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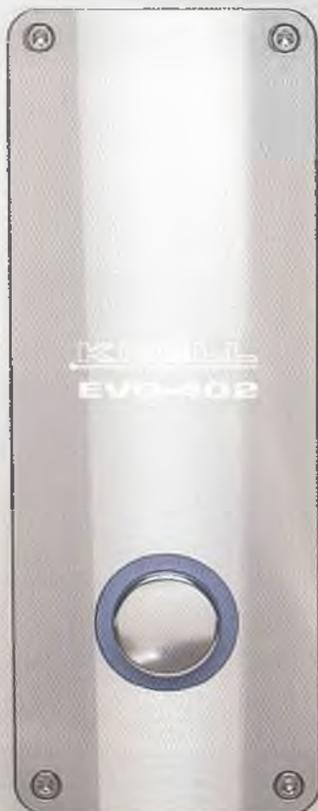
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Of all the faults and flaws in the reviewing process (and there are many) probably the least considered is time pressure. Few readers are aware of just how pressing the deadlines for a monthly title can be. Add in the inevitable late arrival of equipment, teething troubles with new models, problems with start-up production and the hot breath of editorial scoop fever on the writer's neck and any sense of rational perspective rapidly disappears. The newer the product, the more important and complex it is, the greater the potential for problems. So just how long do you need to review a product?

In fairness, given a unit that's well run-in and thoroughly warmed up (that eliminates around 80% of reviews then) an experienced reviewer, working in his own environment can assess its capabilities surprisingly quickly. What he (or she) clearly can't assess is how the product changes over time. So, whilst the actual time spent reviewing might be comparatively short, the preparation and settling, optimization and set-up are all seriously time consuming – but essential to the process; at least if the results are to be of any value. *Hi-Fi Plus* appears every two months, giving our writers (and the equipment at their mercy) far longer lead times and a better chance all round. Even so, and as the saying goes, shit happens. The best plans run awry, equipment breaks, gets dropped or houses get struck by lightning. There's no oddsing the acts of God. But when the equipment you've just finished reviewing, spent hours agonizing over and weighing your words, sent in your copy and seen it go to print – there's no escaping the sickening, sinking feeling that accompanies the realization that after all that the damn thing has suddenly blossomed, achieving a whole new level of performance. And it does happen. I guess it's a bit like the athlete who leaves his best performances on the training ground... How long do you need to review a piece of equipment? You never have long enough; and don't ever think you know it all, because as soon as you do, as sure as eggs is eggs...



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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



The more I think about it the more I come to the conclusion that the astounding success of the Linn/Naim axis in the late '70s and early '80s owed more to their clarity of purpose than it did to the clarity of their products' performance, their ability to convey their own rather than the musical message. After all, a market as over-populated, disorganized and intellectually conflicted as hi-fi presents a pretty daunting face to the prospective customer – especially when the existing inhabitants stand around in little groups and snigger at the newbies' naivety and many assumptions. Under the circumstances, what any audio virgin, about to take to the waters is looking for is a nice neat philosophy, preferably with a few answers attached. See one and he'll grab it with the desperation and iron grip of a drowning man reaching out for a life-raft just before he goes down for the last time.

But what the customer often fails to grasp (no condescension here – I was that punter) is that the salesman, the reviewer, the itinerant expert, is already clinging on to the other side of the same life-raft. None of us likes to look like a fool and as insecure as the potential purchaser might feel, imagine being in the shoes of the salesman, expected to actually know about all this stuff – up there to be shot at and open to any demand. Offer him a nice, simple strategy, preferably with a circular enough logic to exclude or render irrelevant inconvenient questions and he'll be your friend for life. More than a comfort blanket, you've literally saved his (working) life. Think I'm overstating the case? Just look at how many people selling hi-fi still cling to that same set of flawed and limited rules today. Indeed, so securely are they wedded to what they know, that even when first Linn and latterly Naim moved on from their limited world view, many Refusniks were left behind, clinging to the past.

Does that make them bad people? Not at all. What it does is make them adherents to a single path in a world where myriad options actually exist. You see, the interesting thing about Linn and Naim's "front-end-first" strategy was its bipolar nature. There's no denying its internal logic; it definitely works for Linn and Naim products of that vintage. What's less obvious is that it doesn't necessarily apply to other approaches or technologies. Let's see why...

If we look at a classic Linn/Naim set up like the LP12 with an Ittok and Asak, a Naim NAC 32, SNAPS and NAP 250 driving a pair of Saras, we can understand why the products are arranged in this way. Playing records is an exercise in micro

mechanical engineering that rewards the kind of precision and materials technology represented by the LP12. This is not an approach that lends itself to mass production and economies of scale, making it inherently expensive. Likewise, if you are going to use speakers with a cripplingly low impedance and mid-80s efficiency, then your amplifier is going to need a healthy power supply; in turn demanding large transformers and plenty of reservoir capacitance, involving large numbers of the most expensive components. Thus your amps work out expensive too.

So far so good and all perfectly logical: The problem comes when you try to develop a generalized philosophy to embrace this approach. The phrase coined was "garbage in, garbage out" – a concept with which it's hard to argue. The next step was to conclude that the best thing to do was ensure the quality of your signal by getting the best source you could within your budget. The amp could be of lower quality and the speakers lower again, but you'd still get a better result than if you had a really good pair of speakers telling you just how bad your record player really was. It's an attractively simple proposition and one that can be easily demonstrated – within the context of a Linn/Naim type system.

Let's start at the beginning with a Linn LP12/Basik record player, feeding a NAD 3020 and a pair of AR18s. The record player cost \$500, the Nad around \$120 and the speakers about \$80, a classic example of FEF budget distribution. Take a \$2000 valve pre-power and insert it into the system with a Dual 505 in place of the Linn and sure enough it will sound like a bag of spanners. But whilst this does demonstrate the garbage in, garbage out principle, what it doesn't do is tell you how to spend your money. Nor does it demonstrate, as many people believed, that a NAD 3020 is better than a \$2000 valve amp.

If we take things on a bit, through the various stages and upgrade steps, we'd add the Ittok and a better cartridge, a series of pre and power amps leading to the 32/SNAPS/250 and ultimately the Saras. Let's wheel the valve amps back in again at this point, costing as they do, roughly the same as the Naim amps. Whichever amp actually sounds better, the valve amp will always be more expensive because the Naim option will be an upgrade on an existing set-up, probably adding the 250 to an already owned 32 and SNAPS. Trade in the NAP160 and the financial step is much smaller. And for those misguided ►



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souls who still think the valve amp makes sense? Wheel in the Saras and just listen to it fold at the knees. Which is why there are so many people who own Linn/Naim systems.

But if we examine the actual logic in this process we discover a serious discontinuity. The FEF philosophy makes the basic error of equating cost and quality – and doing it across wildly different products and technologies. It happens, by happy accident, that in the Linn/Naim system cost and quality do equate fairly closely, especially if we decide that certain aspects of musical reproduction should take precedence over others (those would be the ones that are exaggerated by really big power supplies then...) But move outside of this limited world view and suddenly the perspective changes. If we start listening to CD instead of vinyl, the technology involved is almost uniquely suited to large-scale mass production. Once we work out what matters in a CD player, we should be able to achieve excellent sound at previously impossibly low prices. Use a horn speaker or a single-ended triode amp and the cost/quality equation shifts again; and so does the nature of the system. The hidden strength of the Linn/Naim approach lay in the fact that other equipment or technologies transplanted into it failed to perform, simply because the environment wasn't suitable for them. Our demonstrations discussed earlier offer perfect examples. The NAD 3020 isn't a better amp than a decent \$2000 valve combination; but the LP12 was a lot better than the Dual 505. Nor was the 32/SNAIPS/250 necessarily better than our notional valve amp, it was just better at driving speakers with a 2 Ohm load. Besides, once you are on that upgrade-escalator the farther you go the harder it is to get off.

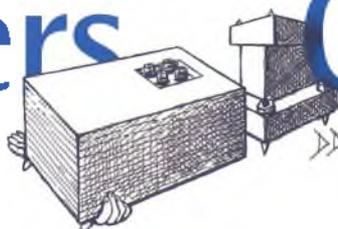
Quality needs to be considered in the context of the task to be performed. In other words, you are not so much interested in the quality of an amp as in the specific qualities it possesses. For every type of product, for every technology: there are good and bad examples. It's not what you use but how you use it that counts – and that's as true of products in systems as it is of components in products. Whilst the search

for the silver bullet solution, the one size fits all answer to hi-fi's many questions is understandable, it's also utterly fruitless and ultimately misleading. When we go in search of system performance, what we need to do is develop a strategy that's appropriate to and recognizes the nature of the products and technologies we are employing. Products like the Naim CD 555 are raising the spectres of cable quality, stereo sound-staging and musical tempi that step outside of simple metronomic repetition – all in a world where these inconvenient truths were previously (and smugly) ignored. Similar blind-spots and limitations afflict other closed loop approaches.

The goal of musically expressive and communicative reproduction can be approached from many directions and tactically speaking, in many ways. What we must learn to do is incorporate those tactics or rules that have some universal value (garbage in, garbage out; the value of proper support and isolation; the absolute primacy of a coherent cable loom and the quality of your mains) into an overall strategy that works with our chosen equipment and approach. There are no easy answers; there is no one solution. But one thing's for sure – as you feel your way the only definite method of avoiding blind alleys and wrong turns is to lift your eyes from the process and keep them fixed on the prize. Occasionally that can mean taking a step sideways or even temporarily backwards. But keeping a clear sense of strategy and the final goal will always ensure that such moves aren't fool's errands. Follow someone else's route and you might not get lost, but you'll end up at their destination rather than your own.

When approaching a purchase keep one thing in mind. It doesn't matter whether your proposed upgrade satisfies a short-term goal or makes you feel good because some reviewer tells you it should. There is only one criterion for judgment: will you ultimately get more musical enjoyment out of your system as a result? And the most important word in that sentence? YOU. It's your system, it's your money; but above all it's your time. Can you really afford to waste it? ➤

Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

Let's talk sub-woofers. It's a very imprecise term, but the one in general use. REL prefers 'sub-bass speakers', reflecting its own rather different (and entirely creditable) perception of how they ought to operate, while I reckon 'bass-only speakers' would be a more generally inclusive and accurate phrase,

but 'sub-woofer' is what the market understands.

They're not a new phenomenon. I seem to recall Mark Levinson building a speaker package that partnered two 24-inch Hartley driven subs with two pairs of stacked Quad ESL-57s way back in the 1970s, but I doubt many left

▶ US shores. And other early examples could also be cited.

However, sub-woofers were real rarities before the late 1980s, when models like the Bose Acoustimass and numerous rivals first introduced stereo 'three-box' sub/sat speaker combos to the marketplace. These were enthusiastically promoted as a new way of enjoying music with virtually invisible speakers, though their appeal – then and now – has been largely confined to those whose home décor takes a higher priority than their hi-fi sound.

3-boxers notwithstanding, the sub-woofer scene really accelerated when the home cinema thing got started in the early 1990s, (re)introducing surround sound to the market. The prospect of finding room for five 'proper' speakers made the 6-box sub/sat combo the weapon of choice for many – probably most – home cinema rigs.

Today, more than ten years on, brands like REL, Velodyne and M&K operate successfully as sub-woofer specialists, and nearly every regular speaker brand has one or more sub-woofers in its line-up. But in my view we still haven't figured out how to use them properly.

The whole basis of those 3- and 6-box systems is the assumption that all the bass can be delegated to a single sub-woofer unit, and that single unit can also be tucked out of sight. The basic premise is that human hearing isn't sensitive to the direction from which bass sounds are generated. The stereo (or surround sound) imaging can therefore be established by the tiny satellite speakers, while the solitary subwoofer can be located anywhere.

While that psychoacoustic analysis is largely true, it does ignore certain other important factors. The most important of these concerns the way loudspeakers interact with rooms at low frequencies. We tend to assume that the loudspeaker is doing all the work, but in fact the room plays a very significant role. It augments the omnidirectional bass output of the speaker by keeping all its output within the confines of the room. (Try taking your speakers out onto the patio some time, and notice how bass-light they sound compared to indoors.)

Rather more significant is the way a room acts as a resonant chamber. It generates specific standing waves, at

frequencies which correspond to the major dimensions, and these interact with each other and the location of the bass source (the sub-woofer) in a very complex and unpredictable way.

That's a major reason why it's important to try different positions with any full range or bass-only speakers. The basic room dimensions can't be changed, and it's virtually impossible to use damping to affect bass frequencies, so changing the position(s) of the source(s) is the only practical means of influencing how speaker(s) and room interact.

One advantage of using a separate sub-woofer is the ability to site it for best room-mode performance, while the satellites can be positioned for best imaging and lowest mid-band coloration. But the crucial problem with a separate sub-woofer is that a solitary bass source invariably delivers much less even bass than the two sources supplied by a regular pair of full range speakers. Not only does the

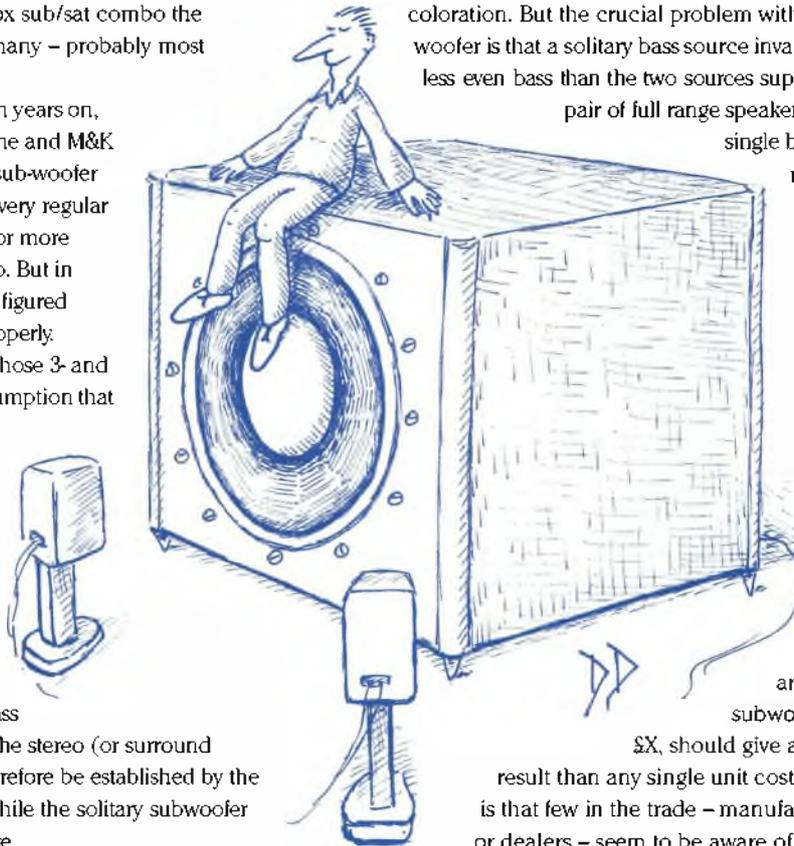
single bass source deliver more extreme room-mode interaction effects, it also leads to much greater variations in bass level in different parts of the room. The crux of the matter is that sub-woofers really ought to be used in pairs, rather than as singletons. It can fairly be argued that two

subwoofers, each costing £X, should give a significantly better result than any single unit costing £2X. The pity is that few in the trade – manufacturers, distributors or dealers – seem to be aware of the fact, or inclined to promote it to customers.

Whereas a regular 3-box sub/sat package will almost always give inferior results to a pair of decent size regular speakers, a 4-box package does offer real potential advantages, allowing both subs and sats to be separately sited for optimum performance.

One possible difficulty is achieving good time alignment between satellites and subwoofers. Another is that tiny satellites don't do very good dynamics, because their main drivers are too small, yet if the main driver is too large, it will go too low into the bass and overlap with the sub-woofer.

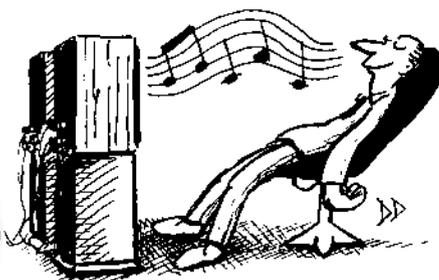
The classic example of 'doing it right' has to be the



► Lyngdorf (nee TACT) approach that has been doing the rounds at hi-fi shows in recent years. This combines two corner-mounted subs with two free space sited floorstanding main speakers, and gives very impressive results acoustically speaking, though it does require everything to be converted into the digital domain to time-align the sats and subs, and provide high-pass filtering to the main speakers.

While I have great respect for this approach, the purist in me remains suspicious of an all-digital approach, so I suspect I'll carry on using conventional large floorstanding stereo speakers. But provided they're used in pairs, regular subwoofers (especially those with intelligent low-pass filtering) do offer an intriguing alternative, hampered only by the difficulty of finding suitable satellites. ►+

Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

Whatever happened to the white van? You know the one: the over-delivery of 'studio monitors' and an orderbook that must be emptied before the hour's out. A quick trip to the mug-a-matic cashpoint and you are relieved of a few hundred quid in exchange for a piece of clipboard covered in Fablon and 40p worth of drive units. It was a lucrative scam seen around the country a few years back, but you don't see the white van any more. Why? Because it's cheaper to punt shonky goods on eBay these days; you don't even need to hire a van.

Recent years have seen a plethora of products emerge sporting high-end price tags. Some of these products live up to that price tag. Many don't. But, there they are, a profusion of new products from new names; they spring up, sell a few products, disappear and are replaced with another flood of new products and new names. And so the cycle of audio life continues.

Except the cycle of life has accelerated of late. Products, designed in Europe and built in the Far East have become the norm. Some companies that have a longstanding reputation have started designing locally and producing globally and will continue to do so; the future of these companies is reasonably assured, and in some cases, the move to Far Eastern manufacture comes with an improved build quality at a given price. These are not the manufacturers that are of concern.

But for every big name, there seem to be ten little companies that no one's ever heard of before. Their long-term stability is not assured. Some will be the next Arcam, some won't. The factory that built the product is immaterial... today it's making valve amps, tomorrow in-car GPS systems and so on. But the company specifying those products and having

them built in that factory may only be around just long enough to sell the first batch of units. This is contrary to the high-end ethos as it stands today.

The problem is two-fold. If you buy a complex and expensive piece of electronics, you expect it to survive for some time. If it breaks down, you want the product repaired swiftly and preferably by someone who knows the unit. You also want a product with a good re-sale value, when time comes to upgrade or move on. Neither of which scenarios are possible if the product line disappeared without trace six months after first launching onto the market.

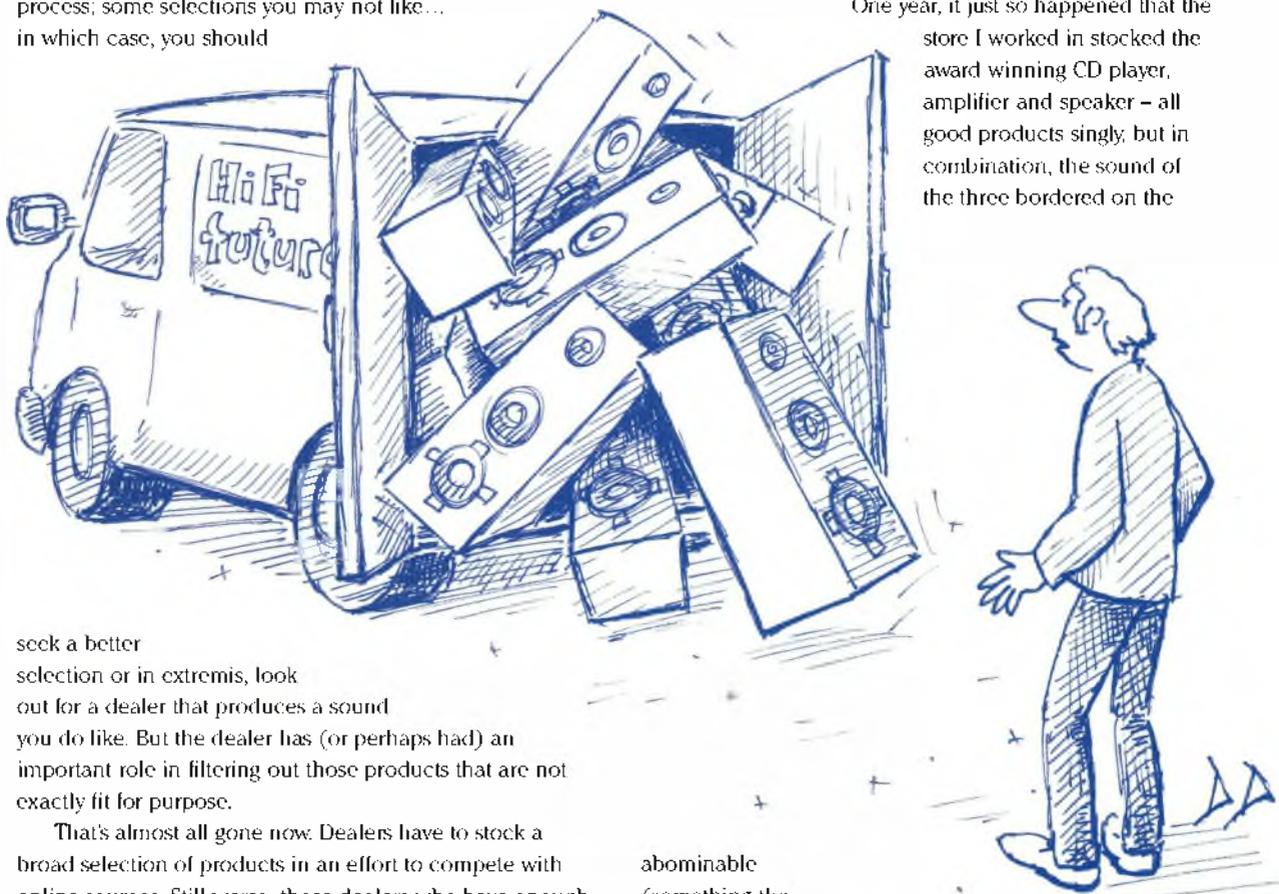
What should we do? Even the big companies were once small fry, and if a company gets too big for the market it can collapse in on itself (so size and age of company is no guarantee of good, long-lived products). Should we take an uber-conservative stance and only buy (or review) products from companies that have been in business for at least a decade? Of course not. Should we check out the financial standing of a company before investing in its wares? Possibly, but this is perhaps overkill.

I think the only way is to be wary. Be wary of big claims and little products. Be especially wary of companies that only show computer-generated examples of the one and only product in the portfolio. Remember the old adage "If it seems too good to be true, it usually is". And, most important of all, be wary of things hyped up by people on the Internet.

The level playing field that is online has no memory; no past, no future. It lives in an ever-present now. So, when a new product by a fly-by-night manufacturer emerges, ►

► The Internet hype makes it appear every bit as legitimate as products built by companies with decades long reputations for strong, solid build quality and legendary service. And, if you get caught out by one of these soon-gone companies, you are just as quickly forgotten as the products you bought.

Normally, these products would not make it past the dealer network, but the traditional hi-fi dealer is fast becoming less important in the hi-fi buying process. Dealers – or at least, good dealers – put together systems that they know work well in combination. They have a selection process; some selections you may not like... in which case, you should



seek a better selection or in extremis, look out for a dealer that produces a sound you do like. But the dealer has (or perhaps had) an important role in filtering out those products that are not exactly fit for purpose.

That's almost all gone now. Dealers have to stock a broad selection of products in an effort to compete with online sources. Still worse, those dealers who have enough integrity to filter out these drive-by products are the very ones that get the most criticism for being restrictive in their stocking policy.

It's not a good time to be a high-end hi-fi dealer. They are beset by online discounters (although less than the middle market dealers, who have seen their business severely affected by online sales) and marked increases in retail rents. Those little hi-fi guys are vanishing, others are working out of their homes. And now, we expect this endangered species to stock products that they know are at best semi-supportable?

Here's what I propose. Avoid those who stock everything, and be prepared for not getting your way if you want to

audition 95 different brands of amplifier. It's a pointless exercise anyway; if you have a 'shortlist' of more than half a dozen products, you'll end up so confused by different performance criteria that the chances are you'll end up with nothing at all. But most importantly, go listen. It's becoming harder and harder to get good demonstrations, but the demonstration is the cornerstone of modern hi-fi.

Long ago, I used to work in hi-fi retail. Around that time, a certain magazine awards issue were of great importance (far more than today), and could make or break products.

One year, it just so happened that the store I worked in stocked the award winning CD player, amplifier and speaker – all good products singly, but in combination, the sound of the three bordered on the

abominable (something the magazine itself was at pains to point out in print). Nevertheless, when the awards issue hit the streets, the phone rang constantly asking after these three products and the best possible price we could give. Trying to tell people that the system wasn't a good match frequently fell on deaf ears. Surprisingly, one person even said, "look pal, I want to buy the system, not listen to it!"

That attitude is alive and well and living in cyber space. Unfortunately, you can't get demonstrations online, which means that people are buying products, or even whole systems, unheard. Which is like trying on a suit blindfold – and just as effective.



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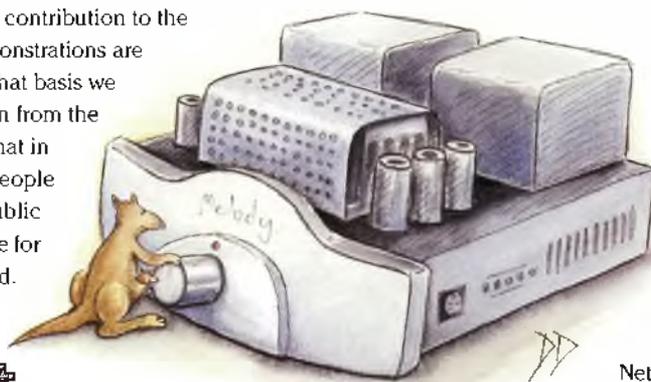
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After an unbroken run of public demonstrations at Manchester Shows, this year, for the first time, Hi-Fi+ will be absent. Unfortunately, owing to a difference of opinion regarding the value of our contribution to the event, our traditional demonstrations are no longer viable, and on that basis we have reluctantly withdrawn from the show. We are well aware that in these circumstances the people to suffer are the visiting public and we can only apologize for the disappointment caused. We too will miss the chance to meet and chat with old friends. ▶+



Melodic Mistake

In Issue 48, the Melody SP3 integrated amp received a richly deserved Product Of The Year award. Unfortunately, it was Real Hi-Fi who received all the phone calls, rather than Select audio who are actually the distributor for the Melody amps, both the entry level SP3 and their more exotic and expensive offerings. Apologies to

all concerned, Real Hi-Fi for taking the calls, Select Audio and their potential customers for the frustration and confusion. For those wishing to discover more about these fascinating and affordable amps, you really can contact Select Audio on: Tel. (44)(0)1900 813064 (44)(0)7962 176477

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The Rocky Mountain Audio Fest and the changing face of the US Show Scene

by Dennis Davis

For the second year in a row, I ventured into the clouds to the "mile-high" city of Denver Colorado, to visit the third annual Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (RMAF). Fellow writer RSF and I arrived early to acclimate to the altitude, and to see if the show organizers could sustain the high plateau of old-fashioned two-channel audio they established last year.

The US now offers three high-end equipment shows – the annual Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, the Home Entertainment Show (HE Show) and the RMAF. CES is really several distinct shows, one of which is the High Performance Audio & Home Theatre show. This is the grand daddy of all shows, where manufacturers and retailers meet to hawk product lines, find distributors and explore new ideas.

While it's a trade only event, I've not met a determined audiophile who could not find a way into the show. But the word Consumer in its name really refers to the target audience, not the show audience. Dealers and manufacturers do not come to CES to rub the flesh with the general public.

Primedia Magazines, Inc. publisher of *Stereophile* and a number of other magazines runs the HE Show, formerly known as the Stereophile Show. It changes location, generally between New York on the east coast and either Los Angeles or San Francisco on the west coast. This coming year, the HE Show will occur in Manhattan. The Stereophile Show started out as a high-end audio only show, but over the years has become increasingly focused on the video market. This is undoubtedly

the result of the HE Show's for-profit status, the acquisition of *Stereophile* by a national magazine chain that owns a video publication, and its choice of very expensive convention markets for its venues. The cost of convention space in Manhattan is astronomical, and the costs in Los Angeles and San Francisco are not that far behind. For many years, the small exhibitor rooms seemed to have more and more video

screens, shunting audio off as a video accessory. In 2006, this trend seemed to reverse slightly, at least in the small hotel rooms. However, the big anchor tenants were in the main of no interest to two-channel audio enthusiasts. The largest spaces were devoted to Sony showing off its new high definition video screen and DVD lines, and spaces devoted to satellite radio.

For whatever reason, the Los Angeles crowds seemed to stay away from the HE

Show in droves. In the early years of the Stereophile Show, I can remember lines forming in the morning to buy tickets, with enthusiastic audiophiles lined up hundreds deep to get in the door. This year, there wasn't even a line at the check-in counter. The fall-off in attendance was confirmed when the official show reports said nothing about increased ticket sales.

The RMAF on the other hand, seems to have an entirely different model in mind. The word audio is prominently featured in the show's name, and the show is almost exclusively about audio. I recall seeing video screens in a couple of rooms, but it felt more like an afterthought than an emphasis. This was the third annual RMAF, and that



Tom Mackris with the Galiber and some distinctly un-lifestyle speakers.

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► in itself says something. Denver is out in the middle of the western US, which can be interpreted as being a long way from anywhere or halfway from everywhere (a fact reflected in its selection as the venue for the all-trade CEDIA event this year). In addition, Denver, with a population of around a half-million, is a very small market compared to New York City (over 19 million), Los Angeles (10 million) or Chicago (2.9 million). One of the interesting features of the show was the "Exhibitor Feedback" form distributed by the show organizers. The first question was "Does RMAF have a future?" as though the show organizers feared that they could not sustain the turnout of the previous year.

Despite its location in the middle of the country and the relatively small population base, the RMAF drew a good audience again this year, with approximately 2,300 attendees, not including exhibitors. Half of the attendees were from Colorado, while the other half came from 44 states and 12 other countries.

In the absolute sense, these numbers do not appear very large. I can remember attending Stereophile Shows many, many years ago, where there seemed to be 2,300 people ahead of me in the line to get through the front door! But the show organizers, Al Steifel and Margorie Baumert were quite pleased with these numbers, which reflected a 23% increase in attendance over last year – and that year was widely adjudged a success.

Why is a modest congregation of audiophiles in the middle of a very large, spread out country so special? What I came away from the show with was a sense of freshness and enthusiasm from both the exhibitors and public, one that seemed to have gone missing many years ago at other consumer audio shows. Fifteen or twenty years ago, there would always be a sense of charged anticipation in the crowd milling about to get in on the first day of an audio show, and the only sense of foreboding was that hundreds of other audiophiles were going through the turnstiles

before you. For some years past, this feeling has been replaced by a sense of ennui.

What accounts for RMAF bucking that trend, and what does it reflect about where the audio hobby or industry is heading? I sense both a different attitude in exhibitors about their participation, as well as a different expectation by consumers about what they expect to get out of shows today.

For many years past, the main topic of (guarded) conversation among exhibitors at the HE and Stereophile shows was the high cost of rooms and whether the exhibitors could ever hope to recoup anything from the experience. RMAF seems to have provided a relief valve for this pent up concern. With reasonably priced exhibitor fees, and the ability to do their own set up without high union costs, RMAF exhibitors were not singing the blues. Instead, what I heard from exhibitors across the board was how satisfied they were



The Soundsmith room with those interesting speakers.

with their interactions, both with the public and with other manufacturers and distributors. Perhaps it's the attitude that accounts for the good will, but I think it's more a shift in consumer attitude that worked to the benefit of this show. What drove the point home for me was, on the last day of the show, noticing how many young couples drifted about the show with smiles on their faces. At first, the skeptic in me wondered if some of them had wandered down the wrong hall from a wedding registry or cat show. But no, I cornered a few of these couples and chatted with them about how they got there and how they felt about the show. They were drawn to the event out of an interest in music and replay equipment. The show organizers had gotten a fair amount of press coverage for the show, sufficient to bring out more than the usual middle-aged male technocrats.

What was the honey in the pot that drew these folks in? First, this was an audio show. Nobody wandered in ►

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▶ looking for the latest iPod accessory. Satellite radio competitors were not handing out flyers and video enthusiasts were not streaming in the doors looking for the latest sub-woofer or flat screen TV. Instead, there seemed to be an unusually large number of two-channel enthusiasts asking intelligent questions. Exhibitors reported that these questioners seemed like real consumers weighing real purchase decisions rather than tire kickers devoid of serious purchasing intent.

This could be felt especially in some of the more interactive rooms. Nordost had its usual set up where it runs through its line of cables playing the same musical cut, allowing listeners to hear for themselves the differences. I wandered in a few times each day to marvel at Nordost super salesman Lars' marvelous rapport with dozens of enthusiast audiophiles who variously sat rapt through the demonstration or peppered him with intelligent questions.

While the Nordost demonstration was hardly new to RMAF, it seemed like some of Lars' enthusiasm had rubbed off on other corners of the show

Another interesting room that seemed to impress everyone was the SoundSmith room, featuring a Strain Gauge Cartridge and matching pre-amplifier, and an array of very affordable small speakers (the Dragonfly, the Monarch and Mantis) which provided perhaps the best sound (from small and sanely priced speakers) at the show. The Dragonfly and Monarch are bookshelf speakers that provided excellent sound in miniature packages. The larger floorstanding Mantis speakers sounded promising, but its package did not appeal to me as much as the more traditional bookshelf line. The Strain Gauge cartridge and related electronics conjured up memories of home brew days long past, when attendees could dream of starting up their own high-end company in a garage. The room was fun and I returned there several times.

At the other extreme of build sophistication and pricing was the High Water Sound room featuring the TW-Acoustic Turntables, one of the most mouth-watering products at the

show two years running. This fine German table was equipped with Frank Schroeder's arm, while French digital electronics from EERA were also feeding UK designed and built electronics from Tron. The only significant US product in the room was the vibration isolation device from MinusK supporting the turntable.

Local (Boulder, Colorado) legend Avalon Acoustics was a no-show, apparently because of a recent change of local dealer. Denver's largest shop, Audio Unlimited, which used to carry Avalon, instead supplied the show with several

Wilson and Focal models. Turntables of every size and price range were everywhere. Another perennial show favorite is the "meet the editors" format seminar, and this show was no exception. This event offered two versions, however – an internet publication editor seminar and a print



A full house meets the editors.

publication seminar. At the internet seminar, attended by about 15 people, one editor predicted that internet publications were well on the way to replacing print media in the audio world. When it came time for the print seminar, our own RSF joining several of The Absolute Sound's editors, the same room was packed out with over 70 people who apparently had not yet learned of the imminent demise of print media.

Is RMAF the premier two-channel consumer show in the US? For me, this show harks back to years past when audio still showed its bobby roots. The exhibitors were a good mix of small-scale manufacturers like Schroeder, Galibier, Hagerman and a host of others, side by side with large brands like Wilson, Clearaudio and Mark Levinson. Exhibitors and attendees alike displayed an enthusiasm that has been somewhat lacking at other shows for many years, perhaps because of competition from computers and video for the affections of today's consumer. But RMAF seems a clear indicator of an uptum of interest in serious audio; long may it thrive.



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Alastair Robertson-Aikman (1924-2006)



Alastair Robertson-Aikman was renowned and respected throughout the hi-fi world. So much ink has been expended on the subject of his tonearms and turntables, even more on his music room and the system it contained, that it would be superfluous to add to the mountain. What is not as widely appreciated is that the same standards ARA brought to his exquisitely manufactured products applied to every other aspect of his life. From 1961, when the SME 3009 first appeared, to the day we lost him on October 29th, 2006, there wasn't a product that emerged from the SME factory that didn't carry the mark of his perfectionist drive. But flawlessly finished products alone will not generate the enormous well of respect in which he was universally held. Alastair's code of conduct governed his own life and passions just as surely as it influenced those around him, which is why he left such an indelible impression on all who met him. His standards are reflected in the products that everybody knows and recognizes, but it is his personal standards this industry can so ill afford to lose. But if he will be missed by us, there are others who will miss him more...

Roy Gregory

Always the best seats in the house...

Alastair liked things beautifully executed and disliked anything less than that. We all know that. There was, however, something else he liked and enjoyed even more than that; in his uniquely understated manner, he adored and pursued the most complex and perfect musical form of all times - opera. And if it were not for his love of opera, then quite possibly there would never have been a Music Room at Stokes, or all those wonderful tonearms and turntables.

In the summer of 1998, having spent many hours in

the Music Room and already being smitten (as a simple instrumentalist) by the perfect beauty of the operatic form, Alastair introduced me to the Glyndebourne Festival. Never before have I enjoyed *Così fan Tutte* as much. Glyndebourne was his favourite oasis of opera, a very special place he fondly returned to again and again. From October 2000 and

Tales of Hoffmann we graduated to his favourite singers and conductors on the stage of The Royal Opera House. Even his deteriorating health could not stop him from simply being there to relish and recharge. Needless to say, every visit to an opera house posed in turn a new challenge to the system in the Music Room. And - yes, it always sounded closer to the live experience than words can describe.

Decades of close rapport with live and recorded performances made Alastair the most natural source of aesthetic and factual knowledge on the subject. He liked the work of the younger Pavarotti, but also held more recent stars like Cecilia Bartoli and Juan Diego Florez in high esteem. One singer, however, always remained at the top of Alastair's chart and closest to his heart - Plácido Domingo. They never met, but Domingo sent Alastair a personal note only a year ago, procured by a mutual friend at the Vienna State Opera, an indication of the affection and respect in which he was held throughout the operatic world.

That world, the world of opera, has lost one of its absolute supporters. The world of audio has lost one of its last mavericks and the holder of its highest standards. I have lost a mentor and a precious friend. But, above all, the world has lost a true gentleman. God bless, Alastair, and rest in peace. Until we meet again - front-row, right behind the conductor.

Branko Bozic



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"What I dream is an art of balance, of purity and serenity" (H. Matisse)



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Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy System 8 Loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

This is the big one. Even after decades, the Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy is the force to be reckoned with in high-end loudspeaking. Like the Quad Electrostatic, it's a benchmark by which all other speakers are judged. But, it's a moving target, as it keeps getting better and better. This latest – the £24,950 System 8 – is the pinnacle of current Wilson thinking, combining trickle-down technology from the likes of the MAXX 2 and Alexandria loudspeakers, with built-up treatments from the stunning new Duette.

Although there are major changes to the speaker system, the external appearance of the System 8 is more or less identical to previous models. The WATT (Wilson Audio Tiny Tot) is an independent midrange and treble unit, which is designed to sit upon the Puppy sub-woofer. Years of symbiotic evolution has meant that the two devices are essentially intrinsically linked – if you wanted to use the WATT on its own as a near-field monitor (it's original task), there are better solutions in the Wilson portfolio today, and the WATT and Puppy are not really considered separately anymore.

To roll out that tired old cliché, this is evolution rather than revolution. But it's a pretty big evolution, up with opposable thumbs and growing a set of lungs. That said the bulk of the change occurs in the top box. The WATT gets a whole new tweeter and enclosure. The tweeter comes from the MAXX 2, and this has also necessitated using the technologies that go into the MAXX 2 crossover. The mid-range and bass units remain unchanged.

Less noticeable by eye alone are the materials changes to the cabinet. But try to pick up a System 7 WATT and a System 8 and you'll see where the difference goes. The System 8 cabinet is far lighter, as it replaces the mass loading with materials science: X material and M material, no less... Wilson Audio adopts the 1950s sci-fi B-movie school of nomenclature. These were first seen in the System 7 Puppy, with X material (which is mined from the atmosphere of the third moon of Vega 5) proving remarkably non-resonant and uncolored and M material (grown in giant vats by the Death Squirrels of Zeti Reticuli) being highly prized for its midrange clarity. Or something like that...

The System 8 comes in four standard colours, another eight regular optional colours and then any colour you can think of to special order. The WilsonGloss process is a like

the Dulux paint matching service in every DIY shop in the land, just far, far more rich and attractive. This should not be understated. It means you can make the speaker as outlandish or as subtly blending as possible. The bright blue and silver-grilled System 8 shown in the brochure definitely falls into the former category. If you want to make the speaker match the lemon yellow Lambo in your garage, no problems; if you want to make the speaker match your home décor, no problems.

It's bad journalistic form to use one product to focus on a review of another, but it's wholly appropriate here. The Wilson System 8 stands on the shoulders of giants; in this case the Duette and the System 7 that this speaker replaces. The System 7 was the big crossover speaker for me; this was the Wilson speaker (or at least, the first Wilson speaker that didn't cost six figures) that I didn't merely 'respect'. The System 7 was the Wilson speaker I actually liked. Others that followed – the MAXX 2, the Sophia 2 – built upon that 'like' to a lesser or greater effect.

Then came the Duette, and everything changed again. Suddenly Wilson speakers sounded approachable, where before they were steely and aloof. Suddenly they had that small speaker sensibility that big speakers ►



► often lack. Suddenly, the System 7 seemed a bit less integrated compared to its little brother. The System 7 had the dynamic edge and it certainly had range, reach and scale on the Duette, but there was a sense of musical belonging that the System 7 needed to have. And that's what the System 8 brings to the WATT/Puppy combination.



Let's put this into some kind of perspective. If this sounds like every iteration of WATT/Puppy prior to the System 8 was found wanting, guess again. Each successive WATT/Puppy sounds awesome; it's just somehow the Wilson wizards manage to slather on another layer of awe on top of each new model. The 'footie score' Wilsons (WATT 3/Puppy 2, Partick-thistle 3/Queen of the South 1 and so on) were remarkable detail retrievers, arguably achieving a pinnacle in System V. System 6 wrought the big change, bringing in enhanced coherence and making the speaker

less demanding of amplification (no more 'great speaker in search of an amp', more just 'great speaker') but with that came a harder speaker to place in a room with ease. Then, System 7 started bringing in still greater musicality and timing, smoothing out the bumps of the 6 in the process. System 8 sort of completes the circle, making this a more rounded speaker, still capable of great analysis of disc and system, but in a more fluid way, that brings it in line with the sort of entertainment opportunities afforded by the Duette. Given that the implication from Wilson Audio is that the developments in the System 8 come from the top down (specifically the MAXX 2), it seems strange that the System 8 seems to have so much sonically in common with the Duette, but perhaps this is not so odd, after all. They are all of the same family, after all.

Ben Harper's *Fight for Your Mind* shows what the System 8 is really capable of. It reveals that glorious mid-range; no longer larger than life or forward, but open and honest sounding. There are sounds that are harder to define on some systems, which come through clear here. For instance, in the back of the right channel throughout the title track is a percussion instrument. In most cases, it could be a tambourine, could be something African or South American,



could even be someone shaking milk bottle tops. Fact is, in the opening bars, it's too far back in the mix to be immediately recognisable. Except on the System 8. Here, it's immediately, instantly recognisable as sleigh bells. It could be nothing else... how could I be so stupid? Even when it's the only instrument in the mix,

it's indistinct on most speakers compared to the sound of the Wilson. Then, there's the timing. Usually, speakers like the Duette would out-time a WATT/Puppy design, by virtue of less drivers and less of a full-range presentation. That doesn't happen here, either. The loudspeaker is entirely neutral when it comes to timing, in that it doesn't impose or enforce a specific timing on the music, but neither does it slug the life out of the music. ►



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Compatibility...

One of the joys of the Wilson ethos – certainly when you think back to when the WATT/Puppy originally appeared – is amplifier compatibility. No amp-smashing load here, no one ohm impedance and 80dB efficiency; the later WATT/Puppy systems, in all their various guises, has been the amplifier-chummy speaker of the high end. Best of all, Wilson's importance in top-notch loudspeaking is so significant, that the vast majority of high-end speakers that have followed in the WATT/Puppy's wake have likewise been reasonably efficient affairs, usually with impedance traces that will never once turn an unsuspecting amplifier into a smoking ruin. This allowed us the choice of using valve amplifiers as well as transistors; if the high-end fraternity had followed the path of something like the Apogee, the valve amplifier would be almost extinct today.

This amplifier-friendliness is deceptive, however. Although, in theory at least, you could hook a £250 amplifier to a pair of £25,000 loudspeakers, it's not something that would be recommended. At the very least, you will end up with a horrific sound. The Duette may be remarkably good at working with amplification far below the norm for a five-figure loudspeaker, but the System 8 is fussier. As always, the System 8 will tell the reviewer exactly what's going on elsewhere in the audio chain (which is why the speaker system has been used by so many source and amp reviewers), and if you cut corners in the front end and amps, you'll notice that skimping time and time again.

It's hard to pick out a high-end combination with the Wilson system, because it is so ubiquitous. Peer into the test listening facilities of practically any American high-end electronics company and you will

find Wilson speakers, because they are such a reference point, just like you'll find a pair of Quad Electrostatics nestling somewhere in a loudspeaker design studio.

But, there are combinations that work together exceptionally well, one of which is Krell. Of course, now Krell has its own speaker range, this is one high-end company that doesn't sport Wilson in its listening room anymore (except by way of competition) but that is immaterial. The new Evolution series is the perfect counterpoint to Wilson, combining the speed and directness of small amplifiers with the sort of muscle needed to drive the speakers to usefully high SPLs. The system partnering the speakers for review featured an Evolution 505 SACD/CD player, connected to an Evolution 202 two-box pre-amplifier and then to an Evolution 402 stereo power amp, all linked using Krell's clever CAST current-domain transmission system – insert your own loudspeaker cable here. From experience, Cardas and Transparent would work well in this setting, while Nordost might make the sound too forthright in the top end.

These Krells, especially the amplification, give the headroom needed to play at balls-out levels and the sort of dynamic range that really shows off the System 8 at its best. But the speaker's comparatively easy-going specification means you aren't limited to amps with hundreds of watts on tap and playing with your electronics is an important facet of the evolving Wilson experience. Whilst power remains desirable its nature and how exactly it's delivered have become less so, making this a speaker to make the most of partnering electronics rather than one that demands a system built on its own terms.

► If something's upbeat, it will play it upbeat. If it's played down, it will play down. Compared to smaller speakers, it does appear to lack the sheer speed of delivery, but this is deceptive; the reality is that the Wilson can cope with the majesty of recordings where those little boxes tend to cut off the drama for speed (and price and box size). Play Eminem, fast, loud and angry and he retains all his vitriol and pace. But play Beethoven on a small two way and you lose a quarter of the string and percussion section, where here the sound is entirely intact.

What seems to have happened is that instead of sounding like a scaled-down Alexandria, the System 8 sounds like a Duette with added depth and dynamics. This is a thoroughly good thing, for two reasons. First... what a bass! Deep bass lines are taut, deep

and controlled, yet when played for droning effect on a disc, your eyes start to vibrate. Second, this small sound made big is just so much more musically integrated than before. Things just snap into focus all the more, music takes on that boppy, small box speaker sound, but with the added bonus of big speaker scale and energy. So, the speaker can cope with Rachmaninov-level dynamic range and damn-the-torpedos-full-speed-ahead

techno, without favouring one over the other. It's a win-win situation.

There's a dismissive attitude toward Wilson speakers in general, usually from those who have only limited exposure to the designs. The WATT/Puppy is the best PA system in the world, goes the thinking.

It's not hard to see how this can come about; the system can play full-range, full-dynamic music at high volumes. Also, in fairness, WATT/Puppy systems of a decade or so ago did make a sound that was forward and hard to handle without the very, very best in source and amplification. But those days are long past. In fact, the forward nature of Wilson speakers of old is almost entirely gone (or rather, it disappears fast with warm-up and run-in... ►



▶ if you listen to the speakers right out the box, they sound forward and bright, but settle down spatially and tonally over time) and a very different presentation is now to the fore. This sound projects somewhat into the room, but gives a sublime depth to the sound and musical instruments within that soundstage sound as if they are entirely natural and in the room with you.

Of course, this does depend on the quality of the disc, and the Wilson design is unforgiving of heavy-handed edits. You find yourself drawn to carefully engineered recordings from the 1970s and before, because they are so sublime. It doesn't make modern recordings unplayable, but just digs out more from Stevie Wonder's *Inner-visions* in so musical a manner, you end up listening to the whole album, and a darkening winter's afternoon in England gets transformed to a balmy summer's evening in America. If more people mastered on these speakers, there would be infinitely better recordings, because you couldn't drop in edit points without their becoming all the more noticeable. Of course, the really subtle edit points still go almost unnoticed, unless you are being hypercritical of positioning within the soundstage – occasionally, it seems as if a singer has taken one step forward for a bar or two before returning to his or her normal position. But, that's not simply an arbiter of good recording technique, but an indicator of just how accurate these Wilsons really are.



That accuracy poses a problem for a reviewer. Usually a speaker can be pinned down as bright or dark or woody or clean and so on. The Wilson is more of a chimera than that. You play lots of woodwinds, the speaker sounds 'woody'. Play some moody Beethoven string quartets and the sound goes all 'dark' and 'moody'. Play some cool and clean Count Basic and... well, you get the picture. Every speaker has a character, but this one is more fleeting, more hidden than most. And perhaps it's that which sets this speaker apart from all the WATT/Puppy systems that went before.

This presages coherence across the Wilson range that wasn't so noticeable before, because this un-sound is something common to Wilson speakers today. The WATT/Puppy – perhaps by virtue of being the senior speaker in the range – sounded different to other Wilson speakers in the range. Now, if someone likes the MAXX 2, but cannot fit so large a speaker in the room, or wants something bigger than the Sophia 2 or Duette, the System 8 fits like a glove. Usually, a speaker system that's old enough to vote, especially one that has gone through so many changes, could be accused of beginning to tire.



Some of those changes have to be anti-aging treatments, and eventually you can only go so far. Wilson's

WATT/Puppy System 8 is the happy exception; it's a design that keeps drawing on developments in design from above (and now below) and just keeps on getting better. From the outside, the changes are subtle, almost invisible, but under the skin, major surgery has taken place and the results aren't just renewed vigour.

I expected the audio equivalent of a hip replacement, what I got was the bionic man!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two box, three-way loudspeaker system
Driver Complement:	2x 200mm bass units 1x 175mm midrange 1x 25mm inverted titanium dome
Nominal Impedance:	4 Ohms
Sensitivity:	92dB
Bandwidth:	21Hz-22.5kHz -3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	330 x 1040 x 480mm
Weight (per speaker):	77.1kg
Price:	£24,950

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conrad-johnson ACT 2 Series 2 Vacuum-tube Line-stage

by Roy Gregory

The original ACT 2 was enthusiastically reviewed back in Issue 35 (and duly received a Product Of The Year Award in Issue 36). Now, some two years later, it has achieved Series 2 status, a transformation outwardly marked solely by a lower case suffix on the front-panel, but which indicates a complete internal makeover. The details of these changes are outlined in the sidebar, but taken along with the effect they have on the sound of the ACT they are sufficient to render this, to all intents and purposes a completely new product. Having said that, there's no going against nature and c-j have always adopted an evolutionary as opposed to revolutionary approach to product development, meaning that any consideration of the Series 2 will of necessity take as its point of departure the performance of that original ACT.

Thankfully, one thing that hasn't changed is the elegant, two-tier chassis format with inset tube turret, a cylindrical, finned housing constructed from layered Perspex which protects the four 6N30P tubes. The ACT 2 is far from small, but the styling does a great job of diminishing what might otherwise be a rather bluff fascia, as well as separating it from the crowd. Visually speaking it remains my favourite of all the c-j products, while the upper control panel is neat, legible and uncluttered, delivering the current status quo at a single glance. Operationally, the Series 2 is identical to the earlier version. Basic buttons on the unit, augmented by the sensibly proportioned remote control cover all the basic functions necessary to operate the ACT in a two-channel or high-quality multi-channel set-up, with enough single-ended connections to cover most eventualities. Overall, it's a

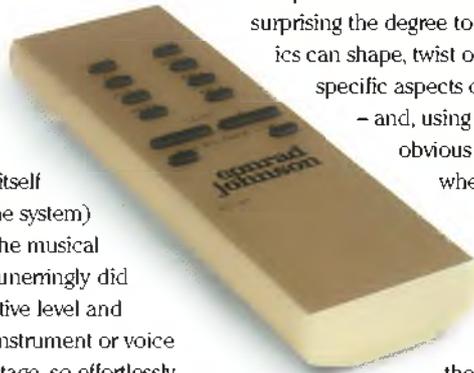
model of practicality and straightforward functionality, concentrating on what you need and dispensing with irrelevant frippery. In these days of micro-processor control it makes a refreshing change from the "just because you could it doesn't mean you should" school of bells and whistles design.

No surprise then that the ACT 2's sound was similarly clear and uncluttered, with an uncanny ability to remove itself (and the rest of the system) from the path of the musical performance. So unemingly did it capture the relative level and position of each instrument or voice within the soundstage, so effortlessly did it keep them separate and distinct that the gap between life and art (or in this case ACT) became at times if not imperceptible then largely irrelevant. Images were incredibly stable and beautifully proportioned, one to another, the soundstage a single holistic space, independent of the speakers. But above all, the ACT was beautifully balanced. There are many pre-amps superior to it in one aspect or another, but these can't match the naturalness with which the c-j goes about its business, the way its various musical abilities dovetail into a single seamless whole. If you want the whole story then refer back to Issue 35, but the effect and importance is akin to that I described in the Avalon Isis review, though unique in a speaker whilst merely rare amongst electronics.

Of course, you can't listen to just a pre-amp or speaker; you can only listen to a system. Yet it's strange how one

component can impose itself on the others around it, as well as the way in which a step forward in one realm can reveal advances elsewhere. The Isis surpasses the ability of any other speaker I've ever used when it comes to making sense of the internal dynamic within a performance – assuming that performance reaches it intact. It's surprising the degree to which electronics can shape, twist or exaggerate specific aspects of a recording – and, using the Isis, how obvious it becomes when they don't. It's not surprising then, that I couldn't wait to get the ACT 2 into the system. I wasn't disappointed.

For all its strengths, the original ACT was not without flaws and, in a way, its greatest strength was that by keeping those weaknesses so perfectly in proportion they were prevented from intruding on the musical performance. Its dynamic range could have been wider, its soundstage more expansive and (particularly for a c-j) it could have been richer and warmer. But because these attributes all interrelate and actually underpin that wonderful sense of instrumental independence and separation, everything was held in balance – the music worked. There were those who decried the end of the traditional c-j sound: even those who preferred the subsequent, more valve-like but ultimately inferior CT5. But that was missing the point. The ACT, aided by the advent of its proprietary Teflon capacitors, moved musical



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► performance into a realm where c-j had never previously been. Well, everyone can relax again: the ACT 2 Series 2 retains all the virtues of the original, but restores those performance aspects that traditionalists found lacking.

With the Series 2 in the system the first thing you'll notice (depending on your predilections) is either the sense of life and presence it brings or the sudden increase in the scale and extent of the soundstage. Not surprising really, as both are intimately related and depend in turn on dynamic range in general and micro-dynamics in particular. Changes to the power supply arrangements and their mechanical isolation, along with the type and disposition of those all-important capacitors, have dropped the noise floor dramatically, blackening the background

The Series 2 developments...

The evolution from the ACT 2 to its Series 2 incarnation involves significant changes to both the circuit and power supply topologies as well as alterations to the type and values of critical bypass capacitors. Whereas the original version employed three regulated supplies, one for the input and one each for the output, this has been changed. A shift from a 0.25µF polystyrene bypass on the input filter to a 2.0µF Teflon has negated the need for the "corrective" influence of the separate input power supply, meaning that the total reservoir capacitance can now be split between the two channels in the output stage. Likewise, the 0.01µF polystyrenes that bypass the cathode diodes have been upgraded to 0.1µF Teflons, while eliminating the need to elevate the filaments has also eliminated a polypropylene capacitor, seen by the audio circuit through the plate supply.

These redistributions and component changes demanded a new mother board simply to

accommodate the larger capacitor sizes if nothing else, so the company took the opportunity to re-work the ground paths as well as incorporating an additional shield between the power supply transformers and the audio circuit, resulting in a claimed 5dB improvement in signal to noise ratio. The end result is a product that shares casework with its predecessor but little else, making upgrades from one to the other uneconomical to perform - especially given a list price increase from £13500 to £16000. This is an increasingly common scenario (take the Audio Research Ref 3 line-stage as another example) although that's unlikely to provide much comfort to existing owners who will doubtless have their own views on the subject (should the situation change, owners of Series 1 units will of course be informed). But listening to the two different products it's hard to escape the conclusion that they're exactly that - totally different products.



and quickening leading edges. Bigger, bolder and richer hued it may be, but the growth is organic, meaning that the ACT's innate balance and perfect proportions survive intact, its subtlety and finesse now coupled to even more lifelike dynamics and scale.

Revisiting Nanci Griffith's *One Fair Summer Evening* I'm presented with a closer, more intimate picture

still, her life-size image immediate and present before me. Listening to her playing, her transitions from her spoken introductions to singing brings home how naturally this pre-amp drives the energy, its storage by the system and release by the signal. Nanci is a solid, living,

breathing presence; she doesn't move forward or back, shrink or grow with volume or musical density. There she is, her voice elevated by the height of the stage, the crowd lower and around you, responding to the humour in her 'tween tracks chatter; and there she stays, whether through the long rambling intro to 'Love At The Five And Dime' or the shift in gear and musical density to 'Spin On A Red Brick Floor'. That stability and sense of scale, the ability to project energy brings a natural physicality to the playing of acoustic instruments, whether it's a cello, a piano or an acoustic guitar. The way in which the instrument takes and converts the energy from the player, the way it releases it, the shape and structure of that release all bring the process to life. With Series 2, the ACT 2 moves from what is being played into the realms of how, firmly



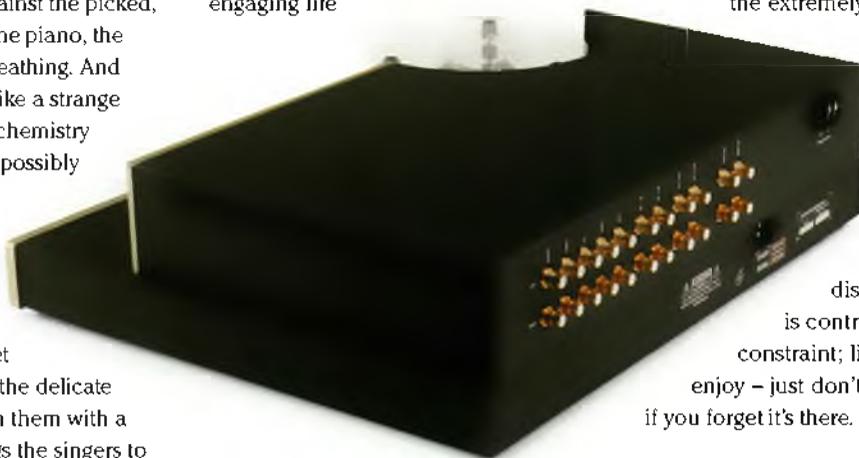
▶ straddling these all too often mutually exclusive capabilities.

Those who doubt the ability of valves when it comes to rhythm and timing should experience the musical integrity this c-j brings to instrumental lines. The deep funk of Tosca's *Suzuki* is perfectly poised against the picked, crystalline sprays of the piano, the music pulsing and breathing. And whilst it might seem like a strange example, just try the chemistry in close harmonies – possibly the most intimate and fragile of all recorded music. The ACT 2 unravels individual voices with uncanny ease yet manages to preserve the delicate relationships between them with a deft finesse that brings the singers to life. Be it lead and backing on a power ballad or metal anthem, or the deep familiarity between the singers on a duet, the nature, the intimacy (or otherwise) in the relationship is clear to hear.



I used the ACT 2 with a range of different amplifiers, from the VTL S400 to the Karan KA M1200s, via the Krell 402 and the Hovland RADIA. Of these, somewhat surprisingly (to me at least) it was the Karan mono-blocks that

best met the pre-amp's balance of delicacy, finesse and musical presence – not to mention of course, its expansive soundstage. Used together (as they were at this year's Heathrow show) there's an immediate sense of rightness about them, an engaging life



and impressive solidity, combined by a superb lightness of touch. Likewise I suspect that the Premier 350 would match beautifully. But it is interesting to note that as we raise the bar for pre-amp performance with models like the ARC Ref 3, the Connoisseur and this latest ACT 2, matching these units to power amps also becomes far more critical to realising their elevated potential.

The latest revisions to the ACT 2 recipe keep it well and truly in the forefront of current line-stage developments. Neither as emphatic as the Connoisseur nor as sumptuously open and languid as the Ref 3, it treads a supremely natural middle path, combining real dynamic discrimination and scaling with convincing resolution of detail and stereo perspectives which will make it many friends. With the ART Series 3

waiting in the wings, it leaves me wondering how much further c-j can stretch the envelope... Any substantial improvement over this ACT seems hard to envisage, yet such is the name of the hi-end game. As it stands, the ACT 2 Series 2 joins the extremely select band of control amps that really make the musical grade in this hardest of all electronic disciplines. This is control without constraint; listen and enjoy – just don't be surprised if you forget it's there. ✚

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Vacuum-tube line-stage
Valve Complement:	4x 6N30P
Inputs:	5x single-ended line 1x external loop 1x theatre
Gain:	21.5dB
Outputs:	2x single-ended main 1x external loop 1x theatre
Phase:	Inverting
Output Impedance:	500 Ohms
Maximum Output:	10V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	483 x 137 x 400mm
Weight:	14kg
Price:	£16000

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9	10	11	12
13	14	15	



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VIDEO

LINE 1

LINE 2

TAPE

ROKSAN

ROKSAN

*Caspian M*SERIES





INPUT

MENU

STANDBY

SELECT

Line 2

F

MUTE

A

Vitus Audio 010 Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

It is no mean feat to jump two-footed into designing and manufacturing audio equipment. The two-channel market seems to be bursting at the seams despite the prophets of doom constantly telling us that it is forever shrinking. But to take that leap with your sights set firmly on the high-end and to have the conviction and belief that you have something genuinely new to offer is something else completely. Hans Ole Vitus, or just plain Vitus as he likes to be known, originally founded his company back in 1995 and was joined by long-term associate Anders Grove (who had been running cable manufacturer Argento) about a decade later. Vitus themselves describe Anders as "the weird inventor type" and that's probably not a bad description of a man who apparently once constructed a speaker membrane from Quails eggs. That's certainly weird enough for me.

Vitus is based in Denmark, where the company design and hand-build several very interesting and expensive audio electronics and some equally serious cabling named Andromeda. Back in Issue 29 RG reviewed the battery powered RP 100 phono and RL-100 line-stages from their Audio Statement series of products and was lost in admiration for what he was hearing. Now Vitus have produced a fascinating new amplifier in their Signature series and I have been fortunate enough to have been using it for the past couple of months and I have to confess that I too am smitten by the way their products make music. This amplifier, the SS-010, is a lot more affordable than the Audio Statement products and its unusual configuration is likely to broaden customer interest even more.

So, is the SS-010 an integrated amplifier or a power amplifier with a

volume control? Vitus himself reckons the latter because that was how it was originally designed, but that doesn't really tell the whole story as it can function as both. In integrated guise it is limited to only two inputs (but that will be enough for most people) while the power amplifier section is only 25 watts. Not enough I hear you say. But wait and read on as this amplifier proves conclusively that not all watts are made equal and if this is really 25 watts, then that's about all I need anyway.

You want to know what this little Vitus is all about? Then try and pick it up by yourself, all 35 Kg of it. You can do it, but I'd advise you not to. Enlist the help of a friend because inside that beautifully constructed case is the heart of this design, a transformer that (relatively speaking) must be the biggest I have ever encountered given the size of the component itself. Behind the use of that particular UI 1400KVA unit (UI denotes the complex shape of the transformer core) lies a story in itself as Hans Ole Vitus has some firm and unconventional ideas on the subject, having spent literally years researching and experimenting with every possible transformer technology available. Despite being used in a number of high-end designs, Vitus dislikes toroidal transformers and believes that the only advantages they offer are those of small size and lower cost, factors that are of no concern in the manufacture of his amplifiers. The custom Vitus transformers, it is claimed, offer the level of stability and clarity that they are looking for and do away with the need for external power conditioners. They have low capacitive mains coupling, low magnetic radiation and very low voltage drop. Far from being another manufacturer talking up

his own products his philosophy and intention is clear. He takes tremendous pride in using the best materials available, regardless of the costs involved, and this strict policy applies to every part of each design and that transformer is just one element of this thinking.

The SS-010 has two inputs, one balanced and the other single-ended and either can be used as a pre-in



when the unit is electronically configured as a power amplifier. This is achieved, as are all the other functions, through the very neat menu system which is accessed via the front panel buttons or the remote control unit. This particular amplifier was supplied with a Phillips Pronto unit that had been pre-programmed to operate the entire Vitus range, as the dedicated version was not yet available. When it does arrive I hope it will provide a broader window of acceptance than the Phillips, as you need to be virtually head-on to the unit to get it to accept commands. However, I fear not as the IR receiver is in the recessed portion of the front panel. The illuminated display offers you the ability to name each input, brighten or dim the display, select the distance between volume steps, bypass the pre-amp section completely (to ►

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► use as a power amplifier) and to select whether the power amplifier operates in class A or A/B. When you power the amplifier from its standby state it defaults to the A/B setting which sounds very good indeed, but it performs appreciably better in pure class A, also achievable via a single input on the remote control.

In either output condition the power rating is 25 watts into 8 Ohms, only the quiescent current is changed. It takes about an hour or so after switching before it heats up and you will hear the amplifier in its full class A glory. Vitus have cleverly included the A/B setting for non-critical listening and to use as an alternative to the standby function to avoid completely powering down, to save on electricity consumption. I mention A/B as being for non-critical listening but in doing so I probably sell it short as it is no mean achiever in this mode, but the main reason to buy the SS-010 is for its sheer seamless top to bottom musical fluency and beauty as a class A amplifier. This is its whole *raison d'être*.

Vitus tells me that one of the speakers he used for developing the SS-010 was the Focal/JMLabs Micro Utopia Be, which coincidentally is the speaker I use at home*. So, it came as no surprise that through these speakers the tonal balance is just about as perfect as I have heard. I should add here that almost all the listening was done with a full Nordost Valhalla loom that was later substituted for a while by the Andromeda interconnect and speaker cables. But given the lengthy run-in times the Andromeda obviously need I decided to eliminate this as yet

* As an interesting sub plot to this review I discovered that Vitus actually offer a series of modifications to the Micro centred around re-wiring the entire speaker with Andromeda cable and I may well report on this intriguing prospect over the coming months.

unknown quantity from the equation for the moment and review them as a separate item at a future date. It should be noted here that all Vitus amplifiers are internally wired with Andromeda. I also don't want you to think that you have to use Vitus' own cables, superb as they promise to be, to achieve such great results.



At the centre of this amplifier's musical brilliance there is an inky black sense of tranquillity from which all music flows. An unforced, unprocessed stream of musical information of such stability and strength that its ability to deal with any tonal or rhythmic conundrum you may ask of it seems almost limitless. It has superb control but not that solid-state artificial, iron-fist grip that characterises so many high-end designs but a naturally structured ease and real world instrumental architecture.

This is helped enormously by an effortlessly large acoustic with tremendous depth, considerable useable bandwidth and truly rock-solid, unwavering multi-dimensional imaging. No single part suffers in comparison to any other, as this amplifier is as good at very high frequencies as it is at the opposite end of the scale. Musically it is as seamless as I have heard and is more colourful and textural than anything

other than the very best designs available. But it is the way in which it manages to incorporate all these areas of technical excellence into such rhythmic concentration and sense of movement and progression that really sets it apart. To talk about what it does and how it does it one really needs to quantify it in musical terms as the Vitus is one of those select few products that just lets the music happen without either forcing or

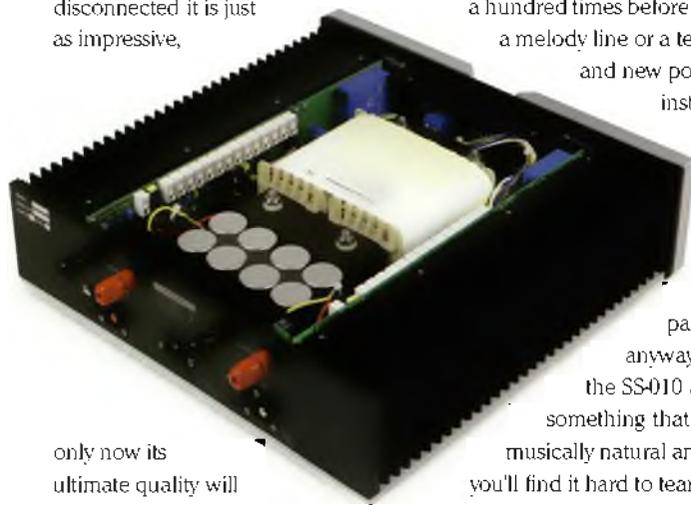
squeezing it out, nor providing a bottleneck to the quite wonderful flow of rhythmic subtleties and micro dynamics and shifts.

It is almost unbelievably smooth but don't let this fool you into believing that it is dynamically shy or remotely soft in nature. It is fast, dramatic, powerful and edgy when the music demands and can swing convincing transients, yet remain totally in control all the while. It's that custom-made transformer again, which seems able to deliver precise amounts of power with absolute precision to any part of the bandwidth when and where it is needed.

Resolution, though not the best I have ever heard, is generally excellent too. It never sounds overtly or clinically detailed but the closer you look, the more nuanced and subtle the music ►

▶ seems to be. I am always looking for audio systems that let me step deeper and deeper into the music and its structures and building blocks. I have an endless fascination with musicians and their relationships with their instruments. For me, it is the quality of the playing that really counts and the way in which musicians illustrate their own personalities in the shape of colour and tone through their amalgamation of taste, feel and technique. The Vitus brings all those things together in such an accessible and focussed way that it somehow seems to enhance the pure beauty of music to a point where the equipment is merely a tool and the music itself is the message. As I said, it just opens the window and lets the music happen with no sense of the mechanics of reproduction getting in the way.

So, configured as an integrated amplifier it is superb and as a power amplifier with the volume control disconnected it is just as impressive,

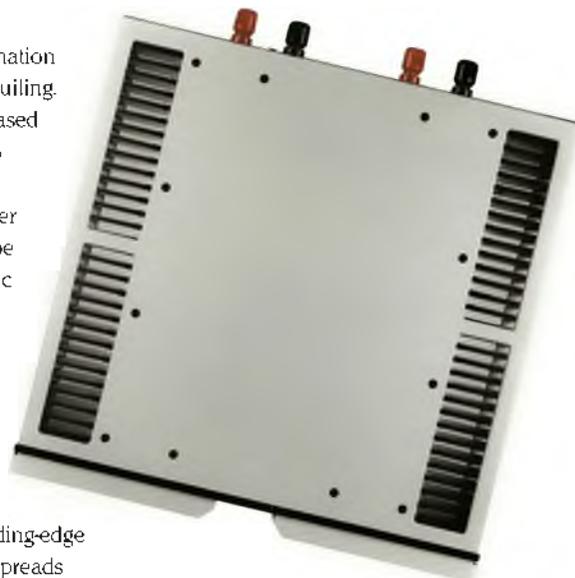


only now its ultimate quality will also be dictated by the partnering pre-amplifier. I used it with the Lyra Connoisseur 4.2L SE line-stage, which is still the best piece of audio electronics I have heard and it was mighty. Ideally I would have liked a bit more gain and Vitus tells me that all production models to follow will indeed be more sensitive. But the transparency, separation and dynamic freedom that this combination produces mean that

the music takes on new fascination and becomes even more beguiling. Working with the Lyra's increased resolution I loved its ability to unravel intense and complex passages of music without ever dropping a stitch and it can be compelling and even hypnotic in its relentless and unerring sense of rhythmic drive and precision. The bandwidth increases and so does the amplifiers sense of control. The bass is now more persuasive than ever with improved pitch and leading-edge impact and as the midband spreads deeper and deeper that extra high frequency articulation and tonal layering and texture give the music a sense of unprocessed reality that is rare and tremendously enjoyable. Just when you think you have its measure it will surprise you by illustrating a new slant on musical pieces that you have heard a hundred times before. You will hear a melody line or a tempo change and new possibilities and instrumental

relationships will open up. The Lyra Connoisseur itself is the master of these particular insights anyway, so hook it into the SS-010 and you have something that sounds so musically natural and powerful that you'll find it hard to tear yourself away.

I suppose the power rating might be inadequate for those with larger rooms or exceptionally inefficient speakers but I reckon it will still be enough for most. And there are those for whom two inputs will not be sufficient. But its possibilities are appealing. You could use it, with complete satisfaction, as an integrated amplifier and set up like this it comprehensively crushes most pre/power opposition, even at twice its price.



Then, at a later date, add a separate pre-amplifier (I'm sure there will be a suitable model from the Signature series soon) with no redundancy. By the time you read this, Vitus will likely have a UK distributor and I would strongly encourage you to seek them out. For a hand-made amplifier of this quality I assure you that the asking price is not excessive. I think it is a great product – in many ways the most impressive I've heard since the Connoisseur, which is praise indeed.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state class A power amplifier - with volume control
Power Output:	25 W Class A / 25W Class AB
Inputs:	1 x RCA, 1 x XLR
Input Impedance:	RCA - 10 kOhms, XLR - 600 Ohms
Frequency Response:	DC to 800kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435 x 130 x 430 mm
Weight:	35 Kg
Price:	£6550.00

Manufacturer:
Vitus Audio A/S, Denmark.
Net: www.vitusaudio.com
Email: info@vitusaudio.com

DEFINITIVE AUDIO



Main image: KSL Kondo Neuro Line Integrated Valve Amplifier £23,500



L to R: 1. Kuzma Stabi XL £10,000 2. Art Audio Concerto Stereo Amplifier (GE) £4400 3. Living Voice IBX R2 (Burr Oak) £4400 4. SME 10 / SME V £4115
5. Living Voice OBX RW (Santos) £7200 6. KSL Kondo Ongaku Integrated Amplifier £49,000 7. Magnum Dynalab 106T Valve Tuner £3600
8. KSL Kondo Gakuoh 300B Mono Amplifiers £48,500 9. Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD Player £2950 10. KSL Kondo V-z (1m) Interconnect £750

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4102



The Krell EVO-402 Stereo Power Amp (and the EVO-202 Line-stage)

by Roy Gregory

If any single brand can be said to define the UK notion of the US high-end, then it's Krell. Big, heavy, hot and expensive, they exploded onto the British market in the mid-80s – often literally, until people got to realize the implications of DC offset in the popular Audio Research pre-amps with which they were so often paired. The amplifiers have evolved through many iterations since the heady days of JMH running three KSA 50s with his Magneplanar MG3as, losing cooling fans and growing heat-sinks, dropping the class-A claims and adopting various proprietary output topologies instead. Yet, in a classic case of “everything changes, everything stays the same” unpacking and installing the EVO-402 created such a strong sense of déjà-vu that for a moment I thought I was back in the downstairs dem room at KJ.

First, there's the all enclosing casework; neater by far than the old KSAs, and lacking the signature handles, its complex extruded panels and extensive machining demonstrate the advances in CNC technology as much as the rise in the company's fortunes. Then there's the strict admonition in the manual to only connect tube pre-amps to the (DC blocking, capacitor coupled) single-ended inputs. Finally there's the weight; thankfully the 402 is devoid of sharp edges and is compact enough to get a decent hold of, but at 135lbs the question remains, how can something so (relatively) small weigh so much? The answer lies in the power supply and Krell's other great claim to fame; this was the first amplifier to popularize the notion of doubling its output into half the impedance. It wasn't the first amp to do it, but it was the first to make

those numbers stick in the public consciousness. The 402 sticks with tradition; two huge 5000VA transformers deliver peak output currents of 37A/channel and rated power of 400W into 8 Ohms and 800W into four. Running flat out that translates into a 6400 BTU/hr heat dissipation, giving this amp a carbon footprint that's equivalent in its cringe-worthiness to a very large SUV with a single child seat in the back. Krell has ever been about conspicuous consumption and that hasn't changed.

What has changed is the sophistication of the beast and the complexity of its circuitry. The 402 not only monitors its output current, DC off-set, rail voltages and temperature, it self protects and even tells the owner why it's shut itself down. The back panel offers three different input options (balanced, single-ended and CAST, which we'll get to later) as well as spade-only binding posts and a 20Amp power socket. The front panel switch glows red in standby, blue in operate and its LED can be defeated by a small switch on the rear. Inside, the circuit features Current Mode and Active Cascode topologies, Krell's way of telling you that this is a current (as opposed to voltage) amplifier, and uses multiple, parallel devices in each stage in order to minimize distortion. All those transistors, even sharing the load, generate all that heat, hence the four huge chimney slots that run top to bottom of the casework – ideal for warming ones gloves before winter morning training rides.

The 402 arrived accompanied by the more expensive of the two EVO line-stage options, the two-box 202. It offers all the usual versatility and user configuration options that we've come to expect these days, from individual input gain and balance to display functionality and input naming. More surprising is the fact that the 202 eschews current fashion by locating the microprocessor essential to that versatility in the same box as the audio circuitry, rather than off-board in the power supply. What's more, the manual, the machined recesses in the power supply top-plate and the incredibly short umbilical supplied all insist that the two units are stacked directly on top of each other.

On paper at least, the claimed performance is extremely impressive. A fully complementary, zero-feedback circuit with extraordinarily wide bandwidth is supplied by a substantial power supply built around a 170VA transformer, four bridge rectifiers and 39600microF of reservoir capacitance. A separate transformer is used to supply the digital control and monitoring circuitry.

Now, even the most ardent fan of the Krell marque would be hard pushed to suggest that their pre-amps are held in the same esteem as their power amps – which brings us to CAST. This is Krell's proprietary system connection technology, allowing the signal to remain in the current mode rather than being converted to a voltage. In an all Krell set-up, the signal would remain thus ►



► from the output stage of the front-end all the way to the output stages of the power amp, tying the system into a single entity as well as overcoming impedance issues related to inter-connect cables and product interfaces.

complex – and not just because of the level matching issues. The poise, dimensionality and smooth, even control of



Of course, conventional socketry is also provided but Krell make no bones about their belief in the inherent superiority (and cost effectiveness) of the CAST approach. The fact that it ties you into their pre-amps is neither here nor there...

With so many interconnection options, which should you plump for? It took a while to get to grips with the optimum arrangement, not helped by the fact that the CAST and balanced outputs add 12dB of gain to the single-ended six. Comparisons of CAST to balanced (using Nordost Valhalla for the balanced runs) showed a clear preference for the livelier, more focused, more transparent and tonally more colourful presentation of the former. But the contest between CAST and single-ended is rather more

the CAST hook-up definitely suffered in comparison to the added vitality, immediacy, micro dynamics and musical phrasing of a pair of single-ended Valhallas. The Nordost cables communicated far more directly with greater musical

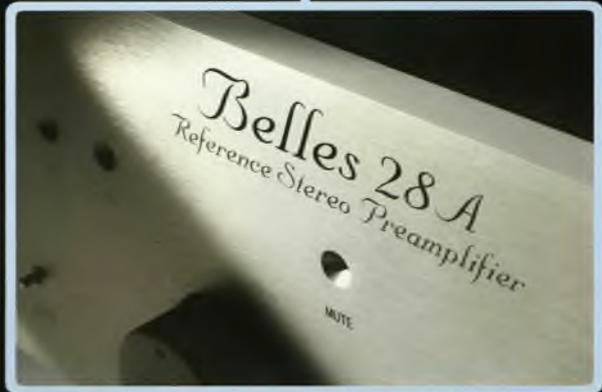


substance and purpose, a greater range of tonal colour and shading. Open and shut then... Well, not quite. The problem with the single-ended connection was a hollowness, a recessed mid that made voices nasal,

almost slightly quacky in the case of Nanci Griffith. Handclaps and audience noise were robbed of substance and their precise location, all problems that became markedly more apparent as soon as you used a pre-amp other than the 202. The ACT 2, the Connoisseur and the Vibe/Pulse all came and went, suffering varying degrees of tonal indignity along the way. More troubling still was the disruption to their musical flow and integrity; the end results sounding mechanical and disjointed. It's tempting to point a finger at the input capacitors on the 402's single-ended connections – a theory borne out by experimentation with a whole range of different cables and an eventual switch to the excellent (and severely underrated) Supra Sword interconnects and speaker cables. Their much meatier sound helped to inject some much needed mid-band energy and presence. It still couldn't overcome the hurdle presented to the alternative pre-amps but (somewhat ironically) lifted the sound of the 202's single-ended outputs above the CAST alternative.

Of course, introducing a Krell source component or KPE phono-stage (which can be driven from the 202's power supply) might well change things again. In the meantime it's hard to escape the conclusion that getting the best from the 402 means using a Krell pre-amp, making this arguably the most expensive three-box integrated in the world!

Just to further muddy the waters, the EVO-202 is itself exceedingly picky with inputs – and differently to the power amp. Here (with no Krell disc player or phono-stage on hand and thus no CAST option available) the balanced connections from both ►



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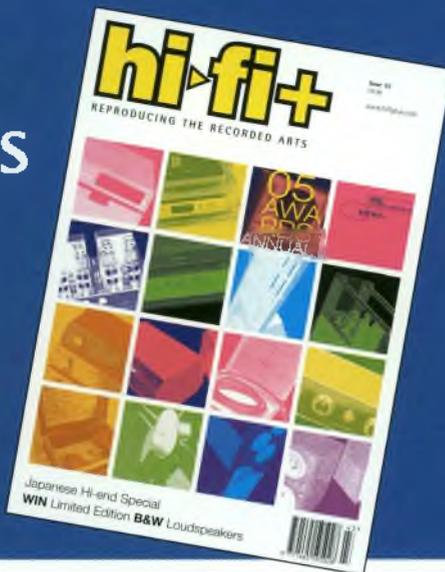
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► the Wadia 861SE and the ARC CD7 were dramatically more satisfying than the single-ended alternatives. The phono sockets delivered a dynamically flat sound lacking in texture but more importantly, musical cohesion and tension. Switching to balanced restored the musical presence and vitality, as well as the feeling of pace and flow. Where the single-ended inputs let your attention wander, failing to capture or stretch the musical moment, the XLRs fastened you to your seat, daring you to turn away, egging you on to wick it up. With 400 Watts on tap, the Krells go loud, they do it without any sense of strain and they positively encourage you to use the facility.

Oh, and one final thing; both the 202 and 402 allow you to switch off their pretty blue displays and status lights. Do it! Perhaps it's a reflection of the astonishingly low noise floor, but killing the lightshow, whilst it makes the Krells look a lot less impressive certainly adds a welcome additional sense of flow and freedom to their musical delivery, making performances more engaging and expressive. There are few products I've heard in which the benefits are quite so obvious (or beneficial).

By now you'll have gathered that it took a while to get the best out of these amps. Was it worth the bother? Well, as a customer you'd expect your dealer to sort all that out, but it also depends on what you are looking for in a system. With the requisite care devoted to configuration and cabling – and a considerable warm-up time from switch-on* these Krells offer one of

* Thankfully, both the 202 and 402 have standby modes that keep the audio circuits warm, but expect a good two to three days for them to hit their stride from stone cold.

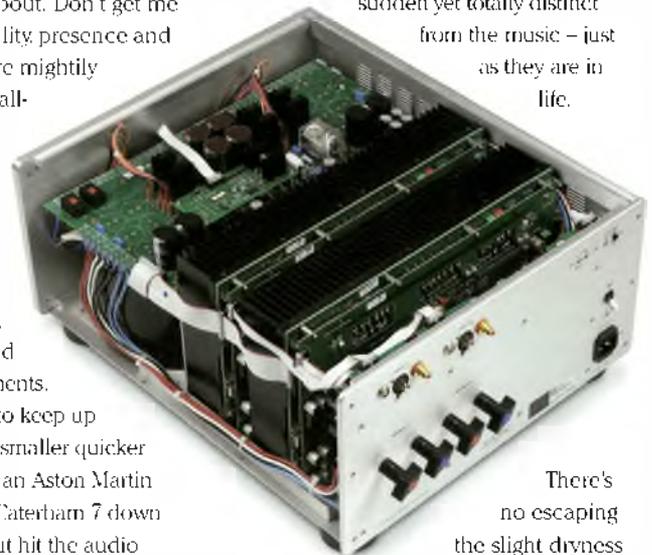
the most unflappable and controlled sounds around. If you're a solo instrument, acoustic recording, sonata or solo female vocal kind of guy then you're



going to crave the intimacy and breathy immediacy that you get from little amps and efficient speakers. That's not what these amps are about. Don't get me wrong; their stability, presence and dimensionality are mightily impressive on small-scale works, giving singers a physical substance and delivering a palpable sense of acoustic space, particularly around individual instruments. But they struggle to keep up with the agility of smaller quicker systems, a bit like an Aston Martin trying to chase a Caterham 7 down a country lane. But hit the audio equivalent of the open round and the Krells simply take off.

Power-chords stacked on top of each other or the six-lane blacktop of the Gorecki *3rd Symphony* take on a sweeping power and presence that

builds with a magisterial substance and scale. The crashing layers of the Cure's *Head On The Door* (an overlooked and seriously underrated masterpiece out now in a deluxe edition) have both the impact and the structure they demand. The opening of the Gorecki builds with a gloriously inevitable sweep as the music swells to fill the massive stage. This new live hybrid SACD recording from Polski Radio (www.polskieradio.pl/raff) offers a fabulously heartfelt and emotive performance conducted by the composer himself. The Krells imbue it with a stately poise and steady purpose based on the separation and stability of the instrumental voices within the orchestra, as well as the beautiful initial fragility and blossoming power of soprano Zofia Kilanowicz' singing. Incidental noises within the audience and orchestra are sudden yet totally distinct from the music – just as they are in life.



There's no escaping the slight dryness that these amps bring to music (although it's significantly diminished over earlier Krell designs). It's a tendency that exaggerates the distance between digital and analogue sources, leaving me playing a lot ►

► of vinyl but also wondering just what a Krell disc player would bring to the mix. The easy, relaxed flow and energy of the TNT/Titan-i combination, played through the latest Groove Plus proved a perfect foil to the Krells' grip, control and seemingly boundless reserves of level and power. I also have a sneaking suspicion that they like to work, preferring a speaker load that gives them something to get their teeth into. With the relatively benign characteristics of the Isis, they always delivered better results at higher levels, once they'd broken sweat. Something more demanding, like a B&W 800D would be meat and drink to them: a potentially awesome combination.*



Take a look at the numbers on these amps (the excellent Krell website is the best way to do this) and it's hard not to be impressed, not just by their scale but also by their sheer scope. The range of connection options (audio and control) is pretty mind-boggling, but they pale into insignificance against the astonishing electrical capability of this, the smallest amp in the EVO range!

Those numbers will leave you in no doubt that the Krell EVO amps are about real muscle – operationally as well as musically. Like a Bentley Coupe, there might be quicker or more agile amps, but there are few that are more luxurious yet offer the same sense of sheer power. What's more, you can be confident they'll deliver that power under pretty much any and all circumstances.

These are amps that put musical inclusion ahead of all other qualities: they'll play whatever you throw at them, no matter how big or small. They'll encompass the scale of even the loudest concert or orchestra, never displaying the slightest disquiet.

They deliver phenomenal control of detail in an utterly unvarnished or exaggerated way. They are fuss-free and fail-safe in operation, as well as incorporating everything you might need to include them in a multi-room or multi-channel set up. They represent,

in so many ways, the modern face of the US high-end, putting musical and practical versatility before that last ounce of emotional communication. The question they ask is how you listen and what price you're prepared to pay for that intimacy and connection. Something tells me that these amps are secure enough in their capabilities to be undisturbed by your response. Their utter self-confidence is sobering and they clearly believe that there are enough listeners out there who'll simply

love what they do as well as the way they do it. Be honest with yourself and you might well be one of them. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

EVO-202 Pre-amp

Type:	Two-box solid-state line-stage
Inputs:	2x CAST 2x balanced XLR 3x single-ended phono 1x single-ended tape
Gain:	12dB (CAST or balanced inputs) 6dB (single-ended inputs)
Outputs:	2pr CAST 1pr balanced XLR 1pr single-ended phono 1pr single-ended tape
Dimensions (WxHxD):	438 x 97 x 464mm ea.
Weight (combined):	20.8kg

EVO-402 Power amp

Type:	Stereo solid-state power amp
Inputs:	1pr CAST 1pr balanced XLR 1pr single-ended phono
Input Sensitivity:	3.04V (balanced or single-ended)
Input Impedance:	100kOhms (single-ended) 200kOhms (balanced)
Output Power:	400 Watts/8 Ohms (both channels driven) 800 Watts/4 Ohms
Output Current:	37 Amps peak
Damping Factor:	125 (20Hz-20kHz, 8 Ohms)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	438 x 248 x 560mm
Weight:	61.1kg

Prices –

EVO-202	£12000
EVO-402	£12000

UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)208 971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Krell Industries Inc.
Net. www.krellonline.com

* Somewhat belatedly I was able to try an all CAST connected set-up driving Wilson System 8s, an experience that confirmed both the suitability of the speakers and the incredibly low grain and noise floor of the CAST configuration. Resolution of information was phenomenal (quite possibly the best I've ever experienced) with incidental sounds in recordings becoming instantly identifiable. But "identifiable" and "believable" are two different things, and for me the CAST connections still lack the palpable life and presence that comes from the very best cables – albeit at a price.



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Ultra High Fidelity Magazine Feb 2006



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Wayne Donnelly - enjoythemusic.com, Oct 2005



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The SQF Pharao Integrated Valve Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

While there are a great many hi-fi and music aficionados who swear by (and invest considerable sums in) the continuing audio performance benefits of the vacuum tube, few make many claims for the ease of use or long term reliability of their chosen technology. Most of those who buy into the thermionic valve route to sonic nirvana accept the warm-up times, failure rate, potential collateral damage and downright quirkiness that goes with relying on fragile atmospheric envelopes enclosed in glass balloons. For some of us it even adds an air of nostalgia, even romance to the process. But as the gap between the operational versatility of the average solid-state amplifier (let alone mini-system) and our hairshirt, bottle driven, audiophile masterpieces has inexorably widened, so that difference has been harder and harder to accept. It started with remote control, but logically speaking (if you'll excuse the pun) that's only the tip of the iceberg.

Once you put a microprocessor inside a piece of audio equipment you discover two things: it can really screw up the sound, and secondly, it suddenly allows you a degree of operational control that you never thought was possible. Experience with microprocessor control grew out of CD players, and along the way we learnt the tricks that allow for their peaceful coexistence with audio circuits. What took longer to sink in is the fact that the possibilities presented by the technology are if anything, even more far reaching with valve circuitry than they are with solid-state. After all, there's a limit to the number of useful operational tasks you can add to an amplifier before the

complexity outruns the benefits. But with vacuum-state circuits there's a whole different vista of application just waiting to be exploited – the actual stability and functioning of the circuit and more specifically, the devices themselves. The latest generation of valve amplification is finally getting with the program. The Audio Research

Reference 210 measures bias voltage on the output tubes and advises the user when

it needs adjustment (as well as by how much). Read the review of the VTL S400 and you'll see that it takes things to a level beyond that. Not only does it monitor the bias, it adjusts it too, as well as warning the owner of tube-failure, identifying the culprit (useful when there's sixteen identical output valves in play) and optimising the electrical parameters for the replacement. Along the way it protects the rest of the amplifier and system from the fallout that can accompany the failure of a major circuit element, important in these days when valve quality itself can be so variable. And there's the rub; there are good valves and bad. To make matters worse, the differences extend beyond simple sound quality and into actual operational reliability. The current extension of circuit control and

monitoring goes beyond user appeal and into the realms of self-preservation.

But for the ultimate marriage of microprocessor control and tube technology, look no further than the German SQF Pharao integrated amplifier. An all tube, four pair EL34 push-pull design, it mates a tried and trusted audio circuit to Buck Rogers styling and a degree of operational control and functional sophistication that would put the Apollo rocket engineers in a tail spin. Okay, so the lack of computational capacity in the Apollo missions is the stuff of legend, but the basic technology employed in the Pharao predates the moon shot by around 40 years.

The audio circuit itself remains something of a mystery, mainly due to my lack of German, but is I believe pretty conventional, with a full line-stage driving the power amp. Nothing terribly unusual there; but once the onboard processor steps in, things change dramatically both on the functional and the operational level. The discrete power supplies to each valve are constantly monitored, with four critical electrical parameters observed and adjusted. The end result is a circuit that clamps each valve into as near a perfect operational envelope as possible. Long term reliability, stability and just as importantly consistency, finally stand to match the solid-state competition, whilst maintaining the sonic benefits of valve circuitry. Naturally, the amplifier is also self-protecting and self-diagnostic.

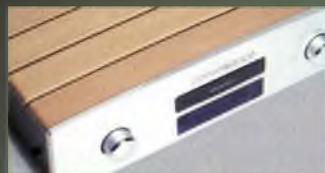
Turning to the operational interface, the Pharao offers all the usual functions we've come to expect: remote control of just about everything, the ability to name individual sources as well as set





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ZU Droid MK IV Loudspeakers - Black (£2,395)	Ex-dem, mint, boxed	£1795

► balance, absolute phase and adjust input sensitivity for each, adjust display brightness and switch the record out on and off. You can even choose the font used by the alpha-numeric display. So far so good. But beyond what is now considered almost the norm, there's a whole level of functional sophistication and operational options. How many amplifiers allow you to adjust their damping factor, or set the time between last use and automatic shut down (anything up to 32 hours in case you are wondering)? More importantly, how many incorporate a phase neutral

is beautifully milled aluminium. The components, socketry and construction are all first class. But the volume control is perhaps the piece de resistance. Okay, so the rotary knob is operating the standard audiophile arrangement of gas tight relays and precision resistors, but discrete steps are incorporated into its motion by a carefully engineered spring beam, added purely for feel. Likewise the knob itself is machined on an analogue lathe, to avoid the steps and perceptible roughness

and the Pharao is all the better for having them. Indeed, the only thing lacking is a mono switch, which is an odd oversight all things considered.

The first thing that struck me about the Pharao was the astonishing difference that varying the speaker damping made to the performance of the system as a whole. With speakers as varied as the Reference 3A and Wilson Duette on hand, I was able to encompass both extremes of its operational envelope, exactly the areas in which you'd expect it to struggle. Yet tweaking the damping factor, down in the case of the Ref 3A, up for the Wilson, allowed the amp an easier match with the speaker, letting it retreat into the background. The end result is the same in both instances; the music's flow becomes more natural, the performance more expressive, the music starts to breathe. As you optimise the amp's damping factor you no longer hear it operating. This is no small thing and contributes enormously to the

performance of the system as a whole, shifting the emphasis onto the musical and away from sonic considerations. Even with more middle of the road loads like the Living Voice OBX-R2s optimum damping was just as important. Which begs the question, why don't more amps offer this facility? It's not a new idea, being quite common in the '50s, and is reasonably simple to execute (in essence, you vary the amount of global feedback). On this evidence it is definitely worthwhile.

Just as the damping factor serves the music, so too does the graphic equaliser, if a little less obviously. Okay, leaving aside those source components with deviant frequency responses and gross room interactions from speakers (neither of which should really feature in a system with an £13K amplifier) just why would you want a graphic? ►

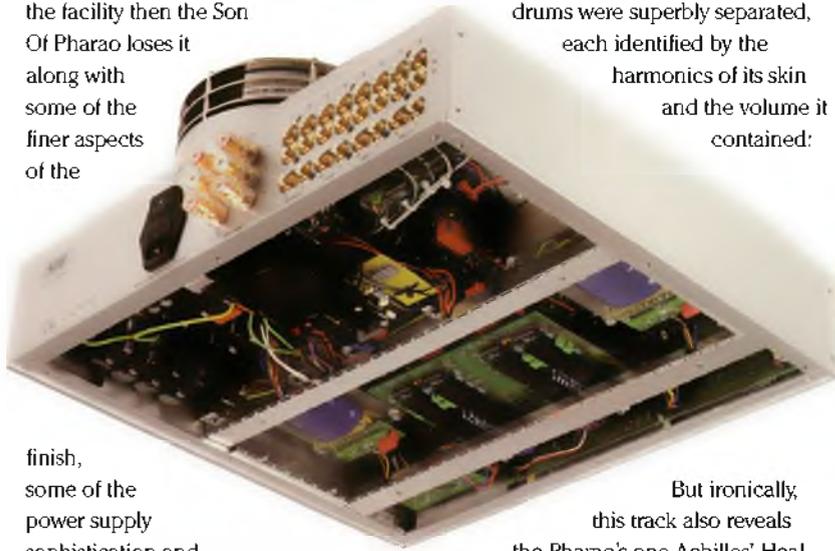


graphic equaliser with eight discrete, user adjustable profiles, each of which can be assigned to an individual input? Combine all this with the option to run the output stage in triode or ultra-linear configuration and you have an amplifier with a unique ability to interface both with the sheer range and variety of modern inputs but also the speakers that it's asked to drive. What's more, it will stay the way you set it, delivering the same sonic performance across the working life of its tube set.

Nor have the other audio fundamentals been neglected. The casework

introduced by a CNC machine. That sort of obsessive attention to detail extends throughout this product. This is not a commercial audio amplifier in the normal sense, more an expression of the designers' art and their reverence for the art it will serve. It's an attitude that oozes from every inch of the Pharao's distinctive and flawlessly finished exterior, that informs every aspect of its beautifully constructed interior. And as if to prove that despite all the evidence to the contrary, these guys and their product don't take themselves too seriously, those little blue windows on the front corners of the chassis are the funkiest power meters I've ever seen. Devoid of calibration they are purely decorative

► The answer lies in the realm of historical and sub hi-fi recordings. Some music and many performers are simply not available on audio grade recordings. For those, a wide bandwidth, ultra revealing system can be the kiss of death – not good if you happen to have a passion for '30's French piano recordings or Uzbek throat songs. For those, a decent, sonically invisible and phase neutral graphic is exactly what you want – and exactly what the Pharao offers. Like I said, serving the music. Of course, if you can dispense with the facility then the Son Of Pharao loses it along with some of the finer aspects of the



finish, some of the power supply sophistication and a chunk of cash from the price tag.

As to the input flexibility, variable sensitivity etc, these should speak for themselves. Personally, I have no burning desire to name my sources (something to do with being a journalist I guess) but for those who do, once again the operation is simplicity itself.

Apart from its sonic disappearing act, the most impressive aspect of the Pharao's performance (and key to its invisibility) was the speed and range of its dynamic response. Everything from the intricate picking of Gillian Welch to the full on orchestral bombast of the Johanos Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* was handled with aplomb, almost irrespective of level. In fact, the sheer stability and imperturbable nature of music via the Pharao might lead you

to think it was some vast, solid-state behemoth – if it wasn't for the presence, colour and life in the music (and all those bottles sticking out of its top). You hear the glassware too, in the harmonic richness and character the amp lends each instrument. Playing the *Flying Daggers* soundtrack the sudden dynamics and shifts in musical density had real weight and impact, underpinned by bass with bottom. By which I mean, bass notes that had pitch and air beneath them rather than being simple, bottomless thuds. The multiple drums were superbly separated, each identified by the harmonics of its skin and the volume it contained:

But ironically, this track also reveals the Pharao's one Achilles' Heal – a lack of absolute transparency and immediacy. Thus you hear the individual instruments and their harmonics, but you don't hear the space around and between them. Even stellar recordings on vinyl sound flatter and denser than they do via heavyweight amplification. Mind you, you'd need the alternatives there for comparison before most of us would notice the lack.

In part this reflects a slight lack of extension and air, but again, only when compared to the very best, or much more powerful alternatives such as c-j's solid-state CA200. Against it you need to consider the attractive presence, flow and substance delivered by the Pharao, its impressive low frequency performance and excellent dynamics. It's wonderfully subtle, versatile and tactile,

beautifully shaded and its operational and matching options allow it to slip effortlessly into the musical background. Indeed, rarely have an amp's ostentatious looks been so out of step with its sonic invisibility. For those who want to enjoy and explore music rather than dismantle it, who want to live with an amplifier rather than simply sample it, the Pharao is a compelling option. This is a long term relationship rather than a one night stand, and just like a trusted partner, its appeal will grow to eclipse the more obvious attractions; the Pharao simply gets better and better the longer you live with it. ✚

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Valve integrated amplifier
Operation:	Push-pull, triode or pentode
Valve Complement:	8 x E88CC 2 x E83CC 8 x EL34
Rated Output:	x 75 W (pentode) 2 x 32 W (Triode)
Inputs:	8 x line-level
Outputs:	2 x record out 1 x sub-woofer out 1 x ext output (not connected)
Input Sensitivity:	100 or 300mV (user adjustable)
Input Impedance:	47kOhm
Speaker Damping Factor:	3/8/70 @ 4 Ohms (UL) 3/8/25 @ 8 Ohms (UL)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	500 x 210 x 480mm
Weight:	36 kg
Finishes:	Silver or black with silver or gold trim
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Opera Audio Consonance Cyber 10 Signature Integrated Amp

by Jimmy Hughes

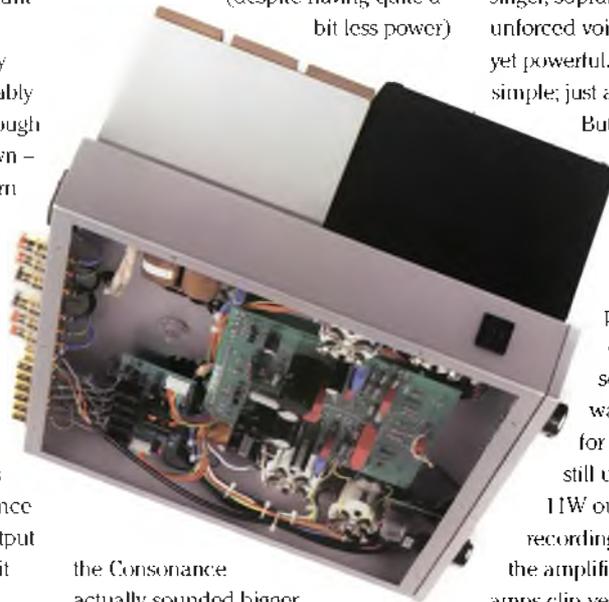
There's something distinctly appealing about low-power amplifiers that produce a big sound. It's probably got something to do with the way some amplifier manufacturers bang on about the need for at least half a Giga Watt just to reproduce the dynamics of a mandolin playing quietly at the back of a large hall. No one doubts the need for power and headroom, but at times the amount called for seems almost obscene.

There's also something distinctly satisfying when a hi-fi friend – preferably one who owns a mega amp with enough current delivery to power a small town – pops by to hear your new toy. You turn it on and the sound all but pins your friend to the back wall. 'Jesus Christ!' he says 'That's Powerful.' 'Yup' you reply 'It's a full Eleven Watts...' A look of confusion crosses his face. He clearly heard you say Eleven Watts, but can't reconcile what you said with the sound being produced. Mind you, I too was fooled; I did not realise the Consonance Cyber 10 Signature only had 11W output when I first began using it. I thought it was at least 30W or more...

It meant I came to the Cyber 10 Signature with a clean slate - no prejudices - and could therefore listen to the amp with no agenda. And the point of this somewhat pointless preamble? To emphasise the fact that there's little if any sonic clue as to this amp's low power output in its sound – for the most part you simply can't tell. Certainly, the initial impression was of a big full sound with plenty of weight and drive. The tonal balance was rich and warm, yet open and clear, with excellent fine detail and good dynamics. I went over to the Consonance immediately after the Melody SP-3 integrated amp. I'd really

enjoyed using the little Melody. It was another small amp with a big sound. But there the similarities ended; the Melody and Consonance sounded quite different.

Tonally, the Consonance was noticeably sweeter and fuller compared to the Melody's leaner brighter presentation. Both amps had their plus points, but (despite having quite a bit less power)



the Consonance actually sounded bigger and more refined. It had a broader fuller bottom-end too, with greater depth and amplitude. In this sense the Consonance sounded more valve-like – rich, honeyed, smooth – without seeming like a caricature. It had that big effortless ease you tend to get from tubes, sounding relaxed and unfazed no matter how loud and busy the music seemed to get. There seemed to be plenty of power available. Not having any prejudices about the lack of Wattage on paper, I just enjoyed the sound – playing all sorts of different types of music to get a feel for things.

The first hint that the amp might

not have unlimited power reserves came while playing a CD of female vocal – *Russian Romantic Songs* on Harmonia Mundi. This is one of those extremely natural and real-sounding HM recordings that has an enormous soundstage and huge dynamic range. It's all the more potent because the songs are of the most part quiet and reflective; the singer, soprano Kaia Urb, has a natural unforced voice that's pure and smooth, yet powerful. The ingredients were simple; just a solo voice and guitar.

But the loud passages

expanded enormously, giving the impression of a real singer present in the room.

During these peak passages, there was a degree of break-up – the sound hard-clipped. As I was playing a new recording for the first time (and was still unaware of the Cyber 10's 11W output), I wondered if the recording was distorting. But it was the amplifier. Now, some low-powered amps clip very smoothly and gracefully – so much so, you hardly realise you've reached their limits. Push EAR's 859 for example and the peaks soften and compress, but don't break-up. The Cyber 10 is not like that. It roughens considerably once you pass its power limits. Yet in fairness I should say that the CD of *Russian Romantic Songs* was the only disc that gave any real trouble. With virtually all other recordings I was able to play the amp as loud as I wanted without problems. Of course, if you really crank up the volume, the amp will eventually clip and make some decidedly nasty noises. But that's true of any amplifier. ▶

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► The question is – can you play music at satisfying volume levels without running into break-up? Using Impulse H1 horns, the answer was an emphatic – yes. With virtually all types of music there was no apparent struggle. Naturally, much depends on your taste in music and the sensitivity of your speakers. I like to listen at reasonably loud but not overbearing volume levels but, despite being horn-loaded, my old Impulse H-1s are not mega efficient – they're only around the 93dB mark. So, anything with this sort of efficiency or higher should be fine. I find simply-miked uncompressed solo vocal recordings to be the most testing, followed by choral. Strangely, 'loud' aggressive music like rock is less demanding. This is because many rock and pop recordings lack dynamic extremes – they're just loud loud loud. By heavily compressing the sound during recording, it's possible to create the subjective impression of power and immediacy

Sometimes, one of (say) four or five otherwise identical line inputs has a slightly shorter signal path which results in slightly better sound. I also give the tape output a try as an input, because (with passive pre-amps) this by-passes the main selector switch and therefore sounds a bit cleaner. With amplifiers that allow the tape output to be used as an input, the improvement in sound quality over the regular switched line inputs is not usually huge. But it's noticeable and worth having. The downside of this arrangement is – you can only have one source connected to the amp at any given time.

When I tried using the Cyber 10's tape output as an input, the sound changed dramatically. There was a significant increase in gain – at least 20dB, possibly more. Rather than listening with the volume control set at about 11.30 I had to lower it to about 8.30. The net result was a noticeably sharper and subjectively more dynamic

and assertive sound, with increased immediacy and transient attack. Subtle it wasn't.

Clearly, the Cyber 10 has an 'active' tape output stage. However, quite why it allows itself to be used as an input is unclear. Nor do I understand why there's such a big increase in sensitivity. But the difference is very noticeable, and it utterly changes the sonic presentation of the amplifier. During a test period that extended over a couple of months, I did

quite a bit of listening via the tape output/input, and initially I have to say I greatly preferred it to the normal line inputs.

With more extensive listening I came to realise it was a Horses For Courses sort of difference. If you like an assertive highly detailed and dynamic sort of presentation, the higher-gain tape-output/input is better. But the normal line input produces a smoother more balanced result that's nicer to listen to and a lot easier on the ear. The former tends to make each recording bristle with detail; the latter sounds sweeter and more homogenous.

One of the first CDs I tried using the tape output/input was a mid '60s recording of Chopin piano music on Deutsche Grammophon played

by Tamas Vasary. I'd known these performances for 30+ years on LP, but had never regarded them as being more than average/good sonically – the sound had always seemed clear, but tonally a bit shallow and 'small' in scale. Suddenly, the recordings sounded amazingly detailed and articulate, with stunning presence and immediacy

Naturally, I mentioned my findings to the UK importers who relayed them to Consonance. Alas, Consonance seemed unwilling to enter into a dialogue, saying that using the amp in this way



could (or would) lead to damage. I asked for elucidation on this point, but apparently that was it – matter closed. To be honest, I can't see how or why using the amp in this way might cause damage – to me, if it works, it works.

However, because of the massive increase in gain, you do have to be careful. Play a loud pop CD with the volume set above 10 O'Clock and the amp will be extremely stressed. With my set up, I could never play much above 9 O'Clock – and even then, only with CDs transferred at a lowish level. For my own personal listening, ►

► I continued to use the amp via both inputs – albeit with a preference for the higher gain tape output/input.

Incidentally, when I had clipping problems with the *Russian Romantic Songs* CD, I was still using the standard line input – I didn't initially try the tape output/input until I'd spent a few weeks with the amp. Later, I played the disc again, but this time via the tape output as an input. The result was an even bigger and more forward presentation that really filled the room.

However, paradoxically, there was no clipping during peaks.

Indeed, I now found I could play the disc at what seemed like a subjectively higher volume level without break-up. Why? I think it's got something to do with the music subjectively seeming more dynamic and forward. As a result, you actually play at a slightly reduced volume level. And this, I feel, is the key to getting the best from low-powered amps like this. You have to try and create the impression of dynamics and scale through quality of sound rather than quantity.

Increasing the gain of the system helps foster this impression. I did it via the back door, so to speak, by using the wrong input. But you could do it in other ways. For example, by using a CD player with a higher than average output level, or a set of loudspeakers that are extremely efficient. By using the 'wrong' input on the Cyber 10 Signature, you get a huge increase in gain – which makes everything sound bigger and more alive.

Subjectively, this means you can play music at what is (in electrical terms) a lower volume level, but have it sound louder and more room filling.

Most engineers will tell you that what I've just said is wrong – and that once you've equalised the volume levels to take into account the added gain, everything is as it was before. But, as the bank Manager in the TV ad says; 'It Doesn't Work Like That'. Subjectively, you hear a more dynamic and assertive sound.



Having happily used the Cyber 10 Signature for a few months, I went upmarket - replacing it with the much more expensive Reference 1.3 transformer coupled preamp and Cyber 300b monoblock power amps. The latter sounded noticeably more finely shaded, with subtler tonal colours and a presentation that was highly detailed yet delicate and very refined and smooth. I'd have to say it was better (and so it should be at the price) yet the smaller integrated amp wasn't disgraced.

Indeed, hearing the more expensive Consonance amplifier made me appreciate just how consistent the Cyber 10 Signature was. On virtually every piece of music the integrated amp gave a very convincing account

of itself. In comparison, the Reference 1.3/Cyber 300b combination was more variable – sounding fabulous on some things, and disappointing on others. While the bigger amp undoubtedly reveals more, the integrated never gives the impression it's hiding anything.

Certainly, I could happily live with the Cyber 10 Signature. I think it's one of the nicest-sounding amplifiers I've ever had the pleasure of listening to.

I found I very quickly

'forgot' I was

listening to it – it has a way of drawing your attention to things in the music, rather than drawing attention to itself. Used via its normal line inputs,

it produces a very smooth cultivated sort of sound. But, when you use the tape output as an input, the Beast within is revealed! Two sounds for the price of one - Buy One Get One Free....



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Push/pull valve integrated
Valve Complement:	2 x 6SL7 2 x 12AX7 4 x 2A3
Inputs:	5 x line-level
Input Sensitivity:	180mV
Outputs:	1 x tape out 4 Ohm + 8 Ohm binding posts
Rated Power:	11 Wpc
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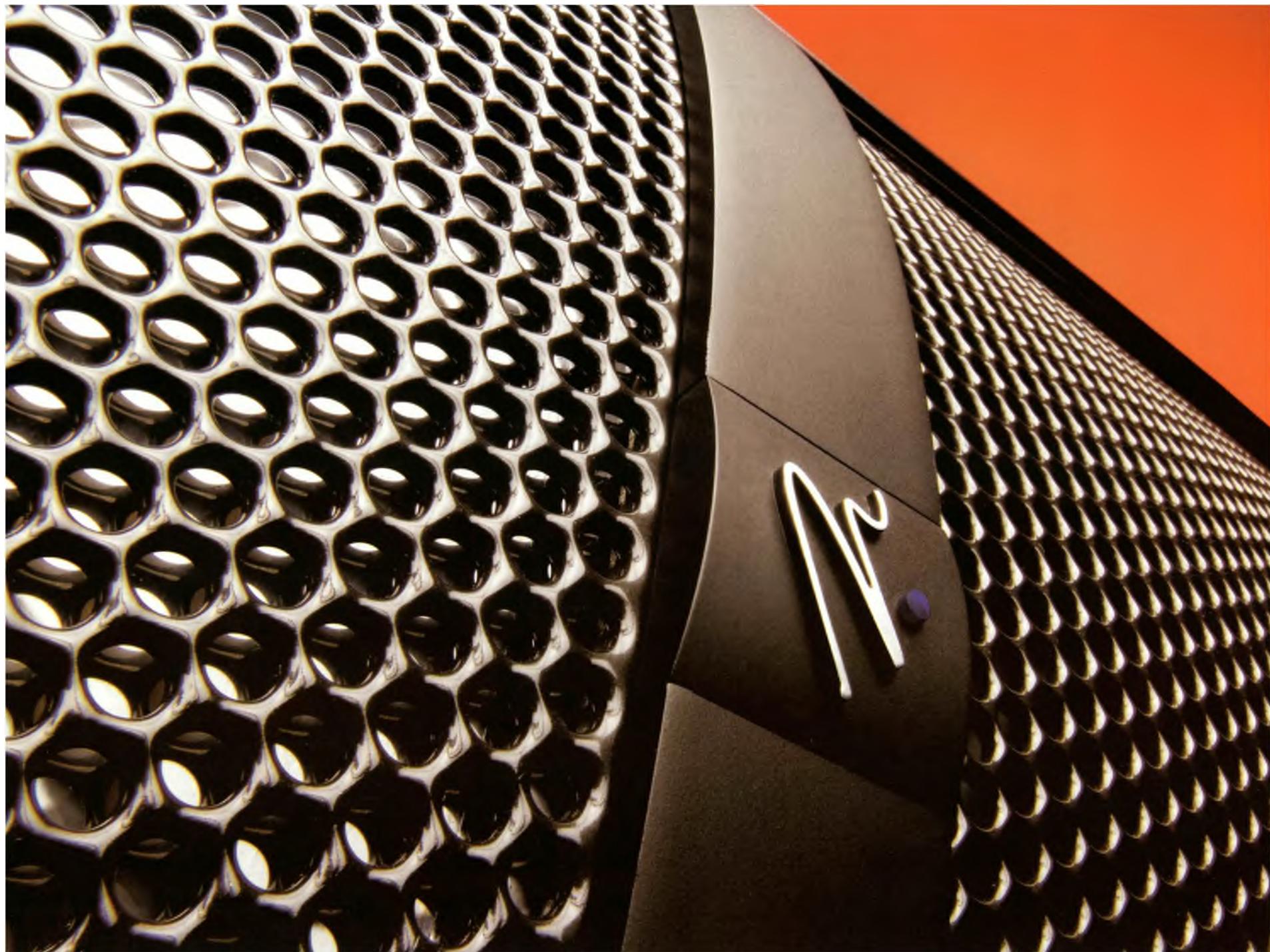
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MartinLogan Vista Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

I have always wanted to like Martin Logan loudspeakers. Having been an occasional user of Quad ESL 57's over the years, I am well aware of what the electrostatic approach can achieve, even if the shortcomings are blatantly illustrated by the way one tends to ignore Led Zeppelin and/or Little feat in favour of *Lute Music From The Sixteenth Century* when fingering through the record collection. Time was when I used to play around with sub-woofers and crossovers in an effort to enlarge the operating window of the Quads, with fairly unspectacular results (if one ignores electric shocks and fireworks), but I gained enough experience to know that it is no easy task. So any company that is into building real world electrostatics, by which I mean something that will go reasonably loud and has some presentable bass, gets the thumbs up from me. Which is what Martin Logan have been doing since the mid-eighties, and with the sole exception of the CLS, have always opted for a hybrid approach, where the electrostatic element deals with the mid and top and a moving-coil woofer in a cabinet is used to provide bass. In theory at least, this allows for greater power handling as the panel is not called upon to undergo the large diaphragm excursions involved in reproducing low-frequencies and the potential for bass is now governed by more familiar considerations associated with conventional box loudspeakers. In practice, combining the two distinctly different technologies presents a considerable number of difficulties that have to be successfully overcome

to achieve any kind of worthwhile result.

So far so good, and there is no denying that MartinLogan have achieved enviable commercial success with this formula over the years, but if I am honest I must say that none of the considerable number of models I've experienced have done it for me. Most of what I have found unsatisfactory has revolved around the bass performance; it has always sounded overblown, sluggish and with all the liveliness of a dead slug. This might well be explained by 'voicing' for the American market, and I am quite happy to accept that in Kansas (from where the 'Logans originate) they have living rooms the size of football pitches, constructed from timber that soaks up bass, and that they design their speakers accordingly, but on the occasions I have heard them in an average British room I have always been overwhelmed by the enormous, and enormously tuneless, bottom-end. Either way, listening to (and on occasions living with) MartinLogan's has thus far never managed to lift my skirt, so to speak.

Then I got the chance to listen to the Summits, reviewed by RG in Issue 44. (There is also an in-depth interview with Gayle Sanders, the man that started the company, which makes

for interesting reading). This session, I have to admit, was something of a revelation, as suddenly all the reasons that I had for disliking MartinLogan products seemed to vanish. The bass end was taught and fast; even a little lean for my tastes, (but then that's how RG likes it and had it adjusted accordingly) and it integrated seamlessly with the electrostatic panel, to great musical effect. So rather than turn my nose up at the opportunity to try out the entry-level Vista I perhaps a little nervously agreed. Slightly smaller than the Summit, the Vista looks to be as far as I can tell, a passive version of the middle of the range Vantage model. So no active bass, but the same well engineered 8-inch unit with an aluminium cone and long excursion, this time working in a vented enclosure. The MartinLogans have always looked elegant, due in no small part to the distinctive electrostatic panel which is gently curved and semi transparent; I'm sure this goes a long way to reducing their visual dominance of the room that they occupy. I also feel that the proportions of this latest generation work particularly well. As an aside,



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WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION

► have the MLs become the most recognisable loudspeaker of the last couple of decades? I had a phone call late one night from an excited girlfriend in America to say that she had just seen a pair of speakers 'just like yours' in an episode of Friends on television. Thanks for that.

Unpacking and setting up the Vista's proved to be interesting, as I had recollections of previous MartinLogans being rather flimsy in their construction and by comparison the Vistas felt reassuringly solid. The electrostatic panel is housed in a rigid aluminium frame that is in turn bolted to the bass cabinet; this is built in an asymmetric fashion so that there is only one pair of parallel surfaces in an effort to reduce internal standing waves. Bi-wiring is provided by proprietary 4mm binding posts, mounted along with the IEC mains input as part of the back panel. This also carries the bass port, which if I am being picky, is a bit flimsy. The general standard of finish is to an excellent standard, and the Vista gives off a general air of refinement and attention to detail. This even extends to the owner's manual, which was well written, informative and provided useful information about setting up and running in; which unfortunately the review pair was not. Internally, the crossover is built using high quality components, and a small separate board takes care of the power supply for the panel. The coupling transformer for the audio is a decent sized toroid. Partnering equipment consisted of the

usual suspects, a Linn LP12 or Densen 400XS front-end, heavily modified Audio research SP10 or Howland HP100 feeding a variety of power amps, including the Naim NAP300, Densen B350 mono blocks and two pairs of Cyrus Mono-Xs for bi-amplifying.

With a less than average sensitivity and a nominal four-Ohm impedance (which, it should be noted does drop to nearly one Ohm at high frequencies) the Vistas would seem to need plenty of power together with load tolerance - nor are they shy about being driven hard. But it is also about controlling the bottom end, which as the speakers ran in, started to show signs of getting a bit out of control. While their more expensive siblings offer very useful adjustment of the bottom-end parameters via the active bass section, with

the Vistas this has to be achieved manually by careful positioning, and in a room which seems to have an adverse reaction to 30-40 litre ported enclosures sitting on the floor, this was a painstaking process. Spikes are mandatory (and supplied)

but I ended up using some fairly chunky cones that elevated the speakers nearly two inches off the floor, which went a long way to removing a degree of thickness at the bottom end.

The Vistas (along with all other ML loudspeakers) do not actually apply polarising voltage to the electrostatic panel until a signal is present, and will switch off after ten minutes or so, a small blue LED on the front panel indicating status.

Once charged, the membrane will have a tendency to attract dust and small particles that over time will lead to deterioration of performance.* If I am honest this was always a big problem for me with MLs in the past. In a room with a real fire (I'll also cordless to the occasional cigarette) and a system with valves and styli ageing, the last thing I needed was a loudspeaker whose performance was dying from day one. Making the units signal activated is a neat way of sidestepping the problem, but in practice the speakers will sound a little 'dull' for a few minutes until the diaphragm is uniformly charged. The review pair suffered from a slight mains hum, audible from the panel when energised, MartinLogan are aware of this and have identified the problem which is easily rectifiable and will not occur with future production.

I always find listening to panel loudspeakers an interesting process after a lengthy period of using conventional (in my case, quite small) boxes, and there is a certain period of readjustment that occurs while ►

* Such is Martin Logan's confidence in their new manufacturing technique for the membrane that they suggest cleaning off the speakers with a brush and a vacuum cleaner to restore the units to full health.



▶ you get used to a very different presentation. The considerable effort I put into taming the bass response was well rewarded as it allowed the panels to perform unhindered and demonstrate just what they could do. Having been used to the precision and focus of small monitors doing the disappearing act, it comes as a bit of a shock when you hear that Vistas produce this big wall of sound that, rather than projecting music at you, seems to engulf you in it. It's a bit like the difference between having two spotlights on stage that highlight a small area with a tight focus, or conversely, illuminating the whole area with bright floodlights. Further small adjustments to the toe in proved beneficial in terms of tightening the image up, and the tilt of the panel makes quite a difference to the tonal balance at the listening position. But I was never able to make the speakers completely disappear in my room, nor increase the apparent depth behind the soundstage. But you know what? It really didn't seem that important. The Vistas were proving to be thoroughly enjoyable, and to use a by now very tired cliché, had me more interested in playing music than further tweaking. Apart from anything else, there was a wonderful novelty in not having to pussyfoot around and avoid music that could prove damaging; an electrostatic that wants to party? Winding it up to antisocial levels and listening to heavy rock or punk proved especially good fun. The character of the Vistas with this sort of music still errs toward the generous at the bottom end, and there is not quite the precision with timing, nor the speed that the Summits (or some other good systems) seemed to be able to achieve. But there was a good sense of integration between the panel and the cabinet that held true for the vast majority of material that I played, and I was rarely reminded

that I was listening to a hybrid design. The midrange performance was articulate and clean, with that lack of smearing and coloration that good electrostatics seem to manage so well, while the top was, in my judgement ever so slightly recessed, and possibly not quite as extended as I have heard from say, the Piega ribbons, sometimes giving the impression of being a little closed in at the frequency extreme.

None of which hindered my enjoyment of the Vista's one bit, which continued to provide a highly addictive 'close your eyes' sort of musical experience. I'm not sure exactly why, maybe it is down to that exceptional



midrange coherence, but the MartinLogan's favoured vinyl over CD more than any other speaker I have used, highlighting the dynamics and fluidity that analogue seems to do so well, and most listening sessions ended up being an indulgent and enjoyable trawl through my record collection.

I was a little worried that after hearing the top of the range Summit,

my experience with the Vista might prove to be a disappointment. I can only say that this was never the case. If anything, it would seem to be even more of an achievement bearing in mind the price tag of just under three grand. Ironically, the Vista could prove to be more demanding of amplification than the more expensive models, given the part that plays in defining the bass performance. But that aside, I think this is probably the loudspeaker I have been waiting years for MartinLogan to produce. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hybrid electrostatic loudspeaker
Frequency response:	43 - 22,00 Hz +/- 3dB
Sensitivity:	90dB for 2.83 Volts/Metre
Impedance:	4 Ohms nominal 1.2 Ohms@ 20KHz
Crossover frequency:	450 Hz
Recommended amplifier requirements:	100 - 200 Watts per channel
Dimensions (WxHxD):	273 x 1445 x 427mm
Weight:	24.5 Kg
Price:	£2995

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

Manufacturer:
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Vienna Acoustics Haydn Grand Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

The downside in selecting audio equipment through a shop demonstration is that you end up choosing on the basis of limited time and material. In the case of speakers, some models just jump out at you immediately and some don't. That's the way of things when buying in comparative demonstrations; you prefer A to B. In many ways reviews start like shop dems. First impressions count and even taking warm up, run-in and system changes into account, often when you hear something exceptional, it lets you know from very early on. But not always, as there are creepers too; bits of kit that slip under the radar. They sound alright (but nothing really special) for quite a while and then, slowly, you begin to realise that you can and are listening to them for extended periods.

Now they seem quite a lot better than you first thought. You explore them musically and ask more and more questions of them. You use them in the right system, with a wide range of music, over a period of time and your ear tunes itself to them. Listening has crossed an invisible line between work and pleasure, and once you are listening for pleasure and not because there is a copy-date fast approaching, things sort themselves out in your head and producing that review becomes easy. And when you have done all your listening without knowing the price (which is the way I ideally like to work) and then you find that it is about a half of what you imagined, then you have some very good news for your readers. So, let me introduce you to the diminutive, but beautifully formed Vienna Acoustics Haydn Grand and let the good times roll.

This is the smallest speaker in Vienna Acoustics' range. It seems a

rather conservative design but a closer look shows some interesting features and an attention to cabinet detail that belies their outward simplicity. This is a two-way bass reflex loaded stand-mount with 4 Ohm nominal impedance. Bass is handled by a 150mm transparent coned driver made from Vienna Acoustics' proprietary X3P cone material. Mounted above it is a custom designed 27mm hand-coated, Ferro fluid cooled, silk domed tweeter. Unusually, this is mounted on a wedge shaped block that sits in the flared throat of the bass reflex port.

This has to be one of the most innovative arrangements I've come across. It makes for a tighter driver configuration with improved phase coherence. It also allows the tweeter a large venting chamber and a practically free-field mounting. I have always preferred small forward facing ports as they leave the speaker less prone to rear-wall effects. The wedge behind the tweeter divides the airflow into two smaller passages and there is none of the bloated chuffing that I hear from single big bore vents on some smaller speakers.

But it's the cabinet that gives this speaker that extra touch of class. They are really solid and their finish is truly exemplary; with beautiful quality veneers, rosewood in this case. I've seen speakers this size that cost well over £3K that weren't as immaculately finished.

There's a detachable grill built on an aluminium frame with a wedge-shaped central spine to avoid reflections. It has less sonic impact than most but I still preferred to use the speaker without them in place. The Haydn Grand is fully shielded and single wired.

Vienna Acoustics do make a stand for the Haydn Grand but as these were not supplied for the review I tried them on my favourite Quadraspire acrylics and found that they are an absolutely perfect fit. Room placement is straightforward. You won't need any help from the walls for bass quantity or quality as this is the Haydn Grand's real strength and where that clever port arrangement really pays off. With most small speakers, especially at this sort of size and price point, you can almost hear that the designer trying to wring every last ounce of bass from the cabinet, going beyond what the bass driver naturally produces and into the world of internal cabinet colourations and oversized ports. The Haydn Grand is the very opposite. You will be more than impressed with the strength, weight and extension available but even more so with the tautness and control that these little speakers possess when driven properly.

Tonally they are evenly balanced although with a tweeter that isn't particularly extended by the latest standards they can seem slightly on the softer side. But what they do



► have is a notable tonal richness and a full-bodied view of the music right the way down through the mid-band, as befits their name. This generous and colourful tonality is quite surprising and expands the Haydn Grand's musical range considerably, especially on those instruments that small speakers can traditionally struggle with. Piano and violin don't suffer from any leading edge clatter while note development is full-bodied, well focussed but with remarkable colour and harmonic warmth. It is encouraging to hear a speaker at this price which can show how the harmonics of a strummed acoustic guitar hang in the air around the instrument and beat against each other before gently decaying; or the way that a single undamped piano chord lives through several colours during its short life.

Part of this is due of course to its decent response to transient input. That moment when the musician energises his instrument needs to be believable and the Haydn does pretty well here. While this is not the finest tweeter I have heard and ultimately lacks a degree of initial bite and progression at this critical moment, it is never harsh or brittle and again represents a near perfect compromise when price is taken into account. Even under musical duress it maintains its composure and focus. It will add a smeared sheen to really top-notch ancillaries, but you can push them quite a long way before their potential begins to run out.

They create a deep and stable soundstage but it is not of the finely etched variety. Get their positioning right and they provide a solid-built wall of sound without too much happening beyond the speakers' outer edges. Toe-in

was critical in my room and required subtle adjustment every time I changed the amplifier, CD player or cables. The better they got, the less toe-in I needed.

To wring the best out of the Haydn Grand you are going to need to sit them on the end of a good system. Like any

quality speaker they won't respond well to a system that hasn't been thought out properly and installed with care. Any harshness in the chain will not go down well with that tweeter and any vagueness or softness in the bass or mid will result in a plumpish mess. But, get it right and the results are intriguing. Rhythmically, they might not immediately grab you and they lack a little of that small-speaker sharpness and instant acceleration, but they are remarkably fluid and musically progressive. The more you listen and grow used to their slightly low-impact ways, the greater your respect for them grows as their flowing agility becomes more apparent than their sheer dynamics. I couldn't help thinking that if only that tweeter had a touch more eloquence about it and some more "air" and ambience how much better things

would be. But, as so often with the Haydn Grand, their finer qualities had me comparing them to small speakers from a much higher price range, like the Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor or the Reference 3A Dulcets, or even my Micro Utopia Bes. Which is quite a compliment to the Vienna Acoustics.

I ended up really liking and admiring these Vienna Acoustics speakers. They deserve better accompanying equipment than their price suggests. They enjoy power too, taut power that is. They will also need a decent set of stands and I can strongly recommend the Quadraspires. But, for me, their main attraction is the tonal strength and sheer colour that they bring to music, and that is more than a little unusual at this price. It makes listening to them for hours on end a relaxing yet still an involving experience. What criticisms I have really must be seen within the context of their astonishing price and an appearance and performance that suggest they cost so much more. I can't wait to see if Vienna Acoustics can repeat the trick with a larger cabinet at a higher price. 



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	27mm coated silk dome 150mm X3P bass driver
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Sensitivity:	89dB
Bandwidth:	42-20000 Hz (±3dB)
Dimensions(WxHxD):	174 x 361 x 265mm
Weight:	10kg ca.
Finishes:	Maple, Cherry, Rosewood Piano Black + £100
Price:	£795

UK Distributor:
REL Acoustics
Tel. (44)(0)1656 768777
Net. www.rel.net

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Vienna Acoustics
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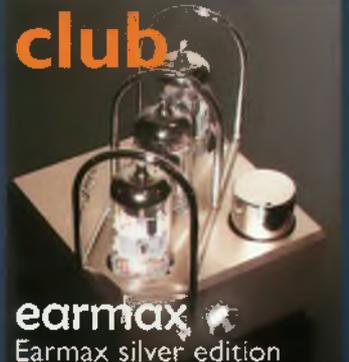
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Accoustic Arts CD Player 1 Mk2

by Alan Sircom

This is unashamedly top-shelf material, in all senses. The Accoustic Arts CD Player 1 Mk2 is designed to work on the top shelf – and only the top shelf – of an equipment shelf. It's also primo Euro audio porn, with blue glowing logo, big shiny knobs and all the trimmings. That doesn't detract from the sound quality – far from it – but if you were thinking of investing in something subtle-looking for your disc spinning, look elsewhere.

The German player is a top-loader, with a big angled and belogo'd knob at the front of the manually operated CD door. The top of this door is mirrored and has the logo (again, bigger this time), etched into the glass; when playing, this is lit from the side by blue LEDs and this illuminates the logo in an impressive, if slightly garish, manner. Pull back the door and you are met with a well-designed sled, built around the cast metal CDM Pro 2 drive module. This is usefully finished in a matt black almost-flock material, which will help cut down stray reflections from screws and other shiny bits inside the mechanism. The disc is clamped in place with a heavy magnetic puck.

The front panel is more restrained, well, slightly. It has two large chrome silver knobs, two smaller (but still about the size of a Minstrel, but not as chocolaty) chrome silver play and stop buttons, a blue LED and a hole for the infra red sensor. These all flank a standard issue blue LED Philips style display in the centre of the player, inset into the brushed alloy front panel. This makes it look surprisingly like a pre-amp (it's a family style – the CD transport, DAC and pre-amp all share a common look), but also makes the player surprisingly easy to use. If you want to drive something like repeat functions, then call upon the remote, but otherwise most functions can be accessed using

those four controls and the operation is smooth and intuitive.

Round the back, the player offers more standard fare, with good quality WBT phono sockets and equally fancy Neutrik XLR sockets. Digital audio connectivity is also a strong point, with coaxial output in both BNC and phono form, as well as an AES/EBU balanced connection.

This is one well-built player. It has its own, magnetically shielded 75VA toroidal transformer, something that wouldn't look out of place in an integrated amplifier. This feeds five separate power supplies, one for the control of the transport mechanism and laser, separate supplies for the display control and LED heaters and one each for the digital signal processing and digital to analogue conversion. Using nigh on 35,000µF of capacitance and ultra-fast diodes, these power supplies are the right way to feed a CD player; Accoustic Arts calls both transformer and power supplies "generously dimensioned" and that seems about right.

It also uses the 'generously dimensioned' term with regard to the buffer section of the DAC. So, the Accoustic Arts is definitely not English, then; no Englishman could possibly put the words 'generously dimensioned' and 'buffer' in the same sentence without sniggering. The *Carry Ons* are too deeply imprinted on the nation's psyche, matron. The rest of the DAC needs no double entendre; it uses a 24-bit/192kHz delta-sigma chip, coupled with an eight-times oversampling digital filter and minimal filtering in the analogue output. The 'A' side of the D/A converter uses high quality metal-film resistors and selected caps and has a mild 12dB

Butterworth-style low-pass filter. The digital output has its own oversized power supply, majoring on voltage stabilization; this helps minimise jitter when signals are passed to an off-board DAC.

You would need to choose a DAC carefully, though, because the analogue stage of the CD Player 1 Mk 2 is something special. Those with long digital memories may recall using a line-matching transformer in-between the output of your CD player and pre-amp. These were designed to keep the

high frequencies of early digital at bay – Luxman, Marantz and Musical Fidelity all had variations on the same theme. With greater development in line inputs and less brittle sounding output from CD players, the line-matching transformer sort of disappeared below the audiophile radar. But, in the Accoustic Arts player, there are dinky little line-matching transformers built into the player itself, giving the HF performance a lift.

It works. I suspect the inclusion of the HF transformers is not the sole reason that the Accoustic Arts player sounds as good as it does. I suspect instead it's down to the thorough execution of the design, from stem to stem, from bottom to blue bling top. But this is one player that works exceptionally well. But, this is not one of those players that shows its qualities immediately. The hundred hours or so of slow, disc-spinning warm-up would ▶



► put paid to that anyway. But, even then the player still doesn't have that immediate impressiveness that marks out the Naim or Townshend Audio players. So, it's easy to dismiss as just something 'so-so', easy, and dead wrong. Wrong because this player's performance is unrelentingly good; the quality creeps up on you, making you feel that those more obvious sounding players are in fact almost garish by comparison.

Think of this as the inverse of Chinese Water Torture. Drip, drip, drip... the sound is not too bad. Drip, drip, drip... in fact, it's doing everything well. Drip, drip, drip... actually, it's really rather good. Drip, drip, drip... now I come to think about it, it's bloody fantastic. And once the Accustic's sound has crept up on you, it's hard to overlook.

The CD Player 1 Mk 2 is remarkably honest in approach. It neither sweetens nor darkens the sound; music played through this – irrespective of genre – will sound entertaining and insightful.

equipment, it's hard to pin down from a sonic standpoint. It has good soundstaging, but so it should have for the money (and so do all its rivals at the price). It has good dynamics, but the same things apply here too.

Ditto coherence,

detailing, vocal articulation and so on. This isn't to say all good CD players sound the same, but once you get beyond the free with a packet of cornflakes mark, they should all perform competently, and you are picking out products with characteristics that suit you and your system.

But what happens when a product fits all the characteristics you can think of in any system? Such products are extremely rare; they have micro-dynamic shading, all the architectural and holographic soundstaging, detail and tonal beauty needed to slot into a big American high-end set-up.

They also have the rhythmic drive, macro-dynamic energy and directness to make good in a traditional British hi-fi rig. This is one such product.

It joins a select alumnus of top-notch components I have had the pleasure of reviewing and represents the most affordable CD player thus far to make it onto that list.

This "does everything for every system" sound is the stuff of Wadia. More specifically, it's the stuff of the Audio Research Reference CD7 and the performance of the CD Player 1 Mk 2 is

very close to this \$8,000 super player. Like the Audio Research, the Accustic Arts deck is naturally and highly musical in approach. It also has a sumptuously deep soundstage (although the CD7 has the edge here) and like the CD7, the CD Player 1 Mk 2 has a sound that doesn't draw attention to itself. Ultimately, the absence of character is even more

profound on the Audio Research, and it plays even more of the unvarnished CD truth than the Accustic Arts, but – given the price differential – it's more of a close run thing than you might expect.

The look may not be to everyone's taste, but the sound will be. Irrespective of system, you owe it to yourself to audition this player. Its closest rivals cost twice as much; sounds like a bargain to me.



It doesn't suffer fools or bad recordings gladly, but is remarkably good at tracking damaged discs and if there's any redeeming factors in the music, the CD Player 1 Mk 2 will retain and replay them well. Like all good high-end

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Top-loading CD player
Analog outputs:	1x unbalanced (RCA); 100 ohm 1x balanced (XLR); 620 ohm
Digital outputs:	1x S/PDIF (RCA); 75 ohm 1x S/PDIF (BNC); 75 ohm AES/EBU (XLR); 100 ohm
Output voltage:	AES/EBU, balanced 3.1V
D/A converter:	24 bit/96 kHz Enhanced Multi-Level delta-sigma D/A converter, 8-times oversampling
Dimensions(WxHxD):	482 x 110 x 375 mm
Weight:	15 kg
Price:	£3,985

UK Distributor:
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ASTINtrew AT 1000 Valve Pre-amp and AT 5000 Hybrid Power Amp

by Jimmy Hughes

In retrospect, it's amazing when you think that tube amplifiers went from total market dominance to virtual extinction in just a few years. By the end of the '60s, none of the main UK amplifier manufacturers – Quad, Leak, Rogers, Radford, Armstrong – were making valve amps. Did the government suddenly pass a law banning the use of tubes?

True, transistor amplifiers had been around for some time – since the dawn of the '60s. But none of the early attempts were reckoned to be any good. It wasn't until the silicon transistor became readily available in the mid '60s (replacing the earlier Germanium type) that valve amplifiers were finally usurped. The rest, as they say, is history...

Except that tubes rose from the dead in a manner comparable to that of Lazarus. Nowadays, the would-be purchaser of a hi-fi amplifier is faced with a wide choice of valve or transistor designs – and even (as here) amplifiers that combine transistors and valves. But, why did valves suddenly go out of fashion so quickly and decisively?

The main benefits of transistors were reckoned to be reduced heat, smaller size, increased reliability, lower cost, less noise, and the elimination of the output transformer. On top of that, transistor amps measured better – and back then hi-fi enthusiasts and reviewers tended to treat specifications seriously: If it measured better, that meant it sounded better.

A decade or so earlier, Harold Leak had established 0.1% distortion as the benchmark of technical excellence. The new breed of transistor amplifier were soon offering distortion levels of 0.01% and lower. Not to mention reduced noise (particularly hum), wider band-

width, and significantly increased power.

The availability of small amps with high output power was attractive for other reasons. The 1960's saw many hi-fi enthusiasts abandon their large efficient single mono loudspeaker to go stereo with two smaller much less efficient enclosures. Suddenly, power output was an issue.

10W might've been entirely adequate with a speaker offering 96db+ sensitivity, but it wasn't much good for those in the low 80dB range.



Loudspeaker manufacturers, realising that few listeners could accommodate two big speakers, set about making smaller ones, sacrificing efficiency (sensitivity) to achieve a semblance of bass response.

But traditionally, the heart of the valve versus transistor contest was a choice between something that sounded rich warm and inviting (valves), compared to the crisp warts-and-all 'accuracy' of transistors. Many felt that valve amps sounded 'better', but transistor amps were more correct and truthful – even if the sound wasn't as good!

This sort of ties in with the deference paid to measurements. If a hi-fi component had measurably lower distortion, wider bandwidth, greater power, and lower noise, it HAD to be better. And, if it didn't sound terribly

good? Er, well, that was down to its, or, transparency and openness showing up faults that 'lesser' amplifiers obscured...

I mention all this because, for those of us of a certain age, it's difficult to throw off the received valve/transistor stereotypes and listen without prejudice. For while it might've been true that '60s valve amps (like the Quad and Radford) sounded warm and euphonic, and many of their transistor successors were bright and steely, this isn't the case today.

Indeed, it's long been my belief that many designers deliberately go out of their way to produce products that don't conform to the accepted stereotypes.

Thus, today you have valve amps that sound amazingly sharp, dynamic, brilliant and highly detailed, and transistor designs that sound rich smooth warm and rounded.

So, what might one expect from an amplifier that combines valves and transistors? Could a marriage of the two create the perfect compromise? ASTINtrew components mix the both technologies. The range includes a CD player, separate pre and power amp, and a forthcoming integrated amp. They're UK designed and made in China.

The power amp features a solid state output stage with tube drivers. Thus you get fairly generous power output levels (50W RMS – 140W peak with 95W RMS into 4 Ohms), with (relatively) compact dimensions and low running temperatures. The pre-amp mixes tubes with electronic volume control.

The loudspeaker output is, of course, direct-coupled, thus avoiding the component believed to limit the performance of valve power amps – the dreaded output transformer. ►



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► Going back to the late '60s, many viewed the elimination of the output transformer as sufficient reason on its own to justify the move away from valves to transistors.



The output transformer was seen as a Bad Thing; all that nasty peak-level saturation, phase shift, and restricted bandwidth, not to mention cost and weight. Yet while these criticisms were (and are) true to a degree, a good transformer can deal with the first three, if not always the last two!

Speaking personally, I like the sonic effect produced by transformers. If well designed and properly made, their benefits far outweigh their limitations. Indeed, it's long been my belief that much of the velvety smoothness and fluidity of valve power amps is attributable to the use of an output transformer.

So far as my review schedule went, the ASTINtrew followed on from the Consonance Reference 1.5 and Cybor 300b combination – a 'proper' transformer coupled all-tube power amp and passive transformer-coupled pre-amp. This had produced a weighty refined presentation of great smoothness and ease.

With the ASTINtrew, first impressions

were of a sharper more immediate presentation, with a brighter tonal balance and crisper attack. It sounded clean, lucid and detailed – like moving 10 or 15 seats closer to the players in a concert hall. The sound had energy and impact,

yet still sounded smooth and integrated. I liked it.

The Consonance combination impressed me with its exceptionally smooth and refined sonics. It had a big powerful bottom end and rich sweet highs. There was a sense of effortless ease that made the music sound relaxed and comfortable, yet the sound did not lack brilliance or bite. It could be very detailed and articulate when necessary. The ASTINtrew combination sounded slightly leaner and more assertive. The presentation was noticeably brighter and livelier, but in a nice way; the sound was clean, open, and impressively sharp and detailed. It had a leaner tighter bass than the Consonance, with greater firmness and control.

Although the hybrid amp lacked the rich billowing voluminous bass quality of the Consonance, to its credit it always kept things under control. With the Consonance, the bottom end could

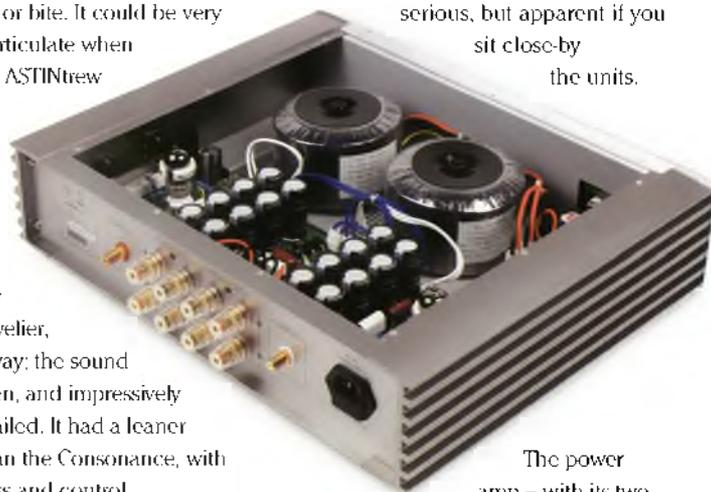
sometimes be too fulsome. Here, the bass sounded deep and clean, with plenty of power and drive. It had a lighter drier quality

After living with the lower powered Consonance (just 10W with the wind blowing in the right direction) and accepting its limitations in terms of wattage, the ASTINtrew offered plenty of muscle. The loudest peaks were handled with grace, and there was no sense of strain during heavy passages.

The heavy heatsinks either side of the case led me to anticipate hot running, but the casework only gets a little warm during use. Perhaps if I'd really pushed the amp to its limits the temperature would have risen more, but for normal domestic use and average volume levels using medium efficiency speakers there's not much heat.

Internally, the power amplifier is of dual mono design, each channel having a separate circuit board powered by individual mains transformers - large 300VA toroidals. With the pre-amp, there's a single smaller transformer with the left/right channels housed on a single circuit board.

Some mains transformer buzz can be heard from both components – not serious, but apparent if you sit close-by the units.



The power amp – with its two larger transformers – is slightly noisier than the pre-amp. The casework does not vibrate in sympathy, by the way – the noise comes solely from the transformers themselves. ►

► The casework is substantial and well finished, enhancing the impression of first-rate build quality. It's made from alloy, except for the steel base section. The top covers are fitted with ventilation slots, but in practise these are hardly necessary as both pre and power sections run fairly cool.

Unusually, the pre-amp's tape record output is linked to the volume control – normally it's a fixed output – meaning you could use this as an output instead of (or as well as) the standard pre-amp output. ASTINtrew suggest you consider bi-amping by adding a second At-5000 power amp – and this could be driven from the Record Out sockets.

Now, it may've been imagination, but I noticed a slight but noticeable difference in sound quality between the two outputs when comparing them. Basically, the Record Output seemed slightly sharper and a fraction more dynamic. I also tried listening to the other line inputs compared to the CD input, and felt Aux I sounded a touch sharper and more immediate.

While the differences weren't huge, there were small but noticeable gains in sharpness and immediacy as a result. Similarly, there was a slightly difference between the two sets of loudspeaker outputs on the power amp – Set A (direct wired to the circuit board) sounding slightly sharper and cleaner than Set B.

I really liked the At-1000's electronic volume control, which gave precise gradations with numerical indication from 0 to 96. It operates smoothly and noiselessly, allowing exact repeatable level settings. The pre-amp is fully remote controllable – input selection and volume level – but there is no left/right stereo balance adjustment.

For headphone listeners the At-1000 is unusually comprehensive with both 1/4in and 3.5mm jack sockets powered by a high-quality single-ended class A

amplifier. There's also a convenient front panel input jack socket for your MP-3 player. The pre-amp has a maximum output voltage of 20V RMS and a gain of 18dB.

All inputs have an impedance of 47k Ohms, while the output impedance is 600 Ohms. Both are unbalanced. The claimed S/N ratio is 95dB, and in use the amp is very quiet.



All input switching is electronic. There's no high-gain equalised input for turntable by the way – you'd need to add an outboard phono-stage to play vinyl LPs.

Both pre and power amps employ pairs of ECC82 (12AU7) tubes said to have a life of at least 20,000. Regarding the valves/transistors issue, I feel hard pushed to say which side of the fence the At-1000/At-5000 comes down on. In terms of sound, it doesn't scream Valve or Transistor at you. Essentially it's a very good natural sounding amplifier that delivers clean well-balanced results.

I liked its crisp incisiveness, yet also appreciated its smoothness and lack of brashness. It's a very neutral sounding amplifier, combining the precision and control you'd expect from a good transistor amplifier with the smooth liquidity and spaciousness of tubes. There's a certain 'rightness' to the sound.

Overall, I'd say its sonic presentation leans slightly more towards transistors than tubes – by which I mean it avoids

the warm euphonic glow and golden richness of the valve stereotype. Yet don't infer that the sound is tonally hard or lean. As I said, the At-1000 and At-5000 combination is actually very neutral and truthful sounding.

It has the refinement needed for naturally miked recording of acoustic music – vocal or instrumental – and the power and attack for rock. At the price – \$535 for the pre-amp and \$697 for the power amp – the combination represents very good value.

While there might be better out there, you're going to have to spend a lot more to get something that truly beats the ASTINtrew. It's certainly an amplifier I'd be happy to live with.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

At 1000 Pre-amp

Type:	Valve line-stage
Valve Complement:	2 x ECC82 (12AU7)
Inputs:	5 x line level 1 x mp3
Input Impedance:	47 KOhms
Outputs:	1 x pre-out 1 x tape 2 x headphone
Output impedance:	600 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 128 x 390mm
Weight:	7kg
Price:	£535

At 5000 Power Amp

Type:	Hybrid dual mono power amp
Valve Complement:	2 x ECC82 (12AU7)
Inputs:	1 pr single ended
Input Impedance:	47 KOhms
Outputs:	2 pr Binding posts/ch
Rated Power:	50W/8 Ohms, 100W/4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 128 x 390mm
Weight:	13kg
Price:	£697

Manufacturer:

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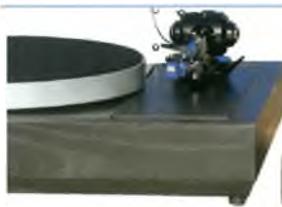
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Focal-JMlabs Chorus 714V Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger



France's leading hi-fi speaker brand, Focal's nomenclature is one of hi-fi's more convoluted sagas, though interesting for all that. Patron Jacques Mahul had been chief engineer at Audax, where he was responsible for such innovations as the aerogel cone. Twenty-five years ago he moved to St. Etienne where he took over his father's engineering business and founded Focal. The company started off by producing innovative, premium quality drivers as OEM units for other brands, (such as Wilson Audio in the US), and for the in-car aftermarket.

As the company grew and prospered, it was logical to move into making complete speaker systems, and to avoid offending its OEM customers the JMlabs brand was created. This side of the operation has become so successful that the company has all but closed down its OEM activities, and consequently reverted to the Focal name for its box loudspeaker systems.

The latest product initiative, introduced mid-2006, introduces the third generation of Chorus models, but does so in a rather unusual way, by creating two separate ranges – the 700V- and 800V-series – neither of which really belong in the beer budget price sector. Both ranges feature rather more styling, driver technology and enclosure complexity than is usually found at the low end of the market, while the more costly and visually striking 800Vs go a few steps beyond the 700Vs in enclosure substance and plinth provision.

This £579/pair 714V is the middle of five 700V stereo pairs and the smallest of three floorstanders, and is one of only two models across both series to use 130mm main drivers. Like its larger 716V brother (which has the more widely used 165mm main drivers), it's a two-and-a-half-way model, using the lower of two apparently identical cone drivers merely to augment the bass end of things

Finished all over in a sober and restrained mid-brown vinyl wood-

▶ print, the distinctive styling has tapering side panels, resulting in non-parallel internal faces that help to de-focus internal standing waves. The panels are all 20-25mm thick, further stiffened by internal bracing, and the whole thing feels very substantially built – as confirmed by the 16kg weight.

Unlike the 800V floorstanders, there's no separate plinth here, so the chrome-finished 8mm spikes fit directly into the base. Without a plinth, and with the very modest footprint that results from small main drivers, a slim front, and modest depth, the physical stability of this very compact speaker is inevitably somewhat compromised.

Focal stresses that it makes all its drive units in house. The two cone drivers have cast alloy frames and 100mm diameter paper cones coated with glass 'micro-spheres' to increase rigidity and/or damping – Polyglass in Focal parlance. The tweeter has Focal's familiar inverted dome, now made from an aluminium/magnesium alloy and using a new suspension system, giving a claimed bandwidth extending up to 28kHz. This is mounted in a rigid cast L-shaped chassis at the top edge of the enclosure, so it remains unobstructed by the main V-shaped grille; however, it does have its own perforated metal protection, easily removable by enthusiasts prepared to risk damage for an improved sound. A large diameter front port reflex-loads the bass, and signal is applied via a single terminal pair low down on the back.

One of the choices facing the designer of any speaker is the compromise between bass extension and sensitivity. The 714V favours the latter,

achieving a very decent 89dB alongside a relatively benign amplifier load that only briefly dips below 6 ohms. (Focal claims 91dB, which seems a little optimistic, alongside a 4.1 ohms impedance minimum; I can find no obvious explanation for these significant discrepancies.)

Rather surprisingly, given that the port is tuned to 54Hz (close to the major mode in my room), output was rather dry around this frequency with the speakers well clear of walls, so I moved them a little further back. This gave the most even balance through the low frequency region, down to around 40Hz at least (below which there's nothing much at all). The balance was still a little dry, but any more wall reinforcement led to excessive output around 50Hz, and a consequent thickening of textures. Output above the bass region was generally quite smooth and even, albeit with

a degree of restraint through the broad presence zone (1-4kHz), followed by a rather obvious broad treble peak, focused on 6.5kHz

Reflecting the measurements, Focal's smallest floorstander doesn't offer much in the way of deep bass grunt, but it is impressively smooth and well balanced across most of the rest of the band. Furthermore, it largely avoids that lack of warmth and upper bass punch and drive which is so often encountered in compact loudspeakers. The lack of deep bass does leave the sound short of authority and visceral impact, but at least it doesn't suffer from the rather 'bleached out' character

which often afflicts small loudspeakers.

There is a measure of thickening, bringing a slight chestiness to male speech, for example. It doesn't seem to be down to cabinet coloration as such, as the very solid enclosure seems to add very little; more likely it's a function of the two-and-a-half-way configuration, where the early filtering of the lower driver inevitably introduces a modest amount of timesmear.

That treble peak is also audible, and it has to be said that although the top end supplies plenty of detail and good coherence, it's not particularly sweet, and can draw a little too much attention to itself. But neither of those criticisms is particularly serious in degree, and both should be taken in the context of the speakers' modest price.

There's no obvious boxiness here, and stereo images are precise and well focused. The sound as a whole might be a little too laid back for some tastes, and dynamics do lack a bit of drama. But a speaker like this will operate alongside relatively modest ancillaries, so a measure of presence politeness is not inappropriate. The one unanswered question lurking in the background is whether the stand-mount Chorus 807V, with its solitary but larger 165mm main driver, might not have greater purist appeal? ➤+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	2.5-way ported floorstander
Drivers:	130mm Polyglass bass 130mm Polyglass bass/mid 25mm TNV inverted dome tweeter
Frequency response:	52Hz-28kHz (±3dB)
Sensitivity:	91dB (measured at 89dB)
Nominal impedance:	8 Ohms
Minimum impedance:	4.2 Ohms (measured at 5.4 Ohms)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	200x900x295mm
Weight:	16kg ea.
Price:	£579/pair

Distributor:
Focal-JMLabs (UK) Ltd.
Tel. 0845 660 2680
Net. www.focal-uk.com



A tale of two CDs...

The Rotel RCD-06 and Creek Evo

by Steve Dickinson

When I bought my first CD player, back in 1993, the low-cost player to beat was a Rotel, and for many years Rotel set the benchmark in the budget arena. The 06 Series separates were introduced early last year, cosmetically virtually identical to the outgoing 02-Series but updated and revised. So is the budget Rotel CD player still a contender?

It would be fair to say, I think, that the Rotel player doesn't pretend to be something it is not. Build quality, fit and finish are all perfectly presentable, but there's no attempt to pass the units off as giant-killers with heavyweight build, or other budget-swallowing fripperies. All the functions you'd expect are there, some of them only from the remote control, and the display is clear, concise yet provides all the information you could want. Outputs are analogue and coaxial digital. There is also an external remote input (remote remote?) so you can hide the unit in a cupboard and site a remote sensor somewhere discreet, and a 12v trigger so the unit can be activated by a Rotel amp or multi-room system controller with a suitable trigger output; a couch-potato's dream.

The first thing that becomes apparent (once you've warmed up and run the unit in) is a certain leanness. There's a sort of stripped-down quality to the sound that echoes the no-nonsense physical appearance. Listen more closely and the sound appears slightly reticent from the upper-bass through much of the midrange, which gives the overall impression of a quick but slightly light-weight delivery. This, in turn, tends to

accentuate the lower bass and the treble. I suspect, in a quick 10-minute comparative demo, this might allow the unit to stand out from its peers to the benefit of sales but the overall tonality sounds a little hollowed-out.

The question then becomes, does this leanness detract from the longer-term

entire spectrum, this tendency could make the music sound more like a series of notes than a fluid, musical event, but to its credit, the Rotel always remained on the right side of that line, detailed without ever becoming disjointed. String tone is excellent: that tense, woody sound of massed cellos, which somehow encapsulates genuine hi-fi sound for me, is well portrayed.

Bass does go quite deep, quite well, and the



listening experience, or, how will the purchaser get along with the unit once the honeymoon period is over? Well, there are plenty of strengths, the treble is good, devoid of glare or harshness, the overall sound is fast and clean.

kd lang's 'Constant Craving' showed the RCD-06's way with percussion, quick and



effective albeit perhaps a tiny bit relentless.

This rhythmic integrity and sense of organisation is what separates the Rotel from cheaper players, it simply makes better sense of the signal. Taken to extremes across the

recessed midrange may ameliorate some muddle in the middle, particularly when partnered with budget speakers and cables. That seems to be of benefit on more contrapuntal or busier music, Weather Report's 'Birdland' sounding fast and punchy, the interweaved parts working well together. The downside is that on bass-heavy material the extra energy can leave the midrange somewhat swamped and a bit congested.

On larger scale works, occasionally the leanness can lead to anaemia and a lack of scale. Large musical forces can be made to sound smaller, for example my recording of the Brahms' *German Requiem* ▶

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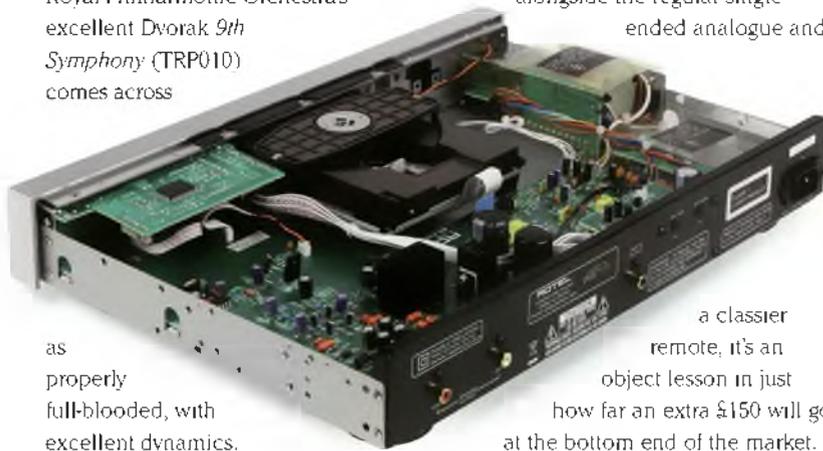
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▶ (LSO/Previn, LSO 0005) sounded at times more like a chamber orchestra and choir, rather than a full-size platform ensemble. Mind you, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's excellent Dvorak *9th Symphony* (TRP010) comes across



as properly full-blooded, with excellent dynamics. The saving grace is that human ear quickly adapts to different presentations and during extended listening sessions there was plenty of enjoyment to be had from this player.

My favourite recording of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (Leonard Bernstein playing and conducting the LA Philharmonic on D-G) was deftly handled, Bernstein's exquisite timing and tonal subtleties nicely and convincingly presented. The lightness of touch is not so noticeable until another player is used again, when the contrast becomes more apparent.

If the other player happens to be the Creek Evo, then things start to get a whole lot more interesting. Creek is another brand with a strong budget reputation, thanks to some class-leading amplifiers early on, twenty-odd years ago. The Evo range, "designed in the UK" (so that will be "Made in China" then) is their entry-level componentry and the thing one notices immediately, compared to the Rotel, is the solidity of the build. Heavier (6kg plays five, although you'd swear it was a bigger difference) and chunkier, the unit sits

foursquare and businesslike. With 12mm of solid aluminium on the front plate, slightly fewer visible controls, coaxial and optical digital outputs alongside the regular single-ended analogue and

a classier remote, it's an object lesson in just how far an extra £150 will go at the bottom end of the market.

The sound is similarly confident: big, bold and full of bravado. It makes the Rotel sound almost diffident by comparison. Sometimes you go to a concert, perhaps something a bit challenging and you



know within a few bars of the soloist's entry whether it's going to be alright or whether the performer's on the limit of their technical ability. You can either relax and enjoy the music, or sit upright with your heart in your mouth. The Evo is the same. Almost the moment the music starts, you can tell the player's well on top of things. The soundstage is wider and deeper than the Rotel's, extending further outside and behind the plane of the loudspeakers and the delivery is

punchy, dynamic and crisp. The tonal balance is more neutral than the Rotel, upper bass and midrange is nicely fleshed-out, but it is the treble that really shines. It's no more extended than any other CD player, but there's more of it. Where the Rotel and many other players roll-off the uppermost treble, thus avoiding unfortunate nasties, the Creek just keeps on going, unashamed and full of life and energy. It's not brash, or bright in the pejorative sense – there's enough weight lower down to temper any suggestion of that. But it is lively, engaging and attention grabbing.

At one point, I reintroduced my regular Rega Jupiter, and it felt a bit like settling back into a favourite sofa; smoother, silkier, with noticeably less grain. Classier. But the simile is not entirely complimentary; sometimes, you only notice where your old model's saggy, baggy bits are when you try something newer and fresher. The Evo has that fingersnapping immediacy and vitality that communicates in a way no amount of lusciousness can compensate for.

The Evo is quite astonishingly musical. You get a really strong sense of the players working together to make music. Timing, attack and micro-dynamics all contribute to a wonderfully vivid performance. Tonal honesty also helps. The Oleta Adams hit 'Get Here' was particularly instructive. On the Rotel she sounded positively adenoidal, but the better ▶

▶ midrange balance and treble clarity of the Creek restored enough of the chest and throat sounds to convince me that this was a serious voice rather than someone singing through her nose.

Throughout most of the review period I had both players connected to my system and I've noticed that for any "off duty" listening I've tended to use the Creek player, almost without thinking. But I've also been listening to these players' respective amplifiers, for a review in next month's issue, and it has been interesting to note that the Rotel player, when partnered by the Rotel amplifier, gives a more balanced account of itself. It's self-evident that Rotel intend the two to be purchased together so it's good to know that that decision would be a sensible one on musical, as well as financial and aesthetic grounds.

In round figures, these players are separated by £150. The Rotel, about \$350 the Creek, nearer £500. On the one hand, £150 is little more than the cost of a suitable interconnect, on the other hand it's almost half as much again as the cheaper player. If we were comparing players at three times the price, we'd consider that premium inconsequential but if this is your first proper hi-fi system it might easily be the difference between buying and not-buying. Likewise, it's nice to know that you can actually buy real, intelligible musical performance at \$350. It is instructive, though, to hear the benefits that \$150 on the price can buy at this level. Clearly only a proportion of the increase in selling price has been spent

on upgrading to better components but that it makes such a difference is telling. When I bought my first CD player I eventually chose an Arcam over the Rotel equivalent.



Both cost \$300 in 1993, which would be over \$410 in today's money. The fact that this Rotel player outperforms my old Arcam and is some 15% cheaper in real terms is genuine progress. Considered in those terms, Rotel have achieved something remarkable, definitely maintaining their position as gate-keepers to real hi-fi performance.



It is perhaps unfortunate for the Rotel that I had it for review at the same time as the Creek, as the RCD-06 is a very likeable and capable player. It never strayed from the path of righteousness and delivered more than enough of the musical message to satisfy. It was also more than capable of pointing out when it was the recording that was letting the side down. But it can't raise the bar. It does enough things well enough to be a rewarding listen, but put it in a better system and it can't raise its game. In contrast, you are left in little doubt that the EVO CD player would be quite at home with considerably more exalted amplification and speakers. If you can afford the extra \$150, you

ought to audition the Creek, but be prepared to spend the money, you'll probably not go back to the cheaper player anything other than extremely reluctantly. Proof, I'd say, that both players offer excellent value at their respective prices. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Rotel RCD-06

Type: One-box CD player
 DAC: Burr-Brown 24 bit, 96kHz Delta Sigma with 8x oversampling filter
 Outputs: 1pr RCA phono analogue 75 Ohm co-axial digital
 Output Level: 2.25V RMS at 1kHz, 0dB
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 435 x 72 x 342 mm
 Weight: 5kg
 Available finishes: Silver, Black
 Remote control: Yes, system remote plus 12v trigger facility
 Price: £349.00

Manufacturer:

Rotel UK
 Tel. +44 (0)1903 221500
 Net. www.rotel.com

Creek Evo

Type: One-box CD player
 DAC: Burr-Brown 24 bit, 192kHz Delta-Sigma (used in non-upsampling mode)
 Outputs: 1pr RCA phono analogue 75 Ohm co-axial digital Toslink optical digital
 Output Level: 2.0V RMS at 1kHz, 0dB
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 430 x 70 x 340mm
 Weight: 6kg
 Available finishes: Silver
 Remote control: Yes, system remote
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Information Technology...

Audio Cables for the Real World

by Roy Gregory

If any market sector in hi-fi could be justifiably accused of over-population then it has to be cables. The number of brands is intimidating, the number of products within each range mind-boggling. Over the years we have tried to develop a strategy that ensures consistent and musically coherent results across a wide range of products, a variation on the "find something you like and stick to it" theme, but extended (where possible) to embrace power cords and the specialized realm of source connections where digital and low-level phono-cartridge signals are involved. Beyond that we've also suggested that listeners and the industry in general have seriously underestimated the impact that a coherent cable loom can make to the musical performance of a system. The old 10% of your budget rule of thumb is hopelessly inadequate given the significant recent advances made in cable performance, as is the old mix and match philosophy of cable selection.

However, easy as it is to shout the odds from the top of a mountain of ruinously expensive loan cables, it's also hopelessly unrealistic to assume that any but the privileged and dedicated few will want or be able to stretch to the likes of Nordost Valhalla – which is incidentally, far from the most expensive offering out there. With that in mind I've conducted a survey that cuts a cross-section through the price range of more affordable offerings, selecting a mix of established brands and interesting newcomers. These are the products that survived the initial selection process. Each is a perfectly valid solution but they do also offer a range of virtues and weaknesses, prices and absolute performance levels. The purpose of this exercise is to establish their character and consequently, what systems and listeners they might best suit. And yes, there are cheaper options out there but few that we'd entertain in a genuine hi-fi system.

Methodology

All the cables were subjected to a lengthy period of burn-in on the Nordost Vidar cable toaster, a process that took some months as well as reducing one corner of my office to a malevolently flickering snake pit. Once that process was

completed they were divided into two basic groups: those that include mains leads and those that don't.

The listening was split between two extremely different systems so as to examine compatibility issues. The first was the Classe/B&W 805S set-up reviewed elsewhere in this issue. The other combined the EERA DL2 CD player with a Leema Tocana amp and Eben X-tremes. Benchmark cabling consisted of Chord Co. Chorus interconnects, Epic Twin speaker cables and Power Chord mains leads, the latter also being used for those cables that didn't offer (or arrive with) a mains option of their own. All interconnect listening was conducted using single-ended connections, rather than balanced, while speaker cables were single-wired unless specifically pre-configured for bi-wiring. All prices given are for a 1M pair of single-ended interconnects, 3M single wire speaker cables unless indicated by a BW suffix and 1.5M power leads. Listening involved both extended sessions with each cable plus close comparisons.

The Music

The following tracks were used for the comparative listening sessions:

The Cure – 'Push'

The Head On The Door Deluxe Edition Fiction 984 001-6

Gorecki – *Symphony III*, 2nd Movement

Gorecki conducting the National Polish Radio S.O.
Polski Radio PR SACD 2

Vaughn Williams – *Tallis Fantasia*

Barbirolli conducting the Sinfonia Of London and
New Philharmonia
EMI CDC 7 47537 2

Eliza Gilkyson – 'Is It Like Today'

Paradise Hotel Red House Records RHR CD 187



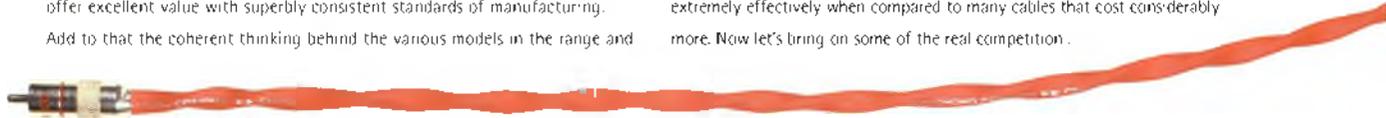
The Chord Co.
Tel. (44)(0)1980 625700
Net. www.chord.co.uk

Chord Chorus – £225. Chord Epic Twin – £289. Power Chords – £140.

Anybody who doubts Chord's claim to benchmark status needs only look at the various systems that the magazine has reviewed across its last two issues. Out of six systems, more than half rely fully or in part on Chord cabling and the company has an enviable reputation for delivering quality products which offer excellent value with superbly consistent standards of manufacturing. Add to that the coherent thinking behind the various models in the range and

they certainly set the mark against which other manufacturers must compete.

I selected the established Chorus interconnect, combined with the new Epic Twin speaker cable as offering solid and musically engaging performance at around the lower end of the chosen price spectrum. That listenability is rooted in their sense of pace and musical organization, dynamic range and good leading edge impact. Weaknesses are lower levels of detail than some and a slightly nasal balance that narrows the range of tonal colours and the impact of tonal contrasts. That might seem damning but a slight smoothing of textures combined with a real sense of musical purpose and momentum goes a long way towards delivering the message in even poorly recorded music, and the Chords do that extremely effectively when compared to many cables that cost considerably more. Now let's bring on some of the real competition.



Group One Interconnects and Speaker Cables

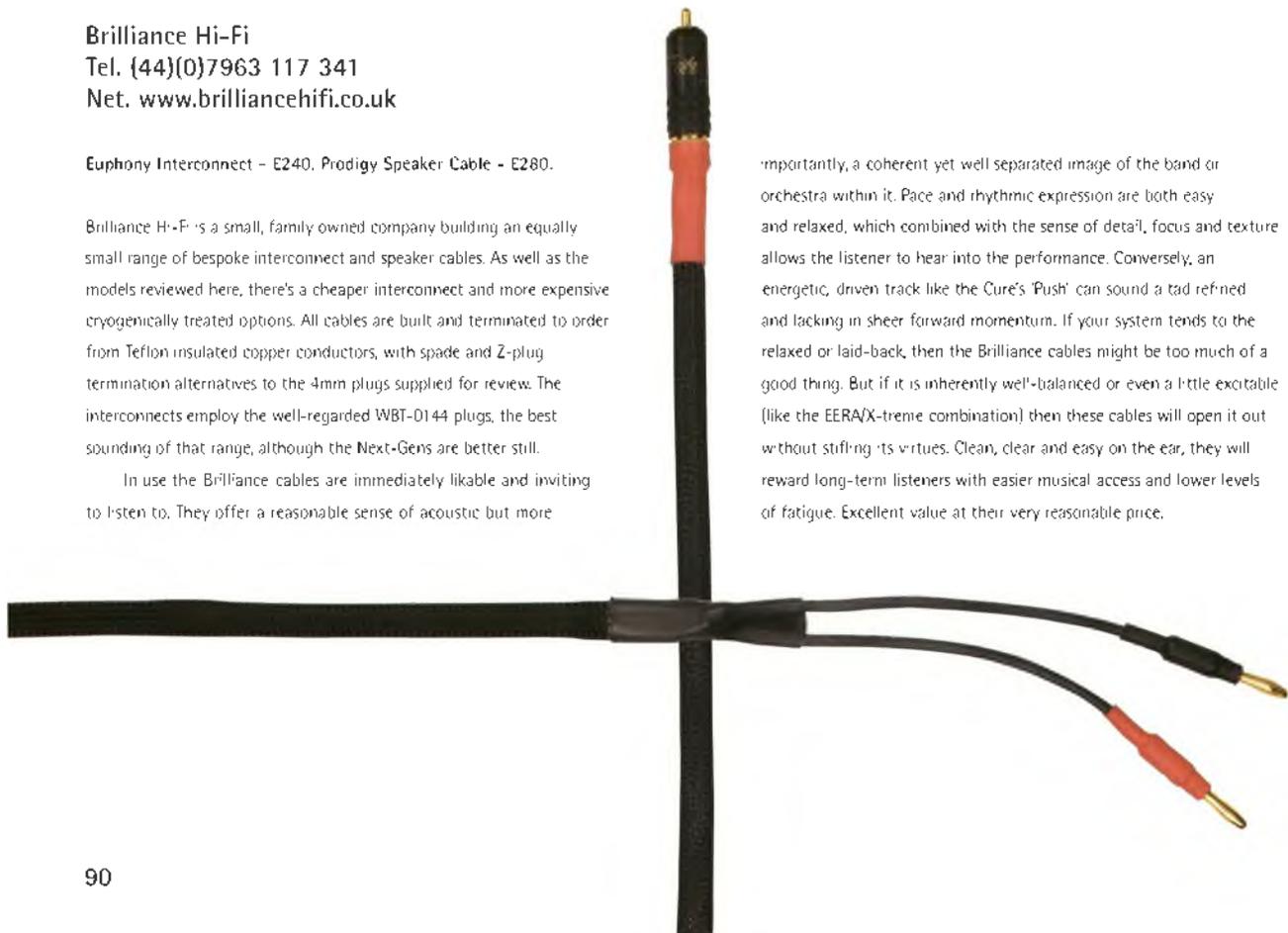
Brilliance Hi-Fi
Tel. (44)(0)7963 117 341
Net. www.brilliancehifi.co.uk

Euphony Interconnect – £240. Prodigy Speaker Cable – £280.

Brilliance Hi-Fi is a small, family owned company building an equally small range of bespoke interconnect and speaker cables. As well as the models reviewed here, there's a cheaper interconnect and more expensive cryogenically treated options. All cables are built and terminated to order from Teflon insulated copper conductors, with spade and Z-plug termination alternatives to the 4mm plugs supplied for review. The interconnects employ the well-regarded WBT-0144 plugs, the best sounding of that range, although the Next-Gens are better still.

In use the Brilliance cables are immediately likable and inviting to listen to. They offer a reasonable sense of acoustic but more

importantly, a coherent yet well separated image of the band or orchestra within it. Pace and rhythmic expression are both easy and relaxed, which combined with the sense of detail, focus and texture allows the listener to hear into the performance. Conversely, an energetic, driven track like the Cure's 'Push' can sound a tad refined and lacking in sheer forward momentum. If your system tends to the relaxed or laid-back, then the Brilliance cables might be too much of a good thing. But if it is inherently well-balanced or even a little excitable (like the EERA/X-treme combination) then these cables will open it out without stifling its virtues. Clean, clear and easy on the ear, they will reward long-term listeners with easier musical access and lower levels of fatigue. Excellent value at their very reasonable price.



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

Crosslink 1L Interconnect - £95
 Crosslink 1S Speaker Cable - £190

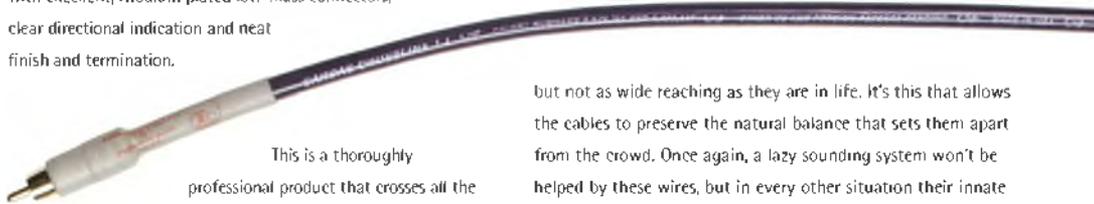
Cardas represent one of the oldest and most respected cable brands in the business. As such it's no surprise that every aspect of even these budget offerings exhibits superb attention to detail, with excellent, rhodium plated low-mass connectors, clear directional indication and neat finish and termination.

This is a thoroughly professional product that crosses all the Ts and dots its Is. Balanced termination is also available at no extra cost. This is an astonishingly poised as well as near perfectly balanced performer. Its ability to recreate the acoustic space of

the performance and dimensionality of the performers is astonishing at the price and amongst the best in this group, while tonality and instrumental texture have an attractive natural warmth. With that space and separation comes an easy sense of the music's structure and organization. Pace and in particular phrasing are both superb, making vocals and acoustic arrangements extremely expressive.

Where the Cardas shows its character is in its mid-hall perspective and a slight lack of dynamic range. This could be read as a lack of immediacy or speed but actually has more to do with a scaling back of energy levels. They're in proportion

but not as wide reaching as they are in life. It's this that allows the cables to preserve the natural balance that sets them apart from the crowd. Once again, a lazy sounding system won't be helped by these wires, but in every other situation their innate evenness and refusal to exaggerate, combined with their superb retrieval of musical and acoustic detail will pay dividends. An absolute bargain, further enhanced I suspect by combination with the excellent but more expensive Cardas mains leads.



Oehlbach
 UK Distributor - Acoustat
 Tel. (44)(0)20 8863 8979
 Net. www.oehlbach.co.uk

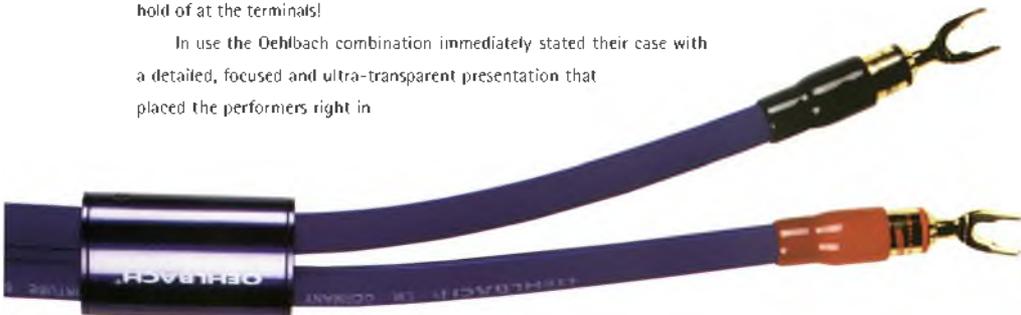
The Pure Sound XXL 100 Interconnect - £375
 Air Blue 5 Speaker Cable - £584

Oehlbach are a new name to the UK market but are a major player at home in Germany. These cables constitute a flagship combination of silver interconnect and substantial copper speaker wires, immaculately finished with impressive looking but oversized terminations which could well compromise sound quality. Having said that, with cables this bulky, you need something to get hold of at the terminals!

In use the Oehlbach combination immediately stated their case with a detailed, focused and ultra-transparent presentation that placed the performers right in

front of you. There was an astonishing lack of grain and a delightful delicacy to details of instrumental technique and vocal style. This combined with a smoothness in the balance and a lack of real dynamic range or contrast to make the close perspective comfortable but lacking somewhat in expressive range and excitement. The complex drum patterns on the Cure track lost their rhythmic accent while the tension in the Tallis was also

diluted. Yet, at the same time the music was always lucid, the overall picture crystal clear. Smooth, open and free of any edge or hardness, these cables will appeal to the cerebral rather than the emotive side of the listening public. Interestingly, they were also remarkably consistent across both systems, although I suspect that their natural home will be in quicker, brighter set-ups where their control and refinement will come into their own.



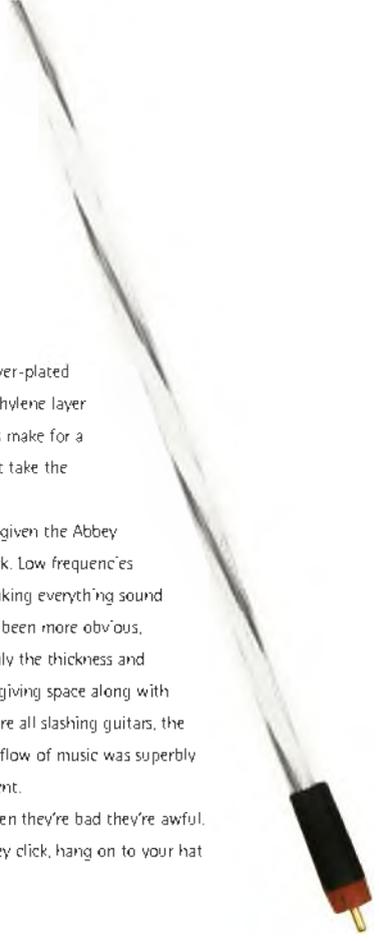
Abbey Road Cables
UK Distributor – Redline Distribution
Tel. (44)(0)131 555 3922
Net. www.red-line.co.uk

Reference Interconnect - £520. Reference Speaker Cable - £980.

Another new name to the UK market, Abbey Road cables employ a mix of ultra fine copper and silver-plated copper conductors contained in a gas-foamed dielectric. Stability comes from a secondary polyethylene layer while a thick PVC jacket provides mechanical damping. The twisted black and white conductors make for a spectacular appearance, while connectors are of the excellent low-mass Eichmann type – just take the requisite care when making or breaking connections.

These were by far the most system dependent cables in this group – and ironically, given the Abbey Road Studios association, it was the B&W based system in which they really didn't work. Low frequencies were softened, rounded and muddy, robbing the music of attack and excitement, making everything sound muted and dull. Switching to the EERA/X-treme set-up the contrast couldn't have been more obvious, performance leaping from a poor last to amongst the best in this group. Suddenly the thickness and heavy quality that had weighed things down was opened out and separated, giving space along with the presence. The bass kicked up its heels and the music took off, the Cure all slashing guitars, the Gorecki an intense and powerfully brooding presence. The ebb and flow of music was superbly captured, the sweep of the Vaughn Williams suitably magnificent.

When these cables are good, they're very, very good, but when they're bad they're awful. One listen will tell what they do to your system, but if they click, hang on to your hat 'cos they motor!



Supra
UK Distributor – Glaive Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)1622 664070
Net. www.glaive.co.uk

Sword Interconnect – £379. Sword Speaker Cable – £900.
28cm Bi-Wire Jumpers – £195

I broke my own rules and reviewed the Supra Sword as a standalone speaker cable back in Issue 41, intrigued by its mightily clever bifilar construction and the sound theoretical basis for its zero inductance design. Basically, each conductor consists of two, closely coupled spiral windings of multiple solid cores. One travels clockwise, the other anti-clockwise down the cable. Simple in theory but only someone with their own cable factory would try to construct such a thing. Fortunately, that's exactly what Supra have got. Well, now they've got a matching interconnect, although I'm not sure of the internal construction or materials. What I can say is that it's both a perfect sonic match for the speaker cable and that it doesn't cramp its partner's impressive style.

The Sword cables are transparent and extremely dynamic, detailed and impressively solid in their presentation. This is the only pairing in this group to approach the Cardas when it comes to portraying a recording's acoustic, while micro-dynamic discrimination, rhythmic and timing integrity, absolute dynamic range and tonal palette are all first class. A genuinely neutral and musically authoritative combination these cables are genuinely high-end performers at what should be considered distinctly real-world prices. Leave aside the lack of brand name kudos; leave aside the "ice-blue" corporate colouring; leave aside the fact that they won't empty your kids' education account. Sit back and enjoy some of the best sound available safe in the knowledge that you've stolen yourself a serious bargain. Supra pride themselves on sound engineering at competitive prices; their most expensive products might well constitute their best value ones too. One whinge; those terminations on the speaker cable have no place in a serious system. Supra also offer the option of good, one-piece spade connectors so who knows how good this cable could be? Otherwise, this is big-name Burgundy performance for the price of a Chilean Pinot.



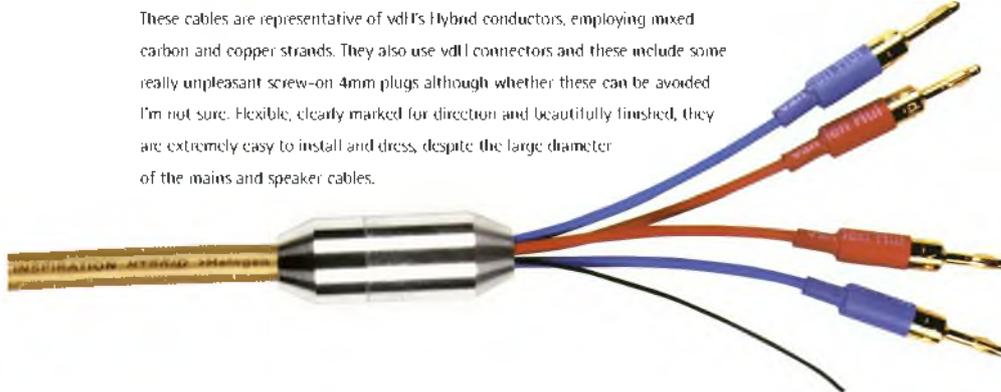
Group Two Signal Cables With Matching Power Cords



van den Hul
UK Distributor: Henley Designs
Tel. (44)(0)1253 511166
Net. www.henleydesigns.co.uk

Integration Hybrid Interconnect – £165
Inspiration Hybrid Speaker Cable – £690 (BW)
Mainstream Hybrid Power Lead – £330

These cables are representative of vdH's Hybrid conductors, employing mixed carbon and copper strands. They also use vdH connectors and these include some really unpleasant screw-on 4mm plugs although whether these can be avoided I'm not sure. Flexible, clearly marked for direction and beautifully finished, they are extremely easy to install and dress, despite the large diameter of the mains and speaker cables.



These wires nearly didn't make it into this group due to a peculiarity in their performance; each time you reconnect them they sound flat, bland and grainy for 10 or 15 minutes. If you don't get past that point then you'd dismiss them out of hand. But with passing time the bass starts to fill out, bringing some weight, colour and heft, while the grain starts to diminish. Once they settle down they are astonishingly even and neutral, their finesse and textural detail perfectly suited to classical material where their unforced pacing and poise really comes into its own. In contrast the acoustic intimacy of the Eliza Galkyson track sounded

slightly stilted, the Cure undermined by recessed drumming despite the beautifully textured and layered guitars. I never managed to totally banish the grain, and it's tempting to point a finger at those 4mm plugs and all the additional metalwork.

Genuinely neutral, the vdH Hybrid sound is also understated and some might find it underdemonstrative. Precise, balanced and controlled, devoid of added weight, it can sound bland, but will certainly suit live/ret systems and I suspect, valve electronics.

Nordost
UK Distributor: Activ Distribution
Tel. (44)(0)1635 291357
Net. www.isoteksystems.com

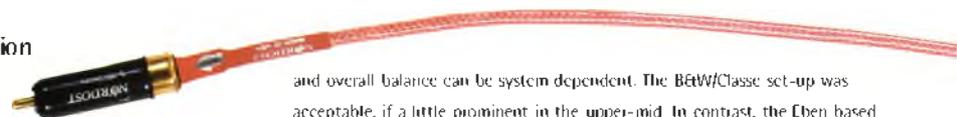
Heimdahl Interconnect – £375
Heimdahl Speaker Cable – £1815 (BW)
Shiva Power Leads – £220

Representing the cheapest all Mono-filament set-up from Nordost, the Heimdahl speaker leads offer a glimpse of the familiar silver-plated copper solid cores through their pretty pink Teflon insulation, only their number and diameter differentiating them from the more expensive cables in the range, whose excellent connectors they share.

These wires sound just as familiar as they look, their immediacy, clarity, focus and dynamic snap and tuning instantly recognizable. At this end of the range the price you pay in performance terms is a lighter, though no less agile bass, which in the wiring system will leave them sounding thin and a bit exposed. If you value musical insight and expression then look no further, but weight

and overall balance can be system dependent. The B&W/Classé set-up was acceptable, if a little prominent in the upper-mid. In contrast, the Eten based system (the speakers are internally wired with Nordost) was an immediate success, almost as if the timing and soundstage had snapped into focus. Bass, though still light, was fuller and better balanced over all, while the Raidho ribbon tweeter made the most of the Heimdahl's high frequency energy and clean definition.

Be prepared to try these cables before you commit to them (and make sure they're well run-in). If they work in your system the results will be spectacular; if not you'll wonder what all the fuss is about. I'd also consider an upgrade to the Vishnu mains leads, a relatively cheap step which goes a long way towards restoring missing bass weight and overall body; the interconnects and speaker cables really deserve it.



True Colours Industries
Tel. (44)(0)77 1019 6949
Net. www.true-colours.com

Cobra Interconnect - £200
King Cobra Speaker Cable - £450 (BW)
King Constrictor Power Cable - £300

This set-up represents the top of the TCI chain and is based on silver-plated, copper alloy conductors wound with PTFE tape. The power cords consist of a central earth surrounded by sixteen conductors arranged in a non-inductive weave and use rhodium plated plugs, while the interconnects rely on metal bodied WBTs and Z-plugs for the speaker connections.

In use, the TCI cables seem to have achieved that near impossible balance of

virtues, a warm weighty delivery without any slowing of momentum or musical pace. Ideally suited to the inner or brighter sounding systems where they'll restore some much needed substance, they deliver sweet sound with real presence to voices

and instruments. Despite some rounding in the bass (and plenty of weight) any clogging effects in the mid-band are strictly limited to a slight extra body and chestiness to female vocals, which is far from unattractive or intrusive. Whilst there's an almost inevitable loss of air on the Barbirolli and Gorecki pieces, the power chords and explosive drumming of the Cure cascade out of the speakers with impressive impact and sheer wallop, making for a highly entertaining time. With good coherence across different systems, the TCI cables will tame thin, bright systems without throwing the baby out with the bathwater, whilst retaining enough power, pace and drive to work in better balanced ones too.

Ringmat
Tel. (44)(0)1277 200210
Net. www.ringmat.com

Pure Signal Premium Blue Interconnect - £240
OFC Pure Power Speaker Cable - £356
Pure Power Mains Cable - £395

Like some other manufacturers, Ringmat use the same cable for speaker and power functions (the latter with a heavy external earth cable). All conductors are stranded copper, while terminations are via WBT NextGen phonos for the (much slimmer) interconnects and locking 4mm plugs for speakers. The speaker and power cables are quite bulky, but at least they're flexible and clearly marked for directionality. The sound of the RingMat loom is fast, light yet powerful, organized and energetic. Excellent pace, momentum and

shifts in dynamic density are achieved without hardness or aggression, while textures, phrasing and vocals display a lightness of touch and air around instruments and within the soundstage. There is a slight rosiness to the upper mid and lower treble, a sweetness if you will, but it doesn't prevent them capturing the full air and beauty of the Gorecki piece, or the space and tension in the Barbirolli. The Cure sound impressively punchy without getting brash or congested, while the message in the music, be it classical, acoustic or pop was always well to the fore.

I wonder how much of the musical clarity and coherence available from the Ringmat cables is down to their use of such excellent connectors. I also wonder how much more you can extract from them (and the system they're being used with) in concert with RingMat's various support and tuning devices. As they stand and used in isolation, they offer a superbly balanced and extremely musical solution which is well worth seeking out.

Kimber Kable
UK Distributor: Russ Andrews
Tel. (44)(0)1539 797300
Net. www.russandrews.com

Silver Streak Interconnect - £217
BTC Speaker Cable - £345
Russ Andrews Signature Power Kord - £286.50

Kimber were one of the audio cable pioneers and arguably the first to understand the impact of RFI on systems and mains wiring. Their plaited construction is a neat solution, each conductor being constructed from assorted diameter copper strands - except for the Silver streak where the hot wire is stranded silver. The signal connectors are all suitably low-mass, which makes the choice of 13A plug all the more incomprehensible. I know it's a heavy cable but, the CPSal straight-in 13A connector is built into an

unnecessarily massive, circular housing of sufficient diameter that you can't get two of them, side by side, into an unswitched MK twin socket. There has to be a better solution.

Sonically, the Kimber loom offers a very low noise floor, superb pace, rhythmic agility and musical flow. It's organized, immediate and open sounding. Its weaknesses relate to absolute levels of detail, transparency and focus, and a tendency to congestion at high levels or with very dense material. However, these hi-fi considerations can be largely offset against its winningly musical and engaging presentation and excellent pitch definition in the bass.

These cables have been around for a while, yet far from showing their age, instead show that sound thinking lasts a long time. Favouring the musical over the hi-fi impressive, they represent a safe pair of hands in most system contexts, imposing little character of their own and allowing the performance to breathe. Never less than entertaining, these are cables you can rely on.



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Family Values...

Is using B&W speakers with Classé electronics a marriage made in heaven or the audio equivalent of marrying your sister?

by Roy Gregory

The launch of B&W's original Nautilus 800 Series back in 1997 heralded THE hi-fi success story of the '90's, catapulting the company from dormant to the dominant global brand in high-quality loudspeakers. By now, we all know about the technology and the various innovative approaches that went into almost every aspect of the driver and cabinet designs. But consider this: the advent of the N802 almost single-handedly rejuvenated the market for expensive, three-way floorstanders in the UK; the transmission line tweeter termination didn't just trickle down the range, it spawned a thousand imitators (well, almost); the curved back cabinet's influence likewise spread way beyond the B&W range, as did the separate head-unit. The N800 wasn't just successful, like many a success, it was also extremely influential.

Not bad, not bad at all – when you consider that as a range the speakers presented an uneven and actually fairly flawed face to the world; proof perhaps

that the power of marketing and appearance can overcome sonic obstacles. Integration between the drivers was never a strong point, the speakers were ruinously hard to drive and if they weren't driven properly than the bass could sound detached – both uninvolved and uninviting. Of course, the N800s are history, superseded and much improved upon by the outwardly similar but distinctly different 800D Series. There's far more to these new designs than just a diamond tweeter – indeed several don't even use it. But bass drivers and crossovers have changed radically. The end result is a range that's far better integrated, easier to drive and finally speaks with one voice; a range that is at last delivering on the technological promise of the earlier series while managing to maintain a

distinctly separate (and superior) identity.

The smallest of the current 800 designs appears here, the two-way 805, and no, it doesn't employ the diamond tweeter. So why the lengthy preamble?

Because it shows the way in which B&W were prepared to take a step into the blue, do it successfully yet, far from resting on their laurels, keep on working to improve on and perfect their original concept. The question now is, can they do the

same with the Classé Audio electronics?

One look at the current Classé range tells you just how far they've come in three short years, and although the flagship Omega range soldiers on, the company's future clearly lies within the distinctive curving fascias of the Delta Series and the matching SS processors. The CAP-2100 and CDP-202 reviewed here represent the most affordable amplification option teamed with a dedicated two-channel source, a combined CD/DVD player with up-rated analogue output stage, yet the dramatically curved extrusion that makes up three sides of each chassis and the touch-screen control panel are common to, and in many ways define, the entire product line. Those distinctive looks are the work of Morton Warren, the same man responsible for the



Why Classé?

Although B&W are one of the hi-fi world's most visible and identifiable brands, people are less aware of their group ownership of Rotel and more recently, the Canadian Classé Audio electronics brand. Rotel's excellence in the budget arena is well known, where they represent one of the most respected "starter" hi-fi brands, as well as increasingly impressive AV and multi-channel line. Whilst the new Classé products take over almost exactly where the Rotel ones leave off, that certainly wasn't the case when the company was acquired, and more than one head was scratched when the deal was first announced.

Classé Audio have been quietly producing solid amplifiers for nearly 30 years, yet despite odd forays into the world of high technology, such as their Omega SACD1, their image was more steady Eddie than cutting edge innovation. The motivation for the deal however, lies in the vital US market, where for years the hard-to-drive N800s had made a natural partnership with Krell electronics. Right up to the point that is, when Krell started making their own speakers. Faced with a choice between the two brands, many dealers found it easier to find a new speaker than new amplification. Suddenly B&W found their route to this lucrative market under threat. The natural response (assuming that you are big enough) is to acquire your own brand of driving electronics to offer to your new dealers. Thus the Classé deal was born, with solid amplification pedigree matched to B&W's management and design flair certainly promising some serious potential.

► mould-breaking appearance of the 800 Series speakers, but it's the touch screen with its soft buttons and multi-layer menus that really define these as 21st Century electronics.

It's easy to dismiss the control panel on the Classé units as a mere gimmick, but that would be a huge mistake.



In many ways it sums up their entire ethos: practical, cost-effective, versatile and future-proof. If engineering can be defined as fitness for purpose then the control technology chosen by Classé is sound engineering at its finest. Whilst it's also easy to get carried away with the touch and play functionality of the controls and menus, it's actually the less obvious features that are more impressive. Remember that the screen is software driven, and suddenly the options become legion. For starters, it can be configured for any chosen language, while simple software upgrades can add new languages as markets emerge. Secondly, the buttons are entirely plastic in nature, meaning that new labels can be added, they can be rearranged, they can effectively be prioritized; even complete new functions could be added via a software change. The LCD screen even allows you to view DVD images and disc menus, as well as navigating options within them. And that's really the point. The display screen is exactly that – a display. As such its

content can be adjusted to purpose and adapted to accommodate future developments and technology. It's sheer versatility makes navigating the multiple option menus for both machines incredibly intuitive, whilst also allowing an astonishing range of functional options, ranging from the standard (input name, sensitivity and switch on default) to the esoteric (volume law and

rate of change, 12v trigger priorities and four single-button, user configurable auto functions) to the purely practical (maximum, switch-on and mute levels, system lock down and parental control over DVD replay of certificated discs). I could actually spend the entire article talking about the mind-boggling array of features built into these machines, but I guess you've already got the idea. Put simply, the Classé user interface redefines



what's possible in terms of using and configuring a product as well as making it almost unbelievably easy to achieve. As of now, this is the standard to which other manufacturers must aspire.

That attention to detail doesn't stop on the surface either. The milled

aluminium feet are recessed to accept sorbothane isolation discs. Each product uses a different durometer sorbothane according to weight, so that when stacked there will be consistent visual gaps between the units. It even extends outwards to embrace some of the best-designed packaging I've ever experienced (a real issue when you start talking about some of the humungously heavy power amps in the range) and inwards to include the circuit design and overall construction. Classé are almost fanatical about testing the sub-assemblies that build into a finished product. Electrical tolerances are incredibly tight, as are visual and mechanical inspection standards. The one thing that kills an electronics manufacturer is repeated returns. Classé take the sensible step of doing everything they can to ensure that the products they sell perform exactly to spec – and will go on doing so for years. Nothing personal but they'd really prefer their customers to spend their time using the products rather than discussing them with the service department at the factory.

The CDP-202 is built around a TEAC slot loading DVD-

ROM transport which outputs its signal to a sample rate converter which creates a re-clocked 24bit/192kHz data stream which is then fed to individual left

and right channel

Burr-Brown PCM1792 8x over-sampling DACs, which in turn feed the differential analogue output stage (making for a dual-differential, differential configuration if you follow). A third Burr-Brown DAC and filter is dedicated to the independent single-ended signal paths, ensuring that listeners get optimized results whichever connections they use. ►

► The CAP-2100 employs two of the 100 Watt power modules found in the Classé power amps, and doubles that output into a 4 Ohm load. Inputs consist of one pair of balanced and three pairs of single-ended connections (one of which offers an internal phono-stage option) as well as a tape loop and a set of pre-outs for bi-amping via the matching CA-2100 amplifier. Don't let the sleek appearance fool you; those heat sinks aren't just for show and the unit weighs in at 23kg, making it a serious lift. Both products have matching, illuminated remote controls, the one for the CD player capable of running an entire system. I did encounter two operational issues; the TEAC transport can be noisy and a rapid flurry of commands can confuse it. General start-up is normally pretty convoluted with DVD drives, with much puffing and panting, and this one is no different. However, some discs, once playing, emit an audible whirr that could be intrusive if you sit close to the machine and listen at low levels. Likewise, rapid stabs on the next button



(via the front panel or remote) can send the machine into a paroxysm of indecision. It catches up eventually, but by then you've probably pressed the button all over again! A more measured approach solves the problem, as does using the numeric keypad. Those two things aside, both

units worked flawlessly throughout the lengthy review period.

Whilst this set-up arrived as a system, completed with a Chord Indigo balanced interconnect, a set of Chord Signature speaker leads, some Signature bi-wiring links and a Canadian Cambré Core rack, I also tried the electronics with a range of different speakers, confirming two things: the CAP-2100 will drive almost anything but it prefers to drive the B&W 805S. There is far more than a notional synergy here, and these products really do bring out the best in each other. Playing the *Johannes/Dallas Rachmaninov Symphonic Dances* (still my favourite performance) demonstrates just how much this amp can get out through these tiny speakers, displaying impressive scale, volume and dynamic range. Okay, so the bass doesn't encompass the subterranean depths that are on this disc, but weight and impact are mightily impressive for such compact transducers. This is partly down to sheer grunt (and the speakers' 3.7 Ohm minimum impedance pulling over 200 Watts out of the amp) but it's also down to the speed and dynamic coherence of the 805S, meaning that whilst it doesn't approach full range delivery, what it does deliver arrives on time and pretty smartly too. Dynamic discrimination is also good and those bemoaning the lack of a diamond tweeter might care to listen to the clarity with which the triangle adds its contribution to the general musical mayhem of the opening crescendo.

Barbirolli's *English String Music* disc demonstrates the other side of the coin, the speakers adding considerable finesse to the amplifier's sheer muscle. The *Tallis*

Fantasia depends on perfect timing to capture and hold the air of tension that makes this such a special performance. This system not only achieves that with ease, it also delivers gorgeous string tone without a hint of the shrill glassiness that this CD can sometimes provoke.

Both these examples also point to one of the system's limitations, an inevitable consequence of its limited low frequency extension. As impressive as the bass delivery is, there's no substitute for the real thing when it comes to soundstaging. Compared to a full-range system, it fails to deliver a coherent or convincing acoustic space. Images are spread with reasonable width, but display little real depth or dimensionality. Perhaps I'm expecting too much, but in a system that does so many other things to such a high standard, this is the one real flaw. There again, how many modern discs contain any acoustic information at all?

I also made one other change to the system as delivered, installing Symposium RollerBlock Jr couplers between the components and the shelves. These added transparency, micro-dynamic definition and a sense of rhythmic snap, accounting in no small part for the drama and tension that was so palpable on the Barbirolli disc. In comparison, those beautifully executed sorbothane interfaces rounded and dulled the picture slightly, robbing the music of pace and immediacy. With couplers in place, focus, separation and overall coherence took a real step forward, as did the sense of purpose in the performance, be it Barbirolli or Buddy Holly. The complex multi-layered slabs of sound that constitute



► Daddy G's *DKicks* built into an impressively textured wall of undulating sound, the interwoven rhythms propelling the whole heaving, quaking mass along. The heavy dance beats mixed with reggae, dub and world roots can quickly mire systems that can't control their low-end output, but here the diminutive 805Ss come into their own, their speed and agility effortlessly establishing and shifting patterns. Even the downtempo horizontal plane that is 'Karmacoma' never wavers from its forward progress, insinuating itself beneath your skin as it keeps your body moving to the beat.

But enough of what this system shouldn't be able to do but can: how about playing to its strengths. Smaller scale works and particularly female vocals are where the Classé/B&W combination excels.



Take Eliza Gilkyson's *Hard Times In Babylon*. Whether it's the wry humour of 'Beauty Way' or the heartfelt title track, the agility and natural organization of the system lets you hear right into the

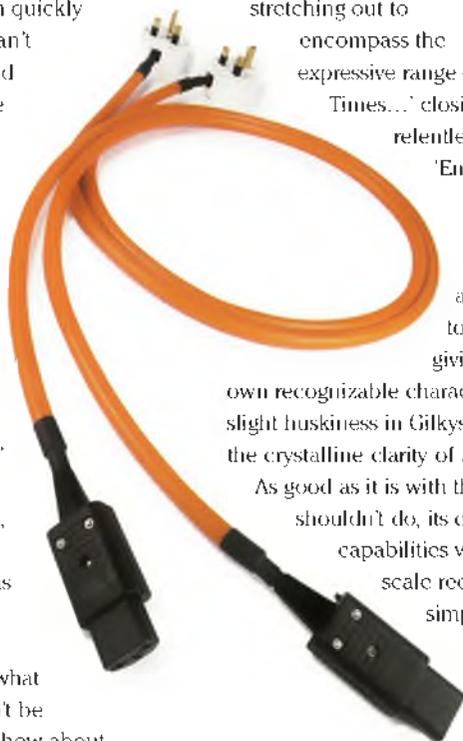
performance, shaping phrases and holding notes, conjuring the meaning and intent in the performance. The rhythmic flexibility comes into its own, stretching out to encompass the expressive range of 'Hard Times...' closing up for the relentless chug of 'Engineer Bill'. Through it all the system allows voices and instruments to breathe, giving each its own recognizable character, be it the slight huskiness in Gilkyson's voice or the crystalline clarity of Alison Krauss. As good as it is with the large stuff it shouldn't do, its communicative capabilities with smaller scale recordings are simply excellent, an object lesson in why you don't need

special skills to appreciate decent hi-fi.

Together, this system represents an astonishingly capable combination. Visually and operationally sophisticated as well as superbly matched, in performance terms there are few things at which it can't take a more than decent stab. Absolute level in anything smaller than a large room should never be an issue, while those feeling short changed by the low-frequency compromise imposed by such small speakers have the option of looking at sub-woofers or larger speakers from the B&W line. The added versatility of high-quality DVD replay and the multifarious interface options would also make these electronics a really worthwhile core element in a multi-room or multi-purpose system. The speaker choice here might be dictated by the UK's

smaller homes, but the options are readily available while the synergistic benefits will surely transfer and I can't see the amp running into trouble much short of 802Ds.

This represents such a great system in so many ways that it's easy to forget the most important of all. All those nice little design touches, the operational interface and flexibility, the hi-fi credentials embodied in the sound, all add up to a single whole: a whole that's greater than the sum of its parts. That's what a system is – something that delivers more than you expect. What's great about this one is that it does that on so many levels. Just watch the response of wives/girlfriends/significant-others; this is a system that looks the part, sounds the part and that they get a kick out of operating too. Now that's a neat trick... 



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Classé Audio CDP-202	£4750
Classé Audio CAP-2100	£3950
B&W 805S	£1600
B&W 805 Loudspeaker Stands	£400
Cambré Core Rack	£200/level
Chord Co. Indigo Balanced (1M)	£1200
Chord Co. Signature Speaker Cable (3M)	£750
Chord Co. Signature Bi-wire Links	£49
2x Chord Co. Power Chords	£140 ca.

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Tel. (44)(0)1903 221500
Net. www.classeaudio.com

The Chord Co
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Out Of The Blue...

New Audio Frontiers build on Densen separates and Piega speakers

by Roy Gregory

Hi-Fi shops constitute exactly that: a shop, a business, an enterprise – and often a few other things besides. But, particularly when it comes to our independent, specialist retailers, they also tend to represent a single personality: the driving force behind them that gives them that character. In the case of New Audio Frontiers, that person is Derek Whittington. His career in hi-fi, like so many, started with something of a wrong turn when, thirty years ago the music-loving, hi-fi buying graphics student was seduced from his chosen path by the chance to run his local hi-fi shop. Since then, he hasn't looked back, becoming by turns the third ever Naim dealer in the UK, a sometime scribe, the owner of some 13000 discs and an inveterate tinkerer in furniture design (starting with the original, mould breaking Tripods and most recently with IsoBlue).

New Audio Frontiers occupies a small corner block, just behind the high street in Loughborough, making it both central and quiet. It started life as a house, was converted into an office and thence back into the shop-come-house that it is today. Open the front door and the hall and what used to be the dining room are neatly, but completely jam-packed with hi-fi and speakers – it made me feel quite at home. Take a look around the dem room and two things immediately become clear: Derek likes music (there are records and CDs everywhere) and despite his long association with (and loyalty to) the likes of Naim and Rega, he does far more than simply follow the party line. Here be, if not exactly dragons, then Shahinian and Piega speakers, Well Tempered record players and Dynavector and Densen electronics. The Analogue streak is no accident and among the LPs propped along the side of the dem room was an Ansermet blue-back *Scheherazade*, a less illustrious Argo of American music (which happens to be a personal favourite) and an original island pressing of the yellow B52s album.



The object of this exercise is to establish a firm system foundation and then grow its performance through upgrades, along the way showing both what the equipment and the dealer can do. Derek chose to start with the basic Densen CD player and pre-amplifier, driving the rather more expensive B330 power amp and a pair of the Piega TS5 loudspeakers, a slim floorstander that's a cheaper and more conventional sibling to the TC-70X reviewed by CB in Issue 47. He was also

at considerable pains to point out that despite their basic nature, the Chord cables and Sound Style rack had been chosen with considerable care and more than a glance in the direction of solid value. The rack in particular, possibly more by luck than judgment and due in no small part to its cantilever construction, is far more sonically successful than its simplicity and price might suggest. Likewise, there are no

fancy mains arrangements or filters involved, the NAF Hydra simply being a neater, more practical solution to the power demands of multi-box systems. Derek is adamant that any system should work plugged straight into a standard wall socket. It's not that a dedicated spur or fancy mains leads can't make a difference, just that they shouldn't be a pre-condition for decent performance.

There's one other aspect to his demonstration approach that is refreshingly different; he prefers to use music with which the listener is unfamiliar (not difficult when you've got 13000 discs to choose from). Occasionally he goes further still, selecting music for which the listener expresses an active dislike. It's his way of showing how a good system gives you much access to a recording or performance; in the same way that you listen to music when it's live that you'd never listen to on a disc. Besides which, it introduces you to new music ▶

▶ and new bands; even if you leave NAF without buying any equipment I can pretty much guarantee you'll be clutching a list of recordings!

True to form, Derek started us off with *Nils Lofgren Acoustic Live*, John Schofield's *Hand Jive* and Joe Cocker's *Stingray*. I chipped in with the Testament live recording of the Du Pre Elgar, getting a little of my own back. At this stage, the system was sounding wonderfully relaxed and unforced, with a clear sense of overall musical structure and direction. It certainly made for an enjoyable and engaging listening experience underpinned by its natural weight and balance, free from the type of low-frequency "enhancement"

that so often muddies the waters with life's more affordable speaker systems. Perhaps it's the Piegas, perhaps it's the



excellence, control and grip of the B330, but there were none of the tell-tale signs to suggest that the speakers and amp were in any way limiting what was coming off of the disc.

Which isn't to say that this system lacked flaws, merely that its flaws are musically benign, meaning you'll tend not to notice them unless you go looking. When you do you'll notice a lack of separation, a flatness to the acoustic space and a lack of inner tension between the musicians.

Time for our first change and the expenditure of an extra £1200 on the XS version of the B-400; this is a machine with which I'm familiar, it being CB's player of choice. However, I've tended to hear it more often than not in the context of more expensive alternatives – an environment in which it survives admirably. Hearing it here in what might be considered a more natural setting underlined just what an excellent machine it is.



The System

Denon Beat B-400+ CD player	£1400
Denon Beat B-200 pre-amplifier	£1100
Denon Beat B-330 power amp	£3000
Piega TS-5 loudspeakers	£1500
Chord Chorus and Odyssey cables	
NAF Hydra, 5-way IEC lead	
Sound Style Z5 rack	£199

Upgrades

Step One

Denon Beat B-400XS CD player	£2600
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Step Two

Denon Beat B-250 pre-amplifier	£3000
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With the 400XS arrived a dramatic increase in transparency, detail, separation and dynamic discrimination. The bass went deeper, with a far more tactile quality and greater texture. Notes had more shape and clearer pitch than before, bringing a purpose and momentum to the music and making the 400+ sound rather lazy in comparison. Returning to the Nils Lofgren, suddenly you notice the crowd, the attack and intent in his playing, the character of his steel strung Ovation guitar far more obvious, but more importantly, much more in tune with the music.

This added sense of life and vitality is down to the crisper, cleaner transients, the blacker background and the increase in both dynamic range and discrimination. Du Pre's bowing became far more obvious, a bigger part of the performance, while those bass guitar melodies that characterize Stewboss finally emerged from the low-frequency murk. Now you got the groove on the John Schofield track, feeling the rhythmic convolutions underpinning the soloists. The original system succeeded by making sure that the bass notes were in the right place and at the right time. The XS upgrade allowed you to hear when they started, and when they stopped.

Now the system was starting to sing, with greater insight into the playing, greater insight into the relationship between parts and within bands. But there was more to come. Spending another 1900 of my hard earned pounds, Derek inserted the B-250 pre-amp into the equation. ▶

▶ A little like the last piece of a jigsaw, suddenly the picture was complete. Now the extra detail and definition were harnessed to the power and drive available from the power amp. Listening to 'The Drowning Man' live take from the Cure's *Faith DeLuxe Edition* set, the interleaving layers fell into shape, their pattern laid over the bass rhythms, the trademark jangling guitars and moaning Smith vocals tied together to make a musically coherent whole.



No, it didn't have the weight and power of the studio mix, the surging low-frequency undulations, but now it had shape and momentum; now it was a performance rather than just a thin and disjointed facsimile of the original. It's an important point; this isn't a great recording, but it does contain great music.

Adding the B-250 to the system gave you access to the performance, fleshing out the mix without drawing attention to its shortcomings. Now the system had the authority and musical poise to pull the performance off the disc, to have you concentrate on the music itself rather than on the system playing it.

What sonic shift was responsible for this musical dividend? What you hear (if you start breaking the music and performance down into parts) is greater substance and presence. There's more shape and body to vocals and instruments, more space and volume within the recording. In turn, that's down to better resolution and control, getting more information in the right place and at exactly the right time. The result is greater intimacy and a natural sense of communication born of something approaching realism, in part as a result of the system doing more right, but almost more importantly, doing less wrong.

Was I convinced by the final set-up, or was it better to travel than to arrive? In fact, the experience was the best of both. On the one hand, the path from start to finish was clearly and

logically defined, the upgrades significant and definitely value for money. On the other, the trip stopped at so many way points, dipped into so many new and interesting and unfamiliar musical pools that the process itself was almost as entertaining as the goal. Derek's inclusion of the B-330 from the start was an unusual decision, flying somewhat in the face of the front-end-first philosophy you might expect from such an established Naim and Rega dealer. Well, yes – but let's not forget that Rd already defined this as a system to be upgraded. As a one-time fix, he'd opt for a different balance of expenditure, maybe teaming the B-100XS with an integrated. But in the context of the upgrade path it made perfect sense to include this as a single outlay and reduce the number of overall steps. It's easy after all, to forget that each step costs you money: the money for the new piece and the money lost on the one you trade for it.

It would be easy to pick the CD player as this system's star turn, but to do so ignores the fact that it's the amp (and speakers) that's showing you just what it's capable of. Having heard the results I can

understand exactly why Derek

was so keen to include it – and as a customer it would be a hard proposition to dismiss. As a strategy it's typical Whittington: practical, effective and off-beat – which sums up New Audio Frontiers pretty well.

I might not have left with any new equipment but this close encounter has already proved reassuringly expensive, several new additions already in the CD rack and more on the way...



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Chick Corea

The pianist, composer and improvisational genius

Interviewed by Anke Kathrin Bronner

As always in life, it is encounters that have shaped the life and career of Armando Anthony Corea. Whether encounters with humans, musicians, composers, music, compositions, religion, or literature, each of them has influenced both the man and the musician and had an effect on his life and music. The trajectory of that path has traversed Latin music, fusion and lately his second piano concerto "in the spirit of" Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, his acclaimed composition from 2006.

One of those fateful encounters occurred in 1982, when he met Friedrich Gulda and performing with him at the first "Munich Klaviersommer" piano festival. Ever since 1983, when he finished his first piano concerto, the pianist has been constantly oscillating between jazz and classical. He has become an intermediary between the two worlds, with his audience consisting of both jazz and classical aficionados.

Chick Corea is one of few artists openly living out his spirituality and his belief in Scientology. He describes his first contact with the religion of L. Ron Hubbard: "It was a total learning experience for me. It was around 1968, 1969, and some of my biggest gains in life came when I extroverted and reached out and saw that the world was made of people." For some listeners the connection between music and religion might be a disincentive, but Chick Corea's intention is not to proselytise. For him, religion is a part of his life and a source of inspiration. The tone poems *To The Stars* and *The Ultimate Adventure* are a vivid testimony to this creative process. His weakness for science fiction in general, and for the novels of L. Ron Hubbard in particular, has led him to an unexpected



extent. But, these two works are not his only compositions inspired by literature, as *The Mad Hatter* (Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*), *The Leprechaun*, and *My Spanish Heart* show.

For more than 40 years now, Chick Corea has been performing on stages all over the world; he has recorded more than the incredible number of 200 albums as soloist, sideman, bandleader, duetist, among them 98 albums under his own name. And there is no end in sight! This is due to the fact that Chick Corea has never rested on his laurels, but is always reinvented himself and his music – anchored by the constants of his fantastic technique and the incredible ingenuity of his improvisation.

AKB: Do you actually have Latin roots as your name and your music suggests?

Chick Corea: Well, I have Latin roots socially and spiritually; but not genetically. Genetically, my roots are from Italy. My grandfather is from the south of Italy, from Sicily. So, my parentage is Italian.

AKB: Good old Europe!

CC: Of course, yes! My musical roots are very wide, because I grew up in Boston and in New York, meeting musicians from everywhere. From South America and Puerto Rico, from Europe, from Cuba and Japan, from everywhere, you know... So, these were really my cultural beginnings, in New York, which is the biggest melting pot in the world.



► **AKB:** When and how did you get involved in music?

CC: Well, my father was all about music. He was a trumpeter and leader of his own Dixieland band around Boston. His passion was jazz and he had a collection of 78 rpm vinyl, from Dizzy Gillespie to Bud Powell and Billy Eckstine. It was him who taught me how to play the piano and read music, all about standard tunes and so forth, when I was four. It was a fantastic way to grow up in music! But later, I got interested in Latin music – as you know, I joined Mongo Santamaria's band after high school.

AKB: But did you also have a classical teacher as a child?

CC: That maybe true for the classical pianist. But for jazz musicians in New York, it is more normal to listen to Bartók and Stravinsky. These are the interesting composers for us. Then, if you're going deeper, you'll want to listen to the other, earlier composers. My interest in Mozart began late really in 1982, with my meeting with Friedrich Gulda, the well-known Austrian pianist.

AKB: Was this your first contact with Mozart? You played the Mozart *Double Concerto* with him, right?

CC: Yes! But our first meeting was on stage, at the premier of the "Munich Klaviersommer" festival. I didn't know him



CC: Yes! He was a friend of the family, Salvatore Sullo. He got me interested in some classical composers, and he showed me some very, very helpful things about playing the piano and technique. He used to play concerts with the Boston Pops in the summer, so he was a very good pianist. But he didn't like jazz (laughs). So... later, on my own, I began to listen to recordings of Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky, Alexander Scriabin and Alban Berg. These were the composers that first got me interested in European music.

AKB: But this is not the norm! Normally, when you start playing piano, you play Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn!



before that, and it was certainly risky enough to meet for the first time on stage. After a half hour of duet improvisation, Gulda played alone. No improvisation, but a composed piece of music. Afterwards, I asked him: "Who wrote that wonderful music?" And he answered: "Why, that's Mozart!" And a few months later, he invited me to perform the *Double Piano Concerto* with him!

AKB: So far, everything you've mentioned has been composed for acoustic piano. But you have also always been a pioneer with digital piano. How did that start?

CC: That was during my time with Miles Davis – about seven or eight months after my joining the band! One evening, when I walked on stage, I headed toward the acoustic piano, as usual. But that evening, Miles pointed at the Fender Rhodes: Play that! ►

▶ Until that evening, I thought that electric pianos were kind of a coloration thing, a kind of addition to the ensemble. But from that moment on, I started playing exclusively electric keyboards, primarily the Rhodes.

AKB: Do you think that the acoustic and the digital sound are diametrically opposed?

CC: Not in my mind!

AKB: How do you close the gap between the two sounds? How does the sound of digital piano contribute to new compositions?

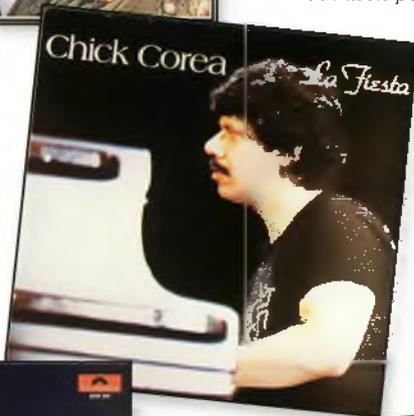
CC: Well, you listen to my records! That's the answer!

AKB: We have all the ECM records, but I can't see what you mean.

CC: Well, the ECM's don't show it, because Manfred Eicher doesn't like electric music. So, my electric music is more on other labels. My recent record *The Ultimate Adventure* for instance, is a good mixing of acoustic music and electric music. But the sound of the music is... Any good music can be played with any instruments, I think, you know! In fact, even Friedrich Gulda who was known for his mastery of Mozart, his favourite thing would be to take Mozart and play it on electric instruments. In fact, he made a recording of Mozart *Sonatas*, do you know it, on the Clavinova?

AKB: Yes, I know it!

CC: Well, you know a lot of things then, if you know this, 'cause this is a very esoteric item!



AKB: Thank you! But, please, tell me a little bit more about your *Piano Concertos*! You finished your first one in 1983, although you made some revision afterwards. The piano part of your *No. 1*, is it completely improvised?

CC: Not really! No. Most of it is written! Some of it is improvised, but most of it is written. It is a concerto for piano and chamber orchestra, and I performed it a number of times, but then put it away for 10 years. Recently,

I re-orchestrated some things, found out the few points I didn't like about it and changed them, and found that it wasn't such a bad piece of music. For my concerto I chose almost the exact same instrumentation as Mozart. I figured that I could perform the Mozart and my own piece with the same size orchestra! I dedicated it to the spirit of religious freedom which, for me, is on the same level as the creative freedom that is the basic right of all people.

AKB: You know, for classical musicians, it is really hard to improvise.

CC: Well, they are not accustomed to it.

AKB: Yes, but also, I don't think they get the idea. They don't know what they can do!

CC: Yes, that's because they didn't learn that way.

AKB: But where do you get your ideas from?

CC: It's an orientation. If you learn classical piano from the classical tradition, so-to-speak, and classical schools, then you won't learn to improvise, because that's not part of the curriculum. ▶

Biography Chick Corea

- 1941: Armando Anthony Corea was born on June, 12th in Chelsea, Massachusetts, USA
- 1945: First piano lessons
- 1952/63: First professional gigs: Corea plays with Cab Calloway and in Latin bands led by Mongo Santamaria and Willie Bobo
- 1964-66: Tenures with Blue Mitchell, Herbie Mann and Stan Getz
- 1966: *Tones for Joan's Bones* is Chicks' first recording as leader; recordings with Cal Tjader, Dizzy Gillespie and others
- 1967: Chick accompanies Sarah Vaughan
- 1968: Chicks second album as leader, *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs*, is recorded
- 1968-70: Chick becomes a member in Miles Davis' band, replacing Herbie Hancock
- 1970: Foundation of the jazz quartet Circle (with Dave Holland)
- 1971: Recording of *Piano Improvisations 1&2*, his first solo piano albums, for ECM;
- Chick turns *Return to Forever*, with Stanley Clarke, Joe Farrell, Airtio Moreira and Hora Purni
- 1972: The albums *Return To Forever* (ECM), *Light As A Feather* (Polydor) and *Crystal Silence* (ECM) are released
- 1973: RTF changes its direction to fusion and its lineup
- 1974: With the new member Al DiMeola, RTF goes into jazz-rock direction
- 1976: RTF's album *Romantic Warner* (Columbia) is awarded a Grammy
- 1977: Third lineup of RTF records *Music Magic* (Columbia) and *R.T.F. Live* (Columbia)
- 1971-1977: Principle conductor of New York Philharmonic Orchestra
- 1978: Tour with Herbie Hancock, acoustic piano duets exclusively; release of *The Mad Hatter* (ECM) (jazz quartet)
- 1981: Touring with an all-star quartet (Joe Henderson, Gary Peacock, Roy Haynes); album *Live in Montreux* (GRP); reunion with Miroslav Vitous and Roy Haynes for *Two Music* (ECM)
- 1982: The album *Touchstone* (Paco de Lucia, Al Di Meola, Stanley Clarke) is released; Chick meets Friedrich Gulda and records *The Meeting* (Philips) with the classical pianist; the band Echoes of an Era is formed, accompanying Chaka Khan
- 1983: Chick finishes his *First Piano Concerto*; *Children Songs* (ECM) for solo piano is released
- 1985: Chick records *Septet for piano, French horn and string quartet*
- 1989: Formation of the Acoustic Band to balance the electric forays of the last years
- 1991: Grammy for the duet recording *Play* (Blue Note) with Bobby McFerrin
- 1992: Chick founds his own label, Stretch Records
- 1997: Recording of *The Mozart Sessions* (Sony Classical) with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra with Bobby McFerrin as conductor; the new acoustic sextet Origin comes to life
- 1998: *A Week At The Blue Note*, an Origin project, is released
- 2000: 17 years after finishing it, Chick records his *Piano Concerto No. 1* with the London Philharmonic Orchestra (Corea Concerto, Sony Classical)
- 2001: *On Past, Present & Futures* (Stretch), Chick presents his new trio
- 2004: Reunion of Elektric Band for a tour; album *To The Stars* based on the novel by L. Ron Hubbard
- 2005: Release of *The Ultimate Adventure*
- 2006: Chick's *Piano Concerto No. 2* is premiered in course of Mozart's 250th anniversary in Vienna

Chick has won 11 Grammy Awards and has been awarded innumerable other awards and prizes.

► **AKB:** And do you think you could teach anybody to improvise?

CC: Absolutely, because it's our basic nature to create. Improvisation is just creativity; this is making music. It's like a composer, like an improviser. I think, every musician should learn to read music, but also learn to improvise.

AKB: Last July you premiered your *Second Piano Concerto*, called *The Continents*. Who or what inspired the composition?

CC: The city of Vienna offered me a commission to write a piano concerto in the spirit of Mozart. I think they wanted something that would be creative and lively. And I consider it an honour! The plan was to go on tour with a Mozart concerto, *No. 24 in C minor*, and with my new piano concerto. Did you know that Mozart wrote 27 piano concertos, but only two of them in minor keys? They awoke my interest; the phrasing reminds me of Bebop!



AKB: Oh, the link between classical music and jazz music! And how would you describe the style of the concerto?

CC: Well, it is more improvised, more than the first piano concerto has been. Because in this piece... It's not really a piano concerto like the first one. This piece is more properly named, I think, "Music for piano, quartet and orchestra". I have a section featuring Tim Garland on the saxophone.

And there's a drum kit and an upright bass playing in a jazz way some of the time. We combine these things, and so it's maybe half and half. I don't know. I didn't measure it, but more improvisational. The form is flexible. It is six movements of diverse style, with diverse rhythms. You can choose your own sequence, a kind of modular system – as I am a crossbreed myself! Each movement can be played as an individual composition, and the concerto will be constantly altering!

AKB: When you are composing, do you have more interest in melody, or in rhythm, or in harmony? ►

► At what point do you start?

CC: There's no mechanical way to compose. And there is no way really to separate between melody and rhythm and harmony. In fact, I don't even think about those words, because music is everything together. But I can compose in many, many different ways! And it's always different every time I try it, you know: at the piano, in my head, sing a melody, play with other musicians and improvise, then take something and develop a composition. So many different ways! Like making a painting; you have an idea, you have a canvas, and then you put a piece in and you put another piece and so it goes!

AKB: This raises a question: Improvisation is almost composing for the moment, the music and the ideas are fleeting. In composing your piano concertos – and you have also written a string quartet – did you want to create something for eternity?

CC: I don't think I thought that far ahead, but maybe create something, yes, that can be duplicated and played again by me or by other musicians. It's nice to do that. And I like to compose music and I like to have it played by others; but in their way, not in my way.

AKB: Has anybody else recorded your *First Piano Concerto*?

CC: No, not recorded. There have been some performances, yes! But the only existing recording is me playing with the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

AKB: You not only composed your concertos "in the spirit of Mozart", but you also perform Mozart. When you are playing Mozart, do you try to play it in the classical way or with your background as jazz musician?

CC: Well, I'm improvising not only in my own work, but on the Mozart too, without a doubt. I think it was intended by the composer, and it's a fun thing to do. I personally think it makes a very nice compliment to the Mozart music!

AKB: What makes your interpretation of Mozart so special?

CC: I don't think anything, and that's probably the best

Discography (Selection):

- 1966: *Tones For Joan's Bones* (Vortex 2004)
- 1968: *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs* (Solid State 18039)
- 1971: *Piano Improvisations, Vol. 1 & 2* (ECM 1014/1020)
- 1972: *Return to Forever* (ECM 1022)
- 1972: *Crystal Silence* (ECM 1024)
- 1973: *Light As A Feather* (Polydor 5525)
- 1975: *The Leprechaun* (Polydor 239-1217)
- 1976: *My Spanish Heart* (Polydor 29003)
- 1977: *RTF: Return To Forever Live - The Complete Concert* (Columbia 35350)
- 1978: *The Mad Hatter* (Polydor 2940-114)
- 1978: *Corea/Hancock* (Polydor 2672-049)
- 1978: *Duet* (ECM 1140)
- 1979: *Chick Corea And Gary Burton In Concert* (ECM 1182)
- 1981: *Three Quartets* (Warner Brothers 3552)
- 1983: *Children's Songs* (ECM 815-680)
- 1984: *Voyage* (ECM 1282)
- 1984: *Septet* (ECM 1297)
- 1986: *The Chick Corea Elektric Band* (GRP 1026)
- 1989: *Chick Corea Akoustic Band* (GRP 9582)
- 1989: *Happy Anniversary Charlie Brown* (GRP 9596)
- 1990: *Inside Out* (GRP 9601)
- 1994: *Expressions* (GRP 9774)
- 1996: *The Mozart Sessions* (Sony Classical 62601)
- 1998: *A Week At The Blue Note* (Stretch 9020)
- 1999: *Corea, Concerto* (Sony Classical 61799)
- 2001: *Chick Corea New Trio - Past, Present & Futures* (Stretch 9035)
- 2003: *Rendezvous in New York* (Stretch 9041)
- 2004: *To The Stars* (Stretch 9043)
- 2006: *The Ultimate Adventure* (Stretch 9045-2)



way I don't think about it. I play Mozart the same way I play Thelonious Monk or George Gershwin. I take a... It's a piece of music that I love, the Mozart. And so I play it in a way that pleases me, in a way that I like. I play it in a way that I hear it, in a way that it goes well for me and that I enjoy it, you know.

AKB: Have you ever compared your interpretation of the Mozart with those by other classical pianists?

CC: Not at all, in fact I didn't enjoy most of what I've heard! (laughing) Actually, there's a recording of Glen Gould that I like. It's a live recording and he plays a really interesting cadenza. There are plenty of other nice recordings too; I like Daniel Barenboim's reading, but I haven't listened that widely.



► **AKB:** You have played in a whole range of contexts: as soloist, with duo and trio, with your band and now with chamber orchestra. Which formation do you prefer?

CC: I'm a musician who likes to make music in every way, and I enjoy many, many different ways to play. I enjoy

AKB: During your career, you have played with many famous jazz musicians: Sarah Vaughan, Stan Getz and Miles Davis. Which has been the most important relationship in your life, for your musical development?

CC: There's no single one. It's impossible to point out one!

Because there were so many and all of the musicians I have worked with added value to my life, you know. A great part of the richness of my life has come from other musicians, musicians whom I've spent time creating with. And I feel fortunate to have been able to be with such great musicians. I feel that's really the way I developed my own music and art; I was continually inspired, and also learnt various approaches and ways into music. It's the same way anyone learns a skill, which is apprenticeship. You work with someone who does what you want to do very well, and you learn the basic ideas and then take it where you want to go. My time with Miles Davis was particularly inspirational because he was a musician that inspired me from when I was very young. I followed his music through the late

forties and all the way through the fifties and the sixties until I joined his band in 1968. So, that was a big experience for me, and a very positive one which gave me a lot of inspiration. And I also met a lot of great musical friends through working with Miles. Although we were all around New York, I met Jack DeJohnette and Dave Holland and



musical partners! I prefer to play solo only occasionally. So, that's not my favourite. But to play with a group and other musicians who I create with, this is my fun. And small groups are really good fun! I like them because there's a small number of people and we can create or improvise something special and usually. But the sound of an orchestra is also very attractive!

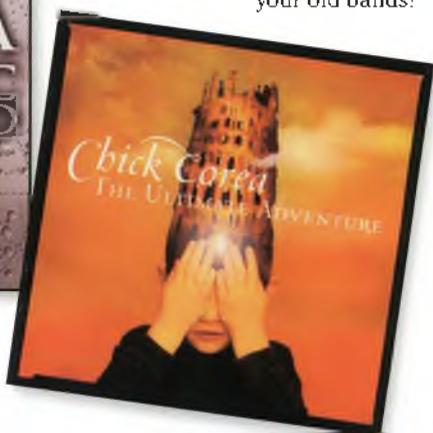
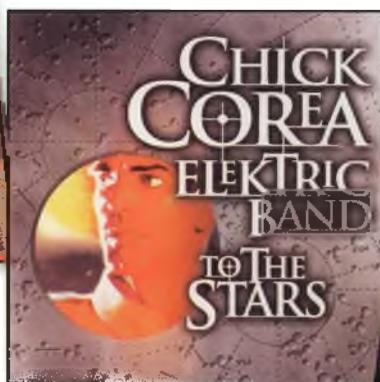
AKB: It's like a discussion, between two or three or four persons?

CC: It can be very nice, yes! For me, music has no law about it. I love the freedom in the music I'm involved with. Whatever instruments, whatever sounds, whatever path, the music takes me on a journey!



► I got to play with Wayne Shorter. I had already played a little bit with John McLaughlin and met Airto Moreira. It was a very good period. But there have been so many like the ones that you mentioned and many other musicians who added to my life.

you participate when you read literature. And me, the composer, I use my imagination to create what the writer is writing! There are characters that I have infiltrated, and little stories. Normally, I write music and then images come to fit it. But for *The Ultimate Adventure* I found the images first and then composed the music to portray it.



AKB: What are your plans for the future? Will you focus on composing – another string quartet or another piano concerto – in other words, will the main focus be on acoustic music? Or will you even reanimate one of your old bands?

AKB: You refer to your latest album, *The Ultimate Adventure* (2006), as a tone poem, which is a technical term from classical music – another point of contact with that genre!

CC: It is a very interesting and uncharted area. I always try to explain that *The Ultimate Adventure* is not a soundtrack to L. Ron Hubbard's book. Music for me is a trip into the imagination, so, there are songs about the characters and people, about places, about moods. The first time I carried one of his books into music was *To the Stars*, featuring my Elektric Band. It was very challenging, compelling and inspiring for me. But I have noticed that it circled its way back to my very first recorded efforts, to *Now He Sing, Now He Sobs* (1968), *Return To Forever* (1972), *The Leprechaun* (1976), *The Mad Hatter* (1978), even to *Tones For Joan's Bones* (1966), one of my very first albums! I think literature is an incredible art form. Literature can leave the reader's imagination wide open. There's a great difference between that and movies. That's what I don't like about them: they give you everything. It is a passive role, whereas

CC: Well, I have a lot of plans! In this next period, we have such diverse things that we are going to do: I have a lot of duets that I'm gonna put together in this next year. One is recreating my duet with Gary Burton. And we are gonna make a new recording together, because that will be the 35th anniversary of our first recording *Crystal Silence*. I'm also going to do something new, which is make a duet with Béla Fleck, who's a friend of mine and someone with whom I really enjoy playing. I think there'll be probably some more duets with Bobby McFerrin. I have some young musicians playing in a trio. I have some electric music dates in November, with the Elektric Band and also with Steve Gadd and Anthony Jackson and Kenny Garret... A lot of plans!



AKB: I see: As always, there's a huge diversity in your music! But all together, it's one whole opus: your life as an artist! Thank you!



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Beth Navarro

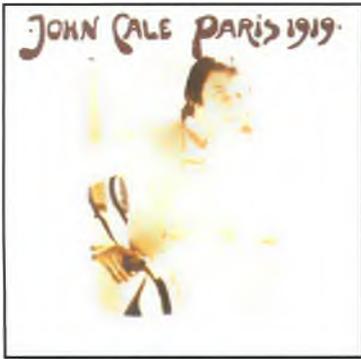
Sanctuary

Halo Records HALOCD14 

Anyone picking this album up in the record racks might think it was aimed at the Enya fraternity. The dreamy sleeve with the peaceful lake, the slightly forlorn photo of Navarro and the title hardly give the impression of a country album, but that's essentially what it is. Not only is it a country album but it's one by a native of this fair isle. Generally the Americans have the market pretty sown up but this girl has talent to burn and a voice that can take her pretty much wherever she chooses. When she's pushing that voice and the band are rocking out behind her Navarro comes across like Carlene Carter. However, to describe *Sanctuary* as an album of whoops and hollers would be doing it a great disservice as it dips its toe in folk territory (the gently sad 'Pol' y) and has its fair share of mid-tempo, steel guitar soaked numbers and poignant ballads, none more moving than the beautiful 'High Wind On The Water', an album highlight. The song writing credits generally go to Alex Scott and Alan Morgan who handle the guitar parts too, whilst Dave Hayward contributes the lonesome pedal steel, keyboards and programming. *Sanctuary* is a pretty good introduction to Navarro's plentiful talents, but a more generous budget and fuller band next time around could open much bigger doors.

AH

RECORDING 
MUSIC



John Cale

Paris 1919

Reprise/Rhino 8122 74060 2 

This was a very welcome re-issue since my vinyl original is starting to show signs of serious wear. Recorded in 1973 with Lowell George and Richie Hayward of Little Feat and The Crusaders Wilton Felder in supporting roles along with the UCLA Symphony Orchestra, this gentle reflective set with only one of its nine original tracks 'Macbeth' rocking out, is certainly Cale's most lyrical and immediately accessible album in his long career as well as one of his very best. It's possible (and very enjoyable), to simply listen to the album and float along on a sea of gorgeous melodies and superb playing but dig a little deeper and there's plenty of substance to Cale's lyrics, especially on 'Half Past France', 'Hanky Panky Nohow' and the plaintive 'Andaluca', a song that just locks in your mind from the very first hearing.

The extras comprise one really strong track 'Burned Out Affair' inexplicably dropped from the original set and an outstanding selection of first, alternate and rehearsal takes including a fragile 'Andaluca' and two takes on the title track, a Beatlish string mix, and a piano mix. If like me you have a treasured vinyl copy you can't go wrong with this re-issue. It's worth the price of admission for the extras alone. If you've not come across the album before you owe it to yourself to do so now.

DD

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



The Young Knives

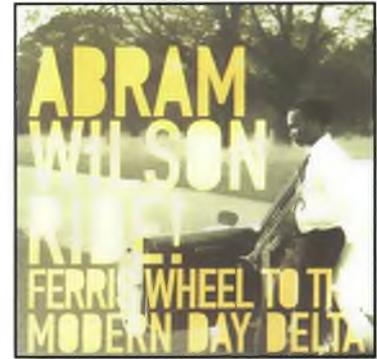
Voices of Animals and Men

Transgressive B000H3092Y 

Voices of Animals and Men provides a blast of anarchic pop and punchy guitars. Convoluted vocals are spat out with an unexpected ferocity as the music tumbles about. The Young Knives seem to draw their influences from all over the last three decades of rock. Their sound is not that far removed from bands like the Strokes and Art Brut, but it's also not just another of the North London set. The Young Knives seem to me to be more like Sparks, pushing each song, each concept slightly further than would perhaps be obvious. So it's not simply enough to sing about the tailoring of the horses in the new forest, it has to be sung in the style of a military major taking personal affront at the very idea. Like Art Brut, their lyrics and style can seem ironic, that they may even be playing some strange joke on their listeners, but this is no comedy album. Their smart and witty social observations are mixed in equal part with surrealist visions, like a walk down an urban high street on a Saturday night viewed through fractured glass. But the real trick is making this distorted vision of life so easy to accept. This is art school rock, determined to create something more than just pop, something aesthetic and introspective. It's also great fun.

MC

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Abram Wilson & The Delta Blues Project

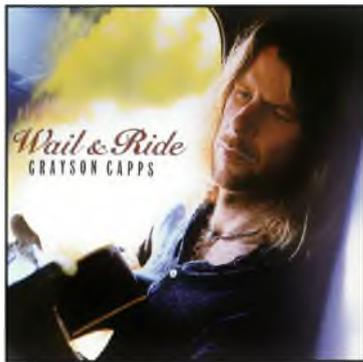
Ride! Ferris Wheel To The Modern Day Delta

Dune CD016 

With a ten-piece line-up fronted by the MOBO nominated trumpeter and vocalist Abram Wilson this set tells the story of one Albert Jenkins, a young Mississippi trumpeter from a music club owning family in search of a more exciting life. It follows this journey as he joins a hip-hop band, rejects his family, and on to his decision about just who he wants to be. It's a real credit to Wilson that this set successfully captures the essence of a range of different musical styles: essentially jazz and blues based it takes in hip-hop, soul and funk whilst maintaining a real integrity and consistency across the whole. Bound together by Wilson's impassioned vocals and great trumpet playing the band is also superb, underpinned by powerful percussion from Shaney Forbes, Neil Charles double bass and a solid, growling tuba from Andy Grappy. The brass section complementing Wilson's trumpet is tight, dynamic and soulful, giving this piece exactly the drive and guts it needs. Fleshed out with harmonica and guitar for the bluesier numbers and supported throughout by Ben Burrell's excellent piano work, this is a set I really wish I'd caught live. Fortunately Dune have done a great job of capturing the full experience here with a full blooded, weighty recording that does this fine set full justice.

DD

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MUSIC 



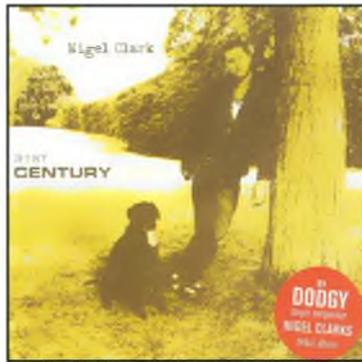
Grayson Capps

Wail And Ride

Hyena Records HYN9352

Way back in 1999 Grayson Capps was the lead singer/rhythm guitarist in Stavin' Chain, a damn fine roots rock band on the verge of great things before they fell foul of one of those never-ending record company merger. The band folded but fortunately Capps persevered and rose from the ashes as an excellent solo artist. *Wail And Ride* follows hard on the heels of his 2005 release *If You Knew My Mind* and is a continuation of that record's blend of bluesy roots rock, country and earthy Americana. It's a better record all round; lyrically and musically the songs are much stronger and the whole thing has a more complete feel to it. Capps' vocals, a sort of smokier Waylon Jennings with a pinch of the Tom Waits growl, is a potent weapon and carries his songs quite beautifully. The title track swings along on a fierce rhythm, a great country blues shuffle with some very tasty acoustic lead, courtesy of the man himself. 'New Orleans Waltz' is exactly that, a waltz to the memory of a devastated city and a sensitive tribute to the loss felt by many. Production is handled by Capps and the delightfully named Trina Shoemaker and they've given *Wail And Ride* plenty of space and a rich, inviting sound, perfect for his terrific songs.

AH



Nigel Clark

21st Century Man

Hijack Records JACK002

Dodgy produced three albums in the mid nineties, each of which was a perfect jewel of soulful pop. The friction between the three constituent members gave their songs a frisson of excitement which other pop bands lacked. Then, in 1998, Nigel Clark left and the band lost a spark they never reclaimed. *21st Century Man* picks it up pretty much where Dodgy left it. Everything on this album has that feel: the songs, the drumming, the guitars. I even had to check the sleeve to make sure the old band members weren't present on the recording. A few things have changed though, Nigel Clark has left behind some of his old band's clichés and jokes and this record is distinctly more serious and mature in tone. This record relies on Nigel's innate ability to write superb songs, fully formed musical creations that need no embellishments or gimmicks. So whilst his old band spiralled in on themselves, heading off down a musical cul-de-sac, this album is like a breath of summer air. Production is sparse, and the tracks sound fresh, with only the vocal effects betraying the studio input. Nigel Clark's vocals still carry the mournful overtones that make each song so heartbreakingly touching, cutting through otherwise saccharine melodies like a knife to the soul. I've waited eight years for this album: that's a lot of expectation, but it doesn't disappoint one bit.

MC



Los Lobos

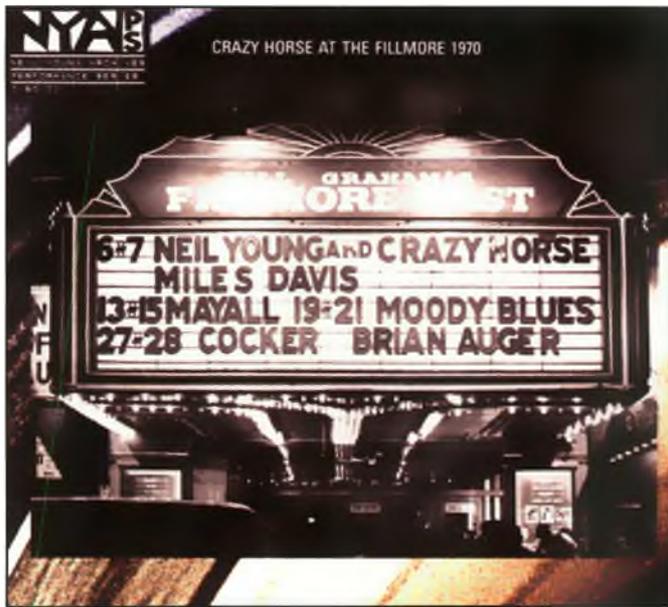
The Town And The City

Hollywood Records 3708392

If they handed out a music award for longevity Los Lobos wouldn't have much trouble scooping it up. The band started way back in 1973 and a cool 33 years later they're still coming up with something relevant to say, musically and lyrically. *The Town And The City* is a throwback in sound to *Kika*, widely regarded as their masterpiece. It's a brooding, intense affair built around 13 songs, the lyrical content of which is predominantly handled by Louie Perez. He taps into the sweet and the sour of what's going on around him, summing it up on 'The City': "Two lovers kissing by the door / there's yelling from the second floor." As musicians Los Lobos have few peers; they seamlessly blend the lean, mean sounds of suburbia with the more romantic side of their Spanish roots, but somehow always manage to keep the whole thing fresh and exciting. This release has an undercurrent of deeply resonating bass lines that merge with a dark, spellbinding groove... it's menacing, but it works really well. Steve Berlin sums up its mood when he says: "This is a record of the moment. There are places where it's dark and foreboding and that's certainly how many people feel right now." Astonishing that after 30 odd years they can still come up with something this good.

AH





Neil Young and Crazy Horse

Live at the Fillmore East
March 6 & 7, 1970

Reprise CDW 44429 

This first archival release from Neil Young – albeit designated on the cover as Disc 02 in the “Neil Young Archives Performance Series” – is an appropriate tribute to his original Crazy Horse backing group.

Crazy Horse, a mind-numbingly simple but splendidly effective rock band, was built around the rudimentary rhythm section of Billy Talbot and Ralph Molina. Living proof of the priority of a rhythm section's compatibility with the front person over individual technique, they would continue to play live with Young, off and on, for decades. Danny Whitten, a talented guitarist and songwriter performing with them here, one who would have led the group to a successful career quite apart from Young's superstar presence and association, was doomed to be dead from a heroin overdose two years later. The group is augmented on these recordings by Sixties California studio eminence Jack Nitzsche on electric piano. He would go on to work with Young on

Harvest, and other later recordings. The selection of numbers from the two New York concerts documented here is relatively small. We get three songs from Young's second solo album, *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* (the title tune, and the now-classic ‘Down by the River’ and ‘Cowgirl in the Sand’); a nice airing of ‘Come On Baby Let's Go Downtown’, the first single released by Crazy Horse on its own; ‘Winterlong’ a lovely mid-tempo number that did not surface on record until it was included in the 1977 multi-disc compilation *Decade*; and ‘Wanderin’), a tune that didn't come out until 1983, when it made for a nicely offbeat single. And that's it. No ‘Cinnamon Girl’ – perhaps this group's finest moment – and nothing from the acoustic sets that opened both of these shows.

At least what is here is choice. For some the long versions of ‘Down by the River’ and ‘Cowgirl in the Sand’ may be too long and jammy (12 and 16 minutes, respectively) but hey, this is an early pinnacle in hippie (read stoner) rock. The CD also delivers very good live sound

PD

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Mustangs

Split Decision

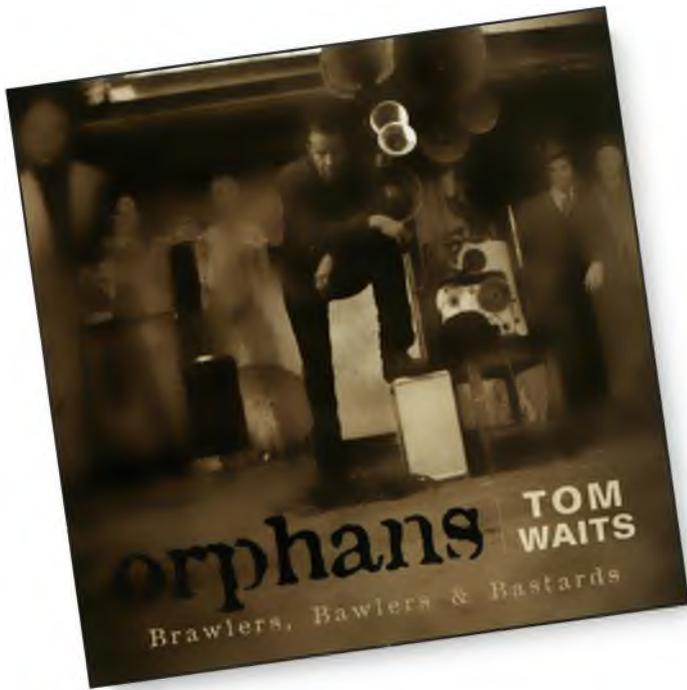
Blues Matters BMBCD20064 

In an overcrowded market you've got to have something special to stand out. Four piece outfit The Mustangs operate in the blues/rock field and by all accounts are a particularly fierce live act... not difficult to imagine when you give their latest album a spin. *Split Decision* clocks in at just over 32 minutes but it's 12 tracks offer up plenty of evidence as to why they are so highly touted by those in the know. In Adam Narsworthy they have a singer and guitarist capable of belting out a driving rock number like ‘Wired’ but who can also turn on the sensitivity when the song calls for it. He's ably backed by Derek Kingsby on harp and a red-hot rhythm section in bassist Ben McKeown and drummer Ian Bartley. The Mustangs aren't a blues band, more a rock band with a bluesy approach who wear their influences proudly on their sleeves. The rock crunch of Free can be heard in opener ‘Can't Find A Lover’, The Kinks and The Beatles surface on the lovely ballad ‘Over Ten Soon’ and there's more than a passing nod to The Who on live favourite ‘Put The Lights On’. All the material is original, well crafted and sung and no doubt an absolute riot in a live setting. Shouldn't be long before the bigger venues come calling.

AH

RECORDING
MUSIC





Tom Waits

Orphans

Anti- 86677-2 

Tom Waits' *Orphans* gathers together over three dozen newly released recordings, together with tracks previously only available on film soundtracks, artist tribute records, benefit compilations and the like, on three subtitled discs. It is an astounding collection.

The first disc, *Brawlers*, is mostly primeval blues, with big drums hit hard, electric guitars nicely distorted through tubes, and Waits' subterranean, wolfish voice. Interspersed among the enjoyable stompers are a few changes of pace, such as 'Bottom of the World', one of those wonderful Celtic tearjerkers Waits does so well, the gospel-based 'Walk Away', and a memorable cover of 'Sea of Love'.

Bawlers, the second disc, is a ballads set, beautifully done. This music is antiqued throughout - lots of solo trumpet or clarinet, plucked banjos, sweet sentiment and waltz tune. Waits can pull it off because it represents his authentic vision, and the strength of his

songwriting is consistent and deep. He rarely looks beyond his own writing here, but when he does - particularly on a cover of the Ramones' 'Danny Says', of all things - the results are also brilliant.

The third disc, *Bastards* is a collection of odder songs, including pieces like his cover of 'Heigh Ho' (yes, from *Snow White*) and Brecht and Weill's 'What Keeps Mankind Alive' (done in absolutely conventional Weimar style). The musical numbers are combined with entertaining spoken word pieces, including some appropriate Charles Bukowski and Kerouac, as well as samplings of the original humour Waits' concert audiences have enjoyed for so many years.

The consistently high quality of this boatload of material is overwhelming. The sound is wonderfully atmospheric and convincingly draws the listener into Waits' particular world. Very highly recommended.

PD



Roddy Woombie

My Secret Is My Silence

Pure Records PRCD021 

Idlewild started life as a punk band, with their four founding members barely able to play their instruments. But as time passed the band grew up and their music matured, finding complexity and subtlety. For the last two albums it has been obvious the band have two, very different personalities. And so they have made this distinction formal with Idlewild turning up the volume and kicking over the amps, while Roddy Woombie (with most of the same band-mates) works in parallel making acoustic music and modern folk. Don't let the word "folk" put you off though, there are no old men on this record, no arranj jumpers, and only a hint of beard. Instead, what you get is Idlewild with fiddles. The first surprise is that the transition between indie and folk seems to have been surprisingly easy. The songs could easily have been crow-barred into a rock structure and packaged up alongside true Idlewild material. The second surprise is how much better the songs sound having been allowed a more natural setting. Flutes and accordions sit surprisingly well alongside electric guitars and allow the tunes to find their own way, progressing as they wish. Kate Rushy's fragile backing vocals complement Roddy's, giving the songs a traditional sound that completes the picture perfectly. Sneaking in quietly at the end of the year, *My Secret Is My Silence* has gone straight to the top of my pile.

MC





Shawn Colvin

These Four Walls

Nonesuch 7559799372 

"I was kinda thinking of Steve Earle when I wrote that." So says Shawn Colvin about 'Tuff Kid', the third track in her brilliant new album. She must have been studying his style pretty closely because it has the combination of hard-hitting lyrics and tough melody he's so noted for. That's not to say she's deserted the style that's served her so well throughout her career. All her trademarks are on show: the lovely, clean acoustic guitar, the jangly pop backing and the instantly memorable choruses. *These Four Walls* finds Colvin again working with long-time collaborator John Leventhal, they go together like honey on toast, bringing the best out of each other. She's also invited a few friends to help the party go with a swing; Patti Griffin and Marc Cohn lend gorgeous harmonies to 'Cinnamon Road', a country folk number reminiscent of Neil Young's 'Hearts Of Gold', and Teddy Thompson contributes to the uplifting 'Let It Slide'. Most of the songs are co-writes with Leventhal but Colvin penned 'I'm Gone' alone and added in two covers, Paul Westerberg's 'Even Here We Are' and a single take version of the Bee Gees' classic 'Words'. She might have been away from the studio for a fair while but Colvin's stormed back with one of her best albums ever.

Praise be.

AH



Various Artists

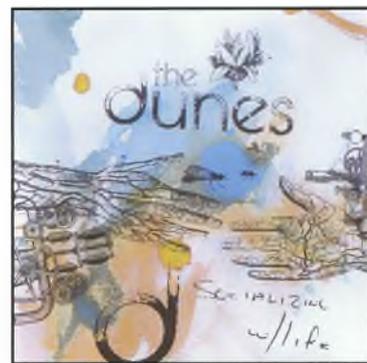
Stockfish Records Vinyl Collection

Stockfish Records SFR 357.8006.1 

"Senti il dolore nella musica si alzò dal pianoforte, ma quando vide la luna uscire da una nuvola gli sembrò più dolce anche la morte" – "He felt the pain in the music and stood up from the piano; but when he saw the moon emerging from a cloud, death also seemed sweeter to him." It is impossible to escape from this poetry – and also the music of 'Caruso'. Those who can must have a heart of flint! Christian Willsohn's interpretation of the Lucio Dalla classic is undoubtedly the climax of this high quality collection. There's something of a boom in vinyl samplers at the moment. *The Stockfish Records Vinyl Collection* is another of these favourite track compilations and contains the work of some great singer/songwriters and a variety of styles and genres: Sara K., Steve Strauss and Louis Capart, just to mention a few.

The German legend Günther Pücher counts on DMM metalwork to deliver superior sonics. His motto is simply "copper only", and you can't deny the power, warmth and body to the sound. But to be honest the brilliant sound is almost reduced to a nice side effect, given the quality of songs like 'Caruso', 'Song For You Far Away' or 'Heaven'. For this music I would willingly accept EVERY noise!

AKB



The Dunes

Socializing w/Life

Curve Music CURV7 

Hailing from Toronto, Canada, The Dunes ride in on a wave of crashing guitars and huge, stadium filling vocals. The lead singer, whose name I couldn't find anywhere on the insert but could possibly be Kevin Pullen, has obviously been studying early U2 albums because he has the Bono wail off to perfection. The twin guitars create a massive wall of sound on the more uptempo numbers and the song writing's pretty solid, although for these ears the slower, more atmospheric numbers hang together a little better. If you're looking to find out more on The Dunes I hope you have more success than I did; I couldn't find a website anywhere. I did manage to locate them on Myspace but that wasn't too forthcoming either, but at least you can hear tracks from the album there. What I can tell you is that if you have a passion for guitar driven alternative rock along the lines of Radiohead, Travis, U2 etc. and you love the anguished sound so beloved by the aforementioned, then chances are The Dunes will be right up your street. Have they got what it takes to catapult them into the premier league? That depends on their live act. If that singer has masses of stage presence to back up his voice then I would tentatively say yes.

AH



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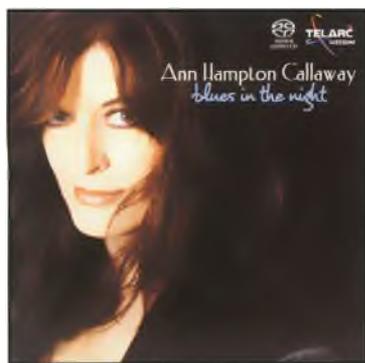
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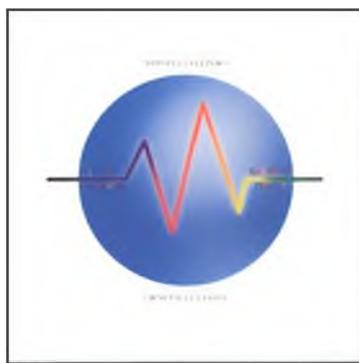
Ann Hampton Callaway

Blues in the Night

Telarc 63641 

Marking her Telarc debut this is perhaps vocalist and songwriter Callaway's strongest release to date. A collection of American songbook classics peppered with self-penned numbers sees Callaway accompanied on several numbers by the delightfully named, all female Diva Jazz Orchestra. Opening with a lively full band rendition of 'Swinging Away The Blues' the upbeat tone for the whole set is quickly established. Other highlights include a silky rendition of the classic 'Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most', and a bluesy joint reading with her sister Liz of 'Stormy Weather' coupled very successfully with 'When The Sun Comes Out'. A joyful rendition of her Lambert, Hendricks & Ross tribute 'Hip to be Happy' crisply accompanied by Christian McBride's bass and Lewis Nash's drums is guaranteed to raise a smile. The title track gets a great treatment too with the full band really stretching out behind Callaway's impassioned vocals. My favourite of the set, possibly because I'm a dedicated Sondheim fan, and the least in character with the rest of the set, is Callaway's reading of the lovely ballad 'No One Is Alone' from *Into The Woods*. Complemented by some beautifully played trumpet from Jami Dauber and tenor sax from Anat Cohen, it offsets the more upbeat material well and completes a satisfying and well recorded package.

DD



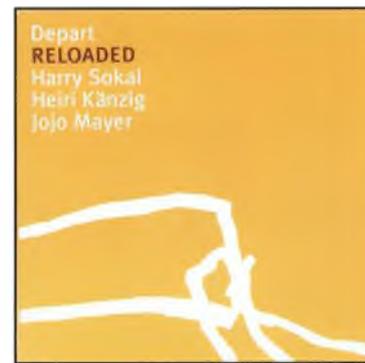
Ornette Coleman

Sound Grammar

Sound Grammar SG 11593 

Ornette Coleman's first album in 10 years to contain new material sees him in splendid form at age 75. For all of the talk of Coleman's avant garde importance, he remains simply one of the great alto saxophonists and a wonderfully gifted melodist with deep blues roots. On this live recording from late 2005 Coleman presents six new tunes, together with versions of 'Song X' and the chestnut 'Turnaround'. Coleman's work has always been challenging, but the new pieces here are by and large as melodic and accessible as anything in his large catalogue. Fans of his famous early Atlantic recordings in particular are likely to be happy with this one. The group here is a splendid quartet that has been performing together for several years. It includes his drummer son Denardo and twin bassists Tony Falanga and Greg Cohen. Cohen is an inspired choice given his many superb recordings with John Zorn's Masada quartet, of music deeply influenced by Coleman. The sound on this large-hall live recording is only decent. The interplay between bassists Falanga and Cohen would be better served by a good small venue (New York City's Tonic club, where Cohen has made so many recordings in association with Zorn, would be an excellent choice.) If Coleman's music has ever appealed to you, however, or if you would like a relatively congenial introduction to his work, don't pass this one by.

PD



Depart

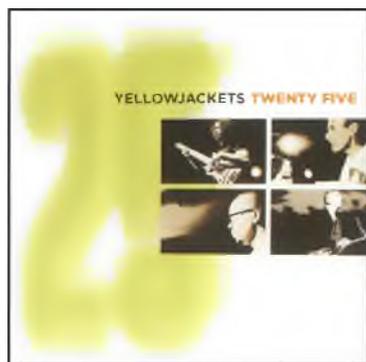
Reloaded

ACT 9453-2 

Depart, the Swiss-Austrian trio, first came to prominence on the European circuit where they toured successfully from 1985 to 1994. Now reunited this marks their comeback release. The trio comprises Harry Sokal, a member of the Vienna Art Orchestra and a leading post-Coltrane saxophonist, the bass player Heiri Känzig who has played with the likes of Art Farmer, and the drummer Jojo Mayer who has made a name for himself in New York and has been involved with David Fiuczynski's splendidly named Screaming Headless Torsos (no, I'd never heard of them either). The album opens with the Coltrane influenced 'Timeless Dreams' with Sokal's fluid soprano floating high above a solid groove from Känzig and Mayer. This is followed by a traditional Swiss tune that for me combines a touch of South African jive with a twist of Sonny Rollins. Either way it really works. Other standouts include the lyrical 'Chluppli Groove', opening with bowed bass an accomplished Mingus tribute in the appropriately named 'Mingus', the gentle 'Another World' beginning with the simplest bass line underpinning Sokal's tenor before moving onto some dextrous and delightful work from Känzig. The album closes with a more straight ahead reading of 'They Say It's Spring' to complete a really enjoyable set and prove that this trio can cut it whatever the approach.

DD





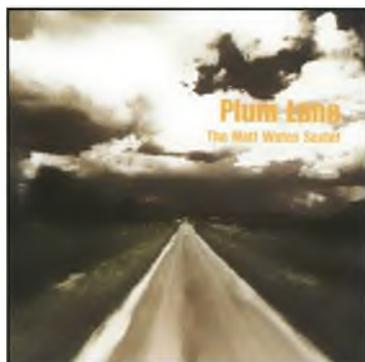
Yellowjackets

Twenty Five

Heads Up HUCD3112 (CD) + (DVD)

Originally formed by guitar virtuoso Robben Ford in 1981 this live set marks the band's twenty-fifth anniversary. Only Russell Ferrante on keyboards, and Jimmy Haslip on bass remain from the original band, but they are still dedicated to their original vision of improvisational jazz that draws on a wide range of influences but defies easy categorisation. The CD captures a 2005 performance in Paris and forms an eight number retrospective of some of their best pieces as interpreted by the current line-up of Haslip, Ferrante, saxophonist Bob Mintzer and drummer Marcus Baylor. The tunes range from every period of the band's evolution from 'Revelation' (1986) through to 2005's 'Freeday'. The playing throughout is consistently funky and strong but I particularly enjoyed Haslip's fluid and extended bass soloing in 'Jacketown'. 'Free Day' with its abstract opening settles into a percussion heavy groove recalling in its early stages elements of Weather Reports 'Sweetnighter' but not quite, holding true to the band's aim of being difficult to pin down. It's all tight, driving and funky as hell though and this full-bodied recording demands to be played loud for best effect. The release also includes a bonus DVD, directed by Tony Zawinul (son of the famous Joe of Weather Report) that includes a fascinating mix of live (2005) performance from the Naïma Club in Italy, archival videos and interviews.

DD



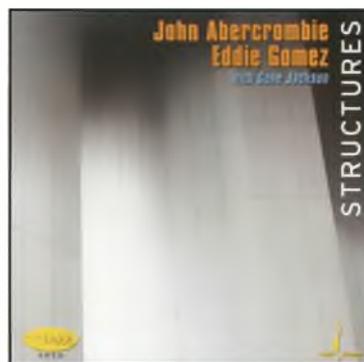
Matt Wates Sextet

Plum Lane

audio-b ABCD 5019 (CD)

Matt Wates has forged a reputation as one of the leading players on the UK scene and in addition to playing with many famous names as a sideman has led this sextet for the last six years. His aim is to 'come up with material that will be fun to play without necessarily trying to extend any musical frontiers'. No bad thing and given the quality of the sextet, which in addition to Wates' alto includes Malcolm Creese on bass, Martin Shaw on trumpet and fluge horn, Steve Kaldestad on tenor, Leon Greening on piano and Steve Brown on drums, this is well set to fulfil Wate's mission. The band take inspiration from the past and bands like the small groups of Horace Silver and Art Blakey and focus on melody, swing and the sense of enjoyment in creating the music. The set is all self-penned with the exception of Jimmy Rowles gorgeous number 'The Peacocks' that gets an excellent arrangement that brings the best from the memorable tune. A particularly nice, concise solo here from Malcolm Creese too. All the numbers are strong but immediate favourites are the bouncing opener 'Guy's Song' with a fluid solo from Kaldestad, the reflective 'The Seer', 'Stockholm Syndrome' showcasing Wates' alto in the introduction, and the upbeat title track. This album is a joy to listen to from start to finish.

DD



John Abercrombie & Eddie Gomez with Gene Jackson

Structures

Chesky SACD317 (SACD)

The second release in Chesky's New York Sessions series, this set brings together ECM stalwart John Abercrombie with Bill Evan's long-time bass player Eddie Gomez and drummer Gene Jackson. Recorded, simply miked in the Chesky fashion, in the spacious acoustic of St. Peter's in New York the trio run through a mix of original compositions and standards to great effect. This set isn't about pyrotechnics, the musicians are too assured of their abilities for that, but is a gentle, reflective example of fine interplay between three masters of the art. "We kept things very loose, yet structured," says Abercrombie. "We figured out ways to set up the tune and then figured out a way to end each tune. And then in between it was every man for himself." Standouts include the lightly swinging opener 'Jazz Folk', a particularly lovely reading of Ray Noble's standard 'The Touch of Your Lips', Gomez' minor key ballad 'Walter Pigeon', 'Embraceable You' which opens with an extended bass intro that says everything about Gomez' virtuosity, and a gentle take of Bill Evan's 'Turn Out the Stars'. The recording does the music and venue full justice requiring, on my system at least, a slightly higher volume than usual to make it all come alive. This is a laid-back, well-recorded and highly enjoyable set.

DD



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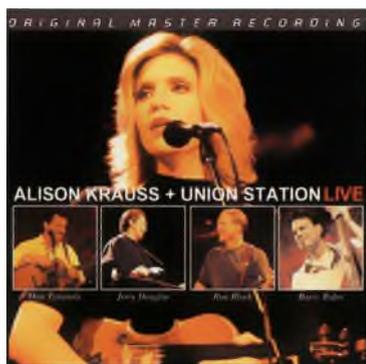
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Alison Krauss + Union Station

LIVE

Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs, MFSL 3-281 

I liked these CDs very much when they first came out in 2002. I was delighted with the DVD when it arrived. I fell in love with the SACD when I bought it two years ago. I am now totally blown away with this set from Mobile Fidelity. Recorded live at the Louisville Palace in Kentucky, from the moment I first heard the CD I knew this was a very special live concert. I'm a big fan of AKUS and was quite enthusiastic about the two releases from Diverse Records as well as the first Mo-Fi release, *So Long So Wrong*, which was simply outstanding. Well folks, you haven't heard anything... yet. Hit after hit is performed with great intimacy and real faithfulness to the original release, but with the addition of an open, airy, live venue. The sound is to die for. For me Mo-Fi are consistently surpassing original release DSD recordings when their vinyl releases arrive. Perhaps 'getting it right' was the reason this set took so long to see the light of day. I don't know and don't care. It's finally here. If you are a fan of AKUS, I urge you to contact your favourite reseller immediately. This is some of the finest music of its genre ever performed and the re-mastering job is simply sublime.

RSF



Henryk Górecki
Symphony No. 3 "Symphony of
sorrowful Songs" Op. 36.
Nat Polish RSO conducted by the
composer. Zofia Kilanowicz, sop.

Lipinski Records SACD LR 105 

While Lipinski Records may be a new label for many of you, I became aware of the company a couple of years ago having auditioned some of their fine monitor loudspeakers at CES. The Górecki 3rd was recorded live on December 12, 2003 at the Holy Cross Church in Zakopane, Poland. The acoustic is warm, rich, but not too reverberant. For many years "the" performance of this work was the David Zinman recording on Nonesuch with the London Sinfonietta and Dawn Upshaw. While the Zinman/Upshaw recording is a superb reading, I believe this version, with the composer conducting will supercede it. The first movement's beautiful melody is built on a full compliment of double basses and organ. It lasts for approximately 33 minutes and not until the end do we hear the first entry of the soprano. The second movement opens with a spray of lush strings before the mood changes, dramatic tension in those double basses underpinning the soprano. It's all over within 10 minutes and then on to the fabulous third movement. This is very romantic, 20th century music and the message is very powerful. The performance is hypnotic, the sound is simply stunning.

Supplier: www.lipinskirecords.com

RSF



Claude Debussy: Nocturnes
Maurice Ravel: Daphnis and Chloé
Suite No. 2.
Detroit SO, Paul Paray

Speakers Corner/Mercury SR90281 

This 45 year old masterpiece sounds as good today as it did when first released by Mercury Records in 1961. While there was much competition in the catalogues for these works (complete *Daphnis and Chloé* by Munch, Monteux and others as well as Debussy *Nocturnes* by Monteux, Gialini) to me, this is one of the great Mercury recordings. The Absolute Sound's maven of Mercury Recordings, Sid Marks rated this in his top three dozen releases when he completed his landmark series of Mercury reviews in the early 1990's. Because of all the competition, this LP never received the recognition it deserved and so it did not sell very well. Originals are extremely scarce. We've discussed in the past the merits of Paul Paray's ability with the repertoire of French composers. He was one of the very best. Ravel's orchestration of the *Daphnis and Chloé* suites was quite elaborate, the instrumental accompaniment being for full orchestra as well as 15 additional percussion instruments! This performance is a sonic tour de force. The Debussy *Nocturnes*, inspired by nature, offer a gorgeous addition and counterbalance to the Rave.. Sonically the equal of the *Daphnis*, the quality of the music sets a different pace and pattern. It's simply beautiful music played exceptionally well. Highest recommendation.

Supplier: www.speakerscorner.de

RSF





Piazzolla

Les Violons du Roy, cond. Jean-Marie Zeitouni. Pascale Giguère: violin; Benoît Loiseau: violoncello

Atma Classique 2399 (SACD)

Atma Classique tell us, "Les Violons du Roy, best known for their interpretations of baroque and classical masterpieces, are transformed into a tango ensemble that caresses every nuance of Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla's "new tango" pieces." Truer words were never spoken. This is a delightful disc of compositions from the master of the Nuevo Tango. If you are not familiar with Piazzolla's New Tango compositions, you will be in for a very sensual, aural treat. Born in Argentina in 1921, Piazzolla spent most of his childhood in New York City where he began playing the bandoneon (a reed like instrument – similar to the accordion and concertina). He returned to Argentina in 1937, already a prominent player in the world of Tango and began composing in the 1950s just as the popularity of the dance was fading. His 'new tango' style adds a large measure of jazz as well as extended harmonies and dissonance to previously structured formulae. His music is clearly revolutionary in its category and while there is no use of the bandoneon in these performances, Les Violons du Roy offer excellent and captivating interpretations of his work. Very accessible music, exceptionally well recorded, this is a most enjoyable outing and very worthy of exploration.

Supplier: atmadassique.com

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Niccolò Paganini

Violin Concerto No. 4

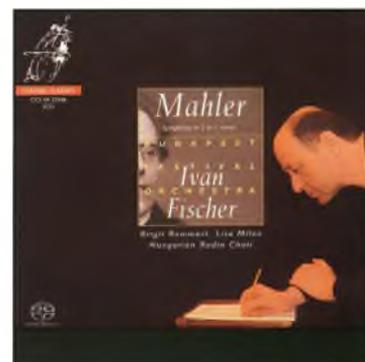
Uto Ughi, I Filarmonici di Roma

Foné Foné 009 LP (180g) (SACD)

Niccolò Paganini was a rebel – and in the eyes of his contemporaries, the Genovese always seemed a bit suspect. Given his almost supernatural musical and technical skills, that comes as no surprise! He soon attracted a reputation as a dare-devil violinist. Uto Ughi, too, deserves this title: undaunted by potential catastrophe the Italian plunges into the violin part of Paganini's *Violin Concerto No. 4*. He makes arpeggios crackle down like cascades, fires staccato salvos and masters the distances on the finger board with verve and elegant portamento. And as if that wasn't enough, he adds the most lyrical expression to the second movement I have ever heard in Paganini's 4th – literally moving me to tears! His *Guarneri del Gesù* (ex Grumiaux), sounds noble and beguiling. The last movement – what can I tell you – becomes a firework display of brilliance! You can almost see the bow swirling through the air and the fingers flying!

The Italian label foné, a Mecca for every music lover, spares no effort to create a sonic experience from another dimension. Two single-sided 45rpm vinyl records bring the atmosphere of a live concert into your home. It is pure luxury to press thirty minutes on two records – but every gram of vinyl is worth the effort! A wonderful start to 2007!

AKB



Gustav Mahler

Symphony No. 2 in C minor "Resurrection".

Budapest FO, Fischer. Milne, sop; Remmer, alto

Channel Classics CCS SA 23506 (SACD)

After giving us an exceptionally inspired Mahler 6th (Channel Classics 22905) here we are treated to a stupendous "Resurrection". There are many great Mahler seconds available but this is the best I've heard on SACD. As the founder of the Hungarian Mahler Society, Fischer has the credentials and insight into one of Mahler's masterpieces. Channel gives us two hybrid SACDs for the price of one and Fischer and the Budapest treat us to a well paced, gripping panorama from the orchestral palette that only Gustav Mahler can paint. You're engaged right from the beginning of the first movement and with the conclusion of the second disc, you'll feel both emotionally drained and uplifted. While I am a big fan of Klemperer, Walter, Bernstein and Solti, I can now add Fischer to this list. The last 4 minutes of the 5th movement, "Im Tempo des Scherzo" contains some of the finest sound I've ever heard on SACD. The forces in Budapest are captured beautifully and the ethereal, heavily emotional portion of this symphony is laid bare for all to hear. While the CD layer is quite excellent the SACD layer is exceptional. Truly inspired and not to be missed!

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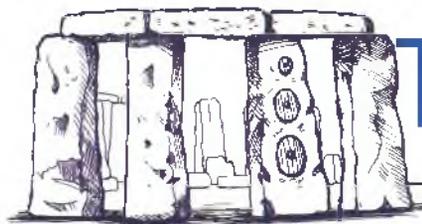


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The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

The Blues, a journey to be continued...

In issue 37 I wrote in part, "There are many collectors who believe blues music was more than over at the end of the 78 era..." My feelings haven't changed much since then and if anything, a couple of years have hardened by sentiments.

I'd written how personal this music is to me and, I'm sure, every other collector, music lover, blues aficionado and connoisseur will tend to agree. The evolution of the music we call The Blues, evolved from the unaccompanied vocal music of poor black labourers in the 19th century. In fact, there was very little 'difference' between what was known as country music and blues music in the late part of the last century, except for the race of the performer.

W.C. Handy (November 16, 1873 – March 28, 1958) was a formally trained musician, composer and arranger who helped to popularize the blues by transcribing and orchestrating the music in an almost symphonic style for bands and singers. Handy's compositions can best be described as a fusion of blues with ragtime and jazz; his signature style was captured in 'The St. Louis Blues'. Handy did much to bring this new music to the public and made it a wildly popular and commercial success.

While Handy became a popular and prolific composer, and billed himself as the "Father of the Blues", I believe that mantle really belongs to the late, great, Charlie Patton (May 1, 1891 - April 28, 1934). Even though 'The St. Louis Blues' was a major success in 1917, Patton had already written and was performing his theme song, 'Pony Blues' at the age of 19 in 1910. Available on the Yazoo label (available through many on-line retailers), this, the first of two versions (the second is known as 'The Stony, Pony Blues'), demonstrates just how these lyrics outline the heart of Blues Music – see the Charlie Patton sidebar over the page. That's right... the blues is about the absolute essence of our souls. Pain, anguish, heartbreak,

love, love lost, unrequited love (it always seems to involve some kind of love and heartache, and some woman/man that 'done you wrong'). There is only one known photograph of Patton and it adorns the cover of the Yazoo albums which also contain much of his musical output. It is of some minor debate which race Charlie Patton was. He was most likely African-American like most of his contemporaries in the

blues field, but because of his light complexion there have been rumours that he was a Mexican, full-blood Cherokee (Howlin' Wolf amongst others - subscribed to this theory). Tragically, Charlie Patton died of heart disease at the end of April, 1934. Patton did it so well and, despite the era in which he performed, fortunately left us with a recorded



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output of about 50 odd songs that really need to be heard and studied.

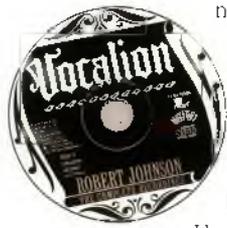
Another master, one who lived a totally different life to Patton's and who survived for less than the blink of an eye in the history of music, arguably had an even greater impact on The Blues for the remainder of the 20th Century. His musical legacy consists of a recorded output of only 29 compositions captured in 41 recordings and his name is Robert Johnson (May 8, 1911 – August 16, 1938).

The songs of Robert Johnson, as well as his ability with a guitar, have influenced more blues musicians than any other. One source notes, "Johnson is widely cited as 'the greatest blues singer of all time' or even the most important musician of the 20th century..." ▶



► The claims made for Johnson's originality and even his influence are often greatly exaggerated. He certainly did not invent the blues, which had existed on record for over fifteen years before he was recorded. His primary influence was the inimitable Son House who, more than anyone else (except his friend Charley Patton), can claim to have heavily influenced what is now considered the mainstream Delta blues, with his rough voice and searing slide riffs played on a steel-bodied National guitar.

But Johnson added to this the keening whimsy of the then obscure Skip James and the jazzy inventiveness of Lonnie Johnson. Indeed, a couple of his songs are nothing other than imitations of his famous namesake. Johnson had also listened to Leroy Carr, who was probably the most popular male blues singer of the time, and based several songs on the records of the urban blues recording stars Kokomo Arnold (source for both 'Sweet Home Chicago' and 'I Believe I'll Dust My Broom') and Peetie Wheatstraw.



What Johnson did with these and other diverse influences was create a new sound that was at once immediate and artful. His use of the bass strings to create a steady, rolling rhythm can be heard on songs like 'Sweet Home Chicago'. His penchant for strange snatches of melodic invention on the upper strings, mingling with a quite different vocal line, appears on 'Walking Blues'. Johnson played with the young Howlin' Wolf and Sonny Boy Williamson II, and allegedly trained his own stepson, Robert "Junior" Lockwood, as well.



There is a direct line of influence from Johnson to rock music and almost every great Rocker has acknowledged this. An important aspect of Johnson's singing, and indeed of all Delta Blues singing styles, as well as Chicago blues guitar, is the use of microtonality – Johnson's subtle inflections of pitch are part of the reason his singing conveys such powerful emotion.

Johnson's total output can easily be obtained on a couple of Sony CDs, Robert Johnson, The Complete Recordings (these are the Vocalion sessions) for the unbelievable price of less than £5 from <http://www.amazon.co.uk>.

While Patton died peacefully – if not comfortably – from heart disease, Johnson's demise follows a different trail. Although it hasn't been confirmed, the conflicting stories carry a similar message. One tale states that Johnson purportedly



Pony Blues by Charley Patton

Recording of 1929–1934 from
Charley Patton: Founder Of The Delta Blues (Yazoo L-1020)

Baby, saddle my pony, saddle up my black mare
Baby, saddle my pony, saddle up my black mare
I'm gonna find a rider, baby, in the world somewhere
"Hello central, the matter with your line?"
"Hello central, matter, Lord, with your line?"
"Come a storm last night an' tore the wire down"
Got a brand new Shetland, man, already trained
Brand new Shetland, baby, already trained
Just get in the saddle, tighten up on your reins
And a brownskin woman like somethin' fit to eat
Brownskin woman like somethin' fit to eat
But a jet black woman, don't put your hands on me
Took my baby, to meet the mornin' train
Took baby, meet that mornin' train
An' the blues come down, baby, like showers of rain
I got somethin' to tell you when I gets a chance
Somethin' to tell you when I get a chance
I don't wanna marry, just wanna be your man

Note: Patton recorded two versions of this song. The first was entitled "Pony Blues" while the second changed to "Stoney Pony Blues". This is one of Patton's most popular pieces. Most Delta musicians had a version of "Pony Blues" in their repertoire, Son House recorded a "Pony Blues" in his 1942 Library of Congress recordings. Tommy Johnson's "Bye Bye Blues" and Willie Brown's "M&O Blues" are both derivatives from the same source. As to which came first has never been clearly established.

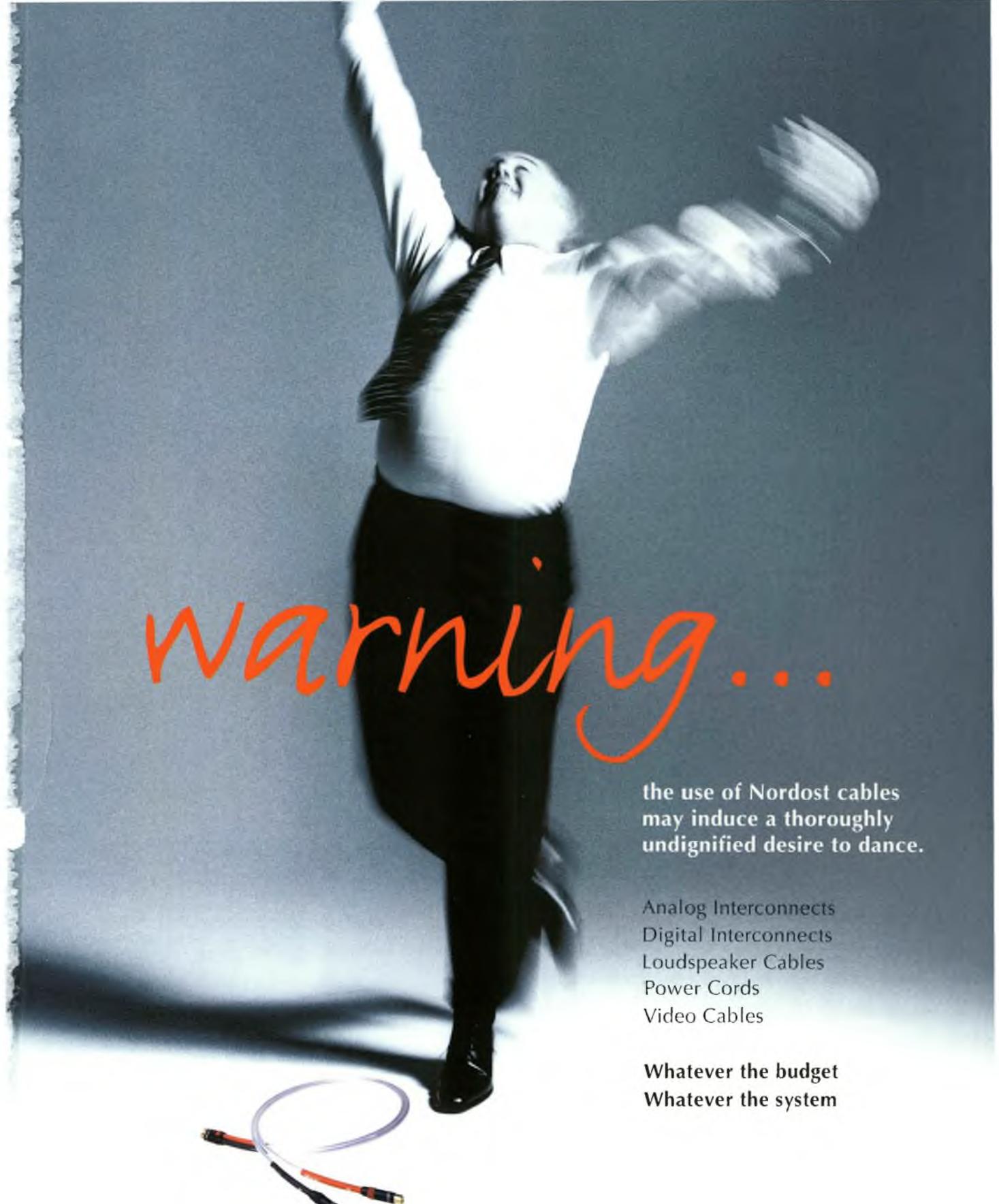
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died from liquor that was poisoned by a jealous husband who found out Johnson was having an affair with his wife. The other clearly states that Johnson was shot by a jealous woman who found out he was cheating on her. Either way, his death has been put to song in Blues Music by many an artist.

This is a journey that will take time to reach its final destination. Having found the station and caught

the train, I'll continue with greats like Son House (available on Pure Pleasure Records), Skip James (also on PPR) as well as Sonny Boy Williamson I and II and Little Walter Jacobs (available on Speakers Corner Records). May I also suggest you look into the great re-issue blues catalogues available through the many online retailers? The Blues is a great journey filled with real raw soul music. Once you've found your blues voice your own musical journey will just be starting.





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