacturer who still builds every amplifier themselves, in the same way that they always have, eschewing hi-fi fashion by pursuing the same sonic goals they started out with. I could have gone even further; I could have answered “DA88S” – after-all, how else do you describe a £6000 bargain?

Now that I’ve asked I guess I could describe it in many different ways: big, awkward looking, even more awkward to handle and unbelievably heavy all spring to mind. But then so too do magnificent, vibrant, present and powerful, and the black humour and blue air that have accumulated whilst manhandling the beast into its new home will evaporate just as soon as you hear the very first notes issue forth. Or rather, explode into the room. This amp has so much body and gusto, energy and sheer musical enthusiasm that you could be forgiven for assuming there are two amps in the one box (it’s certainly big enough). Well, in a way you’d be right. Running four KT88 output tubes a side for 60 Watts of very serious Class A power, this is to all intents and purposes something akin to a pair of JA80 mono-blocks built into a single chassis.

But akin is the word for this is no straight chop and swap job. Whilst the DA88S is about as dual-mono as most amps ever get, the two channels do share a common mains transformer.

Mind you, it’s quite a transformer. Likewise, the output transformers are quite a bit smaller than those in the 80s, although they’re still wound in-house at the Jadis factory, just outside Carcassonne. However, the most important differences are right out front. There’s an extra valve lurking under the perforated hood, allowing the amplifier



extra front-end gain (always a problem if you rely on a single ECC82 input tube). Whereas the JA80s always struggled to reach their rated output, the DA88S is an absolute monster, grabbing hold of speakers and driving them with an authority and grip that belies its modest power rating. To the left of the valve housing is a large and, truth be told, a rather ugly heatsink, nailed down with the single transistor that delivers solid-state regulation of the HT supply. It’s a much meatier arrangement than the one found in the 80, but one that if I was Jadis I’d hide away, along with the sextet of reservoir caps,

under another perforated cage. It would be neater and give a far less lop-sided appearance.

Now, if I’m honest, I always preferred the JA30 to the 80. The smaller amp, despite its power limitations, has a musical rightness and top to bottom continuity that is both beguiling and compelling. In comparison, the 80 always sounded lumpy, disjointed and a bit leaden, especially in the bass, which lacked the fleet of foot agility, pace and timing of the little 30. Thus began a long odyssey, searching for the perfect speaker, one with the coherence, bandwidth and above all efficiency to mate with the 30s I’d fallen in love with.

It was a tortuous path and one that left me longing on many an occasion for just a little more grunt without the grit and clumsiness that always seemed to accompany it. Well, in one respect at least it finally looks like my prayers have been answered. The one thing the DA88 has in spades, as I’ve already mentioned, is power.

In all other respects the DA88S is pure Jadis. The casework is the usual mix of chrome chassis and gold faceplate, with all controls on the front panel. There’s the usual On/Off switch and the Standby/Operate right next to it. Three chunky rotary knobs allow you to adjust volume, balance and select from the five line inputs. A single LED in the middle switches from red to green as you select full power. The rear panel offers five sets of phono sockets for the line inputs, as well as a further pair for the single tape output. ▶

▶ There are also two pairs of five-way binding posts per channel, arranged at right angles to the inputs and devoid of labeling, just to keep things interesting – remember how much this thing weighs and thus what swapping channels entails! One other thing to note is the short sentence buried in the instructions informing you that the DA88S is a phase-inverting design. This means that you should reverse the polarity of your speaker leads at either the amp or speaker terminals. Make sure that you do, as it results in a sweeter, tighter, more immediate and more focussed sound – none of which differences are particularly subtle. Just select a nice, acoustic vocal if you don't believe me.

That's pretty much your lot as far as the outside goes – so no remote-control for those of you who deem such trivia essential. In fact, to dismiss the DA88S on such grounds displays a breathtaking misunderstanding of its entire purpose and *raison d'être* – but more on that in a moment. Remove the bottom plate and you'll find the preferred construction of hard-wired signal path and power supply components. Heavy straps on the underside of the output transformers allow you to reconfigure the impedance taps, although the amp arrives set for 4-8 Ohms which should suffice for most sensible situations in which it finds itself. All the user has to do is carefully install the tubes in the designated sockets and fire it up. As a cathode-bias design the amp is effectively self-adjusting, although it teeters on the power limit for the successful

application of the approach.

I used the DA88S with both my usual Living Voice OBX-R2 speakers and the Reference 3A Da Capos. However, it didn't take long to discover that it was a spectacularly good match for the ProAc Response D38s also in for review, and risky though such a strategy is, it was this combination that made up the bulk of my listening. I hooked it up with the Nordost Valhalla cables and fed it from the Wadia 861SE and VPI TNT6 front-ends.



Whilst I'm normally wary of relying on using two review products in tandem, I made an exception in the case of the DA88S on the basis of previous experience with the other speakers mentioned, which revealed such a case of *déjà vu* that I was immediately confident of the amp's overall character and sound. Talk about a blast from the past. This was like my first exposure to the JA30s all those years ago. How best to explain the difference between this and most other listening experiences? The two Chinese films, *Hero* and *House Of Flying Daggers* seem to divide audiences, viewers developing a strong preference one way or the other. Well, if the stark, bleached landscapes and ascetic philosophy of *Hero* is reminiscent of high-tech, high-end solid-state, the Jadis represents the

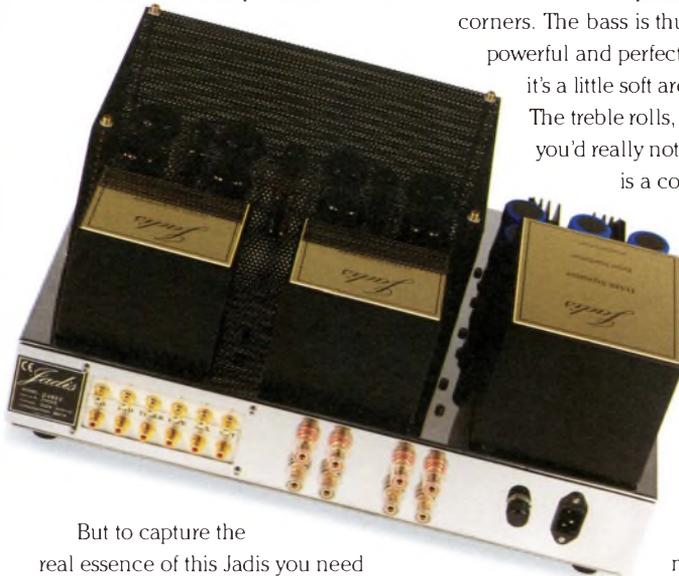
House Of Flying Daggers. Its music is a sensuous deluge of intensely vibrant colour and energy. *Hero* is all about stillness and study – the Jadis dives right in! Play 'The Echo Game' from the *Flying Daggers OST* and you'll see just what I mean. The opening drum-roll reverberates within a colossal acoustic, each additional instrument building, layer on layer into a thunderous crescendo that simply begs you to advance the volume control far beyond the sensible, wrapping you in the sound. The range of colour, the individuality in the choir of vibrating skins, the sheer energy and human effort they represent is quite intoxicating, yet you'll give in before the DA88S does.

Energy, drive and sheer musical enthusiasm are what it feeds off.

Like many soundtracks, *Flying Daggers* is more about atmosphere than coherent musical structure; impressive as it is, it is also a little two-dimensional, a kaleidoscope of individual episodes. Downshift to something more intimate and emotionally complex and it soon becomes apparent that the Jadis is no one trick pony. The delicacy of 'Doghouse Window' (Stephen Dawson and Diane Christiansen, *Duets*) hangs on the fragile relationship between the two voices, a balance of soft contralto and shrill, almost falsetto voice that the amplifier captures perfectly. However, equally important is the understated precision of the sparse accompaniment, the nylon strung guitar and subtle percussion allowed space, time and room to breathe, the cymbals in particular beautifully defined down to the last decay that dies away under the curtailed lyric. Brass is almost always a pale imitation of reality on a hi-fi system, yet Josh Berman's mournful trumpet ▶

► break hits just the right tone, all restrained power and constraint.

Of course, if you want to hear brass let rip then look no further than that old standby *Farmer's Market Barbeque*. The big-band power and energy simply pours out of the speakers, yet it never swamps the subtle improvisation and prompts that flow from Basie's piano, the all-important sense of structure and ensemble that makes this such a great performance.



But to capture the real essence of this Jadis you need something with real musical and dynamic range, a spread of emotional vocabulary. The Piatigorsky performance of the Dvorak *Cello Concerto* on RCA Living Stereo fills the bill admirably, the amp easily able to scale the dramatic and powerful heights of the full orchestral crescendos, yet at the same time preserving the playing of the soloist, the integral balance between cello and orchestra. Play the second movement and you'll hear the ability of the DA88S to deliver sudden dynamic shifts in density and level with convincing power, grace and presence. But equally you'll also appreciate the natural sense of pace and delicacy, timing and placement that Piatigorsky brings to the solo line in the *Adagio*, a lilting, aching quality for which the Cello knows no equal. This ability to operate at both ends of the musical spectrum so successfully and even

simultaneously is unusual indeed. It's also vital to our ability to truly immerse ourselves in the performance. It's what Harry Pearson refers to as continuousness and I'm coming to appreciate that it's the most vital quality of all.

I can sketch this amp in broad hi-fi terms if I must. It is open, sweet and unforced, powerful and dynamic. The tremendous sense of musical poise and flow feeds the soul even as it slightly smoothes the sharpest of musical corners. The bass is thunderously powerful and perfectly placed, even if it's a little soft around the edges.

The treble rolls, but not so that you'd really notice and the result is a cosy warmth and intimacy to the soundstage. The tonal palette is broad and vivid, the soundstage likewise. All these things are true, but in isolation they miss the point.

The Jadis is about the whole. – the sense, the experience, the response to the musical performance. Move on to the third movement of the Dvorak and it tells you that Piatigorsky can't match the grace and technique of Starker in the awkward, angular Cello part. Nor does Munch match the mastery and drama of Dorati. But it tells you this in passing, without destroying the performance. It's a masterful performance in itself, a lesson in deftness of touch and balance that many an amplifier should envy.

I don't find any of the lumpy discontinuity or ambivalent timing here that marred the JA80s for me. Instead the DA88S is closer in character to the 30, and if it can't match that amp's exquisite delicacy and agility, it ain't far behind, whilst delivering a lot more firepower into the bargain. Don't get the idea this is

a fit and forget solution. It requires, even demands, care and respect from the user, in both matching and feeding. It might be a bargain but like other bargains it needs partners of equal quality in order to really shine. That and a listener prepared to set precisely the right volume for each disc, the one that balances power and presence against intimacy and life. It's in there somewhere, although with really efficient speakers you might well want more subtle graduation at the bottom of the volume control (or attenuators on the inputs).

For the listener looking for a consummate musical all-rounder rather than the merely hi-fi spectacular, look no further. Dedicated followers of fashion will rail at a perceived lack of detail and resolution, but those who take the time to listen will realise that in reality, in musical terms, they're missing nothing at all. Install, sit back and enjoy; as deeply unfashionable as it may seem, it's the Jadis way. ✚

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Push-pull integrated valve amplifier
Tube Complement:	3x ECC82 2x ECC83 8x KT88
Inputs:	5x line-level
Input Sensitivity:	120mV
Input Impedance:	>100kOhms
Rated Output Power:	60 Watts Class A (4-8 Ohms)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	500 x 220 x 400mm
Weight:	40kg
Price:	£6000

UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:

Jadis S.A.R.L.
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INPUTS

PURE CLASS A AMPLIFIER



The Sugden A21SE Integrated Amplifier

by Jason Kennedy

On the face of it the Sugden A21 integrated amplifier looks like the longest running hi-fi amplifier in the world – ever. However, because it first appeared in the sixties, its low power output meant that the original design had a perfectly respectable ten-year life span before being replaced by the A28. The A21a that is currently being built started life in 1987 at a time when the hi-fi world began to realise that there was something desirable about low-powered amps and more efficient loudspeakers.

The company behind this classic design was originally formed by James Sugden in the mid-sixties and the A21 was its first product, its class A approach being even more radical at the time because the industry was just coming to grips with relatively high powered class AB transistor designs for the first time. But those early transistor designs left a lot to be desired especially in their high frequency performance and the A21 managed to establish itself well enough to outlast not only the models of that time but several of the major brands as well.

Sugden the company changed hands in 1981 and is now run by Tony and Patrick Miller who have steered a steady course and resisted the temptation to expand for the sake of short term sales. Either that or they didn't want to risk the roller coaster ride of mass production and the compromises it often entails. Contrary to contemporary practice Sugden keeps a large amount of its manufacturing in-house, and that

includes the casework and much of the circuit production. Its philosophy is detailed on the company website and contains the following rather illuminating line: "in hand, in house and under control!" One doesn't get the impression that these men of Heckmondwike are of a frivolous inclination.



The A21a as it's now called was beefed up to a 25watt circuit shortly after the change of ownership, the design incorporating a pure class A output stage with current feedback and a single voltage rail, an approach that underlines many of Sugden's original designs.

The new A21SE is more than just a luxury version of that model. It may only deliver 5 more watts, but its power supply is 50 per cent larger than that in an A21a and its output impedance significantly lower, which means that load tolerance is far greater. The line-stage is supplied by its own current shunt power supplies driven by a separate transformer winding. This new power supply is combined with minimal input signal paths, relay switched input facilities and new line-stage circuitry which Sugden claim

allow them to "fully exploit the benefits of the Pure Class A power output stages".

This is one of the most attractive integrated amps I have come across. It has a very masculine style which I don't imagine swaying too many B&O customers, but if you like metal boxes the attention to detail here is very impressive and the overall form extremely clean and well balanced. The omission, for example, of input names makes the front look unusually neat, while the identical styling of on/off switch, indicator lamp and remote receiving eye is particularly nice.

The Sugden does not go big on features, and while the inclusion of remote control is quite a luxury, the degree of its functionality does not extend beyond altering the volume level. On its black finished rear panel the amp has five relay operated line inputs alongside pre- and tape-outputs, all on RCA phono with speaker terminals provided by glitzy WBT style binding posts with locking mechanisms to grip a banana/4mm speaker cable plug. Unlike the A21a there is no option for a phono-stage on the SE but a matching standalone stage is in the pipeline. There is also a matching CD player already in production.

As this baby pumps out 30watts of class A power it gets distinctly hot when left on for any amount of time, so much so that I reached for the oven gloves when moving it shortly after turn off! This is mostly because the heat sinking runs along the sides ▶

► of the amp where ones hands need to be, but to be honest I don't think there was anywhere I could have lifted it comfortably. But just as you wouldn't touch a valve on an amp that used them, you just have to avoid leaving anything on top of the A21SE, unless you want to grill it!

In another magazine I once reviewed a system that had been recommended by Definitive Audio of Nottingham and which consisted



of a Helios CD player, Living Voice Auditorium speakers and the Sugden A21a. I don't know if Definitive still stocks Sugden but if they do the chances are they might well recommend its use with their Living Voice OBX-R speakers, the same speakers that I often use for assessing amplifiers, as they offer a relatively easy load that's well suited to lower powered amps such as the SE. You can't get Helios CD players anymore but Definitive is a big fan of the Resolution Audio Opus 21 that I use as a reference, so in a way this amplifier forms the heart of a natural upgrade from that simple but effective A21a based system.

In some respects the OBX-R is slightly too smooth a speaker for the SE. Both components are relaxed in the treble and the overall effect is distinctly on the warm side. It's not unappealing though. In fact it's downright gorgeous

with a lot of music. Gillian Welch's voice for instance is beautiful and rich when she sings one of the many laments that she does so well, this amp and speaker combo smoothing out the slightly gritty aspect that harder hitting pairings can accentuate. It also goes loud more comfortably than these speakers do with amps such as the Euphonic Research reviewed this issue, so I could play John Surman's *Amazing Adventures of Simon Simon* at a higher level and enjoy the rich sonority of his bass oboe to full effect. It's hard to imagine a more rich,

woody sound than this instrument produces with this system, albeit from vinyl via a van den Hul Condor rather than the aforementioned disc spinner.

Not everything sounds like this however. Earl and Carl Grubbs' *The Visitors* maintained its emphasis on slightly splashy cymbals while giving up a nice sense of depth in the studio, which proves that this amplifier while smooth is also transparent.

Despite the lack of high frequency edge, temporal resolution is good with rhythmically strong tunes showing good cohesion and tightness. Bob Dylan's fabulous 'If You've Got To Go, Go Now...' revealing much of its musicality and pretty much all of its detail. Midrange resolution is extremely

good with the SE, it reveals nuances and even notes that other similarly priced designs fail to unearth, which means that everything you play through it retains plenty of character and differentiation from everything else. Midrange seems to be what class A is all about. That's what all the gorgeous low power tube amps give, albeit with a little more openness, and that's what you hear with the SE, and that of course is where the heart of the music lies. Frequency extremes are for hi-fi nuts and heavy metal fans (both categories that I inhabit on an occasional basis). Those who are only in it for the music get everything they need from the middle octaves.

That's not to say that this is a narrowband amplifier. You will hear plenty of weight and depth in the bass if it's on the record, but it won't have the bone crunching edge that class A/B designs deliver. Is this due to the inherent crossover distortion of that approach, I guess that's what Sugden and other class A stalwarts would say. If all we had on our records were purist recordings of acoustic instruments that might well be the way we'd all perceive it too. But the existence of electricity within the music and record making process means that much of the edge we hear with class A/B is derived from the source and only very slightly added to by the domestic amplification.

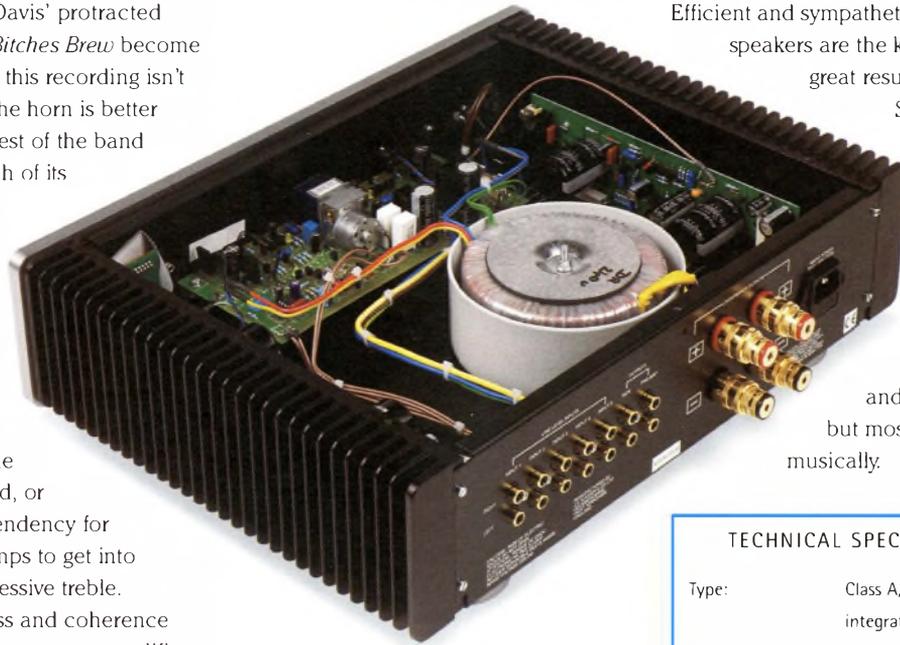
So to get back to what you can hear without crossover distortion let's look at tone colour and the glorious sound of Dewey Redman's saxophone on Keith Jarrett's *Eyes of the Heart*. With many amps this can sound overly rasping and aggressive, which a sax can do if its player so wants, but as ►

► far as appreciating the soul of the music goes this slightly smoother approach has a lot to offer – not least listenability. If you have been tempted by the goose strangling style of free jazz but have trouble coming to terms with its abrasive tone this could be the perfect amp for the job. It's impressive coherence and the ability to deliver detail in a natural and engaging manner makes difficult music as accessible as it's going to get. Even Miles Davis' protracted indulgences on *Bitches Brew* become more intelligible, this recording isn't the greatest but the horn is better served than the rest of the band and delivers much of its tonal character without the distortion that usually accompanies it. A distortion that may be ones ears struggling with the hard edged sound, or possibly it's the tendency for more exposed amps to get into trouble with aggressive treble.

Its smoothness and coherence also makes this a very easy amplifier to listen to whether you're paying attention or not, which does suggest an absence of a particular type of distortion. I often find it difficult to listen to music when I'm working, but with this amp there's no distraction even with the level above quiet. I spent a whole day listening to the internet station Groove Salad (128k bitstream) and found it an enjoyable experience. Indeed one that suggests that accessing music this way has a future even for those concerned about sound quality.

In an auspicious turn of events a pair of Coincident Super Eclipse III speakers turned up while I was reviewing the SE, with their high sensitivity and unusually easy impedance, on paper at least, they looked like the perfect partner for

lower powered amps. Rather conveniently they also managed to balance out the SE's tendency to smoothness with a more upfront balance than the OBX-Rs and a more expansive bottom end, thanks to twin eight-inch woofers. These speakers allowed the SE to reveal its more energetic side, delivering plenty of grunt from Missy Misdemeanor and Redman rapping over Timbaland's heavyweight beats.



The same track revealed more definition and power when amplified by a 200 watt Gamut D200 power amp and Border Patrol Control Unit, a combination that managed to elicit significantly more high frequency resolve and a rather more obviously transparent sound. On the other hand this dearer pairing was no more dynamic and, treble aside, doesn't reveal significantly more detail. Imaging for instance is just as strong with the Sugden when it comes to voices, which stand out in no uncertain manner. In fact voices as diverse as Joni Mitchell and David Thomas are reproduced in a genuine reach out and touch it style, while

acoustic reverb stretches way behind the speakers.

The Sugden A21SE is, like its maker, an idiosyncratic amplifier. It makes a very good case for class A by providing a detailed, dynamic and engaging sound. It has a smoother, warmer balance than most amps but it doesn't take long to accommodate that and start to hear the colour, detail and quality of imaging that it can provide with a decent pair of speakers.

Efficient and sympathetically balanced speakers are the key to getting great results from the SE. With a revealing example of that breed this an extremely gratifying amplifier, both sonically and aesthetically, but most importantly musically. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Class A, solid-state integrated amplifier
Inputs:	5x line-level
Input Sensitivity:	110mV @ zero attenuation for full output
Outputs:	1x pre-out (variable), 1x tape out, 1pr of stereo multi-way binding posts
Power Output:	30 Watts into 8 Ohms, 40 Watts into 4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430mmx115mmx360mm
Weight:	14kg
Finishes:	Titanium (illustrated) or graphite
Price:	£1,995

Manufacturer:

J E Sugden & Co Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1924 404088/404089
Net. www.sugdenaudio.com

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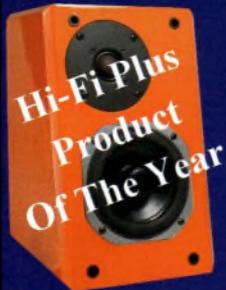
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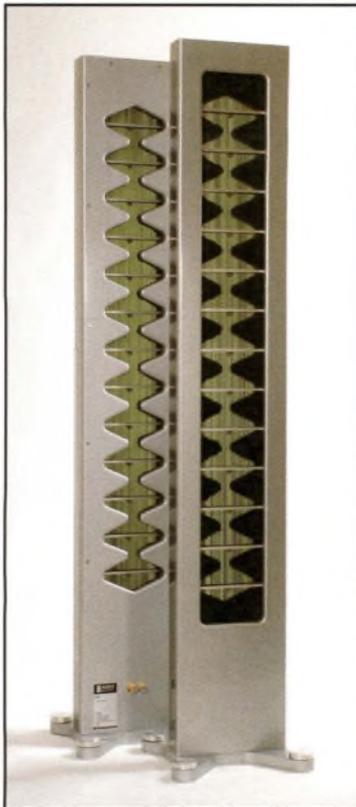
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AMP-80
Stereo Hybrid Power Amplifier



Euphonic Research ATT-600/AMP-80

by Jason Kennedy

There seem to be many occasions with hi-fi, and indeed life in general, when what we want is something in between two alternatives. I want a loudspeaker that is genuinely dynamic, has great timing and seriously wide bandwidth which is just about achievable if you throw enough money at it. The ATC SCM-150s I use do these things. But I also want a speaker that I can move and store fairly easily, and the ATC is not that speaker; it's a two man lift that sits on a stand and would block the corridor if I dragged it out there. When designers are building crossovers or amplifiers they often end up having to choose between two components, say capacitors, which have differing strengths when what they would like is a single capacitor that combines the plus points of both.

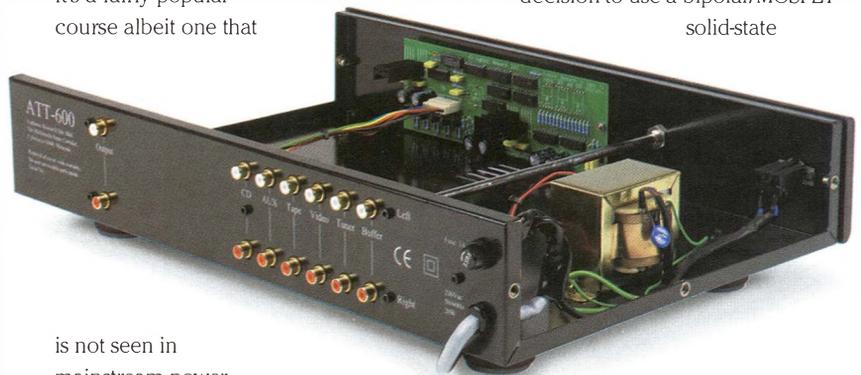
The hybrid amplifier represents an attempt to get around the conflicting requirements that we have of amps, on the one hand we want great transparency, dynamics and tonal shading while on the other it's necessary to have adequate reserves of power and load driving ability. Valve amps provide the former qualities while transistors deliver the latter so it seems like a good idea to combine the two in an attempt at getting the best of both worlds. One way of doing this that can work quite well is to use a valve pre-amp with a transistor power amp. When the two are well matched it's possible to combine the strengths of both camps fairly well. Inevitably however you don't really hear the dynamic subtleties that you get with

a good valve power amp, be it an SET or a push-pull design. You get the low level resolution and finesse of valves but it is filtered through the relatively hard-edged character of a transistor power amp.

The Euphonic Research takes hybridisation to the next stage by combining tubes and transistors in the power amplifier. This is not the first time this has been done of course, it's a fairly popular course albeit one that

not happy with the underlying circuit topology that he found in the majority of modern amplifiers.

The resulting AMP-80 power amp is the synthesis of Dr Wong's new approach. A hybrid amplifier with a valve input stage featuring a military grade 6922 triode, the amp has no overall feedback. The more unusual hybrid aspect of this amp is in the decision to use a bipolar/MOSFET solid-state



is not seen in mainstream power amps very often. It's usually presumed that the best way to build a hybrid is to use tubes for the first stage of amplification and transistors for the final output thus gaining their power advantage. But it's not unheard of for designers to go at it the other way around and end up with a tube output taking advantage of solid state driver stage. Indeed Audio Research has made amps like this in the past and it's a popular approach in amplification for electric guitars and the like where the tube's soft clipping makes for sweeter distortion.

Euphonic Research's founder Dr Teck Wong spent ten years researching audio amplification because he was

push-pull output topology. This is designed to provide the power and control which is rarely available from a single ended triode amplifier, yet "losing none of its musicality and soul."

The AMP-80 is a decidedly different looking beast, standing 40cm high it is the tallest power amp I've had the pleasure of trying to house. It certainly won't fit in any of my rack slots and when you put it on the top the speaker cables don't stretch up to the terminals which are at the top of the box. It looks very nice, however, with its merbau hard wood fascia and on/off switch with the company logo in pewter, the rear panel lets the side down a little with rather ▶

▶ basic socketry of the bare minimal variety and a captive mains lead. At this price you expect a little more, but so long as Dr Wong has spent his money on the inside then this foible can be forgiven. The sides of the case are made up of nastily sharp heat sinks, I say nastily because I managed to pierce a knuckle while trying to move another amp, gaah!

Inside the box there appears to be a lot of air, but there's something producing a fair bit of heat too – those sinks aren't there just to

the 'armour' or the over-bearing height, so it has the matching hardwood fascia and nice pewter badge. There are five passive and one buffered input for so called legacy components such as tape decks or tuners that might have difficulty driving the 600 Ohm load presented by the attenuator. The latter is a relay switched variety and thus noisy when you turn it and not logarithmic as is usually the case with volume controls.

Things got off to an unpromising start with the AMP-80, the first sample producing a loud buzz that suggested all was not well. This may have been related to the surprisingly basic packaging it arrived in. As the manual points out



savage passing flesh. This is a 40 watt per channel "ultra minimalist" two stage circuit using the aforementioned triode with a regulated power supply and battery biasing in order to achieve pure DC biasing as the initial gain stage. The output stage uses push-pull hybrid bipolar/MOSFETs with no global negative feedback and "in excess of" 88,000uF of reservoir capacitance, utilising audio grade electrolytic with bamboo separators in the power supply. Construction makes use of solid core signal wires and military grade 2mm PCBs, the latter being more fire resistant than usual – I told you this thing gets hot.

If the AMP-80 sounds complicated the partnering ATT600 preamp could not be much simpler, this is a passive preamp with the unusual inclusion of a digital display giving level indication. It is constructed in much the same fashion as the power amp albeit without

this is not a lightweight device and needs to travel in comfort if it is to arrive intact. Fortunately a second sample, in the same packaging, did just that.

I got started using the ATT-600 stepped attenuator with the ATC SCM150A SL active speakers, while this is not a technically perfect combination because of the longer than average (3m) pre to active interconnects it still gave some insight into this half of the Euphonic Research combo. After the Bryston BP25 it brought a welcome increase in width to the soundstage which made space for the various instruments to be heard more clearly, to express themselves for that matter. It's tonally very natural as well, the lack of any electronics making themselves heard in the extra colour that

voices project.

On the negative side there was a distinct reduction in energy because of the mismatch between components, such that I felt an urge to keep turning up the attenuator, which as it operates in a linear fashion takes a lot of turning before level increases significantly.

Replacing the ATCs with a Gamut D200 power amplifier and Living Voice OBX-R speakers (with regular metre long Living Voice umbilicals) brought things a step closer to a technically suitable match, albeit nowhere near as close as the Euphonic Research partnership which unsurprisingly is a perfect match in terms of gain and energy delivery. But as the second AMP-80 had not turned up I gave this set up a spin and was impressed with its ability to differentiate

between recordings. Zappa's phenomenal *Punky's Whips* didn't quite live up to expectations in the energy department but still delivered its musical message with little difficulty, drummer Terry Bozzio giving his all in both the vocal and skin beating departments to engaging effect. Abdullah

Ibrahim's *Cape Town Fringe* on the other hand has so much energy on it that it cannot be repressed, the sound coming through open and just a little clanky in the piano dept, which is a good reflection of the recording. This system also gave me new insight into a very familiar recording, Steely Dan's immaculate 'Show Biz Kids' from *Countdown to Ecstasy*, the space revealing skills of the attenuator bringing to the fore the unusual interaction between backing and lead vocals on the track. It almost sounds like a reel the way the two lines interweave.

When the second AMP-80 arrived I tried it with the Bryston pre-amp in order to isolate its character, this combination however had the

▶ opposite problem to that encountered with the attenuator as the high gain of the power amp proved excessive when combined with an active preamp. The Euphonic pairing is clearly destined to go hand in hand at all times, though it is of course likely that the power amp would be happy with another brand of passive preamp should you already own one of those.



You will also need a reasonably efficient pair of speakers to go with the AMP-80; it sounded distinctly uncomfortable with some 89dB/W. 4 ohm Elac 607 X-Jet speakers for instance. Fortunately the extra two or three dB and higher impedance offered by the Living Voice OB-Xs proved well suited and the system could finally begin to show off its qualities, which are not to be sniffed at. Two main strengths are apparent, the sense of speed or precision of timing is very acute. For instance Randy Newman's piano playing on *Songbook Vol. 1* is clearly in time with his foot tapping, this is partly because the foot action is easily discernible but also

because of an intrinsically light touch on the amp's part - there seem to be no trailing edges, no blurring of the points at which notes begin and end. This is more obvious with denser material where the extra clarity means that you can hear what's going on that much more easily. With Zappa's 'San Berdino' for instance it got to grips with the superbly syncopated drum, guitar and bass that drives the track along. And did so to the extent that the track really came alive compared to the last system I spun it on. The other strength is one that was apparent with the preamp alone and that is the ability to reproduce any sense of acoustic space on the recording, be it real or artificial. While the AMP-80 does not sound like a valve amp in most of the usual senses, this aspect is one that you often find with the genre and in this instance is likely to be a result of the tube in the machine. It's a dynamic amp too but so is the Gamut and that has a lot more low end grunt thanks to its 200 watts, but it doesn't have quite the nimbleness on offer with the Euphonic - though the poor match with the attenuator means a proper comparison is near impossible.

The combination of strengths that these amps deliver make for highly engaging listening, this is largely due to the speed factor but the degree of resolve and spatial rendering does no harm either. Gillian Welch's aching laments are delivered in all their haunting glory, and the differing styles of recording on *Time the Revelator* are plain to hear - the live tracks are more real but the studio ones cut that bit deeper.

This was not the most straightforward amplifier combo to review and it requires care in system matching, but if you have reasonably sensitive speakers and don't need to play at bone crushing levels it delivers a remarkably accomplished sound for the price. The hybrid factor is not obvious; this sounds more like a good solid-state amp than a tube one, but listen for longer and you can hear what the glass is bringing to the sound, without having to deal with the limitations of pure tube power. Which makes it a well-judged compromise in anyone's books. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

AMP-80

Type:	Hybrid power amp
Tube Complement:	1x 6922 military
Input Sensitivity:	800mV for full output
Rated Power Output:	40W per channel into 8 Ohms,
Output stage:	Push pull, hybrid bipolar/MOSFET
Finish:	Merbau hard wood fascia
Dimensions (WxHxD):	305 x 400 x 305mm
Price:	£2,499

ATT-600

Inputs (Passive):	5x single-ended line
Inputs (Active):	Buffer
Volume Control:	Discrete switched attenuator - 63x 1dB steps
Finish:	Merbau hard wood fascia
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 100 x 300mm
Price:	£499

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Big Dog Audio
Tel (44)(0)1869 321161
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The Naim CD5x CD Player and Flatcap2x Power Supply

by Jason Hector

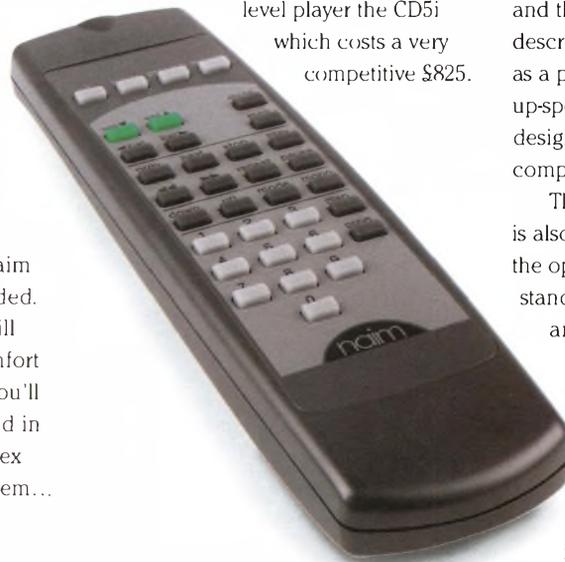
The CD5 and Flatcap2 were the first products from a new Naim that was trying to position itself as a serious player from the entry level to the high-end and I reviewed them for HiFi+ way back in issue 9. These two boxes are direct replacements for the CD5 and Flatcap2 and continue the assault on the lower end of the market with an even more obvious eye on sales outside of the core support base (witness the inclusion of phono sockets on the 5x). To achieve that end, these components will have to work in a much wider system and musical context than the old Naim components they have superseded. Specifically, the combination will need to survive outside the comfort zone of an all naim set up. As you'll see, whether or not they succeed in this respect is a far more complex question than it might at first seem...

The CD5x

The CD5x is the latest CD player from Naim and it follows in the footsteps of the highly regarded CDS3 both in looks and in sound. It is housed in the now familiar black triptych casing (the slimmed version compared to the reference series, and shares many of the innovations first found in the flagship player. The CD5x also features the familiar and anachronistic, hand-operated swinging drawer CD mechanism found on all of the recent Naim players below the top loading S series. The CD itself is secured on the transport spindle by a simple manual magnetic puck which snaps down with

a reassuring click. Once in place the puck is surprisingly difficult to remove accidentally. This hands-on interaction with the CD5x makes playing a CD almost as tactile an experience as popping a record on the turntable, a good thing in my opinion.

Since my review of the CD5, Naim have produced a new entry-level player the CD5i which costs a very competitive £825.



This means that the CD5x is not the first rung on the Naim CD ladder. With typical power supply options and the forthcoming ultimate player, the Naim CD range will total seven player options covering a huge price range. Improvements offered by the 5x over the 5 include an improved Philips transport, up-rated analogue section and larger transformer which forms part of a stiffer power supply. Surprisingly for an entry-level Naim CD player the 5x features a choice of switchable output connection; the expected 5 pin Din socket or phono

outputs. Unsurprisingly the Din connection is recommended by Naim and I used it with a Chord Company Cobra Din to phono interconnect. As I stated before, the 5x benefits strongly from the work done further up the CD player range. For example it uses the same Burr Brown dual mono DACs as found in the CDX2 and the CDS3. Speaking to Naim they describe the CD5x, at a cost of £1450, as a pared down CDX2 rather than an up-specified CD5i as it shares many design features and circuit components with the bigger player.

The renowned Naim upgrade path is also available to the CD5x through the option of adding one of their standard external power supplies via another Din socket on the back of the player. The supply most likely to be connected is the Flatcap2x which I also had access to for the period of this review. This was a very successful option first introduced to the CD3.5. When the Flatcap2x is connected to the CD5x the onboard power supply is relieved of powering the analogue sections of the player, these are then supplied with the two 24V rails from the Flatcap2x. The motivation is that these externally generated voltage rails will remain unperturbed by the activities of the remainder of the CD player in a way that the onboard supplies simply can't manage ... or at least that's the theory. This option is also one of the important differences that separates the 5x from the 5i which can't accommodate the external supplies.

► On opening the box I was immediately impressed with the CD5x. Its sheer weight, obvious solidity and quality of finish are an example to its rivals. The player is also an object lesson in simplicity with just four illuminated push button front panel controls, a simple, large and very clear display and the drawer on the front panel. With the case open the interior construction is just as impressive as the exterior. The remote control is the usual RC-5 based Naim system remote and as such has a lot of buttons that may or may not be useful to you.

Flatcap2x was connected to the CD5x, just like I heard with the Flatcap2 and CD5.

The Flatcap2x is another well-finished Naim product in the same solid box as the CD player. Like the CD5x, this Flatcap features compliant feet to aid case isolation and together with the strong enclosure make it, and the CD player "Fraim optimised". The Fraim is Naim's own equipment support and this

components like a pre-amplifier and a CD player. Each set of supplies is independent of the other to the extent that each features its own dedicated transformer winding.

The Sound

In my opinion, and being blunt about it, the CD5x is not a stellar sonic performer. Whilst it is immediately apparent that the player is an able device it doesn't have a "reach out and grab you" impressive sound, unlike some of the competition, and that's down to two things. As a player, its understated approach takes a little longer to reveal its musical strengths, but even then it comes up short in some respects. Or to put it another way, the good news is that it actually sounds better than you'll think it does – the bad news is, not better enough.

The 5x is a musically insightful performer revealing many of the details in a singer's or musician's technique. As I mentioned in the last issue, the Castle Richmonds were very capable of revealing the subtleties in intonation and emotion in a vocal performance and those subtleties were usually sourced from the CD5x. Again this strength is a pretty subtle one that is often missed on a rushed first listen, but is just the sort of thing a component has to achieve for long term listener satisfaction. It depends to a great extent on the player's overall balance of virtues and this is the 5x's greatest strength; it does most things about equally well.

The image the system generated with this player as source was a little less wide than I am used to, but the ►



The Flatcap2x

The Flatcap2x is the latest version of that perennial Naim product group, the add-on power supply. Like the Flatcaps, Hicaps and Supercaps that have preceded it, the Flatcap2x is superficially a simple device: All it does is supply a couple of clean DC lines. Sounds simple doesn't it? It seems that as with many things in audio electronics, the devil is very much in the detail and Naim have been exorcising the devils in audio power supplies for longer than most. So I was expecting a result when the

raises a question; will you hear the CD5x at its designers intend without a Fraim? I guess not, but as the Fraim is priced at the higher end of the support market and I cannot honestly see too many people using a CD5x, with or without Flatcap, on a Fraim, I stuck to my usual Hutter racks for the review period.

The Flatcap2, unlike the Flatcap, Hicap and Supercap, was designed to power two pieces of Naim equipment. The 2x continues that practice but unlike the Flatcap2 the two separate supplies in the 2x are of equally high quality. This has been achieved through improvements to the mains transformer and some other parts and should make a big difference when the power supply is asked to power two demanding

► solidity and focus was impressive and surprising from a Naim player. The illusion of depth was not the best I have heard and the soundstage was generally restricted to the plane of the speakers. But the ability to reflect the scale and acoustic of a recording was again better than Naim players of yore at this sort of price and this is yet more evidence of the good resolution and the improved balance. Where the older players, and my usual (ancient) Micromega player, are more forward and up-front in their presentation the CD5x is significantly more restrained. This is a benefit if your system is also up-front but this could be altogether too much of a good thing if it isn't. With more complex music the sound could be a little closed in especially when a full orchestra is letting rip. That observation aside the CD5x is a good player with which to explore classical music. It demonstrates excellent retrieval of timbral information and the balance of the player does not over emphasise any particular instrument. The result is very even and realistic.

Bass tightness is in the best Naim tradition so that while depth, or at least the impact of deep bass, is slightly reduced resulting in some leanness, the player never allows the system to get overblown. The 5x does not advertise itself as the most agile of players but it is still capable of good dynamics when demanded, without any hype or exaggeration. This means that music is allowed to flow along but there is enough truth to keep your interest in what is being played even

if that music itself lacks for a driving rhythm or particularly endearing melody.

So if that is the sound of the bare CD5x what does adding the Flatcap2x achieve? After connecting the power supply the sound changes markedly and definitely for the better. The main differences on adding the supply are in the noise-floor, which drops away so revealing a little more of the

sound remains valid. You merely hear more of the positives and less of the negatives post Flatcap. One consistent feeling, both with and without the power supply is that the player, while being revealing, was never over etched or bright in the treble. The sound could never be described as dull but neither would it shriek, even with some very poorly re-mastered CD transfers I have in my collection.

Now bearing in mind that the Flatcap2x is over £500 pounds, the combination is

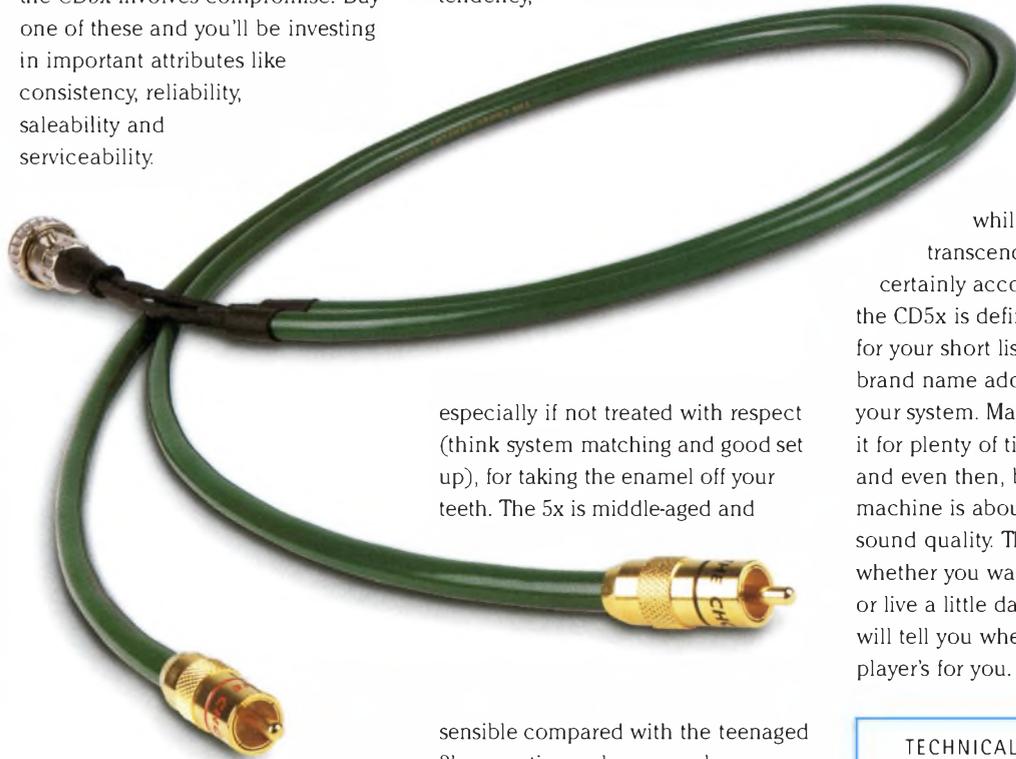


important low level information. For example, sounds and detail that help to illuminate the acoustic of the venue of the recording are simply more obvious from bass through to treble. Similarly, but at the other end of the scale, transients and crescendos are significantly better handled. Serious dynamic jumps harden up with the bare CD5x and the player tended to homogenise the sound during louder complex passages. With the Flatcap supply in place detail is preserved, speed of response is increased and recovery is faster, all of which makes listening less fatiguing.

What does not change with the addition of the supply is the overall character of the sound of the player, so the general description of the CD5x

a CD player with an asking price close to £2K. And you will need an extra shelf on your rack. So are the CD5x and Flatcap2x good value? The answer depends on your priorities. The sound I've described could perhaps best be summed-up as well balanced and safe. Certainly, there are more colourful, dramatic and better sounding CD players available for this sort of money. But, while the Naim combination may not be the most cost-effective way of achieving this level of CD performance, it does profit greatly from some key brand related benefits. These include the secondhand value that Naim

► equipment commands, the superb build available from sharing case-work with much more expensive components, the upgrade path offered by the power supplies and the backup on offer from Naim as a company and its phalanx of loyal dealers. Like all affordable components, a player like the CD5x involves compromise. Buy one of these and you'll be investing in important attributes like consistency, reliability, saleability and serviceability.



It certainly doesn't behave like a Naim player of old. The CD3 for example had an exuberance of timing and rhythmic push that was extremely enjoyable to listen to and frankly addictive, especially if you listened to music that could exploit the players strengths. But the CD3 had a tendency,

especially if not treated with respect (think system matching and good set up), for taking the enamel off your teeth. The 5x is middle-aged and

sensible compared with the teenaged 3's, sometimes clumsy, exuberance. This makes the CD5x a safer choice, and one that's far easier to pair with other manufacturer's equipment, but has the trade-off gone too far? In all honesty I struggle to answer that question. As a reviewer, it is easy to succumb to the sonics uber alles school of thought and pay no mind to the long-term implications of ownership. However, in the real world long-term listening pleasure and reliability are far more pressing and appealing considerations. I only have to play some horribly recorded Lo-Fi or the previously mentioned re-masters, or look at my elderly (and way beyond medical help) Micromega to appreciate just how appealing they are. This player's balance of virtues is

unfailingly sensible and will allow you to enjoy more of your music for longer and it's easy to lose sight of the fact that this has to be the whole point of spending this sort of money on a CD player.

Exciting? No. Sensible? Certainly.

The CD5x is very well put together, it is supported by a premium company (one with an enviable reputation for reliability) and while it does not sound transcendent at its price, it is certainly accomplished. As such, the CD5x is definitely a component for your short list irrespective of the brand name adorning the rest of your system. Make sure you audition it for plenty of time in that system and even then, be aware that this machine is about more than just sound quality. Then, ask yourself whether you want to play it safe or live a little dangerously. That will tell you whether or not this player's for you.



But those things don't come for nothing. Somewhere along the line they have to be paid for, which is what waters down the absolute sound quality. So yes, you can buy a better sounding player for this sort of money, but you need to ask yourself what you're giving up to make those sonic gains.

This review has been surprisingly difficult to write and I am very mindful that it may damn with faint praise. The message is simple; the CD5x is not bad at anything but it is not spectacularly good at anything either. It is unquestionably an enjoyable player but it does not stand out in terms of absolute sound quality.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

CD5x	
Output level:	2.1 Vrms @1 kHz
Outputs:	5 pin Din or phono
Frequency Response:	10Hz – 20kHz (+0.1dB –0.5dB)
Dimensions (HxWxD):	58.4 x 432 x 301 mm
Price:	£1450
Flatcap2x	
Outputs:	2 x 22V and 2 x 24V
Dimensions (HxWxD):	70 x 207 x 304 mm
Weight:	5.4kg
Price:	£515
Manufacturer:	
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Tel. (44)(0)1722 332266	
Net. www.naim-audio.com	

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MAGNUM
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Magnum Dynalab MD-108 FM Tuner

by Alan Sircom

It's not often that a product comes along that is so good, it changes your view on some aspect of hi-fi you already thought you knew and knew well. The Magnum Dynalab MD-108 is one such product. This is the best tuner in the world today, without question. There, you've read the review now. Move along... buy one.

What makes this tuner so damn special? It's not just the packaging, although that helps. The big blue flight case the MD-108 arrives in suggests this is Something Important (although it would be even more Important if the remote control could fit in with the tuner in the ubersnug case; it just has room for tuner, a strapped down manual, a mains lead in a pocket and about 10cm of protective foam in almost all directions.

Even without the protective case, the MD-108 is built to take knocks. It's a big tuner, about the size and weight of a £1,000 seven-channel home cinema integrated amplifier. Magnum Dynalab supply the MD-108 in a choice of three top-class finishes; silver with black lettering (shown), black with gold lettering or gold with black lettering. The latter two are not as tacky as they sound, and the three finishes mean the MD-108 will blend in with practically all high-end hi-fi.

As ever, this is an analogue tuner, writ large, with not a single concession to digital technology (barring an LED read-out and the logic circuitry to drive it). The five-stage varactor tuner head is custom made by Magnum Dynalab (about the last company to still do so) and phase-locked loop synthesis is missing in action. Instead, the tuner allows absolutely precise tuning of a station, locked in place by the stiffness of the power supply. This means the tuner takes a couple of days to settle down and there is mild station drift

when first powered up. But this is why the tuner can only be placed in standby, never switched off without ripping out the rear IEC cable.

The big knob on the left of the front panel switches between aerial inputs; there are two cable/satellite radio inputs and two FM inputs, using screw-in aerial sockets. On the right, there is a large tuning dial. Between them is an array of toggle switches and a display panel, which contains a pair of VU meters (signal strength and multipath distortion level) a yellow LED read-out for frequency and a magic eye valve. This last is an extremely useful affair, as it gives an instant and graphic display of how good the signal is; it also looks amazing (in a 1950s sci-fi style) and is one of the few meters that is sonically benign, arguably sonically beneficial. The magic eye is not the only valve; under the skin is a pair of 12AX7 tubes in the audio switching stage.

The row of toggles is impressive, too. Alongside the usual power, mute and stereo/mono switches, there are three different bandwidth settings (wide, narrow and super narrow) a blend control (to eliminate inter-station noise) and display dimming. Three bandwidth settings means the tuner can deal with different levels of signal strength, not overpowering weak signals or being overpowered by strong ones. As ever with Magnum Dynalab, muting works only to suppress signals while tuning from station to station; it is not a mute button in the amplifier sense of things. The tuner's output features both balanced XLR and single-ended phonos,

with good quality sockets in both cases. In fact, look closer and you'll discover there are two separate output stages, for balanced and single-ended outputs. Now, that's impressive.

There are many commonalities between this tuner and others in the Magnum Dynalab range. On the face of it, only the magic eye and extra bandwidth control mark out the MD-108 above its brothers. In fact, the differences are massive. The Class A audio stage was redesigned from

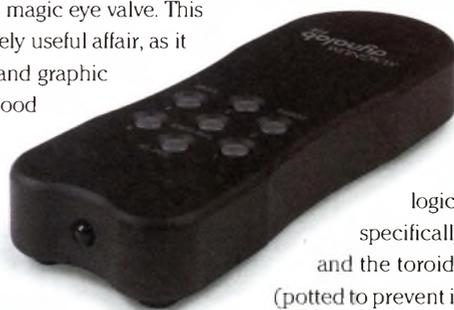
scratch, or rather from

scratches, with the discrete single ended output stage and the bi-polar balanced driver. The CMOS

logic circuit is designed specifically for the MD-108

and the toroidal transformer

(potted to prevent interference) is also custom specified for the tuner. This may bear strong familial resemblance to the other models in the Magnum Dynalab range, but it is very, very different. If you've read Plato, think of it as almost the Perfect Form or the Archetype of the Magnum tuner, or perhaps it's the genius brother that got all the good DNA. Not that the other tuners in the Magnum Dynalab range are somehow the idiot cousins of the MD-108; on any level playing field, even the entry-level model in the range is far beyond the performance of pretty much any other tuner. It's just that with the MD-108 in the running, there is no such thing as a level playing field. It's like playing football against the slope... and with a team of 45 premiership players on the other side. And a referee who's accepted a big bung from the other side. Still, it's easier to use a raft of metaphors than use up all

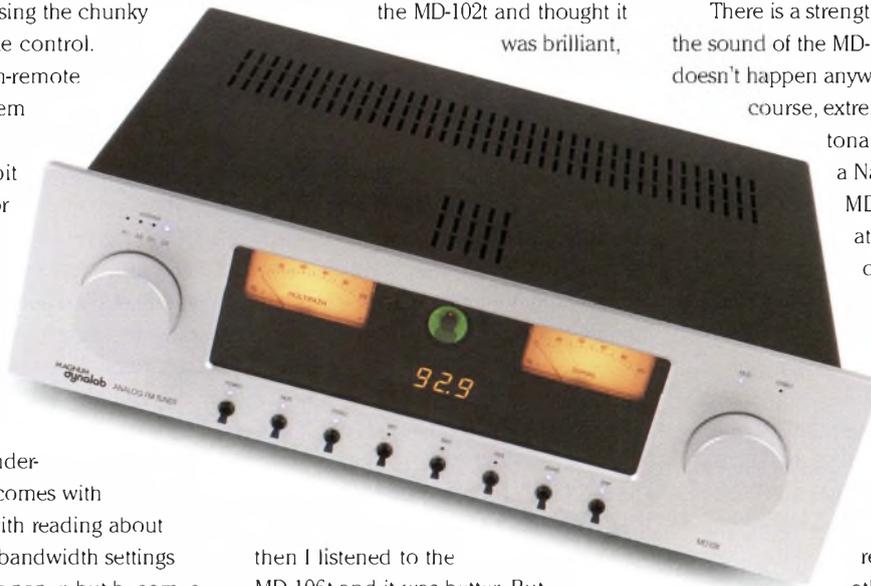


▶ those superlatives I have saved up for the performance.

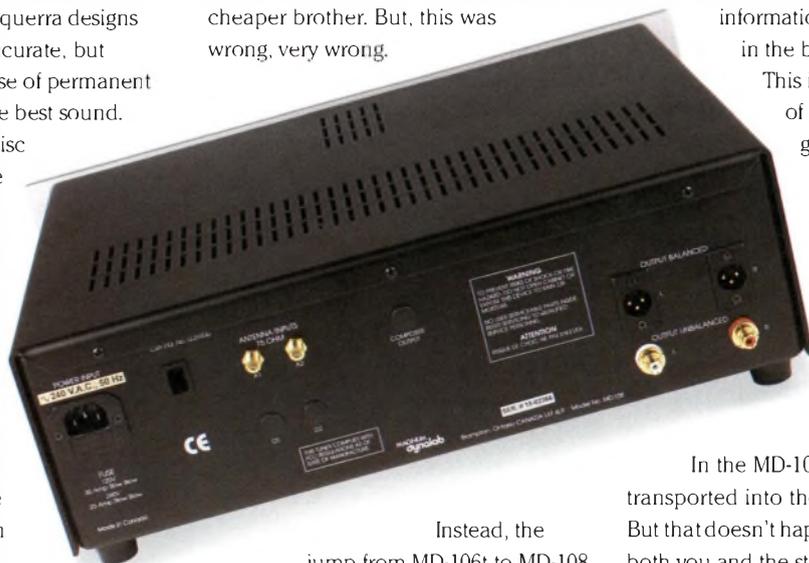
The tuner has considerably more analogue control than any other, although this control can be neatly side-stepped by using the chunky and stylish remote control. But the basic non-remote handling may seem daunting at first, unless you are a bit of a tuner buff. For all its relative complexity, the tuner is intuitive and easy to use. The manual is almost a help, but in fairness, understanding a tuner comes with handling it, not with reading about it. The use of the bandwidth settings looks daunting on paper, but becomes second nature over a very short time.

You get used to the magic eye in seconds and it remains the best tuner signal strength indicator around (the oscilloscope of Day-Sequerra designs was arguably more accurate, but induced a healthy sense of permanent fiddling to try to get the best sound. Here, you just fill the disc with green light). If the sound is still difficult to pin, down, flick one of the three bandwidth toggle switches and possibly the blend toggle. That'll nail 95% of signals, with other surprisingly distant signals capable of sounding more than decent by dropping the tuner into mono to eliminate hiss. The multipath and signal-strength VU meters simply confirm what the magic eye already knows, but careful twiddling of the tuning dial can turn a good signal into a great one.

The MD-108 has some healthy competition from below. The other tuners in the Magnum Dynalab range also vie for the place as the best tuner in the world today, too. First, I listened to the MD-102t and thought it was brilliant,



then I listened to the MD-106t and it was better. But, when I listened to the MD-106t, I secretly harboured thoughts that the law of diminishing returns would make the MD-108 only slightly better than its cheaper brother. But, this was wrong, very wrong.



Instead, the jump from MD-106t to MD-108 is wider than you'd expect; wider than the difference between MD-102t and MD-106t. Arguably, wider even than the gulf between regular price tuners and the MD-102t. It sets such a high benchmark that it puts the whole tuner market into

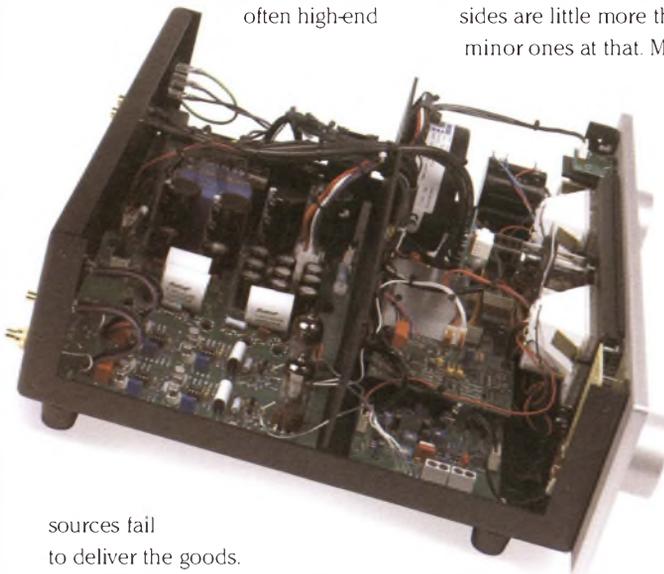
perspective; suddenly, you see the bigger picture, and see justification for the diversity of tuner prices, why there are no expensive digital tuners as yet and just how special the airwaves are.

There is a strength and dynamism to the sound of the MD-108 that simply doesn't happen anywhere else. It is, of course, extremely accurate and tonally honest, but so is a Naim NAT 03 or an MD-102. It's also good at picking up and discriminating signals, but probably not as easily as the MD-106t. But what the 108 has is a smoothness and richness that simply fails to register on any other tuner.

This is not soggy smoothness or enhanced rosy-glow valve like warmth. This is like the best Koetsu cartridges, digging up all the information, but presenting it in the best possible manner. This is a unique sound of high-end in all its glory. It delivers detail like the starkest information-hound, yet presents this information in the sort of package that would even chill out Graham Norton on crystal meth.

In the MD-106t, you get transported into the radio studio. But that doesn't happen here. Instead, both you and the studio are transported to a place where compression and microphone spitch doesn't happen; where everything sounds real and everything sounds good. Beautiful soundstaging, too. It's also something that belies description; a tough call ▶

▶ when that's your job. So, instead, I did the journalistic thing; I hoiked the thing back into its flight case and played it through a number of different systems and discovered it to be perhaps the most transparent source you can possibly own. It has one priority – to make the best sounding airwaves you will ever hear. It does this beautifully, and doesn't require a system to be attuned to its charms to deliver the goods. Of course, if you play this through a high-resolution high-end system (it's natural home), the detail shines through, but it also sounds exceptionally good through a more modest system, where often high-end



sources fail to deliver the goods.

I am not suggesting this is justification for spending \$5,000 on a tuner and \$500 on amp and speakers (there is a thin line between 'tuner fan' and 'tuner nutcase'; this would cross the line), but the MD-108 is so sensational-sounding, such systems seem more appropriate than usual.

What the MD-108 does extremely well is to make listening to the tuner a far more active process than usual. You can play the tuner at whisper quiet levels in the background, but people will comment and your attention will be drawn into the music or speech playing. Play this at a cocktail party (welcome to the 1970s, again) and the conversation will trail off as people listen to the Jazz

FM dinner jazz. Have this quietly knocking out Radio Four while working and suddenly bland news items about share prices take on Black Wednesday gravitas. You drift into the programme and lose the thread of what's going on around you. A good tuner can do this occasionally; the MD-108 does it so commonly, it's almost impossible to use as background. It's a good job there isn't an in-car version of the MD-108, people would drop off the road every few hundred yards when listening to the radio.

As you might expect with such a powerfully good product, the downsides are little more than niggles, very minor ones at that. Most surround the

integration of remote to tuner. The absolutely, unrelentingly analogue nature of the MD-108 doesn't sit comfortably with a remote control, so the tuner needs to be switched into remote mode... and this effectively disables the front panel. Also, the remote codes just

happen to match those of an NTL digital cable TV box; if you have both in the same room, it's difficult to put the NTL box to standby and use the MD-108. As I said, minor niggles in the extreme, and ones far outweighed by the sheer performance of the MD-108.

Many reviews end paragraph begins with the word 'ultimately', as an alternative way of saying 'in conclusion'. But 'ultimately' is appropriate here, because this is the ultimate product for a radio fanatic. There is nothing thus far that gets close to the performance of the MD-108, save for long lost classic tuners

like the Marantz 10B. It's built to live out the end of analogue radio in style and manages to combine the 'wow' factor needed by audiophiles and radio buffs alike. Raises the bar? We need taller posts now. This is the most fantastic tuner you can buy today and if you are really hardcore about your airwaves, this will set you salivating and put your bank account to condition red. DAB – who needs it? ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Analogue FM tuner
Usable Sensitivity-Mono:	0.7 uV 9.0 dBf
50 dB quieting-Mono:	2.0 uV 9.9 dBf
50 dB quieting-Stereo:	2.3 uV 20.0 dBf
Capture Ratio:	1.5 dB
Image Rejection:	125.0dB
Signal to Noise Ratio:	80.0dB
Alternate Channel Att: Wide	- 46.0dB
Alternate Channel Att: Narrow	- 60.0dB
Alternate Channel Att: Super Narrow	- 80.0dB
Adjacent Channel Att: Wide	- 3.0dB
Adjacent Channel Att: Narrow	- 21.0dB
Adjacent Channel Att: Super Narrow	- 48.0dB
THD – Mono:	0.10%
THD – Stereo:	0.10%
Stereo Separation:	50.0dB
AM suppression:	70.0dB
SCA rejection:	80.0dB
IF Rejection:	125.0dB
Audio frequency response:	15Hz-17kHz (±1dB)
Balanced Audio Output:	2.2V
Single-Ended Output:	1.0V
Dimensions (WxHxD)	483 x 128 x 407mm
Weight:	17.7kg
Price:	£5,850

UK Distributor

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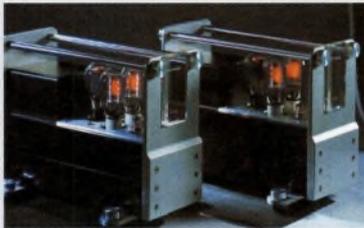
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It's not big, but it is clever! Benchmark's DAC1

by Roy Gregory

If the likes of the Zanden, Metronome or Weiss DACs are a little rich for your blood, then don't despair – there are much more affordable alternatives out there. Amongst the most attractive and versatile of these is Benchmark Media's DAC1, a small unit that's been garnering itself a serious reputation in the pro field. Half the width of a conventional unit, the DAC1 redefines the term slimline, measuring a mere 240 x 50 x 210mm (WxHxD)



including feet and the rack-mount extensions on its front panel. And talking of front-panels, this one could teach the domestic suppliers a thing or two. Nicely sculpted, it uses grey Nextel to great effect in the relieved areas, producing an attractive contrast to the brushed aluminium. Engraving is clear and easily legible, while status LEDs tell you about the digital input and a miniature toggle switch enables you

to select which one you want to listen to. A pair of 1/4" jacks are provided for headphones and a rotary control allows you to adjust output level.

The busy but neatly laid out rear panel offers BNC (complete with phono adaptor), AES/EBU and TosLink optical digital inputs, as well as both balanced XLR and single-ended

phono analogue outputs. Another micro toggle lets you select fixed (including a user definable option) or variable outputs. There's an IEC mains input, which allows you to use a fancy cable if you wish. Total cost of this little box of tricks is £938-83, which seems like a lot given its diminutive dimensions. It seems a bit more reasonable once you stop to consider the many ways in which this little unit can be used. It seems like a bargain once you get to hear what it can do!

I've used the DAC1 with a whole variety of digital sources, including the Wadia 861SE transport and the Metronome Kallista. The astonishing thing is that whilst it might not match the quality and finesse of the Wadia's DAC, or the warmth, colour and body of the Weiss Medea, it never gets phased or over-faced in such company. Instead, its appealing immediacy and bouncy, energetic dynamics give an alternative and engaging read on the performance.

Bass weight and power are excellent, as is the pace and attack of low-frequency lines.

As you'd expect, given its professional heritage, it imposes little of itself on the performance, preferring a warts and all honesty that gives you the signal the same way it arrived.

So, fed with a seriously top-notch signal, this little DAC is capable of both surprising and delighting the listener. Benchmark make great play of their clock technology, a topology that they claim makes the DAC1 virtually impervious to external sources of jitter. Well, interestingly enough, and in common with the buffered input Chord DAC64, the DAC1 does seem relatively impervious to transport quality. Even using a pretty basic budget CD player as a transport did little to diminish its sonic appeal, reflecting more

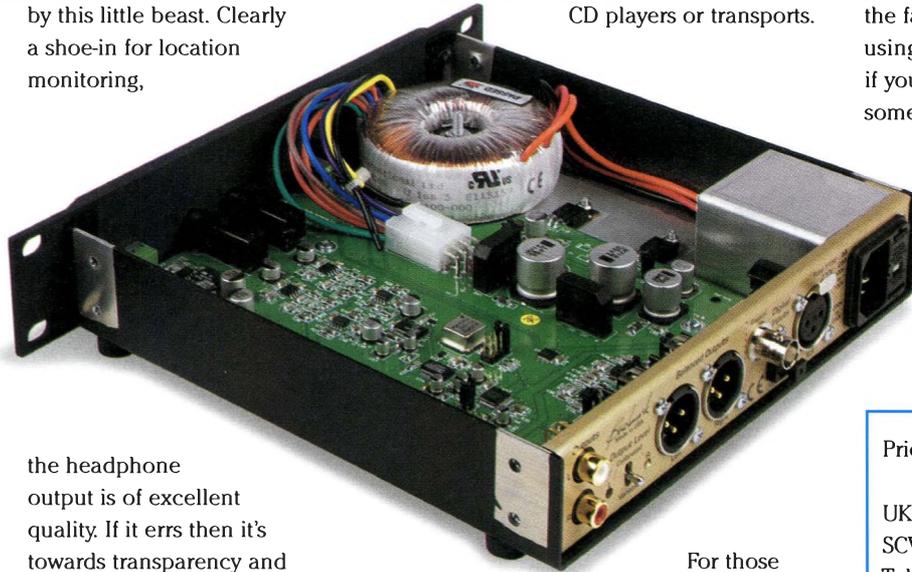


► in the texture of instruments than their energy or placement. Separation and soundstaging remained high-spots, while the beat definitely went on.

Consider then, the options created by this little beast. Clearly a shoe-in for location monitoring,

a system. Given its ability to run multiple digital sources, as well as drive power amps or active speakers direct, it represents a bargain basement digital pre-amp as well as an effective upgrade to older CD players or transports.

front-end should seriously consider this little DAC: bargain basement converter, headphone amp, digital pre-amp and all-round short-stop, it really delivers the sonic goods. Even if you don't think you need the facilities, I'll bet you end up using them sooner or later. Even if you eventually end up with something bigger, more exotic and more expensive I suspect you'll still hang onto the DAC1. It's too cute, too versatile and just too damn good to get rid of! ►+



the headphone output is of excellent quality. If it errs then it's towards transparency and detail at the expense of warmth and a little weight. Given the absence of decent headphone outputs on the vast majority of CD players and amps these days, that alone just about justifies inclusion of the DAC1 into

For those wishing to integrate various digital sources into a single, compact yet high-quality system, nothing I've come across comes close at the price. Those looking to upgrade their digital

Price: £938.83

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Circuitry, Mains Cables & Supports: Upgrading the Philips DVD963SA

by Reuben Parry

In its basic guise this modestly priced Philips multi-standard player punched well above its bantamweight category to comfortably compete with machines around the £1000.00 to £1200.00 mark and beyond. In the favourable reviews by AS and RG (Hi-Fi+ Issue 27) it stood toe to toe with the Rega Jupiter and was ultimately mentioned in the same

breathe as such legendary pieces of kit as the Pioneer A400 integrated amplifier and the Michell Iso phono stage – wonderful benchmark products which on their day redefined performance levels at their respective price points. When this player was switched to the Audio Direct mode, a function which loops out its video circuitry,

both the CD and SACD reproduction came in for particular praise. Smooth, musically satisfying and transparent sounding, this was a DVD multi-channel surround system player whose real strength lay within its audiophile aspirations. These were realised through its ability to accurately present the shape, scale and colour of instrumental and ►

► vocal images. The Philips effortlessly crossed the genres taking messy rock and pop soundscapes, congested orchestral works and pared back to nothing jazz recordings in its stride. Unsurprisingly this has made it a firm favourite amongst those on a limited budget who want high-end insights.

The temptation with these things is to seek out further improvements from what is already a fine little player.

components, perhaps most notably the clocking, where a new Superclock 2 complete with its own power supply has been fitted. Other variations on a theme are the two-channel de-coupling and output stage changes; analogue and digital power supply unit mods and revised main voltage regulation. Turbo charging (including shipping) comes in

That's a difficult one to answer when initial build costs for Philips are so relatively small. Certainly the changes build upon the known strengths. The robust, forward sounding and quite revealing approach continues to highlight the importance of getting that sense of timing and interplay between musicians right in the first place. This already made for a really involving listening experience. It now takes a step forward in terms of transparency and the reproduction of those innermost details.



Almost inevitably this can involve spending a good deal more than the initial £400.00 outlay. The question is how much more money can you really justify? Or, when does it stop being a bargain?

At one extreme (and I am very grateful to a regular reader for the long term loan of this internally revised player) you could undertake extensive power supply, voltage regulation and clocking modifications. This turbo charged DVD963SA comes courtesy of Audiocom International Limited of London. They have addressed a number of key

at a cool \$875.00 price tag with nearly half of these costs relating to the Superclock. This takes an excellent budget/entry point Philips player and places it firmly within an entirely new category – which in the process substantially raises your performance expectations. Of course a two hundred percent price increase does not necessarily mean you will hear a proportionate series of sonic improvements. But, I hear you ask, are there sufficient gains here to justify this additional outlay?

The end result is undoubtedly better hi-fi and more communicative music. What it isn't is the bargain it started out as. Yes, it sounds better than its price peers, but the modifications don't allow it to approach the sound available from the next tier of players (like the McCormack and the Krell SACD Standard), while the constraints ►

► that build cost places on construction and finish start to tell against it. Ultimately, I think that most existing and prospective owners will look at the sheer cost of the Audiodom enhancements and this will almost inevitably be enough to temper their enthusiasm for investment in this Philips DVD963SA upgrade path.

So, what about the player itself and alternative routes to maximising its performance?

Depressing the Dim button on the DVD963SA remote until the facia display is reduced to its lowest visible intensity has an effect too. In the beginning I was less convinced about the gains to be heard here. On my other CD players, where you can turn their displays off completely, the audible benefits were more obviously apparent. It immediately creates improved instrumental separation, with cleaner and firmer images. It was only when playing an SACD of Vladimir Ashkenazy's Shostakovich solo piano works (DECCA 470 649-2) that I really start to appreciate the implications of using the Philips dimmer. The fleet-footed language in the Second Piano Sonata has a fluidity and snap about it. As the piece develops the robust, sonorous and tactile piano chords establish a better sense of continuity, lucidly directing you through all three movements to the very end of the cyclical series of variations in an uninterrupted finale. Finally I was convinced that the dimmer if depressed affected a meaningful enough advance to be used at all times. This comes to the fore when playing the best solo and chamber classical and jazz recordings. I did find it much harder to discern its effects upon complex orchestral and choral works and busily produced pop and contemporary music discs. Why the time spent on such a trivial control? Because its effect underlines how revealing the DVD963SA is, a

trait that follows even in standard form. Real differences can be made to its performance with relatively simple external steps.

A quality mains power lead should be a priority. I purposefully didn't go out of my way to find wildly extravagant examples, instead settling for what was already close at hand. So I began by using the resident Audioplan power chord that usually feeds juice into my McCormack UDP-1 universal player. There were immediately obvious advances in terms of clarity when this was plugged into the back of the Philips machine but I finally settled on the Tube Technology mains lead that normally supplies the power to my Fusion CD 64 player. This was a much better match with improved instrumental separation and spaciousness the most notable results here. Neither of these leads is particularly expensive and you could go as far down the line as deploying a Nordost Vishnu cable. But some degree of restraint is needed and I am conscious that excessive expenditure in this department will again only serve to gnaw away at the budget credentials of the player. So the first step is finding an understanding dealer who will let you experiment with a breadbasket of cables in order to find the best and most cost-effective match.

Another external upgrade seriously worth considering is the method of isolation. I have taken it as given that the DVD963SA will be sat on a dedicated support table, but what about replacing or bypassing the existing feet? The options are almost endless – from Pulsar Points and CeraPucs to Cerabases - you pay your money and take your choice. Again, I wanted to approach the subject of additional isolation from a "real world" perspective. One value for money option to consider is the simple introduction of rubber or

sorbathene feet into the system, such as the Isopods. Sliding three of these inexpensive shoes beneath the Philips player has an interesting effect on the delivery of music. Normally the DVD963SA conveys its information in an exciting and engaging manner because of the machine's capable handling of dynamic changes. I listened to the *Yola* SACD to assess the sound of the Philips as it changed, using the UDP-1 as a stable reference. The McCormack as expected gave a richer, well-defined and truly colloquial vocal presentation. However, when placed on Isopods, the DVD963SA softened Eleanor's voice without reducing her emotional impact. Moreover there were no detrimental effects to the subtle crafted inflexion she brings to these tales of fractured and unrequited loves. Excellent resolution was maintained and these changes delicately added that essential touch of warmth and refinement to the performance in a way that encouraged me to listen longer and deeper into the recording. In these circumstances "rubber wear" is both inexpensive and effective. Where the Isopods moved the 963SA towards the sound of the McCormack, aluminium Pulsar Points moved it in the opposite direction, producing a cleaner, sharper and crisper sound, but ultimately one that's more hi-fi than natural.

Modifying the Philips DVD963SA is not all "onwards and upwards to infinity and beyond". Personally, I'd start at the bottom of the price index looking at mains leads and isolation before entertaining any internal electrical changes. If you can get a side-by-side demonstration of the basic Philips and turbo charged Audiodom machines then do so. On the basis of my experiences and the costs involved I would hesitate to recommend internal modification



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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, Leigh Heggarty.

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Israel Kamakawi'ole

Facing Future

Big Boy Record Company BBCCD 5901 

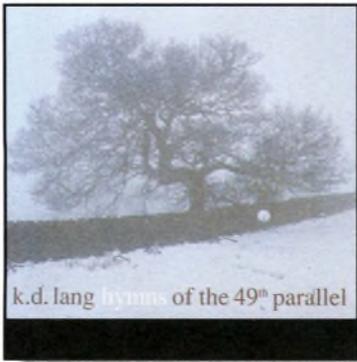
The Hawaiian giant Israel Kamakawi'ole possessed a wonderfully soft tenor voice (past tense because Iz died of obesity) and was best known outside of the island for his version of 'Over The Rainbow' that can be heard on this album. It backs a certain advert for a deodorant that apparently has the affect of making you irresistible to women. However, while I wouldn't describe Facing Future as the most musically telling of releases it never descends into unbearable kitsch. Gentle harmonies supported by bass, ukulele and guitars underscore the simple storytelling on tracks like 'Hawai'i '78 Introduction'. The subtle blend of indigenous rhythms and colours occasionally backs surprising cover material in 'Rainbow' and 'Take Me Home Country Road'. For the songs steeped in the tunes of home - 'Kuhio Bay', 'White Sandy Beach', 'Panini Pua Kea' or 'Henehene Kou 'Aka' - Israel gives us the piquant flavouring and salt of a Pacific island life without ever labouring the point. A warm and detailed acoustic picks out both the instruments and Israel's rich voice with a surprising naturalness, clarity and accuracy of texture one does not usually expect in a mainstream release.

Supplier: www.hotrecords.uk.com

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC





K D Lang

Hymns of the 49th Parallel

Nonesuch 7559-79847-2 

Eleven breathtakingly beautiful covers tenderly sung and sweetly arranged by K.D. Lang celebrate the rich cultural diversity of Canadian song writing. Classic material like 'Bird On A Wire', 'After The Gold Rush' and 'Jericho' which we've all heard a million times over as originals are stripped down and rebuilt by Lang's scoring that includes a ten-piece string section, piano, accordion, acoustic and electric guitars. Applying a gentle rhythmic approach without recourse to intruding percussive instruments heightens the sensuality in this music. While her purposeful vocal treatment may through its intelligence, clarity and emotional persuasiveness have a reverential slant it never spills over into the impotency of impersonation. No one could hope to outdo Leonard, Neil or Joni anyway. So she takes ownership of these songs and those by Jane Siberry ('The Valley' and 'Love Is Everything') and Ron Sexsmith ('Fallen') with an amazing vocal dexterity and an implicit understanding of the possibilities that exist within these powerful lyrical constructs. Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' is a stunning example of the way in which she projects longing and intensity into this music. Rightly too Lang revisits one of her own numbers, 'Simple', which we first heard on the album *Invincible Summer*. This is a much more effective and complex sounding version that makes you review previously held opinions. In fact that goes for all the tracks here.

RP

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



The Kills

No Wow

Domino Records WIGCD149X 

Last year, after relentless touring, The Kills had honed their sound to a furious onslaught that shook the foundations of their claustrophobic venues. So it should come as no surprise that their second album is just like their first, only louder and better. This album is, if anything, even sparser than their debut, with the songs even more basic. The songs are built around simple production – two vocals, the simplest drum machine rhythm available and a single guitar. Their skill lies in combining these elements to create complex patterns that repeat and grow. The vocals are still exquisite, with the husky howling of VV still reminiscent of PJ Harvey at her best, combining well with Hotel's serial-killer whispering. But for me the real front man of The Kills is Hotel's guitar: this is a sound that Hendrix might have discarded for being too raw, switching rapidly from clipped control to pure abandon. Quite how two people can generate the sheer quantity of sound that The Kills manage is a mystery to me. What is clear is that their recording process filters and distils their songs, stripping them of all extraneous sounds. What remains seems to be half blues and half punk, a thundering wall of sound driven by their anger and passion. *No Wow* easily matches their debut album, with stronger songs, punchier production and better recording.

MC

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Nanci Griffith

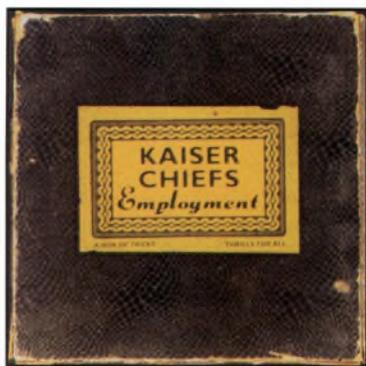
Hearts in Mind

New Door Records 986 443-1 

Nanci is a demanding mistress. She will not allow us an easy way out, a passive consumption of her songs or those carefully chosen tracks penned by the likes of Le Ann Etheridge, Julie Gold, Ron Davies or Clive Gregson is not on her agenda. These songs are delivered in a manner that demands our emotional and intellectual engagement. Several, including 'Heart Of Indochine' and 'Old Hanoi' are strongly informed by her work with the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation and the Campaign for a Landmine Free World. Another, Julie Gold's 'Mountain Of Sorrow', is an uneasy reflection upon a single day, the 11th of September, that has changed the way we live forever. The delicate quite improbable pastoral language in itself creates quite a dissonance with the surrounding cityscape. This tension ripples through the song craft into her thematic concerns. Aside from the political statements there are the urban country love songs, if that isn't a contradiction in terms, and a beautifully framed Le Ann Etheridge number 'Back When Ted Loved Sylvia' which alludes to the Ted Hughes/Sylvia Plath relationship – his poetry, her novels, their marriage, his unfaithfulness and her suicide. The production and musicianship throughout is as cultured as ever.

RP

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Kaiser Chiefs

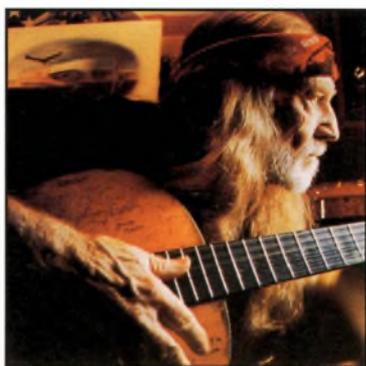
Employment

B-Unique BUN093

I was going to start by saying that Kaiser Chiefs seem to be a cross between The Futureheads and The Jam. But then I realised that just a few issues back I said that The Futureheads sounded strangely reminiscent of... The Jam. So I guess what I really want to say is that Kaiser Chiefs sounds like a cross between The Jam and The Jam. That they also bring to mind a whole host of breaking bands such as The Futureheads is indicative of the fact that here is a band that are painfully cool, albeit in a shabby, flat-cap fashion.

But whereas The Futureheads make upbeat, bouncy music with undercurrents of paranoia, Kaiser Chiefs wear their discontent on their sleeves. This is an album that scours the dirty streets to pick up tales of everyday life and woe: of bailiffs and police brutality. Kaiser Chiefs drive their songs along with layers of staccato guitars but give the songs a more retro feel by throwing piano and Hammond organ into the mix. Indeed, there is something of the dancehall about this record that makes it stand out, makes it work when other might have failed. Here is a band that has managed to record their ideas and leave them intact. This is a superb debut album, and it sits very comfortably alongside the current trends in new bands. However, it will be interesting to see if this is a format that the band can grow into, rather than be constricted by it.

MC



Willie Nelson

It Will Always Be

Lost Highway 602498624203

Wonderfully subtle moments poignantly capturing the melancholia of those hard working and hard living rural communities are conveyed with incredible emotional depth through the callused guitar playing hands and inimitable vocal style of the wry and perceptive Willie Nelson. I love his gently flowing opening series of country waltzes in Picture In A Frame, The Way You See Me and a title track that pricks you with its observations on loneliness and love. Attractively sculpted duets with Paula Nelson ('Be That As It May'), Norah Jones ('Dreams Come True') and the beautifully languid Lucinda Williams ('Overtime'). Crumbling relationships, the pain and those evocative backdrops offer an engaging and sometimes overpowering blend of intense feeling and telling images. Lyrically, such strongly written material from the likes of Kathleen Brennan, Rusty Adams and Sonny Throckmorton and of course those Nelson originals seamlessly fit together presenting a unified front. Willie's performances of all these songs are just so intuitive and darned dependable that I defy anyone to find a single fault with their execution or his vision. An excellent cast of backing musicians and solid production and engineering values from the James Stroud/Julian King partnership at the Ocean Way, Nashville studios completes another eminently satisfying outing from shotgun Willie.

RP



Xanda Howe

And How

Songphonic 0100

Xanda Howe is a sassy and lovely sounding vocalist whose precise and crystalline delivery gives her singing that attractive blend of the fragile and the vulnerable. Her collaboration with producer Osman Kent for eight of these eleven stylistically varied songs shows that Xanda is comfortable both in the classic singer songwriter role for intelligent compositions like 'Warm Poison' and as a pop diva on the techno-pop/disco tracks 'And How and Knowing Eyes'. Occasionally she somewhat unnecessarily adopts a cute and rather girlish singing style that might be fine for the dance floor, but then proves elsewhere that her voice is so much better than this. A closing unedited, live cover version of the Tom Waits track 'Time', instrumentally pared back to little more than a piano for rhythmic support, clears away all the fluff to reveal a vocal sweetness and passion that makes such an unlikely song her own. Inevitably comparisons to Dido will be made but Howe shows with a smart and sensitive trans-cription of the Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem 'How Do I Love Thee' that she is a more complex and imaginative performer than her better known peer. This reverent groove, while dripping with sweetness, is given a modern edge through its nicely developed Jimmy Kent rap. Consequently, Howe's career and growing maturity as a musician should be well worth following over the coming years.

RP





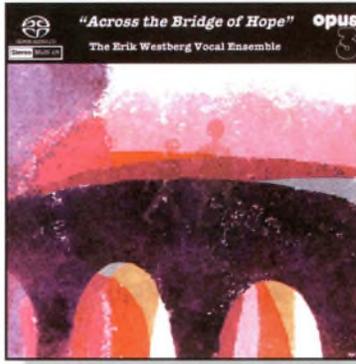
Nat "King" Cole

Just One Of Those Things

StP Records StP-50B 180g 3

Terrific standards, superior Billy May arrangements, impeccably tasteful performances so easy on the ear and so completely disarming that you melt, and that large orchestra jam packed with musicians who really know how to swing these classic tunes to a catch beat are the hallmarks of any Nat "King" Cole album from the 1950s. *Just One Of Those Things* has it all and, while it might not quite match the vintage *Love Is The Thing* or *The Very Thought Of You* releases (which shade it by virtue of the sheer quantity of timeless songs) this is still a superbly executed collection. There are also another three bonus tracks lifted from a later *Let's Face The Music* LP which fit snugly alongside an original line up that includes 'When Your Lover Has Gone', 'These Foolish Things', 'The Song Is Ended' and 'Whose Sorry Now?' Beautiful ballads - undoubtedly, syrupy and soft focused but always harmonious and sentimentally sung by one of the most popular crooners of all time - well, that goes without saying. Oh, and a delicious transfer courtesy of Steve Hoffman that in keeping with this material taken from those original three-track masters overflows with richness, warmth, and sensitivity.

RP



The Erik Westberg Vocal Ensemble

Across The Bridge of Hope

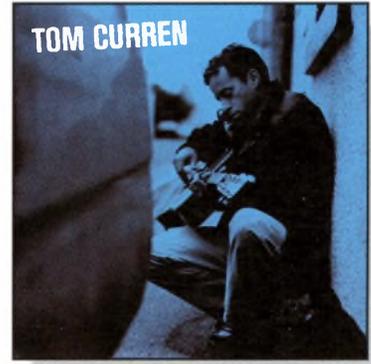
Opus 3 CD 22012 SACD

Attracted initially by some beautifully sung and recorded excerpts on an earlier Opus 3 *Showcase* sampler it was the title track from this set featured in the latest *Showcase* release (Opus 3 CD 22050) that really did the trick and persuaded me to order a copy.

The title track is a near perfect example of modern choral singing featuring an exquisite treble solo from Alexander Linntott. The set is nicely eclectic, with some delightful instrumental interludes including key-fiddle (a distant relation of the hurdy gurdy) in the second track while truly magical singing in the third number 'Claviane Brilioso', evokes a real sense of mystery. 'Touch' composed by Anders Astrand of the Global Percussion Network uses a bracing mix of concert bass drum, tom-toms, suspended cymbals, gongs and steel drums which are played with subtlety avoiding the temptation to build to an obvious ear-splitting crescendo, and all the better for it. There's not a weak track here and each flows seamlessly to the next to deliver a hugely enjoyable musical experience. The recording is of genuine demonstration quality. Recorded in the Church of Nederlulea, Gammelstad, it is spacious, dynamic and entirely convincing drawing you into the music from the very first notes. If you have even the faintest whimsy of interest in choral music this one's for you.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

DD



Tom Curren

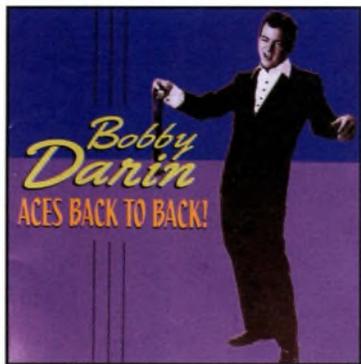
Listone Ltd WESTC 1203 CD

This eponymous album from the ex World Surfing Champion Tom Curren comes straight out of left-field. But does genius on a board transfer so easily to the demands of a recording studio? Well, I guess it's congratulations to Hot Records for promoting a reasonably talented and versatile musician - one who is equally comfortable playing both acoustic and electric guitars, as well as singing and composing songs that have a contemporary folk influenced sound. An opening 'Light Becomes A Fire' (building with its grungy modern beat) has a cultural immediacy that will appeal to an army of surf fans. Yet at the same time it manages to capture much of Curren's honesty and reflect on a reclusive side to the man which is in notably stark contrast to the bombastic and extrovert "surf's up!" musical images surrounding almost every aspect of the people who indulge in this sport. He can and does open out with the up-tempo and rockin' groove of 'I Got'. Still, the best tracks have a strong acoustic basis. 'New Page' played on nylon-strung guitar and a slight yet intimate closing groove in 'Thirst' evoke classic folk sensitivities. This is also an album that reflects Tom's strong spiritual nature. Contemplative tracks like 'Essence', 'Ocean Wide' and 'Holy Wine' have large dollops of faith bubbling up from just below the surface.

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RP





Bobby Darin

Aces Back to Back

Hyna Records TMF 9324  

Bobby Darin was a consummate entertainer who by the time of his death in 1973 (due to a heart condition) had by the age of only thirty-seven reinvented himself over and over again. From Fifties teen idol to rocker, comedian, crooner and as an adept actor, Darin's iconic talent seemingly knew no bounds. Not only was he one of the great vocal chameleons but a noted composer as well, with songs such as 'Splish Splash' and 'Dream Lover' to his name. Dream Lover incidentally appears here as a rare studio demo. The variety and sheer versatility of the man can be heard here in tracks like a swinging 'Beyond The Sea', the finger clicking 'Mack the Knife', a dreamy 'Moon River' or that folk/rock classic 'If I Were A Carpenter'. His voice is enticing and often overflows with rich Sinatra like textures. This collection, which features live cuts, radio broadcasts and studio recordings gives us a small taste of his genius but the variable recordings do not do him justice. Unlimited ability deserves better. The bonus DVD features songs from his early 1970s television variety series and raw black and white documentary footage that has not been aired before.

RP

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Cathy Davey

Something Ilk

Regal 7243 5 71309 2 9 

Eleanor McEvoy's partner Mick O'Gorman pointed me in the direction of the Irish-born singer-songwriter Cathy Davey and her solo fourteen-track debut *Something Ilk*. She has created a stubborn and sharp-tongued rock groove that makes the most of a surprising and quite unusual voice. Her edginess is rooted in abrasive lyrics—words dissecting those unpalatable realities of a confidence sapping relationship in 'Hammerhead' or offering us the dismissive wisdom of 'Yak Yak'. Sometimes the language flows in a disguised but poisonous draught, one that invites you to drink deeply, sometimes through attractively light and almost girlish vocal flourishes. A song like the seedy 'Swing It' leaves you in little doubt as to its thematic origins when Cathy hits you with a bitterly reproachful line such as "Didn't you share me with every breed of monkey that sniffed about your feet". An uncomfortable and daring pattern develops here and on 'Go Make It', 'Trade Secret', 'About Time' and 'Cold Man's Nightmare', songs where she is not afraid to show how our human frailties have created jagged fissures in a relationship. The positive note is found in the assertive way in which her women ultimately resolve these issues. Cathy may not yet be the finished article but her attitude and versatility (she plays guitar, keyboards and a variety of percussive instruments as well as sings) deserves our attention.

RP



Ginny Hawker

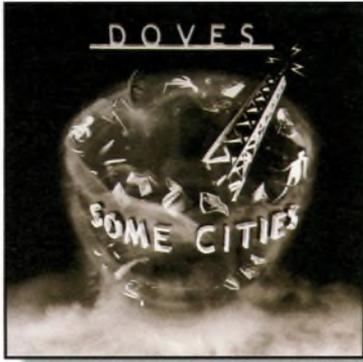
Letters From My Father

Rounder Records 82161-0491-2 

Letters From My Father is an authentic and heartfelt blend of bluegrass, old-time, gospel and honky-tonk rural pickings where Ginny Hawker's lead vocals powerfully endorse those country laments which have shaped our perception of that dusty southern farmland belt. An admirably sparse and uncomplicated acoustic allows traditional songs like 'My Warfare Will Soon Be Over' and 'The Palace Grand' to breath and Tim O'Brien's mandolin and Dirk Powell's fiddle have a natural raw loveliness about them because of it. Hawker has lived with this music all her life and knows so well its intimate, subtle and most affecting nuances. She makes a bluegrass song such as 'Silver Tongue And Gold Plated Lies' and honest numbers 'I'll Not Be A Stranger' or 'Undone In Sorrow' attractively resonate with inner personal meanings. The finger picked guitar, fiddle, banjo and mandolin really gets under your skin with their carefully weighted and appropriate tonal qualities. These sixteen songs take us on an illuminating journey across the changing faces of those American farming communities and in the process it examines with some candour the hard work, spirituality, loves and loses experienced down through the generations.

RP





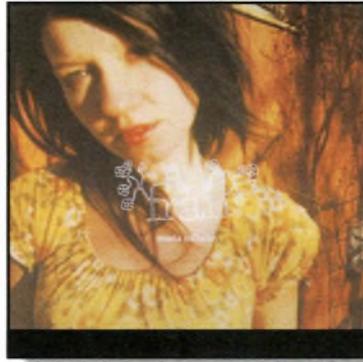
Doves

Some Cities

Heavenly Recordings HVNLP 50 

In a lot of ways this album seems less immediate than their last two records. I might even say, with some degree of trepidation, not quite as brilliant. But I think that perhaps misses the point of Doves, and the direction they have chosen. This album is not about re-invention, nor about re-vitalisation. Doves chose, a long time ago, to forego dance for something more solid, more substantial. It will take more than the various fires that removed their previous incarnation, Sub-Sub, to wipe Doves from the records. So what have Doves done with this, their (traditionally "difficult") third album? They have produced a natural extension of their last two. I said last time that to reproduce a modern classic, creating another perfect record is no mean feat. To do it again, what must that take? *Some Cities* is darker than their last two albums; there's no self affirming 'Pounding' or 'Here comes the summer'. Instead this record offers a choice of bleak reality or serene acceptance. This album may not have the punch of many others, but it certainly isn't lacking in most other respects. One thing strikes me every time I listen to it; that so many of the songs already sound familiar, already register as classics. This is an album which will slowly insinuate itself on your consciousness, and earn its place next to the hi-fi.

MC



Maria Solheim

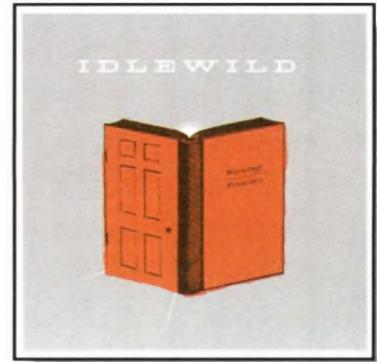
Frail

KKV fxcd 278 

Fragile is a lyrical, quite spiritual and emotionally intelligent album that delves deeply into matters of the head and heart. It explores with some delicacy the vulnerability of a woman who has experienced broken promises, humiliation, unrequited love and acute loss. These themes, wrapped within an ambient and acoustic blanket, rarely stray too far from the folk/pop roots heard on Maria's earlier recordings. Her vocals, while prominently miked, are less expansive and more breathless than before. If anything this heightens the feelings of confusion, hesitation and loss of self esteem heard on 'Kissing Me' or that agonising ache of rejection in the cold imagery of 'The Snow Has Killed', 'Too Many Days', 'Take My Heart Away' and 'Mr. Iceman'. She also explores the hurt of a family blighted by a terminal hereditary disease - 'Pain' and looks at the unhealthy, self absorbed and introspective gestures of 'Restless Girl' in which a woman helplessly wallows in her own pity, addicted to the anger and fear within her. This is a track whose lyrics are underscored by the cut, thrust and tempo of a modern folk blues groove. The powerful production, it's crystal clear and articulate sound, opens out these insights to yet further close examination.

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RP



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warnings/promises

Parlophone 560 7752 

With this, their fifth album, Idlewild seem to have become the old men of indie, tempering their punk roots and creating a more thoughtful record. In fact, it seems as if Idlewild have become the new Teenage Fanclub - this, I must explain, is meant as the highest of compliments. With *warnings/promises* seems to come an acceptance of who the band have become: Idlewild were never your usual punk outfit, but now their music seems at one with their personalities. Some serious changes in their line-up have undoubtedly helped this process along, but these have not so much radically changed the structure of the band, as formalised the situation that has existed since their second album. So what does all this leave us with? Well, *warnings/promises* is every bit as good as any previous Idlewild album. All the components that made up their music are still here, but now they seem to work together more comfortably. Underneath it all, the band still hold the ability to burst forth with unrestrained punk energy. There are still plenty of sharp guitars and solid drum lines, but these have been filled out with steel guitar and careful orchestration. *warnings / promises* was not made for the charts, not a collection of singles padded out with ubiquitous slow album tracks. Idlewild more than equal their Scottish counterparts.

MC



Elizabeth Cotten... Kitchen Sink Blues

by Reuben Parry

Elizabeth Cotten Freight Train And Other North Carolina Folk Songs And Tunes

Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings SF CD 40009



Elizabeth Cotten Shake Sugaree

Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings SFW CD 40147



For much of her life Elizabeth 'Libba' Cotten languished in relative obscurity. Born in 1895 she grew up in the rural backwater of Chapel Hill, North Carolina where music was very much a part of every day life – be that in the fields and the factories during the working week or while at worship in Church on a Sunday. Although from farming stock her family eventually moved to town. Consequently these folk songs, which she learnt, played and eventually wrote herself, are immersed in an African-American tradition of storytelling that pulls together both urban and country influences. Everything from local tunes and blues rags to spirituals and children's verses can be heard here. These are songs that cover just about every aspect of a hardworking black existence. They tease you, pick at those heartstrings, making you smile at their warmth, and occasionally shed a tear because their honesty and deeply organic simplicity is so perceptive. Yet all of these clear-sighted insights, snatches of old tunes and fragments of a half-remembered melody would have been lost to us but for a single bizarre twist of fate. The story goes something like this: By the end of the Second World War the now divorced Elizabeth Cotten was working in Washington DC as a sales clerk. One Christmas a little girl became lost in the department store and it was Elizabeth who reunited the child (Peggy) with her mother. The mother just happened to be that noted composer and music teacher, Ruth Crawford Seeger. This eventually led to Elizabeth's employment at the Seeger home and an introduction to Ruth's son Pete Seeger, of Weavers fame, although it was several years before the family realised that they had such a marvellous self-taught guitarist/singer songwriter in their midst.

Eventually it was Mike Seeger who recorded 'Libba' and that album, together with Peg's earlier 1956 performances in London, helped to popularise the song 'Freight Train' that was written by Elizabeth when she was barely eleven years old. One thing naturally led to another and small concerts were given for politicians and dignitaries including JFK. But it was this collection of intimate Carolina Folk Songs that introduced Cotten's dry observations and inimitable picking style of guitar playing to a broader audience. Her unique left-handed approach to a variety of guitars, including the plywood top Silvertone 'f' hole, the Martin D-28 and Goya classical used here, meant that the bass strings were picked with the fingers while her thumb plucked out a melody. It became known as playing "Cotten style" and even on this recording that was made over a half dozen visits to Elizabeth's Washington home you can still hear (despite the variable sound quality) a really transparent bass line and sweet treble. Most of these songs are barely two minutes long yet even the slightest of vignettes in the shape of 'Wilson Rag', timed at just fifty-three seconds, is a revealing, cornshucking party tune. Many, like the dance song 'I Don't Love Nobody', or those well-trodden tracks such as 'Honey Babe Your Papa Cares For You' and 'Going Down The Road Feeling Bad' are delivered in a straight blues style. Elsewhere there are colourful reflections on life at Chapel Hill with the 'Graduation March' and 'Oh Babe It Ain't No Lie' as well as melodies taken from revivalist and gospel hymns.

Shake Sugaree, a selection of twenty-six open guitar and banjo tunings taped between 1965 and 1966, continues an odyssey through late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century American folk songs. This music, which courses so hotly through 'Libba's' veins, is far better recorded. It also contains ten previously unreleased tracks – among them is a baptism song 'Holy Ghost', 'Unchain My Name' and the family learned tunes 'Fare You Well, My Darling'; 'Can't Get A Letter From Down The Road' and 'Take Me Back To Baltimore'. All of these, with their understated yet rhythmically graceful and subtle variations, capture an essence of those blues and country rags that at one time or another were picked and plucked on stoops across a Nation. The title-track sung by Brenda Evans (Elizabeth's great granddaughter) to a



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– Paul Messenger, Vertex AQ Review, Hi-Fi+ Issue 29



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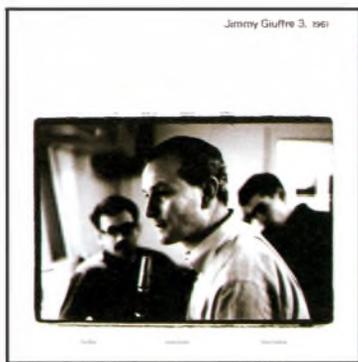
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The Jimmy Giuffre 3

1961

ECM 849644-1

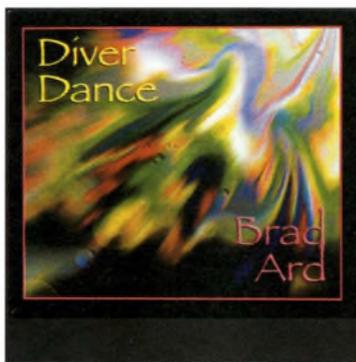


Jimmy Giuffre started his playing career with the likes of Jimmy Dorsey and Woody Herman. In the mid '50's he began to carve his own very distinct path culminating in this ground-breaking drummer-less trio with pianist/composer Paul Bley and bassist Steve Swallow. Giuffre stays on clarinet for this set which brings together (along with additional previously unreleased tracks from the same sessions) what were originally two Verve albums recorded a month apart: *Thesis* and *Fusion* – and what a fine set they make. Sidestepping both cool jazz and be-bop, this band realises a mellow and more melodic improvisational style with more than a nod to free-jazz.

Dominated by Giuffre's expressive clarinet this whole set is a textbook of restrained yet daring improvisation. Complemented by superb support from Bley and Swallow and captured in a very natural recording, the group here is at its peak. They would go on to further and less melodic abstraction (culminating in their final album together *Free Fall* where abstraction was taken to its logical conclusion with keys and tempos dispensed with), but this for me is their finest work. With superb ECM pressings, a sleeve using some great black & white photography from the sessions and with all the quiet beauty contained within these grooves, this is a 'must own' for any serious jazz collector.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

DD



Brad Ard

Diver Dance



The jazz-fusion canon, with a few notable exceptions like the innovative work of Pat Metheny, can be an insipid and insubstantial genre. For some unexplained reason it is much loved by demonstrators of hi-fi and of course often aired by those well known manufactures of lifts, messieurs Otis and Kone. That said, Brad Ard's up tempo guitar contributes greatly to a richly textured series of soundscapes found here, as does Fred Simon's smoothly executed keyboards on seven of *Diver Dance's* twelve grooves. Evocatively and diversely named tracks such as 'Skittering', 'Gas Bag', 'Misty Morning Sunrise' or 'Flight Of The Hormone' cannot quite disguise the uniformity of mood and sound. I have rarely heard music with a less military bearing than that played out for 'A Warrior's Reception'. However, behind his funky flavoured guitar there is enough energy and colour generated by Ard's bold and skilful arrangements of horn, tenor sax, bass clarinet, marimba and vibes to sustain the interests of dyed-in-the wool jazz-fusion fans. Philistines like yours truly will take a little more convincing even though the recording's clean lines, transparency and etched instrumental detail has much to recommend it.

Supplier: panartist.com

RP



Mindbender

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Vadim Music VAD001CD



Here's a refreshing change to the truckloads of noodling sub-jazz that too often come my way only to sit gathering dust un-reviewed on the gloomier reaches of my shelves. Dating from the early seventies and apparently something of a forgotten classic (and very rare and collectable LP), it's not an album that's crossed my path before. It is an odd combination of string quartet, electric harpsichord, a drum kit free rhythm section, electric guitar and bass all put together by the arranger and composer Barry Forgie. This of course could easily have been a long forgotten disaster but it is saved since it has a quirky life of its own: echoes of early seventies film music predominate. The frantic congas, the stabbing strings of the opening title track take you straight back to that time and this mood carries successfully through most of the tracks here from the more lyrical pieces like 'Mediterranee' to the standout track 'Hunted' with definite echoes of Sergio Leone in its ancestry. The lion's share of the compositions thankfully go to Forgie since his are by far the strongest, with Mawer, Roger and Nardini sharing a couple of tracks each. With the judicious use of the 'skip' button (life is richer without Mawer's 'Freedom Road'), this is an unusual and enjoyable set.

DD

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Peder af Ugglas

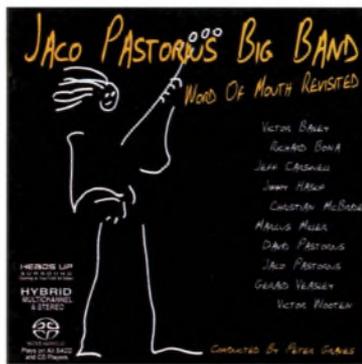
Autumn Shuffle

Opus 3 CD 22042

Having initially learnt keyboards primarily in classical music, Peder moved on to rock and jazz and along the way picked up the electric guitar. This is a refreshingly varied set with Peder's fluid guitar and keyboards supported primarily by upright bass and percussion, fleshed out across the tracks with a mix of accordion, trombone, bowed saw and even digeridoo. The anthemic opener 'Harvest Song' sees Peder's blues-y guitar soaring above rock solid bass and drums with accordion adding that essential 'down-home' touch. This track alone is enough to secure your attention. 'Wino's Dance' opens with a big fruity trombone (superbly caught in this recording) over crunchy guitar chords before a powerful solo. The title track sees acoustic guitar and Bo Nordenfelt's upright bass leading before the slide guitar lays down a wall of sound across the back of the soundstage. Other strong numbers include the blues-y 'Central South' featuring a Hammond B3, the all acoustic 'Passion', and the raunchy 'Passing By' which features just Peder's slide against Bjorn Hamrin's harmonica. Perhaps best of all is 'A Hymn' recorded in a church with Peder's slide soaring high above the earth-shaking notes of the church organ. This is another fine recording from Opus 3: weighty, punchy and with a capacious soundstage.

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DD



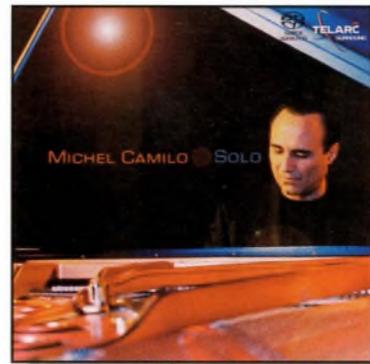
Jaco Pastorius Big Band

Word Of Mouth Revisted

Heads Up HUSA 9078

Sometimes jazz evolves in unexpected ways-transcending genres and establishing a new fan base. Undoubtedly this funky fusion big band sound is superbly well recorded, but in the back of my mind there is a large question mark hanging over it. The old big bands, those led by a Woody Herman or Harry James majored on musicianship, ensemble, brilliantly generous solos and above all compositions and arrangements of the highest standard. They really swing. But there is nothing here to match their 'Blues In The Night' or 'Take The 'A' Train'. By comparison Jaco's big arrangement for 'Killing Me Softly' seems speculative and quite limp. Perhaps I'm too much of a big band traditionalist to fully appreciate a track that features so many instrumental vignettes that this strong and tuneful Roberta Flack hit becomes completely diluted and devoid of personality. I've listened hard for those enduring qualities that seamlessly traverse the decades but I struggle to find them here in the jazz-fusion canon. Great individual musicianship but this remains an album for the converted. If I was dipping my toe into the pool then I think I would choose something by Metheny instead. Not one for the faint hearted.

RP



Michel Camilo

Solo

Telarc SACD-63613

Stepping outside his usual trio format this, despite numerous solo recitals is Michel Camilo's first unaccompanied recording. The set reflects three distinct threads: his beloved Brazilian music (although Camilo was born in the Dominican Republic), jazz-related standards, and his own compositions. The latter despite the quality of the other pieces, are not disgraced in this august company. The opening 'A Dream' mixes Cuban and Puerto Rican rhythms and is drenched in atmosphere. 'Reflections' the longest piece in the set is based on a guajira rhythm – a Caribbean equivalent of the blues – and rolls gently through most of its nine minutes before building to a stately 'montuno' release, a more celebratory feel, at the end of the piece. The more famous numbers are equally sensitively handled with a rollicking version of Gershwin's 'Our Love Is Here To Stay', and for once a fresh reading of Monk's classic but all-too familiar "Round Midnight' amongst others. Of the Brazilian pieces, a delicate, reflective version of Jobim's 'Luiza' stands out although Camilo's take on 'Corcovado' is also fresh. The set closes with his own composition 'Suntan', with faint echoes of Keith Jarrett here and none the worse for that. This recording likes to be played loud where in a good system it will pay dividends giving full weight to this very well recorded and enjoyable set.

DD



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Welcome To The Pleasure Dome... Pure Pleasure Records

by Reuben Parry

Towards the tail end of last year a new player entered the audiophile vinyl arena here in the UK. Pure Pleasure Records, fronted by Tony Hickmott, have after a tremendous amount of hard work begun to put together an intriguing and ambitious jazz, blues and R&B catalogue. Tony, who in 1981 was a founder member of the independent music importer, Greyhound Records, finally had the time (when Greyhound's doors prematurely closed back in 2002) to pursue and negotiate licensing agreements with the major labels and fulfil that unfathomable urge to re-issue high quality limited edition LPs. The two decades spent distributing records and CDs seemed to count for very little in achieving this goal. After metaphorically knocking on innumerable doors one or two eventually opened a crack and fresh relationships were formed both here with Company's like CBS, EMI and Blue Horizon, and amongst the audiophile mastering and manufacturing community as well.

Unquestionably these first releases reflect much of Tony's own taste in music. In his youth he developed a passion for R&B, rock n roll, jazz and blues. Eddie Cochran, Little Richard and Fats Domino were his early heroes. But it was the inimitable Ray Charles who really opened his eyes and ears to the Afro-American music scene. Records by artists signed to the pioneering Stax, Motown and Atlantic labels became his prized possessions, yet it wasn't always just the distinctive notes and chords they played that stirred him. The social perspective lying behind the musical craft genuinely moved Tony. Injustices suffered; that sense of spirituality and community, the industry exploitation and a desire by many black musicians to take artistic and economic control of their careers brought together some truly remarkable stories which naturally enough would frequently inform entire albums. Attempting to understand those

motivations, whether it was forty years or forty minutes ago puts flesh on these bare musical bones. Tony worked that one out sooner than most of us have done.

He also quickly understood that for a fledgling label seeking to establish a reputation for quality in the congested audiophile LP marketplace, it is imperative that the finest available mastering and pressing facilities be employed. To this end, Pure Pleasure Records have utilised the superlative mastering and cutting talents of Kevin Gray at justly fashionable Acoustech in the States, while those original master tapes of recordings stored somewhat closer to home (including Otis Spann *The Biggest Thing Since Colossus*, Randy Weston's *Little Niles* and a *Blues Jam At Chess* featuring Fleetwood Mac, Willie Dixon and Honey Boy Edwards)

make a short trip to Alchemy in Soho, Central London where Ray Staff's artistry is called upon. Pressing is carried out at both Pallas and RTI, with the Pallas record plant in Germany being used for the manufacture of all the 180g LPs featured here.

Of course it's Tony who finally signs off on these test discs prior to a pressing run, so I was pleased to hear that he has always listened to music on decent equipment and is serious about the sound. It's also perhaps worth noting that since the advent of the compact disc he has held an uncompromising view on the subject of digital sound. When asked about the analogue verses digital debate, Tony is quick to quote the musician he admires most, Ray Charles, who said in reference to CD "...it just don't got no balls". Tony, to say the least, finds digitally sourced material both cold and uncomfortable to listen to. Enjoying and taking the principles of warmth, richness and solidity found in analogue recording techniques and then applying those values to his audiophile releases will be another ►



▶ reassuring tick in the box for vinyl devotees. So yes, I think that we can with this first batch of ten LP records, safely place a considerable degree of reliance on his instincts and his ears. The titles chosen (and to that end their availability was always to a greater or lesser extent going to be dictated by the capricious nature of record label licence holders) are full of surprises. They also dovetail quite nicely with Tony's personal musical preferences.



As an opener I began by putting the 1969 Nancy Wilson album, *Son Of A Preacher Man* (Capitol ST-234) on to the turntable. Nice, pancake flat pressing and beautifully clean surfaces with a low noise floor were good starting points. Rest assured that this LP is representative of the production standards found elsewhere in the Pure Pleasure catalogue. Musically too, this is a release built upon some solid foundations. In many ways this was and is an excellent example of that versatility black performers of the day brought to music in the late 1960s, showing, in the space of a few short years, just how far beyond the traditional jazz and blues environs some of them had come, especially in the all important penetration of the popular contemporary scene. Here, Nancy Wilson (who had begun her career as a jazz chanteuse touring and recording with the likes of George Shearing and Cannonball Adderley) was now not only hitting those soulful title track notes but banging out the kind of ballads which had in the 1950s been the sole

preserve of white singers alone. The Jim Webb number, 'By The Time I Get To Phoenix', highlights that much appreciated kind of slow burning and exquisitely timed lyricism. And in Nancy's interpretation of 'Son Of A Preacher Man' she elegantly although somewhat tenuously combines the passion and huge emotional and vocal range of a jazz diva with the flamboyance and rhythmic freedom of a pop singer. One, mind you, who is backed by top-flight musicians playing spectacular arrangements in which softly focused strings or soaring trumpets and trombones are captured with accuracy and candour. Only rarely does an over-reverberant acoustic make this production feel a touch dated. On this evidence it's easy to see why Wilson had by that time become such a popular and prolific performer. Though later on when returning to the jazz venues of her youth she couldn't quite shake that penchant for those dramatic moments of over statement so favoured in popular music circles. But I digress. With this LP her singing, the top notes and intense often extravagant vocal displays

(even towards those difficult to re-master side

ends) are revealed without over-stretching or coarseness. Lovers of female vocal recordings will be pleased with this approach but may be disappointed to learn that there are no more divas in this initial set of re-issues.

However, in February of this year Tony Hickmott signed an agreement with Candid Productions, gaining access to the first generation master tapes for albums such as the 1961 LP *Straight Ahead* by the brilliant and politically astute jazz singer



Abbey Lincoln. Then there's the more recent (from the 1990s) deliciously swinging recordings by Stacey Kent. Throw in classic performances by Charles Mingus, Max Roach and Roy Eldridge (the Newport Rebels) and the future for Pure Pleasure looks very healthy indeed. A fellow Hi-Fi+ contributor most certainly has his eye on these titles. RSF, for it is he, also intends to pen articles about the Blue Horizon label recordings that have already been released by Pure Pleasure, so I shall content myself with short overviews and appreciations where they are concerned.



► The first is a gatefold double LP recorded in Chicago, *Blues Jam At Chess* (Blue Horizon 7-66227), is an album that needs little introduction for blues aficionados. There's a stellar line up that reflects that late 1960s resurgence in English R&B. As well as the Peter Green, John McVie, Danny Kirwan and Mick Fleetwood quartet on choice cuts like 'Ooh Baby', 'Like It This Way' and 'Watch Out' there are marvellous and spine tingling jams from guitarists Walter 'Shakey' Horton, Honey Boy Edwards and Buddy Guy in 'Red Hot Jam'. J T Brown lays down tenor sax for 'Black Jack Blues' and 'I Can't Hold Out'. He is joined by Willie Dixon's string bass. Elsewhere there's the great Otis Spann caressing the keys in 'Hungary Country Girl', 'World's In A Tangle' and 'I Got The Blues'. A mention too for drummer S P Leary does not go amiss. In a word (or two) this is "mouth-watering". However it wasn't the only Otis Spann-Fleetwood Mac collaboration in the January of 1969. The underrated 'The Biggest Thing Since Colossus' (Blue Horizon 7-63217) finds Peter Green at the peak of his powers and Otis Spann's fingertips coursing with emotion. Musically, coming shortly before Spann's career was blighted by illness, adds lasting resonance to these performances. The third LP from this era is Johnny Shines' 'Last Night's Dream'

(Blue Horizon 7-63212). Shines, a rugged blues vocalist and skilled bottle-neck guitarist was a running buddy of Robert Johnson, is joined here by Otis, Walter, Willie and Clifton James (drums) for these tough yet thrilling Chicago blues numbers. 'Mean Fisherman' and 'From Dark Til Dawn' may have their roots in the past but in songs like 'Pipeline Blues' and the power politics of 'Black Panther' there is a telling contemporary edge. This is a powerful, uncompromising album and it comes highly recommended. These Blue Horizon cuts are something to really get excited about.

Possibly one of the easiest of these titles to deliberately overlook (and it would be wrong to do so) is *The Third Face Of Fame* (CBS 63293). Georgie Fame, before his departure into the precarious world of straight pop, was a swinging jazzy singer who did much to popularise blue beat, ska and American R&B in this country. He was the

feature vocalist when the Count Basie Orchestra toured Europe in 1967-68 and his nasal delivery quite similar to that of Mose Allison endeared him to many, as did his free flowing style of piano and organ playing. The cream of British jazz joins Fame for this album. The line up includes the likes of Ronnie Scott and Harry Klein (sax), John Marshall (Trombone), Les Condon (trumpet), Gordon Beck (keyboards) and John McLaughlin (guitar) and Bill Eyden (drums).



There are some great arrangements too. Harry South gives us 'Ask Me Nice'; Bullets Laverne, 'Exactly Like You' and 'When I'm Sixty-Four'. Tubby Hayes contributes with 'Mellow Yellow'. The balance of the eleven songs here: 'Someone To Watch Over Me', 'The Ballad Of Bonnie And Clyde' and 'This Is Always' amongst them, worked out by Derek Wadsworth. The real charmers are those deliciously straight jazz numbers in 'Blue

Prelude', the romantic 'This Is Always' and a sorrowful 'St. James Infirmary'. Less impressive because of their whimsical and slightly anachronistic feel is the Lennon and McCartney track and that comically voiced interpretation of 'Someone To Watch Over Me'. Fame could have done a brilliant traditional cut of this one. His warmth and lightness of touch in Mellow Yellow actually works pretty well because it skews away from sentimentality. Engineer Mike Ross especially on the more intimate jazz material succeeds in creating an atmospheric and natural sounding recording, picking out nice instrumental details and the smooth

▶ and engaging vocals. Overall though this can't disguise a curate's egg of an LP – one where Georgie Fame lives up to his reputation for a variety of styles.

An album completely without blemish though is the 1959 Randy Weston record *Little Niles* (United Artists UAL-4011). This talented New York pianist who worked with Kenny Dorham and Art Blakey proved to be a percussive and powerful player – one much influenced by Ellington, Waller and Monk. A counterpoint to this virile jazz machismo was his fluid, melodic and rhythmically charming music composed for and about his children Niles and Pamela. Although Weston's strength and fortitude is never in doubt, it rests here beneath the surface. Written by Weston and arranged by his trombonist Melba Liston, these seven delicate three-quarter time vignettes encapsulate that delightful innocence of childhood.

Behind it all the session has a reassuring sense of purpose, continuity and clarity. *Little Niles* opens with the track 'Earth Birth' – a wide-eyed innocent look at nature – and closes on the light and lyrically free 'Let's Climb A Hill'. In between Weston allows our imagination to wander like that of a child's. Carefree moments dreaming of calypso and carnival are memorably crafted for 'Little Susan'. Impressionistic pleasures continue through the use of Johnny Griffin's tenor sax to propel a swish of skates in 'Nice Ice'. The title track is fun-filled and mischievous. Pam's Waltz lives up to its gracefully flowing name and in 'Babe's Blues' the George Joyner bass recreates that distant dreamy-eyed place of a child lost in deepest thought. Undemanding, yes, but quite lovely all the same, these subtlest of shades are beautifully realised by a top rated septet that also includes Charlie Persip on drums and the trumpets of Ray Copeland and Idrees Sulieman. Sonically, I was completely taken with the cosy warmth present in this recording and the fullness given to piano and sax notes.

In searching for, at the very least, a tenuous link from this classy Randy Weston outing to the next Pure Pleasure release, I remembered that Weston (especially later in his career) was dedicated to an exploration of African music and its influences upon American jazz. Tony Hickmott is more than aware of these ancestral voices and the search for roots within the rhythms from the Dark Continent.

Compositions by generations of black musicians have gained an importance all of their own. It can probably be summed up in a word, but "identity" does not seem to do it justice. This goes deeper even than that. For some of the greats it gnawed away at their psyche.

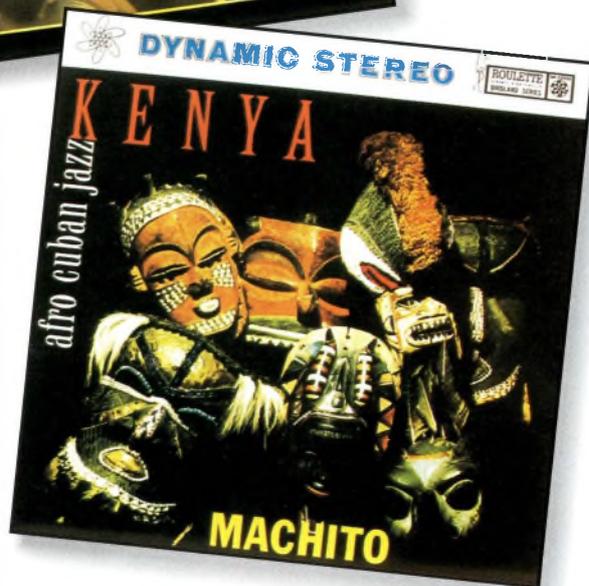
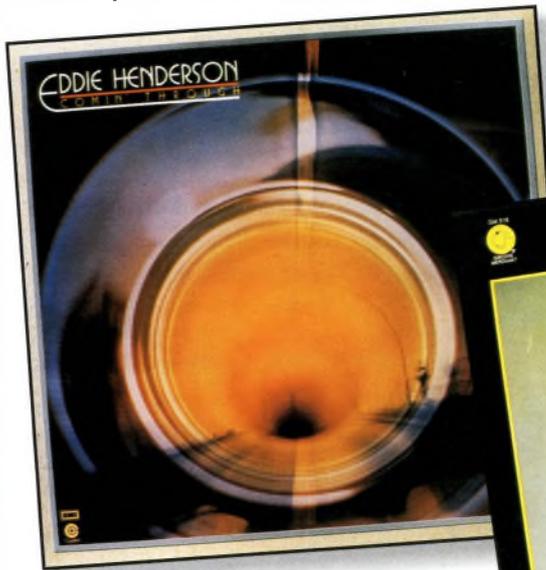
Cuban percussionist and bandleader Frank Raul Grillo (better known as "Machito") and his Afro Cuban players were amongst the leading exponents of one of these jazz offshoots. Typically, on their 1957 album *Kenya* (Roulette SR 52006), the swaying, often steamy Latin American dance rhythms were combined with an insistent African beat propelled through those Jose Mangual bongos and the timbales, congas, guiros and maracas of his fellow percussionists. This bright and distinctly pictorial music also draws upon the talents of some exceptional featured soloists who are given a dozen unrestricted opportunities to explore and express their thematic ideas. The title track, a softly tempered lullaby for the Ray Santoz tenor sax, hints at the possibilities for what was one of the newest African States. In contrast there is an almost savage urgency to 'Wild Jungle' carried by the trumpets of "Doc" Cheatham and Joe Livramento, while in 'Frenzy' it's the trombonist Eddie Bert who figures. These soaring instruments lend it an untamed quality.

But it's still worth remembering that basically this is still a wonderfully entertaining album of dance music infused with the mambo, rumba and cha-cha-cha. Tururato, a spinning and melodically unorthodox tune, showcases the Joe Newman trumpet and Julian "Cannonball" Adderley alto sax. His marvellous blowing here and on 'Cannonology', 'Oyeme' and 'Congo Mulence' touches on notions of freedom, dialogue and spirituality. Socially, culturally and politically it's possible to read a great deal into these broad musical statements. Thought of in this way, *Kenya* becomes a far more interesting commentary at a time when the American civil rights movement was also in its infancy. An uncomplicated early stereo recording taped over three sessions at the Metropolitan Studios in New York reinforces the honesty of the playing and the intent lying behind it. There is more than enough richness for the percussion but it's the cleanliness to the trumpets, trombones alto and tenor saxophones



▶ which really stands out. This is the kind of jazz that leaves you with an awful lot to digest and *Pure Pleasure* is to be commended for such a clever re-issue.

Having tackled Fifties and Sixties recordings, I was curious to hear how Tony would approach the thorny topic of 1970s jazz-fusion. Cards on the table, this period is not musically one of



my favourites. I admit to an engrained prejudice. I think much of this music falls over itself in an attempt to please, so at least you know where I'm coming from. First up was Eddie Henderson's *Comin' Through* (Capitol ST 11671). Henderson although encouraged to pursue a music career by none other than Miles Davis was intelligent and pragmatic enough to continue his academic studies-graduating in zoology, then qualifying both as a GP and a psychiatrist. This 1977 album (not in my opinion one of his best) did however give him modest chart success. Alongside Henderson (trumpets and flugelhorn) are some notables in this realm. Lee Ritenour's guitar on the side openers 'Say You Will' and 'Source'; flawless sideman George Cables evenly spreading his talent between electric piano and clavinet for 'Morning Song', 'Movin' On', 'Beyond Forever' and 'Connie'; and in most tracks including 'The Funk Surgeon' there's trombonist Julian Priester. All of them possessed inquisitive qualities that eventually moved them away from the centre of the jazz scene to explore soul, funk, fusion and electronic idioms. The musicianship is excellent but that apart I still struggle to get my head around a mechanical backing beat and those syrupy strings, mini-moog and flutes. What I do admire is the undisguised ambition heard

within these clever arrangements. The rest falls flat. Yes, this stretches the boundaries of jazz just a little too far for my tastes. However, the West Coast engineering by Jim Gaines out of the San Francisco Wally Heider Studios is really solid and Bernie Grundman's new master builds upon it. He achieves the level of instrumental clarity and separation needed to present such a busy series of encounters. Effortlessly picking out Henderson's threads that always remain central to proceedings. The conclusion is that there was never anything wrong with these masters and though vinyl of the day certainly didn't do them justice, *Pure Pleasure* has done so now.

A funky Seventies cut that does meet much more with my approval is the 1974 Ramon Morris album *Sweet Sister Funk* (Groove Merchant GM516).

Terrific soaring jazz solos courtesy of Ramon's wistful tenor sax notes and the Cecil Bridgewater trumpet pierce Mickey Bass fat and funky bass lines and that ever engaging beat developed through the Mickey Roker skins on 'First Come, First Serve' and the title song ▶

▶ at the end of side one. Though there are only seven tracks in total (with the exception of the closing 'People Make The World Go Round' at just three and a half minutes) they all stretch from five to six minutes in length. This gives Morris and Bridgewater some generous solos to get their teeth into and I enjoyed the way they worked their way through these themes, reintroducing and revisiting them and feeding off each other's ideas. To my ears Dailey numbers like 'First Come, First Serve' and 'Lord Sideways' are leaner and less cloying than the Eddie Henderson exploration of this genre's boundaries. *Sweet Sister Funk* is an album that



retains enough core jazz values to give it a solid base structure from which to investigate and develop a convincing and sustained funky dance beat. It typifies creative black music making during that decade and has aged much more gracefully. Whereas that fusion of styles for *Comin' Through* seems by today's standards to be contrived and quite predictable possibly because the jazz element is too diluted.

Closing out this first batch of releases is a recording that maintains jazz's long association with the film industry, only on this occasion in a strong socio political context with a black exploitation flick. The Wade Marcus compositions played here have jazz guitarist Grant Green as a focal point – one from which to reinforce those cinematic images seen in the 1972 soundtrack *The Final Comedown* (Blue Note BST 84415) as they follow the central character Johnny Johnson to his ignominious end. Thematically, this is music that unequivocally underscores an explosion of anger that traces its roots back hundreds of years from slavery, exploitation, discrimination and victimisation to the poverty and crime of a modern day urban ghetto. The black experience in America is not a flattering one. Reflective and didactic

in 'Past, Present And Future'; sad and fateful on 'Father's Lament'; flick knife sharp on a fleeting 'Slight Fear And Terror' and offering wringing indictments on a life dedicated to violence with the tragic inevitability of the grooves cut for 'Battle Scene', 'Traveling To Get To Doc' and 'One Second After Death'. Throughout though there is a central contradiction: for young men of a certain disposition the gangs and ghetto life has an undisguised attraction and this is conveyed by music that is heavily reminiscent of the *Shaft* film scores of this period. Grant Green excels on this fluid type of canvas. Bringing his reputation as a post bebop experimentalist to the fore with this expressive, hardnosed brand of vitality in a performance where he and his fellow musicians ooze electricity, intensity and elasticity. Sonically this is a transparent and nicely balanced record. Engineering to suitably reveal the breadth, width and resonance of its subject matter.

Collectively, Pure Pleasure has debuted with an imaginative and diverse set of LPs. High production values, good manufacturing processes and with so many thought provoking musical moments uncovered, they have shown that Tony Hickmott has got the basics just right. He may have led us into an occasional cul du sac along the way but that's to be expected from a new label. The strength of this new catalogue now depends on his future access to the very best material and that deal with the executives at Candid Productions will undoubtedly provide the necessary master tapes to take Pure Pleasure a further step forward.

Pure Pleasure 180g Vinyl LP Releases

Nancy Wilson: *Son Of A Preacher Man*.

Capitol Records ST234.

Georgie Fame: *The Third Face Of Fame*.

CBS 63293.

Fleetwood Mac: *Blues Jam At Chess*.

Blue Horizon 7-66227.

Otis Spann: *The Biggest Thing Since Colossus*.

Blue Horizon 7-63217.

Johnny Shines: *Last Night's Dream*.

Blue Horizon 7-63212.

Randy Weston: *Little Niles*.

United Artists UAL 4011.

Machito & His Orchestra: *Kenya*.

Roulette SR 52006.

Eddie Henderson: *Comin' Through*.

Capitol ST 11671.

Ramon Morris: *Sweet Sister Funk*.

Groove Merchant GM516.

Grant Green: *The Final Comedown*.

Blue Note BST 84415.

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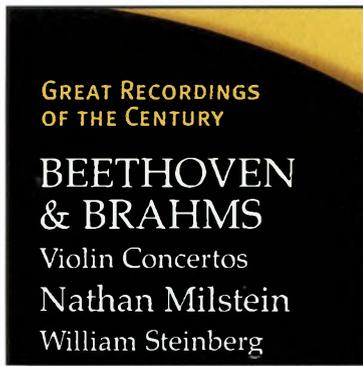
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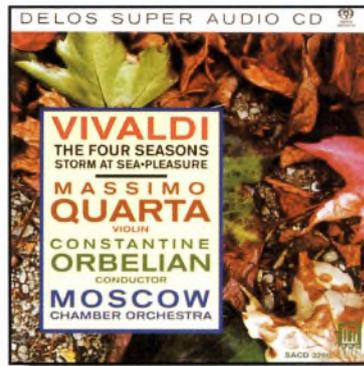
Beethoven & Mozart
Violin Sonatas

David Oistrakh, Lev Oborin & Vladimir Yampolsky

Testament SBT 1115

Beethoven and Mozart are a part of the staple diet for a great violinist and in this performance of the *Kreutzer* with Lev Oborin we find Oistrakh to be at the very peak of his technical and interpretative powers. His wristy bowing, sonorous string tone, secure, powerful and expansive phrasing come across with considerable presence on a recording that dates from 1957. The empathic piano accompaniment making a significant contribution to a deeply satisfying rendition. For the lively Beethoven *Sonata No.3* and a simply marvellous exploration of Mozart's *Violin Sonata No.32* (which was produced by Walter Legge) pianist Vladimir Yampolsky joins the maestro. While he may lack Oborin's almost telepathic relationship with Oistrakh, he is still a wily and quite superb technician—one who understands that an acute sense of ensemble is critical to this recital. The mono recordings sound a little dated when compared to those precisely detailed textures reproduced by their modern day counterparts but because these old tapes really pull the instrumentalists much closer together than most will be familiar with that underlying feeling of coherence and unity is enhanced. They also deliver beautiful musical images full of integrity, warmth, richness and natural balance.

RP



Vivaldi
Four Seasons

Quarta, Orbelian, Moscow Chamber Orchestra

Delos SACD 3280

The Seasons come and go and a few special performances stand head and shoulders above the rest. I am of course thinking of Marriner's Argo recording (analogue 1970), Hogwood on L'Oiseau-Lyre (digital 1984) and a rendition also played on original instruments directed by Agostino Orizio (analogue 180g double LP 1995) from the underrated Italian Fone label. Every decade or so another exceptional release will surface. With five years to go there's plenty of time left. However, a Moscow Chamber/Massimo Quarta reading (pared back to the bare bones and shying away from those now familiar virtuoso indulgences) makes an interesting addition to the baroque music catalogue. Yes, the soloist does impose his personality but there is an indelible sense of honesty – one where an absence of imitation is a virtue that allows Vivaldi's most popular of works to breathe. There is a bonus too. The fillers are those less well known and infrequently heard *Storm At Sea* and *Pleasure* Concertos. A skeletal Delos SACD recording shorn of enveloping warmth and those overly rich textures successfully validates a highly motivated and extremely individual and daring musical approach to the canon.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP



Elgar & Vaughan Williams
Violin Concerto & Lark Ascending

Colin Davis, LSO
Hilary Hahn, Violin

Deutsche Grammophon 00289 474 8732

Two quintessentially English works played here with sensitivity and no little panache by a soloist who achieves the deeply affecting melancholy and an attractive degree of sweetness for Elgar's *Concerto* should be sufficient reason enough on its own to buy this disc. A sumptuous recording full of fine detail, instrumental clarity and the kind of warmth demanded by this music is another. So is this Sir Colin Davis / LSO reading. As a young firebrand he was a wilful conductor who did not always respect the accepted tempi. Forty years on and I think that in many respects Sir Colin has taken up the Sir Adrian Boult mantle. However, Hilary Hahn unquestionably remains the focal point and her successful interpretation and execution of the Elgar while it may not be an unblemished one does prove her credentials as an expressive performer, meditative when required and exciting in the bravura passages. Vaughan Williams' *Lark Ascending* is a very appealing filler. This pastoral romance for violin and orchestra beautifully mimics the flight of the Lark and requires great delicacy and careful handling to achieve the lyrical spaciousness of the skies above. Davis and Hahn evocatively develop that sense of serene beauty and motion.

RP





Tchaikovsky & Korngold Violin Concertos

Andre Previn VPO & LSO
Anne-Sophie Mutter, Violin

DGG 00289 474 8742 (SA)

Affectionate, understanding and attractively framed performances of these Concertos are in the case of the Tchaikovsky marred slightly by a less than satisfactory recording which surprisingly for this format I found to be a little murky. It left me asking myself whether the DGG engineers were striving for too much warmth in works where the romance is best left to the soloist and the scores? That said it is hard to fault the Anne-Sophie Mutter interpretation of a Korngold Concerto that was of course popularised by the great Jascha Heifetz reading of the early 1950s. This remains an extremely challenging yet very beautiful piece of violin writing. Strong and endearing cinematic styled images must be carried with total conviction otherwise that dangerous descent into kitsch cannot be avoided. To their credit Mutter through her virtuosity and Previn, whose career began with film scores, give us a quite dashing and romantic account full of exciting and sweeping melodies. The balance between the London Symphony musicians and the violin soloist is nicely handled too, with the piquant colours and emotional range of Mutter being subtly reinforced by all their orchestral work in the trenches. A plump and rich sound here that has real presence made up for much of the disappointment felt when playing the Tchaikovsky.

RP



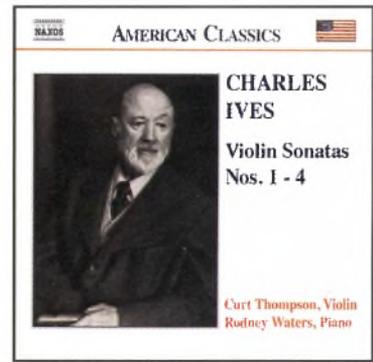
Orff Carmina Burana

Donald Runnicles Atlanta
Symphony & Chorus

Telarc SACD-60575 (SACD)

This is a creditable performance of Carl Orff's mysterious, sexually charged and ritualistic music—one which places a great store on reproducing as close as is possible the Thirteenth Century poetic diction that underpins this hedonistic choral cycle depicting those contrasting highs and lows thrown down by capricious fate. The drama, familiar surges of passion and that sense of theatre and pageantry are entertainingly and evocatively developed. The sap rises in Springtime. The debauchery of that *Tavern* scene is palpable, while the soprano singing of Hei-Kyung Hong in *The Court Of Love* touches and teases the ears until that final call to uninhibited and lusty pleasure greets us with open arms. Sonically, this is an epic display. Massed vocal ranks are clearly and distinctly reproduced. The outstanding instrumental textures—their individual timbres and tonal characteristics and dynamic shifts—are delivered with wonderful accuracy and precision right across and throughout the entire soundstage. And when the bass drum explodes in *O Fortuna* it does so with a tight and exceptionally deep (almost gut wrenching) detonation. The piano, which for example appears on *Fortune plango vulnera*, also plunges you into a realm where keyboard notes have a lifelike authority, weight and presence found missing from many recordings of *Carmina*.

RP



Ives Violin Sonatas Nos. 1-4

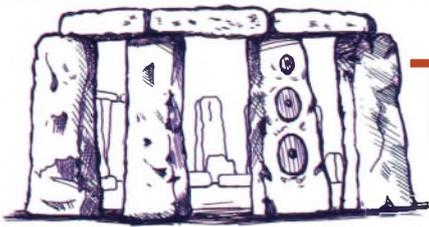
Curt Thompson, Violin
Rodney Waters, Piano

Naxos 8.559119 (CD)

The quality of these Charles Ives sonatas written during the first two decades of the Twentieth Century was only recognised after the composer's death in 1954. Typically these three movement pieces draw heavily upon American popular and folk music traditions while still adhering to a European classical music structure. Although it should be noted that for the *second* and *third* sonatas a fast-slow-fast pattern to the movements has been reversed. Often their finales resonate to the borrowed tunes of New England Protestant hymns giving them a familiar and characteristically reflective sound. The images invoked are definitely pictorial in nature. *Violin Sonata No. 1* suggests rural gatherings and goes on to recall the camp fire tales of the Civil War. This thematic material with its emphasis on small communities coming together continues into the second sonata that alludes to square dances with its fiddle tunes, as well as church and revival meetings. Again hymns, revival tunes and refrains surface in the *third* and *fourth* sonatas—the latter which is entitled 'Children's Day at the Camp Meeting' culminates with the strong musical flavours of 'Shall We Gather at the River'. The Curt Thompson/ Rod Waters partnership sensitively handles their fellow countryman's music and the recording made at the Duncan Recital Hall, Rice University, Houston (which they also produced) creates a wonderfully natural violin and piano balance.



RP



The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

The Brothers Dorian

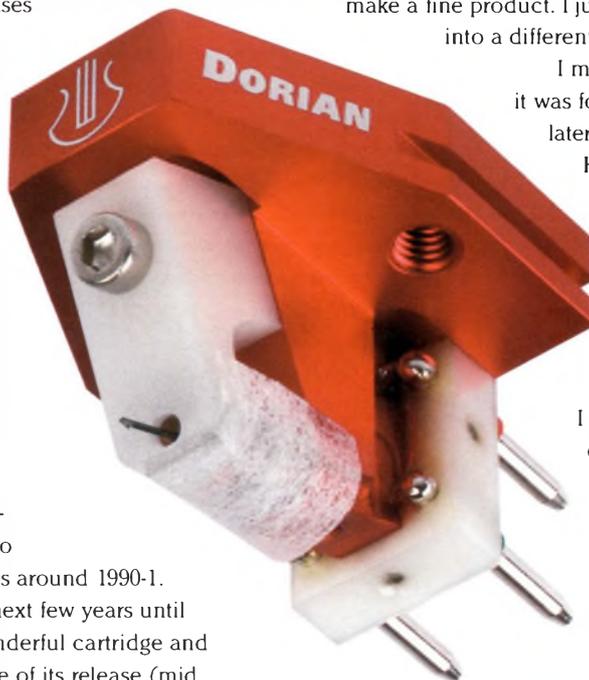
I seem to have been a bit of a cartridge snob. I've always tended to look at a company, like Lyra, and see what fruit is blossoming in the highest branches. This decision of course is made after listening to other products the company makes and also having an opportunity to listen to the product I'm about to buy.

I've gone through various phases of what I want and expect from a cartridge. There was the 'midrange' phase which was followed by the 'give me the bass' phase. These soon passed and I added that 'open silky highs' phase to the equation. Always searching but never completely being satisfied.

I remember a few years ago very much enjoying the early Helikon stereo cartridges. I've always been a fan of the Lyra products even before they were manufacturing products for themselves (the Spectral MCR comes to mind). My first Lyra was the Clavis around 1990-1. I moved on up the line over the next few years until I reached the Parnassus dc/t. Wonderful cartridge and one of the best around at the time of its release (mid 1997 I think).

I got caught up in another phase at this time . . . the age of information retrieval let's call it. I went over to the camp of Clearaudio. I traveled the path from Signature (very briefly) to the Accurate. My next move was the Insider followed by the Insider Gold which ultimately led to the Insider Gold wood body Reference. I loved the Clearaudio cartridges . . . especially my last one. There was nothing happening on that piece of vinyl

I wasn't hearing. Every chair that moved, each cough or rustle and even that drumstick which may have fallen. What began to happen however, was that I was listening to the information and not the music and wasn't getting the satisfaction from my system I required. Now, please, don't take this as a negative against Clearaudio. They make a fine product. I just think I began to grow into a different phase.



I moved back to Lyra. This time it was for a Helikon SL and then later, the addition of the lofty Helikon mono. I was a happy puppy. Things were fine... and then the Titan came along. Well of course, how could I be happy with having fruit that was in the middle branches when

I knew the ripest, most delectable example was just a few feet higher in the tree? Sick . . . yes, I am. What else is new? The Titan is very special (especially those Titan stereos available after the fourth quarter

of 2004 - Lyra discovered a different way of inserting the cantilever into the suspension which improves tracking and has the added benefit of dramatically improving the sound).

Since the Titans have arrived on the scene, Lyra has released the Argo stereo which I've not experienced, but have heard very positive comments about. I heard about the Dorian's from Jonathan Carr at CES in 2005

▶ when he said he was hopeful to have the stereo available later in the year, but wasn't sure he was going to do a mono. Fortunately for everyone, Mr. Carr had designed both (see sidebar) and I for one am quite shocked at how awfully good they are.

Both cartridges obviously contain the same sonic characteristics. There is good separation of instruments, fine depth and in the stereo, excellent corner fill. The layering of first, second and third tier instruments in an orchestra or in a choral setting is very easily unraveled. I don't hear any congestion with either product and this was something I was concerned about in demanding passages. The cartridges are a little up-front sounding, perhaps a row seven designation.

I've been tracking both cartridges at 1.9 grams with a 47K ohm loading from my Herron VTPH1-MC plus. Of course, those across the pond might well differ in this regard and I know that RG loads his Titan at 200 Ohms, so establish your own preferences here. These cartridges are open and airy while offering lightning fast transients and a sound that's a little on the cool side. I don't find this a bad thing. (Also keep in mind I have less than 100 hours on these cartridges and they continue to improve.) Loading them down will tend to add focus and a little body at the expense of some air and speed.

What thoroughly impresses me is the amount of information and musical integrity the Dorians offer at this price point! Think about it: one-seventh the price of the Titan and one-third the price of the Helikon. These offer truly amazing value! I honestly don't know how Lyra has done it. But I can tell you this; as of this review, had I never heard the Helikon or the Titan mono, I would be very happy with the Dorian mono. It's that good. Anyone even remotely thinking about purchasing a mono cartridge simply has to listen to this. The EMI ALP 1496 (mono only), Mozart: *Vesprae Solennes De Confessore, K339; Exsultate Jubilate, K165* and *Benedictus Sit Deus, K117* with Erna Berger, Marga Hoffgen and Karl Forster conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and the Choir of St. Hedwig's Cathedral, Berlin, is an absolute,

sheer aural delight, the Dorian revealing it in all its glory. This is one beautiful record and I wish you all the luck in the world in finding a copy. I've only seen two copies in the last few years and I'm looking at one of them. I'm sure there is a German issue and if any of our German readers have a copy, I'd love to have the opportunity to audition it. Of course it would be returned.

The Speakers Corner Re-issue of Sonny Boy Williamson's *The Real Folk Blues* is offered a spectacular presentation by the mono Dorian. Now of course this can be played with either cartridge, but I have this mental thing about mono records and mono cartridges. (Actually as you are all aware, the presentation should be the same as these records were not cut with mono cutting heads). Having said that, one minute of 'One

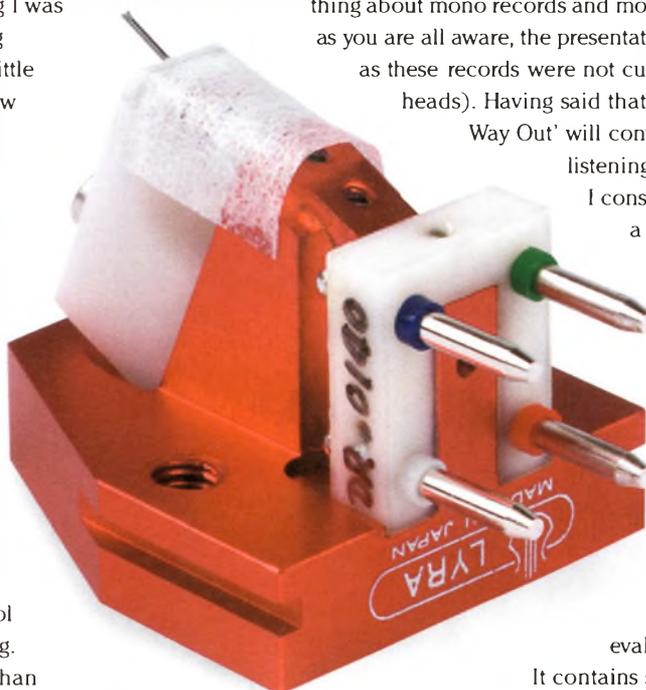
Way Out' will convince you you're really listening to a cartridge that I consider a bargain with a capital B. Which raises

an interesting question that I'll return to later.

The stereo is a delight as well. There is a US Columbia entitled *Waltzes from Old Vienna* (no, I won't tell you the number) that is quite the torture test when

evaluating string instruments.

It contains small ensemble works featuring three violinists, a violist and bass player. Now, throw into the mix the fact that we're talking about US Columbia, and you could be running from the listening room holding your ears. The sound is not bright at all. The Dorian passed the test with charm and grace. Listening to Rachmaninoff's *Sonata Op. 19* for piano and violoncello with Emmanuelle Lamasse, piano and the great Guy Fallot, violoncellist (Gallo VDE 3019), the artists are accurately portrayed at proper height and breadth. This is an 'in your room' recording and one of my reference recordings for the violoncello. (Gallo is a Swiss label for those of you on the hunt). The sound is rich, reverberant and luxurious as is the hallmark of this recording. Again, the Dorian stereo sailed through this with ease. To hear just how confident and secure the Dorian is, play the opening of Respighi's, *The Birds* (can you say Pulcinella) on the Speakers Corner re-issue of US Mercury SR90153. This is another torture track not only for brightness if mistracked, but also with



Model: Dorian

Designer: Jonathan Carr

Adjusted and tuned by Yoshinori Mishima.

Type: Moving Coil, low-impedance, low-output, medium compliance

Frequency range: 10Hz - 50kHz

Channel separation: 30dB or better at 1kHz

Cantilever system: Lyra-designed cantilever assembly with solid boron rod cantilever, and natural diamond, Namiki MicroRidge line-contact stylus (2.5 x 75 micrometers profile). Cantilever assembly mounted directly to internal structure of cartridge body.

Electromagnetic generator system: Lyra proprietary polepiece-less, dual neodymium discs, balanced symmetrical field, magnetic system with permalloy core and 99.9999 (6N) copper coils

Internal impedance: 9.5 ohms

Output voltage: 0.6mV (5.0cm/sec., zero to peak, 45 degrees)

Cartridge weight (without stylus cover): 6.4g

Compliance: Approx. 12 x 10⁻⁶ cm/dyne at 100Hz

Recommended tracking force: 1.8 - 2.0g

Recommended load direct into non-inverting RIAA equalizer amplifier or head-amplifier: 100 Ohms - 47kOhms (determine best impedance value by listening)

Recommended load via step-up transformer: 5 - 15 Ohms (step-up transformer output must be connected to 47 kOhm MM-level RIAA input)

Model: Dorian Mono

Designer: Jonathan Carr

Adjusted and tuned by Yoshinori Mishima.

Type: Moving Coil, low-impedance, low-output, medium compliance

Frequency range: 10Hz - 50kHz

Cantilever system: Lyra-designed cantilever assembly with solid boron rod cantilever, and natural diamond, Namiki MicroRidge line-contact stylus (2.5 x 75 micrometers profile). Cantilever assembly mounted directly to internal structure of cartridge body.

Electromagnetic generator system: Lyra proprietary polepiece-less, dual neodymium discs, balanced symmetrical field, magnetic system with permalloy core and 99.9999 (6N) copper coils.

For optimal monaural playback, core and coils are oriented at 90 degrees rather than the 45-degree orientation that is appropriate for stereo playback.

Internal impedance: 3ohms

Output voltage: 0.25mV (5.0cm/sec. RMS, horizontal movement, 1kHz)

Cartridge weight (without stylus cover): 6.4g

Compliance: Approx. 12 x 10⁻⁶ cm/dyne at 100Hz

Recommended tracking force: 1.8 - 2.0g

Recommended load direct into non-inverting RIAA equalizer amplifier or head-amplifier: 100ohms - 47kohms (determine best impedance value by listening)

Recommended load via step-up transformer: 2 - 10ohms (not more than 10ohms) (step-up transformer output must be connected to 47kohm MM-level RIAA input)

Signal output format: Although the Dorian Mono is a monaural cartridge, for enhanced ease-of-use, the Dorian Mono provides two identical sets of outputs, that should each be connected to one channel of a stereo playback system. For optimal sound with a dedicated mono playback system, either of the Dorian Mono's signal outputs can be connected to the phono stage and the remaining output left unused, or the two outputs can be connected in series (via a jumper) for higher output voltage.

▶ respect to how open and airy the sound truly is. There was not the slightest hint of congestion. The cartridge tracks like a dream and all I can say is I am most impressed with what the gentlemen at Lyra are doing. Should you pass by your local audio emporium and pick from the lower branches of this particular cartridge tree, you could be in for a very pleasant surprise indeed.

Which brings me back to the question to which I alluded earlier. I dedicated vinyl listener with an existing or burgeoning interest in recordings that pre-date stereo must surely by now be aware of the startling benefits of a true mono cartridge when it comes to playing mono discs. Given that such a customer might easily spend his hard-earned cash on a Helikon (just like I did) would he actually be better off buying a pair of Dorians, one stereo and one mono? That depends on just how

good the stereo Dorian is – and believe me when I say that it's very, very good indeed. It might sound like a strange recommendation but I'm suggesting that you consider exactly that. You'll be surprised by how little the stereo Dorian gives away. When you come to the mono you'll be blown away.



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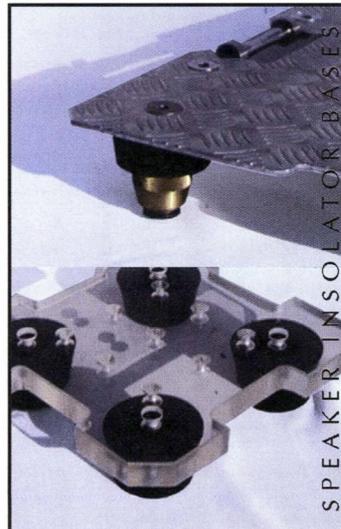
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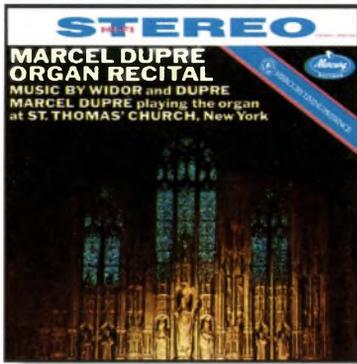
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Marcel Dupré Organ Recital

Music by Widor and Dupré

Speakers Corner/Mercury SR90169 **180g**

A lease buster of a record if ever there was one. I LOVE this album. Charles-Marie Widor's *Allegro (Symphony No. 6, Op42)* goes down so low, and with such power, you can feel the glass in the windows of your home vibrate. Another fun portion of this album appears at the end of the *Allegro* just before the *Solve Regina*. You can easily hear across the rear wall of your listening venue, a truck, driving from left to right! About two-thirds of the way through his journey you hear him shifting gears!

Now, with all that nonsense aside, the music is fabulous. This is one of the finest organ records ever produced and I can't recommend it strongly enough for those interested in the King of Instruments. Dupré's own selection, *Prelude and Fugue in G minor, Op. 7* at the beginning of Side 2 conveys a great sense of space, power and majesty. Don't kid yourself into believing this record doesn't go down to the deepest recesses your system can produce. Believe me it does. The original has been on Mr. Pearson's list forever and it most definitely belongs not just on his list... it belongs in your collection. A fabulous recording authored by a superb organist and composer. Not to be missed.

RSF



Ben Webster

Sophisticated Lady

Speakers Corner/Verve MG V-2026 **180g** **1**

Sophisticated Lady is an album that finds Ben Webster in a deeply introspective mood. Ten languorous slow burning ballads including 'My Funny Valentine', 'Prelude To A Kiss', 'You're Mine' and 'All Too Soon' affords him ample opportunities to explore and indulge that sensual side of his nature through an unmistakably breathy and remarkably rich style of tenor saxophone playing which always radiates immense amounts of warmth. He's so adept at floating a big note, holding it forever to capture the emotion and then milking the moment for all it's worth that I defy anyone not to be overcome by these images. Webster truly exerts his personality and, while this is no *Soulville* or *Ben Webster At The Renaissance*, there is still something profoundly satisfying within these lyrical accounts of top class Ellington, Johnny Mercer, Gershwin, Harold Arlen and Rodgers and Hart arrangements. Standout sidemen, especially the pianists Teddy Wilson and Billy Strayhorn, also have an affinity for this material. Superb musical cohesion and a bold, tightly framed and tactile acoustic with an excellent sense of surrounding space makes for a highly articulate and tactile recording session. All in all a quite lovely release beautifully pressed and presented by Speakers Corner.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP



British Band Classics, Vol 2.

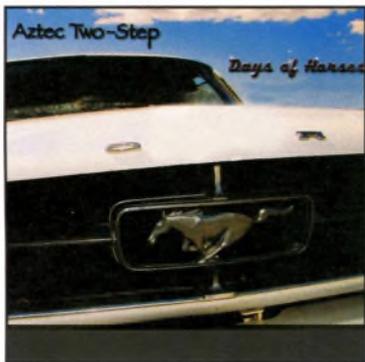
Jacob: Suite: William Byrd; Holst: Hammersmith: Prelude And Scherzo; Walton: Crown Imperial March. Fennell, Eastman Wind Ensemble.

Speakers Corner/Mercury SR90197 **180g** **7**

I think RG must have gone to military school 'cause he rolled his eyes when I brought my WLP copy of the original to the now infamous shootout at Heathrow last year. If not, perhaps he's just had his fill of this music. Not me, especially when it's done so well. I do like band music and enjoy the actual sound woven by woodwinds and brass as captured by Robert Fine in this Mercury Living Presence recording. While I enjoy Gordon Jacob's *Suite: William Byrd* immensely, the stars of the production for me, are on side two. I've got the famous EMI recordings as well as Fennell's Telarc recordings, but these two performances of Holst's and Walton's works are at the top of the "A" list. There is no recording I know that can even come close to the Walton and as close as you're going to get to the Holst might be that Telarc direct-to-disk... but still, only close. If you're at all interested in this type of music or are looking to hear stunning examples of these composers, you will not find better performances than Fennell has given us and you will certainly be hard pressed to find better sound than this Speakers Corner re-issue. Highest recommendation.

RSF





Aztec Two-Step

Days Of Horses

Red Engine Records RER003  

The folk/rock duo of Rex Fowler and Neal Shulman first met at a Boston club in the spring of 1971. They have since that time struck major label record deals, collaborated on finely crafted albums, toured extensively and played their acoustic guitars with an unparalleled brilliance. Yet despite all of this exquisite musicianship, their lyrical song writing, the silky smooth harmonies and intoxicating performances are today still an extremely well kept secret. Only a relatively small but appreciative band of "Americana" fans, reviewers and an odd assortment of camp followers – those who are steeped in the movement's farthest vestiges – loudly proclaim the musical importance and continuing relevance of Aztec Two-Step. *Days Of Horses*, their eleventh album and first studio recording in over ten years, is a wonderfully nostalgic, sensitive and beautifully textured series of vignettes. Eleven songs split almost evenly between the pens of Shulman and Fowler beguile us with their sweet and breezy melodies that are so reminiscent of that hip folk scene of the early 1970s. At the same time they invite us to take a little peek under the hood of their American experiences. Then their lyrics probe and prick at our consciences until an emotional void is filled either with the homely values of the past or those lessons in life that have been learnt along the way.

In the first three songs they reflect upon and celebrate a bygone age. We are cruising down Ventura Highway on the sun drenched title track which so evocatively recalls the images when "back

in the days of horses, around one hundred years, before Corvettes or Porsches, Henry Ford shifted gears". Then there are those half remembered childhood double features and radio hits found in 'Dad Came Home' and a reassuringly warm summer night of 'Stargazers' to caress the ears. But even here there are disquieting moments lurking in the background. Dad came home from a war. They mention a "tour" which is surely a tour of duty in Vietnam. And these images that lie just beneath the surface begin to pick at and then unravel this warm and cosy lyrical and melodic blanket which they've previously wrapped us in. The fourth track, 'Better These Days', is a stark folk blues song that demystifies the alcoholic kick or drug taking highs. Its sentiments could equally apply to modern partygoers or generations of musicians down the ages. Recounting a sliding scale of less glamorous pharmaceutical concoctions injects both humour and a note of reality into this prophetic tale.

The album's greatest strength though is the ability to reach into the hearts and minds of an audience with its powerful narratives and at the same time expand the smallest image or slightest memory into a poetic insight. Magical ensemble playing, supple and indescant harmonies, honest sentiments not complicated by hidden agendas or an underlying sense of irony and of course that undying passion for acoustic music makes for entertainment of the highest calibre. There's a depth and charm which gently extends into those poignant and genuine south to the border songs like 'Tonight I Wish I Was In Texas', 'Down Home' and the quite lovely 'Fools Like Us'.

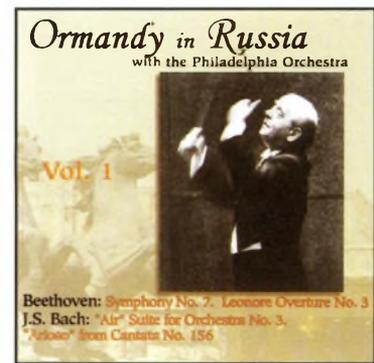
Paul Guzzone's exceptionally sympathetic production captures the very essence of acoustic guitar, mandolin, fiddle and bass playing. It memorably recreates the fluency, bite, energy, warmth and vibrant interaction of these closely woven musical colours that merge, separate and then eventually decay. Ray Staff's Abbey Road cut for the 180g LP pressing made at Pallas in Germany has excellent transparency and like the CD it eloquently recreates the inner details and vocal nuances which tug so strongly at your emotions.

Supplier: Cherished Record Co.

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RP

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Beethoven: Symphony No.7 & Leonore Overture No.3. Bach: "Air" from Suite No.3 & "Arioso" from Cantata No.156 Ormandy, Philadelphia Orchestra

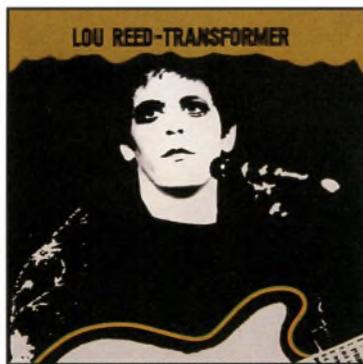
Cisco/Scora 

Entitled "Ormandy in Russia" these works, which were recorded live in the May of 1958, are the first set in a six disc series of Philadelphia performances made in the Soviet Union. While it may not quite have captured the imagination in the same way as those famous Mercury sessions did, they do nevertheless represent vivid, highly evocative and beautifully proportioned readings. Of course the *Seventh Symphony* and *Leonore Overture No.3* have those exceptionally stirring climaxes but their roots are nourished by very different rhythmic patterns. The *Overture* encapsulates the themes of a typical operatic drama while the *Symphony* possesses that controlled and sustained intensity found in a variety of dance forms. The audience is certainly appreciative of both although they are surprisingly ill disciplined and noisy at the opening of the Beethoven *Seventh*. It can be argued that these inner details give it a large dose of the "you are there" realism and immediacy to proceedings. The Bach-Ormandy transcriptions (quality encore pieces) are nicely handled and played in a fashion that rightly leaves you hungry for more. Steve Hoffman's work on the master tapes is as always sympathetically executed with an emphasis upon nuance and subtle interpretative insights.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Lou Reed

Transformer

Speakers Corner/RCA LSP-4807 180g 4

From time to time the compromises imposed by the music business become more obvious than usual.

In 1972 Lou Reed, one of the most compelling and influential American songwriters of his generation, was two years past walking away from his band, the Velvet Underground. He had released an underwhelming first solo album that sold squat. At the same time, English glam rock, heavily influenced by the Velvets, was emerging as the commercial vanguard. David Bowie, at a peak in his career, was its leading figure. Not content with the increasing success of his own work, Bowie sought to spread his influence through the revitalization of other deserving souls such as Iggy Pop, Mott the Hoople and finally, Lou Reed.

Bowie signed on to produce Reed's second solo album, together with Bowie's guitarist and arranger, Mick Ronson. *Transformer* is an entirely appropriate title for the work that resulted. Reed had looked like a long-haired folkie when he performed at a reunion concert in Paris with the Velvets John Cale and Nico at the beginning of the year. He soon found himself wearing pancake makeup and eye shadow on stage (as reproduced on *Transformer's* front cover). The indirect and artful references to homosexuality previously

made in his work became blatant and sensational. And the arrangements on his new album were often dead ringers for tracks from Bowie and Ronson's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* and *Hunky Dory*.

It is testimony to Reed's talent that *Transformer* transcends all of this. Reed brought strong songs to the table. If the Bowie and Ronson influence detracted from Reed's identity, you still shouldn't ignore that at the time they were at the top of their game. 'Walk on the Wild Side' and 'Satellite of Love' have commercial legs to this day. 'Vicious' rocks in the best Velvets fashion, and 'Perfect Day' is as sweet as when it was first written (if also overproduced). There are no bad tracks. If *Transformer* stands as a curious but durable presentation of Reed's songwriting, it's also a monument to its time. It successfully rekindled the career of Reed, and the iconic sleeve did photographer Mick Rock no harm either.

Speakers Corner has done as fine a job as can be expected with these early Seventies multi-track tapes. Gone is the fractured, spitty quality to the top-end, replaced with body, weight and power, especially on the piano. Voices, layered and overdubbed and so much a part of the arrangements, are far more individual and natural in character. This re-issue even flirts with audiophilia on 'Walk On the Wild Side': Herbie Flowers' string bass and those infectious backup singers are never going to sound better than this. The pressing is excellent.

PD



Chet Baker Sextet

Chet Is Back

Speakers Corner/RCA PML 10307 180g 1

As soon as the Thelonius Monk composition, 'Well You Needn't' begins, you know you're in for a fast tempo ride with Baker and "his" sextet. Recorded in Rome in 1962, this is a nice addition to my not-so-large jazz collection. I've always liked Baker and while he is considered by many, one of the most tragic figures in jazz (read: heavy alcohol and drug abuser), the few albums I do own are excellent. With the exception of 'Ballata In Forma Di Blues' by Amedeo Tommassi, everything else here is a standard: Included are 'These Foolish Things', 'Over The Rainbow' and 'Blues In The Closet'. Not a particularly big mono sound presentation, there is however, a naturalness to the ebb and flow of the musical selections contained in these tracks. The record is extremely involving and even the casual listener knows that this 'sextet' is made up of tier-one European instrumentalists. The sound quality is good, but it's really the music that takes control. I'm sure not many collectors have the original of this Italian release in their collections so I'm sure they'll be pleased to add this rather scarce item. I know I've enjoyed it very much and I hope you do as well. There is a nice insert included with several photos of Baker and some very interesting information on Baker and this group. Highly engaging.

RSF



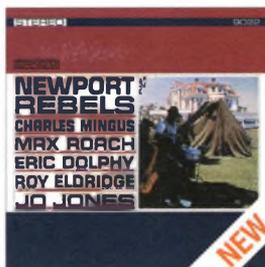
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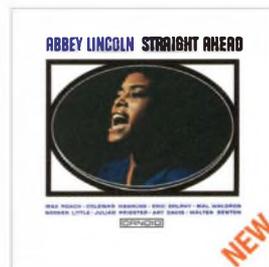
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Jazz...

The Columbia Records legacy

by Dennis Davis

If you were forced to spend the rest of your life on the proverbial desert island, and could take jazz records from only one label, which label would you choose? For me the choice would be obvious, as long as I was honest about following the rules. I could easily retire to a desert island with Acoustic Sounds' 45 RPM series of Fantasy re-issues, but that would be cheating. Fantasy did not create those master tapes; it bought them through acquisitions of the Contemporary and Prestige catalogs, among others. Columbia Records, on the other hand, produced the recordings in its catalog. Columbia Records offers the deepest, richest self-produced jazz record catalog with some of the best sounding jazz ever recorded. Columbia was there at the birth of the LP, and already had a significant back catalog of recordings for re-issue when the first LP was pressed. My record island stash would include crates full of Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Buck Clayton, Dave Brubeck, Sarah Vaughn, J. J. Johnson, Count Basie, Thelonious Monk, Louis Armstrong, Charles Mingus, plus smatterings of Ornette Coleman, Wayne Shorter, Weather Report, Dexter Gordon, Woody Shaw, Denny Zeitlin, John Handy, Gerry Mulligan, Hank Garland, Jo Stafford, Bix Beiderbecke, Teddy Wilson, Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, Bud Powell, Pee Wee Russel, Jimmy Giuffre, Ben Webster, Sidney Bechet, Art Blakey and Benny Goodman. I think that would hold up for a few years on my island, at least until I had to row back to civilization for a new stash of cartridges and vacuum tubes.

In this article, I'll guide you through the maze of Columbia label variations, decipher the matrix codes, discuss some label history and talk about some of my favorite recordings. In this Part One of my Columbia exploration, I will cover the 1950s releases up through the

switchover by Columbia to the famous "6 eye" label.

The earliest of the early Columbia jazz LPs consist of re-issues of early pre-magnetic tape recordings, notably the Louis Armstrong Hot Fives and Sevens, the Benny Goodman 1938 Carnegie Hall sessions, and some early Ellington and Bix Beiderbecke sessions. Record producer extraordinaire George Avakian had already pioneered re-issue series in the

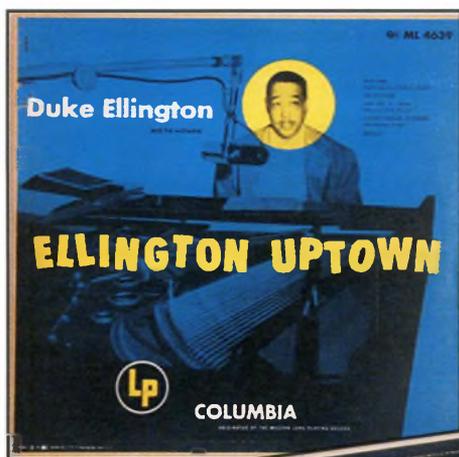
1940s, and after the introduction of the "long playing" record he was a key figure in the breakthrough of the medium by, among other things, mining record vaults and producing invaluable reissue series. He laid out a path of record production that was copied decades later when introduction of the compact disc created an even more fertile bed for re-issue programs. These early re-issues were assigned catalog numbers in the ML 4000 series. Some of the very best are the Goodman 1938 Carnegie Hall Sessions on ML 4358 and 4359, *The Louis Armstrong Story* on ML 4383,



4384, 4385 and 4386 and *The Bix Beiderbecke Story* on ML 4811, 4812 and 4813. There can be some confusion in the way these are identified on the album covers, as Columbia had not set its catalog system in stone this early on. For example, the Armstrong series had catalog numbers that were actually five digits long, but the first digit was generally dropped on the record cover. The first Armstrong Story volume is identified as ML 54383 on the record matrix, the label and the cover. Columbia then dropped the "5" prefix on the balance of the series from the cover. Volume two shows ML 54384 in the matrix and label, but shortens the catalog number to ML 4384 for the record cover. These albums were all later re-issued in Columbia's CL 800 series with different covers and with the "6 eye" label, but sometimes you find an original LP in a later cover. These ►

▶ recordings are obviously all, historical recordings, and were so even when first released on LP. However, their sound is remarkably alive, particularly in early pressings, although they are obviously bandwidth limited. All of these releases were re-issued many times over, and under different catalog numbers once the re-issues hit the changeover to the “6 eye” label.

Another legendary early Columbia recording is Duke Ellington’s *Ellington Uptown* on ML 4639. This is the earliest Columbia jazz release with truly remarkable sound. Side one of the record kicks off with ‘Skin Deep’, featuring Louis Bellson performing drum pyrotechnics, which is enough to justify the entire disc. First released in 1951, it must have been recorded some time after February of that year when Johnny Hodges, Lawrence Brown and Sonny Greer left the band. The line up includes Paul Gonsalves, Harry Carney, Clark Terry, Juan Tizol, Louis Bellson and Billy Strayhorn. This period is usually considered one when the Ellington band was in decline, and if so, I wish we had more declining bands like this around today. Playing his own compositions that had become classics, Ellington created one of the greatest sounding mono records ever produced. Just listen to ‘Take The ‘A’ Train’ and see if you can pick up the stylus and NOT put it right back at the beginning of the track – over and over again. First pressings of this LP have a green



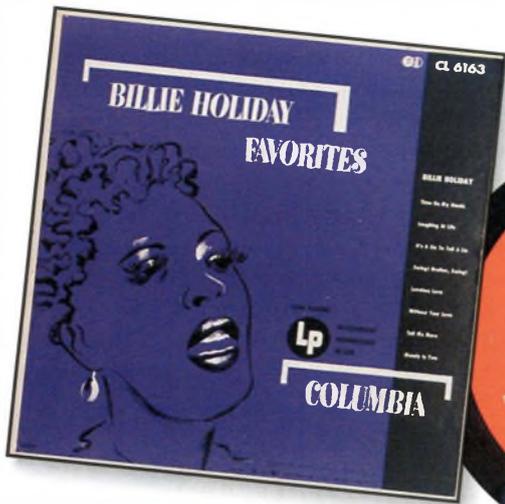
label and second pressings have a purple label. I can’t recall seeing a maroon label version, but the next issue is on the grey “6 eye” label. Clean copies of green label originals are almost impossible to find, purple copies can be found if a diligent search is made, and grey “6 eye” copies are a yard sale staple. All are remarkable sounding, with the edge going to earlier pressings. There is also a later issue sharing the same album name but with catalog number CL 830. It is not the same album, but is a great sounding album in its own right.



Next up in the label variation scheme is the solid maroon label, which Columbia adopted with its original and re-issue jazz series designated the CL 500 and CL 600 12” series and CL 6000 10” series. Columbia used this label style up through at least CL 701. This variation is where the Columbia sound hits its stride. In fact, some of the sweetest sounding jazz recordings ever made bear this maroon label. Of



course, these records are mono only, so if that puts you off, skip this article and some of the greatest sounding jazz records to be heard. These discs sound pretty good with a stereo cartridge, but once you get hooked, a mono cartridge will find its way into your replay arsenal. A good mono cartridge makes these discs sound good enough to wonder what the big fuss was about with the invention of stereo.



Louis Armstrong music of the 1920s.

Even more difficult to find in near mint shape are *Billie Holiday Sings* (CL 6129) and *Billie Holiday Favorites* (CL 6163). These ten-inch discs have the “Long Playing Microgroove” label.

They select songs from the late 1930s, and sound remarkably more “modern” in musical style than the tracks from just a few years earlier. Billie’s voice has darkened somewhat by the late 1930s. Backup musicians on all

three discs include Roy Eldridge, Benny

Goodman, Ben Webster, Teddy

Wilson and Lester Young.

These three discs do not offer the rich sound of

Columbia’s 1950s recordings,

but they are awfully good given their vintage

and are the best versions available of these invaluable recordings.

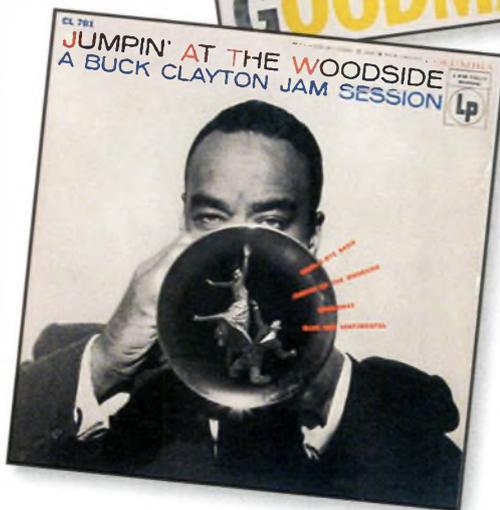
Pride of place in this rich vein of music (with one exception noted later) goes to the Buck Clayton *Jam Session* released by Columbia on five 12” LPs (and some doubling on 10” LPs) between 1954 and 1956. Clayton was active as a trumpet

player, a bandleader and an arranger.

He played with the Basie band in the 1930s, and recorded with Basie into the 1950s. He recorded extensively with Benny Goodman, played as a side man on the early Columbia sides for Billie Holiday, and worked with Ellington, Ruby Braff, Pee Wee Russell, Jimmy Rushing, Coleman Hawkins, Harry Edison, Sidney Bechet and many others.

In later years he remained active, performing into the late 1980s and working as an educator. But his greatest recorded legacy are the five *Jam Sessions* albums: *The Huckle-buck and Robbins’ Nest* on CL 548; *How Hi The Fi* on

▶



▶ The mono soundstage can be as separated and well defined as a stereo recording, without the instruments appearing left and right from the respective speakers as with so many early stereo recordings.

Billie Holiday recorded a treasure trove of sides for Columbia, after her “discovery” by John Hammond, during the 1930s and into 1941.

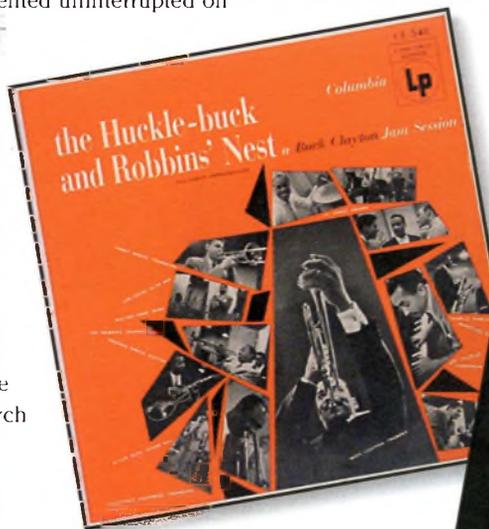
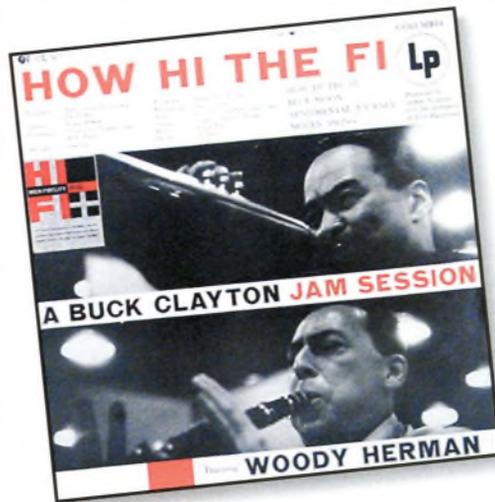
These sides were sifted through by George Avakian in the early days of the LP, and edited into one 12” LP and two 10” LPs. Later, during the late “6 eye” label period, Avakian assembled a much larger selection of these early recordings into two boxes entitled *The Golden Years*. These later boxes are ubiquitous, easily found and not fetching any collector prices. Originals of the early single LP (maroon label with “Long Playing”), however, are more difficult to find in splendid shape.

Lady Day on CL 637 is easy enough come upon in a later “6 eye” label, but clean copies of an original maroon label are hard to find. It features very early recordings from the mid-1930s. Billie’s voice is still relatively fresh, and the instrumental and vocal rhythms are reminiscent of

► CL 567; *Buck Clayton Jams* Benny Goodman on CL 614; *Jumpin' At The Woodside* on CL 701; and *All The Cats Join In* on CL 882. CL 567 was also released as two 10" discs: *Moten Swing* and *Sentimental Journey* CL 6325 and *How Hi The Fi* and *Blue Moon* CL 6326. I've listened to many copies of the 10" releases as well as the 12", and find no sonic advantage to the 10" versions.

The words "Jam Session" feature prominently on the cover of each of the five albums (except CL 614 which simply says "Jams"). The idea of a jam session committed to vinyl conjures up unplanned improvisation and long sides. The concept had been pioneered by Norman Granz with his *Jazz At The Philharmonic* series of live performances that were excerpted on 78-RPM records. It was only with the introduction of the LP that longer sessions could be presented uninterrupted on record. George Avakian produced the series with some early involvement of John Hammond. The earliest sides featured mostly a collection of Basie sidemen, but that shifted somewhat in the later sessions. The recording sessions were in December 1953, March 1954, August 1955 and March of 1956.

All sessions were recorded at Columbia's 30th Street Studio in New York City. The old saw about people not making things the way they used to applies with poignancy to the great Columbia recordings of the 1950s. One of the reasons that they cannot be made that way is because, as corporate America took charge of the music business, too many corners were cut in an effort to increase profits. The 30th Street studio was an old church facility taken over by Columbia in the late 1940's when it was looking for a large recording room. For the few decades that it survived the corporate mentality, 30th Street became synonymous with big, open and spacious sound.



In addition to being the site of the rich 1950's jazz recordings discussed, it also was used for great pop recordings of Bob Dylan, Paul Simon and many others. For more on this studio and its background, search out two fairly recent books: Jim Cogan and William Clark's *Temples of Sound: Inside the Great Recording Studios*, and Ashley Kahn's *Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece*.

The big, open and spacious 30th Street Studio sound is dramatically present in the Clayton Jam Sessions. Any record from the series provides jaw-dropping sonics. The ideal *Jam Session* collection would consist of the first four albums with original maroon labels and the fifth album in a "6 eye" original, supplemented by the Mosaic box set *The Complete CBS Buck Clayton Jam Sessions*. You need the Mosaic set for the great booklet, although the vinyl is nowhere near as good sounding as the originals.

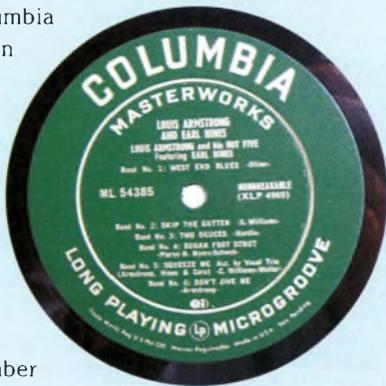
Perhaps the best cut is 'Blue Moon', band 2, side 1 of *How Hi The Fi*, which is why this album has become a sought after audiophile favorite. With a dozen players, including Clayton, Woody Herman, Al Cohn, Jimmy Jones, Walter Page and Jo Jones, you are treated to almost 14 minutes of the most swinging, gorgeously recorded jazz on record. In a similar vein, and perhaps my second favorite song from this goldmine of riches is 'The Huckle-Buck' from *The Huckle-Buck* ►

Calculating age and date of birth...

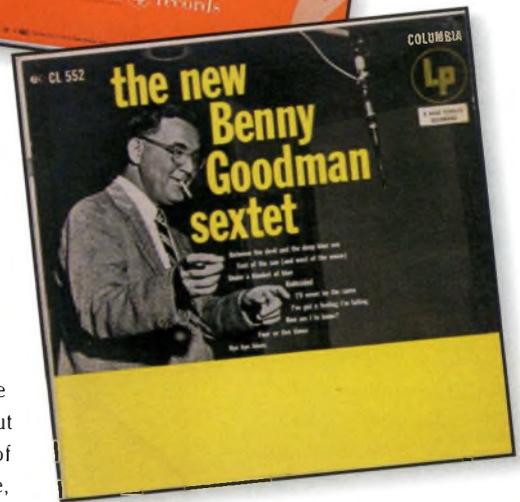
The earliest Columbia 12" LPs had green labels with the words "Long Playing Microgroove" along the bottom edge of that label.

The earliest issues have the master tape number stamped in the deadwax with the stamper information 180 degrees away. These earliest copies have deep stamped block-style numbers. This style gave way, while still in the first label variation to having the stamper information rotate so that it follows the master tape number. The "Long Playing Microgroove" green label gave way quickly to a green label with "Long Playing" at the bottom. The word "Microgroove" is found on the earliest albums through ML 4383, and perhaps ML 4384, but by ML 4385, my "1A" stamper copy does not have the word "Microgroove." Then, nervous for change, Columbia quickly segued into a new label variation by ML 4386,

where it changed label color from green to purple, which became the label color of choice for the balance of the ML 4000 series, and for second pressings of the earlier numbers.



in a maroon label and the original cover is orange and black. It was re-issued with a "6 eye" label and a different cover. It's an amazing record that should be in every record collection. Whatever the criteria for selecting a desert island stash, I would find a way to bring this record. Clean originals are not that easy to find, but "6 eye" copies are common as dust.



Before closing out this part of the article, and moving on to Columbia's

"6 eye" period, let me briefly mention a few more of my favorites from this early period. Dave Brubeck seemed to issue an album every week on either Fantasy or Columbia during the 1950s. A great album on the maroon label, *Brubeck Time*, on CL 622, is also one of my Brubeck favorites. And don't turn your nose up when it comes to Benny Goodman – *The New Benny Goodman Sextet* on CL 552 is a great album with phenomenal sound. And if you see a copy, don't pass up *The Benny Goodman Trio Plays For The Fletcher Henderson Fund* on CL 516. Recorded during a radio broadcast, the sound is not up to the level of CL 552, but it is quite decent and provides an opportunity to hear Goodman's original trio from the 1930s together again in 1951.



► *and Robbins' Nest*. This one is over 20 minutes long and takes up a full side. None of these records is hard to find in a second label "6 eye" pressing. Near mint originals will take a little time searching eBay, but none should present too difficult a challenge or cost much more than many new audiophile releases.

I've saved my absolute favorite album of this period for (almost) last. *Louis Armstrong Plays W. C. Handy* on CL 591 is one of the great Armstrong albums and has wonderful sound to match the music. The original comes

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