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Looking at the equipment reviewed in this issue it's hard not to notice the way in which it reflects the changing landscape of the hi-fi industry. On the one hand, products like the Marten Coltrane Supreme and even Avalon's Indra might seem so expensive as to be irrelevant to most purchasers, yet both reveal the potential waiting to be realised in the latest developmental round of driver technology: technology that can only get cheaper. Meanwhile, the Emillé amplifiers, with their bold styling and equally bold sound are harbingers of a Far Eastern high-end to come. How long before the Chinese are following suit, with products that really sound the part as well as looking it? They're already manufacturing the excellent little Mystere valve amp and the cabinets on the ATC speakers reviewed in this issue. The KEF 207/2 carries a venerable British name but it is nonetheless a Chinese product.

But perhaps the most interesting aspect of this sea-change is the least obvious. Is it entirely coincidental that Audio Research, one of the high-end's oldest and most respected manufacturers are currently producing the best sounding products they have for years? And they're not alone. The pressure of competition is intense, and not only amongst expensive brands who see their traditional markets being drastically undercut by foreign look-alikes. For me, the most interesting products in this context are the Creek Destiny electronics and the Sonus Faber Auditor M, designs from established companies that are built in Europe but meet Far Eastern products head on for price. They do it by sharpening up their act, which has to be good news for all of us. Far from being the death-knell of performance audio products, Far Eastern imports are making manufacturers deliver more sound per pound. Creek's Evo electronics are built in China. They cost less than half the price of the Destiny equivalents, but the latter sound demonstrably better. Which means we have the best of both worlds: £500 kit that delivers previously undreamt of performance; £1200 kit that raises the bar at that price point too.

Ry Gregory



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PLAYING THE SYSTEM

by Roy Gregory

I'm always amazed by the expectations that readers have of equipment reviews. Often, the content is pored over and dissected in microscopic detail, the conclusions, sub-texts and messages buried between the lines all debated ad infinitum. It's a tendency that's become far more prevalent, or at least apparent, since the advent of internet forums, where the confused or insecure can seek solace or enlightenment. Seek and you shall find; well, not in this case. If you want to know what a reviewer thinks of a product, you won't find out from a third party. More to the point, perhaps you should start by understanding exactly what a reviewer is trying to tell you, as well as how he does it. That way you are not looking for information that actually isn't there.

No matter how important and all seeing a reviewer might think he is, there's one thing that he simply cannot tell you; whether or not you should buy the product he's reviewing. Vagaries of taste, context and system compatibility make such "judgements" a practical impossibility. Yet ironically it's exactly this kind of "certainty" that many readers seem to be seeking, and boy do they get frustrated if they don't get it!

So let's establish a couple of things for starters. Firstly, and most importantly, reviewers are just people. Hopefully (but not always) they are more informed and have a wider experience than the man in the street. But no matter how capable and ethical, careful or considered they are they still have preferences and prejudices, things that push their buttons and things that definitely miss the spot. Also, like any other person, they occasionally make mistakes or get it wrong. Equipment reviews are not and never have been the Gospel according to Ignatius P. Tinear III. They are not a source of audio truth and above all, they do not

provide answers to the great questions of our day. Instead, they offer an impression, a construct that seeks to show the reader what the reviewer has gleaned from his time spent with a product. The four basic facets should consist of: what it is; how to get it working at its best; what it does and what it doesn't do. You'll notice that nowhere in there is the question of whether or not the reviewer actually likes the product. Frankly, it's irrelevant. It's also distracting. The object of the exercise is to provide the reader with the raw data to help in reaching their own conclusion. Buying a product simply because a reviewer likes it is a little like going to an expensive restaurant and letting the waiter order your meal; he knows the menu and the chef, but he has no clue whether or not you like offal. It really is a recipe for disaster.

The second thing you need to know is how those sonic impressions are constructed. More often than not they consist of musical examples – "On the third cut of side two, when the sax player hits his solo he was blowing so hard I could actually hear his nose hairs quivering!" The problem here lies in the realm of expectation.

If a reader has a demo on the same piece of kit, he expects to hear the same musical result described in the review. The problem is he rarely does...

The conclusions drawn tend to be that: a) the reviewer is deaf, b) he's exaggerating, c) he's in the pay of the manufacturer.

In fact, the reason is far simpler and has to do with that old chestnut, expectation. Readers assume that a review describes how a product sounds, whereas in fact, what it does is describe how a product CAN sound. That's after weeks of tweaking, swapping equipment, playing various records and generally distilling the experience into a single musical moment. You pick the highlights to make the point. You are after all, interested in describing the best sound the product can produce, revealing its



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Time for a sporting analogy: a long-jumper wins gold and breaks the world record at the Olympic Games. That performance is the result of months if not years of dedicated training designed to peak at precisely that moment. Ever after, when people refer to that jumper, it will be in terms of that record and that gold medal. They won't refer to the thousands of shorter jumps he made in training. Instead they will fasten on his maximum performance to define his career and capabilities. That's what reviewers do with equipment – at least they try to. Clearly a speaker doesn't peak in the same way as an athlete, at least it shouldn't do. But it does run-in, stabilise, react to changes in partnering equipment and different environments. The task of the reviewer is to take a product through those steps, to push its performance as far as he can, discovering along the way, just what it can and cannot do, where it's comfortable and where it's not – and then to describe those boundaries through specific examples.

So far so good. But what happens if you get a Bob Beaman? In 1968, the un-fancied jumper leapt so far past the existing record that his new mark stood for 23 years!

He'd never approached such a distance before, he'd never do it again, but he definitely did do it. What happens to the reviewer who experiences just such a freak performance – a "golden" component that just happens to click with the kit he's using and the room he's listening in? He reliably informs his readers of exactly what he's heard without realizing that none of them are ever likely to repeat the experience. He isn't deaf, misguided or corrupt – he's simply on the receiving end of one of nature's curve balls, and believe me, when it comes to hi-fi there are more curves than straight shooters; curves that can cut both ways, curves that come from the least expected quarters.

Where does that leave the reader? Hopefully with a healthy respect for the difficulties and limitations of the reviewer's art. A review sets out the reviewer's experiences. How relevant they are to each reader depends on an infinitely complex network of interlocking circumstances that it's impossible to predict or describe. I can however sum them up – don't pay for what you don't hear! To (loosely) quote a certain Captain Barbosa, reviews are "not so much a set of rules, more suggested guidelines." They describe what one person got out of a product, they certainly don't guarantee you the same result. ➤➤



HOME TRUTHS

by Jimmy Hughes

The other day I did something I hadn't done in a while. Rather than choosing a single piece of music to listen to, I grabbed a dozen CDs of the same work and sat down to make – comparisons. The work in question was Bruckner's *Fourth symphony*, 'Romantic', and I was shocked to realise I had something like 30 different recordings of this popular work. Incredible - I could have sworn it was more...

Okay, so sitting down and playing three or four minutes of a dozen or so different recordings of the same piece of music is perhaps a superficial 'fast food' way of listening. But I prefer to think of it as the musical equivalent of wine tasting. And as for superficial - well, comparisons are nothing if not educational.

Differences between interpretations of the music, not to mention differences in recorded sound, are thrown into sharp relief as you contrast recent recordings with those made over the past 40 years. Yet what struck me most was that the differences musically were more apparent than variations in technical quality.

In the distant past, when I made comparisons like this, I'd be only too aware of technical limitations in the source material – particularly with some of the older recordings - and it definitely reduced my enjoyment of the music and performance. When I first got into hi-fi back in the early '70s, this was a definite drawback.

You'd buy a hi-fi system to hear music with greater clarity and fidelity, but it would be something of a double-edged sword. Some recordings sounded magnificently sonorous and beautifully detailed. But other recordings seemed hissy and thin, rough and congested, or just plain dull. Because of this, sound quality dictated which recordings could be enjoyed.

Invariably, there would be particular discs that stood-out technically above the others. For me back then, a couple of examples might be Boult's 1967 HMV Holst *Planets suite*, or Solti's 1969 Mahler *3rd symphony* with the LSO on Decca. Technically, these recordings were so ▶

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REL Under Review

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Adam Rayner
R-505 Review
Home Cinema Choice

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Keith Howard
R-505 Review
HiFi News

"Seamlessly adds weight, image scale and range to the vocal numbers, yet sounds more comfortable when working hard"

"You don't hear the sub working – just your system in a whole new light"

Alvin Gold
R-205 Review
What Home Cinema



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revealing in a negative sense, showing everything that's wrong with the source. Now you may think that's what a good hi-fi system should and must do. But I disagree. There's a difference between revealing faults and emphasising them.

With virtually all the various Bruckner 4 discs I tried, the recordings sounded different yet convincing and acceptable. It (almost) didn't matter how old or new they were – the gulf between the good and the great seemed less wide than it once did. Or perhaps more accurately, the great recordings still sounded great, but the-not-so-great no longer sounded disappointing or unacceptable. Whereas before I might not want to listen to a performance because the sound was unsatisfying, the limitations of lesser recordings now seem much less stark – they simply sound 'less good', not unacceptable. Indeed, many older recordings have their own special unique and beautiful qualities just waiting to be revealed.

While I still think Solti's 1969 LSO Mahler 3 sounds amazingly vivid and bristling with detail, the 1966 Haitink version no longer trails in a poor second. Indeed, the vividness of Solti's Decca sonics now seems rather exaggerated and contrived. This is one of those Decca recordings where the engineers take a proactive role. Mind you, there are some amazing effects – the harp glissandos spread left and right across the stereo soundstage near the end of the third movement, for example, create a moment that, once heard, is never forgotten. It's a truly amazing passage musically, made even more amazing by Decca choosing to spotlight the two harps. But - you'd never hear it like that live! Even if you were sitting in the middle of the orchestra. With Haitink, the Philips soundstage is more naturally terraced and truthfully balanced. It sounds like a real orchestra in a defined space. You can hear the brass exciting resonances in the hall, and this actually creates more atmosphere.



IT'S SHOW TIME!

by Roy Gregory

With the autumn Show season upon us, it's time to let you know what's going on at the various events as far as *Plus* is concerned. This year we've opted to give exhibiting at the London Show a miss, partly because of confusion at this end (we're in the throws of moving the office to larger, nicer premises) and partly due to the confusion around the event itself. With *Hi-Fi News* electing not to organize their long-running show this year, the Park Inn event has become the only game in town. But with *HFV* promising a new event next year (albeit one that's yet to actually emerge) and highly respected companies like Audiofreaks electing to exhibit "off-site" in their traditional location at the Renaissance just across the road, we felt that it was probably time to let the dust settle for a year. But, although we won't have a stand at the Park Inn, we will of course be tramping the corridors, so keep your eyes skinned. Likewise, if you want to hear the Avalon Indra loudspeaker we liked so much in this issue, you'll need to cross the road to do it, back to the hotel where the whole story started. You'll find them in the Lancaster and

Wellington suites at the Renaissance.

(www.chestergroup.org)
(www.audiofreaks.com)

Meanwhile, later in the year (the 10th to 12th of October) we'll be attending the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in Denver, Co. Rapidly becoming the premier US event for two-channel audiophiles, for the first time this year we'll be running one of our ticketed demonstrations. RSF and I will be showing you the (hopefully) all too audibly clear impact of small adjustments in analogue set-up. The plan is to show the importance of cartridge alignment, accurate VTA, record replay curves and the benefits of a true mono cartridge for mono disc replay. As I said, the demonstrations are closed door and ticketed, so make sure you book your slot at the sign-in desk as places will be limited. We'll see you there.

(www.audifest.net)



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Incoming!

Please address letters to the Editor at *Hi-Fi+*, 25-27 Whittle Road, Ferndown Industrial Estate, Wimborne, Dorset, BH21 7RP or via the website at www.hifipus.com

Dear Sir,

One of the things I appreciate in *Hi-Fi+* is the coverage of isolation devices. This seems to be neglected by most other magazines. I bought a Hutter rack on your recommendation and found it very effective, as well as keeping the wife happy. I would say that going beyond racks, you tend to review the expensive end of isolation devices. Now I am sure the likes of finite, Stillpoints and Symposium are excellent products. But for those of us with middling value systems, say £10,000 to £25,000 then upwards of \$1000 on an isolation device like Stillpoints, may not be a good allocation of limited resources. I am sure they would give a similar lift to the system as to a £50,000 one, but there may be better ways to spend the money. You cover cheaper cables, but I can't recall much on cheaper isolation devices.

What is the point of this letter? Well I suggest a look at Herbies Audio Lab, a one man and his dog outfit in the US, selling direct with no retailers and a direct line to friendly and helpful advice from Herbie himself. I believe he started with tube dampers and provides a range covering all valves, starting from a few dollars each. I use them on my tube integrated, with a clear improvement in sound quality. I then went on to his range of footers, Iso cups, Big Fat Dots and others. Again they start from a few dollars and those two items under my Acoustic Zen Adagio speakers and Viva valve integrated, produced a dramatic improvement in base clarity and imaging. I can't say how they would compare with Stillpoints or Ceraballs as I haven't used them, I just know they work. I suspect the cheap price comes from direct no frills sales and the fact that isolation is by use of different materials, rather than complex mechanical structures. Herbie also gives a no quibble 30 day refund if you are not happy and a lifetime guarantee on the tube rings.

So, how about a look at cheaper isolation systems, perhaps comparing them with more expensive ones. I would include the use of wood or stone slabs under speakers. My system is on a suspended floor and putting my speakers on a sandstone slab resting on pulsar points with Bi Fat Dots under the speaker, was again, a great success. I would love to compare this with say a Symposium support, but I won't borrow one from a dealer,

if I am not in a position to buy it.

As an aside, I would urge you to audition Zen Adagio speakers, perhaps with a cable loom from the company. As you know, your sister publication *Absolute Sounds*, described the Adagios as one of the best value products in *Hi-Fi*.

A final plea, why no reviews of Opera in your music section? I know opera doesn't float most reviewers boat, but a lot of us are enthusiasts and I would say Opera is a very good test of Equipment. A Verdi Chorus in full flow is a real test of dynamics for any system.

Keep up the good work.

Yours Sincerely

Peter Linden

Via e-mail

One of the things that we have consistently tried to underline is the impact of mechanical vibration (internal and external) on the performance of audio equipment. We see this and the way we deal with it as one of the three fundamental factors that create the foundation tripod of system performance – the others being your mains and your signal cabling. It is precisely because we believe that isolation devices are cost effective that we review them. How expensive do electronics need to be before the best upgrade becomes a finite element or Stillpoints rack? A lot cheaper than you'd think. Is there a better way to upgrade a system than paying attention to those fundamentals? Not until you've got them right. That's why we advocate budgeting for these items as key system components, not mere accessories or after thoughts

However, as you quite correctly point out, there are cheaper solutions or DIY answers to all these issues – and they can deliver surprisingly impressive results for lower costs. Indeed, when we last looked at isolation systems and sinking energy out of equipment back in Issue 41, we spent some considerable time experimenting with simple arrangements that proved remarkably effective. My experience is that a purpose built and designed solution is better, but you can get a long way just by understanding the problem and being inventive. In the same way that we are working towards a strategy and prioritisation of cable requirements, we are trying to do the same with racks ►

▶ and isolation. You'll see the first fruits of that in Issue 54, followed by cable systems assessed in 55. Then we'll be looking at isolation thereafter – and yes it will include a range of solutions and more cost effective approaches.

As regards opera, I couldn't agree more. Witness the frequency with which it features as an exemplar in my equipment reviews. I'm also fortunate enough to visit the ROH and Glyndebourne with some regularity. The problem? Finding the right person to review the recordings. Any takers? Ed.

Dear Sir,

I read with interest your recent article on sub-woofers and look forward to the follow up with anticipation. On the matter of two small ones vs one big 'un, one approach which interests me is seemingly never explored, ie, that of using two smaller subs as a stereo pair, mounting the two-way satellites on top of or next to the subs creating in effect a full range three-way stereo configuration. For those who have little or no space for wall siting, let alone the patience to find exactly the right place along the right wall, the former arrangement seems both logical and practical. Any chance this could be considered by Chris Binns? My speakers – Referenc 3A DaCapo – How good could they get with subs!?

Another mouth watering prospect would be a review of the Pure Sound A30 amp with EAT valves. Can't believe you haven't already thought of that!

Great magazine – keep it up.

Yours sincerely

Achilles Achilleos

Wood Green, London

Four-box systems of the type you describe are actually well represented on the market. The best known is Wilson's WATT/Puppy (now referred to as System 8) but other examples abound, such as Marten's Duke/Ellington and various Penn Audio models, all of which we've reviewed. These vary in nature, some employing active bass, others not. The real issue however is whether you want to use the room acoustics to augment bass performance through optimum siting of your bass units, or overcome the difficulties and space demands of deep bass reproduction through active equalisation. Both approaches are of course valid, and the nature of the partnering speaker influences your chosen route as well, as you'll see if you read CB's follow-up in this issue. But if you are after maximum scale and power, remote siting of subs will generally win out. Ed.

Dear Sir,

Not only are most of the thorough equipment and insightful record reviews in *Hi-Fi+* mighty useful and entertaining, but likewise are your short communications on assorted add-ons and tweaking utensils.

The latter reviews are especially satisfying in the sense that sometimes a small, at a glance quite preposterously priced, "black box" turns out to be a real bargain in improving on total sound quality.

But – a tweaking compound of which you haven't written yet is the British aerosol Permostat, a liquid for the (permanent) removal of surface static on vinyl. It really does work when it comes to removing the static and it also lasts a lifetime (yes I know – that is yet to be determined!). Vinyl surfaces end up virtually dust free, most clearly seen when using a record brush such as the Decca Brush, where on records devoid of Permostat a tiny white string is left when lifting the brush perpendicular to the grooves, but where nothing is left following the treatment of Permostat.

However, the real issue here must be: does this treatment affect sound quality at all? Perhaps both in a negative and a positive way? Negative due to compound residues left within the grooves, positive further down the arrow of time due to a reduction of dust and hence reduced wear?

The item is not available here in Sweden any more (obviously too low a demand among us MP3 listening swedes (sic!)) but is still in production in the UK.

I think the formula has been slightly altered during the years in order to reduce the amount of residue left in the grooves. Anyhow, it is certainly mandatory to polish the record surface vigorously as the liquid is evaporating.

It would be really nice of you at *Plus* to share your opinion of this potentially useful/harmful product.

As always, I am truly yours,

Jan Kährström

Sweden

P.S. And now to something completely different - do I have to remember to renew my subscription on my own, or will you at the Plus remind me?

Permostat has a chequered history in the hi-fi industry, and received a very bad press some years ago. The problem with any such product is assessing long-term effects. I'm passing this on to JMH and RSF for their responses, but I'd be interested in hearing from the public too. There is of course a fail-safe alternative in the shape of the Zerostat pistol, still available from Moth Marketing (Tel. (44)(0)1234 741152 or www.mothgroup.com). ➤

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Giant's Causeway... The Marten Coltrane Supreme Loudspeaker System

by Roy Gregory

Time was, not so very long ago, that the ne plus ultra of American high-end audio was embodied in the imposing shape of massive, four cabinet speaker systems like the Infinity IRS and Wilson WAXM*. That thinking survives today in the shape of the Nola Exotica Grand Reference (a speaker with a name as portentous and nearly as imposing as its appearance) and various equally enormous models from the likes of Genesis and Avalon. But the advent of more manageable systems such as Wilson's Grand Slamm, the Isis and a host of alternatives from the likes of Hanson, Wisdom and others has left the four-tower format looking unwieldy and something of an audio dinosaur, even if its sonic scale remains unchallenged. The high-end map of America has been redrawn, these behemoths inched gently aside and into a darkened corner that the spotlight seldom reaches, their place centre stage taken by svelte middle-weights that cost (and demand) considerably less.

So, if four-box speaker systems have really had their day (and let's face it, the potential market for these products is probably already saturated) why would a boutique European speaker brand tread this well-worn design path so long after the fact? For, on the face of it, that's exactly what Marten have done in producing the Coltrane Supreme, a four-box, multi-driver speaker system with all the hallmarks of those classic American monsters. Take one look at

the pictures (and the price tag) and it's like watching old newsreel: you can see history repeating itself right before your very eyes. Indeed, on the basis of the visual evidence it's an inescapable conclusion – but that doesn't stop it being wrong. Look a little deeper and you'll

appreciate subtle but important differences that make this both a European and very much a Marten design.

For a start, the Coltrane Supremes are an awful lot smaller than you'd think, and appear smaller still. Secondly they use infinite baffle loading for the majority of their range, reflex loading for the bass, in stark contrast to the open-baffles and sealed box bass of speakers like the Infinity IRS and Nola EGR. They're also conceptually simpler than those massive speaker systems

of yore, with far greater consistency between driver types, and significantly, a dedicated bass amplifier to drive and integrate the low-frequencies. So, if they're smaller and simpler, how come they cost so much? The answer to that is also simple; the technological and material content of this system is sky high. In fact, once you start adding up the driver costs alone, you start to wonder how the company arrived at the purchase price. Add in the rest of the physical details outlined in the sidebar and you'll be sending them a calculator.

But as visually and physically daunting as these speakers undoubtedly are, it's nothing compared to the challenge of simply listening to them. Where do you start? What do you play? What should you expect?

The secret is to remember that this is just another loudspeaker. They need to do the same job and be judged in the same way as any other.

Put aside the physical presence (and the massive price-tag that constantly hovers in your subconscious) and ask yourself whether you like what you are hearing. And that's where it gets interesting...

Remember what I said about the mid-band? Now, given the massive investment that Marten have made in reproducing this critical range, what better place to start. Hard to do when confronted by these massive cabinets, so think laterally – turn out the lights! Remove the visual cues and you'll



* Of which DW's wife was heard to remark, "You know Dave, if you want to go on doing this you'd better start making products that people can actually afford to buy!"

Super Club Sandwich... What's inside the Coltrane Supremes

Let's start at the beginning, a very good place to start... Despite all the recent hype about exotic tweeter materials, speaker performance starts with the mid-band; get that wrong and nothing else matters. Despite appearances, that's exactly the ethos behind the Coltrane Supremes and their unique driver line-up. Although this is a five-way system, the range from 300Hz to 8kHz is covered by just two drivers. The familiar 180mm Eaton ceramic midrange bowl runs up to 1200Hz; that's where things get really interesting. In a world where all and sundry seem to have a diamond tweeter fixation, Marten have stolen a march by being the first to use Eaton's new 50mm diamond midrange driver. Well, upper-mid to be more precise. In doing so they have created a system that employs ceramic drivers all the way from 17 to 1200Hz, with diamond thereafter, the 20mm Eaton tweeter taking over at 8kHz and extending output all the way to a claimed 100k!

Now let's look at costs for a moment. A single 50mm diamond driver costs around the same as a pair of the Focal JMLabs Electra 1037Be floorstanders reviewed in the last issue, beryllium tweeters and all! And between you and me, I don't reckon Marten will qualify for a quantity discount

on this unit. Add in the diamond tweeter, five 180mm and six 230mm ceramic drivers per channel and the hardware bill starts to mount alarmingly. Of course, drive units alone don't make a loudspeaker. The Coltrane Supreme cabinets have baffles constructed from a constrained layer sandwich of 30mm solid hardwood and 30mm MDF. The side panels comprise another constrained layer, but this time mixing 25mm carbon-fibre skinned, Kevlar honey-comb composite with 12mm plywood, a lighter construction to help spread resonance within the cabinet. The midrange cabinets are split into three separate volumes, one for the diamond drivers, a second for the lower-mid and the last for the four mid-bass units, the internal baffles adding extra bracing. Each cabinet is further lined with a high-quality wool layer, while the bass cabinets are reflex loaded by a pair of massive ports, firing backwards and tuned to 23Hz. A massive stainless steel footplate is bolted to the underside of each enclosure in order to increase its footprint and thus stability. In turn these are each supported on a quartet of Black Diamond Racing carbon-fibre cones and discs.

Lacing the electrical components together is a significant length of Jorma's flagship Prime silver loudspeaker cable, with crossover components including the exotic Mundorf silver/gold capacitors and a silver/gold inductor for the diamond mid. There

are Bybee quantum purifiers in line with every driver in the midrange towers, gold ones on the diamond units, with crossover components carefully damped and isolated from cabinet vibration. Ignoring the constructional complexity for a moment, by now home constructors should be going a little pale at the parts cost alone...

As well as speaker cabinets themselves, you also get a bass amplifier/filter the size on an extremely large power amplifier. Designed by Mike Bladellius this has both balanced and single-ended inputs/outputs, and delivers 2000 Watts of class AB power directly to the 4-Ohm load of each bass tower via a DSP operated low-pass filter. The all-analogue high-pass output for the midrange towers manages their low-frequency roll-off, helping to integrate them with the bass towers, for which there are rotary controls to set bass level and phase.

Price for the whole kit and caboodle? A cool £120,000 a pair. And the bizarre thing is that as expensive as that looks – and there's no escaping that we're talking not just car prices but seriously exotic cars at that – add up the parts cost of the elements outlined above and compare it to the competition and you wonder how Marten are making any money on this product. I'd hesitate to call it a bargain, but you certainly can't fault the material value!

▶ Instantly realise what these speakers are all about. In a blacked out room these speakers simply disappear, visually and sonically. Instead, they're replaced by a seamless soundscape, a three-dimensional acoustic space if that's on the record, a sonic collage if it's come out of a multi-tracked studio. Play Townes Van Zandt's achingly poignant acoustic rendition of 'Waitin' 'Round To Die' from the *Heartworn Highways* soundtrack* and you'll hear Townes and his guitar, right in front of you; but you'll also hear the frontroom outside of Austin where the song was taped, a friend of his neighbour sat in the far corner who intermittently sings along, the neighbour's dog out in the yard, the warmth of the company, the relaxed

feel of the setting. Townes is lissidized and solid, sat over his guitar, which also has a natural weight and body, that combination of attack and warmth that's so easy to recognise but so hard to capture on a record. The vocal isn't exactly a classical delivery, and nor is the phrasing, with the occasional almost spoken line interrupting the rhythm, but it is astonishingly natural and utterly, captivatingly believable, the event and the song simply unfolding before you.

You've just taken your first step on the Coltrane Supreme's learning curve. These speakers defy expectations and as such it's easy to miss the point. By effectively disconnecting your eyes from the equation you've let your ears understand that what they've been listening too is probably the best small speaker they've ever heard. You've got that precision and pinpoint imaging, that agility and sense of transparent

rightness that comes from small cabinets and simple crossovers done really well. But there are those other qualities too: the astonishing detail and resolution; the lifelike scale and perspective; the volume and dimensionality of the images; the dynamic range and immediacy. Now, these are all things that escape even the best mini-monitors, which is when it starts to dawn on you that what Marten have achieved in the Coltrane Supreme is to take the midrange performance that makes those small two-ways so appealing and extend it both up and down. But the really important point is that in doing so they don't just open the window wider, they improve the view, too.

So, it's not just about the resolution of detail and dynamic range, it's about getting all that information positioned correctly in time and space. That's where the phase coherent bandwidth of

* This is a disc you just have to own. It's reviewed in the Pop and Contemporary section of this issue. Don't miss it. Even if you think you'll hate the music, do not under any circumstances miss this disc. You will be astounded!

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▶ the Coltrane Supremes comes in. Not only are linear low-frequencies critical to establishing a proper sense of scale and acoustic space, they also fill out the harmonic envelope throughout the range, bring body and presence to the players and their instruments, properly proportioned depth to the soundstage and impact to dynamic shifts. The danger is in over-egging the pudding. Too much bass, or bass in the wrong place is worse than no bass at all. Take one look at those bass towers with their 12 white drivers and 4000 Watts of power and you expect to be blown into next week, let alone the next room. The beauty of the Coltrane Supremes playing something like the track I've just described is that with the lights out you'd have no idea they were there. Until you unhook them that is, when the soundstage and images collapse, the acoustic loses its coherence, the background chat suddenly becomes more intrusive, the interjections jar as their timing loses its sense of place in the proceedings. Townes voice becomes thinner, more nasal, and his guitar all about the strings rather than its body. Suddenly its that old familiar hi-fi sound. It's good hi-fi, but the magic has gone. The magic is about how incredibly natural it sounds, how easy the system makes it for you to make sense of the music, the environment, what's actually happening. Part of turning out the lights is unlearning "hi-fi". In fact, the Coltranes have a pretty steep un-learning curve too.

Lesson two on that particular curve has to do with level. When you start out, I can pretty much guarantee that

you'll by playing this system way too loud. Like the Avalons, with which the Martens share certain driver technology, you need to listen in a different way. Generally, things sound "loud" when the levels of distortion start to intrude. With genuinely low distortion systems, that happens much later in the volume range. Add copious power and high efficiency into the equation and loud becomes really loud. Seriously, neighbour botheringly, can't hear the front door loud: and I live in a detached house. Where the Supremes reach the edge is in the upper mid and lower treble, where they get hard, bright and forward. If that happens, back it way off – you're at ear threatening volumes even if it doesn't seem like it. And when you do back it off (c'mon, who faced with speakers like these isn't going to crank it at least once – and soon) notice what happens to the dynamic range and impact: it doesn't change. Do that with most speakers and your ears need time to adjust, everything sounding compressed until they do. Such is the speed of response and dynamic coherence of the Coltrane Supremes that they maintain dynamic range almost irrespective of level – meaning (somewhat disappointingly) that you don't need to play them loud at all.

Which brings us now to the vexed question of bass. Like I said – see all those drivers, expect to be battered into submission – only it never

really happens like that. Of course, reach for something like the 'Drum Dance' from *House of Flying Daggers* and you'll have bass power, volume and impact aplenty. But even then this is a fast, transparent, textured bass rather than the room shaking, rib-rumbling thunder that people think is bass.



You see, it's that un-learning curve again – gets you every time.

Now, I can only talk about what I hear in my room, where the bass is both well behaved and on the lighter side of normal. Other rooms might well provoke the Martens to more flatulent effect, but in mine their bottom end was never less than agile, tactile and tuneful. They never managed to match the natural weighted tonality of the Isis, and for that reason, their definition of soundstage dimensions and boundaries was never as clearly defined, but I'm being real picky here. Playing ▶

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► upright bass from '50's and '60's jazz recordings, the attack, weighting and shape of notes is ghostly in its natural pace and presence, Ray Brown's dexterity running full rein on *This One's For Blanton*, where so many other speakers plod and labour. His bass lines and intricate working of rhythm and melody, accent and phrasing are negotiated with effortless articulation and unfettered poise.

In fact, this more than anything else sums up the character of the Martens. They might seem, conceptually speaking, like a downsized Wilson WAMM or Nola Exotica Grand Reference, but actually they are more like a beefed up WATT/Puppy. They don't have the awesome power and massive stage delivered by the true monsters of the hi-fi-world. Instead they offer a more modest and in many ways more physically realistic perspective on the musical event, combined with the microscopic levels of instrumental analysis and insight that go with the best mini-monitors. These speakers tell you exactly who is doing what, where and when. They take you inside the performance, into the studio, onto the stage. Their musical power comes from their speed and immediacy, rather than the ability to move massive amounts of air. If you want to be lifted out of your seat by sheer musical wallop, then there's no denying the power and majesty of a speaker like Nola's EGR, or the impressive expanse of its walk in and stroll around soundstage. But that speaker doesn't match the tonal and dynamic continuity of the Martens, the evenness of their resolution or their freedom from intrusive excess.

Time then finally, to talk about resolution. Having already said that it's not just about detail, but that it's what you do with that detail that turns it into information, you still need the raw material to work with. The first thing that strikes you about the Martens, particularly before

Movable Feast... Systems and set up

With five cabinets in total (don't underestimate the size of the bass amp) accommodating the Coltrane Supremes can be quite a challenge. Fortunately they are far less visually imposing than you expect. The midrange towers stand just 1350mm tall, and at 250mm wide are physically and visually svelte. Admittedly, the bass towers are significantly bigger, a foot taller and nearly twice the width, but that contrast in height and overall bulk, a discontinuity that jars when you first see the Supremes, actually works for them in the long run. The smaller midrange cabinets standing forward of the bass towers, act as a visual stepping-stone to reduce the impact of the larger cabinets. The end result is less intrusive in my room than the Wilson MAXXs, and not even close to the likes of the Nola EGR or Infinity IRS – speakers that redefine the phrase “wall of sound”. Nor are the Supremes physically unmanageable. During the course of this review they've been in or out of the listening room (meaning up or down the stairs, remember) no fewer than six times. It's a surprisingly straightforward operation assuming that you have two people. And once the speakers are on their cones and discs, they are simplicity itself to manoeuvre, which certainly eases positioning. Just as well really, because with this sort of extension available, placement becomes super critical – even if you can control the bass level.

With a midrange sensitivity of 93dB and a benign 6 Ohm load, placement and adjustment becomes the Coltrane Supreme owner's biggest challenge. The midrange towers are going to stand pretty much where a conventional speaker would be placed. In fact, they went very slightly wider than the norm in my room. Then you've got the issue of placing the bass towers and lacing the whole lot together: inside the mid columns; outside the mid columns; how far forward from the rear wall, how far back? Given that adjustable bass level the LF towers can be stood almost anywhere and deliver a reasonable performance. But getting them in the right place (in my room that's outside and just forward of the back of the mid columns) makes a massive difference to the available bass power, scale and integration. With a potential -3dB point at 17Hz getting the bass wrong can be both financially frustrating and sonically disastrous, so it's worth expending the time and taking the care. I just wish I'd had the Velodyne SMS-1 bass management system reviewed in the last

issue on hand; not to apply bass compensation but just to see what was going on. At around £500 I'd say it was money well spent if you want to set up full-range speaker systems like these.

Further complicating matters is the complexity of the cable loom required. Signal must be run from the source into the bass amp and then on to the main amplifiers, with separate speaker cables running from both the bass and main amps to their respective speaker cabinets. You cannot bypass the bass-amp and if you run balanced in you must run balanced out, single-ended in, single-ended out. Nor can you take liberties with the cables – you will hear it if you do. You'll need identical cable types and lengths on each speaker cabinet. Despite having a purpose built loom of Jorina Prime, Nordost Valhalla and Odin on hand, these demands meant that I ended up with the bass and main amps sat between the speakers – a far from ideal situation as these speakers let you hear everything. Short-cuts in system set up are an absolute no no, and you'll need to create a coherent cable loom, consistent support for all the electronics and pay serious attention to fine tuning source components. Change the shelf under the bass amp? You'll hear it. Put risers under the interconnects? You'll hear those too.

Matching electronics included the Connoisseur, Ayre, Tom Evans and Herron pre-amps, Karan KA M1200, Ayre MXR, TEAD Linear B and a host of Conrad-Johnson power amps. The Connoisseur/c-j combination threw up a further consideration. The bass amp has quite a sensitive input. Use it with a high-gain pre-amp and an equally sensitive power amp and the 93dB efficiency of the midrange towers will produce audible hiss. This is mainly to do with front-end gain so be warned. Despite experimenting with low-power amps driving the midrange towers, the Coltrane Supremes showed a marked preference for more powerful partners, the Ayre MXRs proving to be a particularly cost-effective match.

A separate filter module for the speakers is planned, allowing owners the option of employing their own bass amps, or even using other sub-woofers with the midrange towers as a stepping-stone to the full system or to create a more manageable (and affordable) alternative. Hopefully this might also overcome some of the wiring limitations.

Oh, and just when you thought you were out of the woods, you need to warm the speakers up before listening. Around half an hour or so should do it, but before then they sound thin, exposed and poorly integrated...

▶ they warm up and integrate properly, is the sheer quantity of raw detail they throw out. In this respect they exceed such stellar performers as the Martin Logan CLS and Summit. And they do so across a far wider bandwidth – indeed, across their entire bandwidth. They deliver texture and shape to notes from the bottom to the very top of their range, and tellingly, their bass notes are never earthbound, never roll along the listening room floor. Instead they're always floated within the acoustic. Use a high-resolution source like the Lyra Titan i and the sheer surface detail and dynamic discrimination is astonishing – but because the Coltrane Supremes extend that quality across the entire range it underpins and

Those who have never placed themselves in that category will start to understand why others do.



presentation, inclusive acoustic and ability to recreate the feeling and frisson of the live event. Now, arguably we have the speaker that defines the opposite edge of this performance envelope. If the Isis

is about what is being played and where, the Coltrane Supreme is about the who and the how. And in that regard, nobody does it better. ➤

The secret of speaker design is to achieve balanced performance, so that neither your strengths nor your weaknesses draw attention to themselves. The Marten Coltrane Supreme is a balanced design

– which given the degree of resolution it possesses is a truly remarkable feat.

There's a new generation of top-flight contenders in the speaker wars. Wilson's Alexandria marks a significant sonic departure from earlier designs like the Grand Slamm and is, on limited

acquaintance, a far more balanced and believable performer. The Isis I've discussed in depth, marvelling at its musical coherence and natural

enhances the performance, rather than spotlighting a specific frequency band which ultimately becomes distracting. Examples are legion and I'll not bore you with the specifics. Transparency and detail breaks are going to go nuts over this speaker.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Five-way sealed box with separate, active bass
Driver Complement:	See Sidebar
Crossover:	100Hz (Active DSP) 300Hz (2 nd Order) 1200 Hz (2 nd Order) 8kHz (1 st Order)
System Efficiency:	93dB
Impedance (Mid Towers):	6 Ohms
System Bandwidth:	16Hz – 100kHz ±3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD) –	
Mid Towers:	250 x 1365 x 400mm
Footprint:	360 x 500mm
Bass Units:	350 x 1650 x 500mm
Footprint:	450 x 600mm
Weights –	
Mid Towers:	95kg ea.
Bass Units:	125kg ea.
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KEF Reference 207/2 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

I reviewed KEF's original 207 model back in Issue 26, along with the PSW5000 sub-woofer, a combination that delivered a scale, transparency and musical sophistication that belied their relatively modest asking price (considering the material content of the complete system). Of course, getting a pair of large, visually imposing loudspeakers into the average domestic environment can represent something of a challenge: adding a substantial sub-woofer too could just be the straw to break the matrimonial back. Well, in a world where less is so seldom more, the good news is that KEF's 207/2 manages to shed a drive unit compared to its predecessor, dispense with the sub-woofer and still advance its overall sound quality. They've also dramatically improved the finish along the way: the boat-backed cabinets now coming in a range of deeply polished lacquer or wood veneers.

Clearly, given the sonic improvements, the changes are more than just skin-deep, and they start with the new 'Austin' Uni-Q array contained in the speaker's head unit. This driver was developed as part of the Project Austin development programme, widely reported on after the 2006 Munich High-End show. The experimental mules seen there were to evolve into KEF's recently launched flagship, the Muon (including their innovative bass loading), but their midrange driver, together with its centrally mounted tweeter has also become the key element in the new Reference series.

Primary design goals for the latest generation Uni-Q were improved

dispersion and off axis response, creating a more natural overall tonality and balance. As the midrange cone also acts as a waveguide for the tweeter, its profile is critical to the high-frequency performance and the even transition from midrange to tweeter that characterizes the Uni-Q's sound. Improving dispersion called for a shallower cone, which under normal circumstances would compromise the stiffness and thus the structural behaviour as a result the midrange output of the unit, losing on the swings what you were gaining on the roundabouts. But advances in computer measurement and modelling of cone behaviour have allowed the designers to optimise cone thickness and material properties to circumvent the problem. At the same time, adding a shallow roll to the previously flat surround has extended the useable output at low frequencies, allowing a lower crossover point of 350Hz and an even smoother transition to the 10" lower midrange driver.

The other obvious change in the 207/2 is the absence of the hyper-tweeter that graced the previous version. This has been made possible by advances

in the design of the tweeter itself, which have extended its range (and quality) significantly. One of the challenges in designing the high-frequency element of the Uni-Q array is presented by the space limitations imposed by the need to mount it within the midrange driver's voice-coil. Whilst KEF have always wanted to vent the tweeter assembly, with the gains in low colouration and dynamic performance that go with the approach, reducing the volume of available magnetic material imposed too high a performance price

in terms of linearity and sensitivity. But, in this latest version, they've finally cracked it by the clever use of three separate neodymium magnets. Combined with a new composite dome assembly in which a shallower titanium diaphragm is driven by a 25mm voice coil, the former of which also curves in to brace the dome structure nearer to its centre. Together, these changes have resulted in a significant improvement in performance at both ends of the spectrum, including pushing the first break-up mode out beyond 30kHz, thus rendering the hyper-tweeter redundant.

Naturally, such fundamental changes across the speaker's upper ranges have necessitated revisions lower down. Although the lower mid unit has remained the same, the greater range of the Uni-Q has eased its working bandwidth. Meanwhile the bass drivers



▶ have had their output extended by some 5Hz, but more significantly it has also been re-voiced, the more natural balance achieved by the 'Austin' Uni-Q allowing a fuller, more authoritative bottom-end than the impressively agile but slightly dry low-frequencies generated by the original.

Other features that remain the same are the integral spirit level, tri-wirable crossover and Uni-balance adjustments for high-frequency level (from +0.75dB to -1.5dB in four discrete steps) and bass contour, allowing the user to compensate for placement near walls or in smaller rooms. One word of warning – the three sets of terminals on the back are there to be used. This speaker definitely benefits from bi- or tri-wiring. The bridging wires supplied are there to get you going, but if required I'd strongly recommend replacing them with either high-quality links made from the same wire as your speaker cables, or even better, a set of the Vertex AQ Mini Moncayo speaker links, which were spectacularly successful. Indeed, before installing them I was wondering whether KEF might have been a little hasty disposing of the hyper-tweeter. I needn't have worried, as installing the Vertex links revealed the new HF unit in all its considerable glory.

When it comes to installation, KEF supply a really excellent set of M8 spikes which can be replaced with effective skates to handle polished floors, important given the weight and difficulty in handling the curved, shiny surfaces of the cabinet. I used the 207/2s with a variety of amps including the Goldmund Telos 200, the c-j LP275Ms and the Gryphon Diablo integrated. Cabling was either the Nordost Odin, the full Vertex loom or Crystal Cable's latest Ultra. The

range of combinations itself proved interesting, revealing the 207/2 as just as transparent as the older version but a whole lot less critical. In other words, it lets you hear what's going on but doesn't force it down your throat. In particular, the differences between the various cables were clearly apparent, but the KEFs seemed to fasten on the positives in each case, underlining the benefits of the chosen balance rather than the inevitable compromises.

Indeed, the first thing that strikes you about the 207/2, especially given its imposing size and physical bulk, the complexity of its four-way, five-driver format, is its sheer musical coherence. Work at set up (of the speakers and the system driving them) and you'll hear them simply disappear – which is impressive and not a little spooky.

The original 207 also possessed pretty remarkable integration, even successfully incorporating that extra driver. But its leaner overall balance necessitated the addition of the sub-woofer to fill out the low frequencies, to really make the most of its virtues. In contrast, the more natural tonality of the 207/2 with its more accurate but also warmer and fuller balance, delivers the necessary low-frequency authority without external aid. Couple that to the improved tonal shading and separation across the rest of the range and you have the sort of transparency and clarity normally associated with the best mini-monitors, but allied to the presence, substance and scale that only comes from a full-range system. The images here are precisely positioned and scaled, but they have dimensional qualities too, a to match the coherence of the overall acoustic. In general, speakers perform best on



material that matches them for size. So, play large-scale orchestral works to make a big speaker sound impressive, keep the really intimate, acoustic stuff for the little two-ways. Reverse that and you stand a good chance of tripping a speaker up, but not the KEF. You don't get much more intimate than the uncompressed acoustic brilliance of the emerging "New Country" performers captured on those 1975 recordings from *Heartworm Highways*. Yet, play the unaccompanied acoustic rendition of 'L.A. Freeway' and you'll hear a solid, three-dimensional guitar, cradled in the lap of Guy Clark, perfectly scaled, perfectly natural, sat before you just behind the plane of the speakers. Now, this a great recording and thing about great recordings is that they sound good on everything, right? Well, this is also one of the most natural recordings I've heard, of a very familiar subject. Any discontinuity, any disturbance in the bandwidth or arrival times of the information stands out like a sore thumb. But with the 207/2 I simply hear the music, there's nothing amiss to distract or destroy the illusion. Likewise, Townes Van Zandt's achingly beautiful version of 'Waitin' Round To Die': the front-room acoustic is all there, ▶



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► complete with interruptions, incidental noises and impromptu backing vocals. But none of those things intrude on the song. Instead the coherence of the soundstage, their innate naturalness and precise positioning makes them an integral part of the whole.

Now switch to the other extreme and the SACD re-master of the Reiner/Chicago *Scheherazade*, with its colossal orchestral crescendos couple to huge dynamic contrasts. The KEF's present that huge soundstage in all

its glory, wide and deep with clearly defined boundaries, rear corners and a wonderful sense of air. The orchestra is clearly placed and convincingly terraced, even to the slightly spot lit solo violin. The big brass tutti that opens the piece has a huge, commanding presence

and impact, creating just the right atmosphere to accentuate the fragility of the violin's entrance, the contrast of craft and beauty with the sweeping, majestic power of the sea. And if you think that's impressive just wait for the finale...

Meanwhile, the opening of the second movement, placing the violin again against the carefully developing backdrop of the orchestra underlines the coherence of the soundstage, the speakers' ability to grow with the music without shifting instruments or swamping the quieter ones. If you want to be picky it also brings out the two criticisms that can be levelled at the speaker, but they must be considered in context. Recently I've spent a lot of time listening to some of the most costly and accomplished speakers available. By those exacting standards, the 207/2 (at around a quarter of the price!) lacks ultimate resolution and

transparency. Those "more than the price of a decent BMW" speakers deliver greater texture and more sense of the air and energy around and between instruments. Likewise, read the speakers' spec sheet and you'll see how low it does and doesn't go. Listen to that pizzicato bass line and you get the colour and texture of the notes, their pitch and placement spot on.



But the 207s don't go deep enough to let you hear the underside of the notes or the cushion of air they float on.

So much for the extremes: what do the lessons learnt mean for everyday listening? By not pushing the bandwidth down into the nether regions, KEF have kept the 207/2 both drivable (91dB with a 3 Ohm minimum but 8 Ohm nominal impedance) and responsive.

There's absolutely nothing turgid or constipated by the bottom end. Instead, dynamic demands are met with gusto, low bass detonations delivered with sudden impact, more agile bass lines with life and a natural flow. That combination of agility and presence right across the range is what makes this speaker so musically satisfying, and ultimately what enables it to overcome the flaws outlined above. Given a choice between ultra resolution and vivacious presence I'll take the latter every time. More to the point, relative to its price peers, the KEF delivers as much or more detail, and makes much better use of it. Anything that's more transparent doesn't go as loud or as deep, nothing I've heard that matches its bandwidth and dynamic range is anywhere near as refined or natural. This speaker goes loud gracefully, without congestion or hardening at the top-end (that new tweeter again)

but it also does delicacy and the more calming, seductive side of music. The driver count, bold styling and glossy finish are in some ways misleading – because inside the 207/2 lurks a consummate all-rounder.

I liked the original 207. Add its matching sub and I loved it. Now the 207/2 does much more (musically speaking) in two boxes than that system did with three. It has far better finish and more coherent styling, better sorted ancillaries and performance potential that's far easier to realize. And its best, thanks to its far more accurate and natural tonality, is way better than its predecessor ever managed – sub or no sub. KEF's Reference speakers have long been underrated and underappreciated, but don't let that fool you. The 207/2 establishes a new benchmark for floorstanders at this price-level, combining useable bandwidth and a manageable load with superb musical coherence and timing. For once, the term "Reference" isn't being abused... ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Four-way reflex loaded
Drive Units:	1x 25mm titanium dome HF 1x 165mm Uni-Q MF 1x 250mm LMF 2x 250mm LF
Bandwidth:	40Hz – 60kHz ± 3dB
Sensitivity:	91dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms (3 Ohms minimum)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	400 x 1226 x 685mm
Weight:	66kg ea.
Finishes:	Piano black, satin sycamore, high gloss cherry or American walnut
Price:	£12000

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Avalon Indra Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

"If it looks too good to be true, then it probably is." So said a rider at this year's Tour De France, days after another dramatic recovery, days before drug testing was to prove him (all too predictably) correct. Such cynicism is well placed in modern sports; with several hundred highly trained and closely matched athletes all attempting the same feat, the sudden elevation of one rider or runner head and shoulders above the norm is both increasingly common and anything but natural. Perhaps it's no surprise then that we tend to shy away from similar performance step-changes in other fields of activity, yet the logic that governs them is entirely separate.

We are all familiar with the over-used concept of trickle down, often coupled to the word "technology", so much so that it too gets greeted with scepticism. "80% of the performance for 50% of the price!" is the stuff of marketing dreams, especially in fields where the taking of percentages is at best nebulous. But just for a moment I'm going to ask you to suspend entrenched disbelief and consider that if something is genuinely and consistently different from the run of the mill then there's likely going to be a reason. There's no question in my mind that Avalon's Isis establishes new standards of achievement in musically important areas, a new shape to its performance envelope, if you will: But then, at well the wrong side of \$50K so it should. Sadly, history tells us that such extravagant statements are generally more about show than go, and cynicism again becomes the order of the day. But

interestingly, at the same time that the Isis first emerged, at the opposite end of the range we saw the NP2, a speaker at around a twentieth the price of its (very) big brother, but a speaker that nonetheless shared the same shape to its performance envelope, the same mix of virtues, even if they exist at a far less exalted level. There's a definite, recognisable, shared achievement here, despite the difference in price, appearance and overall performance – and it's



equally definitely a good thing.

Which begs the question, what it is it that these Avalons are doing that other speakers aren't? Well, actually it's more a case of what they're not doing – or to

be even more precise, what they are not doing to the signal. In short, they're not getting in its way. In reality that requires a little more explanation, but fear not, for the tools are at hand. Were I to say, "If you want but can't afford the Isis, perhaps you should consider the NP2" – those that didn't laugh would probably be outraged. Enter then the Indra, a speaker of such grace and elegance, such obvious physical parallels to the Isis that suddenly the suggestion doesn't seem quite so extreme. But then its reassuringly expensive price tag probably helps in that regard as well...

This, my third foray into this new generation of Avalon speakers, could easily be presented as a cut-down Isis. The heavily faceted, immaculately veneered and rear tilted cabinet is a given. The downward firing port with its U-shaped egress to channel the output is a familiar marker. The ceramic midrange bowl and twin bass drivers echo the line-up in the larger speaker too. But in many ways the physical similarities in the choice and arrangement of the hardware are actually little more than superficial. The Indra is very much a little-Isis, but it's actually the thinking – more precisely, the understanding – behind it that makes it so.

We tend to think about speakers and their performance in terms of what they do – they go loud, they go deep, they image (or not) and all the other hi-fi sub-divisions that inform the review or audition process. Yet, as transducers, along with the source components in a system, they stand to wreak the greatest havoc on the music's content. Perhaps we'd be better off concentrating on ►

▶ what they don't do (to the signal) – at least if we want to improve the breed. Where damage is concerned, less is definitely more and you only need to look at the distortion figures on a range of different loudspeaker designs to know that, as a category, they leave a lot to be desired.

Avalon's speakers have always been low-impact in nature. Some would say they've taken sonic invisibility too far, that lightness of touch infecting the realm of dynamic authority. But that's to miss the point. There are two major mechanisms at work in a loudspeaker: the mechanical and the electrical. The former is the one that gets the most attention and it's also the one that's most visible, concerned as it is with all the bits that you want to move (like the drivers) and all the bits you want to stay still (like the cabinet). But it's the latter, the electrical element represented by the crossover, where the damage is often most insidious and ultimately critical. It's also where the designer, particularly the designer using OEM drivers, can have the greatest influence – not always for good. But with speakers, by their very nature, we tend to assume that the bits we can see are the bits that matter, a tendency that's underlined by their also being reasonably intuitive to understand. So we look at a massive front baffle and can appreciate the role it plays in resisting resonance. We can understand how the sculpted faceting on that baffle reduces diffractive effects that destroy focus. We can look at a drive unit and actually see the fancy diaphragm, or flat surround or whatever it is that makes it so special. And don't get me wrong: these things



are special and they do matter. We can see that from the sonic success of earlier Avalon designs. But something happened with the Isis – something fundamental and wonderful. You can hear it albeit to a lesser extent in the NP2, but boy can you hear it in the Indra. And I don't know what that something is but it's to do with how effectively the speaker steps back behind the music and my gut tells me that has to do with the crossover.

Externally, this latest Avalon is arguably their most attractive speaker yet. Compact, even svelte, the characteristically lozenge shaped front baffle reduces the visual impact still further, while the three-way, four-driver line up fills it to create an aesthetically pleasing, balanced appearance.

Of course, everybody knows that you are supposed to use the grilles on Avalon speakers, but hey, if people can take the grilles off to listen then the reverse should also be true, no? The drivers represent a combination of older models, the twin bass units drafted in from the Ascendant, but paired here with the 90mm ceramic bowl midrange first seen in the Opus, and a new adaptation of the 25mm tweeter used in the Isis, but using a ceramic diaphragm in place of the diamond used in the more expensive model. The Indras are single wired, their Cardas terminals accepting spades, so you

may need to re-terminate your cables. Other than that, they are simple to set up, sounding remarkably comfortable from the off*. However, don't be fooled. Positional experimentation will pay serious dividends; you'll know when you've got it right because the bass suddenly gains life and bounce, while the music steps away from the speakers. And believe me when I say, that is what this speaker is all about.

Just like the Isis, the thing that sets the Indra apart from other speakers is its ability to step aside from the music. It's not just that you don't hear the instruments lodged in the speakers (and you don't, even on early stereo left-right mixes) – it's that you cease to be aware of the speakers at all. It's partly the locational thing, but it's also to do with the absence of mechanical influence. You don't hear these speakers working, you don't hear their different bits reconstituting the music. Indeed, so even and well integrated are they that the creation of a seamless, uninterrupted acoustic space for the performance seems entirely natural, a given result of the recording process rather than the minor miracle it actually represents. Furthermore, that naturalness hints at a deeper quality, the easy dynamic and temporal authority on which it rests. It's this that

makes the Indra ▶



*One thing the Indra didn't inherit from the Isis is the latter's threaded cone feet, which I consider an unacceptable omission. Now that the threaded cones exist they should become standard. On my bare wood floor, I found a cork mat placed beneath each speaker (and therefore its part) really helped integration at low frequencies. It's an easy experiment you may want to try.



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▶ not just unobtrusive but also musically inclusive, reaching out to wrap you in the same time and space as the original performers. The Isis did this too, helped no doubt by its impressive bandwidth. But what impresses with the Indra is that it achieves a similar effect from such manageable proportions.

Listen long enough and you start to recognise how it's done. This Avalon possesses that rarest of shared attributes, speed and substance. Musical information arriving just where and when it should, with all the harmonic weight and presence it should carry gives the Indra a confident, almost assertive streak. It's not a coloration in the conventional sense, more a widening of the expressive window, allowing the musicians full rein. More purposeful and arguably more obvious than earlier Avalon designs, it's a quality that makes the Indra easier to 'get'. Just listen to the deliciously dirty funk bass that underpins Angie Stone's '20 Dollars', its lazy slap with attitude giving the song its mixed air of desperation and sleazy menace: not your traditional Avalon fare, but the Indra doesn't just stand aside from the musical message, it positively waves it through.

The second strand to this speaker's innately natural presentation lies in its ability to separate the individual musical strands within a performance without dismantling the whole. As well as allowing the music to breathe it preserves its structure too, so that the complex weave that creates Bach's *Musical Offering* (EMI ASD414), a

constantly shifting pattern of different instruments never loses its shape, while each instrument retains its place and identity. The resulting cats cradle of musical strands becomes a fascinating, mesmerizing interrelationship of individual contributions creating a whole that's constructed from the individual – if you follow my drift.

The eager dynamics, lively energy and easy separation that characterize the Indra are especially apparent on live performances. Acoustic one-takes are simply stunning, even good studio recordings like the incredible delicacy of Lisa Ekdahl's *Back To Earth*, but the lack of compression present in the speaker makes even less audiophile live material crackle with atmosphere. Examples are legion, from Joe Jackson (*Summer In the City* or the live triple album) to Jackie Leven, Siouxsie And The Banshees to Gorecki conducting his own *3rd Symphony*.

Never has Robert Smith's gloriously off-kilter guitar teetered so agonisingly on the brink – not since the Brixton Academy all those years ago.

To get the Indra up and dancing you're going to need a healthy 100 Watts, more if you can afford it. Just don't skimp on the

quality. The good news is that if you've got a favourite amp then these speakers will give you more of it than you thought possible. In the same way that they represent a window onto the performance, they shine a spotlight on the performance of your system too. Great news if its well sorted and well set-up – just don't expect the slinky contours of the Avalons to hide or control any unsightly bulges. Which makes life very

simple – or potentially very complicated if you've already lost your way.

Ultimately, this speaker is about power: the power of one, the power of many. You expect Starker's Bach *Suites* to be big and bold, rich of body, fluid and authoritative. But the Indra's realisation of the changing weight in his bowing, his accents, even his breathing, make this a far more expressive, a far more human experience. At the other end of the Mercury scale, Dorati's *Birds* demonstrates the sheer musical energy and dramatic dynamic swings of a full orchestra, well-marshalled. The Avalons transit from the fluttering delicacy of solo instruments to the imposing swell of a full orchestral crescendo with disarming ease – disarming that is until you realise just how loud that crescendo is. Such seamless musical poise and versatility are what make the Indra a speaker to aspire to. For once the promise of excellence really has translated to a lower price point; for once that price point makes this dream almost attainable... ➤



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way reflex loaded
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm inverted ceramic dome HF 1x 90mm ceramic bowl MF 2x 160mm Nomex/Kevlar LF
Bandwidth:	28Hz – 25kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	87dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	260 x 1040 x 410mm
Weight:	50.8 kg ea.
Price:	£17500

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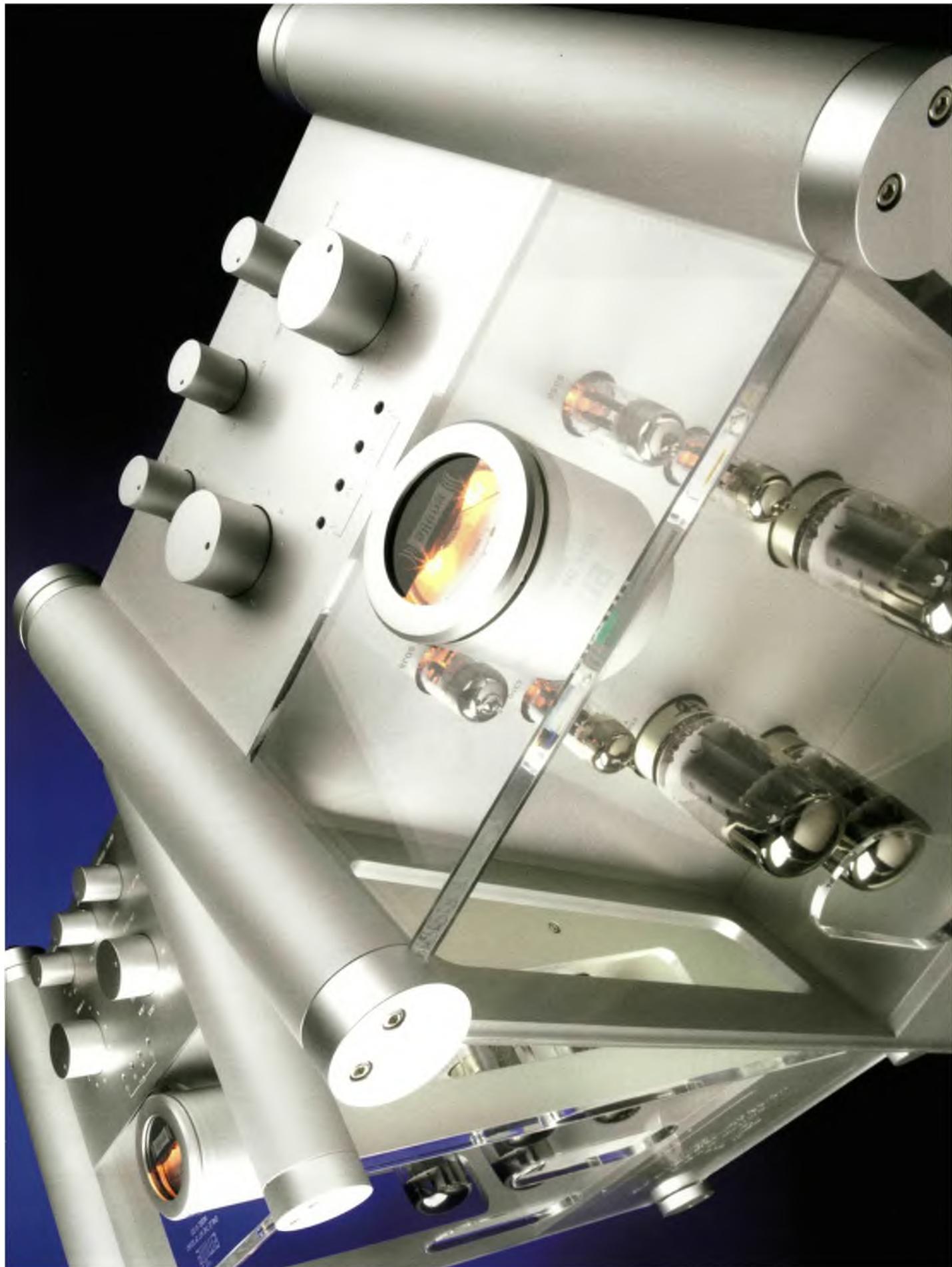
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Emillé KI-120 Integrated Amplifiers

by Roy Gregory

Emillé and their amplifiers hail from Korea, which, in this day and age, is hardly unusual. Which is not the same as saying that the Emillé KI-120s are not unusual...

Integrated valve amps from the Far East are far from unusual. Barely a week goes by without some new Chinese brand washing up on these shores. But don't go assuming that the KI-120s are simply part of the crowd...

The CNC machined casework that once separated up-market offerings from their value for money siblings might have become virtually ubiquitous, but that's not to say that the Emillé amps lack a distinctive character...

In fact, I can pretty much guarantee that you won't have seen anything quite like the KI-120s ever before. They're big, distinctly retro, beautifully finished, and there's two of them. Oh, and did I say that they're big... And whilst mono-blocs, valve mono-blocs, beautifully machined and built valve mono-blocs are not exactly unusual, in this case these two unfeasibly large cases constitute a single, integrated amplifier – and yes, I know that's an oxymoron.

Each KI-120 carries a quartet of 6550 output tubes, running in class AB push-pull to deliver 120 Watts of power. Each chassis offers one balanced and five single-ended inputs, with front-panel controls for source select, volume, power on/off and biasing the

output tubes. The fifth control switches the front-panel meter between bias duties and displaying output power. With that big ol' meter and shoebox configuration, octet of glowing valves and open chassis, there's no escaping the carefully judged "dawn of hi-fi" feel that radiates from the KI-120, underlined by the fact that you need two of them and there's no remote

from 8mm aluminium plates, reinforced at each corner by 48mm quadrants machined from solid rod. The flat panels, exposed fixings and simple shapes are what actually establish the retro theme; no swoopy curves or sculpted, contoured reliefs here. The open top-plate is protected front and top by thick, Perspex panels, held in place by the top caps. The bottom

caps conceal nicely executed, adjustable, conical feet, which are sensibly radiused to prevent instantaneous damage to any supporting surface. The simple, cylindrical control knobs are reassuringly solid, the volume control having crisp detents



control. Indeed, they'd qualify as cute if anybody made a rack big enough to get a pair side by side on a single shelf. Instead they come across as seriously retro and seriously funky, yet in a seriously serious kind of way. It's an impression that's reinforced by the "treasure chest" crates in which the amps arrive, packaging that goes beyond the kind of gimmicky ostentation that tends to afflict high-end aspirants, instead entering firmly into the realm of genuine reverence for the contents. The people who build these amplifiers are clearly seriously serious about them too...

The Emillé amps are each built into a massively sturdy chassis constructed

to allow easy channel balancing.

Valve line-up consists of those four 6550s per channel, combined with a single 6DJ8 and three 6350s, presumably carrying out input, phase-splitter and driver duties, although the manual is short on circuit details. The audio circuitry is built onto a single, neatly laid out PCB loaded with high-quality "name brand" components while the housing at the rear contains the impressively substantial transformers and supports a separate, similarly substantial power supply PCB. You get one balanced and five single-ended line inputs, an earth post and an IEC mains input. You also get output taps for four and eight Ohm speakers and

▶ that's pretty much it, no frivolities, no unnecessary facilities – and no tape loop, should you want to use a surround sound processor.

Thankfully, the long slots on either sides of the valve bed make excellent handles, so moving the KI-120s isn't the chore it could be despite their significant weight. Biasing is also perfectly straightforward, so getting the amps up and running is totally fuss-free – assuming you've got somewhere to keep the crates,



do it proudly too. Indeed, trying the Emillé amps with a variety of different speakers demonstrated their willingness to bend to the task, awkward and inefficient load or not. If big and bold sums up their styling, it sums up their sound too – exactly what you'd expect from a well-driven octet of 6550s in fact. Listen to the sheer power and dynamic impact that you

air, irrespective of the number of instruments playing, the density of the score.

Whilst the KI-120s have that relaxed easy grip on proceedings that lets the music breathe, there's no lack of drive. The straight ahead roots rock of Bill Mallonee and The Vigilantes Of Love (the brilliant 'Goes Without Saying' from Audible Sigh)

or kids with a Pirates Of The Caribbean fixation...

I also received a KPE-2AS phono-stage to go with the mono-blocs, and again it's a twin chassis tube design, although sadly in this instance it's split by circuitry and power supply rather than left and right channels. MC input is via transformers, with high and low impedance settings, an ECC82 and two ECC83s being shared between the beautifully laid out, dual mono active circuitry, while front panel controls set input loading and overall gain. Case work and component quality are absolutely first class, the extreme solidity of the two chassis doing nothing to undermine their severe close of the cuts.

One of the first things you'll notice with the KI-120s is their sensitivity: no shortage of gain here. They'll play loud and with all that power on board they'll

get from the SACD re-mastering of Reiner's *Scheherazade* and you'll see what I mean.

The opening passage simply explodes from the speakers, full of energy, colour and presence. But there's more than just wallop here. All that orchestral fury is contained in a vast yet wonderfully coherent acoustic space, as the piece progresses the solo violin's entry is perfectly poised in space and scale, a contrast in delicacy against the seething maelstrom of those opening bars. Yet despite the little and large nature of the music's demands, the amps never lose grip or momentum, never become flustered or clumsy. Instead they have a surefooted sense of flow and musical momentum, a stability that betrays that rarest and most valuable of commodities, real authority. It's this that enables the amps to hold that fragile solo violin so stable and separate from the rest of the orchestra. It's this that keeps the acoustic space constant, the dimensionality and sense of enclosed

simply stampedes along, the power chords of the middle eight pouring forth, slabs of purpose and attitude. provoking reckless runs along the air guitar's extended fret-board. At the same time, the sense of flow that lets the music move forward so effortlessly brings a smoothness and continuity to proceedings. Those who prefer their rhythms more explicit, micro-dynamic textures more obvious will point to a lack of resolution, and compared to the very best amps, a lack of focus and transparency; and it's a fair cop – but one that rather misses the point. The KI-120s deliver a musical presence and power, a range of tonal colours and impressive scale that conjures life and the emotive content from recordings.

Faced with the thankless task of sharing house-space with the c-j LP275Ms and with the sound of the Marten Coltrane Supremes still ▶

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▶ ringing in my ears, the Emillé amps had a tough act to follow. With that in mind I downsized dramatically to the charming little SoundSmith Monarch stand-mounts. The KI-120s didn't bat an eyelid, grasping the signal by the scruff of its neck, the speakers by the seat of their pants, delivering a performance of such winning gusto as to quite bowl me over. Along the way they demonstrated one of those hidden talents that you chance upon now and then; if you want to make small speakers sound big then this is the amp for you! It didn't matter what I threw at the Monarchs, the scale or complexity of the performance, they took it in their stride, delivering a soundstage and dynamic range out of all proportion with their size. It was like witnessing the electronic equivalent of a Charles Atlas course for Nigel Nicely-Nice.

Of course, the KI-120s really deserve more ambitious partners, and speakers as varied as the Avalon Indra, KEF 207/2 and Nola Viper Reference were handled with aplomb. Each delivered the greater scale, detail, transparency and finesse you'd expect. Indeed, it wasn't until the Indras made their entrance that I finally thought I'd outrun the amp's capabilities. In contrast, the easy enthusiasm of the KEF 207/2 proved a near perfect match, delivering the Emillés' dynamic clout and huge soundstage with engaging energy and serious intent. In this mode the integrated monos were hauntingly reminiscent of one of my fondest musical memories, the DNM/Beard P100 combo that marked my graduation to serious amplification nearly 25 years ago. Paired with Maggie MG11bs there was a presence, drive, energy, scale and volume to images that made listening an almost physical experience. Teamed with the KEFs, the KI-120s were able to

transport me in just the same way. Talk about fired with enthusiasm, fired from a cannon is nearer the mark!

You need to handle such a heady mix with care. In particular you'll need to watch the output level of your source components. The steps at the lower end of the KI-120s stepped attenuator are necessarily fairly course, meaning that the



excessive output of many CD players is best attenuated before it reaches the amplifiers' inputs. Likewise, crude or splashy front-ends are going to be cruelly exposed. Instead look for players with plenty of detail, separation and dynamic range; Goldmund's Eidos 18 CD/SACD player proved ideal, once I'd tamed its output with a set of inline resistors. Unsurprisingly, the Emillé phono-stage was perfectly adapted, with its front panel controls allowing careful balancing of load and overall gain. Ultimately however, I wanted slightly more depth and resolution than the KPE-2AS was delivering, turning instead to the Groove Plus. But don't write the Emillé stage off just yet. It's an interesting and extremely engaging device, sharing if anything, too many of the amps' qualities to sit comfortably beside it. In another context it could be just what you are looking for, a

prospect we'll report on separately.

In the meantime, if you feel like you've lost the enthusiasm you once had for listening, or that your system is getting a shade too polite for its own good, the KI-120s make a loud, proud case for your attention. And you needn't be put off by the unusual format. Something smaller and more manageable, sir? Emillé have a number of other, more conventional offerings that deliver slightly less power while also demanding less of your hard-earned cash. Me, I'd stretch to the KI-120s: because I love the way they look, because of the way they sound, but mainly because they never, ever forget that this is supposed to be about involvement. If this Emillé, mono-bloc, integrated, contradiction of an amp doesn't get you up and dancing... or conducting... or thrashing air-guitar, then I'm sorry, it's probably already too late. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Mono-bloc integrated amplifier
Valve Complement:	2x 6922, 6x 6350, 8x 6550A per pr.
Inputs:	1x line-level balanced XLR 5x line-level single ended RCA
Input Sensitivity:	0.2V
Rated Output Power:	120 Watts into 4 or 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	310 x 384 x 550mm ea.
Weight:	34kg ca.
Finishes:	Black or silver
Price:	£9500 pr.

Manufacturer:

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Marantz SA-7S1 SACD Player

by Roy Gregory

Given the cynics' view of the DVD-A/SACD "format war" I can hear them asking themselves whether this is an SACD player that also plays CD – or a CD player that also happens to play SACD, last nod to a dying format whose protagonists won't admit defeat? Well guys, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but not only is your original premise wrong but your cynicism is sadly misplaced. This is very much an SACD player, and even if you won't find Lily Allen or Girls Aloud on the format, SACD releases are going very nicely thank you. But what's really nice about the SA-7S1 is that it takes CD replay just as seriously. Clear high-end aspirations and a dedicated two-channel topology make this an audiophile player for all seasons – or should that be reasons?

Of course, Marantz started life as one of the founding fathers of the high-end, a fact reflected in the nomenclature of this latest range, the SA-7's matching amps echoing the designations of the legendary Model 7 pre-amp and Model 9 mono-blocs. The brand might be solidly mainstream these days, but it has always maintained its membership of the high-end community, underlined by occasional forays into the likes of Class A amplification and more recently, serious disc players like the two-box CD-7.

When major Japanese companies decide to do "high-end" the results

tend to divide between the laughable and the truly scary – at least as far as the established high-end boutique brands go. The combination of sheer numbers and a serious development budget can create a technological and constructional package that even the most respected specialist manufacturers can only dream about. Just witness TEAC's Esoteric line if you want to see genuine cost no object



engineering – with performance to match. Well, this Marantz is cast from a similar mould, albeit cut from slightly less extravagant cloth. The flagship SA-7S1 tops out the company's range at a price of \$5000, the same point at which the Esoterics start. But, as Marantz are keen to point out, competing players that match the SA-7's sophistication are generally far more expensive..

Interestingly, the parallels with the Esoteric range are more than skin deep. Both are built around massive, newly

developed transports, the SACDM-1 in the SA-7 featuring a die-cast aluminium tray and substantial, extruded aluminium chassis and case; it is impressively fast and solid in operation. Both feature fully balanced audio circuitry and offer inputs for an external clock (although there is as yet no such device in the Marantz range). Both also feature massive, non-resonant chassis construction, although the Esoteric leans towards sheer (extensively CNC'd) mass to achieve this goal, the SA-7 relying on constrained layers instead. Despite being lighter and in engineering terms rather more elegant, they still add up to a machine that is reassuringly solid when it comes time to lift it into a rack.

Digitally speaking, the SA-7 relies on a dual-differential pair of NPC SM5866AS DAC chips, feeding the company's latest PEC (Phase Error Compensation) 77712 digital filter, again arranged in dual-differential mode. This sophisticated multi-purpose chip acts as a digital filter, a DC filter, a noise shaper and an 8x over-sampler. These functions can be variously configured by the user, depending on format: there are three filter/DAC configuration options for SACD replay (including no filter at all), three filter algorithms for CD replay, as well as the option to defeat the noise shaping, DC filter and digital outputs for the latter. Obviously, there is no digital output ▶

▶ from SACD. The digital section is entirely ground isolated from the analogue circuitry, which offers both single-ended and balanced outputs. You can also invert the absolute phase of the signal, a function that operates in the digital domain rather than the more usual analogue solution. Marantz have gone to great lengths to develop a single, large transformer for the SA-7, preferring the unified consistency of the source impedance it delivers. Careful routing of the DC tracks for the different circuit sections minimizes interference. The chassis is extensively copper plated and the player stands on handsome, solid copper feet, which were chosen for their sonic qualities as well as the fact that they look pretty. For once, the supplied remote is clearly laid out with well-spaced buttons that include the various filter options and other settings, allowing you to switch them from the listening seat. Incidentally, the user settings can only be changed with the disc stopped. That might seem like a bad thing, but actually it ensures proper comparison rather than knee-jerk responses to tonal shifts.

Unfortunately, as a reviewer, all those options create something of a moving target, so lets get them out of the way now. On SACD, as long as the recordings were well balanced, Filter 1 offered by far the best sound, setting 2 being more precise and focused, but also more mechanical, setting 3 being airy but also vague and diffuse. I also preferred the sound of Algorithm 1 for CD replay, as well as the sound with the Noise Shaping, DC filter and Digital Outputs all in the off position. However, it's nice to have the options for the less well-recorded discs

one comes across, where they can come into their own. But for the vast majority of my listening it was Filter 1 all the way, and no extra sauce.

Getting the best out of the SA-7 is also pretty straightforward when it comes to set-up, mainly because the mechanical aspects of chassis design have been done with the requisite care. Place it on a decent stand, make sure it's level and use a decent mains lead and you'll be most of the way there. The copper feet are surprisingly effective. A trio of Stillpoints cones tightened things up, improving transparency, dynamic range and musical coherence as expected, but the degree of improvement was smaller than anticipated; worthwhile, but hardly earth shattering. One other thing: I



developed a marked preference for the single-ended outputs, even when connecting to the fully balanced Ayre K-1x pre-amp. They didn't have the grip, or absolute dynamic range of the balanced outputs, but they delivered more air, micro dynamic life, immediacy and temporal fluency. You may or may not agree, but don't just assume that balanced is best.

What is less immediately apparent is the way in which the player interfaces with different systems. The SA-7S1 possesses a definite character that makes matching a critical consideration. Like

many SACD machines it exhibits the natural, unforced and fluid detail that I've come to associate with the medium. But unlike machines from dCS and the aforementioned Esoteric, it doesn't drive that point home by majoring on focus and transparency, qualities those players extend to CD replay too. Instead this is a warm, weighty sounding machine with a full balance, solid presence and a distinctly mid-hall nature that's almost analogue in character. The exceptional positional stability combined with the warmth of its tonal balance makes the Marantz very easy on the ear and un-fatiguing to listen to. The question is, when does something get so laid back that it actually topples over? Which is where the question of matching comes in...

The SA-7S1 will sound at its best used with electronics and particularly speakers that are on the leaner side of neutral (begging the question as to how it gets with its own, matching electronics).

So, it performed far better with the solid-state Goldmund Telos 200 amps than it did with esj, while the KEF 207/2 and even the Avalon Indra (which is neutral to a fault) delivered too much bottom end flesh for the SA-7's bones. And that's the point; because the Marantz sits right at the leading edge of the system, it doesn't just add a hint of flavour, it dominates the underlying foundation and overall balance of the music. Any extra weight at all and the sound will become one paced and two-dimensional. Running it in a lean system is correction after the fact: it will help restore the balance, but it can't reconstitute the structure, which brings us to the second consequence of the player's chosen approach to the music.

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"THE VANTAGE IS SOMETHING OF A GIFT AND ONE THAT KEEPS ON GIVING"

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Through their sheer beauty – both aural and visual – MartinLogan speakers have established hybrid electrostatic technology as the obvious choice for those who want state-of-the-art sound without suffering a profusion of ugly boxes. The company's name is now a byword for elegance in audio.

Every MartinLogan speaker, from entry level and home theatre to state of the art, is immediately recognisable as a MartinLogan product: the peerless, oft-imitated, room-friendly appearance, the captivating see-through panels and furniture grade finish. Best of all, the sound is as clear as the panels themselves.

MartinLogan has raised the bar even higher with the sublime Summit, a speaker that possess all of the virtues of the brand in a disarmingly compact form. To make its virtues available to a wider audience, the Summit has been followed by the smaller Vantage, and – for those with space or budget restrictions – the passive-woofer Vista. We have no doubt that they are the most satisfying MartinLogan speakers ever, magical blends of electrostatic openness and the kind of bass only available from a dynamic woofer. They can charm and excite in equal measure, dealing with everything from delicate, 'unplugged' music to massive orchestras, from funk to fusion.

To augment the Summit and its sisters, especially for home cinema applications, a new baby has been added to the range of MartinLogan subwoofers. The Abyss, coming above the very successful Dynamo but below the Grotto, features a 12in woofer, and it provides a new form of convenience for true flexibility: the Abyss, driven by its internal 300W amp, can be installed with either front- or downward-firing positions. It uses inverse mathematical equalisation, for sound to suit the environment.

New, too, for home theatre and environmental situations, are the Stage hybrid centre channel speaker and the Ticket, a compact and affordable in-wall model. The Stage fits into an enclosure only 34.6in wide, ideal for the new generation of wall-mounted plasma and LCD displays. Better still, a pair of flush-mounted Tickets will complement an in-wall monitor so unobtrusively that they're ideal for studies, bedrooms and anywhere else a secondary system is used.

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▶ with a price tag attached, in this case a lack of micro-dynamic discrimination and temporal precision that robs the music of immediacy and phrasing, the directness of its expression, and which adds to the mid-hall perspective. If you like your music up close and personal (which I do) you'll likely look elsewhere. However, if a more relaxed and less intense presentation is your thing, the Marantz could be exactly what you are looking for.

Positional stability is a seriously underrated quality when it comes to hi-fi systems, and it's at the core of the SA-7's sound. Of course, it's not the music that's relaxed, it's you listening to it – and that's because the stable picture means you're not working so hard. Voices and instruments are rock solid and impressively dimensional, without having that hectoring "look at me" quality that makes ultra transparent systems initially impressive but so often ultimately wearing. So whether it's Sonya Kitchell doing girl and guitar, sat solid in front of you, or Barbirolli's reading of Mahler 5 with the NPO, with its wonderfully terraced orchestral perspective and the sheer presence of its percussion, there's no tendency for instruments to wander with level or crowd forward in the soundstage. You are here, the orchestra is over there and there's never any doubt or shift in that relationship. And, in exactly the same way that reverberant information fills out and smoothes over the gaps and jumps in the performance that you hear sat mid-hall, or further from the stage in a bar, so the SA-7 delivers a big, smooth and rounded presentation, but one that's underpinned with a real sense of substance and power. The performance is all about poise and a commanding

presence. The sweeping seascapes and crashing storm of the Reiner *Scheherazade*, re-mastered to SACD, are mightily impressive, almost physical in their weight and impact. There's no missing the vast sweep of



the ocean or the destructive forces unleashed by the tempest. At the same time, Eleanor McEvoy's 'Non-smoking, single female' majors on sheer presence, but skates over the wry humour in the lyrics.

It's a conundrum that is neatly summed up by the Polski Radio live recording of the Gorecki *3rd Symphony*: This is a fantastic performance built on a measured development of the opening melody, played by the basses. The Marantz gets the solid weight and pitch of the notes just so, but it misses the texture of the bowed notes, the air of menace that creates the musical tension. Which in turn begs the question, what do you want from your music? Play the CD layer of the Gorecki on the ARC CD7 or the GNSW modified Wadia 861 and you get weight and drama, the sort of tension that has you perched on the edge of the listening seat. These more expensive, CD only players put the SA-7S1 in context, with a more musically communicative performance of greater emotional range. But then they do the same to everything else at around the price of the Marantz!

Which brings us finally to the

question of value. The SA-7S1 is a beautifully built and presented player. It's versatile and it's operationally really well sorted. It delivers a presence and solid stability from both SACD and CD that no player at its price can match. If its powerful performance matches your tastes or your system, you'll do well to find a player you prefer (certainly one that plays SACD too) much short of twice its price.

Those in search of more immediacy, dramatic contrast or transparency, or whose systems fight with its chosen balance, will find it wanting. But such is its poise and natural refinement that a home audition will be both mandatory and far from a chore. The SA-7S1 is a player that even if it doesn't satisfy, will rarely disappoint. On the other hand, those who crave its particular virtues can look forward to a long and happy marriage. Marantz have chosen a singular path: vive la difference! ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	SACD player
DAC:	2x NPC SM5866AS
Digital Filter:	Marantz PEC777f2
Analogue Circuitry:	Fully balanced
Analogue Outputs:	1pr RCA (single-ended) 1pr XLR (balanced)
Digital Outputs:	1x SPDif 1x TosLink optical
Output Levels:	5.1V balanced (SACD) 2.5V single-ended (SACD)
Input:	1x BNC for external clock
Dimensions (WxHxD):	459 x 136 x 426mm
Weight:	22.3kg
Finish:	Champagne Gold
Price:	£5000

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Big NADs: the M3 integrated amplifier

by Steve Dickinson



The NAD 3020 was something of an icon. The starter amp of the late 70s and early 80s, it established a whole new category of product, budget audiophilia. A modest 20-watter, blessed with an uncommonly decent pre-amp section (which could feed an external power amp by removing a pair of jumpers on the rear panel) and a mellow musicality very much at odds with the standard, mostly Japanese, fare of the time, the little NAD was the darling of dealers and the hi-fi press, and rightly so. NAD claim the 3020 is the best-selling hi-fi amplifier of all time, with 1.4 million units sold worldwide, a claim I'm not inclined to dispute. There have been various iterations of the baby NAD amplifier over the years, some with more power, some with updated designs and componentry, plus source components of various hues, but I think it would be fair to say that NAD have spent the last 20 years trying to repeat the success of the product that made the company, a feat made all the harder because nowadays there are a few more companies following their blueprint. NAD remains a serious player in the budget and mid-priced audio and AV market, but they are no longer shooting at an open goal.

The Masters Series is something of a departure, avowedly high-end in aspiration and appearance and sold in a price bracket hitherto unexplored by NAD products. The range encompasses AV components, and a dedicated two-channel audio range of M3 integrated amplifier and M5 CD/SACD player. Massively and exquisitely constructed, they bear visual comparison with products many times their price. Provided you don't look at the badge, that is; imagine if Skoda made a Mercedes E-class equivalent. Brand snobs should look away now, though, because the £1900 M3 integrated amplifier is something of a gem. NAD, it seems, are determined to shake- ▶

► off their budget-only image, while retaining their reputation for value.

Conservatively rated at 180 Watts per channel, the fully dual-mono M3's specification includes a pair of massive toroidal transformers, which evidently contribute to the substantial 23.5kg weight, and ensures the NAD, on paper at least, can hold its head up among other entry-level high-end heavyweights from the likes of Briston or Krell. Other serious touches include a stepped attenuator using discrete high-precision resistor networks and a set of balanced inputs. The substantial two-tone front is constructed from separately anodised, thick aluminium plates and powder-coated zinc panels. User-friendliness extends to switchable bass and treble tone controls, operating not unlike the classic Quad 'tilt' facility, and the NAD trademark pre-amp out jumpers on the back panel which make bi-amping or upgrading to a pre-power combo a doddle. There's even an active crossover option should you want to incorporate a sub-woofer into your system. Who says high-end has to be hair-shirt?

Connected between the Rega Saturn CD player and the excellent ELAC FS210 Anniversary loudspeakers reviewed by RG in issue 52, the M3 made an early favourable impression. My faithful NVA 60-watt integrated was having trouble controlling the ELACs' bass in my smallish, squarish listening room so the firm grip of the NAD made for an immediate and significant improvement. I confess, I came to this

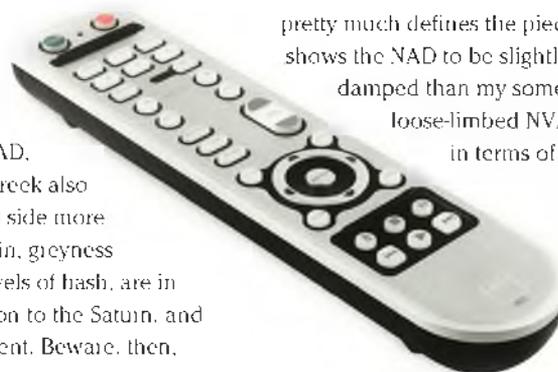
review with a few preconceptions. Muscular amps are all about moving air: dynamics and slam rather than delicacy and subtlety, aren't they? Tellingly, the NAD ceded none of the silky, valve-like unctuousness of the NVA while adding,



for its part, a level of control, pace and flow the NVA couldn't hope to match. Lesson learned, then. Changing the CD player for the £500 Creek Evo was particularly instructive, the differing character of the two players was never more apparent. The NAD brought a level of faithfulness to the source which was, on occasion, a little uncomfortable. The Saturn, for example, is detailed and blessed with a beautifully clear, treble and an enveloping, noiseless background, but while it improves on the Jupiter for sheer gusto, it is the baby Creek which shows the way forward if musicianship, pace and timing are your thing. Through the NAD, however, the Creek also betrays its £500 side more clearly: the grain, greyness and general levels of hash, are in stark comparison to the Saturn, and far more apparent. Beware, then,

prospective purchasers of the NAD M3; your source had better be up to scratch.

In hi-fi terms, the amp delivers plenty. Bass depth and control? Tick! Open and sweet treble; liquid midrange? Absolutely. Dynamics and slam? Take a wild guess. I probably shouldn't have been so surprised at the levels of grace and subtlety, nor the fact that such a powerful amplifier was so light on its feet. This ability to convey a mood, atmosphere, or a sense of acoustic space indicates a delicacy and finesse more commonly claimed for the low-power brigade, but here's one powerful amp which doesn't deserve to be classed as a bit of a bruiser. For example, Schubert's 'Doppelgänger' (Hyperion CDJ33037) creates a vivid sense of tension and dread through strongly tactile quiet passages, while the crescendo of voice and piano rises to natural and emphatic levels with no hint of strain or effort, retaining all sense of structure and flow. 'Melted Matter' from Tord Gustavsen's contemplative album *Changing Places* (ECM 1834) has some subtle brushwork which pretty much defines the piece and shows the NAD to be slightly more damped than my somewhat loose-limbed NVA but, in terms of bass ►



► control, this is a valuable, and minor, trade-off. In fact, these two pieces also illustrate one of the NAD's great strengths: piano tone and structure is extraordinarily good - weighty and sonorous bass counterpoints percussive, bell-like treble. Its control also comes into its own when showing clearly where the music is being driven by the bass player, tuneful, agile bass can be heard to push along the pace, where lesser amps might let you assume it was the percussion doing the job. You'd also expect large-scale music to benefit from the power available and you'd be right: 'In Paradisum' from the Fauré *Requiem* (EMI 7423 5 66894 2 8) shows a very good balance of musical forces, voices and orchestra well positioned in space with swells carefully controlled, thereby retaining the pervading sense of calm and release so central to this piece. If you want drama, Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphonie* (EMI 7423 5 69752 2 4) has plenty of full-blooded dynamics without loss of delicacy, and a strong sense of music flowing around the orchestra.

So, having established the amp's undoubted hi-fi credentials, what's it doing with the music? Well, it was so obvious that the NAD would benefit from a better source than the ones I had to hand that, risking a lifetime of lower back pain on your behalf, I lugged the amp down to my local dealers, to test its mettle against more deserving opponents. We settled on the \$4K Accuphase DP500 CD player, and stuck in the \$2K Accuphase E213 integrated amp as an interesting comparative exercise. The NAD immediately bested the Accuphase

amp on sheer grunt, its 180 Watts clearly offering better bass control and depth than the Accuphase's 90, but the Accuphase edged it in terms of sheer musicality and

the dynamics recede unless you open it up, such that you might just miss the point. If quiet, late-night listening is your thing, or you live in close proximity to your neighbours, the M3 might fail to impress because you're not asking enough of it. Find an opportunity to stretch

it, however, and

there is little to touch it at anything like the price.

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communication. Whereas the NAD was gutsy, dynamic and imperious in its nonchalant control, the Accuphase had a hint more tonal colour, openness and a longer, deeper decay to notes which made it more sensitive to nuance than the M3. Crucially, the area where the NAD had to concede most was in terms of musical interaction: small-scale, intimate bands like Pink Martini sounded far tighter and more together through the Accuphase; through the NAD the music was wonderfully lush and expressive, but the Accuphase made the sheer quality of their musicianship more obvious, albeit in a system built around its strengths and needs. That the NAD competes so well means that in the real world it should be taken very seriously indeed.

There is a final caveat. Like many powerful amps, the NAD M3 likes to be put to work. At lower levels it feels like it is idling, (which it probably is), the speed, smoothness and sophistication are still there, but the gravitas and

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Dual-mono integrated amplifier
Inputs:	6x line level 1x balanced
Input Sensitivity:	446mV
Input Impedance:	150kOhm 120kOhm balanced
Outputs:	2 sets of loudspeakers (switchable), via heavy duty binding posts 2x pre-amp outputs Adjustable crossover settings for sub-woofers
Pre-out impedance:	100 Ohms
Power Output:	180 W/ch into 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxD):	435 x 147 x 435mm
Weight:	23.5 kg
Price:	£1900.00

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Audion Silver Night PX25 Mk II

by Jimmy Hughes



Encountering the Audion Silver Night PX25 Mk II amplifier proved something of a culture shock. There I was, happily living with Musical Fidelity's kW-550 – a massive beast of an amplifier, with a mere 500W per channel output – and suddenly I go from this to something with just 8W. Talk about one extreme to the other...

As the name implies, this Audion amplifier is based around a pair of PX25 output tubes. An 65GN4 and 6587 complete the line-up – four tubes in total. With just 8W output, it goes without saying that your loudspeakers need to be very, very efficient if you're hoping to get anything like respectable volume levels. My Impulse H-1 Horns are quite efficient (around the 93dB mark), but would this be enough? There was only one way to find out! Having just been using a 500W amp, I knew the PX25 Mk II would have no power to spare. But, of course, I hoped it would have enough for normal music at reasonable volume levels. However, as I discovered, this comes down to the chosen output impedance. I've long been an advocate of running valve amps on their 4 Ohm setting, but the limited output power of the PX25 simply couldn't accommodate the resulting loss of level, clipping and all too audible distortion setting in alarmingly early.

Changing the output impedance of the amp from the 4 Ohms delivered to the required 8 Ohms means getting inside its entirely hard wired circuit, and should definitely be left to your dealer. The end result was exactly what I wanted, with more level, and much more headroom, a vital benefit as when the PX25 clips it does so very, very obviously.

Naturally, if your loudspeakers are 4 Ohms, the amplifier would produce its highest volume with its output transformer set to this value – changing it to 8 Ohms or higher would reduce the output. The 'correct' matching ►

► impedance is the one that gives the loudest sound – it indicates the most efficient energy transfer. Certainly, in my system I would not be able to accept the PX25 set to 4 Ohms. It simply hasn't enough power to drive my speakers. But, with the output transformer set to 8 Ohms it has sufficient output to play most music as loudly as I want. It's not got power to spare, but output is adequate.

Anyone choosing the PX25 has to realise this, and also needs to appreciate that its key strength is quality of sound – tonality, smoothness, naturalness – rather than sheer brute force. This is an amplifier for those who value purity and fluidity above impact or loudness. It's unusually clean, and has a lovely sweet mid-band and upper treble. Detail is exquisite, and (within its power limits) the amplifier handles dynamic extremes without hardening tonally. The ideal speaker needs to have around 95dB (or greater) sensitivity. Something that sounds lively and fast, with good transient attack and crisp immediacy, would be perfect.

This amp is also something of an oddity, being somewhere between an integrated and a power amp. It offers a volume control, but only one input. Of course, you could use it with a pre-amp and out of curiosity, I did briefly try the PX25 with ASTIntrew's At1000. It seemed to work quite well, giving a slightly more immediate and forwardly balanced sound. However, I felt that, overall, the PX25 sounded better on its own – it was sweeter and more refined, giving a subtler more delicate presentation. With an input sensitivity of 150mv it's able to accept the output of most CD players, tuners, and phono stages

without the need for a pre-amp. The only snag is – there's just a single input! You have to plug/unplug each time you want to listen to a different source ..

Sonically, the PX25 is one gorgeous utterly beguiling amplifier. Indeed, one of the ironies (given its limited power output) is the way its sheer smoothness and effortless ease actually invites you to increase volume levels. Tonality is very smooth and natural, creating a sound that is deceptively dynamic and rich in detail. You really notice this on simply-miked

recordings of real acoustic instruments and un-amplified voices.

It's very good on massed violins, reproducing the woody mellowness of strings rather than their steely brilliance. Likewise, the human voice is reproduced without emphasis or exaggeration.

One disc that impressed was the coupling of Mozart's piano concertos 9 and 11 on DG/Archiv with Malcolm Bilson and the English Baroque Soloists under John Eliot Gardiner. This 1984 release was the first in a complete cycle of the Mozart piano concertos using Period instruments. An early digital effort, it sounded tonally thin and 'papyry' when I first heard it back in '84, with edgy strings and a complete lack of body. It was one of those recordings that sounded muzzy and congested – as though being played by a worn stylus with a big ball of fluff clinging to it. And that was the CD... Yet via the PX25 it sounded beautifully clear and open. The sound had a light airy quality. The strings (once so acerbic) were brilliant and assertive - without the unpleasant edge that was once so apparent. You could sense the 'scale' of the forces used; small, yet clearly focused,



► creating a sound that was natural and transparent.

There's a welcome absence of 'glare' with this amplifier. It presents the music with effortless ease and a deliciously fluid smoothness that sounds natural and right. I'd say it's best suited to classical music, and acoustic jazz or folk – any music that demands the utmost refinement and truthfulness. It can handle rock too, but some listeners may prefer a less refined amplifier that provides more forwardness and aggression. On the other hand, it can be nice to listen to rock and pop via an amplifier that isn't burning your ears all the time. Lack of power may be an issue for rock and pop, unless your speakers are very sensitive.

It was interesting to come to the Audion PX25 Mk II after the Musical Fidelity kW-550. The latter has a bigger more dimensional presentation, with greater scale and a wider dynamic range. The Audion is definitely smoother and more refined, with a silky ease and sweet mellow tonality the bigger amp cannot quite match. Conversely, the Audion doesn't match the MF's voluminous bottom end. With the PX25, bass is full and firm, but lacks the outstanding depth and breadth of the kW-550. Nor does the Audion project the music with quite the same sense of holographic 3D spaciousness as the MF. But the smaller amp definitely has a subtler tonality.

In use the PX25 runs surprisingly warm. Indeed, it gets pretty damn hot. While it sounds good when first switched on, there's definitely a change after about fifteen to twenty minutes. The sound grows ever more

relaxed and spacious, reaching its optimum after about half an hour. Residual noise is very low; an important consideration for those intending to use the amplifier with sensitive speakers. With my H-1s I could hear nothing – no hiss, no hum, no buzz, even with my ear right up to the drive units, important given that it will inevitably find itself driving high-sensitivity loudspeakers.



Clearly, in view of the rather specialised nature of this amplifier, any recommendation has to be on a horses-for-courses basis. The Audion PX25 Mk II is not a universal product. In sympathetic situations it will sound wonderful. But, miscast, it may sound terrible. Using it with speakers under 90dB sensitivity is asking for trouble. I see it partnering ultra-efficient horn loudspeakers, perhaps with a vinyl front end. It's perfect for that sort of system. It will also partner CD, of course, and its innate smoothness and refinement go a long way towards countering CD's occasional forwardness and lack of subtlety. Its smoothness and

natural, open tonality will also help to reduce the bright peaky forwardness that some high-efficiency speakers exhibit. Some Lowther based designs, for example, can shriek a bit (and sometimes more than a bit) with 'normal' amplifiers. But the Audion should be in its element here.

The only change I'd like to see is an extra couple of speaker terminals on the back, giving users the option to go quickly and easily between 4

Ohm and 8 Ohm taps on the output transformer. Other

than that, I loved it. As indicated, the PX25 MkII is not a 'universal' amplifier. But playing "at home" its strengths will make it hard to beat. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single-ended triode amplifier
Valve Complement:	1x E5GN4, 1x 5687, 2x PX25
Inputs:	1x line-level
Input Sensitivity:	150mA
Output Power:	8 W/ch
Output Impedance:	4 or 8 Ohms, internally hard wired
Dimensions (WxHxD):	220 x 260 x 300mm
Weight:	14.5kg
Price:	£3049
Manufacturer:	
Tel. (33)(0)546 043282	
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Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor M

by Roy Gregory



Is there anything quite so wondrous (for the hi-fi aficionado at least) as a huge sound being delivered by small speakers? There's a definite fascination to hearing that big, big performance coming from such tiny transducers. Just listen to the buzz in the corridors at any hi-fi show; at least one of the "Have you heard..." stories is going to involve the bass and sheer scale generated by some pair of sub-miniature speakers. I can still vividly remember the first time I heard Sonus Faber's Electa Amators driven by the monster Audio Research M300s, a formative experience that definitely bent if it didn't outright defy the laws of physics ...

Indeed, for the last 20 years, ever since the first appearance of the Celestion SL6, small speakers have come and gone, more often than not coupled to unfeasibly large amplifiers, but the products of Sonus Faber have been a constant presence. Does anybody do neat, petite and elegantly discrete nearly as well as the Italian maestro, Franco Serblin? Well, I have to say that the answer to that question, based on the evidence in front of me is... Yes, they do. But before small speaker manufacturers of the world celebrate in premature glee, the product in question comes from none other than – Sonus Faber. After more than two decades at the helm, Franco has decided to focus his attention on the flagship *Homage* series, handing over design responsibilities for the likes of the *Cremona* range to fresh blood. Now, listening to *Act 2 of Così...* with my eyes closed, the stage stretches before me, its sides and rear clearly defined, the orchestra in its pit, Despina coquettish as she sings of love and "opportunity". It is indeed hard to credit that the little speakers that are revealed once I do open my eyes can support this musical tour de force. It's not just that there's no apparent connection between the two, the sound seemingly existing entirely of its own volition, separate and independent ▶

▶ of the speakers, but there's the disparity of scale too. My eyes keep telling me that the two can't be connected, my brain keeps telling me that they are, my ears keep telling the eyes and brain to just shut up and listen. I heartily recommend the latter course..

Perhaps there's a natural affinity between Italian speakers and opera, even opera where the composer isn't himself Italian. Perhaps it's all a conjuring trick, the speakers designed to blow listeners away with the one thing they do supremely well, hoping that they won't realise all the things they don't do until after the cheque has cleared. It wouldn't be the first time... But no, these speakers are just as adept whatever you throw at them, large or small, acoustic or heavily amplified, they take it in their stride. They are the Cremona Auditor Ms – and they are more than a little bit special!

Back in Issue 26, CT raved about the original Auditor, which despite its (relatively) modest price tag we've since considered one of the stars in the Sonus Faber range. The Auditor M takes the performance of the original and extends it significantly – which is no mean feat. Along the way it also tidies up the aesthetics, applying a few finishing touches to what was already one of the most attractive speaker/stand combinations on the market. What's been done? Well, let's start with the drivers. Both come from Scanspeak, the tweeter still being the ring-radiator design, but a different version, one with the sharply tapered,

conical phase plug in place of the original's brass bullet. The 150mm bass-mid driver dispenses with the radial damping slots of the old model, using a plain paper cone instead. In turn, these changes have necessitated a revised crossover, which between you and me is I suspect

largely responsible for the sonic improvements.

The speaker retains the beautiful proportions and cabinet of the original, and is still single wired. But the back panel now features a symmetrical, curved contour that looks far more elegant and also places the rear firing reflex port directly behind the driver it loads. The base of the matching stand is now cut away to create a more sculpted and far less clumpy appearance. All told, the aesthetic changes are subtle but in concert produce a more complete and visually congruent (as well as dramatic) product. Which is pretty much the sonic effect too.

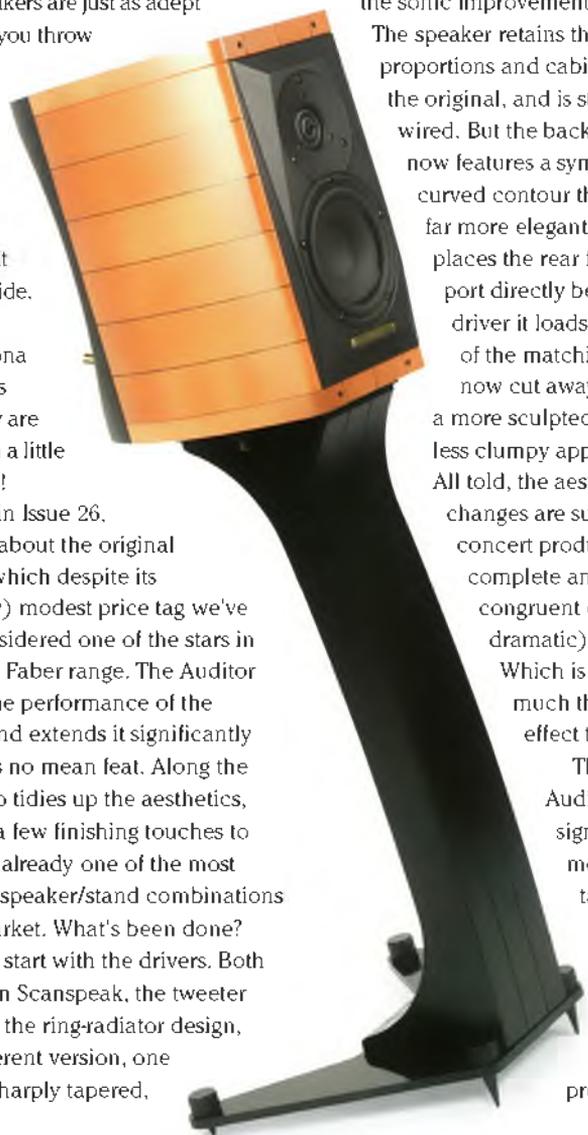
The Auditor M is a significantly more lucid, tactile, expressive and less visible performer than its predecessor.



Individually, the changes are not large, but in combination their impact on the music and its presentation certainly is. Tellingly, CT preferred the original with the grilles in place. Sure enough, they bring a sense of rounded integrity to the broad mid-band of the Auditor M too. The difference is that that rounding now

sounds sluggish and artificial, as well as robbing the sound of immediacy and air. The new version needs no help to seamlessly integrate its drivers, the easier, more articulate response of the bass-mid combined with the extra air and extension of the revised tweeter revealing all too clearly the detrimental sonic aspects of the grilles. The Auditor was always an engaging and articulate, warm and inviting speaker. It still is; but the increase in clarity and its micro-dynamic response have given it a new agility, an ability to step away from the music so that you hear more of the artists' performance and less of the speakers'.

Of course, there's a catch. There's always a catch when you get this much music out of boxes this small. However, in this case it's a price that's easy to pay. Added clarity means additional care when it comes to set up. Toe-in and lateral spacing are critical, but so too is the forward tilt of the speaker. With my slightly lower than usual listening seat it was necessary to wind the rear cones fully down to achieve the correct tonal balance and proper weight. Tilt the speakers back too far and they start to harden and shout, losing their bottom-end foundation and glazing over. Don't worry, you'll ▶



► know when you've got it right! The other things they need are space and power. You can drive the Auditor Ms with any competent integrated and I can imagine some pretty special systems based around the likes of Prima Luna or Pure Sound amplification. Good solid-state will work just as well. But as you add power the speakers just seem to grow and grow, the sound getting bigger and bigger. Although I used a number of different amps with the Auditor Ms, I was fortunate enough to have c-j's LP275M mono-blocs at the same time as the little Sonus Fabers: I just couldn't resist – and I wasn't disappointed.

Give these speakers enough, quality power and they just disappear, leaving behind a huge and wonderfully coherent acoustic space. It's not the tangible volume that a full-range speaker delivers; the Auditor Ms don't do or even attempt fundamentals – which probably helps explain their extremely tactile and articulate sound. Instead, this soundstage is all about mid and high frequency reflections mapping its boundaries. Within them, instruments are held stable and voices soar. I've already spoken about their impressive performance with opera, but put on something small, intimate and acoustic: like the Stewboss *Leap* EP and the naturalness of the guitar's shape and harmonic body, the voice's character and phrasing are uncannily convincing and involving. The difference with the old model is not so much on the note by note level, but more the way in which this latest speaker starts and stops phrases, times pauses and hesitations in the music, ties the various elements together. So, not only are singer and instrument lifesize, but when Greg Sarfaty eases the tempo

and weight of playing entering the chorus of 'I Didn't Notice' the transition is so natural it's almost expected, the hesitations between those quieter, more reflective lines adding to the contrast, underlining their delicacy and fragility. They are working at a different level but these are the very same qualities



that make Despina so flirtatiously independent, Dorabella so coy.

What we have here is a speaker that possesses all the refinement, tonal honesty and presence that have made Sonus Faber a benchmark in compact loudspeaker performance, but with even greater clarity and lucidity, a more coherent and explicit presentation of the performance. It's not just about the notes themselves but about the sense that binds them together, rough and ready as that might be (just wait until you hear what comes out of these babies when you stuff The The's *Mind Bomb* through their terminals, propelled by quarter of a kilo-Watt). If you really want the rough edge of a Woolworths guitar then you might find the Auditor M a little too polite, but for all other purposes they just need a bit of encouragement to get down and get dirty. Oh, and they play loud too, despite their limited efficiency.

This is, dare I say it, in many respects the most balanced and as a result impressive speaker I've heard from Sonus Faber. Unlike previous favourites from the marque it doesn't demand power to work properly, but it works with it if it's available. It is warm and sweet without being clogged or smeared, it is relaxed without sounding stilted or constipated. It does bass,

but not so much as to get itself into trouble or wind up musically constipated.

Imagine Jeeves crossed with a Chinese gymnast and maybe you'll get the picture. If that's too much (or just too much information) get a listen to the Auditor M. Like a far from reluctant debutante it's a picture of poise but it's got a wicked glint in its eye... ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loaded
Driver Complement:	1x 29mm Scanspeak ring radiator 1x 150mm Scanspeak paper coned bass-mid
Bandwidth:	50Hz - 30kHz ± 3dB
Efficiency:	88dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Connections:	Single-wired
Dimensions (WxHxD):	190 x 350 x 320mm
Weights:	9.2kg speaker 11.3kg stand
Prices -	
Auditor M:	£2450
Matching Stand:	£520

UK Distributor:
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Gemme Audio Vivace Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

On the last day of March and first of April, the Park Hotel at Heathrow hosted a modest hi-fi show. Though small, it was a hi-fi show with a difference, notable for the absence of home cinema AV equipment, and an impressive roster of unusual and interesting stereo hi-fi dems. Most surprising was that no fewer than five of the 40-odd demonstrations were using horn-loaded loudspeakers, and I've picked one of the most interesting to review here. It's called the Vivace, costs £2995 a pair and comes from a Canadian company called Gemme Audio, via Brighton-based Alium Audio.

For all their idiosyncracies – and these are undeniable – I do like horn speakers. They're usually imperfect, but that's partly what makes them interesting. They also have something the French would call 'je ne sais quoi' that imbues them with a sense of realism not found in more conventional designs. Without exaggeration, one can even describe them as refreshing the parts of the brain that normal speakers fail to reach, even though that phrase's ring of familiarity comes from a different context.

Horn speaker systems come in several varieties: single driver horn-loaded; multi-driver/multi-horn; and multi-driver with direct radiating bass, sometimes actively driven. Each involves different compromises, and many are handicapped by their weird shape and considerable bulk.

For the purist, the horn-loaded speaker with the solitary full range driver is arguably the most interesting, for two clear reasons. First, it avoids the need for any form of crossover network. (Last issue I reviewed two versions of the ART Emotion loudspeaker, differing only in their crossover components, internal wiring, and a small matter of \$4,000; clearly all forms of crossover network are better avoided!)

Secondly, it reproduces the entire audio range from a single source, which should in theory be ideal. ▶



► However, because in truth it's virtually impossible to achieve the full three-decade audio bandwidth from a single driver – and even if this were possible there would be compromises due to directivity at high frequencies – it's also bound to be compromised, which at least makes life interesting for the reviewer and reader.

While I steadfastly refuse to make sound quality judgements at hi-fi shows, I was sufficiently impressed by what I heard in the Alium room to suggest I should like to try them at home. A few weeks later they brought them over and we settled down for a listen.

First impressions were mostly (though not totally) positive, and mostly (though not totally) as anticipated. The Vivace might be a floorstander, but the enclosure is



reasonably compact, especially for a horn, and it uses what must surely be the smallest main driver on the planet, with a cone just 70mm in diameter. Limited bass output was therefore only to be expected, while the surprise was that the speaker actually packed a rather healthy thump, enough to make it sound much bigger than is actually the case.

Less surprising was the rather forthright and in-the-face upper mid and presence, which certainly takes no prisoners as far as the driving electronics are concerned, and tended to expose the midrange shortcomings of my regular Naim solid state amplification. Changing over to my restored Leak Stereo 20, fed from a Creek OBH-22 passive pre-amp resulted in a more sympathetic overall partnership, with sweeter, more transparent and less aggressive mid and presence,

and a softer, less thumpy bottom end. Which is not to say that the Leak/Creek combo is better than the vastly more expensive Naim pre/power; rather that it suited the peccadilloes of the speaker rather better in this instance, for reasons that measurements subsequently went some way towards confirming.

Before going further down that road, some description of the speaker itself is overdue. The enclosure is a little less than a metre tall, is reasonably slim yet quite deep, with sides that narrow towards front and back. The front, back (finished in black with horizontal stripe decoration) and the lustrously veneered sides all have curved profiles and feel immensely stiff and strong, especially the protruding front panel. The top has a black lacquer finish, and the whole thing weighs a daunting 36kg, which is evidence of just how much material has gone into the cabinetwork. No



grille was supplied, and the only driver is the very small and unusual looking Fostex FE108E Sigma, a nominally 100mm driver with massive cast frame, curiously wrinkled surround, and a 70mm cone with three radial stiffening pleats that are echoed in its central dust cover. The only vent is a single hole halfway up the back panel, which looks much more like a reflex port than a horn mouth. The whole thing sits on an impressively solid tripod arrangement with a single cone at the front, and two more on a massive steel outrigger at the rear, ensuring fine stability.

My scepticism about whether this really was a horn-loaded design was laid to rest by an impedance curve which clearly showed the series of peaks characteristic of a horn, and confirmed that this 8+ Ohm design should be very easy to drive. The port outlet apparently acts as a band-pass filter for the horn output. ►

▶ I couldn't quite match the claimed 92dB sensitivity rating, getting around 90dB with my far-field in-room averaged technique, which is still a useful figure. The frequency response is far from flat, showing significant -7dB suckouts at 1kHz and 10kHz (which the designer Robert Gaboury confirms and attributes to the driver), while the bass alignment didn't seem to match my room too well either – which is rather larger than the 100-200 square feet recommended for this design. Best results were obtained with the speakers a little wider than usual, and about eighteen inches out from the corners. Here the actual net bass energy was pretty well maintained down to 35Hz or so, but output was rather too strong 45-80Hz, and too weak 110-200Hz.

Perhaps the most unusual feature is the strong and seamlessly flat output through the presence and lower treble (1.5-7kHz), and this was very audible indeed, giving the speakers a ruthless but beguiling openness on voices in particular. Stereo focus and imaging were dramatically good, with very little boxiness, while diction was exceptionally clear and voices were unusually expressive. Brass had a satisfying rasp, and percussive detail was both delicate and realistic, though applause was a little less convincing. There did seem to be a measure of 'cuppy' coloration and a tendency towards hardness here, but it's difficult to say whether the speakers or the system was responsible for this.

The overall sound is very fast and exciting, and excellent micro-dynamics bring subtle instrumental textures to woodwinds and strings, and they were particularly effective when operating at very low levels, where full detail and communication is effortlessly retained. Less



concerned with describing the sound than her reaction to music as a whole, my partner commented that they made her want to dance and sing along.

Although the bass end of things wasn't a disaster, the problems with room matching were audible enough on bass-led material. Bands such as Massive Attack and The KLF were never that convincing: although the speakers deliver a healthy enough thump and a decent impression of weight, the harmonic relationships of bass guitars seemed rather skewed, leading to some lack of punch and propulsion. Bass sinewave at decent levels didn't sound particularly clean either, suggesting some harmonic distortion here.

With their vivid communication skills and edge-of-seat excitement, there were times when the Vivaces reminded me of my Rehdekos.

They're a little less dramatic, but certainly smoother and more room friendly. On high quality recordings with sympathetic electronics, results can be magical, but my reactions did vary somewhat according to the character of a recording: dull ones sound exciting, but bright ones can go over the edge, especially if the volume is turned up.

The Vivaces can sound rather relentless with some source and equipment combinations, but the bottom line is they bring a huge amount of fun to the listening experience, and make you want to go on listening long after you should be in bed. While the compromises inherent in a single-driver horn system won't persuade those who like their music loud and heavy, their superiority in musical coherence and agility are more than ample compensation.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single-driver horn
Driver Unit:	100mm Fostex Fe108E Sigma
Sensitivity:	92dB (measured 90dB)
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Bandwidth:	20Hz - 18kHz +6dB
Dimensions:	250 x 915 x 406mm
Weight:	36kg each
Price:	£2995/pair

UK Distributor:

Allium Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1273 325901,
Tel. (44)(0)1273 608332
Net. www.alliumaudio.com

Manufacturer:

Gemme Audio
Net. www.gemmeaudio.com

DEFINITIVE AUDIO



KSL Kondo Nero Line Integrated Valve Amplifier £24,000



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



ATC SCM19 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

ATC is not a large company but it seems to have penetrated an unseemly amount of recording studios with its monitors, mainly because they are built to withstand the abuse and deliver the resolution demanded of pro monitors. A year or two back they even managed to usurp a major US brand, replacing the PA system at Disney Hall, home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Which given the fact that the homegrown competitor had donated its speakers in the first place is quite a coup. The names David and Goliath come to mind.

But despite its success in that domain ATC is not just a pro company, it also makes a wide range of loudspeakers for the discerning music lover to use at home, the sort who are more interested in sound quality than high-tech features and shiny badges. In fact the people who run ATC give every appearance of having little concern whether the speakers sell in the domestic market or not. But every now and again they bring out a new model, and about a year back, brought out a whole new range, which is something of a first. This so called Entry Series consists of four designs ranging from the compact £499 SCM 7 to the £1,999 SCM 40 floorstander, bringing the entry price for the brand to its lowest ever point. The SCM 19 sits just below the 40 in the range and is the biggest stand-mount. It's also about the heaviest stand-mount I've ever had to shift around. There's something disconcerting about its mass (16kg) which seems far too great given its size. If this were a floorstander one's perceptions

wouldn't be quite so confused but it ain't and they are. Every time I pick one of these up it seems too heavy!

This has more than a little to do with the excessive size of the magnet system on the main driver, which weighs more than half as much as the speaker overall. It's the same motor assembly that you find on ATC's 12inch bass drivers where such mass appears to make more sense. But if you want control, and I do want control, then this brute force approach is very effective.



The reason for such a large magnet/

motor assembly is to give the short voice coil a long gap to work in, one that's long enough for the flat wire coil to remain in the grip of the magnet. This is an expensive way of doing things but it does deliver the sort of results you need if a drive unit is going to be used all day at high SPLs.

The price is both fiscal and electrical: this is a pretty low sensitivity system by most standards and you'll

need a pretty powerful amplifier to make the most of it. But ATC argue that Watts are cheap and besides, at least their speakers are far from a difficult load. Even so, SETs won't cut it, so if that's your bag, these speakers probably aren't.

What ATC speakers are all about is resolution and this cannot be achieved with a coloured balance. That means neutrality and you need an amplifier that pulls in the same direction. If you

want colour in your music look for it in the source material, and while tonally colourful hi-fi can be tremendously entertaining it can ultimately do a disservice to that music by subtly remixing it. In some respects this makes ATCs rather unforgiving where recording quality is concerned. A lot of great music was not that well recorded, some of it being

heavily compressed or just plain distorted. Jose Gonzalez's fabulous *Veneer* is a good example of a very poor recording of beautiful music, so you want to listen to it but a softer speaker will make less of the problems. On the other hand it is unfair to ask a speaker to be true, resolute and accommodating of poor quality source material.

Physically the SCM 19 is not that different from its SCM 20 predecessor, even the size is the same 20 litres (apparently the name change was simply to differentiate the two models). The main driver is one of ATC's SL or super linear varieties and uses a doped paper cone with an integral 75mm dust cap. The tweeter is a 25mm soft dome with neodymium magnet ▶

and an alloy wave guide, the latter element improving sensitivity and helping to even out the response. The MDF cabinet is made in the Far-East to keep costs down, allowing more budget for the drivers. Mass may not be everything in a loudspeaker but it generally relates to magnet size and you won't find another bookshelf design near this price point that weighs as much as the SCM 19. The front baffle is doubled up and gently radiused to reduce diffraction and the new SCMs are designed to be used without the grilles in place.

Compared to its predecessor the SCM 19 seems to be a slightly smoother but more resolute loudspeaker. Earlier ATC passives could be a little crude and abrasive for some tastes, but the changes seem to have resulted in a more refined and resolute speaker that is hugely capable and immensely revealing for its price. Capable that is in terms of the level it can comfortably be used at and in the breadth of bandwidth it delivers. The style of delivery is typically analytical and this is not a smooth or overly refined loudspeaker; it is an honest and revealing one. You can get speakers that are more obviously open, and if you pay a bit more there are more refined alternatives, but in terms of the detail in the recording you have to pay a lot more to hear deeper into the mix.

I tried a number of amplifiers with the SCM 19s readily revealing the pros and cons of each; therefore the better the amplifier the better

the overall sound. Power is of course useful, as previously mentioned, but you don't need mountains of the stuff. Russ Andrews PA-1 is a compact fifty-Watter but it delivered a taut and timely result with plenty of energy. The best results however came with Gamut's D200 Mk3, which produced a more three-dimensional and substantial soundstage than the smaller amps whilst also enhancing detail retrieval and timing. This is not a 'fast' loudspeaker but give it some spirited music and it will deliver a very tidy result that is precise yet fluent.



It also has wide dynamic range thanks to the power handling capabilities of the main driver, which means that when a loud transient comes along you are left in no doubt about it. The phrase "good power handling" can be misleading. It doesn't merely mean you can play long and loud, it also means that there is no compression of dynamic peaks. So music with wide dynamic range is revealed in all its glory from the quietest to the loudest notes.

This quality however, can be a problem. If music is heavily compressed you will hear that compression for what it is and the only way to make such recordings entertaining is to turn them up, which will challenge partnering amplifiers and bring out any problems in the room. It also makes differences between recordings more apparent than ever, something that's useful in the studio but not so welcome at home.

But that brings us back to one of my earlier points, you can't blame the speaker for telling you too much. You have to look at the real culprit and that will be the guy who mastered the disc. So if you'd rather listen to Steve Lamacq than Verity Sharp this may not be the speaker for you. On the other hand, if the output of Late Junction and other programmes on Radio 3 is your thing then you will find a lot to appreciate in these self-effacing speakers. While I don't listen to a lot of classical music myself I do appreciate a bit of dynamic range and space alongside the all-important bone-crunching bass, and I can't help but enjoy the results I get with this speaker. The sheer girth they afford EST's *Tuesday Wonderland* when the double bass and piano get into a groove is a delight that few speakers which I could just about afford can deliver. If it's the sound of music you are after, forget Julie Andrews and check these out.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way stand mount
Drivers:	25mm Soft dome with neodymium magnet 150mm paper cone bass-mid
Bandwidth:	54Hz-22kHz (-6dB)
Matched Response:	±0.5dB
Sensitivity:	85dB
Max SPL:	108dB
Nominal Impedance:	8 Ohm
Dimensions (WxHxD):	223 x 440 x 315mm
Weight:	16kg
Recommended Stand:	700mm
Guarantee:	Six years
Price:	£1,499

Manufacturer:
Loudspeaker Technology Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1285 760561
Net. www.atc.gb.net

TRACK

15

TOTAL

MIN

SEC

55:20

5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12
13	14	15	

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TUNER

VIDEO

LINE 1

LINE 2

TAPE

ROKSAN

ROKSAN

Caspian M SERIES



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Henley Designs +44 (0)1235 511 166 www.henleydesigns.co.uk

Heco Celan 500 Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas



Heco are a company with a history dating back to 1949. Post war Germany needed many things and it's easy to forget that amongst them were loudspeakers and so the brand was born to meet that demand. They were successful for many decades making large, efficient models, although the company did run into some difficulties through the 80s and 90s and from what I can gather, had been treading water up until four years ago when they were acquired by Magnat, another well-established German company who are themselves owned by the large American Audiovox Corporation. The Magnat product manager is a devotee of vintage audio and a big fan of EMT turntables, Klangfilm drivers, as well as those made by companies like Telefunken, Saba and Graetz. He shares these interests with Guy Sergeant, manufacturer of the Pure Sound amplifiers, and now UK importer of the Heco brand. Saba drivers in particular have become something of a cult amongst a certain breed of German audiophile over recent years and their "green cones" are highly coveted. When utilised in an open baffle, resonant cabinet configuration they have a particularly beguiling way with the mid-band, or so I am told.

With the considerable resources of Magnat behind them Heco researched the cone materials used in these drivers and has incorporated them into the new range of Heco speakers. They use Kraft paper cones, incorporating long-fibre pulp from exclusively Nordic sources and mixing this with 10% wool for damping purposes. These are in turn built into very smartly finished cast-alloy chassis.

The Celan 500 is a two and a half-way design, the upper 170mm driver reproducing bass and mid, the lower (same-sized but mechanically different) unit for handling low-frequencies. Between these is fitted ▶

▲ a fairly conventional soft-dome tweeter, utilising the increasingly common nano-particle technique to enhance mechanical stability and delay dome break-up. Have a look around the back of the cabinet and you will see two large reflex ports made of cast metal rather than the usual cardboard tube or plastic moulding you might expect to find on a speaker of such moderate cost. The cabinet is a smart asymmetric design; made of selected MDF, and the review pair came in a very nice dark silver metallic finish that, along with the cabinet shape, detracts from their bulk once you are sitting in front of them. Efficiency is good at 91dB and the whole speaker exudes an air of quality that makes its price even more surprising. Rear terminals are impressively chunky WBT-types, with an extra pair of connections offering a 2dB treble boost, should you feel the need for it, which I did. They also come with a set of rounded spikes and floor protectors and another set of rubber tipped versions. I much preferred the former on my wooden floor.

Those large port throats suggested to me that this speaker might not like being located too close to a rear wall. They almost seem to suggest that this design might be about squeezing as much bass from the cabinet as possible. But I

was wrong about that, a fact that became very obvious as soon as I settled back for some music. I started with the Hecos hooked up to their putative "partner" the Pure Sound A30 amplifier, a combination that first persuaded Guy Sergeant to import them. To say I was surprised would be an understatement. I could barely believe the sound that flowed through the room. Far from being heavily bass-biased, here was a presentation of such impeccable tonal balance that I could not help but be impressed. At first the sound seemed a little soft and it is true that

the tweeter is not overtly detailed

or particularly extended, but it is very

accomplished nevertheless.

That might seem like damning with faint praise, but when I think of all the otherwise good designs that I have heard, hopelessly compromised by their raucous, poorly behaved tweeters, you start to realise just how cleverly this unit has been incorporated into the overall design.

When I later switched over to the Creek Destiny amplifier I found that the high frequency performance did become more articulate and eloquent, but the strength of the Pure Sound with the

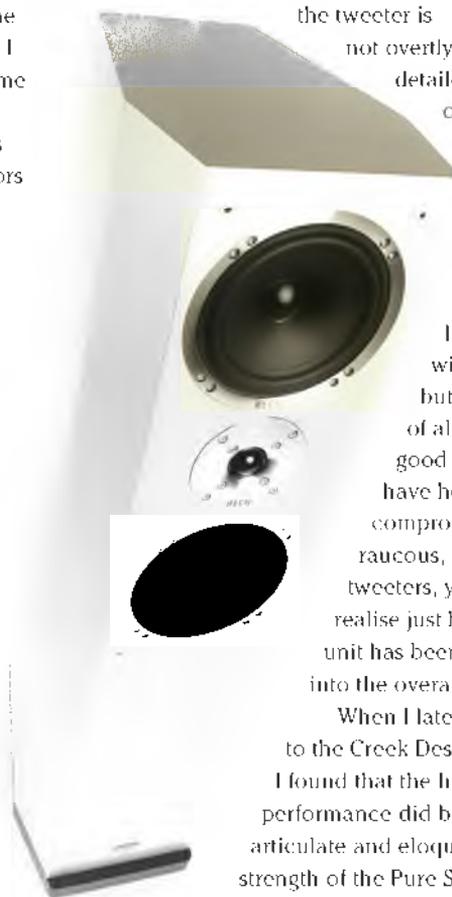
Celan 500 is its tremendous top to bottom integration and natural presentation, which the Creek never managed so convincingly. With the A30 you get the impression that the music is all coming from the same place with no sense of reconstructed high fidelity artifice getting in the way.

In many ways it is one of the least "hi-fi" presentations you will hear.

The soundstage is not characterised by instrumental separation,

finely etched detail or a sense of left and right channels meeting somewhere in the middle. There is a wholesome coherence to the way the music is presented, almost like one great mono mix and I mean this is the most positive sense.

There is an easy-going side to their nature that coincides perfectly with the way the A30 goes about its business. OK, so the bass is not the tightest, most punchy and dynamic or cleanly shaped, but it has a weight and presence that is in touch with the music and moves along with good flow and progression, never feeling exaggerated or overblown. The cabinet size merely allows the music to breathe with a balanced sense of size and scale. But it is the mid-band that is the real star of this show as there is a breadth of tonality and subtle colour shading here that moves the system way above its price. These paper cones give



▶ the music a completely different flavour than those constructed from more modern, high-tech materials. Sometimes in audio systems two and two can make five and this is the case here. Through the range of vocals, stringed and wind instruments this system is never less than delightful and can show amplifier/speaker combinations costing many times its price a thing or two when it comes to presence and the natural palette of tonal colours.

When I installed the Creek Destiny I found that the Celan 500 in some ways became the kind of speaker I had initially expected.



The Creek is a very good solid-state design but successful music systems

are carefully and considerably built and not just thrown together by plugging good individual components into each

other. With the Creek the bass certainly had more sheer power and grip and went lower but it had become detached from the music. The mid was not as colourful but still good while the treble, although more dynamic, detailed and finely resolved also seemed somehow less integrated. As with all fine individual hi-fi components, it is absurdly easy to make these speakers sound very average. I have the highest regard for the Destiny, but it is out of place here. It is, in so many ways, the opposite of the Pure Sound and though it doesn't make for a bad sound it certainly lacks the A 30's special musical affinity with this speaker.

As a pair, the A 30 and the Celan 500 are a soulful combination with an approach and performance that centres on an appreciation of the music, the way it breathes and its ability to involve us through its flavours and beauty. Whilst real head-bangers (rock or classical) need not apply, it isn't only built for string quartets either. It is at its best when dealing with acoustic instrumentation and the human voice as it is so wonderfully subtle and full of nuance, especially through the critical mid-band. There were times during the review when I could hardly believe that the speaker and amplifier, as a pair, were so reasonably priced. But you will need a quality source and cabling (which should go without saying). These days those don't need to cost a fortune either, with Pure Sound's own CD player bidding to establish a kind of benchmark system for the price.



The Heco Celan 500 possesses such a strong bond with the Pure Sound A 30 that increasingly I find myself considering them as a pair. If you are interested in either of them you really must make every effort to hear them together at some point. They are not for everybody and they might not be what you are used to, but together they make a powerful case for the paper cone. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two and a half-way reflex loaded
Driver Units:	1x170mm bass 1x25mm dome tweeter
Sensitivity:	91dB
Impedance:	4-8 Ohms
Dimensions:	240 x 1000 x 365mm
Finishes:	Beech, Cherry, Silver Varnish, Rosewood
Price:	£805.95

UK Distributor:
Puresound
Tel. (44)(0)1822612449
E-mail. info@puresound.info
Manufacturer:
Heco
Net. www.heco-audio.de



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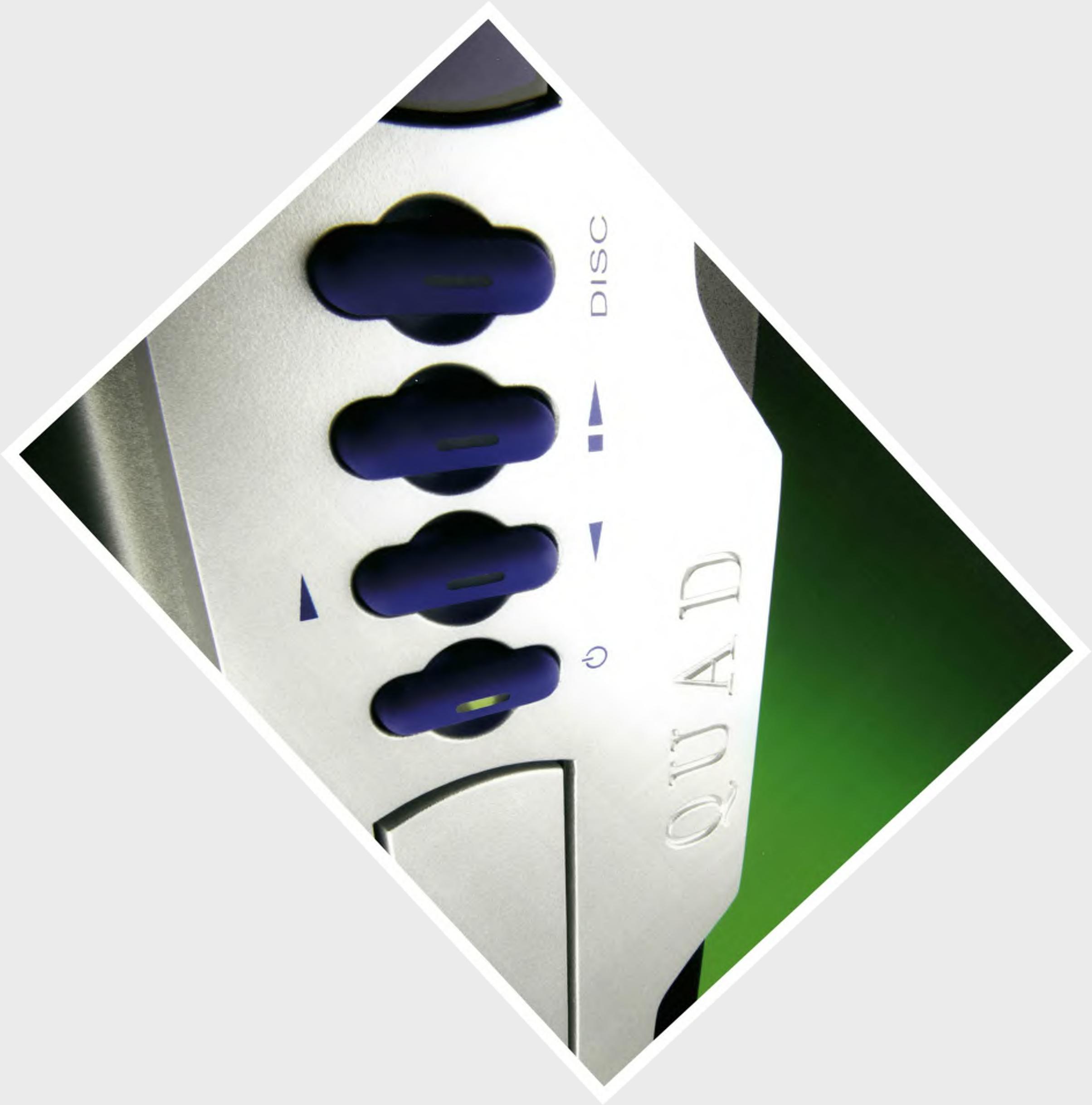
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Four Play...

Different approaches to CD replay from Rotel, Quad, Creek and Primare

by Chris Thomas

Never before have there been so many options open to those wanting music in the home. Not only in the sheer volume of equipment available, but also in the various system-building approaches on offer. Regardless of price, successful audio systems are those where the chosen components have a musical synergy with one another and it would seem logical to assume that the best and easiest way to achieve that is to choose equipment from a single manufacturer. This is often, though not always successful as very few makers are as adept at speaker design and manufacture as they are at producing audio electronics, or vice versa. For this issue I have been looking at four different routes that you could take if you were in the market for a matching CD and amplifier and these, interestingly enough, include a couple of Class D amplifiers, a design that we will certainly be seeing a whole lot more of over the coming years. They are often assumed to be Digital amplifiers but in fact operate in the analogue domain. Pick up a Class D amplifier with a hefty output rating and you will be amazed at how lightweight it is. Designers are understandably attracted by the compactness and high-efficiency rating of these amplifiers. This is commonly in the 90% and above range as opposed to the figure of

around 45% for most similarly powered conventional amplifiers, designs that can also generate heat as a by-product and weigh several times as much. Class D has been used extensively and perhaps most notably in active sub-woofers for a while now and will begin to find its way into more and more serious high-end



amplification as time goes by. It is not a new technology by any means but one that I feel sure we are going to be listening to a lot more – although whether that is a good or bad thing will only become clear in the fullness of time and as greater technological emphasis is brought to bear. It was therefore notable that the two designs here that incorporate Class D amplifiers shared some sonic similarities and that these characteristics seem to echo the current footprint of such amplifiers, at this stage of their development anyway.

The Rotel RCD-1072, RC-1082 and RB-1072

It's easy to think of Japanese audio companies as huge, faceless corporations that churn out equipment on a conveyor belt, pausing only to periodically change cosmetics and the model numbers. But Rotel is in fact a family-owned company that have

spent over 40 years in the audio

and video business and are one of the few Japanese companies of their type to have found constant favour in the UK over that time. They have always offered great value for money and have a build-quality, standard of finish and record

of reliability, which is most impressive. The three individual components here are all from their new Balanced Design Concept series and consist of the RCD-1072, a CD player, which incorporates decoding for HDCD discs (I thought they had all faded away by now), the RC-1082 pre-amplifier and the RB-1072 Class D power amplifier. Together they might be held to represent the classic source/pre/power set-up, albeit in its most modern iteration.

The BDC series borrows certain aspects of circuit design and topography from Rotel's Reference series components and incorporates them in this physically attractive little three-piece system, one that packs

▶ a surprising punch due to its Class D amplification. The RB-1072 power amplifier is by far the lightest of the three pieces, yet can provide an impressive 100 watts per channel into 8 Ohms. The CD player uses the well-respected Burr-Brown PCM-1732 D/A converter and digital filter, while the pre-amplifier is traditionally Japanese, packed full of switching and features. It has five line-level inputs, a front panel Media Player input and even a phono-input with switching for both MM and MC cartridges. It also features a full record-out section for every source and a set of tone controls that seem an almost novel addition these days. Thankfully these can be switched out of circuit, which does rather beg the question why Rotel bothered to include them in the first place? With equipment that the literature constantly reiterates as being all about the sound quality they do seem a somewhat superfluous feature.

It is all fully remote of course and functions as faultlessly as one would expect, as well as looking rather smart with its vivid blue illumination. Rotel do provide interconnects in the shape of phono to phono leads and these will do the job but I have to say that significant and worthwhile improvement can be made by upgrading these and there are many after-market leads at no great cost which could and certainly should be considered.

The review sample had kindly been run-in by B&W, Rotel's UK importers, but I still found that they needed a couple of days constant use before

the class D amplifier lost its initial hollowness and began to flesh out somewhat. But from the start I could hear that this system was full



of detail and delicacy. There is no trace of harshness or compression, just a broad, if rather flat soundstage which feels very energetic and lively. No question either that the power amplifier provides a vivid and sparkling view of the music and has a light rhythmic touch. But the tonal palette is rather limited and musical flavours can often feel more than a little monochromatic. The hollowness that I described does seem less prominent with use, but it never really vanishes completely. So, although the system is impressive in its ability to swing large-scale dynamics speed-wise, it lacks real substance and a sense of weight whilst doing so. When dealing with more introverted music this had me feeling that the musicianship often seemed expressionless, specifically in the mid-band. This, I believe is a result of the amplifier's somewhat bleached tonality, which is a shame as the technical aspect of reproducing the music into a real speaker load is otherwise so concise. In fact its general

control and grip are excellent and the levels of pure resolution are above what I was expecting at this price. Too often though it sounds as if the amplifier gives you the dynamic shape and outline drawing of the instrument but comes up a bit short when filling in the tonal nature and character.

I am forced to consider that I was perhaps asking the Rotel some questions that it couldn't answer as I used it with my JMLabs Micro Utopia Be's so it might be the case that a warmer balanced speaker with a less exposed top-end could well suit the system better.

Bandwidth was reasonable but ideally I would have liked more strength at low frequencies where the system simply needs more presence, extension and just good old-fashioned punching power. I would grudgingly accept it as a trade-off though

as I was so impressed with its overall speed and agility. This gives the Rotel package a real feeling of musical progression and rhythmic flow that relies on the system's excellent drive and ability to deliver and recover from transients so impressively. Across its bandwidth it is tonally quite neutrally, being neither too bright nor too dull. It is the individual instruments that lack colour. It certainly does not have the strong and immediately identifiable punch or sumptuousness and character of the Creek or the Quad. Instead it has a somewhat delicate nature that is filled with fine detail and is certainly cosmetically attractive. What it really needs is more musical strength and dynamic scale to make it more imposing and involving. Given the quality of the front-end components those who crave the same as me might look at Rotel's more conventional amps. Others will like this system just fine, just as it is.



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Paul Messenger, HiFi+ issue 51

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

RCD-1072 CD Player

Type: Single box CD player
 Outputs: 1 x pair RCA analogue
 1 x 75 ohm RCA Digital
 Formats: CD, HDCD
 Dimensions (WxDxH): 432 x 93 x 337mm
 Weight: 5.8 kg
 Price: £595

RC-1082 Pre-amplifier

Type: Single box pre-amplifier
 Inputs: 5x line, 2x tape loops,
 1x phono (mm or mc)
 Outputs: 2x pre-outs
 2x tape-out
 Dimensions (WxDxH): 432 x 92 x 344mm
 Weight: 7.5 kg
 Price: £645

RB-1072 Power Amplifier

Type: Class D stereo amplifier
 Power Output: 2x100 watts into 8 ohms
 Inputs: 1pr RCA
 Speaker Outputs: 2 pairs per channel
 Dimensions (WxDxH): 72x432x350mm
 Weight: 4.6 kg
 Price: £595

UK Distributor:

Bowers & Wilkins
 Tel.
 Net. www.bowers-wilkins.com

The Quad 99CD-P2 and 909 Power Amplifier

Quad's reputation has been forged since Peter Walker founded the company back in 1936. The world was a completely different place then, but the love of music that I am sure drove Peter's dream has spanned the decades and is still with those of us who want to achieve a superior sound at home today. Back in the early 70's I owned a few pairs of electrostatics driven at various times by Quad amplifiers. In those days you got a free pipe and a pair of carpet slippers with every

purchase. I well remember the 405 power amplifier, released in 1975, as I bought one. It utilised Current Dumping, a Quad invention, where twin amplifiers are employed in a very clever dual configuration. A low power, high quality design works alongside a high power, heavy-duty amplifier in a harmonious way to provide delicacy, finesse and excellent power outputs with extremely low distortion. The 909 power amplifier continues that circuit design to the present day and produces a very healthy 140 watts into 8 Ohms from a compact and very neatly packaged component.

The signal to drive the 909 comes from the 99CD-P2 CD player, a rather more contemporary looking device that incorporates both fixed and variable analogue outputs making it possible to do away with the need for a conventional pre-amplifier altogether and drive the 909 directly from the player's internal volume control. The CD player can also accept up to six external digital inputs via either three

This is a very neat, tight and conservative sounding little system and you could sum up its musical performance in one word,.... smoooooth. Oh yes, the music from the Quad practically oozes out of the speakers and there are unlikely to be any sonic nasties to contend with along the way. So let's get the criticisms and gripes out of the way first. Quad needs a classier remote control than this. As the main tactile interface with the units it needs to be more in keeping with their quality. This one just feels cheap.

The other problem I had was that, once I had set the volume level, which is visible on the player's display, reducing it often led to a crack through the speakers, which gave me a bit of a jolt on a number of occasions; definitely something of a mood breaker. Turning the volume up would also occasionally bring unpleasant clicking noises from what I assume were the relays operating. Product fault? Maybe, but one hardly expects such unseemly behaviour from a Quad, the old Etonian of the hi-fi world.

Tonally I found that this combination on the warmish side of neutral and this makes it very easy to listen to for lengthy periods. It also has

RCA sockets or three optical inputs using TosLink connectors, so if you are only going to use CD or other digital source components this makes tremendous economic sense as you could utilise the superior processing (up to 24bit, 192kHz) of the unit to good effect with a DAB tuner, mini-disc, DAT player or even a satellite box. There is also a single optical digital out.



very good depth and a fine sense of ambience and perspective about it. But its cosy balance masks a pretty formidable and powerful character, even if the

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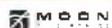
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► nature of its power delivery is on the conservative side. It doesn't have the lean agility and rhythmic momentum or even the tautness of the Rotel, but it is more expressive, fluid and colourful, particularly through the mid-band where it is comfortably better at showing the colour and nature of the musical arrangements. It flows more sweetly than both the Rotel and the Primare and performs the trick of never sounding like it's really breaking sweat or trying too hard. Levels of resolution from the CD player are generally very good but it isn't as articulate at high frequencies as the Creek which bristles with energy and intent, where the Quad brings the music together as a rounded whole in a more relaxed way. While the bass is reasonably tight and controlled, the opposite end of the frequency spectrum is slightly subdued but hardly notable, this amplifier is really all about the critical mid-band where it brings the music together in an almost valve-like way. The 99CD-P2/909 never had me on the edge of my seat with anticipation but it has such a way with vocals, pianos and stringed instruments that you get carried along with it as the music flows ever onwards. Looking at the qualities of the instrumentation and the expression in a voice becomes an integral part of living with the Quad. It has serious power as well and this gives it lots of headroom, yet somehow it never really sounds loud or particularly dynamic. The Rotel, in comparison sounds busier and more

obviously detailed, illustrating the separate musical elements more prominently. But the Quad always sounds more cohesive and wholesome. This is not a sound for everybody though and I would certainly avoid using it with tonally dull or softly balanced loudspeakers. Although

I haven't heard the pairing, I can imagine this particular combination could be very sweet with Quads own electrostatics where its strong points would possibly be a little better realised than with the Micro Utopias.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

99CDP-2

Type:	Single-box CD player with analogue volume control
Digital Inputs:	3x RCA Coax 75 ohm, SPDif 3x Optical TosLink SPDif
Analogue Outputs:	1pr fixed 1pr variable
Digital Outputs:	Optical TosLink SPDIF
Dimensions (WxHxD):	321 x 80 x 310mm
Weight:	4.5 kg
Price:	£999

909 Power Amplifier

Type:	Current dumping stereo power amplifier
Input:	1pr RCA phono
Power Output:	140 watts into 8 Ohms 250 watts into 4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	321 x 140 x 240mm
Weight:	12kg
Price:	£899

Manufacturer:

Quad Ltd
Tel (44)(0)1480 447760
Net. www.quad-hifi.co.uk

The Primare CDI 10

Primare provide the only entrant for this review in the single-box category and let's face it, such designs have never really been good enough for serious listening despite their obvious physical attractions. I have always thought of them as bedroom systems. The Primare is a Swedish made component that seems to have all the bases covered. It contains a CD player, both FM and DAB radio receivers and an integrated 75-watt per channel (into 8 Ohms) amplifier, again using Class D technology. But it is also quite versatile when it comes to external connections too. At the rear there are three pairs of sockets for separate analogue sources plus tape and pre-out sockets in case you want to use the CDI 10 with an external power amplifier.

There are also coaxial and optical digital outputs, though there are no digital inputs to take advantage of the Primare's processing power. To enhance versatility even more there is a 3.5mm mini-jack socket on the fascia of the machine which cleverly doubles as an input and output, enabling you to connect headphones or hook up an MP3 player and use it as an external source. I am slightly perplexed that Primare have chosen to site the controls to operate all but the disc tray on the front of the top panel, which really demands that the unit be placed low and with an unobstructed top. All controls are mirrored on the excellent remote though, so perhaps the stylists got the upper hand on that one.

The CD transport (DVS DSL710) and the converters are lifted from Primare's stand-alone units and together with the DAB they share the same 24Bit/196 KHz decoders. The FM tuner is an RDS type and, like the DAB can be assigned pre-sets (40 on FM, 10 on DAB) and both provide plenty of station information via the display.

This is a slim design but has a ►

► larger than average footprint so siting it is not as easy as with other units here. It is also indecently lightweight for such a powerful component due to the Class D amplification used. Primare seem to be one of the companies to have got something meaningful from this technology and have introduced numerous custom implementations to its operation. Whatever the case I must say that, despite it sharing some sonic similarities with the Rotel system, such as a slightly hollow flavour and an occasional lack of solid body to the instruments, I was more impressed with the dynamic way it went about its business.

The FM section is pretty good, though you'll need a worthwhile aerial to make best use of it. Get one and it demonstrates why DAB is really only of interest if you want to access specific material that's only available through this medium. But it is the CD performance that is really notable and the main reason for buying this machine. By using such a high quality drive and associated electronics Primare have really got this nailed and it will embarrass many a separates system. I was really impressed by both the bandwidth and the levels of resolution, but even more so by the way that the amplifier dealt with them. This is a clean, quiet and dynamic



performer that has excellent levels of instrumental separation and space. Bass is amazingly tight and explicit with great movement and pace and this brings a feeling of anticipation and excitement to the music. It doesn't have the lush and colourful mid-band of the

Quad but it has such striking openness and dynamic freedom that the music always seems taut and sharp with sharper leading edge definition and rhythmic incisiveness. With the Primare



you are always aware that you are listening to two speakers and it can sound more than a little left and right, but this does not really seem to matter. It does not have a really deep soundstage and always seems a little dry, but it spreads its impressive control right across the room, setting up a wide and tall acoustic picture. The Quad is the more cohesive and musically integrated it is true, but the Primare is the more elemental in its portrayal and perhaps more hi-fi in some ways, but it never detracts from the musical message and I found myself playing music of all types and from all eras with no problems. When you look at some of the equipment available from the lower end ranges of large manufacturers catalogues where a "budget" system might cost £2-3K

the CD110 with its decent FM section and free DAB tuner stands out as a real bargain.

Whilst there's still that touch of Class D hollowness about the sound it is not as marked as that from the Rotel, although as the Quad and Creek show, there should certainly be more substance to instruments, which can sound as if they are lacking in the flesh and colour department. But you do get used to it and tend not

to notice it so much after a week or so, especially given carefully chosen speakers.

Where most single-box solutions make heavy compromises in the sound quality department the Primare does a lot better. It will drive with control to very good levels and it can maintain its grip too. It did a respectable job of driving the Micro Utopia Be and was perfectly capable of exploiting the added musical value that a set of Nordost Valhalla speaker cables brings. This is a notable product that would satisfy many people's musical ambitions.

If you are looking for a quality second system for the bedroom, study etc, this should be at the top of your list. But if you are on a budget, then smile because the Gods are smiling too. ►

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single box CD player/ FM/DAB Tuner/Amplifier
Inputs:	3 x line-level 1x front pane, 3.5mm socket
Outputs:	Pre-out Tape-out Co-axial S/PDIF and TosLink optical digital outs Headphone mini-jack
Power Output:	2x75 Watts/8 ohms Class D
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480 x 110 x 385mm
Weight:	8kg
Finishes:	Titanium or Black
Price:	£1200

UK Distributor:
CSE Solutions Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)1423 359 054
Net. www.csesolutions.co.uk

► **The Creek Destiny CD Player and Integrated Amp**

After such an impressive showing in the four-way amplifier review in the last issue, the Creek Destiny integrated model is back, but this time with its matching CD player of the same name. The amplifier is a powerful 100 Watt per channel (into 8 Ohms) integrated design that is most certainly solid-state in its portrayal of music. It is also quite comprehensively specified with five line inputs plus a single tape loop, outputs for two, switchable pairs of speakers and the ability to split pre and power sections. It can also be employed as a gain-selectable active pre-amp (-3dB, 6dB and 9dB) the three different levels accessed via a slider switch beneath the pre-amplifier section. You can also add an internal plug-in phono module (MM or MC) if you need to.

As I found out previously this Creek is a direct communicator with excellent levels of resolution from top to bottom of its impressive bandwidth. It is one of those amplifiers that can really get hold of a loudspeaker by the throat and drive it with taut precision. It is particularly good at the frequency extremes where it has a degree of articulation, helped enormously by that grip that lifts its performance above its cost. Its bristling dynamics do mean that the matching CD player should be carefully considered, so the chance to pair it with Mike Creek's matching CD design was too good to miss.

The Destiny CD player shares its size and extruded panel casework with the amplifier and is larger than

Creek's usual compact electronics. Apart from the standard RCA analogue outputs there are two digital outs and a pair of Creek-Link ports which, when their separate interface is completed, will enable the Destiny range to connect to a custom room controller to be operated from another part of the house.

What I initially liked about the Creek was its no-nonsense approach to bringing the music into the room. There is nothing hesitant, vague or ethereal about its presentation which is forthright and directly to the point. It might not be the most romantic sounding amplifier but its willingness to drive the loudspeaker and project the music with such vivid clarity grabs hold of you straightaway. In the matching CD player it has found a



willing partner and Creek have made an excellent job of voicing the player to mirror the amplifier's strengths. This is a high resolution approach and the player gives the amplifier plenty of work to do. It is very articulate in the sense that it can start and stop better than any other combination here and this means that down at note level it is very expressive when it comes to illuminating playing techniques. It encourages you to appreciate the phrasing and variable playing pressures that musicians incorporate

into their style and technique. So when a Jazz pianist or a rock guitarist plays a key solo or theme the Creek gives it meaning and relevance. On the down side this dynamic approach doesn't make poorly recorded discs any easier to listen to and if the high frequencies are splashy or compressed then the Creeks will let you know about it in no uncertain terms. But give it a solid, high quality recording to get its teeth into and it really "shows" you the music in an unequivocal way.

I also liked the independent dynamic envelope it offers each instrument, particularly in the bass. Its speed means that it has the ability to bring the rhythmic element of the music to the fore. At high frequencies it is excellent. Cymbals have a real metallic ring to them and it captures that shimmering sense of decay very impressively. It can be a

little chilly tonally through the mid-band depending on your taste or the speakers and cabling you partner it with, and those who listen exclusively to classical music might find it a little impersonal and lacking in warmth after a while. It also doesn't offer the most three-dimensional of

soundstages but then, to the best of my memory, this has never been a Creek strongpoint. But it does paint a very solid and stable picture that is rooted between the speakers. Forward in its presentation? Yes, a little but again this will be to many peoples taste, particularly those who like their system to provide edge of the seat involvement. I would prefer to call it impact and there are always trade-offs to be made in hi-fi, at every level. ►

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Destiny CD Player

Type:	Single-box CD player
Transport:	DVD loader with ATAPI interface (firmware upgradeable)
Outputs:	1x RCA analogue 1x Re-clocked optical / transformer coupled co-ax
Output Level:	2.0V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 70 x 310mm
Weight:	6kg
Finishes:	Silver or black
Price:	£1195

Destiny Amplifier

Type:	Solid-state integrated amplifier
Inputs:	5x line-level 1x tape 1x MM/MC phono (optional)
Speaker Connections:	2 sets, switchable
Power Output	100 Watts into 8 Ohms 160 Watts into 4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 70 x 310mm
Weight:	10kg
Finishes:	Silver or black
Price:	£1195

Manufacturer:

Creek Audio
Tel. (44)01442 260146
Net. www.creekaudio.com

could find themselves driving and the contribution that the cables and furniture would make it is indeed folly to try and place them in any sort of order of merit. Of course I have my

I am sure that the Quad is going to have a very broad appeal and I think this is due largely to the quality of the 909



favourites but then, if you had lived with them as I have, so would you.

The Rotel is perhaps the most elusive and hard to pin down. It looks great and functions beautifully but its sound has a slightly characterless quality about it. Of the two Class D amplifiers here I found that the Rotel had least going for it. It can sound hollow and lacking in body, although it is undeniably very eloquent and detailed. Speaker matching will be absolutely critical but I must say that it left me feeling rather unsatisfied.

The other Class D design is the Primare, which seems to carry less of the type's technological fingerprint. Take into consideration the fact that it is priced much lower than any of the other three, that is has an excellent FM section and a useful, if uninspiring DAB ability, plus the fact that, as a single-box design, it offers true convenience, only needs one shelf, one mains plug and requires no signal cabling and you have an astonishing package for the money. Far from shy of the competition, it's always an interesting machine to listen and seems barely compromised in terms of performance.

power amplifier which sounds as British as fish and chips, never attracting too much attention to itself. I also really like the design and build quality. I hope the thumps and clicks that afflicted my CD/pre are not representative of the breed as a whole. If that's the case then Quad have managed to produce a very successful synthesis of the tried and trusted (the 909) and the modern and stylish (99CD-P2), all wrapped up in very attractive clothes.

The Creek Destiny combination certainly makes the best music Mike Creek has ever made and it will be many people's idea of just what a £2K package like this should be. Again, speaker and cabling must be chosen after serious auditioning but, get it right and you are going to be in for a fun time as the punchy, detailed and emphatic nature of this pair will reach out from the speakers, right across the room and hit you on the nose. I am acutely aware that this type of sound is not going to be suitable for everyone, but this system is completely unpretentious and up front about what it does and, love it or hate it, you cannot deny that it makes a bold musical statement. It's been fun for me; it could be your turn now. ➤

► Conclusion

To say that this review caters for a broad range of tastes would be an understatement. These four very different approaches to the problem of assembling matching CD and amplifier components has been a fascinating journey for me as I could see each and every one of them appealing to different people. I am mindful that my taste might not be yours and when you factor in the spectrum of loudspeakers that they



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Pioneer A-A9 Integrated Amplifier and PD-D6 CD/SACD Player

by Jimmy Hughes



Way back in 1990, Pioneer created something of a sensation in the UK hi-fi market by introducing a reasonably-priced integrated amplifier – the A-400 – aimed at audiophiles on a tight budget. It was a bold move. The UK was a tough market to crash, and Pioneer had little or no pedigree in the field of budget esoterica. True, they made the fabled PL-12D turntable. But that was back in the early '70s. The '80s saw Pioneer producing solid but rather average products that slowly slipped from the enthusiast's view in a market dominated by British manufacturers.

So it was that, in the early part of 1990, a small group of writers (of which I was one) were taken to Japan to find out about the soon-to-be-launched Pioneer A-400. It was an interesting trip, demonstrating Pioneer's audiophile credentials and capabilities should they chose to apply them. I did the first review of the A-400 later that same year, and it was something of a rave, greatly exceeding my expectations. Later that same year it won Amplifier of the Year at the *What Hi-Fi* Awards, its success sealed when it was made their Product of the Year... It went on to be a massive seller, and deservedly so.

With the A-A9, Pioneer launch what could well be the A-400 for the early 21st Century. It's a compact but heavy little integrated amplifier offering a conservatively rated 55W per channel output. Like the A-400, it's outwardly a very simple piece of kit. But it has quite a few 'extras' hidden away. These include inputs for MM/MC phono cartridges, a USB input, remote control, stereo balance and bass/treble tone controls, and something called a Sound Retriever, which restores some of the lost bandwidth when playing compressed audio from MP-3. For audio purists 'Direct' bypasses all this for a cleaner sound. Build quality is excellent, with a honeycomb chassis and big twin toroidal mains transformers – one for each channel. The circuit layout is ►

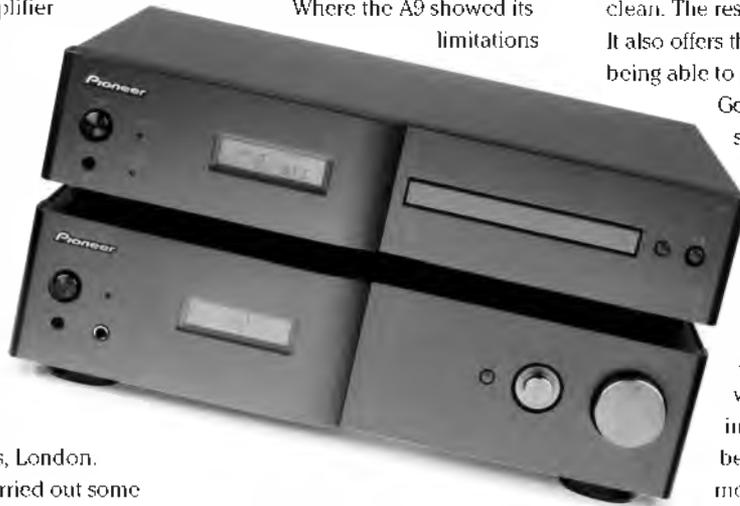
► for the most part left/right symmetrical, creating two individual amplifiers, each with its own transformer and power supply. As a result, stereo sound-staging is particularly wide and deep.

Partnering the A9 amplifier is the matching PD-D6 SACD/CD stereo disc player. Like the A9, it's a deceptively simple product. But there are quite a few additional facilities accessible via the remote handset. Pioneer claim that both products have been 'fine tuned' with input from recording engineers at AIR Studios, London. Presumably, Pioneer carried out some of the final component tweaks and adjustments based on their comments and suggestions. In recognition, both items carry an AIR Studios Monitor legend on the front panel.

First impressions, both collectively and individually, were of a bright, lean, and highly detailed sonic presentation. The A9 amplifier gave a very crisp sound that was smooth and clean, yet very immediate and articulate. I went to the A9 from Musical Fidelity's massive kW-550 integrated, and the comparison was interesting. The kW-550 has served as my reference amplifier for the past few months, and has proved itself a tough act to follow. It's an exceptionally clean and powerful-sounding amplifier with a smooth yet vivid presentation. In terms of price, it's significantly more expensive than the A9, but I compared them anyway... The Pioneer A9 might be smaller and cheaper, but it more than held its own against the bigger

amp in terms of detail and sharpness. It seemed to offer comparable cleanness and purity, and appeared to be every bit as detailed and focused. I used the A9 in its Direct mode, and this definitely gave the best sound.

Where the A9 showed its limitations



in comparison to the kW-550 was at middle and lower frequencies. It hasn't quite got the full-bodied voluminous depth of the bigger more expensive amplifier. The sound is lighter and brighter, with less sheer weight and substance.



The bass goes deep, but doesn't have the same breadth. Given that the A9 costs about a sixth of what a kW-550 would set you back, you might say this is an unfair comparison. And I would agree. But the A9 is so good, it invites comparisons of this sort: Its one of those amplifier that punches well above its weight. With only a little

more breadth and weight, the A9 would be near perfect.

In many ways, the D6 SACD player proved a worthy partner for the A9. It also has a sharp and highly detailed sound – bright, yet very smooth and clean. The result is crisp focused music. It also offers the potential benefit of being able to play SACD as well as CD.

Generally speaking, SACD sounds slightly cleaner and more natural than CD. I compared the SACD and CD layers on Hybrid discs, and (in a few instances where I had the original CD and a later SACD re-issue) CD with SACD. In a couple of instances the CD sounded better than the SACD, but most of the time the latter won, sounding smoother, cleaner, and slightly more open with a 'quieter' less busy and less mechanical presentation. Of course, results vary with individual discs but SACD is certainly capable of superior performance.

The D6 has a Pure Audio option for best sound quality. In this mode, the display and digital output sockets are switched off, resulting in a cleaner, purer sound. The D6 also has Pioneer's Legato

Link Pro – a clever piece of signal processing that aims to restore the missing high-frequency detail barred with bandwidth-limited CDs. Pioneer introduced Legato Link many years back, and its qualities divided listeners at the time. Listening to Legato Link Pro, I liked it but can't get over-excited about the difference either way. Nevertheless, I feel it does produce an improvement and is worthwhile having. If you're not convinced, you can always switch it off of course... ►

► Track access is a bit slow. The D6 likes to have a bit of a think before it responds to your commands. Likewise, fast winding through tracks is slow and 'jerky' – instead of winding back or forth smoothly and quickly, the D6 tends to jump in short segments. I put this down to the use of an SACD transport. This is one of those players that's almost totally disabled without the remote. Front panel controls are limited to Mains On/Off, Disc Load/Eject, and Play/Stop. You need the remote to select CD/SACD, Legato Link Pro, Pure Audio, Next/Previous Track and Fast Wind.

Comparing the D6 to ASTINtrew's more expensive At3500 CD player, I felt the latter produced a slighter bigger richer sound with superior tonality and greater dynamic presence. Even with the D6 playing an SACD and the At3500 playing CD, the latter retained its advantage. But, this depends on the sort of sound you like. Those preferring a brighter, more forward presentation



may disagree and judge the D6 to be the better-sounding player. It certainly has an attractive, lively immediacy that's fresh and energetic. The At3500's tube output gives it a little extra richness and weight, compared to the D6. But some may prefer the latter's extra brilliance.

Without an A400 for comparison

I've had to rely on aural memory, but my feeling is that the new A9 sounds noticeably faster and more immediate than the old A400, but the latter might have bettered it in terms of tonal balance and bass/treble integration. The A9 is definitely for those who like a bright, forward, squeaky-clean sound that's crisp and focussed.



If that sums up your take on good hi-fi, you're almost certain to be impressed. When the A9 is partnered with the D6 SACD player these qualities are reinforced. Whether or not the combination is overly-forward is a difficult one to call. Much will depend on the loudspeakers used and the listening room.

Speaking personally, I'd prefer it if the treble brilliance of the D6/A9 were matched by a more solid midrange and bottom end. I'm not talking about bass depth here – more the subjective sense of lower frequency breadth and fullness that creates a sense of balance between bass and treble extremes. Indeed, a crisp fast top-end can of itself create the impression that the bass is lacking in weight and fullness. The D6/A9 are certainly very detailed and crisp, and sure to impress in that

respect. But I do wonder if they've been tweaked for maximum detail without regard for homogeneity and bass/treble integration. Nonetheless, both the D6 and A9 are very good components that offer a real taste of high-end performance. They're superbly sharp and immediate, and offer exceptional detail and analysis. If your taste inclines towards a sound that's crisp, bright, and bristling with detail, these are for you.

There's probably nothing to touch them at (or near) the price. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

PD-D6 SACD Player

Type:	SACD/CD player
DAC:	Dual 192/24 bit Pioneer Legato Link Pro
Outputs:	1pr analogue RCA/phono 1x coaxial SPDif – RCA/ phono 1x optical SPDif – Toslink
Dimensions (WxHxD):	420 x 100 x 340mm
Weight:	4.5 Kg
Price:	£350

A-A9 Amplifier

Type:	Dual-mono integrated amp
Inputs:	4 x line-level RCA/phono 1x MM/MC RCA/phono 1x USB
Outputs:	1 x tape out 1 x pre-out
Rated Power Output:	55 W/ch
Dimensions (WxHxD):	420 x 113 x 369mm
Weight:	11.5 Kg
Price:	£700

UK Distributor:

Tel. 0870 600 1539

Net. www.pioneer.co.uk

Mystère ia21 Integrated Amplifier

by Alan Sircom



Oh, the mind can play dodgy tricks on you. This is a fine new integrated valve amp with a lot going for it, and all I can think of is Toyah Wilcox lisping her way through "Iphth's a myththery, oh ipth's a myththery..." And now, that's all you can think of too. Sorry.

Trouble was, the *Mystère* was a mystery to me. I had no knowledge of the product or the back-story behind it. In fact, this month I expected to be reviewing a CD player; which was why Simon Marsh (the photographer) looked slightly impressed when I offered to carry the product round London on the Tube. One heft of the 27kg ia21 later and I was in a cab.

The *Mystère* duo is one of the first wholly new products from Pistol Music, a division of Absolute Sounds. Pistol Music is made up of a collection of fine products that deliver Absolute Sounds quality without the stratospheric price tags some of the best products necessarily attain. Think of Emporio as opposed to black label Armani and you'll get the drift.

Mystère and Absolute Sounds diffusion line... a connection forms. Sure enough, as information began to flow in, the *Mystère* started revealing its secrets. It's designed in Holland, by the same people as the *Prima Luna* range. It has the same black piano laquer finish (nice and rich, nice and deep) and the same simple approach to amp making – one knob sits in front of a 24-step attenuator that controls the volume, one switches between the four line-level inputs and there's an on/off switch on the side. Simple. Neat. Effective.

There are two amps in the *Mystère* line-up; this, the 50 watt ia21 for \$1,850 while the 40 watt ia11 costs £1,250. Aside from a bigger, heavier cabinet and more power output, the two are functionally identical, even down to the valve complement. Both use four 6SN7 valves in the pre-amp stage and four EL34s in the output, although the ia21 has the option of ►

► using KT88s instead (there's a switch on the side), all running in push-pull. As to why the output of the two amps varies, details are scant at present, but I guess all will become clear in the fullness of time; meaning after I've finished this review. *Mystère* has gone for valve simplicity. The circuit is self-biasing (called Adaptive AutoBias in *Mystère*-speak) and it has a soft-start power-up, to prolong the life of the valves. It also features fusing on the valve plate itself to protect the output stage in the unlikely event of a valve going pop while playing music. You'll still need to replace both valve and fuse, but that's a lot cheaper than a new set of caps or melted transformer taps.

There are nods to high-end componentry, with double-layer polypropylene coupling caps and lots of high-purity copper conductors throughout. However, the accent seems to be tilted toward good, solid engineering instead of audiophile frivolity. This is why the amp is fully hard-wired and uses robust low-noise resistors in place of delicate hi-fi-chummy devices. And it's why most of the weight is at the rear of the amp, with that big central power transformer flanked by the two output transformers. That said, the Imm thick steel baseplate (with its trio of aluminium spikes) makes a contribution too. And then there's the valve cage – normally a token gesture to political correctness, *Mystère* has designed this from the outset to look right. The hidden tubes can just be seen behind thin slats cut into the cage, making it look like a Cylon from *Battlestar Galactica*. Not the cheesy 1970s *Battlestar Galactica* at that; the dark, brooding current version with suicide bombers... and hot ex-Victoria's Secret models.

I have to confess a personal bias here. I've never been that enamoured with the Prima Luna models I've heard. Okay, I've not auditioned the range in anger, but the limited exposure left me feeling like I was in the presence of very obviously valve sounding valve amps. An amplifier should strive for a sense of neutrality, albeit one that's coloured by the choice of devices used in the design. I felt that the Prima Lunas instead went

The *Mystère ia21* has a far more fast-paced, far more up-beat sound than most of its valve peers. In other words, where most valve amps at this level have an old-school Conrad-Johnson rose-tinted sound, the *Mystère* is more like Audio Research – big, bright and fast. No, it's never going to sound as crisp or as up-beat as the transistor superstars (the Naim Supernait costs not much more than the ia21 and holds all the rhythm aces) but for a valve amp – particularly a valve amp that costs the right side of two grand



for the warm, romantic valve sound as a deliberate design element, or maybe as a by-product of trying to make a valve amp down to a price. There is also a suggestion of load-intolerance with the Prima Luna designs, which makes its presence felt by a change in tonality when you move from speaker to speaker. But, I didn't know there were Prima Luna connections here – and I didn't notice on audition. Returning to the amp in the light of the Prima Luna connection, this is all the more impressive a design because of its load-consistency and its completely different, not so immediately and deliberately valve-like sound.

– this is good stuff. It means the ia21 is pacey enough to keep up with the quicksilver dynamics of Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* or motor-mouth Eminem rapping, but always manages to keep a beat no matter how difficult things become.

Don't think this amp loses the advantages of valves for that tighter, brighter sound. The amp almost behaves like a hybrid, with the air, space and coherence of a good valve amp and the upbeat tempo of transistors: especially coherence, something many people seem to

▶ overlook in the pursuit of starkly precise and often arid transistor sounds.

It must be because coherence is one of the most abstract elements to get across. We tend to compartmentalise our world and the same applies to sound. It's why soundstaging is all important to many hi-fi enthusiasts – if it's easy to separate out individual sounds within an image envelope, they can be categorised, logged and defined (and, incidentally, the ia21 does deliver a very good soundstage – slightly wide of the boxes, projecting deep behind the speakers and relatively far forward, with some height). Coherence, on the other hand, is less easy to fit into a neat pigeonhole, because it plays a long game. You listen to 20 seconds of music and will hardly notice whether the instruments appear to play better together. You won't be able to tell whether the character of an instrument voice remains consistent across its whole range and in front of a range of instruments. Only time will tell, and it's that time that does wonders for the *Mystère*. There's an organic sense of flow here, which many amps struggle to maintain. The more you listen, the more natural the *Mystère* sounds and the more you relax into the sound. Naturally, such a luxuriant coherence can only

occur when an amplifier has remarkable articulation, and here every nuance of the playing or singing is reproduced with precision and élan.

Where the limits begin to show is in the control at the bottom end.

This is not an amplifier for full-range speakers, especially those presenting a difficult load. The pace is a result of slightly curtailing the lower frequencies. This has a knock-on effect in the solidity of sounds within an image. The sense of rootedness you get when playing a beefy powerful amp is not that strong here; it's not unnerving, and images do not float around the soundstage, but there remains a vague sense of dislocation, particularly with percussion.

All things are a trade-off, however, and if the trade is some solidity for a more honest and more up-beat sound, it seems more than worthwhile. This may not be the amp for those with vast speakers, but I suspect the intelligent vast speaker buyer will be spending far more than the cost of the ia21



anyway. This is a welcome addition to the lower price valve pantheon; it brings much-needed pace to the party and sacrifices little to get there. That it comes from the *Prima Luna* stable and manages to sound so very different from that range reflects both the designer's skill and his conscious decisions. If you always hankered after something that combines the pace of transistors with the richness of valves – but were not prepared to go the hybrid route – there's no *Mystère*... this is the amp to go for. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Valve line integrated
Valve Complement:	4x 6SN7 4x EL34 (KT88s optional)
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Weight:	27 kg
Price:	£1850

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Double Subs: More flutter on your bottom

by Chris Binns



I never envisaged spending quite as much time as I have over the last few months listening to the effects of sub-woofers. But having looked at the three distinctly different models in the last issue, there seemed to be a number of additional possibilities worthy of further investigation, together with more products to try out. One particular aspect that I was keen to explore was the use of two sub-woofers (identical pairs but of varying sizes) to see what benefits - if any - there might be over a single unit. To that end I had the use of a second Velodyne DD12, along with two similarly priced but highly contrasting products from B&W. The Velodyne was of particular interest due to its integral digital measurement and management system which proved to be a considerable asset when it came to setting up sub-bass units, taking a lot of the guess work out of initial positioning within the room. The company's SMS 1 standalone unit offers exactly the same facilities in a stand-alone box that is universally applicable to any sub-woofer (or even when it comes to positioning full-range loudspeakers) and also proved both useful and informative in conducting tests over the last few weeks; for a full report on its *modus operandi* check out the previous issue for more information.

As before, my interest lay in exploring the effects of sub-woofers to augment a system that is used purely for music reproduction; this was an exercise more concerned with integration and 'hiding' the sub within the aural palette rather than prodigious amounts of crash, bang and thunder. It's quite possible that this presents a different set of challenges for a sub, a degree of subtlety not always associated with the genre. Ultimately, I guess I want the benefits but I don't want to hear the thing working. As with the previous sessions, the main speakers were the

► B&W 805's, alternating with a pair of the new Acoustic energy AE22 near field monitors, a loudspeaker aimed very much at the professional market. Designed to imitate some of the better aspects of the fabled NS10 it is of infinite baffle construction and has a very dry, well controlled bass roll off that should integrate well into a sub-woofer system.

Velodyne's Digital Drive - Adding a second unit

With the Velodyne SMS1 plugged into the system, I proceeded to again take measurements of the 805's and in order to regain some perspective, set up a single DD12 bass unit using both the test results and fine adjustments by ear, the results consistent with my earlier sessions. Daisy chaining a second sub necessarily complicates the procedure by requiring not only a parallel signal connection but a serial



data feed as well, but this does not transfer any settings, only running commands. Having established basic settings such as phase and crossover on the primary unit, these must then be manually copied across to the slave, whereupon Velodyne suggest doing an EQ set up separately for each box.

In practice, the set up for two subs does become a lot more complicated, with so many more variations in positioning as well as the associated interaction between them. Of course, with the Velodyne subs each individual

box can be adjusted comprehensively, whereas the stand alone SMS 1 applies the same correction to both the left and right output. Either way, the ability to repeatedly measure and actually see what was happening alongside listening to the sweeps became invaluable and served to provide a degree of method to what could have become a confusing process. What quickly became clear is that with two subs in play it was possible to even out the room response a lot more effectively with positioning alone than with just a single unit, therefore minimising the amount of correctional EQ needed.

This was strongly reinforced when it came to listening. There are obvious reasons why adding a second sub should be beneficial - doubling the power output and radiating area for a start.

Then there's the fact that our

generally rectangular rooms suffer a double bass peak, one for each axis, and that these can be handled more readily by two individually placed units than just one. Each unit will also be working less hard for a given volume. But the response was so much more even and controlled, altogether less obtrusive, that as a consequence I ended up being able to run the bass level a little higher than I had done when using a single unit. The result was a more integrated bass response that was much more consistent with volume and far more natural, tonally and dynamically. There was also less of the rather grey, slightly 'leaden' character that I had associated with the single Velodyne sub. Apart

from the rather antisocial positioning that I ended up with, my experience suggested that this was definitely the way forward. Moving on...

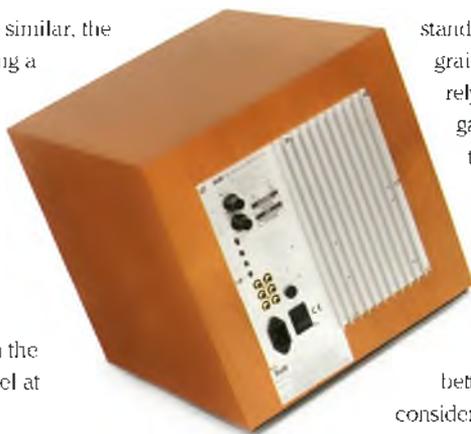
The B&W ASW700 and PV1

Despite costing roughly the same, these two designs could hardly be more different. The 700 is relatively conventional in sub-woofer terms, consisting of a 10" high power, long throw woofer in a traditional compact enclosure, driven by 500 Watts of class D amplification. The line level input has a switched low pass filter adjustable from 40 to 140 Hz, level and phase controls, and a fixed third order high pass output at 80Hz.

The PV1 is very different. A classic case of form following function: small, beautifully formed and extremely solid, the die cast sphere construction naturally creates an extremely low resonance enclosure while the two highly developed 8" units work in opposition to cancel out internal vibration. Amplification comes in the form of 500 Watts of ICE power - a variation on class D topology - that must be pretty compact as there'll be precious little room after the drive units have taken up most of the internal space. The PV1 can operate from either the loudspeaker terminals via a small telecoms jack (and supplied cable) with an adjustable high pass filter from 40 to 140 Hz, or line level where the input is fixed at 150 Hz. Uh, why? I guess its fine if you are using an AV receiver with a filtered LFE output, but otherwise the lack of adjustment severely compromises the flexibility of the PV1 in other systems. I probably don't need to add that I find the high-level loudspeaker connection inelegant, and one that doesn't really make sense to me, but it did force me down a rather radical path that I might otherwise not have explored, as I will explain later. Despite being wildly different in their design and dimensions; the quoted bass roll off ►

is remarkably similar, the ASW700 having a -6dB point at 17 Hz as opposed to the PV1 at 18. Of course, that doesn't take into consideration the attainable level at that point.

The ASW700 packed plenty of punch when it came down to it, reminding me a little of the REL from the last session. Despite the (relatively small) 10" woofer, there was plenty of power to be had, and the 'dry' crisp presentation blended in well with both the 805's and the AE22's. Where the 700 seemed to have an edge over others that I have recently listened to was with the speed and precision it exhibited with kick drum, showing little tendency to wallow or drag behind. But it was less good at opening up the soundstage and conveying a sense of space in the way that the Eclipse managed so well. But as with the Velodyne, pressing two into play yielded results that were far greater than the sum of the parts, even with the doubling of price. At this stage I tried the rest of the system through the high-pass filter of the ASW's, reset the levels and had a good listen. Despite the degradation of having to run long interconnects to and from each sub, and the quality of the circuitry within, the results went a long way to providing the kind of benefits I was really looking for, the equivalent of a good, full range system. Freed from the constraints of having to reproduce low bass, the 805's were able to play that much louder without trouble, and there was suddenly that slam and impact that one often hears with a good active set up, which was kind of the direction the system was heading in. Repositioning the subs for the higher crossover point proved to be a bit of a challenge, and I actually ended up with the subs on 12"



stands; slightly against the grain, as subs tend to rely on the 6dB boost gained by sitting on the floor, but with more than enough bass capability on tap that was not a problem. Integration seemed to be far better, and I spent a considerable amount of time

listening to loud music freed from the constraints of level limitations in the main speakers. This of course set me thinking about the PV1's, and that problem with the fixed 150 Hz input...

The PV1: Can something this compact create any worthwhile bass? In a side-by-side comparison, the PV1 is just not capable of generating similar levels of deep bass to the ASW, or any of the other subs for that matter. But deep, seismic bass at high levels; as I suggested at the beginning of this article, that's not really what I'm looking for. When it comes to music, the PV1 has a real advantage over many others, as it is incredibly fast. The ASW was pretty good in this respect, but the PV1 had a real snap and bite that served to enhance timing rather than drag it down. In terms of bass weight, it became clear that in my relatively large room one was not enough, adding extra impetus to the double-sub argument. (Incidentally, if you have a bad back, the PV1 is a real bonus when it comes to fiddling around with positioning: just remove the plugs and



roll it around the carpet.) My biggest problem was that I didn't like the sound I was getting feeding them from the main loudspeaker terminals, so I ended up using the Velodyne SMS 1 as a low pass filter, which of course meant that I had the benefit of the digital EQ if I so desired. Which I didn't really, but I did end up using the measurement facility to construct a simple passive filter to sit between the ARC SP10 pre-amp and Naim power amp to roll the main speakers off at 150 Hz.

With the PV1's up off the floor (now mandatory considering the quite high crossover frequency) things started to get very interesting: I know we are almost out of sub territory and heading into a three-way system but

hey, it sounded really good. In terms of augmenting the main loudspeakers, the benefits to be had were much the same as when I was utilising the high pass filters in the ASW's, resulting in a system that was capable of real dynamics and high volume levels. The

PV1's would not reach the depths of some of the bigger models that I have tried, but were still producing output below 20 Hz without too much trouble, and the odd 32-foot organ pipe (even the silly 64-foot resultant of Liverpool cathedral) set the furniture rattling in an alarming, but quite exciting manner. But the speed and agility that they were capable of meant that bass guitar and drums were always part of the band, setting the pace and rhythm with a real sense of determination. Which led me to thinking...

I have avoided mentioning the Quad 2805s so far because trying to get sub-woofers working with them is

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► quite frankly, a real bastard. But, having been using these loudspeakers on and off for the last few months I just couldn't resist. Extending the bottom end of the Quads has been the subject of so much debate and experimentation amongst some aficionados of the breed that it must rank alongside that great conundrum, the best amplifier to mate with the beasts, as their personal hi-fi holy grail. The dip-pole radiation of electrostatics seems to be one of the main problems (most loudspeakers are omni-directional when it comes to bass) together with the very light diaphragm that is so much faster than any moving-coil; marrying the two technologies together is an uphill struggle, even if you are Martin Logan. Out of the sub-woofers that I have tried within this session, the Eclipse has been the most successful by quite some degree, due in no small part to its wide open, un-forced performance. The PV1's however, worked extremely well, set up just behind and at 90 degrees to the Quads, and while I am not going to suggest that the integration is seamless, it is one of the best combinations that I have yet heard. Put it this way, I am not intending to let either speaker stray too far from my living room, and will continue to experiment.

Conclusions

The major benefits of using a pair (or more) of sub-woofers are that it is much easier to get an even response within the room, which



ultimately delivers better integration with the main speakers as well as higher maximum levels. Adding a second sub will not necessarily give you greater extension, and that is a consideration, but by and large I found the results far more satisfying with two units in operation. The exception to this was the Eclipse, whose incredibly quick, push-pull operation seemed to maximise on its musical contribution. In many respects the most capable all-round performer we've tried, I can only wonder what two of them might sound like!

The Velodyne subs with their digital management offer a highly flexible and competent performance, as well as being capable of very high levels, probably the loudest of the units I have looked at. The SMS 1 is an extremely useful bit of kit, whether you use it purely for setting up or for daily management of

a sub or subs. It has been invaluable to me over the last few weeks, and it has to be said that it is well worth the

money. The B&W ASW700 is actually a very good sub-woofer, and although I'm sure it would hold its own when it comes to home theatre, has the advantage of being very solid and crisp in its delivery, which makes

it a good addition to a music based system. The PV1: the sub-woofer for people who don't like sub-woofers. Not as capable in terms of depth and volume as the others, it excels in its ability to produce fast, low colouration bass, and a pair of these offer a fascinating option in the context of a music orientated system, especially one using speakers such as the Quad. However, isn't it ironic that in some ways the most interesting sub-woofer here is almost impossible to use in a high-quality system due to its limited connection options. Too good to ignore, I'm sure that you have not heard the last of this... But for the moment my sub-woofering experience seems a little like a game of snakes and ladders! ➤



Contact Details

Velodyne DD12 - £2295 ea.
Velodyne SMS-1 - £575

Redline Distribution
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B&W ASW700 - £1000 ea.
B&W PV1 - £950 ea.

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For details of the REL and Eclipse models, please see Issue 52

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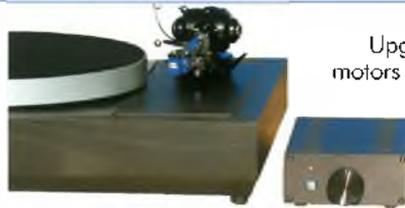
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THE AUROUSAL A1 LOUDSPEAKERS

by Paul Messenger

Elsewhere in this issue I've reviewed the Gemme Audio Vivace, a beautifully and meticulously crafted speaker that delivers a full dose of single driver, full-range fun whilst going a long way towards eliminating the more severe weaknesses that can afflict such designs.

Interestingly, at the same time I also first came across a new company called Arousal, whose debut loudspeaker is a compact standmount using a single, full-range driver. The difference is that at \$450 a pair the little A1 as it's known, costs around 15% of the Vivace's price-tag. I found myself wondering just how much of the more expensive speaker's poise and refinement (relative terms you understand) would be lost in the cost saving exercise?

There's not a lot to the A1, apart from one of Ted Jordan's metal 'double-cone' drivers, with a 90mm diameter diaphragm, neatly mounted in a front-ported, real wood veneered stand-mount enclosure of roughly 11 litres capacity. But that simplicity is actually much of what this speaker is all about, and there's the additional bonus of a relatively modest \$150/pair price-tag.

What distinguishes the A1 from most of the competition is that it uses a solitary drive unit to cover the entire audio band. Well that's the claim anyway; in practice full-range drivers do tend to have limitations, both in maintaining an even overall balance and in dealing with the top and bottom extremes of the band.

The plus side of course is that there's nothing bar a speaker cable and a voice coil between the amplifier and the sound generating diaphragm. The elimination of any crossover network and the avoidance of the use of more than one separate source to cover the audio range have got to be worthwhile pluses. The crucial question must be whether the advantages of the one outweigh the disadvantages of the other, or vice versa.

The A1 isn't by any means perfect



– I don't know any speaker system that is – and the compromises are that much more obvious with a single driver system, at least in terms of the measured frequency balance. This has a distinctly prominent, broad upper mid-band decade from 300Hz to 3kHz, though happily, with the speakers stand-mounted and clear of walls, the bass and treble ends balance out pretty well. Furthermore, sensitivity is pretty good and the load very easy to drive, indicating good suitability to partner modestly powered valve amps.

While the strong mid-band is clearly audible and a source of obvious

'cupped hands' – almost 'megaphonic' – colorations, as is often the case with tonal balance aberrations, the ears adjust and compensate quite quickly, and the underlying advantages of this speaker's innate simplicity come through.

The lack of time-smear and superb coherence create an overall sound that's somehow more 'real' and believable than most conventional speakers, ensuring superior communication of musical subtlety and emotion. It also delivers fine stereo focus, albeit with some lack of air and sparkle.

One down-side of using a relatively large driver right into the high treble is that the extreme top end is delivered in a rather narrow beam, so for best results one should try to orient the speakers so that one sits directly on axis.

The Arousal A1 might have rather more than its fair share of 'character', but for all that it's actually a surprisingly practical, thoroughly entertaining and very involving proposition, demonstrating that with care, the benefits of single driver, full-range designs can be appreciated even in modestly sized and affordably priced products. The Arousal A1s have their own set of weaknesses, but you might well find them outweighed by the musical strengths of this unusual beast.



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THE ZANDEN MODEL 300 AND MUSIC FIRST SILVER PASSIVE PRE-AMPS

by Jason Kennedy

A couple of issues back I went to town describing the workings of Audio Zone's Pre T-1 passive preamplifier and the way it uses transformer tapings to give different levels of attenuation rather than the usual resistor ladder or potentiometers. Apparently this is an approach first proposed by Western Electric in the '30s. The transformers used by Audio Zone are wound by Stevens & Billington of Hastings, who make their own transformer coupled passive device under the brand name Music First.

Unlike the Audio Zone with its choice of two inputs and two outputs the Music First is rather better equipped and has two balanced and four single ended inputs; it also has both flavours of output and an earth isolating switch. It uses Elma switches to change both level and volume and is hand-wired internally with in the case of this Silver version, pure silver cable. The reason why the Silver Music First is so much dearer than its copper stablemate is that this silver wire continues within the transformers themselves. Those transformers use an 80% nickel permalloy core and are shielded by Mumetal cans to keep out external magnetic fields.

The theoretical advantage

that using transformer tapings confers on a passive controller is that it avoids the impedance lottery suffered by simple potentiometers. As soon as CD hit the scene, people started experimenting with 10k pots, often mounted in something as prosaic as a tea caddy, until Modsquad came up with a



commercially available unit that offered source switching too. Hi-fi buffs just love the idea of getting something for nothing and the rest is, as they say, history – despite the fact that every time you change volume with a passive pot you change the impedance seen by both the source and the power amplifier, which can have dramatic effects on the ability of the one to drive the other. This means that both tonal balance

and energy/dynamics tend to vary with level and choice and length of interconnect.

By incorporating transformers you can ameliorate this problem. In the Music First each tapping from the transformer gives a different level of attenuation, eliminating the need for resistors in the signal path, and while input impedance still varies it remains high through 99% of its operating range. In fact it

only drops to a level that might have a noticeable effect on the signal when it is at maximum output, a situation that is unlikely to

arise under normal circumstances. Put on a classical CD cut at an exceptionally low-level and couple it with a 'deaf' power amplifier and you might just get there if your speakers are insensitive enough. In reality, such chronic mismatches are rare – and should certainly be addressed by doing something other than buying a passive controller. Gain can be increased by 6dB via a step-up load should you find the volume control creeping too close to its end stop but this is only recommended with relatively high impedance loads such as you find with some valve amps.

Visually, the Music First Silver ►

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They're now considered essential as far as I'm concerned and bring a new meaning to the term "Simply the best!"

Roy Gregory - Hi-Fi magazine

Tube Rings
by Duende Crustura

WHAT'S **COOL** AT THE TUBESHOP

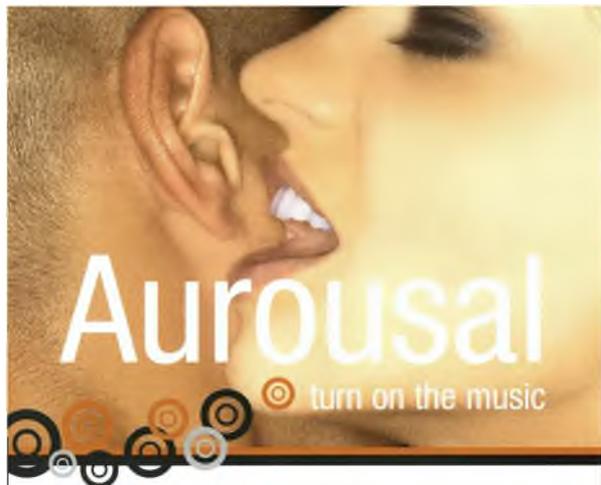


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► is differentiated from its Copper counterpart by control knobs finished in chrome rather than gold, and these look a whole lot more attractive against the brushed aluminium



casework. The unit is quite hefty as a result of the internal transformers despite being compact, as is the nature of passive devices. The single-ended socketry is silver plated which is a nice touch, albeit one that will require a bit of cleaning from time to time – and the aforementioned 6dB gain switch is rear mounted. Another little switch controls the grounding of the transformers for SE and balanced outputs separately (it's probably unwise to try and use both simultaneously). If left in the 'lift' position this can result in nasty bangs through the system when changing interconnects and is thus a detail worth paying attention to!

The Zanden Model 300 Passive line stage is a rather more attractively finished but also more conventional passive controller. Like all things Zanden it isn't cheap, but then exquisite rarely is and the Model 300 is nothing if not a joy to behold. On the rear panel it describes itself with commendable accuracy as a Stereo Passive Line Volume Controller, the lettering positioned underneath a bank of rather fancy

Canare RCA phono sockets. These provide four inputs and two outputs, but inevitably you get none of the grounding or gain options available from a unit that uses transformers.

The pot in this box is a 10k DACT attenuator from Denmark, the same device that you can specify in Border Patrol valve power amps should you be so inclined. The box itself is stainless steel with a champagne anodised, aluminium front panel. Fit and finish are superb, making one almost ridiculously covetous of what is such a simple device.

Sonically these two products produced a fascinating contrast, so alike in some ways, so different in others. The Music First has been garnering accolades at a healthy rate and it's not hard to hear why when you use it in place of even quite decent active pre-amplifiers. It delivers a transparency that is rare at any price, but without the limitations usually found with passive designs. The bass for instance is as powerful and articulate as all but the best active devices while the highs are fully extended, which creates an openness and clarity that is hard to surpass.

One common criticism of passive controllers is that they lack the energy and

vitality of active pre-amplifiers. [However, I suspect that this is more to do with the actual character of the amplification in active devices than limitations in the passives. The Music First can sound less offusive or powerful than an active pre-amp, but only by virtue of not adding anything to the sound. It seemingly delivers all of the power that the source manages to send its way.

It also lets everything else through simultaneously and imaging can fairly be described as holographic with a decent recording, instruments and voices standing solid and bodacious in a soundstage that stretches both wide and deep. It can also be highly analytical, peeling apart the layers of mixes like Coldcut's sample heavy 'Sound Mirrors'. It can sometimes be too transparent in this respect, with the music taking second place to the sound. While it can't be blamed for doing as much there are more obviously 'musical' alternatives in the active world. High-fidelity however is the goal and on that front the Music First Silver is nigh on impossible to fault. In practical terms it could be more convenient: there's no remote control (although such a thing is waiting in the wings) and if you combine a balanced output CD player with a single-ended phono-

stage you will need to be careful with ►



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▶ the attenuation when switching from one to the other because of the high voltage on some balanced outputs. Aside from that, the sonic performance is simply staggering for the price.

The relatively straightforward Zanden makes an interesting comparison with the Music First. Despite its theoretical limitations in the physics department it actually seems to extract a little more low-level information albeit across a bit less bandwidth. It has a silky sound that caresses the ear in a charming fashion, giving a more fluid and graceful sound. This may be because of the “exclusive RF noise absorption material” used or, equally likely, the character of the cabling and socketry. When you go back to the architectural imaging of the Music First, that sweetness and poise can start to sound like flavour, albeit rather appealing flavour.

On the other hand, you’ve got the way in which it pulls out detail right across the mid-band, as well as superior transparency. It excels in the areas of musical delicacy and texture, picking out reverb extremely well. If you want the full power and glory of the musical event the Music First is the clear winner but those after a more intimate and polished sound will find the Zanden Model 300 hard to resist, especially if they pay attention to impedance matching and cable lengths.

If absolute transparency separates these two passive devices, it also divides them from dearer active devices. A Classé CP-700 pre-amp was made to sound positively grainy in comparison, although it delivered tighter, more controlled

bass than the Zanden, making the conventional passive seem mid-forward in the style of certain valve



powered components. The Music First can match the Classé’s bass power and energy, it’s more even top to toe balance and bandwidth, at the expense of less obvious benefits in terms of midrange detail and focus. I guess you pay your money...

I was impressed, very impressed by the level of resolution delivered by both these mains free devices. Those searching for maximum transparency will not be disappointed in the results they deliver. The Zanden is an astonishing performer given its ultra simple topology, but will require careful assessment in the context of the user’s system, simply because its modus operandi offers no protection from the impact of the impedance lottery in an unruly world. That said it worked beautifully with both a Gamut D200 and ATC SCM150ASL actives, both rather different, albeit solid-state devices, so suck it and see.

The Music First is a more universally recommendable and balanced, if ultimately less transparent device. Whilst it’s not a pre-amplifier in the full sense of the term, it nonetheless fulfils that roll more transparently and just as efficiently as most active volume control/selectors. It also offers

sufficient balanced and single-ended inputs for most users needs. I’m intrigued to hear if Music First can deliver the same transparency levels from a remote controllable ‘pre-amp’ with transformer volume control. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Music First Silver
 Input impedance: >50kohm
 Inputs: 4x RCA/phono, 2x balanced XLR
 Outputs: 1pr RCA/phono, 1pr balanced XLR
 Size (WxHxD): 205 x 95 x 220mm
 Weight: 3kg
 Price: £2,700

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

Manufacturer:
 Music First Audio
 Net. www.mifaudio.co.uk

Zanden Model 300
 Input impedance: 10kohm
 Inputs: 4x RCA/phono
 Outputs: 2x RCA/phono
 Size (WxHxD): 214 x 86 x 77mm
 Weight: 2kg
 Price: £1,995

Distributor:
 Audiofreaks
 Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153

Manufacturer:
 Zanden Audio
 Net. www.zandenaudio.com



SOMETHING FOR NOTHING...

KEEPING THE FAITH IN A WORLD WHERE SEEMINGLY ONLY MONEY TALKS!

by Roy Gregory

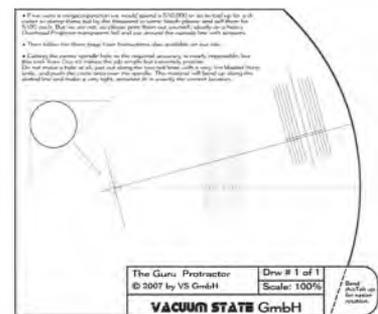
I won't bore you with the details – all you need are the facts. The other day I received an email to which were attached two PDFs, one of a cartridge alignment protractor, one a three page set of instructions. They are available as a free download from www.vacuumstate.com. The intention is that the protractor is printed onto the kind of transparent film used in overhead projectors; the instructions need only to be followed.

They are excellent, both for their clarity and their sanity – and this in a field which can all too often seem wantonly obscure and insanely

complex. Anyone wanting to check out their cartridge alignment or simply understand a little more about it need look no further. The explanation and instructions are refreshingly easy to understand and follow, sensibly laid out by people who learnt this stuff the hard way. The surprise is that they're happy for you to share the benefits of their hard earned experience free of charge.

That email came from Allen Wright, an Australian by birth, now CEO of Vacuum State, a Swiss company with impeccable high-end credentials. Singling me out as one of the few people

who seem to take VTA seriously he attached the protractor and instructions, thinking I might be interested. He wasn't wrong. Nice to see some solidarity in the audio community for once. ➤



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Record Reviews

How To Read Them

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

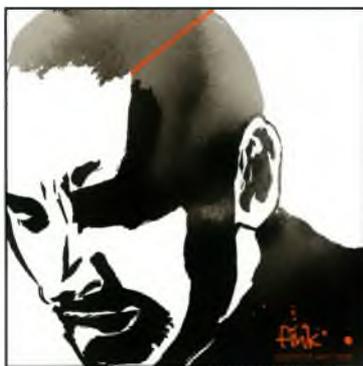
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard,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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

They are: Dave Ayers, Tim Britt, Anke K. Bronner, Mark Childs, Richard Clews, Dave Davies, Dennis D. Davis, Peter Downard, Richard S. Foster, Roy Gregory, Simon Groome, Jason Hector, Andrew Hobbs, James Michael Hughes, Reuben Parry.

Key to Icons

	CD		120g LP
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	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		10" LP
	Double Disc		Availability As S/H LP
	DVD		Vinyl Double Album
	SACD		
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	Multi-Channel		



Fink

Distance and Time

Ninja Tune

Although this is Fink's third album one is inclined to think of it as his second because the very first Fink outing was so different from those that followed. *Distance and Time* is in the same vein as last year's *Biscuits for Breakfast*, a moody, dusky collection of songs that are dominated by the voice and guitar of the songwriter himself. He is joined by drummer Tim Thornton and bass player Guy Whittaker with whom he has spent a good portion of the last year touring, and while this is music is not of the 'tightly honed by years on the road' variety they do seem to gel in a very natural but precise fashion. The main change from the last album seems to have been brought about by producer Andy Barlow who has worked with Lamb among others, he brings some variety to the way the sound is treated with subtle reverb that creates effects rather than attempts to enhance reality. Fink has said that "I was very conscious of not being a touchy-feely photocopy of someone from the seventies" and despite the pared down nature of his work there is no-one that comes to mind as having a similar sound. His songs are often about lost loves and nostalgia for the past, but manage to avoid being laments, producing instead a warm and rich atmosphere that rewards close attention.

JK



Ben Reel Band

New Horizon

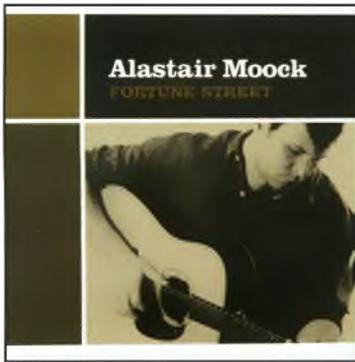
B.Reel Records BRBCDA005

Ben Reel, a native of South Armagh, Ireland, is a superstar in waiting; rarely have I heard an album so complete and fully realized. From the brilliance of the playing and arrangements to the magnificence of Reel's voice - this is heaven all the way. Actually it's his fourth album, so God knows where he's been hiding. With lyrics delving deeply into the spiritual, inspiration is heavily gleaned from classic books like Sogyal Rinpoche's *The Tibetan Book Of Living And Dying* and Deepak Chopra's *Synchrodestiny*. However, it's one thing being a great wordsmith but it counts for nothing in music if you can't weave it into a strong melodic force. Fortunately Reel proves to be a master of both on this really beautiful collection of rootsy, soulful rock.

New Horizon is 'all killer, no filler', and if Reel can manage to get more radio exposure then there's no reason why songs like 'Westcoast', with its instantly memorable chorus, and the message-laden 'All Souls Alive' can't light up the increasingly stale and predictable mainstream airwaves for years to come. Actually, every song here stands up handsomely to repeated plays, but one - the lilting Irish ballad 'When The Summer's Gone', featuring the angelic humming of Julianne Black - is definitely the most haunting song I've heard in years and has 'future classic' stamped all over it. Revelatory work.

AH





Alastair Moock

Fortune Street

Corazon Records 255097 

Alastair Moock describes himself as a folk singer, but that doesn't really do him justice. When he takes occasional nods to Woody Guthrie and Dylan with an historical approach to his lyrics then the label 'folk singer' becomes appropriate, but the 'country blues' tag fits the bill just as easily. *Fortune Street* is Moock's fifth album and contains ten tunes – nine originals and one cover. Producer Dave Goodrich's favourite way of recording is first take with minimal overdubs, so this album has a really earthy, live feel. Moock's wearisome vocal delivery adds plenty of rustic charm to proceedings and, along with the understated but sympathetic backing lends *Fortune Street* its lazy, warm-hearted glow. Where Moock echoes Dylan the most is on 'Cloudsplitter', a condensed version of the book of the same name. Delivered one-take and solo, it tells the tale of controversial American abolitionist John Brown and marks Moock out as a lyricist of some depth and dexterity. The country blues/American/folk road is one well traveled and littered with casualties. Moock may be just another troubadour plying his trade but what makes *Fortune Street* stand out from the pack is its authenticity. It could have been recorded at any time in the last 50 years but it sounds fresh, vibrant and right now, and that's talent.

AH



Bright Eyes

Cassadaga

Saddle Creek  120g

An impassioned sentimentalist who flirts with modernist imagery, nonsense and bad habits, singer-songwriter Conor Oberst is a skilled craftsman of stately mid-tempo American pop music with classic hooks and deep roots in acoustic folk. *Cassadaga* establishes beyond doubt that Oberst, still in his twenties, is the real deal. His songs are grandly produced here with choirs, strings and sound effects, and more than a touch of a psychedelic sensibility. Happily, the results are fun rather than mere bombast. Just as good, *Cassadaga* is not all dressed up to distract your attention from an absence of underlying substance. The basic musical design and execution is solid as foundation stone. These songs would probably sound just as good if the layers of additional production were stripped away entirely. The elaborate production also makes plain the importance of contributions by the two other 'official' members of the group, guitarist and sound engineer Mike Mogis and keyboardist Nate Walcott. Mogis and Walcott may not seize the spotlight, but that is only because they are musicians who serve first the songs that Oberst has brought them. Together with the songsmith they have produced an album that continues to please over many listens.

PD



Chris Duarte Group

Blue Velocity

Provogue Records PRD72292 

Stevie Ray Vaughan became the guitarist every young pretender aspired to, and his passing left a massive void in the blues world. Copyists remain two a penny with some good, some adequate and some just plain ordinary, but the one who comes closest to the spirit of Stevie Ray is another Texan, the brilliant Chris Duarte. Duarte came to the attention of the music industry at the South By Southwest music festival in the early 90's. Lots of labels courted him but he settled on Silvertone, a company responsible for resurrecting the ailing careers of two blues heavyweights, namely John Lee Hooker and Buddy Guy. Duarte's debut, *Texas Sugar/Strat Magic* contained plenty of high octane blues and sold in excess of 100,000 copies, an eye-popping achievement for a relatively unknown name in the business. Duarte's released numerous albums since, but it's this one that comes closest to matching the brilliance of his first. He might get tired of the Stevie Ray comparisons but there are worse (much worse) fates than that. Because his singing voice is similar that's also going to compound things, but he has enough about him to stand out as a prominent artist in his own right. At 79 minutes *Blue Velocity* is too long, but for the most part it treads a riotously enjoyable path and is well deserving of your attention.

AH





Gandalf Murphy And The Slambovian Circus Of Dreams

Flapjacks From The Sky

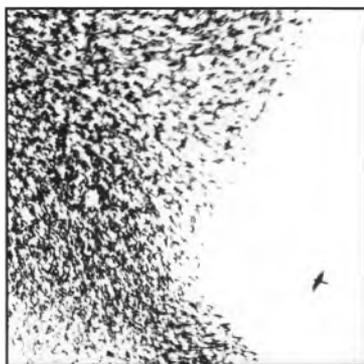
Slambovia Records

The oddly named Gandalf Murphy hail from New York and are led by the hugely talented Joziah Longo. In the early 90's, Joziah was the first American artist invited to perform in China, effectively ending the decade long ban on western music. The Circus, as they are affectionately known, formed in 1998 and soon became a popular fixture on the east coast of America. Their debut long player *A Good Thief Tips His Hat* cemented their reputation, and this follow up has more than enough about it to spread the word internationally. It takes a brave band to release a double studio album of 21 songs and expect to carry it off, but Longo's a songwriter of some substance and it's to his credit that there's very little filler here. He's also fortunate to have a gifted set of musicians at his disposal, players capable of handling the vast repertoire of styles that make up this hugely entertaining album.

Longo's voice (think Tom Petty colliding with Dylan and Lou Reed) is flexible enough to cover all the bases, as is the guitar playing of Sharkey McEwen who shines brightly throughout, particularly on the Floydian 'Talking To The Buddha'.

Diversity's the name of the game here; everybody will find something to tickle the taste buds, so take the plunge.

AH



Wilco

Sky Blue Sky

Nonesuch +

Sky Blue Sky may be the perfect Wilco album for those who didn't get the sonic experiments of the group's last two studio albums, *a ghost is born* and *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*. This one is smack in the middle of the road, but even traveling this conventional route, the group remains at the head of the pack. Leader Jeff Tweedy is writing and singing as well as ever. His songs here are more subtly crafted than usual but repay repeated listening just as well as any on the group's previous records. With his broad stylistic range, he manages to be the dominant personality, without becoming monotonous.

Tweedy's supporting musicians have never been stronger. Most notably, we see the studio debut of guitarist Neil Cline, who began touring with Wilco shortly after the release of *ghost*. Cline is such a fine player that he has a huge impact even in a purely supporting role. When he does get solo room he is superb - check out 'Impossible Germany' and 'Side With the Seeds'.

Sonics are very good, although a bit lacking in ambience. Vinyl buyers will be delighted with the 180g pressings, heavy gatefold jacket, and Stan Ricker's half-speed mastering. And it comes with a copy of the CD too - a nice idea!

PD



Gillian Glover

Red Handed

Maniac Squat Records MSL2007CD0004

Gillian Glover is the daughter of Deep Purple's Roger Glover, but don't expect 'Smoke On The Water' style hard rock to come thumping out of your speakers. That's not to say *Red Handed* doesn't rock - it does, albeit in a more restrained manner. Having a famous father probably helped Glover to assemble such a red hot band. On drums is ex-Spider, Woody Woodmansey, piano, organ and keyboards are handled by Rod Melvin, guitars and harmonica come courtesy of Claus Bohling and the string arrangements are lovingly crafted by Paul Buckmaster, the man responsible for the strings on Nilsson's 'Without You', amongst others. With such a vast array of talent at her disposal it would be criminal if Glover's songs couldn't do them justice, so it's pleasing to report that this debut album more than holds its own.

Buckmaster's glorious string arrangements on the touching 'Red Shoes' are a joy to behold, and Bohling's greasy slide playing on the bluesy 'Hot Knives' provides real menace. Glover's versatility in the vocal department enables her to tackle rock and blues with aplomb but the real accolades belong to the ballads, two of which - 'Go' and 'My Broken Skin' - possess goosebump inducing qualities. *Red Handed* is an incredibly mature and accomplished work of which its creator can be justifiably proud. She's 'go far.

AH





Roxanne Potvin

The Way It Feels

Ruf Records RUF1128 

Roxanne Potvin's contribution to the recent collaboration with fellow guitarists Sue Foley and Deborah Coleman marked her out as one to watch. On that album (*Timebomb*) her talents as a vocalist and guitarist shone like a beacon and this release, her second album but first for Ruf, will just add to the buzz beginning to circulate around her. Based in Quebec, Potvin is a bi-lingual unknown who, on the strength of her talents, has managed to get top producer Colin Linden on board along with two real heavyweights from the singer/songwriting fraternity, Bruce Cockburn and John Hiatt.

It doesn't take too many listens to *The Way It Feels* to understand why she's so highly rated. Aside from having a beautifully adaptive voice, she's one mean guitarist and a blossoming songwriter. Her own songs are good enough to stand alongside a classic like 'I Want To (Do Everything For You)' and not sound remotely out of place. As she purrs and belts her way through the 12 songs, thoughts of Muscle Shoals and New Orleans spring to mind, helped in no small part by her ability to sing accordian-drenched folk songs like 'La Marveille' in French. This is an incredibly accomplished work for one so young. She's not just another blues singer, she's a star waiting to happen.

AH



The Bad Plus

Prog

Do The Math/ Emarcy 172 68326 

The Bad Plus occupy their own space, somewhere between indie rock, postmodern jazz and pop. They have forged a sound that's not easy to categorise and that's no bad thing. This album contains an almost straight and rather delightful rendering of Bacharach's 'This Guys In Love With You', and an even more compelling version of Tears for Fears 'Everybody Wants to Rule the World', set amongst a rich mix of delicate reflective pieces, Anderson's 'The World is the Same' for example, at least in it's opening stages since this morphs into something altogether tougher and more challenging, and a fine version of Bowie's 'Life on Mars', along with hard driving much heavier material such as 'Physical Cities'. Other pieces at first feel more directly jazzy, such as the superb piano on 'Giant' although this piece has faint hints of ambient music in the mix that pulls it way from any easy categorisation. The album is stuffed with strong pieces and the whole experience makes for a really satisfying listen. It's packed with subtleties and surprises which I know will pay real dividends in repeated listening. This is a very fine album by any standard and for me has already sparked an interest in the earlier albums from this excellent band.

DD



Grayson Capps

Stavin' Chain

Ruf Records RUF1131 

If my memory serves me well, this record came out a fair few years ago on the Vertigo label under the moniker of Stavin' Chain. Back then it was hailed as something of a minor classic, but as so often happens it was overlooked and disappeared into the ether. What with Capps' re-emergence as a solo artist, those good folks at Ruf have decided to re-issue it under his name. Quite what John Lawrence, the other half of Stavin' Chain, thinks about being relegated to the role of sideman Lord only knows, but nevertheless this is an album that deserves to find its way into the collections of anyone loving swampy, blues-drenched roots rock. The rich musical heritage that is New Orleans pervades every inch of this fabulous record. From the sing-a-long swing of opener 'Poison', a track Capps resurrected on his last studio album, to the downright dirty slide guitars on 'Monkey Business' and the heavy drawl of the vocals throughout, the whole thing positively reeks of the deep south. You can almost taste the humidity, smell the local dishes and hear the crickets and the creaking of the rocking chairs on the back porch, such is its authenticity.

New Orleans has suffered horrendously in recent times, so how fitting this should re-emerge to remind us of its undying influence on the world of music.

AH





Jesse Malin

Glitter In The Gutter

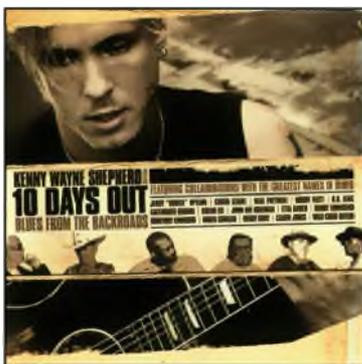
One Little Indian IPLP748CD 120g

For his latest record Jesse Malin stepped outside of the comfort zone of his home city of New York and relocated temporarily to Los Angeles. He found it a lonely town but realized living out of a suitcase brought a much sharper edge to his songwriting. As an ex-punk there's always going to be a certain amount of youthful energy in his songs, but there's much more to Malin than guitars that go up to 11. Like one of his heroes, Bruce Springsteen, Jesse's a storyteller who understands and connects with the working men and women of America. He's a street poet with a keen eye and ear for detail which he puts to good use in his powerful tales of hope and desolation.

As has been the case with the last two solo albums, his close friend Ryan Adams provides additional guitar and vocals, this time to three of the tracks. On one of those numbers, 'Broken Radio', Springsteen adds his considerable presence to proceedings for what turns out to be an album highlight.

The song has more than a hint of Springsteen's visionary style and could easily be one of his own compositions. *Glitter In The Gutter* completes a trilogy of fine releases for Malin. Adams had better pull his socks up fast.

AH



Kenny Wayne Shepherd

10 Days Out - Blues From The Backroads.

Reprise Records 49294-1

While Kenny Wayne Shepherd may not yet be a household name to everyone familiar with blues music, he's made considerable headway in the last decade. There is also an associated CD/DVD combination that was initially released which, through the documentary contained on the DVD, easily demonstrates Shepherd's talents, but more importantly, chronicles this trip which begins in New Orleans, Shreveport, Memphis, North Carolina and St. Louis ending in Salina, Kansas. The importance of this album is heightened by the fact that several of the artists recorded for this document are no longer with us. This musical journey took place in June of 2004. What you're paying your money to hear is Jerry "Boogie" McCain, Cootie Stark, Neal Pattman, Buddy Flett, B.B. King, Gatemouth Brown, Bryan Lee, John Dee Holeman, Etta Baker, Henry Townsend, Honeyboy Edwards, Hubert Sumlin, Henry Gray, Calvin Jones, Pinetop Perkins and Wild Child Butler. This is an important document chronicling a dying breed of American blues musicians. There's an additional and very real pleasure to have the opportunity, in addition to the musicians listed above, to hear the living members of the Muddy Waters Band as well as the living members of the Howlin' Wolf Band, perform with some of those artists. If you love the Blues, I think I've said enough.

Supplier: www.warnerbrothersmusic.com

RSF



Joe Bonamassa

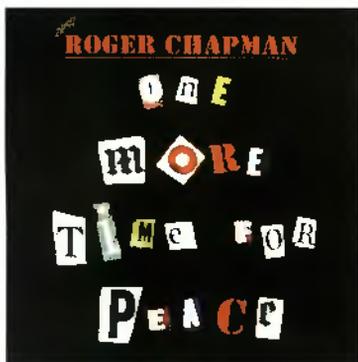
Sloe Gin

Provogue Records PRD7218

Bonomassa's pairing with producer Kevin Shirley on last year's breathtaking *You And Me* was an inspired move. Shirley had his own vision of how he wanted a Bonamassa album to sound and together they conjured a enormous vitality and depth. *You And Me* had an amazing sound and rocked harder than anything the guitarist had done before. It encouraged Bonamassa to stretch out and pull on all his vast influences, and it definitely won him a new army of adoring fans. Unsurprising, then, to find the pair working together on *Sloe Gin*, Bonomassa's seventh album. It maintains the same heavy blues vibe on the rockier numbers but there is also a leaning towards the reflective side. The cover of Bad Company's 'Seagull' remains pretty close to the original and suits Joe well, as does his terrific take on John Martyn's 'Jelly Roll', but of course what the fans really want to hear are plenty of those scaring electric runs that made his name. Enter the title track. Clocking in at over eight minutes it swoops and soars all over the place and is sure to become a highlight of Bonamassa's live shows. With Stevie Ray's passing the blues was looking for a new hero, and now it's got one. I see nothing to stand in the way of world domination

AH





Roger Chapman

One More Time For Peace

Mystic Records MYSCD200 

Roger Chapman wanted this album to sound "hand made". So, he assembled a fabulous array of musicians and simply let them loose in the studio with very little rehearsal and precious little guidance. What materialized from those sessions is a record brimming with vitality, spontaneity and that all important but hard-to-achieve commodity...feel.

Considering how long Chapman's been plying his trade, his voice is in damn good shape. That gravel-throated roar with the distinctive warble that put him on the map with Family and Streetwalkers is put to rollicking good use on *One More Time For Peace*, a collection of self-penned tunes as good as anything in Chapman's vast body of work. The title track is a country-tinged paean to what this beautiful world needs most right now, but seems incapable of finding. It's a cracking start but by no means the best track on the album. In fact, so strong is the songwriting and performances it's hard to pick an outright winner, but if push comes to shove the rousing 'Hell Of A Lullaby' possibly crosses the line in first place. Chapman remains a valid force in music, and this is one record that definitely needs to be heard.

AH



Prefab Sprout

Steve McQueen

Kitchenware/SonyBMG KWCD3-25 

Here is a re-master that – for once – has not stoked the ire of ultra-dedicated 'fans' (and that's being polite), unleashing hell on the online forums. Prefab Sprout's second album is so revered that anything less than perfection would be seen as a crime against art. Fortunately the combined talent of songwriter Paddy McAloon and Thomas Dolby have produced one of the best re-issues for some time. The original album had the distinctive 'glassy' sound of mid-80s chart-friendly pop, with rolled-off bass and the hard midrange typical of the time. The re-master brings the album much closer to the Quincy Jones and Streeley Dan productions that Prefab Sprout endeavoured to match. Packaged with the re-mastered album is a second disc of guitar/vocal arrangements, a valid reinterpretation of the original album. The basic tone of McAloon's voice has changed remarkably little over the years, though he is now able to convey more emotional weight. 'Goodbye Lucille #1' is heady stuff in its new incarnation, while 'Desire As' and 'Taron Young' are bathed in a Mediterranean glow (what would a Prefab Sprout review be without some old-fashioned pretentious guil?) The new recordings distil the 'accessible complexity' of Prefab Sprout's music and mock the fate that denied them chart success, especially in the homeland of Mr McQueen himself. Is it too much to hope that the other Prefab albums will be re-issued with the same imagination and care?

RC



Rosie Thomas

These Friends Of Mine

Sing-A-Long Records 5 03 7703 063624 

Listening to Rosie Thomas as she gently wanders these ten songs, it's hard to imagine her in her other role as a stand-up comic. Rosie's hushed tones and the sparse backing are hardly conducive to a barrel load of laughs, but that's the beauty and the conundrum of this most charming of singer-songwriters.

Rosie's recorded output follows a simple, expressive path - beautiful and deeply personal folksy meanderings delivered in a lovely homely falsetto. When she has her musician's hat on she's not looking to extract laughter from her audience, merely to encourage them to walk with her through the landscapes of her mind.

These Friends Of Mine finds her working with current darling of the press, Sufjan Stevens and another friend, Denson Winter having retired to a Brooklyn apartment armed with a couple of microphones to catch the songs as they tumbled out. New York provided inspiration aplenty and a fair smattering of these songs have the famous city pulsing through their veins. Through Rosie's words and Sufjan's studio abilities the album becomes yet another owing a huge debt to New York's considerable influence. The cover of REM's 'The One I Love' is a real treat too; stripped of all its clutter it becomes a truly inspired piece, the only downer being yet another version of Fleetwood Mac's 'Songbird'.

AH





BILLY COBHAM

DRUMMER, IMPROVISER, ENTERTAINER

Interviewed by Anke Kathrin Bronner

There are only a few drummers in the world who understand how to make percussion instruments sing; Billy Cobham is one of them. This incredibly energetic instrumentalist and technically accomplished musician has been the acoustical heartbeat for Miles Davis, John McLaughlin, Lany Coyell and many others. So much more than a mere human metronome – he left his mark on nearly a hundred recordings.

His collaborations with musicians from other genres, such as Peter Gabriel or The Grateful Dead, are legendary. These excursions into pop and rock music have not only broadened his horizons, but popularised both Billy and his distinctive technique, establishing the drum kit as an instrument equal within the rock band. And his versatility as an entertainer extends beyond his music – this man's a real tease!



AKB: Billy, who were your heroes as a child?

BC: Actually, sportsmen (giggles).

AKB: Really?

BC: Yeah, like baseball players. Like Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella, baseball players with the Brooklyn Dodgers which are now the Los Angeles Dodgers. And guys like Willy Mays from the Giants and Joe Demaggio from the Yankees. I was either going to play sports or I was gonna play music. But I felt more for the music than I did for the sport, so that's where I ended up.

AKB: And what did you learn from these sportsmen?

BC: That you have to work as a part of a team. Music's the same, especially in a symphony orchestra. Unfortunately, finding such a "team" – especially in a classical environment – that's very rare. Number one: There are so many individuals involved. Number two: All of those individuals are incredibly accomplished, generally legends in their own minds, so they end up not working as well together as they should. But when they do, it's one of the most amazing things. I once heard the NYPO playing *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. That was very heavy

when it clicked. It was like you went to another world. It's just beyond understanding. It's the same in any band. When everybody clicks the music has all the power, the combined power of all the individuals playing it.

AKB: As one person?

BC: Yeah, it becomes one. Then it's Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Or it can be

Zubin Mehta with the New York or the Israeli. Or, I mean, it can be many others: It can be the Vienna, you know, in the good days. That was special. Especially with the Beethoven it was very heavy.

AKB: Do you have experience with classical music? You studied music, but was it classical or jazz?

BC: I studied classical, at the School of Performing Arts in New York. That's why I know about this, because I was in the orchestra first. In middle school we had to take these courses. We learnt a certain discipline that is very, very important for me.

AKB: And when did you decide to go with jazz or fusion and not play classical music any longer? ▶

► **BC:** I think when I was in my teens. Because I felt that I had more opportunity to be creative on an individual basis as opposed to being part of an orchestra that was playing music and trying to interpret the music of people who lived maybe as much as 200 or 300 years before. That's very, very difficult to do.

AKB: And you have to follow the conductor.

BC: Well, his interpretation of the music. At least. And this is where the conflict arose; because there is more than one conductor in the orchestra. You know, there's a first chair in each different section and they each have their own interpretation of the music. So, you got a problem, you know.

AKB: Of course! And you can agree with the conductor's opinion or with his interpretation...

BC: There you are!

AKB: ...or you can disagree. And then you have a basic problem, I think.

BC: Oh my, oh my, oh my...

AKB: It's a hard job!

BC: Yeah, yeah!

AKB: You played your first concert with your father, at the age of eight. Did he play the drums, too?

BC: The piano.

AKB: And did you grow up with Jazz?

BC: I grew up with Latin and jazz music. We are from Panama, so we heard a lot of music like this. And it all, you know, comes together, different kinds of things. And my dad is a fan of jazz musicians like Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis, Erroll Garner, Duke Ellington, Count Basie... Then on the other side there was Tito Puente, people like that. So, I had a very rich foundation.

AKB: But to be a jazz musician, you need a lot of inspiration.

BC: Yeah, yeah!

AKB: And for your improvisations, you need a lot of ideas. Where do you get them from?

BC: From everyday life. Everything I do, everything I experience in life is reflected in the way I play.

AKB: And do you think anybody could improvise? A lot of classical players are too shy...

BC: With the basic theoretical background, anyone can do it.

AKB: But how could you teach it?

BC: You have to live it! Everything you can hear, all of that chaos goes into my mind (Editor's note: the interview took place in the forecourt of hell – at the Frankfurt Music Fair, at the Sabian cymbals booth in the percussion and accessories hall where ANYBODY gets to try and play). When I come away, some things will stick. Right now, I hear rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr. Okay. But as I get closer, I hear individual patterns. It's like... getting close enough to the sun, seeing past the sunlight you see all the storms. In close, everything is going on, whilst where we are it's just a white sun we can't even look at it, it's so intense. The same thing is happening in here. Okay, as you get closer, and you hear patterns, these patterns stay. They fall into certain categories. You play as a violinist, so take a great violinist like Didier Lockwood from Paris –who plays with me in the String Quartet. He is a great example of someone who plays the music as he speaks it. He can be almost like a singer. You can hear the notes for just what they are. Based on the fact that you know what will work within a certain chordal structure and how to make those notes become some kind of melody, you can draw in what you need. There are only so many different chordal patterns. Once you get familiar with them in all keys, all modes, then it's about just being selective and choosing the particular patterns to suit your idea and presentation. You choose that and eventually you start to create a thought that is a parallel to the actual melody. So, you know, you can have a melody that stays all the time and you can say (sings a melody). Then you can play (improvises over the tune): It's the same thing.

AKB: But for melody instruments it's really hard to keep in harmony.

BC: Is that right?

AKB: Yeah, it's really hard to know if this note fits into this key or into that chord. They are not used to think in this harmonic way!

BC: But this is a mind thing. Everything is hard. You know, you have to crawl before you walk! You didn't just get up and run when you were born. Everything in stages. You know, you listen to music, you hear a melody and you play a game with yourself sometimes. I did. I sat down and first I learnt the scales. But that's technical. Then you have to put your ►

Biography William "Billy" Cobham

1944:	William Cobham is born on 16 May in Panama		
1952:	First concert appearance with his father, a pianist		
1959:	Starts music studies at the High School of Music And Arts, New York, NY	1994:	Tours with Peter Gabriel in Europe and US
1962:	Billy gets his diploma in music	1998:	Another performance at the Montreux Jazz Festival with George Duke and at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Tokyo with George Duke, Najee, Pieces Of A Dream, Angela Bofill, The Crusaders, Rochelle Farrell, and McCoy Tyner
1968:	First recordings with his discoverer Horace Silver (<i>Serenade To A Soul Sister</i> , Blue Note)	1999:	Starts work on <i>Conundrum</i> book series and records with the London Jazz Orchestra
1969:	Starts recording with Miles Davis; foundation of fusion group <i>Dreams</i> with Randy Et Michael Brecker, John Abercrombie.	2000:	Extensive touring in Europe and Malaysia with Higher Ground
1970-1973:	Member of the legendary Mahavishnu Orchestra with John McLaughlin	2001:	Performances with The Art of 4 (with Ron Carter a.o) and other bands all across Europe
1973:	Billy signs with Atlantic Records and releases his first solo album <i>Spectrum</i> , which is awarded Best Jazz Album by <i>Billboard Magazine</i>	2002:	Concerts for WOMAD and at Real World in Bath
1974:	Billy records <i>You've Got A Friend</i> with Donny Hathaway and Roberta Flack	2003:	Invitation to India to perform with L. Subramaniam and Jean-Luc Ponty; concert in Moscow with Culture Mix (Airtro Moreira and Hiram Bullock)
1975:	First performance at Montreux Jazz Festival	2004:	Performance with Culture Mix at the Blue Note in Milan and extensive touring in Europe and the US; concerts with the radio station WDR Big Band in Germany; Billy has the honour to play with jazz pianist Marchal Solal and Dr. Billy Taylor at UNESCO headquarters in Paris
1979:	Billy performs at Montreux Jazz Festival with Oscar Peterson, Count Basie and Nils-Henning Orsted Pedersen	2005:	Performances with Didier Lockwood, with McCoy Tyner, with John Abercrombie and world tour with Culture Mix; filming for <i>Sonic Mirror</i> , a Mika Kaurismäki film featuring Billy Cobham
1980:	The drummer appears with The Grateful Dead at Radio City Music Hall	2006:	Recordings with Colin Towns and the HR Big Band (A Celebration of the Mahavishnu Orchestra); Billy releases <i>Drum'n Voice Part 2</i> , a return to 70's jazz funk with Jan Hammer, John Patitucci, and Airtro Moreira
1981:	Billy moves to Switzerland where he now lives part of the time	2007:	<i>Sonic Mirror</i> is premiered at the film festival Munich Filmfest
1983:	Tours Japan with Gil Evans and Miles Davis		
1985:	Exhibition of photographic work at the Vincent Kling Architectural Galleries in Philadelphia		
1988:	Billy records the soundtrack for Martin Scorsese's <i>The Last Temptation of Christ</i> with Peter Gabriel		
1991:	Performances at the Playboy Jazz Festivals at Hollywood Bowl and in Tokyo		
1992:	Billy performs, records and produces at WOMAD Festival with Peter Gabriel, Okuta Percussion (Nigeria), and		

► heart into it. How would it feel to say to yourself: "Okay, I know you make me feel so young." Okay, it's alright. So, you sing this, you play this. And then you go: Now, how would I play it? Same thing, but I just alter this around. Same notes, different order; that is what improvisation is. It's an anagram of the original!

AKB: And when you hear a melody, do you hear matching harmonies in your mind?

BC: Sure, immediately! But again it's about learning and being disciplined, you know. To do that, you know, there are certain laws. And if you adhere to those laws and those rules, you realize there are very few, because it is only about making music, not being technical. That is the primary goal: It is about making music. Your proficiency level can only be a support mechanism for the end result.

AKB: You played with Miles Davis. Wasn't it strange to record *Bitches Brew* with one of your childhood heroes?

BC: Well, it was fun to be part of that series of recordings and it added to the foundations of my performance now, yes. ►



AKB: How was it to play with him?

BC: Educational! He gave me a really strong, settled direction that helped me mature, took me beyond what I could have done if I hadn't met him. I had to play all the time as if I knew just what I was doing. I had to be responsible for my mistakes.

I couldn't say: "I'm sorry, I'll try again." No one wanted to hear that. So you do

everything you can because you have to, you're responsible for what you present. So you played like you meant it – all the time. No excuses. That's hard work.

AKB: But this challenge pushed you?

BC: It gave me... It wasn't just me. For instance, there were many times when we made recordings where I was not the only drummer in the band. There were maybe two or three other drummers. And we had to work together. Sometimes it meant that I didn't play. But I had to make that decision. Main thing was that I made a contribution that I could stand behind. Even if that contribution ended up in silence. ►

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► But I had to be responsible enough to make that decision.

AKB: You also played with the Mahavishnu Orchestra and recorded a lot of albums with them. Could you tell me something about the cooperation with John McLaughlin, about working with him?

BC: What can I say? (Pauses) It's actually an extension of the situation with Miles. That's where I met him. We were all going through the same thing.

AKB: But you had a more equal partnership with John than with Miles?

BC: Yeah, it was more... I mean a quality kind of thing with John where contributions had to be made by me at the drum set to support the music that he had written. So, we learned to rely on each other for certain patterns and certain feelings by playing together quite a bit. The beauty of working in Mahavishnu with John was that we played close to 450 concerts in less than two years. So, that didn't leave a lot of days off. But the end result was very, very strong. Unfortunately, it grew so rich and strong that it intimidated John, the leader. And he disbanded the group. He got some other people in who I think were less understanding of the material that he was writing, who just wanted to play like him. When I say that I mean the keyboard player Jan Hammer, who was so much into playing like John. He stopped playing piano and played synthesizer. And he created a synthesizer sound that's very, very close to John McLaughlin's guitar. And again that intimidated John very heavily, because he could play all of John's lines better than John could. This was a problem for John. I can understand that! Jan Hammer also played drums well – well enough, he could have played in the band instead of me, and he would have it done very well. He came from a very strong classical family. He played violin. So, who needs a Jerry Goodman? You know, it was like that kind of thing. But that was just Jan. He knew every bass line, no problem. There was Rick (Laird), a very fine writer and great artist in his own right, just developing. Now he's actually pretty much given up the bass. He's become a successful photographer and painter, you know. And so John had these people around him. Jerry Goodman had been playing with many, many rock'n'roll bands on the West coast.



And he came from a family where father and mother were in the Chicago Lyric Opera Orchestra, you know, first chair violins. It's heavy. So, it got so strong with the band like this playing together that John created a monster he was losing control over, I think. So, we had to go our own ways.

AKB: Has it always been a sort of competition for him?

BC: I think so, yeah. You know, he ended up competing with a... It's kind of like he built a mirror image of himself. He had to look at himself in this mirror and the reflection was becoming greater than he was.

AKB: Oh, that's hard to bear.

BC: And he couldn't make it, yeah.

AKB: You also played with Oscar Peterson!

BC: Yes, I did. I recorded with Oscar Peterson: with O.P. and Count Basie and Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen. I took Buddy Rich's place at the last minute and played at the Montreux Festival. I never heard the tapes... But it was an honour for me!

AKB: Of course! Oscar is fantastic!

BC: Yeah, yeah, a pretty special person!

AKB: Are there still artists you would like to play with? I mean, you have played with nearly everybody!

BC: No! There is one!

AKB: Who is it?

BC: Joni Mitchell!

AKB: Okay!

BC: But she retired!

AKB: Unfortunately! Anybody else?

BC: No, I'm happy with just the way things are going. ►

Discography (Selected):

As a bandleader:

- 1973: Shabazz - Live In Montreux (WEA)
- 1974: Crosswinds (WEA)
- 1975: A Funky Thide of Sings (WEA)
- 1976: Life and Times (WEA)
- 1977: Magic (WEA)
- 1978: Simplicity of Expression - Depth Of Thought (CBS Records)
- 1980: Stratus (INAK, Direct cut)
- 1985: Warning (GRP)
- 1987: Picture This (GRP)
- 1991: By Design (FNAC)
- 1993: The Traveler (FNAC)
- 1998: Focused (Eagle Records)
- 2000: North By NorthWest (Creative MultiMedia Concepts)
- 2001: Billy Cobham, Ron Carter, Kenny Baron: The Art of Three (In+Out Records); Rudiments - The Billy Cobham Anthology (Rhino)
- 2002: Drum'n'voice all that groove (with Michael & Randy Brecker) (Nicolosi Productions - Just Groove)
- 2004: Live on Tour in Europe (WEA International)
- 2006: Drum'n'voice 2 (Nicolosi Productions - Just Groove); A Celebration of the Mahavishnu Orchestra (with Colin Towns, HR Bigband) (In+Out Records)



As a sideman:

- 1968: Horace Silver: Serenade to A Soul Sister (Blue Note); George Benson: Giblel Gravy (Verve)
- 1970: Miroslav Vitous: Purple (CBS Records); Miles Davis: Bitches Brew (CBS Records)
- 1971: Mahavishnu Orchestra: My Goals Beyond (CBS Records)
- 1972: Mahavishnu Orchestra: Inner Mountain Flame (CBS Records)
- 1973: Mahavishnu Orchestra: Birds of Fire (CBS Records); Mahavishnu Orchestra: Between Nothingness & Eternity (CBS Records); Carlos Santana & Mahavishnu John McLaughlin: Love Devotion Surrender (CBS Records)
- 1974: Roberta Flack/Donny Hathaway: You've Got a Friend (WEA)
- 1981: Gil Evans: Live at the Public Theater (Trio/Japan)
- 1988: Peter Gabriel: Passion (Real World)
- 1994: Stanley Clarke, Larry Carlton, Billy Cobham, Najee: Live at the Greek (Epic)
- 1997: Paradox: Paradox (1997, Enja)

The reason I like Joni is because I really respect her approach to music, and I love her visual art! It all goes together. Beautiful what she does, what she paints, and she's got some great ideas for tunes. I've always felt like I'd love to do something behind that, you know! Such is life: you can't have everything.

AKB: Maybe, one day you can convince her.

BC: Yeah... it's okay by me if it never happens. It's just that

when I think about someone she's the someone I wouldn't mind working with.

AKB: And she's influenced so many singers so it would be great if you worked together!

BC: Yeah! And she just has great ideas, great lyrics. She's very, very...

AKB: Charismatic?

BC: Yeah! You can hear what she says. I mean, everything, every word you can understand, you know. And her approach is really very interesting, a unique approach. I love the work, the material she developed for Charlie Mingus. And things like that feel special. When she had the band with

Herbie Hancock and Jaco Pastorius, Wayne Shorter, and Don Alias. It was a great band! Those are special things...

AKB: And what are your plans for the future? Are you planning a combination between classical and jazz?

BC: Yes! I will be performing, if everything works right, some pieces of my own with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra in 2008. It's for septet, featuring Randy Brecker, Ernie Watts, Frank Gambale who played with Chick (Corea), Stefan Rademacher, myself, and a kid named Marshall Gilkes - he is a great trombonist. Oh, and Hughes Woitila, who is a great pianist and drummer, because a lot of the things we are doing are for two drums as well. And we'll tour Australia in March 2008 with my music.

AKB: And will it be improvised, the part for orchestra?

BC: No, I've written parts for the orchestra.

AKB: And will you improvise, or are your parts fixed?

BC: No, the parts for us are written, but there's space for improvisation inside. That's the reason for Randy and Ernie and Marshall and everybody, you know. I've got what we call "bringers" in every section, and when it comes time to play the solos, they go out and solo.

AKB: What's your favourite set-up - a duo, a big band, or as a soloist? What do you prefer?

BC: I don't have a favourite. I would highly recommend that you listen to my recordings and decide for yourself! (Laughs)

AKB: We have a lot of your recordings. ▶

► **BC:** And they are all different, right?

AKB: Yes.

BC: That's good! That's good! So, you can choose which one because I love to play in many different combinations.

AKB: But you have always played in the rhythm section of the band. Have you never ever wished to play a melody instrument? To play the piano or the clarinet?

BC: But I have the melody instrument!!!!

AKB: I knew you would say that!

BC: What you ask me for then (giggles)???

AKB: Because I want you to explain to our readers how drums can be a melody instrument!

BC: Ahm, the drums are not a rhythmic instrument. They are a melodic instrument. A violin would be a rhythmic instrument if a person only wanted to make rhythms on it. But that would be criminal! Because you can get so many tones from a violin. You can get the same thing from a drum. How else could we have communicated across thousands of kilometres? Not just with rhythm, but by the inflections in those rhythms, the tones that come from a drum. It's the same as talking. Every instrument we have, that we play, it emulates what we say. It can be a trumpet, it can be tuba, it can be drum, it can be clarinet, it doesn't matter. It can be a string instrument, any type! We play it the same way we speak. We don't speak in a monotone. We speak polytone; we play drums polytone. Certain drums we assign to specific notes; we play them together, we construct chords. I do that very easily so, for me the idea that drums are a supportive instrument only comes from those who want drums to be a supportive instrument. If that's what they want, that's good – nothing wrong with that. But then there is another world. And that's the world I belong to!

AKB: And what do you think about jazz and its position in the musical world today? Are you afraid that there won't be any jazz musicians within the next twenty or thirty years?

BC: When jazz goes away, we all die! Jazz is on the cutting edge of everything we do! Jazz is the Lewis and Clark explorers... It's an exploration platform. People come in, they say, "Oh, what will gonna happen if we did this with (hums "Twinkle twinkle little star")." And it becomes something else. You can change it to this. Next thing you know, wow. So, now we have two things. And someone comes along and says: I like the alternative to (sings "Twinkle..." again). Okay, so let's make that popular. Now we have pop music. And that's how life goes. Jazz is the extreme. It's not designed to be extremely popular. The ideas from it,

some of them, are taken and made popular. The rest – pffftt – gone to the next thing, because jazz musicians are always searching. Always searching; Yes, that works, that doesn't work. What would happen if I played that tonally? How can I express myself without having to play in any key or in any pitch? So, what comes out is what we could call chaotic. Based on what our society says it is. There is one part of – I think it's Beethoven's *Ninth* – every time I reach that part and I start to hear this, I speed up, when I am driving. It's just that kind of way. And I am realizing (goes on with singing) and then the cops come you know, and it's over for me. Music is that kind of drug, you know. It reflects sonically who you are and what you are doing at the time. The music, the arts, it's all – we all think it, we all act it. This is where it is!

AKB: And how do you think you can reach young people with jazz?

BC: How can we reach them? By playing it as a unit. Playing it from what we said from the heart, which is from the brain, from the soul, what we really believe. If you really play what you believe, people will communicate and they either say: "I disagree with you", or "I agree with you." But they will react. Their reaction will come back to you and you go... It's a conversation, it's a debate, if you will. But when you don't do what you are supposed to do, when you say: "Ah, ah, you know, it comes off! But I'm really not sure if I'm gonna play this or gonna play that": This is junk! Body language says: Why am I here? Maybe I should leave? Okay, I leave!

AKB: So, which advice would you give a young musician if he wanted to start a jazz career?

BC: Have patience, this will take a while!



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**Knut Rössler & Johannes Vogt
with Miroslav Vitous**

Between the Times

Act 9463-2 

17th Century jazz anyone? Please don't run for the door since against all odds Rössler (saxophone and flute), and Vogt (lute and synthesizer), have carved something very special here. Helped by powerful (and well-recorded) double bass from Miroslav Vitous, the ex-Weather Report founder member and Miles Davis sideman, along with percussion from Main Neumeier, this set really works. Based loosely on lute music written in mid seventeenth century Paris, the original tunes are used as the starting point for improvisation with the reworking extending the mood or creating a contrast with the original tune. For me this works really well, the power in Vitous' playing gives a solid and earthy foundation for the delicacy of the lute and alto flute and soprano sax. Neumeier's contributions are subtle and add texture and interest throughout and the whole thing makes for a different and really satisfying musical experience. All the numbers here are strong, but a particular standout and great sampler track that will rapidly get you hooked, is 'Dialogue'. In the central section the soprano sax floats high above the open-tuned lute, weaving intricate melodies underpinned by a subtle wash of synth along with brushed percussion and the whole is bound together by a stunning solo from Vitous.

DD



Danielsson, Dell, Landgren

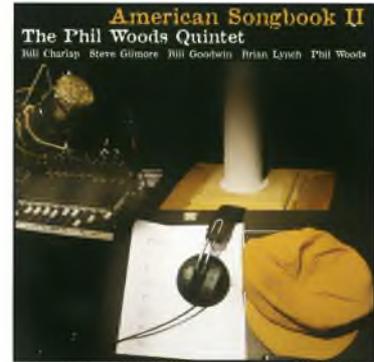
Salzau Music on the Water

ACT 9445-2 

Recorded live alongside the dawn chorus on a pier and platform extending into the palace pond at Salzau, Germany, this CD really does provide the proverbial breath of fresh air. The trio comprises bassist Lars Danielsson, Christopher Dell on vibes, and on trombone and vocals Nils Landgren. The venue – perhaps best described as an open-framed shed on a pier, with a mass of assorted cutlery and metal rods hanging from steel wires suspended between the roof beams – is nothing if not unusual. The trio make full use of this throughout the performance, either through the fact that the elements and any movement will provide a gentle tinkling backdrop to the music or through more direct engagement. The CD opens with the sound of birdsong and restrained percussive sounds from the web of suspended cutlery, as the musicians gently introduce themselves. Swans on the pond add their voices to the mix as this seamless 11-part set gets underway. The music slowly builds throughout and the whole piece is very much about conveying a real sense of the environment the music was recorded in. The birdsong is present throughout and at times you can hear a gentle breeze blowing. The whole fits together perfectly to create a calm and genuinely soothing experience without once resorting to the mind-numbing mush on so many 'relaxation' CDs.

Supplier: www.actmusic.com

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The Phil Woods Quintet

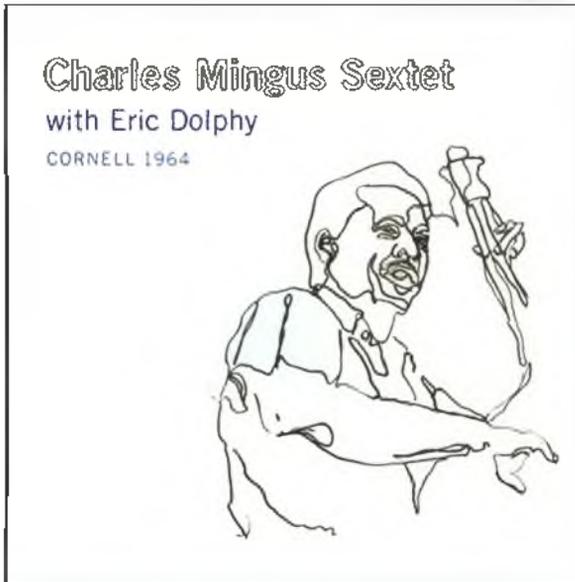
American Songbook 2

Kind of Blue KOB10022 

Following hot on the heels of the award winning 2006 release *American Songbook*, Phil Woods gets together again with the same line-up: pianist Bill Charlap, trumpeter Brian Lynch, double bassist Steve Gilmore and drummer Bill Goodwin, to work through another set of American standards. Given the quality of the players involved and of that first release, it's no surprise that this is an equally strong and enjoyable set. Packed with great solos, good arrangements (four from Brian Lynch, the rest by Woods), and the foundation of the core material, those great songs, what's not to like? Standouts include a fine muted trumpet solo in 'Careless', Wood's fluid intro to 'Last Night When We Were Young', the ensemble playing on Arlen & Mercers 'Come Rain or Come Shine', 'Yesterday's for both Wood's and Gilmore's solos, and the sprightly treatment of that much loved warhorse 'Night and Day'. Like the first set much of the enjoyment here comes from the knowledge that you're in expert hands, a bunch of fine musicians who have earned their chops, none more so than their 75-year-old leader, confidently delivering a skilful and never complacent working through of much loved standards.

DD





Charles Mingus Sextet with Eric Dolphy

Cornell 1964

Blue Note 

In 2005 Blue Note pulled off the most notable archival jazz release of recent years. *Thelonious Monk with John Coltrane at Carnegie Hall*, formerly unknown, stands as the best available record of the work that Monk and Coltrane did together. Cornell 1964 is an equally obscure archival recording of another great collaboration, that between bassist/composer Charles Mingus and multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy. It is a more than worthy sequel. Cornell 1964 captures a complete concert by one of Mingus' greatest groups, a sextet he built over two months at New York's Five Spot in early 1964. Mingus took the group on a famous European tour later that year, but the California university concert documented here took place in March of 1964, when the group was still freshly hunted. The band's music combined a deep respect for tradition with a determination to explore the future. While Ellington, Waller and Tatum are among the composers whose work is represented here, the group set no boundaries and did not hesitate to see how far they could take the music. The result is an extensive set of superior modern

jazz, including versions of Mingus cornerstones 'Orange Was the Colour of Her Dress', 'Fables of Faubus' and 'So Long Eric' that will stand with any in the catalogue. A 17-minute version of Ellington's 'Take the 'A' Train' is a splendid tribute to swing. Two light encores, 'When Fresh Eyes Are Smiling' and 'Jitterbug Waltz', are a delight. The individual performances by Dolphy and Mingus in particular are superb. Dolphy is often ecstatic here, especially on 'Fables of Faubus', while Mingus is positively flying throughout the set. Although there have been many recordings of this group, legitimate and otherwise, Cornell 1964 is certainly a match for any of them: It may well be the best. This album also has the advantage of being one of the few recordings of the group with trumpeter Johnny Coles, who was ill for much of the subsequent European tour. The recording itself is also generally very good, with a nice live ambience. It captures Mingus' playing especially well. For some reason 'Meditations' suffers and does not sound as good as the rest of the set – the track also blighted by occasional dropouts and phasing – but don't let that stop you from getting this wonderful release.

PD

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Mina Agossi

Who Wants Love?

Candid CCD 79855 

The French-Beninese singer Mina Agossi has carved her own unique style. Performing without the aid of harmonic backing she works typically with just drums and bass, although the results are infinitely more subtle and rewarding than that simple combination might imply. Her two previous albums *Zaboom* and *Well You Needn't* have proved very successful but here she's captured in her natural environment and at her very best, live on stage. Recorded over two nights in New York she's accompanied by Eric Jacot on bass and Ichiro Onoe on drums along with Daoud David Williams on percussion and Rob Henke on trumpet. If you're new to her, it'll probably take a while to adapt to her approach; familiar songs can be deconstructed, sometimes starting with a spoken version before slowly picking up pace and taking flight. Her masterly version of 'The Very Thought of You' is a great example. Or, she can create her own unique version of unlikely material, witness the band's stunning take of Hendrix' 'Spanish Castle Magic'. The set is also packed with her own songs, but takes in a delightful version of the Gershwins 'Slap That Bass', and a slinky take of Ellington's 'Do Nothing 'til You Hear From Me'. The recording is excellent and rewards replaying at an appropriately realistic volume.

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The History Man...

by Richard S. Foster

Attack Of The Killer 300Bs... Not all tubes are created equal.

Some are more equal than others. After 18 months, with more than two dozen quad sets – I require four power tubes for my pair of Manley Neo-Classic SE/PP 300B amplifiers – and kit from almost half a dozen different manufacturers, I've had first hand experience of the fact that not all 300B tubes are created equal: in fact, far from it. The Manley amps allow me to switch between single-ended and push-pull topology and although the latter tends to give a more focused and definite sound in my system, I've spent time with each set of tubes in both configurations. I've listened in single-ended and I've listened in push-pull, I've listened long and I've listened late.

I began this journey in late 2005 with Issue 42 (The History Man discusses the Euro Audio Team 300B) and continued it through Issue 48 where I reported my results with the Sophia Electric S.E.T. Princess 300B Mesh Plate Tube. Now it's time to round things out and include the legendary Western Electric, as well as a few other options in passing. It's been an educational journey – so what have I learnt? That once again, in all things audio there is no true right or wrong, personal preference and bias play will play an important role in one's personal selections, a fact that should temper any inclination to rush out and follow "advice".

It's important to bring the EAT 300B and the Sophia Electric S.E.T. Princess Mesh Plate into my final thoughts. Add to these tubes, the Sophia Electric S.E.T. Princess 300B Carbon Plate, the Golden Dragon 4-300B and Golden Dragon 4-300BM (Carbon Plate and Mesh Plates), the OEM supplied Electro-Harmonix and the (in)famous Western Electric 300B electron tube and I've covered a fair spread of the available options, some of it more than once, still others never to be revisited or mentioned.

While I've commented on the Electro-Harmonix before, I think it's a fine tube, especially when used as an OEM product supplied as standard. In fact, standard pretty much sums it up, as that's what it sets – the benchmark for 300B performance. A good all-rounder, it's a tube you can live with, but it's not going to be elected prom queen. Its sonic shortcomings were noted in Issue 42 and I should repeat here that my experience of it is not without noise and crackle issues which, in addition

to limited headroom, were the cause of my search for superior alternatives. The EAT 300B was a giant leap forward and remains one of my top choices today, but the Electro-Harmonix is affordable and serviceable. Don't knock it unless you want to drop the coin on the fancy contenders.

I having received both types of Golden Dragon 300B tubes, I was anxious to hear the differences between them. Unfortunately, these tubes didn't last long in my system as there were biasing issues with both quad sets. Which was a shame because both these tubes deliver an airy, open and unfettered view over the musical landscape. There's a delicate, almost translucent quality to their sound which can be stunning on the right music (think pastoral, think RVW). Unfortunately, the bias on both sets of these tubes kept drifting. Perhaps there was something amiss, but I was quite surprised that both types of tube in both amplifiers gave me consistent biasing problems. They just wouldn't hold their bias properly for a solid hour (barely long enough even to get a proper handle on their sound) and so they had to go. Which is a great pity because what's good about the Golden Dragons is very nice indeed...

While I really enjoyed the Sophia Electric S.E.T. Princess 300B Mesh Plate Tube, the contrast to their equally enjoyable S.E.T. Princess 300B Carbon Plate is fascinating. While I felt the Mesh Plate had an openness, clarity and sweetness without euphonic colouration, I feel the dynamics of the Carbon Plate are more at play. The difference in perceived dynamic power displayed by the Carbon Plate brings it much closer in sound to the Euro Audio Team tube. It seems a more powerful tube than its sibling, with valuable additional headroom. It offered me all the positives of the Mesh Plate without missing a beat, but with the added sense of directness, life and energy that comes from that wider dynamic range. This tube is extremely stable, holding rock-solid bias and delivering a direct, no-nonsense approach to music. Nor is there any glare, edge or thinness at any stage



▶ of operation – even when you push your amplifier to the brink. I found this to be an ideal tube for large orchestral works and heavily amplified rock music. Whether I played the fabulous EMI TWO 404 – Louis Frémaux conducting the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in Saint-Saëns *Organ Symphony*, or my promo of the AC/DC masterpiece, Back in Black on U.S. Atlantic SD 16018, the Sophia Electric S.E.T. Princess 300B Carbon Plate tubes just sang. Listening to the unmistakable voice of John Lee Hooker on the Antilles soundtrack (AN 8755), The Hot Spot was simply divine. His moanin' and humming was exceptionally well defined in the complex mix of Tim Drummond's bass, the trumpet of Miles Davis as well as the slide guitar of Roy Rogers and drums of Earl Palmer, all woven together (Coming to Town).

Oh, and have I mention how delicate this tube can sound? That's what I mean about it losing nothing to the Mesh Plate. Grab your Hybrid SACD copy of Mary Chapin Carpenter's fabulous Sony disc (CS 85176) *Time Love Sex* and turn to track number nine, 'Someone Else's Prayer'. If you've ever wondered what it would be like to be in a recording studio, this track will fulfill your most intimate dreams. It definitely exposes all. The noise floor is so low on this DSD recording, that in the third verse you can clearly hear her mouth open and lips part before she begins to sing. It's so scary you'd swear you were in the room with her. This is a great tube and I think anyone who is looking for an all-round solution, should seriously consider this Carbon Plate gem from Sophia.

Have I saved the best for last? I knew you'd think that. Well maybe yes and maybe no. There are many who think the Western Electric 300B is the best of them all. It's certainly an outstanding product and I know fellow Torontonians and *hi-fi+* contributor Peter Downard champions its cause. It's a tube that does its job and doesn't get in the way of the music, almost standing behind it and giving it a solid shove in the back, such is its emphatic delivery. It is incredibly solid and purposeful, really well grounded, offering music with a firm spatial and dynamic foundation. It's slanted a little more to the warm side of the yin-yang equation, majoring on sheer presence and solid colour, as opposed to say the vivid energy and excitement of the EATs.

Against that you have to weigh its considerable cost and a slightly muscle bound quality. The WE lacks the fluid grace of a tube like the Sophia Mesh Plate, the absolute

sense of air and delicacy. In my system, with my amp and speaker combination, it's the one flaw in an otherwise daunting arsenal of attributes.

And in the end, that's the point. These tubes each have their own particular characters; throughout the listening I was never in doubt as to which tube was reproducing my music. None of the tubes I've lived with were troublesome (except the aforementioned Gold Dragons) and each has offered its own blend of virtues. There is no doubting that the Western Electric 300B is one stellar tube, but what I wrote about the Euro Audio Team product is as relevant today as it was 18 months ago. Both Sophia 300B tubes are outstanding for the different reasons that I've tried to explain, while currently I find myself swapping between the WEs and the EATs as the mood takes me. It's a nice position to be in and rather underlines the fact that, as good as the Western Electrics undoubtedly are there are other 300Bs which each make their own case for your attention. The Electro-Harmonix tubes are perfectly safe and reliably respectable; but if you want to do better you can – it just takes a little time and (plenty of) money... 



Prices And Availability

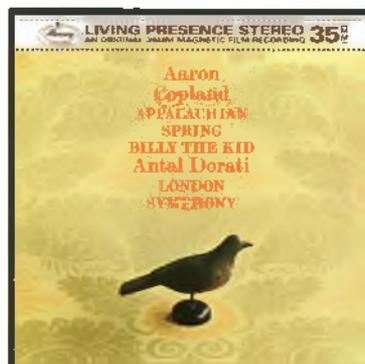
300Bs are available from too many sources to list. The suppliers listed are those who gave tubes for review. The prices are for guidance only.

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**Aaron Copland
Appalachian Spring
Billy The Kid (Complete Ballet).**

Antal Dorati cond. L.S.O.

Speakers Corner/Mercury Living Presence SR90246 **180g**

Listening to this 'old friend' again, reminds me of just why Aaron Copland is considered the most important American Classical Composer of the last century. The drama of both ballets is immediately available to the listener and your attention is committed to the story line offered in the liner notes. The orchestral version, (Appalachian Spring) omitting certain sections of the ballet, and rescored for concert performance, dates from the spring of 1945.

Copland describes the action of the ballet as concerning "a pioneer celebration in spring around a newly-built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the last Century(1800's)" Exceptionally well recorded by Mercury on 35mm film, these are exciting works that tell impressive stories of a time long past. Dorati leads the LSO through these dynamic passages giving your system a sonic workout along the way. Meanwhile, the job of re-creating the gunfights that punctuated the life of Billy the Kid is impressively handled by the orchestra's various instruments. Wonderfully dynamic music that should be in every collection, this is one of my favorite Mercury recordings.

Highest recommendations.

Supplier: www.speakerscornerrecords.com
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Claire Martin

**He never mentioned love
[remembering Shirley Horn];**

Linn Records AKD 295 **SACD**

While many in the UK are I'm sure, quite familiar with Claire Martin, I have to plead ignorance. Although I'd not heard Ms. Martin before, I was interested in this disc because of its dedication to Shirley Horn, one of my favorite singers. Accompanying the quartet's main instrumentalists are a group of 'special guests' scattered throughout the 13 different selections presented. Needless to say I really enjoyed this disc and felt it contained exceptionally fine sound. While not a "live" performance, there is a strong feeling of intimacy with the soloist and the quality of the songs selected really matches the style and substance of the late, great Shirley Horn. The ballads sung by Martin are absolutely in the spirit of Horn and you can imagine Shirley singing any one of them. I'm not a big fan of many of the 'in' Jazz singers today, but I'll admit to developing an interest in Martin and intend to explore her further. If you've not been a fan, I'm sure this disc will turn your head. Impressive lyrics sung with class and style the USB repeated playing. The CD layer is excellent, but the sound really blooms in your room when you switch to the SACD DSD layer. Highly recommended.

Supplier: www.linnrecords.com
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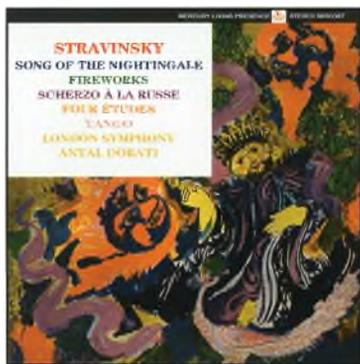
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Pittsburgh S.O.**

PentaTone PTC 5186 307 **SACD**

Well, rather than mincing my words and having to hold you in suspense while you read the entire paragraph, I'll cut to the chase and tell you that this has become not only my favorite performance of the ten *Haydn Variations*, but I'm having a hard time thinking about any other performance of the Brahms 1st beyond this new Janowski recording! The conductor is able to flesh out a Romantic tempo in the symphony I hadn't experienced before. While I still hold Walter, Munch, Boult and Barbirolli in very high regard, if you like the symphonies of Brahms, you have to hear what Janowski and the Pittsburgh are doing. They've created a wonderfully spirited performance with a rich palette of color I've never before associated with this work. It's a beautifully recorded disc and once again, the downconverted CD layer is excellent (even if the award goes to the DSD layer). This is a disc I've played at least a dozen times since I received it and every time I hear it, I have to stop what I'm doing, sit and listen. It provides a very rewarding musical experience and will become a highly valued addition to the collection of all those who love Brahms. Highest recommendation.

Supplier: www.pentatonemusic.com
RSF





Igor Stravinsky
The Song of the Nightingale;
Scherzo À La Russe; Four Études for
Orchestra etc.
Antal Dorati cond. L.S.O.

Speakers Corner/Mercury Living Presence SR90387 **180g**

This is a very important record whether you are an established fan of the composer or not. Side One of this album presents four different faces of the great man, while he delivers smart, concise and exceptionally engaging works you are bound to return to often. He knows how to orchestrate and whilst he wasn't above seeking inspiration in other's work, there is nothing but originality on show here. *The Song of the Nightingale* is a piece I'm especially fond of and the Mercury team did a fabulous job of capturing the excitement and dynamic contrasts here, a feat echoed by the people at Speakers Corner, who have delivered a re-issue to be especially proud of. The original Mercury, in early pressings, has always tended to be on the bright side. That tendency has been banished, a factor which helps rank the re-pressing significantly above original issues. More mid-bass, open silky highs and not a hint of brightness make this a recording you must own. A near perfect disc earns a mandatory Highest Recommendation.

Supplier: www.speakerscornerrecords.com

RSF

RECORDING
MUSIC



Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt,
Gamble Rogers, Steve Earle et al.

Heartworn Highways

Loose Music VJCD167 **CD**

Thirty-years ago, documentary film-makers Phillip Schopper and Jim Szalapski embarked on a program recording the emergence of the nascent New-Country movement, a collection of gritty performers who eschewed the gloss and sparkle of Nashville, returning America's country music to its roots. A collection of interviews and performances, many impromptu, all of them of original material, it became in itself a seminal work, the music captured uncompressed and generally straight to two-track or right off the board. *Heartworn Highways* isn't a soundtrack album as such; instead, it consists of a selection of music and occasional anecdotes, taken from the film. But if the front-room or local bar locations aren't special enough, what really sets this disc apart is the care that went into its mastering, or "restoration" as those responsible would have it. Using minimal treatment and the Rupert Neve designed Legendary Audio Masterpiece mastering suite, sound recordist Alvar Stugard's original tapes were transferred to digital with their full dynamic range and the lifelike, acoustic presence that characterized the performances retained intact. The results are

spookily real and absolutely captivating. In the same way that live acoustic music, any live acoustic music, irrespective of genre, captures and holds your attention, these songs simply hold you to the system. There's no walking away. By the very nature of the source, the quality of the recordings varies, from very, very good to the truly exceptional. The best of them are the solo renditions, just voice and guitar, captured almost "on the fly" – littered with extraneous noises and unwanted intrusions that somehow just add to the magic. But what all these songs have in common is the chemistry of live performance, the tension, the frisson of emotion and communication. The only aspect I could do without is the last four tracks, taken from a Christmas Eve jam session. There's no slackening in the recording quality, it's just the near religious nature of the material sits so awkwardly against the rest of the album. I guess you had to be there. Although, in fairness, with this disc you pretty much are!

I cannot recommend this album highly enough. Whether you love or loath country music (and this is nearer to roots or Americana to be honest) you'll find something wondrous here to amaze you. The artists are or were soon to become legendary, the quality of their music sublime. Besides which it marks the recording debut of one Steve Earle – which is worth the candle on its own.

RG

RECORDING
MUSIC

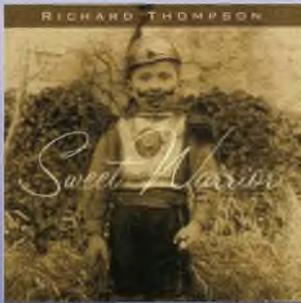


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BILLIE HOLIDAY

THE LEGENDARY LADY DAY

by Dennis D. Davis

There are many jazz vocalists I admire, and I could fill volumes writing about them. But I am not alone in believing myself in love with only one, and Billie was her name.

Cue up almost any Billie Holiday song and I am transported to that world of longing and desire reserved for the most intimate of relationships. The thing that sets Billie Holiday apart from all others

was best summed up by clarinet player Tony Scott: "A singer like Ella says 'My man's left me,' and you think the guy went down the street for a loaf of bread or something.

But when Lady says, 'My man's gone' . . . you can see the guy going down the street. His bags are packed and he ain't never coming back."

Lady Day's legendary "take no prisoners, go to hell" full force attack on life is part of the fabric of what we think we know about jazz singing. Few singers who have followed her can deny a huge debt to Billie Holiday.

Today's record collector knows her mostly through CD re-issues and compilations, which tend to lose track of the fabric of her career, best presented on the long playing record. That recording career can be broken down into roughly five periods, each of which has its own look and feel. The young singer's early outings were with Columbia, after she was "discovered" by John Hammond and first recorded in 1933, where she stayed until about 1941, when the recording industry ban stopped legitimate recordings for a few years. The second period consists of a handful of sides recorded for Commodore during 1939 and 1944. She then recorded for Decca between 1944 and 1950, before moving to Clef/Verve for much of the 1950s. What I call the fifth phase, her last official recordings, consist of a small body of work on Columbia and MGM near the end of her life.

The existence of these five periods naturally begs the

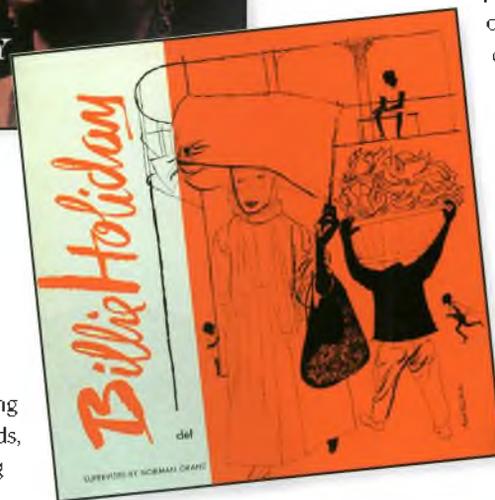
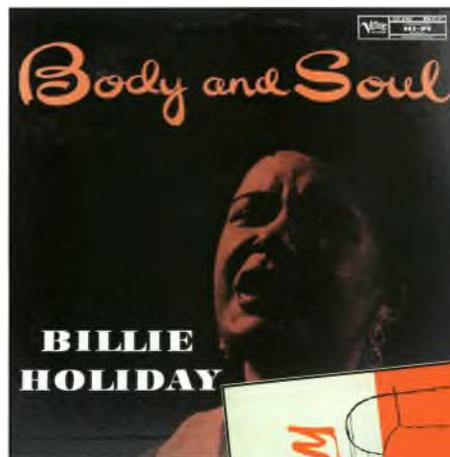
question – which one is "best"? Much ink has been spilled over the changes in Lady Day's voice over the life of her career. Those changes were enormous. Most critics feel her voice declined throughout her life, from the ravages of drug abuse, while some insist that her singing became more compelling. An interesting way to start any consideration of Billie Holiday is to compare her earliest recordings, say some of the 1935 Columbia sides, to one of her last, a good example (for comparison purposes) being her MGM Ray Ellis session on E3764. In the former, she is spontaneous and has an incredible vocal flexibility. In the later, she sounds washed up. While this comparison should not be taken as a final conclusion to the great debate, it gives

perspective to the obvious changes that occurred.

Holiday's earliest recordings, between 1935 and 1941, were made by Brunswick and Vocalion (the masters were acquired by Columbia before the LP era) and obviously first appeared as 78 RPM shellac.

No doubt good copies of the

78s played on a proper set-up are the way to hear these songs at their best. But for those of us limited to LP playback, there are several options. The best sounding are three 10 inch LPs - CL 6040 (*Teddy Wilson-Billie Holiday*); CL 6129 (*Billie Holiday Sings*); and CL 6163 (*Billie Holiday Favorites*). The sound is pretty good given the vintage, and the best (i.e., the earliest LP versions) can sound remarkably good. The finest selection of songs is found on the first disc, which is hard to find in collectible condition, but it was later re-issued ►



▶ as the 12-inch disc *Lady Day* on Columbia CL 637. The earliest version is the Maroon label, but “6 eye” second label copies are plentiful. This disc, in either its original 10 inch or the 12 inch version contains signature Billie Holiday performances of ‘Miss Brown To You’, ‘What a Little Moonlight Can Do’, ‘I Must Have That Man’ and ‘Foolin’ Myself’. These capture Billie at her best, and she has the added benefit of the best backing musicians money could buy, including Benny Goodman, Roy Eldridge and Ben Webster.

The Columbia catalogue has been re-issued many times on LP and CD, including a 10 CD set of the complete Columbia recordings. For me, this is too much of a good thing, including a lot of recordings of second-rate material that is of no great advantage except to music scholars. The *Lady Day* album is a first-rate “best of” package from her Columbia days. For photos and labelography information on these titles see my Columbia Records article in Issue 39.

Holiday’s handful of sides on the Commodore label is quite another kettle of fish. Commodore was a small independent label founded by Milt Gabler, owner of the Commodore Music Shop, in 1938. Gabler recorded a host of jazz greats and released sides on 78 RPM discs. The Billie Holiday sessions took place in 1939 and 1944, straddling the World War II record ban. Gabler lured Holiday to his label with a commitment to record ‘Strange Fruit’, a song overly controversial for the Columbia executives. The dirge-like torch song tells the story of a lynching (“Strange fruit hanging from an old oak tree”). Looking at the session photograph from this 1939 recording, and seeing Billie standing at the microphone in a three quarter length fox fur coat, one imagines that she knew this song would launch her career to yet another high. Holiday became a “celebrity” as opposed to a mere jazz singer, and much of the larger than life image her memory now evokes stems from this famous recording. The Commodore sides seem a fairly dramatic departure from the Columbia recordings – a much slower overall pace, and Billie’s singing seems much more calculated and by comparison affected. The backing band is anonymous and pretty much sounds

that way, with no Ben Websters or Lester Youngs here. Yet these songs are quintessential and among the greatest vocal performances in the jazz lexicon. The twelve sides were first issued at the dawn of the LP era in 1950 on two 10-inch discs, Commodore FL 20,005 and 20,006. They were released with identical front cover art – a famous John De Vries painting of Holiday’s face, close-up, lips painted red the color of the moon rising in the background. The songs were later issued on a 12-inch Commodore LP with the same artwork.

By the end of the war, Gabler had become an executive at US Decca, and brought his major recording stars like Billie Holiday



over to that label. Between 1944 and 1950, Decca released one 10-inch LP (*Lover Man* DL 5345) and three 12-inch discs, the last of which is a re-issue of the 10-inch disc (*The Lady Sings* on DL 8215,

The Blues Are Brewin’ on DL 8701 and *Lover Man* on DL 8702). Shortly before joining Decca, Holiday began using the drugs that plagued her for the rest of her life. During the late 1940’s the troubles these led to sensationalized her. While she lost her cabaret card and the ability to perform in New York clubs serving liquor, her earnings increased because of the heightened celebrity status. The three Decca LPs each have their own character, but each is totally dominated by Billie Holiday, with instrumental accompaniment taking a far more ornamental role.

Gone are the top-flight bands of the Columbia recordings, with the star power of the vocalist taking over from more traditional ensemble music making. Each of the Decca ▶

► LPs is a compilation of songs issued as 78 RPM releases, as the recordings pre-date the long-playing record. My favorite *The Lady Sings*, which contains the choicest selection of songs and some truly classic performances. Just listen to her vocal performance in 'Them There Eyes' and there is no hint of her troubled life. While her voice is not quite as supple as some of her best recordings from the 1930's, this is a truly remarkable performance. And the sound of these recordings can be quite good, despite the vintage. Holiday was the first jazz vocalist to record with strings and those sessions, recorded between 1944 and 1950, were released in 10" (1951) and 12" (1958) form as *Lover Man*. As far as I know, she did not repeat this string experiment, and these are not my favorite Decca sessions. *The Blues Are Brewin'* is a grab bag of different settings, including two vocal duets with Louis Armstrong

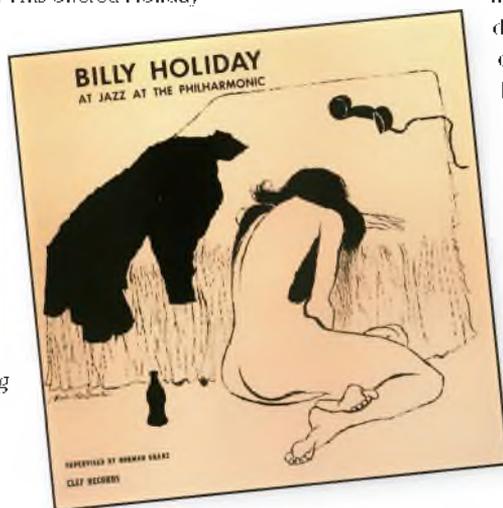
During most of the 1950's Holiday recorded for one or the other of Norman Granz's record labels, including Mercury, Clef and Verve. She had already recorded with Granz between 1945 and 1947 in his *Jazz At The Philharmonic* series, and became a Granz contract artist in 1952. These are the recordings that many music lovers first think of when they think of Billie Holiday. The long-playing record had taken over the market, so these discs are no longer compilations of songs first recorded for and released on 78-RPM shellac. Granz was one of the industry's most powerful jazz producers, and his stable of talent included Holiday's soul mates Lester Young and Ben Webster. This offered Holiday the opportunity to again record with some of the greatest jazz musicians available, instead of the anonymous or second-string backings she endured with Milt Gabler.

The wealth of recorded material on the Granz labels is too much to cover in more than a cursory fashion, so I'll list the available titles and dwell only on my favorites. On Clef, there are four 10-inch records, and another on Mercury. Two of these (*An Evening With Billie Holiday* MGC-144 and *Billie Holiday* MGC-161) were later released on a 12-inch disc: *A Recital By Billie*

Holiday on Clef MGC-686. The earlier of the two 10 inch discs is extremely rare in collectable shape, and the second 10 inch disc and the 12 inch re-issue can be found at very dear prices. However, there is an excellent Speakers Corner re-issue of MGC-686, which makes these early (1952-1954) Billie Holiday Granz recordings available to all. The re-issue reminds you of a couple of things immediately. Although Billie's voice is deeper and less supple than in her Columbia era recordings, her phrasing is still marvelous. What's more, we have Holiday once again recording with top-notch musicians. As good sounding as the Columbias, Commodores and Deccas may be, this is the first truly modern sounding Holiday record. This was brought back to me reading RG's review of the Zanden phono-stage in Issue 50, with its adjustable RIAA settings. With the Columbias, Commodores and Deccas, I found myself wondering just how much better these recordings might sound with a twist of the dial. The Clef recordings, by comparison, sound modern and well adjusted

All these early Clef recordings share one common trait—beautiful cover art: line drawings by David Stone Martin, my favorite being MGC-169, *Billy Holiday At Jazz At The Philharmonic* which includes (in addition to the misspelling of Billie's name) a drawing of a naked lady weeping into her arm. This live recording features an enthusiastic crowd but rather indifferent backing musicians and recordings, although it does include an interesting rendition of 'Strange Fruit', which is much less intense than the Commodore original. The session was re-issued as one side of a 12-inch record *Jazz Recital - The Songs of Billie Holiday/ The Free Forms of Ralph Burns* on Clef MGC-718.

The earliest standalone 12 inch Clef is *Music For Torchin*, MGC-669. While almost impossible to find in its original release, this one is fairly common in a later Verve re-issue on MG-8026 *Solitude* on MGC-690 is a re-issue of the



► first Clef 10 inch record. Next came *Velvet Mood* (MGC-713) followed by one of the iconic Billie Holiday titles – *Lady Sings The Blues* on MGC-721, the last Granz title to bear the Clef label. While all of the Clef titles are indispensable, some are better than others. Speakers Corner has re-issued two of what I consider the three strongest titles, but my favorite, *Velvet Mood* remains without a modern pressing. In some ways, and on some days, this is my favorite of all Holiday's records. It has fabulous sound, Billie's singing is spot on,



the song selection is perfect and the band plays in perfect sympathy with Billie. Barney Kessel's solos

voice has thickened further. On the other hand, the sessions are very well recorded, and include beautiful tenor work by Ben Webster (except on *Stay With Me*). Perhaps best recorded is *Body And Soul* and its beauty shines through in both the original and in Stan Ricker's fine re-mastering on Mobile Fidelity. *Distingué Lovers* is almost as good sounding, but is best in its original mono version rather than the stereo re-issue. Of the two, it includes more upbeat numbers, although this choice stretched Holiday's vocal delivery in a way unimaginable 15 years earlier.

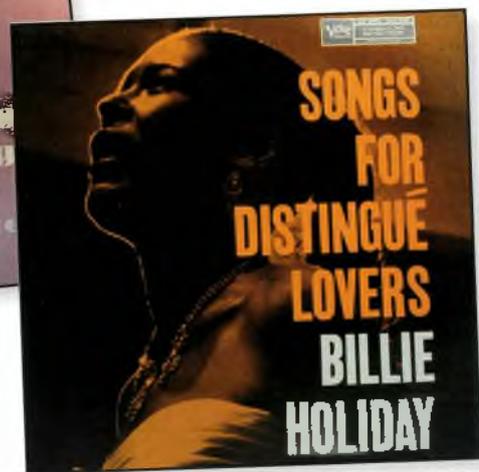
Holiday's final sessions on LP can be found on *Lady In Satin* (Columbia CL 1157 and CS 8048) and *Billie Holiday* (MGM E3764), both with backing by the Ray Ellis Orchestra. The Columbia sessions date from early 1958 and the MGM sessions are among her last recordings from early 1959. Too much has been written justifying the depth and suffering in the Columbia sessions shining through as high art, but only the writer of liner notes can present

the later sessions as more than a sad coda to a unique career. The best way to remember late Billie Holiday is from her December 1957 contribution to the television program *The Sound of Jazz*. Billie, with Lester Young, turns

on 'I Gotta Right To Sing the Blues' and 'When Your Lover Has Gone', Benny Carter's solo on 'What's New' and Harry "Sweets" Edison and Jimmy Rowles playing throughout, are stunning.

Lady Sings The Blues on Clef MGC-721, on the other hand, couldn't sound more different than *Velvet Moods*. Instead of a small band recorded in an intimate setting, a larger orchestra backs Billie. The recorded sound is inferior, with the band sounding almost like it's in an orchestra pit, with Billie on stage. But the song selection and singing make this set rise to the top. The Speakers Corner re-issue is outstanding and includes a lyric sheet that is impossible to find, even if you can find an original LP in perfect shape.

Holiday continued to record for Granz after he segued from the Clef label into Verve. Verve released four original Holiday albums between 1957 and 1959—*Body And Soul* (MGV-8197), *Song For Distingué Lovers* (MGV-8257), *Stay With Me* (MGV-8302) and *All Or Nothing At All* (MGV-8329), consisting of recording sessions from 1956 and 1957. The first two have been re-issued, the first by Mobile Fidelity (now out of print) and the later by Classic Records in stereo. By the time of these sessions, Billie sounds tired and her



in a heartbreakingly beautiful 'Fine and Mellow', immortalized in a studio version on Columbia CS 8040 and in the broadcast performance in video on *Jazz Masters Vintage Collection* (Warner Video Vision 2 60058). An all-star band backs her with beautiful choruses taken by Webster and Young. Avoid other DVD issues of this show, which are of abominable quality. The TV camera dwells on close ups of Billie's expressive face. She gave us this one last powerful performance before leaving us, and as the song ends you truly know that your lover has gone.



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IN PRAISE OF THE UNDER-RATED, UNDER-APPRECIATED OR JUST PLAIN DISCARDED MUSICAL MASTERPIECE

by Reuben Parry

A bare-boned live and largely acoustic album precariously straddling that ill-defined boundary between folk and country music seems on the surface to be an unlikely candidate for "masterwork" status, but the brilliantly evocative and hugely atmospheric *One Fair Summer Evening* transcends genres to reveal the intuitive music of Nanci Griffith and place it upon a pedestal.

While her later studio outings for MCA, including the beautifully crafted *Storms*, may have the kind of shimmering, elaborate and radio friendly production values that paved the way to commercial success, it is the underlying warmth, honesty and humour found here in twelve songs recorded over those two August nights at the Anderson Fair Retail Restaurant, Houston back in 1988 to which the ear is inevitably drawn, a distillation of live communication.

Invitingly intimate and anecdotal performances are underpinned by Griffith's solid singer-song-writing craft. Classic covers like Julie Gold's 'From A Distance' and the superb self-penned 'Trouble In The Fields' exude those exquisite moments of delicate beauty and touching vulnerability that are so rarely recreated in a studio environment.

One Fair Summer Evening is more than a satisfying evening's entertainment. It has much to say about social conscience, integrity, performance and paying your dues, depths of meaning that can be easily overlooked on a first listen because of its gloriously obvious musical qualities. This is a record that nourishes the soul in so many different ways, and although it lacks the political punch of her more recent releases, this for me is Nanci Griffith at her best and that deserves your attention.

Gigging at Anderson Fair was clearly something of a watershed for this Texas girl. Her days as an acolyte, attentively listening to and learning her trade from the likes of Townes Van Zandt or Eric Taylor had long passed. At thirty-five Nanci was a mature and accomplished musician in her own right, stepping forward to take her place at the mike, much to the obvious delight of her fans, rewarding them with yet another

wonderfully relaxed and comfortable acoustic session. Griffith's fluid performance with delicious, sometimes barely whispered lyrics compounding that sense of loss, yearning or concern present in these songs is beguiling. Beneath it all is her wholly convincing brand of storytelling that can create something remarkable out of both the serious and the mundane. Take Nanci's slant on the moving account of a prostitute in 'Looking For The Time (Workin' Girl)' - she doesn't sit in outraged judgement but settles for telling the tale the way it is. The song is all the more powerful for this.

Contrastingly, the penultimate track - a memorably witty 'Love At The Five And Dime' - seduces you with its simplicity and a lightness of touch. It carefully builds from an astutely observed Woolworths Store intro; one that's permeated with tiny, good-natured asides that conjure up a series of romanticised sepia coloured images from a youthful past. Her engaging and eminently tactile style leaves you with a gnawing feeling of emotional warmth. Which is when you realise the part the recording is playing in preserving that tension, the close-coupled community that creates a live event. No record I've heard captures it better; few even get close.

For Nanci, a poet, lyricist and musician, that old adage "less is more" has never been more relevant than when applied to *One Fair Summer Evening*. ➤



Nanci Griffith

One Fair Summer Evening

Originally released on MCA, November '88

Track Listing:

1. Once In A Very Blue Moon
2. Lookin' For The Time (Workin' Girl)
3. Deadwood, South Dakota
4. More Than A Whisper
5. I Would Bring You Ireland
6. Roseville Fair
7. Workin' In Corners
8. Trouble In The Fields
9. The Wing And The Wheel
10. From A Distance
11. Love At The Five And Dime
12. Spin On A Red Brick Floor

Personnel:

Nanci Griffith - vocals, acoustic guitar
James Hooker - keyboards
Denny Bixby - drums
Denice Frank, Doug Hudson - backing vocals

Recorded live at Anderson Fair Retail Restaurant, Houston, Texas August 19th and 20th, 1988

Produced by Nanci Griffith and Tony Brown

LP/CD/HQMC released by MCA Nov '88
MCA 42255
CD re-issued by MCA, Oct '98
MCLD 19388

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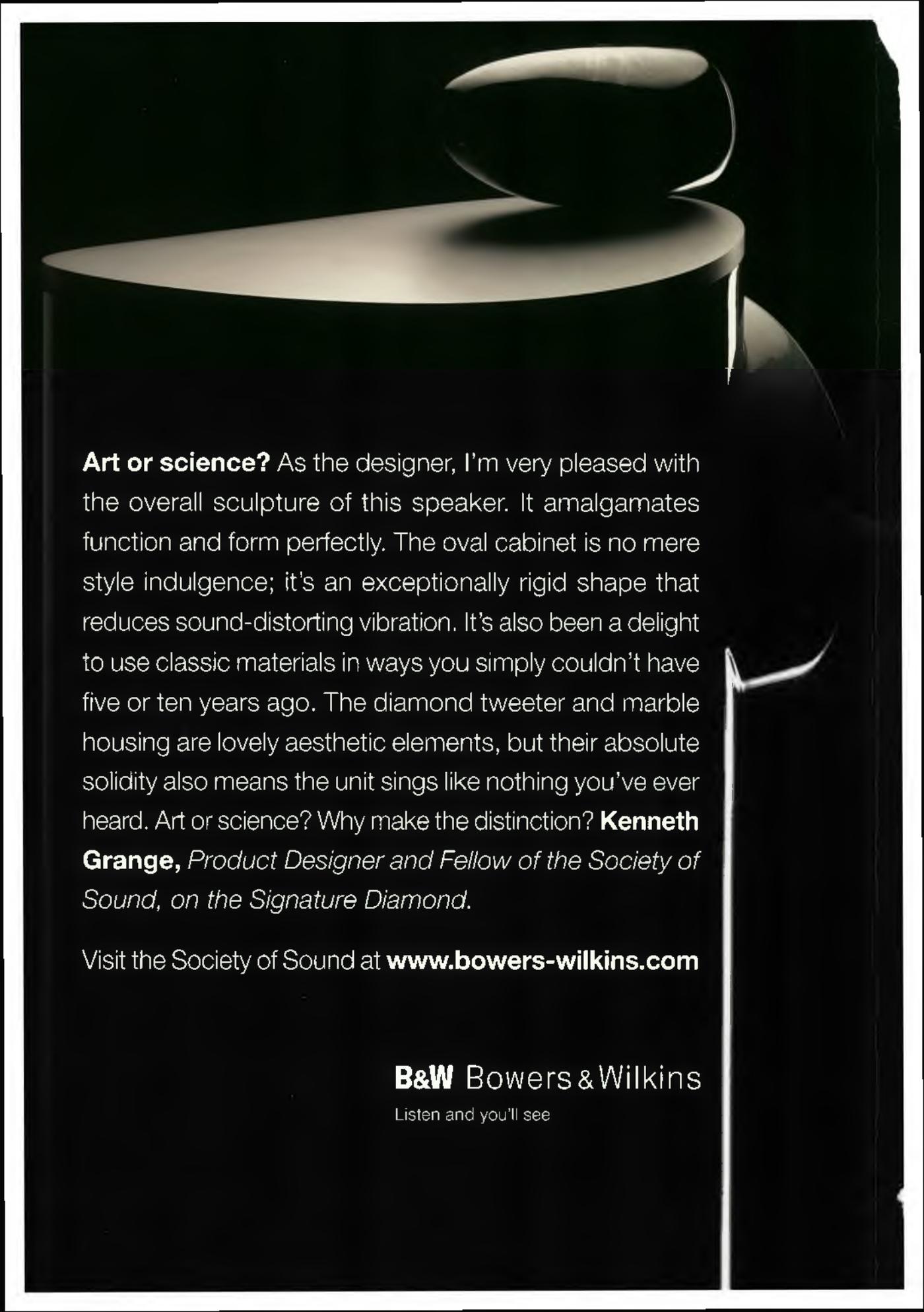
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VALHALLA

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Art or science? As the designer, I'm very pleased with the overall sculpture of this speaker. It amalgamates function and form perfectly. The oval cabinet is no mere style indulgence; it's an exceptionally rigid shape that reduces sound-distorting vibration. It's also been a delight to use classic materials in ways you simply couldn't have five or ten years ago. The diamond tweeter and marble housing are lovely aesthetic elements, but their absolute solidity also means the unit sings like nothing you've ever heard. Art or science? Why make the distinction? **Kenneth Grange**, *Product Designer and Fellow of the Society of Sound, on the Signature Diamond.*

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